

if i close my eyes

Act I: On Some Dark, Quiet Street

March 13, 1956

Danny Mangan stood against the wall of the music hall, listening contentedly to the melodic sounds coming from Willie Smith's fingers as they danced over the ivory keys. *The "Lion" may be old, but he can still play.* Danny glanced around the familiar room. Standing next to him was another boy, also leaning against the wall, listening intently to the music. Danny figured the boy was about his age, meaning fourteen, possibly a year or two older. Having seen him here a number of times at other jazz shows, he'd been curious about the boy for some time. Danny noticed he always came into the shows late and when the music ended, he left quickly. When Willie "The Lion" Smith paused for a break, Danny turned to the boy. He stared at the yarmulke on the boy's head. "Hey," he said.

The boy turned toward Danny with a look of surprise, as if he thought he'd been invisible. "Hey," he answered.

"You're Jewish?" Danny asked. It was just a casual question, a way to start a conversation.

One side of the boy's mouth turned up in a half-grin. "Chinese. And you?"

Danny smirked. He deserved that. "Cuban," he answered, with hardly a pause. It was an obvious lie, just as the other boy's response had been.

The other boy let out a little snort. "I see you here a lot. You live around here?"

Danny shook his head. "Lower East Side. And you?"

"Near Prospect Park. But I've got friends in your area." The boy looked at Danny's black leather jacket, the cowboy boots, and the cap. They were a definite contrast to the conservative dark blue slacks and white shirt he was wearing.

Danny fingered the bottom edge of his jacket protectively. He had just earned it a few weeks ago and was very proud of it. He was tempted to turn and show this boy what was written on the back. Before he could, the other boy spoke again. "You hang out



with those Cowboys?"

"Cowhands," Danny corrected, suddenly defensive. "What of it?"

The other boy shook his head. "Nothing." He turned back to the stage where the Lion was getting ready to play again. Danny was dismissed.

Danny wasn't sure what to make of that response. With a shrug of his shoulders, he followed the other boy's lead and immersed himself in the music.

As soon as Willie Smith finished his last song and closed the piano keyboard, the other boy turned to leave. But this time he paused, sticking his hand out in Danny's direction. "Neil," he said.

Danny took the hand and shook it firmly. "Danny."

The two walked out together and headed toward the Atlantic Avenue subway entrance in companionable silence. Just before the two had to veer in different directions, Neil spoke. "Barry Galbraith is playing next week."

Danny wasn't sure what it was about the Jewish kid that intrigued him. Maybe it was just that he didn't see many youngsters at the jazz concerts he snuck in to. Make that, Neil was the only other person anywhere near his age that he would see at the jazz concerts he snuck in to. Most kids his age seemed more interested in Bill Haley or the Platters. Danny liked them, too, but jazz was very special to him. Luke and the others didn't get it. They made fun of Danny for going over to the jazz clubs in Brooklyn or up in Harlem. While the ragtime pianists were great, it was the jazz guitarists that were his favorites. He had already been looking forward to the Barry Galbraith show next Thursday. Danny nodded. "See you then."

Danny arrived early on Thursday. Neil was there, in the same conservative attire, yarmulke on his head, standing in the back. He gave Danny a half-grin in greeting. "Barry's great, isn't he? I've always wanted to see him play."

Danny eyed the crowded room. "It's going to be packed tonight. Everyone wants to see him."

"That's no surprise," Neil said. "Barry *is* one of the best jazz guitarists around. He's done recordings with all the big names."

Danny nodded, leaned back against the wall, and stuck his hands in his pockets. "He is good. And it's rare to catch him out of the studio. I wouldn't have missed this for anything. But have you ever heard Tal Farlow? He's probably my favorite."



Neil smiled. "Yeah. He has a unique sound. I really dig him." Neil paused to let some people walk by. "But he's not my favorite. My favorite is Timmy Mangan."

Danny froze. His stomach felt queasy. He wasn't sure what to say. He tried to think of an excuse to leave, but he did want to stay and listen to Barry Galbraith.

Neil continued on, completely oblivious to the change in Danny's demeanor. "It's been quite a few years since I heard him, though. I was only ten when I saw him play. He makes the guitar sing like no one else." He finally looked over at his new friend. "Danny? You okay?"

Danny found his voice at last. With a small swallow, he mustered, "You won't be seeing him play again. He died."

"No kidding? When? How? How did you hear?" Neil fired off the questions, still unaware of Danny's inner turmoil.

The words came out slow and steady. "Korea. Jeep hit a mine."

"War. Figures. All the good men die." Neil shook his head. "I hate war."

"Thank you," Danny managed.

Neil's eyebrows scrunched together in confusion. "For what?"

"For calling him a good man." Danny paused, and then nodded toward the stage where Barry Galbraith and his band were getting ready to start. "Let's just listen to the music."

Danny was tense, rigid even. Thankfully, Neil dropped the subject. As Barry and his band played, Danny felt himself relaxing again. The smooth sounds of jazz always seemed to calm him, reminding him not only of his father, but also his mother. He knew he was a big disappointment to them both, if they were watching him. But he had to survive. He didn't want to end up in a foster home after the horror stories his mother had let slip from her childhood. He was making it on his own, and he was proud of that.

When the concert was over, Danny and Neil quickly slipped out one of the main doors. Again, they walked toward the Atlantic Avenue subway station. It wasn't long before Neil brought up the dreaded subject. "I've never met another Timmy Mangan fan."

Danny cast a quick glance at him but didn't answer; he just kept walking.

Neil pushed on. "You obviously know a lot about him." The sound of their footsteps hitting the sidewalk echoed around them. "I noticed you're really into jazz."

Danny shrugged his shoulders. They were still a couple of blocks away from the subway entrance. Trying to change the subject, he answered, "So are you."

"Yeah. I pretty much like all kinds of music." Neil took two more steps, and then stopped. "Why don't you want to talk about Timmy Mangan?"

Danny stopped, also. He wasn't used to such a direct approach. He turned around to face Neil, but shifted his eyes towards the ground. "Just drop it, okay?"

"No. The guy obviously means something to you. Did you know him?"

"Yeah," Danny answered. "I knew him." He turned around and started walking again.

Neil followed. "And?"

Danny stopped again, abruptly, and repeated Neil's method of introduction from the other night. He stuck his hand out towards Neil. "Danny. Daniel Mangan."

Neil nodded his head. "I thought as much," he admitted simply. He reached out to shake Danny's hand, but unlike the first time, there was an air of respect in the simple gesture. As they dropped their hands, Neil raised a critical eyebrow at Danny. "You could've just said so."

"Right." Danny said nothing more, just waited for Neil's next words, words he practically knew by heart. When the other boy remained silent, the two of them started walking again. Danny shook his head. He had to admit he liked that Neil didn't offer him any sympathy. He'd had enough sympathy over the last few years.

Danny's stomach rumbled hungrily as he got on the train that would take him back to Manhattan. He glanced around; there weren't many people on his car. He noticed one woman who had her purse only partly slung over her shoulder, and she looked half-asleep. Danny waited, hoping she wouldn't get off too soon. He was patient. He passed his own stop waiting for that right moment, and it finally came. Most of the other passengers had already gotten off the train earlier, and those that were left were not the least bit threatening to him.

As the train approached the next stop, he slowly got up and made his way toward the doors, standing close to the lady. Her purse strap had fallen to below her elbow. When the doors opened, Danny grabbed it. He felt the shift in the woman's arm as he pulled. He also heard her startled gasp and then the cries of "Stop him!" and

"Stop, thief!" as he took off.

He was fast. Jumping over the gate and up the subway stairs, he ran and ran. Soon, he found himself in Sara Delano Roosevelt Park. Hiding in a thick section of trees, he dumped out the contents of the purse. Keys, lipstick, some scraps of paper, and her wallet. He opened it and quickly counted the cash. Eight dollars and some change. He took inventory of the other items on the ground. Nothing pawnable. Danny sighed. He'd been luckier with the last purse he'd snatched; there had been over thirty dollars in it. Leaving the contents where they were, he calmly headed to a diner up on East Houston Street so he could fill his stomach.

Once his hunger had been sated, he counted the money he had left and thought about his other two needs: shelter for the night and some clean clothes. Both were fairly easy to take care of. He'd already paid his dues to the Cowhands, so this money was all his own. He could save it for the next few meals. And, having paid his dues, he knew he could count on a place next to the warm oil-drum fire in the empty warehouse that was the gang's home base.

As for clean clothes, he just had to hope that no one had found his hiding spot. He wandered back to the subway and caught a train up to his old neighborhood in Harlem. He walked nonchalantly by the front entrance of his old Catholic high school, and then quickly scrambled over the fence surrounding it. He headed for the janitor's closet just down the hall from the gymnasium. Sure enough, the lock had never been replaced and the door opened easily. *No one ever cleans out this closet.* Danny moved some boxes out of the way. His duffle bag was still there. Danny fished in his pocket for the key of the small lock on the zipper ends. Opening the bag, he stared at the contents. All of his belongings besides the clothes on his back were in that bag: two extra pairs of jeans, three extra t-shirts, five pairs of underwear, and five pairs of socks. There were also three small notebooks and a few pictures, but Danny ignored those for the moment. He grabbed some clean clothes and then headed for the gym itself. It was easy to get into the boys' locker room through a window. Soon, Danny was relaxing under the steady stream of hot water in the shower.

