

# SCHOOL FOR SPIES

A day of female Bonding, with lessons in combat, poker and some seductive dance moves **BY LEAH CHERNIKOFF**

It's 10 a.m. on a Saturday, and instead of sleeping in, I'm lying facedown on a wrestling mat at a boxing gym in Chelsea.

I've just been steamrolled by a man twice my size.

Learning hand-to-hand combat from a guy who usually does training for U.S. Special Operations and other elite forces was the first of my lessons at Stiletto Spy School, a day-long adventure in coaxing out my inner Bond girl.

"This to me was part of my mantra of 'Just say yes,'" said Amy Bayer, 45, from Washington, D.C., one of seven other spies-in-training that day. "There comes a point where you narrow your life, and you don't do things that challenge you as often."

For Laurie Spitz, 42, who works in marketing in Boston, the class was a birthday present from her husband. The youngest spy girl, Collette, 25, who lives in Brooklyn and works in fashion, was given her mission by her boyfriend in an appropriately vague e-mail the night before. "We haven't been dating that long," she muttered, confused and bleary-eyed before the 8:30 a.m. combat session.

"I think it's really cool when we get the suburban mom mixed in with the Williamsburg hipster, and they never would have met before but they're bonded here today because of it," said Alana Winter, the school's founder.



"I saw these female icons in the movies — from Diana Rigg in 'The Avengers' to Uma Thurman in 'Kill Bill' — and they were cool, calm and collected. They knew just enough about everything to get out



Gal Friday demonstrates a burlesque chair dance for the class at the Slipper Room; at left, in the back of a Mexican restaurant, the day's instruction also covers when to hold 'em and when to fold 'em. Photos by Jeanne Noonan

of almost anything, and I just thought, 'Where do they go to learn all that?'"

The school started as a weekend-long program in Las Vegas and has been churning out budding Charlie's Angels in New York in the abbreviated Saturday program since December. And while the fee is steep (\$395 for the day, which includes breakfast, lunch and one-on-one attention from the city's top experts in their fields), Winter is working to get the price down.

"The things people are still spending money on are things that are really unusual and also things that really make you feel good," she says. "Stiletto Spy School covers both ... it's all about empowerment and fantasy."

After learning how to gouge out an eyeball (it feels like pushing your thumb through the skin of an orange, the instructor told us), fend off an attacker behind you (go for the groin) and incapacitate potential evildoers with a swift blow to the neck, a cupped whack to the eardrums or a jab to the solar plexus, my schoolmates and I were off to our next adventure: perfecting our poker faces.

At the back of a nondescript Mexican

restaurant, the card sharks who taught Matt Damon and Ed Norton how to bluff for the poker film "Rounders" endeavored to teach the ins and outs of Texas hold 'em. I used to think poker was one of those foreign languages spoken by men (like cars and video games). But thanks to top poker trainers Mike Scelza and Johnny Marinacci, the game was easy to pick up, as well as addictive. I was sad to see the tournament come to an end — almost as sad as I was to see anyone other than myself raking in the chips.

Lastly, the spies were herded into a 15-passenger van and taken to the lower East Side, where we filed into the Slipper Room, which hosts burlesque shows four days a week. There, we learned a classic burlesque chair dance, set to a sultry version of "Love Potion No. 9," from performer Gal Friday.

Yes, there were a few awkward giggles when Gal Friday told us to "caress the chair" and taught us the "breakfast bump and grind" move, which involves "bumping" imaginary oranges off of our hips and "grinding the coffee" between our legs. But in the end, inhibitions were lost. Mission accomplished. ♦



Leah Chernikoff gets a lesson in fighting from Sachin Makani.