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Tibbs

The spirit of Lumby is rooted in the small community of forty---eight hundred warmhearted and well---intentioned people who carve out the best lives they can for themselves and for their neighbors. The relationships among many of the townsfolk have carried on from one generation to the next. Few merchants actually post store hours since everyone knows each other's schedules as well as their own. And restaurants frequently enhance their menus with recipes specifically requested by their regular patrons.

Seated together at a table at S&T's Soda Shoppe were two men who embraced the town's tranquility: Simon Dixon, the sheriff, and Jimmy Daniels, the mayor for two years and proprietor of the town's most frequented tavern, Jimmy D's. They were meeting that morning to discuss preparations for one of Lumby's most deeply cherished traditions: Tibbs Tailgating.

Simon, a brick of a man with a strong body and square shoulders, had proved his worthiness as a lieutenant in the Seattle police force before marrying Anna and moving to her hometown, Lumby. For more than sixteen years, he had watched diligently over the town and its residents.

Jimmy, on the other hand, had lived his entire life in close proximity to Lumby, and three days after turning twenty, got married and established his home on the corner of Main Street and Mineral Street with his beautiful but bashful bride, Hannah. Now, in his mid---forties, Jimmy enjoyed his public role as town leader as much as he valued the apparent comfort of his personal life.

Jimmy rubbed his eyes, tired from looking at the fairgrounds map. "It will just have to be first come, first served. If there's not enough space this year, the overflow can park down on North Grant Avenue."

"I think that's the best alternative, but there won't be much foot traffic down there," Simon said. "People might complain."

"I know, but Tibbs Tailgating has grown so much, it's almost getting out of hand," Jimmy said under his breath.

In Lumby, most of the residents cared as much about the history of a tradition as the tradition itself. This story was frequently retold to whoever would listen:

Thirteen years before, on a glorious Sunday in April, Tibbs Taylor walked into the Presbyterian church on Farm to Market Road, holding Martha's hand. As they had done for two decades of their married life, they seated themselves in the third pew on the left and listened to the sermon given by Reverend Poole. The message that morning was one of following your heart to God, but Martha, being as tired of her husband as she was of his pig farm, only heard "follow your heart." She was so swept away by the reverend's preaching that upon arriving home she packed up her one bag, apologized to Tibbs at the front door, and ventured out into a new world, hoping to find a happier life in California.

Tibbs held out hope for her return for exactly one week, but Martha was never to be seen again. Angered by his wife's betrayal, Tibbs threw all of her possessions, from a torn brassiere to stained teacups, into the back of his rusted pickup and drove it to town, parking on Main Street. Then and there he auctioned off every one of Martha's belongings. Three hours later he headed home, his spirit cleansed and his pockets slightly fuller for the experience.

Thereafter, on the second Sunday of each April, the people of Lumby gathered to sell unwanted items at a town flea market called Tibbs Tailgating. Although some cynics saw it only as an opportunity to exchange one man's junk for another's, Tibbs Tailgating had remained a significant event in the community for well over a decade. It marked a time to clear out the cobwebs of winter and get ready for spring.

"So, you're fine with the plans?" Jimmy asked Simon as he packed up their papers.

"If no one else signs up, we should be good to go," Simon answered. "Additional posters will be put on Grant the night before."

"Good," Jimmy said, following Simon outside. "I'll drop these off with Dennis and have him print up a hundred more catalogues than last year."

Simon accompanied Jimmy as far as the police station at the corner of Main Street and Farm to Market Road, where Jimmy headed for the Chatham Press building. Simon stood on the front stoop and surveyed the town.

Lumby sits quietly on the northern brim of Mill Valley, a lush vale of rolling pastures, rich agricultural fields, and grasslands dotted with white farmhouses. To the west, protecting both the town and the valley, are densely forested hills and low mountains. Beyond those rise the vast and majestic Rockies.

The natural beauty of the surroundings can be appreciated throughout the year, with each season revealing a new wonder. Summer offers the sights and smells of verdant croplands, while autumn brings the colors of a painter's palette, splashing brilliant yellows and oranges across the landscape. When cold winds sweep down from Canada, the first winter snow settles on the jagged mountain ridges and then slowly descends onto the town.

In spring, though, the streams swell and the trees bud along Main Street, officially named State Road 541 but frequently referred to as Old 41. Charming storefronts and small cafés line sidewalks of raised flower beds, scattered fruit trees, and brightly painted benches. As the temperature warms, yellow-, blue-, and green--striped awnings are rolled out with their edges flapping in the breeze.

Simon watched Jimmy enter the Chatham Press building, which housed one of the oldest family--run businesses in Lumby. The enterprise consisted of the town's bookstore, a bookbinding concern, and a substantial printing operation that published the local newspaper, among other periodicals and flyers.

Woodrow Beezer, who built the three---story stone office at the turn of the twentieth century, began the family enterprise, which was, in time, passed on to his son, William Beezer. William was a hard man who kept a keen eye on the bottom line and grew the business tenfold. After William's unexpected death two years ago, his estranged son, Dennis, followed in his footsteps.

Jimmy looked at his watch and walked inside, jogging up the stairs two at a time.

At the top of the stairwell, he heard a loud voice. "What the hell have you done?"

And then silence.

Entering the publishing floor of *The Lumby Lines*, he first noticed Dennis's assistant, Kim, working at her desk, her head lowered. She looked up and quickly pointed to Dennis Beezer's office. As did everyone in town, she knew that Dennis was a good man with a long fuse, but today something—or someone—had obviously set him off.

