

spy school

secret service

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STUART GIBBS

spy school secret service

A spy school NOVEL

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For Dashiell, the best son anyone could ever ask for

acknowledgments

Turns out, it isn't very easy to get into the White House. It used to be a bit easier: you could arrange for a tour shortly before visiting Washington, DC. But these days, you have to call your congressman's office months ahead of time, and even then, there's no guarantee you can get in. I couldn't. So I called my good friend Nani Coloretti instead. Nani is the kind of person who gets invited to the White House, rather than having to take the tour. She gave me all sorts of fascinating info about the White House, which was invaluable in writing this book. I couldn't have done it without her. In fact, I probably learned more from Nani than I would have from the tour, because the official tour doesn't even take you to the West Wing or the Eisenhower Executive Office Building, while Nani has been to both. (I should point out that, if I got anything wrong in my description of the White House, that's not Nani's fault; I may have screwed some things up.)

For the record, the White House does have a website that gives some info about the place, and you can even tour it on Google maps, so that was all helpful too.

In addition, I owe thanks, yet again, to my good friend Larry Hanauer. For those of you who have been carefully reading the acknowledgments to every one of my books, you

will certainly have seen Larry's name come up before. In fact, this is the third series Larry has helped with, making him the first person to get the coveted Stuart Gibbs Trifecta Award. Larry's contribution this time was to tell me what an insane place the Pentagon was—and to point out that, even though it's almost impossible to get into the White House, pretty much anyone can take a tour of the Pentagon. (Including me, it turns out.)

Also, thanks to my editor, the great Kristin Ostby, who sadly left the publishing world after this book. (Not because of it, mind you. She simply had other things she wanted to do more.) Kristin oversaw a lot of my books and left some pretty big shoes to fill, but my new editor, Liz Kossnar, has stepped up to the challenge. And huge thanks to my publisher, Justin Chanda, for making the transition happen smoothly and always supporting my work.

Thanks also need to be given to my eternally excellent agent, Jennifer Joel, without whom *Spy School* wouldn't exist, and to her extremely clever nephew Maverick Satnick, who came up with the title for this book.

Finally, I need to thank my wonderful wife, Suzanne, for her constant support, enthusiasm, and cheerleading—and the world's greatest test audience, my children, Dashiell and Violet. I love you all to infinity and beyond.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS · VII

