

1. SHORTBREAD

12 March 2012

Twelve kids had started basic training back in December, but four quitters, two cracked bones, a badly sprained ankle, a chest infection and an asthma attack meant only three were left as the sun came up on the course's hundredth and final day.

Instructors Kazakov and Speaks had spent the night in the cabin of a dilapidated trawler, playing cards and sipping whisky while their captain navigated choppy waters off Scotland's west coast.

Daybreak had a rugged beauty: golden sky, islands shrouded in mist and the little boat struggling against the sea. But the three trainees appreciated none of this because they'd spent the night out on deck, pelted by sea spray in temperatures close to freezing.

The closest thing the trio had to shelter was a mound

of fishing gear. They'd dug in under buoys and rope and huddled together, hooking their limbs around slimy netting so that big waves didn't pitch them across the deck.

Ten-year-old Leon Sharma had the warm spot in the middle, propped against his twin Daniel with his face nestling the broad back of twelve-year-old Fu Ning. Leon had one eye open and there was enough light for him to see the angry red mosquito bites on Ning's neck, and her pale blue training shirt stained with grass, blood and rust-coloured Australian dirt.

Before basic training Leon wouldn't have been able to sleep on a wooden deck with freezing Atlantic water sloshing about, but the instructors kept trainees in a near-permanent state of exhaustion and his body had conditioned itself to take whatever sleep was on offer.

But pain had woken him up before the others. He'd lost his footing and crashed into a bush on a speed march the previous day. A thorn had driven beneath his thumbnail, splicing it down the middle and leaving a throbbing, bloody mess at the tip of his right thumb.

It was the newest and most painful of two dozen cuts, scabs and blisters on Leon's body, but an even greater torment came from a growling stomach. The fall meant he'd missed his target time for the march and Instructor Speaks had thrown his dinner on the fire as punishment.

Tantalisingly, Leon had food within reach. Trainees weren't supposed to carry food, but Leon knew Ning had a secret stash of biscuits in her pack. He'd seen her

swipe them from the hostess's trolley on their plane back from Australia a few days earlier.

Ning had hooked the straps of her backpack around her ankles to stop it getting washed away. As a mini-wave swept the deck and splashed through the mound of ropes, Leon reached towards the zip on Ning's pack.

It was a risky move: Ning was two years older and a champion boxer who could easily batter Leon if he pissed her off. Despite the throb of the trawler's propeller shaft and the sounds of wind and water, the click of each zip tooth felt like a gun going off.

Once he had an opening big enough for his hand, Leon felt blindly inside Ning's pack. He burrowed past underwear, which had been hand-washed but packed before fully dry. Grains of sand stuck to his arm as he went deeper, feeling the smooth handle of Ning's hunting knife, then at the very bottom pairs of shortcake biscuits in plastic wrapping.

As Leon pulled up shortbread, his palm touched a larger packet. It was rectangular, with the biscuits sitting in a plastic tray and a spongy feel when he pushed down. It *had* to be Jaffa Cakes.

Saliva flushed Leon's mouth as he anticipated the tang of orange and chocolate melting against his tongue. As a small wave washed over the deck, he pulled out the little package and ripped it open with his teeth. Leon hadn't eaten in eighteen hours and stifled a satisfied groan as he crammed a spongy biscuit into his mouth whole.

Soooo good!

He practically inhaled the second, but as the third Jaffa Cake neared Leon's mouth a hand touched his shoulder, making him jump.

'You just gonna scoff them all yourself?' Leon's twin, Daniel, asked quietly.

Leon turned to face his brother and spoke in a whisper. 'You got dinner last night. I'm *starving*.'

'I'll tell Ning,' Daniel threatened, as he aimed his pointing finger at her back. 'She'll crack you like an egg.'

Leon knew his brother wouldn't really grass, but this knowledge also reminded him of his bond with his twin. He pulled the biscuit apart and gave Daniel the bigger half.

As Daniel made a quiet-but-appreciative *mmm*, the sliding door at the rear of the trawler's cabin opened with a crash.

'Wipe your top lip,' Leon said anxiously, as he chewed fast and flicked chocolate flakes off his shirt. 'If he sees us eating we're dead.'

