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Dead Men Should Know Better is his first novel.

To find out more, please visit
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**DEAD
MEN
SHOULD
KNOW
BETTER**

Dominic Canty



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To Jill, Patrick and Francesca

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I

Whatever You Do, Don't...

THE LADY WAS DRESSED to kill – literally. The trademark off-the-shoulder blood-red dress, the knife-shaped clutch bag, the silver hair that hung like scrolls of barbed wire. And on the inside of her left wrist, the two-inch dagger tattoo entwined with thistles – the symbol of the infamous Wolves of River Plate crime syndicate.

Bristo Trabant was in no doubt. This was Azara Pampita Rázzon, the Vixen of the Pampas, Argentina's premier importer of all missiles and machine guns bound for the gangland streets of Buenos Aires and Córdoba.

He eased back inside the main entrance to Le Club Maritime du Soleil, hid behind a large rubber plant, retrieved his mobile telephone and typed '523' – the recognition code for MI6's Priority Surveillance Unit. Next: '014', the allocated ID number for Rázzon, then 'AAA' to confirm she had three bodyguards here with her in Cannes. Trabant pressed 'Send', watched the message go through, then held his breath as the lady breezed past.

Yes, Azara Pampita Rázzon was scary beyond belief. But what frightened him more was that, in the grand scheme of things, she was only the small fry.

‘Quick, quick!’ said Henri, the banqueting manager, to his staff. ‘Señor Gunboat will be here any moment. Get ready to bow, and remember – agree with everything he says!’

The waiters hurried into position, but this was no royal visit. The foyer of Le Club Maritime du Soleil was laced with danger, the kind that drips from the ceiling then runs down the back of your neck in icy-cold globules of sweat.

It was 10.28 p.m.

Bristo Trabant retreated into the alcove beneath the stuffed moose head, retrieved *The Beginner’s Guide To Being A Secret Agent* from his pocket, hurried to Chapter 9, Sub-Section 12, Appendix 98 and read as if his life depended on it, because it most probably did.

If you find yourself in a dark, alien environment, where the beast you stalk begins to snarl – remain strong, my friend. If it doesn’t know your true identity, then it has no reason to bite. Keep calm. Breathe deeply. Refer to protocol.

The sound of voices drew his attention. Trabant looked up to see the main entrance doors being opened, and then, there he was – the beast himself, the whole reason Trabant was there – ‘Gunboat’ Charlie Chávez, the face of the illicit arms trade, standing in the entrance, revelling in the hush.

Gunboat stood five six tall, and wide, and industrial-gauge shoulders supported his oil-barrel neck and boulder-grade head, itself capped with short, black hair. His skin was dark brown, and thick eyebrows formed a perma-scowl, beneath which

coal-black eyes darted with a chill of intent. His nose was wide and powerful, his ears small and piggy, and a downturned moustache ran all the way south to meet the short beard, circumnavigating the jaw-line as ominously as a passage around Cape Horn.

‘Señor Gunboat, it has been too long,’ said Henri, embracing the yacht club’s most infamous member.

Gunboat smiled, but his mouth bore not a ripple of warmth, and on its bottom lip an extra-thick Cuban cigar balanced precariously, defying the laws of gravity.

Trabant shuddered. No MI6 photos could do justice to the human battering ram now standing before him. Yet the finishing touches came from the contours revealed through the crisp white shirt; contours of a fearsome power, a chilling potential, and the subtlest but most definite signs – of man-boobs.

‘Here, have a fresh cigar... and champagne!’ gushed Henri.

‘Muchas... (puff)... gracias.’

‘And your meeting room is ready.’

Gunboat sipped the golden liquid then nodded his approval. ‘Okay, first I do my business, then we start the charity auction and make lotsa money, huh?’

‘That would be wonderful, thank you.’

Gunboat dragged hard on his cigar, blew out a plume of smoke then began walking across the oak-panelled floor, flanked by his two enormous heavies.

Trabant breathed a huge sigh of relief, extracted his mobile telephone, typed ‘523-001-AA’ and pressed ‘Send’. Now all he had to do was confirm everyone else Gunboat was meeting. But how many would that be? Twenty? Thirt—

‘Pardon, Monsieur. Vous voulez un vol-au-vent? I can offer mushroom, cheese, or—’

‘Er, n-no, merci,’ replied Trabant, looking beyond the waiter’s tray of puff pastries to Gunboat’s swirl of evil, as it

continued down the corridor towards the main function room. 'But please remind me, w-what time does the charity auction begin?'

'Refuse one of señor Gunboat's vol-au-vents, and for you it may not begin at all.'

