



THE
STASH

BENJAMIN BRADLEY

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“There comes a time in every rightly constructed boy’s life when he has a raging desire to go somewhere and dig for hidden treasure.”

- Mark Twain

ONE

“*The Goonies*,” Taylor whispered just loudly enough for the others to hear over the hum of the mammoth air conditioning unit they hid behind. Sweat dripped off his sunburnt forehead and pooled on the tarred rooftop below him.

“I’m listening,” Cam replied. Her eyes followed the beam of the searchlight below as it cascaded over the canopies of tall pines that lined the elementary school property. In the glow cast from the squad car’s driver side, she could see glimmers and mosquitoes hovering in the night sky.

“They save their families *and* the town from disaster!” Taylor barked in a not-so-hushed tone that caught Cooper’s watchful eye. The two exchanged a look that spoke volumes after ten years of friendship. Taylor mimed shutting his mouth with a zipper and tossing away the key. He pretended to jump and dive after the imaginary key as it fell off the rooftop. Only Taylor laughed at his pitiful mime impression.

“And almost get killed by a family of evil thugs in the process. Next please.” Cam spoke barely above a whisper, so that Taylor had to lean in to hear her.

“Okay, okay - *Stranger Things*. Small town kids go and save the day once again. Like, even the supernatural shit is somehow all okay when they go back to school,” Taylor croaked in his best movie voiceover voice. Cooper’s eyes were following the searchlight as it bounced off the neon yellow playground slide that he’d played on as a child.

“Uh – are you just forgetting about Barb? Season One and she’s just entirely gone. They barely mention her as the show goes on!” Cam replied.

“And your point is?”

“I don’t want to be Barb. Nobody wants to be Barb!”

“Shhh!” Cooper hissed. “If you two don’t shut it now, we’re all going to be Barb before the night is out.” He let out a huff as he stared intently at his two unruly rooftop companions. Cam and Taylor relented. The three teenagers had been crouched in their position for more than twenty minutes while the police continued their half-hearted search of the property. Cooper adjusted his position as he felt his legs start to tingle with the early signs of pins and needles.

The Littleton Elementary School rooftop was supposed to be the perfect vantage point, according to Taylor, to see the aliens that had been leaving the crop circles on the soccer fields at night. The crop circles that he claimed were *definitely* not from landscapers and were, in fact, communication about an impending invasion. Taylor had been told on countless occasions that he had an overactive imagination. He'd always responded, "Thanks!"

The climb onto the roof was straightforward, although Cooper had found himself questioning their route down when the flashing lights of an approaching squad car lit the world around them. A window in the rear of the building had old metal slats on the side that were the perfect foothold to boost yourself up and grab hold of the edge of the rooftop. From there, it was just a simple pull-up required to access a new world and a vantage point where Cam and Cooper could prove Taylor wrong yet again.

They'd ducked behind the large industrial unit that cooled the entire forty classroom school as they saw the car approach. It was tall enough that they could obstruct themselves from the searchlight the patrolman was using half-heartedly from the driver's seat. The initial search was over and the light powered down. The officer just sat in his cruiser, waiting. Complete stillness washed over the area except for a few hovering fireflies that had survived longer than the rest of their pack through the blistering summer heat.

"I'm just saying, you haven't actually named a single adventure movie where kids save the day and everything is okay." Cam blew and popped a small bubble with her gum in-between sentences. "Yes, they all had fun. Like we did on our way up here. But right now, as we try not to get arrested, the downsides are looking rather alarming, Taylor!"

This was a familiar moment for the three friends. Without fail, Taylor would have a half-baked scheme that involved spirits or aliens or hidden passageways or something similar and despite some brief hesitation, Cam and Cooper would agree and soon end up in a calamitous situation. Cam loved to poke Taylor about his obsession with the unknown and unanswerable. It was so foreign and yet endearing to her the way he stood his ground about wanting to know the truth about everything.

Cooper wouldn't let his two friends explore the world without him, even though he tended to agree with Cam more than Taylor. To date, not a single one of his wacky late-night, 80's-movie-fueled adventures yielded anything more than a daring escape from the cops. Or the movie theatre staff. Or a pack of angry chickens, on easily their strangest adventure. There had yet to be aliens, ghosts or any unanswerable questions after their nights of chaos and clamor. The stories, however, had become legendary in the halls of their high school.

Taylor opened his mouth to speak when they heard the croak of a megaphone being flicked on.

“Kids, we know you’re up there. Just come down and walk over here. We aren’t looking to arrest anybody tonight. Too much paperwork,” the officer said in a breathy tone that fit his rotund figure.

