



1. THE PLAYBOY

Robert Muchamore

CHERUB: 3 FUTURES

To celebrate the May 2011 launch of the *CHERUB: Shadow Wave* paperback Robert Muchamore has written three alternative futures for James Adams, the hero of *CHERUB: Series One*.

The Playboy, The Family Man and The Chairman are all set in October 2031, a few weeks before James' fortieth birthday, but each one shows James' life taking a radically different path.

NOTE ON CHARACTER NAMES:

After leaving CHERUB, James Adams returned to his birth surname of Choke. Most other CHERUB agents also change their names when they retire, but for simplicity their original CHERUB-era names have been used in this story.

CHERUB: THE PLAYBOY

Las Vegas – October 2031

James Choke sat at the end of an emperor-size bed. He was in a 53rd floor penthouse suite with floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked coloured lights stretching five kilometres along the Las Vegas strip.

James would celebrate his 40th birthday in less than two weeks, but his personal trainer kept him in shape. He looked fit, dressed in boxers, with slicked back hair with touches of grey down the sides. He'd look even better when he put on the \$80,000 hand-cut silk suit, and diamond crusted Rolex resting on the duvet alongside him.

'Why are you showing off?' James asked, as he looked round at a stunning blonde, whose head poked out between a mound of pillows and cushions.

She was James' current girlfriend, a twenty-two-year-old cowgirl called Sue Loewe. Her voice was high and her accent came out of East Texas.

'I had your baby,' Sue said bitterly. 'If you love me you should marry me.'

'I've been through four wives and four divorces already,' James said, trying not to lose his temper as he pulled his suit trousers up his legs. 'That's enough marrying for one lifetime. Now are you getting dressed for the opening ceremony or not?'

James ducked as a couple of velvet cushions spun angrily across the room towards him.

‘Four wives and four hundred girlfriends,’ Sue shouted. ‘But there’s only ever been one woman you loved. So why don’t you walk down your precious red carpet with her?’

James buckled his trousers and crawled up the bed towards Sue. She’d come to Vegas to compete in a rodeo, with model looks, an athletic body and the enormous breasts that had drawn James’ eye when he’d pinned on her runner-up rosette for the steer wrestling competition.

‘This is the biggest night of my year,’ James said. ‘The dress you’ve had made costs more than most cars.’

Sue hissed, ‘I want your time and attention, James. Not dresses. Not cars. Not money.’

James thought about trying to kiss Sue, but he didn’t have the heart. He’d been through enough women to know this relationship was in its last stretch: Sue would head back to her mother in Texas with the baby. She’d lawyer up and settle for a few million dollars a year in child maintenance. James would make sure his infant son wanted for nothing and fly him into Vegas for some daddy time two or three times a year.

‘My chopper will be here in twenty minutes,’ James said calmly, as he rolled off the bed. ‘I haven’t got time to fight with you right now.’

‘You’re a greasy arse,’ Sue shouted, as she grabbed a glass tumbler and lobbed it at his head.

Wives and girlfriends had been throwing stuff at James for years. He ducked expertly, leaving the glass to smash against the wall behind him. Then he grabbed his shoes, watch and the rest of the clothes off the end of the bed and made a swift exit through double walnut doors into a grand hallway.

The hallway was more than thirty metres long, with a chequerboard marble floor. The cleaning lady pushing a big scissor-mop acted like she’d heard nothing, but the black-suited bodyguard standing by the lift showed no such reserve.

'Your life would be a lot simpler if you could learn to keep your dick in your pants,' Bruce Norris said.

James grinned – as well as being James' bodyguard Bruce was one of James' oldest friends.

'The day I give up womanising is the day I give up breathing, Brucey Boy.'

Bruce shook his head, showing disapproval, tinged with jealousy. Bruce had toured the globe and won three ultimate fighting belts, but he'd now put wild days on the road behind him and lived a quiet life in a Vegas suburb, with three boys and a wife who worked as a croupier in one of the big casinos.

'I had a call earlier,' Bruce said, as James handed him a jacket so that he had free arms to pull on his shirt and bow tie. 'From your oldest sister.'

