



Wishing for Home Chapter Four Rebellion and Result

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Danny flaunts the Flint's restrictions

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Danny Rogan slumped disconsolately on the edge of his bed. Just one more punishment. And for what? Lingering too long at the farm enjoying the sight of a newborn calf. Things were just getting worse and worse in this awful cottage. Being brave was one thing. No matter what his mother and father expected of him, being home was the only thing.

He gazed out of the bay window to where the branches of the trees in the shadowy woods swayed like beckoning arms. A place to hide. A place to escape to and be sheltered from the cold enmity of the Flints. But how many times had Albin Flint warned him of the dire consequences of disobeying his

demands for Danny to stay out of there?

How much longer would he have to put up with this callous pair?

As he had done so many times lately, Danny lay back on his bed, closed his eyes, and made up scenarios that might get him away from the Flints. He had heard Frankie Keyes talk about simply running away, but Frankie was thirteen and big. Bad as things were Danny just could not see himself running off into the unknown countryside. It might sound brave, but Danny was wise enough to recognise the difference between bravery and blind stupidity.

Other ideas stormed through his mind. Was there a way to get Albin Flint in trouble with the police? But how could he do that? Danny had wondered what could happen if the cottage burned down. No, that was dangerous for little Sarah. Then, Albin Flint's van crashing was another possibility. But like everything else, they were all hopeless stupid dreams.

Two days later events at school suddenly got worse. The bitterness from the local kids was a constant, and when they had any kind of ammunition to get at the evacuees, they were ever eager to use it.

So it was, in an art lesson, where he was trying to capture his own front street in watercolours and was having difficulty with the colour of the privet hedging. The only green he could make was too bright, and there seemed to be no other choice. That was when skinny, sallow Vic Samms slithered up close like some nasty little snake.

Grinning meanly he hissed, "I see your mates done a runner." He even sounded like a snake.

"What are you on about?" Already irritated, Danny could do without this presence.

"Keyesy's done a runner. Soft townies."

"Victor Samms!" Miss Sword's imperious tones cut into the sneering." Get back to your seat, this instant."

Vic gave Danny a final triumphant smirk before sliding away.

Confusion churned Danny's mind. Could it be true? Frankie hadn't just been talking big.

At playtime, Norma confirmed the story, "Oh, yes, he's gone. Mr and Mrs Philips were talking about it."

Danny was thrilled and depressed at the same time. Thrilled at Frankie's boldness yet depressed that his true ally could no longer bolster his own problems.

"When did he go?"

Norma shrugged, "Well, he wasn't at school yesterday. So it must have been Wednesday night."

"He said it would be at night."

"You knew?" Norma's eyes had widened.

Danny nodded. "But did he make it. He might be lost. Or even dead." Danny knew he was merely voicing his own fears about such an action.

Norma's expression changed to one of scorn. "One thing's certain. You'd never try it."

Danny could do nothing but nod at that. It was true. Eager as he was to be home, he could not see himself taking that big a risk.

For the rest of the day, the loss of Frankie preyed on Danny's mind. Lessons he liked swept by in a haze. During the final session, he went to stand by Miss Sword's desk to have his work marked. One or two others were milling about, and someone nudged against him.

Whether it was accidental or deliberate he never knew, but in stumbling his arm caught the box of chalks on the corner of the desk. Desperately reaching for it, he could only help the box as it crashed to the floor.

Coloured chalks splashed in all directions, and, performing weird dance steps to avoid them, Danny could only crunch them under his feet. Other kids giggled or laughed out loud. Vic Samms and Max Hindley grinned and wafted scolding fingers in the air.

"Danny Rogan!" Miss Sword leapt to her feet. She was a very tall lady who towered over him. Normally reasonable, now she glared at him and snapped, "How could you be so clumsy? Stay after school and clear this mess up."

"But, Miss—"

She couldn't know what problem that might cause with the Flints. Miss Sword just waved his protest

away.

It took him ten minutes to pick up all the loose, reusable chinks. Then as the other children left, casting him mocking grins, Miss Sword handed him a brush. She then supervised his sweeping up the coloured dust that other feet had gleefully ground into the stone floor.

Racing up the lane he knew he was half an hour later than normal. From some distance away he could see the cottage gate and Eliza Flint's stiff figure standing there, watching for his return. Trouble again. She turned away as he came nearer. Danny wondered whether he should march straight to the broom cupboard when he got in.

"Where the devil have you been until this time?" The expected greeting, but even as he tried to explain, she waved his attempt aside. " You should be straight into that cupboard but we need hen corn. So here..." And she pushed two silver coins into his hand. "One and sixpence for half a stone. And be quick. Wash your hands first."

