



# 3. THE CHAIRMAN

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:**

*Most CHERUB agents change their names when they retire, but for simplicity their original CHERUB-era names have been used in this story.*

# CHERUB: THE CHAIRMAN

*October 2013 – No 10 Downing Street*

James Adams tipped his armchair back and stared at the portraits on the wall. He recognised Winston Churchill, but he'd never paid much attention in history class at school so he didn't know any of the other historic figures who were glaring at him.

He'd been waiting for long enough to know every detail of the room. He'd drunk two cups of black tea because he couldn't figure out how to work the milk dispenser and didn't want to splash his best suit. He'd also eaten two iced fancies and a mini scone off the cake stand and grown fond of the way his well-polished shoe left an impression every time he pulled it out of the ultra-thick carpet.

James' thirteen-year-old middle daughter Sarah had polished the shoes before school. She was the only one of James' three daughters who still lived at home, because fifteen-year-old Ellen was a qualified CHERUB agent who preferred to live amongst her friends on campus, and eleven-year-old Gwen had just begun her second attempt at CHERUB basic training.

A glance at his watch confirmed that James had been waiting for more than an hour, but as he lunged towards a second mini-scone the door clicked. James shot out of his seat, but was disappointed to see a slim civil servant in a three-piece suit.

'We're sorry to keep you waiting, but the PM and your sister have been in an urgent meeting regarding the Bluewater Bombing.'

‘Has there been any update on the casualty figures?’ James asked. ‘I usually keep a close eye on the news, but I had to surrender all my electronic devices when I entered the building.’

‘At least a hundred dead, but they’ll find more because the roof of a the department store has collapsed. There could be hundreds more shoppers trapped in the rubble.’

‘Christ,’ James said. ‘So can the prime minister still see me at all today?’

‘She’s got a helicopter flight in less than half an hour,’ the civil servant said. ‘If you’re willing to ride with her to the heliport, she’ll talk and walk.’

James nodded. ‘If she can, I can.’

‘And your sister will be present as well, of course,’ the civil servant added.’

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### *CHERUB campus, Basic Training Compound B*

Gwen Adams had been in CHERUB basic training for sixteen days. It was going better than her first attempt when she’d only lasted eight before breaking her wrist during a jump out of a tree, but she hadn’t slept for the last two nights because the instructors kept waking all the trainees up with blasts of freezing water from a fire hose.

Now she’d been dragged out of bed for her first one-on-one interrogation session with a training instructor. The idea of the one-on-one was to take a tired and physically exhausted recruit and subject them to a night of bright lights, choking smoke and deafening noise to try and break their spirit.

Gwen had spent the last hour trapped in a cramped steel dustbin that stank of pig manure, with a dozen vicious African bees for company and reggae firing from a huge loudspeaker stack that was so loud it made her teeth vibrate.

‘Tell me why I should let you out,’ Chief Training Instructor Jake McEwen shouted, as he ripped off the metal lid. ‘You get any stings off those nice bees?’

‘No,’ Gwen said, quiet but defiant.

'Pity,' McEwen said. 'Next time I might have to drop the whole hive in!'

'If you keep still they won't sting you,' Gwen said.

'Then maybe I'll make you carry the can up a big hill, and roll it down with you and the bees inside. That should liven things up!'

Gwen didn't give McEwen the satisfaction of an answer.

'You don't deserve to be a CHERUB agent,' McEwen said nastily. 'You didn't get in on talent. You got in because of who your parents are – or *were* in your Mother's case.'

'That's bull,' Gwen said. 'I've been a red shirt for four years. I've trained as hard as anyone who got recruited from outside.'

'You should have been sensible like your sister. She never even started basic training.'

'Ellen's a black shirt,' Gwen replied. 'A damned good agent. Sarah chose not to become an agent. She didn't *fail* basic training. She never tried because she's into drama and music and wanted to be an ordinary teenager. That was her decision and I respect her for it.'

'Well *you* haven't got what it takes either,' McEwen said. 'If you quit now, at least you'll save a lot of suffering.'

Gwen sneered. 'Is that the best you can do? You'll have to try a lot harder than this to make me quit, McEwen.'

'How about another few hours in the container?'

'Bring it on, sir,' Gwen said defiantly.

'Your mother wasn't the big hero everyone makes her out to be you know,' McEwen said. 'Everybody loves you when you're dead, but the Kerry Chang I knew was a moody slut. It wasn't just your dad she slept with. She bonked half of the blokes on campus, you know.'

Gwen didn't like anyone talking about her mum, but her big sister Ellen had given her some tips for basic training. One of them was that if an instructor is trying to torment you, the best thing to do is to waffle on for ages just to slow them down.