Three days later, Danny's money had just about run out. He'd used up some of his coins washing the contents of his duffle bag at a Laundromat. The rest had been spent on food. The Cowhands' leaders, Luke and Paul, had cornered him that morning. They hinted that while his dues had been paid, they thought he was holding back on them. He could've volunteered to do a few drug runs to appease them, but Danny hated drugs. Instead, he headed to a nearby park, hoping to find a purse to snatch or someone to mug. If he had to make his money dishonestly, he'd rather do it that way. Sure, the person he hit would have the inconvenience of having to replace some stuff, and they'd be out a bit of money, but that was better than the long-term effects of drug use. He couldn't stomach the thought of being responsible for *that*.

Crystal followed him to the park. Crystal didn't have a last name, or, rather, he didn't know it. He doubted Crystal was even her real first name. She hung out with the gang a lot, though she was usually pretty strung

out. They were sitting on a picnic table, their feet resting on the bench below, and Crystal was eyeing the playground.

"Let's go on the swings," she whined.

"That's for kids," Danny answered, mildly annoyed. He hadn't wanted to hang out with her today. How was he going to score some cash with her around? Looking at her pout, he added, "Go ahead, if you want to. I'm staying right here."

"Fine," she replied, twirling her stringy black hair around one finger. "We'll stay here."

Danny sighed. "I said *you* could go. I'll wait for you."

"You just want to get rid of me." She didn't sound mad about it; it was a fact.

"I did want to be by myself. But I'm not. So if you want to go swing, go swing already. I said I'd wait for you."

"Danny, I wanted to talk to you. To warn you." Crystal looked serious. Danny thought she was being her usual over-dramatic self. "Luke and Paul, they're not happy about you going off by yourself so much."

Danny rolled his eyes. He was only slightly concerned. *All they care about is if I help the gang's profits.* "Yeah? They didn't say anything to me about it."

"They wouldn't. But the gang won't tolerate your lone cowboy ways much longer." Crystal paused. "Where *do* you go when you go off?"

"Luke knows. Paul knows. That's all who needs to know." Danny was about to say something else when he heard his name. Turning around, he was surprised to see two boys walking towards them. They weren't wearing the normal Cowhands colors; they were in jeans, t-shirts, and tennis shoes.

"Who are those two?" Crystal asked, curious. The boys were close to the same age as Danny, and they looked alike enough to be brothers.

As they got closer, Danny recognized the Jewish boy from the jazz club in Brooklyn.

"Danny." Neil took a couple more steps. "I thought that was you I saw."

"Neil. Hi. I almost didn't recognize you." Danny looked over at Crystal, who was eyeing the newcomers. "Uh, this is my friend, Crystal."

"Pleased to meetcha." She looked Neil up and down and nodded in approval.

Neil introduced the other guy with him. "My brother, Harvey."

Harvey nodded and barely mumbled "'lo." Then he looked at his brother inquisitively. "Where do you know *him* from?"

Neil looked like he was ready to smack his brother, but his reply was nonchalant. "I met him over at the library --"

Harvey scowled in disbelief. "*He* was at the library?"

At the same time, Crystal smiled. "Cute and smart. I like."

Danny was a quick thinker and he hastily corrected Neil. "Neil may have been at the library, but not me." He didn't offer any further explanation.

"Oh," Harvey simply stated. He looked uncomfortable. "Come on, Neil, let's go."

Neil did his customary half-grin in Crystal's direction, and winked at her. "Nice to meet you, too. Well, we better get going."

"Yeah. See you around."

When they left, Crystal threw even more questions at Danny. "Where do you *really* know him from? He's cute. Would he want to be a Cowhand?"

"Down, girl," Danny said, only half-jokingly. "I just know him from around the neighborhood." He didn't bother to say which neighborhood.

"Maybe I'll go check him out." Crystal started to get up, but Danny grabbed her arm.

"Let him go, Crystal. He's not your type." Danny gave her a warning look.

Crystal quirked an overly-tweezed eyebrow at Danny. "Why? He's breathing, ain't he?" Danny snorted with laughter, and Crystal settled back down, smiling. "His brother's not half bad either. Can I go after him instead?"

Danny laughed again, and threw his arms up in the air, signaling he was giving up. "Sure. Why not?"

Another Tuesday night, another jazz band. Danny snuck in, as usual, and found Neil standing at the back, as

usual. Danny was in his Cowhands gear; Neil was in his school uniform.

Danny walked up to him. "Library?" he asked in greeting, trying not to smirk.

"Yeah, well... my father wouldn't be thrilled to find out I was here." Neil grinned. "Sorry about all that, anyway. I was just surprised to see you sitting there, and accidentally said so to Harvey. He didn't believe I knew you at all. Then he dared me to go over and prove it."

Danny grinned back. "Gotta take a dare."

Neil laughed. "Harvey wanted to crap. He thought you'd beat us up or something."

"Maybe, if he hadn't been with *you*." Danny tried to laugh the statement off as a joke, but he realized it was probably true. If Neil hadn't been with him, Danny might have tried to mug Harvey. He had noticed that Neil walked with an attitude, and in his casual clothes, he looked like just another kid on the street. But Harvey didn't have the same toughness about him. Feeling uncomfortable, Danny quickly changed the subject. "So, what would your father do if he found out you *were* here?"

Neil shrugged. "He'll figure out I'm lying sooner or later. My report card won't reflect any of this studying I'm supposedly doing."

"That's one thing I don't have to worry about." Danny frowned. He'd always kind of liked school.

Neil raised an eyebrow. "Your mom let you quit school?" he guessed.

"My mom's dead, too." Somehow that didn't hurt to say as much as he thought it would. It still hurt, though. Danny felt a bit flushed.

"Crap." Neil frowned. "Life *has* cut you a raw deal."

Danny just shrugged. He hated the turn the conversation had taken so quickly. He needed to learn to keep his mouth shut about his personal business. Danny wiped some sweat off his brow and wondered why the club had the heat on so high. "What's your dad got against music?"

"Nothing, really. As long as I don't want to become a musician, I can listen to all the music I want. On my radio. At home." Neil looked down and scuffed his feet on the floor.

"Do you?" Danny asked.

Neil looked up again. "Do I what?"

"Want to become a musician?"

"I don't know. Sometimes I think about it. Or maybe writing instead."

"Writing?" Danny questioned.

"Writing music; writing songs. But, no, not really. I'm not any good at that." Neil looked around the room. Danny followed his gaze. The band was playing and most people were sitting and swaying to the sounds. On the small dance area, a few couples were swinging enthusiastically.

"What about you?" Neil suddenly asked. "Ever thought about becoming a musician like your father?"

Danny hated how Neil always turned the conversation back to him and his family. The last thing he wanted to think about was his father. Yet, isn't that why he always came here? He loved jazz. And he loved his father. No, it wasn't that he didn't want to *think* about him; it was that he didn't want to *talk* about him. Maybe that was because the people he usually had to talk to were either overly sympathetic or they didn't care at all. Neil was neither. "Dad used to try to teach me to play the guitar. I never could get the hang of it." He laughed softly, remembering. "I would get so frustrated. One time, I threatened to smash his guitar to pieces if he tried to teach me again. He just shook his head at me, and then he looked at my mom and asked if she was sure I was his. She answered, 'Well, obviously. He has your temper.'"

Neil laughed. "Now that I know who you are, you *do* look a lot like your father. You got along with him pretty well?"

Danny nodded. He tried to quell the pain that was suddenly shooting sharply behind his eyes.

"Danny? Are you okay?"

Danny tried to focus on Neil, but couldn't.

"I'm sorry, man. I shouldn't have asked." Neil's face was wavering before him.

"It's not that. I'm just not feeling so great." Danny wiped his brow again. "It's too warm in here. I've gotta go." He turned to leave and almost stumbled, but recovered quickly.

"You don't look so great, either." Neil gave him a concerned look. "Have you eaten yet? I bet my mother's got a nice home-cooked meal ready to go on the table soon."

Danny thought about it. He hadn't had a decent meal all week. Almost every dime he'd "earned" he'd given to the Cowhands. "A home-cooked meal sounds good. Let's go."

Danny's stomach grumbled loudly in agreement, making Neil chuckle. "Sounds like we better get you there soon."

They walked quickly over to Flatbush Avenue and hopped on a bus headed towards Prospect Park. Danny looked out at the dark sky and wondered what time dinner was usually served at Neil's house. It seemed a bit late to be hoping for a warm meal.

Neil saw his look and answered the unasked question. "We always eat late. Pop works at his store and doesn't usually get home until around now."

