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Opening extract from

The Sleepwalker

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1. BACK

Bethany Parker had been away on a mission for eight months, which was long enough for plenty to change on CHERUB campus. There was a line of freshly planted saplings along the path that led to the main entrance, new floor tiles in the main building and an enormous satellite dish in the gravel outside the mission preparation building.

But it was the other cherubs that really made Bethany feel like she'd missed out: girls had different hairstyles and cute boys had succumbed to acne; there were qualified agents she'd never even seen and new red shirts who seemed impossibly tiny.

As she stepped out of the lift on the ground floor, Bethany spotted the handler Meryl Spencer. The athletically built Kenyan broke into a warm smile.

'Nice tan, Bethany. We've been hearing good things about you.'

Bethany was slightly embarrassed by the compliment. 'Thanks Miss . . . I'm looking for Lauren, have you seen her around?'

'She's probably over by the vehicle shop. There's supposed

to be some kind of race, or something. I expect your brother Jake will be up there too.'

Bethany felt guilty as she realised she'd prioritised finding her best friend over her kid brother. After jogging down a short corridor, she stepped through the back doors of campus' main building and ran down the path between the all-weather tennis courts. Her combat trousers and boots felt clumsy after eight months in parts of Brazil and the United States where she'd rarely worn anything heavier than shorts and sandals.

The sun was dropping below the horizon as she crossed the deserted playing fields. Orange light pierced the trees and made her squint, but being back on campus felt good. The cool evening air was a change from humidity and she deliberately ran through the muddiest part of a goalmouth because she felt more at home with a bit of CHERUB campus stuck to her brand-new boots: after a struggle she'd discovered that her old pair didn't fit.

'Lauren,' Bethany shouted, as she came over the brow of a slight hill. Down below, a crowd of thirty kids were gathered in a car park. They mostly faced towards a squat workshop with aluminium sides. The three sets of hangar-style doors along the front were open. Inside were brightly lit workstations covered with tools and four cars in various states of disassembly.

All vehicles in the CHERUB fleet got upgraded in this workshop: stiffer suspension, satellite tracking, performance-tuned engine, plus tinted glass and subtly altered controls to make life easier for under-aged drivers. To ensure the highest standards of reliability, routine servicing and repair work was

also done on campus, along with occasional special jobs such as fitting a car with a hidden compartment, or installing listening devices.

Quite a few people turned to see who was shouting. Lauren Adams gasped as she recognised her best friend. She backed out of the crowd and charged up the hill to give Bethany a hug.

'My god,' Lauren screamed happily, as the two girls pulled each other tight. 'I didn't even know you were back. Why didn't you text me?'

Bethany smiled and made a little squealing sound. 'I wanted it to be a surprise.'

'When did you get back from Brazil?'

Bethany looked at her watch. 'Our jet landed at the RAF base down the road five hours ago, but I had to go straight into an emergency debriefing with Maureen Evans and then I had to see the chairwoman.'

Lauren looked at her friend's navy CHERUB T-shirt. 'Promotion too. Well done!'

'Zara told me I deserved black,' Bethany said. 'But you only get that for outstanding performance on *more* than one mission, no matter how long you're away.'

Lauren nodded sympathetically, though she was secretly pleased that she still outranked her friend. 'So how was the mission?'

'Hard work, but we took care of business in the end. How about you, are you still suspended?'

Lauren shrugged. 'I spent a few days doing security tests on RAF bases, and I helped a pair of new agents settle into a mission over in Northern Ireland, but I'm still

banned from going on any big missions of my own for another month.'

'I brought you back a present, but I thought I'd save it for your birthday next week,' Bethany said, before stopping to give a curious look at a small girl dashing up the hill towards them.

'This is Coral,' Lauren explained, as the six-year-old sidled up to her. 'When I got punished I had to go and help out in the junior block. You know, putting the little red shirts to bed and reading them stories and stuff? But I enjoyed it, so I still go over there to help out and I get enough learning credits out of it that I don't have to do stupid dance or drama lessons any more.'

'Cool,' Bethany smiled. 'Though I've never understood what you've got against drama classes.'

Lauren tutted as Coral slid her hand in Lauren's trouser pocket and shyly nuzzled her leg.

'Drama's *so* moronic,' Lauren moaned. 'Remember that time Mrs Dickerson had us waving our arms around pretending to be trees for a whole hour?'

