



Delicious aromas greeted Sam as he glided through the front door of his parents' house. "Smells like a feast in here, Jo Jo." He hugged his sister, Josie, then walked straight to the bookshelves in the family room, the family's Bassett Hound, Winston Churchill, following behind.

She called from the kitchen, "What're you looking for?"

"Nothing." He scanned the row of high school yearbooks with his index finger.

"Oh, so you're just avoiding the plates waiting for you to set the table, huh?"

"No." He pulled out one, flipped through the pages, and then exchanged it for another.

She came into the family room, wiping her hands on a tea towel. "What are you looking for?"

"None o' your beeswax."

"You've just made me more curious." Rising on tiptoes, she peered around his arm. "You're obviously looking for someone. Maybe I can help you." She rocked back on flat feet. "Who is it?"

His finger stopped at a listing. Merritt Hastings. Page seventy-six and two hundred twenty-two. Booyah. He flipped to

the beginning of the book. Page seventy-six. Right in the middle of the freshman class school pictures.

Josie pulled his arm down to get a look at the page. “Who are you looking for? The freshman class? Jake Combs was a freshman when you were a senior. Remember him from youth group? Or Tim Rollins. Who do you need? I know people in that class, too, remember. I was with them for two years of high school.” She glanced closer at the page. “The H’s? Tommy Hinnant was in that class. He was on the baseball team with you. Oh, and Charlie Houston. He ran track.”

Flipping to page two hundred twenty-two, Sam twisted away from his sister.

Josie peeked again. “A picture of girls in the library?” She drew in a breath. “You’re looking for a girl? Who is it? Tell me.”

“Nope.”

She slapped hands on her hips. “Yes. I mean it. Tell me right now or I won’t let you have seconds of the mashed potatoes.”

“You’re holding my food hostage?” He shook his head. “Tsk. Tsk. Not a real good Christian look, Joey.”

She snorted. “You haven’t been interested in a girl since—”

“Since ... still none of your business. I’m not sending out wedding invitations or even asking for a date. I’m simply trying to place someone.” He slid the yearbook back onto the shelf.

“Who? And if the color tingeing your chiseled cheekbones is any indication, there’s more to this story.” She grinned. “Interesting that you brought up weddings and dates.”

“The so-called color may be indicating irritation at my baby sister.” He turned her toward the kitchen. “I don’t have time to date anybody right now.” *Especially if I buy WBEL.* “Now, let me set the table. I thought Ben and Heath would already be here.”

“They’re on their way, and then we can all video call with Mom and Dad before we eat.”



“IS THIS YOUR BEST PRICE?” Merritt ran her fingertips along the oak table. Smaller than the one Trey and Allison stole, it had a leaf to accommodate eight people, but the flea market vendor had only four chairs.

“I can knock off fifty dollars.” Chewing on an unlit cigar, the seller waited for her answer.

“But it isn’t a complete set. It’s supposed to have four more chairs.”

For a flea market find, the table presented a beautiful front, polished to a high shine with no nicks or scrapes or water rings. Picturing it in front of the windows in the kitchen conjured images of lots of celebrations around it.

“We’re at a yard sale, lady, not a furniture store.” He tapped the hand-lettered sign taped to the table with his forefinger. “I’ll minus fifty like I told ya, but that’s it. Take it or leave it.”

Destiny, a foster sister for about half a year when they were both ten and her best friend ever since, elbowed her, leaning toward her ear. “Negotiation skill number one. Be willing to walk away. Yes, it’s beautiful, but you don’t need a table yet.”

Sighing, Merritt stepped away from the table. “Okay. Thank you.”

“Hey. It’s real oak.” He knocked on the tabletop. “Solid wood.”

“It’s a handsome table.” Merritt flicked one last glance to the table, hating to give it up.

“A beauty like this goes fast. May not be here for much longer.” Determined, the man circled to the front of his stall, removing the cigar from his mouth.

Clutching her friend’s forearm, Destiny nudged her away from the table. “Just keep walking.” She nodded to the man, “She’s sticking to her budget.”

Merritt called over her shoulder, “But thank you.”

“I think he really wants to sell it. Check back before you leave. He might be more inclined to make a deal. You know. Sell

it as opposed to carting it back to wherever he came from.” She adjusted her newsboy cap over teal locks.

