

CHERUB Jr – Spies in Training



WHAT IS CHERUB?

You're not allowed to know where CHERUB campus is and don't bother searching on any maps, because you'll never find it.

CHERUB Campus is so secret that you're not even allowed to fly over in an aeroplane. But if you could, you'd see more than a dozen buildings, a forest big enough to get lost in and lots of neatly trimmed grass. You'd also see tennis courts, football pitches, an outdoor swimming pool and one of the scariest, muddiest, assault courses in the world.

If you looked out of the aeroplane with binoculars, you'd be able to make out some of the children who live on CHERUB campus, riding their bikes, playing sport and walking along the gravel paths between lessons.

You might think you were flying over some posh boarding school, although the uniforms would seem a bit weird.

Cherubs – as the children who live on CHERUB campus are called - don't wear blazers and ties. They wear waterproof boots, combat trousers with lots of pockets for putting equipment in and coloured T-shirts. It makes them look a bit like soldiers.

Only very clever children are picked to become cherubs and they are expected to work extremely hard in school. As well as normal classes like history, English and maths, cherubs have to do special lessons: karate, kick boxing, survival skills, espionage, and computer hacking.

These lessons aren't always as exciting as they sound. In fact they can be just as difficult and boring as normal lessons. But cherubs have to learn tons of extra stuff because they're training to be spies.

WHAT USE ARE KIDS AS SPIES?

The most important thing for any spy is that the people you're spying on don't know that you are one.

Because no sensible grown up believes that kids work as spies, cherubs can get away with all kinds of stuff that grown up spies can't.

WHY ARE ALL THE CHERUBS ORPHANS?

Mums and Dads are *very* protective of their children. So are grannies, granddads, aunties, uncles, foster parents, or whoever else looks after them. They like making sure that you cross the road safely, they like tucking you into bed at night and always knowing where you are and what you're up to.

Mums and Dads would never let their children go off on dangerous missions and become spies. That's why every child on CHERUB campus is an orphan.

And since it's impossible to be born without having two parents, it means that every single cherub has a sad story to tell about how they became an orphan. This book starts with one of those sad stories.

If you don't like sad stories, you might like to skip the first two chapters and go straight to chapter three where all the chasing, fighting and rolling around in mud starts!

(1) THE BIGGEST HOLE IN THE WORLD

Playing in holes is fun. The biggest hole in the world is in America and it's called the Grand Canyon. It's more than a thousand kilometres long and two kilometres deep, which means that if you fell into the deepest part, you'd have three and a half minutes to regret putting your foot on that slippery piece of rock before you finally hit the bottom and went KER-SPLAT.

Lots of people play inside the Grand Canyon. They climb up the walls, they ride rafts down the river that runs along the base and some people even jump off the edge in hang gliders and fly down to the bottom.

If you think that flying to the bottom of the world's biggest hole with a little glider strapped to your back is too scary, a more sensible option is to go down in a helicopter.

Lots of people do this and during tourist season dozens of helicopters swoop in and out of the canyon, keeping close to the edges. Most passengers get a thrill out of seeing the scenery whiz by, though it has been known to make some of them a bit queasy.

The pilots who fly into the canyon are very skilful and helicopters are very safe, so things never go wrong.

Well, almost never...

(2) YOU MUST BE THIS TALL TO FLY!

Five Years Ago

Four year old Zoe King and her three year old brother Rob were on holiday in Arizona. They spent the night in a motel a few kilometres from the Grand Canyon.

Before setting off to visit the canyon the next morning, the two youngsters were taken out into the desert sunshine and made to stand on the bonnet of their family's rental car.

Their Mummy, Daddy and older brother Louis stood alongside them and they got a lady who was walking by to take a photograph so that the whole family could be in it.

Afterwards, the King family got in their car and set off for the canyon.

When they arrived, Rob escaped. The toddler clambered between the metal railings and leaned over the biggest hole in the world before his mother dragged him away.

‘You’re a very *silly* boy, Rob King,’ she said sternly. ‘Stay away from the edge or I’ll make you wait behind when everyone else rides in the helicopter.’

‘But I want to goooooooooooooo in the helicopter,’ Rob whined.

He kicked at the desert sand and made a big fuss as his mum grabbed his hand and marched him towards the heliport.

By the time the five members of the King family arrived at the landing pad, Rob’s face was a mess: bright red, with snot and tears running everywhere.

To make things worse, Rob’s twelve year old brother Louis wouldn’t let him look through his binoculars and his four year old sister Zoe was behaving like a perfect little lady and generally showing her brother up.

But Rob forgot about his tantrum when he saw the helicopter coming in to land. It was silver. It had an American Indian painted on the side and it made such a racket that he jammed his fingers into his ears.

The pilot jumped out, dressed in a flight suit, ear protectors and sunglasses. He opened the back doors while the blades pulsed just a few centimetres above his head and helped two overweight men to clamber out.

As the men waddled towards the terminal building, the pilot waved the King family towards his helicopter. But he frowned when they got close. He leaned inside his craft and pulled out a measuring stick.

He lined it up against Zoe and Rob and shouted terrible news over the roar of the blades:

‘They’re too short to fly, Mrs King. You have to be taller than my stick to ride in my helicopter.’

Rob’s mum looked very upset.

‘But it was *so* expensive,’ she said. ‘We booked tickets for the whole family as a special treat.’

‘It’s in the terms and conditions, maam. You should have read them. Our safety belts aren’t designed to hold small children.’

‘What if my husband and I hold on to one each?’ Mrs King asked.

‘I’m very sorry, but it’s against regulations. I could lose my licence if I let you do that.’

Rob was too little to understand what was going on as a smiling lady came running out of the terminal building and handed ice creams to him and Zoe.

‘I’ll make it up to you both,’ Rob’s mum said, as she leaned down and gave her two youngest children the kind of smile she usually saved for injections and trips to the dentist. ‘You’ll have to wait inside, but we’ll only be away for twenty minutes. The lady will look after you and she says they have a play area and a big box of toys.’

Zoe looked upset, but Rob was more concerned with tearing the wrapper off his ice cream, as his parents and older brother climbed inside the helicopter.

‘So long, suckers!’ twelve-year-old Louis said, giving his little brother and sister a wave, as the pilot slammed the door of the helicopter and jumped into his seat.

Zoe looked upset, but Rob was finding his chocolate covered ice cream a highly satisfactory alternative to a helicopter ride, especially when he got inside the big glass terminal building and saw the play area with a giant model helicopter and a trampoline.

‘Cry baby bunting,’ Rob sang to his sister, as he raced up the steps of the slide with his ice cream held aloft in one hand.

As he glided down on his bum, a flash of orange light tore through the window, followed by an earthshaking bang.

Everyone started screaming.

When Rob hit the bottom of the slide, he raced outside behind all the grown ups to see what was going on.

‘Mummy!’ Zoe screamed, holding her hands over her face.

The air was filled with black smoke and the smell of jet fuel from the exploded helicopter. Chunks of smouldering metal were scattered all around in the sand.

‘Oh lord,’ a large man cried as he stared up at the cloudless sky. ‘I just saw a family get inside that thing.’

‘Mummyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy,’ Zoe screamed again.

Rob felt very strange. He was too little to understand what had just happened, but the hot sun was making his ice cream melt all over his fingers so he thought he’d better concentrate on licking it up.

Rob’s mum always got cross if he made a big mess with an ice cream.

(3) COMPUTER HACKING CLASS

Rob King was now eight years old. He lived on CHERUB campus and was training to be a spy.

He didn't remember much about his dead mum and dad, but he could remember the helicopter crash and hadn't eaten a mouthful of ice cream since that sad day.

Ice cream seemed like extremely unlucky stuff.

It was Friday afternoon and Rob was in computer hacking class with seven other kids. Each kid had a computer on the wooden bench in front of them. Their task was to unscrew the metal case, remove some of the bits

inside, pull out a wire on the back panel, install a special thingy called a *key-logger*, then put everything back together again.

And they were only allowed ten minutes to do it in.

‘Two minutes left,’ Miss Weller said firmly.

Rob felt hot and the tension was making his stomach turn somersaults. He’d pulled lots of stuff out of the computer and fitted the key-logger. But now he had a pile of bits left over and couldn’t work out where they’d all come from.

Even worse, three other kids had completed the task and the rest all had the covers back on their computers and were calmly finishing off.

‘Ninety seconds remaining.’

Rob looked helplessly at the loose wires dangling inside the computer and the green circuit board in his hand. He glanced pleadingly at the dark skinned girl who sat at the next bench, with her task complete and her arms neatly folded.

Her name was Lyra. She was also eight years old and she was Rob’s room mate and best friend – even though she was a girl.

‘Connect that to the yellow wire,’ Lyra whispered, trying not to move her lips.

But Miss Weller was the sort of teacher who could hear someone farting three floors down.

