

Opening extract from

Man vs. Beast

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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.

WHO ARE THEY?

About three hundred children live on CHERUB campus. JAMES ADAMS is our fourteen-year-old hero. He's a well-respected CHERUB agent with several successful missions under his belt. KERRY CHANG is a Hong Kong-born Karate champion and James' girlfriend. His other close friends include BRUCE NORRIS, SHAKEEL DAJANI and KYLE BLUEMAN.

James's sister, LAUREN ADAMS, is only eleven, but is already regarded as one of CHERUB's best agents. On campus she's inseparable from best friend BETHANY PARKER. She's also very friendly with GREG 'RAT' RATHBONE, who was recruited by CHERUB after becoming entangled in James and Lauren's last mission.

CHERUB STAFF

With its large grounds, specialist training facilities and combined role as a boarding school and intelligence operation, CHERUB actually has more staff than pupils. They range from cooks and gardeners to teachers, training instructors, nurses, psychiatrists and mission specialists. CHERUB is run by its chairman, Dr Terence McAfferty, who is commonly known as Mac.

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 (the minimum age is ten). BLUE is for kids undergoing CHERUB's tough 100-day basic training regime. A GREY T-shirt means you're qualified for missions. NAVY - the T-shirt James wears - is a reward for outstanding performance on a single mission. LAUREN wears a BLACK T-shirt, the ultimate recognition for outstanding achievement over a number of missions. When you retire, you get the WHITE T-shirt, which is also worn by some staff.

1. MORNING

Andy Pierce's bed felt *fantastic*. His duvet was wrapped around his chin, his muscles felt relaxed and his warm pillow fitted snugly under his head. But the gash of sunlight leaking between the curtains was tormenting him.

The fourteen-year-old didn't have the heart to crane his head up and look at the bedside clock, but he knew he had to get up. In less than an hour he'd have his elbows propped on a desk and a tie around his neck for the waking nightmare that was Monday morning: English, French and drama. Today would be even worse than usual because Andy was going to get nailed for not doing his Macbeth homework.

He pictured the dirty look he'd get off Mr Walker as his bedroom door swung into the room.

'I called you three times already,' Andy's mum shouted, as she bounded across the carpet towards the window.

Christine Pierce looked like a sour-faced angel: dressed for work in a white polo shirt, white trousers and white canvas plimsolls.

'There's toast on the table downstairs. Stone cold now, I expect.'

The room exploded with light as Christine swished the curtains apart, then whipped away the duvet covering her eldest son.

'Mummmm,' Andy moaned, as he shielded his eyes with one hand and put the other over his privates.

'Oh, give over,' Christine grinned, giving her son a friendly slap on the ankle. 'You've got nothing down there I haven't seen a thousand times before.' Her expression turned to revulsion as she caught a whiff of the duvet hanging over her arm. 'When *exactly* did you last change these sheets?'

Andy shrugged as he rolled on to his bum and grabbed a pair of clean boxers he'd set out the night before.

'I dunno . . . Last week I think.'

'Pull the other one. Those pillowcases are yellow and I don't even want to think about the smell.'

'It's not *that* bad.'

Andy watched his mum's lips thin out as he yanked a school shirt sleeve up his arm. Thin lips meant he had to be careful: she was on the verge of going thermonuclear.

'When I get home from work this evening, I expect to see that *disgusting* bed linen washed and hanging on the rotary line out the back. And you can do your brother's while you're at it.'

'What?' Andy gasped. 'Why have I got to do Stuart's bed?'

Andy recoiled as his mother jammed her pointing finger under his nose. 'You claim you're old enough to stroll in from the cinema with your mates at a quarter past eleven. In my book, that makes you old enough to start taking more responsibility around this house. This isn't a hotel, and I'm your mother, not your cleaning lady.'

'Yes, your majesty,' Andy said sullenly.

Christine glanced at her watch and sounded more friendly as she backed away. 'I've got to run. You know, it would make my life easier if I got a little bit more cooperation out of you.'

Andy had heard this guilt trip before and wasn't buying it. 'Where's my lunch money?' he asked, as he kicked both feet in the air and hitched black school trousers up his legs.

'There's bus fare on the kitchen worktop. Ham, tomato and mustard sandwich in the fridge.'

