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STUART GIBBS

spy school



A **spy school** NOVEL

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For Garrett, Simone, Buster, and Bixby

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June 14

From: [REDACTED], Agent Emeritus
To: [REDACTED], Head of the CIA
Re: Operation Blazing Phoenix

Dear [REDACTED],

The events of this week are a dark moment in the history of the CIA. My beloved alma mater—as well as yours, and that of so many of our other fellow agents—has been exposed and nearly destroyed. There is no way we can safely continue educating students there, meaning that a generation of future agents has been compromised.

But it doesn't have to be a total loss. As you requested, I am enclosing my proposal for espionage training to covertly continue for a select few students who have already proved themselves in the field:

[REDACTED], and [REDACTED]. I volunteer to oversee the continuation of their studies, along with [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] also volunteered, but I believe he would be a detriment to our students, rather than a boon.)

As this project is to proceed with the utmost secrecy, I would recommend that we relocate to [REDACTED] and then [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] while also [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] with [REDACTED].

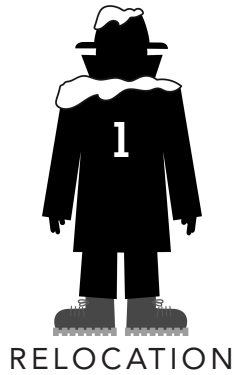
Plus, we should absolutely [REDACTED] or else we'll have a real mess on our hands.

Please get back to me on this immediately. My team is ready to go as soon as you give your word.

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]

P.S. [REDACTED] was wondering if she could get your husband's recipe for the potato salad he served when we visited you last month. I know it's classified, but you can trust us. We're willing to trade you our recipe for apple cobbler in return.



Spy School Satellite Facility
Kenai Fjords National Park, Alaska
July 17
1000 hours

Erica Hale dangled from her climbing rope on the
cliff face, five hundred feet above the ground, and asked,
“What do you smell?”

I paused in the midst of rappelling beside her, quite sure
that I hadn’t heard the question correctly. “Did you just say,
‘What do you smell?’”

“Yes.”

I glanced at the ground fifty stories below us and instantly
regretted doing so. From that height, even the tallest trees

looked as puny as bonsai. Alarmed, I clutched the rock wall so tightly that my knuckles turned white.

Meanwhile, Erica had the calm demeanor of someone sitting on a nice, comfy couch in a room full of throw pillows. “You don’t need to hold on to the cliff like that. The friction of your rope in your belay device is strong enough to keep you from falling.”

“I know that. But I still feel safer holding on.”

“You’re *not* safer. All you’re going to do is tire yourself out. So let go and relax.” Erica kicked off the rock wall and swung out over the void, grinning like a toddler on a playground swing. Her rope groaned under her weight, as though it were thinking about snapping. Erica didn’t seem the slightest bit concerned. She pendulumed back to the wall beside me, her boots thudding against the rock.

A few pieces of stone flaked off and dropped down into oblivion below us.

Despite what Erica had just told me, I clutched the wall even tighter. “Could we please head down?”

“Answer the question first.”

“What’s the holdup down there?” a voice yelled. Forty feet above us, Zoe Zibbell peered over the top of the cliff.

The grinning face of Mike Brezinski appeared beside her. “Is Ben freaking out?”

“No!” I shouted back defensively.

Mike and Zoe shared a knowing look. “He’s definitely freaking out,” Zoe said.

“Of course I’m freaking out!” I exclaimed. “We’re dangling off a cliff—and instead of rappelling down like normal people, Erica wants to know if I smell anything!”

“The point is to be aware of your surroundings at all times,” Erica explained. “Which requires using all of your senses. Right now, you’re hyper-focused on the rock in front of you and nothing else.”

“The rock is *important*,” I explained. “If I fall off of it, I die.”

At the top of the cliff, Zoe sniffed the air. “I smell fear.”

“That’d be Ben,” Erica said.

Which was true. Even though it was summer, it was only fifty degrees in Alaska, plus the windchill. And yet, I was still sweating buckets. I reeked so badly, it was possible that people a mile away could have smelled me.

Mike inhaled deeply. “I smell pine trees,” he announced, “with a hint of seawater.”

“And a touch of fresh grass,” Zoe added. “The fragrance is really delightful.”

“It is,” Mike agreed. “This whole place is what air fresher is *trying* to smell like.”