‘My mother died from breast cancer when I was three years old,’ Gwen said deliberately. ‘I suppose you’re right in a way. I’m sure Kerry had flaws and wasn’t the perfect person that everyone makes out she was. I just wish I could have one chance to meet her in the flesh and find out for myself.’

‘Christ,’ McEwen said, making a gagging noise as he gave the metal bin an almighty boot and knocked it over. ‘You’re such a syrupy little brat I can barely hold off from heaving my guts up all over you.’

Gwen scrambled out on to muddy ground as the can began rolling down a slight hill. As the bin rolled on, McEwen grabbed the back of Gwen’s neck, yanked her to her feet and gave her cheek a hard pinch before shoving her so hard that she barely stayed upright.

‘Grab your kitbag and get back to your bunk,’ McEwen growled. ‘I’ve got eighty-four more days to break you Gwen Adams. And you might as well quit now, because McEwen *will* break you.’

‘If you say so sir,’ Gwen said, tired and angry but more determined than ever as she squelched down the muddy path towards the trainees’ dormitory.

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James knew that the Prime Minister’s home had several basement levels, but he was surprised to find himself shooting down more than a dozen storeys in a high speed lift and stepping out on an underground railway platform.

‘How long has this been here?’ James asked.

The slim civil servant smiled. ‘Not very long. With the current level of sophisticated terrorist attacks, it was vital to have a system that enabled government officials and senior politicians to travel between buildings in complete safety.’

As the civil servant spoke, a driverless two-car electric train could be heard rumbling towards them. As the lead car pulled into the station, James noticed Prime Minister Finch sitting in a large leather recliner. The only other passenger

was James' sister Lauren, who had to make do with one of the shiny plastic benches along the side.

James felt rather special as the train pulled up just for him. Then he felt overawed as the Prime Minister of Great Britain and current president of the European Union reached out to shake his hand.

Prime Minister Finch had a little joke ready. 'I take it you've met my intelligence minister.'

Lauren laughed as James shook the Prime Minister's hand.

'You want to watch my sister,' James told Finch, 'She'll be after your job in no time.'

Finch seemed to like James and laughed noisily. 'Over three thousand people have died in terrorist attacks in Britain so far this year. If Lauren does want my job, she'll not be part of a very long queue. This isn't a good time to be Prime Minister.'

'It's an even worse time to be the minister in charge of fighting terrorists,' Lauren added.

Lauren had come into politics almost by accident. She'd been working for the Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) when an undercover mission led her to meet members of Prime Minister Finch's New Revolutionary Conservative (NRC) party.

The newly formed break-away political party had needed an intelligence expert to give it credibility and Lauren was on the lookout for a new challenge after working for British Intelligence since the age of ten, with only a three year gap for university.

When the NRC swept to power in the 2027 general election, Lauren found herself elected to parliament and thrust into the high-profile role of intelligence minister at a time when global terrorism was spiralling out of control.

'I wish I'd had time for the scheduled meeting,' Finch told James, as the hydraulic doors shut and the automated train began rolling into the tunnel in

almost total silence. ‘I understand your role in the expansion of CHERUB has been absolutely critical.’

‘Back when I was a teenager there were two hundred and fifty kids on CHERUB campus,’ James explained. ‘Now we have more than six hundred in the UK. Our European campus in Spain has another three hundred from EU countries. And there’s more than enough strife in the world to keep all of them busy.’

‘And the Americans?’

‘The Americans have developed their own CHERUB like facility with our support. We have joint training exercises. But we have to be careful: the more people using kids as undercover agents, the greater the chances of someone finding out about us.’

The concrete tunnel ribs started to blur as the train picked up speed.

‘And as well as deputy chairman of CHERUB, you’re a single father?’

James nodded. ‘Three daughters.’

‘You’ve never remarried?’

James laughed. ‘With three daughters and a high pressure job? I haven’t had a lot of time for dating these past few years.’

‘Well I won’t keep you in suspense,’ Prime Minister Finch said. ‘I’ve accepted your application to become the new Chairman of CHERUB, when Zara Asker retires on December first.’

James smiled. ‘Thank you very much.’

Becoming Chairman was a huge responsibility and James felt nervous. He’d only been on the CHERUB staff for twelve years, but the cards had fallen in his favour: Many more experienced staff had either declared themselves too old for the Chairman’s job, suffered health problems that took them out of the running, or simply lacked the appetite for such a demanding role.

‘And if you’re chairman I’m your new boss,’ Lauren added.

James couldn’t resist a dig at his little sister. ‘At least until your lot gets voted out next summer.’



But suggesting that the government was about to get kicked out touched a raw nerve with the Prime Minister. James' withered under Finch's steely glare and the remaining ninety seconds of the journey passed in awkward silence.

'I can't believe you said that,' Lauren whispered, when the train doors finally opened and Prime Minister Finch got swallowed by a cloud of aides, bodyguards and civil servants.

