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MRS SPY

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The Scandalous Life of Ruby Devereaux

MRS SPY

M. J. ROBOTHAM



An Aria Book

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This is a work of fiction. All characters, organisations, and events
portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's
imagination or are used fictitiously.

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To my very own Special Agent Broo – Broo Doherty.
As tenacious and shrewd as any in the Secret Service.
So many thanks.

The life of spies is to know, not to be known
– George Herbert

Prologue

London, August 1962

His urgent footfall echoes on the parched pavement, each step a resounding clip and what seems like a continual clarion bell in his ear, shoes that he's worn for months yet now feel new and clumpy in his attempt to dodge the pursuit. The residential street is almost deserted, save for one elderly woman lifting the lid of her metal dustbin and dropping something heavy in it, but even that doesn't chime like the noise of his own steps. Opposite the sallow light from her hallway, he slides into the gloom of an ivory white portico and listens hard into the relative silence, his soles now static. Where is he, the tracker that's been ghosting him for the past ten minutes? One second, a shadow was there, two lengths behind and doing a good job of being discreet, the next he's vanished into thin air.

Did I imagine it? Have I lost my knack entirely?

Never one to panic normally, now he feels a distinct thrum under his jacket, regretting yet again his choice of a suit over a more casual summer shirt; at nine thirty p.m.,

the summer skies over West London are darkening, but the day's temperature lingers. The city perspires, as does he.

The old woman opposite retreats and shuts the door, dousing the hallway glow, just as a couple walk by, hand in hand, and he makes a split-second decision to slide from the porch and into their slipstream. It's never good practice to use innocent members of the public as cover, but this doesn't feel normal. Come to think of it, it hasn't felt right all afternoon, some inexplicable but overriding sense of... of what? Oppression? Perhaps dread. They know. What's worse, they know he knows. It changes everything – not only where he'll seek shelter tonight, but where his life trajectory is heading. How will he protect...?

Fuck! The renewed clip-clop from behind is more subtle than his own; the returning shadow is not only a whisper but he must be able to walk through walls, like some ruddy spectre. Plus, the pace is gaining, as the chattering couple in front speed up and round the corner, leaving the street empty and him exposed. Moisture coats the inside of his shirt as he looks for another faux-classical pillar to slide behind, when a voice is suddenly there at his side: 'Hey!'

He slows and twists at the affable tone, a cloud of angst expelled skywards, relief mixed with confusion. 'Oh... what are yo—?' He blinks, absorbs: 'What!'

The blade glints off the partial beam from a streetlight for less than a second before it slides in under his jacket and he feels it make contact with the thrum of his heart. Smooth and slick, as is the coating on his hands as he goes down hard on the kerb, clutching at the breach in his shirt and skin, cold sweat now, and his mind goes instantly to a living room not too far away, the monochrome glow of

the television and curtains flapping against the wide-open windows. 'There's a cold beer in the fridge,' Maggie would call out if he walked through the front door right now. 'But go and say goodnight to Libby first, she's just gone to bed.'

Lying on the gritty pavement, he concocts her voice into his ear, picturing every other precious thing contained in that home, and in his now bleeding heart.

One

London, 10 May 1965

For pity's sake, I think I'm brewing a bunion. The soles of my feet ache constantly and my heels sport a layer of hard skin that easily gives me quarter of an inch in height; I'll wager that James Bond is never in need of foot balm. I suppose, though, it is down to the nature of the job, and any chiropodist would have a field day with our department's lower limbs. But this, this... *thing*, sore and throbbing against the side of shoe leather that's just a tad too tight? I'm only forty-five, and even my mother doesn't have a bunion.

Mind on the job, Mags.

