

CHERUB: DISCONNECTED



The events in this story take place at the same time as Chapter 44 of *CHERUB: Divine Madness*.

James Duncan was thirty-one years old. A maths professor with tangled blond hair, he felt pure love as he crouched over the cot of his fourteen-month-old daughter, Megan. She was fast asleep with a pink and white teddy nestled under her chin.

‘Is she OK?’ James’ girlfriend, Gaynor, asked as he stepped through to the living-room. They’d been out for a meal. She wore a long strapless dress and her high heels had been kicked under the coffee table.

‘She’s all snuggled up,’ James nodded, as he stretched into a yawn. ‘I gave the sitter an extra fiver. She seemed really nice.’

Gaynor tutted. ‘And she’ll expect a tip every time now.’

James was startled to see a tower collapsing in flames on the TV screen. ‘What the hell’s that?’

‘I don’t know,’ Gaynor said. ‘I just flicked the ten o’clock news on. It’s down under, I think.’

James grabbed the remote and turned up the sound as he sat with his girlfriend on the sofa. The reporter spoke in an Australian accent and the screen had LIVE FROM AUSTRALIA in the top right corner.

‘The colourful religious guru Joel Regan is dead, believed murdered. His world-famous ark has been devastated in a massive explosion that killed many of his most devoted followers, and government sources have revealed that his controversial Survivors cult has funded the terrorist group Help Earth to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars...’

‘Oh, it’s those nutters,’ James said. He felt dizzy as he bent forwards and kissed Gaynor on the neck; he’d drunk more wine than he’d realised. ‘There was a thing about that lot in the Sunday paper a couple of months back.’

‘At this stage there are no casualty estimates but there are thought to be more than two hundred children inside the ark...’

‘There’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you,’ James said, as he sat on the couch. ‘Something I probably should have told you a while back.’

Gaynor recoiled as she watched an image of a burned child being hoisted into a helicopter on a stretcher. She was engrossed in the drama and turned irritably towards James as he switched TV into standby.

‘I was *watching* that.’

‘Sorry,’ James said, ‘but we’re getting married in less than a month and there’s something I’ve got to tell you.’

Gaynor suddenly looked uneasy. ‘What is it?’

‘Before Megan, erm... I mean, a long time ago – I have a son.’

‘With Trudy?’ Gaynor gasped. ‘Is Kieran really yours?’

‘No, give over!’ James smiled. ‘Kieran was born before I ever met Trudy. This boy would be fourteen now.’

‘Fourteen! But that would make you barely seventeen when...’

‘You know I told you that I ran away from home?’

‘After you went nuts, knocked over that little girl and crashed your dad’s car?’

‘That’s the one,’ James nodded. ‘I was out of my mind. I had no money, nothing to eat and I was just wandering around the West End of London scared that the cops were gonna nab me and throw me in young offenders.’

‘It was getting dark and this lady sat down next to me. She looked really beefy, but then she started pulling video games out of her coat and sticking them inside her backpack. Remember the old Sega Megadrive? She must have had thirty Megadrive games tucked inside her coat. I saw what she was doing and I couldn’t help but laugh. After a while we got talking about this and that. I told her that I’d run away from my parents, although I left out the bit about the cops being after me for knocking down a kid. It was December, freezing cold and I clearly had no place to go, so she took pity and invited me home.’

‘She was in her twenties, a bit overweight – even without all the stuff inside her jumper – but I was kind of in awe. The closest I’d ever been to a girlfriend was a game of chess with Stacey Beech. She told me to take a shower and when I came out she’d found me some clothes: stolen of course.’

‘So what was this woman’s name?’ Gaynor asked.

‘Gwen Choke. She was nice, even though we were as different as could be. Like, my dad’s a doctor, her dad was a bus driver. She made us a nice roast dinner and told me I could stay in the spare room for a couple of nights. But we drank all this wine and started mucking about, chasing around the flat and one thing led to another. I was on cloud nine. I mean, I went from never having kissed a girl to boffing Gwen in the space of about four hours...’

Gaynor looked a touch upset. ‘You said you got your first girlfriend at university, *after* you’d been inside.’

‘I made a huge mess of my life back then,’ James admitted. ‘This is the first time I’ve ever told anyone the truth about when I ran away. Even my folks don’t know this stuff.’

‘So was it just the one night?’ Gaynor asked.

