

HEADLINES & DEADLINES: THE CHRISTMAS BEAT

Written by

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FADE IN:

EXT. DOWNTOWN CHICAGO - DAY - ESTABLISHING

Skyscrapers. Traffic. People rushing to and fro. Christmas decorations going up.

EXT. CAFE - DAY

An anxious MEGHAN WILSON, age 33, pretty but disheveled, hurries down the sidewalk. She enters the cafe.

INT. CAFE KITCHEN - DAY

Meghan solemnly adjusts her waitress uniform, preparing for work.

A large man holding a spatula, the BOSS, approaches.

BOSS
Meghan, I really wish you'd take
some more time off.

MEGHAN
Thanks, boss, but work is probably
the best thing for me right now. I
need to stay busy.

INT. CAFE DINING ROOM - LATER

Boss changes the calendar from November to December.

A waitress removes a Christmas tree from a box.

Meghan kindly refills the coffee of a LITTLE OLD LADY.

LITTLE OLD LADY
Thank you, dear. I was so sorry to
hear about your mother. She was
lucky to have a daughter like you.
You took care of her for how long --
five years? You're such a
sweetheart.

They exchange warm glances, but the lady's smile suddenly evaporates when she sees Boss approaching.

LITTLE OLD LADY
French toast was soggy -- again.

Boss sighs. Meghan chuckles.

INT. CAFE KITCHEN - DAY

Meghan busily restocks items in the kitchen. Waitress SUSAN, holding a Christmas ornament, peeps inside.

SUSAN
Meghan, there's someone here to see you.

INT. CAFE DINING ROOM - DAY

Meghan enters, looks around.

Sitting at a table is DR. HAWKINS, late 50's, wearing a jacket and tie. A surprised Meghan spots him.

SUSAN
You know him?

MEGHAN
He was my journalism professor in college.

Meghan shuffles over to him.

MEGHAN
Dr. Hawkins?

He stands, grinning pleasantly. She gives him a warm hug.

DR. HAWKINS
Hi, Meghan. How are you?

MEGHAN
I'm okay. What are you doing here?

DR. HAWKINS
Just following up on our phone conversation. Do you have a minute?

She nods. They take a seat. In the background, Susan decorates the Christmas tree.

DR. HAWKINS
Are you still interested in a newspaper job?

MEGHAN
Yes. Definitely. I've been asking around, but there aren't many openings for someone with my... lack of experience.

DR. HAWKINS

I know you always wanted to work for a newspaper here in Chicago. The editor of The Chicago Times is an old friend of mine. Based on my recommendation, he's agreed to hire you. As a junior reporter. Starting in January.

Meghan's eyes widen.

MEGHAN

The Chicago Times? Dr. Hawkins, that's one of the best newspapers in the country!

Susan and Boss pause from decorating the tree, noticing Meghan's excitement.

DR. HAWKINS

You were one of my finest students, Meghan. When you dropped out to take care of your mother, I hoped someday you would be able to come back and finish your degree. I know things haven't worked out, but I know working at a newspaper was your dream.

Meghan contemplates, anxious and uncertain.

MEGHAN

Yeah. It was.

Dr. Hawkins gives her a look.

MEGHAN

I mean, it is!

(reminiscing)

I was twelve when my uncle took me to his office one day -- to the newspaper. The ringing phones, people typing away at their keyboards, the lively conversations. It all just seemed so... important. That's the day it got into my blood.

DR. HAWKINS

The job is yours if you want it. But there's a catch.

She gives him a look.

DR. HAWKINS

The editor of The Times and I have a mutual friend down south who owns a small newspaper. In Pine Bluff, Tennessee. They need an editor immediately. It's the perfect fit for you.

MEGHAN

Wait, I don't understand. Tennessee? What about Chicago?

DR. HAWKINS

Go to Tennessee for one month. Do this favor for us and the Chicago job is yours. While there you can gain some experience. Work out the kinks. Everyone wins. And come January, you're back here working at The Times. Living your dream.

MEGHAN

This is all so sudden...

DR. HAWKINS

I hate to rush you, but I need an answer by tomorrow.

INT. MEGHAN'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Meghan sits on the floor, sorting through a box of folders.

A hint of recognition crosses her face when she runs across a college newspaper award: "Meghan Wilson - First Place - Investigative Reporting".

Standing, she paces anxiously.

She examines a photo on a table -- a picture of a smiling older woman. She takes it, admiring it tenderly.

MEGHAN

Well, mom... what do you think?

INT. CAFE DINING ROOM - DAY

A banner on the wall reads: "Goodbye, Meghan! Good Luck!"

Everyone wears silly party hats, greeting and hugging an excited Meghan.

Boss, wearing a greasy t-shirt and Santa hat, puts the final touch on the Christmas tree: a hamburger ornament.

Waitress Susan looks sadly at Meghan.

SUSAN

I'm gonna miss you. You're my best friend, ya know.

MEGHAN

Oh, Susan...

They embrace, fighting back tears.

MEGHAN

It's only for a month. If this doesn't work out, I just hope boss will take me back.

Boss approaches and gives Meghan a big hug.

BOSS

Knock 'em dead, kid! So what exactly does a newspaper editor do, anyway?

MEGHAN

They decide which stories are printed. Make assignments. Edit the copy. Write headlines. Arrange the layout. Basically I'll oversee the whole paper.

SUSAN

So you're the boss?

MEGHAN

Hey, I learned from the best!

Boss stands proudly.

MEGHAN

But I'll get to be a reporter, too. That's what I love doing most. Telling people's stories. A chance to make a difference. I find that so... fulfilling! It's the reason I pursued journalism in the first place. Can you tell I'm excited?!

The crowd chants: "Speech! Speech! Speech!"

Meghan eyes her friends, who gather around.

MEGHAN

Well, I guess this is it! You guys are the best. Thanks for the party. And for everything. For always being there for me. What I'm doing is crazy, I know. But I feel like I'm getting a second chance to pursue my dream. You only live once, right?

Everyone nods in agreement. Meghan grins nervously.

EXT. HIGHWAY - DAY

A little car loaded with luggage travels along a winding road with a breathtaking view of the Great Smoky Mountains.

INT./EXT. MEGHAN'S CAR - DAY

Meghan gazes at the majestic mountains, awestruck.

Looking ahead, she SLAMS on the brakes when she notices something up ahead: several cows standing in the road.

She sticks her head out the window. She BEEPS her horn. The cows don't budge.

Finally she gets out and runs at the cows, clapping.

MEGHAN

Go on. Shoo!

They ignore her. She sighs.

EXT. ROADSIDE - DAY

A sign adorned with a Christmas wreath reads: "Welcome to Pine Bluff, Tennessee - Pop. 797".

Meghan's car cruises past the sign.

EXT. PINE BLUFF TOWN SQUARE - DAY

The quaint town sits nestled among the hills. The square is adorned beautifully with old-timey Christmas decorations.

JOE and HENRY sit on a bench. Joe, a black man in his 70's, wears overalls and a straw hat, whittling on a stick. Henry, age 65, a goofy grin stuck to his face, munches on peanuts.

Meghan's car pulls into a parking space. Meghan gets out, takes a nervous deep breath, looks around, stretches.

In her thin formal attire, Meghan feels a chill in the air, shivering. Glancing around to make sure no one is looking, she runs in place and does a few jumping jacks.

Joe and Henry observe Meghan, puzzled. When she finishes, she turns and glances in their direction. They look away, appearing uninterested. Finally she approaches them.

MEGHAN

Hello.

JOE

Evening, ma'am.

MEGHAN

Can you tell me where I might find Mayor Murdoch?

JOE

Right over there. The fellow with the scowl on his face.

He points toward a man sweeping the sidewalk.

MEGHAN

Thank you.

As Meghan scurries down the sidewalk, someone steps backward out of a shop and nearly runs over her.

It's a man carrying an oversized decorative reindeer. This is CALVIN (CAL) JONES, 38, ruggedly handsome, wearing a flannel shirt, faded jeans and work boots.

They make eye contact. Cal blushes, apologetic.

CAL

Oh, I... please excuse me, miss. I didn't see you. It's Christmas and, well... you know.

Flustered, he nods, turns and struggles down the sidewalk with his reindeer. Meghan, intrigued, watches him go.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - DAY

MAYOR MURDOCH, age 61, sweeps the sidewalk meticulously with his trusty broom. He's neatly dressed, hair combed perfectly over his bald spot, pens and notepad placed strategically in his shirt pocket. His face displays a permanent scowl.

As Meghan approaches, Mayor Murdoch finds a brown, withered leaf on the sidewalk. Perturbed, he grabs it and glares up at the offending tree, then deposits it into a trash can.

MEGHAN
Mayor Murdoch?

He glances up, unhappy to be interrupted.

MEGHAN
I'm Meghan Wilson. From Chicago.
The new editor.

MAYOR MURDOCH
I was told you would be here at
five.
(glancing at his watch)
It's 5:07.

MEGHAN
I'm sorry. There were cows and--

MAYOR MURDOCH
Anyhow, welcome to Pine Bluff.
Just remember to put all trash in
the conveniently placed trash
receptacles, and please wipe your
feet before entering any of our
fine establishments.

Meghan nods, slightly baffled.

MEGHAN
I'm truly thankful for this
opportunity. And I look forward to
getting started!

MAYOR MURDOCH
I'd planned to show you around, but
I have to finish sweeping.

He inspects the sidewalk.

MAYOR MURDOCH
The Christmas festival's coming up,
and these sidewalks are filthy.
People are always... stepping on
them. Tell Zack I said to show you
around. He's decorating the tree.

He points to the other side of the street.

MEGHAN
Oh, okay. Thanks! I...

But Mayor Murdoch is already back to sweeping.

MEGHAN
...nice meeting you.

Meghan turns and marches across the street, Joe and Henry eyeing her all the way.

She arrives at the town Christmas tree, where a young man places decorations onto the branches.

MEGHAN
Um, excuse me?

Turning around is ZACK, a 19-year-old with purple hair. Despite his wannabe tough guy look, he has a kind, gentle face.

MEGHAN
Hi. I'm Meghan Wilson, the new newspaper editor. Mayor Murdoch said you might show me around.

Zack examines her, impressed.

ZACK
Whoa! You're my new boss?

MEGHAN
Boss?

ZACK
I help out at the paper. I'm the tech guy. I'm not a geek, though.

Meghan nods.

ZACK
Come on, follow me!

Zack grabs his bike, hops on and pedals away. Meghan watches him go, perplexed.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - DAY

Zack pedals his bike down the sidewalk. Meghan walks quickly in order to keep pace.

Someone carrying a giant decorative snowman emerges backwards from a shop, and Meghan plows into him, almost knocking him over. It's Cal -- again.

MEGHAN
Oh, I'm sorry. I...

With no time to talk, she must now run in order to keep up with Zack. Cal gawks at her, puzzled.

EXT. BUILDING/ROOF - DAY

Near the edge of the roof sit two lawn chairs. Zack approaches and plops down in one of them. An out-of-breath Meghan finally catches up to him.

MEGHAN
I thought you were going to show me around?

ZACK
I am. This is the best view.

Meghan begrudgingly sits in the other chair. Zack points down below.

ZACK
That's the general store. That's the inn over there. There's the church up on the hill. The cafe. Antique shop. That's about it.

MEGHAN
That's all?

ZACK
Oh, I forgot the barber shop. Sorry. It's right over there. We got a new barber pole last summer!

He cheerfully admires the view.

ZACK
Oh, I must warn you about Ms. Know-it-All.

MEGHAN
Ms. Know-it-All?

ZACK
She's the editor of The Ridgetop Gazette -- the other newspaper in our county. Our big rival.

Meghan nods, interested.

ZACK

When our editor Charlie passed away, she thought she would get the job here. She's from Pine Bluff, so she thought she was the heir apparent. When she heard we hired someone from Chicago, she flipped out.

MEGHAN

She wanted the job that badly?

ZACK

Well, the Pine Bluff Tribune has a lot of tradition. We've won lots of awards. We win the Christmas Challenge every year.

MEGHAN

Christmas Challenge?

ZACK

It's a statewide newspaper competition. They choose the best paper in each county. They judge based on every issue from the first three weeks of December. The winner gets a big trophy. And bragging rights!

MEGHAN

So the contest is going on now?

Zack nods.

ZACK

The Pine Bluff Tribune has never lost. But Ms. Know-it-All thinks she can win this year because instead of competing against Charlie she's competing against you.

Zack notices her concerned expression.

ZACK

No pressure, though.

MEGHAN

No. Of course not.

Down below Meghan spots Cal yet again. This time he's carrying a Christmas tree, struggling, barely able to see around it. She studies him, fascinated.

Cal scans the sidewalk nervously, making sure he doesn't get run over again.

EXT. PASTURE - DAY

Mayor Murdoch and Meghan maneuver through a field scattered with hay bales. Meghan glances all around, baffled.

MAYOR MURDOCH
Our paper comes out on Mondays,
Wednesdays and Fridays. Your
deadline to have it finished is ten
p.m. the night before.

A cow MOOS, startling Meghan.

MAYOR MURDOCH
We don't print the paper here. The
printing man comes by at ten and
picks up the pages and takes them
to the printer. Then they
distribute it all across the
county.