Danny did exactly as he was told. Then he was down to the mill, which was just beyond the Ainsley farm. The old stone mill stood by a stream that ran down to the river, and after rain, the water rushed louder than usual. Mr Jollit stood in the wide, ancient doorway, stooped and solemn-faced as always. Apparently he carried the weight of the world on his white powdered shoulders.

"There y'are, lad. And mean old Flinty will be glad to know that the hen corn is sixpence cheaper just now---That'll bring a smile to his miserable face."

That really pleased Danny. The notion that someone as long-faced as Mr Jollit could think of Albin Flint as miserable was very satisfying.

On the way back to the cottage, he wondered, while normally he handed the bag directly to the Flints, if he took it directly to the bin where hen corn was kept, it might save him from the cupboard.

When he closed the gate, he hurried straight to the hen-house where the occupants, all nodding browns and whites, clucked merrily, as though smelling the contents of the bag he carried.

Carefully, he removed the lid from the rusting bin alongside the mesh fence and hefted the bag to the rim.

"What the devil are you doing?" Eliza Flint's coarse voice seared into his acute senses so that he almost dropped the bag.

“Emptying it for you.”

She was silent for a moment, although her tongue clicked in irritation, as she considered his action. The corn flowed into the bin with a gentle hiss.

“Well, you’d better not spill one grain,” she growled, turning back into the kitchen,

Her way of saying, thank you, Danny thought bitterly. But everything went all right. And when he entered the kitchen he reckoned his ploy had worked, as the cupboard door was closed and Eliza Flint merely told him, “Tea won’t be long. Sit down quietly with your book. And don’t disturb Mr Flint.”

Disturbing Mr Flint was very appealing but might have dire consequences. The scowling man was hidden behind his newspaper as Danny settled himself by the window and began reading about how Tom Sawyer tricked his friends into painting his aunt’s fence.

If that amused him, the chill cold meal that followed was as deadening as ever. Afterwards, as often happened early evenings the Flint’s talked together. Danny rarely paid much attention to what they were saying. He would sit in the abrasive front room atmosphere, his book on his knee, as they moaned about local things, and more and more frequently about the war.

Danny heard odd words like ‘blitzkrieg’ and ‘Dunkirk’. Something about a German battleship called ‘Graf Spee’ being scuttled. Whatever ‘scuttled’ meant. All he hoped to hear was that the war was over and he could go home. But that didn’t happen.

Then, one evening, he heard Eliza Flint talking about Mandy Skirling, a village girl. Who was in his class in school. She had a high pitched voice that had been missing for a couple of days.

“Very worried about it, they were,” Eliza Flint was saying, while Danny moved onto his next chapter.

“Doctor Tripp couldn’t help?” Albin Flint asked.

“Local hospital couldn’t do anything either. Hadn’t the right equipment. Had to take her to the city hospital in—”

And as soon as she said the name of his home town they instantly had Danny’s full attention.

“Stupid thing for her to do though,” Albin Flint growled. “How could she get a stone stuck up her nose?”

“Beats me,” Eliza Flint was saying, but Danny’s skin had gone all hot and tingly. Quietly he put down his book, and trying to look casual, he wandered out to the garden. The light was dimming and clouds of tiny flies flitted like disturbed spirits. He was trembling with anticipation.

For ten minutes in the failing light, he scanned the garden edges, collecting small stones and pebbles. They mounted up on the low wall behind the chicken run, filling him with growing excitement.

Satisfied with his collection, he chose a sandy coloured pebble that glowed with promise in the evening light. Gingerly, he introduced it into his left nostril.

The ensuing minutes were highly frustrating. Stones were either too big, and wouldn’t go in at all, or they had sharp edges that hurt. Some were too small and fell wet and glistening into the soil.

His fingers started coming away from the task lightly streaked with blood.

At last, after much pained but intense pressure he got one small pebble to stick. Joyously, he galloped up the path to inform the Flints about this terrible calamity that had befallen him.

But the vigour of his eager charge caused the obstacle to dislodge, and it fell, wet and bloodied on the path in front of him.

Danny gave up, sore, angry and defeated.

Two days later saw Danny’s worst fears come to light, a day when he gave way to temptation and suffered the consequences.

School ended, and that had been relatively calm. A couple of sneering comments from Max Hindley he had managed to ignore. As ever, as he opened the cottage gate he wished he was somewhere else. The coldness that lay ahead was becoming so hard to bear.