‘*Don’t* help him, Lyra,’ Miss Weller said angrily. ‘This is *not* a team assignment.’

Rob had taken Lyra’s hint and fitted the yellow wire to the circuit board. But he still didn’t have a clue where to fit the board inside the computer.

Even worse, everyone else had now finished. The room was silent apart from the sound of Rob’s white gloved fingers fumbling helplessly inside the computer case.

‘Thirty seconds left, Mr King. You’d better get your skates on.’

As Rob made a desperate last attempt to force the circuit board into the wrong slot, it made a sharp crack and snapped in two.

‘Nooo!’ Rob gasped.

His hopeless task had now become an impossible one. And to make things even worse, a couple of his classmates sniggered at his misfortune.

‘Time’s up,’ Miss Weller said airily, taking a final glance at her watch. ‘Everyone who has finished their task can leave. Have a lovely weekend and don’t forget to read chapters thirteen and fourteen in time for Tuesday’s lesson.’

All the kids except Rob and Lyra grabbed their backpacks and filed out of the small computer hacking workshop.

‘You can go, Lyra,’ Miss Weller said.

She shrugged. ‘I’ll wait for Rob. We’re going paintballing together.’

Miss Weller looked surprised. ‘I thought you were both banned from paintballing.’

‘It was only a three week ban,’ Lyra said. ‘It ended yesterday.’

Miss Weller tutted. ‘I’ll tell the medical unit to expect heavy casualties if they’re letting you two back on the paintball range.’

‘We’re not that bad, Miss,’ Lyra said, grinning guiltily.

Miss Weller now stood beside Rob and looked at the tangle of wires inside the metal case.

‘A disaster,’ she announced, shaking her head. ‘How old are you Rob?’

‘Eight miss.’

‘Nearly eight and a half, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, Miss.’

Miss Weller shook her head gravely. ‘In less than a year and a half, you’re going to turn ten and be sent on CHERUB basic training. You’ve lived here for more than two years already. You’ll be expected to pass first time and

qualify as an underage spy. But that's not going to happen if you produce sloppy results like this, is it?

'No, Miss,' Rob said sheepishly.

'You've removed circuit boards and wires that you didn't need to touch and you snapped that piece by trying to force it into the wrong slot.'

'Sorry, Miss.'

Miss Weller tutted. 'Will sorry cut it when you're working as a spy? What if that computer belonged to a drug dealer or a terrorist? Your life might be in danger if you messed up their computer. Have you even read the chapters in the textbook?'

'Of course,' Rob lied, as he shot an evil glance at the battered copy of the *CHERUB Guide to Computer Hacking* on the desk in front of him.

'What did the chapters tell you to do with the DVD drive?'

'Unplug it?' Rob guessed, as Lyra frantically shook her head.

'*Hah,*' Miss Weller said triumphantly. 'You *haven't* read it. Those chapters don't say anything about the DVD drive. Do you even know what a key-logger is?'

'Something to do with, erm ... logging keys?' Rob said weakly.

‘Once installed, a key-logger records everything typed by the person using the computer. We can return to the computer a few days later, remove the key-logger and we’ll know every password and security code that the owner typed in.’

Miss Weller grabbed the hacking guide off of Rob’s bench and pressed it firmly against his chest.

‘Study it properly,’ she said. ‘I’ll be expecting you to repeat this exercise after class on Tuesday. If you mess up again, I’ll make you run twenty punishment laps around the athletics track. Is that understood?’

(4) ZOE – THE EVIL SISTER!

Rob and Lyra bolted out of the classroom and slid down the banisters to the first floor. They flung their heavy backpacks into their bedroom, making a noise that startled the two guinea pigs who lived in cages on the window ledge.

‘I’ll just give Emily and McFlurry some carrots,’ Lyra said.

‘There’s no time,’ Rob gasped, as he grabbed another backpack that he’d already packed with a towel and a clean set of clothes to put on after paintballing. ‘We *have* to get there first and nab some good equipment.’

Lyra knew Rob had a point. The CHERUB paintball shooting range had thirty-five sets of guns and protective gear. If you arrived late, you ended

up with one of the tatty old guns that didn't shoot straight, a battered helmet and a padded suit that smelled worse than feet.

'I'm faster than you, I'll catch you up,' Lyra said, as she grabbed a plastic bag filled with carrot sticks and began sliding them between the bars of each cage.

Rob ran out of the bedroom, scrambled down to the ground floor and raced off across the squelchy football pitches towards the paintball range.

Paintballing was all about running around in a helmet and padded suit, getting extremely muddy and shooting at your mates with brightly coloured paint pellets. If there was something in the world more fun than paintballing, Rob had yet to discover it. And today he was even more excited than usual, because he'd been banned from paintballing for the past three weeks.

Getting hit by a paintball doesn't usually hurt, but it's dangerous to shoot someone from close range and Rob had gotten in very serious trouble for shooting his big sister Zoe from less than the two metre minimum shooting distance.

Even though Rob couldn't run as fast as Lyra, he was still quick and there was some good kit left when he arrived at the changing hut on the edge of the paintballing area.

The mud splattered room had three long wooden benches. A bunch of noisy eight and nine year olds were excitedly changing into protective gear.

Some had only just arrived and were still peeling off their boots, while others had already zipped themselves into thickly padded suits, strapped on protective helmets, pulled down their face visors and slid on gloves.

Rob happily grabbed the last two really good guns and rummaged inside a plastic crate until he found overalls for himself and Lyra. All the overalls were muddy and disgusting, but he'd found a couple that were slightly less disgusting than some of the others.

'Thanks, mate,' a girl growled from behind him.

Rob turned to see the grim faces of his sister Zoe and her half German best friend, Gerda.

Zoe was only a year older than Rob, but she was much bigger. She looked more like an eleven year old, with a beefy neck and powerful shoulders. Gerda wasn't quite as scary, but was still bigger than Rob.

Rob backed up to the wall and shook his head.

'This stuff is for me and Lyra,' he said. 'I got here first.'

'I got here first,' Zoe squeaked, mocking her brother's voice as she gave him a shove and snatched the gun out of his hand.

Gerda quickly grabbed the other gun and the two suits. ‘Danke,’ she growled, using the German word for *thank you*, but clearly not meaning it.

Rob was upset, but he’d never let it show in front of his sister. He screwed up his face and tried to sound fierce.

‘I don’t care what guns me and Lyra have got,’ Rob said. ‘We’ll still wipe the floor with you two.’

‘Oh, I’m *sooo* scared of little Robee,’ Zoe giggled, as she gave her brother another shove. ‘You sad little shrimp.’

(5) WHEN I GET HOLD OF THEM...

Ten minutes later, fifteen pairs of cherubs stood eagerly at the wire gate of the paintball compound, with their visors down and pockets stuffed with ammunition.

Rob scowled at Lyra. 'I'm gonna get my sister so bad,' he said. 'I don't care if I've got a rubbish gun. When the gates open, I'm gonna follow her and...'

But Lyra shook her head firmly. 'We're *not* here to go after your sister. We're here to have fun and win the game.'

'But we've *got* to get my sister back,' Rob said indignantly. 'She ripped off our guns.'

‘Zoe and Gerda are bigger, faster and older than us. If we pick a fight with them we’ll lose,’ Lyra said sensibly.

Lyra usually acted a bit more grown up than Rob and he realised that she was right, as usual.

‘Us getting banned from paintball was totally bogus,’ Rob moaned. ‘Zoe shot me from close range *before* we shot her, but we were the only ones who got done for it.’

‘Forget Zoe,’ Lyra said. ‘There’s nothing you can do about her.’

‘Why does Zoe always have to pick on me?’

‘You’re almost as bad as she is,’ Lyra reminded Rob. ‘*You* broke her CD player, *you* poured water on her school books, *you* even put itching powder in her underwear drawer that time.’

Rob cheered up enormously as he relived one of the happiest moments of his life: ‘Oww, oww! Miss, my private bits have gone all red!’

The paintball game was being run by a fearsome looking instructor called Mr Pike. He clapped his giant hands together to get everyone’s attention.

‘OK you horrible brats,’ Mr Pike yelled. ‘The rules are simple. You must obey the safety code at all times. The game lasts for forty minutes. Each team

has ten envelopes and there are ten letterboxes hidden around the paintball compound. Whichever team posts a letter in the most boxes wins the game. If you get shot three times by a member of another team, you're dead. As soon as you're killed, you must raise your hands above your head and leave the training compound by the nearest exit.

'Today we also have one extra rule. We've had a lot of rain over the past week and some of the trenches are very muddy and waterlogged. Therefore, all trenches are out of bounds.'

Mr Pike raised a whistle to his lips as he opened the gate of the compound. 'Spread yourselves out and don't start shooting until you hear my whistle.'

The thirty youngsters all cheered as they raced into the compound. Lyra watched to see which way Zoe and Gerda went before dragging Rob in the opposite direction.

