

CHERUB AT CHRISTMAS



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The following events take place on December 24th 2004,
in-between CHERUB: Class A and CHERUB: Maximum
Security.

1. THE OLD NEIGHBOURHOOD

Friday December 24th 2004, 10:37a.m.

James knew exactly what he'd see as he turned the corner into Holloway Villas: six-storey housing blocks, built around a courtyard, with a vandalised playground in the centre and the stench of rubbish as you walked past by the giant steel bins.

The only thing James didn't recognise was the graffiti. PIG41 was the new spray can supremo on James' old estate. His bright red tag adorned walls, doors, billboards and even the pavement itself.

'You OK, James?' Bruce asked as the two boys walked side by side.

'Yeah,' James said, swallowing a lump in his throat.

But he wasn't OK. Memories of the night when his mother died fourteen months earlier still had the power to sting.

Bruce handed James a tissue. 'It's a bit crumpled, but there's no snot on it.'

'Ta,' James said, feeling a little embarrassed as he took it and rubbed his eyes. 'I don't know ... I mean ... I just remembered the ambulance men carrying my mum out and Lauren holding my wrist. It all came flooding back.'

'Nothing to be ashamed of,' Bruce said. 'Nobody's gonna get over their mum dying in any sort of hurry.'

The boys headed up a concrete staircase. A bitter gust of wind hit them as they stepped out on to the second-floor balcony. James' sadness was replaced by nostalgia as he remembered his mum yelling down off the balcony with a finger drumming against the face of her watch.

'Eight o'clock, James. You'll catch hell if I have to come down there and get you.'

James stopped when he reached the living-room window of his old flat and glanced inside.

'Looks like a young couple moved in,' he said as he peered in. 'It's all been done up. Wood floors and that.'

Bruce nodded. 'Looks pretty smart.'

'It does,' James said. 'But I wouldn't have paid two hundred and twenty grand to live there.'

'How much!' Bruce gasped.

James grinned. 'Property prices round here are insane. Mum owned the flat and her mortgage was paid off by the life insurance when she died. Me and Lauren get to share the loot when we leave CHERUB.'

'You're jammy,' Bruce said. 'My parents died when I was a baby and they owed three grand on their Barclaycard.'

James stepped away from the window and rang the bell of a flat six doors further along the balcony. He waited half a minute, but there was no answer.

'We came all this way and the geezer's out,' Bruce spluttered angrily. 'I'm gonna kick his arse ...'

'Keep your wig on,' James grinned. 'This isn't Alan's place. My old mate Sam lives here. I was just gonna say *hi*, but it looks like he's out. Alan lives in the one up the end; he'll be waiting for me.'

When the door of Alan's flat opened, James got engulfed in the arms of a grubby-looking man with a mass of black body hair down his arms and a giant beer gut.

'Hey, Alan,' James grinned, pleased to be reacquainted with a friend, but slightly less pleased at being hugged into a white vest that smelled of three-tins-for-a-pound body spray from Holloway market.

'You look good,' Alan gasped. 'Quite a handsome young man now. You've got taller and thinned out. Come inside. Where's the little lady?'

'Lauren couldn't come. She's back at our foster home with a stinking cold,' James lied. 'This is my mate, Bruce. He's gonna help me carry all the gear home.'

Alan led them down the hallway. 'That's a shame. I was looking forward to seeing Lauren. I hope being sick doesn't spoil her Christmas.'

'I reckon she's over the worst of it,' James said, as the boys stepped into Alan's living-room.

There was no space to sit because the entire room was stacked up with bags of stolen items. Only the tip of the Christmas tree was visible behind a stack of X-Boxes and PS2s.

Alan had been James' mum's number two before she died and now he'd taken over her shoplifting racket. James had grown up around the business and wasn't impressed by what he saw.

'You want to be careful, Alan,' he said, as he spun around looking at the piles of stolen goods. 'My mum would never have anything freshly nicked in our flat. If the police see all this lot, they'll lock you up and throw away the key.'

