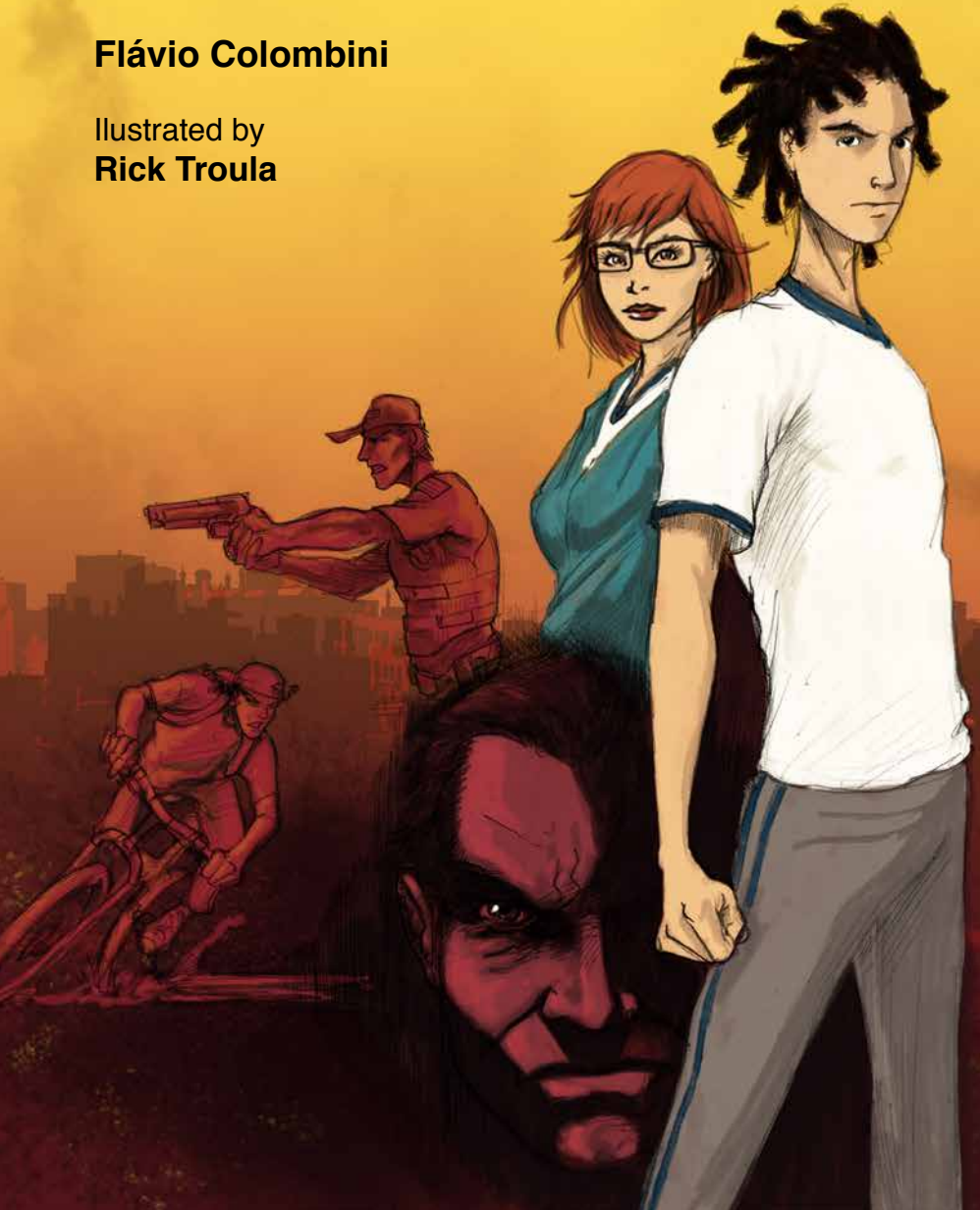




# THE GREAT MISSION

**Flávio Colombini**

Illustrated by  
**Rick Troula**



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Translation from Portuguese: Melissa Mann  
Revision: Enicia Fisher and Flávio Colombini  
Graphic design: Flávio Colombini  
Cover art: Rick Troula

Daniel woke up happy that morning. It seemed like just a regular Thursday, but to him it was a special day. His birthday. He felt self-assured and mature now that he was older. He had turned fifteen.

Danny's mother usually left for work before he woke, but that morning she changed her routine and fixed him a delicious breakfast, complete with cereal, yogurt and fresh fruit. Only after joining him for his morning meal did she head off to her job.

Danny felt like skipping school, but he could not. He had a scholarship to a private high school and he could not afford to mess up this opportunity. While he was proud to study at a top-rated program, he did not like being the only poor kid in an upper-middle class high school.

Danny showered, put on his clothes and walked out the door. His cell phone rang as he was walking to school. On the other end of the line, a deep voice asked, "Who's this?"

"Danny."

"Here's the deal: we've kidnapped your mother."

"What?"

"Shut up and listen!"

Danny was scared. In addition to the man's voice, he could make out the sound of a woman crying in the background.

"Me and my buddies kidnapped you mother. Now you do what I tell you or else she dies. You got it?"

"No. What? How?"

"No questions! You do what I tell you or she dies."



“But—”

“I said, shut up and listen! Go to school. I’m gonna call you again and tell you what to do. And don’t even think of calling the police ’cause I’ll kill your mom right away.” The man hung up.

Terrified, Danny had difficulty taking it all in. His mother—kidnapped. How? He quickened his steps and thought: *Could it be true? What if it’s a prank?* He decided to call his mom. Her cell phone rang and rang, but no one picked up.

He continued walking and thinking about how his mother could have been kidnapped. She takes a bus to work, walking from home to the bus stop. It would be easy for a car to stop and pull her inside. But why? His mom was not rich. Quite the contrary. She could barely pay the bills. What would they ask as ransom?

Danny tried calling his mother’s workplace. The phone rang a number of times until a moody employee answered, “Yes?”

“Nancy, please.”

“There’s no Nancy here. This is a public hospital, not someone’s residence.”

“But Nancy’s my mom. She works there as a nurse, I mean nurse’s assistant.”

“In which ward?”

“The emergency room.”

“I’ll transfer you.”

Danny was on hold for a while, listening to annoying background music until someone picked up and he asked for his mother once again.

“She hasn’t come in yet. She’s late,” said the emergency-room orderly.

*So it must be true; she must have really been kidnapped,* Danny thought. *It’s times like this when it’d be nice to have a dad around to help me.* He had never met his father, who had died a few months before he was born.

“Car accident,” his mother used to say. But she never wanted to talk about it. It was very traumatic for her to remember George Anthony Romero. Danny only knew his father’s name because he had found an old document belonging to him stuffed in a drawer. Danny’s identification, though, didn’t list his father’s name, just his mother’s.

Danny arrived at school twenty minutes before the bell. He stood outside, not knowing whether to go in or skip school and get help. *What could the kidnappers possibly want from me?*

His cell phone rang. The boy looked at the screen, which flashed “Unknown.” He picked up.

“Listen up—”

It was the man with the deep voice once again. And the sounds of a woman shouting and crying in the background were still audible.

“Mom!?! You let my mother go!” Danny yelled into the phone.

“Shut up and listen. Daniel, I’m gonna give you your first mission.”

“What do you mean? What do you want as ransom for my

mom? I don't have any money.”

“I don't want money. You think I don't know you're poor?”

“So what is it you want?”

“Shut up and listen! I want to see if you are man enough.”

“Huh? But what does that have to do with my mom?”

“I'm sick and tired of a world full of cowards. I want you to be a real man. If you do everything I tell you, I'll let your mother go. But if you don't obey me, the next time you see your mother, she'll be in a coffin.”

Coffin. The word scared Danny. He had already seen one person in a coffin. His grandfather, who had died a few years back. But picturing his mother, the person he loved most in this world, laid out in a coffin was too painful to even imagine.

“This’ll be your first mission,” the kidnapper commanded.

Danny listened intently. His mother’s life depended on his paying close attention.

“We heard there’s a boy in your school who’s a rich snob. He walks around everywhere showing off his new stuff.”

“Yes, Paul Phillips.”

“That’s the one. I want you to steal his smartphone.”

“But I’m not a thief!”

“You’ll do as I say! Steal his phone, and don’t let anyone catch you, or else it’s your mom in a body bag!” The man hung up.

*What am I going to do now?* Danny thought. But he didn’t have a choice. He had to follow the man’s orders.

Danny remembered a time his first year in school when he went into the classroom during recess, saw a cool pencil on someone’s desk and stole it. When he realized the pencil belonged to his friend Pete, Danny regretted his actions. He watched the boy looking desperately for the pencil and felt terrible. The next day, when Pete was not paying attention, Danny laid the pencil on top of the boy’s desk once again. It was then that he swore he would never steal anything ever again.

But now it was different. He needed to do this or else his mother would die. He had to steal Paul’s smartphone. But

how?

Just then, Paul stepped out of his fancy car and walked towards the school. Danny followed him from a safe distance.

Paul soon took his new phone out of his pocket to show it to his friend Adrian. Danny watched with a mixture of envy and fear. How was he going to manage to steal it without anyone noticing? It was impossible.

The bell would ring at any moment. Danny stood near Paul and Adrian and listened in on their conversation while they played a game on the smartphone.



“So I fire a few shots and kill these guards here. Bam, bam!”

“Sick!” Adrian exclaimed.

The other students were arriving on campus and walking past them. Danny was still trying to come up with a plan when, to his despair, the first bell rang. He had to think fast.



Paul stopped playing, placed the phone in the outside pocket of his backpack, and zipped it closed. He did this because the school had a very strict no-phones-in-the-classroom policy. So the phones had to be silenced and safely stored in the students' lockers or backpacks during classes.

At that moment, Danny saw his only friend from school, Henry, kicking a soccer ball around with some other boys nearby. Danny went up to Henry and whispered something to him. Henry looked confused, then smiled and kicked the ball in Paul's direction. It flew right into the rich kid's face.

Startled and angry, Paul dropped his backpack and bounded over to face Henry, shouting, "What's your problem?" Danny then set his backpack on the ground, picked up Paul's backpack and walked away. He heard Henry apologize, "Relax, Paul. I didn't mean it."

"Yeah, whatever!"

While Paul was engaged with Henry, Danny came up with a quick plan: *I'll go into the bathroom, take the phone and abandon the backpack there.*

But someone soon shouted out to him: "Danny!"

It was Paul.

"Hey."

"Where are you going with my backpack?" he asked, outraged.

"Huh? Oh, damn!" Danny said, putting on his best blank face. "I didn't even notice I'd picked up the wrong backpack. I thought it was mine."

The problem with Danny's excuse was that his old and shabby backpack did not look anything like Paul's sharp, new backpack.

Danny returned the backpack to its owner and went back for his own. He had lost his only chance. What would he do now?

The students were all walking up the stairs and heading to their classrooms. It was quite a commotion. Everyone was squeezed together, trying to climb up at the same time. That's when Danny had another idea. He stood behind Paul

and took advantage of his position to unzip the backpack. He did this carefully, without Paul noticing.

On the landing, some girls began arguing with two boys who had been making fun of them. Everyone on the stairs stopped moving. Danny seized his chance, stuffed his hand into Paul's backpack and grabbed the smartphone. Just then, Paul looked back.

*Did he see me?* Danny wondered. But Paul just sneered, "What are you looking at?"

Danny hid the phone in the waistline of his pants under his shirt. He moved away from Paul, headed to class, entered and took his seat. Stealthily he turned the phone off and put it in his backpack. It was only then that he breathed a sigh of relief.

Thankfully Paul was in a different classroom and would probably not realize his phone was missing until lunch.

Danny was startled by a text message on his own cell phone that read: "I want to see the phone. Place it on the desk and then put it away again."

*But where is this kidnapper? How can he see me?* Danny thought. He looked at the large windows in his classroom. There were a number of buildings around the school. If the kidnapper or his accomplices were in one of those buildings, they would have a good view of his classroom. They also could have hidden a small camera somewhere. Danny looked around the room but saw nothing that resembled a camera. Regardless, he decided to do what he had been told. He waited for the right moment, which came when Charlie, the class clown, entered the classroom, singing some ridiculous country music song. Danny took advantage of the general distraction and placed Paul's phone on the desk. He waited a moment, then returned it to his backpack. He glanced around quickly. Nobody was looking at him. Perfect.

He then received another text message: "Congratulations! You completed your first mission. Stand by for the next."

Mr. Nelson walked into the room, and history class began. But Danny was not even paying attention. He could not stop thinking about his mother. Was she hurt? Would he be able to do everything the kidnappers asked of him? And what if they gave him a mission during class time and he could not complete it?

But they did not contact him during his first class. And thankfully the teacher did not ask him anything about the subject written out on the whiteboard. Danny would certainly not have been able to answer.

English class was another story.

“Daniel?” Ms. Rose called out.

It took him a while to realize the teacher was calling him.

“Huh?”

“You look distracted. Is everything okay?”

“Yep.” But it was obvious that it was not.

“Then syntactically analyze the sentence ‘The boy is afraid.’”

Danny blanked and forgot everything he had learned on the subject. He remained mute. The teacher continued: “What is ‘the boy’ in the sentence?”

“I—it’s—I mean—” Danny stammered.