(6) UNDER FIRE

‘It’s *so* good to be back playing paintball,’ Rob grinned, as his boots slipped and squelched across the muddy ground.

It was spitting with rain. The canopy of dripping leaves over their heads made it dark and creepy as they jogged past tree trunks splattered with brightly coloured paint from hundreds of previous battles.

As well as the trees, the compound had a number of manmade features designed to make paintball games more exciting: small wooden forts, climbing nets, rusted cars with all the glass removed and pitch black tunnels full of mud and rats that only the bravest cherubs dared venture in to.

Lyra stopped running when she spotted a red plastic box nestled between two trees. It was lucky to find one of the mailboxes before the exercise had even started.

As Lyra crouched down to post one of the ten letters, Rob twisted his boot deep into the soggy ground. When Lyra turned around, Rob flicked his leg forwards and splashed her with mud.

‘Aaarghhh!’ Lyra giggled, as she retaliated by skimming her boot through a deep puddle.

A great wave of muddy water pelted Rob’s protective suit.

The mud fight might have turned more serious, but Mr Pike blew the whistle to start the game. Within a second, Rob and Lyra heard the distinctive pulse of air from a paintball gun and ducked down as two green pellets whizzed between their helmets and splattered into the tree trunk behind their heads.

‘Ambush,’ Lyra shouted.

‘That was *too* close,’ Rob gasped as he and Lyra ducked down and started running.

More paintballs whooshed through the low branches and soggy leaves around their heads.

After running twenty metres, they reached a wooden fence and dived behind it, but not before Rob felt a distinctive stinging sensation in his bum.

‘I’m hit,’ he yelled, as he looked over his shoulder at a splat of yellow paint stuck to his trousers.

But there was no time to stand around worrying. Rob and Lyra both raised their guns into firing positions and peered through slits in the wooden fence.

‘Can you see them?’ Rob whispered, knowing that his companion had a knack for spotting tiny movements in the darkest places.

Lyra nodded. ‘See the branches moving between the two trees over on the left?’

‘I see ‘em.’ Rob nodded.

‘You move around that way,’ Lyra said, pointing towards a line of shrubs. ‘I’ll blast them out and you can nail them as they try to escape.’

‘Good thinking,’ Rob nodded, as he crept away.

He crawled through the undergrowth on his belly, to a position twenty metres away between two prickly bushes. He gave Lyra a wave to signal that he was ready and eyed his opponents – two friends of his called Mark and Craig.

As Craig crept towards the little red mailbox to post his letter and score a point, Lyra jammed the muzzle of her paintball gun between a broken section of fence and began rapid firing.

The first shot hit Craig on the back and Lyra's blaze of paintballs forced him and his companion to retreat.

Unfortunately for Craig and Mark, they ran directly into Rob's line of fire and he showed no mercy, blasting Craig once and Mark twice before they made it into the trees.

'Run and hide, you wimps,' Rob yelled triumphantly as the two boys scrambled away.

'Two hits on each of them,' Lyra smiled as she walked towards Rob.

They made a high five with their thickly padded gloves.

'Nice shooting,' Lyra said.

'This is the greatest game in the world,' Rob said, as he grinned from ear to ear.

Lyra spoke breathlessly, 'Let's go find another mailbox.'

(7) HALF AN HOUR LATER...

After thirty minutes of paintball action, Lyra and Rob were exhausted. Their legs ached, they had sweat pouring out of their hair and they could hear their hearts banging in their chests. But they didn't care because they were having so much fun.

'Do you think they've gone?' Rob whispered, as he lay flat on the ground behind a line of shrubs.

Brown water dribbled down Rob's visor as he pulled his face out of the mud and looked up for an enemy that had shot at them a few moments earlier.

'Only one way to be sure,' Lyra said.

She sat up, half expecting a paintball to come flying out from behind a tree and explode against her helmet.

But it didn't.

'Whoever they were, it looks like they've cleared off,' Rob said.

The pair stood up and looked around cautiously. They each had two splats of paint on their suits, meaning they'd be dead if they were shot one more time.

'It was definitely around here somewhere,' Lyra said as they started walking.

'Right there,' Rob grinned, as he spotted the red mailbox hidden in a bush.

They'd seen the box before they'd been shot at, but hadn't been able to post their letter because they'd come under attack as soon as they got close.

'Now we've got nine points out of a possible ten,' Lyra smiled, as Rob slotted the envelope into the box. 'Eight or nine points usually wins the game, so we must be in with a chance.'

'Seven minutes to go,' Rob whispered, glancing at his watch as they scurried up a small hill. 'Where do you think that last mailbox is? If we get to it, no one can beat us. They can only draw at best.'

Lyra shrugged, ‘We’ve hardly been over the east side, I bet it’s over there.’

‘Oh *wow*,’ Rob gasped, as he looked over the top of a hill into a meadow.

Lyra thought he’d spotted a mailbox, but then saw that it was Zoe and Gerda. Gerda was leaning against a tree, holding on to her ankle like she’d twisted it or something. Zoe had her back to them, with a distinctive blob of green paint across it.

It was *perfect*. Within a second of seeing his sister, Rob raised his gun up to eye level and blasted off three well aimed rounds. Each one splattered into Zoe’s back between her shoulder blades, making her stumble forwards.

‘You’re dead, fat head,’ Rob hooted.

Lyra had shot Gerda in the side, but Gerda dived forwards and managed to crawl away into the undergrowth, despite clearly having something wrong with her leg.

Zoe spun around angrily with her gun and almost pulled the trigger. But the rules of the game said she was dead, which meant she wasn’t allowed to shoot back and there were surveillance cameras all over the compound to make sure nobody cheated.

‘Butt wipe,’ Zoe yelled sourly, as she stood up.

But Rob and Lyra had allowed their triumph over Zoe to interfere with their concentration and Gerda had slipped out of sight.

Despite being injured, Gerda managed to scramble up the hill through the undergrowth and rattled off a shot that hit Lyra in the thigh.

‘Now I’m dead,’ Lyra complained, as she scrambled behind a tree and handed the final envelope to Rob. ‘Take it, try and find the last mailbox.’

Rob gave Lyra a friendly pat on the back. ‘There’s not much time, but I’ll do my best.’

(8) ZOE'S REVENGE

As Rob raced off between the trees towards the eastern side of the compound, Lyra walked downhill towards Zoe and thought she'd try being nice.

'Good game today,' Lyra smiled.

Zoe looked Lyra up and down sniffily, trying to decide if she was worth talking to.

'Wasn't bad I suppose,' Zoe said, as she unscrewed the ammunition clip from her paintball gun.

The two girls headed towards the gate together, eyeing each other warily while holding their hands in the air to show that they were out of the game.

‘We posted eight letters,’ Zoe said. ‘I reckon we’re in with a chance of winning.’

‘We’ve got nine already,’ Lyra said brightly. ‘I don’t suppose Gerda will get any more with her dodgy leg.’

Zoe didn’t like the idea that she wasn’t going to win and gave Lyra a mean look.

‘You were out of order, shooting me when Gerda was injured.’

‘Oh *give* over,’ Lyra said acidly. ‘It’s not against any rules and it serves you right for stealing the guns off Rob in the changing room.’

Zoe bunched her chunky fist in Lyra’s face. ‘Maybe you should shut that mouth of yours, before I cram this in it.’

‘It’s sad that you and Rob don’t get on,’ Lyra said thoughtfully. ‘I mean, I know most brothers and sisters have fights, but you two really hate each other.’

‘Shut your gob,’ Zoe said. ‘It’s none of your business.’

Lyra didn’t fancy pushing her conversation any further. Zoe was tough, clever and would probably make a very good spy when she passed basic training. But she certainly wasn’t a very nice person.

A few seconds later, Zoe proved that she wasn't very nice by grabbing Lyra around the neck. She dragged her away from the path and into a giant boggy puddle.

'What are you doing?' Lyra screamed, as Zoe's beefy arm crushed her windpipe. 'Leave me alone. I can't breathe.'

'You think you've got problems now,' Zoe sneered, as she stopped walking at the edge of one of the trenches that had been declared out of bounds. 'See how you like it down there.'

Zoe let go of Lyra's neck and gave her an almighty shove. Lyra skidded down a slippery embankment, before splashing head-first into thirty centimetres of runny mud.

The freezing sludge blinded Lyra as it poured inside her helmet and filled her nostrils. She coughed violently as she sat up, ripped off her helmet and spat out a mouthful of foul tasting liquid.

'Ooops,' Zoe grinned, as she kicked a giant clump of mud down on to Lyra's head. 'Well tootle-pip, I'd better be going.'

'I'm gonna get you for this,' Lyra shouted, as the lump of mud slithered out of her hair and splashed into the water. 'You wait and see if I don't.'

(9) THE LAST POST

Rob had to locate the final mailbox and post the tenth letter. He was puffed out, but that didn't stop him sprinting as fast as he could towards the eastern side of the compound.

