



Reluctant Press

Sugar & Spice

Maggie Finson



ILLUSTRATIONS BY BRIAN DUKEHART

A 'NEW WOMAN' NOVEL

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SUGAR AND SPICE

By Maggie Finson

Jimmy

Jimmy Taylor grew up without a father. Which might, in part at least, have attributed to his lack of discipline and poor behavior. That unknown father had picked up and simply gone once he had been born, leaving his mother, Evelyn, to both raise and support the boy without either a male presence in the household or relatives nearby to assist her.

The boy grew up largely like a weed, even if a well loved one. Without real direction, spoiled, self centered, and never made to do anything he didn't want to. Through the early years of school, he proved to be intelligent enough for learning anything he chose to pay attention to. Though that was seldom more than needed to get by. Jimmy was a disruptive influence in class, something of a bully among his peers, and showed no respect at all for anyone's feelings other than his own.

That tendency might have grown into something requiring more than simple discipline, if not for an unfortunate physical twist of fate that began showing itself in the boy in his early teens.

Unlike his peers, Jimmy failed to mature physically. At age sixteen, he was still just over four feet tall, skinny as a ten or eleven year old, and without the increased body hair and growing muscle a teenage male expected to have by that age.

A doctor who had examined him when it became clear that he was not maturing at a normal rate had assured his worried mother that some children simply matured later than others, and Jimmy was likely one of those, or one who would never be large physically. Probably a combination of both the man added.

By the time it had become obvious that the problem was more far reaching than a simple late coming of puberty, Evelyn had medical problems of her own that precluded expensive treatments for her son.

To his credit, Jimmy did love his mother very much, and refused the offer she made to get him the treatments that would help him. However, it would be at the expense of his mother not getting the medications she required.

It was all for nothing, as it turned out. The cancer eating away at her insides had been slowed, but not stopped. At sixteen years old, abandoned by a father he had

never known, Jimmy was faced with another abandonment he couldn't prevent. His mother was dying.

“Jimmy,” her voice was a harsh whisper, far from the beautiful voice that had once sung lullabies to him, the rest of her had wasted along with the voice until she appeared to be an old woman at thirty. “I wish things could have been different, that I'd be here to help you grow up, but I won't.”

“You'll be here, Mom,” the boy lied, knowing she would very likely be gone before the month was over. “You'll get better.”

“No, Jimmy,” she insisted, weakly reaching up to brush the tears from her son's cheek with a still smooth hand. “I won't.”

“Your Aunt Margaret will be here pretty soon, to be with me for a while, then to take you back with her once I'm gone.” his mother whispered. “I hope you get along with her, and that she will be able to get you straightened out.”

It was no secret to the boy that no one he had known during his short life was willing to take on the responsibility of either finishing his upbringing, or attempting to tame him. He was go with his aunt, to a new town and all the difficulties that might present, or a government run orphanage for the next two years of his life.

Neither alternative was a pleasant one in his estimation. “I hardly remember Aunt Margaret,” he protested. “And really don't want to move away from here, Mom.”

“She's my sister,” Evelyn answered simply. “So at least you'll be with family after... well later on. And she's agreed to see what can be done about your special problems. You'll have to make the best of things with her. I don't like to think of you in that state home, Jimmy.”

He shuddered at the memory of that dingy place, and some of the other boys who lived there. Jimmy had heard some pretty awful stories regarding what happened to smaller, weaker boys in that establishment and fervently wished to avoid the experience of discovering whether or not those were actually true.

“I guess I'll have to, won't I?” he needlessly agreed with his mother. “But it's going to be hard not being here.”

“You won't be leaving me,” she pointed out gently. “I won't be here to miss you any more.”

“I know that,” Jimmy brusquely replied, then reached to take her hand in his own still smaller one. “It doesn't make things any easier, though.”

Actually, his concern, and gentleness towards the very ill, and dying woman was more out of character than she realized for the boy. He had long nurtured a resentment against the father he had never known, and so against most men. That resentment carried on to authority figures of any kind.

Women and girls, from experience with his mother, he considered weak, and incapable of claiming the right to either judge or change his behavior. If not for his small, undeveloped stature, he might have already been in another state run institution. One for juvenile delinquents with his nearly complete lack of respect for anything or anyone.

As it was, he had been on the fringes of activities that would have landed him in a great deal of trouble had he been caught. The local gangs really had little call for a child sized member, only making use of him during a few break-ins where his small size enabled him to gain entry to places the larger boys couldn't.

