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Opening extract from

Mad Dogs

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1. HERCULES

Even by aircraft standards the toilet inside a C5 transport plane is cramped. James Adams had a shoulder touching the plastic wall on either side of him as he leaned over the steel bowl, looking at flecks of his lunch in the disinfectant-blue water.

His girlfriend Dana Smith yelled from outside. 'Are you OK?'

James had pressed the flush and didn't hear her voice over the roaring turboprop engines as his puke got sucked away. He stood up and turned to face himself in the mirror. He'd spent the last eight days camped out in the Malaysian jungle and despite regular applications of sun block, his skin was peeling.

'James,' Dana repeated, this time banging the door to make sure she got his attention.

'I'll be out in a sec.'

There were no paper cups in the dispenser, so James washed the bitter taste from his mouth by dribbling water into the palm of his hand and sucking it dry.

'Did I just hear you throwing up?'

He gargled and spat out the water before answering. 'Must have been those nasty hotdogs we had at lunchtime . . .'

But it had nothing to do with lunch and Dana knew it. 'You'll do OK, James,' she said soothingly.

James dried his hands by wiping them on his camouflage trousers and had to duck under the door frame as he stepped out into the cavernous interior of the aircraft. His hands were trembling and he couldn't help thinking he'd be visiting the toilet again soon.

'I never realised you were scared of heights,' Dana grinned, as she put a grubby hand on the back of his neck and kissed him on the cheek.

'I'm *not*,' James said defensively. 'Heights I can handle, but jumping out of an aeroplane is *slightly* different.'

'I'm surprised you've been a cherub for so long without doing a jump. I did one in basic training. Come to think of it, I did a couple before then; when I was a red-shirt.'

'I don't think I can do this,' James said warily, as they set off on an unsteady walk through the giant cargo bay. The turbulence did his stomach no favours as they clanked across the corrugated metal floor, heading away from the cockpit.

The Hercules C5 is a dual-role aircraft. For cargo operations the interior can be loaded with anything from United Nations food parcels to Challenger tanks. When the Parachute Regiment comes to town, rows of seats are bolted to the floor and the side doors can deploy a company of paratroops in ninety seconds.

This mission wouldn't stretch the aircraft's capacity: only twelve bodies would make the jump. Eight were ten- to twelve-year-olds nearing the end of CHERUB's 100-day basic

training course. James and Dana were senior CHERUB agents and the final jumpers were adult instructors.

Mr Pike was the head training instructor. He was tough but fair and James respected him a great deal. He wasn't so sure about Mr Kazakov who'd been appointed less than a month earlier. He was a bully who James had got to know rather too well after sharing his tent for the past seven nights.

Like all CHERUB instructors, Kazakov was physically imposing. He was Ukrainian by birth with a dusting of cropped grey hair and a facial scar worthy of an action figure. After serving with the Spetznatz – the Russian special forces – and seeing combat during the invasion of Afghanistan, Kazakov had spent ten years training SAS soldiers in guerrilla combat techniques, before making the move to CHERUB.

'What are you lovebirds playing at?' Mr Pike roared, giving James and Dana the evil eye as he pointed at the drop clock. This bright LED display hung over the door at one side of the aircraft and indicated that there were only one hundred and eighty-six seconds until they were over the landing zone.

'He's crapping himself,' Dana explained.

Mr Pike shook his head. 'I can't believe you've never made a drop.'

'Don't you start . . .' James said, feeling even more anxious as he realised that trainees half his size already had parachutes on their backs and equipment packs strapped to their chests. Some of them were so small that they could barely see over the bed rolls on top of their packs.

Mr Kazakov was inspecting each trainee in turn: checking helmets, tightening harnesses and screaming abuse when

they got something wrong. Right now he was dealing with ten-year-old Kevin Sumner. Ironically, James had helped Kevin get over his fear of heights a few months earlier.

'What's this, *Sumner*?' Kazakov spat, as he noticed a metal spork bulging through the fabric of the pack strapped to Kevin's chest. Kazakov unbuckled the pack, ripped out the metal object and wagged it in the boy's face. 'I *told* you to wrap sharp items inside something soft. Do you want to land on that? Do you want to find yourself with a spork sticking out of your chest on an island beach an hour's boat ride from the nearest emergency room?'

James hooked his parachute over his back as Kevin said, 'No sir,' guiltily.

'No time to repack,' Kazakov yelled, before sending the spork clattering across the aircraft and launching a volley of Russian swear words. 'You're not getting that back. You'll remember your lesson every time you have to eat with your fingers.'

Unlike the trainees, James didn't have equipment to contend with because the instructors' stuff was being delivered by boat.

'A hundred and twenty seconds,' Mr Pike shouted. 'Start hooking up, people.'

As Dana whispered something in Mr Pike's ear, the eight trainees formed a line and began clipping hooks – known as strops – between the back of their parachutes and a taut metal cable above their heads. The youngsters would be making a static line jump, meaning that a pull on the strop would open their chutes automatically once they were clear of the aircraft.

As the countdown dropped below one hundred seconds, Mr Kazakov and Dana both started walking towards James, who'd strapped on his helmet but was still struggling to fit his parachute harness.

'Come on,' Kazakov said, showering James with spit. 'You're *useless*; you're supposed to be helping out with the little ones.'

Kazakov grabbed the harness of James' parachute and yanked the straps so tightly that James' shoulders squeezed together. His stomach churned as the giant Russian eyeballed him.

