

CHERUB: THE RECRUIT

PREVIEW

WHAT IS CHERUB?

During world war two, French civilians set up a resistance movement to fight against the German forces occupying their country. Many of their most useful operatives were children and teenagers. Some worked as scouts and messengers. Others befriended homesick German soldiers, gathering information that enabled the resistance to sabotage German military operations.

A British spy named Charles Henderson worked among these French children for nearly three years. After returning to Britain, he used what he'd learned in France to train twenty British children for work on undercover operations. The codename for his unit was CHERUB.

Henderson died in 1946, but the organization he created has thrived. CHERUB now has more than two hundred and fifty agents, all aged seventeen or under. Although there have been many technical advances in intelligence operations since CHERUB was founded, the reason for its existence remains the same: adults never suspect that children are spying on them.

PREVIEW CHAPTER

Meet James Adams, hero of the CHERUB books, *The Recruit*, *Class A* and *Maximum Security*.

All that stands between twelve year old James and qualification as a CHERUB agent the are one hundred gruelling days of basic training.

This preview chapter from *The Recruit* is all about day one.

BASIC TRAINING

James was due at the Basic Training compound at 5AM. He set an alarm and left it on his bedside table. Worrying about training kept him awake for ages. When he woke it was light. It's never light at 5AM in November. This was bad.

The alarm clock was gone. Not set wrong. Not tipped on the floor and the battery dropped out. Someone had crept in while he was asleep and taken it. Kyle warned him they'd play tricks, but James hadn't expected them to start before he even arrived.

Clothes and a backpack had been dumped on the floor. There were two differences from standard CHERUB kit. The t-shirt and trousers had white number sevens on them. Second, instead of being fabric conditioned and pressed, everything was wrecked. Big stains, rips in the trousers. The underwear was disgusting and the boots had done hard time on somebody else's feet. James moved the backpack. There was tons of equipment in it. He probably should have got up early and looked at everything.

James had to wear the wrecked t-shirt and trousers because they had numbers. But he had his own pristine underwear, and boots that were broken in and only smelled of his own feet. Would he get punished for not wearing the clothes on the floor? Or would he get laughed at for being the only one dumb enough to put on second hand underwear? The state of the boxer shorts made his mind up. He was wearing his own stuff.

There was no time for teeth, comb, or shower. He ran out with the backpack. The lift took ages, like it always does when you're in a rush. There were two older kids in the lift. They knew where James was going from the numbers on his uniform.

One of the kids looked at his watch.

'You starting basic training this morning?' the kid asked.

'Yeah,' James said.

'It's half past seven,' the kid said.

'I know,' James said. 'I'm late.'

The kids burst out laughing.

‘You’re not late. You’re dead.’

‘So dead,’ the other kid said, shaking his head.

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The training building was a concrete box in the middle of a huge muddy enclosure, with no windows and no heating. Five metre high fences separated it from the rest of campus. Just the look of the place scared James.

He ran inside, puffed from running. The room had ten rusty beds with wretched looking mattresses. Three girls and four boys were in front of the beds, crouching on the balls of their feet with hands on heads. After about ten minutes in that position the bottom of your legs goes dead. Six of the seven had been that way for two and a half hours, waiting for James. The odd one out had done an hour.

The head instructor, Mr Large, and his two assistants stood up and walked towards James. Large’s white CHERUB t-shirt was the biggest size you could get, but it still looked like all the muscles inside wanted to burst out. He had buzz cut hair and a bushy moustache.

James flinched when Large reached out and delicately shook his hand.

‘Good morning, James,’ Large said in a soft voice. ‘Smashing of you to pop in. Nice breakfast, was it? Put your feet up, did you? Good read of the papers? No need to worry, James. I didn’t want to start without you, so I made all your new friends wait in a highly uncomfortable position until you arrived. Should I let them stand up now?’

‘Yes,’ James said weakly.

‘OK, kiddies,’ Large said. ‘Up you get. James, why don’t you shake all of their hands as a little thank you for waiting.’

The kids stood up, groaning in agony and trying to wriggle cramp out the backs of their legs. James went along the line, shaking everyone’s hand and getting killer looks.

‘Stand at bed seven, James,’ Large said. ‘Nice clean boots, I see.’

Large lifted up the leg of James’ trousers and peered at his sock. Large’s wrist was bigger than James’ neck.

‘Clean socks too,’ Large noted. ‘Anyone else wearing their own boots and clean socks?’

James was relieved a few hands went up.

‘Very sensible,’ Large said. ‘Sorry about putting those filthy rags and boots out. Must

have been some kind of terrible mix up. Still, you've only got to wear them for a hundred days.'