With both eyes aimed across the street, I lean in the doorway and peer past the rain coming down in a fine, filmy sheet. Spring showers, the weathermen like to call it, as if it's something beautiful and romantic, and we should all skip gaily through a veil of fine droplets, like Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*. The British are determined to categorise rain at every opportunity, making endless talk

on the top deck of buses about what type of precipitation we're having: a downpour, a shower, a brief shower or a bloody great deluge. It's wet, that's what it is. It makes you damp and clammy, the pavements slippery, throwing up grime and smells you wish would stay down there. More to the point, rain is not good for people like me. I can do hot and cold without any issue, blustery wind up to gale force, and snow at a push (with the right type of footwear, of course), but rain complicates matters. People have a tendency to disappear under hats, sometimes with intent, losing themselves beneath a canopy of umbrellas, slipping into a sea of black, nylon waves. If you're not careful, it's game over in a matter of minutes.

'Bane of our lives,' I imagine Davy would be saying right now. *'A true test of our skill.'*

Enemy agents use it to their advantage. But spies like us – like me – we do not welcome rain at all. Inside my damp shoe, my budding bunion likes it even less.

Oh, here we go. A door opens in the red-brick mansion block opposite, and a man hovers for a second on the threshold, looking skywards in that familiar assessment of the clouds above. Brolly or not? But I know he will, since it's perfect cover and his hesitation is merely an opportunity to sweep his eyes left and right, combing the landscape around Russell Square for a tail. For the likes of me. I slink further back into the doorway, making my own swift appraisal:

Mid-height, dark short hair, clean shaven, gaunt cheeks. Wiry and fit under that sharp, lead grey suit? Slim knitted tie. Shoes seen better days. Heavy eyebrows, hawkish nose. Has the look of a ventriloquist dummy.

The description I set down in my head is in report-speak, logging it for when I'll need to type it up later, having trained myself over the years to retrieve it from a memory index when required. Most likely, it's a consequence of being a working wife and mother, and the need to create a whole series of brain cubbyholes in which to park various bits of your life. In my case, a catalogue that is always packed to capacity.

And he's off. Brolly up, he steps onto the street, striding left towards Holborn. Given it's just before nine a.m., he might well have timed his journey to ease himself into the shoal of office workers bound for London's central district, those in dark suits with black umbrellas, swallowed instantly by the swathe of monochrome moving in the direction of business and industry.

I cut in two bodies behind, my vision in split screen – one eye on the opposing pedestrian traffic, and the other on the pavement yards in front, tracking the worn soles of his brogues, in trying to anticipate a swift change in direction. I've no umbrella, and the heat is rising inside my unfashionable rain mac, the thick plastic hood pulled up over a red crocheted beret. The throng is walking at a pace, perhaps too fast for an elderly woman in thick stockings, wing-tip glasses and a large, embroidered bag slung over her shoulder, but – in the collective intent to reach their place of work – no one pays me any mind as I'm herded along.

One poor sap peels off towards an office block and the day's toil, giving me the chance to skip a body ahead and closer to my target. Normally, we wouldn't track so closely, but I daren't chance losing him in this sea. Something tells me he'll make a move soon – instinct, perhaps, but his gait is just a little too jaunty for my liking. Peering under the

back of his umbrella, I see the hair at the nape of his neck shift slightly. It's the tiniest of giveaways. He's surveying. Waiting for a chance. He might not have 'clocked' the little old lady tottering behind, or have looked beyond my thick make-up and drawn-on wrinkles, but if our intelligence is correct, his own impulse will be to assume he has a tail. It's the day-to-day business of 'tradecraft' in the tawdry world of espionage, producing the adrenalin to dampen the sore rasp on my feet as I wait for the elaborate dance to begin.

A few hundred yards on and it's getting uncomfortable. Not just my feet, or the task in hand, but the temperature inside my plastic mac. Hemmed in by bodies, sweat trickles down my back and the nape of my own neck, creating a mobile steam bath. I feel like a greenhouse plant in a heatwave.

Mental note, Mags: ditch the mac.