A couple of shots rang out as he ran. One whizzed by just a few centimetres in front of his chest, but he didn't stick around to shoot back, because there were only three minutes until Mr Pike blew his whistle to end the game.

With less than two minutes to go, he spotted the last mailbox. It was strung up between two trees, several metres off the ground. The only way to post the letter was to climb up a rope net tied beneath it.

Normally, Rob would have taken a good look around to make sure nobody was hiding out in the trees, but there wasn't enough time left to be cautious, so he grabbed the letter out of his pocket, jumped on to the net and began clambering up.

His heart thudded as he reached up and pushed the soggy envelope through the metal flap. As the flap noisily snapped shut, another sound erupted and a splat of red paint hit Rob in the back. A second splat hit his gloved hand, making him lose his grip and a third whacked his thigh as he slid down the net.

'OK, OK,' Rob grinned. 'Stop shooting, I'm dead.'

He didn't care that he'd been shot. It didn't hurt and he'd posted the tenth and final envelope before getting killed, which meant that he and Lyra couldn't be anything less than joint winners.

As Rob grabbed hold of the net to haul himself off the ground, he heard Mr Pike blowing his whistle to signal the end of the game. Rob flipped up his face visor as his friends Mark and Craig jumped out of the trees. Their padded suits were caked in mud.

'So we're wimps are we?' Craig grinned, giving Rob a friendly shove. 'At least we didn't get killed. How many letters did you post?'

‘All ten,’ Rob said proudly.

‘Oh,’ Mark said, sounding a little sad. ‘We only got nine. We thought we were in with a chance of winning.’

‘Never mind,’ Rob said. ‘You might have won if you’d killed me a second earlier.’

Mark and Craig both nodded in agreement.

‘We won last Friday though,’ Mark shrugged. ‘You can’t win ‘em all.’

‘I’d better run back and tell Lyra. She’ll be well happy when she hears that I posted the last envelope.’

(10) ZOE'S PUNISHMENT

When Rob arrived back at the noisy changing hut, he stepped past all the other kids and found Lyra sitting on a bench with tears streaming down her face. Her hair was caked in mud and she had a big graze down her cheek.

‘What happened to you?’ Rob gasped, putting his arm around his best friend’s back as he sat on the bench beside her.

‘Your idiot sister happened,’ Lyra said, pointing at Zoe.

Zoe stood at the opposite end of the hut, facing the wall with her hands on her head.

‘At least Mr Pike caught her doing it on the video cameras,’ Lyra continued.

‘Doing what?’ Rob asked.

But Mr Pike charged into the hut before Lyra could tell him.

‘RIGHT,’ Mr Pike shouted furiously as he slammed the metal door.

He grabbed Zoe by the scruff of her muddy vest, bundled her into his office and shut the door so that nobody could hear what he was saying. But Mr Pike shouted so loud that everyone heard anyway.

‘What on earth do you think you’re playing at, young lady...? Pushing Lyra into a trench is unacceptable and don’t you dare lie to me. It was *not* an accident. I saw exactly what you did and you’re going to be severely punished.’

Rob smiled at the thought of his sister being *severely punished*, but nothing seemed to cheer Lyra up.

‘Come on, mate,’ Rob smiled, giving Lyra a squeeze. ‘You’ll be fine once you’ve warmed up in the shower and had some dinner.’

Mr Pike continued to rave at Zoe in the office. ‘You are banned from all paintball activities for two months. You are going to run fifty punishment laps over the next week and do you see this?’

Rob looked through the glass in the office door and saw that Mr Pike was holding up a grubby towel.

‘When all the others have taken their showers, I am going to give you this rag and make you clean the *entire* changing room with it,’ Mr Pike yelled. ‘You are going to scrub every bench, every floor tile and every wall until there is not a speck of mud to be seen. I don’t care if it takes you an hour, two hours, or even if it takes you until midnight. That room is going to gleam.’

Mr Pike stormed back out of his office and glowered at everyone else.

‘I am now in a *very* bad mood,’ Mr Pike shouted. ‘Unless you lot want to join Zoe King on cleaning detail, I suggest that you take your showers quickly and quietly and then head off to the main building for your dinner.’

Rob noticed a tiny smirk on Lyra’s face as he rubbed her back.

‘That’s the spirit,’ he said.

Mark and Craig sat on the bench facing towards Rob and Lyra. They’d already pulled off their muddy boots and started undressing to go in the shower.

‘Here’s the thing,’ Craig said, as he pushed a fist inside his boot. ‘None of us likes Zoe, and the muddier it is in here, the worse her punishment is, right?’

‘So, what are you getting at?’ Rob asked

‘This,’ Craig said, as he squished the muddy sole of his boot against the wall and used it to draw a thick brown line.

‘Oh yes!’ Rob giggled. ‘Zoe’s got to clean that up, hasn’t she...? And this,’ he added, as he scraped his own boot across the front of a radiator.

Lyra cheered up quite a bit as she swept her hand through her muddy hair and made brown palm prints on the wall.

There were quite a few kids in the room who’d been pushed around by Zoe and it wasn’t long before they were all rubbing muddy clothes along the walls and scraping boots on benches.

By the time everyone had showered, changed into casual clothes and headed off for dinner, it looked as if Zoe would be lucky if she finished her punishment by midnight.

(11) MONEY, MONEY, MONEY

Rob and Lyra had eaten a big dinner in the CHERUB dining room. Now they were lying on their beds feeling stuffed. Rob was concentrating on a particularly difficult section of his computer hacking textbook, while Lyra had finished her homework and was flipping through a store catalogue.

‘I want to get your sister back,’ Lyra said bitterly. ‘She’s always pushing us around.’

Rob rubbed his eyes as he looked up from his homework. ‘Zoe’s still over there cleaning up mud,’ Rob smiled. ‘I reckon it’s a fair punishment for what she did.’

‘But we’ve got to show her that she can’t keep being horrible to *us*,’ Lyra said. ‘She cut my face and made me cry in front of everyone.’

‘She’s bigger and stronger than us,’ Rob said. ‘You said it yourself: if we go after her, we’ll probably come off worst.’

‘We will if we just go chasing after her like idiots,’ Lyra smiled. ‘But not if we plan it all out carefully.’

The room went quiet for a couple of minutes as the two youngsters concentrated on their books.

‘Eureka!’ Lyra yelled, as she tore a page out of the catalogue and showed it to Rob. ‘Look at item C.’

Rob looked at a picture of the biggest, meanest, water cannon he’d ever seen, before reading the description written beneath it:

Item C. Drenchmaster 5000, air powered soaking gun.

Holds two litres of water. Exclusive air pump system squirts water up to forty metres. Quite simply the most powerful water gun available.

NOTE: This item is unsuitable for children aged twelve and under.

Price £16.99. Catalogue number 261 272

Lyra tapped on a banner at the top of the page that said, *Special offer, buy one get one free.*

‘Imagine if we sneaked up behind her with two of those Drenchmasters and... BLAMMO!’

Rob rolled back on his bed and cracked up laughing. ‘That’s a cool idea.’

‘Do you know when the best time to get Zoe and Gerda is?’ Lyra asked.

‘When?’

‘They always put on ear rings and fancy clothes when they out shopping. They walk around the mall pretending they’re all sophisticated, like teenagers or something.’

‘I’m up for that,’ Rob giggled. ‘I’d even pay some money towards the water guns if I had any.’

Lyra’s face dropped. ‘I thought you had thirty quid. You were saving up to get the hard drive for your Playstation.’

Rob shrugged. ‘I was, but I bought that Arsenal shirt instead, remember?’

‘Bums,’ Lyra moaned. ‘I was hoping you’d lend me some of your savings to pay for them.’

‘Sorry,’ Rob said. ‘All I’ve got is three quid. Haven’t you got any money at all?’

‘Fifty-three pence and a one Euro coin left over from our trip to France.’

‘I guess that plan’s out of the window then,’ Rob said, shaking his head.

‘Christmas is months away, our birthdays are even further...’

‘Maybe someone will lend us the money,’ Lyra said. ‘You could ask Mark or Craig and I could mention it to some of the girls.’

‘Doubt it,’ Rob shrugged. ‘Maybe they’d lend us if we were just a few quid short, but nobody will lend us the whole sixteen ninety-nine.’

‘We could ask our carer for an advance on our pocket money,’ Lyra said.

Rob burst out laughing, ‘You’re dreaming. You’d have better luck trying to rob the bank of England than getting extra money out of Mad Madeline.’

Lyra growled and pounded her fist into Rob’s mattress. ‘I’ve *got* to get my hands on enough money to buy a pair of Drenchmasters.’

A thought popped into Rob’s head as he looked at the toys and games scattered around the room.

‘Why don’t we try selling some of our stuff?’ he asked brightly.

(12) EVERYTHING MUST GO!

