

Foul Play: The Danger Academy

Tom Palmer

(an eight-part story to be read aloud in five minute episodes)

Chapter One

The one where Danny realises footballers are being stolen

Danny Harte is a detective, a football detective. He has investigated crimes including kidnapped footballers and burgled managers. He works with his best friend, Charlotte Duncan and a football newspaper journalist, Anton Holt. This is a one-off story written especially for Premier League Reading Stars member.

Danny Harte watched City FC attacking the goal. Two short passes and they were in the United penalty area.

Again.

The City striker received the ball in so much space that he had time to take two touches before he shot.

Danny was clapping before the ball hit the back of the net.

It was nine-nil. *Nine*-nil!

Danny reflected that it was a shame he was watching the City FC under-twelve's and not the men's team.

'Is it normally this one-sided?' a voice next to Danny asked.

It was Charlotte, Danny's best friend. Tall. Long dark hair. Clever.

'No,' Danny said. 'I've never seen anything like it.'

Danny and Charlotte had not gone to City's training ground to see this *particular* game. They were there to watch the under-eighteen's. And, in particular, to watch their friend, Kofi Danquah, City FC's young Ghanaian star.

But at nine-nil Danny felt quite glad he had come.

As the applause died down, Danny noticed one figure was *not* clapping. A short, thick-built man, with dark scruffy hair, wearing a hoody. Someone who looked familiar to Danny. An ex-footballer. And one *his dad* didn't like. But who?

Danny couldn't identify him, but he knew someone who would be able to.

He took his iPhone out of his pocket.

Dad. Who's that player from the 80s you hate? Short. Wide. Ugly. Dark hair.

D x

Half an hour later, on the same pitch, Danny was watching Kofi on the ball. Charlotte had gone to get two cans of Coke.

Because she'd been a while, Danny looked after her to see if she needed a hand. That was when he noticed the two boys stood next to him.

They looked familiar too.

And Danny quickly saw why. They were both wearing United FC tracksuits. He'd seen them in the under-twelve's game. Playing for the opposition.

Being inquisitive, Danny wanted to know why they'd stayed. So he carried on looking at them.

Eventually, one of the lads, short, with blonde hair, looked back.

'Hard luck earlier,' Danny said.

The boy shrugged.

'It was a tough game,' Danny smiled.

'We were *terrible*,' the blonde one said.

Danny realised the boy with him was the keeper who had let in the nine goals. He was taller with red hair.

'I thought *you* actually played well,' he said to the keeper. 'It would have been 20-0 if it hadn't been for your saves.'

'Thank you,' the boy said, in what sounded like a foreign accent. 'We were missing defenders.'

'Why are you still here?' Danny asked. 'Haven't your team mates gone?'

'We're City fans,' the blonde boy said. 'I'm Jake. This is Tomasz.'

Danny grinned. City fans playing for United! 'How did that happen?' he asked.

The blonde boy laughed, then frowned. 'City didn't want *me*.'

'How come you were missing those defenders?' Danny went on. 'I mean... you were pretty outclassed by City.'

‘We were,’ Jake replied. ‘Two of our best players left the team a few weeks ago. Connor and Ronan. They said they were going home to Ireland, but there’s a rumour going round that they’ve been poached by another team.’

Danny frowned. The young United players had reminded him of something. The same thing had happened here at City. But with older players. Aged sixteen. Two of the best in the country. They’d just left to join another football academy. And, bizarrely, they’d cut off all contact with their parents too. And it wasn’t actually another football club they’d joined: it was a so-called International Football Academy, run by an ex-player. Vinny Adams.

‘You said your mates haven’t stayed in touch?’ Danny asked, trying to find out more. ‘That’s strange.’

‘Yeah,’ Jake complained. ‘We were all really close. And suddenly they don’t want anything to do with us. They’ve got new phone numbers and email addresses. They’ve disappeared off Facebook. No trace of them.’

Danny gazed back to the refreshments van. Where *was* Charlotte? He wanted to talk all this through with her. It sounded dodgy.

As he gazed, his phone buzzed.

It was a text from his dad.

Two words.

Vinny Adams.

That was *him*? The man in the hoody? He was *here*?

And, if he was *here*, that meant he was looking for more players for his private football academy! City FC players!

No way!

One, because there was something really funny going on with players leaving their friends and families.

Two, because there was no way he was going to take City players.

Danny was frowning as Charlotte came over to him with the two cans.

‘What?’ she said.

‘I think we’ve got a job’, Danny explained in a soft voice, so no one else could hear.

Charlotte said nothing. She just nodded. She knew what Danny meant. She knew exactly.

