THE SPY AND THE SNAKE

ALSO BY M. J. ROBOTHAM

The Scandalous Life of Ruby Devereaux
Mrs Spy

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To: The 'Write Shower of Babes': Sarah Steele, Emma Flint and Melanie Golding. Fun and formidable women with a splendid line in (in)sanity.

Life is a struggle and a good spy goes in there and fights – Louise Fitzhugh in *Harriet the Spy*

Prologue

Away from Home, May 1968

There is some kind of realisation in the moment when you hear your own breath so loudly that it drowns out almost everything else – people, traffic, a wisp of wind or the rush of river water. All of life beyond your own ribcage. When you are forced to grasp that Breath is not simply a part of you, but has its own separate identity: 'I WILL be heard', it avows. And it has a friend, too: a comrade called Fear that sits alongside, happily fanning the bellows of your pained and overstretched lung structure.

Despite what's happening beyond the relatively thin metal walls of my world right now, I am compelled to spend several vital seconds placating my new companions and giving them head space. 'OK, OK,' I chant inside myself. 'I admit it. I'm scared. Terrified if you must know. Satisfied?' Duly recognised, Breath and Fear consent to give way just a little. 'Now you can get on with it,' they permit at last.

As a sign, Breath oozes out of me and the howling in my ears recede, replaced in an instant by the zing-ping of a

bullet whizzing by. The type that sounds almost comical but will kill and maim on contact. A second later, another, then a third – glancing off the brickwork of buildings alongside us and way too close for the confines of a tin box on wheels. The wary, bright eyes couched next to me shine out from the gloom of the van's footwell – her own Fear comrade is clearly in residence and having words. 'What now?' her eyes plead in silence.

'What now is we get the fuck out of here,' something hollers inside of me, and the duo of Breath and Fear are joined on the front line by Survival, Guile, Madness and the – up until now – quiet element of Courage. The squad is duly mustered.

'GO! GO Maggie!' they scream in unison. And so, I bloody well do.

One

London, Wednesday 8 May 1968

A warm breeze skates over my face, waves lapping gently at the sand when his toned, near-naked body walks into view, the tan of several weeks deeply ingrained in his skin as he moves with stealth across the deserted beach and into the treeline. He pulls a small, neat pistol from inside his trunks, scowls at the horizon and watches as wildlife squawks and scatters with the resounding punch of a single bullet into the peace, sidestepping neatly as a body falls from the tropical branches above with a deathly thud. He turns and faces, eyes sparkling: 'I knew somebody up there was watching me.'

'CUT!' the director screams into his loudhailer, people leap onto the set and a gaggle of make-up women chase after the near-naked man, brushes at the ready, as he strides away. Towards me. On a mission. By the time he reaches my spot just off camera, his wry smile has been replaced with a worried, querying look. 'Was that OK, Maggie? Did I get it right? I really want to look like the real thing, a proper spy.'

'You're certainly getting there, Mr Connery,' I say in the face of his Scottish brogue. 'Perhaps try a little more serious on the last line.'

The reset bell trills and minions clear the space in preparation for a new scene, only this time the clanging goes on and on… and on, endless and deafening. Several fire engines are in fierce competition, all in very close proximity to my ear, fuelling a swift panic, hot breath and a strangulation of the sheets as my delicious dream dissipates to reveal the cloying darkness.

Is this doomsday come to claim me?

I open one eye, all the better to hear with, revealing my trilling phone as the culprit. Then immediately question the wisdom of having placed it next to my bed.

'Flynn,' I croak lazily after fumbling for the handset, 'what do you want?' It's as much diplomacy as I can muster at… a streetlight outside the window reflects on the alarm clock. 'It's four a.m. for crying out loud.'

'I know, but you need to get over here,' says a familiar male voice on the other end. 'And quick.'

'Unless the Soviets are invading right now, I'm not interested.'

'You might be. It's Oleg. He's gone AWOL.'

'Oh hell.' And it might well be the dawning of Hades, since this news is potentially more perilous than the onset of World War Three. 'I'll be there in fifteen minutes.'