Danny nodded but didn't really have the energy to say anything more. When the bus came to a stop and Neil stood up, Danny followed. The smells of a butcher shop on the corner were still strong, and somewhat nauseating. Soon he was entering the third floor apartment right behind Neil. He was surprised to hear Fats Domino singing softly from a radio sitting on a cabinet against the wall. The good smells coming from the kitchen did indicate a warm meal and Danny's stomach grumbled quietly again.

"Mameleh," Neil spoke quietly from the doorway, "is there enough for one more?"

Neil's mother looked up from the stove and smiled at them. "*Jo, lib.* Harvey, set two more places at the table. It looks like your brother will be eating with us for a change." She looked over at Danny. "Who's your friend? And where are his manners? Why are his coat and hat still on inside the house?"

Danny flushed, unsure whether it was from embarrassment or the fever he was sure he had now. He removed his cap and leather jacket quickly. "Sorry, ma'am," he mumbled.

Neil took them from him and hung them up in a closet nestled in a corner by the door. "Mameleh, this is Danny." He motioned Danny into the kitchen. "I'll be right back."

Danny wasn't sure whether to stand or sit. If he did sit, which chair should he take? He was suddenly very uncomfortable. *What if there are special Jewish rules I don't know about and I break them?* The throbbing behind his eyes started again.

Neil's mother interrupted his thoughts. "Sit down, dear." She pointed to a chair, easing that worry, at least. "Look at you. You're just skin and bones. Do you want a *nosh* before I serve?"

He wasn't sure what Mrs. Diamond had just asked, but he really just wanted to stay seated. "I'm okay, Mrs., uh..." Danny realized he didn't know Neil's last name.

"Diamond," Neil's mother filled in for him. "Where do you know Neil from?"

"The library," Danny quickly lied. "That is, I've run into him a few times when he leaves the library."

"Oh?" She didn't sound at all convinced. She fussed around the kitchen some more. "Which library?"

Danny wondered how to get out of this lie. It didn't seem fair; it was Neil's lie, anyway. "I don't know which library he's been at. I see him near the bus stop." He felt someone staring at him and looked up to see Harvey standing there, arms crossed. He apparently had set the two extra places, as Danny saw the dining room table behind him.

"Mama," Harvey hissed. "He can't eat here."

Mrs. Diamond looked up again from the stove. She was transferring something from the pot to a serving bowl. "Why not, *lib*? He needs to eat somewhere. They obviously don't feed him enough at home."

"He's a *ganef*." Harvey glared at Danny.

Danny didn't know what that meant, but he was sure it wasn't good. Neil came back at that moment, having changed out of his school clothes into more casual attire. He grabbed the bowl from his mother and placed it on the table. His brother followed, taking a different serving tray. Danny got up, wanting an escape from Mrs. Diamond's friendly interrogation. "What's a *ganef*?" Danny asked Neil, following them both into the dining room.

Neil coughed quietly, and then answered under his breath, "Thief, rascal, scoundrel..."

Danny nodded. *Maybe I should just go.* He was about to suggest that, when the front door opened. Danny followed Neil and Harvey back to the front room. "I'm home!" the man standing there called out. Mr. Diamond effectively blocked his exit plans.

Dinner wasn't as big a deal as he feared. He'd been afraid to take too much, but with every plate that was passed, Mrs. Diamond would encourage him to take at least two servings. "Take more." "There's plenty." "Don't be afraid to eat." "You look like a little bird." That earned a snicker from Harvey.

The food had a different flavor than what he was used to, but it was good and warm. If only he had more of an appetite. He was still working on his second serving, when Mrs. Diamond suddenly spoke up. "So, my son Harvey tells me you're in a gang."

Danny choked. He looked around the table. Neil quickly smacked Harvey on the back of the head. Harvey glared at Neil in return. Mr. Diamond looked angry. The whiskers of his mustache were actually quivering. Mrs. Diamond went on, seemingly unaware of the reactions around her. "Why do your parents let you run

around with those bad boys? Don't tell me they approve."

"My parents are dead," Danny mumbled, putting his fork down.

"That's no excuse. You probably have them turning in their graves. If you were my boy I'd come back from the dead and haunt you until you did right. Didn't they bring you up properly?" Mrs. Diamond sighed.

Danny looked around the table. The throbbing behind his eyes got worse. Neil met his gaze and shrugged. "Mothers," he mouthed.

Mr. Diamond glared at both Neil and Harvey, who squirmed a bit, but didn't say anything. Then Mr. Diamond just kept mechanically moving the fork from his plate to his mouth, eating.

Mrs. Diamond got tired of waiting for Danny to answer. "Your parents are dead, you're half starved, and you're in a gang. I may not be as smart as my son who spends all his time at the library *studying*," she looked pointedly at Neil, "but I can add things together. Our couch isn't that comfortable, but I'm guessing it's better than the street."

"Mama!" Harvey cried. "You're not going to let him stay here?"

Mrs. Diamond continued on, as though Harvey hadn't interrupted. "Hopefully Harvey will never have to make that comparison, though, since he's the one who'll be sleeping on the couch." She turned to Harvey. "When you've finished eating, change the sheets on your bed for our guest."

Danny was about to protest that he really didn't need to stay, that he'd be fine. Before he could get the words out, everything in his vision faded and turned dark. He felt a sense of relief as he put his head down on the table and closed his eyes.

Act II: I'll Be What I Am

April 3, 1956 -- late at night

Danny woke up a couple of times and heard people talking. Twice he felt someone place a cool damp washcloth on his forehead. The first time, he'd thought it was his own mother. The second time he remembered where he was and realized it must be Mrs. Diamond. She also made him sit up at least once and try to sip some water.

One time he woke up and heard only some very light snoring. He needed to pee. He tried to get up, but the throbbing in his head and the aches in all his muscles made the task nearly impossible. He gave up and lay

back down. He could hold it until the morning.

The next time Danny woke up, the room was filled with sunlight. The curtains had been pulled back, and he could see he was in a bedroom. Another twin bed was on the opposite wall. The bed was made, but Danny thought the snoring he'd heard in the night must have come from there. That reminded him of a more pressing need. He tried to get up again, and although his muscles still ached, he managed to stand up. He noticed he was wearing sweats, and wondered who had changed his clothes. *Well, Mrs. Diamond does have two teenage boys.* He took a quick peek, and was relieved to see he still had on his own underwear.

Danny opened the door and looked down the hall. The apartment was quiet, but a wonderfully familiar smell was emanating from the kitchen: chicken soup. He sniffed the air appreciatively, and then went looking for the bathroom.

Mrs. Diamond emerged from the kitchen. "Danny. You're awake. Good. But you need to get back in bed. You need your rest, dear." She smiled kindly at him as she approached him.

"Good morning, Mrs. Diamond," Danny answered. "But I need, uh... where's the bathroom?"

"Oh." Understanding dawned on her face. "Of course. Second door on your right." She watched him open the door. "Then straight back to bed for you."

Danny nodded and shut the door.

Minutes later, Mrs. Diamond had ushered him back to the bedroom Neil and Harvey shared. He was back in bed, under some protest. He was still achy and tired, though, so he let her win. She had a tray with orange juice and some kind of round bread, sliced open, warm and doughy. "Do you have your appetite back?" she asked. "Last night you didn't eat hardly anything, and now I understand why." In spite of his illness, he'd eaten more than he ever had at one sitting since his own mother died. Mrs. Diamond helped him sit up and fluffed some pillows behind him for support.

Danny was appreciative of her mothering, but also uncomfortable with it. "Mrs. Diamond, thank you. I'll be out of your hair if you just let me get up and get dressed."

Mrs. Diamond shook her head. "Listen to you. You collapse at my table with a fever of one hundred four and you think I'm going to let you go *anywhere*? You need to rest. Then we'll talk about maybe getting you a job at Kieve's store."

Danny wondered briefly who "Keevey" was, then realized she must be referring to Mr. Diamond. *I need to get back to the Cowhands, he thought. Though a job might be nice... No. I need to get back to Paul. He won't just let me quit after all I did to get accepted by them in the first place.* Danny let himself relax for just a minute. I

do need to recover first... and whatever she's making in the kitchen sure smells good. Aloud, he interrupted Mrs. Diamond's friendly chatter. "Thank you for letting me stay here, Mrs. Diamond. But I can't stay long." He reached for the orange juice and the "bagel", as Mrs. Diamond had called it.

"You can stay as long as you like," Mrs. Diamond insisted.

Danny grinned. "Well, that *is* chicken soup I smell cooking, right?"

"Yes it is." Mrs. Diamond smiled happily. "And I'll bring you some as soon as it's ready. It's the best thing to help you get over this flu you have."

Mrs. Diamond continued chatting with Danny while he finished his breakfast. By the time she finally left him alone to get some rest, he was calling her "Mrs. D". Danny didn't feel much like resting, though.