Meghan nods. She notices her nice shoes getting muddy. She frowns.

EXT. BARN - DAY

Mayor Murdoch and Meghan approach a barn with a Christmas wreath above the door. Mayor Murdoch opens the barn door and enters. Meghan, uncertain, follows him.

INT. BARN - DAY

Meghan notices various barn animals. Chickens SQUAWK, pigs SNORT, goats BLEAT.

MEGHAN
I know this isn't my office.

MAYOR MURDOCH
No, this is my barn.

He marches to the back of the barn and opens another door.

MAYOR MURDOCH
This is your office.

Meghan peeps inside and discovers that a section of the barn has been converted into a crude office.

INT. BARN/NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DAY

Meghan steps inside and looks around.

The ramshackle office features two desks, two old desktop computers, a filing cabinet, and a few other assorted items.

Mayor Murdoch admires it proudly.

MAYOR MURDOCH

It's got everything you need.
Electricity. Computer gizmos. All
that stuff. Heat ain't working,
but I'll get that fixed.

As Meghan steps backward, she bumps into something. She looks behind her and SHRIEKS as a llama stares at her. She jumps behind a desk. Mayor Murdoch glares at the llama.

MAYOR MURDOCH

Eunice, you don't have no business
in here.

He leads the llama out the door.

MAYOR MURDOCH

Gotta keep the door shut. The
animals like coming in here. No
need to be scared of Eunice. She
won't hurt you. She might spit
occasionally.

Meghan attempts to compose herself.

MEGHAN

Where's the restroom?

MAYOR MURDOCH

There's an outhouse out back.

She stares at him in disbelief.

MAYOR MURDOCH

But if you prefer, you can walk
over to the cafe. They have those
fancy automated hand dryers.

Tired and frustrated, Meghan rubs her face.

MEGHAN

When can I meet my sports editor?
And my features editor?

MAYOR MURDOCH
That's you. It's a small staff.
You're editor of everything.

Meghan nods, troubled.

MAYOR MURDOCH
I gotta get back to work. Your
next issue comes out the day after
tomorrow. So your next deadline is
ten p.m. tomorrow night.

As he marches off, Meghan panics.

MEGHAN
Wait! Tomorrow?! What do I...
How do--

MAYOR MURDOCH
I know nothing about it. Ol'
Charlie ran the paper for fifty
years. He handled all that. They
told me you knew all about
newspapers and such.

Meghan nods, trying to regain her composure.

MEGHAN
Yes. I... I do! I've got it all
under control. Thank you!

MAYOR MURDOCH
I know the job don't pay much, but
maybe next year we can talk about a
raise.

MEGHAN
(puzzled)
Next year?

MAYOR MURDOCH
Oh, I forgot to tell you about
Sasquatch.

MEGHAN
Sasquatch?

MAYOR MURDOCH
Besides yourself, he's the other
reporter. He lives in the woods.

He points out the window.

MAYOR MURDOCH
See that big tree way back there?

Meghan looks out at it.

MAYOR MURDOCH
There's a wooden box nailed to the
tree. That's where he leaves his
news tips. You need to check it
now and then.

Mayor Murdoch departs. Meghan starts to call after him but
can't get the words out. Exasperated, she falls into a chair
and buries her face in her hands.

MEGHAN
Four weeks. It's only four weeks.
I can do this.

Outside her door, farm animals SQUAWK.

EXT. BARN - DAY

A dilapidated outhouse sits behind the barn. Meghan
approaches and peeps through its cracked door.

As she opens the door, a SCREECHING raccoon bolts from
inside. Meghan SCREAMS and jumps back.

The raccoon flees as Meghan holds her rapidly beating chest.

EXT. HILLSIDE - DAY

A pair of binoculars watch Meghan's every move.

Grasping the binoculars is the MAN IN BLACK: 40's, stoic,
tough-looking, dark suit, slicked-back hair, chewing a piece
of straw. He stands behind a tree, hidden from view. He
picks up a walkie-talkie and speaks into it.

MAN IN BLACK
It's her. She's here.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - DAY

Joe and Henry remain on their favorite bench. Henry takes
out a candy cane and CHOMPS on it.

JOE
Where did you get the candy cane?

Henry points to the town Christmas tree. Joe frowns.

JOE
That's a Christmas ornament.

HENRY
Yeah. A tasty one, too!

Nearby, Meghan scurries down the sidewalk. They nod at her.

INT. CAFE - NIGHT

Several customers scattered around the festive dining room.

A beautiful Christmas tree all lit up. Christmas MUSIC plays in the background.

When Meghan enters, everything suddenly gets quiet. Ill at ease, she finds the nearest seat and takes a menu as customers gawk at her, whispering.

She notices someone at the table beside her. It's Cal. She's glad to see a familiar face.

MEGHAN
Didn't we run into each other earlier?

Cal looks up from his meal, recognizing her.

CAL
A couple of times.

MEGHAN
Sorry about my clumsiness. I'm Meghan Wilson.

CAL
Cal Jones.

He nods. Meghan nods. Cal nods again. An awkward silence. Cal returns to his meal. Finally:

CAL
(without looking up)
I normally don't carry around giant snowmen.

Meghan chuckles.

MEGHAN
Well, I normally don't run over people carrying giant snowmen.

CAL

That was my fault. Normally when I hear footsteps I can tell who it is and where they're going.

MEGHAN

Really?

CAL

But not you. I don't have you pegged yet. You're kinda tricky.

MEGHAN

Hmm... interesting. Maybe I could wear jingle bells on my shoes?

CAL

Could you? That would be helpful.

She can't tell whether he's serious or not. He finally glances up at her, managing a grin. She grins back.

Meanwhile, a man in a Rudolph reindeer costume staggers into the cafe, adjusting his head, unable to see, bumping into Meghan's table and knocking over her cup of water. Meghan ducks out of the way as he finally staggers off.

MEGHAN

And I thought I was clumsy!

Cal stands, takes some napkins, helps clean Meghan's table.

CAL

Sorry. We have a new Rudolph costume this year. Still working out the kinks before the Christmas festival.

Close together momentarily, Meghan and Cal make deep eye contact, grinning awkwardly, intrigued by one another.

MEGHAN

Thank you.

Cal nods. He returns to his table and resumes his meal.

WOMAN'S VOICE (O.S.)

Let me guess: Our new editor!

Perky server ANGIE, age 31, approaches Meghan.

MEGHAN

Yes, hi, I'm--

Angie calls out to the customers.

ANGIE

Hey everybody, it's our new editor
from Chicago! Here to win us
another Christmas Challenge trophy!
Let's give her a big Pine Bluff
whoop dee doo!

Customers APPLAUD. A few even give her a standing ovation.

An ELF playing pinball turns and applauds, but then he loses
his ball in play. He scowls, frustrated.

Meghan waves to the customers, embarrassed. Cal examines
her, now appearing slightly troubled.

Angie approaches Meghan.

ANGIE

Hi, I'm Angie! I run the cafe.

MEGHAN

I'm Meghan. Pleased to meet you.

ANGIE

Have you met Buck, my husband?

MEGHAN

No, I don't think so.

ANGIE

He's the photographer at your
paper. His real dream, though, is
to be a stunt man. He can fall off
buildings, break through glass --
almost anything. He's been struck
by lightning four times!

Meghan nods. Angie gives her a fruitcake sample.

ANGIE

Have a sample. My Christmas
specialty: fruitcake!

Meghan takes a bite. She grimaces, but hides it from Angie.

MEGHAN

Mmmm... tasty!

Angie smiles and departs. Meghan frowns, looking for
someplace to spit it out. But she notices Cal watching, so
she begrudgingly swallows and chases it with water.

Meghan notices all of the Christmas decor.

MEGHAN

Look at all of these decorations!

A stoic Cal doesn't look up from his plate.

CAL

We like Christmas.

MEGHAN

I must admit, I've never been much for the holidays.

Cal gives her an odd look. She notices.

MEGHAN

But it's very... festive!

CAL

So you're replacing Charlie at the newspaper?

MEGHAN

Yes. I started today.

CAL

Charlie was the pulse of the community.

MEGHAN

I've heard good things about him.

CAL

He did things... a certain way.

MEGHAN

How so?

CAL

He was trustworthy. Sure, he reported the news. But he was also our friend. He looked out for our community. He was one of us.

MEGHAN

Sounds like I've got some big shoes to fill.

Cal eyes her warily. She puts on a determined face.

MEGHAN

Well, I'm not Charlie, but I'll certainly do my best!

Cal calmly stands and nods stoically toward Meghan.

CAL
Good evening.

He departs. Meghan watches him go, uncertain about him.

EXT. PASTURE - NIGHT

Grasping a flashlight, Meghan cautiously steps toward her office, avoiding hay bales and cows.

INT. BARN - NIGHT

Meghan reaches her office and flips on the light. She gasps, startled by what she sees: a goat eating papers off her desk.

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - NIGHT

Meghan and Zack stand beside several newspaper-sized blank pages that are situated on table tops.

Zack walks over to an electronic gadget.

ZACK
After you finish a story, just
print it out, run it through this
wax machine and plop it down on the
page, and it's ready to go.

She investigates the equipment, fascinated.

She blows on her cold hands, rubbing them together.

MEGHAN
So how do I assign photos?

Zack picks up a slip of paper.

ZACK
Just fill out one of these photo
forms and leave it in Buck's slot.
He'll leave the photos on your
desk.

MEGHAN
So what's going on in the county
right now news-wise? What are the
big issues?

ZACK

Beats me. I don't read the paper.

He considers further.

ZACK

The town Christmas festival is coming up.

Meghan shrugs. She shuffles through papers on her desk.

ZACK

Our former editor, he got lots of his stories from the hotline.

MEGHAN

Hotline?

ZACK

The red button on your phone. When someone has a news tip, they call that line.

Meghan notices the hotline button, fascinated.

MEGHAN

Will that Sasquatch fellow have any stories tomorrow?

ZACK

I dunno, you need to check the tree in the woods.

Meghan types at her computer, appearing perplexed.

MEGHAN

I'm not familiar with this software. And this equipment. This technology seems... outdated.

ZACK

Yeah. Charlie was old school.

MEGHAN

Zack, I'm probably gonna need your help getting started.

Zack nods. Meghan finally takes a breath.

MEGHAN

I met Cal. He seems nice. But when he found out I was the new editor, he seemed, I dunno... bothered.

Cal's head suddenly pops up from behind a table.

CAL

Well, that oughta do it!

Meghan jumps, startled. She gawks at him.

MEGHAN

Oh, I didn't realize you were...

Cal stands.

CAL

The heater. I fixed it.

Cal gathers his tools and departs before Meghan can get a word out.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - NIGHT

The full moon lights up the snow-covered mountains. Below in the town, Christmas lights twinkle.

INT. INN/MEGHAN'S ROOM - NIGHT

The rustic room is all decorated for Christmas.

Meghan enters, sets her suitcases beside the bed, takes off her shoes and collapses onto the bed, exhausted.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - DAWN

A peaceful morning. Mayor Murdoch sweeps the sidewalk with great precision. He pauses to straighten a Christmas ornament, using a leveler to make sure it's perfect.

INT. INN/MEGHAN'S ROOM - DAY

Meghan talks on the phone. INTERCUT Dr. Hawkins from his office.

MEGHAN

I'm confused about something, Dr. Hawkins. The people here... they don't seem to realize that I'm here for only a month -- that I'm not staying.

DR. HAWKINS

Yes, I wouldn't be able to negotiate something like that. Bottom line: They needed someone, and we helped them out. And it helps you out, too. Let's just keep this our little secret, okay?

MEGHAN

But... that doesn't seem right.

DR. HAWKINS

Don't worry, it'll all work out. After Christmas, just tell them you got offered a job in Chicago. They'll understand. It's business.

Meghan sighs, uncertain.

MEGHAN

They have this newspaper competition: the Christmas Challenge.

DR. HAWKINS

Yes, that's why they needed someone so quickly. The contest is a big deal there. They take a lot of pride in it. They've never lost.

MEGHAN

What if we... lose?

DR. HAWKINS

The editor of The Chicago Times is keeping close tabs on you. Let's just say it would be a good idea to win. No pressure, though.

MEGHAN

No. Of course not.

EXT. COW PASTURE - DAY

A tired-eyed Meghan heads for her office, watching carefully where she steps, barely eluding a cow.

EXT. BARN/NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DAY

A festively decorated tractor is parked out front. Sitting atop it is BUCK, age 44, a big, jolly fellow wearing overalls and a ball cap. He laughs out loud while reading a comic book and eating Christmas cookies.

Noticing Meghan approaching, Buck hops off the tractor, wipes his hand on his clothes and extends his hand.

BUCK

Ms. Wilson, hello! I'm Buck.
Pleased to meet you!

MEGHAN

Yes, I met your wife. I hear
you're an ace photographer.

BUCK

Well, I try. Will you be needing
any photos this evening?

MEGHAN

Yes, please. At this point I don't
yet know what's going on in the
county. So for now just bring me
your best hard-hitting photos and
I'll make something of it.

BUCK

It's an honor to work for you, Ms.
Wilson. I will make you proud!
(remembering)
Oh, I almost forgot!

