

This is in celebration of the third anniversary of a day that's very special to me—the day I became a Jix author! Thanks to everyone in this community who has made me feel like I was a member of the Bob-Whites themselves! My special thanks and gratitude go to Cathy, whom I can never thank enough for allowing me to call Jix "home." Thanks also to my fellow Bob-White Susan, who continues to make my stories better than they ever could be on their own—and stays my friend even when I am a grump! Actually, if we're going to go *there*, Mary, Sue, and Kate also deserve kudos for staying my friend even when I am a whiny grump! *g*

I absolutely loved Sue's *The Last Chance*, so I am paying homage to that great story by "borrowing" her public defender. She said I could! And, one tiny note that's really insignificant, but will bother me if I don't mention it: Susan is a fabulous editor, and she—of course—noticed that "hoofs" should really be "hooves" and that "home room" and "switch blade" should each be one word. It bothered me, too, but, as I am going by the original cellophane version of *The Black Jacket Mystery*, I was true to its spelling of these words. Which reminds me, a portion of this story is directly quoted from the 1961 cellophane edition of *The Black Jacket Mystery*. Without permission, natch. Also, Julie Campbell originally named the town of the series "Sleepyside-on-Hudson" (it was changed in the late-seventies oval edition), so that's what I've called it, too.

Oh, and a "screw" is prison slang for "guard."

West Side Story by Dana

Friday, February 5

Dan Mangan celebrated his fifteenth birthday in a small grey cell in what was officially known as the Youth House for Boys. To Dan and his friends, it was "juvey." Whatever you called it, it certainly wasn't where Dan wanted to spend his birthday—or any other day, for that matter.

The sullen, dark-haired gang member sat on the thin, sagging mattress of his cot and stared at the cinder block wall. Not for the first time, he cursed his lot in life, wondering why he seemed to be constantly hammered down, dealing with an endless series of tragedies, hardships, and bitter disappointments. All he had in the world now were Luke and The Cowhands.

Thinking of his friends, the boy conveniently blocked out the unwelcome thought that *they* were the ones who had landed him in juvey. Such thoughts would get him nowhere. Instead, he reminded himself that The Cowhands had taken him in when he had had no one else to turn to.

Dan's thoughts inevitably turned to his family. *That's* former *family*, the newly turned fifteen-year-old thought bitterly. Dan leaned back against the hard wall and closed his eyes, shutting out his dismal surroundings, and was transported back in time, thinking of all that had happened in his short life.

Danny's family had never had a lot of money, but there had always been plenty of love. Both his parents had come from humble beginnings, his father being raised in the largely Irish Hell's Kitchen on the west side of Manhattan and his mother an orphan. Dan's father had liked to tell over and over the story of how he and Dan's mother had met. Timothy Mangan had been working in a factory near his parents' tenement when he met the beautiful, young Eileen Regan, with fiery red hair and a spirit to match. She had been a headstrong eighteen-year-old, waitressing at a diner, trying to make ends meet.

Dan recalled his earliest memories, living with his paternal grandparents and his mom in a tenement in Hell's Kitchen, while his dad fought the Nazis in Europe. He had delighted staying at home with his Nanny and Grandpop, who watched him while his mom worked at the factory

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his dad had abandoned after the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor. His dad's triumphant return from France when Dan was five years old was an event Dan would never forget.

Dan's happy memories of his parents clinging together on the pier, surrounded by thousands of soldiers and sailors happily reunited with their families, were overshadowed by the memories of what had happened soon after his dad's return. Dan experienced his first loss when his Nanny died a month after her son returned from Europe. Grandpop had followed two months after that.

Despite this bit of sadness, Dan had been generally happy after his father came home from the war. Eileen Mangan was able to quit her job at the factory to be home when Danny returned from school. Timothy had saved as much as he could from his Army wages and was able to move his beloved family from the Hell's Kitchen tenement to a small house on East 40th Street in Brooklyn. He returned to his old job in the factory and also played guitar at a jazz club in Greenwich Village to support his family. But no matter what, he was always at his son's Little League games, and both Eileen and Tim delighted taking their son to Rockefeller Center to ice skate. The small Mangan family lived a comfortable and happy, if meager, existence.

Until the Korean War beckoned Timothy Mangan. Dan remembered the horrible fights that had preceded his dad leaving for a far away country to fight a war for a second time. He recalled the panic in his mother's voice as she begged him not to go and the stoic bravery in his dad's voice as he told her why he *had* to go.

Dan tried to fight the memories of his dad promising to return from Korea and then breaking that promise. He tried to block out his recollection of the sounds of his mother's screams when she had received the cold telegram telling her that the man that she loved was no more.

Soon after that horrible time, Dan found himself back in a Hell's Kitchen tenement, but this time Nanny and Grandpop weren't there, there was no hope that his dad was ever coming home, and his mother was running herself ragged, working two jobs to support herself and her son.

That was when he had met Luke. Luke had come into his life at a time when he needed someone to look up to. Luke didn't have a father, either, and Dan finally felt as though he had connected to someone. Luke *understood* Dan.

But no matter how much Dan tried to forget his circumstances by running around with Luke, it became impossible to ignore the fact that his mother was sick. She had no appetite and had lost a great deal of weight. When she began to experience excruciating abdominal pain, Dan insisted that she go to the doctor. As terrified as he was that he would lose yet another important person in his life—wanting to run away and hide from what the doctor might tell them—he knew that his mother needed help. If there was a chance that the doctor could heal her, he wanted his mom to have that chance.

When the doctor informed them that Eileen had cancer of the liver, and probably no more than six months to live, anger and loss swept over Dan like a tidal wave. Now, sitting in his cell, remembering his mother's losing fight with cancer, Dan felt those feelings wash over him all over again. Rage and anguish gripped him as he thought of the loss of his grandparents, his father, and his mother. He was furious with whatever fate had consigned him to a life on the streets, with no one to call family except The Cowhands.

A uniformed officer entered the cell area, jingling a set of keys. That sound meant freedom. Dan turned toward the stocky guard, carefully masking the interest he felt. No reason to let a copper know what he was thinking.

The guard inserted a key into the lock of Dan's cell. "All right, Mangan, you've been assigned a public defender, and he's waiting to see you." The door swung open, but Dan did not move, staring sullenly at the man in front of him.

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“C’mon, c’mon, kid. I ain’t got all day,” the guard said impatiently. With a great show of nonchalance, Dan slowly stood and left his cell for the first time in eighteen hours. He carefully followed the stocky screw down a series of halls, depressing not only because of their lifeless shade of dirty grey, but also because the seedy-looking, toughened delinquents in their cells reminded Dan of caged animals at the zoo. It wasn’t a pleasant thought. Ignoring the catcalls of the other prisoners in lock-up, Dan let the guard lead him into a small, utilitarian room where a young man in a cheap suit sat at a table, studying a series of papers.

Dan quickly surveyed the room. It was a small square, not much bigger than his cell, with darkly paneled walls and no windows. A beaten table sat in the center of the room, with two metal folding chairs on one side and a third on the side opposite.

Not much for decoration, are they? Dan thought.