Even without real morals, though, Jimmy was bright enough to know how he could expect to fare in life on the streets. Not well at all, given his size, lack of physical development, and a temperament that still got him into more trouble than he was able to manage at times. That temper, and an intemperate mouth, had caused some trouble recently, so maybe getting out of town wasn't such a terrible idea after all, he thought.

"Bye, Mom," he leaned forward to kiss the only person he had ever loved in his life. "I'll be back tonight to visit again."

"I worry about you being out of school so much," she told him. "You ought to hold your visits to the evenings instead of coming every morning and afternoon, even if I enjoy them."

Jimmy didn't tell her that he'd been kicked out of school again. This time for the entire semester, because of failing grades and lack of attendance. Not that it mattered all that much to him. High school was an ordeal he preferred not to think about at all, with the way most of the other students either ignored or taunted him.

"Don't worry about that, Mom," he reassured. "I have their permission not to be there right now."

On his way out of the hospital, he held back the tears of grief and rage he always felt after seeing what was left of his mother. The comfort offered by hospital staff, though well meaning, was usually the condescending sort given to a much younger child, and he hated that most of all. Along with the resentment that so many people were healthy, while his mother was dying and he might never grow up physically.

Jimmy Taylor had a lot of things to resent, in his opinion. And he could care less what anyone else thought of his behavior beyond the street people and gangs he was a peripheral hanger on to. Even that was an iffy proposition these days, with some of the members of one gang wanting to "teach him to watch his mouth". He only hoped they weren't angry enough to be lying in wait for him somewhere, though he was innocent of the charges some had leveled at him.

No matter what, Jimmy Taylor was no snitch. Whoever had talked to the police about a certain burglary had gotten away with it because members of The Runners were convinced that he was the guilty party. He either had to convince them they were wrong, or stay off the streets for a while.

That worry wasn't uppermost in his mind at the moment, though. His mother was getting weaker every time he visited her, and the sister she still thought so much of in spite of no help coming from that quarter in her difficulties, was due to arrive that afternoon.

He only knew the briefest of basics about the woman. Margaret was two years older than his mother, widowed the past year, with two daughters of her own and a small business she ran out of the lower floor of her home in a small town somewhere

on the east coast. Given the distance from where he presently lived in the Midwest, he had seen her only twice, and then when he had been much younger.

Her distaste for a rowdy, undisciplined nephew had been quite clear even then, and he wondered why she would have agreed to take him in at all now. Possibly she hoped the years between their last meeting had changed him. A hope that was bound to be disappointed when she met him, and heard about his current and past activities. Which was bound to happen.

The social worker trying to handle his case, Mrs. Haggins, would be sure to fill his aunt in on all that. Probably just to get even with him. That woman actually thought he deserved worse than the group home for orphans, and would do her best to discourage his aunt from taking the youth in, he suspected.

Well, he'd just make the effort to be the most polite, well behaved young fellow he could manage until he was safely away from this town. Hopefully he could fool his aunt long enough for that, then could check out the opportunities in her home town, once there. Maybe he'd even stay, if things were right. If not, he thought he was prepared for making it on his own.

That would be something to consider later. At the time, he had to deal with his mother's impending death, and more than a few pretty nasty gang members wanting to find, and punish him for a thing, ironically, after all he had been responsible for, that he hadn't done.

* * * *

The phone rang right after he returned to the shabby apartment that was all he and his mother could afford, even with welfare and other subsidies. Jimmy had managed to earn enough through various means, not all of them legal, to keep the bills paid that the government didn't handle, and feed himself since his mother's condition had worsened to the point where she was unable to work, then was confined to the hospital over the past month.

"Hey, Jimmy," The voice on the other end of the phone was familiar, if unwelcome.

"Hardy," he replied uneasily. "What do you want?"

"Just a talk, Jimmy," the gang member, one of the leaders, an older boy who had at least been marginally friendly in the past, assured. "Some of the guys are wondering why you haven't been around lately. Maybe feeling a little guilty over something?"

"My Mom's in the hospital again," Jimmy bluntly told the other, braver over the telephone than he might have been in person with the young tough. "I've been with her a lot lately is all."

"Not hiding from us, are you?" Hardy questioned pointedly. "The Fixer still claims that you queered that deal with the Henderson warehouse for us."

The Fixer, was another gang member who set up many of the burglaries that financed some of the other gang activities. He also was heavily into the drug trade,

which Jimmy had staunchly refused to involve himself in. Mostly because it was too dangerous, no matter how lucrative. Jimmy always had possessed a keen appreciation for self preservation.

“He's still pissed at me about not selling for him, Hardy,” Jimmy pointed out. “And I didn't rat out anybody, I know better than that.”