Although they were perched at the top of an extremely tall cliff, neither of them seemed remotely worried or uneasy.

I was the only one of the four of us with the common sense to be properly terrified about falling to my death. But it was evident that Erica wasn't going to let me descend until I answered her question, which meant that the longer I took, the longer I would spend hanging above the abyss.

Despite my fear, I tentatively sniffed the air. Beyond my own body odor, I picked up on the pine, seawater, and fresh grass that Mike and Zoe had mentioned. And other things as well: the gritty, mineral aroma of the cliff; the hearty, mulch scent of the forest floor . . . and a musty, earthy odor I couldn't quite place. Although something about it seemed important.

So I used my other senses to figure out what it was.

I pulled my gaze from the rock wall and realized that the view from my spot on the cliff was spectacular. It was a rare, cloudless day on the southern coast of Alaska, and I could see for miles in every direction. The mountain I was dangling from was a knob of rock that jutted out of a verdant forest surrounded by a shimmering blue fjord on one side and a jagged range of mountains on the other. The mountains were capped by the colossal Harding Icefield, which was over seven hundred square miles in size and often a mile thick. Numerous glaciers extended from it, snaking down through dark-rock valleys to the water. It was an area so remote and inaccessible that few humans had ever seen it; the mountain my friends and I were on didn't even have a name.

We were completely off the grid. The closest town had only one thousand people and was four hours away by boat—assuming the weather was good. If the weather *wasn't* good (which was often the case), then the closest town wasn't accessible at all. We were staying in a few rustic cabins tucked into the woods on the edge of a glacial lake at the base of the mountain. I could see them below me, although from my height, they looked as small as Monopoly houses. (They were also the same green color as Monopoly houses, so as to blend into the forest.) All our power was solar. Instead of indoor plumbing, we had a latrine. We had brought some dried goods with us to eat, like giant sacks of beans and rice, but for the most part we had been living off plants we foraged and fish that we caught. It was as though we had gone back in time.

Until only a few weeks before, all of us had lived in a very different place: the gothic campus of the CIA's Academy of Espionage in the heart of Washington, DC. For most of its history, the existence of spy school had been a secret. The campus even had an alias: St. Smithen's Science Academy for Boys and Girls. But the school's cover had been blown by a former student turned enemy agent named Murray Hill. Murray was my nemesis. I had thwarted several of his evil plans; in retaliation, he had put a price on my head and leaked the location of the academy to hundreds of assassins. As a result, the CIA had decided the entire training program

was compromised, shut it down, and sent all the students back to their normal lives. . . .

With four exceptions.

Erica's grandfather, Cyrus Hale, was a highly respected spy who had proposed a solution to keep at least a fraction of the program going: take a select group of students and spirit us away to an isolated location to continue our training, which Cyrus would oversee personally. The operation was so top secret that only a handful of people at the CIA knew about it. Even our old principal didn't know, although truth be told, our old principal had rarely known anything.

The reason that Erica, Zoe, Mike, and I had been chosen, rather than anyone else, was that each of us had been accidentally field-tested. Normally, students weren't supposed to go on missions until they graduated the academy after seven years of rigorous training—but circumstances had conspired against us. I had only ended up on my first mission through a series of mishaps, when the CIA selected me as bait to catch a mole and Erica had intervened to save me. After that, unusual events had led to Erica and me being on another nine missions together, in which the fate of the world had often hung in the balance. Luckily, we had prevailed.

And so, even though I had only completed a year and a half of spy school—and had just turned fourteen a month earlier—I was one of the chosen few. Zoe and Mike had been

selected because they had ended up on several of my later missions. Zoe was also in my year, while Mike was technically a year below us, even though he was our age. (He had been my friend at regular middle school and had only been recruited to spy school after cleverly deducing that it existed.)

Erica was easily the most qualified of all of us. She had completed four years of official training at the academy, but as a member of the Hale family, she had also received unofficial spy training since birth. The Hales had been spying for the United States since before the United States had even existed, and her mother's family had an equally long history of spying for England. So espionage was the family business. (Erica's first sentence had been "You're under arrest for treason.") Because of this, Erica had better spy skills than anyone else at school—as well as most of the adults in the CIA. Which was why she was currently teaching the rest of us, even though she was less than two years older than me.