“Mr. Moran?” the guard said. “Here’s your case, Dan Mangan.” With that, he quickly exited the room, locking the door behind him.

Dan eyed the lawyer as the man stood and offered his hand.

“Hi, Dan. I’m Douglas Moran, and I’ve been assigned to your case.”

Dan refused the proffered hand and slowly and deliberately took a seat across from his new attorney. Douglas Moran casually dropped his hand and sat back down. As the lawyer sifted through the pile of papers in front of him, Dan studied him. *The guy looks barely out of law school!* was his first thought. Moran looked to be no more than twenty-five, his dark brown hair cropped very close, and his brown eyes very serious as he concentrated on the work before him. He was average-looking and, despite himself, Dan found himself trusting the guy.

“Dan, I’ve got some news that is probably going to come as a shock to you,” the lawyer began, his voice a smooth tenor. “I don’t know if you’re aware of this, but your mother consulted an attorney before her death. The right to an attorney was one of the few remaining benefits she was able to claim as an Army widow, and she visited an Army attorney at a nearby base. She asked him to draw up a will with details of your care after she was gone.”

At the public defender’s words, Dan again felt a sharp sense of loss and stinging pain, but he quickly forced himself to bury it and concentrate on what Moran was saying.

“Apparently, from what she explained to this attorney, there was a family member that she wanted to take care of you.”

“But we had no family left!” Dan blurted out, forgetting the sullen and cool countenance he worked so hard to project.

“Well, that’s not entirely true. Apparently, your mother had a brother and—”

“That’s a *lie!*” Dan shouted savagely as he jumped from his chair. “My mom and I were alone in the world! She didn’t have a brother, and I won’t have you saying so!”

“Dan.” Moran remained calm. “I understand that this is a shock to you, but your mother told the Army attorney that she and her brother had been separated when she was young. When she was able to, she had returned to the orphanage where they both had been and had learned that he had run away. She never had the resources to track him down, but once she found out she was terminally ill, she approached the lawyer, seeking advice on how to find her brother.”

Dan stared at the lawyer, hatred emanating from his black eyes. “That is *not* true. If that were true, she would have told me about him. You’re lying, or this damn Army guy is lying.”

Dan’s attorney remained calm as he looked up at the young boy. He felt immensely sorry for the boy in front of him, but he knew better than to show that. “Your mother explained to her

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attorney that she had felt like a failure for not being able to provide sooner for her brother, and then guilt-stricken when she found out that he had run away from the orphanage. She bottled it up inside and didn't talk about him. But, when faced with her illness, she decided that she needed to find him. She was going to tell you when she had found him, but, unfortunately, fate didn't give her that time. Upon her death, the Army attorney tried to find you to execute her will, but you had already disappeared."

Dan stared into the serious, brown eyes of Douglas Moran and saw a truthful earnestness there. He slowly sank back into the cheap metal chair and tried to absorb what he had just learned. His mother had a brother. His mother had lied to him. His mother hadn't trusted him enough with the truth.

As the shock wore off, a million questions raced through his mind.

"What's his name?" he finally managed to say.

"William Regan."

"Have you found him?"

"We're working on it, and we hope to locate him soon." Mr. Moran stated, keeping his voice positive.

"And if you do?" Dan asked, cursing the curiosity he felt burgeoning within him. He was determined to stay as cool as possible in front of this suit.

"Given your situation, the fact that your crime was minor, and you're a first-time offender, it's possible that—if your uncle is willing—he could be assigned your guardian, and you would just have to serve some community service and probation."

"No juvey?"

Doug Moran allowed himself a smile. "No juvey," he agreed.

"And if we don't find him?"

"Well, the facts don't change. You're a first-time offender, and your crime was a misdemeanor and not a felony. But, with no guardian, the state must treat you as a ward of the court. That generally means foster care or a youth asylum. Since you've managed to get in some trouble, a juvenile detention center would probably be seen as a suitable youth asylum."

Dan digested that fact. Juvey or some unknown uncle. Which was worse?

"Dan, I know this is hard, but this is what your mother wanted. She really believed that perhaps you could have a chance at a decent life if she could find her brother." He paused and allowed that thought to sink in. "Do you have any other questions?" Mr. Moran asked kindly, knowing his client needed time to absorb this.

Dan shook his head distractedly.

The attorney began gathering his things and said, "In that case, I will get right on following the leads we have on your uncle. I'll be in touch." He handed Dan a small, white business card. "If you need anything, that's my number."

Dan took the card and grunted a good-bye, more out of distractedness than rudeness.

A little later, back in his cell, Dan lay on his bunk and stared at the ceiling. He was fifteen years old, and he was just now finding out about some mysterious uncle? Why hadn't his mother told him? He wasn't sure that he could buy the story that she was guilt-stricken and so never shared this monumental news with him. Had his father known?

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Dan closed his eyes. He guessed that it didn't matter now. All that mattered was that he apparently had an uncle, and maybe his future looked better than a small grey cell in a juvenile detention center.

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Friday, February 12

It was exactly one week later that Mr. Moran visited Dan at the Youth House for Boys. In the week that the gang member had been there, he had learned to hate the color grey. Although it was nice to have a warm place to sleep and be secure in the knowledge of where his next meal was coming from, Dan longed for his freedom.

At this point, even a visit from his lawyer was a welcome relief from the monotony that he faced day in and day out. As the teenager entered the stark visiting room, he tried to read Moran's face for any signs of what the lawyer was going to be springing on him today, but Douglas Moran's youthful face remained neutral.

"Good afternoon, Dan," he said pleasantly after Dan took a seat in the metal chair across from him. Dan acknowledged the greeting with a simple nod of his head.

"I have good news. We have located your uncle, and he is willing to assume custody of you."

For a moment, the room swirled as Dan took this new information in. In all reality, he had never expected them to find his uncle or—if by some miracle they did—that his uncle would be willing to take in a troublemaker he had never even met. For all Dan knew, this William Regan resented his sister for deserting him all of those years ago. Dan tried to identify the new and intimidating emotions that flooded over him, but he had been numb for so long that it was too overwhelming. Instead, he did his best to cram them deep inside and concentrate on what the man sitting across from him was saying.

"He lives in a village not far north of here called Sleepyside-on-Hudson. He has a fondness for horses and is a groom for one of the prominent families that live outside of town. He lives above the garage in small apartment on the estate, close to the stables. The family he works for is..." Douglas Moran consulted his notes briefly. "...a family named Wheeler."

Dan stared in disbelief. Some uncle he had never even heard of until last week was suddenly going to assume responsibility for him, and he was going to go from being homeless to living on an *estate*? He wondered when he would be waking up from this peculiar dream he was having.

A sudden thought struck him, and he wondered how the fancy rich people would react to having a juvenile delinquent gang member from Hell's Kitchen living on their estate. He sniggered at the thought.

"Now, apparently the garage apartment isn't suitable for raising a teenager, so your uncle has made other arrangements, and Judge Armen has agreed to them. This estate has quite a considerable sized game preserve, as well as a gamekeeper. The gamekeeper has his own cabin in the middle of the preserve. He would love to have you stay with him." Moran paused and stared deeply into the eyes of his young client.

