Hearts of the West 4: Margaret Naomi Sandburg--Reluctant Little Lady by Scribe

**Summary:** Part of the Hearts of the West Series
Summary: In the old West, Jim and Blair are raising Jim's son, Jay, and Blair's adopted daughter, Maggie. Things are going great, except for one problem--Jim is determined that Maggie will be a 'lady', and Maggie is determined to be a tomboy. Then complications arise in the form of Carolyn--Jim's ex-wife, and Jay's mother.
This is the latest section of my Hearts of the West series. You can find the previous ones here. Each will have a choice of with or without graphics:
Fandom: The Sentinel
Pairing: None this section
Rating: PG this section
Summary: Jim had half believed that Carolyn was out of his family's life forever--but she's back.
Archive: Mailing lists, WWOMB, others ask
Status: Finished
Sequel/Series: The Hearts of the West Series
Disclaimer: I did not create the characters here, I don't own them. I derive no profit from this effort. I mean nothing but respect for the creators, owners, and the actors and actresses who portray them.
Notes: This takes place two years after the events of James Joseph Ellison, Jr.--Called Jay. Please do not take offence at the Mammy doll--this takes place before the turn of the last century, when racial stereotypes were not just widespread, but prevalent. I'm probably being way off on my estimation of travel times in that period. Cut me some slack--I couldn't find any references. Yes, both the Saturday Evening Post and Life Magazine were being published in the late 1890s.
Definitions: jerkwater: adjective. 1. small and unimportant: remote from population centers and considered insignificant and backward. 2. lacking significance: lacking consequence or significance [Because water had to be supplied to early trains in remote places with a bucket on a rope]
Pince-nez: Eyeglasses without earpieces, that are meant to perch on the nose. Think the principal in the Archie comic books.
Thank you to Elaine for the beta.
Submitted through [http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Makebelieve_YG](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Makebelieve_YG)
**Rating:** FRT - young teen
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Chapter 1: Chapter 1
"Blair, do people in Boston REALLY start to get ready for Christmas right after Thanksgiving?" Jay was busily threading dried cranberries and popped corn on a thin cord, using a carefully blunted leatherworking needle.

"That's silly, Jay," said Maggie, from where she sat beside him. She was in charge of making paper chains. A big pile of carefully cut newspaper strips lay before her. She would loop a strip of paper through an already completed loop, then paste the ends together with a mixture of flour and water. She was wearing one of Jim's old shirts, and that had kept the paste off her clothes, but she had enough on her hands to make it look like she was wearing opera gloves. "That's way too early."

"I happen to agree, Maggie," said Blair, "but that doesn't stop it. Some people spend most of the time between Thanksgiving and Christmas at parties and shopping."

Maggie wrinkled her forehead. "How can they take weeks shopping? How many people do they get presents for?" The only stores Maggie was familiar with were the ones in Cascade, and nearby Lansdale. None of them contained enough merchandise to justify leisurely shopping.

"I don't know, Mags. Some people can just make a fine art out of leisure Sweetheart, don't touch your hair while you have goop on your hands."

"Why not? Daddy Jim says he can't get it to behave, but I bet the paste would keep it nice an' neat." Maggie's hair was amazingly like her adoptive father's--reddish brown, and with a mind of its own. No matter how much time Jim took wrestling it into a neat braid or tail, by lunchtime most of it would be floating free.

"You will *not* test that theory. Those are some fine, long garlands, Jay."

"They'd be longer still if *someone* didn't eat all the popcorn." Maggie gave him an unrepentant grin as she stole another kernel. "When's Dad getting back from Lansdale, anyway?"

Blair was stirring a pot of stew while the children made decorations at the kitchen table. "Should be before you two go to bed. He cabled that he was being held over because the marshal was late getting there to take the prisoner."

Maggie frowned. "I don't like it when Daddy Jim has to take an ol' pris'ner to Lansdale. It always take a whole day, an' what if one of them bad men *hurts* him?"

Blair put down his spoon, went over, and smoothed Maggie's flying hair. "Don't worry, darlin'. Daddy Jim is always very, very careful. This is only a *fairly* bad man. He didn't hurt anyone. Well, not *physically*, anyway. He was a con man who cheated a lot of people out of a bunch of money."
"That's bad enough," said Jay firmly. "Why, if you and Dad hadn't caught that rascal, poor old Mrs. Bennet would have lost her home, and Megan and Rafe might have lost the livery."

Maggie's lip quivered. "Then Raffie wouldn't have had nowhere to live!" She brightened. "She could have come and lived with us!"

"That's generous, but I think we'd have been a little cramped," said Blair, amused. Maggie and Raphaella, Megan and Rafe's girl, seemed to be trying to figure out a way they could live together. Blair thought the only reason they weren't succeeding was because they couldn't agree on WHERE--both girls were lobbying for their own home. "What about Rafe, Megan, and Gabriel?" Gabriel was Raphaella's little brother, just over a year old. He was generally fussed over by the two, even though he had a tendency to pull hair.

Maggie's mind had been turned away from Daddy Jim's possible peril. She said thoughtfully, "Um... Well, Rafe could sleep on the 'xamining table in your office, an' Megan could sleep on the sofa in front, an'..." she was squinting in concentration, then said triumphantly, "An' Gabe could sleep with Jay, 'cause he's just little. Do you s'pose Daddy Jim is gonna buy any presents in Lansdale?"

Blair and Jay both rolled their eyes. Jay said, "Maggie, when was the last time Dad came back from a trip that he DIDN'T bring you something?" Maggie thought about this, then smiled and cheerfully began slapping paste on newsprint again.

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Jim turned the package over in his hands. "Jay loves mechanical things, especially clocks. You're sure that this contains everything he'll need?"

"Everything except the tools, sir," the store clerk assured him. "And there's a very clear set of instructions included."

"He probably won't need them. He's awfully good at figuring things out on his own, but if he gets stuck, he'll have something to refer to. What tune does it play again?"

"When it is completed correctly, it will play 'Claire de Lune'."

"Very nice. And you can wrap it for me?"

"Yes, sir. We have red, white, or green paper available, and if you have far to travel, we'll also wrap it in brown paper, so that it will remain pristine for Christmas."

"Excellent. I'll want that for both my purchases. Now, a doll."

"Oh, YES, sir! We have a lovely selection--china, bisque, wax, and carved wood." The clerk indicated a long case full of a colorful array of dollies.

Jim admired the fancy dresses of velvet, silk, and satin, ruffles, and lace. There were patent leather shoes, kid gloves, real fur muff, and carefully tatted shawls. The hair, real human hair in most cases, was all shades of blonde, with an occasional brunette thrown in, as if for contrast. "They're beautiful."

"Indeed. They're all of the finest quality." He watched the big man as he studied the dolls. "Is this for your own little girl?"

"Yes," said Jim absently. It didn't occur to him that many people might dispute that Maggie WAS his
daughter since they shared no blood ties, and Jim would legally be her guardian only if Blair died. "Margaret
Naomi"

"And how old is she?"

He smiled. "She's almost six."

"Oh. Well, sir, most of these dolls are meant for older children. The bisque dolls are fragile, and I have to
warn you that the heat CAN soften the wax ones so that the slightest roughness in handling can damage the
features. The wooden dolls would be most appropriate. But if you'll entertain a suggestion..." He reached in
and rummaged among the other dolls. His voice dropped, "The management thinks they're a bit common,
and they try to cultivate the elite strata of local society. Sheer foolishness." He pulled out a soft rag doll. "I'm
afraid the selection is rather limited. We have a sailor, and a Negress Mammy doll."

Jim frowned at the toys. The sailor doll was rather cute--dressed in navy blue, complete with tiny brass
buttons--but it was a BOY doll. The female doll... *Oh, no--I DON'T think so.* The doll was styled with
huge, staring eyes, a broad nose, and blubbery lips spread in an ingratiating smile. *Not when we've
managed to keep Maggie free from bigotry so far. And I can just imagine how Simon or Daryl would feel if
they saw that.* Jim pointed into the case. "Let me see that one--the one in pink satin. Oh, and I'll want a
jump rope, too." He smiled. "If I come back without something for Maggie, I'll be snubbed to death, but I
don't want her to try to poke into her Christmas presents. This should distract her."

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"There was no need for you to come along to the station, Ellison," said Marshal Talbot, "but I sure do
appreciate it."

"Not at all, Rance." Jim gave their sullen prisoner a pointed look. "Toomey is a slippery cuss. Don't let him
out of your sight for an instant--not even to use the facilities on the train. They did that the last time he was in
custody--never figured he'd be able to wiggle through that tiny window they had in the washroom, but he
did."

The Marshal made a rueful expression, but nodded. "Hell, I s'pose I've pitched enough manure in my life to
be able to stand it, since it's in a good cause." Rance grinned, nodding at the pile of parcels sitting at Jim's
feet. "You sure Rainier isn't going to balk at toting all that back to Cascade?"

Jim shrugged. "I'd say I was going to eventually end up just getting a wagon or a pack mule, if Cascade
wasn't growing so quickly. Won't be long before we'll be able to get just about anything we need without
leaving town." There was a long whistle from the train's engine. The two lawmen shook hands. Rance led
the prisoner up into the train, with Jim staying close behind till they were inside.

Once the train had started to pull out, Jim bent and gathered his packages. He'd considered packing them in
his saddlebags--Rainier was tied up on the other side of the platform, but he had been leery of leaving them
unattended. There wasn't much casual thievery in Cascade, but people in the bigger cities were a lot freer
about helping themselves to property that was left unattended. He was glad that he and Blair were raising
their children in Cascade. Maggie had never had to deal with the harsher elements of big city life, and Jay...
Jay had seen enough of the seamier elements to make him, even at his young age, appreciate the quiet of a
smaller town.

"Jim?"

Jim froze. For the first time in almost a year he had to fight back the sudden grayness of a zone. Study and
practice with Blair had taught him how to avoid most of the paralyzing spells, at least the ones that were
brought on by concentrating too strongly on any one of his senses. The ones that COULDN'T be guarded against, though, were the rare ones that could be tripped by a sudden burst of intense emotion. This was one of those, because even though there had been only that one, questioning word, he had recognized the voice.

He turned slowly, clutching the parcels like a shield. She'd been wearing a traveling outfit the last time he'd seen her, too--plum velvet, with egret feathers curling on her hat. This time the ensemble was deep green, and her sleek blonde hair was caught back in a demure woven snood, but there was no doubt as to who it was. "Hello, Carolyn."

"Well." She came over slowly. "This is a surprise. I didn't expect to see you till tomorrow, when I reached Cascade." She hesitated, then said, "You didn't come to meet me, did you?"

Jim heard the coolness in his own voice. "How could I? We heard from you last almost two years ago, when you wrote to say you were going over to England. I came to transfer a prisoner."

Her smile was acerbic. "I should have known. Only duty would get you away from that little jerkwater town you settled in."

Jim wasn't going to defend his hometown to his ex-wife. "Why are you here?"

"As smooth as ever, I see. I've come to visit my son, of course."

"Mm-hm. And you intended to just pop in with no advanced notice?"

Carolyn flushed. "I need to make an appointment to see my own flesh and blood?"

"Carolyn, you could be moldering in your grave right now for all Jay knows. That boy writes you faithfully, at least twice a month, and he hasn't had a reply since..."

Carolyn gestured impatiently. "This is hardly the time or place to lecture me about my deficiencies as a correspondent, Jimmy. I'm here now--isn't that what matters?"

Jim chewed his lip. He hadn't missed Carolyn in the least. In fact, he'd been relieved that she hadn't tried to keep in close touch with Jay, though he had ached for the boy when he'd ask, a bit wistfully, if Jim thought that Carolyn was doing all right. Jim was convinced that Jay was happy in his life with him, Blair, and Maggie--but Carolyn was his MOTHER, and the only other family the boy had ever known. He kept his voice level. "He'll be happy to see you, Carolyn. Will you ride back with me?"

"It's gracious of you to offer, but I couldn't possibly start off now. No, we'll be spending the night in the best hotel this place has to offer, then renting a buggy to drive over tomorrow."

"We?"

A man dressed in a sober, but richly tailored suit approached, and took Carolyn's elbow. "I've seen to the luggage, my dear. There's a rather good hotel nearby, and I've sent a man ahead to secure a suite for us." He looked at Jim, frowning slightly. "An acquaintance of yours?"

"Reuben, you've heard me speak of Jim--Jim Ellison." Understanding dawned in the man's eyes as Carolyn tucked her hand securely in the crook of his elbow and she gave Jim a small, smug smile. "Jim this is my husband--Sir Reuben Huxley-St. James, Baronet."
Part Two

The two men stared at each other for a moment, the station crowd bustling around them. It was an assessing stare on both sides, and both men found something impressive in the other. The baronet saw the obvious--Jim's size and physique, and he noted a certain sharpness in the other man's expressions that he put down to native cunning. Jim made a more accurate assessment. He noted that the man was in pretty good shape for one of British nobility, but he took note of much more. He saw intelligence, arrogance, and a ruthless determination, overlaid by a gloss of manners and culture. Yes, this was exactly the type of man Carolyn should have married in the first place. They would suit each other.