“Yeah, I think so too, Jimmy,” Hardy acknowledged, to the younger boy's relief. “But a lot of other people think you did. Maybe you ought to think about leaving town, you know? Just for your own good, if you know what I mean?”

“I can't just yet,” Jimmy responded unhappily. “My Mom's dying. I can't leave her now.”

“You might just be joining her, boy,” Hardy's voice grew harsh. “There's more than a few people wanting to question you a lot harder than I have.”

“I didn't do anything wrong, Hardy,” Jimmy insisted again. “Please tell them that, and that I'll come talk to anyone except The Fixer once things settle down with my Mom and stuff. Okay?”

“Make sure,” the other demanded. “I can't hold off the hunt for long, Jimmy. I like you, but not enough to risk my own hide for something like this. Understand?”

“I got it,” Jimmy tiredly replied. Not mentioning the impending visit of his aunt, and the move to another locale that would involve for him. It would do no good to admit that he was leaving, that admission would only serve to reinforce the perception that he was running away because of what The Fixer said he had done.

“See that you do, Jimmy,” Hardy ordered, then added almost as an afterthought, “Sorry about your Mom, too. I heard about it yesterday.”

“I will,” Jimmy sighed into the receiver, “And thanks.”

“Don't thank me yet,” Hardy finished. “You just take care of business, both ways, hear me?”

“Okay, Bye, I got to go now.” Jimmy replaced the receiver in its cradle, wondering if living was really worth the effort any longer, or if the other gang members would wait long enough for him to safely get away.

Aunt Margaret

Margaret Shane arrived without much in the way of fuss, simply driving up in a rental car, and knocking on the front door of the rent controlled apartment her sister had lived in with her nephew. She still had doubts about taking him in no matter how obligated to family she felt.

She was beautiful as Jimmy remembered his mother being at one time, with shining black hair framing a nearly perfect oval face, and a trim figure that seemed to be something natural rather than carefully maintained as a lot of women seemed to do.

Jimmy greeted her hesitantly at the front door, then endured the motherly hug she gave him before giving the apartment a distasteful looking over. The youth hadn't given much time to cleaning since his mother had gone into the hospital, and had only done what was absolutely necessary even when she had lived in the place with him.

"I haven't gotten around to straightening the place up lately," he apologetically waved at the mess in the living room and kitchen.

"Well," Margaret sighed, "I'll help you get the place cleaned up, we can't leave it like this when you come back to Virginia with me, can we?"

"I guess not," he admitted, not really caring one way or the other, but feeling that agreeing with the woman was the wisest course at the time. There was no need to begin things with an argument, especially when she would likely be speaking to his social worker later on that day, or the next at the latest.

"I know not," she corrected with a wide smile for him. "It won't take us long to get the place as clean as it can be gotten, anyway, I'm sure."

"Okay," he sighed himself, not happy with the prospect of being included in a female cleaning frenzy, but careful not to show that too much, while changing the subject. "Do you need help with luggage, or anything?"

"No, but thank you for asking," Margaret responded, still giving the interior of the apartment an examination that did not bode well for the boy's free time in the near future. "You and I aren't going to be staying here."

"We're not?" He questioned in surprise.

"I have reservations at a local hotel, close to the hospital, and convenient to the people I'll have to speak to regarding you over the next few days. We'll get this place cleaned up enough to be presentable, get your things packed, and clear out within a few days, I think." she informed him firmly, clearly expecting no protest from him about the way she was taking over at the start of their relationship.

"But this is where everyone knows where to find me," he protested in spite of her expectations, then trailed off at the nearly severe look she returned, "The hospital, and everybody, I mean."

"I'll see that the appropriate authorities are notified," Margaret crisply returned. "But do think a change of scene right away would be better for you. I hadn't planned on staying here, anyway, and will not let you do so alone any longer. There's no telling what kind of trouble you might run into in this neighborhood with people knowing that you're here by yourself."

"Whatever," he gave up, recalling that Margaret was a person used to having things her way, and not really wanting to cause trouble with her at that early stage with everything else that was presenting him with problems. Like why he wasn't in class on a school day, which she hadn't brought up, or the very real danger of gang actions against him in the near future.

"Get some of your things together, then," she urged, "and let's get going. We have a lot to do over the next few days, and I would like to visit your mother this afternoon, too."

After packing the best of his threadbare clothing in a battered suitcase, and giving a longing look at some of the things he had to leave behind, Jimmy accompanied his aunt to the car.

Meetings

After being installed in a room adjoining his aunt's in the downtown hotel she had chosen, Jimmy reluctantly accompanied her to visit his social worker. An appointment she had evidently made even before leaving her home.