'I can't do this,' James said weakly. 'I've psyched myself out.'

Dana interrupted. 'Mr Kazakov, I spoke to Pike about James and he's changed the drop order. I'll jump last and James second to last so that I can give him some encouragement if his nerves get to him.'

Kazakov glowered at James. 'I don't share my tent with cowards. You make that jump or tonight you sleep outside with the spiders and snakes.'

'I'm not a trainee you know,' James said indignantly. 'You can't boss me around.'

'You're jumping sixth now,' Dana said, diplomatically pointing Kazakov towards the trainees by the door. 'I'll sort James out. You'd better go hook up.'

A warning buzzer sounded as Mr Pike began opening the aircraft door, flooding the gloomy metal tube with sunlight. The numbers on the clock began to flash as the count dropped below sixty seconds.

'I feel like such a dick,' James confessed, as he looked

across at the trainees. 'Some of them are ten years old.'

'Focus,' Dana said firmly as their gloved fingers interlocked. 'You've been trained for this. Now take deep breaths and stay calm.'

'Hook up, you two,' Mr Pike shouted, from beside the door. 'Eighteen seconds.'

James fought a spasm in his gut as Dana dragged him towards the trainees lined up against the fuselage. None of them looked happy, but none had worked themselves into as much of a state as James.

'Good luck, kids,' Kazakov shouted. 'Remember: three elephants, check canopy and steer *gently* if you drift close to another jumper.'

James and Dana hooked their strops on to the cable, as an announcement loud enough to be heard in a war zone blasted out of a speaker beside them.

'This is the co-pilot speaking. Navigation confirms we are in location. Winds are nine knots north easterly, giving us a drop-zone window of fifty-eight seconds on my mark.'

James looked over the helmets of the trainees as the countdown clock flashed triple zero. There was an eleven-year-old boy less than twenty centimetres ahead and Dana right behind with a reassuring glove on his shoulder, but he felt isolated.

Part of him wanted to fling the chute off his back and go spew in the toilet, while another was acutely aware of how much abuse he'd get back on campus if he did. And if he could master his nerves, he'd be down in under two minutes.

'Mark,' the co-pilot announced.

The drop clock changed from red to green as Mr Pike began yelling, 'Go, go, go.'

To ensure that as many people as possible made the drop smoothly, the most confident trainees – mainly ones who'd jumped when they were red-shirts – were lined up first. As soon as the first trainee was out the next had to stand with their toes overhanging the door. After waiting in a crouching position for the two seconds it took the previous jumper to clear the aircraft, it was their turn to leap.

The gap of less than four seconds between jumps turned the queue into a slow walk. Every time someone lined up in the doorway, James hoped they'd mess up so that they'd be out of the drop zone before his turn came around. But each trainee had invested ninety-six gruelling days into qualifying as a CHERUB agent. Bruised, hungry and exhausted, they'd put in too much to let fear get the better of them now.

So James found himself in the doorway, buffeted by freezing air and sunlight with his strop hooked to the cable above his head. With the drop zone closing in twenty-two seconds, he crouched and felt extremely dizzy as he looked down. They were below cloud cover and the orange chute of the previous jumper was unravelling, high above seven kilometres of golden sand.

'Move your arse, James,' Mr Pike yelled impatiently. 'Seventeen seconds. Go!'

He was locked to the spot. He felt like he was going to shit and puke at the same time and made a lunge for the handle on the side of the door. But before he got a grip, Dana batted his hand away and slammed her palm into the back of his chute, tipping him forward.

'Chicken,' she sneered, exchanging smiles with Mr Pike as she took James' place in the doorway.

James found himself falling face first towards the beach. The reality of this was more than his brain could comprehend. His trousers billowed, air tore beneath his helmet, making his chin strap dig into his neck. It was awful and wonderful. Out of every moment of James' life, freefalling five hundred metres above ground was the wildest.

The shock of being pushed meant that he'd forgotten to count three elephants, but the jump training he'd received the previous day kicked in when he felt a tiny jolt as the line connecting him to the aircraft went taut and ripped open his chute before snapping away.

'Check canopy,' James shouted.

His first upward glance only earned him a face full of sunlight, but two seconds later the sun was filtered through a billowing mushroom of orange nylon. If it hadn't opened he would have had less than five seconds to deploy his reserve chute, but it seemed OK so he followed his training and shouted the next order.

'Make space.'

The brilliant sunshine turned the beach below into white glare, but he looked down and was reassured to see the previous jumper hundreds of metres away. You couldn't look up through the canopy, so the rule was that you only worried about people below you.

'Check drift,' James gasped, before looking down and realising that the ground was approaching rapidly.

The weather was calm and the landing zone huge so he didn't have to open his lift webs to correct his path. This was

a huge relief, because you can't get a feel for steering a parachute while standing on the ground, and the most common cause of accidents for inexperienced jumpers is steering too violently before touchdown.

The final part of jump training had involved the landing: you're supposed to know which way the wind is blowing and get your feet in a safe position. If you get this wrong, you'll find yourself falling one way while the wind tugs your chute in another. Instead of crumpling, your body gets twisted in all directions.

So James was alarmed when he looked down and saw a crab the size of a dinner plate coming into focus. His mind was blank: he couldn't remember which way the wind was blowing, or even which way he was pointing.

All he could do was crumple and hope for the best.