

***THE
GENEVA
DECISION***

SEELEY JAMES

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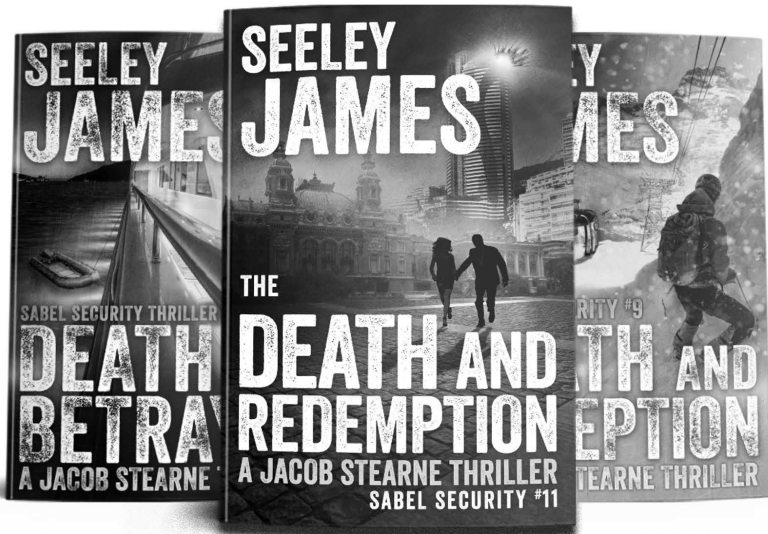
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Published by
Machined Media
12402 N 68th St
Scottsdale, AZ 85254

THE GENEVA DECISION, Sabel Origins #1
Copyright © 2012, 2013, 2015, 2018, 2019 Seeley James
Original publication v1.0-6.1 on 30-Nov-2012
This version is v1.0-7.32, 12-April, 2019
Cover design: Pete Garceau
Cover photograph: Andrew Montooth
Digital ISBN: 978-0-9886996-0-1
Print ISBN: 978-0-9886996-1-8
Distribution Print ISBN: 978-0-9886996-0-1

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For Serena

CHAPTER 1

Geneva, Switzerland

20-May, 8PM

AN ASSASSIN TWISTED BETWEEN MEN in tuxedos and women in ball gowns on a beautiful evening in May backlit by the golden sunlight glancing off Geneva's Lake Léman. It was such a surprise that Pia Sabel rechecked all the visual signs: sweat on his brow, bulging eyes, pulsing neck veins, purposeful stride. He disappeared in the shadows before emerging into the light again.

From the age of ten, off-duty Secret Service agents had permanently etched those signs in her mind but, until that moment, it had all been theory.

The assassin weaved through the forest of people in the small park, just a silhouette in the lingering rays. Then he disappeared again and the string quartet played Vivaldi.

She wondered if she'd imagined him just to get back at her father. He insisted she attend the party. She was to meet Clément Marot at the Banque Marot reception in the roped off park on the lake. She studied the crowd again. The man was gone, either evaporated or nonexistent. Which could be a problem. It wouldn't have been the first time she imagined an assassin.

Pia sighed and resumed her search for Marot. Any man there could be the banker. It was Geneva after all. She pulled out her phone and took another glance at Marot's picture.

When she looked up, she saw the assassin again.

He was crossing the park at some distance. His stride was picking up pace as if he were nearing his target. Then he disappeared behind waiters bearing silver trays of champagne flutes. She looked around at the

reception guests who politely laughed at each other's cocktail wit.

Her stomach squeezed.

She reached into her purse and clicked her panic button. Agent Marty waited on the far side of the boulevard, Quai du Mont Blanc. Could he reach her in time to help? She looked around for security people then remembered there were none. The safest city in Europe had few of them. The very reason Marot wanted to hire Sabel Security.

Shouldering her way between guests, she put herself on an intercept path. With a little luck, she could cut him off and maybe delay him until help arrived. But she reached the balustrade and a magnificent view of Jet d'Eau, Geneva's famous fountain, with no sign of the assassin. She stepped onto a park bench and searched again. His predatory pace would make him easy to find.

Instead, she found Clément Marot chatting with people in the far corner. The assassin stepped out from between two guests on Marot's left, pulled his hand out of his pocket, and pointed something at Marot's temple.

Marot's head came apart.

The bang echoed off the hotel façade and across the water.

Marot collapsed on the ground like a dropped cloth. Sharp shouts and cries erupted as a small crowd moved around the victim. Some tried to move back, others to move in, but they cancelled each other out.

Pia Sabel watched the assassin. He held a gun in his hand and aimed at bystanders' faces. Everyone in his path stepped back a good ten yards, crushing together until there was little room to move. Once they moved, the gunman strode toward the street. After five paces, some men swirled in behind him. He turned around and threatened them with the gun, then resumed his march.

Pia slid her hand around the Glock in her purse's hidden holster but left it there. Too provocative. Too many innocent bystanders.

She sized him up. Average height for a European, he was an inch shorter than Pia. She'd sparred with enough men at the gym to know a fight with him could go badly. Very badly. But there was another move that might work. Dangerous, but someone had to do something.

