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STUART GIBBS

spy school

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To my wonderful wife, Suzanne

acknowledgments

This is a story I've wanted to tell for a long, long time. I first thought up the idea of a spy school on the playground in elementary school, and while the actual story has changed a great deal since then, my desire to share it hasn't. Therefore I am greatly indebted to my wonderful agent, Jennifer Joel, and my equally wonderful editor, Courtney Bongiolatti, for making this happen. Thank you both. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

contents

1: RECRUITMENT	1
2: INITIATION	11
3: CONFRONTATION	20
4: INTIMIDATION	31
5: INFORMATION	39
6: ASSASSINATION	51
7: DEBRIEFING	61
8: DISCLOSURE	69
9: DISSEMINATION	83
10: NINJAS	87
11: ALLIANCE	101
12: WAR	112
13: SURVEILLANCE	130

14:	PROVOCATION	142
15:	ANALYSIS	152
16:	INFILTRATION	162
17:	EVIDENCE	175
18:	SECURITY	190
19:	ABDUCTION	203
20:	IMPERSONATION	224
21:	INTERROGATION	240
22:	AMBUSH	246
23:	REVELATION	258
24:	BOMB DEFUSION	271
25:	APPREHENSION	280

From:
Office of CIA Internal Investigations
CIA Headquarters
Langley, Virginia

To:
[REDACTED]

Director of Covert Affairs
The White House
Washington, DC

Classified Documents Enclosed
Security Level AA2
For Your Eyes Only

As part of the continuing investigation into Operation Creeping Badger, the following pages have been transcribed from 53 hours of debriefings of Mr. Benjamin Ripley, aka Smokescreen, age 12, a first year student at the Academy of Espionage.

Mr. Ripley's acceptance to the academy, while unprecedeted, was sanctioned by [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] Director of the CIA, as part of the operation.

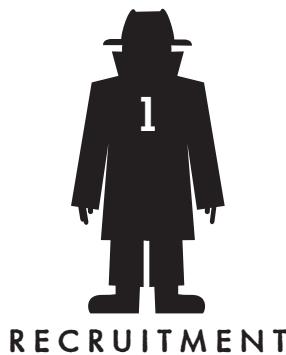
As Operation Creeping Badger did not proceed as planned, given the events of [REDACTED] [REDACTED], this investigation has been launched to determine exactly what went wrong, why it went wrong, and who should be terminated for it.

After reading these documents, they are to be destroyed immediately, in accordance with CIA Security Directive 163-12A. No discussion of these pages will be tolerated, except during the review, which will be conducted in [REDACTED] [REDACTED]. Please note that no weapons will be allowed at said meeting.

I look forward to hearing your thoughts.

[REDACTED]
Director of Internal Investigations

Cc:
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]



Ripley Residence
2107 Mockingbird Road
Vienna, Virginia
January 16
1530 hours

"Hello, Ben," said the man in my living room. "My name is Alexander Hale. I work for the CIA."

And just like that, my life became interesting.

It hadn't been, up till then. Not by a long shot. That day had been a prime example: day 4,583, seven months into the twelfth year of my mundane existence. I had dragged myself out of bed, eaten breakfast, gone to middle school, been bored in class, stared at girls I was too embarrassed to

approach, had lunch, slogged through gym, fallen asleep in math, been harassed by Dirk the Jerk, taken the bus home . . .

And found a man in a tuxedo sitting on the couch.

I didn't doubt he was a spy for a second. Alexander Hale looked exactly like I'd always imagined a spy would. A tiny bit older, perhaps—he seemed about fifty—but still suave and debonair. He had a small scar on his chin—from a bullet, I guessed, or maybe something more exotic, like a crossbow. There was something very James Bond about him; I could imagine he'd been in a car chase on the way over and taken out the bad guys without breaking a sweat.

My parents weren't home. They never were when I got back from school. Alexander had obviously "let himself in." The photo album from our family vacation to Virginia Beach sat open on the coffee table before him.

"Am I in trouble?" I asked.

Alexander laughed. "For what? You've never done anything wrong in your life. Unless you count the time you spiked Dirk Dennett's Pepsi with Ex-Lax—and frankly, that kid was asking for it."

My eyes widened in surprise. "How did you know that?"

"I'm a spy. It's my job to know things. Do you have anything to drink?"

"Uh, sure." My mind quickly cataloged every beverage

in the house. Although I had no idea what this man was doing there, I found myself desperately wanting to impress him. “My folks have all kinds of stuff. What would you like? A martini?”