I don't so much as leap out of bed, as effect a series of rolls which deposit my feet on the chilly wooden floorboards with an awkward teetering, but I'm upright at least. As

anyone of a female disposition will know, donning a bra in near darkness with any sense of urgency is like patting your head and rubbing your stomach at the same time. It takes practice. And time. None of which I have in this moment, especially when my chosen 'uplifting' underwear resembles a scaffold of engineering similar to the Eiffel Tower.

Damn Oleg. What the hell has he been up to now? The movies would have you believe Russian defectors are cool, calm and collected – disillusioned agents of the Soviet state who are recruited by a complicated series of clandestine meetings and secret messages, until they finally agree to spill the beans in a distinctive Slavic drawl: 'Now, I will tell you everything, Mr Bond.'

Not Oleg Lebedev. A second-lieutenant assigned to London's Soviet Embassy (and a sure-fire cover for the Russian KGB), he had walked – nay staggered – into a police station in Kensington three weeks ago and professed in his best English that he 'wished to communicate with your very Secret Services, my good man'. But only after they could supply him with another bottle of that excellent Scottish whisky. If you please.

And that's when I got landed with the job of being Oleg's impromptu housekeeper and sometime minder. Surrogate mother is somewhere on my CV, alongside 'Maggie Flynn – assistant case officer, Her Majesty's Secret Services'. Jack-of-all-trades, and dogsbody. AKA mug. An extremely tired mug at this moment.

Fresh from spring rain, the capital's streets are slick underfoot and almost deserted. It takes ten minutes to

flag down a taxi, from which I alight at Notting Hill Gate tube (having been trained never to lead anyone directly to a safe house), then hurry towards Ossington Street and a long line of upright Victorian terraces. Buzzing three times on the intercom, then another four, I give the password and take the stairs two at a time for at least the first flight, then decide I need some lung function by the time I reach the door. At the third level, my thighs are screaming for respite.

'Thank God you're here.' Geoff's face is awash with relief as he ushers me in.

'How long has Oleg been gone?'

'Getting on for an hour,' Geoff says sheepishly. 'The little toerag dodged out when I went out for a smoke and a breath of fresh air – I thought he was sound asleep. I've toured the streets once already, but no sign.'

Based on Oleg's track record, that's time enough for several triple whiskies and a whole heap of trouble. But where, at four thirty a.m.? Is our Russian savvy enough to sniff out some after-hours drinking at a local pub lock-in?

'Oleg doesn't know this area and he won't spend his precious cash on a taxi,' I reason swiftly. 'I think he'll be nearby. Let's get back out on the main street and look.'

Between us, Geoff and I comb the alleyways and peer through darkened pub windows for any signs of life, though most landlords are shrewd enough to steer their regulars into the back room for extended hours. Amid the sparse traffic up and down Bayswater Road, there's no sign of Oleg, only the odd vagrant sleeping rough or

peeing up the walls with abandon. Sometimes I love my job, but this isn't one of those occasions.

'Shit,' Geoff mutters, no doubt seeing his job and pension disappearing down a nearby drain. 'Where the hell can he have gone?'

We're about to admit defeat and face the humiliation of calling it in to the MI5 night desk, when we're stopped in our tracks. The noise is faint above the growl of a dustcart rumbling by, but it rings alarm bells for the both of us.

'What the…?' Geoff blurts.

'Shh!' I spin a full three hundred and sixty degrees. 'Where's it coming from?'

We track the wailing – an out-of-tune rendition of the Soviet national anthem – to a scruffy doorway tucked between a launderette and a betting shop. The splintered wood has been left ajar, leaving a vague mist to leach out and meet the crisp chill of very early morning, plus that distinct pitch of a Russian murdering a country's patriotism with his voice.

By the time Geoff and I descend the stairs to a basement, the mist has become a fog, thick and piquant. I'm almost knocked off my feet by the smell of a marijuana farm on fire, little orange pinpricks glowing and dying in the smoky gloom. Bodies are slumped in varying stages of drug-inducement, and a man in a paisley shirt and a top hat wanders towards us.

'Hey brothers,' he drawls, and wafts on by. Above the plinging sound of a sitar, we follow Oleg's voice to a dark corner, where he's sprawled on a scatter of floor cushions. He's rolling from side to side, eyes swinging in opposite directions, having abandoned his lament to Lenin and

replaced it with a slurring refrain from 'All You Need Is Love'. Standing squarely above him, I wait for his gyroscopic vision to settle on me amid his inner haze of purple loveliness. It takes a while.

