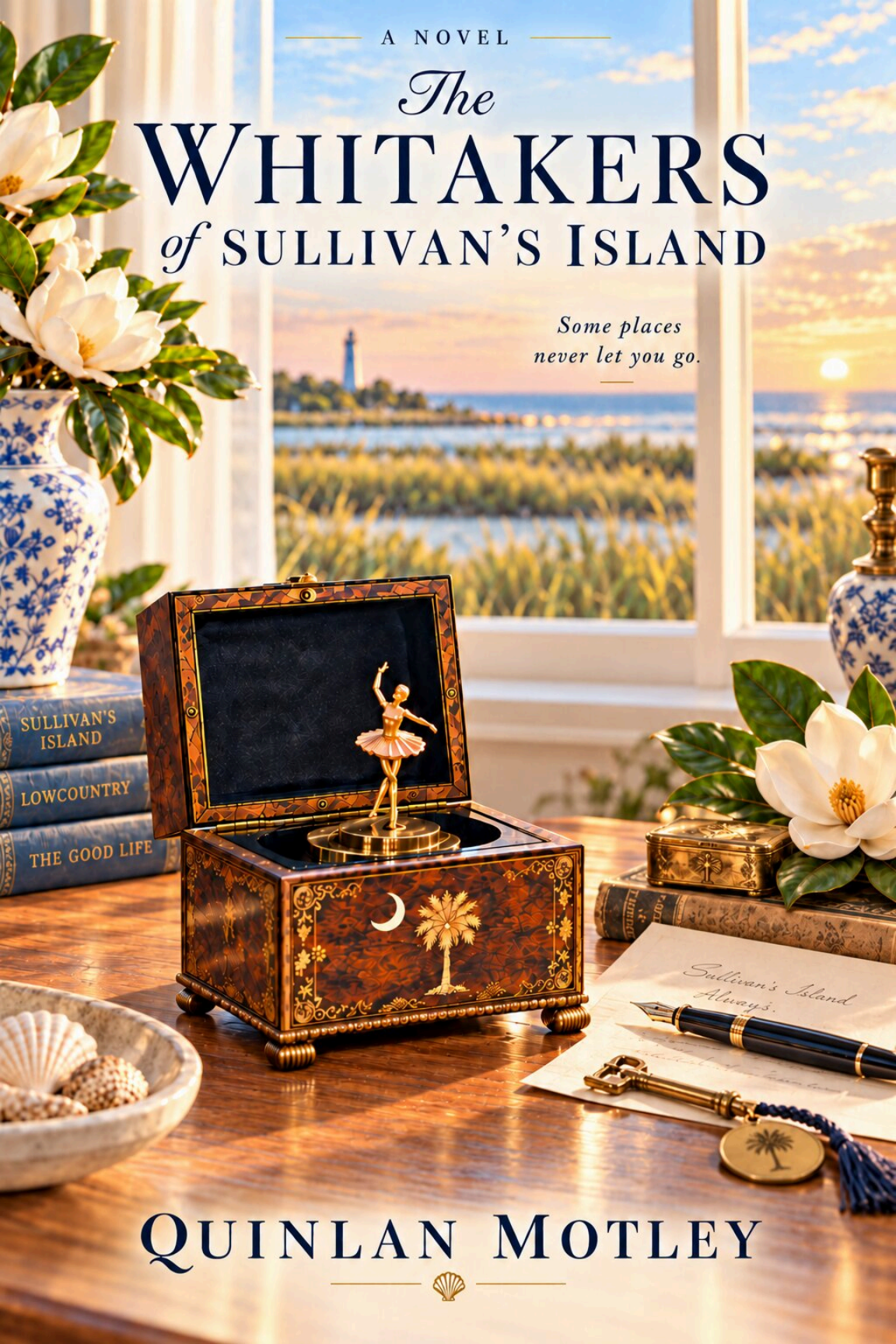


A NOVEL

The WHITAKERS *of* SULLIVAN'S ISLAND

*Some places
never let you go.*



QUINLAN MOTLEY



In Jesus Christ name
AMEN

The
WHITAKERS
of Sullivan's Island

QUINLAN MOTLEY

Copyright © 2026 GoodNovels.org.
All rights reserved.

Published by GoodNovels.org.

CHAPTER ONE

Charleston, South Carolina, Wednesday, November 24, 1971

Eli had given the secretary his name. He had not told her that he thought her employer was his father.

Now Graham Whitaker stood in the doorway with a folder under his arm, looking from the young man to the clock behind the secretary's desk.

"Mr. Park?"

"Yes, sir."

"Come in. I have a little time."

For nearly three weeks Eli had been finding reasons to wait. He followed before he could find another.

"Will you need that typed before Friday, Mr. Whitaker?" the secretary asked.

Graham looked down at the folder as if he had forgotten it.

"No. Leave it for Friday. You can go when you're finished."

Inside, he put it on a stack beside the telephone and offered Eli a chair. There was a Duke law diploma on the wall. On the desk, turned toward the chair Graham had just left, stood a photograph of Graham with a woman and three children.

Eli sat with his satchel on his knees.

"My mother knew you in Korea."

Graham had begun to sit. He stopped with his hand on the back of his chair.

"What's her name?"

"Hana Park."

Eli took the photograph from the book in which he had carried it. The younger Graham was standing beside Hana, whose head was turned toward him. Eli slid it across the desk.

Graham picked it up by the edges.

"Oh," he said.

For a while he did nothing else. Eli had practiced answers to questions about where he had got it and why he had come. The man did not ask them.

"Is she here with you?"

"She died in January."

Graham looked up. Then his eyes went back to the print.

"This January?"

"Yes."

A car sounded its horn outside. Graham pulled his desk chair closer and sat down without letting go of the photograph.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't know."

Eli watched the man's thumb move away from his mother's face. He had seen that careful way of holding the print before, in his aunt's hands, but not here, not in a man who had lived all these years without her.

"How old was she?" Graham asked, and shook his head before Eli could answer. "I know how old she was."

He put the photograph flat on the desk.

"She was my mother," Eli said. It was the one part he had already told him, and still it was where he had to begin. "After she died, my aunt told me you were my father."

Graham looked at him then, properly, without the photograph between their eyes.

"When were you born?"

"October. Nineteen fifty-three."

"October."