Threading her way between guests, Pia took up a position in the

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killer's path. Standing on tiptoe to see over a tall man's shoulder, she watched him. His wary eyes scanned the crowd, daring anyone to stop him. His cold gaze locked with hers for a second before moving on. Then he hesitated, something had caught his eye. He looked in her direction again.

To keep the element of surprise, she turned her back, bent her knees, and lowered herself below the shoulder in front of her. She tried to use all her senses. She watched people's eyes to track his movement. She tried to feel the static charge in the air through her skin. She listened for his footsteps.

Her human shield stepped back, clearing the killer's path.

She coiled the powerful springs in her legs and listened to the killer's footsteps approaching.

Pia exploded into his path, pivoting on her right foot and hooking her left ankle around his. Momentum carried his bodyweight forward, but before he could recover, her left forearm slammed hard into his shoulder blade. The assassin crashed face first onto the concrete pathway. She jumped into the air above him, her gown billowing around her like an unfurling parachute and came down hard. Her knees drove into his back on either side of his spine, halfway between the ribs and the hipbone. The impact forced the air from his lungs and pounded his kidneys.

Emboldened by her initiative, a heavy man stomped on the killer's wrist until the gun fell free. Another man picked it up. Someone hurled epithets in French while other voices called for police and doctors.

Multiple vehicles converged on the scene, their sirens shrieking. Their blue and white lights splashed off nearby windows before spilling into the park. Pia, panting from the adrenaline rush, patted down the killer. In one pocket, a book of matches with a handwritten phone number and a bus ticket from Douala, Cameroon. In another pocket, a wad of cash comprised of several euros and other bills that read Banque des États l'Afrique Centrale. Nothing else—no other weapons, no ID, no wallet, no phone. He writhed and struggled against the men holding him.

Agent Marty pushed through the crowd, looked at Pia and the man under her knees. He said, "Hey boss, you OK?"

CHAPTER 2

20-May, 8:30PM

PIA NODDED, TOOK A DEEP breath, and pointed.

“Killed Marot. He was heading to the street, probably had an accomplice. Cuffs?”

Marty whipped out the plasticuffs and took over.

Grabbing a fistful of her gown, Pia kicked off her heels and pushed through the astonished crowd. She ran toward the quai fifty yards away, jumped the velvet rope, and surveyed the broad sidewalk. Thirty meters to her right, a lone gray Peugeot idled at the curb in the no-parking zone. It was empty, the driver’s door open, no license plate. A tall man, pale with blond spiky hair and a thin goatee, stood not far from the car, just outside the rope. He strained on his toes to peer into the crowd.

His face snapped her way. Their eyes locked.

He turned to run. Should she pull her pistol or try to tackle him? She was not a confident marksman on the range but was a world-class sprinter. She gave chase.

He bolted for the idling car. She angled to cut him off. He had the advantage in distance while she had the advantage in speed. His large black boots clumped across the sidewalk. She closed the gap, but it wasn’t enough.

In a last ditch effort, she threw herself into a slide tackle. Her feet nearly clipped his ankles but caught only a bit of his heel. He stumbled and jumped into the car. By the time she grabbed her Glock, he had the door closed and, half a second later, tore away.

Her darts would never penetrate the car’s sheet metal.

Should have brought bullets.

He was gone.

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SHE CLUTCHED HER GOWN AT the shredded hip and limped back toward Agent Marty. As police cars and emergency vehicles swarmed the street, officers and emergency responders pushed through the crowd. Pia followed in their wake.

Agent Jonelle, hair slicked into a tight bun at the nape of her neck, came alongside Pia.

Pia glanced over. “Thought I gave you the night off.”

“Awfully kind of you, Ms. Sabel. But you know I don’t work for you, right?”

“You work for Dad, then?”

“Mr. Sabel told me to keep your past in the past and unplug any pranks you might think funny.” She paused as they walked. “And I’m here to help you run Sabel Security before you run it into the ground.”

Without breaking stride Pia turned to stare at the woman. She turned forward again, looking ahead twenty yards. Several police officers had arrived and formed a circle to the right of Marty and the killer. Two, a man and a woman, wore blue windbreakers with POLICE CANTONALE stenciled in white from shoulder to shoulder. The rest were uniformed officers.

“Those were Dad’s words?” she asked.

“Pretty much—but cleaned up some.”

“Great.”

The woman in the windbreaker stepped forward to meet them. She carried a purse slung over her shoulder bandolier-style, the way Pia liked to carry hers. She extended a hand, smiled, and gushed something in rapid-fire French. The only words Pia understood were the two that matched the woman’s nameplate, *Capitaine Villeneuve*. Villeneuve didn’t wait for a response but hurried on toward three uniformed officers, shouting orders as she went.

Must have been her official thank you.

Pia approached a pudgy officer next to Marty. His name badge read *Duchamps*.

“His accomplice is getting away in a small gray Peugeot, no plates,”

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she said. "You can catch him if you hurry."

Duchamps stared at her, then turned to Marty. Marty translated and Duchamps stared some more. After an awkward second, he pulled a handheld radio out and repeated the description.