James looked shocked. 'Lauren! What did that fruitcake want?'

'She's got a meeting in New York tomorrow. Said she's passing over Vegas and asked if her name could be added to the guest list for tonight's opening ceremony.'

'What did you say?'

'I checked with Kerry. She didn't seem to have any problem with it.'

James was slightly irritated. 'Lauren's *my* sister, why didn't you check with me?'

'You were out of contact,' Bruce said, raising one eyebrow. 'Sharing the executive washroom with that hot Russian translator.'

'Oh her,' James said fondly. 'Did you get her number by the way?'

'Lauren or the Russian?'

'The Russian.'

'I'm your bodyguard, not your pimp,' Bruce said tetchily. 'We'd better get up to the helipad. Kerry will barbecue your balls if you're late.'

...

Debbie Shan was the on-screen reporter for the local Vegas television station, but the gala opening of Choke Grand Plaza Casino was national news and even though she was on home turf, she felt out of place in the press pen outside the massive new casino, jostling with more famous faces from major news outlets from around the world.

‘OK, Debbie,’ the bearded cameraman said. ‘Take it again from the top.’

‘Was the last take no good?’ she asked.

The cameraman gave a reassuring nod. ‘Your take was *fine*, but with all this hullabaloo we need to get a couple down to make sure we can edit out all the background noise.’

‘Right,’ Debbie said, as she pushed her hair off her face, then switched to the more careful tone she used when speaking to camera.

‘Twenty years ago, two newly married Stanford graduates drove from San Francisco to Las Vegas. But James and Kerry Choke were no ordinary honeymoon couple. James was a card shark, intending to use his maths skills to win big on the blackjack tables. Kerry was a smart young businesswoman who’d already made her first million from an online shoe store she’d set up while still at university.

‘Over the last decade-and-a-half the Chokes have become the biggest thing in Vegas. Starting with the purchase and turnaround of the tiny run-down *Boulder Gate Casino*, the Choke Corporation rapidly became a multi-billion dollar business empire comprising casinos, hotels and sports teams that now stretches from the ownership of James’ favourite Premiership football outfit to the first ever mega-casino built in Beijing.

‘When the Chokes’ marriage broke down, James’s affair and eighteen month marriage to movie star Kate Porpoise catapulted James to celebrity status as he entered one of the most gossiped about relationships in Hollywood history. Despite two more whirlwind marriages in the past five years for James, and Kerry settling down with new husband Paul Hartt - the couple have remained close

friends. James and Kerry continue to work successfully as business partners, and in bringing up their three daughters.'

'Tonight we've seen wave after wave of celebrities from the internet, films and music arriving for the opening of Choke Grand Plaza, which Kerry Choke claims is the biggest and most glamorous casino *anywhere* in the world. The casino hotel has over 7,000 suites, 50,000 square metres of gambling space and an 80,000 seat stadium for the Choke Corporation's newly instated Las Vegas Knights NFL team. What's more I'm told we're going to see more than seventy million dollars worth of fireworks go up in smoke before the doors of this colossal new gambling palace open to the public on the stroke of midnight.'

Debbie paused for a long breath, then looked away from the camera. 'Was that OK?'

The cameraman nodded. 'Perfect. I think we had the noise under control, but we'll do it once more just to be sure.'

...

Lauren Adams had arrived at Vegas airport more than three hours earlier. Her hair was a tangle, she wore ripped jeans and dirty canvas pumps. Her only luggage was a small canvas holdall containing a computer, basic toiletries and a couple of changes of underwear.

With a title fight on at one end of the strip and a new casino opening at the other, Vegas was rammed. She'd had to queue more than an hour for a taxi at the airport, followed by 90 minutes chugging through gridlocked traffic.

Even then, the driver couldn't get within a block of the Choke Grand Plaza. The temperature was touching thirty, even though it was past 10pm and Lauren had to fight through the crowds who'd come out to watch the fireworks, and get a first peek at the latest Choke Corporation casino.

