



TEAROOM MYSTERIES

Tearoom for Two

Elaine Cook found a parking space in the crowded lot of the Mainely Bargains Flea Market. Her cousin Jan Blake, in the passenger seat, looked at her watch.

“Good! We have an hour and a half before we need to be at the lawyer’s office.”

Elaine smiled. “Plenty of time. And the best part is, this is the first weekend the flea market’s been open this season. It hasn’t been picked over yet.”

The two women got out of the car, and Elaine locked the doors. As they walked toward the large barnlike structure that housed the flea market, she placed a hand on Jan’s shoulder.

“Do you realize that in two hours, we’ll be owners of that gorgeous house on the lake?”

Jan looked up at Elaine with the same giddy smile she used to wear in junior high, when they learned school was canceled for a snow day. “I know! I’m so excited!”

Inside, four long rows of tables awaited their exploration. Elaine realized they’d have to pace themselves if they wanted a glimpse of every booth. She leaned toward Jan and lowered her voice. “Now, remember—we need some small decorative items for the tearoom, not just dishes.”

“Got it,” Jan whispered back.

As they meandered along the first row, Elaine caught a glimpse of the two of them in an oak-framed mirror—two women in their mid-fifties, neatly dressed in pants and tailored jackets. Jan was more petite, an occasional gray strand showing in her dark brown hair, wearing glasses through which her blue eyes peered at the merchandise.

They sat in silence for a moment, looking at their new home. The three-story Queen Anne sported a pristine coat of white paint, and the patterned shingle siding and corner tower satisfied something in Jan’s soul. Already she could picture rocking chairs with colorful cushions on the deep front porch, and hanging baskets of fuchsias.

“Just think,” Elaine said. “This house used to be in our family. At least that’s what my mom said I never paid much attention when I was a kid.”

“Me either, but I hope we can find out more about it. I’m just glad it came on the market when we were looking for a place.” Jan reached for her tote bag, in which rested her copy of the deed and her new keys. “Shall we?”

“I am so ready.” Elaine grinned and opened her door.

A cool breeze blew in off the lake as they walked up to the front steps, and Jan pulled her jacket a little closer. The ice had melted off just a couple of weeks before, but the large maple in the front yard was starting to leaf out. In the flowerbeds, daffodils and johnny-jump-ups were blooming.

She and Elaine had toured the house twice before their final decision to buy it, but she still noticed new things—the carved brackets under the eaves, and the cast iron knocker. One thing that had drawn them both to the house was the wraparound porch that offered views on two sides. They could put a few tables out there in summer. From there a few more steps would take them down to the dock, where they could tie up a rowboat or just soak up sun.

Jan could hardly believe they had found such a perfect house, or that the two of them together had been able to buy it outright once Jan’s house had sold. Of course, it would take time to add all the little touches she envisioned—curtains with a Victorian look at every window, for instance, a hand-painted sign, and a welcome wreath on the door. But with hard work over the next few weeks, she hoped they could open for Memorial Day weekend—the unofficial start of



“There you go.”

“Do you have any more teapots?” Jan asked, scanning his wares.

“I don’t think so—not today. Check back next week, though. You never know.”

That was what Elaine loved about tag sales and flea markets. “I’m afraid we’d better get going,” she told Jan. “We have only twenty minutes left to get to the closing.”

“Oh, then let’s skedaddle,” Jan said, picking up the box. They hurried to the exit and out into the parking lot.

A thin man of about forty with short, sandy hair strode past them toward the entrance of the flea market. He scowled as he spoke into the phone held to his ear. “What? You sold it already? But I—”

He pushed through the door, and Elaine heard no more of his conversation.

“Someone’s not happy,” Jan observed.

They walked to Elaine’s car, where they nestled their packages in the trunk.

“It will only take us ten minutes to get there,” Jan assured her as they buckled their seat belts. “I think it’s a good sign that we found two teapots, don’t you?”

Elaine smiled. “I do. We’ll have to come back again soon. We only saw about half the booths.”

Two hours later, Jan’s heartbeat quickened as they drove along the narrow main street of Lancaster’s village. The old houses, the quaint businesses, and the glimpses of the sparkling blue water between buildings lifted her heart. This town had been her childhood home, and now she was back. They rolled up before the house they had purchased, and Elaine shut off the engine.

“Here we are.”

Beside her, Elaine also had the intense blue eyes that ran in the family. Her hair had once been blonde, but was now a soft brown with just a hint of gray.