He grabs something from the tractor and hands it to Meghan.

BUCK

Angie said you loved her fruitcake.
She made a whole one just for you!

Buck grins, cranks up the tractor and rumbles off happily
while whistling a Christmas tune.

Meghan stares at the fruitcake, grimacing, not sure what to
do with it. She eyes a cow, which turns away from it.

EXT. EDGE OF WOODS - DAY

Meghan cautiously enters the forest, grasping a big stick,
ready to use it if necessary.

She finds the tree with the wooden box nailed to it. She opens the top of the box. She peers inside. It's empty.

Glancing up, she notices a large, beautiful star ornament atop the tree. She gazes at it, amazed.

A SHUFFLING sound from the bushes. Meghan's eyes widen. Not caring to find out what it is, she runs away.

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DAY

Meghan works at her computer. The phone RINGS. It's the red hotline button lighting up. She answers it.

MEGHAN

Hello? I mean, Pine Bluff Tribune!

She writes in her notepad: "Big story! Breaking news!"

MEGHAN

I'll be right there. Thanks!

She excitedly races for the door.

EXT. BAIT SHOP - DAY

Buck is already on the scene, clutching his camera.

Meghan jumps out of her car and hurries over to him.

MEGHAN

What's going on?

BUCK

I'm not sure. I just got here.

A stoic FISHERMAN exits the bait shop. He spots Meghan.

FISHERMAN

Are you from the paper?

Meghan nods.

FISHERMAN

Follow me.

He leads them behind the building where they find a snowman wearing a fishing hat and holding a fishing pole.

The fisherman pauses beside the snowman, then turns to Meghan, who appears puzzled.

MEGHAN

Um, listen, someone from here
called me about some breaking news.
Do you know who--

FISHERMAN

That was me.

Meghan eyes the snowman.

MEGHAN

This isn't why you called...

FISHERMAN

Yeah. I made it. All by myself.
I'm practicing for the Christmas
festival snowman contest. I took
third place last year. Thought you
might want a sneak peak of what I'm
working on this year. A scoop!

Meghan stares at him in disbelief. She eyes Buck.

MEGHAN

Does the paper run this type of
stuff? Stories about a guy
building a snowman?

BUCK

If it's a good one.
(studying the snowman)
That's a pretty good one.

Buck aims his camera at the fisherman, who poses happily with
his snowman. Meghan sighs.

MEGHAN

Well, right now my lead story is a
lost ballcap. So...

She begrudgingly takes out her notepad.

FISHERMAN

Really? Who lost a ballcap?!

INT. BAIT SHOP - DAY

A Christmas tree is decorated with fish, tackle boxes,
fishing poles and other similar ornaments.

Meghan enters, putting her notepad away. She grabs a bottled
drink and approaches the register, where she finds Cal
standing behind the counter.

MEGHAN

Oh, Cal... hi again! I didn't know
you worked here.

Cal glances up and nods. He remains reserved, seeming wary
of her. She attempts some small talk.

MEGHAN

Some snowman, huh?

CAL

Yes. It is.

Meghan nods. An awkward silence as they both look down.

CAL

I'm sorry about yesterday. I
didn't mean to get off on the wrong
foot. It's just... Charlie was
like a father to me. Having
someone new run the paper... It'll
take some getting used to.

MEGHAN

No, I understand. Fifty years...
that's a long time.

Meghan suddenly remembers something.

MEGHAN

Oh, thanks for fixing the heater!
It's nice and toasty in there now.
Is there anything you can't do?

He considers. A serious expression.

CAL

Well, I can't skate.

Meghan nods, not sure what to make of him. Finally he cracks
a grin at her. She grins back, appearing rather relieved.

A little girl, ELSIE, age 7, comes running from the back.

ELSIE

Daddy, daddy! Look, I found it!
Grandad's fishing pole ornament!

Meghan is caught off guard. Cal grins, pleased.

CAL

Wow, your favorite ornament! You
wanna put it on the tree?

Elsie happily adds it to the Christmas tree. Then she turns and notices Meghan.

CAL
Meghan, this is my daughter: Elsie.

MEGHAN
Hi Elsie!

ELSIE
Pleased to meet you. But why are you here? You don't look like a fisherman.

Cal and Meghan grin, amused.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - DAY

Joe and Henry sit on their bench. Henry munches on a candy cane. Meghan hurries down the sidewalk, blowing into her cold hands. They nod pleasantly at her, and she smiles back.

Across the square, someone sits hidden behind a newspaper. He lowers the paper and peeps out over it. It's the Man in Black. He observes Meghan closely, curious.

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DAY

Meghan types frantically at her computer. Outside, the CALLS of farm animals can be heard. She steps over to the printer and glares at it.

MEGHAN
Come on! Why won't you work?!

She nudges the printer, finally giving up on it. She hurries back to her computer.

The office door opens. It's Zack. He cheerfully sips from a cup, not a care in the world.

ZACK
Want some egg nog? It's homemade!

MEGHAN
Zack, I can't get anything to work! The computer is locked up, the printer is jammed... and I don't know where Buck is!

ZACK
He's playing darts at the cafe.

MEGHAN
Darts?! We're on a deadline! He's
supposed to have photos for me.
There's a Christmas Challenge going
on!

Zack examines the printer.

ZACK
So what's your big story for
tomorrow?

MEGHAN
A guy made a snowman.

ZACK
Cool!

Meghan walks to the tables and eyes the blank pages. She
senses an odor in the air, repulsed.

MEGHAN
This place smells like a barnyard.

ZACK
It is a barnyard.

Meghan massages her aching temples.

INT. GENERAL STORE - NIGHT

Calming Christmas music fills the store. Santa's sleigh is
filled with goods for sale.

Meghan grabs aspirin and disinfectant, then hurries to the
counter where she finds VIRGINIA, a pleasant-looking black
woman in her 70's.

VIRGINIA
You need to relax, child, you're
gonna do just fine. It sure will
be nice to have our newspaper to
read tomorrow. Just know if you
ever need someone to talk to, I'm
here for you, hon.

Meghan seems touched by this gesture.

MEGHAN
Thank you.

Virginia tries to open the cash register, but it's jammed.
She gives it a smack. No luck.

She suddenly YELLS like a mad woman and gives it a ferocious WHACK. Meghan jumps back, startled, as the register opens.

Virginia, smiling sweetly, hands Meghan her change.

VIRGINIA
Merry Christmas, dear.

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - NIGHT

Meghan hurries inside, spraying disinfectant as she goes.

MEGHAN
Zack, we need to--

She spots Cal on all fours. Startled, Cal raises up and bumps his head on a table.

MEGHAN
Cal!

Cal stands, flustered.

CAL
Zack stepped out. I was just fixing your table. I noticed it was wobbly the other night.

MEGHAN
Oh. Yes. Thank you.

Cal rubs his aching head. Meghan massages her aching temples. She removes the bottle of aspirin from her bag.

MEGHAN
Looks like we could both use this.

She opens the bottle and gives him one.

CAL
Anything else I can fix while I'm here? I got my tool belt.

MEGHAN
I can't think of anything at the moment, but...
(considering)
You seem to know this town pretty well...

Cal nods, shrugs.

MEGHAN

Any chance you could give me a tour sometime? Mayor Murdoch seems too busy. And Zack's tours are, well, rather limiting.

CAL

Sure. I can do that.

MEGHAN

Great. Thank you so much!

They gaze at one another, grinning, nodding awkwardly.

CAL

Well, I'll get out of your way. I know you have a deadline. If you need anything, just holler.

MEGHAN

I appreciate it, Cal. I certainly will!

Cal grins and departs. Meghan watches him go, comforted. Then she quickly gets back to work.

EXT. COW PASTURE - NIGHT

Buck's tractor RUMBLES toward the barn. Buck hops off the tractor as Meghan races outside to meet him.

BUCK

Ms. Wilson, I have your photos!

He hands her the photos. She studies one of them, perplexed. It's a photo of a pig wearing antlers.

BUCK

That's Abigail. She's my pig. She loves Christmas!

Another photo shows a sleeping dog wearing a Santa hat.

BUCK

That's my dog, Wilbur! He likes Christmas, too. But not as much as Abigail.

Meghan is dumbfounded.

Buck grins, filled with pride.

EXT. CAL'S HOUSE - NIGHT

A weary Cal enters, rubbing his aching head, sorting through mail. He examines a small package.

CAL
Ma? Ma, it's here!

Sitting in the living room sewing a Christmas quilt is Cal's MOTHER, a silver-haired woman in her 70's. Nearby on the floor, little Elsie works in a Christmas coloring book.

MOTHER
What's here?

Cal opens the package and takes out a necklace with a button attached.

CAL
Your alert button. Just wear this around your neck, and if you ever fall again just push the button.

She frowns.

MOTHER
I told you, I don't need that thing! What, do I look like I'm old? You wear it. You're the one who's clumsy!

Elsie laughs.

CAL
Ma, it's just a precaution.

She considers. Finally she sighs and takes it. She puts it around her neck.

MOTHER
There, happy now?

He nods. She stares at the glowing Christmas tree.

MOTHER
I feel like watching a Christmas movie.

ELSIE
Yay, me too!

CAL
Sure, why not!

MOTHER
Let's have popcorn.

ELSIE
And pancakes!

CAL
Coming right up!

Cal heads off to the kitchen. He pauses, glancing back at his mother and daughter, studying them warmly. He grins.

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - NIGHT

Meghan and Zack lay out the paper at a hectic pace. There are still blank spaces on a few pages.

MEGHAN
The photos Buck gave me... these
are pictures for a family
scrapbook, not a newspaper!

She glances at the time. The clock reads: "9:58".

MEGHAN
I hope they're not strict with the
ten o'clock deadline.

ZACK
They're pretty strict.

MEGHAN
Oh no! There's no headline on the
page three story!

She races to her computer.

ZACK
Did you type up the sports scores?

MEGHAN
I haven't had time!

ZACK
Boy, you have to get the scores in
there or else the parents will be
ticked!

The door opens. A dignified-looking fellow -- the DEADLINE MAN -- steps inside. Checking his watch, he methodically walks over and begins collecting the pages. Meghan panics.

MEGHAN

Um, sir, I know it's ten o'clock,
but we're not quite finished. We
need a few more minutes.

He ignores her. Like a robot, he collects the pages, even those that are incomplete.

MEGHAN

Please, sir?

He picks up page one. Meghan notices a blank space on page one where a photo should be.

MEGHAN

Wait! The page one photo!

He heads for the door, carrying the pages under his arm.

Meghan grabs a photo from her desk and chases him down. As he opens the door to leave, Meghan slides the photo under his arm and sticks it onto page one. The Deadline Man departs, closing the door behind him.

Meghan plops down in her chair, drained.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - DAY

Buck puts up a banner that reads: "60th Annual Pine Bluff Christmas Festival".

Nearby, Mayor Murdoch stands on a ladder, cleaning a Christmas ball ornament with a dust cloth, careful not to miss a spot.

Joe and Henry sit on their bench. They examine the front page of *The Pine Bluff Tribune*.

JOE

This photo here -- the caption says
it's a snowman, but that don't look
like no snowman to me.

The caption reads: "Local Man Builds Stellar Snowman!" But the image above the caption isn't a snowman; it's Buck's pig wearing antlers. Also, the photo is upside-down.

Joe turns the paper upside down to get a better look.

INT. CAFE - DAY

Meghan sits at a table, perusing the menu. Angie approaches.

ANGIE

Meghan, the photo on page one was awesome! Thank you!

MEGHAN

The snowman? You liked it?

ANGIE

Snowman?

Meghan notices a man reading the paper. She looks over his shoulder and notices the upside-down photo of Buck's pig. The puzzled customer turns the paper upside down to get a better look.

Horrificed, Meghan buries her face in her hands.

Several customers stare at Meghan, whispering to one another.

Nearby, the Christmas elf reads the paper. Meghan looks over his shoulder. She notices pages two and three are incomplete, with blank spaces on both pages. The elf is puzzled by this.

Dying of embarrassment, Meghan slides toward the exit.

INT. BAIT SHOP - DAY

On the wall, a decoration features a fish wearing a Santa hat. It displays the words: "Merry Fishmas".

Behind the counter, Cal peruses the newspaper, puzzled by it. Nearby, three scruffy old FISHERMEN sit at a table, also studying the paper.

FISHERMAN #1

Well, so much for the Christmas Challenge. It looks like our winning streak may be over, fellas.

FISHERMAN #2

We used to have a good paper.

FISHERMAN #3

Where did they find her, anyway?

Zack overhears them and approaches.

ZACK

Come on, guys, lay off. It was her first issue.

CAL
Well, the paper certainly is...
different.

ZACK
Meghan's mother passed recently.
She's had it tough. Give her a
break.

CAL
(sympathetically)
I didn't know.

ZACK
She was working real hard. A lot
of that stuff was my fault. Just
give her a chance. She'll be as
good as Charlie one of these days.

The fishermen don't seem convinced.

Cal lowers his newspaper, troubled.

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DAY

Meghan sits at her desk, talking on the phone. INTERCUT with
Dr. Hawkins in his office.

MEGHAN
Thank goodness it's only temporary.
It was a disaster, Dr. Hawkins.

DR. HAWKINS
Surely it can't be that bad.