Erica also happened to be my girlfriend. I had fallen for her hard on my first day of spy school—both literally and metaphorically. She had tackled me in the midst of my first training exercise—and I had been smitten with her ever since. She hadn't been the slightest bit interested in me for quite some time, but over the course of our missions, I had proven to her that I was actually a pretty good spy—and had even helped her become a better spy as well.

Still, I was nowhere near as skilled as Erica was—and probably never would be. Erica had an exceptionally impressive array of talents. To name only a few: She could battle multiple enemy agents in hand-to-hand combat at once, defuse bombs, speak sixteen different languages, drive a car at high speed—and had learned how to fly a helicopter in just the past three weeks. She also had virtually no fear of anything, as evidenced by her relaxed manner as she hung from the cliff face, and her senses were incredibly well tuned. I had seen her detect an enemy by merely catching a whiff of his cologne from a quarter mile away. She had always claimed that such talents were the result of practice, and so, Zoe, Mike, and I had been trying to improve ours over the last few weeks.

It was working. We had been training seven days a week for up to eighteen hours a day, honing espionage skills such as self-defense, decryption, orienteering, and building explosives from standard household items. We had also been doing a great deal of physical conditioning, hauling forty-pound backpacks for miles through the wilderness, swimming across lakes, and ice-climbing glaciers. I could already see a marked difference in all of us. Mike and Zoe had been good athletes when they'd arrived, but now they were like junior Olympians. And even I was in tremendous shape.

I still hadn't become proficient at *everything*, though.

Despite plenty of practice, my weaponry skills remained pathetic. Earlier that day, I had accidentally misfired a cross-bow and nearly shishkebabed Cyrus, which he was very displeased about. But in most other areas, I had improved.

Even my senses had gotten better.

As I dangled from the climbing rope, I managed to concentrate and find a sense of calm. I focused on listening to my surroundings and detected—in addition to the rustle of the wind in the trees and the distant lap of the water against the rocky shoreline of the fjord—a faint munching noise well below me. With that, I suddenly grasped what the musky odor I had smelled was.

“There’s a bear at the base of this cliff,” I informed Erica.

“Yes.” She grinned, pleased by my progress. “And what color is it?”

A few weeks earlier, I might have been thrown by this question, wondering how on earth I was possibly expected to tell a bear’s color by smelling or hearing it. But now, despite my precarious position on the rock face, I realized I already had all the information I needed.

“It’s black,” I replied.

We were in one of the few areas of Alaska in which there were no brown bears, like grizzlies, because they had never bothered to migrate across the ice field—and we were too far south to encounter polar bears. Black bears were significantly

smaller and less aggressive than grizzlies or polar bears, but you still didn't want to rappel down onto one's head.

Thanks in part to the lack of larger bears in the area, there were *lots* of black bears around our camp. We hadn't done a census, but there were certainly more of them than there were of us, which made late-night trips to the latrine somewhat harrowing. So far, none of us had ever had a bad encounter with one of them. For the most part, they didn't seem to care that we were there, but we still carried bear spray at all times, just in case.

"Correct again," Erica said, in response to my deduction. "So how do we deal with it?"

"We descend slowly, so the bear doesn't think we're a threat. And we ought to make noise, so it knows we're coming and isn't startled."

"Excellent. Luckily for us, it's busy eating a salmon, so it will probably be much more focused on that than you and me, but still, it always makes sense to be cautious."

I gave her a look of surprise. "You can tell what it's eating?"

"I can discern a distinct aroma of dead salmon. Plus, it's a good guess anyhow. Salmon's pretty much all the bears are eating right now."

I nodded, understanding. The salmon had begun returning to the glacial lakes to spawn. Some of the local streams were so thick with them that you could practically walk

across their backs. It was like Halloween for bears; their favorite food was everywhere and easy to come by, and they were gorging themselves on it every chance they got.

“Does that mean we can continue down now?” I asked.

“Yes.”

I heaved a sigh of relief. “Thank goodness.”

During our training, we had experimented with many ways to alert bears that we were nearby. The standard was to simply yell out “Hey, bear!” although that got monotonous on long treks through the wilderness. So we generally had conversations at a much louder tone than usual—or we sang. Erica had turned out to have a gorgeous singing voice and, to my astonishment, an encyclopedic knowledge of Broadway show tunes. She had taught me many over the past few weeks, and I was just about to launch into “The Surrey with the Fringe on Top” as I rappelled down when Erica suddenly tensed beside me.