He went over to a small table that held a radio and a phonograph; a box of albums sat underneath it: Perry Como, Muddy Waters, Red Norvo, Harry Volpe. *Damn, he even has one of my dad's recordings.* Danny pulled out the Harry Volpe. He had recognized the cover immediately. Harry had been his father's mentor and teacher, and his father had done some guitar work on some of Harry's later albums. This was one of them. Danny carefully put the record back and picked up the Red Norvo instead: *Dancing on the Ceiling*. He'd never heard it before, and it did have Tal Farlow listed as one of the guitarists.

After the music started, he got up and moved to the desk under the window between the two beds. The movement of a boy in a leather jacket on the street caught Danny's eye, and he gazed down at the scene below. It wasn't a Cowhands jacket, but it did put an uneasy thought in Danny's mind. Dismissing the thought for now, Danny picked up a few of the books on the desk, looking for something to read. He found *King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table* and another book with a dragon attacking a knight on the cover. Underneath was a pink envelope, and was that the faint odor of perfume he detected? Unable to resist, he pulled it out and saw a big heart with "Jenny + Neil" written on it. Danny chuckled, but decided to respect Neil's privacy. He found another book, *Arizona Roundup*, and went back to lie down and read. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been able to just spend a lazy day reading.

It seemed like only minutes later that Mrs. Diamond knocked on the door, waking him. The album had long since stopped playing, and the book had fallen to the floor.

Mrs. Diamond entered, carrying a tray. "Good, Danny, you're awake. Here's some of that chicken soup I promised you. And I'm making some blintzes for later. Harvey and Neil always like blintzes when they're feeling under the weather."

Danny sniffed the air with some exaggeration and grinned. "Whatever those are, they sure smell delicious,

Mrs. D." He sat up and helped Mrs. Diamond with the tray.

"Are you feeling better? Should we take your temperature again?" Mrs. Diamond fussed.

"The fever's pretty much gone, but my sinuses are still bothering me," Danny admitted. "I'll be good to go after lunch, if you like."

She shook her finger at her patient. "Stop talking like that. I told you, you can stay. Stay."

Danny shook his head, deciding not to argue. Instead, he grinned and winked at her. "If you keep feeding me like this, it'll be hard to leave."

Mrs. Diamond winked back. "Then my plan must be working." Danny sneezed and Mrs. Diamond continued, "See, you need to rest more. And eat more."

Danny grabbed a tissue from the box by the bed and sneezed again. "Excuse me," he finally managed. He started to eat the soup, appreciative of the warm broth and the savory flavors.

"You're a good boy, aren't you?" It wasn't a question she expected answered. "You've just lost your way a bit. You'll find it again."

Danny quirked an eyebrow at her, but continued to eat. *Maybe she's right. But right now I know I need to get back to the Cowhands. They may not be family, but they're the closest I've got. And if I stay...* He couldn't bring himself to finish the thought.

Later in the afternoon, Danny persuaded Mrs. Diamond to let him shower and get dressed. He was in the kitchen, sitting and talking with her about food, her favorite subject, when the front door opened.

"Hi, Mameleh." Neil walked in the room and gave his mother a kiss on the cheek. "Hey, Danny."

Harvey was just behind him. "Hi, Mama. Hi, Danny."

Mrs. Diamond looked surprised. "Neil, Harvey, hello. What are you both doing home so early? Shouldn't you be helping your father at the store? Or at the library, *studying*?" She had emphasized the last word, but there was no trace of meanness in her voice.

Harvey kissed his mother on the cheek before leaving the kitchen to head toward his room.



"Pop wanted to make sure Danny hadn't murdered you and taken off with all the good family silver," Neil retorted. He grabbed a couple of blintzes off a platter on the



table.

Danny gulped. Did Mr. Diamond really think that badly of him? Maybe it was just Neil's odd sense of humor.

Mrs. Diamond winked at Neil. "Your father worries too much. Now, go on, boys. Both of you get out of here. I need to get supper ready." She shoed them out of the kitchen.

Danny got up, grabbed a blintz of his own, and followed Neil to his room. "Were you serious?" he asked, still concerned by Neil's comment.

Neil smirked. "Well, he was a little bit worried, but not enough to close the store and stay home. You're safe." He opened the door and went in, dropping his backpack on the floor.

Harvey was sitting at the desk with some school books open. He looked up as the two entered, then went back to his studying.

Neil dropped one of his stash on top of Harvey's work.

"Hey --" Harvey began to protest, and then quickly grabbed the cheesy goodness in front of him. "Oooh. Thanks."

Neil ignored him and went straight to the turntable. He glanced at the album on there, decided it was good, and set the needle back in position to play. Then he grabbed a notebook and some papers off the desk and sat on his own bed.

Danny sat on the bed he'd been using, and sneezed. He grabbed the box of tissues, and while he was reaching for it, he grabbed the western he'd been reading, as well.

"That's my book," Harvey stated.

Danny gave him a look that said, "And, so?"

"You can read it though," he quickly added.

Danny's fever had made a small comeback and he put the book down again anyway. The letters of the words were squirming on the page like little fleas.

"You okay?" Neil asked.

Danny nodded. "I'm not going to pass out again, or anything." Neil studied his friend. It made Danny nervous. "What?" he asked.

"Is Mama right? Are you really living on the streets?" Neil was always direct. Harvey looked up in interest.

Danny shook his head. "Nah. I've got a place to hang."

Neil nodded. "I thought you'd smell if that was true."

Harvey snickered.

Neil asked another question. "What about food? You *are* scrawny."

Danny glared at Neil. "Are you writing a book?"

"Sure. *The Life and Times of Danny Mangan.*" Neil was not easily intimidated. He opened the notebook he had and penned the words on a clean page. "Danny does not like to answer questions, but I managed to interview him anyway. Son of a musician, both parents dead, the young greaser collapsed from a fever at my dinner table."

"Har-dee-har." Danny threw a wad of used Kleenex at him. "And I ain't no greaser."

Neil ignored the Kleenex. He crossed out a word on the page. "Okay, *cowboy*. So, where do you stay? And *do* you have enough to eat?"

"Stop the third degree, already." Danny lay back on the bed, his knees still bent over the edge, and closed his eyes.

Neil just looked over at him, pen poised. "I could make stuff up."

Danny kept his eyes closed. "Go for it. It'd be more interesting that way, anyway."

Harvey joined the conversation. "Do you go to school?"

Danny opened one eye to peer at Harvey, and then closed it again. He didn't answer.

"What are you going to do with your life? Are you going to hang with that gang forever?" Danny hadn't given Harvey enough credit. He was just as direct as Neil.

"I'll get a job when I'm older," Danny mumbled.

Harvey snorted. "Yeah, right."

Danny sat up. "What about you? What are *you* going to be when *you* grow up?"

"A lawyer," Harvey answered automatically, his voice proud. "Hopefully even a judge."

Danny looked over at Neil. "And you?"

"A doctor," Neil answered. "And you?"

"A mechanic, probably. Or maybe a bus driver." Danny shrugged. "Something I don't need years of college for."

"So ambitious," Harvey tsked.

Neil picked up Danny's dirty wad of Kleenex that was still sitting on the bed where it had landed earlier and threw it at Harvey.

"Gross! Germsville!" Harvey ducked. "And you want to be a doctor?"

"Actually, right now, I want to be a writer." Neil picked a pink envelope from the stack of papers he had grabbed from the desk. It was the same one Danny had spied earlier.

Harvey finally turned completely around in his seat and rested his crossed arms on the back of the chair.

Danny grinned widely, ready to tease. "Writing love letters?"

Neil grinned back. "Yeah." He opened the perfumed flap and pulled out a dainty piece of paper with girlishly rounded writing on it. "This girl Jenny loves anything romantic." Neil picked up the notebook again and read while he wrote, "My darling, I need you more each day. I'll be yours forever, sweetheart. To be with you is my one and only desire."

Danny and Harvey both made gagging motions. "I think I need a doctor. I'm getting diabetic," Harvey teased.

Danny took his finger out of his mouth. "Are you asking her to marry you? Try toning it down a bit."

Neil drummed his fingers with the rhythm of the music coming from the turntable. He scribbled a few words, crossed one out, and scribbled some more.

"Well, what have you got?" Danny asked.

Harvey shushed him. "Never interrupt the master when he's at work," he chided.

Danny rolled his eyes but kept quiet.

Neil continued to work. Finally he looked up. He tore out a piece of paper and cleared his throat as if he were about to read. Instead, he crumpled up the paper and tossed it in the trash can. "I've got nothing."

In a disappointed gesture, Harvey shook his head and turned back around to concentrate on his homework.

Danny collapsed back down on the bed.

Meanwhile, the record had ended. Neil got up and lifted the needle off the album to stop the constant *twing twing twing* sound it was making. Instead of restarting the record, he switched on the radio. After a few seconds of static while the radio warmed up, Frankie Lymon was crooning, "Why Do Fools Fall in Love?"

Danny chortled. "Fitting."

"I'm not in love," Neil protested, "though I'm definitely a fool."

"You said it," Harvey agreed, without looking up from his studies.