"Yes."

Graham's hand closed on the edge of the desk. "I didn't know she had a child."

"She wrote to you."

"I never received a letter."

Eli opened the book again and took out an envelope. He laid it on the desk, with the folded letter beside it. Graham's name and

an old military address were on the front; the marks beneath them showed that it had been sent back.

"This is the letter she sent. It came back to her. My aunt gave it to me with the photograph when we were sorting Mother's papers."

Graham turned the envelope toward him.

"That was my address in Pusan."

He reached for the letter, then stopped.

"You can read it," Eli said. "But I want it back."

"All right."

The letter was in English. Graham read from the beginning. Hana wrote about two new desks she'd received for her classroom, joking about her sister Sujin's complaints at having to move them with the drawers full. At Sujin's name, Graham's mouth moved a little.

Then he reached the words Eli knew without looking.

"I am going to have a baby. You did not know when you left. Neither did I."

Graham stayed on that part longer than it took to read it. He went on to the request for an answer through the school, and to the line about making arrangements. Eli left the page where it was. His mother had needed things. He would not hide that from this man.

At last Graham looked at the date again.

"April," he said. "I was already back in the States."

Eli looked at the envelope. His mother had held it after it came back, knowing it had not reached this man.

"But you didn't know."

"No." Graham raised his eyes. "I didn't know about you."

Eli had thought that an answer, once he had one, would tell him what to do. He could hear the secretary closing a drawer in the next room.

"You didn't know my name before this year?" Graham asked.

"No. Only that my father was an American soldier."

Graham drew a breath as if he meant to say something more. Instead he laid the letter on its envelope and pushed it back with the photograph.

"Your aunt is Sujin?"

"She lives in Pusan. She took the picture."

"I have one too."

Eli looked at him.

"She had two prints made," Graham said. "Your mother gave me one before I left."

"You kept it?"

"Yes."

For the first time since entering the room, Eli looked away because he wanted to, not because he was afraid of being seen looking. In the desk photograph the youngest child had one hand over the older boy's sleeve. The woman stood close to Graham, who was laughing.

"My wife," Graham said. "Caroline. And our children."

"I knew you were married. Does Mrs. Whitaker know about my mother?"

"Yes. I told her before we married."

Eli folded the letter along its old crease. He did not ask what the wife had said.

"Where are you staying?"

"With Mrs. Alden. Ruth Alden. She taught in Korea. She knew my mother. She helped me find your office before I came."

"When did you arrive in Charleston?"

"Early November. I'm here on a short educational visit. Mrs. Alden is hosting me while I visit schools. I go home on January twenty-eighth."

"And you've had the address all this time?"

"Yes."

Eli looked at the door through which he had finally come.

Graham glanced at the clock. Eli closed the book.

"You said you had a little time."

"No. I was only..." He looked at the folder on the desk. "I was going to finish that and go home."

The secretary called goodbye from the outer office, and Graham answered her. They listened to the outside door close.

"Would you have lunch with me?" he asked.

Eli kept a hand on the satchel clasp.

"There are things I'd like to ask you," Graham said. "And things you may want to ask me. I don't seem to be doing very well at either."

Eli had questions. He was less certain now that he could bear all the answers in one day.

"Lunch would be all right."

* * *

At the Colony House, Graham waited for Eli to sit before taking the chair opposite him. Eli put the satchel between his feet. Without the desk, he did not know where to rest his hands.

A man carrying menus greeted Graham by name. Graham began to answer, stopped, and looked toward the other tables.

"This is Eli Park," he said.

"How do you do?" the man asked.

Eli answered him. Nothing else was asked. Graham moved his water glass, although it had not been in the way.

When they were alone again, he asked what Eli would like to eat.

Eli chose something he recognized. He had been hungry outside the office. Now he hoped hunger would come back before the food arrived.

Graham asked about Ruth, and Eli told him that she had left Korea years ago but still wrote to Sujin. The conversation became easier while it concerned someone who was not at the table.

"Do you have classes this afternoon?"

"No. I have some reading to finish."

"For the schools?"

"For myself. Mrs. Alden has more books than places to put them."

"What are you reading?"

"Three Men in a Boat." Eli had left it open on Ruth's sitting-room table, where she had complained of finding it facedown.

"I read the last page first," he said. "I don't think I should have done it."

"Why did you do that?" Graham asked.

"My mother did it."

"She did?"

"In a shop. Before she bought one. If she didn't like the ending, she put it back."

Graham smiled, and Eli could see him trying to put the woman who bought books beside the one he remembered.

"I didn't know that."

"She told me not to do it with books for school."

"Sound advice."

"I didn't always take it."

Their food came. Graham waited until the plates were down, then asked whether he had many books at home.

"Some."

"We could see about getting you a few while you're here."

Eli set down his fork.

"I haven't finished Mrs. Alden's."

"I only meant, if there's something you need."

"I don't need anything today."

Graham nodded. He cut a piece of his lunch, but did not eat it at once. Eli wished he had answered differently and was also glad he had not thanked him.

After a while he said, "Did you love her?"

"Yes."

The answer came before Graham had put down his knife.

Eli looked at the tablecloth. "She never told me about the two of you."

"I loved her," Graham said again, more quietly.

"Did she know?"

"I told her. I think she believed me."

He was silent long enough that Eli thought that was all he meant to say.

"I was waiting to hear from law school. I told her I might not get in. She said she'd want to see me even if they turned me down."

A small smile had come into his face. It did not last.

"She was afraid she'd asked me to supper too soon. With her mother and Sujin there. I was afraid of saying something stupid in front of them. We walked halfway down the road before either of us admitted being nervous."

Eli had known his mother could be afraid. He had not pictured her wanting this man to come back to supper, listening for what he would say.

"She could make you think she wasn't afraid of anything," he said.

"Yes."

Graham looked down at his plate. Eli took a bite of his lunch and gave him time. He did not know how much of this memory he wanted, only that he would have been angry if there had been nothing to tell.

"Are you with Mrs. Alden tomorrow?" Graham asked.

"We're going to her daughter's."

"Would you come to us instead? For Thanksgiving dinner."

Eli's fork stopped above the plate.

"My mother will be there," Graham said. "I'd like you to meet her. I'd like you to meet all of them."

"Have you told your wife?"