James smiled and got daggers from the red headed girl standing on his right in filthy boots.

'Now, before I make my welcome speech,' Large continued. 'Let me introduce my two wonderful friends who'll be helping to look after the eight of you. Mr Speaks and Miss Smoke.'

If you wanted two people to make your life a misery Speaks and Smoke looked ideal. They were both in their twenties and almost as muscular as Mr Large. Speaks was black, shaved bald, sunglasses. Total hard case. Smoke had blue eyes, long blonde hair and was about as feminine as a dustcart.

'Miss Smoke,' Large said, 'Would you kindly fetch me a bucket. And James, would you be sweet enough to stand on one leg.'

James stood on one leg, trying to keep his balance. Smoke handed Large a metal bucket.

'Hopefully this will teach you to be more punctual from now on.'

Large stuck the bucket over James' head. James' world turned black and the smell of disinfectant blasted his nose. He could hear the other kids laughing. Large pulled a baton out of his belt and rapped it over the top of the bucket. Inside the noise was deafening.

'Can you hear me speak, number seven?' Large asked.

'Yes sir,' James said.

'Good. I wouldn't want you to miss my speech. The rule is, every time your foot touches the floor you get another crack with the baton, like this:'

The baton whacked the bucket again. James was learning that standing on one leg is harder when you're blind.

'So kiddies, you're mine for the next hundred days,' Large said. 'Every day will be equally joyous. There are no holidays. No weekends. You will rise at 0545. Cold shower, get dressed, run the assault course. 0700 breakfast, followed by physical training until school starts at 0900. Lessons include Espionage, Language, Weaponry and Survival Skills. At 1400 you run the assault course again. Lunch at 1500. At 1600 two more hours of physical training. At 1800 you return here.'

James' foot touched the floor. Large smashed the baton into the bucket. The noise inside was incredible.

'Keep that foot up. Where was I? At 1800 you return here. Another shower, warm water if I'm feeling kind. Wash your clothes in the sinks and hang them up so they're dry for

morning. Then clean and polish your boots. At 1900 you get your evening meal. 1930 to 2030 homework. Brush your teeth, lights out at 2045. There will also be trips off campus for survival training, the last of which will take us to sunny Malaysia.

‘If anyone is accusing me of cruelty, I remind you that the fences that surround us are not to keep you in, but to keep your little chums from slipping in and giving you a helping hand or a tasty snack. You are free to leave the training facility at any time, but if you wish to be a CHERUB agent you will have to resume Basic Training from day one. If you get an injury that stops you training for more than three days, you start again from day one. James, put your foot down and take off the bucket.’

James lifted the bucket off his head. It took his eyes a few seconds to readjust to the light.

‘You were very late this morning, James, weren’t you,’ Large said.

‘Yes sir,’ James said.

‘Well everyone, because James is still so full after his lie-in and his cooked breakfast, I think you can all skip lunch. Not to worry though. It’s only eleven and a half hours until dinner.’

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The eight kids in training were split into pairs. The first pair, numbers one and two, was Shakeel and Mo. Shakeel was as big as James but only ten years old. Born in Egypt, he’d been at CHERUB for three years and in that time he’d learned a lot that would help in basic training. James realised he was going to be at a big disadvantage to trainees who had spent years in a red shirt.

Mo was another veteran, three days past his tenth birthday. A policeman found him abandoned at Heathrow Airport when he was four. Mo’s parents were never found. Mo always jiggled his bony arms like he was trying to swat flies off himself.

Three and four were Connor and Callum, the twins James had met on the running track a few days earlier. James had had a few conversations with them and they seemed OK.

Five and six were Gabrielle and Nicole. Gabrielle was from the Caribbean, her parents had died a few months earlier in a car wreck. Eleven years old, she looked tough as boots. Nicole was smaller. Twelve, red haired and overweight.

Number eight, James’ partner, was Kerry. She was eleven years old, small and boyish

with a flat face and dark eyes. Her black hair was shaved down to a number one. James had seen her in a red shirt with shoulder length hair a few days earlier. Now she looked totally different. She didn't look as nervous as the others.

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Large led them out to the assault course at a jog.

'Do exactly what I do,' Kerry said as their feet squished in the mud.

'Who made you boss?' James asked.

'I've been at CHERUB since I was six,' Kerry said. 'I did sixty four days of this course last year before I broke my kneecap and got chucked off. You've been here what? Two weeks?'

'About three,' James said. 'Why did you cut off your hair?'

'Quicker to wash, quicker to dry, doesn't get in your face all day. If you do things quickly and get a few minutes extra rest, it makes a difference. I'll do everything I can to make life easy for you James, if you do one thing for me.'

