



2. THE FAMILY MAN

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 FAMILY MAN

PREGNANT DOCTOR IN MOTORBIKE SMASH

A pregnant doctor and her husband were involved in a motorcycle accident on a roundabout while travelling on the A456 last Sunday night. James Choke, 29 and pregnant wife Dr Kerry Chang 28 were rushed to hospital by air ambulance.

Police say the accident was caused when rider James swerved to avoid a truck, which veered into oncoming traffic after its front tyre burst. Choke's powerful Yamaha bike skidded, then careered more than thirty meters down the side of a steep valley.

The young couple were both taken to Birmingham Royal Infirmary by air ambulance, where Mrs Chang went into

an early labour and gave birth to a healthy daughter, two months premature.

Mrs Choke and newly born daughter Gwendoline are doing fine. However a hospital spokesman commented that James Choke has suffered a serious back injury and remained in serious but stable condition.

The truck driver is believed to have emerged from the accident unscathed.

Kidderminster News article, June 16th 2020.

Muswell Hill, North London – October 2031

James Choke reversed his electric wheelchair back towards the stair lift, buckled a red safety belt around his waist and pressed the button to travel down.

As James whirred sedately downstairs, the slim eleven-year-old body of his daughter Gwen whipped out of her bedroom and squeezed past him, dressed in school uniform.

‘Mum,’ thirteen-year-old middle-daughter Sarah screamed from the top landing. ‘I’m sick of telling Gwen to stop using my stuff. You’ve got to *bloody* tell her.’

Dr Kerry Chang emerged from the kitchen, dressed in a white doctor’s coat and looking rather harassed. She stopped youngest daughter Gwen as she reached the bottom of the stairs and scowled at the state of her school blouse.

‘You’ve only been at that school for a month,’ Kerry yelled. ‘How have you got your uniform in that state already?’

As James reached the half way point of his motorised cruise downstairs, Sarah stood dressed in bra and knickers on the top landing with hands on her hips and shouted.

‘Mum, are you listening to me? That little bitch is using my deodorant again. You’ve *got* to tell her.’

Kerry looked wearily up the stairs. ‘It’s not even roll on, Sarah,’ she yelled back. ‘Put deodorant on the shopping list and I’ll buy you a can each. If it shuts you up, you can have two cans each.’

‘Well where’s the shopping list?’ Sarah asked sulkily.

‘On the fridge door,’ Kerry answered. ‘As you well know.’

At the same moment, James and Kerry's oldest daughter, fifteen-year-old Ellen emerged from another bedroom. She cut behind Sarah into the upstairs bathroom and bolted the door.

'Hey, I was just in there,' Sarah shouted, as she kicked the door. 'Bitch.'

Ellen shouted happily from the other side of the door. 'Well you're not in here now, bitch.'

'Pack it in you two,' Kerry shouted. 'And I'm sick of hearing the word bitch in banded about my house. It's not nice. The next one who says it loses a weeks pocket money.'

'Does that include me?' James asked cheekily, but his wife didn't see the funny side.

Gwen had gone into the kitchen to grab breakfast by the time James reached the bottom of the stairs. His wife glowered at him as he unclipped his safety belt.

'What?' James asked innocently. 'I didn't do anything.'

'Exactly,' Kerry screamed, as the bathroom row upstairs broke out again. 'Why do *I* always have to do the shouting? Why do I have to be the bad cop, while you let your three princesses wrap you round their little fingers?'

'Time of the month come early did it?' James asked.

Kerry made a big grunting noise. 'If you weren't already in a wheelchair I'd bloody well put you in one.'

Gwen sprinted out of the kitchen with her school backpack, gave James a kiss and opened the front door.

'Bye-bye, Daddy,' Gwen said brightly, and then in a much grumpier tone, 'and the rest of my oh so *beloved* family,'

'You see what I mean?' Kerry said, as the front door slammed behind Gwen. 'You get bye-bye Daddy and a I get evil eyes.'

'She didn't scowl at you,' James said.

‘Well she sure as hell didn’t kiss me on the cheek,’ Kerry snarled. ‘And Gwen can’t have eaten breakfast. She was only in the kitchen for two minutes.’

‘She’s a big girl, she won’t starve herself.’

‘No, but she’ll scoff sweets on the way to school instead of eating the decent breakfast that I got up and made for her.’

‘You worry too much,’ James said, half smiling. ‘It’s gone half eight. You’ll be late for your shift. I’ll sort the girls out. What would you like for dinner tonight?’

‘Surprise me,’ Kerry said.

Kerry grabbed her coat and keys as James wheeled himself into the kitchen and scraped Gwen’s half-eaten boiled egg and toast into the bin, before loading the dirty plate into the dishwasher.