"No. I'm going to tell her today."

The man with the menus passed behind Graham. Graham did not look around this time, but Eli remembered the first glance.

"Perhaps you should talk to her."

"I'll speak to her when I get home. But I do want you to come."

"What will you tell her?"

"What you've told me. About your mother. About you."

Eli moved a small piece of bread away from the edge of his plate. He wanted to meet Graham's mother. He wanted to know whether Graham was different at home. Neither want made him certain he should go.

"I'll speak to Mrs. Alden," he said. "I think I would like to come."

"May I collect you at half past eleven?"

"All right."

"And take you back afterward."

"Yes. Back to Mrs. Alden's."

Graham nodded. He asked for the address on a clean piece of paper, and Eli wrote it without opening the book in his satchel.

* * *

Ruth was at her kitchen table when he returned. There were two onions on the cutting board and a third in her hand.

"I went to his office," Eli said.

She put the onion down.

"He was there?"

"Yes."

He sat in the chair across from her. Now that he was home, he could feel how tired he was. Ruth had not known who his father was until he and Sujin wrote in the spring. She had found the office and helped arrange this visit. The walk through the door had been left to him.

"What did he say?"

"That he didn't know."

Ruth waited.

"He read the letter."

"Do you believe he didn't know?"

"I think so." Eli looked at the knife beside her hand. "I thought that would make it easier."

She drew the cutting board away from his sleeve.

"He asked me for dinner tomorrow. With his family. I said I would like to go, but I was meant to go with you."

"I'll tell my daughter."

"You won't mind?"

"I'll miss having you there." She picked up the onion. "That isn't the same thing."

He watched her begin to cut it.

"He's coming at half past eleven. He'll bring me back."

"Then leave your key where you can find it. I may still be out."

Eli put his hand in his pocket to make sure it was there.

CHAPTER TWO

Sullivan's Island, Wednesday evening

Caroline had put the bread out to dry and sent Lucy upstairs before Graham came into the kitchen. He was still wearing his tie. She took one look at it and handed him the apron hanging by the stove.

"You'll get flour on that."

"What am I doing?"

"What you promised your youngest daughter. Her cards are on the dining-room table. You're drawing a turkey."

"Then why the apron?"

"Because I need this bowl moved first."

He smiled and lifted it. She directed him to the counter, reached past him for the towel, and found his other hand briefly at her waist. It was a familiar piece of awkwardness, the two of them trying to work in the same kitchen. She leaned against him for a moment.

"Are we ever going to have that lunch?" she asked.

"Next week. Friday?"

"You'll have to put it in your book."

"I will."

He released her, but remained beside the counter. She began wiping flour from a clean place.

"What is it?"

"Someone came to the office today."

"You usually have several."

"A young man. From Korea."

She stopped wiping.

"Do you remember what I told you about Hana?"

"Yes."

He had told her before their engagement. She had asked whether Hana expected him to come back. He had said no. Caroline had believed him, and nothing in the years since had given her cause to doubt that answer.

"She died in January," he said.

"Oh, Graham."

She could see that he was hurt. She put the towel down and waited for him to say how he had heard.

"The young man was her son."

Caroline looked at the bowl he had just moved.

"His name is Eli. He says I'm his father."

She did not answer. From upstairs came Lucy's complaint that Bennett had taken something of hers. It sounded as if they were in another house.

"How old?"

"Eighteen. He was born in October of fifty-three."

"We married in fifty-five."

"Yes. I left Korea in January of fifty-three."

"You didn't know?"

"No."

She had heard certainty in his voice often enough to know when he was using it for somebody else's benefit. This was quieter than that.

"What makes him think..." She could not finish the question without sounding as though she wished some other man had done what Graham had done.

"Her sister told him after Hana died. Sujin. He brought the photograph she took of us, and a letter Hana wrote in April. It was sent back to her. She said neither of us knew when I left."

"You've never had this letter?"

"No."

"Where is it?"

"He kept it. I read it at the office."

"Could you be mistaken?"

"About being his father? I don't think I am."

When Maddie was born, Graham had stood beside the bed afraid to touch her until Caroline put the baby in his arms. She remembered the care with which he had bent his head. Another child had already been walking and talking then. Somewhere in Korea, someone had been cutting his food into pieces.

"If you had known..."

Graham waited.

"What are you asking me?" he said.

"I don't know."

He started to say something else, and she held up her hand. She needed him to stop adding things for a moment.

The bread lay in neat pieces in the shallow pan. Tomorrow morning she was to put it into a meal for the same people she had fed last Thanksgiving and the year before that. She had made Lucy's favorite pie. Bennett had asked whether Grandmother was bringing the other one. Nothing in the kitchen had changed.

"Where is he now?"

"With a Mrs. Alden in Charleston. She knew Hana. He's here visiting schools."

"How long have you known this?"

"Since this morning."

"And you came home just now."

"I took him to lunch."

She looked at him then.

"I didn't want to leave him standing in my office."

"I didn't say you should."

"I know."

"Don't answer things I haven't said."

He took off his tie and laid it on the chair beside him. She could not bear that ordinary movement and could not have said what she wanted him to do instead.

"I invited him tomorrow," he said.

"You invited him here."

"Yes."

"To our Thanksgiving dinner."

"Yes."

"You've already decided what I will do."

"I decided I wanted to see him again."

"And I prepare it. I explain it to the children. I sit down at the table as if..."

"I'll tell the children."

"That is not all I said."

He looked away. She had wanted him to understand the whole thing at once, the way she had been made to understand it.

"You should have asked me," she said.

"Yes."

He came around the table, then stopped short of her.

"I should have. I'm sorry."

The apology did not bring back the afternoon in which there had been nothing to ask.

"Does anyone else know?"

"Mrs. Alden helped him find my office. I haven't told anyone."

"But you went out to lunch."

"At the Colony House."

"Did anyone see you?"

"Of course they saw us."

"Graham."

He pulled out the chair and sat down.

"When we went in, a man who knows my name came over. I looked around to see who else was there."

She watched him.

"What did you say?"

"His name. The man gave us our menus."

"And?"

"That was all." Graham pulled the chair closer to the table. "I was glad that was all."

She knew the relief he meant. She had felt it at church doors when a conversation moved on before it reached a troublesome subject.

"People will think you knew," she said.

