Also by Stuart Gibbs

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

To:
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 unprecedented, 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], 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]. 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]
“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 bul-
let, I guessed, or maybe something more exotic, like a cross-
bow. 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 any-
thing 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 any-
thing 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.”

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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.

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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.