'I know, I know,' Alan said defensively, sounding like he'd already heard this advice from other quarters. 'But you know how mental everything gets at this time of year, James. I've got so much coming and going. I've got two lock-ups piled up with stuff. There's nowhere else to put it all.'

James nodded. 'Mum used to tell everyone to get their orders in early, but it still went mad every Christmas.'

'You boys look half-frozen, would you like a hot drink? All the stuff you ordered is in those three bags over by the door.'

While Alan headed out to make tea, James dragged the bags into the centre of the room to check that everything he'd ordered was there. It wasn't that he didn't trust Alan, but with the place in a state of chaos he could easily have made a mistake.

Bruce read down the list, 'Burnout three, five copies, Gabrielle's make up, PDA for Kerry, Lauren's clothes, my extra-large nunchakus, Predator footy boots size six, Dior perfume set for Kerry, FCUK stuff for Bethany, two pairs of ...'

The bags contained most of the stuff James, Bruce and their pals were getting each other for Christmas.

When Alan came back holding two steaming mugs, James had a roll of fifty-pound notes in his hand.

'Half the shop price for this lot comes to five hundred and eighty quid,' James said. 'It's all there.'

Alan snatched the money and started counting it. Every seat in the room was covered in shoplifted goodies, so James and Bruce had to squat down on the carpet with their hot tea.

'So, what are you up to over Christmas?' James asked.

Alan shrugged. 'Gonna visit my sister and her 'orrible offspring, same as always.'

'Cool,' James nodded.

Alan held out three hundred from the money James had just handed him. 'There you go boy, split that lot with your sister.'

James waved his hands in front of his face. 'Don't be daft, Alan. I told you I had the money to pay for this stuff when I rang up. I'm not asking for charity.'

Alan smiled. 'James, your mother was very good to me over the years. She would have wanted me to look out for Lauren and you.'

'No,' James grinned.

But Alan dropped the money in James' lap.

Bruce laughed and made a grab for it. 'I'll have it if you don't want it.'

James reluctantly picked the money off the carpet. 'You're a good geezer, Al,' he grinned. 'My nan always said she couldn't understand how my mum ended up marrying that idiot Ron when you lived just down the balcony.'

Alan burst out laughing. 'Old missus Choke, I haven't thought about her in ages. She was a tough old bird, your grandmother. Didn't stand any nonsense from anyone.'

James clambered off the carpet and reached out to shake Alan's hand. 'I'm gonna take a piss, then we'd better be going back to cam— erm, to our foster home.'

'Oh,' Alan said, sounding a touch disappointed. 'You can stay a while if you want. I'll take you down the shops and get you both McDonalds or something.'

James shook his head. 'Thanks for the offer, Alan, but we've got a fair journey back and you know how mental the trains get if you leave it till last thing on Christmas Eve.'

2. MUDDY PUPS

12:08

In the main building on CHERUB campus the bell had rung for the end of lessons and the kids were free until the second of January. Some had gone off to the dojo to watch the Christmas Karate tournament, some had gone out to play football, but most kids headed off to their rooms to dump their schoolbooks and change out of CHERUB uniform into normal clothes.

Everyone was in high spirits at the prospect of a week-long break, except for eight kids inside the basic training compound and two others who were serving a punishment over on the far side of campus. Kyle Blueman was being punished for smoking cannabis, Lauren Adams for battering CHERUB's head training instructor with a spade.

Lauren lost her footing as she clambered up the side of the ditch. Her wellington slid down the muddy embankment and she collapsed forward, unable to save herself because she was holding a bundle of branches in her arms. Kyle ploughed through the thirty-centimetre deep sludge and put out his hand.

Lauren could feel cold water trickling inside her waterproof trousers as Kyle hauled her up.

‘Are you OK?’ he asked.