“Yeah. We’ll see. But I need a table for the bi-monthly birthday parties.”

“Have a cookout. Ask people to BYOC—bring your own chair.” Laughing at her joke, Destiny had made a face. “It’ll be fun.”

“Asking people to bring their own chairs will be fun?”

“You’re asking people to your own birthday party. What’s the difference?”

“Millie always said a back rub feels the same if you ask for it or if it comes of its own accord. Yes, my birthday will be celebrated this time along with three other people who have May and June birthdays. You still get to come even if you have to wait to be celebrated till next fall.”

“Wish I could shop some more, but I gotta roll.” Destiny checked her phone. “My eleven o’clock shampoo and cut just texted asking to bring her little boy in for a cut too. Wants to meet earlier.” She kissed Merritt on the cheek. “This morning was fun, though.” Raising her face, she sniffed. “Mmm. Maybe I’ll get one of those elephant ears to go.”

She flashed two fingers as she backed away from Merritt. “Peace out, Girl Scout.”



AFTER UNLOCKING THE KITCHEN DOOR, Merritt pushed it open with her elbow. She lifted the card table over the threshold and rested one side on the floor while considering the best position for her recent purchase.

Not exactly what she’d gone searching for this morning, but this ten-dollar set with four chairs was a deal that would work until she could find the right dining table at the right price. She flipped down the legs and angled the square on the diagonal to

take up more space in the empty spot, then sighed. She'd make it work.

A half-hour later, she scraped the last bit of the KFC mashed potatoes out of the cardboard bowl and leaned back against the padded, metal chair. Millie would not approve of eating straight out of a carry-out container. She insisted on making every meal special. Cloth napkins. Flowers or a candle. Merritt fingered the centerpiece of roses from the backyard. The warm, wet spring had produced early, prolific blooms on Millie's bushes.

"Allison took the crystal vase from the bookshelf in the den, but roses in a mason jar work, too, don't you think, Millie?" An old habit, whispering to herself helped curb the lonesome sometimes.

She traced the pattern on the red-tagged, never-opened tablecloth she'd found in a dollar bin at the flea market entrance. It dressed up the well-worn table, covering up the dings and scratches too. Bonus!

The teapot caught her eye. A cup of tea would be a nice finish to the meal. Could a double portion of KFC mashed potatoes and gravy be considered a meal, though? Maybe she'd eat an apple later if she got hungry.

Or not.

Her hands prepared the tea by rote while her mind cataloged her to-do list. Pastor Dunleavy's approval to practice and give lessons at church afforded her a bit of a reprieve on purchasing a piano. She could wait for a best option. Not settle on the just-come-get-this-old-thing-out-of-my-house pianos listed in online yard sale posts.

Piano students could walk one more block from their schools, doing their homework in the fellowship hall till their lesson began. Living close to the schools and her church had many advantages.

Waiting ... a definite relief. Extra dollars were already allocated for the property taxes. So the piano problem was taken care of for the present. Next up, den furniture. Company needed

somewhere to sit. A couch, two chairs at least. An ottoman could work as seating and a coffee table.

*See? Those home decorating and craft shows do come in handy.*

Her mind returned to the needs in the kitchen. Leaning against the counter, she encouraged the card table in the eating space. “No, you don’t look ridiculous, little table. You look brave. I appreciate all three feet of you in the twelve-foot space.”

*And I’m not ridiculous for talking out loud.*

She really needed a dining table and chairs, however, if she planned on hosting birthday parties and holidays like in the past.

A vision of the wooden table for sale at the flea market this morning floated in front of her mind’s eye. She blinked it away with a grimace. Gone when she checked at noon, it wasn’t the right one. Clearly.

“A better one is waiting somewhere. Right, Millie? I keep trying to be positive.”

Oblong and fashioned from oak, the flea market table exceeded her budget. A round table to seat eight, in a darker wood, and in her price range would tick all her boxes.

The bar part of the island grabbed her attention ... the naked bar with extending ceramic tiles jutting out over nothing. Two stools should be easy to find. Maybe next Saturday. No, next Saturday she’d scheduled the May/June birthday party. Too bad Destiny wouldn’t let her cancel the party.

The whistling kettle jostled her back from her musings. She dropped an Earl Gray bag followed by a sugar cube into the hot water, a nod to Millie’s every-day-should-be-a-celebration attitude.