"Some may."

"They'll think I knew."

"I thought of that too."

"Did you? When you were making plans for tomorrow?"

"I wanted him to say yes."

She turned toward the sink. As chair of the benefit committee for a children's charity, Caroline arranged the spring luncheon and decided whose names went on its invitations. Last spring Anne Foster had asked whether she might bring Marian Ellis. Caroline had said yes. Then Anne had mentioned Marian's little boy, and that there had been no marriage.

Caroline had asked her to withdraw the invitation.

She remembered saying that some of the women were bringing their daughters. Anne had made the call, and Marian had not come. The next week Anne had said only that Marian had been looking forward to it.

Now Caroline could hear herself explaining about the daughters. She wondered how long it would take Anne to remember.

"Caroline?"

"I'm here."

"I can tell Mother tonight. We ought to tell the children before he comes."

She was angry with him for being ready to move to the next thing. She was grateful that there was a next thing he could do.

"Not tonight. Lucy is already meant to be in bed."

"In the morning, then."

"With me there."

"Yes."

"And plainly. I won't have them trying to guess what you've left out."

He nodded.

"What time did you tell him?"

"I said I'd collect him at half past eleven. Bring him back afterward."

"Back where?"

"To Mrs. Alden's."

He would be collected and taken home. She could prepare for that.

"We can have him to dinner," she said.

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet."

He sat without speaking while she found another plate. The dishes were already stacked for the morning. She took the bottom one from a second stack, where it would not leave an uneven space, and placed it beside the others.

"Does he speak much English?"

"Very well."

"All right."

She opened the drawer for another napkin. There were plenty. There had never been any question of having enough.

Graham stood up. "I'll call Mother."

"And do Lucy's turkey."

He looked toward the dining room. "I haven't forgotten."

"You forgot yesterday."

"Yes," he said. "I did."

After he left the kitchen she went back to the bread. From the next room came the scrape of a chair, then his mother's name, spoken into the telephone. Caroline broke a piece that was already small enough.

CHAPTER THREE

Thursday, November 25

Eli's place card was the only one without a turkey.

Lucy had made it after breakfast, when Graham and Caroline had told the children who was coming. There had been questions, and Graham had answered them. Bennett wanted to know whether this changed Saturday. Maddie wanted to know why they had waited until morning to tell them. Lucy had asked how to spell Eli.

Caroline had stayed beside her husband. She had said they would meet him today and that he was their guest. Maddie had looked at her when she used that word, but had said nothing.

Now Lucy was looking at the blank corner of his card.

"You can draw one," Caroline told her.

"Daddy did the others."

"Then ask him when he gets back."

"But he gets back with Eli."

Caroline had no answer that satisfied either of them. Lucy took up her pencil.

Evelyn arrived while Graham was gone. She embraced Caroline, then put her pie on the counter and asked for something to do. Caroline gave her the potatoes. Neither woman pretended she had come without knowing.

When the car stopped outside, Caroline was carrying the gravy boat to the dining room. She put it down before there was anything in it.

Eli came in behind Graham, holding his satchel close to his side. He wore a clean shirt and carried his jacket over one arm. Graham reached back to close the door, and Eli moved out of its way with a quick, apologetic turn of his shoulder.

Bennett did that when he thought he was standing where somebody wanted to walk. The recognition disturbed her more than the features she had prepared herself to inspect.

"Caroline," Graham said. "This is Eli."

"How do you do, Mrs. Whitaker?"

His voice was lower than she had expected.

"I'm glad you could come," she said. "Let me take your coat."

He gave her the jacket. She was relieved to have something ordinary to do with her hands.

Evelyn stepped forward and offered both of hers.

"I'm Graham's mother."

"Yes, ma'am."

She held his hand a moment longer than the greeting required, looking at him with an interest Caroline wished she could share so freely.

"I'm Evelyn. You may have heard something dreadful about me already."

"No, ma'am."

"Then he's being careful."

Graham smiled. Eli did too, a little.

Lucy came around her grandmother.

"I made your turkey. It's smaller than the others."

"I don't think I'll mind."

"On your card," she said. "Not to eat."

Bennett laughed before he could stop himself. Lucy gave him a look and led Eli to the dining room to show him.

Maddie stood back until her sister had finished. Then she introduced herself and asked what schools he had seen. She listened to the answer. Caroline had been afraid the children would stare or fall silent. Now she found that their ordinary interest was difficult too.

At the table Graham waited until everyone was seated. Eli's chair was beside Evelyn's, where Caroline had put it that morning. She saw him look at his card before he lowered his head.

Graham thanked God for the food and for those gathered to share it. His voice caught briefly on the last word. Caroline kept her eyes shut until the amen.

Lucy wanted white meat. Bennett wanted to know whether the potatoes could come his way before everyone took the brown part. Evelyn told him the brown part did not travel separately.

For several minutes there was enough to pass that nobody needed to think of a question. Caroline watched Eli accept dishes and refuse a second helping of one without making a ceremony of either.

"You speak English very well," Maddie said.

"My mother taught it."

"Did she teach you at home?"

"At home too."

"That sounds terrible," Bennett said.

"It could be."

Bennett looked up, pleased to have found something he understood.

"My mother can hear me doing arithmetic wrong from the next room," Lucy said.

"I can hear you asking Bennett to do it," Caroline said.

"That too."

Graham laughed. Caroline found herself smiling before she remembered to wonder what Eli would make of them.

"Do you play baseball?" Bennett asked him.

"Badly."

"So does Lucy."

"I don't want to play."

"That's fortunate," Bennett said.

"Bennett."

Eli had begun to smile. "I sometimes want to. It doesn't help."

"How old are you?" Bennett asked.

"Eighteen."

"I'm thirteen. I could show you."

"If you don't mind starting near the beginning."

That pleased Bennett even more. He turned to Graham.

"After you fix my bicycle."

"I said we'd do it."

"You said last Saturday."

"I did."

"And the Saturday before."

Graham set down the serving fork. "I remember."

Caroline waited for him to make another promise. He did not, and Bennett returned to his potatoes with the look of someone who had established a fact.

The meal went on. It did not become easy, but it became a meal. Once Graham began to ask Eli something while Maddie was already speaking to him. He stopped and let her finish. Once Eli reached for the wrong glass, saw Lucy watching and asked whether it was hers. She told him firmly that it was.