Lauren was a picture of misery as chunks of mud slid down the front of her waterproof jacket. She gathered up the branches she'd dropped around her feet and began lobbing them up on to the embankment a couple at a time.

‘I'm so knackered,’ she said, breaking into a yawn before glancing at her watch. ‘And there's still five hours to go.’

Kyle pulled his shovel out of the slurry. He scooped up a load of soggy leaves and dropped them into a heavy plastic sack.

‘At least we've got the next two days off,’ he said.

Lauren nodded. ‘Yeah, but you can forget about enjoying Christmas. I'm just gonna go to bed and sleep. I don't even care about my presents.’

Kyle felt sorry for Lauren. They'd landed the same punishment, but it was tougher on ten-year-old Lauren than on Kyle, who'd turned fifteen a week earlier.

‘I reckon we deserve a break,’ Kyle said.

‘It's not one o'clock yet.’

Kyle turned backwards and looked at the section of cleared ditch behind them. ‘I reckon we've done a good morning's graft, don't you? I dug out all those leaves, you stripped down all the branches and chopped up that tree trunk.’

Lauren smiled in agreement. ‘Maybe you're right. There's nobody around and we deserve an extra fifteen minutes' lunch after all that.’

They were in a particularly deep section of ditch, so Kyle clambered up the muddy embankment first, then gave Lauren a hand up so that she didn't slip over again. The dining hall was over a kilometre away and they wouldn't have been allowed in without stripping off their overalls and washing, so packed

lunch was their only practical option. Lauren slumped down with her back against a tree, pulled off her gloves and wiped her muddy fingers on a damp flannel.

She grabbed a flask filled with hot soup from her backpack, poured soup into the lid and dipped in a hunk of bread. The extra-thick soup was made in the CHERUB kitchens and Lauren was starving. Kyle dunked his soup with a ham and tomato roll as a man's voice came out of the trees.

'What's this then, slacking off?'

Ken Crane was the CHERUB groundskeeper supervising Lauren and Kyle's punishment. Lauren thought about jumping up and pretending to work, but Ken was close by and he was a decent bloke as long as you didn't muck him about.

'Is it early, Ken?' Kyle said weakly. 'My watch must be fast.'

'Must be,' Ken smirked, as he squelched up to the edge of the ditch and looked at what they'd done.

'Not a bad show,' he nodded. 'You two make a good little team. I'll be sorry when your punishments are over.'

Lauren smiled. 'We certainly won't be.'

Ken laughed. 'Anyhow, I came over here to tell you both to scoot off.'

Kyle grinned. 'You serious?'

'Yep. Take your tools back to the shed and hose the mud off your boots and overalls. I'll pick up the branches and sacks of leaves with the tractor later on.'

Lauren interrupted. 'But Dr McAfferty's very strict. He said—'

'Do I look concerned about Dr McAfferty? It's Christmas Eve and *I'm* telling you to buzz off. Go and have a good Christmas and I'll see you back here in a few days.'

Lauren chucked away the last of her soup, screwed the lid back on her flask and stood up, grinning.

'Thank you, Mr Crane. Have a good Christmas yourself.'

3. A FINAL LOOK

12:40

Ancient memories washed over Marcus Thompson as the taxi wound down the road leading to CHERUB campus' single entrance.

In particular, he recalled a summer's day nearly fifty years earlier. Back then he was a newly qualified CHERUB agent, walking along this very stretch of road in plimsolls and cotton shorts, with a couple of young pals for company. They were heading for a nearby lake that was the closest thing CHERUB had to a swimming pool in those days.

Everything, except the twisting outline of the road itself, had changed. The dirt track that got churned into mud every winter had been widened, tarmacked and fitted with street lighting. The small farms that had surrounded campus back then had gradually been bought up. Where Marcus remembered a view over open fields, there was now a ten-metre breeze-block wall, topped with razor wire and CCTV cameras. Every twenty metres there was a yellow warning sign:

DO NOT ENTER

Any attempt to climb this wall

may be met with deadly force.

