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Opening extract from

Maximum Security

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1. COLD

Before you entered basic training, you probably heard stories from qualified CHERUB agents about the nature of this one-hundred-day course. Although every basic training course is designed to teach the same core abilities of physical fitness and extreme mental endurance, you can expect your training to differ from that of your predecessors in order to retain the element of surprise.

(Excerpt from the CHERUB Basic Training Manual)

It looked the same in every direction. The sunlight blazing off the field of snow made it impossible for the two ten-year-old girls to see more than twenty metres into the distance, despite the heavily tinted snow goggles over their eyes.

'How far to the checkpoint?' Lauren Adams shouted, breaking her stride to stare at the global positioning unit strapped around her best friend's wrist.

'Only two and a half kilometres,' Bethany Parker shouted back. 'If the ground stays flat, we should be at the shelter in forty minutes.'

The girls had to shout for their voices to override the

howling wind and the three layers of clothing protecting their ears.

'That's cutting it close to sundown,' Lauren yelled. 'We'd better get a move on.'

They'd set off at dawn, dragging lightweight sleds that could be hooked over their shoulders and carried as backpacks on difficult terrain. The good news was, the two CHERUB trainees had the whole day to trek fifteen kilometres across the Alaskan snowfield to their next checkpoint. The bad news was that at this time in April, the daylight lasted just four hours and wading through half a metre of powdery snow put enormous strain on their thighs and ankles. Every step was painful.

Lauren heard a howling noise rising up in the distance. 'It's gonna to be another big one,' she shouted.

The girls crouched down, pulled their sleds in close and wrapped their arms tightly around each other's waists. Just as you can hear waves approaching a beach, out here in the Alaskan snowfields you could hear a strong gust stirring up in the distance.

They were both dressed for extreme cold. Lauren's normal underwear was covered with a long sleeved thermal vest and long johns. The next layer was a zip-up suit made from polar fleece that covered her whole body, except for a slit around the eyes. The second fleece was designed to trap body heat. It looked like a baggy Easter bunny suit, minus the pom-pom tail and sticking up ears. Then came more gloves, another balaclava, snow goggles and waterproof outer gloves that went all the way up to Lauren's elbows, ending in a tightly fitting elastic cuff. Finally, on

the outside was a thickly padded snowsuit and snow boots with spiked bottoms.

The clothing was enough to keep them comfortable as they walked, despite the temperature being minus eighteen centigrade, but this dropped another fifteen degrees whenever a strong gust hit. The wind pushed the insulating layers of warm air between the girls' clothes into all the places where it wasn't needed, leaving nothing but a couple of centimetres of synthetic fibre between their skin and the ferociously cold air. Each blast ripped into their bodies, delivering searing pain to any exposed area.

Lauren and Bethany used their sleds as windbreaks when the gust hit. A spike of cold air punched through the tightly fitting rim of Lauren's goggles. She pushed her face against Bethany's suit and squeezed her eyes shut, as snow and ice pounded deafeningly against her hood.

When the gust passed and the snow had settled, Lauren brushed the dusting of powder off her suit and stumbled back to her feet.

'Everything OK?' Bethany shouted.

Lauren stuck up her thumbs. 'Ninety-nine days down, one to go,' she shouted.

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Lauren and Bethany's home for the night was a metal container painted in an high visibility shade of orange. It was the kind of container you'd normally expect to pass on the motorway, mounted on the back of an articulated truck. There was a radio mast and a shattered flagpole lashed to the roof.

The girls had beaten the darkness. The sun's distant face was already touching the horizon and the light it sent through

the mist of falling snow gave the whole landscape a powdery yellow hue. The girls were too exhausted to appreciate its beauty; all they cared about was getting warm.

It took a few minutes to dig out the snow from around the two metal doors that formed one end of the container. Once they were open, Lauren dragged the two sleds inside, while Bethany searched along a wooden shelf until she found a gas lamp. Lauren closed the metal doors, creating a boom that would have been deafening if the girls' ears hadn't been shielded by their outdoor clothes.

'We've got even less fuel tonight,' Lauren shouted, as the lamp erupted in an unsteady blue glow. She looked at the single bottle of gas as she peeled off her goggles and outermost set of gloves. Her hands were freezing, but it was impossible to manipulate anything with three sets of gloves on.

On the first night of their week in the Alaskan wilderness, the girls had found two large bottles of gas in their shelter. They'd heated the room until it was toasty, cooked lavishly and warmed up water to wash with. The fun ended abruptly when the gas ran out in the middle of the night and the indoor temperature rapidly dropped back below freezing. After this harsh lesson, the girls took pains to ration their energy supply.

Bethany fixed a hose from the gas bottle to a small heater and lit just one of its three chambers. This would slowly bring the temperature inside their container above freezing. Until it did, the girls would keep as many of their outdoor clothes on as the task at hand allowed.

They spent the next few minutes rummaging through the supplies that had been left for them. There were plenty of

high-energy foods, such as tinned meats, flapjacks, instant noodles, chocolate bars and glucose powder. They also found their mission briefings, clean underwear, fresh boot liners and floor mats. Combined with the pots, utensils and sleeping bags packed in their sleds, it would be enough to make the nineteen hours until the sun returned reasonably comfortable.

Once the girls had ensured that they had all the basics, Lauren couldn't help wondering what was under the tarpaulin at the back of the container.