"Mister Ellison," said Reuben. "I'm pleased to meet you. Carolyn has spoken of you extensively."

The man's grip was firm, just this side of an attempt at intimidation. "I can believe that. She's said absolutely nothing about you." There was another moment of silence as the two men stood there, hands still clasped, looking into each other's eyes. They finally released each other. "It must have been a whirlwind romance."

"Carolyn and I became acquainted at a country house party last Christmas."

"Really?" Jim seemed to think. "Yes, that's sounds right. We haven't heard from her for about a year."

Carolyn's voice was acid. "Jim, you've exceeded my expectations." She smiled at her husband. "Jim managed to dredge up recriminations in the first five minutes. I think that's a record for him."

"Hm. Well, if you'll excuse us, Mister Ellison, I believe they should have our rooms ready by now. We'll be seeing you in Cascade." He nodded, dismissing Jim, and turned, leading Carolyn away.

Jim watched them leave the station, noticing how the other people almost unconsciously stepped aside to give them clear passage. Jim had a feeling that Reuben Huxley-St. James scarcely noticed this, taking it as his due. Jim shook his head, then gathered up his packages and started for the livery stable to get Rainier. As hard as he tried not to be bitter about his ex-wife, seeing Carolyn had still left a bad taste in his mouth. He wanted to get home--to his family.

He didn't push Rainier, but the horse was just as eager to get home as Jim was, and he needed no urging. It was just after dusk when he finally arrived in Cascade. Rafe was in the stable, mending a harness, and Raphaella was carefully braiding several long hanks of some sort of long, pale material. Jim hopped down at the entrance, and Rafe put away the tack, going to meet him. "Hey, Jim. How was the trip?"

"Uneventful, thank goodness." Jim unloaded the packages from his saddlebags. "Would you mind getting Rainier settled for me? I'd really like to get home."

"Jim, you PAY for that service, and you almost never let me do it for you. Hand him over." Rafe took the reins and led Rainier back to his stall.

Jim felt a tug at his belt, and looked down into Raphaella's wide, dark eyes. "Well, hello, Peanut."

"'Lo, Maggie's Daddy." She pointed. "Are them Chris'mas presents?"

"THESE certainly are Christmas presents."

"Are they for Maggie?"

"Some of them are."
"I'se makin' a present for Maggie," she declared. She held up what she had been working on. "See? I'se makin' her a bracelet."

"That's looking very pretty, Raffie." He squinted at it, and sniffed discreetly. "Horseshair?"

Raphaella nodded enthusiastically. "You know Mister Will's Palomino?"

"I sure do. He's a fine horse."

"Mister Will lets me collect all the hairs that fall out of the horsey's mane an' tail, an' I been saving them just for Maggie. It's gonna be a friendship bracelet."

Jim smiled softly. "She'll like that very much."

Raphaella held a finger up to her lips, then stage whispered, "Don't tell!"

Jim drew an X over his chest. "Cross my heart."

Jim hefted his packages, preparing to go, and Raphaella said shyly, "Mister Ellison? Do... do you think Jay would like one, too? I have some pretty black hair. It looks like his hair, 'cept it's not quite so soft."

Jim fought down a grin. "I think he'd like that fine, Raffie."

Jim walked up the street toward home. The street was quiet, but there were still a few people out taking an after dinner stroll, and he passed greetings with them. He came to his own house, and paused before going to the front door. The curtains hadn't quite been drawn, and he could peek through into the living room.

The room was filled with warm lamplight. Blair was sitting on the sofa, spectacles perched on his nose, reading a medical journal. Maggie was sitting beside him, eyes half shut, leaning comfortably against his side. One hand was playing with Blair's hair, and the other one was busy twirling one of her own curls. Jay walked in from the kitchen and spoke to Blair, offering him a sheet of paper. Blair took it and examined it, then tapped it in a couple of places, speaking to the boy, who nodded in understanding.

Jim enjoyed the sight of his family, safe and happy, then went and tapped on the door. It swung open, and Jay peeked out. His face immediately broke into a wide smile, and he turned his head, calling back, "Dad's home!"

There was a squeal and a thump, then the rapid patter of footsteps. Jay jumped aside with a laugh, and Maggie pelted out, throwing herself against Jim, clutching him around the legs. "Daddy's home! Daddy's home!" She rested her chin on Jim's leg, gazing up at him. "Did you bring me anything?"

He laughed. "Don't I even get a kiss before you ask?"

"Well," said the little girl reasonably, "I can't reach that high. You gots to lean down." Jim leaned down and received an enthusiastic kiss on the cheek. "Thank you, Miss. Now let's go inside before I have to arrest myself for loitering."

They went in and Jay closed the door. Blair hadn't gotten up, but he was watching Jim with a smile even wider than Jay's. "How was the trip?"

"Tedious, as usual." He held up the boxes, "But I DID manage to get a few things accomplished."

"Did you eat?"
"No. I was going to, but I... got distracted." Blair raised an eyebrow questioningly. "I'll tell you over dinner. Jay, could you go put these away for me?"

"Usual place?" he asked, taking the boxes.

"Yes."

Maggie pouted. "I SAID I wouldn't peek."

"That's what you said last year, too," said Blair, "and you knew exactly what you were getting two weeks before Christmas." Jim's blacksmith shop had once served double duty as the town jail. When the new Cascade sheriff's office had been built, the two cells had been fixed up to be the children's rooms, walled and decorated nicely. Much of the labor and materials had been provided in barter for Blair's medical services. One of the holdovers from the jail era, and Maggie's younger days, was the gun cabinet. Jim seldom had to wear his sidearm, and he kept it locked up with his hunting rifle, and shotgun. "These go in the cabinet."


"As far as I know, he's never tried to peek." Blair dug the key out of his pocket, then rubbed Maggie's head. "Look at it this way--it'll be easier for you to resist temptation."

As Jay left with the key, Jim said, "But you're not totally bereft, darlin'." He handed a smaller package to Maggie, who ripped into it without hesitation. When she exposed the rope, she squealed happily, bouncing up and down. "That's long enough for you and a friend to turn it while a third person jumps."

The little girl was holding a handle in each hand, examining the rope. She lifted both hands high over her head--and a long stretch of the rope in the middle remained on the floor in front of her. She looked up at Jim questioningly, and Blair laughed. "She's got you there, Jim. That rope's long enough for YOU to jump."

Maggie's face brightened, and she shoved the handles at Jim. "You do it, Daddy!"

Jim backed up, raising his hands in denial. "Oh, no! Not even for you, Maggie. There are enough chances in my life to look foolish without my going hunting for them. If you want to jump by yourself, hon, all you have to do is wrap the rope around your wrists a couple of times."

Blair patted Maggie on the bottom. "Go put that up, Mags. I expect your Daddy has an appetite after that ride, and it's supper time for him." As she trotted away, Blair called, "And maybe you can talk him into jumping rope on Christmas. He's usually in a good mood then." Blair turned to Jim with a grin, but it faltered when he saw his lover's bleak expression. "Jim?"

"Don't count on it this year, Blair." He hesitated. "Well, maybe. I doubt she'll want to spend Christmas in Cascade."

"Who..." Understanding dawned. "Carolyn? She's coming?"

Jim rubbed the back of his neck. "She's sort of already here. She's staying overnight in Lansdale, but they're planning on coming in tomorrow."

"They?"

"Carolyn and her husband."
"Oh." There was a wealth of unspoken thoughts in that single word. Blair took a breath. "Sort of sudden, isn't it?"

"Not really. I'm not sure how long they've been married, but I don't think this is a honeymoon trip. I think the Baronet would lean more toward a grand tour of Europe. Carolyn made it into the nobility."

"Minor nobility. Baronet's about as low as you can go on the lists. It's the most often bestowed title--people buy them, through out-and-out bribes, or social, business, and political favors. Those can't be passed down."

"Maybe he isn't in the upper levels, but he's got a 'Sir' in front of his name, and that carries a lot of weight with some people--like Carolyn. Sir Reuben Huxley-St. James."

Blair smiled faintly. "Oh, my. I think my grandparents would have cut their own throats to be socially tied with someone like that." He hesitated, then said quietly. "We ought to tell Jay."

Jim sighed. "I suppose so. It might be a shock to his system if she just shows up."

"Go wash off the dust. I left you a plate of supper in the warming oven. Jay decided to wait on eating dessert to have it with you, and you can tell him then."

"All right." Jim sniffed, and smiled. "I just hope he doesn't lose his appetite. It'd be a shame if Maggie had to eat that extra piece of sweet potato pie."

"Miss Maggie is about to go to bed, no matter what she thinks," said Blair firmly.

Jim went back into their bedroom and started stripping down to his drawers. He could hear Blair and Maggie in the kitchen, and paused to listen, chuckling.

"Bed time, Mags."

"But Papa, I'se not sleepy."

"Maybe not, but you're TIRED."

"But it's not dark."

"Mags, look at the clock. See where the hands are? Remember, I told you that when the hands get like that, it's time for bed."

"But they gets like that in the mornin'."

Jim had to bite his lip to keep from laughing out loud at this undeniable childish logic as Blair answered, "You know what I mean. Now scoot and get into your nighty."

"But I gots to wish on a star."

"Margaret Naomi Sandburg..." Jim heard the rapid patter of tiny feet that signaled that Blair had won this round. He heard Blair call, "I'll come in a little while to tuck you in..." Maggie started to call a question, and Blair quickly added, "and give you a good-night kiss, and read you a story, and put a glass of water by your bed." There was silence. Blair came into the bedroom, carrying a steaming jug of water. "I've learned to cover all possible arguments."
As Blair poured the water into the basin, Jim said, "She's just going to come up with something new, you know."

"I know." Blair grinned. "I'm sort of looking forward to seeing what she comes up with."

He poured the water into the basin. "Test it." Jim dabbled his fingers in the water, then nodded. They'd learned to be careful about testing the heat of Jim's bathing water, ever since the time he hadn't paid attention and had ended up curled on the bed for a half-hour, clutching his face.

It had been a year into their relationship, and Jim had begun to get a little complacent about how successful he'd been controlling his senses. But he told Blair that he'd felt like he'd splashed his face with acid. It brought home to him in a sobering manner that being a Sentinel was a constant learning experience, and would have been nearly intolerable without his Guide. It made him worry about Jay. What if his boy didn't find his own Guide?

Jim pushed aside these thoughts. *I have other worries right now.* He dipped a cloth in the water, squeezed out most of it, and began to wipe himself down. He was letting himself enjoy the sensual moist warmth, then he noticed that Blair was leaning in the doorway, watching him keenly. Jim fought down a smile. "I thought the next thing on the schedule was getting Maggie settled."

"It is, it is. But Jim, during my long rambles across the breadth of America, I learned to take time to appreciate great natural beauty. I'm doing that right now."

Grinning, Jim flicked water at him, and Blair laughed. "Paaaa-pa?" Maggie's voice, with that singsong quality that said she was prepared to go on for a long-time, floated out to them.

Blair shook his head, smiling. "Coming, Sugar." He addressed Jim, "Dinner's in the warming box, pie is in the pie safe," and left.

Jim finished washing quickly, pulled on a fresh shirt, and went out to the kitchen. Jay was sitting at the table with a book, but he hopped up quickly when Jim came in. He took a dishtowel and went to the stove, opening the warming box. "Sit down, Dad--I'll get it for you."

Jim took a seat, and Jay brought his plate over to him. "Thanks, son."

Jay nodded. "Want some water? I filled the crock this afternoon."

"Sure." Jim started eating as Jay dipped a glass of water out of the stoneware crock that held the family's drinking water. "You helped Blair with the stew, didn't you?" Jay smiled at him. "Want to know how I can tell?"

"Because I did the same thing I did last time I helped--I used two bay leaves instead of one, like Blair usually does."

Jim chuckled. As Jay put down the glass, Jim reached up and tousled his hair. "Go ahead and have your pie--no need to wait for me."

Jay didn't have to be invited twice. He quickly brought a hefty wedge of orange-gold pie over to the table, and Jim sniffed appreciatively as the scents of cinnamon and nutmeg reached him. For a few minutes the two ate in companionable silence. When there was no more than a bite or two of his dessert left, Jay said, "So, how was your trip?" He lifted solemn eyes to his father. "Was it really all right?"

The three men of the Ellison-Sandburg household were in a conspiracy to keep the rougher facts of life from...
Maggie. It had been agreed that she wouldn't be kept in the well-bred oblivion favored for most young women of the day, but it was also agreed that there was no need for her to face ugliness so early in life. "Yes, Jay, it was really all right." Jay's stance relaxed a little, and Jim dreaded what he was about to tell him, hating to spoil the boy's contentment.

Jim pushed away his empty plate, and Jay instantly started to get up. "I'll get your dessert..."

"No, wait. Sit down, Jay." Jay did so, giving his father a questioning look. It wasn't often that Jim passed up a chance at pie. "Something sort of eventful DID happen in Lansdale. I met someone." He took a breath, then said, as evenly as he could, "I ran into your mother at the train station."