Rob and Lyra crawled around the floor looking for things they didn't play with anymore. They ended up with a backpack stuffed with an odd assortment of Playstation games, action figures, Lego sets, a couple of DVDs and even a giant pink bunny called Mel that Lyra had slept with every night until she was six years old.

They headed out into the corridor and began knocking on the doors of the other kids in the junior block, carefully avoiding rooms where older girls who were friends with Zoe lived.

Rob sold a Tonka truck and a big stack of trading cards to a little five year old called Martin. Lyra sold a couple of hits CDs and a Playstation game,

but when they ran out of doors to knock on, they were still short of their £16.99 target.

‘How much have we got?’ Rob asked Lyra, as they turned back into their room.

‘Six pounds sixty-four,’ Lyra said miserably. ‘Even with the pocket money we had to start with, we’re still seven pounds short.’

Craig stuck his head through the doorway. ‘Did you sell much?’ he asked.

‘Not enough to get the Drenchmasters,’ Rob said, as he stared miserably down at his socks,

‘Shame,’ Craig said. ‘I’ll take those two Playstation games if you want, but I can’t pay you until pocket money day.’

‘No way,’ Lyra said. ‘Everyone will have money on pocket money day, but we want to go to the shops tomorrow.’

‘Oh well,’ Craig said, looking at his watch. ‘It’s nine o’clock. I’d better start getting ready for bed, or Madeline’s gonna do her nut.’

‘Is that the time?’ Rob gasped, as he glanced around at his clock radio. ‘I thought it was earlier.’

‘See you tomorrow,’ Craig waved, but as he headed out into the corridor he had a brainwave and turned back. ‘Here, you know who might be able to help you?’

‘Who?’ Rob asked excitedly.

‘Kyle Blueman,’ Craig said.

Kyle was a sixteen-year-old cherub who lived in the main building. Everyone on campus knew him because he was always trying to earn money by making and selling pirate copies of movies and video games.

‘How can Kyle help us?’ Lyra asked.

‘He gets kids to run errands and do jobs for him,’ Craig explained. ‘Jake Parker made over two-hundred pounds copying DVDs for Kyle and Wendy made a mint selling photocopied Harry Potter books.’

‘And you think he’ll give us a job if we go over and see him?’ Rob asked.

Craig shrugged, ‘It’s just a thought. But if you want to see Kyle tonight, you’d better hurry up. Madeline will be locking up any minute now.’

Rob and Lyra looked uncertainly at each other.

‘What do you reckon?’ Lyra asked.

‘It’s our only chance of getting our hands on the money in time to go shopping tomorrow,’ Rob said. ‘We might as well give it a try.’

As Craig stepped back to his room, Rob and Lyra belted out into the corridor and started running downstairs to the ground floor. Unfortunately, their carer, a chubby woman called Madeline Darko, had beaten them to the door.

‘And where *exactly* do you two think you’re going at this time of night?’ Madeline asked, as she turned a key in the lock.

‘Miss, we just have to pop across to the main building to see someone,’ Lyra said.

‘I left my comic over there at dinner time,’ Rob added.

‘Did you *really*?’ Madeline said as she tapped on the face of her watch, clearly not believing either excuse. ‘It’s two minutes to nine and I can assure you, you’re *not* going anywhere except upstairs to the washroom to brush your teeth and then back to your rooms to put your PJs on.’

‘But...’ Lyra said.

‘No ifs, no buts,’ Madeline said firmly. ‘If you two aren’t in bed in ten minutes flat, I’m going to want to know why. Now *move* it.’

(13) THE DARKNESS

Rob and Lyra cleaned their teeth, put out the light and climbed into bed. Madeline stuck her head inside their room to make sure they were both behaving, but their heads popped up as soon as she shut the door.

Lyra flicked on her torch and pointed it at Rob. ‘Are you ready?’

‘Ready,’ Rob nodded, as he swung out of bed.

He pulled jeans and a hoodie over his pyjamas, before sliding his feet into his trainers and heading for the door.

‘Quietly,’ Lyra cautioned, as Rob grabbed the door handle.

Rob poked his head out into the corridor and looked both ways to make sure that Madeline wasn’t around.

‘Looks OK,’ Rob said, as he crept into the corridor and moved quickly towards the swinging doors that led on to the stairs.

The exit door was locked, so they headed down an unlit corridor that had classrooms on either side, turning the knob on each door as they went. The first three doors were locked, but – much to Rob and Lyra’s relief - the fourth one swung open into a maths classroom with graphs and counting charts on the wall.

Lyra placed a chair by the window, then stood on it and reached up to unscrew the catch that locked the window. While she pushed the chair out of the way, Rob opened the window and swung his leg out over the ledge. He slid his bum off and his trainers crashed noisily on to the gravel path that surrounded the building.

‘Ssssssssh,’ Lyra said anxiously.

But there’s no quiet way to jump on to gravel and Lyra made as much noise as Rob had done. They both looked around anxiously, but there was no sign of Madeline coming after them.

CHERUB campus is big and it was over a kilometre from the Junior Block, where Rob and Lyra lived, to the main building where all the older cherubs who were qualified to work as spies lived.

As they crept around the side of the junior block, Rob and Lyra eyed two electric golf carts standing under a canopy. The carts were used by teachers and other staff to move quickly around campus. Children were only allowed to use them with permission and they'd only get it if they had something heavy to carry, or if they were looking after another kid with a serious injury like a broken leg.

'Let's drive,' Rob grinned.

'Are you mad?' Lyra said, shaking her head, 'We'll be made to run about a million punishment laps if we're caught driving a cart without permission.'

Rob shrugged, 'But we'll get to the main building and back so much quicker, which means there's less chance of getting caught.'

'Well I suppose,' Lyra said. 'Bagsy I'm driving.'

Rob wasn't too happy about Lyra driving, but she raced off and was in the driving seat before he got a chance to complain.

'Bags I'm driving back,' Rob said, as Lyra flipped on the headlamps and squeezed the accelerator pedal.

(14) KYLE BLUEMAN

Rob and Lyra parked the electric buggy at the rear of the eight storey main building. There was a permanently staffed reception desk in the front entrance, so they had to sneak through the fire doors at the back and walk upstairs to Kyle's room on the sixth floor.

They felt nervous as they moved along the corridor. There would be big trouble if any of the staff caught them out of bed.

The older cherubs lived in the single rooms that branched off both sides. Most of the doors were open because there was a party going on. Loud music thumped out of several stereos and teenagers lined the walls holding cans of

Coke and paper plates, while a banner had been hung from the ceiling saying, *Happy Birthday Gabrielle!*

Kyle lived in room 616, but when Rob and Lyra reached the door, they discovered a blonde haired boy called James leaning against it snogging his girlfriend.

‘What are you two squirts doing up here?’ James asked. ‘Shouldn’t you be in bed?’

‘We’re looking for Kyle,’ Rob explained.

James tutted, before knocking on the door. ‘Kyle, I’ve got a couple of little customers for you out here,’ he said.

‘Just a minute, James,’ Kyle answered from inside.

As Rob and Lyra waited anxiously for the door to open, three girls charged out of a room across the hall and began fighting with pillows.

‘Sorry, little dude,’ one of them shrieked, as a pillow skimmed over Rob’s head.

The whole scene of older kids partying, snogging and chasing around made Rob and Lyra uncomfortable. When Kyle opened his door, they barged inside without waiting for an invitation.

‘Come in, why don’t you?’ Kyle smirked as he pushed up the door. The slender teenager was dressed in baggy jeans and seemed younger than sixteen.

Rob looked all around and marvelled at the neatness. Everything in Kyle’s room was tidy, from the stacks of magazines on the bedside table to the polished boots lined up on a rack near the door.

‘If you’ve come looking for DVDs, I’ve got them all,’ Kyle said, as he knelt on his carpet and slid an aluminium case out from beneath his bed. ‘Three pounds for movies, five for Playstation games, two for music CDs.’

‘Are they pirate copies?’ Rob asked, as Kyle flipped open the box, revealing almost a thousand silver discs.

‘Of course,’ Kyle grinned. ‘You can’t get real ones at those prices, but they’re all tested and guaranteed to work.’

‘Where are the games?’ Rob asked, as he knelt down excitedly and started flipping through the disks.

‘AHEM,’ Lyra said, noisily clearing her throat. ‘We didn’t come here to *spend* money.’

Kyle looked surprised as he stood up. ‘Well what did you come here for?’

‘We were hoping you could help us to earn some money,’ Lyra explained.

‘And how am I supposed to do that?’ Kyle asked.

Visiting Kyle had seemed like a good idea when Craig suggested it, but now Lyra felt stupid.

‘Someone told us you give kids jobs to do,’ Lyra explained. ‘Selling stuff and that.’

‘Jake Parker said you paid him nearly two hundred pounds for copying some DVDs,’ Rob blurted.