As Leon zipped Ning's pack and swallowed the evidence of his crime, Instructor Speaks stepped on to the tilting deck. Everything about Speaks said *hard man*, from the wraparound sunglasses and shaved black head, to the mirror-shined size-fourteen combat boots on his feet.

'Sleep well, maggots?' Speaks boomed, cracking a smile as he woke Ning with a dig in the ribs. 'On your feet. Line up at the double.'

Sleepy eyes blurred as Ning disentangled herself from the fishing gear, and both shoulders burned where her

pack had rubbed them raw on the previous afternoon's speed march. When Speaks closed up, Ning expected a shove for being slow, but his arm delved past her into the rope mound and swooped on the wrapper from a pack of Jaffa Cakes.

Speaks held it up for inspection, jaw agape in mock horror. Ning realised one of the twins must have swiped it from her pack and glanced back to scowl at them.

'Well, well!' Speaks said, as the three trainees attempted to stand in line on the swaying deck. 'A *serious* breach of the rules. Mr Kazakov, come look at this.'

Kazakov was in his mid-fifties, but the grey-haired Ukrainian instructor looked as fit as he'd been thirty years earlier when he'd fought for Russian Special Forces in Afghanistan. He was already on his way outside when Speaks called and he came on deck holding a mesh sack filled with fluorescent life vests.

'Who ate these Jaffa Cakes?' Speaks shouted. 'Fess up now and I won't be too hard on you.'

Ning was anxious: if the instructors started an investigation and searched her pack they'd find the other biscuits she'd nabbed on the plane.

'It's just litter, sir,' Leon said. 'It probably blew on deck while the boat was docked.'

But it was a poor lie and Speaks instantly noticed chocolate stains where Leon's front teeth met his gums. The giant instructor squished Leon's cheeks between thumb and forefinger and yanked him out of line.

'If there's one thing I can't stand it's liars,' Speaks roared, as he gave Leon a shake, then grabbed his bad

thumb and squeezed hard. 'Still snivelling over that pathetic little graze?'

Leon winced with pain as the scab over his broken thumbnail split and blood trickled down his hand.

'How dare you lie to me!' Speaks hissed. 'Just because it's the last day of training, don't think I'll take it easy on your bony arse. Get your kit bag over here. Let's see what other contraband you've got.'

Leon had teary eyes and drips of blood pelting the deck as he walked back to the rope mound and grabbed his pack.

While the instructors concentrated on Leon, Ning yawned and took in her surroundings. The trawler was idling into a natural harbour, with near-vertical cliffs rising out of the mist a couple of hundred metres away.

Kazakov pointed towards land and began a lecture as Speaks ripped open Leon's pack and threw all his stuff out over the sodden deck.

'It's now just before seven a.m. and basic training ends at midnight,' Kazakov began. 'Somewhere on that island you'll find three grey CHERUB T-shirts. If you find a T-shirt and put it on, you can congratulate yourselves on passing basic training. Give us a call on your radio and we'll come and pick you up. But if anyone's not wearing a shirt by midnight, I'll see you back on campus in three weeks' time and you'll start training again from day one. Questions?'

Daniel raised his hand. 'Sir, are our T-shirts all together, or hidden separately?'

Kazakov considered the question as he reached into

the sack and handed Ning a life vest.

‘Figure it out,’ he said eventually.

Once her life vest was zipped up, Ning went down on one knee and began pulling a waterproof rubber cover over her backpack. While she did this Leon began gathering up his gear, which was washing around the deck. But as he bent forward to take his water bottle Instructor Speaks grabbed a handful of his shorts and lifted him into the air with one muscular arm.

‘Jaffa Cake-eating mummy’s boy,’ Speaks yelled, as Leon dangled centimetres from his face. ‘I want you out of my sight, so you can make do without your kit.’

With that, Speaks took two huge strides to the stern of the trawler and lobbed Leon over the side.

‘Happy swimming,’ Speaks shouted, as he threw a life vest after the trainee. ‘You might need this as well!’

Kazakov glared at the other two trainees as Leon made a big splash. ‘Off you go then,’ he ordered. ‘That water’s not getting any warmer.’