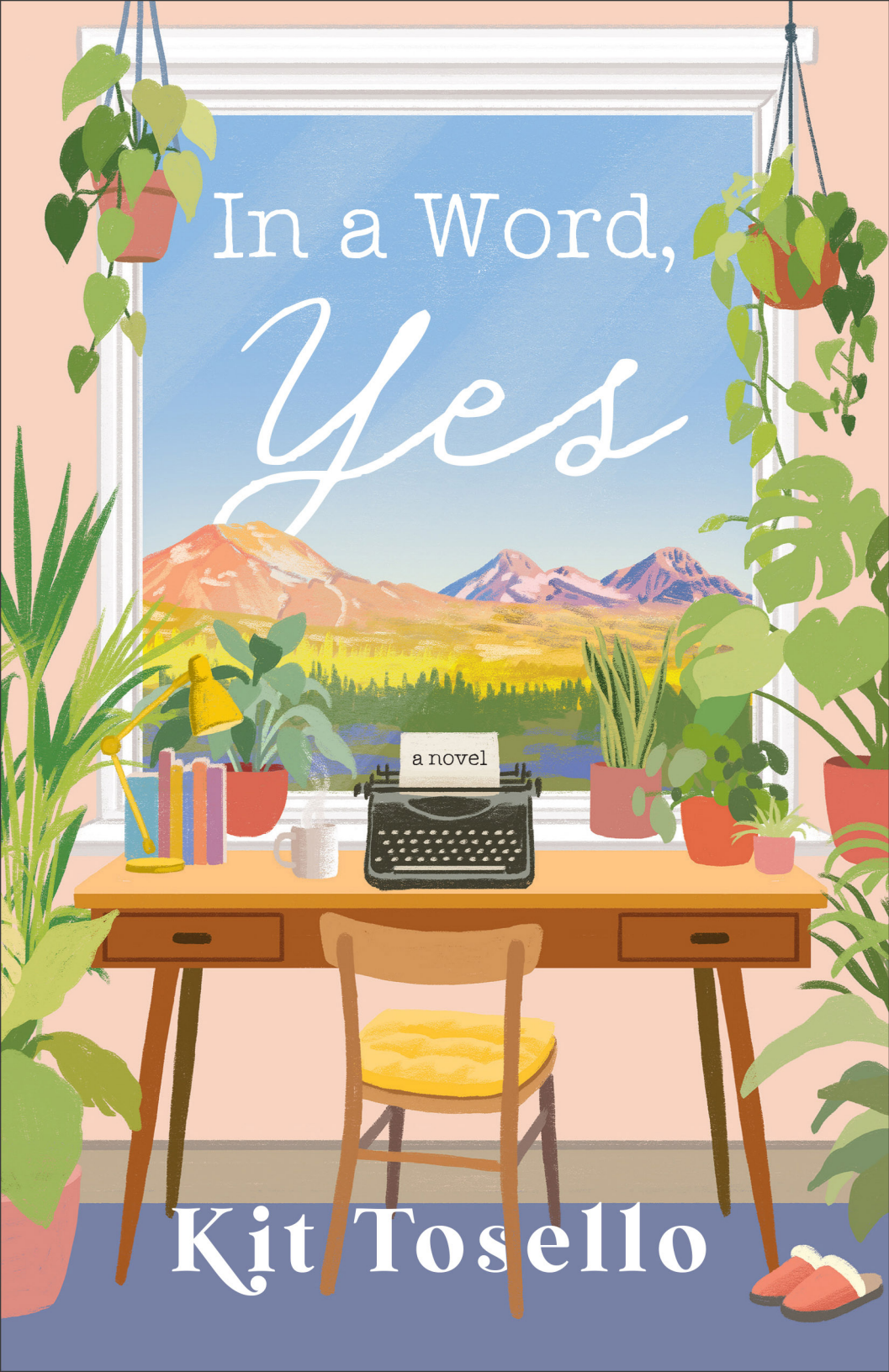
In a Word,
Yes
a novel
Kit Tosello

In a Word, *Yes*

Kit Tosello

Revell
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Grand Rapids, Michigan

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In memoriam

For my mother, Doris Mulkey,

who possessed mad typing skills

and a wealth of words,

yet only ever chose the kind ones

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One life on this earth is all we get, whether it is enough or not enough, and the obvious conclusion would seem to be at the very least we are fools if we do not live it as fully and bravely and beautifully as we can.

