



PREVIEW CHAPTERS

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 lamp posts 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 people saying *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 smiled. '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 track suits 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 into 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 mates nodded. ‘It’s kicking off, man,’ one grinned, 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 hurtled 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.

2. TWINKLE

‘Will you all stop jabbering and shut the hell up!’ Lauren Adams yelled, as the thirteen year old wrapped her hands over her ears.

She was in her eighth floor room on CHERUB campus. Her bed had been tipped on its side to make space for the maps and diagrams spread across the carpet and she sat studying them with six fellow CHERUB agents: her boyfriend Rat, her best friend Bethany, Bethany’s eleven-year-old brother Jake, Rat’s best friend Andy Lagan and eleven-year-old cherubs she barely knew called Ronan Clark and Kevin Sumner.

‘If we’re gonna get picked to go to Las Vegas next month, we’ve *got* to get our plan straight and pull off this security test,’ Lauren continued firmly. ‘The ATCC is a new facility with state of the art security. We’ve got to get into the heart of the building and cause damage in the main control room.’

Kevin was the smallest kid in the room and he looked at the maps nervously. ‘Which bit is the ATCC?’

‘The whole building, doofus,’ Jake Parker sighed noisily. ‘ATCC: Air Traffic Control Centre.’

‘Oh,’ Kevin said. ‘I thought it was one of the alarm thingies.’

Bethany cuffed her brother Jake around the head. ‘Don’t bite Kevin’s head off, he’s only little.’

Jake gave his sister the finger. ‘He’s less than a year younger than me, dog breath.’

Rat sighed. ‘Don’t start fighting again you two... Christ, what’s that stink?’

They all turned towards Ronan. He was a stocky lad, mad on rugby and combat training but less keen on showering afterwards. He’d just pulled off one of his muddy boots.

‘Put it back on,’ Bethany gasped as she wafted her hand. ‘How long have you been wearing those socks?’

‘My eyes are watering,’ Andy complained.

‘Only about a week,’ Ronan said as he buried his nose between his toes and took a long sniff.

‘Don’t!’ Bethany yelled. ‘Dirty animal.’

‘It’s harmless,’ Ronan grinned, as he swung his foot towards Bethany. ‘It’s just my natural bodily juices.’

A couple of the lads laughed, but Lauren stepped over the maps and loomed above Ronan. ‘If you don’t put that boot back on, me and Bethany will drag you into the bathroom, strip you butt naked and scrub you with my toilet brush.’

‘Kinky,’ Andy laughed. ‘Stripped and scrubbed by two hot chicks...’

‘Two repugnant walruses, more like,’ Jake said.

But Lauren shot the lads evil eyes and they both shut up. Ronan reluctantly pulled his boot back on and even though it was freezing outside, Bethany got up and flung open the balcony doors to clear the air.

Lauren went back to squatting in front of the maps before speaking again. ‘I’ve got a good reputation and my black shirt,’ she said, stretching out her T-shirt to emphasise the point. ‘It won’t make much difference to me if we mess this up, but we need to pull it off if you three younger lads want a sniff of some decent missions any time soon. So you guys choose: screw around, or calm down and start taking this plan seriously.’

Kevin, Ronan and Jake didn’t like admitting that Lauren was right, but she glowered until they all nodded.

‘OK,’ Lauren said. ‘I’m the only black shirt here, so I’m making myself chairman. Any objections?’

Lauren half expected a mutiny. But they all knew someone had to take charge if their plan was going to work.

Rat raised his hand and waited for Lauren’s nod before he spoke. ‘Here’s where I see the problem with our plan right now,’ he said. ‘Bethany and Lauren do their bit at the front of the air traffic control centre, but me, Andy and the three little dudes are gonna end up at the back facing six adult security guards with no weapons.’

‘We need guns,’ Jake blurted. ‘Tranquilliser darts or stun-guns at the least.’