Dan's eyes narrowed. So, this "uncle" of his was already pawning him off on some unsuspecting gamekeeper! His uncle was embarrassed of his newfound relation and had to keep up appearances for his hoity-toity, rich boss, so he was sticking him in some remote cabin in the middle of the woods with another employee of the rich guy. So much for Dan Mangan catching a break. So much for finding a family member to erase the bitterness Dan felt to the core. No, he was being shuttled off to the middle of the woods where he would be out of sight, out of mind. Well, he wasn't going to let that happen!

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“And if I refuse?” he asked, his voice dangerous.

“Well, Dan, then frankly you’ll be stuck here at the Youth House until you’re eighteen. Depending on the sentence the judge gives you, anywhere from six months to two years of that time would be spent here in lock-up, serving your time.”

“What are the chances I would get six month’s lock-up?” Dan asked. He could handle six months of this. And then he would run away again once he got his “freedom” back, such as it was.

Moran knew what he was thinking, and he knew that Judge Armen was a pretty sharp customer, too, and would see through Dan’s plan. “Well, considering the fact that you have been presented a more attractive option, and you would be opting for remaining in juvey, I am afraid that would look as though you were hoping for a si- month sentence so you could run away as soon as you had served your time. You’re a flight risk, and Judge Armen is no fool. I’m afraid he would probably give you the full two-year sentence.”

Dan swore inside. Was he *that* transparent? He decided to play devil’s advocate.

“I’m not a flight risk in some hick village upstate?” his voice dripped with all of the scorn that he felt.

“To be frank, you won’t have any money to travel anywhere where you’ll be able to get lost, like the city, and none of your gang buddies will be around to help you out.” Moran’s brown eyes bore into Dan’s black ones. “Dan,” he said, not unkindly, “you’re being given a second chance. You have a family member who is willing to take you in and get to know you. You’re going to be living in modest, but comfortable, circumstances, and you’ll have more freedom there than you would here. Embrace it.”

Not a chance! Dan thought. *A family member willing to get to know me, my eye! That’s a load of bull! My uncle has already decided to throw me out into the woods. He can’t even stand to live with me, let alone get to know me.*

His face was impassive as he looked at his attorney, but his thoughts were churning. He was certain he had time to somehow get word to Luke that he was going to be staying at the Wheeler estate in Sleepyside. It would be child’s play for Luke to find a rich guy’s estate in some hick village. Luke would find him, and Dan would be free. Heck, he might even be able to swipe some stuff from the rich guy, and this sentence to Hicksville might even be a profitable one.

“Fine. I’ll do it,” he said, his black eyes revealing nothing of his thoughts, though he could tell by the way that Moran was looking at him that he knew there was more going on Dan’s head than met the eye. For his part, the young public defender only hoped that the young boy had heard some of what he said.

“Dan, how many New York City gang members get a second chance like the one you’re being offered? Not many, I can tell you that.”

Dan watched as the man ran an agitated hand through his hair, the only emotion Dan had really seen the public defender express.

The lawyer continued, “Look, I know a lot of my clients won’t be rehabilitated because they know no other way. But I can tell you’re different.”

Dan’s eyes narrowed at that. “You don’t know me at all. How can you even say that?”

“You want the truth? Your eyes aren’t dead, like I see in other kids.”

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Dan exhaled at that. He knew exactly what Douglas Moran meant. He had seen it himself. He thought a minute and then said, "Fine. I'll give it a shot. A real shot."

"Good," the public defender said and then straightened some papers. "Your uncle will be here tomorrow morning to pick you up. I'll have all of the paperwork ready for him to sign, and you should be in your new home by tomorrow afternoon. Any questions?"

Dan was dismayed to hear that he was leaving juvey so soon. How would he get word to Luke? He was willing to give Sleepyside a shot but not without letting his gang know where he was headed. He did his best to keep his cool, nonchalant exterior and shook his head. "No questions."

"Do you need anything, Dan?"

"Nothing you can give me," Dan said shortly and then immediately regretted the words. Not only did they reveal too much about his feelings, but his attorney actually was a decent guy as far as he could tell. "Maybe my uncle can," he mumbled in appeasement, feeling foolish.

Moran seemed to understand and simply nodded. "Do you still have my card?" At Dan's nod, he stood. "Then I will see you tomorrow morning. I know this is going to be pretty stressful, so if there's anything I can do..." his voice trailed off. He knew anything he had to offer would be grossly inadequate. This poor kid was an orphan about to meet a relative he had never even heard of a week ago.

He had nothing left to offer but his hand, and this time, Dan accepted it.

"See you, Dan," the young lawyer said and turned to walk out the door.

The guard immediately reappeared and led Dan back to his cell, which the teenager was surprised to find was not empty. He had seen several cells that housed two occupants, but he had been lucky enough not to be assigned a cellmate in his week-long stay. Then he realized he recognized the skinny kid in the cell, and his spirits soared. It was Melvin "Stinky" Stinklebaum, a fringe member of his gang. And now his problem was solved: Stinky would get word to Luke where he was heading.

Stinky and Dan gave no sign of recognition as the guard used his key to open the cell. "Looks like you've got yourself a roomie, Mangan. Play nice," he sneered gleefully as he pushed Dan, quite unnecessarily, into the cell. Dan refused to take the bait and simply kept his back turned on the stout guard until he heard his footsteps disappear down the corridor.

"Whaddya doin' here, Stinky?" he asked as soon as the guard was out of earshot.

Stinky shrugged. "Got picked up for liftin'. I just wanted a soda pop, but the other kid hanging out near the soda case saw and happened to be the owner's son, so he ratted me out to his pa and here I am."

"That's a drag, man," Dan offered.

"Yeah, I got the royal shaft, but I figure my PD will get me outta here in no time. What about you? You got booked for assault, right? That's not too bad; at least it's not a felony. You gonna be outta here soon, Danny?"

Dan hated it when anybody but his mother called him Danny, but he ignored it and immediately set about telling Stinky his message for Luke.

"I'm going to live with my uncle out in some hick village called Sleepyside-on-Hudson. It's north of here. My uncle works for some rich guy named Wheeler, and I'm going to be staying at some cabin in the woods on the rich guy's estate. I'm leaving first thing tomorrow morning, so make

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sure you get word to Luke so he knows where I am. If it doesn't work out, maybe we can grab some stuff and disappear to California or something like that. Can you do that, Stinky?"

"Yeah, sure, Danny. I can do that for ya. A rich guy, huh? Well, that's gotta be better than living in that alley by that diner."

Dan murmured a non-committal "Mmm" and then rolled over on his bunk, signifying that the conversation was over, and he wanted to be left to his thoughts.

Sleep didn't come easy for Dan that night, and he was exhausted when the guard came to take him from his cell for the last time. He said good-bye to Stinky and made his way toward the room where he would be processed out of the juvenile detention facility.

The paperwork took an hour to complete, and finally Dan was on the "free" side of the Youth House for Boys, feeling nervous and scared. He determinedly put up a brave face. He was feeling a little better now that he was back in possession of his black leather jacket, his black leather cap, and his cowboy boots. He allowed a sullen look to settle on his features before he was led to where he assumed that Mr. Moran was waiting with his uncle.