Because Danny Harte and Charlotte Duncan were not just normal football fans. They were detectives. Football detectives. In the past two years they had solved footballer kidnaps, Russian billionaires trying to murder England players and a string of burglaries of footballers' houses.

Now they had another football mystery to solve. Just *what* was going on?

And there was no time to waste.

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Chapter Two

The one where Danny has a trial to join a football academy

In the last chapter, Danny and Charlotte stumbled across a strange phenomenon. Young footballers were leaving top clubs for a mysterious international football academy. Danny knows when something dodgy is going on in the football world, so his next move is to investigate.

Danny stood outside the entrance to Vinny Adams International Football Academy. It was 8.55 a.m. His trial was due to start in five minutes.

This was it.

The day before, after the game at City FC training ground, Danny and Charlotte had devised a plan.

The only way they were going to work out why all the players were leaving other clubs to join the Vinny Adams International Football Academy was to get into the academy.

But how?

There was really only one answer. With all the football crimes they had investigated before, they'd needed the help of the local sports writer, Anton Holt. Danny had met him when he was investigating the kidnap of City FC striker, Sam Roberts, two years earlier.

This is how the conversation went when Danny had called him.

'Anton?'

'Danny. How are you?'

'Fine. I need you to get me into Vinny Adams International Football Academy.'

'Do you?'

'Yes.'

'When?'

'Tomorrow.'

There was a pause at the other end of the line. Holt was thinking: Danny knew that. But what he liked about Holt was that the journalist trusted Danny. Even though Danny was a child and Holt was an adult, he always went with Danny's instinct.

'A trial costs £5000,' Holt said.

'Oh,' Danny replied.

'You think there's something dodgy going on there?' Holt asked, serious.

'Yes,' Danny said.

'So do I,' Holt went on. 'I've been trying to work out *what* for months. There are loads of rumours about Adams, but nothing has even been proved.'

Holt paused. Then spoke again. 'Be there at 9 a.m. tomorrow.'

'But who'll pay?' Danny asked.

'My newspaper,' Holt replied. 'Don't worry.'

And that was it. Sorted.

But Danny had not arrived at 9 a.m.: he'd come at seven.

Why?

Because he wanted to watch. Gather any evidence he could before going in. He'd brought a small pair of binoculars with him.

The Academy was based next to an old World War Two airfield, in one of the old hangars. Danny observed it from across the disused runway. There was a small wood where he could sit and watch.

Most of what he saw did not seem unusual. Cars arriving from 8.30 a.m. Parents dropping boys at the academy. Men carrying bags of balls and football kits.

But Danny *did* see two things that made him want to ask questions.

First, a man walking across the runway to a large derelict hangar at 7.43 a.m., pushing a trolley. What was he doing?

Second, a set of lights going on in, what looked like, a second floor of the academy, two figures moving about. What was up there?

He knew that by asking questions like these, he'd have a chance of finding something out.

Inside the academy was amazing. It reminded Danny of a cathedral.

Right in the entrance was a massive photo of Vinny Adams, his face beaming down from on high. There was also a shop selling Vinny Adams tea-towels and key rings and footballs and books and DVDs.

In the shop he took the chance to pose his first question. 'What's upstairs?' he asked the woman at the counter. 'Offices?'

'There is no upstairs,' the woman said, smiling.

But there was something in her eyes that told Danny she was lying.

Once he had announced who he was, Danny was led through a corridor of signed Vinny Adams shirts and photos. Like a gallery of Adams' greatest moments, with a narrow corridor leading off to the right. Somewhere for Danny to have a look later. Maybe that was the way upstairs.

Then he was asked to sit down – with nineteen other boys – to watch a live video link. Vinny Adams welcoming them to his academy.

Adams explained – by video that Danny was pretty sure was *not* live – that the players had two days to prove they were great footballers and that, if they passed the trial, they could be playing football for a major European football club within a year.

As the video went on, Danny turned to the boy to his left. 'Did you pay £5000 for this?' he asked, interested to see if the others had got there because they were good at football – or because they were rich.

'Yes,' the boy answered, as one of the coaches scowled at them for talking.

Twenty lads, Danny thought. £5000 each. That's £100,000. And if they do this every two days, that's over fifteen million a year.

Where does all that money *go*? he wondered.

Danny's trial went a lot better than he expected. He thought he would be the worst player by miles. In fact, he was one of the best. But he knew it was not because he was *good*: it was because most of the others were *bad*.

They did some running and passing and shooting. And Danny had to admit it seemed just like the training sessions he'd watched at City FC. The same techniques. Normal. Nothing weird about it at all.