'Well, at least we found him,' I say, conscious of trying to assuage Geoff's guilt. His brief lapse was careless, but none of us are exempt from the horrors of losing a 'mark', and Oleg's incessant search for alcohol has made him a slippery beast in the long weeks of his confinement.

'Yeah, but look at him,' sighs Geoff. 'I think he's probably popped something else, as well as a few lungfuls of wacky baccy.'

'Then we'd better get him out of here, before we all succumb and join Lucy in the sky with diamonds.' The pungent haze is already making my head spin.

Oleg comes to the end of his Beatles rendition and climbs slowly down from his cloud. One spiralling orb comes to rest on me, the other off at right angles. 'Lizzy!' he exclaims with a broad beam, using the cover name he knows me by. 'You're here. Where did you park your horse?'

'In the stable upstairs, Oleg. What have you taken?'

His eyes sway again, and he looks at his hands in wonder, as if they are a new and astonishing part of his anatomy. 'No whisky Lizzy, but they had some nice sweeties, so I tried one. It was crazeee.'

'What exactly was it?'

He stares into oblivion and the light fitting above. Detail seems well beyond Oleg, despite the rainbows behind his eyelids.

I waylay a wavering hippy behind us. 'What's he been doing?'

'I don't know, man,' he shrugs. 'Some acid maybe.'

The former prim and uniformed Second-Lieutenant Lebedev peers skyward for inspiration. 'It was white as that cloud,' he says helpfully, pointing to the ceiling that's a deep shade of grubby. 'And as beautiful as you are, Lizzy. Gorgeous.'

I sigh. 'Let's get him up, Geoff.'

'What can we do?'

'I don't know!' I flash back, the lack of sleep fuelling my tetchy mood. 'I suppose we do what we've done before, flush it out of him, then wait.'

The truth is I'm at a loss. I haven't yet added doctor or drugs guru to my list of talents, and hitherto Oleg has only ever decamped on an alcohol bender to the nearest pub. I'll give it to him, though – he's willing to sample anything the capitalist West has to offer. It's a tricky call, since alerting the MI5 doctor means we'll have to come clean about Geoff's lapse, but losing a valuable asset to a drug-induced psychosis ranks as worse. Sackable, in fact. No more MI5 Maggie.

Being a tall and solid build, Geoff easily shoulders the Russian's rangy body and hauls him to the top of the stairs, to Oleg's vocal encouragement of 'Giddy-up cowboy.' The smog-filled London air hits like cool rain in the desert, and I'm conscious of smelling like an escapee from a commune. Mercifully, we make it back to the safe house without encountering a beat copper, needing only one stop where Oleg throws up in technicolour in the gutter. So much for keeping our spies under wraps.

Exhausted by three flights of stairs, Geoff deposits Oleg on the vinyl-covered sofa, where the Russian slumps,

tongue lolling. Meanwhile, I make tea and spoon it into his mouth as he burbles 'Mama' repeatedly, until our budding turncoat finally falls into a deep slumber. The resounding snore is an indication that he's still breathing.

'Thanks, Mags,' Geoff says, nursing his own cup of tea. 'I should have known something was up. He was restless all evening, jabbering ten to the dozen about his wife and kids back home. I couldn't shut him up. He'd had a skinful of whisky by then and started asking for you. Well, "Empress Lizzy" to be precise.'

'It's all right,' I say, feeling more human with tea inside me. Although it's both annoying and a major breach of MI5 protocol, I'm secretly pleased that someone – albeit a washed-up soak of a spy – is in need of me. 'But let's not broadcast this, shall we, Geoff? You stay until the day relief arrives, and just say our friend here needs to sleep off last night's booze. I'll pass the word to his handler back at base and see if we can't get him moved to somewhere more permanent. A drying-out clinic preferably.'

'And what about our bohemian friends?'

I purse my lips together. 'We have to hope the chemicals were of a good quality and did their job. The fumes alone were on the way to scrambling my brain.'

Geoff swallows. 'Thanks Maggie, I owe you one.'

'You never know, I might need you to pull me out of a hole one day. Though I hope to God it doesn't smell like that.'