'Really?!'

The waiter nodded. 'I must report all decliners.'

'In that case, I'll g-go for the cheese.'

'A wise choice, Monsieur. The auction begins at 11 p.m. sharp.'

'T-thank you.'

It was 10.34 p.m. Twenty-six minutes of gut-churning hell to endure, after which, if he'd relayed enough intelligence, he might just be able to slip away.

As soon as the waiter was out of sight, Trabant discarded his vol-au-vent and made for an open window. But he longed for more than fresh air and a wonderful view. In honesty he just wanted to be back home, where he felt safe. Never in a million years was he the right man for MI6 surveillance work, let alone as part of their elite Priority Surveillance Unit.

He allowed his eyes to wander past the rustling palm trees, across the promenade and down to the beach, where an army of sun-loungers now stood at ease. To the right lay Vieux Port, the Old Port, with its cool ripples of inky black water and armada of million-pound yachts. Beyond that stretched the densely packed hill of the Old Quarter, bathed in a yellowy street-lamp wash, and under the watchful eye of the ancient fort, itself well grounded in conflict, but right now offering not a morsel of advice.

Never before had he felt so lonely.

A flash of light drew his attention – a camera flash – from somewhere to the right, near Place du Général de Gaulle. Cannes was alive with the pomp and spectacle of the Film Festival, as starlets posed on the endless rolls of red carpet, and

congratulation and adulation resonated from every bar and restaurant. But here, in the French Riviera's swankiest yacht club, at this private event, he could only feel the chill – the chill of the darker shadows, of the parallel world into which he should never have been thrown.

'Monsieur, it is time to adjourn,' said Henri, gesturing towards the inner sanctum of the yacht club.

Trabant reluctantly eased himself into the procession of dazzling women and well-groomed men heading into the function room. So these were the beautiful people, the likes of whom he'd only ever seen in *Hello* magazine. Radiant, sophisticated; their bronzed, glitzy sheen procured from an unbending dedication to Ra, God of the Sun, and an access-all-areas lifestyle simply beyond the wildest dreams of his nine-to-five desk job.

The scene inside was equally spectacular; of brilliant white walls and nautical portraits; of ships' bells and clusters of balloons. The floor was covered by a sumptuously thick-pile carpet, and dead ahead was the stage. To its left, a curious doorway. To its right, a long marble bar, beyond which awaited a balcony.

Trabant opted for the adjacent mirror, and rechecked himself for the hundredth time. His suit – his only suit – dark blue and single-breasted, bore not the remotest comparison to the reams of tailored silk and satin flowing all around him. He knew he stood out like a sore thumb, but worse still, a sore thumb in a cheap suit, and—

'Very handsome,' said the hostess, as she glided past.

'Who?'

'You, Monsieur!'

Trabant went to contest her remark but was too late; she'd already disappeared into the crowd. Still unconvinced, he returned to his reflection. Handsome? Never! His six-foot frame was thin and ungainly, with blue eyes that looked weary

and a crest of black hair that hadn't sat straight in over thirty years. But that was the fault of his ears, who'd always had a mind of their own.

'Incredible!'

'Hmmm?' Trabant turned to see a weaselly old man, dressed in a smoking jacket and monocle, now at his side. 'W-what is?'

'Her – the hostess who just spoke to you. Look! Body contoured like an alpine ski pass. Olive skin sun-kissed as the fields of the Loire Valley. Lips red and full as a London bus at rush hour.'

Trabant followed the weasel's eyes until she came back into view, now circling the far side of the room like an exotic bird of paradise. He'd spoken to her before, or at least he thought it was her, on both previous evenings when she'd served in the restaurant, though he'd been almost too nervous to lift his eyes from his food. And now he tried again to look away, but this time his eyes refused. They lingered on her voluptuous curves that ebbed and flowed within the body-hugging black velvet dress, that hung perfectly upon her six-foot, hour-glass frame. And her jet-black hair, which was coiled into a tight bun, revealed a neckline of delicious feminine purity.

'See what I mean!' beamed the weasel.

'Yes, she's...' Trabant turned in search of the right word, but the weasel had gone, summoned back by the disapproving glare of his wife. And now the hostess was approaching once more, this time capturing him with her eyes. And how he wanted to dive into those dark pools of milk chocolate and never resurface. But he couldn't, he shouldn't. Oh, my! The girls simply weren't like this back home in Chipping Sodbury.

'Drink, sir?' she asked.

'Y-yes, please. Apple juice?'

'Straight?'

‘No, on the rocks.’

‘Coming up.’