At the lunch break, he decided to take a walk. Do some more investigating. He'd seen nothing odd and was worried that he needed to find something to justify Anton newspaper spending £5000 on him.

They had an hour's break. To eat a healthy meal in the canteen.

Danny grabbed a sandwich then told the others he was going to the toilet.

Danny quickly found the corridor that led off the hallway of signed shirts. He checked he was alone, then pushed the door. A sign on it read NO ENTRY. Once he was on the other side, he listened.

Could he hear anything?

No. Nothing.

He walked on.

All the doors had labels. STORE. GENERATOR. MEETING ROOM ONE. MEETING ROOM TWO. KIT ROOM. But there was one *unmarked* door.

Why was it unmarked when all the others were marked? Danny couldn't resist doors that did not have a label.

On the other side he found a staircase . Going upwards.

So there *was* no upstairs, then?

Danny stopped to listen again, before going up.

There was no sound. Like it was empty.

Slowly, carefully, Danny climbed the stairs. Keeping his head low at the top.

In front of him was a large open area. Well lit, it was the same area he'd seen people walking around that morning when he was watching from the woods. At the far end there were two doors. One with a light on, one without.

Danny walked cautiously over to the doors. If he could see or hear what was going on in there he might know whether this was just a normal football academy, as it seemed. Or something more sinister.

He was nearing the first door when he heard it. A loud noise that seemed to be making the whole academy shake.

His first thought was: earthquake.

His body went into an automatic squat. Self-preservation.

That was when he saw it. Through the window. A large grey aeroplane landing on the runway.

Curious about what could be arriving, at what was meant to be a disused airport, Danny stumbled over to the window.

Would the plane have people in it? Or materials?

He stared out, wishing he'd not left his binoculars downstairs in his bag. And, as the engine noise faded to silence, he heard another sound.

Footsteps.

Footsteps on the stairs behind him.

Someone was coming and he didn't have anywhere to escape to.

Chapter Three

The one where Danny is chased

Danny went into the International Football Academy, pretending he wanted a trial. But really he wanted to investigate why footballers were leaving their clubs to join it. Finding some free time, he went upstairs to see what he could find out. Suddenly, he heard footsteps.

Hearing the footsteps coming up the stairs, Danny ran.

There was nowhere to go, except into one of the two rooms. He chose the one without the light on. He figured nobody would be in there.

And he was right.

He shut the door quietly behind him, then tried to slow his breathing down.

Now he had to listen out, anticipate what might happen.

The next sounds were a click, a pause, then a bang. And he felt the wall he was leaning against shudder slightly.

The door of the next room opening, someone going in, then shutting it. No question. Meaning, no one was coming after him. Not immediately, anyway. He was safe. He could stop thinking about escaping – and go back to trying to find things out.

Voices from the next room interrupted his thinking. He moved to the partition wall to hear better. And, at first, it was silent, but then, eventually, voices.

‘Can you hear me, Connor?’ A man’s voice.

‘Yes.’ A boy’s voice now. But strange. Like he was half asleep.

‘He’s under,’ the man’s voice said.

‘Good.’ Another man.

Under? Danny asked himself. What did that mean?

‘Connor. I’m going to say something and I want you to repeat it back to me. Okay?’

‘Okay.’

‘And what I am going to tell you is the truth and you must accept it is true and not think anything else. Okay?’

‘Okay.’

‘The academy is your family now. You will forget your parents and life before today. We are your family. Do you understand, Connor?’

Then Connor spoke. ‘The academy is my family now. My parents aren’t my parents anymore. You are my family.’

Connor?

Danny wondered if it was the same Connor that Jake had been talking about the day before. His former teammate.

Why were they talking to him like this? Why were they making him repeat things?

And then it struck Danny. They were *hypnotising* him. Brainwashing him. Making him forget his parents.

This was a result.

Although, terrible for the boy, it was evidence for Danny. Proof that this was no normal academy.

Now he had to get out and tell Anton what he knew.

Danny walked softly to the door and opened it. But, unlike the first time he’d opened it, it creaked loudly. Immediately, he heard the voices in the next room go quiet.

Then footsteps.

More footsteps.

Danny knew what to do now.

Don’t think.

Just run.

He slipped his hoody over his head and sprinted across the large room, hitting the stairs in seconds.

Then he heard two things.

First, a man shouting after him.

Second, an alarm. A loud piercing alarm.

He hammered down the stairs. Hard. Each footstep hurting as he took the steps three at a time.

Then into the first corridor and the second, a thunder of feet behind him.