By Order Ministry of Defence.

'Gives me the spooks this road,' the taxi driver said, as he took a sharp bend slightly too fast, pressing Marcus against the car door. 'It's like the X-files, or Area 51, or something. Everyone goes on about it in the pubs and that. I even know a couple of ladies who work in the kitchens, but they never say a word about what goes on inside.'

Marcus allowed himself to smile. Fifty years hadn't changed some things: the locals still wanted to know what CHERUB campus was all about.

'It's probably better you don't know,' Marcus said.

The driver laughed. 'You're probably right, old-timer. I'll give you lot one thing though, this place is good for business. The run between here and the station is one of my biggest earners.'

The taxi took another bend uncomfortably fast, and when they were round it the metal gates of CHERUB campus were visible. The cab driver pulled up in front of the gate and walked around to the boot to grab Marcus' suitcase. His elderly passenger was struggling to get out of the car, but turned down an offer of help.

'That's six-eighty, guv.'

As Marcus fumbled in his wallet, the chairman of CHERUB emerged through a riveted door at the side of the main gate. He spread his arms out wide and the two men hugged.

'My god,' Mac shouted. 'Marcus Thompson, I haven't seen you since ...'

Marcus smiled. 'I was here for the fortieth reunion, back in eighty-six.'

Gabrielle O'Brien knocked on the Chairman's door and got called in immediately.

Dr McAfferty – commonly known as Mac – sat at his fireplace holding a tumbler of whiskey. Gabrielle didn't recognise the black man sitting opposite. He had a few wisps of grey hair on his head and a can of Heineken in his hand. He turned to Gabrielle and gave her a gap-toothed smile.

'By gum, you're beautiful,' Marcus grinned, standing as quickly as his frail body would allow and kissing the back of Gabrielle's hand. 'Will you marry me?'

Gabrielle backed off uneasily, sensing that the man was a little drunk. 'I think thirteen is a bit young to be getting married.'

'*Thirteen*, but you're a giant,' Marcus smiled. 'You look at least fifteen. Is it me or are you kids getting bigger these days?'

Mac laughed. 'They're bigger. That's why they eat so much and grow through so many clothes. I got a letter from the Intelligence Services Procurement department last week. They wanted to know why I'd spent over sixty thousand pounds on footwear over the last year.'

'Sixty grand,' Marcus spluttered, shocked. 'In our day we had hob nail boots and white plimsolls that got handed from one kid to the next till the soles wore through.'

'Tell me about it,' Mac grinned. 'The combat boots these kids wear for training are a hundred and twenty pounds a throw. And every kid these days *has* to have designer gear for their casual clothes.'

Gabrielle smiled guiltily. 'Well, kids on the outside wear that stuff and we have to blend in when we're on missions.'

Dr McAfferty nodded. 'Gabrielle, Marcus here is one of my oldest and dearest friends. We were both CHERUB agents together back in the nineteen-fifties. He's been living in Barbados for most of the last twenty years, but he's caught the nostalgia bug and asked if he could visit us for Christmas. I'm afraid

I have some paperwork to finish up before the holidays, so I'd like you to treat Marcus to the grand tour. Show him all our new buildings and facilities. Access all areas, I think we can trust him.'

Gabrielle would have preferred to hang out with her mates, but Marcus seemed a nice enough old bloke and you can't really say no when the Chairman asks a favour.

As Marcus walked slowly towards the door, Mac whispered in Gabrielle's ear. 'I appreciate this, Gabrielle. Take Marcus round in one of the golf buggies, he's a very sick man and I'm led to believe that he's only got a few months to live. He just wants to take a last look at the place where he spent most of his childhood.'

4. GMT + 8

16:03 UK time

It was past midnight in Tokyo, but Kerry was jet-lagged and couldn't get to sleep. She threw back a corner of her bedding and looked at the digital clock on the bedside table: 00:03, Christmas Day.