Lauren found Las Vegas tacky and revolting. The Choke Grand Plaza comprised four sixty storey towers clad in fake marble and gold leaf. The building had all the subtlety of a kick with a steel-toe capped boot and to make the place even worse, the rooftop penthouse complex atop the tallest tower was shaped like a giant NFL football. Lauren also spotted well-disguised cranes, suggesting that the Choke Grand Plaza wasn't quite as ready for its grand opening as her brother and ex-sister-in-law would have liked the public to believe.

Still, Lauren was late and her associates had been working on her plan for months, so there wasn't time to stand around gawping at the gaudy monstrosity. If getting to the casino had been a scrum, she was elevated into much classier surroundings as soon as Grand Plaza security blipped the VIP pass that Kerry had sent to her mobile.

'Mrs Rathbone,' an oily little guard dressed in casino uniform said, as he raised a velvet rope to let Lauren into a hotel lobby with a five storey atrium, giant waterfalls and chandeliers the size of a mini-van. 'I'm Keith Selway, head of security in tower three. You should have called us when you landed, we had a driver waiting for you at the airport.'

Lauren felt gutted, because when she thought about it she even remembered Kerry saying something about a limo pick-up.

'I didn't even know James Choke had a sister,' Selway said, as he led Lauren towards elevator. 'You must be very proud of him.'

Lauren smiled awkwardly. 'Oh, I'm *so* proud.'

'Do you see your brother often?'

'It's been a few years,' Lauren said. 'But our children are quite close. James' three daughters holiday with my brood out in Sydney most summers.'

'You live in Australia?'

Lauren nodded. 'My husband's Australian. Now if you don't mind, I need to get to my room and change as quickly as possible. I can't really step on to the red carpet looking like this, can I?'

As Lauren spoke, Selway tapped away at a touch-screen computer. He read something before looking up.

‘Your phone should operate the lift automatically, there’s no need to check in. As requested, Kerry Choke has arranged for a selection of evening wear and jewellery to be delivered to your room, with her compliments. Simply wear whatever outfit you prefer and the rest will be returned to the shop. A parcel also arrived for you today, and it’s been placed on the desk in your room.’

‘Excellent,’ Lauren said.

The elevator opened directly into a huge room that was a good deal more tasteful than the building’s exterior. Selway made a great fuss, hoping to earn himself a tip by showing Lauren everything from which button raised the Jacuzzi bath out of the floor, to the electric massage function built into the lounge chairs. In the end Lauren handed over \$10 just to get him out of the door.

As soon as Selway was gone, Lauren looked quickly at a clothes rail with half-a-dozen designer dresses on it. She picked one without much thought, along with matching white shoes. She took far more care over unwrapping the small parcel on the desk. It contained a set of screwdrivers and wire cutters, plus a thumbnail-sized wireless modem.

Lauren knelt under the desk and unscrewed the faceplate on a computer network socket. The socket was a standard network port, but when Lauren pulled the cable a few centimetres out of the wall she found the point where the device linked into a fatter optical cable. This cable linked to the hotel’s main network hub and would enable a hacker with suitable passwords to gain high speed access to Choke Grand Plaza’s central computer system.

Between the copper and fibre optic cable was a transponder box that turned electrical pulses into optical ones. Lauren opened its plastic clamshell case and inserted the tiny modem. After crawling out from under the desk she picked up her phone and told it to call Gareth.

‘Gareth, I’ve fixed your device into the hotel network,’ Lauren told the phone.

‘I just saw the connection pop up on my screen,’ Gareth replied, sounding a little arrogant. ‘I’ve been sitting here waiting. I said I’d need an hour to get the job done, but the ceremony starts in less than half that.’

Lauren sounded cross. ‘Kate’s people asked me to do this as a favour. I’ve got four kids to look after back in Australia, so be grateful for what you’ve got.’

Gareth grunted before hanging up.

Lauren felt anxious as she crawled out from under the desk and screwed the faceplate back on to the network socket. It felt wrong abusing her relationship with James in order to make a political point, but although she still loved her brother it had been years since she’d really connected with him.