The sentence was very simple, but Danny did not know how to answer. Could he be this boy? He certainly was afraid. Terrified about what could happen to his mother if he did not do everything the kidnapper wanted. Danny tried to think of something to say. “The boy, um—”

“Can I answer, Ms. Rose?” Lily interrupted. She was the smartest girl in the class.

“What’s going on, Danny?” the teacher asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Then pay more attention. It’s unacceptable that one of the class’s best students is not be able to analyze such a simple sentence.”

Danny remained silent. The teacher nodded to Lily, who answered proudly.

“‘The boy’ is the subject of the sentence. ‘Is’ is the verb—”

Danny was not even able to focus his thoughts on Lily’s explanation. The only thing he could think about was his mother and the kidnappers. They did not make contact during his second class. Could they have killed his mother? Would they even call him again?

During the third class, the school principal, Ms. Rivera, walked into the classroom. She was very serious and was known for being uncompromisingly strict. Danny froze when he saw who was standing next to her. It was Paul, and he was angry. Ms. Rivera announced to the class: “Paul came to my office to report the disappearance of his new smart-phone. He thinks it was stolen. But the school prefers to assume that all the students here are honest. I came to ask if by chance anyone has found his phone?”

Nobody said anything.

“It’s black with a green camo case,” Paul added. He then looked accusingly at Danny, who looked away, afraid of being found out.

Ms. Rivera continued: “Whoever finds the phone, please return it to Paul directly or leave it with me in the front office. Now, if we find out that his phone really was stolen and if there is a culprit, that student will be expelled from the school.”

The principal exited the classroom after giving her short speech. Although Danny did find Paul to be a haughty, rich kid, he pitied him. *Poor guy. He likes his new phone so much.*

Danny liked to go about with a clean conscience. For years, he had honored the promise he had made in first

grade and had never again stolen anything from anyone. He felt badly for having broken his promise and having done what he did to Paul. He thought about returning the phone without anyone noticing. But what if the kidnapper asked again for the phone and Danny no longer had it? It would be his mother's end. He couldn't risk it. It was better to be expelled from school than to displease the kidnappers and lose his mother.

The rest of the class passed quickly. It was during break that Danny's cell phone rang once again.

The deep voice on the other end of the line said: "Now I really want to see if you're man enough."

"What?"

"Listen. I want you to hook up with the prettiest girl in your class."

"What do you mean?"

"Are you deaf? I want you to kiss the hottest girl in the class."

Danny immediately pictured Julia. She was beautiful. Certainly the prettiest. All the boys were crazy for her. Danny felt a certain sense of pleasure. He would never have the courage to hook up with Julia. But now that the kidnapper was ordering him, it would be kind of cool for him to complete this new mission.

"Do you fully understand what you need to do?" The kidnapper's gruff voice interrupted his reverie.

"Yes, I get it. You want me to kiss Julia."

"What Julia? Julia Foolia! I don't know who she is. I want you to kiss the most beautiful girl of all."

"Who?"

"Lily."

"Lily? But she's ugly."

"They told me she's the prettiest."

"But—"

"She's the one. I looked into your life before kidnapping your mother. They told me you were a little faggot, that you had never kissed a girl. I'm giving you a chance to prove you're a man. To save your mother and to rid yourself of this shame. Now go kiss her!"

"But—"

“No buts!”

The kidnapper hung up.

*How does he know so much about my life?* Danny thought. It was true; Danny had never kissed a girl. Some of the boys even made fun of him for it. They bragged of their awesome kissing experiences, even though Danny didn't quite believe them. He thought that, when he had the chance to kiss, he would know more or less what to do. It was just a matter of pressing his lips onto the girl's lips, opening his mouth (but not too much) and moving his tongue around smoothly in sync with her tongue.

Ready or not, Danny now had to experience his first kiss. But he did not want it to be with Lily. She was the best student in the class, and Danny admired her for that. He was also studious, though he never managed to get grades as good as hers. The problem was that Lily was kind of ugly, with bangs that fell across her forehead, somewhat crooked glasses, and pimples. He definitely did not feel any attraction to her.

But Danny was not much to talk about either. His hair was a mess; he also had pimples and was more or less ugly, depending on the day. It was clear that he knew he would never be able to make out with Julia, but Lily? What a joke! It could at least have been Marianne.

But none of that mattered now. Danny had to kiss Lily. It was what the kidnappers wanted, and his mother's life depended on it. Without wasting any more time, Danny glanced at Lily on the other side of the schoolyard and headed in her direction. But he was stopped by Henry, who gave him a big hug.

“Congratulations, Danny! I just now remembered that today's your birthday.”

“Oh yeah! Thanks, man! I kinda forgot myself! You're the only person who remembered. You and my mother—”

“You think I'd forget my best friend's birthday?”

“Thanks! But I gotta go; I need to kiss Lily.”

“What?”

*I shouldn't have said anything*, Danny thought, as he continued to walk towards Lily.

Henry followed. "You're going to kiss Lily? Are you nuts?"

Danny stopped, turned to Henry, and tried to sound casual, "Of course I'm not. I just want to kiss someone today, and I think I have a chance with her."

"Why?" Henry prodded.

"Because she's ugly."

"Who's ugly?" a girl's voice asked. It was Lily. Standing right next to them.



Danny had been distracted by Henry and had not even realized how close he had come to Lily. Rather embarrassed, he tried to cover for himself. “Nobody’s ugly,” Danny said to her. He then turned and dismissed Henry, “I’ll explain it to you better later. Let me talk to her now.”

“Fine, but I think you’re nuts.”

Henry distanced himself, and Danny turned back to the girl. “Lily—”

“Hey.”

“Can I talk to you about something?”

“Yep.”

“Ok, but just to you.”

“What do you mean?” Lily and her two friends, Pearl and Joy, were looking wide-eyed at Danny.

“Come with me; I want to talk to you in private.”

Lily thought it was weird but walked with him over to a corner of the schoolyard. “What it is?” she asked.

Danny was direct. “Do you want to hook up with me?”

“What?”

“Do you want to hook up with me?”

“What do you mean?”

“I want to kiss you.”

“But do you like me?”

“No.”

“So why do you want to hook up with me?”

“I don’t need to be in love to want to hook up with you.”

“But—”

“I just want to kiss you. Can I?”

Danny leaned in to her mouth, but she backed away.

“Right here? In front of everyone?” Lily protested.



“So what? Nobody’s watching.”

“Nobody’s watching?!”

Danny looked around and saw a ton of people in the schoolyard looking at them. Lily’s friends, Henry, and a bunch of other students. He felt the heat of embarrassment flush his cheeks. Everyone watching him trying to hook up with one of the ugliest girls in his class, and he wasn’t even succeeding. But he did not give up. His mother’s life depended on this. He pressed on with his romantic pursuits.

“So what if they’re watching! I’m not embarrassed!”

“But I am,” she said. “They’re going to make fun of us.”

“No they won’t. Please, just one kiss!”

“No.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” she said.

“What do you mean?” Danny asked, growing impatient.

“If I tell you something, you promise not to tell anyone?”

Lily asked.

“Fine. Tell me.”

“Promise?”

“I promise,” he assured her.

She hesitated a bit before she spoke.

“I never kissed anyone.”

“What?”

“I don’t know how to kiss.”

“So what? I don’t either.”

“What?” Lily seemed surprised.

“I’ve never kissed anyone either.” Danny confessed.

“But then—”

“Let’s kiss for the first time! We’ll learn together!” Lily seemed to consider the idea. “Please...” Danny insisted.

“You aren’t going to go around telling everyone I’m a bad kisser?”

“Of course not. I must be a bad kisser too since I don’t have any experience. Please do this for me! It’s my birthday.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“OK.”

“OK what?”

Lily stared at Danny. She smiled timidly. It was a “yes” without words. He understood it was his turn to act. He looked at Lily and drew his face in closer. He was very eager for his first kiss, and at this point he really did have a desire to kiss her. But she backed off again and did not let him follow through with it.

“What now?” Danny asked.

“Let’s wait until school gets out, and we can go somewhere where nobody’s watching.”

“No, I can’t wait!”

Without wasting any more time, Danny closed in and kissed her mouth. They stood with their lips touching for a few moments, feeling that strange and enjoyable sensation that a kiss brings. Then their lips opened, and their tongues touched and began to move smoothly together.

*It’s not really that difficult to kiss, Danny thought. And it’s wonderful!* For a moment, he forgot everything that had been happening in that hellish morning and felt a taste of paradise.

But it only lasted a moment. The sudden image of his mother, suffering at the hands of the kidnapers, tormented his thoughts once again.

He stopped kissing Lily. He felt awkward and pulled away from her embrace. She had a look of wanting more. It had been a wonderful kiss. A gift from heaven, or from the kidnapers, on this day of hell.

“Thank you,” Danny said.

He then turned around and walked off. Lily stood still, looking confused as Danny left her suddenly and crossed the schoolyard. He saw Henry and some other school kids heading his way, but he swerved and walked to the other side. He did not want to hear remarks or jokes about his big performance. But it was no use.

“What fine taste you have there, Danny. Kissing Lily. Gross. She’s butt ugly!” remarked Alan, an annoying blond kid who loved to amuse himself by bothering others.

“I think he has a problem with his vision. He needs glasses,” added Fred, Alan’s best friend who was just as irritating. “But he’s got no money to buy them!”

Other boys nearby began laughing. But Danny had no response for them. Just then his cell phone beeped. He read the text message, obviously from the kidnapper: “Just one kiss is not enough. Go back there now!”

Danny grew extremely angry and blurted out, “DAMN IT!”

Even the boys were taken aback. Danny turned around, walking quickly in Lily’s direction. Lily was now surrounded by her girlfriends who were giggling and whispering to each other. Danny grabbed Lily by the hand, pulled her away from the other girls, and gave her another kiss. It was a long kiss. It was so long that a circle of spectators formed around them. It was so long that Sam, the hall monitor, came over to pull them apart. He was saying: “No public displays of affection in school!”

But Danny ignored him and continued to kiss Lily. Sam put his hand on both students’ shoulders so that they would understand that it was them he was addressing. “Stop kissing! The principal no longer allows kissing and public displays of

affection on school grounds. Many parents think this is indecent behavior.”

Danny continued to kiss Lily, indifferent to the monitor’s orders. Lily tried to stop, but Danny embraced her even tighter and continued to kiss her. Finally, the monitor shoved his hands between them and forcefully pulled them apart. At that, Danny looked at Lily with a sense of satisfaction. And Lily looked like she did not understand what had just happened but had enjoyed it just the same. The monitor ordered each off to a side saying, “I don’t want this happening again!”

The bell rang. Danny walked on in silence amid all the boisterous students returning to their classrooms. He ignored more comments from Alan and Fred and snickering from students all around him. He felt victorious for having fulfilled his mission and surprised because he really enjoyed kissing Lily.

Nothing happened during the fourth class. No questions from his math teacher. No calls from the kidnapper. Thank God! The bell rang, and the room turned to pandemonium, with everyone talking at once as they exited the classroom. Danny barely heard his cell phone ring as he entered the science classroom.

The word “Unknown” appeared on the screen. Danny felt a wave of apprehension as he answered.

“Hello.”

“I want you to bring a bag of potato chips to your class.”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“What do you mean? Potato chips?”

“You heard me, lazybones. I want you to show up with a bag of potato chips in the classroom before your class is over!”

“But that’s impossible,” Danny replied in desperation.

“I don’t want to hear it. You’ve got a little less than 50 minutes. Do it, or your mom dies!”

“Why potato chips? Are you crazy?”

“You’re the crazy one, willing to let your mom die over a bag of chips. Do this now and stop arguing!”

He hung up. Danny looked at his cell phone in disbelief at what he had just heard. Why would the guy ask for something like this? For no other reason than to test him, he guessed. How was he going to get a bag of potato chips?

The school no longer sold junk food like this in the vending machines. It was considered too fatty. The new policy was healthier food for the students. But what good did it do? When school let out, all the students went to buy snack food at the

convenience store around the corner. That was it! Danny would go there to buy the chips. But how was he going to leave the school grounds with the annoying monitors watching over everything?

*Relax, one thing at a time*, he thought. *First I am going to leave the classroom*. But before he could leave, Mr. Simmons walked in. Danny got up and headed to the door, banking on the fact that the teacher had barely entered the room.

“Where are you going, Daniel?” the teacher reproached him.

“I gotta go to the bathroom,” Danny responded.

“I have to go to the bathroom,” Mr. Simmons corrected.

“You too?”

“No. I’m correcting you. We say ‘have to,’ not ‘gotta.’”

“OK. I have to go to the bathroom. May I?”

“No, you may not. Why didn’t you go between classes just now?”

“I just now felt the need.”

“Too late. Now you’ll have to wait until class is over.”

“But I can’t!”

“You will wait until after class. I don’t want to hear about it. I don’t like students going in and out of the classroom.”

“But—”

“Go back to your seat!”

Danny returned to his desk, very irritated. He was so angry he could burst. *I’m going to leave no matter what. What will he do if I just run out of the classroom? I don’t care. I could get a warning or even be suspended, but that doesn’t matter. What’s important is saving my mom*, he thought.

Danny prepared himself run out of the classroom. But, just as he was about to, he heard the sound of a fart. *What’s that?* He looked behind him. It was Cliff, the boy who sat directly behind him. He had placed his hand over his mouth and blown out, imitating a really loud farting sound. The teacher became irate and asked, “What was that?”