Kyle suddenly sounded annoyed. ‘Jake Parker is a big mouth who nearly got me kicked out of CHERUB. No offence, but I don’t trust little kids to work for me anymore and even if I did, I wouldn’t pick you two. I hardly know you.’

‘Can I buy this?’ Rob asked, as he slid a Playstation game out of the case.

‘Sure,’ Kyle said. ‘Five quid.’

‘No you can’t,’ Lyra said angrily. ‘We’re saving up for the Drenchmasters.’

‘You might as well give up,’ Rob said. ‘We’re never going to get the money and this game is a total bargain.’

Lyra tutted and stamped her foot, ‘Oh *go* on then. Buy your stupid game.’

Rob grinned at Kyle and handed him five pounds in change. Kyle reached across the room and put the money in his desk drawer.

‘I’m sorry I couldn’t be more helpful,’ Kyle said, sympathetically. ‘I tell you what though, seeing as you came all this way to see me I’ll let you have another game for half price.’

‘Sweet,’ Rob said, as he started flipping through the pirated games in Kyle’s case. ‘Two pounds fifty, they’re like forty pounds in the shops.’

‘What can I say,’ Kyle grinned, ‘I’m a nice guy.’

Rob picked another game out of the rack and happily handed Kyle the money, but his smile vanished when he saw the angry scowl on Lyra’s face.

(15) ILL GOTTEN GAINS

‘I’m sorry, Lyra,’ Rob said, as they reached the bottom of the stairs and headed back towards the electric cart.

‘You spent all our money on two *stupid* Playstation games,’ Lyra growled. ‘You don’t care about my feelings at all, do you?’

‘I’ll let you drive the buggy back,’ Rob said.

Lyra huffed as she got into the driving seat. ‘You know, when I buy the Drenchmasters tomorrow, I’m not sure if I’m going to let you use them.’

‘Well we’re not getting them anyway, so it doesn’t matter.’

Lyra grinned mischievously. ‘Aren’t we?’ she said, as she peeled a twenty pound note out of her tracksuit top.

‘Where did you get that?’ Rob gasped.

‘When you gave Kyle the five pounds I watched him put it in his desk drawer. I noticed that he had about a hundred pounds in there. I sneaked in and pinched a twenty while he was selling you the second disk.’

Rob’s mouth dropped open. ‘You stole Kyle’s money,’ he gasped angrily.

‘Keep your stupid voice down,’ Lyra said.

‘Are you insane?’ Rob spluttered. ‘Kyle’s sixteen, if he finds out that you nicked his money, he’ll kick our butts.’

Lyra shrugged. ‘He had loads of money in there, he’ll never notice.’

Rob was shaking his head. ‘What’s gotten in to you, Lyra? You’re usually more sensible than me, but you’re acting like a total nutter.’

Lyra grabbed Rob by the scruff of his hoodie and pulled him close. ‘I’m sick of the way Zoe treats us,’ she snarled. ‘Tomorrow, we’re going to get her back, or die trying.’

(16) THE SHOPPING MALL

Saturday is a free day for all the cherubs who live in the junior block. They can hang around in their rooms and play, go swimming in the campus leisure pool, play sport, or go on an outing in one of the CHERUB mini busses.

There are usually six choices of outing, which include ten-pin bowling, trips to the cinema, caving and go-carting. But the most popular choice is always shopping, especially amongst the girls.

Lyra and Rob hadn't got back to their beds until past ten o'clock and almost overslept. They scooped down bowls of cereal as fast as they could and made it to the mini-bus heading for the shopping centre seconds before Madeline closed the sliding door.

‘Phew,’ Lyra gasped as they stepped along the cramped aisle inside the packed mini bus.

They ended up sitting directly opposite Zoe and Gerda. The two girls had both put their hair up. They wore high heels, short skirts and carried matching handbags.

‘Oooh look at the ladies in their fancy clobber,’ Rob mocked.

Zoe tutted. ‘We can’t all go around with greasy hair and dirt under our nails like you and your tomboy girlfriend.’

‘Hey,’ Lyra said angrily.

Lyra *was* a bit of a tomboy, but she had a habit of thumping people who said it to her face.

‘Did the little tomboy wash all the mud out of her hair?’ Gerda asked sarcastically, as Madeline drove the mini-bus through the main gates of CHERUB campus.

Rob noticed that the backs of Zoe’s hands were all red and sore. ‘How long did it take you to scrub the hut?’

Zoe shrugged, trying to make out that the punishment had been easy. ‘Not long,’ she said.

‘You weren’t back when we all went to bed at nine o’clock,’ Lyra said.

‘You two are totally immature,’ Zoe spluttered, as she raised her palm. ‘So talk to the hand, ‘cos the face ain’t listening.’

It took half an hour to drive from CHERUB campus to Shopping World. It was one of the biggest shopping centres in the country, with just about every shop you could think of.

The only trouble is that Shopping World is always packed on a Saturday. Madeline yelled out instructions as she led twenty cherubs across the giant car park towards the main entrance.

‘Under eights must stay with me,’ she yelled. ‘Eight and nine year olds can go off on their own, but one of you must have a mobile phone and you must stay in pairs at *all* times. We’ll meet back outside WH Smith at one thirty sharp. Do NOT be late.’

(17) ITEM 261 272

Rob and Lyra raced along the shiny floored corridors of Shopping World to the catalogue store.

‘They’d better be in stock,’ Lyra grinned as she entered.

And they were.

Five minutes later, they emerged through the automatic doors, each holding a huge cardboard box with a brightly coloured Drenchmaster 5000 inside.

They found a bench, tore open the packages and began removing the mass of twisters, clips and wires that held the guns in place.

‘I wish it was black,’ Rob said as he raised the brightly coloured gun up to eye level and aimed it at passing shoppers. ‘That would make it so much cooler.’

‘Lets fill ‘em up and try ‘em out,’ Lyra said.

Lyra went into the ladies and Rob into the gents. Unfortunately, the sinks at Shopping World had the kind of taps that you had to keep pressed down with one hand, which made filling up the guns a pain.

After several minutes, and several concerned looks from adults using the toilets, Rob emerged with water splashed down his t-shirt and soggy tracksuit bottoms.

‘They’re really heavy now they’re full,’ Lyra said.

Rob spotted a chubby woman accompanied by some of the youngest cherubs approaching the bathroom.

‘It’s Madeline,’ Rob gulped. ‘She’ll do her nut if she catches us with these.’

Unfortunately, they were stuck in a corridor and their only escape route was through a fire door. The pair charged through the door and outside into bright sunshine.

They were in a courtyard at the back of the shopping centre, which was designed for giant trucks to pull up and make deliveries to the shops. But there were no trucks or grown ups around at this time on a Saturday and the flat concrete had been taken over by hundreds of pigeons.

‘Lets try this baby out,’ Rob grinned.

He grabbed the handle on the side of the gun and pumped it frantically to build up the pressure inside. A little gauge on the side of the gun showed when it was fully charged.

‘I hope this is good,’ Rob said, as he prepared to pull the trigger.

Lyra knew what Rob meant: there were lots of toys in the world that looked amazing in catalogues and on TV commercials, but were complete rubbish when you got them home.

But the Drenchmaster 5000 wasn’t one of them.

Rob broke into a huge grin as two streams of water roared out the front of his gun. One pigeon took a direct hit and hundreds more fluttered into the sky as the powerful jets sprayed the concrete.

‘Wow,’ Rob giggled, as Lyra frantically pumped her gun.

She aimed the gun at Rob’s lap and gave him a tiny squirt.

‘Ha-ha, you peed yourself.’

Rob turned his gun to get Lyra back, but when he pulled the trigger all he got was a little dribble out of the end.

‘Man, it runs out *fast*,’ Rob said, then he realised that Lyra was giving him one of her most evil grins. ‘Don’t soak my clothes, Lyra,’ he grovelled. ‘We’re here to get Zoe and Gerda, remember?’

‘I’ll tell you what,’ Lyra said. ‘I won’t squirt you if you tell me how lovely I am.’

Rob tutted. ‘Lyra, you’re lovely.’

‘HmMMMM,’ Lyra said thoughtfully. ‘You didn’t really sound like you meant that. Say it again, with more feeling.’

‘Lyra, you’re as ugly as a pig’s butt and you smell even worse,’ Rob sneered, before spinning around and running away.

(18) THE GREAT FOOD COURT STAKE OUT

Lyra only squirted Rob a little bit when she caught him. They went back inside and refilled their guns.

They were too heavy to drag around all morning and Madeline would go bananas if she caught them walking around Shopping World with loaded Drenchmasters, so Rob and Lyra decided to hide out in the food court and wait for Zoe and her friends to get lunch.

The food court was huge, with McDonalds, Burger King, KFC and hundreds of round tables. They found a table right at the back, stashed their guns beneath it and waited.

The only thing worse than waiting a long time for something is waiting a long time for something that you're excited about.

