

THIS MAN CAN DO NO WRONG

THE SECRET MARTIANS

JACK SHARKEY



First Book
Publication

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SHARKEY

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by JACK SHARKEY

MASTER SPY OF THE RED PLANET

Jery Delvin had a most unusual talent. He could detect the flaws in any scheme almost on sight—even where they had eluded the best brains in the ad agency where he worked. So when the Chief of World Security told him that he had been selected as the answer to the Solar System's greatest mystery, Jery assumed that it was because of his mental agility.

But when he got to Mars to find out why fifteen boys had vanished from a spaceship in mid-space, he found out that even his quick mind needed time to pierce the maze of out-of-this-world double-dealing. For Jery had become a walking bomb, and when he set himself off, it would be the end of the whole puzzle of THE SECRET MARTIANS—with Jery as the first to go!

Jack Sharkey decided to be a writer nineteen years ago, in the Fourth Grade, when he realized all at once that "someone wrote all those stories in the textbooks." While everyone else looked forward variously to becoming firemen, cowboys, and trapeze artists, Jack was devouring every book he could get his hands on, figuring that "if I put enough literature into my head, some of it might overflow and come out."

After sixteen years of education, Jack found himself teaching high school English in Chicago, a worthwhile career, but "not what one would call zesty." After a two-year Army hitch, and a year in advertising "sublimating my urge to write things for cash," Jack moved to New York, determined to make a career of full-time fiction-writing.

Oddly enough, it worked out, and he now does nothing else. He says, "I'd like to say I do this for fulfillment, or for cash, or because it's my destiny; however, the real reason (same as that expressed by Jean Kerr) is that this kind of stay-at-home self-employment lets me sleep late in the morning."

1

I was sitting at my desk, trying to decide how to tell the women of America that they were certain to be lovely in a Plasti-Flex brassiere without absolutely guaranteeing them anything, when the two security men came to get me. I didn't quite believe it at first, when I looked up and saw them, six-foot-plus of steel nerves and gimlet eyes, staring down at me, amidst my litter of sketches, crumpled copy sheets and deadline memos.

It was only a fraction of an instant between the time I saw them and the time they spoke to me, but in that miniscule interval I managed to retrace quite a bit of my lifetime up till that moment, seeking vainly for some reason why they'd be standing there, so terribly and inflexibly efficient looking. Mostly, I ran back over all the ads I'd created and/or okayed for Solar Sales, Inc. during my five years with the firm, trying to see just where I'd gone and shaken the security of the government. I couldn't find anything really incriminating, unless maybe it was that hair dye that unexpectedly turned bright green after six weeks in the hair, but that was the lab's fault, not mine. So I managed a weak smile toward the duo, and tried not to sweat too profusely.

"Jerry Delvin?" said the one on my left, a note of no-funny-business in his brusque baritone.

"... Yes," I said, some terrified portion of my mind waiting masochistically for them to draw their collapsers and reduce me to a heap of hot protons.

"Come with us," said his companion. I stared at him, then glanced hopelessly at the jumble of things on my desk. "Never mind that stuff," he added.

I rose from my place, slipped my jacket from its hook, and started across the office toward the door, each of them falling into rigid step beside me. Marge, my secretary, stood wide-eyed as we passed through her office, heading for the hall exit.

"Mr. Delvin," she said, her voice a wispy croak. "When will you be back?"

The Plasti-Flex man is waiting for your—"

I opened my mouth, but one of the security men cut in.

"You will be informed," he said to Marge.

She was staring after me, open-mouthed, as the door slid neatly shut behind us.

"*W-Will* I be back?" I asked desperately, as we waited for the elevator. "At all? Am I under arrest? What's up, anyhow?"

"You will be informed," said the man again. I had to let it go at that. Security men were not hired for their loquaciousness. They had a car waiting at the curb downstairs, in the No Parking zone. The cop on the beat very politely opened the door for them when we got there. Those red-and-bronze uniforms carry an awful lot of weight. Not to mention the golden bulk of their holstered collapsers.

There was nothing for me to do but sweat it out and to try and enjoy the ride, wherever we were going.

"*You* are Jerry Delvin?"

The man who spoke seemed more than surprised; he seemed stunned. His voice held an incredulous squeak, a squeak which would have amazed his subordinates. It certainly amazed me. Because the speaker was Philip Baxter, Chief of Interplanetary Security, second only to the World President in power, and not even that in matters of security. I managed to nod.

He shook his white-maned head, slowly. "I don't believe it."

"But I am, sir," I insisted doggedly.

Baxter pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes for a moment, then sighed, grinned wryly, and waggled an index finger at an empty plastic contour chair.

"I guess maybe you are at that, son. Sit down, sit down."

I folded gingerly at knees and hips and slid back into the chair, pressing my perspiring palms against the sides of my pants to get rid of their uncomfortably slippery feel. "Thank you, sir."