'Can't I get chip money?'

'Don't start on that one again. You know I haven't got thirty quid a week for you and Stuart to spend on junk food.'

Andy tutted. 'Everyone goes round the chippy. Sandwiches are totally embarrassing.'

'Go whine to your father. His wife's driving round in a new Focus, while I'm maxed out on three credit cards.'

This guilt trip worked better. Andy had grown to realise that his dad was a total scumbag. His mum had to put in a ton of overtime just to keep their heads above water.

'I should be home by seven,' Christine said, leaning forwards and kissing her son on the cheek. 'And I'm not joking about changing those beds, you hear me?'

Leaving a smudge of lipstick on her son's face, she backed out of the room and set off downstairs. The teenager was half a minute behind, threading his belt into his trousers as he walked.

Stuart was in the kitchen and irritated his big brother by being perky and neat as usual. The eleven-year-old had his hair combed, blazer and tie on and Bugs Bunny blaring out

of the portable TV. As Andy grabbed a triangle of cold toast, the two boys exchanged grunts.

'Mum's stressed out,' Stuart said sourly. 'Why you gotta keep winding her up all the time?'

Andy wasn't proud of the way he got into rows with his mum, but he didn't mean it. It just kept happening, part of being a teenager or something. Whatever his true feelings, Andy wasn't going to give his little brother the satisfaction of a straight answer.

'Why don't you mind your own?'

Stuart sucked air through his teeth. 'You're so selfish.'

'Piss off.'

'Don't start, you two,' Christine shouted from the hallway. She had a bag over her shoulder now and the car keys in her hand, all set to leave. 'You've got ten minutes or you'll both be late for school. Don't forget to turn the deadlock in the front door as you leave.'

Andy gave his mum a nod. 'Later Mum, have a good day at work.'

'Not much chance of that,' she answered gloomily.

Andy waited for the front door to close before scowling back at his brother. 'You're asking for a punch with that smart mouth.'

Before Stuart could think up a comeback that was nasty enough to sting but not so nasty it earned him a dead arm, a scream erupted out on the driveway.

It could only be their mum and it wasn't an *I've seen a spider* scream or the way she'd screamed at their father when they were getting divorced. It came from deep inside, like she was in a lot of pain.

The two lads bolted out of their seats at the dining table and raced down the hallway towards the front door.

A Balaclava-clad man smashed Christine's car windscreen with a mallet as Andy burst out on to the driveway. Christine writhed in the gravel, screaming and spitting. Her face and hands glistened with red paint that had been thrown in her face.

The man popped two more windows along the side of the car, but Andy fixed on his accomplice, a stocky dude looming over his mother. He wore camouflage trousers, a black Balaclava and looked ominously like he was about to stick the boot in. Andy didn't even have shoes on, but couldn't stand there while someone laid into his mum.

'You're dead,' Andy screamed as he charged forward.

He was stocky, but the teenager wasn't up to fighting a grown man. The masked dude wrapped an arm around Andy's neck and planted a gloved fist hard into his face.

'I'm not the killer here,' the dude snarled, as Andy's nose exploded in pain.

Andy toppled backwards into a hedge, before a giant boot sank into his belly, pushing him deep into the tangled branches. As Andy wiped a bloody nose on his white sleeve, the Balaclava-clad men jogged off towards a battered Citroën parked across the end of the driveway.

The little getaway car lurched as Andy experienced the most desperate feeling of his life. It wasn't just the pain in his nose, or worrying about his mum, but a feeling of total inadequacy: he'd let the thugs who'd attacked her get away and hadn't been able to stop them because he was only a kid. As Andy untangled himself from the branches and

staggered on to his feet, he could hear her moaning.

'I can't see,' Christine sobbed.

Stuart stood on the doorstep, chalk white and rigid.

'Don't just stand there, moron,' Andy yelled as he stumbled towards his mother. 'Get inside, call a bloody ambulance.'