Mercifully, he makes a move soon after, though I almost miss it as I'm busy wiping steam from my glasses. Never has a so-called pensioner moved so swiftly, darting from the mid-stream of suits and on to the busy thoroughfare next to Holborn tube station. He slaloms towards the station entrance and then swerves to make a right turn, hopping over the zebra crossing at the last minute and narrowly missing a collision with a black taxi. I'm only seconds behind, stooping as befits my pensioner disguise and brazenly stepping out in front of oncoming traffic, hand outstretched and causing a second taxi to screech to a halt. Behind the wheel, the cabbie glowers his contempt and mutters a 'Bloody hell' into his windscreen.

He's good, this Dummy Man. Not once does he glance to his rear, but I drop back a decent distance, conscious that he'll be using the glass-fronted shops along New

Oxford Street as a handy reflection to check who's behind. It's exactly what I would do. He must be feeling a little more confident that he's either shaken a tail or hasn't picked up one in the first place, because he stops by a newspaper stall and hands over change for a daily edition. That's when I take the opportunity to nestle halfway in a convenient nook between buildings, whip off the mac (with an audible sigh), swipe the beret from my head and chafe at my face with its scratchy wool, scrubbing off the worst of the thick Max Factor. Within seconds, both are stuffed into my copious carrier, so recently dubbed the 'Mary Poppins bag' by my mother. Pulling myself up to a full height of five foot six, it's an ordinary woman of forty-five who emerges casually from the nook, one that any passer-by might struggle to describe. 'Just average,' a witness would doubtless comment, scraping to recall. 'Bit taller than most perhaps, maybe. Not thin, not fat. Hair? Mid-brown possibly? Um, I can't quite remember. You know, like any middle-aged woman.'

And that pleases the likes of me, Maggie Flynn. As it would any spy worthy of the label.

Perhaps I spoke too soon, because Dummy Man has picked up his pace again, see-sawing through the office-bound crowds that are now thinning out, crossing left over the road, then right again, doubling back and running for the number 23 east towards Holborn. Now, there's little doubt he's 'dry-cleaning' his route thoroughly, which means he must be on the way to a meet. An important one, maybe? The Czech embassy is in the opposite direction and his cover there as a desk diplomat doesn't hold with this wayward path to work.

Heat is spiralling again as I follow at a run, the bunion

complaining bitterly. He leaps onto the open platform of the double-decker bus as it pulls away and I'm still running. Puffing. Panting, as the conductor hangs onto the pole and looks out with an expression of bewilderment at my frantic efforts to board.

Mental note number 2, Maggie Flynn: get fitter.

'Whoa lady!' The conductor hauls me in following my desperate lunge, as I land knees first on the slippery wet platform like a sack of potatoes. 'You nearly split your difference doing that, missus.'

Scrambling upright with his help, I survey my torn stockings and bloody knees, feeling like a pensioner and a toddler in unison, while passengers on the bottom deck are looking at me with a combined admiration and scorn for my idiocy. Definitely not in the tradecraft manual to attract so much attention. With a sheepish smile, I take a seat near the entrance and focus on the back stairs. At worst, Dummy Man's liaison will already be taking place on the top deck at this very moment, surreptitiously talking in low whispers with his contact stationed on a seat in front. I'll miss a perfect opportunity to earwig on their conversation. Result: assignment failed. Then again, his spontaneous swerve on the street and the timely arrival of a bus – any bus – tells me it's merely part of his routine, and the rendezvous is yet to come. With throbbing knees to match my feet, I've no choice but to sit tight. Three stops later, Dummy Man emerges from the top deck, tightly clutching his newspaper.

While he hops off lithely in the direction of Charterhouse Street, my descent is more of a stumble as the conductor

comes at me with a helping hand. 'Look after yourself, love,' he says cheerily, 'and no more heroics, eh?'

Mercifully, it's stopped raining, with a weak sun and blue sky pushing through at last, a warm spring breeze already drying the pavements. Even so, I'm praying we're not on a lengthy cleaning route, given that some have been known to last hours. My legs might not make it, calf muscles seizing up with each step. 'Surely you need a rest, or else a cuppa?' I mutter under my breath, in both hope and desperation.