Caroline brought the pie in with Evelyn's help.

In the kitchen Maddie said, "Could he come back sometime? I've got a book he might like."

"We haven't finished today."

"I know. I meant another day."

"Let your father make the arrangements."

"Why?"

"Because there are other things to consider."

Maddie waited, but Caroline did not name them. She handed her the plates.

When Caroline returned to the dining room, Maddie was giving Eli the book.

"You can bring it back when you've finished," she said. "And if you go to Grandmother's, I'll bring a record for you to hear. She has a player."

"What is it?" he asked.

"Elvis. 'Suspicious Minds.' You think it's finished, then it starts coming back."

"So it doesn't end?"

"It ends. Just not when Bennett wants it to."

Caroline carried the empty dishes past them, listening to her daughter make another afternoon possible without asking her.

By the time they went outside, the afternoon had cooled. Lucy put on her sweater and then complained that it covered the collar of her dress. Evelyn said the collar would survive being remembered without being seen.

Graham brought the camera from the house.

"Before we lose the light."

They took a photograph on the porch each Thanksgiving. Caroline sent prints to relatives at Christmas. Last year's was still in her mother's sitting room, Lucy leaning forward so that she would not disappear behind Bennett.

Caroline turned toward the place where they usually stood. For a moment she saw the photograph she had expected the afternoon before, before Graham had come home, before there had been a seventh card. She wanted that familiar group, just once, without having to decide what to say when she put the print in an envelope.

Eli stood near the steps, outside the small rearrangement of chairs and people.

"I could take it," he said.

"Yes, thank you." The answer came from her too quickly.

Graham kept hold of the camera.

"There's a timer. I can set it over here."

He indicated the railing. Caroline knew it worked. They had used it the year before. Evelyn drew Bennett nearer to her, leaving a place on his other side.

"Let's have this one first," Caroline said.

Her husband looked at her. She looked back, and did not withdraw the request.

He could have set the camera down. Instead he put it into Eli's hands.

"It's this button," he said.

"I see."

Graham showed him how to wind the film. Then he went to his place beside Caroline. His sleeve touched hers. She moved Lucy a little to the left.

"Can you see everyone?" Graham asked.

"Yes."

There was time to hear a car turn into the next street. Caroline held her smile. Eli lifted the camera.

After the shutter clicked, Lucy asked whether she had blinked.

"Take another," Caroline said.

Eli lowered the camera to wind it. Graham had moved half a step forward. Evelyn touched his sleeve.

"Now?" she asked, looking toward Eli.

"One more," Graham said, and stood back beside Caroline.

Evelyn let go of his sleeve. She did not look toward the camera until Eli raised it.

Eli took the second photograph and came up the steps to return the camera. Graham accepted it without looking at the counter.

"Now we'll use the timer," he said. "Come and stand with us."

"No, thank you."

Graham looked at him.

"You should be in it."

"It's all right." Eli reached for the jacket Caroline had laid over the chair. "I'd like to go back now."

She wanted to say they had only meant to take the usual one first. The words would not come out differently enough from what she had already said.

Evelyn came to the steps with him.

"Will you have lunch with me tomorrow?"

"I have a school visit in the morning."

"After that, then. I won't eat at eleven merely to prevent you."

He looked at her. "I'd like to."

"I'm free after eleven," Graham said. "I can collect you when you're back at Mrs. Alden's."

Eli nodded, but kept his attention on Evelyn while she told him where she lived. Caroline could hear how carefully the older woman was keeping the invitation small.

Lucy brought a wrapped piece of pie from the kitchen. Caroline had not told her to save one.

"For Mrs. Alden," Lucy said. "Unless she doesn't like it."

"Then I'll eat it."

"You can tell me."

"I will."

He thanked Evelyn for the pie and Caroline for dinner. He called her Mrs. Whitaker again, though there was no reason he should have called her anything else.

Lucy fetched the penciled card from the table and gave it to him with the pie. Graham opened the car door for him, and Caroline watched them leave. Inside, Eli's plate was still beside the place where his card had stood.

* * *

Ruth had not come home. Eli let himself in and took the pie to the kitchen. He found a plate, put the wrapped piece on it, and set it where she would see it.

Graham had asked in the car whether he still wanted to go tomorrow.

"Yes," Eli had said. "I would like to see your mother."

The rest of the drive had been quiet. At the door Graham had said he would telephone after eleven, and Eli had agreed.

Upstairs he put his satchel beside the bed. He took out his mother's photograph and looked at the space around her, at her mother's doorway behind the two of them. He did not know who had been just outside that picture, waiting for Sujin to finish.

He laid it on the table. In his jacket pocket he found Lucy's place card. He set it beside the photograph, then moved it far enough away that neither covered the other.

He had seen Graham stand beside his wife. He had seen him stay there.

Tomorrow he wanted to ask Evelyn what her son had been like when he was small.

CHAPTER FOUR

Friday, November 26

At breakfast Eli asked Ruth whether it would be difficult to move him to another host.

She stopped spreading marmalade.

"Have I done something?"

"No."

"Then you had better explain before I spend the morning trying to remember it."

"Somewhere farther from the island."

Ruth had known him since he was a boy struggling through the English stories his mother selected. She did not usually let him abandon a difficult sentence.

"What happened yesterday?"

"He was kind."

"Your father?"

Eli nodded.

"And his family?"

"They knew I was coming. There was a place for me."

He found that he could eat, which was irritating. He had expected a distress so complete that it would exempt him from ordinary needs.

"They took a photograph," he said at last. "I took it."

"Ah."

He waited for her to tell him he had misunderstood.

"Did you want to be in it?" she asked.

"Not by then."

"This is your room until the end of your visit," Ruth said.

"What happens at the Whitakers' doesn't alter that."

"I don't want to be troublesome."

"Then stop leaving books on the stairs."

He looked up. She was smiling, slightly.

"I moved them."

"After I found them with my foot."

He smiled back despite himself.

Ruth had offered to host him months before his passport was issued. His funding and return passage were arranged. Graham Whitaker had signed none of the papers.

"I would like to stay," he said.

"Good. Finish your toast."

He was back from his school visit when Graham called at eleven twenty. Eli accepted the invitation to lunch at Evelyn's. On the drive to the island his father asked if he had slept.