It was very subtle. Until recently, I might not have even noticed the change in her demeanor. But now I did. “What’s wrong?”

“Shhh,” she said, then cocked her head slightly, listening.

I listened too. Once again, I heard the happy munching of the bear, but there was something else, even fainter and more distant. It was at the very edge of what I could detect, and yet, when I concentrated, I recognized it as the sound of hand-to-hand combat.

Erica had heard it too. Her eyes went wide in concern. “Grandpa!” she exclaimed, and then began rappelling as fast as she could.

Normally, when you rappelled, you walked slowly down the cliff face in reverse; as the rope passed through the belay device attached to your climbing harness, the resulting friction would prevent you from falling. At first, I had found it unsettling to back down a steep vertical surface, but eventually I had realized it was quite safe as long as you proceeded with care. However, in her haste to get to her grandfather, Erica had thrown caution to the wind. She wasn’t rappelling so much as sprinting backward toward the earth; her rope was passing through her belay device so fast that it was smoking.

“What about the bear?” I yelled to her. “Aren’t we supposed to be descending slowly so it doesn’t think we’re a threat?”

“We’ve got bigger problems than the bear!” Erica yelled back. “Get down here now! All of you!”

“On our way!” Mike shouted from the top of the cliff, and then he and Zoe disappeared from sight. With Erica and me on the climbing ropes, it was faster for them to run down the mountain than to wait for us to reach the bottom and then rappel after us. I could hear their footsteps fading as they sprinted away along the trail by which we had reached the peak.

I warily glanced at the precipitous drop below me. Hurling down it under normal circumstances would have been scary enough; doing that with a hungry bear at the bottom was absolutely petrifying.

Despite this, Erica was already well over halfway down.

So I gathered my nerve and raced after her.

I didn't descend nearly as swiftly as she did, but I still went much faster than I felt was prudent. I let go of the rope and let it slide through my belay device while I backpedaled down the sheer cliff face. It was sort of like being in an express elevator—without the elevator car. The wind whistled past my ears while the rope sizzled and the forest came rushing up to meet me. It was all rather unsettling—although still much better than a full-on plummet would have been. Before I knew it, I was lowering through the tree-tops. The landscape grew dimmer as the foliage blocked the sunlight, and I was immediately overwhelmed by the smells of pine, damp moss—and bear.

The black bear I had sensed before was, in fact, not far from where I was about to touch ground, devouring a massive salmon it had hauled out of a nearby stream. It was large for a black bear, at least five hundred pounds by my guess, with claws like meat hooks. Normally, I would have been in no hurry to go anywhere near it. But this was an emergency. Thankfully, the bear was extremely intent on gorging

itself, like a cruise ship passenger at an all-you-can-eat buffet, and it was evident that Erica had made it past without any trouble; I could spot her darting through the forest in the distance, heading back to camp, well ahead of me.

I fought every instinct I had about avoiding large, ravenous carnivores and set down on the spongy earth. Despite the bear's presence, I felt a massive surge of relief to be on the ground again. I quickly unclipped my belay device from the rope and did the last thing any survival expert would recommend: I ran full speed toward the bear.

It didn't even look at me. I was sure it knew I was there, though: The hair on its hump stood on end, and it emitted a low, guttural warning growl that I could feel in my bones. And yet, I still wasn't enough of a threat to warrant a break in eating. If I had come much closer, or foolishly tried to take the fish away, the bear would have likely eviscerated me with its claws, but it remained focused on its food as I sprinted past.

I had successfully rappelled down the cliff face and avoided a bear. So I only had whoever had attacked Cyrus to worry about.

Which, now that I thought of it, was certainly the biggest threat of all.

The bad guys, unlike black bears, were obviously looking to cause trouble. It was hard to hear anything over the pounding of my feet and the hammering of my heart, but

it seemed to me that the sounds of fighting had stopped. That could have been good news: Cyrus might have defeated whoever had attacked him. Then again, he might have lost, which would be very bad indeed.

It was a quarter mile back to our camp, along a meandering trail that we had hacked through the woods. Thanks to my physical training, I covered the distance quickly. Only a minute after passing the bear, I caught sight of the first cabin.