Kerry had always kept James grounded, but Lauren felt her brother had given in to his baser instincts when they’d divorced: womanising, gambling and partying. And while James constantly complained about press intrusion, he secretly seemed to revel in his bad-boy-billionaire profile.

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‘Daddy!’

Gwen Choke was 11 years old and still got excited when she saw her dad. James lifted her off the ground as he hugged her. At 13 and 15, Sarah and Ellen were more reserved and settled for kisses on the cheek.

Gwen and Ellen had their mother’s straight dark hair, while Sarah was a blonde who might almost have passed for her auntie Lauren at the same age. All three girls wore matching, slightly punkish, outfits, with black motorcycle boots, red stockings, mini-skirts and leather jackets with the *Grand Plaza Casino* logo on the back.

‘Loving the matching gear,’ James said. ‘Did your mum pick them?’

‘They’re horrific,’ Ellen spat. ‘I feel like a billboard. Why can’t I just wear what I like? Everyone else gets to.’

‘Your mum’s put a lot of thought into this,’ James said, trying to sound parental. ‘You get to wear what you want the rest of the time, don’t you?’

Kerry stepped into the bare concrete room and sensed her oldest daughter’s unhappiness. ‘Still moaning about that dress?’

Ellen shrugged. ‘I’m wearing it, aren’t I, for Christ’s sake?’

James and Kerry kissed. Kerry’s smell always set off a longing inside James, but he tried to ignore it.

‘Is Sue not coming?’ Kerry asked.

‘She’s in a mood,’ James said, as he shook his head. ‘Post-natal depression, I think.’

‘I guess that’s the last we’ll be seeing of Sue then,’ Sarah said cynically. ‘I wonder which dumb blonde we’ll be calling Auntie next?’

James wanted to tell his middle daughter off for being sarcastic, but the other two girls were smirking. And it wasn’t like Sarah had said anything that he hadn’t thought himself, so he changed tactics.

‘So where’s *your* husband?’ James asked.

‘Medical Conference in Toronto,’ Kerry said, as she glanced at her watch. ‘You’ve known for months that Paul wouldn’t be here tonight. Anyway, it’s time we rolled out.’

‘Mum reckons Auntie Lauren’s coming as well,’ Gwen said. ‘She’s not got her kids with her, but it’s still cool. I haven’t seen her since summer.’

‘Haven’t bumped into her,’ James said dismissively. ‘And I’ve no idea why she’s here. Last time I spoke to Lauren about the casino business she told me that it leeches profits from the poor and stupid and leads to gambling addiction and family breakdown. So what’s she doing at the opening of a glitzy new casino?’

‘Casinos do leech their profits from the poor and stupid,’ Ellen said, unable to resist having a dig at her parents.

James laughed. 'I tell you what Ellen, when you get your driver's permit how about I make a charitable donation to gamblers anonymous in your name, instead of buying that Porsche you're after?'

'She'd wreck a Porsche if she got it, anyway,' Sarah said.

'Shut up, bitch,' Ellen snapped back.

'You two,' Kerry shouted. 'Behave!'

Sensing that family harmony was about to collapse, Kerry turned the conversation back towards Lauren.

'Maybe Lauren just saw an opportunity to make up for lost time,' Kerry suggested. 'You two used to be so close. When did you last speak to her?'

James shrugged. 'She phoned me at Christmas? Or was it when the girls were in Australia the summer before last?'

Gwen sounded outraged. 'That's *fifteen* months, daddy. How can you go fifteen months without talking to your own sister?'

'They had a fight,' Ellen said.

'Lauren and I *never* had a fight,' James said firmly. 'We just grew apart. We lead different lifestyles and have very different attitudes.'

'We need to move now,' Bruce said, as he came into the room through a fire door. 'Unless you want to miss your own fireworks.'

The Choke family walked through a concrete corridor that smelled of damp and new paint. It was built under the main fountain at the casino entrance. Kerry's bodyguards, Alfie and Max, led the way up a spiral staircase. At ground level they all emerged into a luxurious gazebo where a couple of really big name celebs who'd been paid vast sums of money to show their faces at the casino opening nibbled crab-cakes and sipped wine.