"Yes."

"I didn't, much."

Eli looked at him. He had not imagined his father lying awake. He had imagined the house closing around the people who belonged there and resuming its usual conversation.

"I'm sorry about the photograph," Graham said.

"I offered to take it."

"And I put the camera in your hands. I stood there beside Caroline while you took both pictures."

Eli watched the houses passing the window.

"I wanted to see your mother today."

It was not the whole reason he had come, and Graham did not insist on the rest.

Evelyn served soup and another slice of her Thanksgiving pie. There was no place card, no announcement about him. When his answer about where he lived meant little to her, she admitted it. He described the steep way to his aunt's home and the shop where the proprietor still asked after his schoolwork although he had once broken her window with a ball.

"Did you pay for it?" Evelyn asked.

"My mother did. Then I paid my mother."

"A sensible arrangement."

"It lasted a long time."

Graham asked how old he had been. Eleven. Whether his aunt had lived with them. Yes, until she married; later she had moved back after her husband died. Eli answered because these were questions he could answer without defending anyone.

"What was he like when he was small?" he asked Evelyn.

"At nine he learned to whistle. We heard nothing else for a week."

"I practiced outside," Graham said.

"Under the kitchen window. Then he learned to do it with two fingers. I regretted complaining about the first kind."

Eli looked at his father. "Can you still?"

"Not at the table," Evelyn said.

Graham lowered the hand he had already begun to lift. Eli laughed, and his father grinned at him.

After lunch Graham proposed a drive. Eli had a report due for school.

"Could I work here for an hour instead?"

"Of course," Evelyn said, and gave him the spare room.

Through the open door Eli could hear the older woman's voice carrying up the stairs. Graham answered, and she laughed. The sounds reminded him of home so unexpectedly that he had to put down his pen. His mother and Sujin had seldom agreed about how loudly a person ought to speak inside a house. Usually they had conducted the argument at a volume that proved neither was listening.

Before leaving he asked whether Graham could come again on Saturday.

"Here?" his father asked.

"If Mrs. Whitaker doesn't mind."

Evelyn said she did not.

"I'll collect you in the morning," Graham said.

There were things Eli had not asked at the restaurant. He wanted to ask them where his father would not be looking over his shoulder at another table.

* * *

That evening Ruth asked the operator for the Pusan call arranged before Eli left Korea. Sujin would be waiting at the church office on Saturday morning there. When his aunt answered, Ruth left them to talk.

He spoke in Korean, so quickly that she told him to slow down. Was he eating properly?

"Yes. I met him."

The line crackled. He repeated it, naming Graham.

His aunt was quiet long enough for him to ask if she was still there.

"I am here. Was he kind to you?"

"Yes."

"Thank God."

"He didn't know about me."

"Then I'm glad you went."

He wanted to tell her about the photograph, but she was too far away to sit beside him afterward.

Instead he told her about Lucy's instructions for the pie she had sent Ruth. Sujin laughed and asked if he had left any. He said he had been closely supervised.

Then she asked what Graham looked like now.

"Older than in the picture."

"We all are."

She told him she had begun taking in mending with a neighbor. They worked at his desk while the daylight was good.

"Where have you put my books?"

"On the shelf. I haven't thrown them out."

"I didn't think you had."

"You sounded as if I had. We have three coats to finish next week."

"Isn't that a lot?"

"I don't mind. A woman came back yesterday just to show me how well the sleeve fitted."

He could hear how pleased she was. He had imagined the room exactly as he had left it.

Eli turned the receiver in his hand. In January, while he and Sujin sorted his mother's papers, she had given him the photograph and the returned letter and told him whose name was on the envelope. He had been too hungry for the name to ask why he had not been allowed it before.

"When did you know he was my father?"

"Hana told me before you were born."

"You could have told me."

"She was your mother. She said she would tell you herself."

"But she didn't."

"No."

"What was she waiting for?"

His aunt did not answer at once.

"After the letter came back, she was afraid to begin again. They had said goodbye. She didn't know whether he would want her, or a child."

"She had years."

"Later she said that if she told you his name, you would want to find him."

"I did want to."

"She was afraid of that too."

"She could have asked me."

He could hear a door closing at the other end of the line.

"She kept saying she would tell you when you were older," Sujin said.

"You believed her?"

"At first."

"And after that?"

"Your mother was hard to argue with."

"I know. I lived with her."

Sujin said his name, then stopped.

"That was easier for you," he said. "Waiting for her."

"She was my sister."

"I was there too."

"I kept thinking I should speak to her again. I should have."

For a moment he wanted to put down the receiver. He imagined leaving her in that little church office with the answer she ought to have given him years before. Then he heard her breathing and remembered that she had walked there early so he could hear a familiar voice.

"I'm angry with her."

"I know."

"With you too."

"Eli, I am sorry."

He pressed the heel of his hand against his eye.

"I don't know what to do with it."

"Stay on the line a little longer."

Ruth came back to help them settle a time for another call before Christmas: Monday evening here, Tuesday morning in Pusan, in the week of Christmas. Sujin said she would be at the church office again.

Before saying goodbye he asked whether she had mended the brake on his bicycle. She said she had taken it to be done because she was tired of hearing him complain about it from the other side of the world.

He laughed. Then he cried after the call. He did not want his mother to have been wrong, and he did not want being angry with her to make him miss her more.

CHAPTER FIVE

Saturday, November 27

"Why didn't you write to her?"

Graham set down his cup. They were alone at Evelyn's kitchen table. His father had brought him over at ten, and Eli had waited while Evelyn showed him the room he could have if he wanted to stay the night. Now that he had asked his question, he wished she would come back and interrupt.

"When I left, we were saying goodbye," Graham said.

"People who say goodbye can still write."

"Yes."

"Did you? Even once?"

"No."

The direct answer took away the argument Eli had been preparing. He had expected a list of unsuccessful attempts, something he could compare to his mother's letter. There was only no.

"You knew where she lived."

"Yes."

"You could have found out."

"If I had written or gone back, perhaps I would have."

Eli stood and went to the sink.

"I used to think someone would come," he said.

He had not intended to tell this part.

Graham said nothing.

"There were Americans at church. Sometimes someone would come with Mrs. Alden, and I would watch to see if she introduced him to my mother. I thought they might have been sent to ask about us. Once I asked whether my father knew our new address. Mother said it would not be difficult to find her."

