

Table For Two

Lori clutched the little red ball closer to her rumbling stomach. The ball, a little dusty and losing its color, gave way in her arms. But she didn't notice.

Taking a tentative step forward, Lori sniffed the air. A heady, salty smell, savory and sweet all at once. She knew this smell: fire-roasted sausages and caramelized apples. The street vendor was here again. Her mouth watered and she tried to imagine what the food would taste like in her mouth. Probably smoky with a tang of sweetness. But she didn't know. No one had ever cooked sausages for her before.

Following her nose led her down the street to the cart. Lori passed many people on the way. Ladies in nice dresses, men in pressed suits, they all shied away from her. Lori didn't know why, and didn't mind. All she wanted was to fill her stomach with something yummy.

She stopped a few feet away from the cart, content with just smelling the cooking food, letting the flavor carried on the air fill her nostrils, seeping into her thin cotton smock and grimy skin. It was at this moment the vendor looked up from turning the sausages and saw her staring wide-eyed, drooling.

"Shoo, you're scaring the customers," he said in a gruff voice from years of breathing in heavy smoke. A half burnt cigarette hung between his lips. Lori watched it go up and down as his mouth moved. A bit of ash fell and sizzled on the grill. "What'd I say? Scram!" He stepped out towards her, tongs held high. She shrank back from the weapon. Hot grease dripped down the length of the metal and onto his hands. He cursed and put them down. When he looked back up she was already scampering away.

She went back to her secret hideout, a building two blocks away from the sausage vendor. It was a very tall building. Lori couldn't see the top. She ran up five flights of stairs and down the long dark hallway to a door. A silence filled the corridor around her, broken only by a door slamming a floor

below. Lori slipped a dull metal key out and scraped it into the lock. Without a sound the lock turned. Lori pushed the door open a crack, but the door wouldn't move any further. But it was enough for her tiny body to slip through. The hideout was dark. It always was. She would get in trouble if anyone ever saw the light on, that's what Benjamin said. She tip-toed through the familiar dark, around the maze of strewn trash bags and a couple chairs. The hideout had a strange smell today. She hopped over a hard, lumpy object she didn't want to investigate, around the dead rat she hadn't thrown out yet, to her little corner. It was dark, darker than black, in that corner, and hidden away from any prying eyes. It was the only place she could turn on the light.

She clicked her little flashlight. A small weak beam of yellow flooded up to the ceiling revealing flecks of peeling paint. The light cast a soft glow in a circle around Lori. With the light to see she spotted the remainder of yesterday's dinner, a half-eaten fast food burger, still sitting out on the floor. She grabbed it, taking a large bite. She forced herself to chew slowly, to let the sensation of food in her mouth fill her appetite. The stale burger turned to mush in her mouth and she was forced to swallow it before the texture made her gag and spit it out.

Two more bites and the burger was gone. She counted on her fingers. Mom hadn't brought home food in three days. She turned her head to where Mom's body lay on her mattress, her dark wavy hair covering her face. She wasn't allowed to wake Mom up when Mom was sleeping. That was the rule. If she did, Bad Things would happen. Lori didn't like Bad Things. Not even Benjamin could stop the Bad Things.

The sound of a large growling cat came from her stomach. "Shh," she whispered, "Mom will wake up soon." She patted her stomach, feeling its thinness. Maybe she would get lucky today. She stood and stepped around Mom's form, ignoring the dark liquid staining the mattress. Her foot slipped in the pooled liquid on the ground but her hands slapped the ground and stopped her before she fell on

the mattress. She froze, waiting for the strong hands that would push her to the floor and hit her, but it didn't come. Mom was sleeping very deeply today.

Back out on the street, the cool autumn wind whipping her thin smock around her thighs, Lori slipped back out to the main street. An older lady with a sour face turned her face when she saw Lori, as if she saw garbage in the street, seeing but ignoring her. Lori watched her, curious. What would it be like to live like her and others like her, to have places to be, people to see?

Lori stopped when she saw the sausage vendor. She stood a few feet behind him, eyeing the sausages, each skewered on a stick for easy eating. She switched the grip on her ball to her left hand, leaving her right free. She raced forward. Before the vendor even knew what was happening, she grabbed two sticks, turned left, and ran down the street. At least that was the plan. Before she even went three steps a large hand gripped her wrist.

"Little thief, you think I didn't know you were coming?" he growled. "You've been eyeing my cart for three days. I've seen the likes of you before, always think you can get away with it. Not so fast, are you..?" His voice faded as he turned Lori to face him. His eyes drifted down to her dirty dress, and the dark red stain on her hands and feet. She was barefoot. She'd lost her shoes somewhere. His voice lost its harsh tone but hand grip remained as strong as ever. "Where did you get your hands dirty?"

Lori looked at her hands closer and saw they were red. Red was the color of her ball, and of blood. But this blood was streaky and darkening to brown even as she looked. She shrugged. "It was on the floor." She struggled to free her hand, but his grip was too strong. The vendor loosened his hand, but took the skewers back. He placed one back on the grill, and held one in front of her.