‘No, I was totally smitten. I mean, she was seven years older than me, but she *really* pampered me. Stolen food, stolen clothes, stolen booze. Nothing but the best. We had Christmas and New Year with her parents and it was a great time, but a few weeks into the new year she told me she was pregnant.

‘I was seventeen and I couldn’t handle it. Gwen said she wanted a baby and understood if I wanted nothing to do with it. At first I said I’d stick by her, but the more I thought about it, the more it freaked me out. I mean, I’d always imagined that I was going to be a doctor like my old man and yet there I was, seventeen years old and living in a council flat with my pregnant girlfriend. I told Gwen that I wanted her to get an abortion, but she said she wanted a baby with someone smart like me and she wouldn’t ask me for anything.

‘I got really depressed. I knew the cops would catch me eventually and I just waited until she went out, packed up all the stuff she’d bought me and headed back to Cambridge. My mum was glad to see me. She didn’t pry and the next morning my dad took me to the police station to give myself up.’

‘So have you ever seen him?’ Gaynor asked.

James nodded. ‘He’s named after me. Gwen sent me pictures and stuff when I was in prison and she brought James up to visit me when he was a few months old. She’d started getting a few other girls to shoplift for her whilst she was pregnant and she was building herself a proper little empire.’

‘Didn’t you bother contacting her when you got out of prison?’

‘Yeah,’ James nodded. ‘The baby was walking by the time I got out of young offenders. I was flat broke and I’d got my place at university, but I was determined to be a proper dad to the little fellow. But Gwen seemed to like picking up waifs and strays and she had this new bloke called Ron. He was a right horrible sod. The first couple of times I turned up to see James he kept having digs at me. Calling me a snooty so and so.

‘Then the third time I came he’d heard something about the car crash. He kept going on about how a bloke like him would have got life for knocking down that little girl and that I’d only got off with three years because of my public school accent. I’d toughened up a hell of a lot when I was inside and I

just saw red and decked him. But James was really upset and Gwen was crying and it was just this whole god-awful scene.

‘I called up again a few weeks later. Fortunately Ron was out and I managed a chat with Gwen. She said she was pregnant with Ron’s kid. I said maybe it would be better if I steered clear for a while. We spoke on the phone a few more times and she sent me some pictures of James with his new sister. It wasn’t that I didn’t mean to go back, but I got into my degree and I waited longer and longer.’

‘So when did you last hear from Gwen?’

‘She used to write a letter and send me his school picture every year and I used to jot a few paragraphs in a Christmas card. But she stopped about three years ago for some reason. I wrote a letter to ask if she was OK, but I didn’t get a response. I even tried calling, but the phone was disconnected. I think she’d split up with Ron, so I guess she moved away. Probably remarried or something.’

‘There’s a part of you that I won’t ever know,’ Gaynor smiled. ‘So why did you choose to tell me this now?’

‘Well, partly it’s the getting married thing. But also I figure that he might go looking for his old man at some point. My parents still live in the same house, so he’d have no problem tracking me if his mum gave him the address.’

‘When did you say he was born exactly?’

‘October ninety-one,’ James said.

‘So he’ll be fifteen this year?’ Gaynor smiled. ‘I could just see you trying to squirm your way out of it when this big strapping son turns up on our doorstep!’

‘You sound OK about this,’ James said uneasily. ‘I mean, tell me if you’re mad. You’ve got every right to be.’

Gaynor shrugged. ‘You were so messed up at that time... It’s like, you were this geeky kid who grew up to become a maths professor, but right in the middle there’s two years of absolute craziness. That part of your life is like some whole other person who I’ve never met.’

‘I was thinking that I might try to track him down,’ James said. ‘I think a boy should get to meet his dad, even if he ends up thinking that he’s an asshole.’

‘James, he’s almost fifteen. He’s just as likely to plant one on you and tell you to piss off.’

‘And maybe that’s what I deserve...’

‘And don’t start on this now,’ Gaynor said. ‘I mean, Megan’s still a baby, we’ve got the wedding and the honeymoon to plan. We could probably get by without a teenage boy in our midst over the next few months.’

‘Yeah,’ James smiled, as he slipped an arm around his girlfriend’s back. ‘I wasn’t talking about getting in touch right now, but I’d like to meet him, you know? I might try finding out where Gwen Choke moved to and I’ll ask her if it’s OK to write him a letter or something.’