

## ***HERO TO ZERO***

The first thing Danny had to do on Tuesday morning was go to his head of year and tell her that he had missed school the day before.

That had been his mum's first instruction this morning.

Danny got to school early and waited outside her office. There were very few other children around in the long, overlit corridor. But those who came past looked at Danny oddly, then shuffled on.

'Hello, Danny,' Mrs Page said when she arrived, carrying a box and a stack of files. 'You're in early. What can I do for you?'

She invited him into her cluttered office and offered him a seat.

Then Danny explained. Like he'd promised he would. He'd missed school. Yesterday afternoon. He was sorry.

Mrs Page was OK with him. At first she was surprised. Then she asked him why. Why had he left school in the middle of the day? Was something troubling him? Could she help?

'It's just you've never done this before,' she said. 'You're usually such a good young man.'

Danny wondered if he should tell Mrs Page. He decided he would. She probably thought he was being bullied or something. And he didn't want her getting the wrong idea, didn't want her worrying.

'I went to the City Stadium,' he said, 'to see who was coming in and out of it. To see if I could find out anything about the people who want to buy City.'

At first Mrs Page laughed. Very briefly. Danny saw her try to control herself. Then she nodded. *Trying to look serious*, Danny thought. And that was when he saw a City mug on the sink in the corner of her office.

So *she* was a City fan too. She probably wanted to know what he'd seen. But he knew there was no way she was going to ask.

'Right,' she said, finally in control. 'Danny, this mustn't happen again. It's the first time you've done this. If you do it again you'll be on report. OK?'

Danny nodded and said thank you.

Mrs Page smiled.

And that was it.

Walking from Mrs Page's office, Danny met Paul.

'What were you doing in there?' Paul asked, nodding to their head of year's office.

Danny took Paul down the corridor to the foot of the staircase and explained. In detail. He felt safe down here. No one knew they came here.

Once he'd told his story, Paul shook his head.

'You're mad,' he said. 'Arrested? What was it like?'

'Horrible.'

'So have you got a police record?'

Danny paused before he replied. He thought he heard someone on the stairs above them. A sound,

then a silence. He wasn't sure if there was someone up there. Someone listening. So he lowered his voice. He didn't want this to come out.

'No. Not unless I do something else. Then I get a police record.'

Paul shook his head again. And Danny wondered if his friend was disappointed in him. Like his mum and dad were.

But then Paul's eyes lit up. 'So, what did you see?' he said. 'At City?'

Ten minutes later Danny walked into his form room. As he did, there was a sudden cheer and round of applause. Led by James Nash.

Danny stopped in the doorway. What was going

on?

Then he noticed Charlotte standing in the corner with her friends Sophie Hannah and Rachel Connor. And that she was frowning at him.

Danny mouthed, *What?* to her, but she just cast her eyes down.

Then Danny looked at James again.

'And here's the hero!' James said. 'Danny Harte. Our criminal classmate.'

The applause was louder now. Twenty faces grinning at him. Clapping and laughing.

Danny felt embarrassed. He knew what this was about. James had found out he'd been arrested. James had told everyone. James was trying to make a big deal of it. When Danny wanted to forget it.

And how had James found out? Had Paul told him? No way. He'd never do that. And he'd not had time, surely.

Danny's mind went back to when he was in the stairwell, talking to Paul, telling him what had happened. He had heard someone above on the stairs. That someone must have been James.

And now Danny wasn't sure how to respond either. How did he want to appear? What did he want people to think of him? James? Charlotte? Everyone? So – in an attempt to stop the applause more than anything else, because he'd never had attention like this before – he bowed.

'What was that about?'

Charlotte had stayed behind in the classroom, after registration. The rest of the class had gone, several slapping Danny on the back, as if to say he was cool now. Now that he'd been arrested.

'Last night ...' Danny started to say.

'I know what happened last night, thanks to James Nash. Soon the whole school will, after that performance.' Charlotte was furious. 'You told me you wouldn't go down to City – and then you went anyway!'

Danny shrugged. He didn't know what to say. This was the first time Charlotte had told him off. If she *was* telling him off. She was really upset, he knew that. And he wasn't quite sure what to do. If his sister had a go at him like this he'd just swear at

her or walk off.

But with Charlotte ... What was he supposed to do?

'You've got nothing to say,' Charlotte said, 'have you?'

Danny desperately wanted to say something. *Should* he say sorry? Should he shout back at her that he could do what he liked? That she had no right to tell him what to do?

And why was everyone on his back? He'd made one mistake and now everyone was being mean.

His mum and dad.

His sister.

And Charlotte, his ... But that was the problem: he wasn't quite sure what Charlotte was. And she

was still staring at him.

Danny felt like he was paralysed. He had nothing to say.

'You lied to me, Danny,' Charlotte said. 'That's what's annoyed me. I hate liars. That's why I like you. You tell the truth. Usually.'

Danny's head went hot. His mouth dry. His body chilled, from the shoulders down to his legs. He looked out of the window, hearing a plane descending into the airport. Then he turned to Charlotte and replied.

'So?' he said. 'You're not my mum, are you?'

After Charlotte had stormed off, giving Danny the sort of look he'd never seen her give to anyone, he

had to reach out and hold one of the school tables.

To steady himself.

This was terrible.

This was awful.

He wanted nothing more than to walk out of the school gates. To get away from the school, the other students and his friends.

But most of all, he wanted to get away from himself.