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Opening extract from

Rugby Academy: Surface to Air

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Published by

Barrington Stoke Ltd

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First published in 2015 in Great Britain by
Barrington Stoke Ltd
18 Walker Street, Edinburgh, EH3 7LP

www.barringtonstoke.co.uk

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library upon request

ISBN: 978-1-78112-398-0

Printed in China by Leo

To Lucas Craxford

ONE

Rory stared in horror from the back seat as the bus he was travelling in veered the wrong way round a roundabout. He closed his eyes, held onto the seat in front of him and waited for the collision.

A few seconds later, Rory opened his eyes again. Everything was fine. He was an idiot. And he knew it. He was just going to have to accept the fact that he was in France and French people drive on the wrong side of the road.

It wasn't the only new thing to get used to. The billboard ads flashing past were for products Rory couldn't place. And the music

on the bus radio was all stuff he'd never heard before.

At home, when Rory and his mum had looked at the town of Toulon on a map, they'd seen that it was by the sea on the south coast of France. So Rory had expected it to be a place of beaches and palm trees. He had not expected warehouses and dual carriageways, traffic jams and beeping horns. Rory couldn't even tell his mum about it. She was thousands of miles away, working for the RAF in the Central Asian Republic. Or somewhere.

To clear his mind of his troubles, Rory scanned the horizon for rugby posts. If he saw rugby posts, he'd be able to imagine kicking the ball over them. And that would help him relax.

Rory's two best friends from school – Owen and Woody – were on the back seat next to him. The three of them were travelling with the rest of the school rugby team to take part in a tournament. Their school – Borderlands –

was representing the UK against a team from France, a team from Russia and a team from Italy. They were competing to be European Schools Rugby Champions.

When the bus came off the dual carriageway, Rory looked down at his map. They were heading into the centre of town now. Rory knew that he would get to see rugby posts very soon if they carried on this route, because the bus would head straight past the famous Stade Félix Mayol. It was one of the greatest rugby stadiums in Europe.

"Damn it," Rory heard the boy on the seat in front of him say. That was Jesse. Scrum half, star player, and Captain of Borderlands rugby team.

"What's up?" another voice asked. That was David, Jesse's friend.

"We're heading right, up into town," Jesse said. "If we'd gone left here we'd have seen the

harbour. My mum should be here by now. She sailed out of Plymouth ten days ago."

"On your yacht?" David asked.

"Yeah," Jesse said. "The new one. The *Elite*."

Rory looked back at his map and traced the route of the bus with his finger as a way to block out Jesse's voice. Jesse bothered Rory. The idea that his family owned a yacht bothered him too.

When Rory looked back up, he saw it across a tangle of roads. The mighty Stade Félix Mayol. Its stands towered over the road. There was an arch at the corner of the stadium, with the words –

VILLE DE TOULON – STADE MAYOL

On the other side of the arch, there was a hint of green and two sets of posts. Rory yearned to take a ball and start kicking there

and then. He half stood up to get a better view. Then he saw Owen smiling at him – his friend knew what he was thinking.

"Do you think they'd let me?" Rory asked.

"I doubt it," Owen said.

"Let him what?" Woody asked.

"Kick," Owen said. "On the pitch."

But Rory wasn't listening to his two friends. He had his eyes closed now. In his mind he was in the stadium and on the pitch. He let the ball fall from his hands, kicked to send a drop goal between those tall white posts.