Helping your children choose books they will love

I reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

CHERUB: People's Republic

Written by

Robert Muchamore

Published by

Hodder Children's Books

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

1. LAPS

July 2011

Three women sat in the chairwoman's office on CHERUB campus. Blinds shut out low evening sun as the air conditioner battled high summer.

'Tell me about him,' Dr D said, speaking in a brash New York accent as she studied a photo of a twelve-year-old. 'He's a good-looking boy. Do I see a touch of Arab in him?'

Dr D was tiny and the wrong side of sixty. Despite the heat she wore a tartan cape, thick grey stockings and knee-high boots. She looked like someone's cranky old secretary, but was actually a senior officer with the American intelligence service – the CIA.

Zara Asker was another spy who didn't look the part. CHERUB's forty-year-old Chairwoman sat opposite Dr D, wearing a three-quid plastic watch and her youngest

son's dinner down the front of her dress.

'Ryan joined CHERUB fourteen months ago,' Zara explained. 'His grandparents were a Syrian, a German, an Irishwoman and a Pakistani.'

Dr D raised one eyebrow. 'Sounds like the first line of a bad joke.'

'Ryan was mainly brought up in Saudi Arabia and Russia. His dad was a geologist in the oil industry, but drink and gambling problems led to debts and he turned up dead under some rubbish bags. Nobody knows if it was murder or suicide. Ryan reached Britain in 2009 with his mother and three younger brothers. She'd bluffed her way into a private treatment program for a rare form of cancer, but got kicked out when she hit the limit on her credit cards. Immigration tried sending the family back to Syria, but she was too sick. She died penniless in an NHS ward, with four boys under eleven and no known family.'

'Are they all here at CHERUB?' Dr D asked.

Zara nodded. 'We never split families. Ryan's the eldest, he's got twin brothers who are about to turn ten and Theo who's seven.'

'You said Ryan's not had much mission experience,' Dr D noted.

'Just a couple of one-day things,' Zara said. 'But he's champing at the bit, and the operation you're proposing should be well within his capabilities.'

Dr D nodded as she reached forward and dropped Ryan's photo on to a glass coffee table. 'So when do I get to meet him?'

*

Ryan didn't know he was being talked about as he strolled off the campus athletics track. It was baking hot and he had a six pack showing as he stretched up the bottom of his grey T-shirt and used it to mop sweat off his face.

The twelve-year-old was muscular but not bulky. He had brown eyes, straight dark hair in need of a trim and a silver stud in a recently pierced ear. After two mouthfuls from an underpowered drinking fountain, Ryan went up three paved steps towards a tatty shed used by the athletics staff.

It was gloomy inside because the frosted window was boarded following an encounter with a football. There was nobody home, but the coaches' smell lingered in tracksuits and musty all-weather gear on wall hooks.

A clipboard on the window ledge bulged with crumpled forms. You could flip back and read through four months of minor crimes paid off with punishment laps.

A bead of sweat pelted the A4 page as Ryan grabbed the Biro-on-a-string and started filling boxes on the first blank page: *Time, date, name, agent number, laps run, reason for punishment.*

This last box irritated Ryan and he was tempted to write *No good reason.*

He had no problem accepting the tough discipline faced by agents who broke CHERUB rules, but having to run five kilometres because he'd got a fit of the giggles

was ridiculous. Especially when other kids doing the same had got off.

'You holding on to that all night?' someone asked irritably.

Ryan's heavy breathing meant he hadn't heard the girl in red CHERUB shirt and pink Nikes step up behind. He reluctantly scrawled *Laughing in class*, signed his name and passed the board over.

'All yours,' he said sourly.

Ryan jogged along a gravel path towards campus' eight-storey main building. Campus was dead because loads of kids were holidaying at the CHERUB summer hostel. A lift took him up to the seventh floor, but he broke off before reaching his bedroom to get a drink from a small kitchen.

'Ryan, you reek!' Grace complained, wafting in front of her nose as he squeezed by.

Grace was Ryan's age, but a full head shorter. Her best friend Chloe sat bare-legged on the worktop between a microwave and three dessert glasses, which were halfway to becoming trifles.

The vibe was awkward because Grace was the closest Ryan had ever come to having a girlfriend and their weekend of holding hands and awkward silences had ended with Grace lobbing macaroni cheese at his head.

'Can't help stinking,' Ryan explained, as he grabbed a pint glass from a cupboard and quarter filled it with ice chips from the dispenser in the fridge door. 'Punishment laps. In this *bloody* heat.'

The girls seemed curious as Ryan took a bottle of Diet

Pepsi from inside the fridge door and poured it over the ice. As he gulped fizz, Grace bashed up pink wafer biscuits before sprinkling the crumbs over custard in the dessert glasses.

'It's not like you, Ryan,' Chloe said, with a slight tease in her voice. 'You're usually a good boy.'

'Blame Max Black,' Ryan said, before ripping off a vast Pepsi-fuelled belch.

'Dirty pig!' Chloe protested, before Ryan began his story.

'We were in Mr Bartlett's maths class. Bartlett goes out of the room to fetch something. Max and Kaitlyn had been rowing all through morning break. Kaitlyn calls Max a *mongoloid*. And you know how oranges shrivel up when they're really old?'

The girls looked mystified by this turn in the story, but nodded anyway.

'Max has got untold crap in his backpack,' Ryan said. 'I mean, he's had the same school bag for years and I don't think he's cleaned out once: snotty tissues, socks, leaky pens. It's basically a biohazard. So he reaches down his bag and comes up with this shrunken old orange, about the size of a ping-pong ball. He throws it really hard at Kaitlyn.