Dan was surprised to see that the lawyer was alone as he approached. Douglas Moran's face lit up with a smile when he saw his young client.

"Good morning, Dan. How are you this morning?"

"Fine."

"Great. Your uncle is outside in the waiting area. I wanted to give you a chance to ask any last-minute questions before you meet him."

Dan took a deep breath. He didn't admit it, but he was touched that the lawyer would look out for him that way. The guy wasn't half-bad. "Nah, I'm okay. Let's just go meet him."

Dan had thought he was putting on a brave front and didn't realize that Douglas Moran saw the fear in his eyes. Dan couldn't know how much Douglas Moran had come to respect him, knowing that he had been exposed to more than any fifteen-year-old should ever have to be exposed to. He didn't now how badly the young attorney wished the simple and more innocent existence in a small town would allow Dan to put aside the chip he carried so heavily on his shoulder and that a relationship with his uncle, albeit a bit young to suddenly have the responsibility of a fifteen-year-old boy thrust upon him, would begin to heal the wounds of Dan's orphanhood.

But, of course, the lawyer said none of this.

"Okay, right this way," Douglas Moran said aloud, ushering Dan through a white-painted steel door with no windows.

Dan found himself in a very spartan waiting room, filled with utilitarian couches and a chair or two. His glance took in a tense, elderly Hispanic couple sitting on one of the couches before he noticed the only other occupant of the room. Standing before Dan was a man in his mid-twenties with a shock of red hair and emerald green eyes that were very reminiscent of Dan's mother's. Dan was stunned at the resemblance that William Regan bore to his mother, and the grief of her death was suddenly fresh once again.

The red-haired man was staring at Dan with shock, too, and Dan wondered what he was thinking. The older man immediately approached the teen and held out his hand. "Hi, Daniel, I'm Bill Regan. I...I'm happy to meet you."

Dan caught the hesitation on Regan's part and knew that he was anything but happy to be saddled with some J.D. kid. That thought, combined with the overwhelming grief that

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threatened to overtake him upon being reminded so brutally of his mother, made Dan sneer at his uncle and ignore the proffered hand.

“Right.”

Regan looked surprised, and even a little hurt, Dan grudgingly admitted, wondering if maybe his new uncle did care a little bit about him after all. Regan looked at the lawyer questioningly, as Dan sized him up.

Douglas Moran cleared his throat. “I know this transition will not be the easiest in the world, but I know that the two of you can work this out. I trust that you’ll both give it a chance, and if you need anything, I’m just a phone call away. Please don’t hesitate to give me a call.”

“Thank you, Mr. Moran,” Regan politely said. Dan made a non-committal grunting sound.

“Good luck to both of you,” Doug said, shaking Regan’s hand and then Dan’s.

“Thank you,” Regan said and looked at his new charge. “Ready, Daniel? Are you called Daniel? Or do you prefer Dan?”

“Dan’s fine,” the boy said as he followed his uncle down a short corridor, through a lobby, and outside into the fresh air. Dan paused to look around, noting that freedom did feel pretty swell after the confinement he had endured.

“Okay, Dan, and you can call me Bill or Uncle Bill if you feel comfortable enough.”

Dan remained silent.

A three-year-old black sedan sat near the curb, choking and sputtering in the cold air, and Dan followed Regan over to it, surprised that he was going to an already-running car with someone behind the wheel. Regan opened the door to the backseat for Dan, and Dan climbed in. Then, Regan climbed in the front passenger seat, and the sedan moved away from the curb and headed north out of the city.

“Dan Mangan, this is Tom Delanoy. Tom’s the chauffeur for the Wheelers. That’s the family I work for,” Regan said, turning to glance at his nephew in the back.

Dan didn’t acknowledge the introduction, but Tom said, “Nice to meet you, Dan.” Dan refused to be swayed by the friendly tone of voice and the welcoming look on the chauffeur’s face.

“I think you’ll really like Sleepyside. It’s where I was raised. A nice, quiet village on the banks of the Hudson River—well, mostly quiet.” He and Regan chuckled at this, but neither elaborated, and Dan felt annoyed at being left out of the joke.

So this is how it’s going to be, Dan thought. Always the outsider.

“We live outside of town,” Tom continued, “but you’ll have plenty of company your age. In addition to the Wheelers’ kids, Jim and Honey, there’s the Belden family that lives next door. They’ve got four kids. Three of them are around your age. There’s also another girl who lives on a nearby estate who the kids hang around with.”

Dan remained silent. He really didn’t want to make conversation, and he doubted he was going to be around long enough to get to know these hick teens, so why should he care? He also noted that his uncle still hadn’t tried to make conversation with him. Didn’t he even *want* to know about his sister?

Tom continued to extol the virtues of the village, explaining that there was ice skating in the winter, swimming in the summer, and hunting in the autumn. Dan caught the sharp look that Bill threw at Tom as he stated that last fact.

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No doubt he's afraid of what the dangerous gang member from the city would do if he got his hands on a gun, Dan reflected bitterly. He knew what his uncle thought of him, and he immediately knew that there was no way he could give this a real shot like he had told Mr. Moran. Why should he bother when his uncle clearly wasn't? He didn't the least bit guilty about his plans to ditch him as soon as Luke made it up to Westchester. *Good-bye Hicksville, hello California.*

Finally, even Tom seemed to run out of things to say, and the trio sat in silence.

"So, I, uh, guess I just missed your birthday," Regan said hesitantly. When he didn't receive an answer from the backseat, he continued, "I'm sorry about that. I'm sorry I've missed all of the past fifteen years. How about a belated birthday burger at a great joint called Wimpy's?"

Dan shrugged. "Whatever." The thought of a burger after more than a week in juvey eating institutional food and eating scraps before that was a welcome one to Dan, but he refused to admit that or show any emotion other than sullenness.

"Great," Regan said, pretending that Dan had given him an enthusiastic response. "I really think you'll like Wimpy's. It's a diner that's been converted from an old train car. The kids hang out there a lot."

True to Regan's words, the small diner was filled with teenagers, sipping cherry sodas and listening to a jukebox. Dan could feel their stares as he, Tom, and Bill sidled up to the counter. All of the teens in the joint were wearing gay plaids and bright colors. None of them wore black, and certainly not leather. Dan ignored them as he watched a jovial counterman approached them.

"Hey, Regan, Tom," he greeted the men before he nodded at Dan, a quizzical but friendly expression on his face. "The usual?"

"Sounds good, Mike," Regan said. "And whatever Dan here wants. This is Dan Mangan, Mike." Dan caught the pause before his uncle continued, "He's going to be living with Maypenny, helping him out on the preserve."

"Welcome to Sleepyside," Mike said. "I'm sure you'll like it here." When Dan said nothing, the counterman continued, "These guys always get double-cheeseburgers, fries, and a chocolate malt. Sound good to you, or should I get you a menu?"

"Make it three," Dan said.

"Sure 'nough," Mike said and immediately turned to put their order in to the kitchen.