MEGHAN
It's just... this isn't what I
expected. My other reporter
doesn't even have a phone. He
leaves his stories in a box on a
tree.

DR. HAWKINS
A tree? What kind of tree?

MEGHAN
I dunno, but--

A KNOCK at the door. Mayor Murdoch peeps inside.

MAYOR MURDOCH
Might I have a word with you?

MEGHAN

Oh, sure.
(into the phone)
I'll call you back, Dr. Hawkins.

Mayor Murdoch approaches. Meghan fears the worst.

MAYOR MURDOCH

I just want to inform you that
there will be a city council
meeting tomorrow at seven -- in
case you want to cover it.

MEGHAN

Yes, I do! Thank you!

He departs. Meghan breathes a sigh of relief, hopeful.

EXT. WOODS - DAY

Meghan, grasping a large stick, approaches the wooden box on the tree. She opens it. It's empty again.

She takes out her notepad and writes: "Mr. Sasquatch, I need stories! Thanks, Meghan". She puts the note into the box.

Glancing around the woods, she tightens her grip on the stick and scurries off.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - DAY

Mayor Murdoch admires the decorations for the Christmas festival. He nods, pleased.

But when he glances at the town Christmas tree, he does a double take. He notices that one of the ornaments is a Halloween pumpkin. Frowning, he takes out his pen and pad makes a note of it, shaking his head.

Nearby, Cal stands with his hand in pockets as if waiting for someone. Finally Meghan comes rushing toward him.

MEGHAN

Sorry I'm late! You sure you don't
mind showing me around?

CAL

Not at all.

She nods. She searches her bag, finally digging out her notepad. Then she searches for her pen. She appears stressed. Cal notices.

CAL
Maybe we need to start by going
somewhere fun. Do something...
relaxing. Calm your nerves a bit.

Meghan considers this. She takes an anxious deep breath.

MEGHAN
Maybe you're right. Lead the way!

EXT. RIVER - DAY

Quiet, peaceful. Snow flurries.

Cal and Meghan sit on the bank holding fishing poles, staring at the water.

Cal grins, content. Meghan frowns.

MEGHAN
Are we having fun yet?

CAL
Trust me, you need this. You'll
thank me later.

Meghan shrugs. He eyes her, feeling slightly remorseful.

CAL
Sorry, I'm not the best tour guide.
I mostly just know the good fishing
holes. But, um, this is Crockett
River. Named after Davy Crockett.
He used to roam this area.

Meghan nods. She takes out her notepad, jots down the info.

MEGHAN
You guys are serious fishermen. I
didn't know people went fishing
during winter.

CAL
We do when it's nice out.

Meghan glances up at the falling snowflakes, shivering.

MEGHAN
By the way, your daughter Elsie...
she's quite the charmer!

CAL
Yeah. And full of energy. It can
be a handful sometime -- being a
single parent.

Meghan considers this.

MEGHAN
Oh, I didn't know.

CAL
But my mother helps out. So do
friends. The whole community,
really. We're fortunate.

Meghan nods, intrigued. Cal studies her.

CAL
So Chicago, huh? What's it like
there?

MEGHAN
Windy.

Cal nods.

MEGHAN
But the summers are nice. The
pizza is good. There's lots to do.
Sports. Museums. Concerts. Good
restaurants. People rushing here
and there. The sights, the
sounds...

CAL
You do all of those things?

She sighs.

MEGHAN
Not really. I actually prefer to
stay home, put on my jammies and
read a good book.

Cal nods.

MEGHAN
And when I say book, I mean an
actual book -- not online. I wanna
hold them. Feel them. Smell them.

CAL
You like smelling books?

MEGHAN
Magazines, too.

CAL
And I thought it was just me.

Meghan chuckles, amused.

CAL
You have family in Chicago?

MEGHAN
Just an aunt and uncle. My father lives in Arizona. My brother is in Oklahoma. He's a storm chaser! He was always the wild one. And I was the homebody.

(reminiscing)
When I was a kid, I once got lost in a corn maze. They had to call the fire department! From then on, I stayed home. Inside.

Cal chuckles.

MEGHAN
What about you? Did you ever live anywhere else?

CAL
No. This is my home. These are my people. I belong here.

He glances around the forest.

CAL
I find clarity here. I know these woods like the back of my hands. I know every tree. They're like friends. I can count on 'em. It comforts me.

Meghan nods, impressed. She gazes up at the canopy.

MEGHAN
I like trees, too.

Cal points out one above them.

CAL
That one right there -- the oak? That's Earl. He's a good guy. But he's a bit shy, especially when his leaves start shedding.

Meghan laughs.

MEGHAN

We only had one tree where I grew up. My brother and I climbed it so much, the neighbors probably thought we were monkeys!

Cal laughs. She observes him, noticing his contentment.

MEGHAN

Sounds like you've found your own little paradise. We should all be so lucky. Something you said: "I belong here." I'd like to be able to say that someday. Somewhere. That's important to me.

She glances around the woods again.

Cal eyes her. A quiet moment as they take it all in.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - NIGHT

The 60th Annual Pine Bluff Christmas Festival is underway.

The town sparkles with lights and decorations.

The townsfolk enjoy Christmas-themed games... hot cocoa... ice skating... face painting... caroling.

Mayor Murdoch observes anxiously. So far, so good.

The guy in the reindeer costume tries to adjust his head again, but he stumbles and falls into the bushes.

Meghan, pen and pad in hand, watches the fruitcake-eating contest, taking notes. She grimaces, grossed out by it.

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - NIGHT

Meghan sits at her desk, shuffling through papers. Zack enters, playing with a Christmas snow globe.

ZACK

Find any good stories today?

MEGHAN

Well, I interviewed the fruitcake-eating contest winner.

(exasperated)

(MORE)

MEGHAN (CONT'D)

That's why I'm excited about the council meeting tomorrow. Finally, some hard news! This is what I've been waiting for, Zack. Something to sink my teeth into. That's what attracted me to journalism in the first place: the opportunity to uncover the truth and report it to the people. The chance to make a difference and impact people's lives. It's exciting!

Zack nods, impressed by her enthusiasm. The phone RINGS. The red button lights up.

ZACK

Hotline! I'll get it.

Zack answers it.

ZACK

Pine Bluff Tribune! Uh-huh. Oh, hi Ms. Yates. Your cat? Okay, I'll be right there.

Zack hangs up the phone. Meghan appears puzzled.

ZACK

Her cat's stuck in a tree and won't come down. I'll take care of it.

Zack departs.

MEGHAN

We get cats out of trees?

After a moment:

CAL (O.S.)

Knock, knock.

Meghan turns to see Cal peeping inside. She smiles.

MEGHAN

Cal, come in!

As he does, Meghan notices Elsie behind him carrying a tiny Christmas tree.

ELSIE

Miss Meghan, look what I brought you!

CAL

I know you're not one for the holidays, but we thought maybe your office could use a little Christmas cheer.

Elsie sets it on her desk. A surprised Meghan stares at the bare little tree.

CAL

But if you don't want it, you can toss it out. We just thought...

MEGHAN

No, it's lovely. Thank you, Elsie!

Elsie grins proudly. Then she gazes up at her dad.

ELSIE

Daddy, can I go say hi to the chickens and piggies?

CAL

Sure, Elsie.

Elsie happily runs out the door. Meghan watches her, grinning. Then turns her attention back to the tree.

MEGHAN

Wow. I dunno, it's just... I was never much good at doing Christmas. When I was a kid, mom said I once left taco shells and buttermilk for Santa. Stale taco shells. Santa didn't come around for a while after that.

Cal chuckles. Meghan reminisces.

MEGHAN

But I do have a few good Christmas memories. Making homemade ornaments with mom. My brother and I would put them on the tree while singing carols. And then dad would always lift me up and let me put the star on top of the tree.

CAL

That sounds nice.

MEGHAN

Yeah. It's just... I haven't had any quite like that in so long.

(MORE)

MEGHAN (CONT'D)
I guess I sort of lost the
Christmas spirit.

CAL
Well, maybe we can change that.

They make eye contact, smiling. They both gaze at the bare
little tree.

INT. CAFE - MORNING

Buck assembles a toy Christmas train. A tired Meghan watches
him as she sips coffee and types on her laptop.

Meghan notices a newspaper on the table next to her. She
examines it. The name of the paper is *The Ridgetop Gazette*.

ANGIE
Um, before you read that: Has
anyone told you about Ms. Know-it-
All?

MEGHAN
The editor?

ANGIE
Yeah, of *The Ridgetop Gazette* --
the paper you're holding. Our
papers are, like, big rivals. And
she's upset she didn't get your
job.

MEGHAN
So I've heard.

ANGIE
She does a gossip column on page
two called "Ms. Know-it-All".
Today's column is about you. Don't
pay it any mind, though. She's
just jealous.

Angie walks off as Meghan turns to page two and reads. A
look of surprise spreads across her.

Elsewhere, a CUSTOMER reads the same column.

CUSTOMER
Wow, Ms. Know-it-All is on a roll
today. Listen to this:
(reading aloud)
(MORE)

CUSTOMER (CONT'D)

Crockett County residents are still discussing the debut of Pine Bluff Tribune editor Meghan Wilson. The first issue appeared to be put together by first-graders and featured a smorgasbord of embarrassments, from upside-down photos to missing headlines. With the incompetent and under-qualified Chicago native at the reigns, the once proud Pine Bluff paper has been brought to its knees.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - DAY

Joe and Henry sit on their bench. Henry holds a gingerbread house, attempting to remove its roof.

They look up as a dejected Meghan trudges down the sidewalk. Henry hides the gingerbread house as they nod at her.

When Meghan departs, Henry takes back out the gingerbread house. He finally manages to remove the roof. He takes a bite, happily CHOMPING on it. Joe glares at him, irritated.

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DAY

Meghan stands gazing at her little Christmas tree, which remains bare.

She holds in her hand a crude ornament: a candy cane made of construction paper and glued-on macaroni. A child's handwriting on the ornament reads: "To Mom - Merry Christmas! - Love, Meghan".

She studies it affectionately. Then puts it on the Christmas tree. She admires it, wiping a tear from her eye.

Zack enters. She notices Zack's Christmas sweater.

MEGHAN

Zack, that is one ugly sweater.

Zack swells with pride.

ZACK

Thanks! Hey, did you get any news tips from Sasquatch?

MEGHAN

No, nothing. Thank goodness for the council meeting.

(MORE)

MEGHAN (CONT'D)

Most of the stories I'm using tonight are saved. The photos are ready. I should be in good shape.

She grabs her notepad.

MEGHAN

I'm gonna head over to the meeting.

ZACK

I'll go with ya. Maybe they'll have free Christmas cookies or something!

MEGHAN

I may stop by the general store first. I need some warmer clothes.

EXT. MAYOR MURDOCH'S BARN - DUSK

Meghan and Zack exit and walk through the cow pasture.

Behind the barn, a figure emerges from the shadows. It's the Man in Black. He glances around, making sure the coast is clear. He enters the barn.

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DUSK

The Man in Black shuffles through papers on Meghan's desk. He grabs some photos and stashes them in his jacket.

He finds egg nog in the fridge. He helps himself to it.

He takes a seat, turns on the computer and begins typing.

INT. COMMUNITY CENTER - NIGHT

A sign reads: "City Council Meeting - 7 p.m."

Several townsfolk are scattered about, including the guy in the reindeer suit whose head is on backwards.

Seated at a table on the stage are Mayor Murdoch, Virginia and Cal.

A group of teens SING Christmas carols.

Mayor Murdoch glances anxiously at his watch.

Meghan enters, barely recognizable in her new lumberjack look: flannel jacket, trapper's hat, gloves and boots.

Zack indulges in free Christmas cookies.

As Meghan and Zack find a seat, the townsfolk gawk at Meghan's attire, murmuring.

Cal does a double-take when he sees Meghan's new get-up. He's partly perplexed and partly amused.

Meghan notices Cal and waves warmly at him. Cal nods, giving her a thumbs up sign.

Mayor Murdoch glances at his watch again. Standing, he takes a mallet and BANGS it on the table, which frightens the carolers, causing them to hit a sour note.

MAYOR MURDOCH

I call this meeting to order.

A wide-eyed Meghan excitedly takes out her pen and notebook and prepares to write.

MAYOR MURDOCH

Item number one: Our Christmas Festival started this week. But you already knew that. Item number two: I make a motion that next time we meet, we vote to raise the fine for littering by five dollars. This week on one of our sidewalks I found a gummy bear. A yellow one.
(glaring into the crowd)
I'm not sure who did it, but you won't get away with it again. You can count on that.

Mayor Murdoch eyes Cal.

MAYOR MURDOCH

You have anything, Cal?

CAL

No. The fish aren't biting.

MAYOR MURDOCH

Virginia?

She shakes her head "no."

Meghan watches, waits. Mayor Murdoch looks into the crowd.

MAYOR MURDOCH

Anyone else have anything?

The crowd is silent.

MAYOR MURDOCH
Good, I have work to do.
(bangs the mallet)
Meeting adjourned.

Mayor Murdoch grabs his trusty broom and heads for the exit.
The crowd begins to disperse.