It was a miserable feeling, being trapped in a hotel room with only a snoring mission controller for company. Kerry's first big solo mission was a golden opportunity to establish her reputation amongst the elite corps of recently qualified CHERUB agents.

She'd spent weeks polishing up her Japanese language skills, hours reading mission briefings and detailed texts on the Yakuza. She wanted to succeed more than anything else in the world; it was just a shame that she couldn't have flown out a couple of days later and spent Christmas with her friends on campus.

Kerry closed her eyes again, but quickly realised that she wasn't even close to feeling sleepy. It might have been dark outside, but as far as her body clock was concerned it was four in the afternoon. She

stepped up to the window and opened a tiny crack in the curtains. The room was fourteen storeys up and the streets below glimmered under a mixture of streetlight and neon signs. Flocks of ant-sized people moved along the pavements and the traffic remained solid, even at this early hour of the morning.

If the room had been larger, Kerry might have flicked on the TV or bedside light to read by, but the two single beds were separated by less than half a metre and she didn't want to disturb her mission controller. Instead, she stepped into the bathroom and pushed the door closed quietly before turning on the light.

The cramped space had a slight disinfectant smell. There was barely enough room between the shower, toilet and sink to take two steps. She sat on the toilet lid and noticed that there was a telephone attached to the wall beside the tissue holder.

James had been picked up at the station nearest to campus by mini-bus, along with a bunch of other cherubs who'd managed to wrangle Christmas Eve as a shopping day. He was waiting for the lift up to his sixth-floor room, holding two big bags of presents, when his mobile rang.

He flipped it open. 'James Adams, super stud speaking.'

'Super *what*?' Kerry giggled. 'Super idiot more like.'

'How was the flight?'

'Ten hours, economy class. Two days before Christmas, so you can imagine. Heathrow airport was a nuthouse, the plane was packed. It's already Christmas Day over here. Well, we're ten minutes into it anyway.'

'I've just been down to London with Bruce,' James explained as he stepped into the lift. 'I'm holding your present in my hands actually.'

'You know this is a really long mission, James. It's gonna be at least April before I get to open it.'

'I'll tell you what it is if you like.'

Kerry thought for a second. 'Nah, it'll be a nice surprise when I get back.'

'I just hope *I'm* not on a mission when you do. We could end up not seeing each other for yonks.'

The lift doors opened at the sixth floor and James stepped out.

'Well,' Kerry said, 'I only rang to wish you a happy Christmas and I bet this call is costing a packet.

I'd better go.'

James made a kissing noise. 'I wish you were here, Kerry. Christmas is gonna suck without you around.'

'I'll miss you too,' Kerry said sadly. 'Goodbye, James. Tell Gabrielle and everyone else that I wished them a happy Christmas.'

James flipped his phone shut and put the two bags down on the carpet outside his room.

Bruce grinned at James and blew him a kiss. 'Bye bye Kerry, *smooch*,' he grinned, mocking James' voice. 'I miss you sweetie cakes, *smoochy*, *smoochy*.'

James tutted as he pulled his room key out of his tracksuit bottoms. 'Shut up. Just 'cos you haven't got a girlfriend. You'd better help us sort out all this shopping. I've got tons of wrapping-up to do.'

As James headed into his room, he heard his name being yelled out from Meryl Spencer's office at the end of the corridor. He knew it couldn't be Meryl herself. She was at a TV studio in London.

He realised it was her assistant, Christine.

'James Adams,' Christine repeated angrily. 'Get your sorry butt down here *right* now!'

'Crap,' James muttered to Bruce under his breath.

'Busted,' Bruce giggled.

'Clearly,' James shrugged. 'I'm just trying to think what I've done.'

He pushed his shopping in the doorway and headed towards the slender woman standing at the end of the corridor.

'Into the office, James,' Christine said tersely.

James headed in, Christine followed. The door clattered shut as she sat down behind Meryl's desk.

