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Opening extract from

The Bad Spy Guide

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Chapter One



One tatty ID card.

That's all I've got left of the most incredible tale you'll ever hear. Still, you've never seen an ID card like this one before. 'A passport into another far more brilliant world.' That's what I said when I first saw it.

By the way, the ID card isn't actually mine. No, it belongs to a boy called Henry. And it all started one swelteringly hot night in June . . .

No, stop. I'm rushing into the story far too quickly. I'm dead keen, you see. But first things first.

My name is Tasha (no one, not even any of my teachers, calls me Natasha), I'm twelve years old and I want to be a private investigator. The first time I mentioned this everyone killed themselves laughing and thought, she'll grow out of it. But I haven't!

In fact, I've even had some training. How did I manage that? Well, take a peek in my bedroom. There you'll see eight shelves crammed with mystery stories. You won't just find the ones people in my class are reading either. No, there are dead old ones too: like James Bond and every Sherlock Holmes story ever written.

But I didn't just read them. I studied them. I learned from them. You could say I've been trained by the very best.

I only had one tiny problem. I didn't have any mysteries to solve. Here I was, with all this training and enthusiasm . . . and nothing to do. Talk about frustrating.

I live in a sleepy little village called Little Farthingwell (or Little Fartingwell, as some people in my class prefer to call it), but in so many books I've read these are the very places that are just brimming with crime. So I've kept my eyes

permanently peeled – and yes, all right, let's get this out of the way right now: I've made a few mistakes, including a real whopper recently.

I won't waste your time by going into all the details. I'll just say – well, the dentist's wife really did seem to just vanish and then a dog did keep sniffing around a part of the garden where she could so easily have been buried.

And yes, OK – it must have been quite a shock for that dentist to see me digging up his front garden at half past two in the morning. And I don't even blame him for calling the police, especially when his wife was away in— But you really don't want to hear any more about that, do you? Good – because I'm so sick of everyone going on and on about it.

Anyway, that's the thing about school: be just a little bit different (like me) and people don't like it, you know. And after that incident they came up to me at school saying I was mad and crazy – and a big joke. Only one person stuck up for me – and that was Julia, my best friend. But even she had a go at me in private.

I tell you, my image was in shreds. But

I wasn't going to stop. And on a slightly happier note I did go on to find this suitcase by the side of the road. It was locked and I had such high hopes that it had been dropped by bank robbers and was full of stolen money. In fact, it was full of smelly clothes and had just fallen off a car roofrack. No, wait, I did get a little reward for discovering it – so it was a start, I suppose.

All the time, though, I was waiting for that big mystery where I could show off all my investigating skills . . . and now I really can take you on to that swelteringly hot night in June when I finally got my chance.

Chapter Two



On the evening I'm telling you about, I was on my own for a few hours because Dad was driving my mum to the airport. She was flying off to New York – swanky or what – where she would travel about for the next three weeks telling everyone why she was a top businesswoman. I was proud of her. But right then the house had a horrible, empty feeling which I didn't like at all.

And normally I'd have been on the phone to Julia. But she'd gone down with such a bad attack of summer flu she could hardly speak; her mum thought it best I didn't even text her right now

and just let her have complete rest.

My room was so stuffy that night, I opened my bedroom window wide. But all the new air felt as worn out and tired as the old stuff. Everything was just so flat. If only someone would call round with a mystery for me to solve. People were always dropping in on Sherlock Holmes. Surely one person could consult me. They needn't pay me a penny either. In fact I'd pay them! That's how desperate I was.

There must be someone out there who needed my help.

And that's when I spotted a figure crouched underneath the massive cherry tree in our front garden. Immediately I reached for my notebook, which goes absolutely everywhere with me.

Then the person beneath our cherry tree sprang forward – and I recognized him. He caught the same bus as Julia and me every morning – and went to the boys' school just down the road from our concentration camp. He was called Henry Grimes; he'd only been in the village a short while and Julia thought he was a geek. I'd met him once when I was out with Mum at the shops. She had stopped

to chat to his mum when they first moved in. All I'd noticed about Henry's mum, actually, was that she had striking red hair (you see, I'm very observant, like all spies have to be).

Henry himself was quite tall and sliced-bread thin. He looked younger than his age (twelve) – a bit baby-faced really, with blond hair (Julia reckoned it was dyed) and glasses. When he took his glasses off, though, he had interesting eyes: they were a light green colour and always had a far-away look in them, as if he'd just landed here from a distant planet.

No, I'm not saying he was an alien. Behave! I'm just trying to explain that there was something a bit mysterious about him right from the start. I remember once I saw him on the bus sitting by himself and he intrigued me so much I very nearly went and sat next to him. I would have done if I hadn't been with Julia.

He lived in one of those cottages at the other end of the village, yet here he was hiding underneath the branches of our cherry tree. Why? I was just brimming with nosiness, especially when he got out

a notebook and started scribbling furiously in it.

He appeared to be staring at the house opposite mine. A pair of prune-faced snobs called Mr and Mrs Baxter lived there. But I couldn't see what was so fascinating about it.