Jay froze, staring at Jim. There was a long moment of silence, then Jay cleared his throat. "Is... is she doing well?"

The wistfulness of Jay's tone tore at Jim's heart. "She's doing very well. She's remarried, Jay."

He blinked. "Oh." He had to take a moment to think about this, and Jim let him, not saying anything, just trying to offer silent support. "Is he nice?"

"I don't know him. He looked all right--very respectable, well-to-do. Your mother says that he has a title. He's a baronet."

Jay frowned, obviously searching his mind. "That isn't very important."

Jim had to fight down a smile. *God bless the kid. He isn't one to be impressed by labels.* "Some people might think so." Jay shrugged. "She's going to be here tomorrow."

Jay's eyes widened. "She's going to come to see me?"

*God DAMN it, Carolyn! I can forgive a lot of things, but letting your son get to the point where you wanting to see him is a surprise--that I can't forgive.* "Of course she is. Why else would she have come all the way from England?"

"England?" He frowned. "That's a long way off. Maybe that's why she didn't come back. I mean, she wouldn't travel all that way for just a short visit, if she had to go all the way back, would she? She hasn't seen me for a long time. Do you think she'll be surprised at how big I am? I've grown a lot."

"Yes, you have." *You've grown in so many ways, Jay, and she's missed it all, damn her.* "You ought to go to bed now, son."

"Yes." Jay stood up, taking his plate to the sink. He pumped a little water into the basin and started washing his plate. "She might come by early. It wouldn't be polite if I wasn't ready to greet her. Do you think I ought to wear my Sunday clothes?"

Jim closed his eyes. All the indifference, bordering on neglect, and the abandonment, but she was still his mother, and he wanted to please her. "You can if you want, but you'll have to be careful with them, since Sunday's just day-after-tomorrow."

"I will." He put the dish in the drain rack and started out to his room. Just before he went out, he turned back and went to Jim. His arms went around him, and he laid his head on Jim's shoulder. Jim returned the embrace. Jay whispered, "I... I was starting to wonder if she was going to..." He squeezed Jim again and pulled away quickly. "Good night." He hurried out.
Jim just sat, staring at the tabletop. A few minutes later Blair came in. He paused, studying his lover, then went to him and sat on his lap, putting his arms around Jim's neck. "You all right?"

Jim sighed, rubbing his hand up and down Blair's back. "I suppose so. It's just that I'd almost convinced myself that I wasn't going to have to deal with Carolyn again--and here she comes." He snorted. "Married. Well, it looks like she finally landed the sort that she wanted. Maybe he can make her happy--lord knows I never could."

"Some people can't be satisfied, Jim. They go their entire life struggling toward something, and most of the time they don't even know what that is. They may THINK they know, but when they get what they were going for, it isn't enough. Those are the really sad ones. They think they have what they want, they believe they should be happy, but they're not, and they don't understand why."

Jim rested his chin on Blair's shoulder. "You're right. I didn't even know what I was searching for till you drifted into town." He smiled. "It's nice when what you need comes to you."

Part Three

The next day Maggie, who was making her way through a generously buttered and sugared bowl of oatmeal, eyed Jay curiously. At last she pointed her spoon at him and said, "Jay, how come you're wearing a towel 'round your neck?"

Jay was gingerly eating a slice of toast and jam. "I don't want to get my clothes messed up."

Maggie frowned. "Jay," she said in a very reasonable tone of voice. "We got two kinds of na'kins. We got the ev'ry day kind, and we got the fussy, fancy kind that we only use when the preacher comes to supper. How come you don't use them?"

"They aren't big enough. You can either lay them on your lap, or tuck them in your collar, but either way they just don't cover everything. I didn't want to risk covering my lap and having my front get messed up, or covering my chest and getting something in my lap."

Maggie thought about this for a minute, then nodded. "You're smart, Jay."

Jim, who was lifting sausages out of a frying pan at the stove, said, "Yes, he is, and don't say 'how come', Maggie. Say 'why'"

She blinked at him innocently. "How come?"

Jim sighed heavily, and Jay quickly took another bite of toast, probably on the theory that it would muffle his chuckle. Blair, sitting opposite Maggie, laughed. "Jim, she's already learning to read, and she uses better English than a lot of the adults around here. She'll pick it up."

"It's just that the way a person speaks is a big part of how people view them." Jim brought his plate of sausage and scrambled eggs over to the table. He sat down, saying, "I'd like her to not just have decent grammar, but for her manner of speaking to be *refined*. If we don't correct her, she's going to end up sounding like a ranch hand."

Blair grinned at him. "A ranch hand has a much saltier vocabulary than Miss Maggie, but I know what you mean. Be patient, Jim. Let her sound like a little girl before she sounds like a lady."
Maggie was eyeing Jim's plate. "That sure is a lot of sausage, Daddy. Do you think you can eat all of it?"

Jim gave her an amused look. "I think I can manage it. Why do you ask?"

"Well, you always say that we shouldn't waste food, an' I'd hate to see sausage go to waste."

Jim looked thoughtful. "You're right about that, Maggie. It's a sin and a shame to waste food." He took another bite of sausage, chewing slowly

Jay said earnestly, "If we had a dog, there'd never be any wasted food. He'd eat it all up."

This was a new slant on an old argument. The possibility of a dog or a cat joining the family had been discussed often and at length, but never to a conclusion that truly satisfied anyone in the family. The children couldn't convince the parents to adopt a pet, and Jim couldn't get the children to forget the subject. It wasn't that Jim objected to pets, but he had felt that bringing a new animal into a home situation that hadn't quite settled down, especially when one of the members was very young and very vigorous, wasn't the best idea. But Maggie had grown up a lot, Jay had settled in comfortably, and Jim was beginning to think that his anti-pet argument was sounding pretty weak. Now was not the time, though. "But we don't have a dog. I'm just going to have to try to choke all this down myself."

To no one's surprise Maggie piped up helpfully. "Daddy Jim, I could help you eat some of those."

"Oh, I wouldn't want you to force yourself, Maggie. Besides," Jim indicated her bowl. "You still have some oatmeal left, and we don't want to waste..." Maggie immediately began to gobble down her oatmeal. "Maggie—manners! A lady doesn't bolt her food like that."

Blair was leaning his chin in his hands, smiling at his daughter. "The last time I saw *anyone* eat like that it was a lumberjack who had been lost in the woods for two days."

Maggie hadn't slowed down. "You're going to choke," Jim warned her.

Maggie scraped the last spoonful up and swallowed it. "Nuh-uh. Oatmeal is too mushy to get stuck." She held out her empty bowl, eyeing Jim's plate expectantly.

Shaking his head, Jim forked one of the sausages into the bowl. "Someone get her a fork before she either uses her fingers, or tries to eat it with a spoon."

"I will. I'm through." Jay stood, carefully shaking crumbs from the towel onto his empty plate.

As Jay untied the towel, Blair said, "Jay, are you sure? You aren't quite up to Jim's level of accomplishment as a trencherman, but you usually manage more than toast for breakfast."

Jay was getting a fork out of the silver drawer. "I'm all right. I didn't really want that. To tell the truth, I've been feeling a little queasy, but I remembered that you said that sometimes eating a little something would settle your stomach."

As Jay handed the fork to Maggie Jim asked, "Did it help?"

"Not much."

Jim gave Blair a troubled look, but Blair shook his head. "I don't think it's anything to get worried about. It's just that sometimes excitement can put a few butterflies in the belly."
Maggie had stabbed the sausage, and was now nibbling on it. Jim decided not to gripe that she hadn't cut it up, and instead be happy that she hadn't crammed the whole thing into her mouth. Washing the breakfast dishes was one of Jay's chores, and he was eyeing Maggie's bowl. Blair said, "Jay, I'll do those today, so you don't have to worry about getting your shirt wet."

Jay gave him a grateful look. "I'll do the supper dishes tonight." He fidgeted. "I think I'll just go check the front room." He left.

Jim poked at his eggs, and muttered, "He cleaned up in there twice last night."

Blair cocked an eyebrow. "Jim Ellison is complaining that someone is being too neat?"

Jim put down his fork. "I figured he'd be a little nervous about seeing his mother again, Blair, but..."

Maggie finished her sausage. "He's acting like he did when he first came to live with us."

Both men stared at the little girl. Blair said, "Miss Maggie is a very astute woman."

She frowned. "I'm a toot?"

Blair laughed, and Jim finally smiled. He reached over and rubbed her curls. "Yes, you definitely are. Put your bowl in the sink, then go wash your face and hands and put on fresh clothes."

Maggie sighed dramatically as she obeyed. She paused on her way out and said, "You sure Jay's mama didn't marry the king of England? E'vrybody sure seems to be acting like she did."

Blair held his laughter till Maggie was out of the room. Jim gave him a look, and Blair said, "I'm sorry, Jim. I just can't help but wonder how many people have wanted to say something like that to Carolyn's face, but haven't dared."

"Well, I certainly hope Maggie restrains herself. Carolyn can make the temperature drop ten degrees with a look. Maggie hasn't really been exposed to unkindness, and I'd like to keep it like that for a while. I'm thinking maybe we should send her over to visit Raphaella for the day."

Blair took Jim's now empty plate over to the sink. "I understand why you say that, Jim, but I have to say I don't like the idea. This is Maggie's home, and I don't believe she should be run out to avoid a possibly unpleasant situation. I believe that Carolyn, as an adult, holds the main responsibility for taking a child's behavior in stride."

"It doesn't seem she's very good at that, but you're right." Jay moved past the door to the front room, and Jim, voice low, said, "He probably could have slept in. I've never known Carolyn to voluntarily get up early. We'll be doing good if she shows up in time for lunch."

Jim was right. Minutes ticked by, then hours. Jay tried to keep still, but he ended up straightening things that had already been straightened, and dusting surfaces that were spotlessly clean. Normally such a display of housekeeping would have gladdened Jim's heart, but he knew that Jay was doing it for someone who was unlikely to notice, much less appreciate it.

Things were quiet in Cascade, and since the town had hired two more deputies, giving Cascade a fair sized law enforcement staff, for a town its size. Jim had spoken with Simon, and the sheriff had readily agreed to give him the day off, and the next couple of days, if he needed to play host. Joel Taggert was a bachelor, and had cheerfully informed Jim that he was ready to take up any slack necessary in return for an invitation to Christmas dinner.
Jay would have waited outside, but December in Cascade was definitely not ‘porch sitting’ weather, so he had to be satisfied with getting up every few minutes to peer out the front window. Jim was reading a law text, but not much was sinking in. He was too aware of the boy. He hadn't seen Jay this agitated since he'd learned about his Sentinel senses, and begun to come to terms with them.

Maggie came into the front room. "Daddy Jim, can I go down an' see Raffie now?"

Jay didn't look back at her. "Maggie, my mother should be here soon. Don't you want to meet her?"

"Yes, but she's gonna be here a long time, isn't she? I haven't seen Raffie since yesterday."

Jay turned back. "Yes, but Raffie lives just down the street, and you can see her... Maggie, you aren't going out dressed like THAT!"

Jim glanced over. Maggie was wearing a pair of heavy denim trousers, and a flannel shirt. With her curly red-brown hair frizzing around her face like a halo, she looked more than ever like her adopted father, Blair. Maggie looked down at herself, puzzled, then looked up at Jay. "I'se clean."

"Yes, but Maggie, those clothes..."

She frowned. "I'se decent." She tugged at her pants and shirt, peering at them. "Nothin' showing. No holes."

Jay looked at Jim helplessly. "Dad."

Jim laid aside his book. "Maggie, I think what Jay is saying is that he'd rather you put on one of your dresses."

Maggie put her hands on her hips. "Jay, I'se goin' to play with Raffie at the stable, an' a stable is no place for a dress."

"I see no reason why you shouldn't be able to play in a dress and stay clean, at least for a little while."

"But I wanna go visit Mama Ragbag an' her new babies." Mama Ragbag was the Rafes' tortoiseshell stable cat. Between the mice she caught and the food the town children sneaked her she should have been rotund, but she was so active that she stayed rail thin--except when she was pregnant, which was often. Mama Ragbag was well known for climbing up into the loft to have her litters. With the steady stream of children coming to visit the new arrivals, Rafe complained that he needed to fix the ladder up with something like the collars people put on branches to keep squirrels away from bird feeders.

"Can't you wait and do that tomorrow?"

"But Jay, their eyes were 'most open yesterday. I wanna see what color eyes they have."

Blair came out of his examining room, ushering an elderly man. "All babies have blue eyes, Maggie," he informed her.

She looked at him doubtfully. She was quite sure that, between them, Daddy Jim, Papa Blair, and Jay knew everything in the world, but still... "Cats don't got blue eyes." It was almost a question.

"Some of them do. You've just never seen one, Maggie."

"You sure?"
The old man smiled at her. "They sure do, little lady. I saw one once in Chinatown that had eyes even bluer
than yours. He was a long, lanky critter--cream colored, 'cept he looked like he'd stepped in chocolate sauce,
then had his face pushed in it, and his tail. The Chinaman who owned him said his name was Ming Toy,
and he was of royal descent."