Meghan looks around in disbelief. She glances down at her
blank notepad. She looks toward the stage, as if still
waiting for something to happen.

MEGHAN
You've gotta be kidding.

EXT. COMMUNITY CENTER - NIGHT

Mayor Murdoch marches down the sidewalk. Lumberjill Meghan
chases after him.

MEGHAN
Mayor Murdoch?

He pauses, looks back.

MEGHAN
Aren't there any other newsworthy
items to discuss? You know, things
going on in the county?

MAYOR MURDOCH
No. It's Christmas.

MEGHAN
You mentioned raising the fine for
littering. Could you elaborate?

MAYOR MURDOCH
We'll talk about it next meeting.

He hurries off. Meghan wants to say more.

MEGHAN
But...
(voice trailing off)
...the Christmas Challenge...

She drops her head, defeated.

Cal watches from afar. He moseys over in her direction, not
quite sure what to say. He studies her attire.

CAL
Well, at least you're warm now.

She sighs. Zack catches up to her.

ZACK
Hey Meghan, I can't help out at the paper tonight. Gotta babysit my little sister. See ya later!

Zack rushes off. Meghan starts to call out after him but decides against it. She appears desperate. Cal notices.

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - NIGHT

A frantic Meghan enters, followed by Cal.

MEGHAN
Thank you so much for offering to help!

CAL
I've never put together a paper before, but I'm a quick learner.

Meghan flips on her computer and gets to work.

MEGHAN
I might be able to write one paragraph on the meeting -- and that's if I really stretch it.

Cal sniffs the air. So does Meghan.

CAL
What's that smell? Like burnt egg nog.

MEGHAN
And cheap cologne.

Meghan stares at her computer monitor, concerned.

MEGHAN
Wait, what happened to the local sports story? I had it saved, but it's not here!

Cal opens the top of the printer and examines it.

CAL
Uh-oh. Looks like someone spilled egg nog in the printer.

Meghan surveys her desk.

MEGHAN

The photos! Where are the photos?!

She searches all around, panicked.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - NIGHT

A peaceful night at the festival. The lights twinkle. The townsfolk enjoy hot drinks, cookies and Christmas cheer.

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - NIGHT

The clock on the wall reads: "9:58."

Meghan works desperately at her computer. Cal struggles mightily as he helps to lay out the paper.

MEGHAN

I am so fired after tonight.

CAL

It's not your fault. You're the victim of shenanigans.

Meghan runs to the table tops and surveys the paper. There are blank spaces everywhere.

MEGHAN

We don't have any photos to fill these spaces!

CAL

How about the photos you used for the last edition?

He pulls out the pages that were used for the previous edition. Those photos -- the snowman and Buck's pig -- remain on the pages.

MEGHAN

But I can't run the same photos again. Besides, I don't have any captions written up!

CAL

We've got one minute.

MEGHAN

Okay, go, go!

Meghan and Cal nearly collide as they hurriedly peel the photos off the old pages and stick them in the blank spaces.

MEGHAN

Make sure they're not upside-down!

The office door opens. It's the Deadline Man. He checks his watch, then collects the pages.

MEGHAN

Please, sir, just a few more minutes! We were vandalized!

He ignores her.

She tries to hold on to one of the pages, but the Deadline Man takes it from her. He takes one from Cal as well.

Meghan is nearly in tears as he methodically takes the rest of the pages, then departs.

Meghan drops her head onto her desk, frustrated.

Cal eyes her sympathetically.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - DAY

Joe and Henry sit on a bench. Joe examines the newspaper.

JOE

That picture of Buck's pig must have been popular. They ran it again today.

Henry glances over, noticing the pig wearing antlers.

HENRY

She is an attractive pig.

Elsewhere, Mayor Murdoch tidies up around the Christmas festival. He watches people step on his precious sidewalks, leaving small bits of snow. Trying to maintain his composure, he sweeps up after them.

Meghan, wearing sunglasses and her trapper's hat, wanders down the sidewalk head down, hoping no one recognizes her.

INT. CAFE - DAY

A customer reads the newspaper. Turning a page, he notices several blank spaces. Disgusted, he tosses the paper aside.

Elsewhere in the cafe, Meghan hides in the corner, sipping coffee, head down, still wearing sunglasses.

As she shuffles through her notepad, someone pauses in front of her. She glances up. It's Cal.

CAL

Are you undercover today?

Meghan glances up, slightly embarrassed.

MEGHAN

I... no. Please, have a seat.

Cal sits across from her. She removes her sunglasses.

CAL

Any word yet on the egg nog bandit?

Meghan shakes her head "no."

MEGHAN

I really wanted to win the Christmas Challenge. I know it's so important to everyone here. But...

CAL

Don't let that bother you. It's just a silly trophy. You're gonna do fine. Just give it some time.

Meghan nods, uncertain. Cal studies her.

CAL

I'm curious: What made you want to become a newspaper person?

MEGHAN

My uncle. He was a newspaper man in Chicago. Everyone else had regular ol' boring jobs, but he was a character: top hat, sports coat, chomping his cigar, talking fast. He always had these great stories about places he'd been and people he'd met. It all seemed so exciting.

She mulls it over.

MEGHAN

But it's more than that. I enjoy telling people's stories.

(MORE)

MEGHAN (CONT'D)
Searching for the truth. I think
it can, I dunno, help people. Who
knows, maybe even make the world a
better place?

She shrugs it off.

MEGHAN
I dunno, maybe I'm just a
dreamer...

CAL
No, I think it's a noble pursuit.

MEGHAN
But big picture? I wanna do what
you do.

CAL
Sell worms?

Meghan chuckles.

MEGHAN
I admire how the townspeople feel
about you. How they depend on you.
The closeness you have with them.
That sense of community. That's
something I've never felt. I long
for that.

Cal considers her words as they watch Rudolph and a Christmas
elf enter and greet happy customers.

MEGHAN
So what's your favorite thing about
running a bait shop?

CAL
Well, I get free popsicles.

She nods, impressed.

CAL
The bait shop wasn't something I'd
planned. I actually wanted to be a
park ranger.

MEGHAN
I can see that.

CAL

My father owned the bait shop, and I started working there in high school. My siblings left Pine Bluff. I stayed. It just sort of stuck.

Meghan nods. He considers it further.

CAL

It suits me. I mean, I do know the best fishing holes. And the people that come into the shop... many just need someone to listen. A shoulder to lean on. Perhaps coming to the bait shop can, I dunno, brighten their day somehow.

MEGHAN

And what about all of those other odd jobs you do around town?

CAL

Just trying to make myself useful. My mother always said I had too many irons in the fire.

MEGHAN

And now you can add newspaper man to your résumé. Thanks again for your help last night. It would have been much worse without you.

Cal shrugs it off.

MEGHAN

So your siblings left, but you stayed behind to keep the town going. You're practically the George Bailey of Pine Bluff!

CAL

Well, I don't know about all that. I'm just glad they put up with me.

She studies him, admiring him.

MEGHAN

I'm glad you stopped by.

Cal grins, pleased.

CAL

Me, too.

Nearby, an OLD WOMAN peruses the newspaper. Suddenly her jaw drops, shocked by what she reads.

OLD WOMAN
Abominable Snowman?!

She peers out the window, frightened.

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DAY

Meghan and Zack stand beside a grim-looking Mayor Murdoch, who holds a copy of the paper.

MAYOR MURDOCH
You were vandalized?

ZACK
It's Ms. Know-it-All. It has to be. Who else would do this?

MAYOR MURDOCH
But that doesn't explain the Abominable Snowman.

Meghan and Zack glance at each other, puzzled.

MEGHAN
What?!

Mayor Murdoch hands her the paper.

MAYOR MURDOCH
The story says the Abominable Snowman was spotted heading toward Pine Bluff. Says we should all stay indoors or go underground.

MEGHAN
I didn't write that story!

MAYOR MURDOCH
Isn't that your name on it?

MEGHAN
Yes, but... Someone must have gotten into the system and--

MAYOR MURDOCH
Just be more careful. The
Christmas festival is going on, we
can't be scaring people away
talkin' about giant marauding
snowmen. That's not the Christmas
spirit.

Mayor Murdoch departs, along with Zack.

Meghan drops into her chair.

MEGHAN
Just three more weeks...

EXT. SQUARE - DAY

The Old Woman from the cafe hurries down the sidewalk,
scanning the horizon as she passes a man and woman.

OLD WOMAN
The Abominable Snowman is coming!

She rushes away as the man and woman shrug, perplexed.

EXT. MOUNTAIN ROAD - DAY

An old pickup truck is parked beside the road.

Meghan and Angie sit in the bed, gazing at the snow-covered
mountains.

MEGHAN
It's so wild and beautiful.

ANGIE
Yeah. I come here when I need to
clear my head. I figured you
needed a change of scenery.

MEGHAN
We don't have mountains like this
back home.

ANGIE
You have skyscrapers, though.
That's pretty cool.

Meghan shrugs.

Still gazing at the mountains, Meghan suddenly stands up in the bed of the truck, clenches her fists, raises her hands over her head, and lets out a primal SCREAM.

The scream ECHOES all around them. Angie nods, impressed.

ANGIE

This is a good place to let it all out.

Meghan sighs. Finally she sits back down.

MEGHAN

I thought running a newspaper would be so... romantic. I guess I didn't take into account deadlines, angry readers, vandals... barns, outhouses, goats...

ANGIE

C'mon, you're being too hard on yourself. It'll get better. You're gonna love living here. And you and I are gonna be such great friends... I can already tell!

Meghan considers her words. She appears as if she wants to say something, but decides against it.

MEGHAN

I really wanted to do a good job. I wanted to make this work. Maybe Ms. Know-it-All is right: Maybe I'm in over my head.

ANGIE

Oh, Ms. Know-it-All is just mad because she can't get a man. Speaking of which, what's your situation like? Got your eyes on anyone?

MEGHAN

No, I don't have time.

ANGIE

I think Cal has a thing for you.

MEGHAN

What? No. Cal? Really?

ANGIE

He blushes every time he's around you. I've never seen him blush before.

MEGHAN

He's... different.

ANGIE

He does so much and helps so many people. I don't know where we'd be without him. And it's not like he doesn't have enough on his plate already.

MEGHAN

What do you mean?

ANGIE

His wife passed four years ago. And he takes care of his mother. And his daughter. Runs the bait shop, too. But he never complains. He's a keeper.

She nudges Meghan.

ANGIE

But you gotta catch him, first!

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - DUSK

The Christmas festival continues.

Mayor Murdoch carefully sweeps the sidewalk. He notices a light on a Christmas tree is out. Irritated, he attempts to screw the bulb in tighter. No luck.

He taps on the light. Nothing. He taps harder. When he does, all the lights on the tree go out. He sighs.

Elsewhere, a more relaxed Meghan roams the festival alone. She observes and jots down a few notes, admiring the decorations, snapping a few photos.

She notices a couple enjoying a carriage ride. When she sees the driver, she does a double take -- it's Cal, wearing old-timey clothes and a top hat.

As the carriage approaches, Cal tips his hat at Meghan.

CAL

M'lady.

Meghan just shakes her head at him, amazed. She snaps a photo. They make eye contact, smiling warmly at one another.

Meghan gazes at Cal differently than before. It appears something has changed in her. There's a spark in her eye.

INT. CAFE - DAY

Meghan enters with her laptop and takes a seat. She notices customers staring at her, snickering. An OLD MAN looks over at her.

OLD MAN

Don't pay 'em no mind, miss. There
ain't nothing wrong with blowing
off a little steam occasionally.

Meghan is baffled. Angie sets a newspaper in front of her:
The Ridgetop Gazette.

ANGIE

Page two. I'm sorry. They must
have followed us.

Meghan turns to page two, which displays a photo of Meghan standing in Angie's truck with hands in the air, screaming. The caption reads: "Pine Bluff Tribune Editor Partying Hard!"

EXT. CAFE - DAY

Meghan flees the cafe, covering her face in embarrassment.

MAN'S VOICE (O.S.)

Party on, Ms. Wilson!

Meghan frowns.

Across the way in a darkened alley, the Man in Black observes Meghan's troubles, pleased with his handiwork. He enjoys a celebratory Christmas cookie.

INT. BAIT SHOP - DAY

Cal stands behind the counter carving a bird Christmas ornament.

The same three fishermen sit around the table, reading *The Ridgetop Gazette*.

FISHERMAN #1

Ms. Know-it-All is really getting on her case. Listen to this:

(reading the paper aloud)

Ms. Wilson doesn't seem concerned that she has turned *The Pine Bluff Tribune* into the laughingstock of the journalism world. In fact, rather than working to improve the paper, sources say she spends all of her time partying, chasing men and generally living it up.

CAL

That's not true. She's been working hard non-stop since she got here.

The fishermen gawk at the photo of Meghan, chuckling.

FISHERMAN #1

Working hard or hardly working?

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - DAY

Mayor Murdoch studies the paper racks on the sidewalk. *The Pine Bluff Tribune* rack still contains papers. *The Ridgetop Gazette* rack is empty -- sold out. He grimaces.

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - NIGHT

The clock on the wall reads: "10:00".

Meghan and Zack work feverishly on the paper. Several blank spaces remain on some pages.

The office door opens. It's the Deadline Man.