Frederick Buechner

Between every two pines is a doorway to a new world.

John Muir

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one

ennui (n.): a feeling of dissatisfaction

Lucy

At 8:12 in the morning, near the corner of Third and Elm, I happen upon an act of audacity that will never make the front page of *The Mountain Messenger* no matter how much it rattles me. From a hairline fissure in the sidewalk, a single petunia rises strong. It cranes its violet-and-yellow face to the sky, as if to say "Why not?"

Why not indeed.

Beyond the graveyard, clusters of the same blossoms edge the back steps of the old stone Presbyterian church. Yet somehow this little lady escaped the fold.

I tap pause on my earbuds. Gripping the cemetery's wrought-iron fence, I crouch close and whisper, "Nicely done."

Maybe as a delicate seed, she was carried here on a stiff breeze or the bottom of some child's shoe. Sure, you could call the fact that she made it to safety, somehow finding her way into this speck of dirt, a thing of wonder.

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But that's not what has me transfixed.

I narrow my gaze at the brazen thing. *And then you dared to bloom.*

If a flower could talk, this one appears to be saying "You ought to try it sometime, Lucy."

Rude. I mean, this morning's decision to walk rather than drive the six blocks to work counts as a win, right? *Something* had to be done for this vexing unease.

Who knew that a person's life could fit like a well-worn sweater one day and turn itchy the next? I need to change things up, is all.

Never mind that I can already see the day's events playing out ahead of me, same as last Monday, and the Monday before, and, well yeah, the two hundred preceding Mondays . . .

Once I'm settled at my station in the front lobby of the newspaper office, I'll fall into the mindless rhythm of answering phone calls and formatting classifieds. No doubt by now old Samuel Peabody III's dimly lit corner office is shut up as tight as a tomb. Our grizzly bear of an editor in chief prefers to be left alone while scratching out his weekly opinion piece. From three streets away, I can practically smell the acrid aroma of dark roast coffee sludge (Sam always brews the first pot), muted by the sweetness of whatever home-baked delicacy Dot brought to share.

Dot and I will swap Wordle scores. (I really tripped on today's word. What was it? Oh yeah, *moxie.*)

Sheesh. This is getting personal.

At this precise moment, Mighty Meg is probably out running down some last-minute story. Monday mornings mean we're all on deadline. Yet inevitably again today, some local will call or pop by in a frenzy, ad in hand, well past deadline.

Inevitably I'll accept it.

From a career perspective, I suppose I've plateaued at the *Messenger.* But hear me out. I cherish being part of something so essential to our town. Something bigger than me. Furthermore, I don't *not* enjoy my job. I know the rhythm of its seas. My days hold

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few surprises—a feature I cherish. Besides, what more can a girl expect after abandoning her journalism degree midsemester for a man whose secrets would scar her heart?

So go ahead. Mock me, little petunia. You're not wrong.

I tip my Hydro Flask and give her a good drenching. She'll need it today. Early fall in central Oregon loves to deal out a few random days of withering temperatures before the cozy season arrives to stay, and today looks to be a scorcher. For the moment, though, the sun's rays are friendly, cresting the far tree line where national forest gives way to city limits.

Lord knows I appreciate my little speck of soil here, where Chase and I put down roots. It's lovely. Peaceful. Safe. If God has more for me, he's going to have to spritz me with Miracle-Gro Bloom Booster.

I eye the sky. *No, that isn't a request.* I haven't the audacity.

But then I smile inside. *Audacity* was *Merriam-Webster*'s word of the day, and already I've used it twice. So, there's that!

Turning left onto Birch, I restart my audiobook. This one's a cozy mystery that requires I suspend my disbelief to the utmost. Come to think of it, when did I become a thirty-one-year-old who listens to stories about croissant heists in French bakeries and tabby cats that solve murders? Sure, my tastes are broader than that, but still.

I make a very poor millennial.

Over at the redbrick school administration building, a pair of high-spirited fawns bounce across the lawn. Which is why I notice the marquee out front. Someone updated the large blocky letters to announce *Parent-Teacher Confrences Oct. 21.* Instantly the contents of my stomach curdle.

But why? I mean, beyond the egregious misspelling?