As Stuart came to his senses and raced for the phone, Andy noticed that a hangman's noose had been spray-painted on to the garage door and a message written alongside it:

QUIT YOUR JOB AT THE ANIMAL LAB
NEXT TIME YOU DIE
BY ORDER - THE ANIMAL FREEDOM MILITIA

2. PUTTY

'Doctors fear that the thirty-six-year-old woman may have suffered permanent damage to her eyesight. This is the latest in a string of increasingly violent attacks by the Animal Freedom Militia. Avon police say they are doing all they can to protect employees of Malarek Research, but with more than two hundred workers at the laboratory, their resources are stretched to the limit . . .'

The news item came from a screen hanging on the wall beside James Adams' head, but he wasn't listening. He was in the dining-room on CHERUB campus and those of his mates who weren't away on a mission sat around their usual table: Kerry, Bruce, Callum, Connor and Shak.

It had been a couple of minutes since Bruce had gone arse over tit, spilling a tray of macaroni and 7up over a girl sitting a couple of tables across, but everyone was still winding him up about it.

James had a stack of chicken bones on the plate in front of him. His bloated tummy dug into the waistband of his jeans and he was content to sit back and let the conversation pass him by. Kerry had finished eating as well and she'd sprawled

out in her chair, slipped her feet out of her sandals and rested her ankles across James' lap.

She could have put her feet on one of the empty chairs at the next table, but she hadn't and James appreciated the affectionate gesture. It meant Kerry was in a good mood and with luck they'd be heading upstairs for snogging and homework once their food settled.

Shak sat on James' right and took a quick glance at Kerry's feet. 'Your feet're really small. Kerry. What size shoe do you take?'

'Size two.'

Shak nodded. 'I found out why women have smaller feet than men the other day.'

Kerry looked baffled. 'On average, women are smaller than men all over.'

'Who wants to know why women have smaller feet than men?' Shak asked, breaking into a grin.

The kids around the table didn't look enthusiastic.

'Is this another one of your lame jokes?' Bruce asked.

Shak grinned. 'My jokes are *quality*.'

Everyone except Shak either spluttered or shook their heads.

Callum summed up the mood. 'If you say so, dude.'

'Fine, if you don't want to hear it . . .'

Bruce tutted. 'Tell us the stupid joke, Shak. Otherwise we'll never hear the end of it. Why do women have smaller feet than men?'

Shak's grin grew until it ate up his whole face. 'So they can stand closer to the kitchen sink when they do the washing-up.'

The joke was as bad as everyone expected, but it raised a laugh because the boys were already in a jovial mood. James managed a quick grin before he turned and caught the frosty look on Kerry's face.

'Male chauvinist pigs,' Kerry snapped, as she pulled her feet off James' lap and faced him off with her hands on her hips.

'Hey, I didn't tell the joke,' James said, raising his palms defensively.

Kerry glowered. 'But you laughed.'

There was a loud crack as she slapped James across the cheek.

'Jesus, Kerry,' James said, raising his arms in front of his head to stop her getting another shot in. 'Keep things in proportion, why don't you?'

'You'd all better wipe those smirks off,' Kerry said, shooting thunderbolts at the other boys around the table. Then she zoomed in on Shak. 'You reckon sexist jokes are so funny? How would you feel if I sat here telling Paki jokes?'

There was a tense silence as Kerry grabbed her food tray and steamed off. James sheepishly rubbed the stinging red mark on his face.

Callum and Bruce creased up as soon as she was out of sight. 'Did you hear that crack!' Callum yelled.

'That was *baaaad*,' Bruce said, as he exuberantly slammed his hand against the table.

James turned sourly towards Shak. 'Thanks for winding my girlfriend up.'

'No snogging for Mr Adams tonight,' Callum grinned.

The lads all snickered at James' expense.

'I don't know what you're all looking so happy for,' James said. 'Where have all your girlfriends got to tonight...? Oh, wait, I remember. None of you losers *have* girlfriends.'

'I've got Naira,' Callum said.

Bruce laughed. 'You had two snogs and she's been away on a mission for six months.'

'Still counts,' Callum said, glowering at Bruce. 'She e-mails me almost every day. Who have you ever snogged?'

'I've kissed girls.'

James laughed. 'Like who?'

'Not here,' Bruce said. 'Out on missions and stuff.'

Everyone groaned because they didn't believe him: Bruce was shy around girls.

'He snogs that little blue teddy he always sleeps with,' Shak giggled.