MEGHAN

Please, sir, just a few more minutes. Our electricity went off and we--

Ignoring her, the Deadline Man takes the pages and departs.

Zack appears pleased.

ZACK

At least we got the sports scores in. And no Abominable Snowman!

Meghan slumps to the floor. She drops her head and sobs.

INT. MAYOR MURDOCH'S OFFICE - DAY

Mayor Murdoch works at his desk, removing a string of Christmas lights from a box. There's a KNOCK at the door.

MAYOR MURDOCH

Come in.

A subdued Meghan enters.

MEGHAN

May I have a word with you?

He nods. She sits. Takes a deep breath.

MEGHAN

I want to let you know that I'm resigning as editor.

Mayor Murdoch doesn't seem overly surprised.

MEGHAN

I appreciate the opportunity, but it's just not working out for any of us. The people here, they deserve better. I'm... so sorry.

Mayor Murdoch appears resigned to fact that she's made up her mind. Masking his disappointment, he nods.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - NIGHT

While townsfolk enjoy the Christmas festival, a forlorn Meghan sits on a bench, gazing at the lights, contemplative.

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DAY

Meghan works at her computer. There's a TAP at the door.

MEGHAN

It's open.

Cal peeps inside. Meghan perks up.

MEGHAN

Cal, hi! Come in.

He steps inside, appearing a bit tentative.

CAL

Well, how about that? We didn't collide this time.

MEGHAN

Yay, progress!

CAL

I heard you'll be leaving us soon.

A long silence as they both contemplate this.

MEGHAN

Yeah. It's for the best.

CAL

Some of us wish you'd reconsider.
You've just had some bad breaks,
that's all. Who knows, maybe
you'll get some good scoops from
Sasquatch soon.

MEGHAN

Yeah, well... you know. It doesn't
matter now.

CAL

Anyway, I... I just wanted to wish
you well. In whatever you decide
to do next.

MEGHAN

Thank you, Cal. Same to you. I
regret that I didn't get a chance
to get to know you better.

(catching herself)

I mean, all of you -- everyone
here.

They glance at each other. An awkward silence.

CAL

Again, I apologize I was so cold at
first. I was just... I dunno.
Sometimes I'm a little old-
fashioned.

MEGHAN

Nothing wrong with old-fashioned.
It's refreshing. It makes you
unique.

Cal blushes slightly. Getting a bit fidgety, he starts for
the door, but then turns back to Meghan.

CAL
I know it hasn't been easy for you.
Taking care of your mother for all
that time. Giving up your career.
That takes a special person.
That's... real love.

He regards her warmly.

CAL
Most people never know real love.

She considers this. They eye one another fondly. Finally
Cal turns to depart.

Meghan wants to say more. She stands.

MEGHAN
Um, Cal?

He pauses. She takes a step toward him, appearing torn.

MEGHAN
In case I don't see you again
before I go. I, uh... I hope you
have a wonderful Christmas.

CAL
You too.

Cal forces a grin and departs. Meghan sighs.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - DAY

Joe and Henry watch Meghan, who wanders down the sidewalk.

JOE
I sure am gonna miss seeing her
rush all over town. Running into
people. Doing jumping jacks.
Seems like a nice lady.

Henry nods.

As Meghan continues down the sidewalk, from out of nowhere a
happy Elsie runs up to her.

ELSIE
Miss Meghan!

MEGHAN
Oh, hi Elsie!

ELSIE

I was in the Christmas play and you put my picture in the paper. That was real neat! My grandma liked it, too. She cut it out and put it on the fridge. Thank you!

She hugs a surprised Meghan, who grins and hugs her back. Then Elsie takes something from her pocket.

ELSIE

I made this. For you.

Elsie hands it to Meghan, then smiles and runs off.

Meghan looks down at the homemade Christmas ornament: a star with glitter. On back it reads: "To Meghan. Merry Christmas! Love, Elsie".

Meghan studies it, overwhelmed.

INT. CAFE - DAY

Meghan sips coffee as she watches the toy Christmas train.

ANGIE

Have you heard the news? They plan to hire Margaret Green as your replacement. Ms. Know-it-All.

Meghan sets her cup down, stunned.

ANGIE

After all she's done to you, I can't believe she has the nerve to come work here. And then what she said about you in her column today. That was too much.

Curious, Meghan sees a man reading *The Ridgetop Gazette*. She grabs the paper from the startled man. She turns to the gossip column and reads.

MEGHAN

(reading aloud)

Sources tell Ms. Know-it-All that Wilson will be returning to Chicago this week. Presumably she'll return to waiting tables, a job much more suited to her talents than running a newspaper.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - DAY

A solemn Meghan calmly gets into her car and drives away.

EXT. ROAD - DAY

Meghan's car speeds past a sign: "Entering Ridgetop".

EXT. RIDGETOP GAZETTE NEWSPAPER BUILDING - DAY

A sign reads: "The Ridgetop Gazette - Crockett County's No. 1 Source For News".

Meghan's car pulls up. Meghan marches for the door.

INT. RIDGETOP GAZETTE - DAY

The office Christmas tree is aglow. A REPORTER works at his desk. Meghan charges past the stunned fellow, approaching a door marked: "Editor".

MS. KNOW-IT-ALL'S OFFICE

Sipping tea at her desk is Ms. Know-it-All, MARGARET GREEN: 40's, sophisticated, a turned-up nose, an air of superiority.

The door is thrown open. Margaret looks up, recognizing Meghan.

MARGARET

Well, well... if it isn't our
little friend from Chicago.

Meghan charges toward her.

MEGHAN

Just where do you get off running
that kind of stuff in your paper?
Spreading lies, spying on people,
vandalizing...

MARGARET

(innocently)
Whatever do you mean?

MEGHAN

Have you no ethics whatsoever? No
shame?

MARGARET

Ms. Wilson, it's not healthy to blame others for your shortcomings. You had your chance and failed. Now I'm going to get mine.

MEGHAN

You've single-handedly ruined my career. I oughta come across this desk and wipe that smirk off your face.

MARGARET

Did you learn that in ethics class?

The reporter enters and holds Meghan back.

REPORTER

Please, mam, you need to go.

MEGHAN

You barked up the wrong tree, lady!

The reporter leads Meghan away, but she grabs the two office Christmas stockings as she goes.

MEGHAN

I'm gonna fill these with coal!

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - DAY

At the Christmas festival, Mayor Murdoch adds a new string of lights to a tree as a fiery Meghan approaches.

MEGHAN

Mayor Murdoch, I'm not resigning after all. I know The Ridgetop Gazette has been beating us and getting the scoops, but those days are over. I'm gonna pulverize 'em. Make mincemeat of 'em. Wipe the floor with them. And win the Christmas Challenge. I'll be in my office if you need me.

She storms off. Mayor Murdoch shrugs and continues working, getting himself all tangled up in the string of lights.

EXT. COW PASTURE - DAY

A cow chews the cud, looking up as a fierce flannel-wearing Meghan marches determinedly toward her office.

The cow MOOS. Meghan eyes the cow.

MEGHAN
Yeah, that's right!

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DAY

Meghan sorts through her notes as Zack looks on.

MEGHAN
I'm just gonna have to work longer
hours, make more phone calls, dig
deeper for stories.
(remembering)
Oh, the Snowman Contest is tonight!

ZACK
I can cover it if you want. I know
you have lots of work to do here.

MEGHAN
That would be great. Thank you,
Zack!

Zack shrugs. He suddenly has an idea.

ZACK
Hey, maybe you could write
something terrible about Ms. Know-
it-All. You know, to get revenge.

MEGHAN
I won't stoop to her level. I'm
going to beat her with good, old-
fashioned, hard-nosed journalism.
I need to make my last two weeks
here count.

ZACK
(puzzled)
Last two weeks?

Meghan catches herself.

MEGHAN
I mean, the last two weeks of
December. You know... the
holidays. The Christmas Challenge?

Zack nods.

EXT. WOODS - DAY

Meghan approaches the box on the tree. She opens it, surprised to find something inside. She removes a piece of scratch paper. It contains a note written in pencil.

The note reads: "Here's a scoop. The principal of Ridgetop High will resign and run for sheriff. Inquire about it."

Meghan studies the note, curious.

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DAY

Meghan talks on the phone.

MEGHAN

Mister Brown, is it true you'll be stepping down as principal of Ridgetop High in order to run for sheriff?

She perks up, jotting something in her notepad.

MEGHAN

When did you make this decision?

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - NIGHT

Townsfolk stroll around at the Christmas festival.

In one area, several people build snowmen with great urgency as the crowd CHEERS them on.

Zack stands among crowd, wearing headphones, listening to music, uninterested in the contest, focused on his hot dog. Glancing around, he notices a cute girl nearby.

Zack observes the contest briefly, then turns his attention back to the girl, who smiles at him. Zack, a big smear of mustard on his face, plays it cool, nodding, grinning.

INT. MS. KNOW-IT-ALL'S OFFICE - DAY

Margaret dusts off the top shelf. She grins, pleased.

MARGARET

I think the Christmas Challenge trophy will look good right here.

The reporter enters and tosses a newspaper onto her desk.

REPORTER

I think you better see this.

Margaret takes the paper and notices *The Pine Bluff Tribune* front-page story: "Ridgetop Principal To Run For Sheriff". She gawks at it, stunned.

MARGARET

I don't believe it. She scooped us! Little Miss Chicago went and scooped us!

Tossing the paper aside, she grimaces.

MARGARET

How could this happen?!

INT. CAFE - MORNING

Angie, Buck, Virginia and others read Meghan's newspaper article with enthusiasm, murmuring and discussing.

EXT. WOODS - DAY

Meghan opens the box on the tree. There's another note inside: "New fire station planned. Inquire about it."

Meghan studies the note excitedly.

INT. BAIT SHOP - DAY

Meghan enters, looks around, doesn't see anyone.

MEGHAN

Cal?

EXT. BAIT SHOP - DAY

Cal stands behind the shop, using binoculars to watch something. Meghan spots him and approaches.

MEGHAN

Cal!

He lowers his binoculars, thrilled to see her.

CAL

Meghan! I heard you decided to stay with us.

MEGHAN

Yeah! What are you looking at?

CAL

Oh, just birds. I spotted two Purple Finches -- a male and a female. Don't see many of them around here. The female's color is drab, very camouflaged, but the male's coloring is brilliant.

Meghan notices bird feeders scattered around.

MEGHAN

Huh, I didn't have you pegged as a birder.

CAL

Yeah, well, some of my pals think I'm strange with all my bird books and such. But it's relaxing. Birds are fascinating if you take time to watch them.

Meghan nods. Cal feels a bit self-conscious.

CAL

I like other stuff too besides birds.

(contemplating)

I like baseball.

MEGHAN

My favorite sport!

CAL

Wheelbarrows.

MEGHAN

They're very handy!

CAL

Old movies.

MEGHAN

Bogart, Stanwyck. You're speaking my language!

CAL

Banana pudding.

Meghan frowns.

CAL

No?

MEGHAN

Can't win 'em all.

They gaze at one another.

MEGHAN

The reason I stopped by is, I
printed up some business cards.

She removes them from a satchel.

MEGHAN

I know you see a lot of people here
at the shop. Could you maybe pass
them out to your customers? Tell
them if they ever have any news
tips, please give me a call.

CAL

Yeah. Sure.

MEGHAN

Thank you! Oh, and if anyone ever
catches a big fish, call me. We'd
love a photo for the paper!

A bemused Cal notices her enthusiasm.

CAL

Yeah, but I'm sure you'd like more
hard-hitting news occasionally.

She shrugs.

CAL

If it would help, I could get a
speeding ticket or something.

MEGHAN

You're a hoot, Cal.

CAL

Nice bird reference.

She notices a bird on a feeder.

MEGHAN

What kind of bird is that?

CAL

Black-capped Chickadee.

He hands her the binoculars, and she examines the bird.
Cal studies her. Meghan catches him looking. She grins.
A cell phone RINGS. Cal answers it.

CAL
Yes? Okay, I'm on my way.

He glances at Meghan.

CAL
My mother's alert button went off.

Cal rushes away. Meghan considers.

MEGHAN
I'll go with you!

EXT. CAL'S HOUSE - DAY

A pickup truck pulls into the driveway. Cal and Meghan jump out and race for the door.

INT. CAL'S HOUSE/LIVING ROOM - DAY

Cal and Meghan enter.

Sitting awkwardly on the floor is Cal's mother. Nearby, Elsie looks on, concerned.

ELSIE
Grandma fell, daddy. I tried to help her up, but she's too heavy.

Cal's mother frowns.

MOTHER
I'm not that heavy!

She notices Cal gawking at her.

MOTHER
Well, don't just stand there. Help me up!

CAL
Ma, are you all right?

MOTHER
I will be when you pick me up off the floor!

Cal and Meghan help her to her feet and onto the couch.

MOTHER

It certainly took you long enough
to get here. What, did you stop
and have lunch first?

CAL

Ma, you need to be more careful.
How did you fall?

MOTHER

How should I know! One minute I
was standing and the next minute I
wasn't.

She casts a suspicious glance at Meghan.

MOTHER

And who is this?

CAL

Meghan Wilson, our newspaper
editor. I told you about her.