Sure, there was that fiasco last year with Chase's second-grade teacher, an epic complication to my single-mom life. But so far, his return to school is providing the kind of snug daily routine kids like my Chase crave far more than the average eight-year-old, and

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Mrs. De Los Santos hasn't yet sent home a single dreaded yellow slip for behavioral issues.

So what's this toxin gnawing at my insides?

When realization finally dawns, it clocks me. Like someone has, in fact, punched me low in the gut. My lungs constrict. *October twenty-first.* A sealed vault of unwelcome memories clicks open.

It'll be five years on October twenty-first.

Oxygen. I need more oxygen. No, that's not it—pine-scented fresh air extends as far as the eye can travel, and today that means clear to the last ribbons of snow glistening on the Cascades. I try to sink into the audiobook narrator's tranquilizing voice. Because none of that matters.

The events of five years ago bear no resemblance to my life today. Chase and I are living, breathing, *thriving* proof of the psalm I've so often rehearsed. God *has* sheltered me with his wings. His faithful promises *have been* my armor and protection.

This funky disembodied sensation will pass.

Across the street, the butter-yellow Western facade of Sweet Reads Used Books & Tea beckons me like a friend. *Yes.* A million times yes. My feet knew to carry me here. Chocolate chai. That's the antidote.

I step off the curb.

"Heads up!" A thundering voice. A blur of khaki. On two wheels.

"Sorry!" I yell, hopping back to the curb. After all, I wasn't using the crosswalk.

And then, in slo-mo, comprehension dawns.

The broad-shouldered man on the bike, the one I nearly encountered quite violently just now, wears a stiff black vest with SHERIFF emblazoned across the back. In all caps! As in, someone deputized to maintain law and order.

To keep our streets safe from disoriented proofreaders who jaywalk.

The brown-haired officer arm-signals a left turn at the nearby

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intersection and glides out of sight—but not before tucking his chin and throwing a glance over his shoulder. What was that look? A raised brow. And was that a half-sneer? Or half-smile? Inscrutable. It all happened so fast.

With my luck, he's circling the block for a return visit with his ticket book.

In line at Sweet Reads, I lay a hand over my heart. It prances all over the place like one of those fawns. The doorbell jangles behind me. Heat creeps up my neck. I'm about to be publicly interrogated by an official in uniform, I just know it. I turn, but it's only one of the Grumblies arriving.

The Grumblies is what I privately call the coterie of balding gents who gather at the same table most mornings to sip hot beverages and air their grievances loud enough for all to hear. Seems to me, whenever they run out of enough hell-in-a-handbasket current events to sustain their daily habit, they just scratch their chins and start over again.

I hitch my canvas tote bag higher on my shoulder. Since when do our local sheriffs don Bermuda shorts and patrol the town on bikes, anyway? Not that it isn't a perfect fit for Charity Falls' small-town neighborly vibe. Charming, really.

"Dang, Lucy," my friend Savannah says, greeting me at the counter with her whitening-strip smile. "Lavender's a good color on you. Missed you at church yesterday."

I stare at her. Blink. I expected her to comment on my addled appearance, not my new thrifted top. How could she miss the telltale eye twitch? But it's better this way. At least, this is what I tell myself. I'm a lot of things, but a pity-seeking missile isn't one of them. Besides, I see no need to divulge my misstep with the cop. Savannah knows all too well how checked out I get when I'm shook.

"Actually, I was there," I say, pushing my glasses higher up on my nose. Sure, I can afford contacts now. But I stick with glasses, if only so I don't look twelve years old. "Chase got off to a bumpy start. We came late."

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"Oh, boo!" she pouts. "Sorry. Sounds rough. But you should've come sit with me and Lucas."

"It was fine. I needed to sit in back so we could leave early. I'd made a deal with Chase."

True, and also not true. Some days I'm not entirely up for peopling. Plus, who wants to be a third wheel? Savannah's new husband is great, but for his sake I need to bow out sometimes.

Don't mistake me. It's not that I feel sorry for myself.

But sometimes . . . well, sometimes I sense others do. Still, I came away from the service with a C. S. Lewis quote that bears contemplating. I'll get around to it eventually.

What I'd never tell Savannah—and it pains me to even say it—is that, from my end of things, the minute she got serious with Lucas, our friendship became healthier. She's one of those people drawn to me, the ant to my sugar, someone who drains my emotional tank. Thanks to the help of a wonderful therapist, I've finally learned to guard my boundaries.