LOCATION
CLASSIFIED

TO
SPY
SCHOOL

POTOMAC RIVER

EISENHOWER EXECUTIVE
OFFICE BUILDING

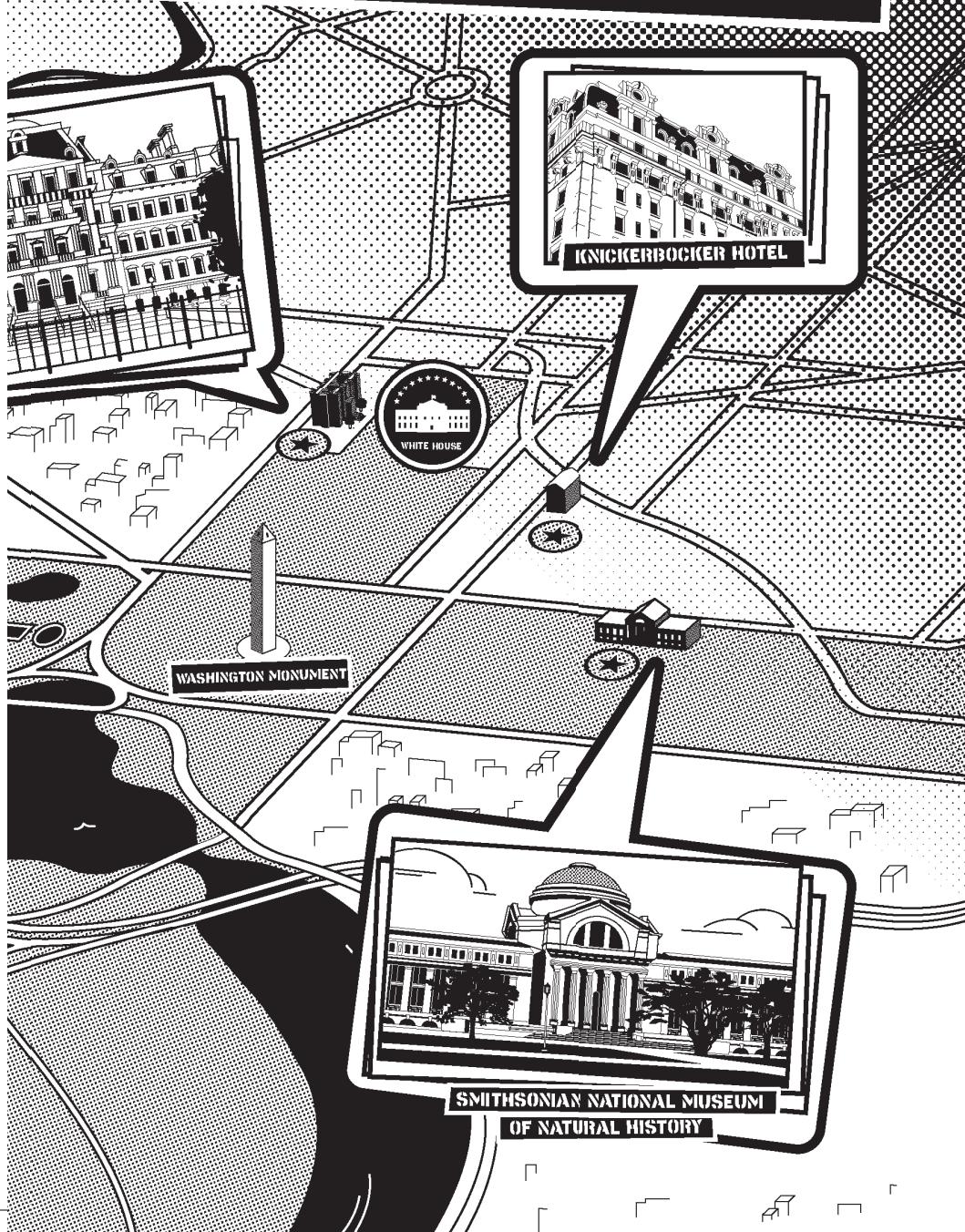
LINCOLN MEMORIAL

TIDAL
BASIN

ARLINGTON MEMORIAL BRIDGE

TO PENTAGON

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA



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XII · CONTENTS

February 9

2100 hours

Mr. [REDACTED]

Since my last dispatch, I have continued to monitor various channels used by SPYDER for their communications. I regret to report that, in the last twenty-four hours, there has been an enormous increase in chatter concerning a [REDACTED]. Given this, I think we can only assume that you are in imminent danger. This is a Code Red situation. We need to activate Operation Pungent Muskrat immediately.

To that end, I stand by my recommendation of agent-in-training Benjamin Ripley for the job. I have worked with Benjamin on three previous (albeit unauthorized) missions and he has proven himself on each, displaying intelligence, cleverness, and moral fiber. The only drawbacks are his [REDACTED] and his severe crush on [REDACTED], neither of which should affect this mission. I have attached his dossier for your approval.

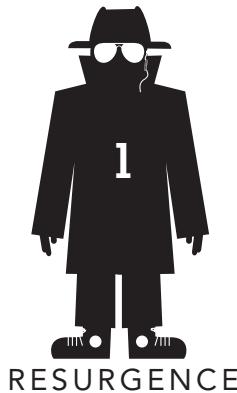
Of course, this mission will also require the cooperation of your son, [REDACTED]. I know you two have had your issues lately, but please impress upon him that [REDACTED]. Your life—and the fate of this entire country—is in his hands.

Please let me know if we are clear to proceed at your earliest convenience. I am prepared to initiate this operation at a moment's notice. Although, for your safety, the sooner it happens, the better.

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]

P.S. Given the highly risky nature of this mission, please do not discuss it with anyone at [REDACTED], not even [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]. In addition, burn this message and the dossier and then, if possible, flush the remains down the toilet.



Vandenberg Library
Nathan Hale Building
CIA Academy of Espionage
February 10
1500 hours

“SPYDER is back!”

Zoe Zibbell’s exclamation rang out through the spy school library. In her excitement, Zoe had spoken a bit too loudly—and since we were in the library, it was quieter than any other place on campus. The cavernous room was four stories tall, ringed by three mezzanines on which thousands of books were shelved. Zoe’s words seemed to echo off every

last one of them: “SPYDER is back . . . SPYDER is back . . . SPYDER is back . . .”

Zoe winced, realizing her announcement had been a lot more public than she’d intended. Then she quickly sat down at the table where she had just interrupted my homework.

