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Opening extract from

The General

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1. DEMO

The anarchist organisation known as Street Action Group (SAG) first came to light in summer 2003 when its leader Chris Bradford hijacked the rostrum at an anti-Iraq-war demonstration in London's Hyde Park. Bradford urged a peaceful crowd to attack police officers, before setting light to straw-filled effigies of Prime Minister Tony Blair and US President George W. Bush.

By 2006 SAG had built a cult following and was strong enough to begin staging its own anti-government protests. These culminated in July with the Summer Mayhem March *through central Birmingham. Dozens of cars were vandalised, windows were broken, more than thirty protestors were arrested and a police officer was stabbed.*

In the months that followed, prison sentences were handed down to several senior SAG members involved in the rioting. Heavy police presence wherever SAG planned to appear made staging violent protests increasingly difficult.

Chris Bradford became bitter at what he called 'state oppression' and an MI5 agent sent to infiltrate SAG made a shocking discovery: Bradford was trying to acquire guns and bomb-making equipment in order to transform SAG into a terrorist organisation.

(Excerpt from a CHERUB mission briefing for James Adams, October 2007)

It was December 21st, the last Friday before Christmas. The sky was purple and strings of lights dangled between Victorian lampposts on the pedestrianised London street. The pubs around Covent Garden tube station were crammed and office workers huddled in doorways smoking cigarettes. Teens gawped into shops well out of their price range and The Body Shop was full of miserable-looking men buying last-minute gifts.

Shoppers and drinkers ignored a rectangular pen made from metal crowd barriers as they shuffled past, though some noted the irony that two dozen police officers in fluorescent jackets lined up to face thirteen protestors inside the barriers.

James Adams was one of the thirteen. Sixteen years old, he was dressed in a bulky army surplus jacket and twenty-four-hole Doc Marten boots. His hair was shaved down to a number one on the sides and a shaggy, green-tinted Mohican ran from his forehead down to the collar of his jacket. He banged his gloved hands together to fight the cold as cops gave him stern looks.

Chris Bradford stood three metres away. Well built, Bradford had scruffy ginger hair, a baggy hoodie worn with the fluffy lining on the outside and two cameras filming him. One was held by a cop, who walked the perimeter with a titchy camcorder. The other was a more impressive beast. It sat on the shoulder of a BBC cameraman and a lamp mounted on top shone its light in Bradford's face.

'So, Mr Bradford,' BBC correspondent Simon Jett said. He had a silk scarf tucked into his overcoat and a microphone in hand. 'Today's turnout must be a disappointment. Many people are saying that the Street Action Group is on its last legs.'

Bradford's green eyes bulged and his shovel-sized hands shifted towards the correspondent's lapels. 'Who's been saying that?' he growled. 'Gimme names and addresses. It's always *certain sources*, but who are they? I'll tell you who – it's people who are running scared of us.'

Jett was delighted. Bradford's combo of slight menace and fruit-and-veg-seller cockney accent always made good TV.

'So how many protestors were you expecting to see here today?'

Bradford snatched a glance at his watch and bared his teeth. 'Trouble is, most of our crew are still in bed three o'clock in the afternoon. I guess I set the kick-off time a little too early.'

Jett nodded with fake sincerity. 'You sound like you're taking this lightly, but you *must* feel that the wind has been taken out of SAG's sails. Especially when you compare the turnout here with the thousand-plus people on the streets of Birmingham last summer?'

Bradford batted the plastic hood over the camera lens. 'You wait and see, Mr BBC,' he snarled, sticking his face right up to the camera. 'Inequality breeds hatred. There's more poverty and inequality in Britain today than ever before. If you're sitting at home in your nice house watching the likes of me on your thirty-two-inch LCD, you might not see the revolution rising up from the streets. But

you mark my words: we're coming to get you.'

Jett could barely contain his smile. 'Do you have a timescale? When can we expect this revolution?'

'Next month, next year, who knows?' Bradford shrugged. 'Things *will* change radically before the end of this decade, but if you only watch the biased rubbish the BBC churns out, the first you'll know it is when my boys kick your front door down.'

The correspondent nodded. 'Chris Bradford, thank you very much for talking to me.'

'Cram it,' Bradford sneered, as the cameraman turned off the light and moved the weight of the big camera off his shoulder.

Bradford refused Jett's offer of a handshake and skulked towards a lonely-looking woman on the opposite side of the pen.

James overheard Jett telling his cameraman to take some footage from outside of the pen before they left. The policemen lifting up the barriers to let the BBC crew out asked when the story was likely to be on the news.

'Don't hold your breath,' Jett said drearily. 'I'm down here in case something kicks off, but I told my editor before I left: SAG is yesterday's news.'

'Hope so,' the policeman said. 'That officer up in Brum lost a lot of blood. She was lucky not to be killed.'

Jett nodded sympathetically. 'You take care of yourself, officer, and have a great Christmas.'

'You too,' the officer smiled.

As the cameraman filmed the barriers and lines of police, James raised the hood of his jacket and pulled the drawstring

tight so that it covered most of his face. CHERUB agents are trained to keep away from the media and he gained further anonymity by taking out his mobile and staring down at the screen, typing a message to his girlfriend, Dana.

HOPE YOU'RE FEELING BETTER. TEXT ME I'M A LONELY BOY!

James pressed send and regretted it straight away. Dana hadn't replied to his last message and *I'm lonely* made him sound weak. He couldn't work out what he'd done to piss her off, but she'd been acting weird for days.