Jonelle tapped her shoulder. "What makes you think they're working together?"

"They were both soldiers."

Marty extended his free hand, holding her Vivier heels. She smiled thank you.

Pia examined her captive while Jonelle waited for an explanation. Since he wasn't facedown with her knees in his kidneys, she could get a look at him. He had a swarthy complexion, black beard, dark eyes, and a high and tight haircut. A broken nose and bloody shirt. No longer struggling, he seemed oddly calm. Not subdued. Not worried.

"This guy was aiming at people's heads," Pia said. "Marty told me that's how soldiers aim in case the enemy is wearing body armor. And the other guy wore Army boots."

Marty dragged the killer to his feet and pushed him toward the officers. Duchamps took one arm, Capitaine Villeneuve took the other, and they walked toward a squad car on the street.

"Pardon me," the tall man in the windbreaker said. "I must have your statement." When their eyes met, he smiled and pointed his pen at her. "You are Pia Sabel, the Olympic footballer, oui?"

Pia nodded. Fans of women's soccer had dwindled since the games ended.

He was handsome and lean, like a distance runner, his skin drawn tight over sinewy muscles. Coin-sized curls and strong features. His words rumbled in a rich baritone.

"I thought this. Your tackle of Louisa Nécib in the Olympics was, ehm..." He snapped his fingers as he searched for the right word. "Notorious."

She shrugged. "In France."

He smiled. "Oh, pardon me. I am from Chamonix, just across the border. And also Capitaine Villeneuve. We are on special assignment to the Canton. But no matter. So then, I need your statement." He patted his

pockets before finding the pen and pad already in his hand. “Just the few questions, if you please. You tackled him, he fell face first causing the broken nose. I have this from the others. You took items from the pockets. What were these?”

“I was looking for weapons. Patted him down. I put them all back.” Pia described the contents of the killer’s pockets.

“Oui.” He jotted. “Anything that distinguishes the items?”

“The matchbook had *Objet Trouvé, Valois Maritime* embossed on the outside and a phone number on the inside.”

Jonelle said, “Excuse me?”

At the same time, Alphonse said, “Do you remember the number?”

“Just +41-22, something something.”

Alphonse nodded. “Country and city codes of Geneva.”

“Yes.”

“Perhaps the clue, oui?” he said.

He whistled to Capitaine Villeneuve, who knelt by the patrol car’s open back door. Absorbed at that moment with securing the prisoner in the back seat, Villeneuve didn’t respond. Duchamps waited in the front, his mind and eyes elsewhere. Alphonse stretched to wave and whistled once more before giving up.

Pia said, “Probably the number of whoever hired him.”

“Hired? Assassin? How do you think this?”

“An Arab working with a Nordic-looking guy, both soldiers, they picked a public space with no video cameras, they weren’t afraid of any resistance from the crowd. That’s a lot of planning. These guys are pros.”

Alphonse’s mouth hung open. “Many conclusions for such, ehm, petite evidence.” His smile took the sting out of his words.

“Still.”

“Excuse me,” Agent Jonelle said. “Valois Maritime is a shipping company. The *Objet Trouvé* is one of their ships. It’s listed on the meeting agenda.”

Alphonse looked at Pia.

Pia looked at Jonelle. “Agenda?”

“Yes. On your phone, under calendar. The meeting with Clément Marot.”

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Pia scrambled to retrieve her phone, pulled up the calendar and the meeting notes.

Sécurité - Banque Marot

1. Questions Internal
2. Questions International
3. Priorities Premier:
 - Objet Trouvé - Valois Maritime, Marseille
 - Étoile de Lyon - Total SA, Paris
 - Zorka Moscoq - Lukoil, Moscow
 - Altid Trigg - Statoil, Stavanger

Alphonse read over her shoulder. He said, “You will send this to me?”

“Sure,” Pia said.

Just beyond him, Pia saw an officer escorting a college boy in a tuxedo with an older woman on his arm. Their faces turned down, their posture weak and bent—the son and widow. She wanted to say something to them, do something that would make them feel better.

The officer escorting them broke off and walked over to her. He said something in French. She raised her brows and slowly shook her head. He said, “Madame Marot has requested you keep the meeting tomorrow.”

“I can do that.”

As he walked away, a frantic woman in an off-white sequined dress intercepted him. She gestured and pointed with outstretched arms, her body bent at the knees and waist, her neck strained. The officer shrugged and pointed to another officer. The frantic woman ran in that direction. He rejoined the bereaved and led them forward.

A loud shout caught Pia’s attention. Capitaine Villeneuve ran toward a knot of uniformed officers, yelling at them as she ran. Alphonse looked up from jotting on his pad, leaned an ear toward his Capitaine and stiffened. His eyes opened wide, and he shouted back to Villeneuve. He turned back to Pia. “My apologies. I must go. We finish your statement soon, oui?”

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“Sure.”

He sprinted toward the quai, where Capitaine Villeneuve had assembled three uniformed officers. She gestured in every direction. The group split up, running.

Jonelle turned to Marty. “You speak French—what was that about?”

“They said al-Jabal escaped.”

Pia said, “You mean the killer? How the hell did that happen?”