The library was far more crowded than usual. On most afternoons, my fellow students and I would have probably been studying in the school dormitory, but on that day the freshmen had their first homework assignment in Introduction to Explosives: Each was assigned to defuse a small bomb. The bombs weren’t supposed to be strong enough to level a building, but where explosives were concerned, things could always go wrong, so it made sense to play it safe and steer clear of the dorm. More than a hundred students, ranging from second to seventh years, were hunched over tables throughout the library. They all tried to act like they weren’t interested in Zoe, as we’d learned in Intermediate Clandestine Observation: Seeing Without Being Seen, but I could tell they were desperate to hear more.

Until recently, SPYDER’s existence had been extremely classified: Only a few highly ranked people at the CIA had known about the evil organization. But in the past year, SPYDER had caused some major trouble, like trying to blow up the very building I sat in, attacking a busload of students near the school’s wilderness training facility, and attempting

to destroy a large portion of Manhattan. After that there was no hope of keeping SPYDER confidential at the Academy of Espionage. Everyone there was training to be a spy; it was their job to know things. Almost all of them had sussed out the truth by now.

I made no attempt to hide my own interest in Zoe's news. SPYDER had attempted to recruit me twice—and then tried to kill me when I'd refused—so I had a vested interest in knowing what they were up to. I looked up from my cryptography homework and asked, "How do you know?"

Zoe slid into a seat across the table from me and whispered, "Chameleon and I overheard. We were doing our eavesdropping project for Advanced Covert Ops, and we figured the higher-placed our target, the better our grade would be. So we went after the Idiot."

Zoe was into nicknames. Chameleon was Warren Reeves, who excelled at camouflage (but was lacking in most other spy skills). The Idiot was our school principal, who was an idiot. A big one.

"And you pulled it off?" I asked.

"Yeah." Despite her worried state, Zoe flashed a proud smile. "We slipped two X-class wireless transmission bugs into his office last night."

"His office?" I repeated, impressed. The principal wasn't an easy target. True, he wasn't a very intelligent person—his

job was basically to handle paperwork and administrative issues that no one else wanted to—but the CIA *knew* he wasn't intelligent, so he had far more security around him than a capable person would have required. His office was on the top floor of the building we were in, five floors above us, and entry to it was protected by an advanced network of cameras and armed guards. “How'd you get past all the security?”

“I distracted the guards while Chameleon did the infiltration.”

“And he did it without any problems?”

“Why do you sound so surprised?”

“Because Warren's a lousy spy. The last time he tried to infiltrate a room, he got stuck in the air vent. We had to call the fire department to get him out.”

Zoe frowned. “Chameleon's been working hard to improve his skills lately.”

“That doesn't mean they've actually gotten better.”

“Yes, they have,” snapped a nasal voice behind me.

I wheeled around to find Warren standing three feet away. Although if he hadn't spoken, I might not have noticed him. His camouflage was even better than usual. He was wearing a set of clothes and face paint that exactly matched the ancient oak furniture of the Hale Building, allowing him to blend in perfectly at the end of a row of shelves.

I wasn't the only one who'd failed to notice him. Most of the nearby students were caught by surprise as well. A fourth-year girl who'd been pretending to browse the books behind us while furtively listening to our conversation was so startled by Warren's sudden appearance that she yelled in fear and dropped a heavy volume of Caldwell's *Pictorial Guide to Poisons and Antidotes* on her foot.

Warren sat down beside me, gloating smugly. This was disconcerting, as he'd done such a good job with the face paint that he didn't really look human. Instead, it was like sitting next to an extremely obnoxious ventriloquist's dummy. "You're no better a spy than I am," he declared. "The only reason you've had all these missions is that you've just been lucky enough to have SPYDER attack you."

"I wouldn't exactly consider that lucky," I said.

"Whatever. The point is, if I'd been there, *I* could have saved the day instead of you."

"Chameleon, you *were* there," Zoe pointed out. "And you *didn't* save the day. In fact, you nearly killed Ben by accident. Twice."

Warren recoiled like a puppy who'd been caught pid-dling on the carpet, the way he always did when Zoe hurt his feelings. While Zoe was developing into a very good spy, she somehow remained completely oblivious to the fact that Warren had a massive crush on her.

“Hold on,” I said to Zoe. “Did you say you infiltrated the principal’s office *last night?*”

“That’s right,” Zoe replied.