ELSIE

Grandma, she's the one who put my
picture in the paper!

MEGHAN

Hi! So nice to meet you.

She studies Meghan, uncertain about her.

MOTHER

You talk funny.

CAL

(embarrassed)
Mother!

MOTHER

Where are you from?

MEGHAN

Chicago.

MOTHER

So why are you here? Did you get
lost or something?

CAL

Ma!

MOTHER

Cal wouldn't do well in Chicago.
As a kid, the wind gave him
terrible ear aches.

Cal shakes his head, exasperated.

ELSIE

Miss Meghan, would you take me ice
skating sometime? Dad's no fun to
skate with, all he does is act
silly and fall down.

MEGHAN

That sounds fun. I'd love to!

Meanwhile, Cal's mother scrutinizes Meghan further. She
shrugs, finally looking over to Cal.

MOTHER

Eh, I guess you could do worse.

CAL

Ma, what are you talking about?!

Cal turns red. Elsie giggles. Meghan tries to hide her
amusement.

EXT. CAL'S HOUSE - DAY

Cal and Meghan exit.

CAL

I'm sorry about all that.

MEGHAN

Oh, don't apologize. She's
charming. Feisty, but charming.

They walk toward Cal's truck.

MEGHAN

I think it's wonderful what you're
doing. Helping your mother.
Spending time with her.

CAL

Well, she did raise me. I figure
it's the least I can do.

MEGHAN

Cherish those moments, Cal. My
mother and I...

(MORE)

MEGHAN (CONT'D)
it brought us closer. We talked
about everything. I wouldn't trade
a moment that we had together. It
was a privilege.

Cal considers her words. As they walk, Meghan notices
greenery in a tree above her.

MEGHAN
Look, mistletoe!

She seems pleased. Cal looks up and examines it.

CAL
I believe that's poison ivy.

MEGHAN
Oh.

She steps closer to him, caught up in the moment. They look
deeply into each other's eyes.

A horse WHINNIES, startling Meghan. She turns and notices
horses in a pasture.

MEGHAN
Are those your horses?

Cal nods. She gazes at them.

EXT. HORSE PASTURE - DAY

Cal leads a horse by the reins. Sitting atop the horse is a
nervous yet excited Meghan. She looks all around, soaking up
this new experience.

She reaches out and rubs the horse gently. A huge smile
spreads over her face.

MEGHAN
This is soo awesome! I've never
been around horses before.

CAL
You're a natural. Definite cowgirl
potential!

They walk a bit farther, enjoying the peace and quiet.

Meghan gazes at the snow-topped mountains in awe.

MEGHAN
Wow...

Cal notices her smile and enthusiasm. He's smitten.

CAL

If you'd like, maybe we could go riding together sometime. I know this one spot in the mountains that's beautiful in the spring.

Meghan considers this. When Cal isn't looking, her smile evaporates.

INT. CAFE - DAY

Customers excitedly read *The Pine Bluff Tribune*. The front-page headline: "New Fire Hall Planned For County".

Meghan works busily at her laptop while enjoying a Christmas pastry. Angie approaches.

ANGIE

I bet Ms. Know-it-All is so mad she could chew nails. You're getting all the scoops lately!

MEGHAN

I wish I could take credit, but it's Sasquatch. He's giving me all the leads. How does he get his information? What exactly is he?

Angie shrugs.

MEGHAN

He has lovely handwriting, though. The notes in the box... they're written in pencil.

EXT. WOODS - DAY

Meghan opens the box on the tree and pulls out a note. It reads: "Inquire about Highway 71 extension."

INT. BAIT SHOP - DAY

Cal stands behind the counter. He picks up the paper and notices Meghan's story: "Highway 71 Road Extension Planned".

He nods, impressed.

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - NIGHT

There's a new wooden bird ornament on the office Christmas tree. Zack examines it.

ZACK
Cal gave this to you?

MEGHAN
Yeah. He made it.

Meghan works diligently at her computer.

MEGHAN
Zack, about your snowman contest story. I don't mean to be critical, but you need to write a little more about the contest itself. You mention the tasty hot dog and the stale popcorn, but...

ZACK
I told you I'm no good at reporting.

MEGHAN
But who won the contest? I don't see that in your story.

ZACK
I'm not sure. I got, uh, distracted.

Meghan sighs.

ZACK
Oh, Cal said he'll stop by and help you tonight. I gotta babysit again.

Meghan nods, pleased.

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - LATER

The clock on the wall reads: "10:00".

The Deadline Man enters, checking his watch. Meghan and Cal work desperately on a page that's incomplete.

The Deadline Man gathers the pages.

MEGHAN

Wait, please, I have just one more space to fill!

Ignoring her, he takes the page and departs.

Meghan sighs, exhausted. Cal is surprisingly upbeat.

CAL

Not bad! Just one more minute and we'd have been finished!

MEGHAN

Not good enough. There was no excuse this time. No goat. No vandals. No excuse.

Cal drops his head.

Meghan notices him, softening a bit. She manages a grin.

MEGHAN

But you... you were great. You've been a lifesaver, Cal. Thank you.

Cal perks up, shrugging it off.

MEGHAN

Ya know, I think we make a pretty good team.

Cal grins, pleased.

MONTAGE

INT. HIGH SCHOOL GYMNASIUM - DAY

Meghan interviews the basketball coach, eagerly taking notes.

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DAY

Buck shows Meghan his photos, including one which shows a kid sitting on Santa's lap. Meghan nods, pleased.

INT. COMMUNITY CENTER - NIGHT

A sign reads: "Crockett County School Board Meeting". Meghan busily takes notes. Sitting across the room is Ms. Know-it-All. They glare at each other.

EXT. CHRISTMAS FESTIVAL - NIGHT

Meghan and Elsie ice skate together, having a blast. Cal watches from the sidelines, eating popcorn, waving at them.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - DAY

Mayor Murdoch replaces another gingerbread house on the town Christmas tree. He eyes Joe and Henry, who innocently look away.

EXT. CHRISTMAS FESTIVAL - DAY

Children make s'mores at the fire pit.

A man walks the catwalk during the ugly sweater contest.

Buck takes photos of the Snowball Toss contest, dodging a snowball.

A reindeer race consists of puppies wearing antlers. Meghan watches, puzzled, taking notes.

END OF MONTAGE

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - NIGHT

The Pine Bluff Christmas Festival continues into the night.

Cal stands alone, observing the festivities. Meghan spots him. Perking up, she puts away her notepad and approaches.

MEGHAN

What, you're not working for once?

CAL

Well, actually I'm here to make sure the tree lighting goes off okay. I did the electrical work.

MEGHAN

Figures. I'm surprised you're not playing Santa, too.

CAL

I did. Once. They said I wasn't jolly enough.

Meghan chuckles. She looks all around, enjoying the festivities.

MEGHAN
This is fun!

CAL
I thought you didn't go much for
the holidays?

She shrugs.

MEGHAN
They're growing on me.

Cal notices a hot chocolate stand.

CAL
Care for some hot cocoa?

MEGHAN
You don't have to twist my arm!

Cal walks over and gets two cups. He hands one to Meghan. They sip hot chocolate and happily stroll around, barely avoiding the stumbling guy in the reindeer suit.

Nearby, Angie and Buck explore the festival with little Elsie. When Elsie spots Cal and Meghan, she runs over to them.

ELSIE
Daddy, this is so much fun! Hi,
Miss Meghan! You look pretty
tonight!

Before a surprised Meghan can respond, Elsie spots Santa nearby and rushes over to him.

MEGHAN
She is such a sweetheart!

Meghan and Cal follow Elsie, who gazes up at Santa.

ELSIE
Excuse me, Santa? How many elves
are at the North Pole? Where does
tinsel come from? Why are your
cheeks so rosy? Why reindeer and
not moose or elk?

Santa appears overwhelmed. Meghan and Cal laugh.

Nearby, a happy elderly couple walk arm-in-arm. They greet Meghan and Cal before moving on.

Meghan takes it all in.

MEGHAN

So this is what they mean by
community. I mean, Chicago is
great, but... this is different.

CAL

So you're saying you like it here?

MEGHAN

Yeah. I do.
(eyeing Cal)
There's plenty to like.

Cal grins, pleased.

Nearby, VOICES count down: "Ten, nine, eight..."

CAL

The tree lighting!

He and Meghan hurry over toward the town tree. Cal appears
anxious. Meghan joins in the countdown: "Three, two, one..."

The tree LIGHTS UP beautifully. Everyone CHEERS. Meghan
eyes Cal, who lets out a sigh of relief.

MEGHAN

I never doubted.

Nearby, a choir SINGS Christmas carols. Meghan and Cal enjoy
the music together.

Meghan takes a deep relaxing breath.

MEGHAN

This is... nice. This is what
Christmas should be.

She and Cal gaze at one another, lost in the moment.

Suddenly remembering something, Meghan checks the time.

MEGHAN

Goodness, I have a deadline
tonight! Thanks for the cocoa!

CAL

My work is done here. I can help
you!

Meghan seems appreciative as they hurry off together.

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - NIGHT

Meghan works feverishly, not quite finished.

The Deadline Man enters and collects the pages.

He goes to collect the page that Meghan is working on, but she takes the page and runs off with it. He chases her.

Like a football player, Meghan fakes left and then right. She runs past his outstretched arm, dives and hands off the page to Cal, who spins away from the Deadline Man and slaps a story on the page, filling the blank space.

Cal then hands the page to the flustered Deadline Man, who grabs the page and departs. Meghan appears stunned.

MEGHAN

We made it! We made deadline!

Meghan and Cal celebrate, jumping and dancing and exchanging a high-five. The nearby barn animals SQUAWK their approval.

EXT. MAYOR MURDOCH'S BARN - NIGHT

A shadowy figure emerges from behind the barn. It's the Man in Black. He watches Meghan and Cal depart.

He makes sure the coast is clear, then he enters the barn.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - DAY

Someone backs out of a shop awkwardly, carrying a large bag of bird seed. It's Cal. When he hears the sound of JINGLING bells, he pauses, puzzled.

Then he sees Meghan approaching. He notices that she now has JINGLING bells on her shoes.

She grins slyly at him, then continues on. Cal watches her go, shaking his head in amazement.

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DAY

Meghan and Zack enter. They detect a smell.

ZACK

That smell. Like burnt egg nog.

MEGHAN

And cheap cologne.

Zack opens the top of the printer.

ZACK
Uh-oh. Not again...

Meghan stares down at her desk.

MEGHAN
The photos!

She sorts through her stack of photos, stunned. Someone has used a black sharpie to draw ridiculous objects on the photos: beards, mustaches, funny hats, giant snowmen, etc.

EXT. EDGE OF WOODS - DAY

The Man in Black uses binoculars to watch Meghan as she shows Mayor Murdoch the tarnished photos. He snickers, proud of his handiwork.

CAL (O.S.)
Such a waste of perfectly good egg
nog.

Startled, the Man in Black turns to see Cal glaring at him. Behind Cal stands Buck, glaring and CRACKING his knuckles.

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - DAY

A grim Meghan paces while Zack works on the printer.

MEGHAN
It's just not fair to the readers.
There's no way I can put out a
quality paper when I have to
contend with this.

The office door opens. The Man in Black begrudgingly steps inside, wearing binoculars and grasping his walkie-talkie.

Meghan and Zack gawk at him, alarmed. Meghan sniffs the air, detecting a familiar scent.

Following him inside is Cal and Buck. Meghan is perplexed.

CAL
I found him outside.

Meghan regards the Man in Black, who drops his head, unable to look her in the eyes.

Cal notices his fancy shoes.

CAL

Not many people around here wear shoes like those. Looks just like the footprints I found outside the other night.

Meghan eyes Cal, impressed.

MEGHAN

So you're a detective, too?

CAL

I used to watch Magnum P.I.

Meghan encircles the Man in Black, studying him with interest.

MEGHAN

My guess is that the person who's been doing all of the vandalism was put up to it by someone else. If this person would come clean, I might have mercy on them.

The Man in Black grows uneasy. But remains silent.

MEGHAN

Zack, call the sheriff.

Zack picks up the phone.

THE MAN IN BLACK

No, wait! I, uh...

He glances back at Cal, who puts on his best intimidating face. It doesn't work. But behind Cal, Buck's intimidating face does the trick. The Man in Black gulps.

MAN IN BLACK

It was me. I'm Ms. Know-it-All. I mean, I'm not actually Ms. Know-it-All, but she pays me to spy on you. And disrupt your work.

(pleading)

I'll do anything you want. Just keep Haystack here away from me.

He again glances back at Buck.

Meghan considers his plight.

MEGHAN

Well, it is Christmas. I'm willing to forgive, but only under one condition: You promise to stop spying on us and leave us alone.

MAN IN BLACK

Yeah. Okay. I promise.

MEGHAN

Also, this office is getting a bit dirty. It could use some sweeping.

The Man in Black glances around, shrugs, nods.

MEGHAN

Oh, and one more thing: Sing us some Christmas carols.

She takes a seat and waits.

The Man in Black studies her, baffled.

MEGHAN

Well? We're waiting...

He appears uncomfortable. Tries to think of a song. Clears his throat. Swallows hard. Then:

MAN IN BLACK

(singing badly)

The first noel...