Lately, though, I wonder if I'm so good at saying no that my mouth no longer remembers how to form a yes.

Savannah flicks a glance behind me. A line must be forming there. She helicopters her fingers over the register. "So, what can we get started for ya?"

Before I can answer, Ian Witherspoon materializes beside her. "I got ya, Lucy," the owner says, raising a steam pitcher in salute. "Chocolate chai, extra chocolatey." The oat milk container sits open on his counter. He even remembers my milk preference? "Oh, and don't run off. I have something for you."

Savannah's eyes widen. She shoots me a discreet wink pregnant with meaning. *Ack*. She's wrong about Ian where I'm concerned. Way wrong. This place that smells of cardamom and the pages of old books may be one of my happy places, but the owner is a friend to all. Although his slight British accent and the early silvering of his temples wouldn't hurt his case, if I were looking for that sort of thing. Which I'm definitely

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not. But Savannah will always see what Savannah wants to see, bless her.

Let it go, I lip silently, although her boss is no longer anywhere in view. She flashes a cheeky grin as I move to the pickup area. Whatever. The girl can't help it that she's duty bound to sprinkle me with some of her giddy-newlywed glitter.

A whiff of chai spices escapes as I secure the lid. Something tickles my bare ankle. "Louie!" I reach to give the shop cat a scratch, and he winds between my legs. The orange tabby is one of my favorite things about Sweet Reads, along with the sign hanging over the entrance to the adjacent reading room that reads "Once you have read a book you care about, some part of it is always with you." A quote from the cat's namesake, Louis L'Amour.

Thanks to Sun Country Apartments' cruel no-pets policy, I make do with other people's animals. And if L'Amour is right, I'm carrying parts of many, many books around with me every day.

Yep, I've come to the right place. My heart now ticks imperceptibly, just the way I like it.

Ian reemerges carrying a slip of paper folded in half. "Funny you stopped by, Lucy. I was just thinking about you—I mean, thinking of giving you a ring . . . at the *Messenger.* Phoning in an advert, I mean." He really does have one of the most likable faces in town—kind, yet also distinguished. A two-legged Scottie dog.

"Here," he continues. "My mobile's on there. I mean, in case you have any questions. I mean, is this okay? Do you mind if I just give it to you since you're here? I can totally phone it in, if that's bet—"

"Of course not. No problem," I say, waving off his over-the-top consideration. If only everyone were so polite. "It'll run on Wednesday."

"Oh, good."

"So, it's a classified?"

"No, it's actually a—oh, blast, what do you call it?" He snaps his fingers, stumped. "I'm hoping it can go on that public announcements page. Actually, maybe you'd be interested. I mean,

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interested in the . . . in *that*." He gestures to my canvas bag. Today I'm sporting the one I earned in the library's summer reading challenge that proclaims "My Weekend Is Booked." But what is Ian babbling about? Oh right—the paper. The one I tucked away without even a glance.

Okay. I'll admit things are occasionally awkward between Ian and me. That's the trouble with being over thirty and single in a postage stamp of a town, where everyone's aware of everyone else who's over thirty and single. You're forever walking the fine line of friendliness so neither person mistakes the other. Is Ian into me? I prefer to remain uninformed. In fact, just once I'd love to navigate the town without being made to feel self-conscious. Is this too much to ask?

"Just let me know," he says. "Cheers, Lucy!"

Is he . . . blushing?

Outside, the soft air's familiar embrace reminds me that enjoying some level of recognizability in this community is better than obscurity. Leaving Salem in the rearview mirror and starting over here means I'm not known for past mistakes.

Nor associated with my mother's fame, hallelujah.

No shame.

No fame.

In Charity Falls, I get to be plain old Lucy Montgomery, classified ads girl. Mousy brunette. Chase's mom.

For a long time, this has been more than enough. For five years, I've been swimming in an ocean of freedom.

This weird new ennui is just an anomaly. Bound to pass soon.

I linger, admiring Sweet Reads' window display. Under a sign that says HOT SEPTEMBER READS, long wire skewers with marshmallows affixed to the ends lean against a fake campfire. Camp chairs have been artfully arranged with stacks of the newest releases, among them novels by John Grisham, Jane Kirkpatrick, and Steph Stoneback. S'cute!

Oh, to be relaxing by a lake with a good story!