After another delicious supper that night, Danny knew he had to leave. He hated the thought of going back to canned beans warmed over the fire and lumpy white bread that stuck in one's gut, but he knew he had to go back. And he did miss some of the guys already. They were his friends; they were almost like his family.

Danny knew it was pointless to try and leave politely. He'd hinted a couple of times at dinner that he would go, but Mrs. Diamond just wouldn't hear of it. Even Mr. Diamond grumbled that he may as well stay until he was completely well. After everyone had fallen asleep, Danny quietly crawled out of bed. He retrieved his jeans and t-shirt and changed out of the borrowed sweats. Outside, a cloud moved to uncover the moon. The sudden, dim beam of light hit the garbage can and the paper Neil had crumpled up earlier. Curiosity got the better of Danny, and he picked up the paper and stuffed it in his pocket. He turned to leave the room and ran smack into Neil.

"Ow," he whispered.

"Where are you going?" Neil spoke in a whisper also.

"I've got to get back," Danny said simply.

"In the middle of the night? Why?" Neil started in on his questions again.

Danny shrugged. "I just have to. I shouldn't have been gone this long. It's not cool."

"Not cool with who? The other gang members? Why would they care?"

"Some of them will care."

Neil must have noticed Danny's worried look. "What's going to happen?"

Danny shrugged again. "Depends."

Neil shook his head. He held his hands out and grabbed Danny's arms. "You're going to let them beat the crap out of you. Why?"

Danny's eyebrows raised in surprise. *How does he know what will happen?* "They might not." He knew it was a lie.

Neil dropped his arms in disgust and anger. "Go on, then. Moron."

Danny walked around Neil and opened the door.

"If you need to, you can come back," Neil said quietly.

Danny paused and then walked out the bedroom door. He moved stealthily past Harvey, who was sleeping on the couch. He grabbed his jacket and cap from the closet in the front room and quietly unlatched the front door, letting it close gently behind him.

"Well, well. Look who's here." Paul sneered at the younger boy. "Where the hell have you been, Danny-boy?" He punched Danny in the arm, quite a bit harder than Danny expected, but he kept his balance.

"Sick," Danny answered truthfully. "I passed out with a high fever yesterday, and I've just been lying low since."

Danny's nose was running from the sinuses clearing, and he still had a very low-grade fever. All he really wanted to do was curl up by the fire and fall asleep. He knew that wouldn't be allowed to happen. The niggling thought he'd had just this morning returned to him. *Better they beat me up here than let them track me down and find the Diamonds.*



"Really?" Paul snarled. "You know, Danny-boy, I never did like you. You're a thief," Paul punched Danny in the

stomach, "and I don't trust thieves." Another punch in the gut finally got Danny to stumble forward, but, still, Danny took it. Paul was the leader of the Cowhands, a late-twenty-something-year-old who got drugs from some bigger supplier, and then turned around and sold them to even smaller suppliers. He was a business man, primarily; a middle man. *A greedy bastard.* Danny knew messing with Paul would be big trouble. He regained his balance and looked the leader in the eyes.

"Cut him some slack," Luke piped up. Luke was second-in-command, so to speak. Luke was also an old neighbor. It was only because Luke had known him when his mother was still alive that Danny had ever been allowed to join the Cowhands. "He looks like hell."

Paul gave Luke a warning glare. "Stay out of it, Luke. I'm blaming you for bringing him in to begin with." Paul turned back to Danny. "You lost your parents, so I took some pity on you, even though I knew you wouldn't sell for me. Thirteen-year-old nobody. You would've died on these streets." Paul emphasized every few words with another punch.

Fourteen, Danny thought defiantly. He'd had a birthday last month, but hadn't bothered to tell anyone.

Paul continued on. "Stupid. Little. Thief. See, the problem with getting profits from your thieving is, I never know how much you've really gained. I've warned you about holding back on us." By this time Danny was on the ground, unable to get up again. Paul was kicking him instead of punching. "You go off on your own too much, Danny-boy. You think you're too good for our rules."

Danny tried to keep his eyes open and focused on Paul. But there were three faces floating in front of him, all with the same sandy brown hair hanging over the same beady green eyes.

"We're Cowhands, not Lone Rangers. You want to stay with us; you need to get with the act."

The taste of blood and vomit mingled in Danny's mouth. The feel of the cold cement floor of the warehouse against his face was soothing. Danny's last thought before his eyes closed involuntarily was that he hoped Paul was almost done.

Act III: Go Find Your Brother

June 4, 1956

"*Do your ears hang low, do they wobble to and fro...*" Crystal sang along with the chimes from the ice cream truck that was slowly making its way toward them.

Danny put his hand over her mouth. "Okay, already. Okay. I'll buy you some ice cream. Just *please* stop

singing." He lifted his hand gingerly.

Crystal gave him a satisfied grin. "Eskimo Pie."

Danny shook his head. "Let me rephrase that. I'll *pay* for the ice cream; *you* will be the one to stand in line with the little kids." He reached into his pocket and pulled out some coins, handing them to her with his own grin. "Fudgesicle for me."

Crystal took the money and hopped up from the picnic table where they were sitting. "Be right back," she called out in a sing-song voice, already on her way to stop the vendor before he turned the corner.

Danny watched her and waited patiently for her to come back. He shrugged out of his jacket; it just wasn't *cool* for a Cowhand to be seen doing something as childish as eating ice cream. Although Crystal would see him, he didn't need anyone else to.

Crystal returned and handed him the chocolate confection. "Here you go." She sat down on the bench below him.

Danny made short work of his treat, and then watched Crystal enjoy hers. She looked different than the last time he saw her. "So, besides hanging out here, what have you been up to? I haven't seen you around lately. You look good." Her hair actually looked like it had been washed, and she must have gained about ten pounds; she had lost that sunken look around her eyes and cheekbones.

Crystal looked up at him and shrugged. "Mom's in jail again. I've been staying with my dad and his new girlfriend." She took another bite of her ice cream. "I heard about you, though."

"Yeah, well..." Danny let that subject drop quickly, but pulled his jacket back on at the reminder.

"Oh, and I saw your friend again the other day. The good-looking one. Nick." She licked her lips dramatically.

Danny wondered what kind of lipstick she had on; it was still as bright a pink as before the ice cream. *Must be some powerful stuff. Wonder if it'll stay on if I kiss her?*

"He asked about you," Crystal went on when Danny didn't reply.

That caught his attention. With as casual a tone as he could muster, he asked, "Neil? What did he want?" Danny hadn't seen Neil since the day he'd left the comfort of that Flatbush apartment.

"Nick, Neil, whatever."

Something in her tone made Danny realize that it was she who had approached him, not the other way

around. Danny chuckled. "He brushed you off?"

"Yeah." Crystal frowned, and then shrugged her shoulders again. "His loss."

"Yeah," Danny answered, pulling her back to lean against him. "Tell me the whole story, anyway. I need to find out if I should go kick his ass or not." It was an act. Danny didn't want Crystal to know he was curious about what Neil had said, and using the cover of protecting her would get her to open up.

"He wasn't rude about it. But I'll let you decide. He asks a lot of questions, though, doesn't he?"

Danny couldn't help but laugh at that. "He's working on a book, I think."

"Oh." He felt Crystal shrug in a puzzled manner, and then she told him the story. It really was nothing. She'd seen him walking down the street and had gone over to him. All Neil had asked was if she was Danny's girl. And when he left, he'd told her to say "hi" to him. Everything else he'd asked had been about her. Although Neil had been nosy, he had not been rude.

"I'll let him live, then," Danny told her when she'd finished. "I think he's just really interested in some other girl."

"Figures." Crystal got up. "I better get back home. My dad's pretty strict."

Danny got up with her. "I'll walk with you."

July 14, 1956

"You're going to have to do this," Luke explained.

Danny glared at the older boy. "I told you from the beginning I wasn't ever going to sell drugs. You said that was cool."

"I lied. Sue me." Luke glared back at Danny, then softened his expression. "Just until Derek gets out, okay?"

Danny shook his head. "You know how I feel about that."

"Look," Luke explained, "These people're gonna buy whether you sell it to them or not. If they don't buy from us, they'll buy from someone else. That would really make Paul mad. So, why not make some dough?"

"Screw Paul." Danny spit on the ground.

Luke shook his head, and then suddenly swung and hit Danny on the jaw. "Stupid."

Danny staggered a bit but stood his ground.

"Paul's gained some respect for you. He admired the way you never cried out a couple of months ago. Don't blow it now; next time he won't be so nice." Luke's tone of voice was that of a teacher to a young child.

Danny couldn't believe the crap coming out of Luke's mouth. *Respect? Try resentment.* Danny had pretty much hung low since coming back from the Diamonds. He kept up with the stealing, adding shoplifting to the mix. Danny had also avoided the jazz shows that kept his soul grounded. Instead, he'd stayed close to Cowhand territory. He spent his free time hanging out with the other gang members, now. Paul had commented that at least Danny had learned who his family was.

Danny looked across the warehouse where some of the other Cowhands were hanging out. "Why can't one of them do the sale?"