Bethany laughed as she imitated the teacher's voice. *'Breathe deeeeeeep and feel your body move with the wind rushing through your branches.*'

'I wouldn't mind so much, but you can't breathe deep,' Lauren said. 'That drama studio has no windows and it always stinks of feet.'

The two girls laughed harder than the joke deserved, because it felt good being back together.

'Coral, this is my friend, Bethany,' Lauren said, as she pulled the little girl out from behind her legs. 'Stop acting daft and say hello.'

Bethany squatted down and gave the tiny girl a smile.

'Coral's only been on campus a few days,' Lauren explained. 'Her big brother's already rumbling with the other red shirts, but Coral's a bit overwhelmed so I'm keeping an eye until she settles in.'

'Hello Bethany,' Coral said, as she reached out to shake hands.

Bethany noticed chips of Lauren's black varnish on Coral's fingernails as she took her little hand. 'Aren't you formal!' she said. 'Nice to meet you, Coral.'

Coral seemed less shy after the introductions. Lauren and Bethany each took one of her hands and stretched the youngster between them as they walked downhill towards the gathering in front of the vehicle workshop.

'So what's going on in the garage?' Bethany asked.

'It's mainly about boys flexing their egos and getting grease on their overalls,' Lauren said. 'You can cut the testosterone down there with a knife.'

'I see,' Bethany said, though she clearly didn't.

'They retired a couple of the old golf buggies the staff use for getting around campus,' Lauren continued. 'But instead of scrapping them, Terry Campbell has been helping some of the boys convert them into racing carts by fitting motorbike engines. You know what James is like about anything even *slightly* to do with motorbikes? I've hardly seen him since we got back from summer hostel.'

'And my brother's involved too?'

Lauren nodded. 'Jake's part of James' crew.'

With Coral still holding their hands, Lauren and Bethany eased between the crowd and stepped through the open

front of the garage. There were two golf carts, each surrounded by boys in blue overalls.

The carts were dented and rusty after more than a decade of plying the paths around campus, but instead of being allowed to die with dignity, they'd had their batteries and electric motors stripped out and replaced by the engine and transmission from a motorbike and a selection of dubious accessories stuck on the outside. James' team had added four sets of wing mirrors, gold paint and go-faster stripes.

'What a heap of crap,' Bethany said, making sure everyone heard as she stepped up to James Adams' stocky legs, which poked from beneath the jacked-up buggy.

'Hey, sis,' Bethany's eleven-year-old brother Jake said, as he turned away from a tool chest. 'Did you bring me a prezzie?'

'I've got three loads of dirty laundry you can have if you like,' Bethany said, before giving him a brief hug. Like most siblings Jake and Bethany loved each other deep down, but in their case you needed a submarine with a powerful searchlight to get there.

James slid out from under the buggy and spoke to his three team-mates as he sat up. 'I put a clamp and half a roll of sticky tape over the seals, so we shouldn't have any more problems with oil pressure.'

'I'm back, James,' Bethany said, grinning and holding her arms out exuberantly. 'Are you pleased to see me?'

James shook his head with contempt as he lifted up the buggy and kicked away the jacks, before lowering it to the ground. He was shocked at how different Bethany looked. She'd grown eight centimetres, she had much nicer boobs

and the tan made her look more than thirteen. If she'd been a couple of years older she was the kind of girl he'd probably try getting off with.

'You've certainly changed,' James said, as he looked around and saw that the other two members of his crew – thirteen-year-olds Rat and Andy – practically had their tongues hanging out.

'Bethany, listen to this baby when we fire her up,' Rat said eagerly, as he lunged towards the cockpit and reached in to press the starter button.

'I'm nearest,' Andy said, as the two boys leaned into the golf buggy from opposite sides and almost cracked skulls.

Andy reached the button first and there was a clattering sound, followed by a huge plume of foul-smelling exhaust and finally a roaring noise that made the metal walls of the workshop shudder.

'Mr Campbell showed us how to tune the exhaust to make it as noisy as possible,' Andy shouted, as he studied Bethany's reaction.

'Pretty cool, eh sis?' Jake yelled.

The noise made Coral squeeze her hands over her ears as Lauren and Bethany looked at one another and shook their heads. Lauren leaned across, shouting into her best friend's ear, 'I *think* we're supposed to be impressed by this.'

Bethany shook her head and laughed. 'They're so manly! How can we possibly resist them?'