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It takes restraint not to play my audiobook for the last two blocks of the journey. Instead, I tiptoe to the edge of the question burning hot in my gut. What comes next in *my* story?

When I turn down Main, the *Mountain Messenger* office comes into view, its weathered wood porch opening its arms to me in a hug. Fisting my latte, I amble past the row of historic cottages now occupied by wellness professionals and real estate teams, where honeybees sip from bright clusters of lavender and black-eyed Susans. Ginger tickles my nose and tingles at the back of my throat.

So what? So what if I'm not breezy and daring? Who says every seed that wings its way out of the graveyard has to spawn a resplendent garden? Not that I wouldn't mind a bit more color in my life. Less bearing up and more bloom. But I rebuke this pesky restlessness.

Shouldn't it be enough just to survive?

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two

pine (v.): to yearn intensely or persistently, especially for something unattainable

The beginning-of-the-week hush still hangs over the news office's dark-paneled interior. Out here alone at my station, I rather imagine myself captain of a very small ship. I key in new help wanted ads for Blue Lake Resort and Trading Post Café. Servers are ever in short supply in a tourist town. A flick of the wrist. A click of the mouse. The design program bows to my whim.

Here's a sad fact. Every week in the US, two community newspapers—these ink-and-paper bastions of civilization—meet their end. Go belly up. Join the choir invisible. Or, as my dad likes to put it, take a dirt nap.

Fortunately, small-town journalism in Charity Falls is still alive and . . . mostly kicking. Although our team would breathe easier without the perpetual struggle to keep the lights on around here.

Who could imagine living in a world where you have no idea what's happening close to home—the stuff your neighbors care

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enough about to bite their nails over or go to bat for? Newspapers are community glue!

Well. For now, anyway, the beloved *Mountain Messenger* has not yet gone the way of so many small papers. Mine is a job that matters, and I won't spend the day pining for anything more.

Have I mentioned I love newspapers?

Moving on to the announcements page, I delete those no longer relevant—last weekend's GiddyUp 5k fun run and a seniors' pickleball tourney—replacing them with the new blurbs, including the one Ian provided. Things are looking nicely balanced. I'm on schedule.

At least, until the trio of cowbells hanging from the front doorknob jangles, and in walks a familiar hunched figure wearing a navy ball cap with the VFW emblem.

"G'morning," he growls in a voice so husky I'm guessing he hasn't used it yet today. Unsurprisingly, the gentleman carries a wrinkled scrap of paper that looks a lot like the torn-off corner of a piece of junk mail.

Oh, Baxter. How many times have I kindly reminded him that the deadline to turn in an announcement is eleven o'clock?

"Happy Monday, Baxter," I manage to say brightly.

He's unshaven again today. And when he offers me the note, I pretend not to notice his worsening hand tremor. Two months ago, we printed his wife's obit, and he hasn't been himself since.

"What have you got for me?"

Baxter flicks the paper scrap I now hold, with the air of a former hard-shell military commander. "It's all right there, see? We need donations for the VFW–American Legion raffle. Can you get that in this week's paper?"

Up close, his face appears unusually puffy, calling attention to constellations of age spots. A lump rises in my throat. Suddenly I'm staring into the eyes of my grandmother, her face ballooned as the result of a steroid she had to take for some infection or other. It was the last time I saw her before she passed.

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A glance from Baxter's shaky handwriting to the wall clock confirms it's 11:46. Still, how can I say no to this dear old crank? You have to admire someone who's always on mission.

I offer my warmest smile. "Sure. I can get that in there for you. No problem."

"Thank you, dear."

"Oh, uh, Baxter?" I say as he shuffles unsteadily to the door. "May I interest you in a slice of Dot's apple-walnut bread for the road?"

Behind thick lenses, Baxter's eyes widen. "Oh-ho-ho. You betcha." Who knew the man has a dimple when he smiles?

After seeing him out, I'm back at it, reworking the announcements page to accommodate Baxter's late addition. But what's this in the blurb above it? A typo?

Writers group seeks members.
Strong tea, gentle critique.
Thursday evenings, 6:30 p.m.
at Sweet Reads.
Bring your WHIP.

Wait, what? This can't be right—although I don't doubt that attending a critique group would be torturous. Snickering, I riffle through the papers on my desk for Ian's announcement. Here it is. It reads "Bring your WIP." As in W-I-P. Work in progress. Okay, *phew.* This makes sense. Which means I allowed spell-check to add the *h*.