Rob and Lyra killed time by eating Happy Meals, trashing the action figures that came with them and then making paper aeroplanes out of the cardboard packaging.

When they ran out of cardboard, Rob found a newspaper that someone had left behind and they made giant paper aeroplanes and started throwing them about.

Eventually, a security guard came over and told them to stop messing about because they were disturbing customers eating at the other tables.

‘There she is,’ Rob grinned, when Zoe, Gerda and two of their other friends *finally* arrived.

The four girls joined the queue at Burger King. They all wore boots and short skirts, and carried handbags.

‘They really think they’re something, don’t they?’ Rob sneered, as he sprung out of his chair. ‘Lets go blast ‘em.’

But Lyra dragged him back.

‘They’ll just run off,’ Lyra said. ‘Wait until they’re all sitting down. Then it will be much harder for them to get away.’

‘Good thinking,’ Rob nodded.

So they waited another few minutes as the four chattering girls bought themselves burgers and sat a table on the opposite side of the food hall.

‘They haven’t even seen us,’ Lyra grinned. ‘You creep up behind that wooden partition and I’ll come in from the other side.’

‘OK,’ Rob said, trembling with anxiety.

Rob grabbed his Drenchmaster and bent down low, so that you could barely see him moving between the tables. He ended up crouching beside the partition, less than a metre from the table where Zoe, Gerda and their two friends were unwrapping their burgers.

‘I really want to go back to Claire’s Accessories,’ Zoe babbled as she took a delicate bite out of her cheeseburger. ‘I got the blue beads, but I’d really like the pink ones...’

‘Oooh you’ve got to get them,’ one of the other girls said. ‘They’ll really go well with that blue top you bought last week.’

‘And you should get that nail varnish with the glitter in as well,’ Gerda added.

Rob heard a clanking noise, like someone tripping over a chair leg.

‘Oh look, it’s Lyra the little tomboy,’ Zoe tutted. ‘What are you creeping around for, bonehead?’

‘You’ll see,’ Lyra shouted, as she raised her Drenchmaster.

Rob bobbed up from behind the partition just in time to see the twin jets of water blasting Zoe and Gerda in the head.

Rob aimed at Zoe from the other side and hit her from point blank range, then moved his aim down so that the water blasted all the food on the table and sent trays and cups of Coke and Fanta skidding across the tabletop and clattering into the four girls’ laps.

‘My best top,’ Zoe wailed, as her friends waved their arms in the air and screamed like insane cats.

Zoe sprung angrily out of her seat, vaulted over the partition and charged towards her brother.

Rob scrambled backwards, but Zoe knocked him down and pinned him to the floor. Water dripped out of her long hair as she twisted the gun from Rob’s grasp and held the nozzles right in front of his nose.

‘Prepare to die, freak,’ Zoe said.

Fortunately for Rob, the security guard wrapped a fat arm around Zoe’s waist and plucked her off the floor at the exact second she pulled the trigger.

Unfortunately, the guard was yelling, 'How dare you behave like this in my food court,' at the top of his voice and the two streams of liquid shot into his mouth.

Rob clambered off the floor, as the guard roared with anger. He looked for Lyra and spotted her sprinting between tables with Gerda and the other two girls chasing after her.

Rob decided to run away, but he gulped as he saw Madeline and a train of little kids steaming towards him. He spun on his heels, only to find another security guard closing in on him from that direction.

Rob was trapped. All he could do was watch the chaos for a few more seconds before an angry adult grabbed hold of him.

Lyra tripped over a chair leg and got bundled by Zoe's three girlfriends, while Zoe wriggled free and floored the soggy security guard with a well aimed Karate kick.

Rob stared at the food and drink all over the floor, the watery streaks and puddles everywhere and the shocked expressions on the faces of diners at the surrounding tables.

He felt light-headed and his stomach had shrivelled up into a tight little ball.

Maybe this hadn't been such a good idea after all.

(19) THE MOST TROUBLE, EVER!

Madeline was too angry to shout. She calmly ordered all of the kids back to the mini-bus and drove to CHERUB campus with a furious red face and her fingers gripping the steering wheel so tightly that Rob thought it might crumble to dust.

When they arrived, Madeline told Zoe, Rob, Lyra and Gerda to go upstairs and wait outside Miss Green's office.

Miss Green was the Head Carer, which meant that she was in charge of all the cherubs who lived in the junior block. You only got sent to Miss Green's office if you were in **BIG** trouble.

The only other time Rob had been sent to Miss Green was when he kicked a football through his bedroom window twice in one week.

Rob hadn't got wet, but Zoe, Lyra and Gerda were all dripping onto the vinyl floor outside Miss Green's office.

Miss Green sat inside while Madeline explained what had happened at Shopping World. The four kids couldn't hear this explanation, but after ten minutes they heard Miss Green stand up, pound on her desk and yell at the top of her voice.

'This is *totally* unacceptable.'

Rob, Lyra, Zoe and Gerda all jumped to attention as Miss Green ripped open her office door.

'I didn't start it, Miss,' Zoe blurted. 'Rob and Lyra bought the water guns.'

'Did I ask you to speak?' Miss Green shouted, with a roar that made Rob wonder if flames were about to shoot out of her mouth.

Rob felt like crying as he promised himself that he'd never go along with one of Lyra's crazy plans again.

'This is too serious for me to deal with,' Miss Green said. 'You're all going to have to come with me to Dr McAfferty's office.'

Rob gulped. He'd never been in enough trouble to get sent to Dr McAfferty's office before.

Dr McAfferty was the Chairman of CHERUB. He was in charge of everything and he was the only person who could kick you out of CHERUB and send you back to an ordinary children's home.

'Please,' Lyra said, as she started to sob. 'This is all my fault. Don't take me to the Chairman. I swear I'll never do it again. I don't want to get expelled.'

Gerda burst into tears next and that was enough to set Rob off.

'Not the chairman,' he sniffled. 'Please Miss Green.'

Zoe liked to think she was tougher than the others and refused to cry, but she started turning very white and by the time they arrived at the Chairman's office in the main building, she looked so pale that the Chairman's secretary asked if she was going to be sick.

(20) AN UNUSUAL PUNISHMENT

Madeline and Miss Green went into the Chairman's office to explain what had happened. It only took a couple of minutes, but Rob was so worried that his arms were shaking and the wait felt as if it went on for a hundred million years.

Dr McAfferty was an elderly man who spoke with a Scottish accent. He was usually very friendly. Every year he dressed up in a Santa suit and handed out presents on Christmas morning. But after hearing what had happened at Shopping World, he didn't sound friendly at all.

'Rob and Zoe King, come into my office *now*,' Dr McAfferty yelled, from behind his big oak desk.

‘Sit down,’ he added, as the two siblings shuffled into the room.

‘I didn’t...’ Zoe said.

‘Quiet,’ Dr McAfferty yelled. ‘Whatever it is, I don’t want to hear it. I want you both to sit still and listen carefully.’

‘Now, I get the feeling that despite being brother and sister, you two dislike each other. Is that true?’

‘Yes, sir,’ Rob and Zoe nodded.

‘I find that very sad,’ Dr McAfferty said. ‘But some people don’t get along and that’s just the way the world is. *However*, while we don’t expect everyone here on CHERUB campus to like each other, we do expect everyone to behave themselves. The battle that’s going on between you two has lasted far too long and it must stop, *right now.*’

To make his point clear, Dr McAfferty picked up a heavy book and thumped it against his desk. Rob and Zoe both jumped, before the chairman continued his speech.

‘Miss Green tells me that you’ve both been made to run punishment laps, you’ve written letters of apology to each other, been confined to campus, been confined to your rooms, been banned from various activities, but you still

keep getting in trouble. Can either of you give me a good reason why I shouldn't boot you both out of CHERUB?

'It was Lyra's plan,' Zoe said. 'She admitted it in front of Miss Green.'

'Me and Zoe could be put in different parts of the building,' Rob suggested. 'If we don't come near each other, there won't be any more trouble.'

'No,' Dr McAfferty said firmly. 'You two *must* learn to get along with each other. If there is one more row, fight, or any other kind of incident between you two, I'm going to kick both of you out of CHERUB. Is that understood?'

'Yes, sir,' Zoe and Rob said.

'But I'm not going to make it easy for you,' Dr McAfferty added. 'You're going to have to prove to me that you're worthy of your places at CHERUB.'

'As you know, most of the rooms in the junior block are designed for two kids. But on the fifth floor, there's a small room that's only big enough for one bed. It hasn't been used for a few years and it's pretty dingy. But I'm going to have a set of bunk beds put in that room and you two will be sharing it for the next six months.'

'But...' Zoe gasped.'

‘Sir, no,’ Rob gasped. ‘Anything but *that*.’

Dr McAfferty smiled. ‘If you don’t accept my offer, you can pack up your bags, say goodbye to all of your friends and we’ll find you somewhere else to live.’