'Piss off,' Bruce said angrily. 'And I don't sleep with Jeremy. He fell off that shelf over my bed one time and Kyle went and told the whole world.'

'What the hell kind of name is Jeremy for a teddy?' James smirked.

'Yeah,' Connor nodded. 'You'd at least think he'd snog a teddy with a girl's name.'

Bruce exploded out of his seat and glowered at Connor. 'Wanna try repeating that in five seconds when I've punched all your teeth out?'

James backed up his chair and grinned at his mates as he stood up. 'I'll leave you four pussies to sort your squabbles. I'd better be in my room when Kerry comes knocking.'

'You reckon?' Shak said. 'That's really gonna happen when she just cracked you one.'

'I *happen* to have an ace up my sleeve,' James grinned. 'Little Miss Perfect is failing algebra. She needs my massive brain to sort out her Xs and Ys.'

Connor tutted. 'You're totally jammy, James. You always get lucky with girls.'

James looked smug as he walked away from the table. 'What can I say guys? Chicks can't resist me - they're putty in my hands.'

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James went up to his room, stepped over the dirty laundry and sat on his double bed reading the copy of *Great Expectations* his English teacher had inflicted on him. He was supposed to be two hundred and fifty pages in already, but he was mired in the low seventies and couldn't concentrate because he expected Kerry to knock at any minute.

But he was having doubts by the time he reached page 106 and when a knock finally came, it was a triple.

'Lauren?' James yelled, as his sister's long blonde hair dangled inside the door.

'Ha-haa,' Lauren smiled, pointing at James as she stepped into the room. 'Your face is well red. Kerry said she gave you a good stinging.'

James slid his bookmark in and straightened himself up. 'You saw Kerry? Is she coming over?'

'Doubt it,' Lauren said. 'She's just been up in my room getting help with her maths homework.'

'You little traitor,' James gasped. 'What did you do that for? I'm way better at maths than you.'

'She's in a right mood with you, James. And I might not

be as good at maths as you, but I still get all As and I'm ahead of Kerry. Anyway, it serves you right for cracking a sexist joke.'

'Shak told the joke, I barely laughed.'

'Whatever,' Lauren shrugged. 'You and Kerry are such drama queens. It'll be hands all over each other again by tomorrow.'

'So, did you just come here to gloat about me getting slapped?'

Lauren grinned. 'Came to ask a favour, actually.'

'Sounds ominous.'

Lauren sat on the edge of the bed. 'You know Kirsten McVicar?'

James shook his head.

'Yes you do, James. She was at my birthday party. She's Bethany's friend, but she's a year younger. She was wearing those black tights with the green spots on?'

'Nah,' James said. 'Your mates all talk the same crap and you're always swapping clothes. Why's it matter anyway?'

'Kirsten dropped out of basic training last week. And you know Bethany's brother Jake is doing his training as well?'

James nodded. 'How's the little dude getting on?'

'Kirsten says Jake's struggling. He's only just turned ten. He's sprained his thumb and he's not exactly huge for his age, so he's having a hard time carrying his pack on long runs and stuff.'

'Pity,' James said. 'I hope Jake doesn't fail. He's a bit full of himself at times, but--'

'Pot calling kettle if ever I heard it,' Lauren interrupted. 'Anyway, me and Bethany made up a plan to give Jake a

boost. We want to take him a little pick-me-up package. You know, chocolate bars for energy, dry boots and underwear, a padded strap to make carrying his pack easier.'

James looked shocked. 'Lauren, you can't just waltz into the basic training compound. The gates are alarmed and there's barbed wire and surveillance cameras everywhere.'

'Me and Bethany have it all worked out, but we could do with someone older coming with us.'

'No, no, no!' James laughed. 'Don't look at me. We'll get hammered if we're caught. Jake's a nice little kid, but he'll just have to suffer through basic training, same as we all did.'

'Please, James.'

'Besides, why do you care? I mean, I can see Bethany would want to risk her neck for her little brother, but you? I've never heard you say a good word about Jake. You battered him that time he blocked your toilet up with popcorn.'

'Bethany's my best friend. I'm doing it for her.'

'Hang on,' James gasped, as his face lit up with realisation. 'You're not doing this for Jake at all. Lover boy's in training as well, isn't he? You're doing this for Rat.'