'She dives out of the way, tilts off her chair and bops her head on the desk behind her. The orange whizzes on. It hits the handle of the cup on Mr Bartlett's desk. Max's throw was so hard the dried-out orange explodes and the mug does this little pirouette before toppling over.

'Earl Grey tea, almost a full cup. It goes *everywhere*. All over Bartlett's paperwork, and the desk drawer's open, so it's running in there: hole punch, staple gun, calculators, whole pack of squared paper and exercise books. Bartlett comes back inside. Kaitlyn's bawling and waving her arms around and totally milking it. Bartlett starts screaming at Max.

Chloe and Grace were both into the story, and Ryan felt more relaxed. It was the first time he'd spoken to either of them since the macaroni incident six weeks earlier.

'So Bartlett was venting steam, going ape,' Ryan said. 'He gives Max a hundred punishment laps and sends Kaitlyn off to first aid. Then he gets everyone to calm down, but I can't stop. Like, I'm swallowing and trying to keep a straight face, but me and Alfie are wetting ourselves laughing. So Bartlett kicks us both into the corridor and gives us five kilometres of laps.'

'Harsh,' Grace said, as she topped each trifle off with aerosol cream and Maltesers. 'Bartlett's usually mellow. I can't even remember him raising his voice.'

Ryan tipped more Pepsi on to the ice. Chloe put on a serious voice. 'Well *I* don't think it's funny. Kaitlyn needed three stitches in her head.'

Ryan looked shocked. 'Seriously? Max's an idiot. He never knows when to stop.'

Chloe raised one eyebrow and burst out laughing. 'Had you going there, Rybo.'

Ryan shook his head, then smiled with relief. 'I was gonna *say*. Her head barely glanced the table. Gimme

some Maltesers. Who's the third trifle for?'

'Not you, that's for sure,' Grace said, tipping brown balls into Ryan's outstretched palm.

Ryan dropped six Maltesers in his gob and crunched as he grabbed his half-drunk Pepsi glass off the worktop and headed out.

'Oi,' Chloe shouted. 'Where do you think you're going?'

Ryan backed up to the kitchen doorway and saw Grace pointing at the Pepsi bottle.

'What did your last servant die of?' she asked. 'Put it back in the fridge.'

Ryan stepped back grumpily. He was knackered and the girls had loads of stuff out on the worktop already.

'Putting one bottle back's hardly gonna kill you,' Ryan said.

'We might kill *you* if you don't,' Chloe said, as she jumped down off the cabinet. She was barefoot and Ryan's eyes fixed on her painted toenails as he opened the fridge door and bent forwards to slot the Pepsi back inside the door.

If he'd looked the other way he might have seen Grace before she yanked the elastic of his shorts and fired a long blast of cream towards his butt crack.

'Yuk, it's all sweaty down there,' Grace yelled, shielding her eyes as the aerosol whooshed.

Ryan tried backing out, but Chloe was pushing on the fridge door, wedging him in place until the can gave its last gasp.

'Cameraphone, cameraphone!' Grace said.

Chloe let go of the fridge as the empty can clanked against the floor tiles. As Ryan straightened up Grace smacked his bum, making the whipped cream explode out of his shorts. Then an iPhone camera flashed.

'Psychos,' Ryan shouted. 'What was *that* for?'

'The hell of it,' Grace said.

The second photo was the best shot, showing Ryan's face halfway between laughter and fury, with cream streaking out the bottom of his running shorts and dribbling down his thighs. The third showed Ryan lunging towards the iPhone, while Grace leaned into the frame with a mad grin and a double thumbs-up.

'You wait,' Ryan yelled, as he waddled towards his room like he'd crapped himself. 'You'd both better watch your backs.'

'We're really scared, Rybo,' Grace shouted, between howls of laughter.

They both knew he hated being called Rybo.

'Rybo, Rybo, Rybooooooo!' Chloe said, making it sound like a football chant.

Ryan slammed the door of his room and turned the key so the girls couldn't get in.

If tough training and punishments were the downside of being a CHERUB agent, the bedrooms were the biggest perk. Ryan had a comfortable space, with a leather sofa and TV one side of the door and a mini fridge and microwave on the other. His bed was a double and a large desk with a laptop and schoolbooks on it stood by the window.

Not wanting the cream streaking down his legs to end

up on his carpet, Ryan took three long strides and cut into his bathroom. Rather than mess up the floor, he stepped into his bath fully clothed: any gunk left in the tub would wash away when he turned the taps on.

Once his trainers were off, Ryan turned on the shower head. As the water got warm he stripped off, letting sweaty, cream-soaked clothes rinse in the swirling pool around the plughole.

His T-shirt was clingy and stuck halfway over his head when a phone started ringing.

'Tits!'

There was a handset mounted on the wall beside his toilet. Ryan was in two minds about answering. It was probably Grace and Chloe on a wind-up, but could also be something important. He almost slipped as he reached over and stretched the curly-corded handset across the room.

'Ryan, it's Zara.'

Ryan jolted. The chairwoman only called individual agents for serious business, like an important mission, or the kind of trouble that earned punishments far graver than laps. It was hard to hear so he used a soggy-socked foot to turn off the shower.

'What do you want?' Ryan asked nervously, as his brain flipped through possibilities.

'Just yourself,' Zara said. 'I've got two people down here who'd like to meet you.'