Dan tried not to think about the fact that his uncle refused to identify him as his nephew when he introduced him to the counterman. *He's ashamed of you, Dan*, his inner voice whispered. *He doesn't even know you, he hasn't given you a chance, and already he's made himself judge and jury. He's going to stick you out in some cabin in the woods where he doesn't have to stand the sight of you.*

Tom and Bill made small talk, while Dan sat in sullen silence. It was a relief for all three when the food, steaming hot from the kitchen, arrived, and they had an excuse not to talk. Dan planned on staying silent as much as possible.

The young man's mouth watered as he stared at the juicy, double-decker burger before him, topped with mustard, mayonnaise, ketchup, lettuce, and a big, fat, juicy red tomato. It had been a long time since he had had a meal like this, and he hungrily bit into the burger, unaware that Regan had seen the look of intense hunger on his face as he stared at the meal before him.

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Dan did appreciate the meal, if not the company, and he felt much better prepared to meet the old man he would be living with.

They left the cozy diner, and as the sedan twisted and turned through the woods, Dan stared out the window at the absolutely foreign terrain. The “road” they were on was no more than two dirt tracks, almost reclaimed by the thick bushes and dense trees that surrounded him. Every now and then, he would see a small path or trail winding its way between the trees. Even with a lot of the trees bare, there were enough evergreens crowded together that it was hard to see very far into them. It felt like the last frontier wilderness to a city boy like himself. He was sure to get lost!

Suddenly, Dan had an unpleasant thought. How would Luke ever find him out here?

The car came to a stop, and Dan realized that the road went no further, but he still couldn’t see a cottage.

“The cottage is on the other side of that thicket,” Bill explained, pointing toward a footpath snaking through the branches and brambles. Dan looked dubious but followed his uncle along the path until he came to a clearing with a rustic log cabin, complete with a fire pit over which a large, black pot hung.

A gnarled, old man with a pleasant smile exited the cabin and hurried toward his guests.

“Well, hello there!” he greeted them in a hearty voice. “I heard that horrible beast of yours making its way up that old logging road, and I knew it had to be you. Hi, Dan, I’m Mr. Maypenny, but I don’t stand on formality. You can just call me Maypenny.” The old man’s friendliness took Dan by surprise, and he found that, despite himself, he already liked this tough old relic. His clothes were peculiar, but Dan realized that now that he was in the country, his own clothes were peculiar.

Maypenny seemed to read his mind. “Got no bags, I see. Don’t worry. I know Regan here plans to take you to White Plains tomorrow to get you some clothes.” Dan looked in surprise at his uncle, who nodded. “Come on inside. Can I offer any of you some hunter’s stew?”

“We just ate at Wimpy’s, Maypenny, but thanks,” Regan said, beckoning Dan to follow the old man into the cabin.

Once inside, Dan looked around and thought that, although it was primitive and sparsely furnished, it was better than anything he had experienced in quite some time. He could make due until Luke got here and they could head to California.

Regan and Maypenny exchanged a few words that Dan could not hear, and then Regan looked at his nephew.

“I’ll pick you up tomorrow, and we can get anything you need for school. I’m sure you’ll find you have great quarters here with Maypenny. I’m glad you’re here, Dan, and I’m just a short walk away if you need anything.” Regan looked at his nephew with an uncertain, anxious expression.

Dan sneered back at him in return. “Right, if I need you, I’ll be sure to come knockin’.” The sarcasm was not lost on Regan, who looked as though he had been stung.

“Okay, well, see you tomorrow. Thanks, Maypenny,” Regan said before heading outside to the car where Tom was waiting.

Dan caught Maypenny studying him, and suddenly, he felt guilty for the way he had treated his uncle.

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“Danny, I’m going to tell you a story,” Maypenny said, after a moment’s reflection. “Come sit down by the fire.”

Dan reluctantly obeyed, knowing a lecture was imminent. He’d been here all of ten minutes, and already he was getting nagged at.

“I met a runaway last summer, a couple of them, in fact. Both of them had lost their parents at an early age. Both of them had a lot to run from. One was running from a cruel stepfather, while the other had run from an orphanage. Neither one had had an easy life, but once they got to Sleepyside, things became a lot better for both of them. They accepted that they couldn’t change the past, that they would never see their parents again, and that—if they gave folks a chance—things might not be as bleak as they had once thought.

“Those two runaways are now settled into their roles here in Sleepyside. One, young Jim Frayne, you’ll meet at school. He was adopted by the Wheelers and lives on the estate.” Dan was surprised to hear this. “He couldn’t take living with his stepfather anymore and came down here to find his great-uncle, who lived down the road from the Wheelers. His uncle was sick with pneumonia and malnutrition and died shortly after Jim arrived. Jim had a chip on his shoulder when he first arrived, too.” Dan didn’t miss the implication that he himself had a chip on his shoulder. Maypenny continued, “But he got over that real fast when he saw that the folks around here were friendly and generous. So, you’ve got someone you can already relate to when you start school on Monday. Jim’s a real friendly youth. The other youngsters are so friendly that you’ll forget yourself,” the old man paused and chuckled, “especially that harum-scarum Belden girl. She’s friendlier than a Lab puppy!”

Mr. Maypenny continued, “That other runaway had already exorcised his demons before he got to Sleepyside last year, but that doesn’t mean that he can’t relate either. He used to hide out in barns and didn’t trust a soul until he got himself straightened out—and that wasn’t so long ago either. And that man, Danny, is your Uncle Bill.”

With that, Maypenny stood up and said he was going to take his old mare Brownie for a ride through the preserve. He invited Dan to make himself at home before he left, apologizing that he only had one horse and couldn’t have him accompany him.

Dan was grateful. Meeting his uncle, the shock of finding himself in unfamiliar territory, and then the thought-provoking words of Maypenny had taken their toll. He needed sleep. He also didn’t want to have anything to do with riding a horse, but he wouldn’t admit that to Maypenny.

Dan lay back on the sofa, gratified that his host trusted him enough to leave him alone, and was soon fast asleep.

~*~*~*~*~

Monday, February 15

Dan followed Maypenny toward Glen Road, wishing that he didn’t have to go to school. Because he had missed his entire freshman year thus far, he was going to be on probation. If he couldn’t keep up with the other freshmen in his class, he would be dropped back to the eighth grade. That thought did not sit well with Dan. He was also upset that his new high school also contained the junior high. He had already graduated from junior high—he didn’t want to be stuck with junior high kids again! The students here were certain to be less sophisticated than in New York, too. Plus, he was the new kid, starting in the middle of the year. Any way you looked at it, it was a drag.

He remembered what Maypenny had said about the kids being extra friendly and allowed himself a little hope, but not much.

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The yellow school bus was sitting and waiting for the duo. Dan took a deep breath and entered the bus. He looked around and only saw a smattering of students. They looked at him with interest, but Dan was grateful he didn't see any scorn or ridicule.

That was until he saw a girl with unruly, blonde curls say something to her two girlfriends and snicker. Dan gave her a cold look, and the girl blushed a deep red.

Serves her right! Dan thought. *So much for the friendly people around here. Forget about even trying to be nice to them—Maypenny was wrong.*

Dan ignored the tentative smile the pretty girl with hair the color of honey gave him and sat down defiantly in the front of the bus at Maypenny's command of "sit down." Maypenny sat down next to him.