And, finally, out into the reception area. The Vinny Adams shop. The lady at the desk. But he was pretty sure she'd not seen his face.

Then the fresh air of outside. The sense of freedom. That felt better.

He looked behind him. Just to check. Two men, coming out of the doors, fast.

Danny accelerated and ran for ten minutes before he dared stop. He'd not looked back. But now he had stopped, he could see that no-one was following him.

He was safe.

For now.

Once he'd got his breath back, Danny called Anton Holt.

'Anton. They chased me. They're doing something weird in the academy.'

'Danny.'

'What?'

'Leave it.'

'What?'

'Get out of there. We're not investigating the academy anymore.'

'Why?'

'Drop it.'

'Why?'

'Drop it.'

Danny tried to get more out of Anton. But the journalist refused to speak about it.

'Do you promise me you'll not go back in there?' Anton said.

Danny paused.

'Danny?'

'I... ' Danny said.

'Good,' Holt interrupted. 'I'm leaving the country for two days. I'll call you when I get back.'

'I... I can't,' Danny said. But Holt was gone.

Danny walked back into town. It would give him time to think.

About what he'd heard in the academy. *Had* they been brainwashing that boy?

And about Anton.

About why he'd dropped his interest in the academy. Had someone told him to stop? And, if so, who?

Would he ever get the chance to go back in there and work out what was going on?

Danny stopped in his tracks. He really needed to speak to *someone* – and he knew who.

He took out his phone, dialled Charlotte and waited for her to pick up.

'Charlotte,' he said. 'I don't know what to do.'

Then he told her what had just happened, leaving nothing out.

By the time Danny reached town, it was decided.

He would go back into the academy. He would find out more about it, regardless of what Anton said.

And Charlotte would come with him to make sure he was safe.

Danny had taken on gunmen in Milan, private armies in Moscow and had been chased by a crazed football agent. But the next day was going to be the most dangerous day of his career as a football detective.

Chapter Four

The one where Danny sees a ghost

Danny has been investigating a strange football academy. Under false pretences, he went to the academy, where he was chased while he was investigating somewhere he shouldn't have been. Now he is back for a second day, taking a risk that nobody saw who it was who was snooping.

Danny sat in the woods for a second morning.

Today there was no man entering the hanger and no lights going on in upstairs rooms. No plane arriving on the runway.

Danny saw nothing in the two hours he was sat there. As a result, his mind started to wander. To the cases he and Charlotte had taken on in the past, the danger they had been in. When had he been most scared?

Although he'd faced dangerous football agents from Ghana, Russian billionaires with private armies and been shot at while swimming away in an Italian lake, the worst thing he had ever come up against had been a seventeen-year-old boy from his home town.

Ian Mills.

And it had been the most frightening because Mills had not put Danny in danger: he'd put *Charlotte* in danger, making Danny feel worse than ever.

Danny shuddered at the memory. The sun was coming up. It was morning. But somehow he felt colder than ever.

Danny was nervous entering the academy for a second day, even though he knew Charlotte was watching from a café over the road, her telephone switched on. There was something about going into a building that you might not be able to get out of that played on his nerves. Like a lab rat going into a cage that might never come out of alive.

But today there was nothing to suggest Danny was in danger

There *were* two security guards in the reception area. That was new. But there was no reason for him to think they were a danger to him, seeing as they didn't react at all as he approached..

Why were they there, then?

Because they'd had an unknown intruder the day before?

Clearly they didn't recognise him.

Danny walked on boldly. He signed in at the reception desk, not even looking at the security guards. It would only draw attention to him if he did.

Then past the images of Vinny Adams.

Past the signed shirts and photos, displayed like relics in a church.

Past everything and into the dressing rooms.

Day two of the trial was exactly the same as day one. Running. Ball work. That sort of thing. The only difference on the schedule was towards the end of the day.

An interview.

Danny frowned when he saw that.

Interview?

Why did they need to interview the boys? Surely they just had to see how good they were at football.

Another question. But still no answers. And time running out.

At the dinner break, Danny chose not to sit with the other trialists. He wanted to find Connor and Ronan, Jake's friends. Jake had given him some photos of the players. Danny walked around with his food tray for a couple of minutes trying to find the boys they depicted. He was aware that one of the security guards, who had been in reception first thing, was in the dining hall now. He was also aware that the guard was watching him.

But Danny continued to look for the two players. That was the best thing to do. He'd read it in a detective novel. If something was different, carry on as normal. If you start to *behave* differently, then you'll be spotted by your enemies.

Mercifully Danny saw Connor and Ronan on the next table. They were sitting alone. In silence.

