

WHAT IS CHERUB?

CHERUB is a branch of British Intelligence. Its agents are aged between ten and seventeen years. Cherubs are mainly orphans who have been taken out of care homes and trained to work undercover. They live on CHERUB campus, a secret facility hidden in the English countryside.

WHAT USE ARE KIDS?

Quite a lot. Nobody realises kids do undercover missions, which means they can get away with all kinds of stuff that adults can't.

Key qualities for CHERUB recruits include high levels of intelligence and physical endurance, along with the ability to work under stress and think for oneself. The three hundred kids who live on CHERUB campus are recruited between the ages of six and twelve and allowed to work undercover from age ten, provided they make it through a gruelling hundred-day basic training programme.

CHERUB T-SHIRTS

Cherubs are ranked according to the colour of the T-shirts they wear on campus. **ORANGE** is for visitors. **RED** is for kids who live on **CHERUB** campus but are too young to qualify as agents. **BLUE** is for kids in basic training. A **GREY** T-shirt means you're qualified for missions. **NAVY** is a reward for outstanding performance on a single mission. The **BLACK** T-shirt is the ultimate recognition for outstanding achievement over a number of missions, while the **WHITE** T-shirt is worn by retired **CHERUB** agents and some staff.

PART ONE

December 2012

1. CASH

Kentish Town, north London

There was ice on the pavement from snowfall a few days earlier and the wind had a sting that made Craig Willow pull his Spurs scarf over his ears. He was a big man, with a boxer's flattened nose, but two decades past glory days in the ring.

The street was all Victorian houses. Most had been refurbished by posh types, but number sixteen was shabby, with a tumbledown garage and ancient sash windows faded to the dull green of something you might hack up after a dose of flu.

Craig pulled a front-door key out of grubby tracksuit bottoms. The place had been used as student accommodation until a few summers earlier. The hallway had pre-pay gas and electric meters, pigeonholes for mail and a long-disconnected payphone.

There was no heat, but it was still warmer than outside. Craig pulled off sheepskin gloves and gave numb fingers a rub before banging his fist on a metal door. Someone sped downstairs on the other side and spoke with a tetchy Welsh accent.

‘That you, Craig?’

Craig sounded irritated. ‘Nah, it’s Father bloody Christmas come a week early. You can see me on the CCTV.’

‘Hagar says you’ve got to say the password. Nobody gets in or out without it.’

‘OK,’ Craig said, taking a big breath and tightening his fists. ‘The password is, *Open the door you little knob head, or I’ll stick your skull through the wall.*’

After a pause, bolts started clanking inside the heavily reinforced door. When it swung open, Craig advanced three steps and gently cuffed the skinny teenager on the other side.

‘Password,’ Craig snorted. ‘You’re going the right way about getting a slap.’

But Jake didn’t take the threat seriously. ‘Boss’s son,’ he teased, as he led Craig up steps covered with frayed carpet. ‘You’ll probably have to call me sir, some day.’

‘You’re Hagar’s *stepson*,’ Craig corrected. ‘When he loses interest in your mother he’ll ditch you like week-old bread.’

The conversation dropped because they’d rounded the top of the stairs and stepped into a large room. There were blackout blinds at all the windows. At one end was a pair of long desks, and an electronic money

counting machine. The other end of the room was a chill-out area, with wrecked couches and a big-screen TV showing Sky Sports with the sound muted.

The two men in the room were touching fifty and seemed intimidated by Craig's bulk.

'What's been happening?' Craig demanded.

'Three hundred and sixteen thousand,' the taller of the two men said, as he pointed to a large safe. 'Vacuum-wrapped into 10K blocks. The other safe's got two hundred and twelve. And there's eighteen KGs of cocaine in the sports bag.'

Craig's brow shot up and one of the men took a frightened half-step backwards.

'Are you messing with my head?' Craig blurted angrily. 'Who said to send drugs to the count house? Why didn't someone call me?'

Jake answered. 'Piece of business went bad. It were an emergency, like. Hagar said it's a lot of merchandise and this was the safest place.'

Craig shook his head with contempt. It was a basic rule of drug dealing that spanned millionaire kingpins to kids hustling £10 bags on the street: you always keep money and merchandise separate. 'Any pick-ups scheduled?' he asked.

'It's just you and Jake on guard, unless something changes.'

'OK then,' Craig said, looking at the money counters. 'Get yourselves home to them wives and not a peep to anyone about our eighteen packets of powder.'

'A couple of crews came up short,' one of the oldies

said, pointing to a notebook on the table. 'Archway firm, as usual. It's all in the ledger.'

'A few swings of my old baseball bat usually loosens their pockets,' Craig said, relishing the prospect of some violence.

Jake gormlessly mimed the gesture of a swinging baseball bat as the two cash counters headed for home. Once they were through the steel door at the bottom of the stairs, Craig made sure they'd cleared the building on a security camera before going down and putting the bolts back across the steel door.

When he got back up, he was again irritated by the bulging sports bag filled with eighteen kilos of cocaine under one of the desks. Apart from a few assault charges, Craig had always stayed out of trouble with the law and had never been to prison. Getting busted guarding a house full of illicit money would mean a three- to five-year prison sentence. A house full of drugs *and* money would up the sentence to ten years and the thought sat uncomfortably as he dumped his jacket on the couch.

Jake shouted from the kitchen. 'There's a City match on Sky in a bit. I did a run to Sainsbury's earlier. What do you fancy? There's microwave curry, hot dogs, or I could do bacon, egg and chips.'

Craig made a grunting sound before speaking. 'I'll look in the fridge in a second. I've gotta go upstairs for a shit.'