Luke held his gaze, his tone threatening. "I'm asking you. You do it."

Danny took the bag of white powder Luke handed him. *Why not? I've already lost everything else.* He sighed in defeat. "Give me the details."

Danny had finished with the drop and was on his way back to the warehouse. He wanted to be rid of the money in his pocket. He felt absolutely sick to his stomach, and it wasn't the flu this time. When he arrived, he was disappointed to see that Paul was not around. All the way back, with each step he'd taken, his resolve had strengthened. He was scared he'd lose his nerve if he had to wait for Paul. He picked an empty corner and sat down and waited. A couple of the guys had tried to come over and talk to him, but he'd given them such a mean look they decided it would be safer to leave him alone.

Paul walked in and Danny finally got up, eager to get this over with. He approached him deliberately.

"Danny-boy. I hear you made a run for me, finally." Paul sneered in triumph.

Danny reached into his pocket and took out the cash. He counted it slowly in front of Paul, and then handed the entire wad to him.

"You can keep your share, you know." Paul laughed; it was an evil-sounding snicker. "Buy yourself a nice meal for a change." He handed a few of the bills back to Danny.

Danny shook his head. "Keep it. All of it. I don't want it." Danny took off his jacket and let it drop to the floor.

"Whatcha doin', Danny?" one of the other Cowhands asked.

Danny ignored the boy and turned back to look at Paul. "Keep it all." Then he walked towards the door.

"You crazy, boy? You can't just walk out of here."

Danny heard Paul walk up quickly behind him, but he didn't change his pace. "Watch me," he said forcefully.

Paul yanked Danny by the back of his t-shirt and reached to punch him, but Danny was faster. He blocked the punch and got his own in. Danny had never fought back before, but this was different. His life was on the line, and he knew it. He also knew the unspoken rules said no one else would interfere, on behalf of either one of them. He hoped the other Cowhands stuck to those rules. He drew his fist back and punched again, getting Paul right in the sternum. Danny saw the surprise, anger, and hatred in Paul's face. He kept going, his own anger fueling him: anger at his parents for leaving him; anger at himself for doing the things he had done. It didn't matter that Paul was more than ten years older than he was; it didn't matter that the things Danny was really angry about weren't Paul's fault. *He still deserves to have the shit beat out of him, even if he's not to blame.*

The fight dragged on pretty evenly. What Danny lacked in strength, he made up for in agility. Once, Danny managed to look at the faces of the other Cowhands who had gathered around in a circle, eager to see the outcome. He didn't know whether they were rooting for Paul or for him, but it spurred him on. He returned his focus to the fight and narrowly avoided having the heel of Paul's boot crush his knee. And in that second when Paul was off balance, Danny tripped him. He managed to keep Paul from getting up with more kicks. From there, he seemed to have the upper hand. *Paul's probably not used to anyone fighting back.* Danny grinned at the thought and sneered down at Paul. "How do you like it? Feels good, don't it?" Danny kicked him again, adrenaline masking all his own pain. "Having that cold hard floor cool you down; it's downright comforting, ain't it?"

Eventually, Paul stopped moving. *Luke might've been right after all. I do feel a bit of respect for him after kicking the shit out of him.* Somehow, the thought wasn't all that consoling. Danny straightened up and continued on to the door. With a menacing look, he turned to the other Cowhands. He used the back of his hand to wipe some blood from the corner of his mouth. "Anyone else wanna try and stop me?" He hoped someone would take the challenge.

No one in the room moved. Not even Luke. Satisfied, Danny turned and closed the door behind him.

Danny took the subway up to his old Harlem neighborhood. The clickety-clack of the train helped calm his agitated state. By the time he arrived at the 135th Street stop, his anger had abated and been replaced by a

kind of euphoria. He was free.

He walked over to his old high school and grabbed his duffle bag from the supply closet. A nice, long shower helped him calm down even more. Twenty minutes later, he was cleaned up as best he could be. He sat down on one of the benches in the locker room and pulled a notebook out of his duffle bag. It was a three-ring binder, about two inches thick. He flipped through the pages: musical notes and other markings he couldn't read. They were the last songs his father had been working on before he left for Korea. One of these days, Danny hoped he could find a musician who could translate the gibberish and maybe even record the music. *Harry Volpe? Maybe...*

He reached the last of his father's pages and laughed. Neil's sickeningly sweet love-letter stared up at him through the wrinkles. Danny was never sure why he bothered to keep it. Maybe just so he could remember Mrs. Diamond's yummy cheese blintzes. He put the binder back and pulled out one of the two spiral notebooks instead. Harvey's words echoed in his mind: *"What are you going to do with your life? Are you going to hang with that gang forever?"* He had given up his dream of becoming a journalist long ago, but he had never stopped writing. Turning the pages, he finally found some blank sheets. He rummaged in the duffle bag for a pen and let the words pour on to the page. It felt even more cleansing than the shower had.

A noise from the corner of the room startled Danny. It was just a mouse or a rat, but it brought him out of his reverie. *I need to find a new place. Luke knows too much about me, about my past, and he's loyal to Paul. He'll track me down here and Paul will kill me.* He stuffed everything back into the duffle bag.

With the bag hoisted on his shoulder, Danny left his old neighborhood behind. He couldn't stay there; he couldn't go back to the Lower East Side. He headed to Flatbush, the long way around, hoping Neil had told him the truth. He hated to crawl back there, begging for a place to stay, but he was pretty sure none of the Cowhands would be able to find him there. *Why didn't I just stay there in the first place?*

It was late when Danny arrived, too late to go knocking on the Diamonds' door. Knowing his options were limited, he hunkered down in a grove in Prospect Park and decided to try in the morning.

The next day, Danny found his way to the apartment without any problems. He climbed the two flights of stairs and quickly knocked on the door before he could change his mind. He heard some mumbled voices, and then someone shouted through the closed door. "Who is it?"

"It's Danny. Neil's friend." Danny waited.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

Danny looked at the door again. It was definitely the right apartment. "Mr. Diamond? Is that you?"

"Diamond? The Diamonds moved." An old man opened the door a crack and peered out at Danny. "They moved."

"Oh." Danny's shoulders slumped. "Sorry to bother you." He turned around and left.

September 18, 1956

"Judge Armen wants to see you in his chambers," the bailiff told Danny. "Let's go."

With a resigned sigh, Danny got up and followed the young officer.



Danny entered the cramped office, overstuffed with a large desk and books that seemed to spill out everywhere. The judge who was seated behind the desk pointed to a chair opposite him. "Sit down, son." His voice was soft, kind.

Danny sat in the designated chair, tense and rigid.

"I've been reviewing your case. First offense?" Judge Armen peered at him over wire-rimmed glasses.

Danny nodded. "Yes, sir."

"You were caught snatching a purse," Judge Armen stated.

Danny looked out the window on his right, avoiding the judge's gaze. "Yes, sir."

"The woman dropped the charges when she got her property back. A case like this should never have come up to me. The police should have released you, but it says here there's no one to release you *to*. Do you have any family, Daniel?"

"No, sir."

Judge Armen searched through some papers on the desk and picked up a legal pad. "Tell me about your parents, son."

Danny answered the question as simply as he could. "My father died in Korea. My mother died soon after."

"And did they have any family?" Judge Armen's voice was still calm and even, exuding patience and understanding.

Danny relaxed his stance slightly. "My father's parents died when I was around four. He was an only child. I don't know if I had any other family on his side." He paused, letting the judge finish writing his notes. When Judge Armen looked up, he continued. "My mother was an orphan. She had a younger brother."

"Had?" Judge Armen asked. "Did he die, too?"

Danny shook his head. "I don't know. The last we heard from him, he'd gotten in trouble with the law over some horse races in Saratoga. That was about four or five years ago."

"Hmm." Judge Armen licked the tip of the pen, then poised it to write again. "He doesn't sound like the most upstanding citizen, but I feel obligated to check it out, anyway. Does this uncle of yours have a name?"

"Willie. My mom always referred to him as Willie. I don't know his last name." Danny gazed out the window to his right again. The view wasn't that fascinating, but he didn't like facing the judge. "My mom's name is Sarah Mangan. But that's her married name; I don't know her maiden name."

"Thank you, son." The judge wrote the information down. "It's not much, but it's something to go on." He set the pad of paper and the pen down on top of some other papers on the desk. "I have to appoint you a guardian, meanwhile. Just temporary, for now. If I can't find your uncle, or if I find him and he's not a suitable guardian, then I'll have to place you in the foster care system."

Danny nodded glumly. He knew when the cops hadn't released him, this would probably happen.

Judge Armen picked up a large tome that was spread open, revealing a telephone underneath it. Danny heard the gentle *click-whirrr* as Judge Armen dialed each number. The other party answered, and Judge Armen kept his eyes on Danny as he spoke. "Akeeba? Moshe, here. ... Yes, thank you. Same to you and your family. Listen, Akeeba, I've got the boy here. You were right; he has no family. ... Well, he might have an uncle. I'll look into that. ... I've got the papers ready. ... Yes, you just need to come down here and sign the guardianship forms. ... I'll keep him here. ... Shalom." Judge Armen hung up the phone.