Cliff answered mockingly: “It was Danny! Let him go to the bathroom or else we’re gonna die with the stink.”

The whole classroom laughed. Danny grew angry and was

about to curse Cliff when Mr. Simmons said: "Fine, Danny! I'll make an exception. Get outta, I mean, you may go to the bathroom. But make it quick!"

Danny couldn't believe it. Cliff was the third most annoying kid in the classroom (losing only to Alan and Fred). He was always making things difficult for Danny. But now, without realizing it, he had helped him.



Danny left the classroom quickly, pretending to go to the bathroom. *I don't have time to lose*, he thought. *But how am I going to leave the school grounds?* Danny did not have the answer. He headed down the stairs and toward the exit, but soon ran into the hall monitor, Sam, who stopped him and asked, "Where do you think you're going?"

"To the bathroom," Danny answered.

"But there's a bathroom on your floor. Why did you come down here?"

"The bathroom up there really stinks."

"Oh, all right. I'll send maintenance to clean it. Go on now."

Danny went into the bathroom. He peeked out, waiting for Sam to disappear. He then left the bathroom, running to the school entrance gate. But it was locked. He looked all around to see if there was some way to jump the school wall, but it was useless. The wall was ten feet high, and there was nowhere to scale it.

Danny did not know what to do. He ran to the back of the school to see if there was another way out. Then he saw that Beatrice, the snack bar manager, was still there, closing out the cash register. Everyone called her Auntie. Danny went over to talk to her, in a rush.

"Auntie, got any potato chips?"

"No. The school will no longer let me sell them. Too fatty."

"I don't think so," Danny disagreed. "I always eat snack food and I'm not fat."

"I agree with you. What makes you fat is watching TV all day and not doing any exercise. But you try telling that to the principal. I was talking to her about this just yesterday—"

Danny was no longer paying attention to what she had to say. He was looking out at the school walls. He saw the basketball court, with its high wire fencing designed to keep the balls from escaping. The end of the fence was built right up against the high brick wall of the school.

Without giving it a second thought, Danny took off, scaled the fence and reached the top of the high wall. Beatrice yelled, "GET DOWN FROM THERE, BOY!"

Danny didn't listen. He looked down towards the ground on the other side of the wall. It was the back of an upscale apartment building. Below was concrete. If he jumped from there, he would probably get hurt. But further on the right of the wall was a small garden with grass and shrubbery. Danny walked on top of the wall and fearlessly jumped into the garden. It was a nice jump. He felt like a movie stuntman.



Danny landed right into the garden. The grass absorbed the landing, and he did not even hurt himself. But his right hand landed in something disgusting and he soon realized what the garden was used for. Dog restroom. *Ew!*

He craved a faucet to wash his hand, but there wasn't one anywhere near. So he managed to wipe his hand the best he could on the leaves of a plant.

Then he heard Beatrice screaming desperately, "A boy just jumped over the wall! HELP!"

Danny walked on hurriedly. He reached the building's front gate and pretended to be a resident on his way out. Doormen generally don't ask questions of people leaving a building, but this one did. "Where were you, boy? I didn't see you come in."

Danny improvised quickly. "I was at John's—"

The doorman buzzed the door open, but then asked, "Which John?"

Danny did not answer. He quickly left the building and broke into a run.

Seconds later Danny was at the corner convenience store. He picked up a bag of potato chips and went to pay. He felt his pockets. *Where's my wallet? Damn it!* He had left his wallet in his backpack, and his backpack was in the classroom. What was he to do now?

The owner of the store was standing behind the counter. The boys called him the Turk because he had a very long mustache and spoke with a strange accent. Danny went up to him, showed him the bag of potato chips, and asked, "Can I pay you later?"

"Non! I don't sell on credit!"

Danny carefully checked his pockets. He found a forgotten bill. *Awesome!* He handed the bill over to the Turk.

"Here's what I've got."

"Non good. The chips cost two fifty. You short one fifty."

"Please. It's a question of life or death. I need these chips. My mother was kidnapped."

"Kidnapped? Ha, ha! What that has to do with potato chips?"

"I can't explain now. I swear I'll pay you tomorrow. I go to that school over there."

"Non."

"I need these potato chips."

"Non."

"Please don't call the police. I am not a thief."

"Hey!"

Danny fled, potato chips in hand, yelling, "I'll pay the rest later!"

He ran as fast as he could. After a few yards, he looked back and saw nobody was behind him nor did he hear any-

one yelling, "Stop, thief." So, he relaxed and stopped running. It was then he heard a shout, "Stop, thief!" It was the Turk, coming after him with a broom in his hands. "STOP,



THIEF!"

Danny dashed, turning the next corner to throw the man off. He went into a coffee shop and hid in the bathroom, taking the opportunity to wash his hand, which was still a bit dirty from dog poop.

He waited a little and then decided to go out. But right then he saw the Turk passing. Danny quickly hid behind a display of coffee mugs. He waited a bit longer, peeked and saw that the man was far from there, and left the coffee shop. He ran in the opposite direction of the Turk and returned to the school gates.

The boy looked at the tall walls and became distraught. *Now how am I going to get back inside the school?* The

gates only opened when school let out, but he needed to reach his classroom with the potato chips during the current class period. He could not wait. *Damn it! Who are these idiots who kidnapped my mom and are making me do these ridiculous things?*

Where could the kidnappers be? Were they watching Danny at this very moment? Were they laughing at him? Was his mother okay?

Danny sat down on the ground, relieved at not having been caught by the Turk but desperate to find a way back into the school. He thought about getting back into the school the same way he had left, through the apartment building. But the doorman would never let him pass. Even if he entered through the garage, hiding behind some car, there was no way he could scale the building's wall to get back inside the school.

Danny lost hope.

*You won, you morons! I can't get back inside the school. I lost. I won't complete the mission. But if you kill my mother, I'll kill you!*

Danny was so angry he nearly cried.

*Damn! And all of this on my birthday!*

Just then he saw a family – father, mother and two children – ring the buzzer at the school. Danny got up and stood close to the family. The father spoke into the intercom, “We have an appointment with admissions to tour the school.”

“We’ll be right with you.”

After a moment, the door opened for the family. Danny stuck close behind them.

“Three children,” the admissions officer affirmed.

“No, just two,” the mother corrected him.

“Then who is—?”

Before he could finish the sentence, Danny pushed past them and raced into the school. He ran upstairs, hid the bag of potato chips under his shirt and entered the science classroom, trying to walk in casually. Mr. Simmons looked angry.

“What took you so long?”

“I was—sick. Diarrhea.”

The whole class laughed. Danny had a flushed face, and he was sweating and breathing hard. It looked like he had gone through hell in the bathroom.

“Fine, sit down!” the teacher ordered.

Danny did as he was told. He was satisfied that he had managed to get back to the classroom. But he was still fearful. He thought the admissions officer had recognized him and would show up at any moment to take him to the principal’s office.

Just then there was a knock at the door. Danny lowered his head, uselessly trying to hide. “Excuse me, teacher. Is Daniel here?” someone asked. Danny looked up. It was the hall monitor, Sam.

“He is,” the teacher answered.

Sam stared at Danny. Auntie Beatrice was standing next to him. She looked at Danny, mystified, not believing what she was seeing. “But I swear I saw him jumping over the wall!”

“How could he do that if he’s sitting right there?” Sam said.

“But, I swear—”

“Sorry for the interruption.”

Sam and Beatrice stepped out, closing the door behind them. The teacher continued his lecture, and Danny sat back in his seat with a sense of relief.

But he soon grew worried once again. *Did the kidnappers see that I managed to complete the mission? I hope so.* But a few minutes later Danny received a text: “Show me the potato chips.”

Danny was already so distressed with everything that he did not think twice. He opened the bag and began throwing the potato chips up in the air, right in the middle of class.

The students all enjoyed the sudden display of craziness, with everyone jumping up to catch the potato chips that Danny tossed in the air.

The teacher, who was writing on the board, looked over his shoulder and was taken aback with the ruckus.





“WHAT’S GOING ON?” he screamed.

The class froze, including Danny. *What now?* he wondered. But just then the bell rang. It was the end of the class, and everyone began grabbing their things to leave. Lily, who sat in the first row, took it upon herself to answer the teacher: “It was a protest against the prohibition of snack foods in the school.”

Danny was leaving the class when Mr. Simmons scolded him: “Be sure the principal and your parents will be notified of your unacceptable behavior.”

*I wish my mom is notified,* thought Danny. *That would mean she’s still alive.*

As he walked toward the front of the school, Danny felt a sense of satisfaction. He had survived a crazy school day and managed to complete yet another mission. He was closer to saving his mother. But the good feeling was soon interrupted when he walked past the principal's office and saw Paul's dad arguing with Ms. Rivera.

"Is this the kind of school you run? With thieves stealing personal property?" he complained.

Danny and Paul caught each other's eyes. *Does he suspect me?* Danny thought and continued walking. Paul then pointed to Danny and said to the principal in a loud voice, "I think it was him, Ms. Rivera. He tried to take my backpack and then he stood behind me when everyone was going upstairs to class."

Danny quickened his pace. He heard the principal ask Paul, "That's a serious accusation, Paul. Did you see Daniel take the smartphone from your backpack?"

Without waiting to hear the answer, Danny disappeared. He quickly exited the front gate and began walking on the sidewalk, not saying goodbye to anybody. Just then his cell phone rang again. He answered. This time the kidnapper sounded somewhat pleased and excited. "The last mission was small potatoes. Now I am going to see if you're really a man!"

"Fine, what do I have to do this time?" Danny asked angrily.

"Fight Lucas."

"What?"

"You heard me. Go pick a fight with Lucas!"

"But he's the strongest guy in school!"

"So what?"

“He takes Jiu-Jitsu and Karate and I don’t know what else.”

“So what? Aren’t you a man?”

“I’m just a boy. You’re the one who wants me to be a man.”

“That’s right; you’re going to prove yourself a man right this instant or your mom becomes worm meal. You understand me?”

The man hung up the phone. Danny couldn’t decide what he felt more: furious or terrified. He had heard the famous story that Lucas alone had once beat up three boys at the same time. They had been dumb enough to mess with him. Now it was Danny who was going to be the stupid one. *How wonderful!* he thought, *I’m going to take a massive beating.*

Danny had even less experience with fighting than with kissing. He had once been punched in the face, back in fifth grade. Some little punk kept provoking him until he could no longer stand it and he cursed back. He then took a sweet punch to the face and doubled over to hide the fact that he was crying. He had not liked the experience and was always careful not to get caught up in anything. He never again fell victim to provocations. If someone bothered him, he would walk away and avoid a fight at any cost.

Now he had to become his opposite and once again do something he would ordinarily never do. But today was no ordinary day. He had to save the person he loved most on the whole earth. The person who had loved him since he was still inside her belly, who had been there for him at every stage of his life. It was his mother who had always told him not to get into fights. Now he had to fight for her sake.

Despite everything, the idea of provoking a tough guy gave him a kind of internal satisfaction—the same energy that compelled him to kiss Lily, now forcing him again to be brave and a bit crazy. Since he knew he was going to take a good beating and get really pummeled, he might as well enjoy himself doing it.

He courageously approached Lucas and said, “Luke, I

want to fight you.”

“What do you mean fight me?”

“Fight with you, fist to fist, see who will win—”

“What did I do to you? Why would you want to fight me?”

“You didn’t do anything. I just want to fight you.”

“I don’t understand. You want to fight with me for no reason?”

“Yeah, no reason whatsoever. Just for the sake of fighting.”

“But you know that I take Jiu-Jitsu, Karate and Muay Thai?”

Danny didn’t really understand the last term, but he answered, “Yes, of course, I know. Everyone knows.”

“So then you know that people who practice martial arts follow Eastern philosophies and are prohibited from fighting or using their skills without good reason.”

“What? What’s with the talk about having a reason? I want to fight you! I need to fight you!”

He started to raise his voice, and students leaving the school began gathering in a circle around Lucas and Danny.

“What do you mean you need to fight me? Are you crazy?”

“Uh huh, yep, I’m crazy, nuts, missing some screws. Please, fight me!”

“No! I don’t have problems with you. I’m not going to fight.”

This was more difficult than Danny had expected. He thought he’d quickly take a few good beatings and complete his mission. But Lucas was a more peaceful and sensible guy than he appeared to be. He put on the airs of a tough guy but he had a good heart. Fortunately, Fred and Alan showed up just then, and they started to provoke Lucas.

“Dang, Luke, are you afraid of Danny?”

“Is he stronger than you?”

“I think you don’t even know how to fight.”

“Shut up!” Lucas responded. “I’m not going to hit Danny for no reason. You guys are the ones who deserve a few

good punches.”

Once again, Danny thought about his kidnapped mother and found the courage to complete this utterly unpleasant mission.

“Shut up, Lucas!”

Danny threw his backpack on the ground, got into a fighting stance and continued, “They’re not the ones you need to fight; I am.”

“Dang, I wouldn’t let that go if I were you!” Alan provoked.

“Luke, you’re being humiliated!” Fred said.

Lucas was finally convinced.

“Fine, Danny. If you want to fight me so badly, then hit me. I practice martial arts for self-defense. I can only fight if someone attacks me.”