The weasel had been right. She *was* incredible, earth-shudderingly so. In fact, surely the most beautiful woman in the world? Trabant pondered that thought a moment longer, then returned to the same conclusion, that it wouldn’t be necessary to meet every other woman in the world to compare, for he instinctively knew that to him she would still be – the most beautiful woman in the world.

‘Voilà! One apple juice.’

His heart raced like a bullet train.

‘My name’s Eva.’

‘I’m B-Bristo.’

‘I know. But please be careful, Monsieur Bristo. It is a beautiful evening, but the sharks are beginning to circle.’

Trabant watched her disappear then turned back to gather his thoughts. Sharks? In the Mediterranean? Yes, the room was full of them. And he immediately recognised another. ‘523-016-AAA’ – Nedho ‘the Hook’ Hamsho, the Istanbul Confession Extractor.

Trabant typed the recognition code, pressed ‘Send’, then quickly moved on around the perimeter of the room, weaving through the hum of conversation until about two metres from the curious doorway. It was now guarded by Gunboat’s two henchmen, both of whom had shaven heads and flattened noses – the standard requirements to excel in the fright game. And their complexions were identical too – pockmarked and grazed, as if someone had forgotten to sand properly between coats. Yes, their presence scared him rigid, but the door they guarded was half-open. He *had* to look inside.

A cluster of guests provided excellent cover. He edged closer, feigning a loss of bearings until finally able to peek into the deep, dark room. Inside, beneath a cloud of cigar smoke,

stood a long, polished table littered with drinks and open briefcases. And at the far end, talking machine-gun Spanish, sat Gunboat Charlie Chávez.

Trabant checked the other faces around the table. Some he recognised from the MI6 database, while others—

‘Eh, what you doing?’ asked one of Gunboat’s heavies, stepping forward to block Trabant’s view.

‘J-just looking for the, er... balcony. Honest!’

‘This room’s none of your business. Get lost!’

iii

The Mediterranean Sea looked cool and moody, just like the other guests on the balcony. Trabant made his way to its farthest corner, took a lungful of air and tried to regain some composure. But a quick glance back through the window confirmed the heavies were in deep consultation. They *must* be on to him. Hell! And now they were glaring right back at him! There was only one thing to do – phone HQ.

At last the line answered. ‘Vauxhall Cross Plumbers, how can we help?’

‘It’s me, the plumber,’ whispered Trabant, behind a cupped hand. ‘I think I’m blown!’

‘Please confirm number, location and status.’

‘Er... Number 218869. Location: 247. Job status: getting really dangerous. Please, this is urgent! Is the apprentice on his way?’

‘Negative. Apprentice delayed. I repeat – apprentice delayed.’

‘But you said—’

‘Deep breaths, 218869. The first job’s always the hardest. We’ve received your SMS reports so far. Good work, but are there other unreported leaks in the area?’

‘Yes, lots!’

‘Then you must complete the evaluation.’

‘But I...’

The line went dead.

Bang! Whiiiiizzzz!

Trabant jumped out of his skin, as a firework illuminated the bay in a brilliant spread of green and red. The whole of Cannes seemed to gasp in wonder, but he could spare no time for frivolity. He had to relay the names of those in the deep, dark room with Gunboat.

The first he’d remembered was ‘523-021-AAA’ – Paolo Varienga, the Brazilian underworld financier. Then ‘523-019-AAAAA’ – Solomon ‘Double Tap’ Hurunguru, the Central African Republic warlord, nicknamed after his favoured double-shot execution technique.

He texted both their details, then tried to recall more. Ooh, yes, the Russian, number 018, or was it 025? Er... Maybe he could just text his name. Yes, but how to spell it? Hell! Was it Sergei Miskachilov, or Mischatanov, or...?

‘Pardon, Monsieur. Vous voulez une crêpe suzette?’ asked the waiter.

‘Oh, yes, I’d better. And while you’re here, could you please remind me – the Russian gentleman in the room with Monsieur Chávez; how do you spell his surname?’

The world stopped, and the waiter blinked then instantly hurried inside, towards the large cauliflower ears of Gunboat’s heavy. And in that split second, in that moment of irretrievable foolishness, Trabant knew – it was the question he should never have asked. Every other guest in the yacht club seemed to know it too, as the atmosphere turned like an assassin’s blade, and the heavy charged out onto the balcony to seize its quarry.

‘Hey! What the—’

‘Come with me!’

‘No, I...’

Trabant was frogmarched back inside, past the guests and into the meeting room, where he was dumped unceremoniously into a chair at the opposite end of the table to Gunboat.

‘But please, I...’

Gunboat exhaled a long, jagged plume of cigar smoke. ‘What’s your name?’

