

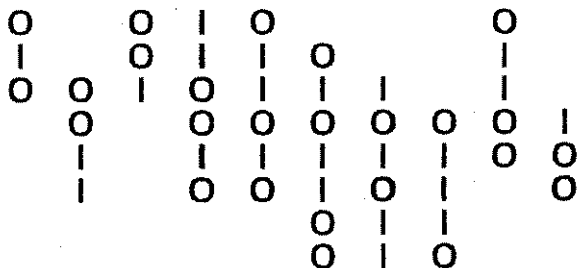
Opening extract from
Hero.com

Written by
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Published by
Oxford University Press

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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—but 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 jump-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.



FROZEN

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.

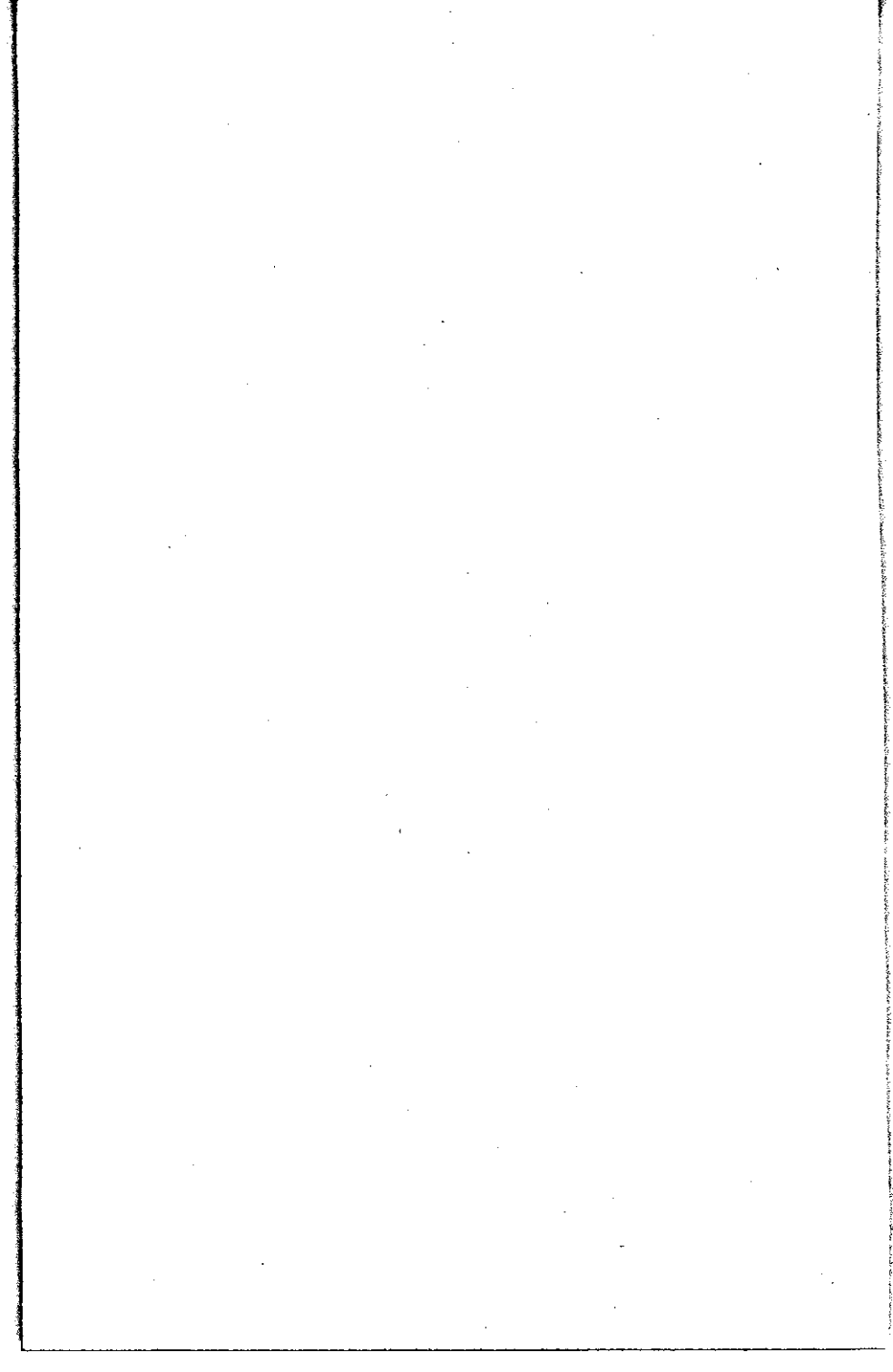
And it seemed Toby was the only person who could now save the world from disaster.

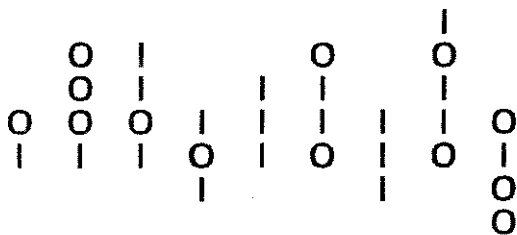
Talk about a bad week.