Danny swallowed his fear. Now he had to fight. As much as it hurt him to attack someone he admired, Danny jumped at Lucas. He pushed him and then punched his face. But Lucas deflected the punch easily, raising his forearm in front of his face. Danny punched him again and again, but Lucas defended himself in similar fashion. Danny then pulled back a bit and kicked Lucas in the groin. But he defended the kick with the palm of his hand.

Danny’s friend Henry came over at this point, saw what was happening and jumped in the middle, trying to separate the two.

“Hey, Lucas, please don’t hit Danny!”

“I don’t want to hit him—”

“Yes you do!” Danny interrupted. “Henry, please get out!”

Danny directed his friend away from the fight, and Henry stood there shaking his head in disbelief.

Danny attacked again. He threw a number of kicks and punches at Lucas, but none hit him. Karate kid defended himself against all of them. And the worst was that he did not punch back.

Could this be a real fight? The kidnapper and his accomplices were somehow watching everything. Would they be satisfied? Danny didn’t think so. So he grabbed Lucas by

his clothes and whispered in his ear, "Since you don't really want to hit me, at least pretend to do it."

"What do you mean?" Lucas yelled, "Are you crazy?"

"Yes. I want to see if you have the courage to hit me! Do it!"

Danny felt satisfied at having overcome his fear. He didn't care anymore if he took a beating. It was for his mother. He pushed Lucas, who got angry and, for the first time, fought back. He pushed Danny and yelled, "Psycho!"

"SO HIT THIS PSYCHO! COME ON!"

Lucas finally resolved to show his strength. He gave Danny a side kick. Then he jumped and sent a rotating kick right into his face.



To top it off, Lucas did a sweep, which made Danny fall to the ground.

Oh! Danny was dizzy. But he smiled. Now he was satisfied with the beating and thought that the kidnappers would also be. That was certainly a fight! Danny had taken quite a licking. He did not even want to get up, thus indicating that he had accepted defeat.

At that point Lucas came in close to him and said, "I didn't want to hit you, but you deserved it."

Danny looked straight at Lucas and said, "Thank you!"

Lucas left right away, and Henry helped Danny get up.

"You took a beating from him and *thanked* him?"

"Of course! He could have finished me off, but he spared me."

"I really don't understand what's gotten into you today. You've really lost it!" Henry seemed worried. "First you kissed Lily, and now this!?"

When Danny went to pick up his backpack, he had another surprise. It was unzipped, and Paul was standing in front of it, brandishing his smartphone.

"I knew it was you!" he said.

The rich kid then went over to his dad, who was just leaving the principal's office. Danny grabbed his backpack and ran away from the school. He knew he would probably be expelled. But he preferred not to think about it. The important thing now was to save his mother.



Danny thought about many things on his way home from school. *Were the kidnapers satisfied with how I completed my last mission? When are they going to call again? Are they watching me right now, even though I'm far from school?* He looked around and thought he saw someone hide behind a tree. *Could one of them be following me?*

He walked, turned the corner and quickly ran into a pet shop. Once inside, he pretended to be admiring the puppies in the window. But he was actually looking out to the street through the shop window. He wanted to see who was following him. But he grew worried. *What if the guy gets angry when he realizes I spotted him?*

Someone turned the corner and hid behind a tree near the pet shop. After peeking out and seeing nobody, the person came out from behind the tree. "Whew!" Danny sighed. He then left the store to go talk to his pursuer. "Lily. Why are you following me?"

"Huh! I'm not following you."

"Do you have something to do with my mom's kidnapping?"

"What? Your mom was kidnapped?"

*Damn! I shouldn't have said that,* Danny thought.

"I realized something was wrong with you and I was following you to see if I could help," Lily said.

"I don't need help."

"Are you sure?"

Danny did not answer. He could not tell anyone about the kidnapping and he still feared he was being followed. Lily continued, "You're serious about your mom? But why you

are acting all weird, kissing me, getting into fights and all? Shouldn't you be going to the police?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"How was your mom kidnapped?"

"I just said I don't want to talk—"

They were both silent for a few moments, walking down the sidewalk side by side.

"I wanna thank you."

"For what?"

"Kissing me."

"You're welcome," Danny responded, somewhat embarrassed.

"I always wondered what my first kiss would be like. But the way it happened was better than I had imagined."

Danny felt even more embarrassed. Lily continued, "I didn't even know you liked me. You never let on."

"But I didn't want to kiss you."

"So why did you?"

"I can't tell you."

"Tell me, please. I'm curious."

Danny was quiet and continued walking. But a short while later he grew nervous and exclaimed, "That kidnapping son of a—" Danny could no longer stand keeping all the anguish inside. *Screw it if the kidnapppers are watching me!* he thought. He decided to get it off his chest. Within a few minutes, he had told Lily everything. He told her about the calls and the missions he had to complete to save his mother. Including the mission to kiss Lily.

When she heard that, she felt sad and was unable to contain herself.

"That's the only way someone will kiss me! Nobody likes me. I'm ugly." Lily burst into tears. "Why are some people born ugly and others pretty? Why did I have to be the one born ugly?"

"You're not ugly, Lily. Stop being so selfish! My mom could die at any moment, and you're worrying about your looks."

"You don't think I'm ugly?"

“Listen, I think *I’m* ugly. I also have low self-esteem. But so what? I would rather be an ugly boy with a mom than a good-looking boy with no mom. I want to save her! When all of this is over, I’ll be with you if you want. Two ugly people together. It’s a match.”

“But you just said I’m not ugly.”

“And I meant it. I’m also not that ugly. But I’m a wimp who had never kissed anyone. At least today I kissed you. And I liked it.”

“That’s nice that you liked it because I did too. I’m sorry for having flipped out. But it’s over. Now I want to help you save your mom.”

“Thanks, but I don’t think there is anything you can do to help.”

“Are you sure?”

“I am. Wait—maybe there is something. Do you know how to track a number when it’s an ‘Unknown’ caller?”

“No, I don’t. Maybe your cell phone company can help you with that.”

“How?”

“I don’t know. Call them! Have you tried calling your mom?”

“Of course, but she didn’t answer.”

“Try again now!”

Danny took his cell phone and tried. Then he yelled: “Damn prepaid phone! I’m out of credit. I cannot make more calls, just receive.”

Lily offered her phone. “Use mine.”

Danny took it, dialed his mother’s number and handed the phone back to Lily.

“You talk.”

“What do you mean?”

“If the kidnapper answers, he’ll recognize my voice.”

Lily took the phone, waited, and then said, “It just rang and then went to voice mail. Should I leave a message?”

Danny took the cell phone from her and said, “Mom, hang in there! I love you!” Danny hung up and immediately called

the hospital where his mom worked. After waiting a long time and being transferred a number of times, he begged, “Please, this is an emergency!”

“What type of an emergency? What are the patient’s symptoms?”

“It’s not a patient; it’s a nurse. My mom works there as a nurse’s aide. They called me and told me she’d been kidnapped.”

“So you need to call the police, not here.”

“But I want to know if she went to work today.”

“How could she come to work if you just said she was kidnapped?”

“Please, can you just check if Nancy from the emergency room showed up for work today?”

“Hold on.”

Danny waited, listening to the annoying background music until the woman picked up again.

“They told me she did not come in today.”

Danny hung up and returned the phone to Lily. He then began to pace in a frenzy. “Damn! I still had hope that all of this was a big prank. But it’s real. It’s happening all right. My mother was kidnapped. I don’t believe it. Why is this happening to me! And on my birthday! What did I do to deserve this?”

“Calm down, Danny!”

“Oh God, please, oh Heavenly Father, please do not let my mom die! Help me save her! I promise to be a good person—”

“Calm down, Danny! You’re already a good person,” Lily insisted.

“I’ll help my mom clean the house, cook, wash clothes; I’ll study harder, get only good grades in school—”

“You already get good grades, Danny! Now calm down— your phone’s ringing!”

Danny looked at the screen and almost collapsed with relief. The word “Mom” appeared. It was his mother calling. He had a wonderful feeling. His mom had not been kidnapped. It had been nothing more than a nightmare. His mom was trying to call him. Danny answered.

“Mom?”

The deep voice of a man spoke, “No, I’m not your mommy.” It was the kidnapper. Danny’s last hope that his mom was safe immediately faded away.

“Someone’s calling your mom’s cell. But she’s not going to answer. Not as long as she’s in our hands.”

“Damn it! Let me talk to her!”

“And you might as well know that I did not like that pathetic little fight. If you continue to carry out your missions like that, I’m going to burst your mom’s head. You got it?”

Danny did not answer. The man continued, “Your mom is sad and asked to see you again before she dies. So I told her, ‘the only way you’re gonna see your son is if he’s on TV.’ That’s when I got the idea for your next mission. You’re going to be on TV.”

“What? How?”

“You figure it out, twit! I’ll flip through the local channels until I see you. But I’m not very patient. If you do not show up on TV within an hour, your mom’s going to the dogs.”

The kidnapper hung up. Danny was furious. “How can this guy give me a mission like that? How am I going to get on TV? In an hour? Impossible. I’m not famous. I’m not the President.”

“That’s one hell of a crazy mission!”

“What am I gonna do?”

“Well, to begin with—it’s not just famous people who are on TV. You can become a news item. It’s very difficult, but not impossible.”

“How?”

“You have to do something drastic. The TV channels only interrupt their programming for important news.”

“But how can I become important news?” he thought a bit. “I know. I’ll rob a bank.”

“How? Do you have a gun?”

“No, but I can use a toy gun.”

“Do you have a toy gun?”

“No.”

“Then it won’t work. Besides, it’s dangerous. What if some security guard shoots you? Instead of saving your mom from death, you’d be the one who ends up dead.”

“You’re right. That wasn’t a good idea.”

“I’ve got it!” Lily said, excited. “You could climb up a tall building and pretend like you’re going to commit suicide.”

“I think that would work. Maybe it would attract those sensationalist news shows. But what if I really do fall from the building?”

“You’re right. That wouldn’t be cool,” Lily commented. She thought a bit longer until her face glowed enthusiastically. “I have another idea—this is a good one!”

She told it to Danny, who listened closely and then concluded, “We can’t stick around thinking all day. We’ll have to go with this one. Hope it works.”

Danny and Lily went running to her house. Her mom and dad were at work. The place was empty. Everything was in order to carry out the plan.

Lily picked up the phone and dialed 911. When someone answered, she pretended to be desperate.

“Hello?”

“911.”

“There’s someone breaking into my house. Help!”

Danny banged on the door, pretending to be a burglar.

“Aaaaahhh!” Lily screamed, “He’s trying to get in.”

“What’s your address?” the operator asked.

Lily gave her address and begged, “Please come quickly!”

“Try to stay calm. We are dispatching a patrol car to your house!”

“How do you want me to stay calm? He’s trying to break in. He broke in. Get out of here! Get out! Aaahhh!”

Lily hung up.

“I hope they come quickly,” Danny said.

“And that they bring TV reporters with them.”

“I hate doing this. Pulling a prank on the police—it’s unforgivable. They have so many real problems to deal with.” Danny paced in front of the living room window.

“Yes, but you’re being threatened to do this. It’s not your fault.”

“I hope it goes right. If not, I’ll not only lose my mom, but I’ll go to jail.”

“No. You’re a minor. If they arrest you, you’ll be sent to a juvenile detention center.”

“Big difference! I’ll be a prisoner just the same.”

“But I prefer not to imagine the worst. It’s better to think that everything’s going to turn out all right.”

They soon heard the sound of sirens in the distance.

“Danny, can I ask you something?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t know if this is going to work. I don’t know if you’re going to be arrested, or worse—it’s just that I liked kissing you and—I don’t know if I’ll have another chance or if you’re going to want to—it’s just that—I’m not making myself clear—”

“Don’t worry. I think I know what you’re trying to say.”

Danny leaned in, put his arms around her and kissed her on the mouth. It was an affectionate and delightful kiss. They held their embrace for a short while until Lily interrupted, “Happy birthday!”

“Thank you! Although ‘unhappy birthday’ describes better my day.”

“Don’t say that. Everything’s going to be all right!”

The sirens grew louder. They heard the cars arriving and stopping in front of Lily’s house.

“Where’s the knife?” Danny asked.

“Here.” Lily opened the kitchen drawer and handed him a huge knife. “It’s my dad’s, for barbequing.”

Danny took the knife, went to the living room and opened the window that looked out on the street. He peeked out and saw two police cars parked and some policemen looking inside the house. “Damn! No cameras,” Danny complained.

“We need to make a show. If not, no TV people will ever show up.”