I looked back at Warren. “Then why are you still camouflaged?”

“The paint won’t wash off,” Warren said morosely. He looked as though he might have turned red if he hadn’t been painted brown. “I couldn’t get the perfect oaken tone with standard face paint, so I had to use wood stain instead. Now I can’t remove it.”

Zoe snickered despite herself.

“It’s not funny!” Warren whined. “Today in self-defense class, Professor Simon mistook me for a table and set a book on my head.”

Zoe laughed even harder.

“We’re getting off track,” I reminded her. “What’d you hear in the principal’s office?”

“Oh, right.” Zoe returned her attention to me while Warren sulked. “We’ve been monitoring the bugs ever since we placed them last night, but we didn’t pick up any intel until just now.”

“Was the principal out of the office all day?” I asked.

“No, he’s been in since oh-nine-hundred,” Zoe reported. “He just hasn’t been doing anything important. He spent most of the day filling out ammunition-request forms and

playing games on his smartphone. And it took him an hour to decide what to order for lunch. But then, about thirty minutes ago, he got a phone call about SPYDER.”

“From who?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Zoe admitted. “We didn’t tap the phone. We only bugged the room, so we could only hear the Idiot’s side of the conversation.”

“What did he say?”

Zoe glanced around the library before answering. All the other students who’d been eavesdropping made a show of pretending to read their textbooks. Zoe removed her cell phone from the pocket of her jacket and slid it across the table to me.

A set of earphones was wound around it. I stuck the buds in my ears. Warren gave me a jealous look, as if I were the luckiest guy on earth because I might have come into contact with some of Zoe’s earwax.

Zoe’s phone was already cued up to the proper audio file. I pressed play.

The file began with the principal muttering what sounded like nonsense. “Stupid hedgehogs!” he yelled. “Stop stealing my flapjacks!”

I looked to Zoe, intrigued. “Is this some sort of top secret code?”

“No,” Zoe replied. “It’s about the game he’s playing on his phone.”

“It’s called Flapjack Frenzy,” Warren explained. “You try to make as many pancakes as possible and these hedgehogs try to steal them. So you have to fight them off by shooting them with maple syrup. . . .”

“The rules of the game really aren’t important right now,” Zoe told him.

Warren frowned sullenly.

On the recording, the principal’s phone rang. He let it ring ten more times while he apparently tried to finish the level of the game, before finally giving in and answering. “This is the principal,” he said curtly. “This had better be important. I’m in the midst of something very serious.” Then he gasped in surprise and asked, “SPYDER? Really? How do you know?”

This was followed by a period during which the principal was obviously listening to a lot of information that the person on the other end of the phone line was giving him. For the most part, it seemed he was trying to sound interested, saying things like “Hmmm” and “Fascinating” and “Wow,” although I could also hear the distinct sounds of the game continuing: tinny music punctuated by the occasional squelch of maple syrup and squeal of pixelated hedgehogs. Suddenly, the principal said, “No, I’m not playing a game on my phone! I’m listening to you!” And then the tinny music shut off. Afterward, the principal continued to make

interested sounds, as if trying to prove that he was rapt with attention.

At the entrance to the library, Mike Brezinski slipped through the doors.

My fellow students regarded him with almost as much surprise as they had given Zoe's announcement that SPYDER had returned. Mike was well known on campus as the newest recruit to spy school. Until only a few weeks before, he'd been my best friend from the outside world. Up until that point, I had tried to keep my enrollment at the Academy of Espionage a secret from him—as well as everyone else I knew, including my own parents. The school's very existence was classified: The rest of the world thought we attended St. Smithen's Science Academy for Boys and Girls. But Mike hadn't merely figured out that I was attending a top secret spy school; he'd also played a crucial part in thwarting some bad guys on Operation Snow Bunny, after which the CIA had recognized his potential and recruited him. However, even though Mike was my age, he had been forced to start as a first-year student. Which meant he should have been dealing with his explosives homework, not sauntering into the library.

“What’s *he* doing here?” Warren hissed.

“Maybe he finished his homework already,” Zoe suggested.

“There’s no way,” Warren said. “They only started the

timers fifteen minutes ago. Even Erica Hale didn't defuse her first bomb that fast."

Mike spotted us, waved happily, and hurried over, pausing to smile at a few attractive girls along the way.

Most of the girls smiled back. That's the kind of guy Mike was.

