



# BLACK FRIDAY

## Robert Muchamore



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## **WHAT IS CHERUB?**

CHERUB is a branch of British Intelligence. Its agents are aged between ten and seventeen years. Cherubs are mainly orphans who have been taken out of care homes and trained to work undercover. They live on CHERUB campus, a secret facility hidden in the English countryside.

## **WHAT USE ARE KIDS?**

Quite a lot. Nobody realises kids do undercover missions, which means they can get away with all kinds of stuff that adults can't.

Key qualities for CHERUB recruits include high levels of intelligence and physical endurance, along with the ability to work under stress and think for oneself. The 300 kids who live on CHERUB campus are recruited between the ages of six and twelve and allowed to work undercover from age ten, provided they make it through a gruelling hundred-day basic training programme.

## **CHERUB T-SHIRTS**

Cherubs are ranked according to the colour of the T-shirts they wear on campus. ORANGE is for visitors. RED is for kids who live on CHERUB campus but are too young to qualify as agents. BLUE is for kids undergoing CHERUB's tough one-hundred-day basic training regime. A GREY T-shirt means you're qualified for missions. NAVY is a reward for outstanding performance on a single mission. The BLACK T-shirt is the ultimate recognition for outstanding achievement over a number of missions, while the WHITE T-shirt is worn by retired CHERUB agents and some staff.

## **THE ARAMOV CLAN**

In April 2012, CHERUB agent RYAN SHARMA was promoted to the rank of Navy Shirt following a successful American-led operation to infiltrate a global smuggling organisation known as the Aramov Clan.

Rather than immediately destroying the Aramov network, United States Intelligence decided to take over the clan. The aim was to slowly wind Aramov operations down, while gaining valuable intelligence on dozens of other criminal groups that use the Aramov smuggling network. This covert takeover was led by a unit known as TFU, under the command of DR DENISE HUGGAN.

Shortly after his promotion, Ryan Sharma returned to the Aramov Clan's headquarters in Kyrgyzstan, posing as the son of CHERUB instructor YOSYP KAZAKOV. While TFU agents discreetly controlled the Aramov

Clan from the top, Ryan and Kazakov operated at grass roots level, picking up the kind of intelligence that never reaches senior management.



# 1. THANKSGIVING

*November 22nd 2012, Manta, Ecuador*

Manta Airport's only terminal felt like its best days were behind it. Built to serve a United States Air Force squadron running anti-drug operations, the Yanks didn't like it when the Ecuadorian government kicked them out and before leaving they'd stripped everything – from the main radar in the control tower to the benches at the departure gates.

Fourteen-year-old CHERUB agent Ryan Sharma squatted on a canvas backpack in the airport's sparsely populated passenger lounge, hearing cheesy piped music compete with rain pelting the metal roof.

Ryan had barely slept during a twenty-hour journey from Kyrgyzstan. The long flight had given him a sore throat and bloodshot eyes. A hot shower and soft bed would have been perfection, but it would be a

long time before he got near either.

For the past seven months, Ryan had been based at Aramov Clan headquarters in Kyrgyzstan – known as the Kremlin. Ryan's job was to scrape gossip out of the smuggling operation's employees and family members.

The Kremlin didn't offer much in the way of entertainment and the main hangout for teens was an outdoor yard full of weightlifting equipment. Ryan had pumped enough metal to put ten centimetres on his chest. He liked the way he looked with his shirt off now, and so did the girl he'd fallen in love with.

Three aircraft could be seen through plate glass windows across the shabby lounge. It was early morning, but clouds blotted the sun and it felt more like twilight. The smallest plane was a turboprop flown by the Ecuadorian Post Office; next door was a Boeing 737 cargo jet with custard-yellow hull and the logo of *Globespan Delivery*. The company's slogan was painted beneath it: *Anywhere, Anytime, On Time*.

The third much larger aircraft loomed behind these two, standing on eighteen threadbare tyres, with flaking paint and patched-up bullet wounds. It looked badass, like it might roll up to the two smaller planes and make them hand over their lunch money.

It was an Ilyushin-76. The four-engined Uzbek-built freighter had rolled off the production line in 1975 and could swallow a truck through its gaping rear cargo door. This old bird first saw action when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. Records showed the Soviet Air Force selling her for scrap in 1992, but in reality the

old freighter had spent twenty years flying the world, carting everything from stolen Mercedes coupés, to Class A drugs.

Anyone could hire her if the money was right, and besides the naughty stuff the Ilyushin had dropped bags of food in earthquake zones, and made deliveries for the US military in Iraq. Over the years, the plane had worn the insignia of twenty different airlines, two national governments and the UN, but anyone smart enough to follow a paper trail of forged maintenance logs and dodgy holding companies would always have found that the real owners were the Aramov Clan.

Ryan had to block out the cheesy airport music as a low voice sounded through the invisible communication unit buried inside his left ear. ‘Has she moved?’

The voice belonged to CHERUB instructor Yosyp Kazakov, currently playing the role of Ryan’s dad.

Ryan looked up slightly, catching a woman in the corner of his eye. She was touching thirty, sat in a battered armchair, wearing a pilot’s uniform. A cap with the *Globespan Delivery* logo on a yellow band rested on the next seat.