'That's got to be something to do with our mission for tomorrow,' Bethany said.

They stepped across and dragged the tarp off a giant cardboard box. It was over two metres long and almost up to Lauren's shoulders. Scraping at the layer of frost over the cardboard revealed a Yamaha logo and an outline drawing of a snowmobile.

'Cool,' Bethany said. 'I don't think my legs could handle another day trudging through that snow.'

'Have you ever driven one?' Lauren asked.

'Nah,' Bethany said, shaking her head excitedly. 'But it can't be much different from the quad bikes we drove last summer at the hostel . . . Let's open our briefings and work out what we've got to do tomorrow.'

'We'd better take our temperatures and radio base camp first,' Lauren said.

There was a radio set already linked up to the aerial on the roof. Its battery was cold and it took several seconds for the orange frequency display on the front panel to light up. While they waited, the girls took turns measuring their

body temperatures with a small plastic strip that you tucked under your armpit.

The indicator lit up between the thirty-five and thirty-six degree marks on both of them. It meant the girls were running slightly below normal body temperature, which is exactly what you'd expect for two people who'd just spent several hours in extreme cold. Another hour would have been enough for them to develop early symptoms of hypothermia.

Lauren grabbed the microphone and keyed up. 'This is unit three calling instructor Large. Over.'

'Instructor Large receiving . . . Greetings, my little sugar plums.'

It was reassuring hearing a human voice other than Bethany's for the first time in twenty-four hours, even if it was that of Mr Large, CHERUB's head training instructor. Large was a nasty piece of work. Pushing kids through tough training courses wasn't just part of his job; he actually enjoyed making them suffer.

'Just reporting in to say that everything is fine with me and unit four,' Lauren said. 'Over.'

'Why aren't you using the coded frequency? Over,' Mr Large asked angrily.

Lauren realised her instructor was right and hurriedly flipped the scramble switch on the front of the receiver.

'Oh . . . Sorry. Over.'

'You will be tomorrow morning when I get my hands on you,' Large snapped. 'Minus ten house points for Hufflepuff. Over and out.'

'Over and out,' Lauren said bitterly. She put down the

microphone and kicked out at the side of the metal container. 'God, I *really* hate that man's guts.'

Bethany laughed a little. 'Not as much as he hates you for knocking him head first into that muddy hole with a spade.'

'True,' Lauren said, allowing herself a grin as she recalled the event that had brought her first attempt at basic training to an abrupt end. 'I suppose we'd better get cracking. You start translating the briefing. I'll go outside and bring in some snow to melt for drinking water.'

Lauren found a bucket and grabbed the torch out of her sled. She pushed the metal door of the container and squeezed herself and the bucket through a small gap, so as not to let out too much heat.

The sun was gone and only the tiny shaft of light from inside the container enabled Lauren to notice the giant white outline in the snow. Half convinced that she was overtired and imagining things, Lauren flicked on her torch.

What Lauren saw left her in no doubt. She screamed as she scrambled back inside the container and swiftly pulled up the metal door.

'What's the matter?' Bethany asked, turning sharply from her mission briefing.

'Polar bear!' Lauren gasped. 'Lying in the snow right outside the door. Luckily it seemed to be resting; another few steps and I would have trodden on it.'

'It *can't* be,' Bethany said.

Lauren waved the torch in her training partner's face. 'Here, take this. Stick your head out and look for yourself.'

It only took the briefest of glances to confirm it. The mat of white fur, with plumes of hot breath steaming out of its

nostrils, lay less than five metres from the entrance to the container.

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Once Lauren recovered from her near-death experience, the girls thought things through and decided that the situation wasn't too serious.

They could get all the drinking water they needed by leaning out of the metal doors and scooping up the snow around the entrance. Once they'd got enough snow, they decided to leave the giant bear in peace. It seemed unlikely the animal would leave itself exposed to the cold all night. Surely it would move away to find shelter before the sun came back up.

The inside of the container had now warmed up enough for the girls not to be able to see their breath curling in front of their faces. After their day in the cold, it seemed toasty. They stepped out of their boots and outer suits, hanging them on a line in the warm air above the gas heater, so that the moisture in them would evaporate overnight.

The metal floor of the container was cold to touch, so they put on trainers and laid out insulating foam mats retrieved from their sleds. They turned the heater up and lined icy tins of corned beef and fruit in front of it, as Bethany melted a saucepan of snow over a portable stove.

It took an hour to read the briefings for the final twenty-four hours of their course, under the flickering light of two gas lamps. The briefings only ran to five pages, but were written in languages with non-European alphabets that the girls had only started learning at the beginning of the course: Russian for Bethany and Greek for Lauren.

The gist of the briefings was simple. The girls had to unpack the snowmobile from its shipping crate and prepare it for first use: a task that involved screwing various bits together, lubricating the drive track and engine and filling the tank with petrol. From sun-up, they'd have two hours to make a thirty-five-kilometre journey by snowmobile to a checkpoint where they would liaise with the four other trainees for something the briefing ominously described as the '*Ultimate test of physical courage in an extreme weather environment*'.

'Well,' Lauren said, as she dug her spoon into a can of corned beef that was warm and greasy on the outside but rock hard in the centre, 'at least the instructions for the snowmobile are in English.'