

1. GOLD

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 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 a 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.'

2. BOWLING

James Adams had been looking forward to spending Saturday night in town at the bowling alley, but now he was here he'd got himself in a mood. The four other CHERUB agents on the lane seemed to be having far more fun than he was.

Kyle was in great form, lording it over everyone, buying them hotdogs and Cokes with the small fortune he'd made burning pirate DVDs for half the kids on campus. Kyle always had some dodgy money-making scheme going on, but as far as James could work out this was the first one that had ever earned decent money.

The identical twins, Callum and Connor, were also enjoying themselves, despite their stupid bet with each other that one of them could get off with Gabrielle before the night was out. James had told the twins they were dreaming: they might be nice guys, but Gabrielle was thirteen and totally fit. If Gabrielle wanted a boyfriend – which as far as anyone could tell she didn't – she could do better than pick between two gangly twelve-year-olds with dishevelled blond hair and a gap the size of a Mars bar between their crooked front teeth.

'Strike...' Gabrielle shouted, as ten pins rattled off in different directions. She flailed her arms and jiggled her bum about, doing a kind of freaky war dance. 'You're up, Kyle,' she whooped.

Gabrielle turned away from the scene of her triumph to see Callum and Connor grinning at her from their plastic chairs, either side of where she'd been sitting before she bowled.

'Great shot,' Callum beamed.

'Didn't I say you'd bowl better if you swung your arm back a little less?' Connor interrupted, as he shot an evil glance at his identical twin. 'Your balance is much better now.'

Gabrielle remembered the advice, but she hadn't bowled any differently to normal. The strike had been down to luck. She looked at her plastic seat and realised she couldn't handle another second of the two boys fawning over her. She reached under her chair and grabbed her bag.

'Where are you going?' Callum asked apprehensively. 'What's the matter?'

'James looks a bit down in the dumps,' Gabrielle explained. 'I'm gonna sit with him for a minute and see if I can cheer him up.'

'Good idea,' Connor grinned. 'I'll come with you.'

'No,' Gabrielle said stiffly. 'You two are gonna stay *right* there.'

'But...' Connor said, half standing up before sitting down again.

'Look,' Gabrielle said. 'I don't mean to be rude, but you two are acting seriously weird and it's getting on my nerves. Can't you let me have five minutes' peace?'

Gabrielle felt bad as she reached over and pulled her jacket off the back of her chair. Both twins had the exact same expression: like toddlers whose mother had punished them by confiscating their favourite toy.

James was in a daze, staring down at the floor between his legs. Gabrielle tapped him on the knee. 'What's up, misery guts?' she asked, as she took the seat next to him. 'Still thinking about Miami?' The previous summer, James had got into a bad situation and ended up shooting a man to save his own life. He still had nightmares about it.

'I guess,' James shrugged. 'And I kind of miss Kerry. I haven't heard from her in over a week.'

'Neither have I,' Gabrielle said. 'But the last message I got said she'd arrived in Japan and was going deep undercover, so it's hardly surprising.'

James nodded. 'I spoke to her mission controller on the phone. He says everything's fine and hopefully Kerry will be home in a month or so.'

'What about Lauren?' Gabrielle asked. 'How's she getting on with basic training?'

'You know how it is,' James said, 'you only ever hear rumours, but I think she's doing OK.'

Gabrielle started to laugh. 'Remember when we were in training? Me and Kerry locked all you guys out on that hotel balcony and made you grovel to get back in?'

James allowed himself to smile a little. 'Yeah, we never got you back for that.'

Something cold touched the back of James' neck. He looked around and realised he and Gabrielle had been splashed with Coke and ice by the gang of sixteen- and

seventeen-year-old boys who were playing the next lane. They were acting rowdy, rucking and throwing stuff around.

‘Oi,’ Gabrielle stormed, as she scowled over her shoulder at a mass of acne in a Tottenham Hotspur shirt. ‘Do you mind?’

‘Sorry,’ the kid said, grinning mischievously at the ice in the bottom of his cardboard cup. Gabrielle got the impression he wasn’t sorry at all.

‘James,’ Kyle shouted. ‘Your frame.’

James got out of his seat and grabbed a bowling ball off the rack. He’d picked up a coupon and taken a couple of free bowling lessons, so when James was on form he looked the business: delivering the ball in a powerful arc and racking up respectable scores. But not tonight. In fact, James’ mood had nothing to do with missing Kerry, or worrying if Lauren would pass basic training. James was feeling down because he couldn’t aim a bowling ball to save his life.