Alexander laughed again. “This isn’t the movies, kid. I’m on the clock.”

I blushed, feeling foolish. “Oh. Right. Water?”

“I was thinking more like an energy drink. Something with electrolytes, just in case I need to leap into action. I had to ditch some undesirables on my way over here.”

“Undesirables?” I tried to sound cool, as though I discussed things like this every day. “What sort of . . . ?”

“I’m afraid that information is classified.”

“Of course. That makes sense. Gatorade?”

“That’d be grand.”

I headed to the kitchen.

Alexander followed. “The Agency has had its eye on you for some time,” he said.

I paused, surprised, the refrigerator door half open. “Why?”

“For starters, you asked us to.”

“I did? When?”

“How many times have you accessed our website?”

I grimaced, feeling foolish once again. “Seven hundred twenty-eight.”

Alexander looked the tiniest bit intrigued. “That’s exactly right. Usually you merely play the games on the kids’ page—at which you performed very well, by the way—but you’ve also browsed the employment and internship pages with some regularity. Ergo, you’ve considered a career as a spy. And when you express an interest in the CIA, the CIA becomes interested in *you*.” Alexander pulled a thick envelope from inside his tuxedo and set it on the kitchen counter. “We’ve been impressed.”

The envelope was marked, *To be hand-delivered ONLY to Mr. Benjamin Ripley*. There were three security seals on it, one of which required a steak knife to open. Inside was a thick wad of paper. The first page had only one sentence: *Destroy these documents immediately after reading*.

The second page began: *Dear Mr. Ripley: It is my great privilege to accept you to the Academy of Espionage of the Central Intelligence Agency, effective immediately. . . .*

I set the letter down, at once stunned, thrilled, and confused. My whole life, I’d dreamt of being a spy. And yet . . .

“You think it’s a joke,” Alexander said, reading my mind.

“Well . . . yes. I’ve never heard of the CIA’s Academy of Espionage.”

“That’s because it’s top secret. But I assure you it exists. I graduated from there myself. A fine institution, dedicated to creating the agents of tomorrow today. Congratulations!” Alex-

ander raised his glass of Gatorade and flashed a blinding smile.

I clinked glasses with him. He waited for me to drink some of mine before downing his, which I figured was a habit you picked up after a lifetime of having people try to poison you.

I caught a glimpse of my own reflection in the microwave behind Alexander—and doubt descended on me. It didn't seem possible that he and I could have been selected by the same organization. Alexander was handsome, athletic, sophisticated, and cool. I wasn't. How could I be qualified to keep the world safe for democracy when I'd been shaken down for my lunch money three times that week alone?

“But how—?” I began.

“. . . did you get into the academy when you didn't even apply?”

“Er—yes.”

“Applications merely provide opportunities for you to tell the institution you're applying to about yourself. The CIA already has all the information it needs.” Alexander removed a small handheld computer from his pocket and consulted it. “For example, you're a straight-A student who speaks three languages and has Level 16 math skills.”

“What's that mean?”

“What is 98,261 times 147?”

“14,444,367.” I didn't even have to think about it. I have

a gift for mathematics—and, as a result, an uncanny ability to always know exactly what time it is—although for much of my life, I hadn't realized this was anything special. I thought *everyone* could do complex mathematical equations in their heads . . . or instantly calculate how many days, weeks, or minutes they'd been alive. I was 3,832 days old when I found out otherwise.

“That’s Level 16,” Alexander said, then looked at his computer again. “According to our files, you also aced your STIQ exams, have a strong aptitude for electronics, and harbor a severe crush on a Miss Elizabeth Pasternak—although, sadly, she appears to have no idea you exist.”

I’d assumed as much about Elizabeth, but it still hurt to hear it confirmed. By the CIA, no less. So I tried to divert attention. “Stick exams? I don’t remember taking those.”

“You wouldn’t. You didn’t even know you *were* taking them. Standardized Test Inserted Questions: STIQ. The CIA places them in every standardized test to assess potential espionage aptitude. You’ve gotten every one right since third grade.”

“You insert your own questions in the standardized tests? Does the Department of Education know that?”

“I doubt it. They don’t know much of anything over at Education.” Alexander set his empty glass in the sink and rubbed his hands together excitedly. “Well, enough chitchat.

Let's get you packed, shall we? You have a busy afternoon ahead."