'James, Meryl allowed you to take a Christmas shopping day on the understanding that you were up to date with all of your homework.'

'Yeah,' James nodded. 'I am.'

'I had Mr Grwgowski up here looking for you earlier, James. He doesn't seem to agree with you.'

James looked a little shocked. 'Oh.'

'A short essay, written in Russian, on the history of Moscow. I believe it was due to be handed in more than a week ago.'

'Yeah, um ... I forgot.'

'James, if I had a pound for every time you've conveniently forgotten a homework assignment...'

'Sorry, Chris, but I'll do it right after Christmas, I swear.'

Christine slowly shook her head. 'Oh no, you won't. You're going to do it right now.'

'But ...'

Christine pointed at a small wooden desk in the corner of her office. It was a really old-fashioned one with an inkwell built in and a place for storing your books underneath.

'James, I took the liberty of going into your room while you were out. I found your Russian books and your pencil case and put them on that desk ready for you to start work.'

'But ...'

'No ifs, no buts, James. You're going to sit at that desk and complete that homework while I'm sitting here watching you.'

'It's gonna take hours though,' James whined. 'It's Christmas.'

'Then you'd better get a move on. As far as you're concerned, Christmas doesn't start until you've finished that assignment.'

James reluctantly slumped down at the desk. 'So much for the season of goodwill,' he said miserably as he opened his textbook. 'Can I at least watch Meryl when she's on TV later?'

Christine looked at her watch. 'James, her show's not on for another two and a half hours. If you get your act together, you'll be finished long before then.'

5. CELEBRITY MADNESS

18:58

It had been more than five years since Meryl Spencer appeared on television. She'd always had a reclusive streak and rarely made public appearances, even when she was at the pinnacle of her career. She'd told everyone that she'd accepted the offer to appear on the show because it was for charity, but she was also quite flattered that people still remembered her more than six years after retiring from athletics.

Meryl felt self-conscious, sitting behind a neon-lit counter with two other sports personalities for company. She had a buzzer and bank of small screens in front of her. The hot studio lights were pushing up beads of sweat on her neck and a young man leaned in and dabbed them away with a cotton wool ball.

A roar came up from the audience as the warm-up comedian rounded off his spiel.

'Ladies and gentlemen, let's have a big cheer for tonight's host. England's all time number one international goal scorer and winner of three premiership titles, Martin Monroe.'

The balding ex-footballer stepped in from stage left in a snappy suit as the audience began cheering. He signed a couple of autographs, before stepping on to the set and taking his seat at the centre of the stage. Meryl heard the director speaking into her earpiece.

'OK people, look happy. Remember, you're going out live to seven million people so let's keep it sweet.'

Meryl's face got another dab with the cotton wool and her glass of water was refilled while the opening titles rolled. The audience went wild as the camera panned in on the host.

'Hello and welcome to this special Christmas charity edition of Sports Quiz. Two teams of three contestants battling it out and, for one night only, every correct answer wins five hundred pounds for charity. Joining our regular team captains Rhys and Susan tonight are four outstanding sports personalities from around the world.'

Meryl stifled a gasp as her face filled up the monitor. *Seven million people.*

Monroe continued. 'Joining us tonight in a rare public appearance, Meryl Spencer.'

The audience broke out into another bout of wild clapping.

'Meryl was the red-hot favourite for a one-hundred-metre gold at the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona but tragically pulled up in her heat. But it all came right in Atlanta in 1996.'

The monitor cut away from Meryl's face to a scene recorded in the Olympic stadium eight years earlier. A close shot opened out to show a line of muscular women on the starting blocks. The pistol fired and the women sprung up. Meryl was first out of the blocks and continued powering away from the field, passing the finish line ten and a half seconds later, three strides clear of the field.

The commentator's voice, *'The Jamaican simply blew the rest of that field away ...'*

Meryl had seen footage of her victory thousands of times before, but she still looked proud as the director cut back to her face.

