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Opening extract from

Rugby Academy: Combat Zone

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Illustrated by

Dave Shephard

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RUGBY ACADEMY



COMBAT ZONE

TOM PALMER

With illustrations by
David Shephard

Barrington Stoke

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For the children and adults at
Albrighton Primary School and at RAF Cosford,
with thanks for their help.

ONE

The silver BMW made a sharp swerve left to avoid the deer that stood frozen in its headlights. Woody held his breath. A part of him wished the car had come off the road. But only so that the journey would stop – he didn't have a death wish or anything like that.

But the car didn't come off the road. Woody watched his dad's arms tense as he controlled the car with perfect skill. That was how Woody's dad always drove. It was part of who he was.

A man who liked to travel at speed.

A fighter pilot in the RAF.

Woody stared out of the car window. Its headlights lit up the forest on either side of the road. Thick tree-trunks flashed by.

"I don't want to do this," Woody said. "I liked my old school. I liked my friends. I'm just about to start my GCSEs."

His dad didn't take his eyes from the road. "Borderlands is a great school," he said. "It was my school. You'll make new friends. You'll play lots of sport."

"The wrong sport," Woody snapped.

His dad paused before he spoke again. Woody knew he was working out what to say so that he could win the argument.

"Rugby is a wonderful game," his dad said at last. "I learned more from rugby than you'll ever learn playing soccer. And the school runs a serious rugby academy now."

"It's called football," Woody said. "And I like football. I'm good at football. You know I am."

Woody's dad was silent again. They were out of the forest now. The BMW was speeding up a winding slope onto a moor.

Woody thought about the letter he had received a month before, from Norwich City. They'd offered him a place in their football academy. That was the reason his dad was driving him to Borderlands – to stop him being a footballer. Woody had even had to hide his football in his bag, so his dad didn't know he'd taken it with him.

"There's more to life than sport," his dad went on. "You'll get a better education at Borderlands. It's a fine school. One of the best."

Woody didn't reply. He wanted to swear at his dad like his dad swore when he was angry. But Woody kept his anger locked deep

inside himself. It was at times like this that he wished his mum was still around. She always knew how to break the tension. But she was in Australia. Remarried with two new daughters. Woody had made the choice to stay in England with his dad.

After a few minutes of tense silence, Woody's dad switched on the radio. The news headlines filled the car.

Floods in Cornwall and Devon.

The Man U manager had been sacked.

Then back to the main story.

"There have been further scenes of violent conflict in the Central Asian Republic," the reporter said. "The Prime Minister is on his way to New York to speak at the United Nations. Before he left, he said, 'We must take this situation seriously. It threatens the peace of the whole Middle East. We must do what we can for the people of the Central Asian

Republic.' Experts predict that the UK will be at war within 24 hours."

Woody saw his dad's hands tighten their grip on the steering wheel.