There was a silence, during which I breathed uneasily, and a bit too loudly. Baxter seemed to be trying to say something.

"I suppose you're wondering why I've called—" he started, then stopped short and flushed with embarrassment. I felt a sympathetic hot wave flooding my own features. A copy chief in an advertising company almost always reacts to an obvious cliché.

Then, with something like a look of relief on his blunt face, he snatched up a brochure from his kidney-shaped desktop and his eyes raced over the lettering on its face.

"Jerry Delvin," he read, musingly and dispassionately. "Five foot eleven inches tall, brown hair, slate-gray eyes. Citizen. Honest, sober, civic-minded, slightly antisocial...."

He looked at me, questioningly.

"I'd rather not discuss that, sir, if you don't mind."

"Do you mind if I do mind?"

"Oh ... Oh, well if you put it like that. It's girls, sir. They block my mind. Ruin my work."

"I don't get you."

"Well, in my job—See, I've got this gift. I'm a spotter."

"A what?"

"A spotter. I can't be fooled. By advertising. Or mostly anything else. Except girls."

"I'm still not sure that I—"

"It's like this. I designate ratios, by the minute. They hand me a new ad, and I read it by a stopwatch. Then, as soon as I spot the clinker, they stop the watch. If I get it in five seconds, it passes. But if I spot it in less, they throw it out and start over again. Or is that clear? No, I guess you're still confused, sir."

"Just a bit," Baxter said.

I took a deep breath and tried again.

"Maybe an example would be better. Uh, you know the one about 'Three out of five New York lawyers use Hamilton Bond Paper for note-taking'?"

"I've heard that, yes."

"Well, the clinker—that's the sneaky part of the ad, sir, or what we call weasel-wording—the clinker in that one is that while it seems to imply sixty percent of New York lawyers, it actually means precisely what it says: Three out of five. For that particular product, we had to question seventy-nine lawyers before we could come up with three who liked Hamilton Bond, see? Then we took the names of the three, and the names of two of the seventy-six men remaining, and kept them on file."

"On file?" Baxter frowned. "What for?"

"In case the Federal Trade Council got on our necks. We could prove that three out of five lawyers used the product. Three out of those five. See?"

"Ah," said Baxter, grinning. "I begin to. And your job is to test these ads, before they reach the public. What fools you for five seconds will fool the average consumer indefinitely."

I sat back, feeling much better. "That's right, sir."

Then Baxter frowned again. "But what's this about girls?"

"They—they block my thinking, sir, that's all. Why, take that example I just mentioned. In plain writing, I caught the clinker in one-tenth of a second. Then they handed me a layout with a picture of a lawyer dictating notes to his secretary on it. Her legs were crossed. Nice legs. Gorgeous legs...."

"How long that time, Delvin?"

"Indefinite. Till they took the girl away, sir."

Baxter cleared his throat loudly. "I understand, at last. Hence your slight antisocial rating. You avoid women in order to keep your job."

"Yes, sir. Even my secretary, Marge, whom I'd never in a million years think of looking at twice, except for business reasons, of course, has to stay out of my office when I'm working, or I can't function."

"You have my sympathy, son," Baxter said, not unkindly.

"Thank you, sir. It hasn't been easy."

"No, I don't imagine it has...." Baxter was staring into some far-off distance. Then he remembered himself and blinked back to the present. "Delvin," he said sharply. "I'll come right to the point. This thing is.... You have been chosen for an extremely important mission."

I couldn't have been more surprised had he announced my incipient maternity, but I was able to ask, "Me? For Pete's sake, why, sir?"

Baxter looked me square in the eye. "Damned if I know!"

2

I stared at him, nonplussed. He'd spoken with evidence of utmost candor, and the Chief of Interplanetary Security was not one to be accused of a friendly josh, but—"You're kidding!" I said. "You must be. Otherwise, why was I sent for?"

"Believe me, I wish I knew," he sighed. "You were chosen, from all the inhabitants of this planet, and all the inhabitants of the Earth Colonies, by the Brain."

"You mean that International Cybernetics picked me for a mission? That's crazy, if you'll pardon me, sir."

Baxter shrugged, and his genial smile was a bit tightly stretched. "When the current emergency arose and all our usual methods failed, we had to submit the problem to the Brain."

"And," I said, beginning to be fascinated by his bewildered manner, "what came out?"

He looked at me for a long moment, then picked up that brochure again, and said, without referring to it, "Jerry Delvin, five foot eleven inches tall—"

"Yes, but read me the part where it says why I was picked," I said, a little exasperated.

Baxter eyed me balefully, then skimmed the brochure through the air in my direction. I caught it just short of the carpet.

"If you can find it, I'll read it!" he said, almost snarling.

I looked over the sheet, then turned it over and scanned the black opposite side. "All it gives is my description, governmental status, and address!"

"Uh-huh," Baxter grunted laconically. "It amuses you, does it?" The smile was still on his lips, but there was a grimness in the glitter of his narrowing eyes.

