



**SEVENTEEN**  
**LAST MAN STANDING**  
**JOHN BROWNLOW**

**H**  
HODDER &  
STOUGHTON

# I

Being a spy, it's not what you think.

It's boring.

I don't mean boring as in dull.

I mean boring as in mind-crushingly, ass-clenchingly, teeth-grindingly tedious.

Sitting in a cubicle, one of a hundred identical little beige cages, wearing your office shirt and your office shoes and your office tie, listening to the hum of the AC as you wonder what the special will be today in the commissary, fantasising about allowing yourself a non-decaf after 11.30 a.m., as you pore over six-month-old Azerbaijani newspapers in the hope of scraping some pointless little tidbit of information about exploitable tensions in the lower levels of the Baku political hierarchy.

Baku is insane, by the way. Off the hook. Like Dubai on steroids, but with more arm wrestling. They like jam in their tea and the national sport is played to a musical accompaniment. But you don't know that because you haven't been there.

That's because you're a spy – or, as your job title reminds you at each increasingly negative performance review, an analyst – stuck four feet from your co-worker who has yet to be introduced to the marvels of modern deodorant technology, wearing shitty government-issue headphones that make your ears hurt because the padding wore away six months ago

and there's a freeze on spending on account of Congress can't get its head out of its ass for long enough to pass a budget.

And so your life ticks away heartbeat by heartbeat as you listen to interminable, poorly recorded conversations between Omar the Taxi Driver and Hussein the Fruit Vendor discussing the relative merits of the offside trap in the diminishing hope that at some point they will reveal why Omar's brother-in-law, who now lives in Toronto and has introduced them to the exciting world of NHL hockey, suddenly has more money in his bank account than you earn in a year, or are ever likely to.

It's not all bad. Sometimes they let you scan satellite pictures of the Eritrean or Mongolian desert until your eyeballs bleed. The most exciting moment in your career so far came when you thought you'd spotted a missile silo under construction on the North Korean peninsular but when you took it to your supervisor she pointed out it was a sewage treatment plant.

But, you know, points for trying.

What I'm saying is, all that stuff you see on TV and in the movies? Travelling to exotic locations where you burn rubber in brightly coloured exotic sports cars, sprint across rooftops under fire from automatic weapons while performing parkour, fuck glamorous personalities of diverse ethnicities and suspect allegiances, and blow interesting people's heads off using silenced weapons for reasons that remain opaque until the third act, at which point they come roaring back to bite you in the ass?

There's none of that.

Literally, none.

Not even a little bit.

Unless you're me.

## 2

The Bugatti Veyron is overkill, but the expenses for this job were particularly generous and if I have one motto it is this: ride the horse in the direction it is going.

Today the horse is lemon yellow and purring along at 204 km/h in the outside lane of Bundesautobahn 9 en route from Munich to Berlin, just outside Nuremberg. Half of me wants to make a detour east to the Nürburgring and do a couple of loops around the circuit, but you have to leave some fruit on the tree. It isn't even halfway to its top speed but I'm trying not to appear any more of an asshole than is absolutely necessary.

Because today it is absolutely necessary.

There are two schools of thought about visibility.

You can either be visible, or invisible.

There is no in-between.

Invisible means: you're the harried middle-aged woman juggling her handbag and the Starbucks cup as she fumbles for her ID on the way through the security checkpoint. You're the janitor with poor English and thinning hair sluicing the floor with a mop around the tables where a brace of Harvard legacies are discussing whether it's better to rent a floatplane or a yacht to get to the island and can't even be bothered to move their feet. You're the grey man on the subway with greasy hair and patches on his elbows who looks like an

out-of-work antique dealer down on his luck, toting a plastic shopping bag full of old books back to a safe house, where you will steam open the flap of one of them to reveal new identity documents.

You have no digital footprint. You do not use credit cards. You use burner cellphones which you change every week, or more often, or preferably not at all. Wherever possible, you communicate using physical means, from dead drops to the postal service. You remain analogue in a world of ones and zeroes.

Security by obscurity.

The problem with that?

It doesn't work. Not any more.

Biometrics will fuck you up. And not just automated facial recognition, which is everywhere. You could put a paper bag over your head and the AI will pick you out by your gait, by the way you favour one leg over the other, by the way you over-pronate, by your flat feet, by the cock of your hips or the way you wiggle your ass. And good luck crossing an international border unless you're carrying a passport from a country that doesn't use biometrics yet, like Russia, which will draw all the attention you need and more.