Seeing the reflection of them together gave Elaine a feeling of belonging. Her husband, Ben, had died only six months ago, and she had lost their dream of retiring together. But reconnecting with her cousin had given her new purpose. Jan was alone too, and they could envision a fulfilling season together. That both Jan and Elaine’s husbands had died before their fifties ended was shocking and devastating, but Elaine had to believe that the Lord works all things for the good for those who love Him. Perhaps the tearoom they were opening was part of that good plan.

Though she had been away from Maine for many years, Elaine knew she had made the right decision to come back, and to enter this new venture with the cousin who had been like a sister to her.

“Elaine, look.” Jan tugged at her sleeve, pulling her toward the next booth.

Elaine caught her breath. “Oh!” She stepped closer and reached to lift a square blue-and-white teapot reverently. She carefully turned it over to study the markings on the bottom. “I think it’s identical to the ones we have.”

“That’s genuine Nanking china,” the woman sitting behind the table said, rising from her chair.

Jan smiled. “Yes, I know. Our grandmother had a tearoom during the 1930s. We each have one of the Nanking teapots she used.”

“We’re opening a tearoom ourselves,” Elaine told her. “We hoped to buy more teapots to use serving our customers.” As she spoke, she turned the tag tied to the handle so that she could read the price.

Jan leaned in to look too and sucked in a breath. “Oh, my, that may be outside our budget.”

“What about this one?” The woman held up a plump white





teapot with a spray of dainty violets on the side.

Elaine nodded. "I like that."

"Five dollars," the woman said. "Not old, of course."

"We'll take it," Jan said, "and those two tins." She nodded toward the tea containers. The cousins hoped to find older pieces they could use in their new business, instead of ordering new china. Collecting their tearoom service would be a labor of love.

"Where is your tearoom?" the vendor asked.

"In Lancaster," Elaine said. "On Chickadee Lake."

Jan held out a twenty-dollar bill. "It's in the most beautiful old house, right on the water."

"We hope to open by Memorial Day, but we have a lot of work to do," Elaine added.

The woman wrapped the teapot in newspaper and bagged it with the tins. "There you go. Thank you, ladies. And good luck with your tearoom."

They moved on toward the next booth.

"I had no idea Nana's china was so valuable," Jan whispered. "Maybe we should sell ours and use the money to buy less expensive ones. We'll need at least a dozen."

Elaine shook her head. "You know we don't want to sell Nana's teapots. And we talked about this. We'll just have to pick up more at yard sales. The money we budgeted will cover it, and no one will care if they don't match."

They ambled along the length of the row and started up the other side of the aisle, watching for teapots and anything else they could use in the Queen Anne house. Elaine scooped up three little white ceramic cream pitchers. They would need a lot of those.

Jan stooped to look at a box of books that sat on the floor at the end of one booth. "Cookbooks!" She began rooting through them. The balding, bearded man who sat behind the table threw her an

indulgent glance, then his face sharpened as he looked at a boy of about seven who was playing with some of his sale items, lining up glass insulators and egg cups in a row on the floor.

"Cut that out, Mikey. I told you not to take things out of the boxes." He caught Elaine's eyes and shrugged. "My grandson."

Mikey sighed and began shoving the items into the nearest box.

"How much for the cookbooks?" Jan asked.

"Oh, let me see..." The dealer rose and shuffled toward her. "Ten bucks for the box?" He stooped and hefted it onto the table. "Oh, there's something else in there."

"It's a teapot!" Elaine reached into the carton and picked up a small pot with straight sides and a rounded spout. "Isn't it odd?"

"I don't think I've ever seen one like that," Jan said. The pot was painted a buttery yellow, and on the side was a bunch of amateurish pansies. "It's hand painted, isn't it?"

"I think you're right." Elaine peered closely at the clumsy design. "They say that in Victorian times, ladies of leisure did a lot of china painting. I wonder if it's that old." She turned it over. "Well, it doesn't look new," she conceded, viewing the rough, unglazed surface of the underside.

"Twenty bucks, including the teapot," the dealer said quickly.

Elaine kicked herself mentally. If she hadn't sounded so interested, he probably wouldn't have raised the price of the box lot so much. "Well, the painting is kind of sloppy, and it's small, but I love the shape. I think I'll get it."

"You got it," the burly man said. His close-trimmed beard and heavy eyebrows reminded Elaine of the Paul Bunyan statue in Bangor.

"Uh ... do you have any newspapers? To wrap the teapot in?"

"Oh, sure." The man stooped and fished a section of the Waterville paper from beneath his table and rolled the little teapot in it.