Blair nodded. "Siamese. Mister Parker, I'm afraid there isn't much I can do for the vision problems. In the
past twenty or so years, they HAVE made great strides in eye surgery, and there's been significant success in
cataract removal, but I'm not qualified to do anything that delicate. Frankly, I don't know of anyone nearby
who is. If you'd like, I can make some inquiries and see if there's a specialist on the West coast." (They are
still using the horse and buggy, but do cataract surgery?)

"I got me a fine magnifying glass, and I can still read, so there's no big hurry. But if you can find the time,
Doc, I'd appreciate it." He reached out and tweaked one of Maggie's curls. "I'd hate it if I got to where I
couldn't see this little lady's dimple clear."

Jay said, "Mags, won't you PLEASE change into a dress? Or at least a skirt and blouse? For me?"

Maggie sighed heavily. "I s'pose I could put on my jumper."

"Hey," said Jim. "You never give up without a fight when I ask you to wear something more feminine."

"That's 'cause you ask all the time," said Maggie reasonably. "Jay's just asking for a favor."

Blair had opened the door for Mister Parker, and now he said quietly, "Jay? I don't think there's going to be
time for any wardrobe changes."

An elegant closed carriage--no doubt the best that Lansdale could offer--was pulling up in front of the house.
While visitors to Cascade were no longer unusual, this was a close-knit neighborhood, and Jim and Blair
were well liked. People would be interested about out-of-town visitors, especially ones who could afford
such plush transportation. Even well-to-do Cascade residents were satisfied by open wagons.

The livery dressed driver (another rarity), got down and tied the reins to a porch post, nodding to the people
gathered on the porch. "Afternoon, folks. Would this be the Ellison house?"

Jim had come out on the porch also. "I'm Jim Ellison."

Jim nodded again, and went to open the carriage door. "We're here, sir."

"Excellent." Huxley-St. James stepped down from the carriage, then turned and reached up to help Carolyn
down.

As the woman delicately shook out the folds of her wide skirts, the driver said, "Have you decided how long
you'll be staying over, sir?"

"No, but we'll be here at least overnight."

"Then if you won't be needing the carriage right away, I'll take it down to the livery stable and see to having
the animals lodged."

"To be sure. We will be staying at the largest hotel, and you may take a room there, also. You'll need to be
available, and I'll recompense you when we settle accounts." As the man went back around to climb up to
the driver's seat, St. James offered Carolyn his arm. "My dear?" Carolyn tucked her hand in the crook of his
elbow, and they turned to advance to the porch.

Carolyn paused at the step, eyeing Mister Parker. "Oh, dear. Have we arrived at an awkward time?"

Mister Parker blushed, and murmured, "Looks like you folks have company, so I'll be running along."

Blair gritted his teeth. *Amazing. She just arrives, and manages to make someone who BELONGS here feel out of place.* He patted the old man's shoulder. "I'll start asking around, and I should have some news for you in a week or so." He watched Mister Parker hurry away, and said, "I don't consider any time I'm doing my job to be awkward."

St. James glanced at Carolyn. "Job?" He looked at Blair doubtfully. "Are you Mister Ellison's man?"

Jim almost groaned. He knew that St. James was asking if Blair were employed as a butler or valet, but he also knew that Blair could (and judging from the glint in his eyes, INTENDED to) deliberately put a very different spin on that term. Blair was just about to speak when Maggie reached up and grabbed the back of his belt, using it as a strap so she could peer around him at the visitors. He took a deep breath and said slowly, "I'm Doctor Blair Sandburg. I share this house with Jim."

Maggie had come out from behind her father, though she still held onto his belt. She was regarding Carolyn with wide eyes. Even though Carolyn would have termed her ensemble a traveling dress, nothing elegant, it was still one of the fanciest outfits Maggie had ever seen. Carolyn gave Maggie a bright, false smile, and said, "Is this your little boy?"

Blair didn't have to say anything--Maggie could speak for herself. She said sharply, "I'se a little girl!" She looked up at her father. "Papa Blair, does she have kitty racks like Mister Parker? She don't see very good."

Carolyn's smile froze, and Jim coughed several times. Maggie looked at him with serious concern. "Daddy Jim, do you need that pep'mint cough syrup?" She looked at the rather stiff man standing beside the shortsighted lady. "I like pep'mint, but this tastes a little nasty, 'cause some of it is whiskey."

Blair put a hand on Maggie's head. "This vociferous imp is my daughter," he gave her a stern look, "Margaret Naomi."

The dreaded use of her full name told Maggie that she was treading on shaky ground, so she decided that she'd better be extra polite. Jay had come up behind her, and she grabbed his arm, dragging him toward the couple. "This is my brother, Jay. You 'member him, I expect." She cocked her head. "Don't you? You should, 'cause you're his mama, but you ha'n't seen him in a LONG time."

*Maggie is obviously destined for a career in diplomacy,* thought Blair.

Jay was standing very still, silently staring at Carolyn. He murmured, "Mama..." reaching out toward her. Carolyn stiffened slightly. She was still smiling, but her eyes were forbidding. Jay's arms dropped, and he slowly held out his hand. "Mother."

"Strictly speaking, Jay, a gentleman should wait for the lady to extend her hand, but I'm glad to see that you're trying." She allowed him to take her hand for a moment, then pulled it back, reaching up to pat her still perfectly coiffed hair. She glanced around and said mildly, "What a charming street."

*Translation,* Jim thought. *I don't appreciate being kept out on the street.* He gestured back into the house. "Please come in."

Maggie gave Jim and Blair both piteous looks. "I can't go see Mama Ragbag?"
Jim looked at Blair, his expression saying, *"You see what I meant?"* Blair reached back into the house and took Maggie's coat off its hook. "Here, baby. You don't take this off unless you're inside Raffie's house, understand?" She nodded eagerly as he helped her button the coat. She could do it, but sometimes her fingers slipped when she was excited.

Carolyn said, "I must say, Mister Sandburg, that you're remarkably brave to allow your little girl to go off by herself like that."

"Indeed," said St. James. "Shouldn't her nanny go with her?"

"We don't have a nanny goat," protested Maggie. "An' we don't have a billy goat, either. Mister and Missus Thomas wanted to give us one when Missus Thomas had her baby, but Papa Blair said they should keep the goat for the milk, and..."

Blair reached into his pocket and pulled out a quarter. "Here. Treat Raffie to some candy, and be sure to bring some back for Jay."

Maggie squealed happily, hugging Blair's leg. "What kind do you want, Jay? Pep'mint is awful good, an' if you don't eat it, Papa Blair can use it later to make cough syrup."

"I don't care, Mags," he said absently.

This got him a puzzled, and slightly worried, look. She tugged on Blair's arm, and he obligingly leaned down. Maggie stage-whispered, "Papa, you better feel Jay's forehead. Maybe he's sick." She trotted off toward the stable.

The rest of them entered the house. St. James escorted Carolyn to the sofa, and they sat side-by-side. Blair said, "Would you care for coffee, or tea?"

"Tea would be lovely," said Carolyn.

St. James looked at Jim. "I'm afraid that when we first met she was used to the American version of tea. I had to educate her palate, since you Colonials haven't had a clue about tea since that ill-considered instance in Boston during the rebellion."

"We have a choice," said Blair pointedly, "of Jasmine, Green, Chamomile, or Earl Grey."

St. James sat back a little, actually appearing to be mildly impressed. "You have Earl Grey? I had a devil of a time obtaining any even in New York."

"I order quite a lot of supplies from a Chinese contact in San Francisco, and he's happy to supply tea along with the herbs and roots. It's a very nice blend--light on the oil of Bergamot."

"Then yes, please. A good strong cup of tea isn't far short of a resurrection." Blair went into the kitchen to prepare the tea, and St. James continued, "This is quite a nice little town. From what Carolyn had told me, I expected near wilderness."

"It wasn't that rough when she first came through, and that was some time ago," said Jim flatly.

Carolyn heaved a martyred sigh. "You had to say it, didn't you?" She glanced at Jay, who was standing beside Jim. "Jay, I don't know what he's been telling you about me, but honestly, I couldn't come any sooner. You have to understand that there was more than a continent between us. You don't make that kind of journey casually."
"I understand," Jay said quietly. "Even a trip to Lansdale is a big productions sometimes. We've been talking about visiting San Francisco for almost a year now, but the time never seems to be right."

*But you can be damn sure if I had a child in San Francisco I'd FIND the right time--fast,* Jim thought. "I haven't said a thing about you, Carolyn, except that I was sure that you'd write him as soon as you could."

Carolyn's jaw tightened, and her eyes narrowed, but Jim had kept his words and tone carefully neutral, and she didn't want to appear too defensive--that might indicate that she felt she had something she needed to justify. Instead of commenting, she patted the cushion beside her. "Jay, you may come and sit down. I've told the Baronet all about you, but he wants to become better acquainted."

This revelation struck Jim as rather odd. He would have sworn that Carolyn probably didn't say much about her previous marriage, and he'd have taken bets against her admitting she had a child, except under duress. The thought of her bragging about Jay just didn't seem natural--for her.

He also wouldn't have expected an English Baronet to have much interest in a twelve-year-old American boy, especially one who couldn't claim any relation to a prestigious family. St. James heartily surprised him by engaging Jay in conversation, asking him questions that led the boy to open up about his life. Before Blair returned with the tea, St. James had a fair overview of Jay's life in Cascade. He'd heard about Jay's excellent record in school, his progress at learning to ride, how Jim was teaching him to shoot a rifle (but firmly refused to let him touch a handgun), his success in games and contests with the other town boys. St. James listened, nodding slightly, looking thoughtful.

Blair brought in the tea (on the pewter tray that had been a gift from a grateful rancher, after Blair delivered his first child). He placed it on the low table before the sofa, and Carolyn immediately moved forward, taking the position of hostess to pour. Blair stood back, but Jim could see him starting to fume a little. His husband didn't usually worry about the thousands of tiny rules and regulations that 'polite' society deemed necessary for daily life--the ones that governed everything from how to treat servants (they just automatically assumed that one would HAVE servants), to who to speak to on the street, and how to cut someone who wasn't up to one's standards. But Carolyn's automatic assumption (with no invitation or request) of a duty that was considered to be an honor must have rankled a little.

Still, he said nothing as she poured for first the Baronet (hardly a shock), then himself, then Jay. Jay's expression as he was offered the cup said that he was conscious that an honor was being extended. In Carolyn's circle children were seldom allowed to join adults for any gathering. Jay murmured, "I take milk and sugar with mine, thank you."

"Nonsense," said Carolyn, once again offering the cup. "Only babies, old folk, and the hopelessly common take their tea adulterated." Both Jim and Blair noted the Baronet's approving look. Jim had a feeling that Carolyn was expressing her husband's own philosophy, verbatim. After all, when he'd been married to Carolyn she'd taken her tea with enough sugar to stand a spoon upright in the cup. Blair felt his teeth go on edge as Jay quietly accepted the cup and sipped, not quite able to hold back a tiny grimace.

As they drank the tea, the Baronet began to speak about himself. The group received a thorough run-down on his several factories, his country estate, his London townhouse, and the villa he rented each summer in Italy. Then he went on about the hounds and hunting horses at his country estate, and the thoroughbred racer which was highly favored in the next round of races at Ascot.

Jim found himself thinking that the idea that the English didn't brag was mistaken. *He's going to start itemizing things any moment now, moving on into his silver services and the art on his walls.*

Instead St. James mentioned that he'd attended Eton. "Have you heard of Eton, James?" he asked Jay.
"Yes, sir," the boy replied. "It's supposed to be a very fine school."

"There's no 'supposed' about it, my boy. It's THE finest, and they're quite discriminating about who they accept. Finances are not the only consideration. Good breeding is of equal importance. The boys who attend Eton go on to Cambridge or Oxford. You seem to be dedicated to getting a good education, James. I think that Eton would suit you well. There's nothing comparative here, I'm afraid."

"There will be some day," said Jay. "Cascade is really growing. We have TWO teachers now, and they think we're going to need three in a year or so."

The Baronet's smile was so condescending that Blair wanted to slap him. "Yes, well, it will be some time before they can offer the quality education that Eton can." He hesitated. "Would you like to attend Eton?"

"I want to get the best education I can, since I want to be an engineer," he cast a glance at Blair and continued quietly, "or a doctor, like Blair. But since there's no big school close by, I'll have to do a lot of studying on my own after our school teaches me all it can."

"Not necessarily. Truly, James--would you like to attend Eton? It can be arranged."

Jim was frowning. "I don't see how. Quite frankly, I couldn't afford even a single term."

"You wouldn't have to, Mister Ellison. I would pay."

There was a moment of silence. Even Jay looked shocked. Jim said stiffly, "We have no need of charity."

"It would not be charity, sir. The boy is, after all, my stepson. If he is up to their academic standards, and I'm sure he is, it would be a simple matter to have him enrolled next year. He could spend the holidays with Carolyn and myself. Well, part of them, in any case. We DO have heavy social obligations, but there would always be servants to see to his needs..."