2. BARGAIN

Karen had to collect six coupons in the newspaper. Once she had the full set, she went online and battled with an overloaded airline website for the bargain of the century, snaffling four flights for a long weekend of Christmas shopping in New York with her son, daughter and mother-in-law.

The offer was only valid on certain flights on certain days of the week. She ended up only being able to book flights in September and even then she had to pay a supplement to get the earlier flight back so that the kids would only miss one day of school (the headmaster gave her a withering look, as if the loss of a single Monday would destroy her children's career prospects).

But Karen liked the idea of taking her kids to New York and she bit like a Rottweiler whenever a bargain came her way. Despite check-in queues, the godawful in-flight food and monster snarl-ups passing through immigration when they arrived at JFK, it had been a good weekend.

They'd been up the Empire State Building; they'd stayed in a swanky hotel and melted a pair of credit cards at an

outlet mall ten miles out of the city. Karen's mother-in-law spoiled the kids rotten and the two youngsters had loved every junk-fuelled sleep-deprived minute.

Angus was eleven and Megan nine. They had the right-hand pair of seats out of the four in the jet's centre aisle, with their mum next door and Grandma fast asleep at the opposite end. They were two hours out of New York and the crew had dimmed the cabin lights and turned up the heat to try getting the passengers to rest, but Angus was under the spell of a new Gameboy game and Megan had found a film to watch on the little seatback screen in front of her. Their mum would have preferred them to catch up on sleep, but air travel always gave her a thumping headache and she wasn't going to fuss as long as they kept quiet.

Megan's film was a romantic comedy about a biker who falls in love with a doctor he meets after crashing his motorbike. The biker shaves his beard, buys a suit and gets a straight job which leads to all kinds of situations which were hilarious if you asked Megan, or boring romantic crap if you asked Angus. He'd watched the first five minutes before flipping open his Gameboy.

But as the film neared its climax – where the biker throws a punch at a wedding and runs away in shame before discovering that the doctor loves him for who he *really* is, not who he's pretending to be, Megan's headset kept going on the blink and she was only getting sound out of one ear. She reached under the armrest and swiped Angus' headphones from his lap.

'Hey,' Angus snapped, as he reached across and grabbed the plastic headband. 'What are you playing at?'

'Mine are busted,' Megan said. 'You're not using 'em.'

'But I might use them later.'

'You can have them back then, you div,' Megan said, as she pointed frantically at the little LCD seatback screen. 'My film's almost finished and I can't miss the end.'

Karen opened her eyes and looked crossly at her children. 'Pack it in, you two. Angus, give her the headphones.'

'But then I'm screwed for the whole rest of the flight! I know what she's like. She says it's for a minute but I'll never get them back.'

Karen grabbed her own headphones and waved them in the air. They were still wrapped in cellophane. 'Angus, if you need headphones later you can have these,' she said. 'Now can it. You're both acting like spoiled brats.'

Karen was partly cross with the kids, but also with her mother-in-law who let them eat junk food and get away with murder. It always led to them acting hyper.

Megan couldn't resist a triumphant smile as she snatched her brother's headphones. But as she gave the cord a tug, the two-pronged jack at the end snagged the underside of Angus' Gameboy and it slid off his lap and hit the carpet between his legs.

'Careful, you slag,' Angus snarled.

Karen's eyes opened wide. 'Angus, how many times have I told you not to call your sister that? It's a *very* unpleasant thing to call a girl.'

Megan tutted. 'He's so dumb. He doesn't even know what it means.'

Angus laughed. 'It means you like letting boys feel you up.'

Before Angus knew it, Karen had grabbed her son by his newly purchased New York Yankees shirt and squeezed his arm. 'Grounded,' she said firmly. 'I will *not* tolerate you speaking like that, Angus . . . Two weeks, no pocket money and no rugby club either.'

'What!' Angus gasped. 'That's bogus. I just got into the first team.'

Megan scrunched down so that she could keep watching her film below her mother's outstretched arm. Karen let go of Angus when she saw the filthy look she was getting from the woman sitting across the aisle. She felt like a bad mother for losing her temper, for clawing Angus and for having a son who spoke noisily about his little sister getting felt up.

Angus scowled defiantly at his mum. 'Dad paid over a hundred quid for new boots and kit. You can't stop me going to rugby.'

