


RANSOM

A yellow school bus is shown in motion, blurred horizontally, against a blue sky with light clouds. The bus is the central focus of the upper half of the image.

T H E H E I G H T S

A white picket fence runs across the bottom of the image, with a large white letter 'H' integrated into the fence's structure.

Chapter 1



Antonio was racing to get ready. It was the first track meet of the year. And he was late.

“Hurry up, Antonio,” Ana yelled. “You’re going to miss the bus!”

“One minute, Mom,” shouted Antonio. “I can’t find my shoes!”

“They’re by the front door,” Ana called out. “Let’s go!”

Antonio ran down the stairs. He

grabbed a banana. Then he put on his shoes.

Lilia was waiting for him. She'd been ready for over an hour.

It was a sunny Saturday morning. Antonio and Lilia were on the Rockdale Heights track team. They had a meet at Newport High in the afternoon.

Ana drove them to school. The team met in the school parking lot. They were all taking a bus to Newport. It was about an hour away.

"Sorry we can't make the meet today," Ana said. "Your dad and I have to talk with the builder. But we'll be at the next one."

"That's okay, Mom," Lilia said. "We have a lot of meets left."

“Good luck!” Ana shouted. Then she drove away.

The kids climbed aboard the bus. The coaches checked off their names as they got on.

“Everybody’s here,” Coach Rome said. “Let’s go!”

Coach Fine, the girls’ coach, gave everyone a pep talk. The Heights had a great track team. They all worked hard. They wanted to win.

At Newport High, Coaches Rome and Fine led the kids in warm-ups.

The meet went great. Rockdale Heights won. Lilia and Antonio won their races too. It was going to be a good season for the Heights track team. They even had a shot at the state championship.

The team boarded the bus to go home. The coaches made sure no one was left behind. At four o'clock the bus left Newport High.

The bus should have arrived at Rockdale Heights at five o'clock. But it didn't. Some of the parents were worried. They called their kids' cell phones. But they all went right to voicemail.

Two hours later, parents started to panic. They called the police. They looked everywhere between Rockdale and Newport. But there was no sign of the bus.

Everyone was scared and confused. A bus with over fifty people on it had vanished.

Chapter 2



There was no sign of the kids all night. Fear and panic swept through the Heights. Parents begged the police to do more.

Then the chief received an e-mail. It read:

We have the bus. The kids are safe—for now. Get us two million dollars in unmarked bills. And you'll get them back.

We'll contact you in twenty-four hours. Once we have the money, we'll tell you where the kids are. Here's proof that we have them. We're not playing games. If you want to see these kids alive, you must follow our instructions!

The chief stared at a photo of the terrified track team. Then he made a decision. Chief Vega called the FBI. A town meeting was set up at the high school. The school was full of parents, police, and FBI agents.

The chief was worried. They'd have to pay the ransom. It was too risky not to. Hopefully the kidnappers would keep their promise.

"We're doing everything we can to find the kids," Chief Vega said. "We're

getting the money ready too. We have twenty-four hours to find them. If not, we have to do what they say.”

No one in the crowd argued. Saving the kids was the most important thing.

Rafael Silva talked to Chief Vega.

“Antonio and Lilia are on that bus,” Rafael said. “I want to help. Tell me what to do.”

“I know, Rafael,” the chief replied. “But there’s nothing you can do. I’ll call you if I need you.”

The Silvas were scared and upset. “Maybe the best thing I can do is stay at home with Ana,” Rafael thought. “But it’s hard to just wait for news.”

“Go home. Everyone needs to sit tight,” said the chief.

The next day Chief Vega needed fresh air. So he took a walk. This was the worst thing that had ever happened in the Heights. So many kids were in danger. They had searched all night for the bus. There wasn't even one clue.

The FBI believed it was best to pay the ransom. The chief agreed.

He stopped in a deli. He needed more coffee. The deli's phone rang.

"Hey, Chief, the phone is for you," the clerk said.

The chief blinked. Then he grabbed the phone.

"Do you have the money?" a voice said.

Chief Vega was shocked. No one knew where he was. How did the

kidnappers know? “They must be watching me,” the chief thought. “They’re smart. We can’t trace the call from here.”

“Yes, we have the money,” the chief answered.

“Good. Now listen carefully,” the voice said. “There is a blue bag behind the police station. Near the woods. Put the money in that bag. Then have someone deliver the money. Do not use anyone connected with the police or FBI. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Chief Vega said.

“At five this afternoon, I’ll call the station with instructions. Once I get the money, I’ll tell you where the kids are. But I’m warning you. No tricks!

The kids are fine, now,” said the voice.
“But they won’t be if you don’t listen!”

The line went dead. Chief Vega ran back to the station. He found the blue bag. Then he called Rafael Silva.

“I need your help, Rafael,” Chief Vega said. “How fast can you get here?”