‘Mind if I sit here?’ Danny asked.

‘No,’ the darker boy said. Connor.

Danny had decided to be direct with them. Say he recognised them. He needed answers and he was going to have to start pushing a bit harder.

‘You two used to play at United FC, didn’t you?’

The boys looked at each other, then back at Danny. He could see they didn’t know how to react. They remained silent.

‘I’m a friend of Jake,’ Danny went on. ‘And Tomasz.’

‘Oh yeah,’ Ronan replied cautiously. ‘We remember them.’

Danny glanced up. Was the guard still watching him?

Yes. And *now* he was coming over.

Danny knew he had seconds to get some answers.

‘Why did you leave United?’ he asked, knowing they had no duty to tell him anything.

‘We are at the International Academy now,’ Connor said.

‘It’s our family,’ Ronan added, like a robot. ‘We don’t need United.’

The guard was half way across the hall now.

Family? Danny thought. That was the word they were using when they were brainwashing Connor last night.

‘What about your family in Ireland?’ Danny pushed.

‘The Academy is our family now,’ Connor parroted.

‘Come on lads. You’re meant to be training now,’ the guard said, suddenly behind them, his hand on Danny’s chair.

What was going on? Danny asked himself. Why were they behaving like this? Why was the guard getting them away from him?

He had half a day left and only more and more questions. No answers. Holt had paid for him to come here and he was going to leave with nothing.

‘Danny Harte. Interview.’

There were only two trialists left. Everyone else seemed to have gone home. All the boys, the coaches, the other staff. Leaving the two security guards, standing by the exit chatting.

Danny had been sat looking around, wondering if there was anywhere he could go to find more out. Maybe a computer terminal? Something like that.

But now he had been called for his interview, he had to go.

He walked across the room.

This was his interview. To find out if he had gained a place at the academy.

He knew, of course, he hadn't. He wasn't good enough. But the interview might be interesting. What they might tell him could help him piece together the jigsaw in his mind about what this place was all about.

He approached the door.

No voices on the other side. Why was that?

And the weight of the questions he'd been asking himself all day began to trouble him. As did the eyes of the security guards following him from the seats to the door.

This wasn't right.

He had a gut feeling.

Just like Alex Rider had gut feelings in the Anthony Horowitz books he loved.

So what should he do? Head for the exit? See if the security guards let him by? Why wouldn't they?

Or should he go through the interview? See what he could find out?

Go in. That was the answer.

Anton had spent £5000 putting him in here. And he'd found nothing. He *had* to go in.

Inside there were two men.

The older man was one of the coaches from the trial, still wearing his tracksuit.

The younger was someone Danny had met before and had hoped never to meet again.

Ian Mills.

The man who had kidnapped and threatened Charlotte.

Danny's worst nightmare. The shock took the breath out of his lungs.

He stepped back, ready to turn and run, knocking into the two security guards who had come up quietly behind him.

They held him.

‘Don’t imagine you’re going anywhere,’ Mills laughed. ‘We’ve got unfinished business.’

Then Mills turned to the man beside him. ‘Get the van and bring it round the side. We’ll take him to that disused quarry. We’ll do it there.’

‘But what if people come looking for him?’ the other man said.

‘We’ll be out of here tonight,’ Mills said, grinning. ‘The boss has said it’s time to go to our new academy base, abroad.’

And Danny wondered if he was about to be taken to his death, just at the point that he had uncovered something terrible.

Chapter Five

The one where Danny is taken to a quarry to be shot

Danny has been investigating a strange football academy. Under false pretences, he went to the academy. On the second day he was caught by an old enemy, Ian Mills, a man who wants revenge on Danny.

An hour after Danny was supposed to have left the academy, Charlotte was standing alone. In the cold.

Where was he?

Late!

She had no choice: she had to phone him.

She took out her purple mobile phone. A colour she was already regretting choosing.

But, unlike an hour ago, there was no reception on it.

'Now what?' she said.

She was starting to feel worried about Danny. Really worried.

She snapped her phone shut. There was only one thing for it. Go into the academy.

Find him. If he was in danger, nobody knew who *she* was, so *she'd* not be in danger.

There was one man with his back to Charlotte when she opened the door and found herself in a reception area. But she knew he'd seen her. He'd watched her come in through the doors.

'Excuse me?' she said.

There was no reply.

'Hello?'

The next thing Charlotte knew was that metal shutters were closing outside the doors, barring her exit.

'HEY!' she shouted. 'I'm still in here.'

The van was not comfortable. Danny's hands and feet were taped and he was being thrown around, banging his head and his knees and everything else.

