HOW I COULD BE MAX DOMINGUEZ

BY EMMY LAYBOURNE
Chapter 1

The Canadian government man’s name was Mr. Tannenbaum and even I know that means his name was Mr. Christmas Tree.

That was a good sign, to me. Because people get what they want at Christmas, sometimes. Only Mr. Tannenbaum seemed like he wanted to say no to me and Mrs. Dominguez.

“I understand there’s a burning desire on behalf of you, Max and you, Mrs. Dominguez, for this adoption to take place, but our current policy is to defer on matters of adoption to the Unites States government,” he said.

Tío was supposed to be with us, on account of his English, but he thought the meeting was at two, only they moved it to eleven and we couldn’t find him so me and Mrs. Dominguez were on our own.

“Yeah, but does it count that they’re hardly even American? They are pretty much from Mexico,” I said.

“That has no bearing on this matter, Max,” Mr. Tannenbaum said.

“My sister live New Mexico,” Mrs. Dominguez kept saying. “We goin’! We goin’!”

Mrs. Dominguez was trying to make him understand that her sister was going to send for their family, to sponsor them, as refugees. And if they didn’t adopt me, I’d be left behind.
“I have a full workload, Mrs. Dominguez. I understand your position, I truly do, but this is not a matter we can accommodate you on.”

Mrs. Dominguez was wringing her hands. We waited a long time for this meeting and now it was about to be over.

“You ever heard of 4H, Mr. Tannenbaum?” I asked.

“Of course, I have, son—”

“Well, I was in 4H for one summer on account of a family moved in down the road and they had eight kids, I’m not kidding and all of them, all of them had yellow hair like mine. I could have been a Fitzpatrick in a heartbeat and for that one summer, I almost was.”

“That hardly seems to—“

“I never ate better! The mom cooked hot dogs and pork and beans with real pieces of bacon in it every day for lunch and she let me eat right along her kids! She had a van. A regular van, not even a mini-van, to cart those eight kids around in.

“I guess she felt sorry for me because, well, that was right around when my dad moved out for permanent, because my mom found a pasty under the visor of his Dodge ram and if you don’t know what a pasty is, it’s a stripper thing they put on their private parts. It’s not a good thing to leave around lying where a mom can find it.

“After he moved out, my mom got all these extra grave-hard shifts at the diner to try to keep up the payments and keep the lights on, etcetera, so me and Lucky, that was my dog, we was alone most all of the time.”

Mr. Tannenbaum turned to Mrs. Dominguez like, ‘Can I get a little help here?’ but she was just nodding and smiling at me like she always does when I tell a story.

“Anyway, Mrs. Fitzpatrick she signed me up for 4H along with
her eight kids and I did good. Surprising—well good. I was good at animals. I was good at being a citizen. And even health studies. Like washing hands and cough into your elbow and stuff like that.”

“And I’ll have to ask you to tell me the rest another time—”

“Yeah, but just listen to the end part, okay? The head guy, Mr. Dawner, he just loved me. I was his little pet boy and I went everywhere with him. And it wasn’t anything weird or anything, it was actually just okay. He liked me.

“And every day, he’d say to Mrs. Fitzpatrick, when she picked us all up in her van, that I was a good, bright boy. And she’d smile at me and ruffle on my head.

“Only then, on the last day of 4H, my real mom came to get me. Oh, she came ‘cause I’d been on and on her about how I wanted her to come and see what I done ‘cause I made this igloo out of sugar cubes for a project on different types of houses around the world and to meet Mr. Dawner and everything.

“And my mom had been working the grave-hard. And she was maybe drinking some, because she smelled like beer and I remember she had those sores on her mouth like she’d get sometimes.

“And when she held out her hand to Mr. Dawner, he pulled away. Like she was a skunk or a homeless lady or some kind of flu going around.

“And I saw his eyes go on over to Mrs. Fitzpatrick and I realized: he thought I was one of hers.

“And my mom didn’t like that. And like I said, she’d had some beers, and she grabs me by the back of my shirt and she says to him, ‘Max is mine, you creep. He’s a Skolnik and he’ll always be a Skolnik.’ And I was real mad and I kicked her by accident on the leg and I ran to the other side of our crappy little Honda
civic and she came after me swearing and slapping.”

Mr. Tannenbaum was actually on the edge of his chair.
“What happened next?” he said.

“Mr. Dawner backed up and he and Mrs. Fitzpatrick stood
talking and shaking their heads like what a dirty shame and my
mom yelled curses out the window. Then she backed up into the
fender on Mr. Dawner’s car and drove off.”

Mr. Tannenbaum looked at me, then out the window, then
back at me. He sat there for a good, long while.

“I don’t understand what that story means, Max,” he said
finally, real quiet.

“It means I can fit,” I told him.

“You can fit... in what way?”

“I can fit in with regular people like Ulysses and Tío and Mrs.
Dominguez, who cook and keep their things nice.”

Some people you just have to spell things out for.

“My name can be Dominguez. Max Dominguez. Get it? I don’t
have to be a Skolnik my whole life after all.”

Mr. Tannenbaum looked at Mrs. Dominguez. She was patting
me on the back. Smiling. She is the kind of person who loves to
smile.

“She likes it when I tell stories,” I said confidential-like to Mr.
Tannenbaum. “She told Ulysses to tell me my voice sounds to
her like a little brook running under a bridge.”

Mr. Tannenbaum sat there for a minute, looking out the
window. Then he took a tissue from the box on his desk and
blew his nose like a honking goose.

“I’ll see what I can do,” he said. “But I can’t promise
anything.”

Me and Mrs. Dominguez went outside and since I said I was
hungry, she gave me an apple what she had tucked away in her
purse the whole time. It was a happy apple to eat, like a party apple, because I know Mr. Tannenbaum is going to get the job done.