Kerry made a big show of hugging everyone, while James helped eleven-year-old Gwen overcome her shyness and get an autograph off the star of her favourite TV show. At precisely six minutes to midnight, the first firework barrage lit up the sky.

James felt like he'd entered a warzone as he stepped along the red carpet towards the Grand Plaza's huge Gothic-columned entrance, with a long haired daughter on each arm. Fireworks cracked above and hundreds of cameras flashed, from both photographers in the press area and snappers in the 30,000 strong crowd.

As another blast of fireworks erupted, a woman broke through the security barriers and threw a giant pair of gold knickers at James' head. They missed, but James stopped to pick them up as security guards dragged the woman away.

'Thank you so much,' James said. 'I always wear this brand and I was running low.'

James got a gentle whack from middle daughter Sarah. 'Dad, you're *so* embarrassing. If the boys in my class see a picture of me in the paper wearing this stupid outfit while you hold up a pair of gold knickers I'll *die* of embarrassment.'

But James barely heard his daughter's complaint because the next barrage of fireworks was powerful enough to shake the ground they walked on.

Two dozen VIPs had been given giant scissors to cut the ribbon on the stroke of midnight and declare the casino open, but before that could happen there would be a short video presentation of all the thrills that the new casino was going to offer.

Lauren wasn't important enough to get scissors, but she had been allowed to stand with a slightly larger group of VIPs off to one side of the casino entrance. Her three nieces all made a beeline as soon as they spotted her.

'Auntie Lauren it's been ages!' Sarah said, as Gwen hugged her.

'I totally want another holiday at your vineyard,' Ellen said. 'Its so mellow out there.'

'How's Uncle Rat?' Sarah asked.

'Did that sick horse get better?' Gwen added.

'Uncle Rat and Mabel the horse are both much better,' Lauren said. 'Rat's hair's grew back after the chemotherapy stopped and I really hope you can all

make it out to Australia for Christmas this year. I know my kids are mad keen to see you again.'

'I want to go surfing again,' Sarah said. 'And little Mac is *so* cute.'

James was approaching too, but as he was about to pull Lauren into a hug she felt her phone vibrate and took it out of her bag to see a message from Gareth that read, *Job done. Seconds to spare!*

'Was that more important than me?' James said irritably as Lauren stared at the phone.

'Little Mac's got an ear infection,' Lauren lied, as they finally hugged. 'Doctor's given him antibiotics.'

'Sorry to hear that,' James said. 'It's been way too long since I saw you. I think you were pregnant with Mac and how old is he now?'

'Three next month,' Lauren said, as they squeezed each other. 'You should visit when Kerry and the girls fly over. You stopped coming, but I never stopped inviting you.'

'Maybe I will this year,' James said, though it was an empty promise: he didn't share his daughters' liking for Lauren and Rat's dusty ranch and vineyard, and the Aussie press didn't give him enough room to misbehave when he went out partying in Sydney.

'You're coming Daddy!' Gwen said, wagging her finger. 'I heard you promise.'

'I said *maybe* I'll go,' James replied, but he tailed off because the fireworks had stopped and the sixty storey casino towers had blacked out, apart from two vast video screens erected to show a short promotional film.

James had watched and approved the video himself, so he was unpleasantly surprised when instead of showing a sweeping helicopter shot of his new casino, the screens cut to a picture of his second ex-wife, the gorgeous movie actress Kate Porpoise.

She stood against a stark grey background and began speaking to camera.

‘Don’t worry everyone,’ Kate began, in a soothing voice. ‘In two minutes time the lights will come back on, the casino doors will open on schedule and you can all have some fun. But before you walk through the doors, maybe you should think about all the glass, concrete and steel that went into making this vast new casino, and all the resources it will use before it gets all shabby and they blow it up and build a replacement.’

‘Maybe you can also spare a thought for the four construction workers who were seriously injured during the building process. And maybe instead of going inside and gambling your money in order to make the Choke Corporation even richer than it is already, you could take five or ten dollars and help make the world a better place by donating it to one of the following organisations. Thanks for listening and whatever you decide to do, I hope you have a great evening!’