In other words, a high-tech Freudian slip.

The pang in my abdomen is telling. If I'm honest, I'd love to be the kind of person who joins a writing group, sauntering into a crowd of strangers ready to bare her creative soul. The kind of woman who cranes her neck to the sky and says "Why not?" Besides, what else do I have going on Thursday nights while Chase is at tae kwon do?

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But when I imagine walking in with my 17,229-word unfinished manuscript in hand, something no one apart from my parents and Savannah knows about, my chest tightens. The smell of Dot's apple-walnut bread turns cloying.

What had Ian been thinking, inviting me? For all he knows, I craft nothing more than the occasional obituary. Well, there's been that handful of times my editor threw me into the deep end—a couple of new-business profiles, filling in during Brad's vacations. And then a year ago or so, Sam convinced me, despite my objections, to cover a local woman's campaign to restore a beloved local landmark.

The result? Ruinous! Thanks to *my story*, one of Charity Falls' esteemed citizens was cast in a negative light. Clearly I'm meant to cocoon myself here at the front desk, where I can't do any real damage.

* * *

By four o'clock, the paper's off to the printer, and what to do about dinner sits uppermost in my mind. It doesn't help that Meg roosts atop my desk, a spiky-haired pixie on a shelf, swinging her blood-red Chucks and singing the glories of Rigo's Tacos. Brad and Dot hover around my station as well, hanging on every detail about the town's newest food truck.

"In a nutshell," Meg concludes, "teeming with juicy goodness and cotija cheese."

I sigh inwardly. If I could wish away my son's over-the-top aversion to any single food group, it would be tacos.

"Ooh, trivia nights are starting back up over at the food carts," Dot sing-songs.

As activities go, this ranks somewhere on my list of things that would require a personality transplant. Too fraught with opportunities for public embarrassment. Besides, I don't exactly keep up on pop culture the way Dot does.

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Suddenly Sam's rusty-old-tuba voice blares through every desk phone. "Confab, everyone. My office."

Brad performs an exaggerated eye roll, scarfs the heel of his apple bread, and chases it with a coffee swig. "Day's not over yet," he says, brushing crumbs from his neatly trimmed goatee. I have to smile. Brad Vickery is twice divorced. Dot Stubblefield, an empty nester. And Meg Malone appears committedly single, a lone eagle.

Chances are good I'm the only one here whose day is far from over.

Even if what the rest of the day holds is repotting my jungly dieffenbachia, boiling macaroni, and joining Chase to knock out the next installment on his fastidiously charted tree diagram of every *Star Trek* episode since the dawn of television.

The editor in chief's office smells like old saddles and cigars. Sam doesn't stop pecking away at his keyboard until we're all assembled around the ancient hulk of his desk. Seated, I once again take pains to avoid eye contact with the open-snouted, fang-toothed head of a black bear staring down at me from the wall above Sam.

Taxidermy is so not my vibe.

Sam slips off his wire-rimmed readers and chucks them atop a disorderly stack of paperwork. "Here's the whole shootin' match," he says, lacing his fingers and leaning forward. "I'm down by two freelancers for the next couple 'a months. Now, I'll do what I can to pick up the slack, but with Noleen's surgery coming up, I can only shoulder so much."

I stiffen, an invisible dart pricking my conscience. Poor Sam. So many unknowns with his wife's cancer. His voice contains even more gravel than usual. Did Meg just flick an accusatory look my way? True, I didn't land this job based solely on my mad data-entry skills. Desperate for work, I'd also trumpeted my almost-degree in journalism.

But then he says, "So I'll need you all to keep your ears to the

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ground," and my shoulders begin to relax. "Put some feelers out. We could sure use another go-to correspondent. Two would be better. Meanwhile, Brad, you'll cover the city hall beat until Floyd returns in November." Brad opens his mouth to argue, but Sam cuts him off with, "And for goodness' sake, make it shine. Lucy hasn't got time for rewrites."

I nod along with the others and push my glasses farther up my nose. This isn't directed at me after all. But there it is, the briefest brush of Sam's gaze on me. And in it, a flash of disappointment. At least, that's what I think I see.

Oh, come on. Do I look like the savior type? No one here could possibly believe that.

Dot's apple bread sits like a stone in my stomach. I hate it when I can't make everyone happy.