The raspy voice was familiar. They didn’t need to get any closer to recognize the voice of Officer Derrick Magee. They’d outrun his sloth-like pursuit on more than one occasion and somehow managed to escape. Well, *usually* escape. They had one tally in the loss column so far and the rooftop mischief seemed destined to be tally number two unless the skies opened up and Taylor’s aliens beamed them free to safety. Somehow, getting caught seemed more likely.

Cam could see Taylor scripting together his response in his head. He looked up to Cooper and signaled for Cooper to hand over the megaphone. The all-too-easily procured amplifier was readily available on Amazon.com and Taylor had been begging for a moment to use it.

“We’re just doing an inspection up here, no kids in sight,” Taylor responded in his own booming voice that echoed through the air. Cam and Cooper groaned.

“Really? No kids in sight? That’s something an adult would say?” Cooper whispered furiously at Taylor. Cam just laughed. Taylor tried to defend himself but caught Cam’s infectious laugh and could barely get a word out between giggles. Cooper fought back a smile and was about to scold his friends when he was interrupted again.

“Look, just step off the roof and we’ll take you home. No charges for trespassing.” The policeman’s voice boomed and bounced off the empty school grounds.

“Told you a megaphone wouldn’t save us.” Cam prodded Taylor. “Was that your best plan? Shout back to the cops with our own adult voice impressions and hope they just leave?”

Taylor shrugged. “Best \$24.99 solution I could think of! Do you know how many times we could have used this in the past?”

Cooper looked down at the tarred surface of the roof. It was bleeding onto his shoes, turning his white Adidas sneakers into a new shade of gray. Cam looked over to Taylor again. “Well, Mr. Adventure King. Got a plan to get us out of here?”

Taylor picked up a worn tennis ball from the rooftop and grinned back at his friends.

Minutes later, the three teenagers sprinted through the brambles and brush that blanketed the spaces in between pine trees as they blazed a new trail off of the school’s property and towards their bikes, stashed in the woods off Springfork Drive. Taylor’s not-so-brilliant idea, to throw all of the tennis balls that had been caught on the roof, didn’t quite distract the

officers as much as they'd hoped. The chase was on. Officer Magee fumbled through the brush behind them.

"*The Sandlot!*" Taylor shouted over the crunch of running feet on dead leaves blanketing the floor of the woods. The megaphone hung from his hand as he ran and collided with overgrown weeds and shrubs.

"What?" Cam sprinted to catch Taylor.

"*The Sandlot!* They all turn out okay in the end!"

"This isn't *The Sandlot*, now shut up and run!" Cam increased her stride into a full sprint.

Cooper was out first and grabbed his bike from the bottom of the pile. Cam and Taylor hopped on theirs and the three peeled out, heading south toward Old Chamberlain Street. The heavy breathing and muffled shouting of Officer Magee in pursuit moved closer as they pedaled away from the patch of woods.

"Gotta do some more cardio, Magee!" Cam shouted back as they pedaled furiously. They were out of reach before he could respond.

Cooper led the three down the big hill where he and Taylor had stuck baseball cards in their spokes and pretended they were riding motorcycles as kids. He swerved to a sharp left, his back tire sliding out and then re-aligning. The others followed. Barely a bike length behind Taylor, Cam glanced back up the hill but saw no trace of their followers.

Cam yelled to Cooper but he was too far ahead now, pedaling with all of his might toward the Black Creek Greenway that bisected the county. When she caught up with the others at the Greenway entrance, she shared that they were safe.

"No prison for us tonight," Taylor spoke into the megaphone and the amplified voice made both Cooper and Cam cover their ears.

"You're an idiot," Cam shouted over the static erupting from the microphone. "Turn that crap off before Magee hears it and let's go home."

The three friends stood, panting and glistening from the summer heat. Their sweat-soaked shirts hung from their young shoulders and stuck to their skin as they broke into laughter and shuffled towards home.

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Ben grew up in Parsippany, New Jersey. He currently resides in Durham, North Carolina where he consults for nonprofits and international development organizations. He credits his love of books and writing to his mother who taught him at a young age to appreciate and enjoy stories. Mysteries, thrillers and biographies are among the genres he most frequently reads.

When he's not writing, Ben is an avid traveler and hiker who also enjoys juggling while running half-marathons. Ben is an AmeriCorps Alum and StartingBloc Fellow with a passion for improving the world.

Learn more about his work at www.benjaminbradley.com/books or follow him on Twitter at @BBradleyBooks.