The crowd and VIPs looked stunned or confused as a short list of organisations and money transfer barcodes flashed up on screen. James whacked Ellen’s hand as she held up her phone, but he didn’t manage to stop her before several dozen photographers snapped her using the spend function to donate \$70 to an environmental group.

‘Your mother is going to be *livid*,’ James said. ‘She spent months making sure every detail of this ceremony was spot on.’

Kerry walked up to James and whispered in his ear as a ten second countdown appeared on the screen.

‘Keep smiling for the cameras,’ Kerry snarled, with the worlds fakest grin etched on her face. ‘But I’m going to sue that *bitch* ex-wife of yours for every penny she has.’

‘Seven,’ the crowd chanted. ‘Six...’

‘*Our* company will not be suing my ex-wife,’ James said. ‘She’s the mother of my twins. Think about the boys.’

‘Five...’

‘So what, we just let her get away with this bullshit?’ Kerry hissed.

‘It’s the hacker we should worry about,’ James pointed out as the crowd chanted *four*. ‘If they can hack into hotel systems can they get into the air conditioning, or the security cameras? There’s over ten million dollars cash stored in the casino vault.’

‘Three...’

‘I’ve already texted the security director telling him he’s fired,’ Kerry said.

‘Two...’

Lauren had recoiled slightly at the thought of a hacker hunt, but nothing could ever be traced back to her, provided she removed the modem she’d attached to the network socket in her room before she checked out the following morning.

‘One... Zero!’

Cheers erupted as the countdown clock reached zero and a midnight chimed. Gwen Choke joined the celebrities in cutting the ribbon with giant scissors and then the two lines of security guards stepped out of the way and allowed the huge crowd to surge up a dozen escalators into Las Vegas’ newest and most luxurious casino.

James turned to Lauren after Kerry and his daughters had headed inside with the crowd.

‘Still playing jokes on your big brother eh?’ James said, smiling fondly.

Lauren practically swallowed her tongue. ‘I don’t know what you mean.’

‘Aww give over,’ James said. ‘You and Kate Porpoise have always got on well. You’re both into environmental causes and it’s pretty damned suspicious that you should fly in from Australia and turn up out of the blue for a casino opening when you hate casinos.’

‘I just came here to catch up with you,’ Lauren said unconvincingly. ‘I’m meeting a friend in New York for dinner tomorrow and I had to change planes somewhere along the way.’

‘Kerry will be pissed off, but I don’t much care,’ James said casually. ‘We’ve shelled out millions of dollars in adverts and paid celebrities to walk down our red

carpet on opening night, but I'd bet that the little sabotage stunt you and your eco friends have pulled off will get us more publicity than *all* of that.'

'Bad publicity,' Lauren said.

'There's no such thing,' James said. 'Well, maybe if I got my wang out and tried molesting some cocktail waitress over a craps table that *would* be bad publicity. But a few eco-mental hippy types whinging won't hold much sway with our customers.'

Lauren bristled with anger at her brother's description of environmentalists, but Bruce tactically intervened.

'Hiya, Lauren,' Bruce said warmly, as he hugged his old friend. 'Are you in Vegas for long? I'd love for you to come over for dinner and meet my boys. I'm giving them all ninja training. My three year old smashes roof slates with his bare hand.'

'Bruce, I want you to escort Lauren up to her room,' James said, sounding more like a boss than a friend. 'Help her to remove her hacking equipment before hotel security has a chance to find it.'

Bruce looked awkwardly at Lauren, before pointing at the big screen, which was now back to showing the Grand Plaza casino logo.

'I should have known it was you,' Bruce said, smiling. 'That's old skool! The kind of prank we'd have pulled back in our CHERUB days.'

James didn't like the fact that Bruce found it so funny and shook his head. 'I'll never hear the end of this if Kerry finds out,' James told Bruce. 'Frankly Lauren, I can't understand why you've done this. Maybe you and I aren't that close anymore, but our kids are and they'll be the ones who'll get hurt the most if you fall out with Kerry.'