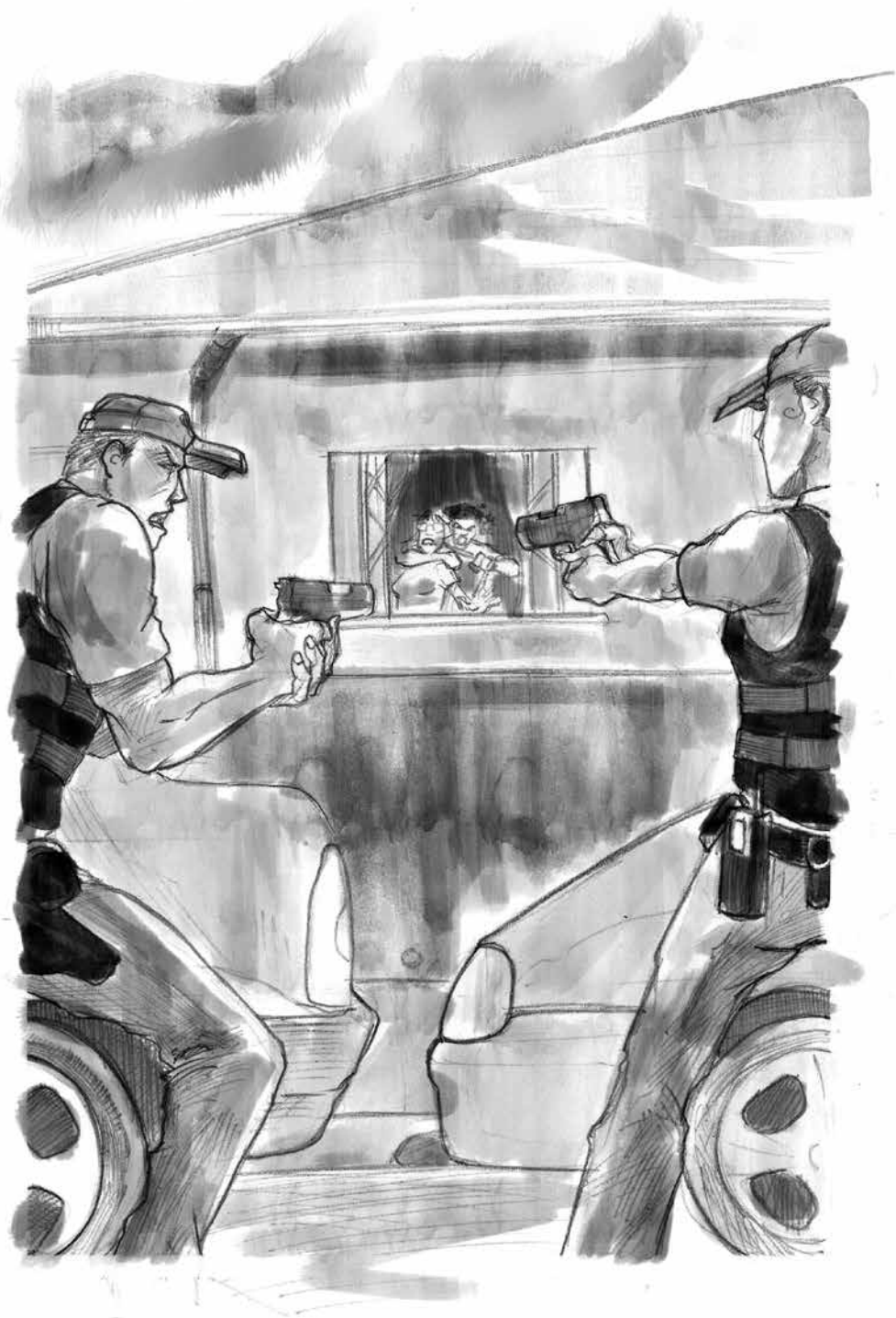
“Are you ready?”

“Uh huh.”

“Let’s hope for the best.” Danny grabbed Lily from behind, put the knife up to her neck, and then drew her up to the window, yelling, “Get out of here, all of you! I don’t want the police here!”

The police officers were alarmed; they ducked behind their patrol cars and pulled out their guns, which they aimed at Danny.





The boy froze. Seeing the guns pointed at him was beyond unpleasant. But he continued, “This is between me and her. You’ve got nothing to do with it. If you don’t leave, I’ll kill her!”

Danny and Lily then crouched down, below the window and out of the police officers’ sight.

“Now we just have to wait again.”

They heard the police officer radioing for backup. Not long afterwards more patrol cars arrived. Danny looked out the corner of the window and saw some black SUVs. They were SWAT vans—from the police’s special weapons and tactics team.

“How crazy!” Danny exclaimed in a voice that betrayed his growing anxiety. He then saw some elite shooters take strategic positions and aim their rifles at the window where he was. Danny began to shake with fear. “I’m going to die. Now what? We shouldn’t have done this. Those guys are going to kill me. I just know it.”

“Stop it! They’re not going to kill you. I saw a documentary about the police. They only shoot if it’s their last option. They’ll try to negotiate first. Don’t be afraid! Everything’s going to be all right. Think about your mom.”

Danny remembered his mom and managed to feel a bit more courageous. Lily peeked out the window too.

“Damn! A ton of people have shown up and no sign of reporters. Where are the cameras?”

Just then they heard a strange voice coming from the police megaphone.

“This is Lieutenant Maxwell and I am here to help you. Let’s talk. We want to resolve this situation without violence.”

Danny and Lily stood up. He continued to stand behind her, threatening her with the knife, and yelled, “I don’t want this to get violent either. So everybody leave, and I won’t slit her throat.”

Danny tried to hide behind Lily so as not to take a shot in the head. The lieutenant continued, “Please, boy, you are young. Don’t do anything foolish! Let’s talk.”

“Talk about what?”

“About you and the girl. For starters, why are you holding a knife to her neck?”

It was then that Danny had a great idea.

“No, I’m not going to talk. You’re just waiting for the chance to shoot me. I’ll only talk if you bring in the TV reporters and the cameras. You won’t have the guts to kill me on live television.”

“But, son, we cannot call the TV cameras in—”

“Yes you can!” Danny yelled. “No TV, no negotiation.”

Danny and Lily stepped away from the window and crouched down. She was happy.

“Way to go! Great strategy!”

“Let’s turn on the TV!”

“OK.”

Lily crawled to the couch, picked up the remote control and turned on the television, keeping the volume low.

“Now all we have to do is wait.”

And they waited.

“They need to get here quickly. We’re running out of time.”

They waited.

“Damn! They’re still not coming!”

And waited.

“If I’m not on TV in five minutes, they’ll kill my mom. What do we do now?”

Lily changed channels desperately until she saw images of a police car heading somewhere she recognized. “That’s my street!” Lily said.

They both heard a helicopter arriving and flying overhead.

“They’re here.”

They saw the images of Lily’s house on the TV station.

“It worked. We did it!” Danny said, happily.

“No, Danny. You still need to appear on TV. And you can’t run the risk of only showing up briefly. We need to come up with something to draw in the reporters. You need to be on air as long as possible so we can be sure that the kidnapers see you. If not, they’ll kill—”

“My mom. I know,” Danny remained silent and concentrated. He then said, “Let’s go. I’m going to do what I can to lure the cameras.”

The window of Lily's house was now showing on TV. She and Danny stood up in the same position as before. The scene they saw was terrifying. A growing crowd of onlookers stood and watched, with the police trying to push them back. The SWAT team remained in position. But now it was not just the guns that were pointed at Danny and Lily. The television cameras were aiming at them as well.



Once again, Lieutenant Maxwell talked through the megaphone to Danny. "The media is here. Now please drop the

knife so we can talk.”

Danny raised his voice in response. “I’m not going to drop the knife. But I will talk. In fact, I’m going to tell you my side of the story.”

Danny glanced back and saw himself on the living room television. He actually felt excited. He had always dreamed of being on TV, but never imagined that this is how it would be. Danny focused and continued talking in a loud voice. “I’m Danny and this is Lily. I am in love with her, but she doesn’t want to go out with me. I came over here to her house, and she got scared. She tried to escape, but I just wanted to talk.”

“You scared me, Danny. You’re out of your mind. You’re crazy!”

“Crazy for you, Lily,” he said, looking at her affectionately. He then faced the audience and continued, “I saw that she called the police and I got really angry. I picked up this knife and told her I was going to kill her. And I am! If she doesn’t like me, then she’s not going to like anybody else!”

“But, Danny, I do like you,” she affirmed.

“No, you don’t. You’re just saying it because I’m holding a knife to your neck.”

She then screamed loud enough for everyone to hear: “I really do like him! But since he tried to burst in all of a sudden, I got scared and called the police. And then he got angry.”

“That’s right! And I don’t know why do all these people want to kill me. This is between her and me. What are you all getting involved for?”

Lieutenant Maxwell intervened. “The police do not want to kill you.”

“Then why are all of you aiming your guns at me?”

“Because you’re holding a knife to her neck,” the lieutenant responded.

“So tell them to put down their weapons, and then I’ll drop the knife.”

“Negative. You get rid of the knife first, and then we’ll

lower our guns.”

“No deal. You’re trying to trick me. I know it.”

Just then Danny heard the television behind him and the reporter saying: “We’ll be right back with this fascinating story of love and violence between these two teenagers after our commercial break.”

Danny immediately crouched down, pulling Lily down with him.

“Why did you duck?”

“Because they’re airing commercials. We’d be risking our lives and not even be showing up on TV.”

“Damn commercials!” Lily exclaimed. “What if they start airing some other news and forget about us? We need to keep this interesting so that they keep covering us.”

Danny glanced at his phone. “The time the kidnapper gave me just ran out. Now what?”

“What if they haven’t seen you yet? We need to get more air time. If they see you, even if it’s late, they’ll probably accept that you completed your mission.”

“There are so many channels on TV. They might not see us anyway. I’m doomed!”

“No, you’re not. The kidnapper has your mom’s phone, doesn’t he?”

“Yep.”

Lily got her cell phone and texted the last number called—Danny’s mom—saying, “Go to channel 13”.

“Great idea, Lily! You’re awesome!”

When the commercials were coming to an end, Danny and Lily once again appeared in the window. The lieutenant then began to speak: “Danny, we need you to put the knife on the floor and your hands in the air.”

“Why do you think I will do that? If I let go of her, you’ll shoot me or invade the house. She’s my only safe bet.”

“That’s not true, Danny. The police are not going to shoot you or invade the house. We only want you to stop threatening the girl. Drop the knife, Danny!”

Lily looked back and saw that they were once again on

TV. She began to improvise. “Danny, drop the knife. I like you.”

“Do you really?” he asked.

“I do.”

“Will you go out with me?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t believe you! You’re lying!” Danny yelled towards the cameras.

“I’m not lying. I *love* you!”

“What? You... love me? That’s serious! You don’t say ‘I love you’ to just anyone unless you really feel it deep down.”

“I mean it.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Lily, I love you too!”

Danny pretended to be overcome with emotion and shared a long kiss with Lily. The cameras got a close-up, and the onlookers on the street began to clap.

After the kiss, Lily peeked behind her and saw that they were still on TV. She whispered to Danny, “We put on quite a show!”

“We did. The kidnappers must have seen us. Thank you for helping me!”

Danny hugged Lily tightly. A gunshot rang through the air and Danny fell to the ground. Lily screamed out desperately, “AHHHHHHH!” She kneeled down beside Danny, who was lying on his back, not moving. There was blood on his shirt. “Danny, Danny! You’re hurt. What the hell happened? Are you okay? Please, talk to me!”

After a long moment of silence, Danny shifted. He put his hand on his wounded shoulder and said, “Damn! They shot me!”

“Oh, Danny!”

“Ow! They got my shoulder.” He examined the wound. It wasn’t very deep, but it was bleeding and it hurt a lot.

“You were lucky. It just scraped you. But why did they shoot you?”



“Ow! I don’t know.”

They turned to watch the replay on TV. When he had gone to hug Lily, Danny still had the knife in his hand. From the outside, it looked like he was going to stab her neck. The reporter was narrating: “After the kiss, it seems the boy changed his mind and was going to kill her with the knife. That’s when a sniper shot him. We do not know if the kid is alive or dead. It looks like the police are going to enter the house.”

Danny was scared. “I need to escape.”

“But how are you going to do that? You’re injured! And they’ve got the place surrounded.”

“I need to escape! If they arrest me, the kidnappers will think I’ll tell everything to the police and they’ll kill my mom for sure.”

“Ok, I’ve got an idea. Come with me!” Lily pulled him by the hand. Danny grabbed his backpack, and they went downstairs to the basement. As they went, Lily explained, “Our house connects to the neighbors. It’s actually one house divided into two. This side is my parents’ house, and the other side is my aunt’s. They put a door in the basement here that opens onto both houses. I’ll open it for you. Now, go into my aunt’s house and escape through her backyard. I don’t think the police will be there.” Lily opened the door and gave Danny a quick kiss goodbye. “Go now, hurry! Take care of yourself!”

Danny went into the adjoining house, and Lily closed the door. He climbed the stairs quietly, heading to the ground floor. He heard two women talking and guessed it was Lily’s aunt and grandmother. It seemed like they had just turned on the TV.

“I don’t believe it! It’s Lily!”

“Who?”

“Lily, your granddaughter. What did this boy do to her?”

“Who?”

“That’s why the police are outside.”

“What?”

Danny tiptoed along and opened the back door. It was easy to go unheard. The helicopter flying overhead was making plenty of noise.

He managed to exit into the backyard. There he noticed a black shirt hanging on the laundry line. He took off his blood-

stained shirt and put the black one on instead. As he put it on, he noticed a number of rose-shaped designs on the shirt. He thought it was a little girly but he knew he couldn't worry about that kind of thing now. He took his baseball cap out of his backpack to add to the disguise.

That was when he heard barking. He glanced back and noticed a dog heading in his direction. *Lily didn't say anything about her aunt having a dog*, he thought, paralyzed in his tracks.