The other school of thought?

Security by being totally-fucking-out-there.

Hence the Veyron.

When people see a supercar, all they see is the car.

Nobody gives a shit who's driving it. At best they see some loathsome private equity lizard, a dotcom bro, some minor Saudi princeling, or the Botoxed trophy wife of a Central Asian mobster-turned-oligarch. Nobody wants to meet their eye. They look away.

I'm none of those things, but the blazer and the Rolex and the open shirt and the sunglasses and the slicked-back hair let them make up their own stories and judge me accordingly.

You're judging me now, I can feel it. You want to look away.  
Good.  
It's working.

In Berlin, I pass up the opportunity to gawp at the remnants of the Wall. Those Cold War days seem almost quaint now, desperate people floating over the wall in balloons or splashing knee-deep in shit through sewers or lying bleeding to death in the kill zone between the inner wall and the outer one, victims of the snipers in the East German sentry towers, harried Stasi officers hurrying out in unmarked cars to snaffle up the bodies before the bad news could leak out.

The irony was that East Germany didn't stop at the outer wall. That wasn't the border. The East Germans built a buffer zone of a few yards to allow them to maintain the western side of the wall if they needed to, but which was also open to the West. The West German authorities had no jurisdiction over it, and it became a party zone, a true no-man's land, a place where no law could reach you. There are stories from back in the day of bodies being dumped there with bullets in the backs of their heads. The CIA would dump their victims in the French zone, the French in the British zone, and the Brits in the American zone, which tells you more about the state of Western diplomatic relations between nuclear powers at the height of the Cold War than a four-year political science degree.

I head past the tourist trap that is Checkpoint Charlie, and turn down into the underground parking of one of the soaring glass-and-steel banking monoliths just off Potsdamer Platz. The moment he sees the Bugatti, the valet shoots out of his little cabin. He barely even clocks me, so intent is he on the car. He's sixty if he's a day and from his expression he just got the first natural hard-on he's had in a decade as he slid into

the gloriously supple leather of the bucket seat.

‘Don’t scratch it,’ I tell him. I don’t give a shit, actually, but I want to make him sweat so his fingerprints are easy for the forensics to lift. Underneath, they won’t find mine, thanks to the calfskin driving gloves, but you can’t be too careful.

I take the ticket and head to the parking elevator.

He doesn’t see me put it in the trash.

I give the Bugatti a last look as he drives it away.

And think to myself: I fucking hate that car.

# 3

I haven't told you my name. That's because it isn't mine any more. It belongs to somebody else, somebody who used to be me, somebody I stopped being a long time ago. There probably aren't ten people alive who have a memory of that person, not because I did anything to them, but because that person was a nothing, a nobody, a cipher, a sentence that had no meaning.

I left them behind. I don't miss them and they don't miss me.

To people I meet every day, I'm whoever it's useful for them to think I am. It's not a question of acting, any more than acting is a question of acting. It's about being. The great thing about having no actual identity, no fixed personality, is that you can slither from one persona to another like one of those naked hermit crabs sliding into a new shell every time the dishes pile up too high in the sink of the old one.

To people in the business, I'm one word.

Madonna, Cher, Pelé, Beyoncé, Michelangelo, Plato, Seinfeld, all rolled into one.

I'm Seventeen.

Younger than you expect.

Well groomed, flashy, sometimes a bit too loud.

One of those American accents that's hard to place.

A little obnoxious.

Well, no. *Fucking* obnoxious.

If you don't like me, that's okay. It's not a business where being liked is a big deal.

Seventeen, because there were sixteen before me.

To wear a number is a badge of honour. It's like being the forty-fifth president of the United States, or the twelfth Miss Universe, or the reigning heavyweight boxing champion of the world. It means, simply: you're the best. The most powerful, the most beautiful, the strongest or, in my case and the cases of the sixteen before me, the most deadly, and for that reason the most feared.

No-one's sure who was first. My money is on Zigmund Markovich Rosenblum, who you might want to Google if you have someone handy to chase your eyeballs after they pop out and roll down the street.