Danny met his gaze with interest. He wondered who Akeeba was. It was an unusual name, to him anyway. And the judge had ended the call with "*Shalom*." Was he being placed in the custody of a Jewish family?

Judge Armen might have been a mind reader. "Daniel and Sarah. Those are good Jewish names. You're mother wasn't Jewish, was she?"

Danny couldn't help let out a snort. "Sorry, sir. No, we're Irish. Catholic."

One of the judge's eyebrows shot up. "Oh, my. This will be interesting." He paused, and then leaned back in his chair. He folded his hands into a tent, his fingertips touching. "Are you *okay* with staying with a Jewish family?"

Danny met the judge's gaze evenly. "Do you want an honest answer?"

"Yes, I do." Judge Armen waited.

"I don't *want* to stay with anyone. I'll probably run away. So, no, it doesn't really matter to me what they are." Danny's tone was straight-forward and factual, not the least bit argumentative.

Judge Armen nodded. "I guess your running away is a chance we'll have to take." He stood up, and Danny did the same. Judge Armen motioned him to sit back down. "I have to get back to the courtroom. You wait here. Bailiff Robertson will be outside my door at all times."

Danny waited rather impatiently in the tiny office. He wandered over to the desk, curious if, among all the papers, his own file was there. The legal pad the judge had been writing on had somehow disappeared amongst the books and papers. There seemed to be a delicate balance to the mess on the desk and Danny was afraid to move anything.

Next, he went over to the door and opened it. Sure enough, a large black man in a bailiff's uniform was standing there. "Just checking," Danny said simply. The bailiff didn't reply. Danny closed the door and strolled over to the window, gazing out at the city streets below.

The time passed slowly, but eventually the door handle moved; Judge Armen had returned. "Danny, your guardian is here."

Danny turned around and tried to see behind the judge.

Judge Armen smiled kindly at him. "Downstairs. In the lobby."

Danny followed the judge down the three flights of stairs to the lobby. He was curious to see his temporary guardian. When he spied the large man waiting by the stairs, he broke into a genuine grin, his first in a long time. "Mr. Diamond?! What are you doing here?"

"Hmph," Mr. Diamond grumbled. "You don't think it was a coincidence my friend, Moshe, ended up with your case, do you?"

Danny shook his head, still surprised. "I did think things were moving kind of fast."

Mr. Diamond gave Danny a stern look, trying to be serious. "Yes. Moshe pulled some strings. Now, what's this I hear about you wanting to run away again? You're going to break my Rosie's heart."

"Well..." Danny remembered the teasing nature that he felt during his previous brief stay with the Diamonds.

"If she promises to make me more of those delicious blintzes, I just might stay a little longer this time."

Judge Armen winked at Danny and then addressed Mr. Diamond. "If Rose makes those blintzes, I'll be staying with you a while, too."

"Anytime, Moshe. Anytime. As a matter of fact, why don't you and Miriam come for dinner tonight?" Mr. Diamond responded.

"Wish I could, Akeeba. Maybe another night. I still want to hear the whole story about young Daniel, here. I have a feeling you left out far too much the first time." Judge Armen patted Danny on the shoulder and then shook Akeeba Diamond's hand. "Take care of him, Kieve. I'll be in touch soon."

Mr. Diamond nodded his goodbye to his friend, and then ushered Danny out the door in front of him. A beat-up looking blue car was parked in front of the building, illegally, and Mr. Diamond opened the door for Danny to climb in. Soon, they were on their way.

Danny watched the passing street signs as they made their way through the city. "Mr. Diamond?"

"Hmm?" Mr. Diamond kept his eyes on the road.

"Why?" Danny had thought Mr. Diamond would be glad to be rid of him. He couldn't come up with any reason why Mr. Diamond would bother with a street punk like himself.

"After you left, my wife, she worried about you. Wouldn't let it go. Neil said he didn't see you anymore. So, I put a word in with a good friend... or three." Mr. Diamond's mustache tried to hide the smile, but Danny could see the corner of his mouth had lifted up.

"Three? You had three people looking for me, and they couldn't find me?" Danny chortled.

Mr. Diamond glanced quickly at him. "Well, if you count Neil, four. But none of my friends could find you unless you got in trouble. I didn't think it would take them so long."

"Thanks," Danny retorted. "I do try not to get caught, you know."

"Apparently." The whiskers in Mr. Diamond's mustache quivered.

"I tried to go back."

"What?"

"I tried to go back to your apartment. I had no where to go..." Danny's voice trailed off.

"We moved. I'm sorry. I wish I could've let you know somehow." Mr. Diamond stopped at a light and looked over at Danny. "Your back, now."

Danny nodded. The light changed, and Mr. Diamond continued driving. "Where are we going?"

"Home, son. Coney Island."

"Can we stop somewhere so I can get my things?" Danny wanted his notebooks, if nothing else.

Mr. Diamond looked over at him in surprise. "Where?"

"I found a hiding place, over by Prospect Park. In your old neighborhood."

"Tell me where to turn."

A short while later, they were near the park, and Danny gave him the directions. He got out of the car, ran over to some dumpsters, and rummaged behind them. He returned with his duffle bag slung over his shoulder. Dumping it in the back seat, he got in the car again and Mr. Diamond continued on his way.

Soon, Mr. Diamond was pulling into a driveway in a nice residential area of Brighton Beach. He put his finger over his mouth, letting Danny know he wanted to surprise the others. Opening the front door, he called out, "Rose, I'm home. We have one more for dinner."

Mrs. Diamond came to the door to greet her husband. "Kieve, where's our guest? Who is it?"

Kieve moved out of the way and Danny stepped forward. "Mrs. D. Hi."

Mrs. Diamond rushed up to Danny and gave him a surprisingly strong hug. "Danny!" She kissed him on the cheek, and then stepped back. "I've been worried sick about you! How dare you go off and leave like that in the middle of the night? I really do need to teach you some manners." Her eyes twinkled throughout the scolding.

Neil and Harvey must have heard the commotion, as they came to the door also. "Don't just stand there. Let him in, Mameleh."

Mrs. Diamond moved aside, allowing Danny to follow Mr. Diamond into the house.

Mr. Diamond cleared his throat. "It's only temporary, for now, but Danny will be staying with us. I expect you to treat him like he's family."

Neil grinned and then smacked Danny on the back of the head. "Moron."

"Hey!" Danny protested, taken by surprise. "What was that for?"

Harvey chuckled. "That's how brothers act in this house. You get used to it."

Danny grinned and smacked Harvey the same way in return. "Yeah, I could get used to this."

"Boys! Cut it out or I'll whip all of you." Mrs. Diamond held up a wooden spoon, but the happy grin on her face made the threat fall short. "Dinner's about ready. Wash up and sit down."

Dinner was fairly quiet. Not a strained, uncomfortable quiet, but more of a long-day, let's-just-eat kind of quiet. When Harvey, who had been the last one to finish, finally put down his fork, Mrs. Diamond broke the serene silence. "What have you been up to the last six months, Danny?" Mrs. Diamond's question was sudden and direct, which didn't surprise Danny in the least.

The day had been long and overwhelming, and Danny wasn't sure what he really felt about this new change to his situation. He was nervous, but he also wanted to be honest with these people who had only treated him nicely, in spite of his own demeanor. He kept his eyes focused on his empty plate; his answer was guarded. "Hiding, mostly."

"Hiding from what?" Mrs. Diamond asked. When that question got no response, she tried again. "Or should I ask, hiding from whom?"

Danny looked up at the other members of the Diamond family. Neil mouthed the name on the tip of Danny's tongue. "Paul."

Damn! How the hell does he know? Outwardly, Danny tried not to show any surprise. Without emotion, he simply nodded.

Mrs. Diamond noticed the exchange. "Hiding from whom?" she asked again, this time looking at Neil.

"Paul," Neil answered obediently.

"And who is this Paul?" Mrs. Diamond looked first at Neil and then at Danny.

In a very polite tone of voice, Danny answered the question. "I can't talk about Paul without using language that would be inappropriate at the dinner table." He hoped that would be enough.

"What about you, Neil? Can you explain, *without foul language*, why Danny would be hiding from this Paul?"

"Yes, I'd like to know, too," Mr. Diamond added. Both parents stared at Neil, waiting for him to answer.

Danny started to rescue him, but Neil held up a hand, stopping him. "It's okay. I think I can explain." He took a sip of juice before continuing. "Paul is the bas - uh, guy, who beat the cr - beat up Danny when he stayed here the last time. Paul is also the guy that Danny nearly k - that Danny fought in order to leave the gang."

Danny heard Mrs. Diamond's sharp intake of breath. "Is that true, Danny?"

Stunned at just how much Neil knew, Danny simply nodded again.

"So, Paul is the leader of this gang, and you are no longer a part of this gang, because you fought with Paul?" Mrs. Diamond asked. Her words came out slowly; she was trying to understand.