‘B-Bristo Trabant.’

‘Trabant? What, as in the—’

‘C-car? Yes.’

Gunboat turned to the heavy stood behind. ‘Ha! Another gringo loco, eh, Raúl?’

‘Sí, Boss.’

‘My men say you been snooping around and asking questions,’ continued Gunboat. ‘Who you work for?’

‘N-no one.’

‘Oh, so you gatecrasher, huh?’

‘No. I was invited. I’m a journalist, for the, er... *Pimlico & District Chronicle*.’

Gunboat leant closer. ‘Not a plumber?’

Eek! ‘N-n-n-no... a film critic, here for the festival. Honest! Please, you’ve got to believe—’

‘I no got to do nothing. But I do want to know which intelligence agency you work for. MI6? CIA?’

‘*P-Pimlico & District*—’

‘THAT RUBBISH!’

‘It’s actually highly regarded.’

Gunboat sank back in his chair. ‘Newspapers no mean no thing to me. And neither, señor Trabant, do you. You lying to me, so I ask again – who you spy for?’

‘I wasn’t!’

‘Then why you so interest in my amigo, Sergei Mischailov?’

‘I’m not.’

‘Ah, but you ask the waiter about him. Why?’

‘I just thought Mr Mischail might be a famous, er... film director?’

‘He been on plenty news clips, but he no make no movies. I think you a spy.’

‘But I—’

‘NO INTERRUPT!’ shouted Gunboat. ‘You stumble in wrong place at very wrong time.’

Sergei Mischailov now spoke up. ‘I agree, señor Gunboat. This man is obviously a spy. So kill him.’

‘Yes, and a spy with impossibly large ears!’ added Azara Pampita Rázzon, inspecting Trabant as if he were some repulsive specimen. ‘Señor, did you have them made, or were you raised by a herd of elephants?’

The room erupted with laughter.

‘Must have been a difficult birth,’ she continued.

‘Eh, perhaps the doctor pull him out by his ears, huh?’ joked Gunboat.

‘It was the midwife, actually,’ replied Trabant. ‘S-she delivered me.’

‘SHUT UP!’ shouted Gunboat, slamming his fist down on the table. ‘I DELIVER YOU TO UNDERTAKER IF YOU NO TELL ME WHO YOU ARE!’

‘I also think you should kill him,’ said Rázzon.

‘Hear, hear,’ added Double Tap. ‘Our business is done. Now it’s time for the entertainment.’

‘Sure is, Gunboat,’ beamed another man, wearing a Texan ten-gallon hat. ‘Remember Montenegro last year, when you challenged that fool to a game of cards; when you lost and then shot him to pieces? That was such great fun. P-l-e-a-s-e can we see that again.’

‘Your drinks, messieurs,’ cut in Eva, expanding her cleavage to divert their attention. ‘Champagne for señor Gunboat, and for you, Monsieur Trabant,’ she continued, walking quickly to

the opposite end of the table, ‘apple juice on the rocks, just as you like it.’

‘T-thank you.’

‘My pleasure,’ she replied, looking back up the table. ‘Señor Gunboat, you know it is against the law in France to force someone to play games against their will.’

‘Perhaps, but I no a law-abiding citizen. No ever have been. Which is why the British Secret Service is here tonight, to watch me. Isn’t that right, señor Trans-Am?’

Trabant could feel the word ‘Guilty!’ flashing above his head like a hazard warning light. Did Gunboat really know he worked for MI6’s Priority Surveillance Unit, albeit only in an IT support capacity? And if so, then how? And if he did know, he should also know he was only here by default, as every other field operative in the department was either allocated, or incapacitated with chickenpox.

‘Monsieur Trabant is a renowned film journalist,’ continued Eva, as she collected empty glasses from the table.

‘Am I?’

‘Most definitely. Ladies and Gentlemen, I have read many of his articles, and they are all exemplary. And surely someone of your intellect, señor Gunboat, would have done precisely the same?’

‘Hmmm... As I say, I no read papers, but I read this gringo’s mind. He here for trouble.’ Gunboat turned to his nearer heavy. ‘Raúl – tell Henri to prepare the gaming table.’

‘Sí, Boss.’

‘No!’ protested Eva. ‘That is wholly unnecessary.’

‘The only thing necessary,’ replied Gunboat, ‘is for señor Sergei to continue with tradition.’

Mischailov smiled, jotted down the names of three card games on a piece of paper, then walked over to Trabant. ‘Pick one.’

‘D-do I have to?’

‘YES!’ shouted Gunboat. ‘But no dare say your choice out loud, or I kill you right here.’