He's the only one you'll find on Wikipedia. The second was a child whose parents were murdered by the Tsar, ended up homeless, was kidnapped by German intelligence at the outbreak of the Great War, trained in espionage and sabotage, then returned to the streets of St Petersburg where he reported on troop movements, but secretly turned against his German masters and became a double agent. All before the age of twelve.

Three through fifteen are all confirmed dead. It won't surprise you that none of them expired from natural causes, unless you count falling out of a window or a 737 (Seven, Thirteen respectively).

Sixteen, my predecessor, is an unknown. He simply disappeared. Retired, for reasons completely opaque to everyone, at the top of his game. Stone quit, never to be seen again.

Me? I slid into his shell.

# 4

The elevator takes me up. It's on the outside of the building, Berlin sliding away from me as I rise, the Reichstag building, the Tiergarten, the Schloss Charlottenburg all parallaxing into view. At the seventh floor, the elevator stops and a girl in a blue pencil skirt and white blouse gets on, holding a bundle of files. She looks Italian, with dark hair pinned back behind her ears. She smiles at me and for a second I feel sorry for her, working here among these concupiscent jerks, one of whom will probably propose to her, marry her, then insist she give up her job and bring up a brood of replicants in one of the giant stone McMansions that now circle the city like a bear trap waiting to snap shut.

I glance at her hand. He's already proposed, a chunky engagement ring glinting.

Maybe you think I'm being an ass assuming all this. Probably you're right. But this is the way the world rolls. Banks, private finance, venture capital, it's not what you might call an equal-opportunity playground.

I wonder if her fiancé, whoever he is, is one of the people I'm about to kill.

The elevator bings. Her floor. She gets off.

I watch her go.

I hope for her sake he is.

There's another girl on the reception desk, wearing a ton of make-up and imitation pearls. These are the ones you have to

watch, because they're smart. They live in the real world. They deal with everyone from mailmen to heads of state. The younger associates, the ones still working eighty-hour weeks and working up proposals every night until 3 a.m., predate them with no intention of ever taking them home to Mummy and Daddy.

She sees me coming and I can tell before I've taken off my sunglasses that she's got my number. She smiles but the smile says she hates everything about me, from the hand-tooled leather of my shoes to the crease in my pants to the pattern on my tie to the too-white of my expensively straightened teeth.

I love her already.

She is glassily polite to me, which I am sure takes all her strength. I tell her I have a 3 p.m. with Gerhard Meyer, which is true. He's sell-side, which means that he has oleaginous vermin like me in and out of his den all day long. He thinks I represent a teacher's pension fund based in Toronto, hoping to unload some rickety private placement, the commission on which will pay for his third divorce, since he's now boinking his executive assistant.

I've never met the man, and never will, but I know these people.

The waiting area is tessellated by knots of suits, supplicants at the court of Mammon with attaché cases on knees, heads together, and armpits damp with nerves, all hopeful that this meeting, unlike the nine previous, will unlock the line of credit and prevent the unstoppable force of their failing venture's burn rate colliding with the immovable object of No Money Left. But Meyer's selling, not buying, and he's not going to keep me waiting.

His assistant appears, and it's a young black man – Somali, maybe? – impossibly slim, with high cheekbones and narrow-waisted grey pants that fit him perfectly. He seems nice. Is

Meyer boinking him? If so he has better taste than I gave him credit for.

The assistant's name is Bashir. I have no desire to kill him so I alter my plan slightly, passing the conference room that contains my target and following him instead to Meyer's office where Meyer rises to greet me, palm outstretched. He has a moustache that won't stop, and I'll leave it at that. Bashir offers to get me coffee and I ask for a double espresso macchiato, knowing that will take him a while, then apologise to Meyer and ask where the washroom is.

He tells me. I leave my attaché case, which the police will discover later contains only a copy of Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, partly to give it a believable heft, but mostly because if you're going to leave a clue, you might as well make it as confusing and meaningless as possible.

I head out.

In the washroom, I catch sight of my reflection.

Men of my trade – not the women, women are different – I can spot a mile off. Sometimes it's the breadth to their shoulders that tightens the back of their jacket. Their soldier's walk. Sometimes it's as subtle as a webbing belt or as obvious as a broken nose. Sometimes it's the carefully grown-out regulation haircut, or the stubble and dead eyes of the SOF who took a little too much pleasure slitting the throats of teenagers in the dusty backstreets of Central Asia. Some, the most dangerous, have a stillness to them that can be unsettling. If you glance at their hands you will notice they are largely free of rings. Google 'de-gloving' if you have a strong stomach and want to know the reason.