He lined up, holding the heavy ball under his chin. He took a good smooth swing. The ball crashed nicely into the front three pins, and for a second James thought he’d scored his first strike in ages. But pin seven, at the back on the far left, merely wobbled and number ten on the extreme right didn’t even have the decency to do that. James couldn’t believe his rotten luck.

‘Seven-ten split,’ Kyle shouted, slapping his thighs deliriously. ‘You’re going *down* again, Adams.’

James glanced up at the scoreboard. When they bowled in a group, James usually fought Kyle for first place and won more than he lost. But he’d already lost two matches tonight and was thirty points behind Kyle in this one, with four

frames left to play. James thought Kyle rubbing in the misery was harsh, conveniently forgetting he would have acted exactly the same if it had been Kyle having a bad night.

James grabbed his ball as soon as it clattered on to the rack and stopped spinning. He lined up to take his second shot, glowering at the two pins standing on opposite sides of the lane.

To make a seven-ten split, you need to hit one pin so hard that it bounces against the wall behind, then spins out and knocks down the pin on the opposite side. The shot requires a hefty chunk of luck and even a world championship standard bowler wouldn't expect to make it often.

'You'll never hit both in a million years,' Kyle goaded.

James turned back and smirked at Kyle, struggling to fake an air of confidence. 'Sit your butt down and watch the master at work.'

James swung the ball as hard as he could, but when you bowl fast you lose control. The ball did a little bobble as James let go. It had plenty of pace, but James knew straight away that it wasn't right.

'Turn back,' James gasped desperately, as the ball edged closer to the gutter. 'Come onnnnnn baby...'

The ball thunked into the gutter a couple of metres shy of the pin. James put his hands over his eyes and cursed under his breath. He almost couldn't bear turning away, knowing he'd catch sight of Kyle's smug face.

'Eight points and a gutter ball,' Kyle said happily. 'Maybe you should wander down to the bumper lanes and ask the supervisor if you can play with the little red-shirt kids.'

James huffed as he slumped back into his seat next to

Gabrielle. 'The way I'm going tonight, I reckon the little kids would beat me.'

'You're doing better than Callum and Connor, though,' Gabrielle said sympathetically, pointing up at the TV screen with the scores on it.

'Some consolation that is. Those two are hopeless.'

Gabrielle smiled and brushed the back of her hand against James' leg. 'Just not your night, I guess.'

As she said it, both their backs got sprayed with more Coke. They turned quickly to see two beefy looking guys in football shirts wrestling in a puddle on the floor. James waited until they broke apart before having a go at them.

'What are you two retards playing at?' James barked furiously. 'I'm bloody soaked.'

'My top's all marked,' Gabrielle said, looking anxiously down her back and wondering if the stains would come out.

The two lads were giggling as they got to their feet. 'We're just having a laugh,' the one in the Tottenham shirt said.

The other lad looked less sympathetic. 'There's loads of empty seats over there,' he grunted. 'Why don't you just move?'

'Because this is *our* rink,' Gabrielle said. 'I don't want to walk five miles every time I take my shot.'

'Yeah,' James agreed. 'Why should we move, just because you want to roll around the floor with your boyfriend?'

The kid jabbed James in the back. 'Are you calling me a queer?'

James and Gabrielle stood up and turned around to face the two lads, who towered over them.

'I didn't come here for a row,' James said.

'Nor did I,' the tough guy said. 'But you're going the right way about getting into one; so why don't you just take your little *wog* girlfriend off and sit somewhere else?'

The tough guy had twenty-five centimetres and fifteen kilos on Gabrielle, so he never expected what happened next. Gabrielle, who was a second-dan Karate black belt, launched a high kick over the row of plastic seats. Her bowling shoe slammed into the thug's kidney and by the time he'd got his breath back, he was pinned to the ground with a bloody nose and an orange painted thumbnail digging into his cheek.

'Call me that again,' Gabrielle screamed, as she bunched up her fist. 'Go on ... I dare you.'

Her voice echoed across the bowling alley's metal roof as a hundred sets of stunned eyes turned towards her. The whole place went quiet, except for the sound of a couple of squealing toddlers and the blipping of arcade machines.

James quickly straddled over the rows of seats and rested his palm on Gabrielle's shoulder. 'Come on, Gabrielle,' he said soothingly. 'Cool it. It's not worth getting upset over the likes of *him*.'

Gabrielle released her hand from her victim's face and stood up. James thought he'd defused the situation, but then he realised four other lads were moving in to surround them. As he stepped forward to walk back to his lane, a clumsy punch glanced across the side of his head.