"Eli."

"I didn't even have a name to ask for. I thought whoever he was must know mine."

He could hear Graham moving behind him. He did not turn. If the man touched him now, he was afraid he would push the hand away.

Graham stopped at the other side of the table.

"I knew I had lost your mother," he said. "I didn't know I had a child."

"That is easier for you."

"Yes," Graham said at last.

Eli wanted the man to say something foolish enough that he could be angry without becoming ashamed of it.

"She was a good mother," Eli said.

"I haven't doubted that."

"I don't want everyone telling me what she should have done."

"I won't tell you that."

Eli came back to the table and sat down.

"Why did you say goodbye?"

"I was going home. She had her mother there, and Sujin, and her teaching. I didn't know what I could offer her except waiting."

"You were going to school."

"I'd applied to Duke, in Durham. I didn't know yet whether I'd get in. I was still in the Army."

"And she didn't want to wait."

"No. But I didn't ask her to, either."

Eli tried to imagine his mother being young enough not to know what she would do. In every memory he could reach, she was already his mother.

"After I came home, I told myself leaving her alone was what we had agreed," Graham said. "Then Duke accepted me. I went up to Durham to look for a room. I remember wanting a desk by the window."

Eli waited.

"I thought she'd laugh at me for being so particular. I'd worried for months that they wouldn't take me."

"You could have told her."

"I could. But then I thought I'd have to ask if she would see me again."

"Wouldn't you have wanted to?"

"Yes."

His father reached for his cup, then left it.

"But I wanted to get started. I had books to buy, things to arrange. Once classes began, there was always something I could say I had to do first."

His father stopped.

"What was she like when you were little?" Graham asked at last.

Eli looked at him. His father could not recover the years by being told what was in them.

Then he remembered the shoes.

"My feet grew. I kept telling my mother there was something wrong with the shoes. She said they couldn't be shrinking every month."

Graham smiled a little. "Bennett did that."

Eli looked at him.

"I'm sorry," his father said. "I didn't mean to change the subject."

"No. It's all right."

And, unexpectedly, it was. He could imagine Bennett presenting a shoe as evidence that someone else had made a mistake.

"She used to take me back to the shop," Eli said. "I thought if she went with me they might believe us."

"Did they?"

"They sold us larger shoes."

Graham laughed, and Eli was pleased before he could decide whether he ought to be.

Evelyn returned carrying a bag of groceries. Eli helped her put them away. Over lunch she asked about his books. Graham stayed, and for a while Eli could answer him without speaking about his mother.

Afterward he brought down the schoolwork he had carried from Ruth's. His father rose from the table.

"Would you rather I left you to that?"

"You can stay. If you like. I don't want you to correct it."

"All right."

"Everyone here asks whether they may correct my English."

"I was going to ask whether you needed another chair for those books."

Eli laughed and moved them. Graham sat down with the newspaper. Once he read something aloud that he thought Eli would like, then apologized for interrupting. Eli asked him to finish it.

Before leaving, Graham invited him to help repair Bennett's bicycle on Tuesday afternoon.

"I may not be any help," Eli said.

"That has never kept me from trying."

Evelyn asked whether he would stay until Sunday evening. Eli telephoned Ruth, who agreed to speak to the coordinator. When Graham left, Eli went upstairs and unpacked his spare shirt.

CHAPTER SIX

Sunday, November 28

Caroline found an error in the church's list of Christmas parcels and was grateful for something that could be corrected with a pencil.

As the parish room emptied after the service, a woman she did not know came to the doorway carrying a little boy. Was this where the parcels were being arranged? Caroline put down the list and brought a chair.

The woman remained standing. She was there about a neighbor, she explained. The neighbor would never ask for herself.

"Then I'm glad you have," Caroline said.

Caroline took down the address and children's ages. The older boy already owned the coat someone had proposed sending.

"We'll find something else," she promised.

The little boy had fallen asleep on the woman's shoulder. Caroline held the door while his mother turned sideways to carry him through.

"She was frightened to ask," Maddie said.

"People often are."

"You were nice to her."

Caroline heard the emphasis and looked up. "Was that a surprise?"

"No. May I go to Grandmother's this afternoon?"

"We were all just there on Friday."

"You weren't. And I wasn't."

That was true. Graham had told Caroline about the lunch, and she had somehow filed it among things the family had done.

"What did you want to do?"

"See Eli."

Caroline looked toward the open door. The parish room was quiet now, but anyone might return for a forgotten handbag.

"We'll talk about it at home."

When Graham came to find them, Caroline secured his promise to make two parcel deliveries before Christmas. Maddie said nothing on the way home.

* * *

At home Maddie followed her into the kitchen. Bennett was at the table, picking apart a piece of bread.

"Now?"

"If you mean Grandmother's, not this afternoon."

"Why?"

"We have to think about the family too."

"He is family," Maddie said.

"People will talk. You will have to answer questions at school. All of you."

Bennett stopped pulling at the bread. Caroline saw him look at his sister and was glad, for a moment, that somebody understood her.

"Then I have to telephone him. I said on Thursday I'd bring a record for him to hear. I want to know if he thinks the ending is too long."

Caroline remembered the record now, and how easily Maddie had made the promise.

"You may telephone and tell him you cannot come today."

The girl stared at her, then went to the hall telephone.

From the kitchen Caroline heard Maddie ask for Eli, then begin in a voice almost too bright.

"I'm sorry. I can't come after all."

A pause.

"No, I haven't changed my mind. Mother says I can't."

Maddie came back carrying the record.

"You could have told him we have things to do," Caroline said.

"Do we?"

"There is always something."

"Then give me something."

Caroline looked at the counters, already clean.

"Go and change your clothes."

Maddie left. Bennett took the rest of his bread outside.

Graham came in as Maddie went upstairs.

"What's happened?"

"Maddie wanted to spend the afternoon with your mother."

"With Eli."

"Yes, with Eli."

"And?"

"I said no."

"Why?"

Caroline found the question less satisfactory each time.

"I have asked you for a little time," Caroline said. "You invited him before you spoke to me, and now I must behave as if I have known him all my life."

"Maddie wanted to listen to a record with him at Mother's."