I have none of those tells.

I look less built than I am, my clothes expensively tailored to conceal the wire of my musculature. Hair you'd swear has

never felt the tang of a boot-camp razor. Tall enough to look you in the eye but not tall enough to intimidate you unless I mean to. A nose that's been broken three times, but you'd never know because I pay a man in Beverly Hills to have it reset perfectly each time. I moisturise, not out of vanity, although there's that, but to hide the effects of desert sun or arctic wind on my skin.

On the third finger of my right hand there's a plain silver ring with an inscription inside.

When we know each other a little better, I may tell you what it says.

I reach under my jacket and from the concealed holster I remove the pistol I'm carrying.

# 5

Amateur photographers love to talk about cameras. Professionals couldn't give a shit generally. I mean, they have preferences, but a professional photographer can get the shot with a pinhole camera made out of a baked-bean tin, and it will be better than anything you, an amateur, could achieve with the most expensive camera in the world.

But you dig a little deeper, and you'll discover there's always one camera that still holds magic for them. Maybe it's a Leica M2 with a 35/1.4 pre-aspherical Summilux for that Cartier-Bresson glow. Maybe it's a beaten-up old Rolleiflex TLR, like the one Hitler used. It could be a Widelux, clockwork driving the lens through 150 degrees to make a panorama. Or . . . well, you get the idea.

The one thing they all have in common?

They are mechanical. Nothing automatic about them. They do what you tell them, nothing more and nothing less. They are the stick-shifts of the camera world.

Which brings us to the B&T VP9 Welrod 9mm.

Swiss made, manually operated, bolt-action with a built-in suppressor, it's one of the only silenced pistols that's actually quiet. *Hollywood* quiet. The VP stands for 'veterinary pistol', as it was originally designed for vets to put down animals without frightening the neighbours. My God, the feel of the thing. There is no show to it, no flash.

It just sits there, black and perfectly smooth, and whispers to you: I know what you have to do, and I will do it, and I will not judge you.

If it took pictures, I'd be a hell of a photographer.

# 6

I exit the washroom. I know where the conference room is, not just because Bashir took me past it, but because I've had access to the building plans for six weeks now and I know every inch of every floor. As I head there I take deep diaphragm breaths: in, hold, out through the mouth. I want my heart-rate to be as low as possible.

On a good day, I can get it down to fifty beats per minute or so without any trouble.

I check my pulse, fingers on my wrist. Ten seconds. Eight beats. Forty-eight.

I push open the frosted-glass door.

I already know who will be inside, and I know their seniority from the org chart, which tells me roughly who will be sitting where. The org chart on the website helpfully only includes photographs of executives. Someone once told me you should always be nice to assistants, and that includes not killing them unless you absolutely have to.

I also know there won't be security. Why not? Because this is home turf.

You know how money – real money, fuck-you money, the kind of money that swills around in private Swiss bank accounts, the proceeds of arms deals and state-backed coups, the kind of money that never needs to be laundered because, courtesy of matryoshka-like corporate entities it never appears

on the radar of anyone remotely connected to taxation or law enforcement – moves around the world?

It's not through Bitcoin.

Here's what happens. You, a billionaire with blood on your hands, wish to move money from A to B. You meet with one of your people in a SCIF – a Secure Compartmented Intelligence Facility, a room enclosed in a Faraday Cage, impermeable to electromagnetic radiation, acoustically and electrically and atmospherically isolated. Trust me. You're a billionaire. You have one.

You give them instructions. They call a number in Zurich, a gnome in a suit gets on a private jet, and twelve hours later your private banker is standing in the SCIF with you. You tell him you would like to move money from A to B, and how much. He gets back on his private jet, flies back to Zurich, and executes the transaction on the extravagantly hardened computer system that runs your accounts.

It's the kind of cryptography that no hacker will ever crack, because there is nothing to crack.

Except there's a weak point.

The gnome. He's on his way back to the office from Flughafen Zürich when his limo is T-boned. Masked men drag him off to a warehouse somewhere where they apply what is known in the business as 'rubber-hose cryptography' because it involves, in its crudest form, beating the target with a rubber hose until they tell you the password.