Zack strains to keep from laughing. The Man in Black pauses, unable to go through with it. But Meghan glares at him.

MAN IN BLACK

...the angels did say...

Cal and Buck grimace, barely able to stand it.

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - NIGHT

The Man in Black sweeps the office floor without much enthusiasm. He glances back at Cal, who supervises him.

THE MAN IN BLACK

Ya know, I wouldn't get too close to her if I were you.

CAL

(puzzled)

What? What do you mean?

THE MAN IN BLACK
 Meghan. She's playing you for a
 fool. All of you.

Cal doesn't understand.

THE MAN IN BLACK
 She ain't staying here. She never
 intended to. She just came here to
 hone her skills. Climb the ladder.
 She has a job lined up at a big-
 time newspaper in Chicago.
 Starting in January.
 (amused)
 What, you think she wanted to stay
 in Pine Bluff? With you?

He chuckles, continues sweeping.

Cal is at loss.

EXT. WOODS - DAY

Meghan removes a note from the box. She grins, pleased.

A branch SNAPS in the distance. Meghan, not afraid now,
 looks all around the deep woods, curious.

MEGHAN
 Hello?

No reply. She sighs.

INT. MS. KNOW-IT-ALL'S OFFICE - DAY

Margaret enters her office, holding a copy of *The Pine Bluff Tribune*. She examines the headline: "Crockett County Park To Add New Hiking Trail".

MARGARET
 This has got to stop. She's
killing us!

She notices a large envelope on her desk. Puzzled, she opens it and pulls out a photograph.

The photo shows Meghan posing triumphantly over the defeated Man in Black, who sadly holds a broom while wearing antlers.

Margaret turns the photo over. It reads: "Your game is over. Let's play nice now, shall we? Merry Christmas, Meghan."

Margaret fumes.

EXT. SIDEWALK - DAY

Mayor Murdoch examines the paper racks. *The Ridgetop Gazette* rack still contains papers. *The Pine Bluff Tribune* is sold out. He almost manages a grin.

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - NIGHT

The clock on the wall reads: "10:00".

The Deadline Man enters, surprised by what he sees.

Meghan and Zack sit with their feet propped up, relaxing, munching on Christmas cookies and sipping cocoa.

MEGHAN
It's all yours.

The Deadline Man gathers the pages and departs.

Meghan and Zack do a celebratory fist bump. And then they enjoy another cookie.

Zack admires the little Christmas tree, now all decorated with unusual ornaments -- bird, tractor, fish, etc.

ZACK
That used to be such a sad little tree. Now look at it!

MEGHAN
Yeah. So many friends I've made here have brought me ornaments. Each ornament has its own story. It's like my very own little community Christmas tree.

She admires it warmly.

MEGHAN
It's the best Christmas tree I've ever had.

INT. INN/MEGHAN'S ROOM - MORNING

The phone RINGS. Struggling to wake up, Meghan grabs it.

MEGHAN
Hello?

Her eyes widen.

MEGHAN
What?! Really?! Um, can you hold
on for a second?

Meghan sets the phone down, stands on the bed and jumps up and down, celebrating.

INT. CAFE - DAY

Customers read *The Pine Bluff Tribune*, pointing to stories and discussing them with enthusiasm.

Meghan enters, barely able to contain herself.

MEGHAN
We won! The Christmas Challenge!

The cafe erupts into celebration.

BUCK
You won! Woohoo, you won!

MEGHAN
We won, Buck. You, Zack, Cal,
Sasquatch -- all of us! We won two
awards!

ANGIE
Two?!

MEGHAN
On the Journalism Today website, we
were named small-town paper of the
week for the whole region! They
raved about our superb
investigative journalism! It's the
first time The Pine Bluff Tribune
has ever won that award!

BUCK
Well yee-haaa!

Buck gives Meghan a hug as the excitement spreads.

ANGIE
I think this calls for a party!

MEGHAN
Party?

ANGIE

To celebrate our awards. Our
newspaper. Our new editor.
Everything! I'll get to planning!

INT. INN/MEGHAN'S ROOM - DAY

Meghan talks on the phone. INTERCUT Dr. Hawkins from his
office.

MEGHAN

Thank you, Dr. Hawkins! Yeah, it
was a big surprise.

DR. HAWKINS

I'll make sure everyone at The
Chicago Times hears about it.
They've been following your
progress. They're looking forward
to having you. And I know you're
excited to get back here -- to dive
into some real, hard-hitting news.

Meghan considers, suddenly seeming uncertain.

MEGHAN

Yeah...

EXT. SIDEWALK - NIGHT

The storefronts are all lit up for Christmas as the festival
continues.

A somber Meghan moseys down the sidewalk alone.

She pauses, watching through the cafe window as festive
townsfolk enjoy the decorations and music and each other.
She studies them, a sense of longing on her face.

CAL (O.S.)

Congratulations.

Meghan turns to see Cal. She brightens.

MEGHAN

Oh, Cal, there you are! I tried
calling. Thank you!

She runs to give him a big hug but pauses when she notices
his glum expression. He methodically sticks his hand out.

Puzzled by his coldness, Meghan shakes his hand.

MEGHAN

I couldn't have done it without
your help!

Cal nods. He studies her sadly.

MEGHAN

Is everything okay, Cal?

He finally manages to put on a brave face.

CAL

Yeah. It's just, ya know,
Christmas. I've got lots to do.

An awkward silence as Cal looks away. Meghan studies him.

CAL

Congratulation again. Good
evening.

He reluctantly turns and proceeds down the sidewalk.

Meghan watches him go, mystified.

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - NIGHT

Meghan and Zack busily work on putting together the paper.
Zack hums Christmas carols. Meghan appears distracted.

ZACK

You're quiet tonight. Especially
for someone who just won a big
award. Two big awards!

Meghan shrugs.

MEGHAN

Guess I'm still a bit overwhelmed
by it all.

She looks over at the shiny new Christmas Challenge trophy.

ZACK

I thought Cal was gonna help out
tonight? Like I said, I might have
to leave early...

MEGHAN

I left him a couple of messages,
but he hasn't called back. You
know Cal, he's pretty busy this
time of year.

Zack suddenly perks up.

ZACK

I'm looking forward to the big party tomorrow night! It's gonna be a blast. We've got so much to celebrate!

MEGHAN

(without much enthusiasm)
Yeah.

INT. INN/MEGHAN'S ROOM - NIGHT

Meghan sits at the edge of the bed. She gazes tenderly at the photo of her mom.

MEGHAN

Well, mom, it's working out as planned. Soon I'll be back home living my dream. The one you and I talked about so many times...

She stands and approaches the window, appearing melancholy. She stares out over the town, admiring it, contemplating.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - NIGHT

A troubled Meghan strides down the sidewalk. She takes a deep breath, trying to put on a happy face.

A couple of townsfolk give her odd stares, almost as if disgusted by her. But she doesn't notice and continues on.

She arrives at the picnic shelter for the party. She reads the banners: "Congratulations Pine Bluff Tribune!" "Good Work, Meghan - We Are Proud of You!" "Our Paper is #1!" She manages a slight chuckle.

She glances all around, but there's no one in sight. Puzzled, she checks the time.

Finally she spots Zack lumbering down the sidewalk.

MEGHAN

Zack! The party starts at 7:30, right?

Zack glances up at her, a dejected look on his face. He turns and walks away from her.

MEGHAN

Zack?

He disappears into the darkness. Meghan watches him go, baffled.

Meghan paces. Finally she notices Cal approaching. Relieved, she anxiously approaches him.

MEGHAN

Cal!

She notices his stoic expression.

MEGHAN

What's going on? Where is everyone?

CAL

It probably has something to do with this.

He hands her a copy of *The Ridgetop Gazette*. She examines the front page.

MEGHAN

(reading aloud)

Pine Bluff Tribune editor uses town as stepping stone. Planned to take Chicago job all along.

Meghan is stunned.

CAL

I guess everybody knows by now.

Meghan turns away from Cal, unable to face him.

She takes a deep breath. Finally she looks over at him, holding back tears.

MEGHAN

I'm so sorry, Cal. What I did was wrong. I should have been up front. I used you.

Cal studies her.

MEGHAN

Everyone hates me now. I don't blame them.

She drops her head, devastated.

CAL

I don't hate you. Nobody hates you. The people here aren't like that. No one here wants to take away your dreams. It's just... this is a close-knit community. They trust one another. They're just hurt a little. That's all.

He considers it further.

CAL

You're right: You should have said something. But that's water under the bridge. Give it a couple of days, it'll blow over.

Meghan contemplates something, suddenly appearing anxious.

MEGHAN

I... I have to go now.

CAL

Go? Where?

MEGHAN

Chicago. I think I should head back tonight.

CAL

Are you sure?

MEGHAN

I've done enough damage here.
Goodbye, Cal.

She starts to extend her hand, but then has a change of heart. She hugs him instead. Cal, caught off guard a bit, is tentative at first. But then he gradually responds with a warm embrace.

Finally Meghan steps back and gazes up at him.

MEGHAN

You're a good man, Cal. Thank you for being so kind to me. I wish you nothing but the best. Tell Elsie and your mom I said goodbye.

She forces a grin, then turns and walks away. Cal wants to say something, but can't get the words out.

Remembering something, Meghan pauses and removes a sheet of notebook paper from her pocket. She examines it.

As she walks away, she crumples up the paper and tosses it toward the trash can, where it bounces off the rim.

Cal watches her go, torn.

After a moment, Cal walks over and picks up the crumpled notebook paper. As he starts to drop it into the trash can, he notices handwriting on it.

He uncrumples it and reads. As he does, his mouth drops open. He glances up and looks for Meghan, who is long gone.

INT. INN/MEGHAN'S ROOM - NIGHT

A suitcase on the bed. Meghan folds her clothes.

As she packs, she runs across a photo. It's a picture of Meghan and Cal at the newspaper office, laughing and posing with the llama.

Studying the photo, Meghan takes a deep breath. She wipes a tear from her eye.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - NIGHT

All is calm and peaceful. Christmas lights twinkle.

Meghan packs luggage into her little car. She turns and examines the town one last time.

She spots *The Pine Bluff Tribune* paper rack. She sniffles. She turns for her car and opens the door.

ANGIE (O.S.)

Meghan?!

She turns to see Angie racing toward her, followed by Buck.

BUCK

We didn't know.

MEGHAN

Know what?

Zack emerges from the shadows.

ZACK

That you had decided to stay.

Joe and Henry arrive. So does Virginia. And Mayor Murdoch.

MEGHAN
How did you know?

They all look to Cal, who holds up the crumpled piece of paper.

CAL
Your speech. For the party.

Others arrive. The elf. The stumbling reindeer.

Meghan studies them all, at a loss for words. Moved by their appearance, she steps toward them.

MEGHAN
I just want you to know that...
you're all so very special to me.
Each and every one of you. And I'm
so, so sorry that I hurt you.

Cal studies her intently, a tender expression on his face.

MEGHAN
Before I arrived here, I felt
lost. I honestly wasn't sure what
I was doing or where I was going.
But coming here has given me a
sense of direction. A purpose.
Your kindness... I can't even put
it into words. I will never be
able to thank you enough.

The townsfolk listen with interest, softening toward her.

MEGHAN
Since I was a kid, my dream was to
work at a newspaper in Chicago.
That's true. And now I have that
opportunity. But this place. This
community. You all have made me
feel so wanted. So happy. Like I
belong. My mother always said that
home is where the heart is. And my
heart...
(looking to Cal)
...is in Pine Bluff.

Cal can't help himself any longer. He moves toward her.

CAL
Stay. Please?

They gaze into each other's eyes.

Meghan contemplates, glancing at the crowd. She swallows hard. Then she looks back up to Cal, a spark in her eye.

A hush in the crowd.

Meghan suddenly moves toward Cal and kisses him.

CAL
Is that a yes?

She considers. She looks to Mayor Murdoch, who nods his approval. She grins, then looks back to Cal.

MEGHAN
That's definitely a yes.

The crowd applauds as snow begins to fall. Everyone gazes up in awe.

Elsie arrives with her grandma. She waves at Cal and Meghan, beaming.

Meghan soaks it all in.

MEGHAN
This is perfect. Like a dream.
Everyone is here. Everyone
except... Sasquatch.

CAL
Oh, don't mind him. He's a bit of
a recluse.

MEGHAN
So you've met him?

CAL
You could say that. Maybe you
have, too.

Puzzled, Meghan notices the pencil in Cal's shirt pocket. She takes it and examines it.

MEGHAN
Wait. No one writes with pencils
anymore. Except...

Her eyes widen.

MEGHAN
No! You? Sasquatch?!

Cal shrugs.

CAL
What can I say? I hear a lot of
news at the bait shop.

MEGHAN
So along with your other jobs,
you're a reporter, too?

CAL
I'd say more of a snoop.

Meghan shakes her head, amazed. Cal glances at his watch.

CAL
Well, whaddaya know. It's
officially Christmas Eve.

Meghan regards him warmly.

MEGHAN
Merry Christmas, Cal.

Cal looks deeply into her eyes.

CAL
Merry Christmas, Meghan.

Meghan and Cal kiss passionately as the Christmas celebration
begins.

FADE OUT.

THE END