'Will she have it in for me now?' James asked nervously.

'Finch has got much bigger fish than you to fry,' Lauren said. 'But I wouldn't make a habit of pissing her off... Oh, shit!'

'What?' James asked, as Lauren looked forlornly back into the train carriage. 'Lost something?'

Now it was Lauren's turn to look uncomfortable.

'I'm supposed to be flying on the helicopter with the prime minister,' she explained. 'But I've left all my briefing documents in the cabinet room.'

'Can't they just scan and e-mail them?' James asked.

Lauren shook her head. 'Don't be dense. They're ultra secret. I'm not even supposed to let the briefcase out of my sight.'

Lauren left James behind and began pushing through bodies trying to speak with the PM. James followed his sister because he had no idea what else to do. He soon found himself sharing a rapidly ascending lift with Lauren, Prime Minister Finch and a couple of her political flunkys.

Lauren used her most grovelly voice as she told her boss what had happened. James wasn't prepared for the way Prime Minister Finch ripped into her.

'For god's sake!' Finch yelled. 'We've just had one of the *biggest* terrorist blasts in history and you've left some of the most sensitive papers in government lying on a table.'

'It's not a problem,' Lauren said. 'It's not like they just let any old cleaner in to tidy up the cabinet room after a meeting.'

‘It had better *not* be a problem,’ Finch roared. ‘If those papers get leaked I don’t know what the consequences would be. You go back and pick up those documents. Have we got another helicopter?’

One of Finch’s aides nodded and said that another helicopter could be dispatched for Lauren.

‘I have to arrive on time because I’m the prime minister and I can’t be seen to have my schedule disrupted by terrorism. You get your papers back and fly up on the next flight.’

After dressing down Lauren, the PM turned and spoke to her press secretary. ‘If anyone from the press asks why the Intelligence Minister didn’t fly with me, we say that she was held back in an urgent crisis meeting. Right?’

By this time the high-speed lift was slowing and the doors opened into a full moon, with city lights all around them. They were on the rooftop of a twenty-four storey office building alongside the River Thames. There was an RAF helicopter ready to take flight. More than two-dozen armed police officers guarded the rooftop, while a fleet of pilotless protection drones hovered in the air overhead.

One thing James had learned in life was that the more important you are, the less time you spend waiting around in airports. The British Prime Minister was airborne in the time it took to walk to the helicopter and buckle her seatbelt.

‘I can’t believe I left those papers in the cabinet room,’ Lauren told James, shouting over the buffeting from the rising chopper. ‘I’m just *so* tired. With all this terrorist activity, I’ve barely slept in two nights. My kids haven’t seen me in over a week.’

James reached across to put a reassuring arm around his sister’s back, but as he did he saw an orange flash out of the corner of one eye. When he looked over, James saw that one of the protection drones had launched a missile directly at the Prime Minister’s helicopter.

‘Jesus Christ,’ James shouted, as the Prime Minister’s helicopter’s tail rotor was hit square on by the missile.

'The terrorists must have hacked into the controls for the protection drones,' Lauren said, as they both dived for cover.

James didn't hear half of this sentence because the exploding helicopter had lit up the sky.

The force of the blast lifted several of the armed police who'd been guarding the perimeter off their feet, blowing them over the building's edge to certain death when they splattered the streets below.

James was luckier and found the blast slamming him back into the lift. Lauren was alongside but she'd whacked her head as she'd fallen back and now slumped at James' feet inside the lift car.

'Lauren?' James said, as he crouched over his sister and pinched her cheek.

But she was out cold.

Even worse, James now saw that the terrorists had hacked more than one of the protection drones. Two of the small, pilotless, planes swept low across the rooftop, shooting at lines of policemen who had nowhere to hide on the flat helipad.

The cops' body armour was no defence against 20mm anti-aircraft shells, and while some managed to get a few shots at the drone, most were annihilated before they even raised their weapons.

James looked at the lift panel and hammered the controls, hoping that they'd descend back into the building, but the lift required some kind of pass or key to operate and James didn't have one.

He realised that if the terrorists had hacked the drones, they'd have high resolution night-vision images from the drone's onboard cameras. As intelligence minister, Lauren was the most important person still alive on the rooftop and the drones would surely target her if the bad guys spotted her.

James looked around the lift car, hoping to see an access panel that would let him escape into the lift shaft, but if there was one he couldn't see it.

As one drone took another sweep across the rooftop, one police officer acted dead until it was right over him. As it passed overhead he rolled over and

aimed straight up with his gun. Several shots to the belly did enough damage to send the small black craft spiralling out of control, but the cop's only reward for his bravery was a well aimed shell from a partner drone.

At least while the bad guys were munching up the cops, they weren't looking at who was in the lift. James crawled out of the car and found what he was hoping to find: a maintenance grille on the outside of the rooftop lift shaft.