‘Not yet,’ Ryan said, putting a hand across his mouth so that he didn’t look like some loony talking to himself. ‘Size of that latte she bought, she’s gotta need a piss soon.’

‘What’s she doing?’ Kazakov asked.

The pilot was reading a copy of *USA Today*. She’d made it through the paper itself and now studied a wodge of advertising pull-outs. Home Depot, Wal Mart,

Target, Staples. *Black Friday Special* – 40-Inch Sony \$399, Two-Part Air Con \$800, Complete Harry Potter Blu-Ray \$29.99.

‘She looks depressed,’ Ryan said.

Kazakov snorted with contempt. ‘It’s Thanksgiving. She wants to be home in Atlanta, watching NFL with hubby and the rug rats.’

Ryan felt a stab of guilt. What he was about to do was hopefully for the greater good. It might save thousands of lives, but this pilot was about to go through the most horrifying experience of hers.

‘You really have it in for the Americans,’ Ryan noted.

The voice that came back in Ryan’s ear was grudging. ‘You’ve got three brothers, Ryan. How would you feel if the Americans had sold a missile to a bunch of terrorists that killed one of them?’

Before Ryan could answer, he saw the pilot fold the crumpled newspaper and post it beneath her seat. As the woman stood, she tucked her cap under her armpit and grabbed the briefcase standing between her legs.

‘Showtime,’ Ryan mumbled.

He let the woman take a couple of steps before standing up himself. As he swung his pack over one shoulder, Ryan realised the woman was hurrying. Either late for something, or desperate to use the bathroom.

‘Shit,’ Ryan mumbled, knowing it’s much harder to follow someone in a rush.

‘Problem?’ Kazakov asked.

‘I can handle it,’ Ryan said quietly, as he tried to catch up without making it too obvious.

‘Try getting her in the corridor.’

‘I know,’ Ryan whispered irritably. ‘I can’t *think* with you babbling in my earhole.’

Although Manta wouldn’t handle a passenger flight for another six hours, there was still a newsagent and café open and a few other people in the lounge. There was a chance the pilot might freak out, so Ryan didn’t make his move until she’d walked into a deserted corridor, passed a speak-your-weight machine and was turning into the ladies’ toilet.

‘Excuse me,’ Ryan said loudly.

The pilot assumed Ryan was speaking to someone else, until he repeated the call and tapped the back of her blazer. She looked startled as she turned, then a little irritated.

‘Can I help you, son?’ she asked, sounding cocky.

‘I need you to listen carefully,’ Ryan said, keeping his voice flat as he pulled a large touchscreen phone out of his pocket. ‘I’ve got something to show you.’

The woman raised both hands and took a step back. Ryan’s olive complexion meant he could just about pass for a local.

‘No money,’ she said frostily as she swiped a finger across her throat. ‘It’s bad enough kids begging on the street. Clear off before I report you to security.’

Ryan switched on the phone and turned the screen to face the pilot.

‘Stay calm, don’t make a sound,’ Ryan said.

The pilot dropped the cap under her arm as she saw the picture on screen. It was her living-room. Her

husband knelt in front of the couch, dressed only in pyjama bottoms. A hooded man stood behind, holding a large knife at his throat. On his left stood two small boys, dressed for bed. They looked scared and the older one had wet pyjama legs from peeing himself.

‘What is this?’ the pilot asked, trembling. ‘Is this a joke?’

Ryan kept his voice firm, but felt terrible inside. ‘Tracy, you *need* to keep your voice down. You *need* to listen carefully and do everything I tell you to. If you do *exactly* what I say, your husband and sons will be released unharmed.’

The pilot trembled as her eyes fixed on the photograph. ‘What do you want?’

‘Speak quietly,’ Ryan ordered. ‘Take deep breaths. Walk with me.’

Ryan pocketed the phone and began a slow walk, leading Tracy back towards the passenger lounge.

‘Me and my people came on that big Ilyushin parked out on the tarmac,’ Ryan explained. ‘But we need a plane with flight clearance to get cargo into the USA.’

‘What kind of cargo?’ Tracy asked.

Ryan ignored the question. ‘We’ve got friends behind the scenes at this airport. Right now they’re loading your 737 with our stuff. You’re scheduled to fly to Atlanta in four hours. You’re going to take off on schedule, but once you’re in US airspace, you’ll put out a mayday and do an emergency landing at a small airfield in central Alabama. By the time the authorities realise what’s happened, we’ll have emptied our cargo and vanished.’

You and your family will be released unharmed.'

'I want to talk to my husband,' Tracy said.

'You can want whatever you like, you're getting Jack shit.'

'How do I know that picture isn't Photoshopped?'

Ryan hated what he was doing, but faked a mean smile as he looked back. 'You want your boy Christian to lose a thumb?'

'You're just a kid yourself,' Tracy stuttered, as she touched a wet eye. 'Who are you working for?'

'They like to call themselves the Islamic Department of Justice,' Ryan said. 'But I don't work for them. Me and my dad are just in this for the money.'