The huge dog approached and smelled him. Then jumped up and placed its paws on Danny's chest and shoulders. The boy felt a sharp pain right where he had the bullet wound and nearly fell over backwards, but he managed to keep his balance. The dog was enormous, nearly the same size as Danny, but luckily very tame. It even licked Danny's face, and the boy returned the greeting by petting the dog. When it returned to all fours, Danny turned around to con-

tinue his escape, but encountered something even more frightening.

He found himself face to face with a police officer who had just entered the backyard. Danny stood frozen in fear. But the policeman placed a finger in front of his mouth, indicating for the boy to remain quiet. “We are dealing with an incident in your neighbor’s house. I think it’s best you go inside and remain inside.”

The police officer jumped over the wall into Lily’s backyard. Danny stood for a moment in disbelief. Since he was wearing a different shirt, had a baseball cap on and was playing with the dog, the policeman did not even suspect him. He probably thought Danny was Lily’s neighbor.

The boy heard the police breaking down the doors and invading Lily’s house. *That was close*, he thought. He jumped over the wall that separated Lily’s aunt’s backyard from the next-door neighbor’s, on the opposite side of Lily’s house, then he left through the front gate of that neighbor’s house. He mingled with the crowd of onlookers watching the show, walking among them without being noticed since everyone was watching the police action at Lily’s house.

Everything went smoothly until a shrewd man recognized Danny and said: “Aren’t you the nut who was kidnapping the girl?”

“Not me!” Danny replied and tried to make his way out.

But a female police officer that was holding back the crowd of onlookers was wary. “Hey, you! Boy, stop right there!”

Danny continued walking, quickening his pace, and made his way out of the crowd. The policewoman was close behind, trying to make her way through. Danny saw a bike leaning against a wall. The owner was probably the big boy standing next to it, trying to see what was happening. Danny grabbed the bike, hopped on and took off. The boy and the police officer went running after him. “You jerk! Give me back my bike!” the boy screamed.

“Stop right there!” the policewoman ordered.

Danny pedaled hard but it was tough to pick up speed. They had nearly caught up to him when he pushed himself to pedal as fast as possible, gaining some distance. His two pursuers continued running after him, but when they saw it was impossible to catch him, they stopped.

Danny continued pedaling and felt a great sense of relief at having escaped alive. He felt the wind on his face, smiled and thanked God for having saved him once again. But he knew that the police officer would radio in the incident and that the police would soon be after him. So he continued racing away. He biked through the streets until he was far away from Lily's house. When he could no longer hear sirens, he stopped to rest. It seemed like he was finally safe.

But the deafening sound of chopper blades put an end to his short-lived sense of peace. The news helicopter, with the camera attached to its nose, had spotted him and hovered overhead, signaling his position to the police. Danny continued pedaling with all his strength towards downtown. *There's no way out*, he thought. *I'll never be able to escape with this helicopter on my back, telling the police where I am.* Despite the dreary outlook, he didn't even think of quitting. He would try to escape while he still had any chance.

Danny turned a corner and came right up against a police car, which skidded and began chasing him. He pedaled as fast as he could, but the car caught up quickly with his bike. It was close to hitting the bicycle's back tire when the boy pulled the bike up onto the sidewalk.

Danny swerved around a few scared pedestrians until he managed to turn onto a one-way street in the opposite direction of the cars. The police car tried to follow him, but there were so many cars coming in the opposite direction that it had to pull over and stop. The boy had freed himself from his pursuers and continued biking, with the helicopter filming everything.

Danny could just picture the words scrolling across the bottom of the screen as images of his escape aired on television: "Live now: young delinquent being chased by police."



Danny rarely watched TV or live news, and now he found himself starring in one. The news crew had showed up just at the right time to help him fulfill his mission for the kidnapers, but now it was only getting in the way. He was going to end up being caught because of the helicopter. *I have just one chance to escape*, he thought.

After biking down a few more streets, he came upon a big downtown street that had an elevated avenue directly above it, bustling with cars. Danny continued to bike just underneath the elevated avenue. The many tall buildings in the area prevented the chopper from flying lower to try to spot the boy underneath the elevated avenue.

Danny also changed directions to throw off the helicopter. He biked and biked until he heard its noise growing fainter. Before more police cars arrived, Danny abandoned the bike and took off running. Since the police were searching for a boy on a bicycle, he'd call less attention to himself on foot.

He noticed a truck stopped at the traffic light, its cargo covered by a tarp. The light turned green, and Danny took off running amid the traffic towards the truck. It was difficult to run since he was so tired. A delivery boy on a motorcycle nearly hit him. The heavy truck was slow compared to the rest of the vehicles on the street, but it was still difficult to reach. With a lot of effort, Danny finally managed to jump onto the moving truck, climb into the bed and cover himself with the tarp. It was a great hideout.

The television helicopter was still searching above the elevated avenue, unable to see anything that Danny had done. Dozens of police cars soon reached the place where they had found the abandoned bike, but there was no boy to be found. Danny was exhausted and took the opportunity to rest in the truck bed, enjoying his newfound freedom. He had finally escaped.

Danny remained in the back of the truck for quite a while. His body was resting, but his mind was not. *Is Lily ok? Did she get hurt when the police entered her house? Did the kid-nappers see me on TV?* He remembered his mother. Many images came to mind: his mom reading him stories when he was little, helping him do his homework, teaching him to ride a bicycle, taking care of him when he got hurt, and lovingly hugging him. His mother was wonderful! But was she alive? He felt a mixture of strong emotions, but mostly he felt fear.

The truck did not travel far or fast because of the heavy traffic. Danny decided to get out of the vehicle while it was stopped at a traffic light. He was still in the downtown area but saw no policemen around.

He was startled when he looked down at his arms. They were black. As were his pants. *How? Why?* But then he gathered that the truck transported sacks of coal, which was why he was utterly filthy. He tried to wipe away the fine black powder, but it was useless. A shower was the only thing that would get him clean. He decided that today was, without a doubt, the worst day of his life. Not to mention the worst birthday. All he wanted as a present was his mom home safe.

Just then his cell phone rang. “Unknown.” It was the kidnapper again. Danny noticed that the phone’s battery was low in charge. He answered quickly and heard, “Congratulations, Danny! You’re a television star!”

Danny could not take the joke any longer. “My battery’s dying. You’re not going to be able to reach me anymore. Where’s my mom?”



“She’s here. She cried when she saw you on TV.”

“Let me talk to her.”

“No way.”

“Let me talk to her, please! I did everything you asked. I just want to know she’s alive.”

“Don’t piss me off!”

“Please!”

“Shut your trap! I already said no!”

“If you don’t let me talk to her, I’m not going to do anything else you ask.”

“You wouldn’t have the guts!”

“I would so. And I’ll even go to the police and tell them everything. And they’ll go after you.”

“Shut up, boy! You don’t know what being chased by the police even is.”

“I do too.”

“You don’t know what it is to get shot at.”

“I do too.”

“You don’t know what it is to spend years in prison.”

“Not yet, but—”

“Shut up and stop giving me lip!”

“You shut up!”

“You watch your mouth—”

“I can’t take any more of you, you son of a—”

“Of a what?”

“You heard me.”

“Don’t talk dirty, boy!”

“I’ll talk dirty if I want. But, ‘son of a—’ is not a swear. I didn’t say the last word.”

“Didn’t your mom teach you any manners?”

“Of course she did. Better than your mom, who didn’t even teach you how to kidnap properly. You need to kidnap rich people, not poor people. Now let me talk to my mother!”

“I’m not gonna let you do a damn thing. I’m going to pop her, right now!

“No!”

Danny heard through the phone the sound of a door

opening and a woman trying to scream. It sounded like she was gagged.

“I’m going to send your mommy to hell!”

“No!”

Danny heard a gun shot. The kidnapper hung up.

“Noooooooooo!”

Danny tossed his cellphone aside and began sobbing. His mother had been killed.

He withdrew to a corner of the sidewalk and sat there, in complete desolation, for over an hour. The phone beeped, warning him that the battery was about to go, and then eventually shut off.

People walked by Danny and did not even notice. His filth made him look like a homeless boy.

Night fell. Between sadness and exhaustion, Danny ended up falling asleep right there on the ground.

Danny awoke in the middle of the night, cold and hungry. He truly felt like a homeless kid. He had never had a father and now he no longer had a mother. He had nobody. His grandparents had died. He had never met his aunts and uncles, who all lived in a faraway state. He was an orphan and a fugitive. If he was lucky enough to stay out of juvenile detention, he was going to have to live on the street or in an orphanage. He felt terribly guilty for his mother's death. If only he had been a bit more patient with the kidnapper.

Right then, Danny wished nothing more than to be dead. He wanted to meet his mother. *Where might she be? Where do people go when they die? Was she in heaven?* Danny felt an urge to kill himself. If he died, would he then see his mom in the afterworld? Maybe, but he preferred to live. Only by being alive could he help apprehend her murderer.

The boy got up and walked aimlessly through the city. His stomach rumbled. He remembered that he had not eaten for a long time.

Sometime later, he stopped before a lo-mein stand next to a bus stop along an all-night bus route. He admired the Chinese man sautéing the noodles with vegetables and bits of chicken. He was dying to have some. But he had no money.

He noticed a big, tall man who looked like a club bouncer just getting off work scarfing down the lo-mein. Danny unwillingly stared with the look of desperate hunger. The man looked back at Danny, filthy and hungry, took pity and gave him the rest of his meal. The boy ate desperately and managed to temporarily trick his hungry stomach.

He continued meandering the streets of downtown. He was afraid to return home. Afraid of not seeing his mother there. Afraid of the police.

He passed by an appliance store, with a huge window filled with computers, refrigerators and television sets. The TVs were all turned to the same channel. Danny jolted when he saw himself on the pre-dawn news. The station was showing images of him in the window at Lily's house, threatening her with a knife, kissing her, getting shot, escaping by bike and being chased. He really had become news and was dumbstruck seeing the recent events on TV. Despite it all, he had not managed to save his mother.

As he stood there, a drunken beggar showed up and stood next to him. He looked at the TV, then looked at Danny and asked, "Are you famous?"

"No," Danny answered, not taking his eyes off the television set.

"Are you an autist?"

"An artist? No."

"So why are y-you on TV?"

"That's not me."

"Of course it's you. I'm d-drunk, n-n-not blind."

"It looks like me, but it's not me."

"D-do you work at age bin go?"

"HB what? Shhhhh! Let me watch this!"

"Ok, ok! No need to get upseeeh!"

Just then, Danny saw something that surprised him. It was Lily being interviewed. She was fine. Danny was excited. But the TV was mute. He pressed his face against the window to try to hear anything. Nothing. So he tried reading her lips. She said, "Dan thought—kidnapped—but—it was quite—prank."

That was when the TV flashed a picture that left him overcome with happiness. It was his mother giving an interview. How was the station showing her on TV? He read her lips and was able to make out, "My son—good boy—I am fine—come home."

Danny jumped for joy. He could not contain himself. His mother was alive!



He hugged the drunken man and began dancing with him, shouting: "My mom's alive! My mom's alive!" The man did not understand a thing but danced anyway. Danny was so elated; he did not even notice the man's stench. He just

danced and twirled joyously until it dawned on him: *The kidnapping never even happened. It was just a tasteless joke. But who would do this to me?*

Danny left the beggar dancing along with a bottle of alcohol and walked off. He did not intend to go home since he thought the police would be there, waiting for him. Danny found a public phone and called his landline collect. A familiar voice answered right away: "Hello."

"Mom?"

"Daniel!"

"Are you alright, Mom?"

"I'm fine, son. Are you? Where are you? I tried calling your cell phone when I heard—"

"The battery died. Where were you all day? I tried calling you at work—"

"I took the day off today. I spent the whole day looking for your birthday present."

"A computer?"

"Yes. The one you wanted. It's right here waiting for you."

"Great! Thanks! But what about your cell phone? I tried calling it—"

"It disappeared. I think it was stolen, without me noticing it."

"The kidnapper has it!"

"I wasn't kidnapped, Danny!"

"Who has done this, then? And why?"

"Just come home, Danny!"

"Are the police there?"

"Yes."

"I will come home, but not right now."

"Where are you? I can pick you up—"

"I need to do something first. But don't worry about me. I'm fine. We'll see each other later. I love you, Mom! Bye!"

He hung up, happy to have spoken with his mother, who was alive and well, but sad at not being able to hug her right then.

The sun was coming up. Danny caught a bus, said he had no money and begged for a free ride. The driver was kind enough, or intimidated by his wild appearance, and let him ride without paying the bus fare. Within minutes Danny was back in his own neighborhood. He went to his best friend's house and waited in the front yard. When Henry was on his way out to school he had a surprise.

"Danny! Where were you? I saw you on TV! What was that all about? I was worried. Everyone's looking for you. Man, you're so dirty!"

"Oh, yeah. I forgot."

Danny washed his face in Henry's patio sink, and asked him:

"Let me borrow your sweatshirt."

"OK, but why?"

"I can use the hood to hide my face. I am going to school and I don't want to draw attention to myself."

"You're joking, right? There's no way you'll go unnoticed. You're all over the news! In fact, why do you even want to go to school today?"

"I want to know who put me through the toughest day of my life."

"You think it was someone at school?"

"It has to be. How could he know so much about Paul, Lily, Lucas—"

"But who do you think could have done this to you?"

"I'm placing my bets on the class jerks—"

"Alan and Fred?"

"Yeah."

“But how?”