Rob and Zoe glowered at each other.

‘Well, I suppose,’ Zoe said.

‘I don’t want to get kicked out,’ Rob shrugged, ‘So I guess I haven’t got any choice.’

‘I guess you haven’t,’ Dr McAfferty smiled. ‘And remember, if there’s so much as a squeak, a scream, or an object being thrown inside that room, you can both pack up your belongings and say goodbye to CHERUB.’

‘What about Lyra?’ Zoe asked bitterly.

‘Lyra will be punished,’ Dr McAfferty said. ‘But that’s my business, not yours. Now go back to your rooms and start getting your things ready to move up to the fifth floor.’

(21) THE DINING ROOM

Madeline told Rob and Zoe to get lunch in the dining room before doing anything else.

Rob was so miserable that even finding his favourite fish burger and curly fries on the menu didn't cheer him up. Zoe stood behind him in the queue, but they didn't speak to each other and found tables on opposite sides of the room.

Lyra had been kept back to receive her punishment from Dr McAfferty and by the time she joined Rob, he was licking ketchup smears off his empty plate.

‘You should count yourself lucky that you’ve only got to move in with donkey breath,’ Lyra said. ‘Because it was my idea to buy the Drenchmasters, I’ve got to run ten punishment laps every day for the next month, I’ve got to scrub dishes in the kitchen *every* night and all my pocket money for the next month is going to pay towards cleaning up the mess at Shopping World.’

‘I’d rather do *all* of that than spend one night sharing a room with Zoe,’ Rob said. ‘Besides, I’ve had my pocket money taken away too.’

‘Pah,’ Lyra said. ‘You got off light.’

‘I was thinking,’ Rob said. ‘Would you mind looking after McFlurry for me? I don’t want him in my new room. There’s no window and Zoe will probably try to poison him.’

Lyra thought for a second before nodding. ‘I don’t mind feeding him and doing his water bottle, but you’ll still have to clean out his cage whenever it stinks of wee.’

‘Deal,’ Rob nodded as he felt a large hand sliding around the back of his neck.

Lyra felt a hand sliding around her neck too.

‘Fancy bumping into you two again,’ Kyle said.

Rob and Lyra both gulped.

‘Hey, Kyle,’ Lyra said, trying to sound innocent. ‘Is something the matter?’

‘Yes there is,’ Kyle said. ‘Before I left my room last night, I looked in my drawer and found that some money had gone missing.’

‘How strange,’ Lyra said.

‘It wasn’t us,’ Rob added. ‘There was a big party going on outside, maybe someone snuck into your room and took it.’

Kyle slowly shook his head, ‘I locked my room when I went out. The only ones who came into my room were you two.’

Lyra frantically shook her head. ‘We didn’t take your twenty quid, Kyle. I swear.’

Rob smacked his hand against his forehead as Kyle grinned triumphantly.

‘How did you know it was twenty quid then?’

‘You just told us,’ Lyra said.

‘I told you some of my money went missing, but I didn’t say how much.’

‘Oh...’ Lyra gasped.

‘Luckily for you, I’m not a snitch and I’m not the sort of person who goes around thumping eight year olds,’ Kyle said. ‘But I do want my money back.’

‘The thing is...’ Lyra stuttered.

‘There’s a bit of a problem,’ Rob explained. ‘We spent it.’

‘On what?’

‘A pair of Drenchmaster 5000s,’ Lyra said.

Kyle thought for a second, before breaking into a grin. ‘Drenchmasters are a good laugh,’ he said. ‘Give them to me, plus the two Playstation games I sold you and we’ll call it even.’

Lyra shook her head. ‘You can have the games, but Miss Green confiscated the Drenchmasters after we used them at Shopping World.’

‘Well, whatever,’ Kyle said. ‘You two still owe me twenty quid. Now, I know you little kids get six pounds a week each. So in two weeks, you’ll have enough to pay me back and –’

‘No we don’t,’ Rob interrupted, ‘We’ve both just had our pocket money confiscated for three months.’

The boy called James who’d been outside Kyle’s room the night before came up to Kyle and slapped him on the back.

‘Hey, Kyle,’ James said, ‘why are you hassling eight year olds?’

Kyle turned sharply and glowered at James. ‘They might *look* small and innocent, but these two nicked twenty quid off me last night.’

‘Good for them,’ James grinned. ‘You’re always conning people with that dodgy gear you sell.’

‘James, can’t you butt out?’ Kyle asked. ‘I’m trying to do business here.’

‘Leave them alone, Kyle,’ James said firmly. ‘They’re only little and it’s not as if you’re short of a few quid.’

Kyle swept his hand through his hair and thought for a few moments.

‘OK,’ he said finally. ‘You two can forget about my money, but I’m warning you both, stay away from my room or there’ll be trouble.’

Rob and Lyra smiled at James as Kyle walked away.

‘Cheers, James,’ Rob said.

‘You saved our butts,’ Lyra added.

James put out his hand and Rob and Lyra gave him a high five.

‘I heard what you two did at Shopping World today,’ James grinned. ‘Everyone’s talking about it. It sounds hilarious.’

‘You reckon?’ Lyra said miserably. ‘I bet you wouldn’t say that if you’d seen our list of punishments.’

(22) AND NOW, THE END IS NEAR

Rob stumbled into his new bedroom holding two giant boxes of clothes and toys and threw them on to the bottom bunk.

The room was horrible. It smelled like rotten fruit, the wallpaper was peeling off and there wasn't even a window. Zoe sat on the top bunk with her legs swinging over the edge.

'There's not enough room for all your junk in here,' she said acidly.

Rob looked around and saw that Zoe had already brought in more than twenty boxes of stuff.

‘There’s no room because you’ve got so much junk here already,’ Rob said angrily. ‘And I want the top bunk. I can’t stand sleeping with someone else making the springs squeak on top of me.’

Zoe smiled, ‘Well I got here first and I’m bigger than you, so tough titty.’

Rob slumped miserably on to the bottom bunk, which looked like being his for the next six months. Then he had an anxious thought about his glass picture frame. He’d deliberately left it on top when he packed so that it didn’t get squashed and break, but everything had tumbled out of the boxes when he’d dropped them on to the bed.

Rob snatched the frame from beneath his spare boots and was relieved to see that the glass hadn’t broken.

The picture inside was the one that had been taken of his family just a few hours before his mum, dad and older brother Louis died in the helicopter accident.

Rob reached towards the only shelf in the room and saw that Zoe had already put a ghastly pink and yellow frame with daisies on it up there. But as Rob closed in, he saw that Zoe’s frame had exactly the same picture inside it.

‘Hey,’ Zoe said as she jumped down off the top bunk.

Rob was expecting to get thumped, but he was surprised to see Zoe smiling at him.

‘I didn’t realise that you had that picture too,’ Zoe said.

‘Of course,’ Rob nodded, ‘I love it. Mum and Dad’s heads look a bit funny on your one.’

Zoe flushed red with embarrassment. ‘When I was little, I used to kiss their faces goodnight.’

‘Ahh,’ Rob grinned. ‘Do you ever wonder what they’d be like now, if they were still alive?’

Zoe nodded. ‘Our Mum would probably have some grey hair, Dad might have gone bald.’

‘Or gotten fat,’ Rob grinned.

‘Louis would be eighteen,’ Zoe said. ‘He’d probably be at university, with a girlfriend.’

‘Yeah,’ Rob said. ‘He might even have had a job, and bought us presents.’

‘I can’t hardly remember,’ Zoe said. ‘But I still think about Mum and Dad every day.’

‘And me,’ Rob nodded, as he felt a tear welling up in his eye. He looked around and saw that Zoe was upset too.

‘You know what?’ Zoe asked, as she pulled a coin out of her pocket. ‘I don’t reckon Mum and Dad would want us to fight all the time. I’ll toss you for the top bunk. Heads or tails?’

‘Heads,’ Rob said.

Zoe flipped the coin and tried to catch it, but it slipped between her fingers and rolled across the grubby floorboards.

‘Looks like heads,’ Zoe said. ‘You get the top bunk.’

‘Nah, you keep it,’ Rob said. ‘You’ve already got your duvet and pillows up there.’

‘Well, if you’re sure,’ Zoe said.

As Zoe climbed back on to the top bunk, Rob sat down on his new bed and smiled, because he’d just had the first normal conversation with his sister since...

Rob thought very hard and realised that it was the first normal conversation he’d *ever* had with his sister.

‘Here, Zoe,’ Rob shouted. ‘Are we friends now?’

‘We’ve got to live together in this room for the next six months, so it’s probably best if we try not to kill each other,’ Zoe said.

‘I reckon that’s what Mum and Dad would have wanted.’

Rob saw Zoe lean over the side of her mattress and reach down with her beefy arm.

‘Shake?’ she asked.

‘Sure,’ Rob said.

Then he reached up and grasped his sister’s hand.