"Just a minute," said Jim bluntly. "Let me see if I understand this. You're suggesting that Jay go all the way to England to attend a school, and just live there all year round?"

"It would hardly make sense for him to travel back here in the summer months, at least not for the first few years."

"The first... Exactly how long would you expect him to be over there?"

"Most children graduate at eighteen, and then, of course, his length at university would depend upon his chosen course of study. I'm sure that an engineer would be quite an asset to my own endeavors, and once he completed his degree I could find a place for him..."

"Jim," Blair blurted, "I can't believe you're listening to this."

Jim's voice was dangerously level. "I was waiting to see how far he'd go in planning my son's life."

"He's my son, too, Jim," said Carolyn sharply. "And it's my responsibility to see that he has the best advantages I can afford him."

"He HAS advantages, Carolyn. He's got a caring family, a decent education, and all his physical and emotional needs are being more than met."
She gestured dismissively. "All well and good, but let's face facts--this is a backwater town in a country that is still raw. You're a former blacksmith, and now you're making a living handling criminals. It's hardly the sort of background that's going to launch Jay into the upper levels of society."

"Launch? What is he--a three-masted schooner?" said Blair hotly.

"Blair..." said Jim quietly.

"Yes," said Carolyn. "It's hardly your business."

"Actually," Jim responded, "it's hardly YOUR business. We haven't seen you or even heard from you for two years. You show up unannounced, and in less than an hour you're planning the rest of his life--the rest of his life AWAY FROM ME!" His eyes narrowed. "Why are you doing this?"

"Really," said St. James, "how can you question her good intentions? It's unutterably rude."

Jim's voice was gritty. "This is my SON we're talking about."

"Jim, you didn't even know him for most of his life," said Carolyn.

Jim glared at her. "That's unfair. You know very well that if I had known..."

"You SHOULD have known. A REAL father would have."

Blair threw up his hands. "Does logic ever enter into ANYTHING you say? Look, Jay has a happy, stable home here with his father."

"And I can provide a stable home as well," countered St. James, "including financial stability that you will never be able to manage, Ellison. He can be quite a wealthy man. Wouldn't you want that for him?"

Carolyn was studying Jay. The boy had gone pale, and his eyes were wide. "Jay, this isn't for children. Leave the room."

Jay started to stand, and Jim said, "He's the most vitally involved person here, Carolyn. Jay, if this is making you uncomfortable, you can go," he gave Carolyn and the Baronet a pointed look, "but you don't have to."

"I just don't understand." Jay's voice was a little plaintive. "Mother, you want to take me away?"

"For your own good, Jay. The Baronet can give you everything. You'll have your own room, decorated any way you like, the best accommodations at school, servants... There's a beautiful horse already picked out for you--a big cream colored one, an excellent jumper."

The attempt at bribery was blatant, but Carolyn had misjudged her son (proof that she'd never really made an effort to know him). "I'll have a horse when I'm older--Dad promised me."

"Jay, you're too young to understand this. With the St. James name, doors will be open to you. It will be an entirely different world..."

Now it was Jim that had gone pale. "Just a minute, Carolyn. What do you mean--with the St. James name?"

Carolyn looked at St. James questioningly. He nodded. "I have no son, and no close relative to be my heir. Sadly, a bout of fever when I was very young made it highly unlikely that I can be a father."
Blair said, "I'm a doctor. No one can say for certain that such a thing would cause sterility." Carolyn was making an expression of distaste. "Oh, stop it. I wasn't the one who brought it up."

"Mr. Sandburg," the Baronet was coloring a little. "There is..." he glanced at Jay, and lowered his voice, "there are physical reasons that make it obvious. I warned Carolyn of this when we were married."

Blair's eyebrows rose slowly, and Jim blinked. Carolyn was carefully examining her nails. There were only two things that could be taken as solid proof that a man could never sire children--actual castration, or impotence. It was becoming clearer by the moment that this was a marriage of convenience for the couple.

St. James continued, "You can imagine my delight when she told me that she had a son--a fine, sturdy, intelligent, well-bred boy who'd be a credit to my family line. Now that I've met young James, I must agree." Jim could see where this was heading now, but the words still came as a shock. "I'll be happy and proud to adopt him, and raise him as my own."

Part Four

The silence in the room was deafening. Finally Jim said, "I knew there had to be a reason for you to come back. I just had no idea it would be so... so..."

"Evil," said Blair shortly. Carolyn gasped, and St. James, frowning, started to stand up. "I'm warning you--if you challenge me to a duel, it's illegal over here." He gave the man a slightly feral smile. "But that doesn't necessarily mean I wouldn't accept in this case."

Carolyn regarded him narrowly. "I find your attitude strange. I'll say it again--this doesn't concern you."

"This boy is a part of my life--a BIG part. I care about him deeply. And he's my little girl's big brother. Maggie would be heartbroken if Jay left us."

"Don't be foolish. Give her a few new dresses, and she'll be happy enough."

Blair opened his mouth, then closed it, shaking his head. "I was going to ask how you could say that, but considering that you've been distracted from not having your own son by a title..."

"Blair, don't." When his lover shot him an angry glance, Jim put a hand on his arm and said quietly, "Please. There's no point in any of us being upset over this." He looked back at Carolyn. "It's out of the question."

"You can't just arbitrarily make a decision like that," said Carolyn indignantly.

"Do you know what arbitrary means?" asked Blair.

Carolyn blinked. "I..."

"If you mean determined by chance, whim, or impulse, you couldn't be more wrong. If you mean subject to individual judgment, then yes. But if you mean established by a court or judge--that can be arranged."

The tension in the room was thick. Carolyn turned toward Jay, saying, "Jay, you can end this nonsense. Your father won't try to force you to stay against your will. Simply tell him that you want to go with me, and that will be the end of it. We can leave tomorrow, and make a stop in New York City. You'll like that, the buildings are..."
"Dad doesn't have to force me to stay. I don't want to go."

Carolyn didn't quite gape—that would have been unladylike. "You haven't thought this through."

"I don't have to think about it. They NEED me here. I'm the one who makes sure the cuckoo clock keeps proper time, and I sweep the front porch and dust the front room every day. I promised Mrs. Bennet I'd help her with her vegetable garden this spring. She's getting old, and it's hard for her, but she can't afford to hire a man to help. And I'm teaching Maggie her alphabet. I think she might be able to read some before she goes to school next year. Blair is teaching me to cook, and pretty soon I'll be able to help..."

"But don't you understand?" Carolyn's voice vibrated with frustration. "You won't have to do any of that if you come with us. You'll have servants. You won't have to lift a hand if you don't want to."

"YOU don't understand. I don't mind doing those things. Some of them I even like. Maggie's really funny, and she has such a good time learning, and... and... And I LOVE her, Mother! I love her, and Dad, and Papa Blair. Maybe when I get older I'll have to leave here to go to college, but that won't be for a long time."

Carolyn's voice had grown cold. "I wouldn't count on that. Jim, I've tried to be civil about this, but I can see that diplomacy is useless. I want you to renounce your relationship to Jay, so that St. James can legally adopt him."

Jim stood up. "I think you'd better leave now."

Carolyn didn't budge. "I'm serious about this, Jim. It will make things a lot easier if you sign the papers. He isn't even really your son."

Jim swayed slightly, then took a deep breath and said softly, "Liar."

Carolyn smiled coldly. "It's your word against mine, and who do you think a court will believe? After all, you have no proof."

Jay stood up abruptly and bolted from the room. Blair started to reach for him, but Jim said, "Let him go. I don't blame him for wanting to get away from this. God, I'm glad you let Maggie go to the stable. This is ugly. Caro, you seem to believe that everyone will think money and a title will outweigh almost anything. I happen to believe you're wrong. I may not be rich, but they know me in this area. They know what I'm like, and they know that I love my son, and can take good care of them. You may be his mother, but you walked away from him without a backward glance, and haven't so much as sent him a note for two years. That hardly demonstrates maternal concern."

"Look, Jim, do you really want to put Jay through an ugly custody battle? Remember--there's no doubt that I'm his mother, but there's no proof that you're his father." Carolyn sounded smug.

"Yes there is." Jay came back into the front room, carrying a large piece of parchment.

"What are you talking about?"

Jay handed the paper to Jim. "She used to keep this in her jewelry case. When she told me we were coming here, I took it out because... Well, because I just wanted to look at it, and see if what she told me was true--and I kept it." He looked at Carolyn bleakly. "I guess she didn't miss it."

Jim studied the paper, and a grim smile began to play over his lips. Carolyn didn't like that smile. "What is it?"
Her former husband silently handed the paper over to Blair, who studied it. The smile he turned on the two people sitting on the sofa was triumphant. "It's a birth certificate for James Joseph Ellison, Jr. The mother is listed as Carolyn Ellison, nee Plummer, and the father is most definitely listed as James Joseph Ellison, Sr."

Carolyn actually bared her teeth, but the Baronet cleared his throat, putting his hand on her arm. "My dear, don't let this distress you. There's no point in continuing this discussion. I don't want to see you wrangling like a common woman of the streets. I have a battery of fine lawyers, and I'm sure that this matter can be settled satisfactorily." He stood, urging her to her feet. "Mister Ellison, I'm sorry that you fail to see what is in your child's best interests. You will be contacted by my lawyers in the future. Come Carolyn."

Blair stepped over quickly, opening the door, and swept them a deep, ironic bow as they sailed out. He shut the door, and said, "Please note that I did not slam the door."

"No, you didn't." Jim went to the door, opened it, and slammed it so hard that Blair's framed medical certificate rattled on the wall. "That's my privilege." He turned back to his son, the anger dying a bit, to be replaced by concern. "Jay?"

Jay's voice was faint. "I'm all right, Dad. I mean... I think..." His voice cracked. "Dad, she can't do it, can she?"

Jim reached him in two strides, sweeping the boy into his arms. He held Jay tight, pressing the dark head against his chest. His voice was fierce, "No, she can't. I won't let her, Jay. If the law isn't as sensible and decent as I think it is, I'll just take you up into the mountains. They'd never find us there."

"But what about Blair and Maggie?" said Jay plaintively. "Blair might be okay, but Maggie's just little."

Jim pressed his face to Jay's hair. "Don't worry about it now. You're my son--legally, and in every other way. She can't just take you away from me. Maybe I don't hobnob with dukes and earls, but I know a few people, and they know a little bit about the law."

"What if she tries to make me? I mean, just take me, without going to court. The gypsies kidnap children, and the Indians used to, didn't they?"

Blair didn't laugh--this was a very serious worry for Jay. "They don't any more. They're pretty civilized now--a lot more so than some people I could name. And if your mother tried anything like that..." He trailed off. "I've never struck a woman in my life except to try to shock them out of unconsciousness, but in this case, I might make an exception."

The door opened, and Maggie and Raphaella came in, both bundled up tightly. Maggie explained, "Gabe is cutting another tooth, an' Megan said couldn't we come here an' stay under YOUR feet for a little while." She looked at Jay, Jim, and Blair, and said doubtfully. "What's wrong?"

The three men exchanged glances, and came to a silent understanding. Maggie would not be involved in this. If she thought there was even the remotest possibility of Jay being taken away, she'd fret herself sick. "Nothing's wrong, sweetheart," Blair assured her. "It's just that Jay hadn't seen his mama for a long time."

"Oh." Maggie was ready to accept that explanation. She looked around. "Where'd she go?"

"I think she's at the hotel," said Jim.

"She's not gonna stay here tonight? I could let her sleep on my bed, an' I could sleep over at Raffie's." Raffie nodded vigorously.
"That won't be necessary."

Raffie had sidled over to Jay, and now looked up at him shyly. "H'lo."

Much of the strain went out of Jay's face, and he bent down toward her. "Hello, Raphaella."

Raphaella giggled. Very few people called her by her full name. Raffie reached into her coat pocket and pulled out a paper-wrapped peppermint ball. "You want some candy, Jay?"

"Maggie," said Blair. "Where's Jay's share of the peppermint?" Maggie suddenly became very interested in her toes. "Maggie!"

"She ate one," said Raphaella, "but she didn't mean to. She just got excited an' ate it before she 'membered, an' Mama Ragbag got the other, an' I think she hid it." Again she turned her dark, liquid eyes on Jay, offering the candy. "You can have my other one."

"I don't want to take your candy, Raphaella."

"You could share it," suggested Maggie. "First Jay, then Raffie, then..."

"No, they cannot," said Blair firmly.

"I know, Raphaella," said Jay. "I have a thin little saw in my toolbox. I can cut this peppermint in half, and we can share it that way. What do you think?"

"I think you're 'most the smartest boy in the whole world," she said earnestly.

"Come on, then. I have the tools in my room."

Jay and Raphaella went back into the kitchen, but Maggie lingered, struggling out of her coat. "Papa Blair, is that lady going to come back?"

"I hope..." Jim was shaking his head. "Probably not, darlin'."

"Oh, that's too bad."

Jim gave her a puzzled look. "Why would it be too bad?"