"You mean, we're going *now*?"

Alexander turned back to me, already halfway to the stairs. "You scored in the ninety-nine point ninth percentile on the perception section of your STIQs. What part of 'effective immediately' did you not understand?"

I stammered a bit; there were still a hundred questions tumbling around in my brain, vying to be asked at once. "I . . . uh . . . well . . . Why am I packing? How far away is this academy?"

"Oh, not far at all. Just across the Potomac in DC. But becoming a spy is a full-time job, so all students are required to live on campus. Your training lasts six years, starting in the equivalent of seventh grade and going through twelfth. You'll be a first year, obviously." With that, Alexander bounded up the steps to my room.

When I got there twenty seconds later, he already had my suitcase open and was casting a disdainful eye on the contents of my closet. "Not a single decent suit." He sighed. He selected a few sweaters and tossed them on my bed.

"Is the academy on a different schedule than normal schools?" I asked.

"No."

"Then why are they accepting me *now*? It's the middle of

the school year.” I pointed to the four inches of fresh snow piled on my windowsill.

For the first time since I’d met him, Alexander Hale appeared at a loss for words. It didn’t last long. Less than a second. As though there were something he wanted to say but didn’t.

Instead, he told me, “There was a sudden opening.”

“Someone quit?”

“Flunked out. Your name was next on the list. Do you have any weapons?”

In retrospect, I realize the question was designed to distract me from the current topic. It served its purpose extremely well. “Uh . . . I have a slingshot.”

“Slingshots are for squirrels. We don’t fight many squirrels in the CIA. I meant *real* weapons. Guns, knives, perhaps a pair of nunchucks . . .”

“No.”

Alexander shook his head slightly, as though disappointed. “Well, it’s no matter. The school armory can loan you some. In the meantime, I suppose *this* will suffice.” He pulled my dusty old tennis racket from the back of the closet and swung it like a sword. “Just in case there’s trouble, you know.”

For the first time it occurred to me that Alexander might be armed himself. There was a slight bulge in his tuxedo, right below his left armpit, which I now took to be a gun.

In that moment, the entire encounter with him—which had merely been strange and exciting so far—became slightly unsettling as well.

“Maybe before I make any big decisions, I should discuss all this with my parents,” I said.

Alexander wheeled on me. “Out of the question. The existence of the academy is classified. No one is to know you are attending. Not your parents, not your best friends, not Elizabeth Pasternak. *No one*. As far as they’re concerned, you’ll be attending St. Smithen’s Science Academy for Boys and Girls.”

“A science academy?” I frowned. “I’ll be training to save the world, but everyone’s gonna think I’m a dork.”

“Isn’t that pretty much how everyone thinks of you now?”

I winced. He *did* know a lot about me. “They’ll think I’m an even bigger dork.”

Alexander sat on my bed and looked me in the eye. “Being an elite operative demands sacrifice,” he said. “This is only the beginning. Your training won’t be easy. And if you succeed, your *life* won’t be easy. A lot of people can’t hack it. So if you want to back out . . . this is your chance.”

I assumed this was a final test. The last step in my recruitment. A chance to prove I wouldn’t be dissuaded by the threat of hard work and tough times ahead.

It wasn't. Alexander was being honest with me, but I was too caught up in the excitement of being chosen to notice. I wanted to be just like Alexander Hale. I wanted to be suave and debonair. I wanted to "let myself in" to people's homes with a gun casually tucked inside my tuxedo. I wanted to ditch undesirables, keep the world safe, and impress the heck out of Elizabeth Pasternak. I wouldn't have even minded a rakish crossbow scar on my chin.

And so, I stared back into his steel gray eyes and made the worst decision of my life.

"I'm in," I said.



CIA Academy of Espionage

Washington, DC

January 16

1700 hours

The academy didn't look a thing like what I expected an institution that taught espionage to look like. Which, of course, was the whole point. Instead, it looked like a dowdy old prep school that might have been popular around World War II but had long since lost its mojo. It was located in a similarly dowdy, rarely visited corner of Washington, DC, hidden from the world by a high stone wall. The only thing that seemed the least bit suspicious about it was the cluster of security guards at the front gate, but since

our nation's capital is also its murder capital, extra security around a private school wouldn't raise many eyebrows.

Inside, the grounds were surprisingly large. There were vast expanses of lawn that I assumed would be beautiful in spring, although they were currently buried under a foot of snow. And beyond the buildings stood a large, pristine swath of forest, untouched since the days when our forefathers had decided a fetid, malaria-ridden swamp on the Potomac River was the perfect place to build our nation's capital.