Mrs. Haggins peered down her nose in disapproval at Jimmy, fidgeting in a chair beside his aunt who had just listened to the catalogue of his sins, so to speak, provided in a crisp, well prepared monologue.

Margaret sighed, then gave a small chuckle. "Well, I see that another kind of environment would be very good for Jimmy. One that I'll be able to provide for him."

"He's a trouble maker, Mrs. Shane," Haggins insisted, "And I severely doubt that you will be able to change that."

"Oh, Jimmy will have far too many things to stay occupied with he won't have time for getting himself into the kinds of trouble he has around here," Margaret assured the other woman. "I have a much firmer hand than his mother ever did, and really do believe that a change in his surroundings will have a beneficial effect on him."

Still doubtful, but beginning to see the steel beneath his aunt's velvet exterior, Mrs. Haggins allowed a pinched smile to spread across her face. "Well, the state has no objections to your trying, and does think you will be able to provide a suitable environment for the boy, so I'll simply wish you luck with him."

Jimmy grimaced, not caring for being discussed as if he wasn't present, but having grown partially used to it after countless visits with well meaning, but detached social services people over the past few years.

"If you'll just sign these forms," Mrs. Haggins offered a sheaf of papers to his aunt. "The state will release his records, and pass responsibility for him to you."

It was quite clear that she, for one, would be very happy at having him off her hands as Margaret signed the numerous forms required. Once those had been passed back, and the copies given to Margaret, the social worker grinned cheerfully at him. "That's it then. You and I won't be seeing each other again."

"I'll miss you too," Jimmy offered with a grin of his own.

"That will be quite enough of that," his aunt coolly informed him. "Say a polite good-bye, and let's be getting along with other things, Jimmy."

"Good-bye, then," he grudgingly told the social worker. "And thanks for doing what you have for me."

That drew a look of surprise out of the woman who had actually seemed to be trying to make life more miserable for him than it already was. She glanced at Margaret with a less dubious smile. "You're welcome, Jimmy."

"Maybe you will be able to do something positive with him," she admitted to his aunt. "I haven't gotten a civil word out of him since I was first given his case."

"That will change," Margaret promised, with a dark look at him that changed into an almost radiant smile. "With a firm hand applied by someone who cares for him, I think Jimmy is going to get along fine with me and his cousins."

He wasn't sure he liked the sound of that much, especially when combined with the unyielding look of determination on her face after the smile faded. But as things stood, there wasn't much he was able to do about it. His future was now tied to this soft looking, but internally hard young woman, until he was able to get free of her and the plans she had for him.

That would have to wait, though, until he was safely clear of his present circumstances and had the chance to gauge what he would, and wouldn't, be able to get away with regarding her.

* * * *

Their visit with his mother was the worst part yet. Evelyn had faded noticeably since he had been there that morning, and the doctor attending her had whispered to Margaret while wearing a solemn, quiet expression that spoke as eloquently as any words to the boy. His mother was going, and soon.

"Take care of him," she pleaded with her healthy sister. "My Jimmy isn't bad, not really, I just haven't been able to be firm enough with him."

"I know," the other woman gently told her sister. "I'll see to giving him the things he needs."

"Thank you, Margaret," giving a weak smile, his mother turned her head to stare at Jimmy, "And you do your best not to embarrass me with your aunt, okay?"

"Okay, Mom," he choked out the promise, then turned away to hide the tears. With Jimmy hanging on to her hand, she passed quietly into what her son hoped would be a far better place half an hour later.

* * * *

The funeral was an ordeal he got through with a numb feeling that everyone offering their condolences was actually glad that things were finished and they would be soon be seeing the last of him.

Packing her things, for whatever good it did, was an activity he found difficult, even with Margaret around to help. As promised, he found himself cleaning the small, shabby apartment under her supervision, but couldn't find the strength of will to protest at the time.

His feelings were very mixed, when all had been done, and the few boxes containing his possessions were stacked for the shippers to claim, while his mother's things were sent to organizations that would see them distributed to people who could use them. His aunt had separated a few keepsakes from the rest, boxing them separately, and including them among the boxes of his own things for shipping to her own, and his, home on the east coast.

* * * *

“Hey, Jimmy,” Several young people were waiting for him outside the apartment once he had finished with the packing. He recognized them all with a sinking feeling, especially the tall, thick form of Allen, The Fixer. “Sorry about your Mama.”

“Sure, thanks,” Jimmy tried edging away from the group, but they had formed up in a rough circle around him.

