

FADE IN:

INT. HOME - LIVING ROOM/KITCHEN DAY

Small, cluttered two-bedroom apartment.

-- Clothes on the sofa, shoes and boots near the front door.

-- Unopened moving boxes piled up in every corner.

A bar counter divides the living room from the kitchen. The countertop looks like a tornado hit it. A laptop and printer peek out from under the paper.

A small Christmas tree stands on top of three boxes off to the side against the wall.

HOPE (mid-30s) emerges from her bedroom, dressed to impress. Her make-up and business suit are impeccable, hiding her exhaustion. She spots a piece of paper half-way under the front door. She picks it up and glances at it.

ON PAPER

RENT: \$300 PAST DUE. Pay now or move out.

ON HOPE

She tosses the paper on top of a stack of HOSPITAL BILLS next to her laptop on her way to the kitchen.

Hope savors the soft hum of the appliances as she enters the kitchen. She grabs the tea kettle from the stovetop and makes a cup of hot tea. As the water heats up, Hope checks...

BREAKFAST MONTAGE

-- Refrigerator - Half-gallon of milk, quart of juice, cheese.

-- Cabinets - One cereal box. She pulls it out and shakes it. Empty. She tosses it in the garbage.

-- Purse on a bar stool - Granola bar. She tosses it on the countertop.

END BREAKFAST MONTAGE

The tea kettle whistles. She turns off the stove and takes down a cup. She spots a banana behind the paper towel roll next to the sink. She tosses it next to the granola bar, and pours herself a cup of hot water.

Hope gets up, grabs her cup, and pours the tea down the sink. She glances at a Christmas family photo of her, Young Katie, and TREY on the refrigerator. She plays with her ring.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY - FLASHBACK

Cold winter day. Snow falls outside. A fire in the fireplace.

Young Katie spins around in front of a large Christmas tree like the Sugar Plum Fairy. Trey laughs. Hope wraps presents.

ON HOPE

Hope's cell phone rings, shaking her from the memory. She glances at Trey's obituary taped next to the photo as she runs back to the countertop.

She pushes the paper about in search of her phone. Young Katie leans over and grabs a crayon and paper, uncovering Hope's phone. Hope grabs it, puts her wireless earbuds in, and steps away from the countertop.

HOPE
(on phone)
Hey, Joady. Nothing yet.

YOUNG KATIE
Dear Santa...Please help my
mommy.

Hope walks back to the countertop, sits down next to Young Katie, and sets her phone down. She brings up her RESUME. We see she's a MARKETING MANAGER. She makes a few tweaks.

HOPE
I'm sending out more
today...Retail? I don't...
know...

YOUNG KATIE (cont'd)
She lost her job, then my
daddy went to heaven. She is
sad all the time.

Hope turns to look at Young Katie.

HOPE
I gotta go.

Hope hangs up and looks over Young Katie's shoulder.

YOUNG KATIE
Please help her be happy again. Love,
Katie.

Young Katie looks up at Hope. Hope flashes her a weak smile.

Young Katie folds up her letter and slides off the chair. She walks over to a CHRISTMAS COUNTDOWN CALENDAR near the tree. She picks it up and opens up a day.

YOUNG KATIE (cont'd)
 Yay! Santa's almost here. [pause] Oh
 no. Santa doesn't have my letter.

Hope walks over to Young Katie and sits down on the couch. She closes her eyes and lifts her head to the ceiling. She takes a deep breath and looks at Young Katie.

HOPE
 Santa will get your letter.

YOUNG KATIE
 Promise?

HOPE
 Yes. Go get dressed. And brush your
 teeth and hair.

Young Katie runs to her room.

Hope stands up and walks back to her laptop. She prints out a few resumes and shoves them into a folder.

Young Katie emerges a few minutes later wearing her two favorite shirts, pants, and a sparkly tutu. Hope sighs.

YOUNG KATIE
 I'm ready!

HOPE
 Alright. Put on your sweater, boots,
 and coat.

YOUNG KATIE
 Where are we going?

HOPE
 You'll see.

EXT. OUTLET MALL PARKING LOT - DAY

Hope pulls into a half-empty parking lot and parks in front of The Princess Closet.

She twists in her seat, coming face-to-face with Young Katie standing in between the passenger and driver seats. Young Katie stares at the Christmas decorations and Santa poster.

YOUNG KATIE
 Santa!

Young Katie holds up her letter.