'No,' Lauren gasped. 'I mean, Rat is Jake's training partner. But he's not my boyfriend.'

'Look Lauren, I know you've got the hots for Rat, but I'm on top of everything now. All my homework is up to date and my grades aren't bad. I must have spent a thousand hours running punishment laps and scrubbing toilets since I came to CHERUB. I'm not sticking my neck out for anyone unless it's life and death.'

'I thought you might say that,' Lauren grinned. 'So I'll have to call in the favour.'

'What favour? I don't owe you squat.'

James felt his heart jolt as Lauren gave him her evil smirk. Her face had altered since she was a toddler, but that expression hadn't changed a bit. It was the look she used to get right before jamming an ice-cream cornet in your face. It was the look she had when she broke the video and told their mum she saw James do it . . .

'Remember last year, when we were in Idaho?' Lauren said airily. 'Remember cheating on Kerry with a girl called Becky?'

James nodded grimly.

'I never told anyone; but, I mean, that information could slip out at any time and Kerry would kick your arse. So, I just want one little favour in return for eternal silence.'

'You *what*?' James yelled. 'That's not asking for a favour, that's blackmail.'

'I suppose you *could* call it that,' Lauren smirked. 'But James, you like Rat, you like Jake. Is it really such a big problem?'

'What kind of scumbag blackmails their own brother?' James asked indignantly.

Lauren ducked the question. 'James, me and Bethany have everything planned out. There's no way we'll get caught.'

'You know what,' James said, trying to sound confident, 'I'm calling your bluff. That thing with Becky happened more than a year ago and Kerry knows I'm no angel. She'll understand.'

Lauren grinned as she headed for the door. 'Fine, I'll go tell Kerry about Becky now then.'

James acted casual as Lauren headed out into the corridor and turned towards Kerry's room, but he couldn't keep up the act and scrambled after her.

Kerry's room was less than twenty metres away and Lauren was all set to knock by the time he'd caught up.

'OK, you win,' James whispered bitterly.

Lauren smiled contentedly. 'Thought I might.'

James huffed, 'But you can't keep blackmailing me. You've got to swear on our mum's grave never to tell anyone.'

'That's fair,' Lauren nodded. Then she broke into a grin and gave her brother a hug. 'Thanks, James.'

James was too pissed off to hug Lauren back, but he did have a grudging admiration for her cheek. Then Kerry's door popped open.

'Thought I could hear you two,' Kerry said. 'What's going on out here?'

'Nothing,' James said unconvincingly.

Lauren smiled at Kerry. 'I told this idiot to come and apologise to you.'

James was relieved to see that Kerry was smiling back at him. 'Guess I overreacted,' she said.

James shrugged. 'Sorry I laughed at that joke.'

'I'll live,' Kerry said as she stepped up and kissed James on the cheek. 'Did I hear you say you were behind on *Great Expectations* earlier?'

'Page one-twelve,' James nodded.

'That's further than me,' Kerry said. 'I'm never gonna catch up, so I got the film version out of the library. You want to come in and watch it?'

'Lifesaver,' James grinned, as he stepped into Kerry's room. Then he looked back at Lauren. 'Catch up with you later, sis.'

'I'll send you a text with the details,' Lauren said. 'Don't be late.'

Kerry looked a bit confused. 'What's she up to?'

James moved in to kiss Kerry back. 'Don't worry about it,' he grinned, as he looped his arm around her back and kicked the door shut with his trainer.

3. DARK

Angst kept James awake and he rolled out of bed a few minutes before the 2 a.m. alarm. He put on clothes that would make him hard to see in the dark: navy blue tracksuit with a baseball cap and black Adidas trainers.

Lauren and her best mate Bethany were waiting for him six floors down in a crawl space under the fire stairs.

'Thanks so much for coming,' Bethany grinned. 'I don't know how Lauren persuaded you. I never thought you'd agree in a million years.'

'No worries,' James said sourly, as he scowled at his sister.

James couldn't stand Bethany. She was intelligent and funny, but her mocking tone and giggling fits drove him nuts.

'Are you sure nobody saw you sneak down here?' Lauren asked.