He had stopped thinking about the academy. He had stopped thinking that if his hands weren't bound then he could phone Charlotte. He was thinking about what Mills had said. *Take him to that disused quarry. We'll do it there.*

And unfinished business.

Danny didn't need to refer back to other books he'd read to work out what was going on this time. They wanted to kill him. There was no doubt about that.

He waited until the van felt bumpy. Not the smooth tarmac of the main road anymore, but a rough track. Next, the van would stop.

He braced himself.

How would they do it? Shoot him?

He listened carefully.

Footsteps.

The rattle of the door handle.

A rush of cold air as the door opened.

And Ian Mills facing Danny.

Mills leapt into the van and cut the tapes binding him. Then he stepped back.

'Stay in here,' Mills ordered. 'Okay?'

'Okay,' Danny said, his mind soaring. This was his chance.

Mills climbed out of the van and shut the door.

Immediately, Danny grabbed his phone and dialled Charlotte. Just as it started to ring he heard a phone outside the van ringing too.

Good, he thought. That'll buy me time.

Then the van door opened and Danny saw Mills standing grinning, holding up a *purple* phone.

'Guess whose this is?' Mills goaded.

Danny crumpled inside. He had worked out what was going on. Mills had Charlotte. His worst nightmare had just come back.

'Here's what's going to happen,' Mills said.

Danny looked at him, but said nothing.

'I'm going to let you go. You're going to phone Charlotte's family and say she's with you. If you do that Charlotte lives.'

'Why?' Danny asked, puzzled.

'I shouldn't tell you about this, but there's nothing you can do to stop it. In half an hour a plane is leaving the academy with seventy top class youth footballers on board. There they'll all be given new identities and will forget who they were and will be sold to the biggest clubs in the world for millions. Maybe billions.'

'Why don't you think I can stop it? You're leaving me here with my phone.'

'Because if you do *anything*,' Mills smiled, 'I will kill Charlotte without a thought. And I am pretty sure you would rather the world fell apart than see anything bad happen to Charlotte.'

'And you'll leave her once you've gone?' Danny asked, thinking that this was becoming too simple, too easy.

'Oh no,' Mills smirked, 'I'm keeping her. We'll help *her* forget who she is too. Give *her* a new identity. Charlotte Mills? How does that sound to you?'

The van had disappeared over the hill now. Danny stood up in the bottom of this huge canyon, his mind working everything out.

Mills had been right about one thing. Danny would not call the police. And Danny would let her parents know she was okay.

He would do everything asked of him. To be sure to keep Charlotte safe.

But Mills had *not* said that Danny could not return to the airfield. Nor had he said that Danny could try to stop them taking the players – and his best friend.

Chapter Six

The one where Danny realises he is about to lose Charlotte forever

Danny has been investigating a dodgy football academy. But it has all gone wrong. His best friend, Charlotte, has been kidnapped and is about to be taken out of the country, along with dozens of England's finest young players. And Danny has to get to her. And fast.

Charlotte sat in the back of the car, helpless. It was locked. She had tried all the doors. She was a prisoner.

All she could do was watch.

First, the academy players, aged from ten to sixteen, carrying things out of the buildings – and onto the airfield. Goalposts. Large images of Vinny Adams. Gym equipment. Everything from inside.

But why?

She tried to think. But it was hard. She was a prisoner and she didn't know what was going to happen to her next.

Second, she heard a noise and felt the car trembling. She craned her neck to look behind her. At first it was a huge shape or shadow. And then she saw the propeller. Under the huge wing of a plane.

Why a plane? Who was leaving? Her? And where to?

Charlotte watched, puzzled, as a large door opened underneath the plane and the academy players started to load up the things they had taken.

Danny jogged at a medium pace from the quarry to the airfield and the academy. He knew if he ran too fast, he would run out of energy. But too slow and he'd get there late. So he ran as fast as he thought he could.

All he could think about was Charlotte. All he could feel was how he thought she was feeling. That and the terrible fear that he would never see her again.

Danny tried to run that bit faster, even though he felt breathless and his legs were wobbly.

He had no choice.

Once she had watched everything being loaded onto the plane, Charlotte knew something was about to happen.

And she was right.

A group of people emerged from the academy. All in long black coats.

Charlotte squinted to see if she could identify anyone.

Yes. He was there. Ian Mills. He was small compared to some of the others. But who were *they*?

They came closer and closer and as they did she scanned around the perimeter fence. She was looking for Danny. Where was he? If he was going to come out of the darkness and save her he would have to do it quite soon! And then, looking at the group of men again, something triggered in her mind.