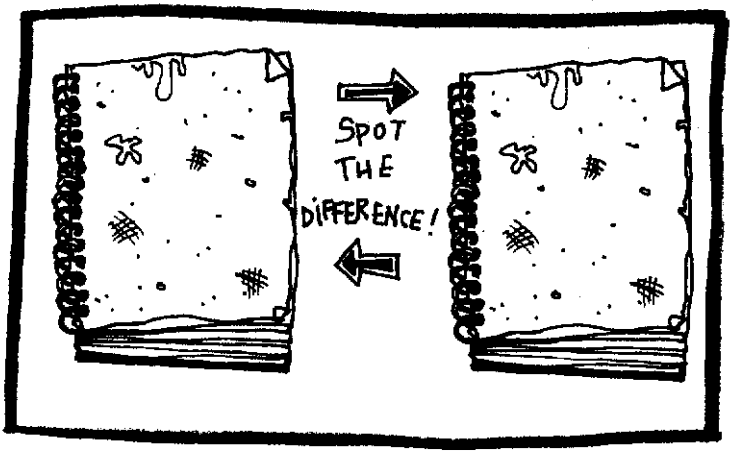
Finally he came out from under the cherry tree. He stood in the middle of the road, putting his notebook away and gazing at the Baxter abode as if he just couldn't tear his eyes away from it.

And then I yelled down to him, 'Hey, Henry, just what are you doing?'

He whirled round and he looked dead guilty, as if I'd caught him doing something really bad. Then he sort of gasped my name – 'Tasha!' – and never said another word. Well, the poor guy didn't get a chance, did he? For at the same moment a very old, very battered car came roaring down my road at a colossal speed. I could see the driver wrestling frantically with the controls. Then the car gave a tremendous swerve and backfired so loudly, it sounded just like a gunshot.

And there – sprawled on the ground and lying very still – was Henry.

Chapter Three



I hared down my stairs. It had all happened in a flash, so I hadn't even been able to shout a warning to Henry.

I flew outside, where to my huge relief, I saw Henry sitting up and talking to the older boy who'd been driving the car.

Henry suddenly noticed me and gave a tiny smile. 'Hello again . . . we got interrupted, didn't we?'

'Are you hurt anywhere?' I asked.

'No he's not, says he feels fine,' cried the driver hastily.

'Don't think there's anything broken anyway,' said Henry. 'Not even my glasses.'

He put them on again. 'So I've been pretty lucky really. I jumped out of the way just in time.' He looked as pale as milk, though, and he got to his feet so gingerly.

The driver started talking to Henry again, saying how he'd only passed his test two days ago and he didn't want anything going on his licence. That was all he was bothered about. Then I noticed Henry's little notebook and pen had flown down the road, so I picked them up.

And his notebook was exactly like mine. So that was one thing – probably the only one – that he and I had in common: an identical taste in notebooks. I slipped it into my pocket.

Henry shook hands with the driver, who was all smiles now he knew Henry wasn't going to report the accident. Neighbours were hovering round too, with shocked, curious eyes, but I steered Henry away from them and into my house for a cup of tea.

Then, in the kitchen, I said to Henry, 'So come on, why have you been hanging about outside in such a highly suspicious manner?'

He took a slug of tea and then replied, 'Because we're living in exciting times,

Tasha.'

'Tell me more,' I cried at once.

'Do you know what's going on across the road?'

'No.'

'Well, an incredible thing has just occurred there.'

My skin was starting to sizzle now. 'You don't mean a crime?'

'No, I mean they've got a nest of goldfinches in their back garden.' Then, because I looked totally underwhelmed, he went on, 'I doubt you've ever seen a goldfinch before. They disappeared from our gardens years ago . . . but now suddenly they're back – at your neighbours' house. There was a bit about it in the village magazine last week.'

'Oh, was there?' I said vaguely.

'Well, do look out for goldfinches flying about. They've got a red and white face and a gold bar on their wings. They've also got a very distinctive cry. Perhaps you've heard it.' And right there in the kitchen he went: *'Twit, twit . . . twit, twit.'*

'Whenever I hear a bird going *twit twit*, I'll think of you,' I said. 'Do that again, will you?'

He started another impression, but then reddened. 'You're laughing at me, aren't you? That's cool, I do get carried away when I'm talking about goldfinches. They're such amazing birds. But I'll stop boring you now . . . and thanks for the tea. See you then.'

'Oh, before you go,' I said, 'I picked up your notebook.' I took it out of my pocket and handed it to him.

'Thanks a lot,' he cried, grabbing it eagerly. 'I've jotted down so many details about goldfinches in there. I saw one fly right above my head tonight. Bird-watchers all over the country are going to be so envious.'

'Remind me about that noise goldfinches make again.'

He grinned. 'You'll just have to remember my terrible impression. Bye.'

And off he went.

A nice, geeky bird-watcher – that's what you're thinking. Well, so was I until I realized I'd mixed up the notebooks and given Henry mine by mistake.

I was just quickly glancing through it when I got a shock. For he hadn't written down one single thing in it about

goldfinches. Instead, there were all these notes about people who'd called on the Baxters: times they'd arrived, brief descriptions. The kind of reports you'd expect an undercover policeman to make.

But why was Henry doing this? And why did he pretend he was just observing goldfinches?

This needed investigating, didn't it?