'Meryl,' the genial host grinned. 'That run still stands as the Olympic record and as the third fastest hundred metres ever run by a woman. A truly phenomenal achievement.'

Meryl nodded. 'Thank you, Martin.'

Martin smiled sneakily as the audience clapped. 'And we understand you went to Japan and made some TV commercials shortly after your victory?'

Meryl covered her face with her hands and shrieked with nervous laughter. 'Oh no, you're not going to show *that*.'

Meryl knew they *were* going to show *that*, because they'd done it in rehearsals a few hours earlier. She heard the director's voice in her earpiece.

'That's a great expression, Meryl. You look really shocked, now give the audience a smile just to make it known that you're not really upset – that's perfect.'

*

There were more than a hundred and fifty kids gathered in the CHERUB dining hall watching Meryl Spencer dressed in a chicken suit being fired out of a cannon, while an array of incomprehensible Japanese slogans flashed across the screen.

James was laughing as hard as anyone else. 'Oh my god!' he snorted. 'I wonder how much they paid her to do that.'

Kyle replied, 'Meryl did OK, judging by the gold Rolex and that fancy Mercedes she drives.'

James and Kyle sat around their usual table with Bruce, Callum, Connor, Gabrielle and Marcus Thompson. The sixty-two-year-old had turned down the opportunity to join Mac in the staff dining-room. He'd downed a bottle of red wine while he struggled through a plate of fish and chips, and entertained the kids with anecdotes from the early days of CHERUB.

Marcus told the kids that he enjoyed their company because they made him feel young. The kids didn't mind because most of the stories were funny and Marcus was happy to dish out dirt on some of CHERUB's most senior staff.

6. LESSONS ABOUT DRIVING AND ALCOHOL...

When Sport Quiz ended, the kids had to clear out of the dining-hall so that the kitchen staff could come in and get set everything up for Christmas dinner the next day.

‘What are we gonna do now?’ Kyle asked. ‘Someone upstairs must be having a party or something.’

James shrugged. ‘I’d better go back to my room, I’ve got loads of presents to wrap.’

Gabrielle spoke. ‘I’m taking Marcus over to the Junior Block. The little kids are doing a nativity play.’

‘I’m up for that,’ Bruce nodded. ‘Remember last year when that little shepherdess fell off the stage?’

Kyle nodded. ‘I felt sorry for her, but it *was* hilarious.’

Everyone else decided to go over and see the play.

‘Come on, James,’ Connor said. ‘Let’s all stick together, it’s Christmas Eve.’

‘I can’t. I’ve got presents to wrap.’

‘Who cares?’ Kyle said. ‘They’re all gonna be unwrapped in a few hours anyway.’

James had bought labels and wrapping paper in town the previous weekend, but the more he thought about it, the more he realised that the prospect of sitting on his floor with scissors and tape wasn't going to be nearly as much fun as hanging out with the gang.

'OK,' James nodded. 'I'm in. Lauren should be over there anyway and I wouldn't mind seeing her for a bit.'

Marcus led the way towards the exit.

'To the Batmobile,' the grey-haired man shouted, taking a swig of rum from a hip flask that had appeared from inside his jacket moments after he'd drained the last of the wine.

As they stepped out into the chill air, Gabrielle was alarmed to see Marcus taking up the driver's seat of the electric golf buggy she'd been using to shuttle him around campus.

'Marcus,' she said sternly. 'I don't think you're in any fit state—'

Marcus broke into a big grin. 'Hogwash, girl,' he grinned. 'I've been driving all my life and I've not had so much as a scrape. Come on, kids, climb aboard. Next stop the junior block. Have your fares ready to pay the conductor.'

'Shotgun,' James shouted, as he dived into the front passenger seat of the little buggy. Kyle, Bruce and Callum crammed themselves into the back, while Connor and Shakeel had to perch on the small cargo shelf with their legs dangling over the rear of the vehicle.

