

## Sub Rosa

by James Wong

Chairs were drawn, beverages made and beige biscuits laid out on a rectangular shaped table. The seven women huddled around, mugs in hand. Agent Brown knew the meeting would last around something like ten minutes and was a time when the women would let their guard down and thus, was an ideal opportunity to eavesdrop and pick up on any loose talk that may later prove useful.

Agent Brown stood to one side and made out, she was investigating the kettle and the array of ceramic pots for structural and operational integrity. This was proving to be the perfect cover as no-one was paying any significant attention to her. She remained unremarkably present and felt assured as she leaned into the swell of her training that had prepared her for such covert missions. She moved lightly, purposefully, naturally.

She used her peripheral vision to keep an eye on her surroundings, all the while seeming quite uninterested in the ongoing babble as she listened intently. She couldn't quite make sense of what they were talking about but remained confident, knowing that when she heard information worth noting, she would know it and be able to recall it word for word. That had also been part of her training and she had an aptitude for such assignments. Her codename for this mission was *The Fox* and she allowed herself an indulgent moment as she marvelled at how apt that name reflected what she was exceptionally good at.

One of the seven reached over and opened a drawer. Agent Brown caught a glimpse of its contents without giving any sign of a lingering look and immediately recognised this as important intel - it was the cutlery draw and knowing its location could come in handy. Assassination wasn't the mission but if her cover was blown then a blade would increase her slim chance of making it out of here alive.

Before the 10 minutes were up, Agent Brown sidled out of the room. She passed a man shuffling as made his way past her. He was wearing a flat cap who gave no indication he had seen her. She signalled to him by brushing her nose with three fingers held closely together. This was letting him know that she was still gathering intel; the pausing of her fingers under her nose and swift downward sweep as she brought her hand down to her side let him know that she remained deep undercover. He gave no sign whatsoever that he had seen or understood her signal. That was good - he was sticking to his training. This was her contact on the inside and his codename was *Sitting Duck*. He had been a mole here for many years and likely for many more years to come. "Such dedication" she thought admiringly.

Agent Brown recalled his aptitude for disguise. She had signalled to him before, but then he was disguised as a tradesman, probably an electrician and another time as a small child. How he achieved this she didn't know but she felt assured knowing she had such professional and competent back up on this mission.

Agent Brown made her to the atrium and took her place next to a pillar, partially veiled by the fronds of a potted plant. She was actually still unsure of her mission but she knew she would receive more instructions in due course.

She heard a buzzer sound and knew that a door through which she had yet to find a way to pass through was about to open. She heard a voice belonging to one of the seven call out.

"Violet, there's someone here to see you."

She gave no outwardly visible signs of having heard this and continued to inspect the wall lamp with a connoisseur's interest.

"Violet, you have visitor!" sounded the voice right behind her now.

'A strange and disconcerting coincidence that this woman would be using her *real name!*' she thought.

Agent Brown turned to face the women and the visitor with an uncommitted look that was intended to exude puzzlement and polite interest in the women's inquiry and the visitor's presence.

"Violet, look you have a visitor" and the woman gestures towards a civilian man in his sixties. Agent Brown observed the man. He was vaguely familiar and had a friendly air about him but in the business of espionage, it was essential to always be on guard. You never really knew, who was working for who and things were never as they seemed.

"Hello Mum, you're looking well," said the man.

Agent Brown maintained a neutral look, her mind going in to overdrive, racking her memory to place this person and decided it was best to go along with it.

"Oh! Why hello dear" Agent Brown said, feigning emerging from a daydream. "How are you? How was your journey?"

The women who had accompanied the man gave him a sympathetic look as his smiling face became still and his heart broke a little more.

"Why don't you both take a seat and I'll bring you over a nice pot of tea. It's also time for your medication Violet so I'll bring some Jammy Dodgers to help the medicine go down, I know they're your favourite."

Agent Brown... Violet, and the man made their way to a table in a shady part of the atrium where there were brought a pot of tea and some biscuits.