James shrugged. 'Not as far as I can tell.'

'Cool,' Lauren said. 'The shooting range is next to the training compound, so if we get stopped, we'll say we've been assigned to a mission and we're heading off to sign out some stun guns.'

'That's only gonna work if it's someone who doesn't know us,' James pointed out.

'Yeah,' Bethany said. 'But how many people are gonna be wandering around campus at this time of the morning?'

'S'pose,' James said. 'So what's our plan?'

'The less time we're out of our beds, the less chance that we'll get noticed,' Lauren said. 'So I'll explain as we run. Grab that pack and get moving.'

'Are you sure this fire door isn't alarmed?' James asked, as he reached towards a large blue backpack.

Lauren shook her head. 'Have some faith, bro. Me and The Bethster have every detail worked out.'

James felt his shoulder sag as he hooked the pack over his arms. 'Christ, I thought we were taking them a few bits of food and stuff. What's in here, lead weights?'

'Me and Lauren have the clean clothes and food,' Bethany explained. 'You're carrying all our equipment: wire cutters, electrical tools and three sets of waders.'

'We're the brains, you're the muscle,' Lauren grinned, as she pushed the fire door open. It was early summer, but the air still had a nip to it at this time of the morning. There was no alarm and Lauren looked back at her brother as if to say *I told you so*.

Knowing their packs would jangle if they ran, the three kids kept to a brisk walk. They cut across a squelchy corner of a football pitch, before heading into the woods that covered all of the undeveloped areas on CHERUB campus. After dealing with a tangle of undergrowth, their feet found a dirt path.

'This takes longer than walking across the open fields, but

nobody uses this trail except for running cross-country,' Lauren explained.

'And if we do come across anyone, we can use the trees as cover,' Bethany added.

James felt slightly reassured: the girls had obviously put in a lot of thought.

Once they were clear of the buildings, Lauren broke into a jog. But they couldn't run fast because the moonlight penetrating the branches was barely enough to make out the path. James moved up alongside his sister.

'We're going right up to the back of campus,' Lauren continued, breathing heavily. 'Remember when me and Kyle were on punishment and had to dig out all those ditches?'

'Uh-huh.'

'Most of them carry water off the farms that surround campus. They all feed into the stream that runs across the training compound. In a couple of places we cleared out ditches that join the stream *inside* the training compound. All that stops you getting in is a few strands of barbed wire and we can easily snip that.'

'Before you ask, we've checked and it's not electrified or alarmed,' Bethany added.

'What about video cameras?' James asked. 'They're everywhere. The instructors know if a squirrel farts inside that compound.'

'There's fifty-three cameras,' Lauren nodded. 'But they all run off a single circuit. If we pull the fuse the whole lot stops working.'

'How'd you find that out?'

'Martin Newman got punishment, cleaning out the

administration building,' Bethany said. 'We sweet-talked him into making a copy of the electrical plans for the whole of campus.'

Lauren giggled. 'And now you've got to go to the cinema with him.'

'Shut up,' Bethany gasped. 'Don't you worry. I know I promised, but I'll find a way to wriggle out of it.'

'Martin's gonna be so gutted,' Lauren said. 'Doesn't it crack you up the way one of his ears sticks out and one doesn't?'

'You can't talk, Lauren. You fancy Rat and he's no oil painting.'

Both girls were giggling at their little in-jokes, which irritated James.

'Make some more noise, why don't you?' he sneered.

'There's nobody around,' Lauren said dismissively, but both girls realised they were being dumb and calmed down.

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It took ten minutes' jogging along the winding path to reach the back of the training compound. The three kids had slowly increased their speed as their eyes adjusted to the moonlight.

They were in good shape and none of the trio was seriously out of breath as they pulled up beside a ditch that was about a metre and a half deep. Lauren slid a torch out the back of her jeans and shone it around.

'This is the spot,' she whispered. 'James, get the waders out.'

James was relieved as he slipped the weight off his shoulders and unzipped the pack. It hadn't rained in a week,

so they could find some hard ground to change their footwear, but they'd passed through a couple of boggy areas and their trainers were coated in mud.

After throwing two smaller sets of booted rubber trousers at the girls, James caught a whiff of feet as he wriggled the waders up his legs and hooked the straps that held them up over his shoulders.