‘Why don’t you read the mission briefing?’ Lauren sighed. ‘Our job is to test the security arrangements put in place by the private company at the new ATCC. If the government wanted people with balaclavas and machine guns, they’d have sent in the army. We’ve got to dress and act like ordinary kids on a pre-Christmas rampage. We can use our mobiles, but no walkie

talkies. We can't take listening devices, explosives, lock guns or anything else that your average thirteen-year-old doesn't carry in the pocket of his hoodie.'

Bethany raised her hand and waved her mission briefing in the air. 'But Lauren, it does also say that the security guards are backed up by a team of military police.'

'With guns,' Jake added.

'Read it properly,' Lauren said. 'It's a rapid response team stationed on an RAF base eight kilometres away. As long as we don't give the regular security team at the ATCC time to sound the alarm, we'll only be up against private security guards with batons and pepper spray.'

'If only we knew *exactly* who these guards were,' Bethany said. 'I mean, they could be anything from dodderly little old men to retired Special Forces.'

Lauren shrugged. 'When that control centre opens in the New Year it's gonna be in charge of every civilian and military flight from the midlands right the way up to the Scottish highlands. Planes could drop out of the sky if it was blown up.'

Ronan nodded solemnly. 'So unless the security has been set up by total idiots, we won't be facing a team of boy scouts.'

'Why don't we go over to Dennis King in Mission Preparation and say that we need more information on the security team?' Andy asked.

Lauren shook her head. 'Security tests like this one are part mission, part training exercise. King *might* give us more information if we ask, but were supposed to devise our plan based on what they've given us. We'd get marked down in our assessment for sure.'

'I know,' Rat yelped triumphantly, as he smacked his fist into his palm. 'Catapults.'

'What about them?' Lauren asked.

'Kids carry catapults,' Rat explained. 'And when I lived at The Ark in Australia I was always bored. One of the few toys I had was a catapult. I used to fill it with rocks, pop out of a tunnel or a manhole, aim it at someone's head and dive for cover before they knew what had hit 'em. I caused at least a dozen concussions before Georgie caught me and had my butt paddled.'

'Sounds like a plan,' Lauren smiled, before Jake butted in.

'I'm a good shot with a catapult, we used to massacre squirrels with them over the back of campus.'

Lauren didn't like Jake and as an animal lover and vegetarian she was even less impressed than usual. 'Excuse me?' she said ferociously. 'What have campus squirrels ever done to you?'

'Not recently,' Jake squirmed. 'I'm talking about when I was a little red shirt, camping out in tents in the summer.'

‘Boys,’ Bethany said, shaking her head. ‘They all seem to go through a stage where all they want to do is kill stuff or set fire to it.’

Rat tutted, ‘That’s completely sexist, Bethany. If I went around making generalisations like that about girls you’d-’

Ronan spoke at the same time as Rat. ‘I love setting fire to stuff...’

‘Alright,’ Lauren interrupted, clapping her hands together. ‘Lets focus on the security test shall we? There are definitely catapults downstairs in the weapons store room and if you think they’ll help our cause, go and get some by all means.’

‘It’s been a while since I shot a catapult,’ Rat said, glancing at his watch. ‘We’ve got a couple of hours before we leave, so I wouldn’t mind getting a bit of practise in.’

Jake smirked, ‘We could shoot up the ducks on the lake.’

‘You’re *not* funny Jake,’ Lauren said. ‘If I see you or anyone else hurting animals on campus I’ll pick you up and body slam you so hard that you’ll piss blood for a month.’

‘Empty Coke cans make good targets,’ Kevin said, trying to be constructive.

Jake nodded. ‘Especially if you paint squirrels on them.’

‘*Alright*,’ Lauren nodded, gritting her teeth and fighting the urge to jump on top of Jake and beat the crap out of him. ‘You boys can go off and play with your catapults. But before you go, I reckon we should go through the whole plan one last time from the top. I want all of you to know your jobs off by heart. Bethany, why don’t you start?’

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