It cost me nearly everything to learn that people-pleasing isn't kindness. It's selling your boundaries hoping someone will call it love.

"Puts me in a real pickle with the McPhersons," Sam continues, "at a time when what they need from me is another round of belt-tightening. Much as I hate to saddle you all with worry . . ." He levels an apologetic gaze at us. "I need to say it. This little ship of ours is listing dangerously."

I swallow hard. What a grave image. My coworkers and I sit motionless. While at one time the *Messenger* was locally owned, it's now part of a family-owned regional chain of small weekly gazettes, which, frankly, is the only reason it's still afloat. And I happen to know Sam's been summoned to meet with the McPherson Group soon because I booked his flight to Kalispell, Montana.

"Now, on another note," he says, switching to a tone a degree or two more upbeat, "what I'm about to share next is a little, shall we say"—here he quirks one shaggy white eyebrow—"backstairs." When he reclines, his old desk chair creaks a complaint. "I just got a call from Steph Stoneback's agent—no,

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scratch that—her *publicity manager*." Disdain drips from the last two words.

My head snaps up. *Come again?* A high-voltage hum seems to fill the room. Dust motes flash like sparks in a shaft of late-day light.

Sam couldn't possibly have said—

Meg breaks the stillness, leaning forward. "Not . . . you don't mean *the* Steph Stoneback. The one churning out all those sappy suspense novels?"

Sam hikes his eyebrows meaningfully. Then he screws up his face.

"You gotta be kidding," she says.

Dot and I exchange a side-glance. When I tell you Dot is a peach, I offer an apt metaphor. My coworker drips with juicy sweetness. Her pert, heart-shaped face, auburn pigtail stubs, and remarkable lack of wrinkles belie the fact that she's raised three children to adulthood. At the moment, though, her features have gone slack, and no doubt my expression mirrors hers. She and I have shared many a gush over the latest Steph Stoneback bestseller. Not to mention the movie versions of *Yukon Thunder* and *Delta Deception*. Has there ever been a swoonier fictional hero than Gage Remington? Dot would assign this an emphatic no.

I plead the Fifth.

Clearly Sam, aka Samuel Peabody III, aka Lou Grant—the private nickname my parents love to use when we discuss my boss—doesn't share our sentiments. Apparently Grant was some pudgy old bellyacher from the Jurassic Era of sitcoms, and my folks find the comparison a real knee-slapper. Like most of their archaic cultural references, this one, too, is lost on me. Just let the old folks have their fun, as I see it.

"Seems the illustrious author will be in town next month to do some background work," Sam says. "She's looking to get the whole central Oregon wilderness experience—whitewater rafting, rock climbing, fly-fishing, and what have you. Figures she

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might fly under the radar here." He pauses to insert one of his trademark derisive chortles. "Nevertheless, her *people* alerted the press. They're giving us an exclusive."

Dot snatches a folder off Sam's desk and begins fanning herself feverishly. A current zips through my veins. Steph Stoneback in Charity Falls? Surreal.

Brad runs a hand down his face and lets fly a swear word. He moves his ever-present toothpick to the opposite corner of his mouth and forms a wolfish grin. I suppose he's thinking this ought to help him sell ad space. I hate knowing that any bonuses will more likely go toward green fees or cryptocurrency speculation than catching up on his child support.

This is the trouble with a small town. Sometimes you know too much.

Sam raises a hand. "Now, thing is, I promised to keep it on the DL. Her manager wants a say over when we publish. I'll grant her that much. Which means for the time being, I need you all to keep this *debajo de sus sombreros*."

I clear my throat. "Think she expects to dictate our content?" I've often heard Meg moaning about an interviewee determined to control the narrative. Not that I blame them. Isn't that what I do when it comes to my personal history? Control the narrative?

"Oh, I put the kibosh on that." Sam's barrel chest deflates, and he shakes his head with disgust. "Probably more trouble than it's worth. Whoever covers this will need to accompany Ms. Stoneback on some of her open-air emprises."

Not a term I'm familiar with, but this is nothing new. Sam speaks his own version of our common language. I'll look it up later.

"'Course, I'm too, uh—let's just say I've had my fair share of those kinds of exploits." I make the mistake of following his gaze up to the snarling bear. Which is a far cry from the docile creature conjured up by "Teddy Bear's Picnic," the kiddie song constantly

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blasting from the bright-red kids' cassette player my little brother Mikey carried everywhere—once upon a very different time.