The recording on Zoe's phone was still playing. On it, the principal suddenly spluttered, "Benjamin Ripley?" He sounded extremely annoyed. "What do you want with him this time?"

I stiffened, surprised that he'd just used my name.

Unfortunately, nothing else was said. The principal returned to listening again, only now his occasional grunts and interjections sounded much more aggravated than they had before.

The principal wasn't a big fan of mine. Shortly after my arrival at spy school, I had insulted him to his face in order to further an investigation, and at the beginning of the current school year, I had accidentally blown up his office with a mortar round. That hadn't entirely been my fault, but no matter how many times this had been explained, the principal refused to listen. He was still using a broom closet as his office, and he hated me for it.

Mike reached my table, spun a chair around, and sat in it backward, resting his arms on the backrest. "What are you listening to?" he asked.

“Class lecture,” I replied quickly. I didn’t know if Mike had learned about SPYDER’s existence yet (he had missed all my previous confrontations with them), but I certainly didn’t have clearance to tell him about it.

Mike gave me a sideways glance, like he didn’t believe me and wanted me to know it.

“What happened to your explosives homework?” Zoe asked, trying to distract him. “Did you defuse it already?”

“No,” Mike said.

Warren gasped. “You mean you left a ticking bomb in your dorm room?”

“Calm down, Salamander,” Mike told him. “I didn’t do that either.”

“My nickname’s ‘Chameleon,’” Warren said testily. “Not ‘Salamander.’”

Mike shrugged. “They’re both lizardy things.”

“So what’d you do with the bomb?” Zoe asked.

“Well, I started to try to defuse it,” Mike explained, “but it was ridiculously complicated. So I figured, what’s the point? I mean, suppose some bad guy had really left this bomb for me. Defusing it wastes valuable time. While I’m dorking around with it, the villain escapes. So why not just forget about it and let the villain *think* I’m busy defusing it? He drops his guard, figuring I’m out of the picture—and that’s when I nab him!”

“So you’re going to let the bomb go off?” Zoe pressed.

“Yes,” Mike said, then thought to add, “Although I left it in a safe place where it won’t hurt anyone. I also moved the timer up so it’ll detonate earlier than expected.”

“Why would you do that?” Warren demanded.

“Diversion,” Mike told him. “The bomb explodes, and the bad guy thinks, ‘Aha! He’s dead!’ and then *really* lets his guard down.”

Zoe and I shared a look, realizing that, while unorthodox, Mike’s plan actually had some merit. This was where Mike had already stood out at spy school. Unorthodox thinking often earned you high grades here, and Mike didn’t merely think outside the box; he rarely even noticed there was a box in the first place.

Warren, however, was one of those kids so rigid about proper procedures that he could barely brush his teeth without consulting a manual. Mike’s refusal to play by the rules always exasperated him. “In exactly what sort of safe place did you leave this bomb?”

“Out in the quad,” Mike replied. “It’s far from any innocent bystanders—and I placed a nice heavy pot from the kitchen over it to cut down on shrapnel. I also taped up some signs warning people to keep their distance.”

“Signs?” Zoe repeated. “What’d they say?”

“‘Live bomb in area,’” Mike replied. “‘Beware of explosive debris.’ Things like that.”

“You can’t do that!” Warren spluttered. “It’s against the rules!”

“The bad guys aren’t going to play by the rules,” Mike countered. “Why should we?”

This was exactly the sort of thinking that tended to get A’s at the academy.

The distant bang of a small explosion echoed from the quadrangle. The books shuddered on the library shelves. All the students who hadn’t been close enough to overhear Mike’s plan leapt from their tables and ran to the windows to see if any large pieces were now missing from the dormitory.

“See?” Mike said proudly. “The perfect diversion.”

Zoe grinned, impressed. Warren glowered even more.

On the recording I was listening to, the principal finally stopped grunting, indicating that whoever he was talking to had finished speaking. “Fine,” he said petulantly. “I’ll approve his activation.” Then he hung up.

The recording ended.

I looked to Zoe and Warren, disappointed. “That’s it?”

“That’s all there was,” Zoe replied. “What more do you need? He confirmed that, uh”—she glanced at Mike warily—“what we were discussing before is actually happening.”

“Wait,” Mike said. “Are you guys talking about SPYDER?”

We all turned to him, surprised.

“SPYDER,” he repeated. “The international consortium of bad guys committed to causing chaos and mayhem for a price?” He looked to me. “Don’t pretend like they don’t exist. They’ve tried to kill you a few times.”