One of them looked familiar.

Short, but well built. Dark hair.

The man.

The man Danny had pointed out to her at the City training ground two days ago.

It was him. The ex-player. Vinny Adams.

But she had no more time. Ian Mills was at the car door now. He clicked a button and the locks were released.

Mills opened a back door. 'Come on Charlotte,' he said. 'You've a plane to catch.'

Danny reached the academy shattered. He had never run so fast for such a long distance.

But he had to forget that. He had a job to do.

He headed straight for the academy door. There were no lights on.

He burst in through the door, taking his small torch from his pocket and shining it into the reception area.

He could hardly believe what he saw.

Nothing.

The whole area had been stripped. No reception desk. No shop. No huge images of Vinny Adams.

They'd gone. All in an hour.

Mills had been telling the truth.

Charlotte was waiting for the right time to try to escape. She knew she had little hope of getting away, but she would not go passively onto this plane.

But when Mills took her out of the car, she saw he had a gun.

A gun!

Then when he told her to go up the metal staircase on wheels, she found herself flanked by the two security guards from earlier in the day.

She had no option but to go up the steps. And, as she did, there was a roar and a sudden wind. The propellers were turning. The engines were on. The plane was about to fly.

How could she escape *now*? It was hopeless.

Danny was trying to work out what was going on. Everything gone. No academy. Just an old hanger now. What did that mean? They'd gone. The players. The coaches. Ian Mills. And – could he bear to think it – Charlotte too.

He turned as soon as he heard the engines.

The plane. The one he'd seen yesterday. They were going to leave in that.

But they'd *not* gone yet!

Danny sprinted out through the front entrance.

There it was. The plane. Its lights on. Its propellers turning.

Charlotte was on the plane

He had to get to her.

He started to run towards the plane, into the dark, barely able to see ahead of him.

And Whack! He hit the fences. The ten foot wire fences that surrounded the airfield.

His arms and his face stung, whipped by the wire.

Think. He had to think.

Where was the gate?

He paused. And, as he did, his phone rang.

He looked at the name on the screen.

Charlotte.

His hands fumbled, a smile breaking out on his face.

'Charlotte!' he shouted. 'Are you okay?'

'She's fine,' the voice at the other end of the phone said, a loud noise of engines in the background. 'Look at the back door of the plane.'

Danny looked.

And there she was. Charlotte. Standing passive and helpless.

Then Danny watched in horror as he saw Mills come to the entrance, kick the metal staircase away from the plane, then close the door.

Almost immediately, the plane began to edge to the end of the runway.

It was over.

Chapter Seven

The one where Danny has to stop the plane

Danny has been investigating a dodgy football academy. But it has all gone wrong. His best friend, Charlotte, has been kidnapped and is about to be taken out of the country, along with dozens of England's finest young players. Danny has to get to her. But the plane is moving down the runway.

Danny watched the plane moving away, turning, its lamps blinding him for a second.

He was exhausted, all his energy gone.

And Charlotte was on the plane. With that man, that terrible man, Ian Mills, saying he was going to brainwash her, make her marry him.

Danny felt like vomiting, his thoughts were so overwhelming.

That was when he realised something. Charlotte was *more* than his best friend. He loved her. And his whole life seemed to be slipping beneath him as the plane moved away.

There was nothing to think about.

He needed to stop the plane.

Even if he had to jam the engines with his own body, he'd stop it.

But first he had to do something sensible.

He dialled 999.

'Police, please,' he said. 'And ambulance.' Then he stressed what was going on, trying to speak clearly and slowly and make sense.

And then something took him over. Some force, some extra strength. He flung his phone to the ground. And then he was climbing. To the top of the ten foot fence. Next straddling it, then dropping down on the other side.

As he accelerated, he saw the plane had turned and was beginning to move down the runway.

It was taking off.

How long before it was in the air?

Less than a minute?

He was sprinting now. His feet pounding the concrete, sending sharp stabbing pains up his shins and into his thighs.

What was there he could do? Catch the wheels of the plane and be carried to wherever it was going, suspended at thirty thousand feet?

What else could he do?

He could barely think as he ran.

But then it came to him. The solution.

The staircase that Mills had shoved away with his foot. It was on rollers. It was sat at the edge of the runway.

Danny sprinted to the staircase and began to push. It was surprisingly light and it moved, teetering as he put in more effort.

But would he get in front of the plane in time?

Danny had a hundred yards to go to get the staircase into the path of the plane.

And, as he pushed, he wondered if he was doing the right thing. Pushing a staircase into the path of a plane: would the plane crash? Or just be forced to slow down? And, if it did crash, would Charlotte be hurt – or even killed.