"Well, you like her, don't you, Daddy Jim? She dresses real pretty, with petticoats, and she talks fancy, and she's a lady, isn't she?"

Jim blinked, then said slowly, "She's what some people call a lady, Maggie. At least on the outside she is."

"Like you want me to be?"

Jim rubbed his face. "Why don't you go make sure that Jay cuts that peppermint evenly?"

At the reminder of the candy, Maggie pattered off quickly. Jim stared after her, then looked at Blair. "Good God, have I really been trying to turn her into something like Carolyn?"

Blair shook his head. "No. You just got a little carried away with the surface things, Jim. You'd have figured out that Maggie needs to be herself soon. Seeing Carolyn again just sort of pushed the issue. There's nothing wrong with a woman being very concerned about appearances, status, and the finer points of etiquette. It's
just a problem when that's pretty much ALL that they think of."

"Well, I have a problem now. It's pretty minor compared to what Carolyn has threatened, but it's still a problem."

"And that would be?"

"I'm going to have to replace Maggie's 'BIG' present. I've just had it brought home how very inappropriate it is for her."

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Carolyn and the Baronet left town early the next day, WITHOUT contacting the Ellison-Sandburg household again. Jim left, too, but not on the same train. Jim had sent a telegram to a judge he'd become acquainted with, and bright and early he was headed toward Seattle, armed with the name of a very good, very PROMINENT lawyer, and assured that he would be expected.

Maggie wasn't at all happy about Daddy Jim going away again so soon, but she was somewhat mollified by the thought of all the stores in Seattle. But even that wasn't really important, since she needed to cheer Jay up. For some reason her big brother seemed distracted--almost sad. Whenever she got near him, he'd give her a hug. Maggie enjoyed that a lot, but it wasn't exactly Jay's usual behavior. It was almost like he was afraid that if he didn't hang on to her, she'd disappear. She thought maybe it was because his mother was gone again, but in a display of tact rare for her age (and even rarer for her personality), she didn't mention it.

Jim returned two days later. Blair tried to interpret his lover's expression when he entered their home that evening. Before they had met, Jim had been adept at concealing his feelings, hiding them behind a stoic expression. Since they'd been together, Blair had learned to read him, noting tiny clues that would have escaped anyone else. Jim wasn't by any means feeling easy, but there was no despair or desperation.

Blair began to feel cautiously hopeful, but they couldn't really discuss things right away. It had been agreed by all involved that Maggie would not be exposed to this situation unless it simply couldn't be avoided. The fact that her bedtime was a little earlier than Jay's (much to her displeasure) gave the rest of the family a chance to talk.

Jim, Blair, and Jay gathered in the kitchen, and Jim laid out the facts. The judge was cautiously optimistic about Jim's claim. "If the father can provide a stable, comfortable home life, he generally has a slight edge." Jim shrugged. "The system was set up by men, and it's tilted in their favor. Normally I'd think that was kind of unfair, but I have to say I'm REALLY glad this time. The fact that St. James has a pot of money and a title shouldn't cut all that much mustard over here, and this is where it should be decided, since Jay, Carolyn, and myself are all American citizens."

Jim reached over and rubbed Jay's hair. "Son, you may very well be the one who saved this situation. Your birth certificate gives us real ammunition in this fight. Once the judge locates the government copy of the record, our position will be even more solid. Carolyn can try to lie about our blood ties, but the fact that she claimed it when you were born will be hard to refute. I never thought I'd say it, but God bless paperwork."

"Am I going to have to talk to the judge?" asked Jay. There was some apprehension in his voice, but it was clear that he was stiffening his spine, ready to do whatever was necessary to remain with the people he'd come to love.

"You might at some point, but it won't be for awhile. These things take time. Lawyers can back-and-forth with each other worse than a ladies' sewing circle. What will probably happen at first is that their lawyer will send us some sort of notice, trying to bully us into giving up without a fight. Then our lawyer will send them
a notice basically telling them that there's no way in hell that WE'LL give up--why don't THEY give up? After a couple of rounds of threat, they'll get down to checking every law that was ever written. Then maybe they'll want to meet face-to-face, and they'll ask for us and their clients to meet face-to-face, to see if things can be worked out. Things WON'T be worked out, and then a judge will have to be brought into it. This could take months. I'm perfectly willing to keep fighting this till you reach your majority. In the mean time, I want you to try to put this out of your mind." He smiled at his son. "It's almost Christmas. Don't let them spoil this for you, son. Now, I need your help. I just realized that the main present I bought for Maggie just isn't right for her. I need a suggestion for something else. Do you have any ideas?"

Jay's eyes lit up. "I sure do!" he said enthusiastically.

"That was fast." Jim studied him. "You sound like you've been thinking about this for awhile." Jay grinned at him. Jim sighed, giving Blair a wry glance. "Why do I have the feeling I just stepped in the middle of something?"

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It was a week before Christmas, and Jim was taking his turn on duty in the sheriff's office. There currently were no prisoners, and he was hoping it would stay that way till after Christmas. He'd already tidied the office and sorted through the wanted notices. He'd already familiarized himself with the facts concerning every known criminal that might, on an off chance, conceivably pass through the Cascade area. Normally he'd have been reading something--perhaps one of Blair's classic texts, or a more recent author, like Mark Twain. In fact, he had Twain's newest book--A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court--open on his lap, but it was a waste of time. He couldn't, under threat of bodily harm, have recounted what had happened in the last few pages.

The door opened, and he looked up almost gratefully, ready to be distracted from his own thoughts. He smiled as he recognized Daryl Banks. "Hey, Daryl. News from your dad?"

"Only that he's enjoying his day off." Daryl hesitated, then said, "If you need him, Jim, I can run over to the house and tell him."

Jim closed the book, feeling a flicker of apprehension. "Why would I need to call him in?" Daryl hesitated, then walked over and extended an envelope. Jim's apprehension grew. Cascade had it's own telegraph office now--the townspeople no longer had to drive all the way to Lansdale to send a wire. Daryl had been working as a delivery boy for the last few months. Jim knew that not every telegram was bad news, but at the moment he couldn't think of any likely GOOD news. *Hell, could it be something from Carolyn's lawyers already? I was hoping we wouldn't have to start worrying about this till after New Years.*

Jim's custody worries weren't common knowledge in Cascade, but a few close friends knew. Jim had learned, through Blair, that there was no sense in closing yourself off when you were faced with hard times--not when there were people who cared about you who wanted to help. Rafe and Megan knew, and so did his fellow lawmen. He'd told them, feeling that it was his duty to let them know. There were others who depended on him for their safety and security, and he wasn't lying to himself--he thought that he was probably due to go through several different kinds of hell.

"You go on back to the telegraph office, Daryl," Jim said quietly. "If I need to be relieved here, Joel is over at the cafe." Daryl watched him carefully, and Jim said, "Daryl--this might not be something I'm comfortable dealing with around someone else, all right?"

Daryl nodded. "Just remember, if you need anything..." He left.

Jim stared at the envelope, feeling cold growing in the pit of his stomach. For some reason a brief thought
flashed through his mind--a day two years ago. It had been a beautiful day, a casual trip to the outskirts of town to pick berries. It should have been idyllic. Instead there had been screams. He'd looked up to see his son, as pale as death, gripping a writhing snake that was almost as long as he was tall. The only time there had ever been a moment of comparable terror in Jim's life had been when he had found Blair unconscious, drugged near to death by Garret Kincaid. Both times he'd managed to rescue his loved ones. Now there was another threat, but this one wasn't physical, and he was worried. He was worried that he wouldn't be enough to keep his son safe, and with him. His hand shook a little as he picked up the letter opener and slit the envelope. He unfolded the paper, and started to read. The first few words, indicating who had sent the message, seemed to confirm his worries.


Jim re-read the message several times, trying to let it sink in. Carolyn had seemed fine a few days ago. Of course that didn't mean much. He lived with a doctor, and he was well aware that serious, even life threatening, illnesses could appear in hours. *But there's something wrong, here. Why would Carolyn be asking for ME? And why was this wire sent by a lawyer? Her husband was full of airs, but I don't think he'd have gone so far as to avoid contacting me personally, if there was a serious situation.*

Jim tapped the paper in his hand, frowning in thought. *What could this mean?* His expression hardened. *I wouldn't want to think that she'd try to lure me away so someone could snatch Jay, but I can't put it past her. If she managed to get him out of the country, it would be hellish to get him back. I have a feeling the British government would dig in its heels and act like their national symbol, the bulldog, if they thought they were protecting the interests of one of their gentry--even a minor one.*

Jim got Joel Taggert to take his place on duty in the sheriff's office. Joel was more than happy to, once the situation was explained. Then Jim went home to tell Blair about the new development, and ask his advice. Blair had read the telegram, and started pacing. Finally he had stopped, heaving a sigh, and said, "As much as I want to say you should just tell her to go hang, I think you need to go."

"It's a relief to hear you say that, because I'd just about come to that conclusion myself. This is puzzling me half to death, and I need to find out what's going on." His jaw firmed. "I'm not taking Jay, though."

"No," Blair agreed. "For one thing, they don't say what sort of illness she has. You couldn't risk exposing him to anything contagious. For another thing, here he has dozens of people ready to spread an alarm, or fight, if someone tries to take him away. In Kansas he would just have you," Blair laid a hand on Jim's chest, "and while you're damn formidable, you're not an army."

"I'd better get going. If I turn right around as soon as I get there, I should be able to make it back in time for Christmas."

Blair winced. "Damn! I'd nearly forgotten about that. Try, Jim. If worst comes to worst, I'll keep Maggie from opening your presents on Christmas morning."

Jim threw a couple of changes of clothes into a bag and hurried to the train station. He didn't seek out Maggie or Jay to say good-bye, and he knew that he was going to catch it for that when he returned. But there just wasn't time, and he trusted Blair to take care of the explanations. Besides, he was half-worried that Jay would try to insist on coming along. After all, Carolyn was still his mother, and it would be natural for him to be worried. But Jim was firm in his belief that it would be better for Jay to stay home, and he didn't relish the thought of having to oppose his son--not while he knew the boy's nerves were still raw, and tightly strung.
The trip wasn't easy. While train might be the fastest method of travel available, it still was less than comfortable unless one could afford a private car. It was cold, dusty, and sooty, and the constant vibration and noise would give all but the heartiest traveler a headache. Before he had learned to control his senses, such a trip would have been sheer hell for Jim. But Blair had taught him various ways to relax, and avoid being overwhelmed by the stimuli around him. In fact, Jim probably weathered the trip better than some of his fellow passengers. He even managed to get a fair amount of sleep, stretched out on a sofa in the lounge car.

He arrived in Kansas City two days later, in the early afternoon. He stood on the bustling platform for a few moments, trying to decide where he should go first--the hotel, or the law offices. Finally he decided that it would be better to go directly to Carolyn. Since he hadn't brought council, he'd prefer not to deal with her hired legal gunslingers till he had his own with him.

The Grand Prairie Hotel was easy to find. The ticket vendor gave him directions readily enough, though he hesitantly suggested that Jim might prefer to try a more 'home-like' establishment. *Translation: I don't look like I could afford it,* Jim thought wryly as he made his way through the streets.

Sure enough, the doorman at the hotel gave him a jaundice look when he realized that Jim was indeed headed for his establishment. He didn't block Jim's path, but he spoke up forcefully. "Can I help you, sir?"

"Not unless you're in charge of showing people up to the rooms."

The man's expression was stiff. "Do you have a reservation?"

"I'm not here to check in. I'm here to see one of the guests."

One eyebrow arched, stating clearly that the doorman doubted Jim could have any legitimate reason to speak to one of his patrons. "Are they expecting you?"

Jim wasn't the most patient person in the world, especially when it came to pretension, and his patience was almost at an end. "I suppose so, seeing as how her lawyer sent for me. I'm here to see Mrs. Huxley-St. James"

"We do not have..." the man's eyes widened. "Do you mean the Baronet's wife?"

"I don't suppose you have more than one staying here."

"Oh, I'm SORRY, sir. You must be Mister Ellison. I was told to watch for you, but I didn't know... Of course, you've just finished a long, journey, and you..." The man was flustered. Jim wondered if he would keep his job long, if he couldn't remain cool under a little social pressure. The doorman snatched up a little silver hand bell and rang it briskly. "Someone will show you up immediately, sir." A liveried bellboy trotted out, looking to the doorman alertly. "Johnson, this is Mister Ellison. You are to take him immediately to suite 3B. Once you have delivered him, be sure that they have all they need before you return to your duties" He looked back at Jim. "May I express my concern and well wishes for the lady? We are all quite distressed."

"I'll let her know."

As Jim followed the young man into the hotel, he thought, "Not that it will make a lick of difference to Carolyn.* Normally Jim wouldn't have wanted to ride up in the elevator--he really didn't trust the contraptions--but in this case he wasn't prepared to make a fuss about it. Still, it didn't do anything to make him feel more relaxed.
The bellboy led him down an elegantly carpeted hall. There were only a few doors, indicating suites instead of single rooms. The accommodations in the Grand Prairie might not be of the same caliber as a more famous hotel, but they were more than comfortable. They stopped at a dark door decorated with 3B, in gilt, and the boy knocked discreetly.