'Where'd you get these?' James moaned. 'They're nasty.'

'Kyle had them when he was on punishment,' Bethany explained. 'He wore them every day for six weeks, so I'm not surprised they're a bit ripe.'

'Once you get down in that ditch, Kyle's smell is the last thing you'll worry about,' Lauren said, as she threw something at James.

He narrowly missed the catch, but realised it was a head-mounted lamp as soon as he picked it off the ground.

'The light's good for fifty metres, but don't use it any more than you have to,' Lauren said.

James slipped the elastic strap around his head and quickly flipped the tiny LED bulbs on and off to make sure they were working. Bethany was still struggling to get into her waders and Lauren sorted her out while James hooked on what was now a much lighter pack and set off towards the ditch.

He considered jumping into the muddy water, but it would splash up his arms and make a racket, so he took a cautious approach, sitting on the edge of the ditch with his legs dangling and gently lowering himself down.

There was a squelch as his waders sank into the twenty centimetres of mud that lay beneath the stagnant, thigh-high

water. As his feet settled, James rested his palm against the clayish soil of the embankment to steady himself.

By this time, the girls stood atop the embankment and Bethany looked flustered.

'Maybe we shouldn't,' she said anxiously.

James rose to the tantalising possibility of Lauren's hair-brained scheme being called off.

'Maybe you're right,' he said, perhaps a little too eagerly. 'This is risky and the instructors are bound to punish Jake and Rat as well if we're caught.'

'We didn't come this far to quit,' Lauren said stiffly.

Bethany nodded apprehensively. 'Lauren's right - I always get the jitters.'

Lauren scowled at James. 'And don't *you* encourage her.'

James stared gloomily at the water as the two girls held hands and slipped down the embankment together. Bethany looked a touch wobbly as she took her first steps, but Lauren had months of wading experience under her belt and led off at a pace James and Bethany struggled to cope with.

It was less than ten metres from the spot where the path met the ditch to the tangle of barbed wire at the back of the training compound, but James' thighs already ached from pushing his legs through the swirling mud.

Lauren flipped on her head lamp to inspect the zigzagging strands of barbed wire. She tried pushing them, but they were taut.

'They've reinforced it since I was down here on punishment,' Lauren whispered anxiously. 'I hoped we'd be able to push the wires down and make a gap big enough to step through, but we'll need to cut it.'

James turned his back to Lauren so she could unzip his pack and grab the chunky set of wire cutters from inside.

'You know this is vandalism of CHERUB property?' James said. 'If they catch us, we're in serious trouble.'

Lauren sounded annoyed. 'Stop moaning, James. I'm trying to think.'

James watched as his sister artfully cut a single strand of wire. It left a gap of about half a metre at one corner of the ditch, right next to the embankment.

'We'll get a bit muddy, but we can squeeze through,' Lauren said.

She snipped off the loose strand of wire, before bending it up and hurling it into the trees. 'Nobody comes out here unless one of the ditches dams up, they won't miss one strand of wire.'

James agreed with his sister's logic, but wasn't in any mood to go around throwing compliments at her.

Squeezing under the wire was a palaver that involved going through one at a time and feeding their packs through afterwards. James was broader than the two girls and ended up with mud streaked across the back of his tracksuit.

Once they were through, it would have been quicker to climb out of the ditch and run along the embankment, but they didn't want to risk being caught on video so they carried on wading, keeping as low as possible with the white of their faces shielded by baseball caps.

Seventy metres beyond the wire, Lauren leaned against the embankment and quickly flashed the powerful beam of

her head lamp. It caught one side of a concrete shed before she ducked down again.

'Party time,' Lauren grinned.

The ditch here was shallower than where they'd dropped in. The three youngsters stepped out and set off at a run towards the shed, with globs of mud sliding down the outside of their waders. When they reached the shed wall, Lauren and Bethany pushed the straps holding the waders up off their shoulders.

'Get them off and put your trainers back on, James,' Lauren ordered.

'What's the point?' James asked. 'We've got to go back the way we came.'

'No we don't,' Lauren explained. 'There's only ever one training instructor on duty at night. As soon as they see that the cameras have stopped working, they'll come down here. We'll run in the other direction to the main training building. We can hand the packages across to the trainees, then we'll sprint out via the front gate.'