What's the point of trying to make friends anyway? Dan silently asked himself as the bus lurched forward and started toward the village. *I'm leaving this hick town as soon as Luke gets here. I don't need these people!*

Dan almost made himself believe that on the short ride to Sleepyside Junior-Senior High. As soon as the bus pulled up to the front of the school, Dan and Maypenny got off and headed straight to the principal's office where Dan was shortly enrolled as a freshman by the competent and efficient school secretary.

"Miss Taylor," Mr. Maypenny said, after the necessary paperwork was completed, "would it be possible for Mart Belden to show Dan around?"

Miss Taylor nodded. "Of course, I'll send word to Mrs. Woolsey."

"I'm much obliged, ma'am." Mr. Maypenny turned and looked at his young charge. "Mart will get you settled into school. Have a good day, son."

Dan nodded glumly and watched as the one person he was starting to trust in this town strode out of the office.

The school secretary beckoned a nearby student-aide and instructed her to show Dan to his home room. "Please tell Mrs. Woolsey that Mart Belden should be assigned as your guide for the rest of the day. Mr. Maypenny hit upon an excellent choice. Mart has a very similar schedule to yours and can show you where your classes are and where the cafeteria is. He's very popular and can also introduce you to a lot of people. Good luck."

Dan managed a grunt, unwilling to accept any friendliness from a school administrator. He followed the brunette student-aide to his classroom.

She gave him a friendly smile as she showed him the correct room. "Welcome to Sleepyside," she said with a wave as she headed back toward the principal's office.

Dan took a deep breath and entered the classroom door before him. His head went up a defiant notch when the chattering conversation came to halt as he entered. Whispers followed the brief silence. Dan did his best to ignore it and walked over to the teacher at the front of the desk.

"Why, hello, you must be the new student I was told about. Dan, is it?" At Dan's sullen nod, Mrs. Woolsey continued to welcome her new student. "Welcome to the freshman class here at Sleepyside Junior-Senior High. Did the secretary assign a student as your guide?"

"Mart Belden," Dan said reluctantly. He had hoped that he could get out of having a guide, even if it was Mr. Maypenny who had requested him.

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“Wonderful,” the plump teacher said and then turned to her class. “Class, this is Dan Mangan of New York City. He’s new to Sleepyside, so I’d like you to give him big welcome and introduce yourself after class. Mart Belden? Can you please stand up?”

Dan watched as a boy with a blond crew cut at the back of the class looked up in surprise and stood. “Yes, Mrs. Woolsey?”

“You’re to be Dan’s guide for today. If you could show him around, I would appreciate it.”

Dan did not miss the look of dismay that crossed over the Belden boy’s face, nor did he miss the snickers from the two boys who sat next to Mart. But by the time Mart responded to the teacher, he had placed a smile on his face. “Sure, Mrs. Woolsey.”

What was Mr. Maypenny thinking when he said this town was friendly? Dan thought as he stared at the blond-haired boy, thinking how much he looked like that fresh girl on the bus this morning.

“Dan, there is an empty seat in the fourth row. If you wouldn’t mind taking it, we can begin.”

Dan nodded and took his seat, wishing he were back in New York. Not the angry, tough New York he had come to know, but the safe and pleasant New York where he had a house and two parents.

Wishful thinking, Danny boy, that irritating inner voice mocked him. *Toughen up!*

After class, several of his fellow students took their teacher’s advice and introduced themselves. They seemed genuinely friendly, but Dan could not forget the silence and then the whispering that had accompanied his entrance to class.

The blond-haired boy stuck out a hand. “Hi, Dan. I’m Mart.”

Dan ignored the hand. He was not going to soon forget the look on Mart’s face when he learned he had to show Dan around.

Mart dropped his hand awkwardly. “So, what class do you have next?”

Dan consulted a piece of paper the school secretary had given him. “English with Mr. Trotter.”

“Hey, me too! I’ll show you the way,” Mart said, a truly friendly, but nervous, smile settling on his features.

Dan listened to Mart chatter on about after-school activities and sports teams as they weaved their way through students in the crowded corridors. The new student paid no attention, as he was not interested in joining any of the clubs or teams his new school offered. He already had a group that he belonged to: The Cowhands. He was sore that both his Uncle Bill and Maypenny had insisted that he get rid of the gang logo that had been on the back of his leather jacket. Apparently, the school board had recently issued a decree about unsanctioned student organizations. Even the kids out by where he lived had had their club threatened. Bill and Maypenny had bragged about the kids’ do-gooder activities the night before, but Dan hadn’t really been paying much attention.

Dan’s experience was much the same in his next two classes as it had been in home room. After so much time off from school, it was hard to stay focused in class, especially with all that Dan had on his mind. He was grateful when it was lunchtime.

He followed Mart into the cafeteria. “I’ll introduce you to my friends and family,” Mart said. “They’re sitting right over there.”

Dan said nothing, and they approached the table where a solemn dark-haired boy sat with the trio of girls he had seen on the bus this morning: the pretty dark-haired one, the friendly-looking

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honey-haired girl, and the sassy one with the curls and the freckles. He wasn't about to let them get the best of him again!

"Hi, family and such!" Mart said as they reached the table. "This is Dan Mangan. Dan, here are some of the characters you'll have to put up with in Sleepyside High."

Dan watched as the dark-haired boy rose and offered a solemn hand. He took it and even managed a smile and a brief "hi" in return.

He turned to see the curly-haired girl staring at him with blatant distrust, and he saw red. He barely noticed that the honey-haired girl was smiling at him, or that the pretty brunette was openly admiring him. All that he registered was the open derision on the blonde's face, and it took all of his will not to bite her head off then and there. Instead, he only nodded stiffly at the girls before following Mart up to the counter and grabbing a tray.

"Girls can be a pain," Mart said conversationally, "but Honey, Di, and Trixie are actually pretty swell." When Dan didn't say anything, Mart continued, "You should give them a chance."

Dan turned a murderous look on Mart. "Look, that curly-haired girl is your sister, right?" At Mart's mute nod, Dan continued, "Well, she didn't give *me* a chance, I can tell by the look on her face. So why should I give *her* a chance?"

Mart obviously didn't have an answer for that, because, to Dan's satisfaction, he stayed silent.

After the two had filled their trays with institutional food and were headed back toward the table, Dan spoke up. "It would probably be better if I didn't have to sit at your table. I recognize those three guys from our home room. If you'll introduce me, I'll sit with them."

Mart nodded and headed that way. He quickly introduced Dan to Ty Scott, Chuck Altemus, and Jerry Vanderhoef. Dan noted how Mart acted as though he couldn't get away fast enough and hurried back over to the table with his friends. Dan strained to hear Mart's words, wondering what he would say about him. "Dan's getting acquainted with the guys in our home room. It's better."

It's better, is it? Dan thought bitterly before he turned his attention to the questions that the three guys were throwing at him about New York City. Dan started telling them about his gang. As he talked, he saw that they were hanging onto his every word, especially Jerry. He became more and more animated, embellishing his stories a bit here and there when it sounded good. He found that he liked having an audience.