The door was opened by a woman wearing a dark dress, covered with a full-length starched apron. The mode of dress and the serious, businesslike air told Jim that she was probably a private nurse. She gave the men a severe, questioning look. The bellboy said, "Miss, this is Mister Ellison. We were told he was to be brought right up."

"Yes, indeed." She opened the door. "Please come in, Mister Ellison. Boy, I require another basin of chipped ice, and more towels. Quickly!" The boy was already scampering down the hall as she shut the door.

Jim found himself in a sitting room. He glanced around, realizing that this single room was more spacious than the living quarters of many families. There was a substantial looking middle-aged man seated on a small sofa. He was holding a sheaf of papers, but he'd taken off his pince-nez to look at Jim. The woman said, "Mister Holbine, it's Mister Ellison. I need to get back to the lady. Please send the boy in immediately when he returns with the supplies."

"Of course, of course." As the woman passed through a door into an inner room, the man crossed to Jim, offering his hand. "Nathaniel Holbine, Mister Ellison. I wish we could have met under happier circumstances."

Jim shook hands. "I wish you'd tell me just what the circumstances are."

"Yes, surely. Have a seat, sir. Can I offer you some refreshment? You must have just arrived from the station, and judging from your speedy arrival, you've traveled straight through."

"Thank you, but I'm fine for the time being." Jim took a chair, and Holbine resumed his seat on the sofa. "What's this about Carolyn being ill? Why didn't her husband contact me? For that matter, why was I contacted at all? Our last meeting wouldn't have led anyone to believe that I'd be the one for her to turn to if she was in an uncomfortable situation."

Nathaniel Holbine looked grave. "There are certain kinds of news that one does not wish to impart through the impersonal and rather public methods of modern communication. I suppose it would be best to be rather blunt, since time may be important. Sir, the Baronet St. James is dead."

Jim drew in a slow breath. Such an abrupt announcement was startling. "How did it happen?"

The lawyer made a face. "It would be ridiculous if it were not so dreadful. It was canned green beans."

"Excuse me?"

"Canned green beans. Food poisoning, sir. On their arrival in Kansas City, the Baronet and his wife dined with one of our more prominent local families. You'll pardon me if I do not name them, as they are suffering from this horrible incident themselves. The lady of the house had specified that the menu for the evening was to include green beans in the French style." The man shrugged. "This is Kansas in the middle of winter. There ARE no fresh green beans available, of course, but that didn't matter to her. She insisted that the cook find some way of providing them. Just let me say that the mistress of that house is very young, and perhaps not the most sensible of women. I believe that she saw this as a test of wills between herself and her domestic staff. In any case, the cook was directed to provide green beans, or lose her position."
He made an eloquent gesture, expressing the sad disbelief that someone could be so headstrong and naive. "The cook did the only thing she felt she could--she substituted tinned green beans. Unfortunately the cans were defective. Apparently the mistress of the house had also instructed the cook to purchase goods that had been discounted for small defects whenever they were offered, and these cans had been dented. The results were tragedy."

"But... green beans?" said Jim. "I thought that most food poisoning wasn't fatal. I know a doctor, and he's talked about it before. He says that in most cases all that results is that the person is really miserable for a few days."

"It all depends on how much contaminated food is consumed, and the physical state of the victim. The poison in this case must have been rather virulent. Everyone who consumed the contaminated beans suffered to some extent. It's a blessing that the children in that household were fed separately, as is usual in most wealthy establishments. The very young, and the elderly are particularly susceptible. Sadly, the host's elderly mother was particularly fond of green vegetables. She passed away, and the rest of the dinner party suffered to varying degrees. I know that the Baronet appeared to be in good health, but he was not a robust man. He had suffered a fever in childhood, and this weakened his constitution. He had to be quite careful to avoid colds and infections. This type of food poisoning, botulism, has only been isolated in the last few years, and it affects the nerve system, rather than the digestive system. It induces varying degrees of paralysis, and in the Baronet's case it hindered his respiration. In effect, he suffocated."

Jim winced. He hadn't liked the man, and had been prepared to fight him with his entire being, but he hadn't reached the point of wishing him dead. This made Carolyn's summons a little easier to understand. She was once again alone in the world, and ill. "And Carolyn?"

"I will not sugar-coat this, sir. Your former wife is gravely ill. There is a real possibility that she may die. I realize that you are not on the best of terms with her right now..."

"That's a very tactful way of putting it."

Holbine cleared his throat. "Frankly, sir, neither the Baronet nor his wife have anyone who might be even marginally considered a close relation. Considering your past association with her, and your shared interest in her son, I thought it would be prudent to contact you."

Jim was quiet for a moment, then said, "She really might die?"

"The attending physician would be better suited to comment on that, but.." he shrugged, "I have been given no reason to hope."

"Can I see her?"

"If the doctor will allow, that is why you were called." There was a knock on the door. "That will be the bellboy with the requested supplies. Miss Renquist, the nurse, is a marvel at inspiring prompt and diligent efforts. I believe she served in Union hospitals during the last war, and I must say that I think she would have been able to inspire better obedience than most drill sergeants."

He went to the door and let the bellboy in, then went to the door through which Miss Renquist had disappeared earlier. He knocked, and she appeared, directing the boy to deposit the items in the inner room. Mister Holbine said, "Mister Ellison has been apprised of the situation. Is she up to having a visitor?"

"I'll ask the doctor."
She stepped back into the room, and a moment later a stout, gray-haired man stepped out. "Mister Ellison, I'm Doctor Claude Pendragon." His expression and tone were very solemn, and Jim braced himself for bad news. He wasn't wrong. "It's good that you came as quickly as possible. I'm afraid she doesn't have long."

"But I thought that this disease wasn't all that dangerous if a person was young and healthy."

"In most cases, sir, but I'm afraid that the food poisoning is only the initial cause of her distress. It killed her husband outright, and it weakened Mrs. St. James. She has pneumonia. That coupled with the restrictions the botulism put on her respiration... I wasn't sure she'd make it through the night. She's been very restless, which hasn't helped her condition. I'm hoping that your presence will calm her, and perhaps buy us a little time."

"Is she going to die?"

The doctor didn't flinch from Jim's bluntness. "Unless there is a miracle, yes, she is. She's more or less accepted it, I think. I've been trying to keep her quiet, but she's insisted on talking with her lawyer, arranging her affairs. I suppose she asked for you for the same reason. I understand there are unresolved problems between you two."

"You could say that."

"I'm going to ask you to set aside whatever differences you have. She doesn't have much time left. I won't let you see her if you won't promise to try to keep her as peaceful as possible." Jim nodded agreement. "Thank you. Steel yourself. She doesn't look well."

He let Jim into the room.

It was dominated by a large, high, four-poster bed. The nurse was beside it, busily preparing an ice pack, and she blocked Jim's view of the bed's occupant. The doctor preceded him, speaking quietly to the nurse, who nodded. She carefully placed the ice pack on the patient's forehead, then took up a small basin. She passed Jim, on her way out of the room, and he had a glimpse of the basin's contents. He wished he hadn't.

He remembered from listening to Blair that when the pneumonia infection had heavily affected a patient's lungs, their coughing would produce phlegm and mucus, often in copious quantities. Jim had the feeling that Miss Renquist would not allow such material to sit around any sick room she attended, and that had to mean that the contents of the basin had been produced recently.

As if to prove this assumption, there was a deep, rattling cough from the bed, and the doctor quickly snatched up an empty basin. After the crude, liquid sound of spitting, the doctor took a damp cloth and tended to his patient. His voice smooth and soothing, he said, "Mrs. St. James, your former husband has arrived. Do you feel strong enough to speak to him?"

"Yes, please." It was Carolyn's voice, but it was weak--almost reedy.

The doctor beckoned, and as Jim approached, he listened closely to the sound of Carolyn's breathing. It was labored, almost gurgling. Even had he not been a Sentinel, he would not have needed a stethoscope to realize that there was something drastically wrong here.

His first thought was that she shouldn't look so frail. While she'd always been feminine, she'd also been supremely self-willed, and that had made her seem strong, but now... He reminded himself that she must have been ill for well over a week. He knew from Blair that pneumonia often killed a patient's appetite, and that dehydration was a very real problem, so both had probably contributed to Carolyn's wasted appearance. Her cheeks were sunken, and her eyes shadowed. Her skin looked papery, and her lips were cracked. Her hair was in a braid, but she must have been restless, because it was beginning to come unraveled, dry wisps flying around. She was very pale, except for two spots of hectic color, high on her cheeks.
He must have been staring, because she gave him a weak, but still unpleasant, smile. "I should have had the nurse freshen me up a bit. The doctor and lawyer have been trying to make me accept that you might not come, but I knew you would. James Joseph Ellison would break his neck trying to do what he saw as his duty."

"You make that sound like a bad thing, Caro."

She smirked a little. "Just not the smartest attitude around."

"I'm not here to argue ethics with you."

"Fair enough. Doctor, I'd like to be alone with him for a few minutes." The doctor hesitated, and she said, "You don't want me to get agitated, do you? Remember how I was before you agreed to send that telegram."

"Very well. Mister Ellison, if she shows any signs of distress, I expect you to call me immediately."

He left the room, and Jim pulled a chair up to the side of the bed. After a moment, Jim said, "I thought you didn't like green beans."

Carolyn laughed weakly. "I hate them, but Reuben would have disapproved highly if I had refused them. He was worse with me about cleaning my plate when I was a guest than my mother ever was." She wrinkled her nose. "I didn't really notice anything particularly strange about them, but then, ALL green beans taste nasty to me." She was quiet for a moment, then said, "I'm a rich woman, Jim." Jim nodded silently. "Everything he had, it comes to me. I made sure of that. I didn't marry him till he showed me a copy of his will. We understood each other."

"I'm glad you found someone who could make you happy, Caro."

"Happy?" she sounded puzzled. "Yes, I suppose so. He wasn't really a bad sort, Jim. A little full of himself, but that was bound to happen. When you have the whole world telling you how important you are, it's hard to disagree with them. And you may not believe this, but he really wanted to be a father. It wasn't so much for an heir, but for a SON. He would have been good to Jay."

"But he wouldn't have been his father, Carolyn. I'M his father."

"Yes, you are," she agreed. "I guess it was a little silly of me to try to deny that. It's obvious to anyone with eyes and half a brain. Anyway, you don't have to worry about anyone trying to take him away now."

"Then you won't be fighting me for him?"

Carolyn gave him a jaundiced look. "Let's be honest, Jim. If Reuben hadn't wanted a son, I doubt if you'd have ever heard from me again. I'm not a maternal person--I've never pretended to be. Besides..." her voice faded, "I'm not going to survive long enough for that to be a consideration."

Impulsively, Jim reached out and took her hand. It was dry, and hot, and it lay limply in his grip. "Carolyn, there's always hope..."

"No, there isn't. I'm going to die, and I've decided to do one final, decent thing before I go. I've instructed Mister Holbine to draw up papers declaring once and for all that you are Jay's father, and sole guardian. He's also adjusted my will so that Jay is my sole heir. Everything I have will be his, and Jim?" She smiled. "I have everything that Reuben had. My son is going to be somebody."
Jim closed his eyes, then said quietly, "He already is, Carolyn. And he will be, even if he has to scratch for a living all his life." He opened his eyes and gazed at Carolyn, his expression resigned, and a little sad "But you still don't understand that, and I suppose you never will." The dull cynicism in her eyes told him that this was true.

She started coughing again, and he called the doctor. Pendragon tended to her, Jim went back into the front room. Mister Holbine sat down with him and began to go over the legal papers he'd been examining when Jim arrived. His partner, Mister Crocket arrived to assist in the explanations. Soon they asked Miss Renquist to return to the room, and the manager of the hotel was summoned. These two stood as witnesses. Even though a woman who had intimately shared his life was dying in the next room, Jim felt a growing sense of relief as he affixed his name to the documents.

Carolyn died just before midnight. Jim was worrying about whether or not he should bring Carolyn back to Cascade for burial, but the decision was taken out of his hands. The lawyer informed him that Carolyn had expressed a wish to be buried alongside St. James, on his estate in England. He agreed, feeling a little grateful that he wasn't responsible for that decision.

While most of the world would think it was a shame that Jay's mother would be buried so far away, Jim privately thought that it would be better for the boy. Jay would have a chance to visit his mother's grave some day, but Jim couldn't help but feel this would be easier on the boy's psyche. He would not have a constant reminder that he had wanted to stay with his father instead of going with her. While Jim knew that any guilty feelings that Jay might have had that he had been abandoning the woman who had, in effect, abandoned him would have been intensified if Carolyn had been laid to rest near his home, a constant reminder.

Holbine had suggested that Jim take rooms at the hotel while they began the procedures necessary for enforcing both St. James' and Carolyn's wills Jim informed him that the Grand Prairie was outside his budget, and he had a family waiting for him at home. He would have his lawyer contact Holbine after the first of the year, but he intended to spend Christmas surrounded by the people he loved. "And my son just lost his mother. I need to be with him." That morning he took the first train heading back West, but first he sent a telegram to Blair.