Dummy Man is walking with purpose, slicing into an alleyway as we run the length of Smithfield meat market and all its associated odours, where I'm forced to hang back more than is comfortable, and then looping towards a small green park in the middle of a square. Sheer relief! This must be it – perfect cover for a man with a newspaper, just passing the time of day and blending into a general tableau of women with prams, plus several children in wellingtons splashing in the leftover puddles.

From a distance, I watch him circle halfway around the lush lawn, passing empty benches dotted at intervals on the path. His ever-so-slight hesitation tells me he's looking for the designated spot. Finally, he sits and opens up his copy of *The Times*, a big spread of newsprint from which to hide behind. I lower myself onto a seat with one empty bench separating us, judging it just close enough for what I need.

Once again, we wait. Delving into my bag of tricks, past the wet mac and several hats, I produce two lengthy needles and a ball of wool, applying a dowdy, cotton cloche hat which ages me ten years in an instant (and one my own mother wouldn't be seen dead in). Click-clack, click-clack.

People smile sweetly as they walk past, and you can see it on their faces: *Ah, bless the old biddy knitting in the park. Perhaps she's lonely?*

Or perhaps this old biddy's eyes are scouring every inch of the perimeter, picking out each person who walks through its black iron gates, with or without a dog or child, barely looking at the wool working its way back and forth. Tick, tack.

James Bond and George Smiley really should learn to knit.

It takes five minutes and several rows of garter stitch until a figure in a similar dark suit enters by the far gate, folded paper in hand, easily identified as a potential target. Dummy Man is planted in the middle of the bench as man two makes a poor play of moving alongside, like a bad American noir film. I wonder if Orson Welles might step out from the shadows at some juncture. Each shuffles a few inches, and within seconds they both are behind two large broadsheets.

Damn it! Their faces are obscured by the day's headlines, and I have to make a play of dropping the wool and leaning forward. Snap goes the shutter of my tiny camera, the lens just peeking out from a bespoke hole in the lining of my bag, relief that the mechanism hasn't been damaged by my spectacular crash-landing on the bus. But it's not enough, since both are making a good job of being obscured, and I'm at the point of considering a risky 'walk-by' when a stiff breeze blows at the newsheet and both men are forced to lower and reposition their cover.

Snap, snap.

I'm too far away to hear their conversation, and annoyingly, a woman has planted herself beside me, bent on a detailed discussion over wool weave. 'Do you prefer

worsted or four-ply?’ she rambles, while my mouth moves to answer, eyes still fixed on Tweedledee and Tweedledum.

Pound to a penny, this is a KGB or Stasi meet. Too obvious, you might think, in broad daylight and in full view. And yet there’s something to be said for hiding in plain sight – no walls, no ears, no proof. They could be discussing a Soviet-style attack on Her Majesty’s government, the thieving of nuclear secrets, or a defection among themselves. The weather, even. Who’s to know? Just two businessmen passing the time of day. Out of the shadows in their dark and shady world.

The entire episode takes less than five minutes, during which my focus is on both pairs of hands clutching at a newspaper. There’s no exchange that I can detect, save for the subtle mumble of words from their lips, as if Dummy Man has found his ventriloquist at last. He leaves first, folding *The Times* and tipping a genial nod to his benchmate before striding away. Man two gets up several seconds later and heads in the opposite direction. Nothing material has been exchanged, as far as I can see, so it’s a simple trade of intelligence. Despite the ache in my lower limbs and a scab forming nicely on my kneecap, I make a prompt decision to follow the second man, and it’s soon obvious that he’s no seasoned agent. He walks briskly and directly towards his place of work just ten minutes away, which happens to be the seat of a British trade delegation, working to improve links with Eastern Bloc countries. Oh, he’s been improving things, all right – principally, his bank balance.

Snap, snap. *Gotcha.*

Job done. Mission accomplished. Isn’t that what they say on the television?