Trabant hastily tapped option two.

‘Bravo! No so difficult, eh? Now, Ramón – take the spy to his seat.’

‘But, señor Gunboat,’ continued Eva, ‘this is a terrible mistake!’

‘Señorita, you a good hostess, but you interfere *way* too much. The gringo should know better. Now shoo! I have game of cards to play.’

iv

A large circular table had been covered with a green cloth and placed on the stage, with two antique chairs set opposite each other. Bristo Trabant sat on one.

Eva pushed her way through the hastily assembling crowd, trying to catch Trabant’s eye, to warn him. She knew that if he did beat Gunboat he would pay with his life. Gunboat was the worst loser ever, but refusal to play him also carried the same life-terminating consequences. Bristo just had to play badly and let Gunboat win, as countless others had done over the years, and then – just maybe – he would escape with his life. It was the only hope.

The room fell deadly silent. Gunboat was now taking his seat, revelling in the hush, bathing in the horror etched upon Trabant’s face.

‘Señor, no look so worried,’ he said, leaning forward.

‘Really?’ replied Trabant, clutching the glimmer of hope. ‘W-why’s that?’

‘Simple. When you’re a dead man, you have nothing left to lose.’

Trabant’s world stopped again.

The croupier placed a pack in front of each player. ‘As Monsieur Trabant is the challenger, he shall go first.’

‘Wait!’ shouted Eva, reappearing from the far side of the room. ‘Fresh drinks!’ As she placed the glasses down, she looked deep into Trabant’s eyes and shook her head in warning.

‘Right, out the way,’ said the croupier. ‘Let’s get this game underway.’

As the crowd inched closer, Trabant reached forward and took a deep slug of apple juice. He could already feel the intensity of Gunboat’s stare, squeezing droplets of sweat from his forehead like a wine press.

‘Monsieur, if you please...’

Trabant nervously turned his first card.

Queen of Hearts.

Gunboat laid his first card beside it.

Ace of Clubs.

Trabant followed, and the game quickly gained a breakneck momentum.

Seven of Diamonds.

Four of Clubs.

The crowd stepped closer still, primed with the juicy anticipation of Gunboat’s murderous reaction.

Six of Hearts.

Ten of Spades.

Tension rose higher still, now clawing at the ceiling, desperate for release, until finally Gunboat laid down his remaining card. But no winners this time.

Conversation returned to the room, tinged with a wolf-pack frustration at being robbed of the kill. As the croupier gathered the scattered cards into a pile, Trabant eased back in his chair, exhaled his own bluster of tension, and replaced it with a long slug of juice. Hmmm... delicious! Freshly squeezed apples and crushed ice always hit the spot.

‘*Whatever you do, don’t play him at cards.*’

The head of MI6 had been most clear. But another long slug and Bravinger's warning became further diluted.

Trabant began to look around with renewed confidence. He was still alive, he'd survived the test, and his sense of relief was such that it overruled any possible notions of something else going wrong. And so, why shouldn't he play again at cards? After all, it was only a game, and despite his gruff manner, perhaps Gunboat Charlie wasn't as bad as everyone made out. Trabant looked across to Eva as the second sets of cards were placed in front of each contestant. She wore another don't-beat-him-just-get-out-of-there expression on her face, which Trabant decided to interpret as a go-on-you-can-do-it look. He winked back. Eva closed her eyes.

Gunboat surveyed Trabant with increasing suspicion then nodded to his two heavies, who instantly moved into position – one by the room's entrance, the other directly behind Trabant.

'Mesdames et messieurs, let the second game commence,' announced the croupier.

Deathly silence reclaimed the room.

Four of Clubs – thrown down aggressively by Gunboat.

Six of Diamonds. Trabant was warming up. He'd surely impress Eva by winning the game, and become hero of the night.

Six of Spades.

Nine of Hearts.

Two of Spades.

The cards were thrown down faster and faster. Gunboat bit harder onto his cigar, emitting toxic mumblings under his Panamanian breath, tensing up as he felt the game slipping away. Trabant – stone-cold sober – felt sharp.

Gunboat threw down the *Nine of Diamonds*. As the card slid across the previous one, Trabant quickly released his next. It whistled through the air in slow motion, eventually landing on

the table before him. Gunboat's reactions were slow, distracted by a momentary glance to check his men were in place. His eyes returned to the table in horror. The card Trabant had thrown down had barely settled, yet matched his own card exactly. He went to mouth the word but was too late; Trabant was already there – shouting the word that would change history, the course of world affairs, and the word that would start the countdown on his very existence.

The word was final.

The word was cutting.

The word was...

'Snap!'

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