Part Five

The telegram arrived the third day after Jim had gone to Kansas City. Jay and Maggie were at the school Christmas party, but Blair still took the wire into his examining room, locking the door behind himself before he opened the envelope.


Blair was spiritual more than religious, but now he pressed the paper to his forehead, closing his eyes, and said a brief prayer. He prayed for the man he loved, knowing that Jim was going to feel guilty that he was relieved by what had happened. He prayed for Jay, knowing that what was true of the father would be true of the son. He said a personal prayer of thanks that what was a messy, horrible situation had been resolved with the least amount of pain, and finally he prayed that Carolyn was finally going to find some sort of peace and contentment at last. Then he prayed for the strength to tell Jay what had happened.

It wasn't as hard as he had feared. He'd told Jay right away that his mother was ill. Jay knew that if it was bad enough for his father to go halfway across the country, it had to be serious. Living with a doctor, he was
also well aware of the limitations of medicine--he had a much better grasp of mortality than most children his age. When they returned Maggie was sporting a chocolate smear on her chin and playing catch with a new patchwork beanbag that was decorated to look like a frog. After showing it to Blair, she went to her room to decide the perfect place to put it, and that gave Blair and Jay a few minutes alone. "Jay, I've had a telegram from your father. He's on his way home, and he should be here in a couple of days."

Jay nodded. "I hope he makes it back in time for Christmas. Maggie will be awful sad if he doesn't." He hesitated, then said softly, "Blair? What did he say about my mother?"

Blair put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry, Jay. Your mother died."

Jay bit his lip. "I sort of thought she might have, from the look on your face. You don't like it when anyone dies, Blair. Not even if you didn't like them much when they were alive. Did she ask about me?"

"I don't know," Blair admitted. "I just got a telegram, and you can't say much in those. I'm sure your father will be able to answer all your questions when he comes home."

Jay suddenly seemed to think of something, and said anxiously, "What about her husband? He can't say what happens to me now, can he? I might have gone with her if the law said I absolutely had to, just so Dad wouldn't get in trouble trying to keep me, but I won't go with him."

"He died, too. You don't have to worry about that any more. No one is going to dispute your right to stay with us."

The boy slumped a little. "That's good. Blair, I never would have wanted anything to happen to..."

Blair hugged him. "Jay, you don't even have to say that. I know. We ALL know. It's all right. And it's all right to be sad, too. After all, she was your mother."

Jay nodded. "Yeah. You know, she could have left me a lot of times. I know there were a couple of men who wanted her to--I heard them. But she wouldn't do it. She waited till she knew I would be safe, with Dad. She wouldn't have left me if she didn't know that he'd take good care of me."

"You're right about that, Jay. You're absolutely right." *Kind of ironic that one of the most selfish things she ever did turned out to be one of the most decent.*

They didn't tell Maggie about what had happened. They would later, but agreed that there was no reason to spoil her enjoyment of the season any more than they had to.

Christmas Eve arrived, and Jim hadn't yet returned. Maggie went to bed with her enthusiasm about Santa's coming visit muted by her longing for Jim. "He's s'posed to be here," she'd complained. "That old train just moves too slow. Howcome Daddy Jim couldn't be here yesterday?"

Blair was tucking her in. "Maggie, for him to get here that fast he'd have to fly."

"Well, then howcome we don't have something like a train that flies? Huh?"

"We just don't. You need to be patient, Maggie. It took us a long time to invent the train and make it work the way it does. It will probably be a lot longer before we figure out how to fly."

Maggie thought, then said, "I bet Jay could think up something like that. He's smart."

Blair laughed. "Yes, he is. And who knows? Someone will have to do it, and Jay is just as likely as anyone
"else." He bent down and kissed her. "Now, go to sleep, peanut, or Santa Claus will go right by this house." Maggie quickly tucked one hand under a plump cheek, squeezed her eyes tight shut, and began to breathe deeply. "Oh good, Maggie is asleep. I'd better be quiet so I don't wake her up." Blair tiptoed out of the room, listening to muffled giggles.

Jay went to bed soon after, a little distracted, but not too melancholy. The relief of knowing that his place in the family was safe offset much of his sadness about Carolyn's death. He WAS wistful about Jim not being home. Before he'd come to Cascade, most of his Christmases had been spent with paid sitters, while his mother attended parties. He had been thrilled by the little rituals shared with the family, and the thought of having to open presents without Jim in the morning took some of the joy away.

Blair didn't really feel like sleeping either, but went to bed anyway, since he was going to need to get up early to begin preparations. Their family, Rafe's, Simon, and several single citizens, were combining forces for Christmas dinner. Blair had gotten off easy--all he was expected to provide was a turkey. A grand sized tom turkey, fully dressed and ready to be roasted and basted to golden perfection, was even now hanging in the coldest part of the outbuilding, and Blair anticipated no problems in that area. The trick had been keeping Maggie from eating the cornbread he'd baked for the stuffing.

He'd expected to lie awake, but instead he dozed off quickly. He was awakened by a large, warm body slipping under the covers and spooning up close behind him. He muttered sleepily, "That better be Jim Ellison. I'm a doctor--I know how to use a scalpel."

"When did you get so vicious?" Jim kissed the back of his neck.

Blair turned in his arms, then kissed him back. "My lover has been away. It makes me grumpy." He stroked Jim's hair. "Are you all right?"

Jim sighed. "Yeah. This solved the problem, but damn, Blair. As much as she infuriated me, I wouldn't have wished something like this on Carolyn." He gave Blair the full story.

"Green beans?"

Jim nodded. "It's sad, but so help me, I can't help but feel..." He shrugged.

"That it's kind of perversely funny. Don't beat yourself up over it, Jim I'm firmly of the opinion that the Lord has an odd sense of humor. Otherwise he would never have invented the giraffe. I tell you, though--it's going to be hard to hector Maggie to eat green beans from now on."

"We could substitute cabbage."

"You know what usually happens when we have cabbage." Blair held his nose eloquently.

Jim chuckled. "I'm willing to sacrifice if you are. Let's go to sleep. I'm going to have to get up early to go get Maggie's present tomorrow. I just hope it's the right choice."

Blair hugged him. "I don't know if it's possible for Maggie to love you any stronger, Jim, but if it is--this'll do it. Trust me."

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Maggie had pretended to be asleep when Papa tucked her in, and Papa had been fooled. She hoped that Santa Claus wouldn't count that against her for being naughty, but she just HAD to stay up to wait for him.
She had decided to wait up and ask Santa if, instead of the kitten she'd been hoping for, she could have a fancy dolly, or a pretty dress. She didn't really WANT either of these things, but Daddy Jim had been acting sort of sad lately, and Maggie thought that maybe if she had these, he might cheer up. But it was beginning to look like making the sacrifice might not do much good, since Daddy Jim wasn't back from his trip...

"Maggie?" Maggie mumbled in her sleep, trying to pull her pillow over her head. "Margaret Naomi Sandburg." There was the dreaded Three Names, but it was said in such a gentle, teasing voice that Maggie instinctively knew that she wasn't in trouble, so she could safely ignore the voice for a little longer. There was a poke in her side, and she swatted blindly at the hand.

Another voice, Jay's, she thought, said, "I've never seen her take this long to wake up."

Then she heard Papa Blair say, "Looks like you're going to have to pull out the big guns."

"Maggie, if you don't get up right now, I'm going to pack up all your presents and send them to the poor children in China."

At this threat Maggie managed to crack her eyes open, and she saw Daddy Jim, smiling down at her. "Merry Christmas, sweet... Oof!" Jim's greeting was cut short as the little girl squealed and lunged up, wrapping her arms around his neck, and trying to smother him with kisses. Maggie finally let him breath. "Well, good morning to you, too," Jim laughed.

"I missed you," she said sincerely.

"I noticed. Are you ready to see what you got for Christmas?"

The little girl almost vibrated with excitement, but then said calmly, "Maybe we ought to wait till after breakfast." Jim gaped, then Maggie giggled, clapping her hands and shaking her head.

Jim glanced back at Blair. "She's your daughter, all right." Jim looked back at Maggie. "Do you think you can avoid bumping your head on the doorframe?" Maggie knew what this meant. Squealing happily, she swarmed over Jim. With a little assistance, she was soon sitting on his shoulders Jim stood, and they made their way carefully out into the front room—and the Christmas tree.

There was an orgy of present unwrapping. Maggie was learning to weave, and each of the men received slightly lopsided bookmarks. She informed them cheerfully that Megan had promised to teach her how to knit, and they would all get socks or mittens next year. Nothing was said, but quiet looks were exchanged. They had all seen Megan's knitting.

Jay presented Blair with a copy of the Saturday Evening Post, and Jim with a copy of Life magazine, along with hand drawn cards that assured them that more copies would be delivered each week for the next year. "They'll be a few weeks late since they have to come from the East coast," he said.

"That is NO problem," said Blair, thumbing through the magazine with delight. "Jim, we trade off when we finish, right?"

Jim was reading, too. "Yeah, but not UNTIL we're finished. I've got political articles."

"I've got jokes."

Jim looked up alertly. "You have jokes?" Blair tucked the magazine behind his back, grinning. "Right, but I don't want you reading them out loud to me before I get a chance to read them for myself."
Jay was thrilled with his music box kit. He showed it to Maggie, promising that she could have it when he finished it. "But that's YOUR present, Jay," she protested, though covetousness was shining in her eyes.

"Maggie, MY present is the chance to put it together," he assured her.

Maggie was ecstatic over her new box of watercolors, but she pointed at the final package sitting under the tree. "Isn't that one mine? That's what you brought home with you the last time you went to Lansdale."

Jim scratched his chin. "That's a little complicated, Mags. It WAS for you, but it's for Raffie now." She gave him a disbelieving look. "Hear me out, Maggie, hear me out. I wasn't thinking very clearly when I bought that. I think when I tell you what it is, and what I got you instead, you won't mind."

She looked doubtful. "That's an awful big package. What is it?"

Jim spread his hands to illustrate the size. "It's a big china doll with long blonde curls and blue glass eyes. She's dressed in pink satin, and she has real lace petticoats, leather shoes, and tiny kid gloves. Her eyes close when you lay her down, like she's going to sleep." This description was almost guaranteed to make a little girl of Maggie's age salivate. "Now, if you really want this, you can keep it. Do you want it?"

Maggie didn't even pause. She shook her head firmly. "No, thank you. Raffie will love it. She likes things like that." She brightened. "Can I say it's from me?"

"You certainly can."

"Good." She paused. "You said you got me something else?"

Jim stood up. "Wait here." He walked back toward his bedroom.

Maggie looked at Blair. "Do you know what it is?"

"I do, and I'm not telling, so get that questioning glint out of your eyes."

Jim returned, carrying a woven picnic hamper, a red ribbon tied in a bow on the handle. He set it in front of Maggie. She stared at it, then looked up at Jim. "Oh. It's... nice, Daddy Jim." She was obviously puzzled. "Isn't that our old picnic basket? I mean, is it just mine now?"

"The present isn't the basket, little lady. The present is what's inside," Jim explained.

She perked up, reaching toward it. "Cookies?" Suddenly the hinged lid of the hamper bumped up, and she jerked her hand back, wide-eyed. "Cookies don't move!" The lid bumped again, and there was the sound of scratching. Maggie's mouth dropped open. Finally a thin, complaining sound filled the air. //Meeeewr//

Maggie jerked the lid up and peered into the hamper.

Bright yellow eyes set in a furry black face blinked back at her. Jim and Blair had braced for a scream of excitement, and were prepared for panicked howls from the kitten. Instead Maggie said softly, "Ah, baby kitty!" She reached in and carefully lifted out the tiny kitten, cradling it gently against her nightgown. "It's one of Mama Ragbag's babies."

She was sitting cross-legged on the floor. Jim squatted down beside her, reaching out to stroke the kitten's head with the tip of one finger. "This was the only one that wasn't spoken for. Mama Ragbag is such a good mouser that everyone wants one of her kittens. It's a little boy cat," he glanced quickly at Blair, "thank
goodness. What do you say, Maggie?"

She gave him a fierce one-armed hug. "This is the best Christmas present anybody ever, ever got! Thank you." She kissed him on the cheek.

"I don't want you to be disappointed, but he's going to have to live with his mother for another couple of weeks. He's not quite big enough to leave yet."

She nodded. "That's okay. Babies need their mamas when they're little. But he'll be bigger real soon, an' then can take care of him. It's not just the borned mamas who can take care of people. Sometimes, if you love them enough, you can take good care of someone you didn't have borned to you, right?"

Jim looked over at Jay, sitting beside Blair on the couch. Their heads were tipped close together as the boy read over the instructions for his music box kit. There was an unconscious ease between the two, an affection that Jim knew from experience didn't always exist, even between parent and child. He hugged Maggie. "That's right, sweetheart. Absolutely."

The End

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