'What?' James asked.

'Protect my knee,' Kerry said. 'There are titanium pins holding the bits together. When we do karate, please don't kick me on that part of my leg. If we have to run with heavy packs, take some of my weight for me. Will you help me, James, if I help you?'

'Whatever I can do,' James said. 'We're partners anyway. How come they're letting you take this course if your knee isn't better?'

'I lied. I said the pain was gone. All the kids I grew up with are living in the main building and going on missions. I spend my evenings watching six-year-olds cut up sticky paper. I'm getting through basic this time or I'll die trying.'

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Kerry knew all the cheats on the assault course. One side of the muddy tunnel was drier than the other. There was a knack to how you caught the rope to swing across a lake. She pointed out one of the hidden video cameras. The instructors dragged you out of bed at 3AM and made you re-run the whole course if they caught you cheating on video-tape. Best of all, Kerry knew there was a raised bar under the water, which cut ten metres out of the swim across the lake.

'You swim like a five -year-old,' Kerry said.

After fifty minutes, James was muddy and freezing cold, but they'd finished tons ahead

of anyone else. Kerry found a standpipe, turned on the water and pulled off her t-shirt. She started washing out the mud.

‘James, always wash out your t-shirt. Use it to wipe yourself off, then wash it again. It will be freezing when you put it back on, but we do the assault course first thing every morning and have to wear the same clothes for the rest of the day. If you leave the mud on it dries out and itches like crazy.’

‘What about the trousers?’ James asked.

‘Won’t get time to wash them. But first chance you get, pull off your boots and wring the water out of your socks. You hungry?’ Kerry asked.

‘I never had breakfast despite what Large said. I’ll be starving by this evening.’

Kerry unzipped a pocket on her trousers and pulled out a king size Mars bar.

‘Cool,’ James said. ‘I’m sorry it’s my fault we’re not getting any food ‘til this evening.’

Kerry laughed, ‘It’s not you, James. There’s always some excuse why you don’t get lunch. Or why everyone has to do an extra run of the assault course. Or why everyone has to drag their beds outside and sleep in the open air with no covers on. They try and find ways to make you hate everyone else. Don’t let it get to you, everyone will get their turn.’

Kerry bent the Mars bar in half.

‘You want this, James? Make the promise first,’ Kerry said.

‘I promise I’ll help protect your knee,’ James said.

‘Open wide.’

Kerry crammed half a Mars bar into James’ mouth.

Shakeel and Mo were heading across the last obstacle, with Callum and Connor a few metres behind. James could hear Large shouting at Nicole in the distance:

‘Move that bum before I stick my boot up it.’

James felt a bit sorry for her; but on the other hand, as long as they were shouting at Nicole they weren’t shouting at him.

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Everyone had to do physical training in the mud. Crunches, squats, push ups, star jumps. After an hour James’ was numb all over from cold and muscle pain. His uniform was a heavy sheet of mud.

Nicole was on the ground, too tired to move. Miss Smoke put her boot on Nicole’s head, dunking her face in the mud.

‘Get up tubby,’ Smoke screamed.

Nicole got up and stormed towards the gate.

‘You can’t come back,’ Smoke shouted. ‘One step outside and that’s it.’

Nicole didn’t care. She went out the gate. Fifteen minutes later she was back. Balling her eyes out and begging for another chance.

‘Come back in three months sweetheart,’ Large shouted. ‘Get rid of that wobbly arse or you’ll never make it.’

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It was a bit of a sensation being down to seven kids on day one. All the trainees talked about it. Nicole seemed soft giving up so early. On the other hand they were all envious, imagining her back in her room watching TV after soaking in the bath.

James had warmed up as much as he could in the shower and now sat at the table with the other six trainees, waiting for dinner. Having Kerry for a partner was great. Especially watching the other kids make all the mistakes Kerry warned him about.

The dinners got wheeled up from the main building in a heated trolley. Smoke handed out the dishes. James ripped off the metal lid. The stir fry rice was a bit dry from being kept warm, but it tasted OK and everyone was starving. Kerry got her plate last. James could tell something was wrong from the noise when it hit the table.

Kerry lifted up the lid. She had no food, just an empty Mars bar wrapper in the middle of her plate. She looked gutted. Large rested his massive hands on Kerry’s shoulders.

‘Kerry poppet,’ Large said. ‘You’re not the first kid to come back here. You may think you know all the tricks, but so do we.’

Large walked away. Kerry stared at her empty plate. James couldn’t let her starve after all the help she’d given him. He made a line down the middle of his plate and gave half to Kerry.

‘Thanks, partner,’ Kerry said.

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