What would be worse: a minor plane crash or Charlotte and all these innocent footballers stolen from their families and their country?

Danny charged harder into the path of the plane.

He could see now that the pilot must have had spotted him, that is was changing its direction slightly, hoping to escape the staircase.

Danny stood there, defiant, in the middle of the runway, as the plane approached, huge now it was bearing down on him.

Chapter Eight

The one where Danny realises he's dying

Danny has been investigating a dodgy football academy. But it has all gone wrong. His best friend, Charlotte, has been kidnapped and is about to be taken out of the country, along with dozens of England's finest young players. The plane they are on is about to take off, Danny taking a risk and putting an obstacle in its path.

The plane seemed to skip on the runway as it moved towards Danny.

The brakes, he thought. The pilot must have hit the brakes.

But still the huge machine was speeding towards Danny. And, because it was nearly upon him, he sprinted to the left, diving at the last moment onto the grass on the edge of the concrete.

Then he heard the smash and looked to see the plane veering to avoid the staircase, clipping it with its wing, the staircase skittering noisily across the runway and the plane coming to a halt.

Danny had stopped the plane.

But not damaged it.

It could probably still take off.

He sat up. What now? Could he get inside it?

He had a few seconds, maybe more, to do something now the plane was stationary.

He had to try.

Danny stood and walked towards the plane. And saw, to his surprise, that the back door was *opening*. He longed to see Charlotte, to save her at least, but it was Mills who stared down onto the runway at Danny.

And he was grinning.

'Nice try, Danny,' he shouted. 'We'd love to stay, but we've there's a friendly country that is going to let us live a life of luxury, once we've sold a few of these players. So, I'm afraid it's goodbye now.'

Danny walked towards Mills. He might be able to get his hands up to the plane and lift himself up. Get at Mills.

The next few seconds seemed to move in slow motion.

Mills raised his hand and pointed at Danny. Then there was a flash. Then Danny felt like someone had slide tackled him from behind.

Finally, lying on the ground, he registered a loud bang.

What was going on?

Danny looked at his leg. Where he felt he'd been kicked. He saw that his trousers were torn away and his calf was red and white.

Then he felt the pain.

A violent pain that flung him back onto the grass.

And he knew he had been shot.

Arching his back in agony, Danny was aware the plane was in motion again.

Leaving.

He tried to move, but the pain made him throw up. Now he felt weak. Horribly weak. And he wondered if he was going to die. Could you die from being shot in the leg?

Next Danny saw lights. Like Christmas lights. They were on the ground, getting larger and larger. And some coming from the sky.

And his pain seemed to be fading.

And then he had a thought: was this what happened when you died?

Lights.

Weakness.

Pain fading.

But he could still see the plane moving, its silhouette shape against the lights.

And he could hear something.

Sirens.

And the thwok-thwok-thwok of a helicopter.

Was it the police?

And that was Danny's last memory of the runway in the night.

Danny was at the football again.

But this time he was standing with the help of a crutch, a huge white pot on his leg. And this time it was at United FC's training complex. Surrounded by woods and what looked like a stately home.

Charlotte was next to him, steadying him with her arm. Not that he needed steadying. But it felt okay.

City were losing 3-1. But it didn't matter. It was still 10-3 on aggregate, after the 9-0 last week.

And the really important thing for this match was that United had their defence back. Connor and Ronan in United shirts again. Defending well. Playing alongside Jake and Tomasz.

Danny smiled. This was his first day out of hospital.

When he woke, in the ward, the morning after he was shot, Charlotte was sat with him. And the next morning.

On the first morning she told him what had happened in the plane.

Once the pilot saw the seven police cars and two helicopters bearing down on the plane, he decided to surrender.

Mills and Adams were less keen to give up. They had opened a side door in the plane and tried to jump onto the runway. They could have been successful, but trying to do it at the same time brought their downfall. Literally.

Colliding as they scrambled out of the door, they both fell badly and broke two legs and an arm between them.

The police picked them up easily.

This left the pilot and the two thugs on the plane with twenty-three of the UK's most talented young footballers.

They surrendered.

And that was it.

During a quiet passage in the game, Charlotte turned to Danny.

'So what now, super hero?' she asked. 'You've stopped half-a-dozen evil footballing masterminds. There's no-one left.'

'There will be,' Danny said. 'And we'll be waiting.' And, as he did, his crutch slipped and he nearly fell into the mud.

But Charlotte steadied him.

'Thanks,' Danny said.

'No problem,' Charlotte replied, smiling.