Sure enough, as he entered the kitchen, Eliza Flint’s stiff figure turned to him, “Oh, you’re here at last.” Danny knew he wasn’t late at all as Eliza Flint went on, “Anyway, get yourself down to Ainsley’s farm. I need some milk. And no hanging about.”

Oh, those chilly eyes as she indicated the large billy can. But at least it meant getting away for a short while and meeting some relatively cheerful people. He raced away to the farm, took the milk and noticed Mrs Ainsley’s disappointed face as he told her he had to hurry back and couldn’t see the calf. Playing safe, that’s what he was doing.

The kitchen was empty when he got back, his fingers sore from the cutting wire handle. He heard the dull rumble of the Flints' voices from the front room as he stepped around little Sarah, who was sitting on the back doorstep combing her doll's hair with some ferocity.

"Like Mama does mine," she cooed, and Danny could believe that. Then she added, "Beena farm, Danny?"

"Yes, the farm."

"Milk?"

"Yes, Sarah, just milk." And he held the can up, not easy because it was heavy and he wanted to get it the weight of it off his fingers. She gave her a smile, thinking that she was the only near-human person in this place. Her little brow furrowed as though he had made a funny face. She didn't recognise a smile, Danny reckoned.

With some effort, he lifted the can to place it on the kitchen table. Then he flexed the deep creases out of his fingers, before going to the bathroom to wash his hands before he was told to. Always best to stay one step ahead, he'd learned.

It was as he dried his hands that he heard a crash followed instantly by a high pitched squeal from Sarah. Rushing through to the kitchen he saw, beyond a glaring Eliza Flint, Sarah standing sobbing, her dress soaked in milk that still dripped from the skirt. Milk was spreading over the floor around the billy can which lay there.

Eliza Flint turned to him, "You stupid boy. Look what you've done."

"I didn't do—"

Before he could complete his denial, he was pushed in the back as Albin Flint's voice growled behind him, "You going to argue, boy?"

"But —"

Twin Flint glares stopped him. Eliza Flint's hands touched at her mouth in exasperation. Little Sarah just stood, dripping milk and howling. Neither parent made any move to soothe her. Her mother merely said, "Quiet, Sarah. It's not your fault." Her eyes were bleak on Danny once more as she growled, "You put the can right on the edge where she could reach it."

Danny opened his mouth but could say nothing. The sheer unfairness choked him. That was always as far as he could reach with the can. Sarah must have pulled at the looped wire handle to tip it. Now, he saw Albin Flint stride towards the cupboard and feared the worst.

But his tormentor only reached inside and, producing a mop and bucket. Thrusting them at Danny he snarled, "Don't just stand there, boy. Get it cleaned up. And you'd better make a good job of it."

Eliza Flint led the sobbing Sarah away to be changed, and with a final scowl, Albin Flint returned to the front room.

Danny began dabbing the mop tentatively on the milky floor. Quickly, he realised that if he pushed it towards the door, the liquid found a natural channel and disappeared down a drain. Then, on hands and knees, he rubbed at the floor with a cloth until no milk remained.

He sat up to squeeze the cloth into the bucket and saw that the Flints were standing like threatening jailers, watching him. "It'll have to do," Eliza Flint grumbled. "I have to get the tea ready."

Danny half expected to be returned to the cupboard along with the mop and bucket. But Albin Flint simply growled, "If you make trouble for yourself then you can expect to take the consequences. It's straight to bed after your tea." And he hung over Danny as though about to swallow him.

Disconsolately, Danny wandered out into the garden. Dark, resentful thoughts filled his head and his brow was heated. His mood, the Flints, and the oppressively warm air under dark clouds all pressed in on him.

The injustice of the incident plagued at him. How could he have known that Sarah would be able to do that? Everything was working against him, and there was no way of fighting back. There was nowhere, no one, to give him comfort.

That was the moment he found himself staring at the promise offered by the sheltering trees. Looking back once towards the cottage, a wave of rebellion struck him and made his body glow. All his thoughts of playing safe were suddenly swept away. Wildly, eagerly, he rushed towards the trees, ducked under the branches that reached out like welcoming arms, and plunged into the forbidden woods.

The sudden gloom and protective closeness of the trees freed him, lifted his spirits so that he strode joyfully kicking up spouts of dead leaves, loving the smell of rich earth and mould. How he revelled in this act of deliberate disobedience. Doing something the Flints had forbidden was a kind of vengeance. Now he really felt he was being brave. And, oh, did he enjoy it?