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 . . .







The Storm

It was cold, but crystal blue skies offered a perfect day for laser-tag in the forest that stood at the end of the road. Brown fronds crunched noisily underfoot, but the flaxen leaves that still clung to the trees offered just enough cover to hide. As usual the game between Toby and Pete was fast and furious. Toby was the more athletic of the two, and pressed his advantage by sprinting through the trees, leaving Pete exhausted by the time he caught up. Plus, Pete was never a good shot. In fact, had the gun been a high-energy laser, rather than a toy, half the trees in the forest would have been on fire. Now *that* would be fun.

But after almost an hour of punishing laser combat, the sky had glowered. Bloated clouds rolled across the sun and brought a heavy shower that forced the boys to retreat from the forest. The autumns had become increasingly erratic thanks to their parents' legacy of global warming. By the time they reached the garden gate the shower had bloomed into a torrential downpour that





hammered a rhythmic tattoo against the garden furniture.

And the back door was locked from the inside.

'Lorna!' yelled Toby as he rattled the handle and thumped on the wooden frame, flakes of old paint floating to the ground. 'It's raining! Open up!'

Pete had caught him up and joined Toby in beating the door. 'Why's it locked?' he asked, cold raindrops dripping across his glasses and blurring his vision.

'My sister, that's why.'

On cue, shrill laughter from the window above got their attention. Lorna brushed her long dark hair from across her face as she watched her brother's predicament. A flash of blonde hair appeared alongside to watch with equally wicked amusement: Emily.

'Getting wet?' taunted Lorna. 'Not a good day to be stuck outside.'

Toby stood back, waving his laser-tag rifle in frustration. 'Oh, very witty. Very *clever*. You'll pass your exams in a flash with comments like that!'

Pete was not as adept in sarcasm as his friend and shouted, 'Can't you see we're soaked?'

Lorna was unmoved. 'Serves you both right!'

Pete scowled. 'What've I done?'

'Not letting us join in your stupid game,' chided Lorna.

The rain was coming down harder; fat drops slapped

The Storm

their faces. And each strike infuriated Toby. 'If it's so stupid, then why are you upset?'

'Upset? Do I *sound* upset? I'm having a great time! I'm in here, nice and warm. And *dry*.'

Toby held back his angry reply; he didn't want to risk aggravating his sister. He swapped a glance with Pete who knew what was coming next. The ultimate weapon. 'If you don't let us in right now . . . then I'll tell Mum when she gets back.'

'A bit old for that, aren't we?'

So maybe the 'ultimate weapon' didn't apply as much when you're twelve, or in Lorna's case, an unscrupulous thirteen and a bit.

'Looks like you're stuck!' said Emily with delight.

Lorna nodded. 'And after all the stupid jokes you two have played on us, nothing's going to change our minds.'

No sooner had the words slipped from her mouth than a jagged lightning bolt stabbed the ground with multiple forks, blasting a pair of heavy branches off a solid oak tree that had dominated the garden for over a hundred years. With a terrifying crack of electricity, fragments of wood shot across the grass.

Lorna blanched, looking up in shock. Toby and Pete spun round; the smell of charred wood invaded their nostrils as several scarred branches crashed to the floor in a shower of embers just a few metres away.



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'Well, just keep out of my way and we'll be fine,' said Toby. 'No more arguments.'

'Fine. We'll do our own thing.'

'Good,' said Toby sullenly.

'There are lots of things we can still do inside.'

There was a pregnant pause.

Lorna's and Toby's eyes locked as though reading one another's thoughts. Toby's leg muscles tensed, and by the time he was on his feet Lorna had already bolted ahead of him through the kitchen door.

Like her brother, Lorna enjoyed sports, in particular cross-country running. But Toby had the advantage in short-distance sprints and he shoved her against the wall as they passed in the hallway, leaving her shouting after him as he entered their father's study.

'Toby! Stop! That's so not fair!'

Emily and Pete followed in their wake, eager to join the chase but unaware of their destination.

The study was lined with reference books, framed maps, and photographs of exotic destinations, souvenirs from their father's constant travelling. A heavy desk, the size of a wardrobe, sat in front of massive bay windows offering an impressive view of the garden and the angry storm.

Toby vaulted the side of the desk and slipped straight into the comfortable leather reclining chair, situated directly in front of a large LCD computer monitor. He



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on-screen browser, scrutinizing the numerous links on the colourful homepage that had appeared.

'Check out the movie trailers,' said Pete, placing a greasy fingerprint on the screen as he pointed to the link. He glanced up at Emily. 'If you've homework to do, don't you have a computer at home?'