If you go down in the woods today, you're sure of a big surprise . . .

Great. Now the tune is stuck in my head.

"Got the hitch in my step to prove it," Sam says, yanking on the waist of his jeans.

By now, Mighty Meg is a bull mastiff perched on high alert, and for good reason. The woman scales ten-thousand-foot mountains for kicks. Once, caught overnight in a sudden winter storm on Mount Hood, she built an ice cave while nursing a broken leg and lived to write about it. She's also our only staff reporter, with the exception of Brad's business coverage. We all know where this is going.

Sam turns to her. "Megs, what d'ya say?"

"Shoot, yeah. No problem."

A solid plan. So why do I feel like my insides are shriveling? Mine will be the last set of eyes on Meg's article before it goes to print. Also important. Still, what might it be like to be her for one day? To have moxie?

Has she ever even read a Stoneback novel? Doubtful. Stoneback's stories are for the rest of us. And judging by the author's bestseller status, we are no small group who prefer to experience our share of suspense on the printed page.

Ideally with a side of romance.

Sam juts his chin at the oversized wall calendar. "For now, let's target the October twenty-one issue." Conversation follows, but now I sit fixated on the calendar, only giving my editor one ear. Because his mention of that particular date one month from now overshadows even the Steph Stoneback revelation.

There it is again, that chill raising the hair on my arms. *October twenty-one.* This time, though, the memories stay in their crypt. That was another girl, another life. Five years have put a Grand Canyon of distance between her and me. Still, shouldn't I have

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something more to show for half a decade? Absently, I retwist my sloppy bun and re-stab it with the pencil.

Face it. You're a woman who wants to do a lot of interesting things, trapped in a body that doesn't.

My coworkers stir, alerting me this meeting has come to a close. But when I rise to follow them out, Sam speaks up. "Mind hanging back a minute, Lucy? Take a seat."

Fiddlesticks. Suddenly my throat is parched.

"Listen," he says. "Now, I'm well aware you've got your hands full at home. And you know I understand. But we sure could use your help for a bit."

Again with the menacing melody. *If you go down in the woods today, you'd better go in disguise . . .*

I sit up straighter and put on my best Lois Lane face. After all, Samuel Peabody III is my editor, not my therapist.

I clear my throat. "What did you have in mind?"

"Priority one's the city hall beat—I'd much rather have you on it than Brad. Things are heating up over there, what with all this talk of a highway bypass. Could get mighty contentious with downtown business owners. Not that you couldn't handle it. You've got great instincts."

The compliment passes through my body in a wave of prickly heat. At the moment, I'm forced to question Sam's instincts about *me*. Great instincts? I'm barely one step ahead of a trail of life choices that tell a very different story. Also, *contentious*? The word itself is, well, contentious.

"And then, of course," he continues, "you know I'm always looking for features. Just bring me your ideas."

"I appreciate the vote of confidence," I say. "I'll definitely give it some thought."

"Good. Good. Yes, well . . ." His eyes drop.

So does my stomach. I haven't offered the hoped-for response. Every cell in my body sings with desire to rise to the occasion. I want to be a team player. I just prefer to do it from my front desk

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sanctuary. Lucia Maria Montgomery is the unfortunate recipient of exactly zero extrovert genes, and what Sam proposes is basically a wide blue Pacific Ocean of opportunities for failure. Mine *and* the paper's.

The calendar draws my eye. The box marked October twenty-one appears to pulsate, issuing a challenge. There goes the corner of my left eye twitching. Now is when a better woman would spout, *What I mean to say is, I'll do it.* Her editor's reply: *Great! Knew I could count on you.*

Sam's chair groans as he settles into a posture of resignation. "Well. I've said it before, and I'll say it again. You've got the chops."

I rise to leave and offer a tight-lipped smile. It's all I can muster. I'm not immune to Sam's praise. Just tempted to flick it away, like apple-cake crumbs from my top.

"G'night, Montgomery."

I like it when he calls me that. Hearing my maiden name in a professional environment allows me to pretend I'm still the woman I was before the nightmare. Before I turned over the wrong rocks and experienced things a person can't un-experience. It isn't possible, of course, to ever again be Lucy Montgomery, the before girl, in anything more than name. Which isn't all bad.

True, today I'm less carefree. But I'm also less naive.

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