Danny nodded once again, looking up at her.

"And now you have to hide from him? Why?" Mrs. Diamond's gaze was kind and sympathetic. When Danny didn't answer right away, she pushed. "Why are you hiding?"

Danny spoke quietly. "He'll kill me."

Mrs. Diamond gasped.

The sudden thump and rattle of the dishes startled Danny. Mr. Diamond had been listening in his usual stoic manner, letting Mrs. Diamond ask all the questions. But he had just slammed his hand down on the table and the water in his glass was still swishing back and forth. His face was red with anger as he muttered loudly in Yiddish. "*Es vert mir finster in di oygen. Nisht fur dich gedacht!*"

Whatever Mr. Diamond said did have the affect of helping Mrs. Diamond recover. She shot more questions at Danny. "He wants to kill you because you won the fight? Why can't he just let you leave? Are you so important to him?"

Danny looked up at her and met her tear-filled gaze. "It's not just that I fought him; it's that I won. I humiliated him in front of the gang. I stripped away the respect that he had. He can't let me get away with that."

"I see," Mrs. Diamond responded, her tone conveying her immense sadness. "How old are you, child?"

Danny bristled involuntarily at being called a child, though he knew she hadn't meant it as an insult.



"Fourteen," he answered.

Mrs. Diamond got up and stood next to him. Then she bent down and hugged him tightly. "Fourteen? So young, and you've already lived two lifetimes." She didn't let go.

After what felt like many minutes later, Danny heard Mr. Diamond's deep, calm voice. "Rose, you're smothering him."

Mrs. Diamond let go then and stood back up, dabbing at her eyes. "I guess I'll go get our dessert."

Mrs. Diamond left, and Danny looked at the others. Mr. Diamond gave him a sympathetic look, one that nearly mirrored his wife's earlier gaze. However, Danny could still see some anger behind that look. He hoped the anger wasn't directed at him. Feeling uneasy, Danny's eyes shifted to Harvey, who was staring at him with outright awe. Finding that just as awkward, Danny looked over at Neil. Neil seemed to be the only one comfortable in the whole room.

Mr. Diamond broke the silence that had crept into the room with Mrs. Diamond's absence. "How did you know about all this, Neil?"

"Can I plead the fifth?" Neil grinned hopefully at his father.

"No." Mr. Diamond answered. "Unless you want to work at my store for the rest of your life, no."

Danny looked over at his friend, curious as well. And then he guessed. "Crystal?"

Neil nodded.

Danny laughed, out of relief or out of hysteria, he wasn't sure.

Mr. Diamond was not laughing. "Since Neil told us about Paul, why don't you tell us about Crystal?"

"Yes, sir." Danny, mollified, told what he knew. "Crystal's just this girl that hangs out with the gang sometimes. She's pretty harmless, but she does usually know what's going on with everyone."

Mr. Diamond's mustache bristled, something Danny had grown used to seeing already. "And, why, Neil, are *you* hanging out with this Crystal girl?"

"I *try* not to." Neil defended himself. "She's seen me a few times, and she comes up to me and just starts talking." Neil had answered his father, but Danny saw the unspoken communication between them. There was more, and Mr. Diamond knew it. With a sigh, Neil continued. "Her real name is Kirsten. She's fifteen. Her parents are divorced and she's living with her mother right now."

"Damn. She was better off with her father." The words had left Danny's mouth before he could stop them.

Neil shot him a knowing glance. "Yeah, I agree."

Mr. Diamond shook his head. "I should just lock you in your room, shouldn't I?"

Mrs. Diamond had returned carrying a tray with some wonderfully aromatic baked-apple concoction. "It wouldn't help, Kieve. But it's worth a try." She set the tray down, and Harvey, apparently eager for something to do, passed the plates around. Mrs. Diamond focused her attention on Neil. "When are you going to bring Kirsten around to meet us?"

In one quick movement, Neil reached up and grabbed a plate from Harvey, and then stuffed his mouth with the warm dessert to avoid answering.

Danny was weary. He thought sleep should come easy, but it didn't. He couldn't turn his mind off; all the events of the last year played out in front of him again. Most of it seemed very real: Luke, the Cowhands, Paul. When the police had taken him into custody two nights ago, that seemed real. But this night, the Diamonds: this felt like a dream. *Will it ever all go away?* Danny turned toward the wall, staring at the blankness. A clean page; a new start. *If I close my eyes, will this go away?*

the end

Author's Notes:

Word count: 13,709

Steph H and Mary N totally ROCK!!! Your constant support and encouragement are thoroughly appreciated. The inspiration, cheerleading, kibitzing, editing, and extremely useful comments and suggestion you gave me made this story so much better than it would have been. It's been truly wonderful having you as sounding boards for my crazy ideas. I cannot possibly thank you enough, but thank you.

yarmulke is pronounced "ya ma ka"

(which always makes me think of that Hannukah song:

Put on your yamukah

Here comes Hannukah

So much funnukah

To celebrate Hannukah)

I know nothing about jazz. I know even less about jazz in the 1950s. Thank goodness for Google. ;)

Willie "The Lion" Smith, Barry Galbraith, Red Norvo, and Tal Farlow were all Jazz musicians who would have been known in the 1950s.

Harry Volpe was a jazz guitarist who also taught guitar in New York out of a music store that he ran.

Bill Haley, the Platters, Perry Como, Muddy Waters, Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers, and Fats Domino were popular singers/groups in the 1950s

Why Do Fools Fall in Love? topped the charts in February, 1956.

Neil Diamond is a real person. Neil, please don't sue me. I'm one of your biggest fans.

Harvey Diamond is also a real person, and Neil's younger brother. I don't know why I've made him a bit uptight here -- he just is. I hope to feature him in some other stories and show a nicer side of him.

Rose and Akeeba (Kieve) Diamond are also real people, and they are Neil's parents. Kieve ran a store called "Diamond's Dry Goods" in Flatbush. In 1956 (not sure when exactly, but for my story I decided it was at the beginning of summer), he moved the store and his family to Brighton Beach.

Everything I know about Neil I read a long time ago in a biography. I can't remember the title, nor can I remember the author. Half the "facts" I remember, I probably remember incorrectly. Therefore, please remember that this is a work of fiction. If I didn't know, I made it up. I have no idea if Neil ever wore a yarmulke. I don't know if he even liked Jazz, nor do I know where he lived, etc. However, any nods towards Neil's real life are completely intentional.

All personalities of the characters and all dialogue are completely made up. I only know a few facts about the Diamond family -- I don't know what they were really like. Hope I don't offend them!

Neil was born January 24, 1941, making him 15 in this story. Dan is 14. Harvey is 13. I don't ask the parents' ages. ;)

Neil did not seriously consider becoming a song writer until after he met Pete Seeger during summer camp in 1956. He wrote his first song, "Hear Them Bells" in 1956, but I'm not sure when exactly. He got his first guitar on his 16th birthday, Jan 24, 1957.

"My darling, I need you more each day.", "I'll be yours forever, sweetheart.", "To be with you love is my one desire." All lines are lyrics from Neil's first song, *Hear Them Bells*.

While I'm at it -- "If I Close My Eyes" is a line from *Brooklyn Roads*; "On Some Dark Quiet Street" is a line from *At Night*; "I'll Be What I Am" is a line from *Solitary Man*; and "Go Find Your Brother" is also a line from *Brooklyn Roads*.

Timmy Mangan is not a real person, but in my universe he's a jazz musician who recorded a few albums. I don't know who made Tim Mangan a musician, but I'm certain it's not canon. I've always liked the idea, though, so I hope you don't mind my stealing it.

I decided to make Tim's death a Jeep accident in Korea, combining the war and car accident stories from the two different versions of Black Jacket.

The Korean War ended in 1953, so Neil could have seen Tim play anytime between 1950 and 1952, and did, in this fiction, see him play in 1951.

Bagels and blintzes have been around for a very long time, but they weren't widely popular outside the Jewish community back in the 1950s. I don't think Danny would have recognized them.

Thank you to PatK, Terry, and CLynn for help with the bits of Yiddish, or at least for trying and providing some super helpful links.

King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table by Roger Lancelyn Green was first published in 1953.

Arizona Roundup by William Hopson was published in 1948. Other than knowing it's a western novel, I have no idea what it's about.

Es vert mir finster in di oygen. Nisht fur dich gedacht! = It is getting dark in my eyes. It shouldn't happen!

The following sites provided gobs of useful information on various subjects:

Neil Diamond: <http://www.iaisnd.com/>

Judaism: <http://www.jewfaq.org/>

Yiddish: <http://www.pass.to/glossary/Default.htm>

Fifties music, slang, fashion, etc.: <http://www.fiftiesweb.com/fifties.htm>

Jazz Guitarists: <http://www.classicjazzguitar.com/>

Photos of Neil and the background "wallpaper" are from the "In My Lifetime" CD booklet.

Pictures of Danny are from the Cameo version of "Trixie Belden and the Black Jacket Mystery."

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