“Now you got some things to talk about with us, don'cha?” The large teen asked.

“I didn't do anything, Fixer,” he responded fearfully. “And you know I didn't.”

“That's somethin' you're gonna have to prove,” the group's spokesman smiled nastily. “Or pay for.”

They were just about to pull him away, to whatever rough justice had been planned, when one of the rare patrol cars that cruised the neighborhood pulled to a stop at the curb for the occupants to get a better view of what was going on.

“Lucked out this time, runt,” The Fixer told him as the group pulled away wearing false smiles. “But that's okay, we'll see you another time, won't we?”

Both police officers in the cruiser eyed the rapidly dispersing group, then Jimmy, but decided not to intervene in something that wasn't clearly trouble happening. Jimmy gratefully pulled the door shut behind him with a ragged sigh as his aunt regarded him, the patrol car, and receding gang members with a worried, then severe expression on her lovely face.

“What was that all about?” she asked.

“Just some friends saying good-bye,” the boy responded, finally able to draw in a breath without panting in fear.

“No it wasn't,” Margaret coldly argued. “You're in more trouble than I thought, aren't you?”

“It's nothing,” he tried assuring her, still not able to convince himself of the narrow escape he had just been given by fate.

“I know better than that, Jimmy,” his aunt sternly disagreed, while watching the street through the window for any sign of the gang members returning. “I haven't always lived in a small town. Those boys wanted to take you with them, and would have if the police hadn't stopped here when they did.”

“Okay, they think I ratted them out,” Jimmy gave up trying to convince her otherwise. “But I didn't.”

“You should have,” she primly told him. “Because they aren't going to let you get away easily, are they?”

“No,” he admitted.

“Is it drugs?”

“No, I never dealt that in kind of thing,” he honestly told her. “And the big one you saw doesn't like that either. I think he set me up, but I can't prove anything.”

“So they'll be watching for you, won't they?” she questioned without letting up on her disapproval. “They'll try to get to you again.”

“I suppose so,” he admitted uncomfortably.

“Which means it's a good thing that everything here has been taken care of, doesn't it?” Margaret gave him a musing look that he found extremely uncomfortable. “Or will they be watching the airport, too?”

“They might know I'm leaving town,” he agreed, “And would likely watch places like that, but not in any strength.”

“What will they do once they get their hands on you?” pulling the drapes closed after making sure the gang members were really gone, and that the police presence she had called for earlier was still in evidence, Margaret turned to give him an expectant look.

“It won't be anything good,” he honestly told her. “You should probably just get out and leave me to them.”

“No,” shaking her head, his aunt dismissed that. “Once you're out of town, would they follow you?”

“I doubt it,” he shrugged. “I was already told that getting out of town would be a good thing to do, but guess the time limit on that choice has run out.”

“I can't just leave you to them,” she thoughtfully ran her eyes over his small form, “I promised your mother to take care of you.”

“It'll just make trouble for you, Aunt Margaret,” he protested, glad in a way that things had been taken out of either of their hands.

“Is there any one of them watching now, do you think?”

“With the cops outside the door?” he asked derisively. “I don't think so. They can find me without spying now, whenever they like.”

“Not if you're disguised,” Margaret continued staring at him with that unsettling, almost cheerful expression of anticipation she had worn for the past few minutes.

“What does that mean?” He asked unhappily.

“You aren't going to like it much,” she promised. “Just consider it a small lesson in what could happen to you if this kind of thing should be repeated when we get home, and go along with whatever I tell you to do, okay?”

“You're serious,” he nervously glanced out the window, wondering if it wouldn't be better to let the gang have him. “About sneaking me out of town, aren't you?”

“Yes,” she nodded decisively. “A promise is a promise, and you're family whether I like the way you've turned out so far or not. Will you agree to do everything I need you to until we get you safely away?”

“I guess so,” Jimmy agreed without much enthusiasm.

“I want a better answer than that,” she admonished. “If you expect me to take you in, and get you out of this mess, you'll have to agree to everything now.”

“Right now?” he questioned, “Without knowing anything about what you're planning?”

“Right now,” Margaret commanded. “Or else you just go right on out there and find your friends.”

“Okay, okay,” he agreed, sure that she would follow up on the threat to leave him to the gang's justice in spite of promises to the contrary to his mother.

“Then get yourself in here,” she nodded, opening a carton containing a few items of clothing. “We'll deliver you to the hotel then decide what to do once we're there.”

Jimmy did as she told him, without complaining even when the flaps of the cardboard carton folded over him and he heard the distinct sounds of tape being fastened over the top to keep it closed.