Jerry wanted to know if Dan had been a founder of the gang. He hadn't, of course, but Jerry would never know that.

"Sure," he said carelessly, toying with his food and waving his fork to emphasize his words, "I helped start our club. Nobody tells us what to do around our neighborhood. We take care of that!"

"Do you carry switch blades?" Chuck wanted to know, eagerly leaning forward as he awaited the answer.

"Switch blades? Not us!" Dan put his fork down. "The cops get tough when they find 'em on you." Truth be told, it was the only reason that Dan was not charged with a felony for the crime that had ultimately landed him here in Sleepyside. "We don't need stuff like that." He struck a fist into the palm of his other hand forcefully. "Pow!"

Dan looked around, gratified that his audience had forgotten to eat. All three pairs of eyes were fixed on him.

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Dan continued his storytelling until the bell rang, signaling that it was time for the next period. Dan took up Ty Scott's offer to show him where his next class was and exited the cafeteria without a backward glance at Mart.

So long, Mr. Tour Guide, Dan thought smugly as he headed off to his math class.

The rest of the day was uneventful, and Dan was reflecting on his day as he walked home, struggling to get some traction with his cowboy boots in the lightly packed snow. He had noticed today that no one else wore cowboy boots, even though it was very fashionable among gangs in the city. Dan didn't care, though. Those boots had been hard-won on the streets, and he was going to continue to wear them. Who cared if he fit in with a bunch of country bumpkins?

You do, his conscience whispered. Dan pointedly ignored the voice and continued his struggles on the slippery path.

He suddenly heard the sound of horse hoofs and looked back, startled. When he saw who was coming, the fresh girl and her honey-haired friend, he scowled and stepped back off the path to let them by.

To his dismay, the pretty one pulled her horse up a few feet away from him. "How about a lift? Those boots are too slippery for snow!" she laughed, and Dan grudgingly admitted to himself that it was a nice laugh, a friendly laugh. "Climb on behind. We're on our way to see Mr. Maypenny."

Dan was tempted. Despite the fact that the blonde girl had been nothing but hostile, this one had a sweet face and seemed genuinely friendly. Then he noticed the curly-haired girl, who he recalled was Trixie from Mart's introductions earlier, staring at him from her horse, and whatever chance he had of accepting Honey's offer flew out the window.

He scowled at them both. "I can make it okay. I don't need a lift."

"But there's no need of your walking when we're going to the same place," Honey said gently. "If you'd rather ride alone, Trix and I can double up and you can take Starlight, here. He's very gentle."

Dan's fear of horses, combined with Honey's last remark, somehow provoked him. Why should he need a gentle horse? He was no wimp! "I told you I don't want a ride," he said loudly, his scowl deepening. "You can't give me orders, even if I *do* work for your pa."

The minute he said the words, he regretted it. Honey had been nothing but genuinely friendly, and it was his fear of horses that irked him, not so much Honey. He could see as she gathered up her reins that she was hurt, but pride kept him from saying anything.

"If you ask me, Hon, he just doesn't dare to try to ride. He's afraid!" Trixie taunted him.

Oh, this one is a piece of work! Dan thought angrily. *How dare she call me chicken?*

"Oh yeah?" he said out loud, his lip curling. "Big talk, freckles. Climb down and I'll show you." He put his books down on a rock, trying to fight the panic he felt at the thought of climbing up on the beast in front of him. But there was no way this girl was going to call him chicken!

To Dan's chagrin, she was out of the saddle in a flash, and he could delay no longer. "Okay! Be sure you know which side to get on. Susie's particular," she said as she handed Dan the reins.

Dan swung on the horse, feeling relieved that it wasn't as hard as he thought it would be.

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“Take it easy, cowboy,” Trixie advised. “Maybe you’d better lengthen the stirrups. I keep them pretty short.”

Dan refused to take any advice from this girl. “Who’s riding?” he answered shortly as he slapped the reins against Susie’s neck, like he thought he had seen on television once upon a time. “Come on, move!”

Susie moved promptly, and Dan was caught completely off-guard when she kicked up her heels and bucked. Dan tried to hold her in, but he knew at once that he had been foolish to even try to pretend he knew how to control a horse. He managed to stay on as she made a dash for a stand of spruce close to the trail.

“Stop her!” he heard Honey call excitedly.

What do you think I’m trying to do? Dan thought wildly as the horse plunged forward toward a low-hanging limb. Dan tried to stay on, but it was a futile attempt, and he went heels over head into the brush beside the trail where he landed hard and lie face down in the snow.

Dan felt himself coming back from a swirling blackness into cold wetness. Realizing that his face was buried in snow, he groggily rolled over and tried to sit up, only to fall back and hold his head. He could feel a large lump on the front of his forehead.

This feels like the knot I had after the rumble with the Savage Nomads, he thought briefly, wondering what had happened.

“Guess there’s nothing broken after all,” he heard a girl’s voice say. He snatched his hands from his face and stared at the two girls with an unfriendly scowl.

“Hi! How do you feel?” Honey asked.

Dan touched the bump on his forehead and winced. “What happened?”

“Susie brushed you off on a tree limb,” Honey explained. “I hope you aren’t hurt?”

“Nah!” Dan scrambled unsteadily to his feet and stood swaying. He had been hurt worse than this in gang fights, so he certainly wasn’t going to show any weakness in front of two nosy country girls. “I’m okay.” He even found himself trying to smile at Honey.

She is pretty nice, he reluctantly admitted to himself.

“You don’t look it,” the girl with the curly hair and the abundance of freckles said frankly. “You should have lengthened those stirrups and you would have had better control of Susie. I guess you don’t know much about riding.”

Why, you smug little... Dan thought, scowling. He fixed her with a glare and asked tauntingly, “But you know all the answers, don’t you, freckles?”

He expected her to come back with a scathing retort, but she just looked at him rather contritely.

I hope you do feel bad, freckles, but I’m not going to forgive you. If you think that, you’re as delusional as you are fresh!!

His bad temper continued. “And now I suppose you’ll run and tell old Maypenny I tried to break your horse’s leg or something!” Dan sneered.

“I will not!” Trixie was getting angry, Dan could tell.

Good! he thought smugly.

“And you ought to be ashamed to speak about your grandfather disrespectfully!” the infuriating girl continued

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Dan stared at her blankly for a moment, trying to figure out what was so disrespectful and who his grandfather was. When he realized she meant Maypenny, he laughed harshly.

“My which? Haw! That old square from squaresville? He’s no relation of mine, and quit saying so!” He hadn’t meant to speak so meanly about the one man who had been decent to him since he had come to this village, so, to cover up his inner discomfort, he brushed the snow off of his jacket and noticed that his jacket sleeve was ripped. He fingered it uncertainly, pulling the two edges of the tear together.

Honey spoke hurriedly with a friendly smile. “If you’d like, I can mend that for you so it won’t even show. I’ll get a needle and a black thread from Mr. Maypenny.”

Dan was torn. He really hated to see anything happen to the jacket he was so proud of and had worked so hard to earn. It had been bad enough when his Uncle Bill and Maypenny had made him remove the gang’s name from the back, and now it was torn, too! And Honey, despite him being a real drag to her, was being a real doll. As he was opening his mouth to accept, he looked at Trixie and saw her staring critically at him. He flushed and told Honey with a frown, “Don’t bother. I don’t need anybody’s help.”