Gabrielle placed a firm hand on Marcus' shoulder. 'Mr Thompson, I *really* don't think you should be driving.'

Marcus shot her a mischievous grin. 'I don't want to marry you any more, Gabrielle O'Brien. You're starting to sound just like all of my ex-wives.'

Marcus hit the accelerator and the overloaded buggy began whirring away without her.

'Frankly, I'd rather walk,' Gabrielle shouted bitterly after them. She was angry at the way Marcus had treated her after she'd spent half the day chaperoning him around campus.

The little buggies were good for thirty kilometres an hour, but not with seven passengers aboard. Marcus lurched the steering wheel sharply to the right as the buggy edged off the paved path on to the grass verge.

'Watch it, dude,' James yelled.

'I can hardly see where I'm going,' Marcus said, as he pulled back on to the path and began picking up speed.

'It might *help* if you turned the headlamps on,' James said. 'The switch is on your right, below the steering wheel.'

Much to James' alarm, Marcus took his eyes off the road and began looking for the switch. All six passengers simultaneously realised that Gabrielle had been right about their elderly pilot being in no state to drive.

James grabbed the steering wheel as the vehicle lurched off the road. Marcus flipped the headlamps on in time for James to see that they were going *way* too fast to make it around a sharp bend less than twenty metres in front of them.

'Oh my god,' James shouted, wrapping his arms over his face as Marcus hit the brake pedal.

The braking did little to stop them careering off the path into one of the combed gravel beds at the front of the Dojo. There was a horrific grinding noise as the buggy ploughed into the loose stones, sending them firing off in all directions.

The battery cut out and the headlamps failed as the buggy nudged a low wall and ground to a halt. James heard the flying gravel settle and breathed a mouthful of dust as they were plunged back into darkness.

'Is everybody OK?' he gasped.

'I think we're gonna live,' Kyle said dryly, as he clambered out the side of the buggy. 'Just.'

Bruce and Connor had both fallen off the back when the buggy as it juddered over the gravel, but it only seemed to be pride that was hurt as they dusted themselves down.

Marcus Thompson began to giggle drunkenly. 'You think I should have let young Gabrielle drive after all?'

Kyle whispered in James' ear, 'If I didn't know the old soak was already dying, I'd kill him.'

7. GOODNIGHT SWEETHEART

By the time they'd hauled the golf buggy out of the gravel and reset the fuses to make it run again, James and his friends had missed Mary and Joseph setting off for Bethlehem and the little baby Jesus was dilated to seven centimetres. All the seats were gone, so they had to stand up at the back of the hall.

'I can see the head,' a seven-year-old Joseph squawked from the gloomily lit stage at the front of the hall.

Mary yelled out in pain as an attentive shepherd mopped her brow.

'Come on, Mary, put your back into it.'

'I can see it,' Joseph screamed as he grabbed a plastic doll off the floor and launched it high above his head. 'It's a boy.'

'We're going to call it Jesus,' Mary said.

James went up on tiptoes and tried to spot Lauren in the darkened hall. He whispered to Kyle, 'Can you see my sister anywhere?'

Kyle looked at his watch, 'It's gone nine and she looked pretty beat when we finished digging. Maybe she went to bed early.'

James nodded. 'I'll go check out her room.'

He crept out of the hall and passed down a deserted corridor. He knocked gently before sticking his head inside the door. The room was dark, but he could make out Lauren's outline rising and falling beneath her duvet. One arm dangled over the side of the bed and her fingertips touched the floor.

James stepped inside and stood watching his sister for a moment. He felt sorry for her, knowing that she faced five more weeks of digging, followed by the horrors of basic training. He wished there was a way he could take some of the burden off his sister, but he knew that the only thing he could do right now was let her sleep.

'Goodnight, sis,' James whispered as he backed out of the room.

At least he knew Lauren would be happy in the morning when she saw what he'd got her for Christmas.