YOUNG KATIE (cont'd)
Can I give him my letter?

HOPE
We'll see.

Young Katie pouts and slumps back into her seat.

Hope grabs her resumes, gets out of the car, and opens Young Katie's door. She coaxes Young Katie out of the car.

INT. OUTLET MALL - VARIOUS STORES AND COFFEE SHOPS - DAY

JOB SEARCH MONTAGE

Hope and Young Katie drop off copies of Hope's resume. Hope talks to MANAGERS behind the counters. Most shake their heads no or take her resume and dump it once her back is turned. Near the end, Young Katie drags her feet.

END JOB SEARCH MONTAGE

EXT. MALL GAZEBO - DAY

Hope and Young Katie stand in line to visit Santa. Trey's best friend, NATE (40s) and his daughter CIARA (5) step up behind them. Nate reaches out to Hope.

NATE
Hope?

Hope turns.

HOPE	NATE (cont'd)
Nate. Sorry. I didn't see you.	It's so great to see you. How are you?

HOPE
We're okay.

NATE
I'm glad to hear it. Sorry we haven't called. It's just...

HOPE
No worries.

Hope, Young Katie, Nate, and Ciara move forward.

NATE

Hey, lets get the girls with Santa together. Trey and I used to do it all the time.

HOPE

We don't have --

ELF

Next.

Hope, Young Katie, Nate, and Ciara step up. Young Katie and Ciara jump up and down excited.

NATE

(to Elf)

We want to get a picture of the two girls together with Santa.

ELF

\$25. Cash or card?

Nate hands the Elf his card.

HOPE

Wait. Here's my -

Nate gently pushes her hand away.

NATE

My treat.

Hope puts her card away.

HOPE

Thank you.

Young Katie and Ciara get their picture taken with Santa, talk with Santa, and then walk back to Hope and Nate.

HOPE (cont'd)

Thanks again.

NATE

My pleasure. Merry Christmas. And Hope, it was great to see you again.

Hope and Young Katie walk away.

EXT. THE PRINCESS CLOSET - NIGHT

Hope and Young Katie approach The Princess Closet store. Young Katie sees a window display - Clara dances about the display, her Nutcracker in her arms.

YOUNG KATIE
(points)
Mommy. Clara and the Nutcracker.

Young Katie runs over to the display. Hope trails behind.

Hope and Young Katie stand at the window transfixed. Clara and the Nutcracker go behind a Christmas tree. When they emerge, the Nutcracker is as tall as Clara.

YOUNG KATIE (cont'd)
Wow! He's. So. Big.

Young Katie twirls around in the snow, humming the Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy. Hope fights back tears as she watches.

Young Katie leaps into the air. She lands in the middle of a snow drift, breaking the spell. Hope helps her up. They wipe off the snow.

Young Katie sees her BALLERINA CHARM BRACELET from her dad laying in the snow. She grabs it and puts it on.

INT. PRINCESS CLOSET - NIGHT

Hope and Young Katie walk in to a busy children's clothing store that's closing for the night.

-- STAFF, dressed as elves, process final purchases and clean up a large table covered in cookies and icing.

-- Parents make purchases and help kids pack up their decorated cookies.

-- MARY (60s), dressed as Mrs. Claus, oversees the activities.

Young Katie heads for a second table nearby with the same do-it-yourself cookie decorating supplies. Mary approaches.

MARY
Want to decorate a cookie before we close?

Young Katie inches closer to the table.

YOUNG KATIE
Can I?
HOPE
Not right now, Katie.

YOUNG KATIE
I'm hungry. I want a cookie.

HOPE
We'll eat after this. Promise.
(to Mary)
Sorry.

Mary waves it off.

HOPE (cont'd)
Is the manager here?

MARY
You're looking at her.

Mary eyes Hope up and down. She notices her wool sweater and trench coat. She then looks at Young Katie's layers of clothes, fall coat, and rain boots.

MARY (cont'd)
How can I help?

Hope scans the store. Parents and kids head out the door.

HOPE
Are you still hiring for the holidays?

MARY
Sorry. We just filled the position.

Hope's shoulders droop. She looks away.

HOPE
Thanks.

Mary watches Hope and Young Katie leave.

EXT. THE PRINCESS CLOSET - NIGHT

Mary locks the door. The next door STORE OWNER joins Mary at the door.

STORE OWNER
How's Ivy doing? Did she fill the position yet?

MARY

No, not yet.