"You can have this, but stay here. Don't go anywhere." Lori's eyes stayed on the sausage. She nodded. She could already taste the fat glistening on its surface. She took a big bite, the warm sweet salty flavor bursting in her mouth. It brought tears to her eyes. It was warm and chewy. She closed her eyes and took another bite.

The vendor walked a few feet away and waved to a cop patrolling nearby. They both walked over to the vendor's car and Lori. Content and feeling full, Lori stared up at the cop in his dark blue uniform as he looked her over.

"What's your name?" he asked her, crouching down to see her eye-to-eye.

"I'm not supposed to tell strangers my name," Lori said.

"That's okay. I'm not a stranger. I'm a police officer." He pointed to his badge and uniform.

"See?"

Lori frowned, chewing the last piece of sausage. She kept staring at him as she licked the grease from her fingers. "Lori." She gave the sausage skewer back to the vendor and he gave her a second skewer. She ate this one a little slower.

"Lori, can you show me the red on your hands?" the police officer asked. He held out a hand for hers. She put out her left hand, which still held her ball. The officer gently took the ball from her and then inspected her hand. The blood was a smear down her palm ending at her wrists. It all seemed to be external. "Did you fall down?"

She didn't speak, instead opening and closing her hands for her ball. He placed the ball back in her hand. She finished chewing the last of the sausage. "I fell in my hideout."

Above her the vendor sighed and shook his head. The officer shared a look with him. Lori had seen that look before on Benjamin's face whenever he spoke to Mom and didn't want Lori to hear. She turned and ran down the street.

"Lori, wait!"

She could hear the officer calling her, but she kept running. When she turned a corner she stopped. The officer rounded the corner a few seconds later.

"Did you finish talking to the sausage seller?" Lori asked.

The police officer's eyebrows frowned, but then he smiled. "Yes, I did. Lori, can you show me your hideout?"

She shook her head. "I'm not supposed to."

He bent down so that they were at eye level again. "Why not?"

"Benjamin and Mom said not to."

"Is Benjamin your dad?"

Lori shrugged. Benjamin was the cold wind of winter right before the warmth of spring. Benjamin could hold Mom back when she was in one of her moods, when she drank too much from the bottle and started hitting Lori. But Mom never said Benjamin was Lori's dad. And Benjamin always said to listen to Mom.

"Can you take me to your Mom?" the officer asked. His voice was different from the vendor's, smooth like chocolate. Lori had seen chocolate in a store window and it looked like it would melt once she put it in her mouth.

"Why?"

"So I can speak to her."

Lori's eyes widened and she took a step back. Her grip on her ball tightened.

"Lori? It's okay, you're not in trouble." He didn't move an inch even when Lori retreated from him.

Mom had told her about police officers. They were there to help her, but they could also hurt her. How was she supposed to know which was which? He didn't look like a bad person. "Do you promise?"

"I promise. I just want to ask her a few questions."

"Mom doesn't want to talk to cops."

"Why not?"

Lori shrugged again.

He sighed. Then he lifted a hand. Lori stiffened, but he only put it on his head and scratched his head. "I'm sure she'll be okay with me just sending you home?" The officer held out his other hand. He looked very friendly, like a scruffy dog.

Lori tilted her head. "What's your name?"

"Mel."

She pursed her lips the way she'd seen Mom do sometimes. "Okay, Mel. But just drop me off, okay?" She put her small hand into his. His hand was warm and a little rough. But she felt a sense of comfort when he closed his hand around hers. She started skipping. Mel walked next to her.

Up the stairs they went back to her little hideout. Mel didn't ask her any more questions and she didn't say anything. She hoped Mom wouldn't be awake to see him. He was being very nice to her.

They reached the door and Lori took out her key. "Thanks, Mel. I'll be okay now."

Mel shook his head. "No, I need to speak to your mom. I'll be really fast."

Lori took her key back from the lock. "No, you can't. I'll get in trouble."

"Then why don't you stay here. I won't say you brought me."

He smiled and Lori tried to think of what Mom would say. It would be okay, right? "Okay." She gave him the key and he unlocked the door. He went inside, closing the door behind him but leaving it open a crack. Lori waited in the dark hallway, listening to the ringing of the crickets and the rustling of the mice.

Lori's eyes were drifting closed. She'd had so much to eat today. She couldn't remember the last time she'd eaten this much. But somehow it seemed her stomach was still empty. Just then Mel returned. He closed the door and held out his hand. "Lori, your mom wants you to come with me."

"Why?" She took a step back.

"It's a special treat for you. What's your favorite place to eat?"

She shrugged. She'd never eaten anywhere other than home before.

"I know a great place that serves some really fluffy pancakes. Do you like pancakes?"

She nodded slowly. She didn't know what pancakes were, but they sounded yummy.