The camp had originally been built by the US Army during World War II, before Alaska was even a state, back when all the combatants were scrambling to establish military bases around the Pacific. (The Russians and the Japanese had also set up a few outposts in the Alaskan wilderness at that time.) It didn't matter how large each base was; the objective was merely to get footholds on the ground. This particular camp appeared to have been used only rarely since then, and it had possibly been forgotten by everyone in the government except for Cyrus. When we had arrived at the site four weeks earlier, the cabins had been in terrible shape, with leaky roofs, rotting walls, and plenty of uninvited inhabitants. Erica and Zoe had found dozens of voles in theirs, while the one Mike and I shared had a family of wolverines living in it. But we had come with tools, plywood, and wolverine repellent—and some of the original army equipment, like the cast-iron wood-burning stoves, was sturdy enough to withstand a

nuclear blast and therefore still operational. So it hadn't been too long before we had everything up and running. Within a few days, the cabins were repaired and downright cozy.

There were eight cabins in total, but we had only refurbished four: one for the girls, one for the boys, one for Cyrus, and one for Erica's parents, Alexander and Catherine Hale, who were currently away on a resupply mission. There was also the latrine and a mess hall (which were thankfully located at opposite ends of the camp from each other), a few equipment sheds, and a drying room for our clothes, which were often sodden, given the generally inclement weather in Alaska. Cyrus had the cabin at the farthest end of camp, closest to the boat dock. He claimed he'd chosen it so he could protect the rest of us from enemy attacks, as those would most likely come from the water—although Erica had told me his real reason was that the cabin was closest to the latrine. (Cyrus's aging bladder wasn't working as well as it used to, and he usually had to get up two or three times a night to relieve himself.)

I slowed as I came through camp, alert for any sign of what had happened in the fight. I didn't see any unconscious enemy agents sprawled on the ground—but I didn't see any sign of Cyrus, either. I cautiously made my way past the mess hall and the other cabins until I arrived at Cyrus's.

Someone had knocked his door off its hinges to gain

entry, most likely the enemy. I paused a few feet away, worried that a few bad guys might still be lurking inside.

I heard footsteps coming toward the doorway. And then Erica raced out, looking as distraught as I'd ever seen her.

"He's gone!" she said. "They took him."

"Who's they?" I asked.

"I don't know, but they couldn't have gone far."

Behind Erica, I caught a glimpse through the open doorway of Cyrus's cabin. A serious fight had obviously taken place there. None of us had much furniture—as we'd had to build it all by hand—but what little there had been was smashed to pieces.

Erica held a rag in her hand that reeked of chloroform, indicating that Cyrus had been overwhelmed and then knocked out.

An outboard motor suddenly roared to life close by, in the direction of the boat dock: The enemy, getting away.

Erica bolted toward the dock.

And before I could even think twice about the sanity of what I was doing, I ran after her.



NAUTICAL MANEUVERS

Spy School Satellite Facility

Kenai Fjords National Park, Alaska

July 17

1030 hours

The boat dock was located on a small peninsula that had been created during the last ice age by one of the nearby glaciers. Geologically, the landform was a moraine, a mass of rocks and sediment that the glacier had pushed in front of it. When the ice age ended and the earth began warming again, the glacier shrank, leaving a large, deep basin behind the moraine. Eventually, part of the moraine had collapsed, allowing seawater to fill the basin, but some of it still poked above the surface: a low, arcing ridge of loose rock

that jutted into the fjord. It was like a miniature version of Cape Cod in Massachusetts, which had been created in the exact same way, but by a significantly larger glacier.

For the past few thousand years, the glaciers had retreated at a pace that was, well . . . glacial. But with climate change, the pace had picked up dramatically. The glacier nearest to our camp had shrunk by half a mile in less than a decade, while the considerably bigger one at the end of the fjord was constantly shedding sheets of ice.

Erica and I raced through the woods from our camp and scrambled to the top of the moraine. A small inflatable Zodiac boat was motoring across the calm waters of the fjord. There were four men in it, only three of whom were conscious. The fourth was sprawled out so haphazardly that one of his legs was dangling over the side. I couldn't see his face but presumed it was Cyrus.

Several oars jutted out over the other side, which explained why we hadn't heard the boat approaching. The enemy agents must have rowed it to the moraine. This would have been hard work but could have been done almost silently. Now, in the otherwise quiet fjord, the Zodiac's motor sounded as loud as a rocket launch.

Normally, there would have been several other watercraft at our small boat dock, mostly kayaks and canoes that we used for endurance training, but our enemies had scuttled

and sunk them all so that we wouldn't be able to follow them.