Mary looks up and sees Hope in her car.

EXT./INT. CAR - NIGHT

Hope double checks Katie's buckled in tight then turns on the car. The radio blasts Christmas music.

Hope glances down at the GAS GAUGE. Almost empty. She slams her clenched fists on the steering wheel.

HOPE

(whispers)

Damn...Car. Food. Or Home. Please,
dear Lord, help me.

Mary knocks on Hope's window. Hope jumps and rolls down the window.

MARY

Everything okay?

Hope wipes away her tears and nods.

MARY (cont'd)

My friend, Ivy, runs Festive Table.
The food bank on Holiday Lane. She's
hiring. Here's the address.

Mary pulls out a piece of paper from her pocket and hands it to Hope along with a small bag of three Christmas cookies. She winks at Young Katie.

MARY (cont'd)

And a little treat for the road.

HOPE

Thank you.

Hope rolls up the window and pulls out of the parking lot.

INT. FESTIVE TABLES - DUSK

Hope and Young Katie enter. Food is stacked from floor to ceiling. Forklifts move food from the shelves to the packing stations. VOLUNTEERS fill boxes with food for cars outside.

KRIS (60s), looks like Santa in suspenders, approaches Hope and Young Katie.

Young Katie looks up at him with big eyes.

KATIE
Are you Santa?

Kris bends over to look at Young Katie.

KRIS
(laughs)
No, but we're like this.

Kris crisscrosses his fingers.

KATIE
Wow!

He stands back up to face Hope.

KRIS
How can I help you?

HOPE
Mary at The Princess Closet sent me.

Kris turns his back to them.

KRIS
I-v-y!

IVY (60s), a white-haired woman with glasses, comes over.

Hope thrusts her resume at Ivy. It's a little wrinkled.

HOPE
She said you had an opening.

Ivy scans the resume then hands it back to Hope.

IVY
Hmmm...any fundraising experience?

HOPE
No, but I'm a quick learner.

Young Katie walks over to a nearby table with stacks of food and empty boxes and starts to pack boxes. Hope joins her.

Ivy watches Hope and Young Katie work. Kris returns and stands next to Ivy.

KRIS
Ivy, she needs us.

IVY

I know. I'm just not sure what I can do.

KRIS

I bet you can find something for her to do. The smallest act of kindness can have the biggest impact.

Ivy looks at Kris, who winks at her. She nods, and then joins Young Katie and Hope.

IVY

If you're willing to learn, we can try -

HOPE

Yes! Thank you! Thank you.

IVY

You'll start the first of the year. In the meantime, take a box of food home with you when you leave.

Kris joins them. He hands Young Katie a gift. Her eyes grow big.

YOUNG KATIE

Santa! It's really you!

Young Katie rips it open - a nutcracker doll. She takes it out of the box.

Hope grins at Kris. Tears well up in her eyes. She turns to Ivy and quickly turns away again before she breaks down with unfathomable gratefulness.

She composes herself, lifts her head up high, and turns to face -

INT. FESTIVE TABLE - NIGHT

ON THE SCREEN: THREE YEARS LATER

Ivy, Kris, Hope, and OLDER KATIE (7) stand in between a stage and a table. They serve a line of DONORS and FOOD BANK PATRONS. It's the Festive Table annual Christmas fundraiser.

A YOUNG GIRL (4) stands close to her MOM (20s). The girl is dressed in an oversized dress and coat. Her face is a little dirty.

Older Katie glances between the Young Girl and her Nutcracker doll sitting on the stage.

She turns around to grab the Nutcracker doll and walks around the table to face the Young Girl.

OLDER KATIE
Hi. What's your name?

The Young Girl leans in closer to her Mom.

MOM
Her name's Molly.

Older Katie holds out the Nutcracker.

OLDER KATIE
Molly, I need your help. I found this amazing Nutcracker doll. It needs a home. Would you like to have it?

Older Katie holds out the Nutcracker doll to Molly. Molly's eyes go wide. She shakes her head, and takes the doll.

OLDER KATIE (cont'd)	MOM
Thank you.	Thank you. She asked Santa for a doll.

Older Katie returns to serve others in line.

Hope leans over to Older Katie.

HOPE
That was so kind of you, Katie. Thank you.

OLDER KATIE
A kind act, even a small one, can make a difference in someone's life.

Hope hugs Older Katie.

HOPE
So true, Katie. So true.

FADE OUT

THE END