'What about the alarm?' James asked.

'Doesn't matter,' Bethany said. 'They'll find out that it went off eventually, but the instructor won't be anywhere near the control room to hear it.'

'Doesn't it sound anywhere else, like the security console on the main gate?'

Lauren shrugged. 'Not as far as we know.'

James shook his head as he kicked the waders away and went into the pack for his trainers. 'You mean you *don't* know for sure?'

'It's pretty unlikely, James. I mean, why would anyone on

the main gate need to know if an alarm went off at the training compound?"

'But you're not sure,' James hissed furiously. 'You *guaranteed* that we wouldn't get caught!'

'Yeah,' Lauren shrugged, 'but I always knew there was some risk. I mean, I only said about the guarantee to make sure you came.'

The realisation that Lauren had lied on top of the blackmail made James furious. He had his trainers on now and he stood up and faced his sister off. 'I'll get you back for this. You're out of order.'

'If you do I'll tell Kerry,' Lauren grinned back.

'You swore on our mum's grave.'

'Tell Kerry what?' Bethany asked.

James and Lauren both snapped at her, 'Mind your own.'

Bethany knew James didn't like her, but she was annoyed with Lauren. 'We're in the middle of the training compound here,' she said acidly. 'Can't you leave the family feud till we're back in our rooms?'

She had a point.

'OK,' Lauren said, looking at Bethany, 'you put all the waders in the big pack. James, there's a plastic box with electrical tools in the front compartment of your pack. Grab that and come with me.'

James walked around to the front of the shed, happy at least that he hadn't landed the filthy task of cramming three slippery sets of waders into the pack. The shed door was aluminium with a yellow and black warning sign riveted to it.

ELECTRICAL HAZARD
640 VOLTS
QUALIFIED PERSONNEL ONLY
DANGER OF DEATH

'You said this was just a fuse box,' James gasped.

Lauren shrugged. 'There must be some other stuff in there, but I can handle it.'

James grinned with relief when he spotted the heavy duty padlock on the door. 'We haven't got our lock guns,' he said. 'And there's no way we'll manage to crack that monster off.'

'Don't need to,' Lauren said, as she slid a key out of her jeans and pushed it into the padlock. 'Good old Martin. It was in the same filing cabinet as the plans for the electrical system.'

They stepped into the shed, which hummed with the sound from a washing-machine-sized transformer. A panel mounted on the wall opposite had a dozen rows of switches with fuses lined up underneath.

'Open the box - I need an electrical screwdriver.'

James' fingers were numb from the water in the ditch and he fumbled as he peeled back the plastic lid.

'Which one's the electrical screwdriver?'

Lauren shot him a contemptuous look as she snatched it. 'The one that looks like a screwdriver, maybe? Point your light at me and keep your head still while I work.'

She looked along the rows of switches. Each one controlled a different system inside the training compound and they were labelled with strips of faded Dymo tape: SHOWERS, LIGHTS (INT), LIGHTS (EXT FLOOD), LIGHTS

(ASSAULT COURSE), WATER HEATER, GOLF BUGGY (RECHARGING). The circuit labelled CCTV was halfway along the third row.

'Here we go,' Lauren grinned. 'I'll replace the fuse with one that's blown. When the instructor comes in here, it'll look like the circuit fused because of a power surge or something.' She leaned in close and read the writing on the fuse casing. 'Fifteen amp, size C.'

Lauren reached into the box of electrical stuff and grabbed a chunky fuse with a green label. She flipped the main switch for the CCTV circuit to the off position before using the screwdriver to pop out the working fuse. After replacing it with the pre-blown fuse, she turned the circuit back on. A red warning light came to life, confirming that the fuse was a dud.

'OK,' Lauren said, grinning confidently. 'So far so good.'

They both flipped off their head lamps as they stepped outside. Bethany's hands and arms were covered in mud, a result of her struggle to get the waders back into James' pack.

'All done?' she asked.

Lauren nodded as she looked at her watch. 'Two thirty-one a.m.,' she said. 'I reckon we've got about ten minutes before the instructor gets here to replace that fuse.'