"It starts with that. People will talk."

"They may."

"You make that sound very easy."

"I know. I was afraid of it too. You saw what I did with the camera."

He looked toward the door through which Bennett had gone.

"Hana is dead, Caroline. I'm trying to get to know my son. I've asked him to help with the bicycle on Tuesday. I thought he and Bennett might get on."

"We have children here who need you too."

"I know."

"Bennett doesn't."

"Then I'll talk to Bennett," Graham said.

"And what am I supposed to do?"

"Let Maddie go to Mother's. Speak to Eli when he comes. Give him the chance we'd give anyone else."

"He isn't anyone else."

"No. He's my son."

Caroline looked toward the hall, wondering whether the children had heard.

"We are not going to hide him," Graham said.

Maddie appeared at the door with the record under her arm.

"May I ask Daddy?"

Caroline felt heat rise in her face. "Your father and I are speaking."

Graham looked at their daughter. "Give us a moment."

Maddie withdrew just beyond the doorway.

"She can be home by five," Graham said.

Caroline would still need to name the danger of listening to a record at a grandmother's house.

"By five," she said.

Graham went to tell Maddie. Their daughter did not come in to thank Caroline. A few minutes later the front door closed.

Caroline took up the parcel book again, then put it away. There was nothing wrong with the list.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Tuesday, November 30

Bennett would not let Eli touch the bicycle.

He did not say so. He moved the wheel each time Eli reached to steady it, and when Graham asked for a rag, Bennett snatched one from the shelf before Eli could turn around.

Behind Evelyn's house on Tuesday afternoon, Graham had finally brought the replacement part. Bennett arranged the tools beside the upturned bicycle.

Eli kept his hands in his pockets.

"Do you know what's wrong with it?" Bennett asked.

"Your father said the front wheel wobbles."

"I know that."

"Then we agree."

"A good start," Graham said.

Eli considered going inside to work on his school report. But he had accepted the invitation.

"Where do you want me?" he asked.

Graham pointed to the other end of the bicycle. "There, if you don't mind. It keeps tipping."

Eli crouched and held it steady.

"I said I could do that," Bennett muttered.

"You can help me with the wheel," Graham said.

Bennett read the shop's instructions aloud, raising his voice whenever his father tried the next step too soon. A streak of grease reached Graham's cuff.

"Your sleeve," Eli said.

Graham examined it. "That will be an interesting conversation."

"Mother told you to change," Bennett said.

"I thought this would take ten minutes."

"You always do."

Eli smiled before he could stop himself. Bennett saw it.

"He does," he insisted.

"I believe you."

On Sunday Bennett had rescued Maddie's visit by discovering that the record player was unplugged. He had listened to the first song with profound resignation, then asked her to play it again.

Now Bennett read the next sentence and asked whether they needed to replace the piece his father was holding.

"Come look," Graham said.

The boy crouched beside him. Eli could see the resemblance everyone had been seeking in his own face. Both looked annoyed when they were merely thinking.

He watched too long. Bennett noticed and straightened.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Then why are you staring?"

Graham looked up. "Bennett."

"I was watching," Eli said.

"There's nothing to watch yet."

Eli let go of the bicycle.

"You can do it, then."

Eli stood.

"Do what?" Bennett asked.

"Everything."

"Eli, wait," Graham said.

"I am waiting. I've been waiting to be told where to put my hands."

"It's my bicycle," Bennett said.

"I hadn't forgotten."

Eli heard himself and disliked the sound. He was eighteen; Bennett was thirteen. Knowing that did not make the younger boy easier to bear.

Graham stood. "You don't have to snap at him."

For an instant Eli thought he was the one being corrected. Then he saw that Graham was looking at Bennett.

"I didn't ask him to come," Bennett said.

"I did."

"You ask him to everything."

"That's not true."

"You went to get him Friday. You went to get him Saturday. You came over here Sunday."

"And I brought you with me Sunday," Graham said.

"Because Maddie needed someone to fix the record player."

"You stayed."

"We need you too."

"I know you do," Graham said.

"Then why does everything have to be about him?"

Eli reached for his case.

"It doesn't. I can go."

"I'm not asking you to," Graham said.

"I know who is."

Bennett looked away.

Eli wished immediately that he had not said it. The boy's anger had been easier to face than the embarrassed color spreading across his cheeks.

Graham took a breath and began more quietly.

"Bennett, I was supposed to repair this with you before Thanksgiving. I put it off before I'd even met Eli."

"You were working."

"Yes. I kept making you wait. We'll finish the bicycle, and we'll have some time together on Saturday, just you and me. You can choose what we do."

"You said that about fishing."

"Then we'll go fishing on Saturday."

Eli lowered the case. He had nowhere he wanted to go.

"I'd like you to stay," Graham told him.

Eli set down the case.

"Tell me before you turn it," he said to Bennett.

Bennett bent over the instructions again.

They finished the repair with Bennett reading instructions and Eli steadying the bicycle. Once the wheel turned freely and no longer wobbled, Graham set it upright.

"I'd better try it."

"You're too big."

"I'm aware of that."

He went only a short distance, his knees rising at an angle that made Bennett put a hand over his mouth. Eli tried not to laugh until Graham turned and saw them. Then it was impossible.

"I believe it's repaired," Graham announced, dismounting with more care than he had used getting on.

"You nearly weren't," Bennett said.

He took the handlebars as soon as his father let go.

Inside, Evelyn had made sandwiches. Eli showed her the account of his school visit, then left the notebook open on the table.

"Would you like to go somewhere on Sunday?" Graham asked him. "We could drive along the island."

"Could we walk instead? Somewhere you don't have to point everything out through a window."

"We can do that. I'll telephone on Saturday to settle the time."

Bennett asked if he could have the last sandwich. Evelyn told him it was half a sandwich and he might divide it with Eli. He cut it unequally, examined the pieces, and passed Eli the larger one with the expression of a boy who did not want the matter discussed.

When Graham went to bring the car around, Bennett followed Eli onto the front steps.

"Do you really play baseball badly?"

"Yes."

"Some people say that so you'll think you're going to win."

"I say it so you'll stand farther away."

Bennett laughed. "We could throw a ball next time."

"All right," Eli said.

Bennett turned toward the house. "I'll get your notebook."

Eli stayed on the steps and waited for him.