Two metal barriers were lifted away, opening up one end of the steel pen. The petite inspector in charge of crowd control bawled out, 'It's three-thirty, people. Time to march on Downing Street.'

The inspector knew she'd been heard, but the protestors ignored her. She grabbed a megaphone from a colleague before repeating herself.

'This demonstration was scheduled for three-fifteen,' she blared. 'You've already been allowed an extra fifteen minutes for assembly. Anyone not leaving the assembly point now will be arrested for a breach of the peace. Now MOVE IT!'

Bradford stepped towards the officer and glanced at his watch. A lone press photographer snapped a photo as the big man faced the squat officer with her fluorescent jacket and megaphone.

'Come on, sweetheart,' Bradford said, turning on the charm and tapping the face of his watch. 'We're waiting for a few more chaps to arrive. I've sent my man up to the station. The underground trains must be delayed, or something.'

'You've had your time,' the inspector said, shaking her

head resolutely. 'My men want to get home. So you can march, you can disperse peacefully, or you can take a ride in the back of a police van. What you can't do is waste any more of our time.'

Bradford spat on the pavement, before turning towards his pathetic gathering. 'You heard the nice lady. Let's roll, people.'

The photographer's flash popped as thirteen protestors filed out of the pen with fluorescent police jackets surrounding them. The cops exchanged grins, amused by SAG's pathetic showing.

Shoppers watched curiously as the march filed past and kids gawped as if it was a continuation of the street entertainment and human statues in the covered market a hundred metres away. As the police led the protestors briskly over the cobbles around Covent Garden market, James began eyeballing clumps of people in the uniform of rebellion: a mixture of punk, Goth and army surplus similar to his own. Some joined the back of the march, quickly doubling its strength, while others tracked its progress from a distance.

Bradford sidled up to the inspector as they turned out of the market and on to a side road leading downhill towards the Strand, a broad avenue of shops, theatres and hotels less than fifty metres from the north bank of the River Thames. James was near the head of the march and Bradford gave him a wink as two dozen youths dressed in sportswear emerged from a side street.

'Looks like someone turned up after all,' Bradford said to the inspector. 'Someone must have written the wrong address on our invitation cards.'

The inspector didn't give Bradford the satisfaction of an answer, but James could tell she was on edge. She grabbed her radio and ordered backup as she realised that the protestors had made a mockery of the police's attempt to assemble all the demonstrators in one place.

'SAG!' Bradford shouted, punching his fist in the air as the tracksuits and trainers merged with the dreadlocks and donkey jackets of SAG activists.

'SAG!' the crowd of close to a hundred chanted back.

James' heart sped as a fellow protestor caught the heel of his boot.

'Sorry mate.'

The crowd was tight and the cops now had bodies swarming around them. SAG had assembled the same toxic combination of hardcore anarchists and local youths looking for aggro that had kicked off the riot in Birmingham seventeen months earlier.

'Oggy, oggy, oggy,' Bradford shouted.

'SAG, SAG, SAG!' the crowd shouted back.

Another fifty marchers had joined the fray by the time James stepped on to the Strand and turned right. A huge drum was booming across the street and the shaven-headed drummer was leading a crowd of protestors out of an alleyway that ran up from the riverbank.

The cop nearest to James had spit running down his back. His baton was drawn but the officers were afraid to break formation and lash out because they were heavily outnumbered.

An amplified chant went up through the police megaphone. 'We've just nicked your megaphone; we've just nicked your megaphone, la-la-la-la.'

Everyone laughed as the drummer and his crew cut through snarled traffic and moved to the front of the march, but the next chant had a nastier edge.

'Let's stab all the coppers; let's stab all the coppers, la-la-la-la.'

A vast roar blew up as James glanced around and saw that the cops had changed tactics and dropped behind the protestors. Sirens wailed in the surrounding roads as the march merged with another large group of SAG sympathisers pouring out of a bendy bus.

There were more protestors than pavement and bodies spilled into the road and mingled with the crawling traffic. Horns blared and an impatient cab driver lost his door mirror and got his side window kicked in.

A gap between the buses enabled James to see across the street where more protestors were coming up from the riverbank, as the front of the march headed for Trafalgar Square.

James had lost track of Chris Bradford and all the other SAG members he'd got to know over the last seven weeks. He felt disorientated and was surrounded by a bunch of thuggish lads not much older than himself. They cheered, chanted and egged each other on, as the BBC cameraman balanced precariously on a concrete bollard, trying to film the chanting crowd from a high vantage point.

'Told you it was worth coming down here,' the lad next to James grinned, swigging from a can of beer as more glass smashed in the distance.

'Bloody 'ell,' his mate laughed. 'That was a big one. Someone's done a shop.'

His friends nodded. 'It's kicking off, man,' one said, before another chant of 'SAG, SAG, SAG!' ripped through the crowd.

Less than five metres from James, two Goth girls – who looked like the last people on earth to start a riot – pulled the metal liner out of a litter bin and hurled it through the front window of a sandwich bar. The crowd started clapping and a shout of 'Down with sandwiches,' went through the stolen megaphone.

The action of the two women embarrassed several testosterone-fuelled males into action. Four more shop windows caved within seconds and a man in a flash suit was dragged out the back of a taxi and given a slap before being relieved of a wallet and a Rolex.

James couldn't see over the crowd, but could hear hundreds of triumphant voices and the crunch of broken glass under his boot. Things were about to kick off, big time.