However, the Hale family was always prepared for emergencies. We had our own motorboat at camp, but it was tucked behind the massive trunk of a dead tree farther down the moraine, and then hidden under a camouflage tarp for extra protection. Sure enough, our enemies had missed it. The motorboat was much bigger and faster than our enemies' Zodiac, powerful enough to get us to the closest town if needed (although it was much faster to take a helicopter, which was what Alexander and Catherine were using for their supply run). The boat was an aerodynamic sliver with a small pilothouse and a pair of three-hundred-horsepower engines.

Erica and I quickly yanked off the tarp, dragged the boat into the water, and hopped aboard. Within seconds, Erica had the engines fired up and we were in pursuit.

Behind us, Mike and Zoe emerged from the forest, heading for the moraine, panting heavily after their long run down the mountain. But we were already on our way.

Our motors roared even louder than those of the Zodiac, alerting our enemies that we were approaching.

The men turned toward us, and even from a distance, I could see their eyes go wide with surprise. Obviously, none of them had expected us to have an emergency backup boat, not to mention one that was so fast.

It was only now that I realized I didn't know what the next part of our plan was.

"Um . . . Erica?" I asked. "What are we supposed to do once we catch up to them?"

"We do to them what they did to Grandpa. Knock them senseless." Despite the challenge of this task, Erica spoke about it in the casual way that a normal person might have said they were going to drop by the post office.

I gulped. Even though I had been training hard lately, I was still wary about hand-to-hand combat. I had improved enough to beat most normal people in a fight, but enemy agents weren't normal people. "Er . . . there's three of them."

"I know. I can count."

"But there's only two of us. And I'm, well . . ."

"Pathetic at fighting?"

"I was going to say not that competent. But yes. Maybe we should go back for Mike and Zoe? Then we'd outnumber the bad guys."

"That'd take too much time. And besides, I can handle this."

"Are you sure? Those guys are very big. The guy at the stern looks like a Sasquatch without any hair."

"Fine with me. That'll just make them overconfident, and they'll underestimate us. Which will give me an advantage. Also, I have *this*." Erica popped open a storage compartment and took out an electric cattle prod. We had many of these

at camp. Cyrus and Erica had souped them up so that they could render an attacking bear unconscious with one jab.

“Oh,” I said. “Is there another one of those for me?”

“Yes, but I’m not going to give it to you.”

“Why not?”

“Because there’s a decent chance you’ll zap yourself with it by mistake and turn yourself into a gibbering pile of jelly.”

“Good point. Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Just stay out of my way and offer moral support.”

“Okay.” I still wasn’t crazy about this plan, but I knew from experience that I wasn’t going to change Erica’s mind.

Besides, we were rapidly coming up on our enemies. They had now reached the center of the fjord, well away from its mountainous shores. The bad guys’ original surprise at seeing us had faded, although they didn’t seem to be preparing for a fight. At first, I figured this was because they were—as Erica had predicted—underestimating us. Which made sense. After all, we were merely two teenagers, and young teens at that, while the three of them had the musculature of people who had been consuming steroids since birth. But as we came closer, I noticed they were all smirking knowingly, like poker players with aces up their sleeve.

A second thought came to me that should have occurred to me earlier.

“Where did these guys come from?” I asked.

"I'm guessing Russia," Erica replied knowingly. "The lettering on their Zodiac is Cyrillic, and they dress like FSB." FSB was short for Federalnaya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti, which meant "Federal Security Service." The FSB was Russia's counterintelligence agency, their equivalent of the CIA. It had been created to replace the infamous KGB, which had operated throughout the Cold War, although plenty of old-time KGB operatives still worked for it.

"I didn't mean where did they come from *originally*," I said—although I was still interested in the answer. "I meant where did they come from *right now*? That boat isn't big enough to get them all the way here from the closest town, is it?"

Erica turned to me, looking worried. In her haste to rescue her grandfather, it appeared that she hadn't considered this either. "You're right. There must be—"

Before she could finish her statement, something began to rise out of the water ahead of us. Something very, very big.

At first, I thought it was a whale, because whales were relatively common in the fjord. Two days before, a humpback had breached so close to my kayak that I'd nearly been tossed by the waves it created. But the object was too blocky to be a whale, and it rose straight from the water, like an elevator, rather than propelling itself forward, as a whale would have done. It was dark and metallic, and water streamed off its sides.