'Watch me,' Karen said, as she gave him a look that made it clear she meant business. 'If I'd used that language when I was your age, your granddad would have put me over his knee.'

Angus thought it was probably best not to push his mum any further, and he reached between his legs and picked up the Gameboy. He'd paused the game when he started rowing with Megan, but the pause had been knocked off when the Gameboy hit the floor and now the *game over* screen flashed on the tiny display.

'Now look what you've done,' Angus said, as he dug his sister in the ribs.

'For god's sake, you two,' Karen shouted as she pulled off her seatbelt and jumped out of her seat. 'Can't you leave each

other in peace for five minutes? Megan, you come across this side and I'll sit between you.'

'But it's the end,' Megan protested. 'There's like two minutes to go.'

'Now,' Karen steamed, as she popped the buckle of her daughter's seatbelt and hoisted her to her feet.

As Megan stepped up on to her seat cushion, Karen realised that they'd woken up the couple in the seats in front and there were *bad parent* stares coming at her from all directions. Megan straddled the armrest and dropped into her mum's seat, then began a desperate attempt to reconnect her headphones and find the right channel on the LCD screen.

Angus undid his seatbelt and stepped into the aisle.

'And where do you think you're going?' Karen asked.

Angus rolled his eyes, as if his mum was the stupidest person on the planet. 'There are so many places to go on an aeroplane, aren't there?' he said. 'Where do you think? I need a piss.'

Angus was bitter at being grounded. The only way to get back at his mum was to maximise her embarrassment, so he made sure that the word *piss* came out loud enough for everyone to hear.

The eleven-year-old had kicked off his trainers, but aeroplane toilets aren't the cleanest places on earth and Angus didn't fancy planting his socks in someone else's urine, so he reached under the footrest and grabbed his Nikes.

As he wriggled his sock into his right shoe there was a deafening bang. The floor shuddered and there was a

grinding sound as the jet rolled violently to one side. Angus' hip slammed painfully into the seat across the aisle. Within a second his feet were off the ground and his head bashed into a tray table before he began a helpless slide across the laps of three passengers towards the windows.

Just before Angus smashed head first into the side of the aircraft, a man's hands reached up from the middle seat and saved him. One hand caught around the waistband of his tracksuit bottoms while the other thumped into his chest, pinning his body against the seatbacks. The blow knocked the wind out of him, but it was less painful than going head first into the aircraft window would have been.

The hands were all that kept Angus from crashing into the luggage bins and light fittings as the aircraft continued to roll. People screamed as they realised the aircraft was flying upside down. Angus' legs dangled as plastic cups, spectacles, meal trays and iPods rained on the plastic ceiling. The long hair of a woman in the row behind hung over her head and a steward who'd been walking along the aisle slammed into the roof.

But there was some relief as the roll continued and the jet came full circle. Although the aircraft continued to shudder, some sense of normality returned as people realised that they were back the right way up and apparently staying there.

'Everybody get in your seats and fasten your belts,' a steward shouted tersely as he stepped over the debris in the aisle and rushed to help his stricken colleague.

The interior of the jet became oddly calm as people, not knowing what to expect, cast their eyes upwards as if awaiting instructions from god.

Too stunned to speak, Angus found himself being manhandled by the three adults he was lying across. He was soon standing in the aisle, facing the embarrassing reality of tracksuit bottoms down to his knees.

But people had other things on their minds, and even Megan was too shocked to smirk as her mother tugged Angus back to his seat.

'Sit down and pull your belt on tight, sweetheart. Are you OK?'

Angus' chest hurt where he'd been pinned against the seatbacks, but it wasn't bad and he gave his mum a reassuring nod, before turning to thank the stocky man who'd saved him from a nasty bump on the head.

'What happened?' Megan asked.

Her grandmother reached across and put a hand on the girl's knee. 'It was probably just turbulence, sweetie.'

'But there was that big bang,' Angus said anxiously, searching for the Gameboy he'd left resting on his seat.

A calm female voice came over the intercom. 'Ladies and gentlemen, I'm Maxine O'Connor, your co-pilot. We appear to have suffered a mechanical failure and my colleagues and I are currently trying to establish the exact cause. In the meantime, please stay in your seats with your seatbelts tightly fastened and keep the aisles clear to enable the crew to access any injured or distressed passengers. Also we appear to have some injuries, so if there is a doctor or other medical practitioner onboard, we would appreciate it if you could make yourself known to the cabin crew at this time.'