Frozen

The C-130 transport plane bucked against the invisible eddies that swirled around the aircraft 10,000 metres above the earth. More commonly known as a Hercules, the aircraft was the workhorse of the air force—ut it had not been designed to take the kind of punishment that was hammering it now.

The malevolent storm had appeared from blue skies. Snow pelted the craft and choked the four powerful engines, one of which was still aflame from the missile impact forcing it rapidly to lose airspeed and precious altitude. Below, the bleak continent of Antarctica beckoned to the Hercules's passengers with a sub-zero embrace.

Inside, two twelve-year-old boys—Toby and Pete—gripped the safety harnesses bolted to their flight-seats, their knuckles white as the plane bellyflopped. Any items not secured jumped into the air—and remained there, held in a curious state of zero gravity as they nosedived towards the earth.

Toby thought he was going to be sick for sure.

Having watched countless documentaries on the television he remembered the term 'parabola': NASA flew planes towards the earth to simulate zero-G. The planes were affectionately known as 'Vomit Comets'. And that's exactly how he felt now, feeling the bile rise in his throat.

He also recalled seeing that they would have about forty seconds of this nauseating feeling before the plane crashed into the ground. And after everything that had happened this week, he was pretty sure they wouldn't survive *that*.

All these thoughts flitted through Toby's mind in a second. He smashed open the restraining clip on his safety harness and floated out into the cargo area of the plane like he'd seen astronauts do on television.

Pete watched Toby free-float out and unbuckled his own belt to join him. Unable to precisely control his movements, Toby floated upside-down, the inverted perspective disorienting him further.

Thirty seconds to impact . . .

'We have to open the rear doors!' yelled Toby over the monstrous droning of the Allison Turboprop engines.

Pete looked around frantically. 'The release switch is automated. It's in the cockpit.'

'Dammit!' cried Toby.

They both knew there was no time to break through

into the fortified cockpit and override the mechanical Drone Pilot.

Twenty-five seconds.

Toby kicked himself away from the bulkhead, and soared towards the rear of the aircraft, steadying himself as he flew over pallets held in place with canvas webbing. He knew once they opened the door the supply pallets would create an additional problem.

Pete tried to use his arms to swim through the air; instead he revolved uselessly on the spot.

Toby cried over to him. 'I can't do this! This is your area of expertise!'

Pete threw out a hand and steadied himself by catching the pallet webbing.

'Blast the doors and use the pallets to spring out!' cried Toby.

That was the problem with flying; it was difficult to do if you were plummeting. You needed a springboard to push yourself upwards. Even with superpowers, physics always butted its unwelcome nose in.

Twenty . . .

Pete laboriously heaved himself over to Toby. Both boys planted their feet against the pallets; coiled for action.

Pete removed his glasses—he had long learnt his lesson—and focused on the rear cargo door that opened like a jaw under the Hercules's tail section.

BAM! A concentrated beam of blue energy leapt from his eyes and blew the cargo door into twisted metal fragments. Frigid winds sucked at the aircraft's contents.

The sudden loss of pressure pulled the contents of the craft out with teeth-jarring speed. The pallets vaulted under their feet, rocketing the teenagers out into the blizzard. Inertia pushed them flat against the boxes underfoot but both boys knew they had to push upwards; otherwise they would simply crash into the ground with the rest of the aircraft.

Using every part of their remaining strength, they pushed—and suddenly they found themselves flying up, away from the aircraft and its carge of supply pallets—

And towards the jagged mountains!

No sooner had they taken flight, than the Hercules smashed forcibly into the side of the mountain. Pete's mental countdown had not taken account of the fact that the ground had swept up in the form of the Neptune Mountain Range to meet them.

The Hercules transport erupted into a vivid orange fireball. Twenty freefalling pallets impacted into the inferno seconds later. Toby could feel the flames licking his heels, but he urged himself to fly faster, throwing out both arms before him, just in case that assisted. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Pete banking downwards, away from the fireball's path. Toby lost no time in joining him.

Frozen

They arced around and down in a flight path that a military jock would term a 'yo-yo Manoeuvre'. Within seconds the steeply sloping, icy flanks of the mountain were underneath them and the Hercules was lost from visibility in the storm.

The cold bit hard, zapping Toby's energy even through the multilayered thermal gear that covered almost every centimetre of him. He knew he had no choice but to land firmly on the mountain slope, or risk dropping from the sky and rolling the rest of the way downhill. A quick glance confirmed Pete was thinking the same.

Toby pivoted so he was no longer aiming headfirst down the mountain. He slowed, dropping the last metre to the ground. He fell on all fours to keep his balance, and sank to his knees and elbows. Pete landed next to him. Already the driving blizzard had coated them with a layer of frost.

Pete's teeth chattered. 'That . . . was a new experience, huh?'

Before Toby could reply a noise got his attention. It was bass-heavy, countering the wind's tremolo. The ground beneath them shook; with a feeling of dreadful realization, Toby turned his gaze uphill.

The flaming carcass of the aircraft was sledging down the hill, and gaining momentum with every second.

'Watch out!' screamed Toby.

He had no time to push his friend aside, and no strength to take flight again. Instead he could only leap sideways with the very last of his energy.

His face was buried in the snow as he landed, and the world shook around him as the burning twisted debris thundered past like a runaway locomotive. He remained motionless as, seconds later, he was pelted with smaller debris that bounced off his protective gear. Toby was certain that, had he not been wearing the multiple layers, a jagged piece of shrapnel would have cut him open.

The ground stopped trembling and the driving wind howled some more. Toby picked himself up and looked wildly around.

Pete had gone.

'Pete! Where are you?'

Panic seized him, overriding the permeating chill. He staggered forward.

'Pete! Please?'

He looked hopelessly around, and then dropped to his knees. With every ounce of self-control, he stopped himself from crying; tears would freeze over his eyeballs in the -50° Celsius atmosphere and no doubt blind him.

If the aircraft had struck Pete then he would surely be dead. Pete's current range of superpowers would do nothing to save him from being crushed by a flaming aircraft.

Dead. Maybe like Lorna, Emily . . . and his mother.

Toby shook the dark thoughts from his mind and assessed his situation. It was almost as stark. He was two thousand miles away from the nearest civilization, which was located on the tip of Argentina, trapped at over a thousand feet on the snow-covered peak. Hurricane-strength winds promised to spirit him away if he dared fly again—not that he had the strength.

His best friend was probably dead. His sister and her friend had been caught, and a madman held his mother captive: an unspeakably evil villain who had demolished Fort Knox in the United States.

And it seemed Toby was the only person who could now save the world from disaster.

Talk about a bad week.

Toby reflected on how the last seven days had transformed their lives beyond imagination. In one moment he and his friends had turned from teenagers into superheroes. The innocence of their youth had been stripped raw.

Everything had changed the day they chanced on the source of their extraordinary powers . . .