Back out in the real world, night has given way to a creeping daylight and the city is coming alive, a stiff breeze drying out

the pavements on what promises to be a warm and clement day. I feel half-dressed and dishevelled, but it's almost eight a.m., leaving me to wonder if I can make myself look presentable in the ladies' back at MI5 headquarters, and whether I have enough perfume in my handbag to spritz away the current Eau de Drug Den. No one will notice anyway, so it's best to head to work. First, though, I slide into a café on Bayswater Road and reward myself with a decent breakfast and a cappuccino, recalling the wise words of my old Donkey partner on the surveillance beat, Frank Tanner: 'No day is complete, Mags, without the crack of a good egg or two.'

How right you were, Mr Tanner. And how I miss you saying it.

Breakfast done, it's a half-hour stroll cutting through Hyde Park in the direction of MI5 headquarters in Mayfair, marvelling once again at how the capital blooms every day, in every way. The zany, blocky fashions of a few years ago have given way to the fluid contours of hippy culture, from the 'swing' of '66 to the Sergeant Pepper summer of '67, and today's flower power; even the suited and booted Beatles have swerved further towards mysticism, John Lennon ditching his black cap for his new-look granny glasses and orange kipper ties. At the dawn of summer 1968, some corners of the capital glow like it's carnival time each and every day.

And if I felt my age back then, a mere three years ago, this latest explosion of counter-culture leaves me feeling ancient at just forty-eight. I'm suddenly reminded: unless

I'm planning on reaching the magical century of old age, I've already lived half my life. Depressing. The thought necessitates a spring into my step (achy legs aside), and a determination to soak up every sight and sound, every shade of brightness under the spring sunshine. Just a shame it doesn't feel as if I'm actually living it the other twenty-three hours of the day.

The gloom of Leconfield House – forever labelled the 'Spy Shack' in Frank Tanner-speak – descends upon me as I rise to the third floor in the cranky old lift of MI5 HQ, the use of which is probably more perilous than any assignment out in the field. There's no one to notice I'm late, since the office is sparsely occupied at just gone nine. A good deal of the intelligence officers – the bona fide agent handlers – have a tendency to roll in mid-morning, spending the early hours meeting contacts, or so they say. Conveniently, the Official Secrets Act excuses them from revealing which out-of-hours bar was the location for their vital rendezvous. In the meantime, it's me and the typing pool holding fast on the nation's security.

'Morning Mags,' chimes Billy, rounding the corner at speed with his mail trolley. His cheeriness in the face of the Spy Shack drear astounds me every day, the squeaky wheel on his cart reflecting the general state of shabby disrepair in which we both toil. Billy's sunny disposition outshines the flimsily erected partitions and the drab décor, walls that are poorly painted in a variable spectrum of grey-green, grey-brown, and even grey-grey. When daylight does penetrate the dusty and permanently drawn blinds, it's instantly

repelled by the enormous task of lifting the mood and slumps to the scuffed bare boards, where it sits in a fit of inert depression all day. Much like a number of the staff at their desks.

'Morning Billy, anything for me today?' I hitch up a smile that's no rival for his permanent grin.

'Just this, Mrs F.' He hands over two large brown envelopes, one full of replies from various enquiries I've made, and the other packed with photos of a recent surveillance op across London, images that I could easily have snapped myself a few years ago, pounding the streets come rain or shine, all hours of the day and night. While I don't miss the pulsing ache of blisters or the pinch of frostbite on my fingers, there is often a pang of regret for that life I've left behind, of being part of MI5's crack team of Watchers widely considered to be the best surveillance spooks in the business. A tight circle that always had your back, we shivered, broiled and laughed together, drank too much tea and a good deal of beer after a shift's end, happy to be the bottom rung on MI5's career ladder. But with Frank retired to the sunny climes of Tenerife and the Donkeys dispersed elsewhere, it's little more than a memory nowadays.

As for me, being desk-bound is causing my waistline to expand at an alarming rate, not helped by a certain model who set the fashion world alight with her stick-like limbs and set the bar for figures everywhere. I do love Twiggy, but I feel sure my left thigh wouldn't squeeze into any one of her miniscule waistbands. Thank the Lord for this new fashion in kaftans.