"Not really," I said hastily. "It baffles me, to be frank."

"If you're sitting there in that hopeful stance awaiting some sort of explanation, you may as well relax," Baxter said shortly. "I have none to make. IC had none to make. Damn it all to hell!" He brought a meaty fist down on the desktop. "No one has an explanation! All we know is that the Brain always picks the right man."

I let this sink in, then asked, "What made you ask for a man in the first place, sir? I've always understood that your own staff represented some of the finest minds—"

"Hold it, son. Perhaps I didn't make myself clear. We asked for no man. We asked for a solution to an important problem. And your name was what we got. You, son, are the solution."

Chief of Security or not, I was getting a little burned up at his highhanded treatment of my emotions. "How nice!" I said icily. "Now if I only knew the problem!"

Baxter blinked, then lost some of his scowl. "Yes, of course;" Baxter murmured, lighting up a cigar. He blew a plume of blue smoke toward the ceiling, then continued. "You've heard, of course, of the Space Scouts?"

I nodded. "Like the old-time Boy Scouts, only with rocket-names for their various troops in place of the old animal names."

"And you recall the recent government-sponsored trip they had? To Mars and back, with the broadly-smiling government picking up the enormous tab?"

I detected a tinge of cynicism in his tone, but said nothing.

"What a gesture!" Baxter went on, hardly speaking directly to me at all. "Inter-nation harmony! Good will! If these mere boys can get together and travel the voids of space, then so can everyone else! Why should there be tensions between the various nations comprising the World Government, when there's none between these fine lads, one from every civilized nation on Earth?"

"You sound disillusioned, sir," I interjected.

He stared at me as though I'd just fallen in from the ceiling or somewhere. "Huh? Oh, yes, Delvin, isn't it? Sorry, I got carried away. Where was I?"

"You were telling about how this gesture, the WG sending these kids off for an extraterrestrial romp, will cement relations between those nations who have remained hostile despite the unification of all governments on Earth. Personally, I think it was a pretty good idea, myself. Everybody likes kids. Take this jam we were trying to push. Pomegranate Nectar, it was called. Well, sir, it just wouldn't sell, and then we got this red-headed kid with freckles like confetti all over his slightly bucktoothed face, and we—Sir?"

I'd paused, because he was staring at me like a man on the brink of apoplexy. I swallowed, and tried to look relaxed.

After a moment, he found his voice. "To go on, Delvin. Do you recall what happened to the Space Scouts last week?"

I thought a second, then nodded. "They've been having such a good time that the government extended their trip by—Why are you shaking your head that way, sir?"

"Because it's not true, Delvin," he said. His voice was suddenly old and tired, and very much in keeping with his snowy hair. "You see, the Space Scouts have vanished."

I came up in the chair, ramrod-straight. "Their mothers—they've been getting letters and—"

"Forgeries, Fakes. Counterfeits."

"You mean whoever took the Scouts is falsifying—"

"No. *My* men are doing the work. Handpicked crews, day and night, have been sending those letters to the trusting mothers. It's been ghastly, Delvin. Hard on the men, terribly hard. Undotted *i*'s, misuse of tenses, deliberate misspellings. They take it out of an adult, especially an adult with a mind keen enough to get him into Interplanetary Security. We've limited the shifts to four hours per man per day. Otherwise, they'd all be gibbering by now!"

"And your men haven't found out anything?" I marvelled.

Baxter shook his head.

"And you finally had to resort to the Brain, and it gave you my name, but no reason for it?"

Baxter cupped his slightly jowled cheeks in his hands and propped his elbows

on the desktop, suddenly slipping out of his high position to talk to me man-to-man. "Look, son, an adding machine—which is a minor form of an electronic brain, and even works on the same principle—can tell you that two and two make four. But can it tell you why?"

"Well, no, but—"

"That, in a nutshell is our problem. We coded and fed to the Brain every shred of information at our disposal; the ages of the children, for instance, and all their physical attributes, and where they were last seen, and what they were wearing. Hell, everything! The machine took the factors, weighed them, popped them through its billions of relays and tubes, and out of the end of the answer slot popped a single sheet. The one you just saw. Your dossier."

"Then I'm to be sent to Mars?" I said, nervously.

"That's just it," Baxter sighed. "We don't even know that! We're like a savage who finds a pistol: used correctly, it's a mean little weapon; pointed the wrong way, it's a quick suicide. So, you are our weapon. Now, the question is: Which way do we point you?"

"You got me!" I shrugged hopelessly.

"However, since we have nothing else to go on but the locale from which the children vanished, my suggestion would be to send you there."

"Mars, you mean," I said.

"No, to the spaceship *Phobos II*. The one they were returning to Earth in when they disappeared."

"They disappeared from a spaceship? While in space?"

Baxter nodded.

"But that's impossible," I said, shaking my head against this disconcerting thought.

"Yes," said Baxter. "That's what bothers me."