Through the frosted glass of his office door, Jimmy saw Dennis pacing back and forth, occasionally frowning at the person seated in the chair in front of his desk.

Jimmy considered leaving—this was obviously very bad timing indeed.

Just then Dennis slammed open the door. "Kim," he said, forcing calm into his voice, "would you please get Jimmy on the phone?"

"He's standing right there," she said, pointing.

Dennis waved him over. "I was just calling you," Dennis said, shaking the hand of his close friend.

"So I heard," Jimmy said cautiously. "What's up?"

Dennis ran a hand through his hair in frustration. "I think you need to come in and sit down."

Walking into the private office, Jimmy saw Dennis's nineteen---year---old son, Brian Beezer, slumped in the chair. His head hung low, his dark brown hair mostly covering his handsome, angular face. His long legs were outstretched, with his feet knocking against each other.

Dennis handed a piece of paper to Jimmy. "Read this advertisement that was faxed over to us this morning. It's to be run in *The Lumby Lines* in a few weeks."

"Why are you giving it to me?" Jimmy asked.

"Please read it," Dennis said, turning with annoyance toward Brian.

Jimmy scanned the copy, taking note of the critical words: Balloon rides . . . Regional Balloon Festival . . . Lumby.

When Jimmy had digested its meaning, he started laughing. "Well, this is clearly a mistake, Dennis. We don't have any hot air balloons in Lumby, so it would make no sense that we would host a hot air balloon festival." He held out the fax. "I'm sure someone's just pulling your leg. That, or whoever submitted this just faxed it to the wrong local paper in the wrong town."

"No, they didn't," Dennis said, glaring at Brian.

Jimmy saw how angry his friend was. "What's going on?"

"Tell him," Dennis told his son.

Brian slid farther down in his chair. No one could do sullen better than the son of the newspaper's editor.

"Brian, tell him," he repeated.

"Well," Brian said at last, "Terry and I were looking at some magazines a few months ago, and saw this thing . . ."

"What thing?" Jimmy asked.

Brian hesitated. "An article. Anyway, it said they were—"

"Who?" Jimmy continued to press for clarity.

"The U.S. Hot Air Balloon Association. They were looking for a town to host this year's balloon festival." Brian continued to stare at his knees, which were nervously moving back and forth. "And we thought it would be cool if it was here, in Lumby. So we pooled some money at school."

Dennis was ready to explode once again. "How much?" he demanded.

"Two hundred and fifty dollars."

Both men looked at the teenager in disbelief. How could high school kids collect that amount without parental involvement or even awareness?

"Go on," his father said.

"We filled out the application and got a money order." His story abruptly ended, and after a few moments it was obvious that Brian had no intention of continuing.

Jimmy coaxed the boy. "And?"

Brian twisted in his chair. He went on very reluctantly. "Well, they wrote back several times asking for more information, and then about a month ago they sent us a contract."

Jimmy leaned forward, visibly confused. "Why would they possibly send a contract to you?"

Brian looked up at his father, hoping he would end the interrogation, but his father just glared back. When he saw no escape was possible, he lowered his head still farther down on his chest so he could barely be heard. "I told them I was the mayor."

Jimmy's jaw dropped. Part of him was impressed with how the boys had managed to win what must have been a competitive bid; the other part was disappointed in how they had done it. He quickly thought through the situation and found a seemingly obvious solution. "Well, no serious problem here. We'll just call them and courteously bow out—a thanks but no thanks reply."

"I've already tried," Dennis said wearily. "In fact, I've been on the phone all morning. I was told that the brochures and catalogues for the festival, along with countless advertisements, have already been printed and paid for. If Lumby reneges at this late date, it will cost us a significant amount of money in penalties." He paused as he looked for the contract on his desk. "As it was my son's doing, I would personally cover all penalties, but the amounts they quoted would financially ruin us. I even had Russell Harris over this morning to review the contract and he advised us not to break it."

Jimmy was still trying to find the silver lining. "Well, it can't be that big a deal. How many folks attend one of these festivals?"

"A thousand," Brian whispered.

"A hundred, you said?" Jimmy asked.

Dennis shook his head. "No, he said one *thousand*."

Jimmy let out a loud laugh. "But that's ridiculous! There are barely a hundred hotel rooms in a twenty---mile radius!"

"Seems Brian exaggerated those numbers as well," Dennis explained.

As the magnitude of the problem began to sink in, Jimmy's eyes widened. "What else did you write on the application that I should know about?"

"Here," Dennis said, picking up the papers that were on his desk. "You can read them for yourself."

Jimmy spent a few minutes perusing the documents. "Well, if our attorney says we can't break the contract, then we don't," he told Dennis. "I think we need to tell the town."

Dennis nodded in agreement. "Kim is already working on a short article. And Brian will be writing a personal apology to the town's residents."

"Brian, is there anything you haven't told us?" Dennis asked his son one final time.

The teenager glowered at his father. "Not that I can remember."

Dennis was tempted to reply sharply, but he restrained himself.

When the silence grew too heavy, the teenager jumped to his feet.

"All you can see are the problems!" he cried. "Don't you see the benefits? All these people will be coming to town with their awesome hot air balloons." He glanced at the faces of the two adults. "Come on. This will be the biggest thing that ever hit this town. It might turn into a great tradition, like Tibbs Tailgating."

But both men were so focused on the reality of the challenge that neither could envision what Brian saw: the skies over Lumby filled with vibrantly colored balloons of all patterns and shapes drifting silently toward Woodrow Lake. And Brian, still being young and adventurous, couldn't see the predicament he had brought upon the town.