Years of lock picking experience meant he made short work of a bulky padlock holding the panel in place, but one of the drones was swooping in for a third attack run as he ripped the panel away, revealing a two-storey ladder that led down into a maintenance area around the lift shaft.

Luckily James' best suit was a similar colour to heliport tarmac and the black beast skimmed overhead without taking a shot. As soon as the unmanned plane had passed, James scrambled back towards the lift.

But James wasn't the only man alive on the rooftop. Three surviving police officers had seen him rip off the maintenance flap and began a desperate sprint towards it as the drone turned to make another attack run.

Their running would make the escape route obvious to the drone pilots, and while all the cops had to do was make it to the hatch, James had to double back and carry Lauren from the lift car.

'Christ you're a big lump.' James told his unconscious sister, as he threw her on to his back.

As James staggered back out on to the roof, two drones were making attack runs from opposite sides of the gore-spattered helipad. Two of the cops had made it through the maintenance shaft and down the ladder, but the third man saw what James was trying to do and stayed bravely at the top of the ladder waiting to help James get Lauren inside.

James had spent much of the last few years working behind a desk on campus. He wasn't terribly fit and his shoulders ached and stomach muscles strained as he waddled along with Lauren on his back.

The drones were closing from opposite sides at over a hundred and fifty kilometres an hour and James felt sure that it was only a matter of seconds before a 20mm laser-guided shell ripped through his torso and turned him into a big red smudge.

‘I’ve got her legs,’ the cop shouted. ‘Let her go.’

As James let Lauren flop off his back into the arms of the policeman, one of the drones opened fire. The three-metre-wide aircraft skimmed so close to James’ head that heat from its tiny jet engine singed hairs on the top of his head.

But instead of firing a 20mm shell at James, the drone sent a trio of missiles spiralling upwards, taking out the drone coming in from the opposite direction.

Apparently the terrorists hadn’t managed to hack into *all* of the Prime Minister’s protection drones and James had been saved by one of the ones still controlled by the good guys.

Still, James wasn’t about to stick around to watch dogfights and dived head first through the hatch, straining all the muscles down one side as he grabbed the metal ladder and pivoted his body until his feet hit the rungs.

He clanked breathlessly down two and a half storeys on the outside of a lift shaft that went all the way down to the secret railway twelve storeys below ground. The policemen who’d made it through the hatch had sat Lauren on a landing, then opened a fire door that led into an office whose workers had gone home several hours earlier.

‘What happened?’ Lauren asked groggily, as she rubbed her eyes. ‘I’ve got a concussion. I’ve not had a concussion in years!’

The struggle on the rooftop wasn’t over and chunks of rubble tumbled down the lift shaft as more 20mm shells punched through the helipad two storeys up. But nobody else made it through the access panel, either because they didn’t know it was there, or because they were all dead.

One of the cops smiled at James. ‘I don’t know who you are, but I reckon you saved all our lives up there.’

James didn't respond because he'd ripped several muscles. As he slumped against the wall he knew he'd just witnessed one of the biggest terrorist acts in British history. The prime minister was toast, but James couldn't think about that and all he saw in his head were the faces of his three daughters and he felt an almost overwhelming urge to find them and give them hugs.

'So who am I?' James asked himself quietly, as tears welled in his eyes.

'You're the new Chairman of CHERUB and you're going to do a great job,' Lauren said, as she shuffled half a metre across the carpet tiles and rested her badly-grazed hand on the ripped knee of her brother's best suit.

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As James and Lauren hobbled down forty-eight flights of stairs to ground level, an emergency meeting of senior cabinet ministers took place in Downing Street. The assembled ministers agreed that a decisive message had to be sent to the British people by rapidly selecting a new Prime Minister.

Three senior cabinet ministers put their names forward but the NRC was a deeply divided political party and even the candidates themselves eventually saw that they needed a compromise candidate that they could all unite behind.

When news arrived that the Intelligence Minister had survived the rooftop attack, a consensus began to form that in a time of major crisis a young dynamic minister with a background in intelligence and anti-terrorist operations would be an ideal candidate for Prime Minister.

Lauren was in the basement lobby of the office building when the Chancellor of the Exchequer called her mobile.

'We think you're the right candidate and certainly the only one who might carry the support of the entire NRC party,' the chancellor told Lauren. 'The top job's yours if you want it.'

Lauren had just bumped her head and still wasn't quite with it. 'Top job,' she mumbled. 'What are you talking about?'

‘We want you to become Prime minister.’

Lauren gulped. Did she really want to make the biggest decision of her life right after a nasty bump on the head? Did a mother of two young kids really want to replace someone who she’d just seen blown up by terrorists?

‘I’ll need a minute to think about it,’ Lauren said.

And then she hung up.



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