The buildings themselves were ugly and gothic, trying to imitate the majesty of places like Oxford and Harvard but failing miserably. Though braced by flying buttresses and dotted with gargoyles, they were still gray and uninteresting, designed so that anyone who accidentally stumbled upon St. Smithen's Science Academy would turn his back and never think of it again.

But compared to the squat cement slab where I went to middle school, the campus was gorgeous. I arrived with Alexander at an inauspicious time, minutes before nightfall in the dead of winter. The light was bleak, the sky was leaden, and the buildings were shrouded in shadow. And yet, I was thrilled. The fact that we'd come in Alexander's customized luxury sedan with a few extra buttons on the dashboard probably heightened my excitement. (Though he'd warned

me to keep my hands off them for fear of launching heavy artillery into rush-hour traffic.)

My parents hadn't protested my leaving much. Alexander had wowed them with his pitch for the "science" academy and reassured them that I was going to be only a few miles away. Mom and Dad were both proud of me for getting into such a prestigious institution—and thrilled that they wouldn't have to pay for it. (Alexander told them I'd earned a full scholarship, and he told *me* the whole tab was picked up by the U.S. government.) Still, they'd been surprised that I had to leave so quickly—and disappointed that Mom couldn't even make me a farewell dinner. Mom was big on commemorative dinners, throwing them for things as mundane as my getting elected captain of the school chess team, even though I was the only student on the school chess team. But Alexander had quelled their anxiety by promising I could return home to visit soon. (When they'd asked if they could visit me on the campus, he'd assured them they could, although he'd artfully avoided telling them exactly *when*.)

Mike Brezinski hadn't been quite so enthusiastic about my going. Mike has been my best friend since first grade, though if we'd met later in life, we probably wouldn't have been friends at all. Mike had grown into one of those cool underachievers who should have been in all advanced classes but preferred remedial ones because he didn't have to work

in them. Middle school was one big joke to him. “You’re going to a science academy?” he’d asked when I called him with the news, making no attempt to hide his disgust. “Why don’t you just get ‘loser’ tattooed on your forehead?”

It took every ounce of restraint I had not to tell him the truth. More than anyone, Mike would have been blown away by the idea that *I* had been selected for training by the CIA. As kids, we’d spent untold hours reenacting James Bond movies on the playground. But I couldn’t reveal a thing; Alexander was sitting in my room, casually eavesdropping on my phone call. Instead, I’d only been able to say, “It’s not as lame as you think.”

“No,” Mike had replied. “It’s probably lamer.”

So as I arrived at the Academy of Espionage, escorted by an honest-to-God federal agent, I couldn’t help but think that, if Mike were there, for the first time in our lives he’d be jealous of *me*. The campus seemed full of promise, intrigue, and excitement.

“Wow,” I said, my nose pressed against the car window.

“This is nothing,” Alexander told me. “There’s far more here than meets the eye.”

“What do you mean?”

Alexander didn’t answer. When I turned back to him, his normally confident expression had clouded.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I don’t see any students.”

“They’re not all at dinner?”

“Dinner’s not for another hour. This period is reserved for sports, physical conditioning, and self-defense training. Campus ought to be crawling with people right now.” Alexander suddenly braked in front of a rambling four-story building with a sign denoting it as the Armistead Dormitory. “When I say so, run for that doorway. I’ll cover you.” It turned out, there *was* a gun holstered under his left armpit. He snapped it out and reached for my door handle.

“Wait!” Within a second, I’d gone from blissful to terrified. “Isn’t it safer to stay in the car?”

“Who’s the agent here? You or me?”

“You.”

“Then run!” In one fluid motion Alexander popped my door open and practically shoved me out it.

I hit the ground running. The stone path to the dormitory was slick with slush trampled by a hundred pairs of shoes. My feet slipped and skidded in it.

Something cracked in the distance. A tiny explosion erupted in the snow to my left.

Someone was shooting at me!

I immediately began to question my decision to attend the academy.

Another series of cracks echoed in the cold air, this time

from behind me. Alexander was shooting back. Or, at least, I *assumed* he was. I didn't dare turn around to see for fear that it'd waste precious milliseconds that could be better spent running for my life.

A bullet ricocheted off the ground by my feet.