“How long have you known about SPYDER?” Warren asked suspiciously.

“Oh, for a while now,” Mike said. “It’s not like its existence is a secret.”

“Actually, it is,” I said.

“Really?” Mike asked. “Well, it’s not a very well-kept secret.”

“Apparently not.” I sighed, then slid Zoe’s phone back to her. “Though I’d love to know what they’re up to now.”

“You’ll find out soon enough,” Zoe said brightly. “They’re activating you!”

“We don’t know that for sure,” I said. “I know the principal mentioned my name, but that was a couple minutes back. For all we know, he’s activating Warren.”

“Warren?” Zoe laughed. “Don’t be ridiculous! He can’t handle SPYDER!”

“Um . . . I’m right here,” Warren pointed out gloomily.

“The Idiot was obviously talking about you,” Zoe told me. “He sounded really upset. He wouldn’t be that peeved about activating most people. But he hates you with every last fiber of his being and will until the day he dies.”

“Well, that’s reassuring,” I said.

“You blew up his office,” Warren told me.

“Because *you* put a live round in a mortar!” I reminded him. “If I hadn’t aimed it toward this building, a bunch of innocent people would have died!”

Warren shrugged, as though this argument wasn’t convincing.

“If you’re getting activated,” Mike said eagerly, “can you pick me as your partner?”

“No!” Zoe squealed, raising her hand. “Pick me! He’s only a first year.”

“This is an undercover mission, not a kickball game,” I informed them. “I don’t get to pick teams. And I’m still not completely convinced I’m the one being activated.”

“You should be,” a voice said.

We all jumped in our seats.

Erica Hale was leaning against a bookshelf only a few feet away. Unlike Warren, she hadn’t gotten close to us by camouflaging herself. Instead, she simply moved with a stealth and grace that would impress a tiger. Erica was only a fourth-year student, but she was still the best spy-in-training at school by far. Much of this was due to having exceptional natural talent, but she was also a legacy: Her family could be traced all the way back to Nathan Hale and had worked as spies ever since. Her grandfather had trained her since she

was a baby. There were rumors that at age three Erica had thwarted a trio of bank robbers with only a juice box and a Slinky.

Erica was dressed in her standard way: a tight black outfit that allowed her the freedom of movement to steal through the night or pummel enemy agents while still looking extremely stylish. But then, Erica was beautiful enough that she would have made a potato sack and a clown wig look stylish. I had a serious crush on her, as did almost every other guy on campus. However, I was the only student who had really spent any time with Erica. Erica was so determined to be an elite agent that she considered friendships to be liabilities, which led her to be distant and reserved. (Zoe called her “Ice Queen.”) I’d only gotten to know her because she’d been my partner on my previous missions.

In the process, Erica’s chilly demeanor had thawed around me now and then. In fact, near the end of our most recent mission, Erica had even kissed me. Afterward, however, she had told me it didn’t mean anything, claiming that she’d merely been trying to calm me down, as we were about to be annihilated in a nuclear explosion. Ever since then, she’d grown even more distant than usual, avoiding me like the plague. This was the first time she’d spoken to me in weeks.

“Get your coat,” Erica told me. “It’s time to move out.”

“Wait,” I said. “Am I being activated right now?”

“This is a crisis situation,” Erica said flatly. “There’s no time to waste.”

“How about bathroom breaks?” I asked. “Is there time for one of those? Because I should probably go while I have the chance.”

Erica sighed, like needing to go to the bathroom was something that only happened to other people. Now that I thought about it, though, this might have been true. I couldn’t recall her ever needing to make a pit stop. “Fine,” she said. “You can go. But make it quick.”

I started to grab my books and backpack, but Erica said, “Don’t bother. You won’t need those.” She looked to Mike. “Can you take those back to Ben’s room?”

“Sure.” Mike flashed her his standard winning smile. “Anything else you need me to do?”

“No. By the way, that was good thinking with the explosives homework.”

Zoe and Warren gaped in astonishment. Hearing Erica give anyone a compliment was almost as unlikely as spotting a unicorn.

“Good thinking?” Warren sputtered. “What he did was reckless and dangerous and against the rules!”

“Yes,” Erica agreed. “It’s exactly what *I* did on that assignment.” She shifted her attention back to me. “Why aren’t you in the bathroom already?”

“I was waiting for you,” I said.