Emily shook her head. She had an older brother at home, and was used to having to fight to get her own way. She was annoyed at Pete, his attitude always seemed to change around Toby. When he was alone with Emily they had fun and he was always looking out for her. But as soon as Toby entered the equation Pete would side with him no matter what. She wasn't going to allow him to get his own way this time. She opened her mouth to respond—as lightning lit up the room like a flashbulb. A second later thunder clapped the air with astonishing fury, making them all jump.

'Storm's getting worse,' warned Emily.

Lorna followed her gaze outside as she had a troubling thought. 'Toby, I don't think you should be on the phone during a thunderstorm.'

Toby didn't look up, as a series of the latest Hollywood movie trailers appeared on-screen. 'We're not on the phone. We're on the net.'

'Yeah, but it still uses the phone line, stupid.'

Pete looked up at her, his mouth forming the words



The Storm

'Click on something,' urged Pete.

'OK. The first symbol, I suppose,' said Toby, motioning towards a swirling whirlpool. He clicked and moments later the webpage changed to another series of icons. These looked more familiar: a stickman-like figure in various poses: flexing muscles, lines coming from its eyes, stretched horizontally, shimmering, bloated . . . There were many and Toby had to scroll down the page to see them all.

'This is stupid,' said Emily. 'It's just another dull nerdy website.'

With a faint pop, a smaller window appeared on the screen. Paragraphs of text wavered between dozens of languages before finally solidifying into English.

'I can't read that. What's it say?' said Pete taking off his glasses and rubbing the dirty lenses vigorously on his shirt.

Toby read aloud, 'Welcome to Hero.com. As new visitors you have a free two-day trial download. Maximum of one download per person. Be sure to check out the mission board and don't forget to fight on for justice!'

Silence filled the room as they each took in the words.

'Junk,' said Lorna. 'I've heard about these things. They ask you to download what turns out to be a virus onto your computer then they take all your bank details.'



The Storm

He placed both hands firmly on the desk to steady himself. 'I'm fine. Just a little dizzy.' The feeling passed as soon as he said it. He pulled his hands from the desk.

They wouldn't budge.

Toby frowned. He pulled harder. This time his hands peeled away like a suction cup on a window, complete with a loud noise like a Velcro-strip tearing. The others backed away from him, concern evident on their faces. Toby examined his hands. They seemed normal enough, if a little grubby.

'What's wrong?' asked Pete.

Toby remained silent. He stood up from his chair, hands held straight out with his palms up. His fingers tingled as if he'd been sleeping on them. Some inkling appeared at the back of his mind, spurred on by his overactive imagination.

'Something's different,' he mumbled.

Lorna raised her hand to his shoulder, but the expression on his face made her hesitate. 'What is it?'

Toby turned to the curtains and gingerly touched them with one hand. The material instantly stuck to his fingers like glue and would not drop away until he gave his fingers a sharp flick.

'What's on your hands?' Lorna asked.

'Some kind of electrostatic charge?' asked Pete. 'Like when paper sticks to a comb, or you rub a balloon on your hair and it sticks to the wall.'



The Storm

Pete pushed his glasses firmly on his nose, as though it would dispel the illusion. 'That's utterly impossible!'

Pulling himself further up the wall, Toby positioned himself nose-to-nose with the ceiling.

'Impossible or not . . . he's doing it,' said Lorna in an awed voice. She was smart and, if she were under duress, she'd have to admit they all were. But Toby's actions defied both physics and logic, at least to the best of her knowledge. Surely, she thought, if people could walk up walls then everybody would be doing it? She would have seen it on TV. A voice of reason chimed from the recesses of her mind: she must have fallen unconscious when the lightning struck. This *must* be a dream.

But as her nails dug into the palms of her clenched fists the pain assured her she was still conscious, which meant this had to be *real*.

'We'll be famous,' she murmured.

'That's awesome!' exclaimed Pete.

'No, *that* is so *weird!*' Emily added.

'Watch this then,' said Toby, now feeling a little more confident with his new-found skill.

Leaning backwards as much as he dared, he moved one hand to the ceiling, quickly followed by the other. Making the transition from vertical wall to upside-down ceiling with his feet was easier than he'd anticipated.



The Storm

Sarah closed the door behind her and nodded. She knew her children's penchant for getting into mischief, but nothing seemed out of place. And if there was a crisis, she hoped she'd raised them to be self-sufficient enough to cope with it.

She was worried because they didn't see much of their parents these days. Her workload had increased, and her husband was forever away on field trips. Right now she was too tired, and wanted nothing more than to take her insulin and sink into a relaxing bath.

'If you say so. Just don't use the computer. I need to work on it tonight and I don't want it damaged by lightning.'

Sarah moved into the lounge, her voice receding. Toby let out a huge breath and scuttled safely down the wall. Lorna wheeled around on him with an accusing finger.

'See? You nearly got us into trouble. You and that stupid website.'

'What did I do?'

Lorna and Emily trudged upstairs. 'I guess that's the end of that!'

Toby and Pete exchanged a glance. They both knew she was wrong. Something like this could not be forgotten, or swept aside. Something like this needed to be explored and tested.