James instinctively swung back with his elbow to take out his assailant, catching him full in the face and deftly sweeping away his opponent's legs as he stumbled backwards. The other three lads didn't like this one bit. Two lunged at James,

while the guy in the Tottenham shirt tried to take down Gabrielle by jumping on her back.

CHERUB had trained James to handle himself in a fight, but there's a limit to what you can do against three significantly larger opponents at close range. Luckily, the other cherubs were rushing to his defence.

Kyle, Connor and Callum all piled over or around the seats and launched themselves at the thugs. James caught a second punch and his bowling shoe squealed as he lost his balance on the polished wooden floor.

He tried to get back on his feet, but found himself trapped on the ground, while a tangle of limbs waged war overhead. He caught sight of Kyle's knee hitting someone in the guts and Tottenham-shirt guy getting pulled into a painful arm-lock by the twins.

By the time a group of adults - including the two CHERUB supervisors looking after the younger kids in the bumper lane - charged in to break up the fight, there was no doubt about the result. The five yobs were crawling around on the floor in varying degrees of pain, with a ring of steely-faced CHERUB agents surrounding them, defying them to make another move.

James rolled on to his back and took a big gasp of air. He got a little rush from being on the winning side, even though his main contribution had been getting thumped in the head and falling over. He reckoned the older kids deserved what they'd got; the way they'd started on Gabrielle was totally out of order.

But James' mood darkened as he levered himself up on to the plastic seats. His head hurt, his clothes were filthy and

there were going to be consequences when they got back to campus.

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Dr Terence McAfferty, usually known as Mac, stared at the five kids lined up in front of his big oak desk, wondering exactly how many times he'd faced similar line-ups of worried faces in the thirteen years since he'd been appointed chairman of CHERUB. He was sure the number ran into thousands.

'So,' Mac said wearily, 'what caused the fight at the bowling alley earlier this evening?'

'This guy on the next rink had a go at Gabrielle,' Kyle explained, stepping forward and taking the lead role because he was the oldest. 'They were chucking their drinks around and acting like idiots. We all kind of lost our temper and piled into them.'

'You all *simultaneously* decided to pile in,' Mac said, clearly not finding this explanation likely. 'And I suppose none of you is any more to blame than anyone else?'

'That's right,' Kyle lied.

The rest of the line-up nodded. They'd huddled together and sorted out their cover story on the mini-bus ride back to campus. Gabrielle had started the punch-up, of course, but she'd been racially abused and none of the other kids thought she deserved to cop all the blame.

'I understand,' Mac said reluctantly. 'If that's the way you want me to deal with this, so be it. But I spoke to the staff members who were at the scene and I think I have a pretty accurate idea of what *really* happened.'

As he said this, Mac cast deliberate glances at Gabrielle and James.

‘I shouldn’t have to tell you how serious this incident could have been,’ Mac continued. ‘It’s been drilled into you all time and again. What is the number one priority for groups of CHERUB agents when they’re off campus?’

The line-up droned the answer, at different speeds and with varying degrees of gusto: ‘Keep a low profile.’

‘A *low* profile,’ Mac nodded. ‘CHERUB is a secret organisation. The safety of your colleagues who are currently away on undercover missions depends upon the fact that nobody knows we exist. When you’re off campus, I expect you to behave in a manner that doesn’t attract undue attention. I expect you to avoid trouble at all costs, even under extreme provocation. Is that clearly understood?’

‘Yes sir,’ everyone nodded sombrely.

‘A whole bunch of people saw your little display of fighting skills at the bowling alley this evening. Don’t you think they’re going to be extremely curious about who you are and how a group of youngsters might come by advanced martial arts skills like that? Can you imagine the fuss that would have been caused if one of the boys you assaulted had been seriously injured? I know you’re all trained in unarmed combat and had the good sense to use minimal force, but freak accidents can still happen.

‘On top of that, you can count yourselves extremely lucky that I have connections at the local police station. I had to use all my leverage to ensure that the five of you aren’t sitting in a police cell at this very moment facing criminal charges. So, your punishments.’

It was midnight. The kids had been tired and fidgety while they listened to the lecture, but they snapped to

attention at the mention of punishments, anxious to know what they were going to get.

‘First of all, you’re all banned from going into town for the next four months,’ Mac announced. ‘Secondly, we’re always short of pupils at CHERUB and right now we’re getting desperate for new blood...’

Mac reached into his desk drawer and pulled out a pad of pre-printed mission briefings. James let out a little groan as he realised he was about to be sent off to some strange children’s home to recruit a new CHERUB agent. James had never been on a recruitment mission before, but everyone he knew who had said they were a complete nightmare.