“Alan could have faked the kidnapper’s deep voice, and Fred the woman’s screams.”

“That’s strange. But how could they call you that many times if they were so near you, even inside the classroom with you?”

“The first time they called, I was outside. They could have been anywhere. The second time too, because I was at the entrance to the school. They could have sent the text messages right from inside the classroom. The other time was during recess. They could call me without any problems and send the message for me to kiss Lily again. The next call, when they sent me to get potato chips, I was in the classroom and so were they, I think.”

“How’d they do it then?”

“I know!” Danny continued, mostly talking to himself. “It was during the break between classes. They could have been in the hallway, or in the restroom, and called me without anyone noticing.”

“You think?”

“Then they sent me a text message to show the chips—they could’ve done that in the classroom—and the other call was outside the school.”

“So you think that they—”

“I do. Before I thought it was someone from an outside building with a view of the classroom. But it could have been someone inside the school.”

“Alan and Fred. Who would have thought? But why would they do this?”

“They love to tease me—”

“But a prank like this is way over the top.”

“I agree. But there’s only one way to be sure. I’m going to go into the school, confront Alan and Fred directly, and clear this up once and for all.”



Danny and Henry had nearly reached the school when they saw a police car parked close to the main gate. Danny ducked behind a tree. He peeked out and saw Lieutenant Maxwell there, eyeing the students as they entered the gate. “Now what?”

“There’s no way. Even with the hood and cap hiding part of your face, he’ll see you.”

“But I need to get inside!”

“How?”

“I’ve got an idea. But you need to help me.”

Danny told him the plan. Henry listened and immediately sprung into action. He went up to Lieutenant Maxwell, “Hi, Officer!”

“Hi.”

“I’m a friend of Danny’s.”

“Is that so? Then I want to talk to you.”

“OK, but let’s hurry because I need to get to class.”

“Don’t worry; I’ll give you an excuse slip for the day.”

“But I don’t want to miss my classes. I have some important tests today. I’m a good student. I don’t want to fall behind. If I skip class and don’t learn the material, I won’t be a good student, you see?”

Henry babbled on in an attempt to distract the lieutenant from looking at the school gate so that Danny could get by. But it wasn’t easy. The officer never stopped eyeing the students as they entered the school. Danny took advantage of the fact that five students were all arriving at the same time and made himself blend in with the group. In this way he managed to get through unnoticed and enter the school

without the lieutenant seeing him.

But a first-grader recognized him. “Danny?”

“No.”

“You’re Daniel, right?”

“No.”

“Yeah, you are.”

“You’re mistaken, kid. I’m John.”

“But I saw you on TV yesterday. I told everyone that you go to my school, but nobody believed me. Can you come over my neighborhood to tell my buddies that you really do go to my school?”

“No.”

“Aw, Danny, please?”

“Shhhh! Don’t say that name!”

“Danny—”

“Shhhh!”

Soon other kids at school noticed him and tried to talk to him. One boy even asked for his autograph. The lieutenant noticed the commotion and looked inside the gate. He saw Danny and hurried after him.

The boy managed to shake off his new fans, went running up the stairs and into the classroom. His classmates were surprised to see him. Danny was in a hurry and went straight over to Alan.

“So you’re the one who tricked me?”

“You’re crazy! What are you talking about?”

“You’re the only one it could be. You were the kidnapper, and Fred was the woman.”

The other kids in class laughed.

“What woman? I was no woman!” Fred shouted, worried and somewhat dumbstruck, while Alan defended him, saying, “Dang, Danny, you need to get your head checked!”

But, Danny continued. “I just don’t know how you got my mother’s cell phone.”

Just then Lieutenant Maxwell entered the classroom and yelled, “Danny, you’re coming with me!”

“Just a second!”

“NOW!”

“Then I want you to arrest them too,” Danny said, pointing to Alan and Fred. “They were the ones who pulled this prank on me.”

Scared by the officer’s presence, Fred began crying and talking to Alan.

“It wasn’t us. I told you it wasn’t a good idea! Now we’re in for it.”

Alan grew irate and yelled at Fred: “You wuss! Shut your mouth, you idiot!”

“It wasn’t our fault. It was the guy who—”

“Shut up!” Alan ordered.

That was when Fred looked out the window to the building across from the school. Danny looked in the same direction and saw a man partially hidden behind a curtain, looking at them from one of the windows. The man realized he was being watched and quickly moved away from the window. *Who could that guy be? Why was Fred looking up there?* Danny wondered.

“So then all three of you are going to come with me to the police station to explain this whole thing!” the officer ordered.

The classroom had four rows of desks, creating three aisles between them. Danny was at the back. The lieutenant went after him down the right-side aisle. Danny ran in the direction of the door through the left-hand aisle. The lieutenant pushed some desks in front of Danny to block his exit. But the boy kept running, leaped onto a chair and hurdled the desks. He quickly reached the classroom door and bolted.



Danny quickly descended the stairs, skipping steps. The lieutenant was behind him. The bell rang, and the monitor was just closing the school gate as Danny flew by.

When Danny was outside the front gate, he ran toward the building where he had seen the man in the window. He crossed the street without looking either way. A car passing by slammed on its brakes, the tires skidding. It stopped very close to Danny, who got scared but continued to run.

He reached the front of the building, but he did not know how to enter. A six-foot high iron gate with sharp spikes on top blocked his way. Danny saw that the lieutenant was coming so he began to climb. He placed one foot on the horizontal bar that fell right in the middle of the gate, pulling himself up, then placed his other foot on top, just between the sharp spikes. He managed to keep his balance on top of the gate. When the lieutenant was just shy of catching him, Danny jumped down and landed on the building's grounds.

Lieutenant Maxwell looked to the doorman's booth and began shouting for someone to open the door for him, but nobody did.

Danny ran into the building. He tried to figure out which floor corresponded to the man in the window. Probably the seventh floor. He grabbed the elevator door, but it did not open. The elevator was not yet on the ground floor. Danny pressed the button a number of times and waited. He then looked desperately through the front glass door at the lieutenant, who was trying to jump the gate.

The elevator finally arrived. Danny went to pull open the elevator door, but it opened before he even had a chance to grab the handle. A man was exiting the elevator. When

Danny looked at him, he stopped dead in his tracks.

It was like he was looking at himself, only older. The man also stopped. The two stared at each other in shock.

Lieutenant Maxwell clumsily ripped his uniform on the sharp spikes, but eventually managed to jump the gate.

Just then, the man in front of Danny pulled a gun from his waist, aimed it at the lieutenant and shouted, "Get out of the building right now!"

The police officer did not react. He only said calmly, "Relax! Let's talk about this."

"Like hell let's talk! GET OUT OF THE BUILDING NOW!"

The man grabbed Danny from behind with an arm lock and aimed the gun at his head.

"Get out of here or I'll blow this kid's brains out!"



The lieutenant decided to obey. He tried to open the gate from the inside but was unable. The mysterious man saw that nobody was in the booth and shouted, "Where's the doorman?"

The doorman appeared just then, zipping up his pants. He walked hurriedly back from the restroom.

"Open this damn door!" the man ordered. But the doorman did not obey and began crying.

"Please, don't kill me!"

"Shut up and do as I say!"

"Please, I have a wife and children!"

The doorman started to shake and was unable to do anything. So the mysterious man pulled Danny into the booth and pressed the red button. The building's gate automatically opened. The man shouted at the officer once again, "Get out now or Daniel dies!"

*How does he know my name?* Danny thought. Lieutenant Maxwell left the grounds, and the scared doorman went running after him. The gate closed on its own.

The lieutenant returned to his patrol car and called for backup. The man continued to keep the gun pointed at Danny's head and pulled him onto the floor of the doorman's booth, out of the police's line of sight.

"Look at what you've got me into now!" the man said.

Danny tried to understand what had happened but dared not ask a thing. The gun intimidated him. The man continued, "I realized this was going to get dirty when you saw me at the window. I wanted to get out, but the damn elevator took so long—and you got to me first. Hey, you're starting to get courageous. You saw me and then immediately dashed off to check who I was. You didn't even get scared. This little lesson actually worked, see?"

The man put down the gun, clasped Danny's face in his hands and looked at him affectionately.

"You look just like me. I've waited so long to meet you. They locked me up the day before you were born. I was stupid enough to get together with some friends to rob a

bank, which would have made for a pretty money. But we got caught. And they even accused me of killing the bank manager. But it wasn't me; it was that punk Walter who was lucky enough to escape. I spent nearly fourteen years in jail, and you never once visited me.

*Is this guy telling the truth? Is he actually my dad?* Danny thought.

"Mom said you had died."

"In Nancy's mind, I died the day I was locked up. I saw other inmates' families visiting them, their children growing up—I dreamed of seeing you. But you never showed up. Nancy never sent even a single letter with a photo of you! When I finally got out, your mother didn't let me meet you. She threatened to call the police if I even came close to you. That's when I had the idea to rent this apartment in front of the school so I could see you every day. I asked your classmates about you—the blond one who lives in this building, Alan, and—

I forget the name of his friend, who looks a bit dumb."

"Fred."

"That's right. They told me you were a sissy, weak, coward, ran away from fights, didn't hit on girls, only wanted to study... I heard that and I didn't like it. In my day, being a man was a matter of honour. It wasn't like today, when you can act like a girl and that's fine. Men had to prove they were men. If you couldn't, you were screwed. I was hoping to pass on those same values to you. That's when I came up with the idea of the kidnapping, so I could teach you how to be a man. Because my son has to be a real man!"

"But I could have died! You were so cruel!"

"Life's cruel, son. I gave you the best birthday present I could give. I taught you to be strong, to be able to face life bravely. Look at your dad as an example here. If I were not strong, I would not have survived so long in jail. It's hell in there."

Danny could hardly believe what he was hearing. He couldn't understand his father's twisted logic.



The man continued: "My father was tough on me. If I did anything wrong, he would hit me, with his hand, with a slipper, a belt, a stick, whatever he could grab. If I cried, he beat me even harder, until I stopped crying. That helped mould my character, make me strong. With you it was different, I was far away, I couldn't bring you up in the same way. That's why I set all that up, so that you could learn in one go what I couldn't teach you before."

Sirens. The two peeked out and saw some police cars stopping in front of the building.

"We need to get out of here," the man said.

The two exited the booth, running low to the ground. Danny thought of trying to flee, but something about the mysterious man who said was his father intrigued him. He wanted to know more about the guy. The two quickly reached the building's elevator.

They rode to the sixth floor. The man took Danny into apartment 68. The place was a mess, filled with merchandise: boxes of perfumes, mobile phones, and lots of sportswear, including sneakers, football jerseys and sweatshirts.

"Do you sell these things online?" Danny asked.

"You think it's easy to let go of a life of crime. The minute you're released from prison the crime syndicate will force you to do some 'favors'. They found out the police were going to launch an operation against pirated goods so they handed me the stuff to hide until things blow over."

"Do you need to do everything they say?"

"If I want to stay alive, yes. And if I want to protect you, too. They know everything about my life and can kill my son if I don't do what they ask."

Danny was shocked.

They soon heard Lieutenant Maxwell from below, shouting into a megaphone and trying to make contact with them. But Danny's dad didn't pay any attention. The boy tried to warn him. "George."

"You know my name, son."

"The police are trying to talk to us. Why don't you negoti-

ate with them? You can use me as a hostage to try to escape.”

“I don’t talk to the police.”

George sifted through the mess, looking for something. While doing so, he brought up another topic with Danny.

“I was happy to see you facing all the challenges I gave you, stealing the boy’s phone, kissing the girl, getting the potato chips—”

“But how did you get the ideas?”

“Your friends—”

“Alan and Fred are not my friends.”

“They’re not? Well, they told me they were. They were the ones who gave me clues about the rich kid, about the most beautiful girl in the class—”

“Lily is not—I think they wanted to play tricks on me—”

“They sent text messages telling me what I wasn’t able to see through the window. They helped me a lot. I just think they should have found a guy your size to fight with you. That one gave you a blow so bad it broke my heart! Though a real man needs to know how to take a beating as well. You don’t always win in life.”

“Who was the woman who cried when I called you?”

“It was this here—”

George turned on a recorder that played the sound of a woman crying and shouting.

“I recorded your friend—Fred pretending like he was a woman crying. It worked all right.”

“I knew it was him,” Danny said.

“I had also recorded the gunshot sound I used that time—”

The conversation was interrupted by strange noises coming from outside the building. The two looked out the window. They saw dozens of police officers and police cars in the street. There were sharpshooters positioned all around. They were completely surrounded. There was no way out. But George did not seem worried. He finally found what he had been looking for. A huge, long, and heavy black bag. “Come with me!”

He picked up the bag and took Danny to the elevator.  
They went to the building's twenty-seventh floor.

They exited the elevator, walked up a flight of stairs and went through a little door that entered onto a small terrace. Then they walked up another small iron ladder affixed to the wall that led to the top of the building. The rooftop was empty except for some antennas and a lightning rod. The view from the top was impressive. It was the tallest building in the area. Danny wondered: *What is my dad planning now?*

“We need space!” George said. He then forcefully ripped up the building’s antennas and threw them down below onto the terrace. He kicked the lightning rod a number of times and managed to bend it until it was lying on the ground. He then opened his big sack and began pulling out a series of aluminum tubes, steel cables and a cloth made of resistant, synthetic material. He began unfolding, extending and fitting everything together while continuing to talk with Danny. “The idea to have you show up on TV was mine alone. I loved seeing my son become a star!”