James had a good argument, but Lauren wasn't about to accept a lesson in responsibility from one of the most irresponsible men she'd ever met, so she snapped back angrily. 'Jesus James, the planet is choking to death and you're

building a casino with ten thousand air conditioning units in the middle of a desert. How can you live with yourself?’

‘I live very nicely,’ James said, grinning. ‘In my 53rd floor penthouse, with a stunning girlfriend half my age, a private jet and a woman who charges eight hundred dollars to manicure my nails.’

Bruce sensed that this argument was about to get explosive and pushed himself between the siblings.

‘Come on, you two,’ Bruce said. ‘Cool heads, eh?’

‘Just get her out of town,’ James said, as he took a step back. ‘When you’re done in Lauren’s room, take her to the airport and arrange for one of the Choke Corporation jets to fly her to New York, or wherever it is she’s *really* going.’

‘Goodnight James,’ Lauren said, as her brother turned to head back into his corporation’s new ten-billion-dollar casino complex.

But the funny thing was, although James and Lauren hadn’t agreed on anything in years, there was so much history between them that they couldn’t bring themselves to hate each other.

James turned back to Lauren. ‘Am I still invited for Christmas Dinner?’ he asked.

Lauren smiled. ‘Always,’

‘Then I’ll be there, with my girls this year,’ James said. ‘And as long as you let me know how your hacker friends got into our computer system, I’ll make sure that Kerry never finds out that you were involved.’

Lauren smirked. ‘Hacking your casino was easy because *you* never change your password. You’ve been using *LordSexyPants55* since you first joined CHERUB.’

James jaw dropped, but he tried to brush it off as he disappeared into a mass of bodies, surrounded by casino security guards and members the public. They reached out to shake James’ hand and begged for autographs.

Bruce and Lauren headed the other way, walking down the now desolate red carpet, past the empty press pen and back towards the gazebo while the crowds continued pouring up the escalators.

‘So, do you hear much from the old gang?’ Bruce asked.

‘I see Rat most days,’ Lauren said.

‘I mean *apart* from your husband,’ Bruce said, laughing. ‘Kyle’s disappeared off my radar lately.’

Lauren nodded. ‘He wasn’t even at the last campus reunion. Gabrielle came out to Aus for a holiday last year with her husband. She’s earning big bucks working for a bank in Hong Kong. Bethany e-mails every now and then, but I haven’t seen her in years. And of course there’s people like Kevin and Dante, who’ve got jobs at CHERUB.

‘And Callum and Connor design skyscrapers,’ Bruce said. ‘Did you see that thing they built in Taipei?’

‘Monstrosity,’ Lauren said. ‘But it won like a gazillion awards, so what do I know?’

‘Next time you’re in Vegas, you *must* stay long enough to have dinner with my family,’ Bruce said.

‘Join us for Christmas out in Aus,’ Lauren said. ‘I assume my brother pays you well enough to take the family on a good holiday once in a while.’

‘He pays me a lot,’ Bruce said. ‘But I’m not sure it’s enough for some of the messes I have to clean up, or some of his majesty’s little tantrums.’

‘He can be such a pig,’ Lauren said. ‘I’ve actually lost count of how many kids James has got now. Is it eight?’

‘Ten,’ Bruce said, ‘by six different women. But for all James’ money, and being the party boy clubbing ‘til 5am and hanging out with rock stars and being in the gossip columns, I don’t actually think he’s a very happy person.’

‘Kerry?’ Lauren asked.

‘Obviously,’ Bruce said solemnly. ‘James has always loved her and always will. But Kerry gave him more chances than he deserved and he still got his picture in the paper coming out of a nightclub with his hand up a stripper’s shirt.’

‘If he is unhappy he’s got nobody to blame but himself,’ Lauren said firmly. ‘So, do you wanna stop off at a bar on the way to the airport? I don’t know about you, but I could murder a gin and tonic or five.’

Bruce looked at his watch. ‘Vegas is supposed to be a party town, isn’t it? So yeah, why the hell not?’



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