He was sorry to see Honey draw back as if she had been slapped. He wasn’t angry at Honey, only at Trixie. Boy, did that girl make him see red!

“You could at least say thanks!” Trixie said biting. “You’re just lucky if Honey doesn’t tell Mr. Maypenny that you tried to ride one of her horses and you didn’t know how and it was a wonder you didn’t break its neck.”

“Go on, tell him!” Dan was so furious that he turned on Honey without even thinking. “And you can tell your rich pa, too, while you’re at it! I won’t be stuck in this hick town long enough for it to make any difference to me!” Dan picked up his books and angrily set off down the bridle path.

Dan could feel the stares of the girls as he slipped and slid on the snowy ground, but he was determined not to fall down. His thoughts were in a whirl as he headed back to Maypenny’s cabin. He had not meant to tell the girls of his plans. What if they squealed on him? His plans with Luke were sunk. He was also sorry that he had hurt Honey’s feelings. That he blamed on that infuriating Trixie! If she hadn’t kept goading him, he wouldn’t have gotten so mad that he’d hurt Honey’s feelings.

But what was nagging the most at Dan was Trixie’s assumption that Mr. Maypenny was his grandfather. He supposed it wasn’t such a big leap to take, and it didn’t really bother him. He would have actually liked having a grandfather like Maypenny. No, it was something else.

It was the fact that his *real* relative refused to claim him. From the stories he had heard on Sunday, his uncle, or Regan as he was called by most everyone, it seemed, was close with this group of kids who called themselves the Bob-Whites. If he was so close to them, why wouldn’t he own up to being Dan’s uncle?

Because he’s ashamed of you, Mangan, that’s why! that annoying voice in his head sneered at him. Dan couldn’t even tell it to shut up, because he knew it spoke the truth. Dan thought of the vague dreams he had had when he found out that he had an uncle. He had lain in his cell and thought about having an uncle to care about him and pal around with. It had been a nice thought, which only made the reality of the situation that much worse.

Suddenly, Dan remembered that the girls had said they were going to Maypenny’s. The last thing he wanted was to be at the cabin with the girls, so he left the path at a rocky stretch beneath the shelter of an ancient evergreen.

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He moved as swiftly as he could away from the path, loath to have any more confrontations with Trixie and Honey.

He finally reached a clearing in the woods, noticing that several paths led into and out of the clearing. He sat down on a nearby rock and thought about all that had happened at school that day.

He thought about the Bob-Whites with their matching red jackets and couldn't help but compare them to The Cowhands. They were obviously a close-knit group. Dan longed for that sort of belonging again, conveniently forgetting all the times his gang had gotten him in trouble.

In his mind's eye, he pictured the solemn, dark-haired Brian. He definitely thought he was someone he could be friends with, if he wasn't too square. Mart, once he got past his discomfort, had been okay, too. He had noticed in his classes that Mart was very outspoken and loved to clown around. But he also saw what Mart probably didn't realize himself—a slight insecurity that prompted the clowning. Dan could definitely relate to that and made him forgive Mart's initial reaction when he had been chosen to be Dan's guide for the day. Dan did look strange compared to the average student at Sleepyside Junior-Senior High, so he found he couldn't be angry at Mart for feeling awkward at first.

And Mart had really warmed up to him throughout the morning, giving him a lot of useful information, if he had cared about those sorts of things.

The pretty dark-haired girl—Dan thought he remembered her name was Diana—had also been friendly. As a matter of fact, it hadn't really registered at the time, because he had been so angry with Trixie, but Diana had looked at him with open admiration. She certainly hadn't been judgmental and had obviously found something all right with the way he looked. Dan liked that.

And Honey, well, Honey had been swell, even when he didn't deserve it. He thought about how the seven of them lived so far from the village, but in proximity of each other, and briefly imagined himself in a red jacket, calling them friends. Dan discarded the thought and laughed derisively. They were rich kids, and he would never fit in, could never hope to be one of them.

You've been out here in the country for three days, Mangan, and you're getting soft already! that voice inside his head said. *You don't need them! You don't really want to be a part of that outfit, do you?*

But, deep in his heart of hearts, he knew he did. Which, paradoxically, made him angry. Angry for being soft, angry for wanting something he could never have, angry at the uncle who denied him, angry at the world.

Dan was so lost in his thoughts, that he didn't hear the footsteps until they were upon him. He jerked up and found himself looking into a pair of friendly, green eyes.

"Hi," the redheaded boy said with a warm grin. "I'm Jim. You must be Dan." He offered his hand, and Dan took it.

"Yeah, that's me."

"I had a field trip today, so I wasn't at school. But I was at Maypenny's a little bit ago, and he told me you were staying with him. Welcome to Sleepyside."

"Thanks," Dan said, unsure of what else to say. He realized that this was the runaway that Maypenny told him about, and he didn't know if the redhead would appreciate that he knew about that. That made him wonder just what Maypenny had told Jim about *him*.

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“Mr. Maypenny tells me that he asked Mart to show you around. Mart’s my next-door neighbor. So, I guess I can assume that you met my sister Honey, and Mart’s brother, Brian, his sister, Trixie, and our other friend, Di.”

“Yeah, I met everybody,” Dan said, shrugging. He hoped that Jim would leave him to his thoughts.

You’d think in a game preserve the size of this one, you could get some privacy! he thought.

“I don’t know what Mr. Maypenny told you about all of us, but I’m a newcomer to Sleepyside, too. I’ve been here since last July, just after my fifteenth birthday.”

There’s something else we have in common, Dan thought. *I got dumped here right after my fifteenth birthday, too!*

“I’m going to be honest. Mr. Maypenny told me that you lost your parents. I hope you’re not mad at him for telling me that. I lost mine, too. I just wanted you to know that I know where you’re coming from.”

“Okay,” Dan said. He was unsure of what to say in response. He instinctively liked the athletic-looking redhead, but he didn’t want to form any friendships that he would just be leaving behind anyway.

“Well, I’ve got to go help the others with a fundraiser we’re working on, but I saw you here and wanted to say hi and introduce myself, since you already met everyone else at school today,” Jim said.

“That’s cool. Thanks.”

“It was nice to meet you, Dan,” Jim said, offering his hand again.

Dan shook it. “Yeah, you, too, Jim,” he said, and meant it.

As he watched Jim walk off, he stared at the red jacket that was even brighter than the mane of red hair atop Jim’s head. The letters “B.W.G.” were stitched on the back, and Dan instinctively knew that the letters had been Honey’s handiwork. Why he knew or even cared about that fact, Dan didn’t know, but he was sure that the sweet girl would enjoy sewing jackets for her friends, just as she had offered to mend the tear in his own jacket for him.

For some reason, that red jacket really struck a chord with Dan. He thought of Jim’s friendliness and the fact that Jim had been an outsider like himself not so long ago. And now Jim belonged.

Maybe there’s hope for me after all, Dan thought. *Maybe I could belong. And maybe, just maybe, my west side story could actually have a happy ending.*