It is quick, violent, and extremely effective.

Like me.

Point being, if you're the billionaire, you're not the one who takes risks. Your workplace, your glass-and-steel tower, is your safe space.

Your house, your supposed home, is full of squabbling fail-sons and -daughters whose main preoccupation is who will

inherit what and how soon, and a spouse who loathes you with good reason, but is bound by the terms of the prenup, and is currently obsessed with what kind of slate you should import from Italy for the roof on the south wing.

It's a warzone, frankly.

You begin to relax when you slide into the plush black leather of the armour-plated limo, but you don't feel truly safe until you duck into the maw of the parking garage, and – ah! – up the private elevator to the Shangri-La of your cavernous penthouse office with its tasteless cocobolo desk or ironic faux-*Jetsons* mid-century tat or gold-plated dictator-chic, or whatever the fuck it is you think makes you look important, or younger.

It's your castle, your court, your realm, the place where you are King, where your word is law.

Once in a while you emerge for a board meeting or a pitch and the peasants tug their forelocks as you pass. It makes you feel wanted. Loved.

And because of that, your guard is down.  
Just the way I like it.

# 7

Turns out there *is* security. He must have been inside when I passed before.

No big deal. I like to be proved wrong.

The guy is huge, a mountain of muscle and testosterone bulging out of a suit a size too small, with cropped hair and, perched on pink piggy ears, those terrible tactical sunglasses all security guys think are obligatory but scream *erectile dysfunction*, and restrict their vision indoors when confronted by people like me.

There are six targets inside and the VP9 magazine only holds five shots, so I was going to have to reload anyway. I walk straight past him, then stop, turn and say 'Hey!' to someone behind me in the corridor. He checks to see who it is, only there's no-one there and I put a bullet in his temple. A Rorschach-blot of blood spatters against the smoked privacy glass of the conference room. Part of me feels bad for him, but if you're in the game, you're in the game.

I have to step over his body to push my way into the conference room, where people are already rising in panic.

Four shots left.

There are three male VPs in their thirties who are the main physical threat, the kinds of guys who mountain-bike and do CrossFit in an effort to make up for the endless dinners and cocktails they are forced to endure trying to separate clients from their money or women to whom they are not married from their underwear, or both simultaneously.

Thock, thock, thock. Done and done and done.

In my peripheral vision, a twenty-something Associate begins crawling along the wall, trying to leave. He's shaking, terrified. I put a round in the wall just by his head to let him know that he's being a fucking idiot and because I need to reload anyway. He concedes the point by curling into a foetal ball.

Good lad.

I reload, the movements so instinctive I could do them in my sleep, which I'm told by people in a position to know I sometimes do.

I'm working my way up the org chart now. The Comptroller is a woman in her fifties with a mumsy air. I would feel worse about killing her if I didn't know that the numbers she juggles and fakes represent tanks and helicopters and automatic weapons shipped via third parties and fake export certificates to regimes who do not, as a rule, have the best interests and welfare of their citizens at heart.

I'm not saying what I do is a public service exactly, but actions have consequences.

The Chief Executive is early sixties. He looks like he's having a heart attack already, which would make it his fifth or sixth. I know from my research a mine he helped finance in Brazil collapsed, killing something in the region of a hundred indigenous miners. Euthanising him with a veterinary pistol seems oddly appropriate.

Which leaves the Old Man.

This guy, I mean. I almost admire him.

You remember Adnan Khashoggi. The arms dealer who was worth \$4 billion in the 1980s, back when \$4 billion was real money? Helped broker Iran-Contra, thick with Imelda Marcos? He died penniless. Where did the money go? you ask.

The answer is standing in front of me.

He's eighty-something now, and he's not even scared. He's known this moment was coming for years, decades probably.

He smiles, and his teeth are crooked and yellow. You see this in rich men when they come from nothing. They wear bad teeth as a sign of pride, as a reminder of where they came from, as a fuck-you to anyone who would judge them.

I get it, I really do.

'Young man,' he says in German. 'Whatever they're paying you—'

I put two shots in his chest before he can finish.

For some crazy reason, it isn't enough.

He's still moving, blood coming out of his mouth.

I put my last bullet in his head.