A rabbit darted in front of him, a brown streak, from under his feet. Yelling and whooping he chased after it until it vanished behind a tree stump. He ploughed joyfully on through lush grasses and thick leaf mould. Overhead, the branches endowed a sense of security that had not been his for such a long time. Oh, yes, this was well worth a session in that stupid cupboard.

Then he bethought himself. Don't go overboard. Determined not to be caught out, he curtailed his enjoyment. Being sensible, he returned to the oppressive cottage before they could miss him or guess at the outrageous step he had taken.

But he felt renewed, revitalised by the enormity of his act.

Eliza Flint was bent over the bench in the kitchen, pouring hot water into the teapot. The table in the front room was set in its usual bleak and uninviting fashion. On his plate lay two slices of pink meat, thin and dry as playing cards. Albin Flint was slouched in the only armchair, a newspaper in his hands, his shoulders hunched forward.

Danny kneeled up on a chair to look out of the window down the green-lined lane, Not for the first time, he imagined his mother suddenly appearing, coming to take him home. Still, the run-out in the woods had gratified him. He was relaxed and nice and calm.

Too soon!

"Danny Rogan!" Eliza Flint's harsh voice broke jarringly into his reverie, causing him to jump back from the chair. "Have you been in the woods?"

Shocked, Danny felt his face redden as though under a blow-lamp. He turned to face her rigid, aproned figure, sensing Albin Flint lowering his newspaper. Trembling, unable to fathom how she could know he stammered, "No—no—I haven't."

"Liar!" Albin Flint's bark made Danny shrink. Unable to face the accusing stares, his eyes darted nervously around the room. He took in the brown miserable wallpaper, the carvings on the sideboard doors, the fussily blackened fireside hearth.

As though drowning he needed something to clutch at. Breathing became difficult. Guilt threatened to choke him. He could only deny the truth.

"Look at your socks, boy," Albin Flint growled. Had he ever appeared this angry? Thick fingers were fingering his belt buckle.

Sarah, all blond hair and pink cheeks pointed and chuckled delightedly. Making Danny look at the direction she indicated.

Tiny green spiky balls clung tellingly to his short grey socks. It was such a tell-tale that Danny, in spite of everything, and in response to, for him, Sarah's first chuckle, could not suppress a grin at the silliness of it all.

"You think it's funny, boy?" Albin Flint was out of his chair and taking a step towards him. "That's goosegrass, you've got on your socks. And it grows nowhere but in the woods. Haven't I warned you?"

Those thick fingers were fumbling at his belt buckle. Danny could not take in the full implication of that until the belt was suddenly slid from around Albin Flint's waist with a rattling, whipping sound that had something heave up in Danny's chest. He wasn't going to—do that, was he?"

Eliza Flint's lips set in a firm line as she placed a hand on little Sarah's shoulders and led her towards the door.

Nervously, Danny moved to follow. The next second a sharp stinging pain shot across his lower back, making him gasp with shock and hurt.

"I warned you, boy. You don't disobey me." Danny half turned in despair as he saw the belt travelling again. This time it caught him high on his legs as he tried to duck away. Stinging heat filled his lower body as he stumbled to the door.

"Bed now. No tea for you. And mend your ways or there'll be more of this."

Tears, of anger and frustration, as much as pain ran down his face as he ran to his bedroom, where he stood for a long time, suppressing the tears, but filled with a million conflicting thoughts. Outside, trees that had shared his pleasure, now rocked and growled in the rising wind, as though apologising for his plight. Home, and the comfort that lay there filled his mind.

Among his mixed-up thinking, there came one that hadn't bothered him before. As far as he knew, his mother was still in hospital. So charged up with his own unhappiness he had never gone into it deeply. Now, guilt ripped at him.

He had only been seven-years-old when his grandad had gone to the hospital and he had died there. In Danny's infant mind then hospitals were places where people went to die. He didn't think that now.

Hadn't his cousin, Jeff, gone in with something that sounded like ' plurals', and he came out all right. But still, why had his mother been away so long?

Another reason to get home and away from the cruel Flints.

He tried to read eventually, but couldn't concentrate. Lying in bed as the evening wore on, his thoughts became more and more confused and troubled, before sleep finally came to him.

Sometime in the night, he dreamed that a huge black bear with red eyes and savage teeth came out of the roaring trees to stand snarling at his window. Then it developed the angry face of Albin Flint.

When he woke up in the early morning the bed and his pyjama pants were wet. At first, he felt ashamed and disgusted. That hadn't happened since he was a baby. Then in a perverse way, he was glad, even though it would earn him another spell in the cupboard, or worse.

All he could really think of was that Danny Rogan wanted to be –home.