“Why? I don’t need to go.”

“I just thought it was good manners to not run off. . . .”

“There’s no room for manners in the spy game,” Erica told me.

“Your father has excellent manners,” Zoe pointed out.

“My father’s the worst spy on earth,” Erica countered.

“Good point,” Zoe conceded.

I waved good-bye to everyone and hustled out of the library, slipping my winter coat on as I went. I could feel the eyes of every other student on me as I exited. Most had returned from the windows, having confirmed that Mike’s explosion hadn’t caused any damage, and were now watching me jealously.

It was exceedingly rare for a student to be activated for a mission while at spy school. In fact, it was rare for *graduates* of spy school to be activated for missions. Normally, only the cream of the crop was approved for fieldwork; the rest became analysts and desk jockeys. Meanwhile, this was my fifth assignment (albeit only my second official one) and I’d barely been at the academy a year. I had ended up on my first missions mostly due to bad luck, but I’d proven myself on each, figuring out the enemy’s plans and helping thwart them each time. That had earned me the right to participate in Operation Snow Bunny. Apparently

I'd performed well enough on that to merit being activated again.

Despite this, I was still awfully nervous. I did my best to put on a good show, holding my head high and striding confidently through the library, but inside I was a mess. I was worried about what lay in store and how dangerous it might be. I was concerned that I might not be up to the task and feared that I might fail—or die.

And, to be honest, I was pretty disturbed by how Erica was behaving around Mike.

There were certainly other things I should have been concentrating on, but this one kept gnawing at me: Erica had given Mike a compliment. She'd barely ever given me a compliment—and I'd helped her prevent the nuclear devastation of Colorado. Yes, she had kissed me, but she'd then insisted she hadn't felt any emotion toward me. Meanwhile, Mike had a way of winning over girls.

I glanced back toward my friends, trying to be subtle about it, fearing I might catch Erica giggling at something Mike had said, giving her hair a coy flip, or batting her eyes at him. None of that was really Erica's style, but then, neither was complimenting people.

Thankfully, Erica was on her way up the aisle behind me.

Although, she was *also* looking back toward Mike.

He waved good-bye.

And Erica, to my astonishment, waved back.

Which made me feel even worse than being assigned to a potentially life-threatening mission did.

I shoved through the big oak library doors into the soaring entry foyer of the Hale Building, ducked into the boys' room, quickly took care of business, then emerged to find Erica waiting impatiently for me. She checked her watch, as though the fifty-three seconds I'd taken to pee had been fifty-three seconds too long. (I have an unusual gift for math, and one of the side effects is an uncanny sense of time. I always know exactly how long it takes me to do anything, right down to the second.)

Erica strode toward the main doors of the Hale Building.

I dutifully followed her. "Where are we going?"

"We?" she said icily, though her annoyance didn't seem directed at me. "We aren't going anywhere. Only you are."

I froze in astonishment. "You're not on this mission?"

"No. I'm just the messenger." Erica barged out the doors, allowing a blast of cold air to knife into the foyer.

I suddenly felt even more worried than before. My success on my earlier missions was due, in large part, to Erica. She had always been close by to help me out, determine what to do, and, more often than not, clobber a few bad guys. The idea of being activated without her was terrifying. She was smarter than me, calmer than me, more confident than

me—and a hundred times better at combat than me.

I emerged from the Hale Building to find Erica standing by the driveway that circled past the entrance. It was nasty cold out. The grounds of the academy were a carpet of dead grass encrusted with ice.

A large black SUV was idling in the driveway.

A stoic driver sat behind the wheel, her eyes shielded by sunglasses.

The rear windows were tinted, so I couldn't see who was in the back.

Erica opened the rear door and said, "Here he is," to whoever was inside.

I looked to her, hoping for some hint of what was going on, but she didn't give me one. "Have fun," she said, though she didn't sound like she really meant it.

I climbed into the SUV and Erica shut the door behind me.

The interior of the vehicle was unusual. It was designed more like a limousine. The middle row of seats faced backward, toward the last row, so you could face whoever you were riding with. There was a plate of soundproof glass between the middle seats and the front, so the driver couldn't hear anything if you didn't want her to. There was a small bar built into each of the side panels, with rows of glasses and an ice bucket.

But the most unusual thing about the SUV was the two other people inside it.

The first was Cyrus Hale, Erica's grandfather and one of the finest spies the CIA had ever produced.

The other was the president of the United States of America.