I hit the dormitory door at full speed. It flew open, and I tumbled into a small security area. There was a second, more secure door ahead next to a glassed-in security booth, but the door hung ajar and the glass was pocked with three neat, round bullet holes. I scrambled through and found myself in an open lounge area.

It was the type of place students would normally have been hanging out. There were ratty couches, an old television, a lopsided pool table, and some ancient video games. Hallways extended from it on both sides, and a weathered grand staircase led up to—

Something suddenly swept my feet out from under me. I landed flat on my back. A split second later someone dropped on me, sheathed entirely in black except for the eyes. Each knee pinioned one of my arms to the ground. A hand slapped over my mouth before I could scream.

“Who are you?” my attacker hissed.

“B-B-B-Benjamin Ripley,” I sputtered. “I’m a student here.”

“I’ve never seen you before.”

“I only got accepted this afternoon,” I explained, and then thought to add, “Please don’t kill me.”

My attacker groaned. “A newbie? Now?! This day just keeps getting better.” Now that the voice was inflected with sarcasm rather than aggression, it was higher than I’d expected. I looked at the body sitting on my chest and realized it was slim with curves.

“You’re a girl,” I said.

“Wow,” she replied. “No wonder you got accepted. Your powers of deduction are amazing.” She pulled her mask back, revealing her face.

I wouldn’t have thought my heart could have beat any faster than it had while racing for my life from a hail of gunfire, but it suddenly sped up to a whole new level.

Elizabeth Pasternak was no longer the most beautiful girl I’d ever seen.

The girl sitting on my chest appeared to be a few years older than me, maybe fourteen or fifteen, with thick dark hair and incredibly blue eyes. Her skin was flawless, her cheekbones were sculpted, and her lips were full. She was slight of build—almost delicate—and yet she’d been powerful enough to flatten me in half a second. She even *smelled* incredible, an intoxicating combination of lilacs and gunpowder. But perhaps the most attractive thing about her was how calm and confident she was in the midst of a

life-or-death situation. She seemed far more annoyed that I'd stumbled into the action than by the idea that bullets were flying outside.

"Do you have a weapon on you?" she asked.

"No."

"Can you use a gun?"

"I can handle my cousin's BB gun pretty well. . . ."

She sighed heavily, then unzipped her flak jacket, revealing a sleek leather bandolier across her chest bristling with weapons: guns, knives, Chinese throwing stars, grenades. She bypassed all of these and selected a blunt little object for me. "This is a Taser. It's not effective over long range, but on the plus side, you can't accidentally kill me with it." She slapped it into my hand, gave me a quick tutorial—"On/off switch. Trigger. Contact points."—then stood and motioned for me to follow her.

I did. It wasn't as though I had any other ideas. We passed the grand staircase and headed down the south hall of the dormitory. The girl seemed to know what she was doing, so I felt slightly safer being with her. I mimicked her moves, creeping along as she did, holding my Taser the same way she held her gun.

As it was my first action sequence, I wasn't quite sure what the protocol was. It seemed I should introduce myself. "By the way, I'm Benjamin."

“So you said. I’ll make you a deal. If we survive this incident, then we can get to know each other.”

“Okay. What’s going on?”

“Apparently, we’ve had a security breach. There was an assembly on diplomacy for the entire student body this afternoon. The enemy infiltrated the campus during it and surrounded the assembly hall. All students and faculty are being held hostage inside.”

“How’d you escape?”

“I didn’t. I’d ditched the assembly. I could give a hoot about diplomacy.”

“Is anyone else with you?”

“As far as I know, it’s only you and me. I tried calling for backup, but the enemy is jamming all transmissions somehow.”

“How many of them are there?”

“I’ve counted forty-one. So far. Those I’ve seen are very professional, heavily armed, and extremely dangerous.”

I gulped. “I’ve been here only five minutes, and I’m supposed to face an entire platoon of deadly commandos with only a Taser?”

For the first time since I’d met her, the girl smiled. “Welcome to spy school,” she said.



Nathan Hale Administration Building

January 16

1710 hours

Thinking you might be ambushed by enemy operatives at any second is a lousy frame of mind to be in for your first school tour. Although I followed the girl past many locations that would be important to me if I survived, I couldn't focus on any of them. Meanwhile, the girl remained amazingly composed given the circumstances, even pointing out things of interest along the way, as though this were the standard orientation.

“This is the only dormitory for the school,” she informed me as we crept through the first-floor hallway, weapons at