“There was nothing good about it for me. By the way, how did you get my Mom’s cell phone?”

“I stopped at the hospital the day before yesterday and asked her once again to introduce me to you, but she said no. I got angry and, without her noticing, I pinched her cell phone from her purse. That was when I had the idea of the kidnapping prank and asked your friends to help. I was the one who made that deep, threatening voice. I was good, wasn’t I?”

Danny didn’t answer. George continued, “I thought of every detail. I really wanted you to believe in the kidnapping, so that you would fulfill your missions wholeheartedly. And you

were a success. I am so proud of you, my son!”

“Why did you pretend to have killed Mom? That was horrible!”

“That was when you disrespected me on the phone. I got angry and wanted to teach you a lesson. But I think I overdid it.”

Despite everything, Danny could not feel anger toward George. The excitement of having a father lessened the suffering he had felt over the last twenty-five hours.

Danny walked to the corner of the building and looked down. Only then did he grasp just how high they were. He even felt a bit dizzy. He did not like heights. Nevertheless, he was able to see the special police force in black uniforms, with helmets and machine guns. They were jumping the walls and invading the building on all sides. “Dad—they’re entering the building. They’ll soon reach us!”

“Dad? Did you just call me Dad?” George began to cry, but tried to hide it. He gave Danny a big hug. “You mean a lot to me, Danny. The son I dreamt about for so long is now really here. You’re right here with me.”

“But we have to—” Danny suddenly realized what his father was actually doing. He was assembling a huge hang glider.

George wiped the tears from his face and began to speak. “Your father did a lot of things before getting mixed up in crime. I even once worked at a hang gliding runway, assembling these rigs here and checking pilot’s equipment. After a while, I learned how to fly. And I kept this hang glider as my last option of escape.”

“So go. I’ll head on down and try to throw off the police to buy you more time.”

“What are you saying there? Come with me, son! I have equipment for two people. I’ll pilot and you’ll go along for the ride.”

“But isn’t it dangerous?”

“Less dangerous than staying here, waiting for the police to shoot us.”

“But—”

“It took me so long to finally meet you. I’m not going to let you go at the first sign of difficulty. Put this on, Danny!”

George gave him a harness and a helmet. Danny suited up quickly while his father did likewise.

“Dad, how do you fly with this thing?”

“I’ll tell you in a minute, but for now just follow my lead and do what I do.”

He clipped the strap harness to the center rod. Danny did the same. They picked up the hang glider, which weighed some seventy pounds, and went to a corner of the rooftop so as to have more room to run. When they did so, they heard the police down below, trying to open the door to the small terrace. But it was somewhat blocked by the antennas that George had thrown at the terrace.

“There’s no time. They’re coming!”

“Run!”

The police managed to open the door. As they climbed the iron ladder that lead to the top, George and Danny ran full force and launched themselves off the building.

Danny thought he was going to die, but he soon felt the air prop up the hang glider, which then leveled off. The two were belly down, lying on air, suspended by the harness. George held the control bar, piloting the hang glider, while Danny held fast to George. They were flying! It was hard to believe. Still scared, Danny looked back and saw the policemen, their mouths agape, staring at the two from on top of the building.

George piloted well. Danny felt safe by his side. He became less tense and let himself succumb to the pleasure of flying. It was wonderful!

He had always wanted a father and now he had one right by his side. And the two were flying. It was like a dream. Danny wanted to make the most of this dream. He lapped up the air that blew in his face. He took in the beautiful view before him. The city seen from above was beautiful!



But the boy's happiness was short-lived. He saw police cars below following the path they were making in the air. A team of elite sharpshooters was getting out of a big police car and looking up. George changed course, passed behind some buildings and moved out of the police's field of view.

"I am going to fly over that area with all those buildings. That'll make it harder for the police to spot us," he said.

They managed to keep their altitude and fly far. The police had lost sight of them. But soon the winds began to pick up in earnest, which made them change route yet again. They drifted over a neighborhood full of houses. And the police on the ground spotted them once again. Worse yet, the hang glider was losing altitude. A police van stopped and two elite sharpshooters got out and took position, aiming straight at the hang glider.

Danny heard the buzz of a shot pass his side. Another shot hit the wing and made a small hole on the cloth. George found it more difficult to control the glider. Despite this, he

managed to distance himself from the shooters. Danny heard one more shot and then it seemed they were safe. They flew another half mile before Danny felt something wet in his hand. It was blood. Running down his father's arm. "What's this, Dad?"

"They hit me."

Danny saw the red stain on George's chest, near his right shoulder.

"But—"

"I've taken many bullets in this life, son. It's not now that I'm—arggghh!"

George let go of the control bar. Danny grabbed it tightly, but they were losing control. "Dad!"

George found the strength to grab the bar again and help keep the glider stable. He then said, "I think we managed to throw them off. Let's fly a little bit more until we can find a place to land."

But then Danny heard a familiar sound. He looked back and, to his surprise, he saw a police helicopter chasing them. As if that were not enough, another helicopter appeared, from a TV station, filming everything. "Oh no!"

His father suddenly felt sharp pains once again. "Son, I can no longer pilot. I don't have the strength. Steer for me."

"What?"

"Hold on here. I'm going to teach you how to steer."

George released the glider's control bar, and Danny grabbed hold of it tightly. It was very difficult to control.

"I've got a grip, Dad. Now teach me."

George did not answer. Danny looked aside and saw his father passed out, blood trickling from his mouth.

"Daaaaad!"

Danny grew desperate. He did not know what to do. He tried to keep the hang glider under control, but the police helicopter drew close and the wind from the blades made the glider lose even more stability. Danny held the control bar with all his might so as to continue leveling, but he was quickly losing altitude.



He flew in the direction of a busy avenue, with cars coming and going at high speed. After escaping so many dangers, Danny did not want to die by being run over by cars. With effort, he managed to steer the hang glider in the direction of a small park. He would try to land there. But he remembered that he did not know how to land. They would fall full force. He would certainly die and finish killing his father.

He then noticed a small lake in the middle of the park. It seemed like a good place to fall. He tried steering the hang glider in the direction of the lake as best he could. The glider descended fast. He swerved away from a utility pole and went right through a bevy of pigeons. When he was just shy of the lake, he ended up falling onto a huge tree.

The branches and leaves helped absorb the fall. Fortunately, both were wearing helmets and did not get hurt badly by the impact. The hang glider remained stuck in the tree and the two were suspended, their legs swaying in the air like two puppets. George was still passed out. A crowd of people soon appeared to see what had happened. Danny began to yell.

“Please, someone call an ambulance! My dad’s hurt.”

The boy managed to release his harness cords and wrest free of the hang glider. He clung to the tree branches and headed down. He wanted to get help for his dad. But before he could get his feet on the ground, guns were already pointing at him. The police had arrived.

Two police officers restrained Danny. They raised his hands behind his head and handcuffed him, then put him in a police car, out of which he could see a rescue crew arriving to save his father. But he could not see if they would be successful. The police car soon left the scene, taking Danny directly to the police station. He once again felt desolate. The joy of discovering that he had a father was so quickly displaced by the disgrace of watching him die by his side.

Danny was interrogated at the police precinct about all of the incidents over the preceding two days. He explained in detail everything that he had been through.

Afterwards, Danny was finally allowed to see his mother. He hugged her, kissed her and cried in her arms.



“Are you okay, Mom?”

“I am. I’m just so glad to see you, son!”

“I tried so hard to save you. I’m so happy you’re okay.”

“I was fine the whole time, son! It was just a prank that—”

“I know, Mom. I met my father today.”

“George is a criminal.”

“Is that why you hid him from me all this time? You didn’t let him see me after he got out of jail—”

“He escaped from jail, son.”

“What?”

“It was in the newspapers. He and five other prisoners escaped through a tunnel last month.”

“But he said—”

“Criminals like George are compulsive liars. You cannot trust what they say.”

“But he told me so many things—”

“The police were looking for him. This was just one of the thousands of reasons I didn’t let him see you. He’s not a good influence on you. I know that growing up without a father was tough. But I thought it better to have a dead father than a criminal father. That’s why I said he’d died in an accident. I didn’t want you visiting him in jail. That’s no place for a boy. I didn’t want you to identify with your father and think it’s okay to be a thief like him. George is nothing to me. He was just a romantic fling, a moment of foolishness in my life—”

“I was born from that foolishness—”

“Yes, it was the most wonderful foolish thing I ever did in my life. I have you because of it.”

“But I think you should have told me the truth. I had the right to know and to choose for myself if I wanted to have contact with my father.”

“Now you have this right, son. You can visit George whenever you want.”

“If he survives—”

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Danny thought he would be sent to juvenile detention, but he was not. He was allowed to wait for his hearing in freedom. Back home, he ate a huge plate of food and then slept for sixteen hours straight.

Fortunately, Danny’s dad withstood the wounds and re-

covered. When he was released from the hospital, he went straight to jail. The escape, the blackmail and the pirated goods were reason enough to condemn him to seven years in jail in addition to the two years of time still pending from his previous conviction before his escape. Danny decided he would visit him from time to time and try to form a friendship with his dad.

When the time came for Danny to be heard at the juvenile court, he was severely reprimanded. In his speech, the judge listed all the crimes that the boy had committed: “You stole from a schoolmate and a store, you pulled a prank on the police, you pretended to threaten a girl, you stole a bicycle and then fled the police, not once, but twice. You deserve to spend some time behind bars. But since you are a first-time offender and since you were being severely threatened—”

Danny was sentenced to one year of community work as storyteller and school aide for children in public nurseries, orphanages and hospitals.

There were also punishments levied at school. Alan and Fred were expelled for having aided Danny’s father and for the terrible behavior they generally exhibited. As for Danny, the principal said, “You too should be expelled for what you did. But since your behavior and grades have always been excellent, I am going to forgive you. You will keep your scholarship but, in exchange, in addition to maintaining high grades, you will have to provide study support to weaker students.”

Danny was happy to be allowed to stay at his school. He decided to stop at the convenience store and pay the Turk what he owed. He expected a strong scolding, but the Turk actually wanted a picture with Danny, who was now famous.

By the time Danny returned to his classes, much had changed. Everyone wanted to be his friend. The attention made him feel good, but he did not let sudden fame delude him. He remained studious and continued to be best friends with Henry.

As soon as he had the chance, he went to talk to Lily.

“Thanks for helping me that day.”

“You’re welcome,” she said shyly.

“I’m sorry I made you go through all that.”

“There’s no need to apologize. It was the most exciting day of my life. I had my first kiss, my second kiss, I helped you draw in the police, I had my third kiss, we confronted the police, we were on TV, I had my fourth kiss, which the whole country witnessed, I helped you escape, I then saw my house invaded by the police, I gave a ton of interviews for TV, newspapers, magazines, I had my 15 minutes of fame—”

While she was talking, Danny noticed she seemed prettier. Her appearance had not changed. What had changed was his perspective. Since he knew her better, he began to notice her inner beauty. Lily was sensitive, intelligent, generous, spontaneous and happy. These qualities made her a beautiful person. Danny also noticed the beauty in her gestures, in the way she cast her eyes, in her way of talking.

Because of Lily, Danny finally realized that his birthday had not been so bad after all.

“It was wonderful!” Lily continued, “and I have to thank you for that day. Thank you!”

“You’re welcome!” he said. “We can do it again whenever you want.”

“Not everything again. I only want to repeat one thing.”

“What?”

Lily looked at him with a smile on her face. Danny took the hint. He leaned in close and kissed her. She wrapped her arms around his neck.

Sam, the student monitor, came over to separate them.

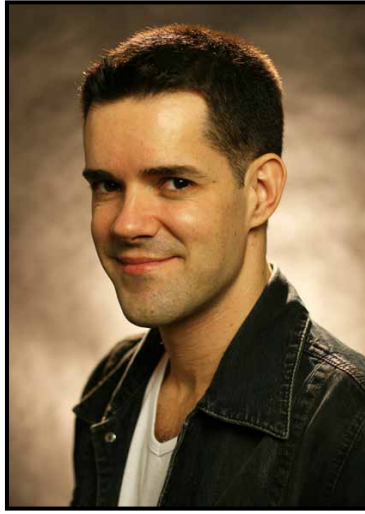
“Excuse me, but you know the school rule. No public displays of affection.”

Danny and Lily didn’t pay him the least bit of attention.

Ms. Rivera, the principal, soon showed up. She eyed the scene and sighed, wistful for the days of her youth, and signed for Sam to leave the two alone.

They continued kissing, oblivious to anything else.





Flávio Colombini

I live in São Paulo, Brazil and I love to write stories. I wrote this one in seven days, but then I rewrote the ending twice and revised the text dozens of times until it sounded right. It was a lot of work, but I did it with joy.

I graduated in film studies. I have written and directed many short films, music videos and two independent feature films. I have also 30 children's books published in Portuguese. This was my first book for young adults, and one of many titles translated into English.

If you would like to know more about me, visit my website: [www.flaviocolombini.com](http://www.flaviocolombini.com) and click on the English icon on the homepage.

### Rick Troula

I am an illustrator, cartoonist, designer and teacher. I also work with concept art, storyboards and art direction. My website is: [www.ricktroula.com](http://www.ricktroula.com)