



TOM TAKE TO
THE SKIES

 **PALMER**

WINGS: TYPHOON

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WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
DAVID SHEPHARD

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ONE

Jess was just about to play the perfect pass to her sister, Maddie, when a boom like thunder tore the sky in two. She ducked, fell over and could only watch as the ball rolled over the line, off the pitch and towards the changing rooms.

What the hell was that?

Jess had no idea. She was still on the ground, and when she dared to look up she saw the fiery afterburners of a war plane disappear into the perfect blue sky. The plane answered her question. The ear-splitting roar was one of the downsides of playing football on a pitch right next to an RAF air base.

“What sort of a pass was that?” Maddie yelled, as she strode towards Jess.

Jess hung her head. “The plane put me off,” she said.

Jess could cope with almost anything that life on the football pitch could throw at her. She could get up after a foul. She could work on her game after a bad match. She could smile and shake hands after her team lost to another. Anything. But she could not put up with Maddie tearing into her in front of everyone else. Her sister never knew when to shut up.

“You’re rubbish, Jess,” Maddie yelled. “Total rubbish. We had time for one or two more attacks. Now we’ve got no chance of winning. And it’s all your fault.”

Jess knew better than to say anything. Instead she closed her eyes, dug her hands into the grass and ripped up two clumps of soft turf in silent rage. When she opened her eyes she

saw that Jatinder had crouched down next to her.

“Your sister is a total hot-head,” Jatinder said. “That plane’s designed to scare the hell out of trained soldiers. Don’t feel bad that it did the same to you.”

Jatinder stood up and offered Jess his hand. She took it and let him haul her up.

“Thanks,” she said with a smile.

Jess liked Jatinder. He was calm and a good footballer, but he felt like more than just a team mate. He and Jess and Maddie and another player, Greg, were staying with a couple in an old building called Trenchard House near the RAF base. They’d made friends right away – on and off the pitch – in the first few days of the football summer school. And now this was the last game before the school finished.

The last game and very nearly the last minute. The last chance to make an impression. It was time for Jess to forget her mistake, ignore her sister and get stuck in again.

Jess worked hard to win the ball back from the throw-in she'd given away. Before long, she put in a low sliding tackle, taking the ball off a dawdling defender. She played a neat pass to Maddie, who turned fast and dribbled the ball over to the far side of the penalty area.

Jess sprinted into the box, staying onside. Just.

"Maddie!" she called. "Pass!"

Maddie did her best to lose the defender who was forcing her wide. She turned, then hit a shot from a tight angle. Her attempt had plenty of power behind it, but went well wide. Soon after, the ref blew the final whistle.

Jess felt full of a hot, fierce anger. If Maddie had played her in they could have scored, got a draw. But Maddie was like that. Selfish. She never gave back to her team mates. She was too hungry for glory for herself. And Maddie didn't have the excuse of a war plane putting her off.

Jess glared at Maddie as they walked off the pitch.

Why did it have to be like this? They used to pass to each other all the time. They used to spend hours kicking a ball back and forth to each other in the garden, in the playground and on the beach on holiday. But those easy times together were a thing of the past now. Now Maddie thought she was something special because she'd started at secondary school. Whenever she was with Jess, Maddie made sure to treat her younger sister as if she was a baby.

After Jess had showered and changed, she met Jatinder and Greg outside the changing

rooms. As they waited for Maddie, Jess looked for the last time at the mural of footballers painted along the low block wall in bright, bold colours.

“Come on,” Greg said. “Let’s get back to Trenchard House. We don’t want to be late.”

Jess nodded. Steve and Esther, who’d been looking after them, had promised that if they all behaved well they’d get a treat on their last day and she didn’t want to be late either.

“Where’s your sister?” Jatinder asked.

Jess shrugged, feeling her hair straggle wet against her neck.

“Is she still getting changed?” Greg said.

“Suppose so.”

“Can’t you go and tell her we’ll be late?” Jatinder said, clearly getting fed-up.

Jess sighed. “Look. If I go in there and ask her to hurry up she’ll just be slower on purpose. We’d be better just to wait.”

Jatinder gave her a funny look. “Really?”

“Really,” Jess said. “Haven’t you noticed that when I ask her anything she either refuses, does the opposite or just ignores me?”

Jess saw Greg and Jatinder share a confused look.

“If she doesn’t get a move on,” Greg said, “we’ll be late back to Steve and Esther’s and we’ll miss the treat, whatever it is.”