‘I’ll be home around seven,’ Kerry said. ‘Barring medical emergencies.’

James knew he was more likely not to see his wife until nearer nine, but didn’t comment.

‘Love you,’ James said, as Kerry pecked him on the cheek.

‘Love you too,’ Kerry said, giving a smile that warmed James’ heart.

Kerry gave a final blast up the stairs before heading out. ‘You two girls have got *fifteen* minutes. If I get a text message from the school saying that *either* of you are late there’s gonna be *big* trouble when I get home tonight.’

‘Yeah, bye mum,’ Sarah said, as she raised one eyebrow. ‘Take a chill pill, why don’t you?’

With three girls in a small house mornings would always be stressful, but James found it easier after Kerry left for the hospital because her style of charging around the house biting people’s heads off just seemed to stress everyone out.

James knew his daughters weren’t perfect: There was the odd letter home from school, an occasional missed curfew and Ellen had had a couple of

boyfriends who he'd have happily horsewhipped, but compared to some of the stunts James had pulled when he was a teenager his daughters were angels and it seemed unnecessary for Kerry to make a fuss over every tiny thing.

'I wish you'd stop stressing your mum out,' James said, looking up the stairs at Sarah as he wheeled past.

As James looked up at the thirteen-year-old, still waiting for her turn in the bathroom, she reminded him of the way his sister Lauren had looked at that age.

'You know your mum's got a very demanding job,' James said. 'Do you have to set her off *every* morning?'

'Face facts, dad: we need an extra bathroom,' Sarah said, as she punched the door again. 'Or a bigger house.'

James felt guilty as he wheeled himself into the dining room which served as his office. Kerry earned a decent wage as a doctor, but James only scraped a living doing online tuition for university maths students.

The main reason why they'd never moved to a bigger house was that it would cost tens of thousands fitting it out with stair lifts and special bathrooms, widening doors and making all the other adaptations that would be needed to accommodate a person who was paralysed from the waist down.

James worked from the first floor dining room. It was a nice old victorian semi, and the room had bay windows overlooking a lawn which was expertly tended by their robot mower.

The office was a bit of a geek fest, with retro games consoles and a two-metre-wide megascreen. James' computer woke up when it heard him rolling into the room and it's synthesised voice asked for a password.

'*LordSexyPants55*,' James said.

The computer accepted the password and James' virtual life opened up on the 3D screen. He had a Facebook message from Lauren saying that she was heading to Canada on a CHERUB mission and might be out of touch for a

couple of weeks. There was a swanky 3D animation which was an invite to the opening of Kyle Blueman's new legal practice in Clerkenwell, along with a bunch of written messages and video clips from confused and sometimes anxious maths undergraduates that would have to be dealt with before lunchtime.

But James had recently subscribed to the newest Playstation VI module for his megascreen and decided that he needed to chill out by playing *Blast Buggy – XXX Psycho Edition* before settling down to some serious work.

As soon as James pointed to the game icon, the vast screen became a 3D tunnel filled with jets of flame, steam vents and bubbling pools of oil. When he pressed the resume icon, James was driving a hovercraft at breakneck speed, while using his virtual legs to control speed and a bright blue plastic machine gun to fire mortars at the other racers.

He was in the zone and heading for a record lap a couple of minutes later, when a tap on the shoulder made him shoot up with fright. Ellen and Sarah were both dressed in school uniform and howled with laughter as their father paused the game.

'So *this* is what you spend all day doing,' Ellen said, shaking her head theatrically and tutting.

'While we're slaving at school,' Sarah added.

'No, no, no,' James said defensively. 'I don't play games *all* day. I just wanted to work off some stress before I knuckle down.'

'Sure dad, *whatever*,' Sarah said, before giving James a kiss on the cheek.

'Have a good day at school,' James told them, as Ellen kissed him.

'And don't work *too* hard, daddy,' Sarah said, giggling with her sister as they stepped into the hall.

'And I won't be in until 3am at the earliest,' Ellen added. 'If mum asks, tell her I'm at a big drunken party having unprotected sex with just about everyone.'

James knew Ellen was joking and played along. ‘No problem,’ he said. ‘My wallet’s upstairs on my bedside table. Help yourselves to a hundred pounds each so that you can buy copious amounts of hard drugs.’

‘Thanks,’ Ellen shouted. ‘Gee, you’re the best daddy in the world.’

James smiled to himself as he heard his daughters head out of the house, followed the familiar clang of his front gate. He wasn’t rich, his life wasn’t packed with excitement and being in a wheelchair was a constant irritation. But James had lots of good friends, three fantastic daughters and a crazy stressed-out wife whom he loved with all his heart.

James decided to play *Blast Buggy – XXX Psycho Edition* for ten more minutes before getting down to some serious work. Or maybe he’d make that twenty minutes...



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