'I could start cooking,' Jake said.

Craig tutted. 'We're on guard for the next twelve

hours, kid. What difference will waiting for me to take a crap make?’

Craig grabbed a copy of the *Sun* off a coffee table before heading to the bathroom on the top floor. The toilet was rank and the only cleaning product was an empty bottle of Toilet Duck which he lobbed into the bathtub in frustration.

‘I’m sick of dirty scumbags never cleaning up after themselves around here,’ Craig roared, as he pulled down his tracksuit bottoms and settled on to the toilet.

‘You say something, boss?’ Jake shouted up.

‘Never bloody mind,’ Craig said. Then, to himself as he shook his head, ‘Twelve hours stuck here with that dumbass . . .’

It was a regular bathroom, apart from the LCD screen which flicked between images from eight different CCTV cameras. They showed everything from the count room and stairs, to the unoccupied lower floors, the back garden and the street out front. There was also a controller which enabled you to pan and zoom each camera.

As Craig aimed a huge fart into the toilet bowl, he was disturbed by a rustling sound behind his head. Thinking it was a mouse or cockroach, he rolled up his newspaper to take a swipe. But instead of an insect he saw that a gloved hand had punched through the plaster wall behind him.

Before Craig could do any more than turn his head, a needle stabbed the flab between his shoulder blades

and the hand injected a syringe filled with a fast-acting sedative. As he slumped forwards on the toilet with jeans around his ankles, a woman in a hockey mask began quickly but quietly knocking out chunks of plaster.

Within a minute, the fist-sized hole was big enough for the woman to clamber through. To make it she had to shove Craig's chubby, unconscious body off the toilet. As the woman - who was named Kirsten - knelt down and placed two fingers on his neck to check for a pulse, her thirteen-year-old niece Fay stepped through the hole.

'Is he OK?' Fay asked.

Kirsten and her niece were of similar height and dressed identically in hockey masks, black jeans, hooded fleeces and black Converse All Stars. All of their gear was covered in plaster dust.

'He'll come around in a few hours with a nasty headache and a lot of explaining to do,' Kirsten said. 'Don't forget the bags.'

As Fay knelt on the toilet lid and reached through the hole into the house next door, Kirsten pulled out the handgun holstered around her waist and took the bolt off the door.

'If anything goes wrong, you run like mad,' Kirsten said. 'Although I can't see Jake giving us too many problems.'

Fay nodded as her aunt opened the door and began creeping downstairs. The teenager watched from the landing above as Kirsten surprised Jake in the kitchen.

‘On your knees or I’ll blow your head off,’ Kirsten yelled.

Fay grabbed the backpacks and hurried downstairs, by which time Jake had been marched through to the count room, and made to kneel with his hands on his head.

‘Get the brace,’ Kirsten ordered, as she kept her gun aimed at Jake’s head.

Then Kirsten looked at Jake. ‘You know how to open the safes?’

‘They’re on a time lock,’ Jake said, shaking his head frantically. ‘Can’t open ’em before ten in the morning now.’

Kirsten laughed. ‘That’s funny, ’cos we patched a link into your CCTV cables. I’ve been watching this count room for two weeks and I’ve seen you opening that safe up at all times. Day and night.’

As Kirsten said this, Jake’s posture deflated and Fay pulled a bizarre set of rubber underwear out of her backpack.

‘You ever been to Texas, Jake?’ Kirsten asked.

‘No,’ Jake said warily.

‘Folks grow big out there,’ Kirsten began. ‘My girl over there is holding genuine Texas Department of Corrections-issue electrified underwear. When they get some real big-assed, hundred and fifty-kilo guy and need to keep him under control, they make him wear one of those. You switch it on for a couple of ticks and it blasts him with enough electricity to make him sob like a pussycat.’

‘How long until the morning shift arrives?’ Fay asked, following a script she’d practised with her aunt.

‘Eleven and a half hours,’ Kirsten announced. ‘These suits take one or two blasts to break the biggest, meanest men on earth. Now, young Jake, I’m gonna shoot you with a tranquilliser and you’ll wake up wearing that underwear. Then I’ll have *all* night to zap your tiny little balls. Or, you can be a sensible boy and go open those two safes right now.’

Jake raised one finger and flipped Kirsten off. ‘I’m not scared by a couple of chicks,’ he spat.

Fay instantly responded by whipping out an extendible baton and smashing Jake in the back of the neck. As he sprawled across sticky carpet, the thirteen-year-old planted the heel of her trainer between Jake’s shoulder blades, then expertly grabbed his arm and yanked it up behind his back.

‘Jesus, nooooo,’ Jake screamed.

‘Eleven hours,’ Kirsten said, her eyes narrow slits through the hockey mask. ‘We may be chicks, but we like to play rough.’

‘Stop it,’ Jake moaned breathlessly.

‘Will you open the safes?’ Fay asked.

‘If you leave my arm alone.’

Fay let go and allowed Jake to crawl towards the twin safes. As the first one popped open Fay began loading the wedges of vacuum-packed notes into a nylon bag.

‘Five hundred and twenty-eight grand in cash,’ Kirsten said. ‘Plus eighteen kilos of cocaine, which we can offload for another eight hundred.’

‘One point three million,’ Fay said, as she cracked a smile. ‘Not a bad night’s work.’

Once the bags were packed, Kirsten jabbed Jake with enough sedative to take him offline for a few hours.

They drove away in Jake’s Vauxhall Astra, abandoning it behind St Pancras Station. Once they’d stripped off their black clothes, they picked a taxi off the station rank and took a short ride to a flat in St John’s Wood.