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Opening extract from

Rugby Academy: Deadlocked

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ONE

When the plane had taken off from Heathrow and the seatbelt signs had gone off, Miss Evans leaned across and handed Owen a book.

"What's this, Miss?" Owen said. He knew the question sounded daft as he asked it.

"A book," Miss Evans said. "For you."

Owen turned it over in his hands and smiled. A present from Miss Evans. That was kind. Really kind. But it was a book.

Deep down inside, Owen had that feeling he always had when books were involved. The churning worry that he wouldn't be able to finish it. But he wouldn't give in to that this

time. Miss Evans had given him this, and he could see that it wasn't just any book. It was called *Calon* and the cover was a red Welsh rugby shirt. If there was any book in the world he wanted to read, then this was it.

"Thank you, Miss," Owen said, as the plane dipped to the left and they headed over the clouds towards the Equator and on to New Zealand.

Owen wasn't the only 15-year-old boy on the flight. There was a whole bunch of them, including his two best mates from Borderlands – Woody on his left and Rory on his right. All three were members of the school rugby team, and they were heading to Auckland to take part in the 4-team World Schools Rugby Trophy. Owen couldn't believe it was really happening.

One of the main reasons they were here was sitting in the seat in front of them. Jesse. The team captain. Their star player. Jesse had

just signed an under-16 contract with Toulon in France. He was exceptional on the pitch. But he was also an idiot off it. Not someone to get on the wrong side of.

"Tell me again, how many hours will this flight take?" Rory asked Owen.

"Twenty-six altogether," Owen said.

"That's a loooong time," Woody muttered, as he tapped at the video screen on the back of the seat in front of him. He found the BBC News pages and Rory and Owen leaned forward to look.

FIRST FORCES COMING HOME
RAF heads back to UK after conflict in Central Asian Republic

Owen smiled. That was good news for most of his team-mates on this flight. Borderlands was no ordinary school – at least half the pupils had parents in the RAF who'd been involved

with the conflict. The RAF had defended the capital city of Lusa and helped its terrified and starving people. One boy who was on the flight – David – had lost his father when a transporter plane was shot down as it delivered aid.

But now the RAF were coming home.

"I'm pleased for you," Owen said to Rory and Woody. "Really pleased."

"Thanks." Rory smiled.

"Yeah, thanks." Woody nodded.

Owen was surprised that his friends didn't sound happier at the news. They were still staring at the screen.

"I thought you'd be happy," Owen said. "Now it's over."

"It's not that easy," Rory admitted, and then he fell silent again.

Then Woody chipped in. "When I know my dad's coming back soon I feel sort of worse than when he's out there," he said. "It's so close. But stuff could still happen ..."

Owen looked at his two friends, trying to understand.

Rory went on. "But the fact they're coming home when we're going away makes it worse too. I seriously thought about not coming so I could see mum and dad home safe."

Owen nodded like he understood. But he didn't, not really. He would never understand what it was like to have a parent in the RAF. He couldn't. Imagine knowing your dad was in a plane and someone was firing surface-to-air missiles at him.

Somewhere over Turkey, Jesse spotted Owen's book.

Owen had been reading it in short bursts, so he could keep focused. But it was late now, after midnight back in the UK. He was sleepy.

"How many pages have you read?" Jesse asked.

"What?" Owen said.

"How. Many. Pages. Have. You. Read?"

Owen knew that this was not a normal friendly question. Jesse didn't do normal friendly questions. He was bored and looking for ways to amuse himself. Maybe he hoped other people were listening so he could show off.

"I'm not sure," Owen said. He stared hard at Jesse.

"Not sure?" Jesse smiled.

"That's right, Jesse."

"Does that mean you can't count – and you can't read?" Jesse mocked. "Bad luck, mate." He

held up a super-thin, top-of-the-range Kindle. "Have you got one of these?"

"No," Owen muttered.

"Get with the programme," Jesse sneered. "I've got loads of books on this. I bet I could read them all before you've struggled to the end of chapter 1 of that one."

"Good for you, Jesse." Owen turned away from Jesse and saw that Mr Johnson, head rugby coach at Borderlands, was studying the two of them. Mr Johnson had a look on his face that said 'stop what you're doing'. And he was aiming that look at Jesse.

Jesse went back to his Kindle.

"You OK, Owen?" Mr Johnson asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Try and get some sleep, son."