

**ELEMENT**

**42**

**SEELEY JAMES**

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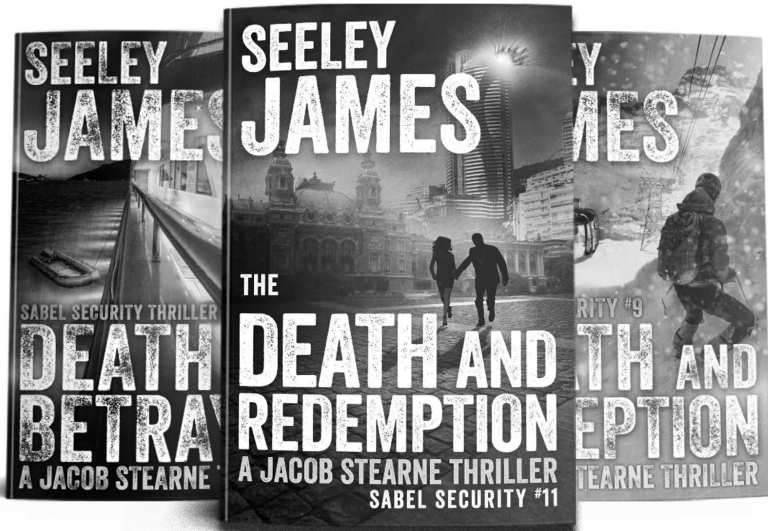
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# CHAPTER 1

THE VOICE IN MY HEAD returned when I stopped taking my meds. My caseworker said the voice was part of my condition—PTSD-induced schizophrenia—but I call him Mercury, the winged messenger of the gods, and a damn good friend. For years, he was my biggest ally in combat and helped me predict the future. I'm not talking about very far into the future. Sometimes minutes, sometimes seconds, and sometimes just enough to see it coming. Mercury would draw my attention to small changes in air density, the faint sounds of rustling cloth, or the weak electrical charge of someone lurking nearby.

He saved my ass more than once and, as is always the case with gods, there were those who believed and those who didn't. Believers fought and lived and died beside me without ever disrespecting Mercury. Non-believers sent me in for evaluations. My docs didn't believe in gods, they believed in meds. They told me they were smarter than my abandoned deity, so I took their advice until one day everything went wrong and good people died.

I was resting in a dark jungle when I reaffirmed my faith in that ancient divinity. Prama, the hotel owner, was drawing lazy circles on my chest with her finger when Mercury spoke to me in a voice loud and clear and slightly panicked.

Mercury said, *Dude, you better think about your future real fast cuz it's coming. Can you hear it?*

I raised my ear off the sweaty pillow and listened to the noises coming from a ways down the road. Tin doors squeaked open, truck springs creaked, boots hit the ground, voices issued commands. It wasn't hard to predict the future. Sixty seconds from now at the hotel up the lane, soldiers would throw doors open, drag sleepy eco-tourists from

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warm beds, shove them against the wall, push a photo in front of them, and bark in whatever tribal dialect they speak in that corner of Borneo, “Have you seen this American?”

They were searching for the perpetrator of something.

I hadn’t perpetrated anything, but I was pretty sure I knew who had.

Prama was about to speak when someone pounded on my door. Four thumps, all rapid and demanding. The way MP’s bang on doors. My heart stopped until I heard Agent Tania whisper-shout, “Jacob. Damn it. Wake up!”

That clinched it. I knew who the perpetrators were.

My eyes rolled to the ceiling and I thought about life and death and love. I’d thought I was dead twenty-three times and didn’t care much for the experience. I’d never been afraid of it. I’d killed all the people who tried to kill me. Plus a bunch more who were thinking about it. I didn’t want to check out on account of some hajji with an AK-47. But I thought I’d left all that behind.

My job at Sabel Security had become a matter of careening from one ill-conceived, spur-of-the-moment crusade to the next. Death had been more remote when I walked point in Kandahar. If all I cared about was life and death, the choice was obvious: re-enlist.

But then there was the love part.

“You gone answer door?” Prama said.

It was the love part that kept me on the job. I was in love with my boss, Pia Sabel. Tall and strong and built like a tiger. She was the kind of woman a man like me would die for.

Well. Theoretically.

Romance with her was so remote I may as well crush on a movie star. To her I was just one of the staff.

Tania pounded on the door again.

I extricated myself from under Prama’s naked body and savored the scent of the jungle motel’s ancient battle with mildew. A glance at the clock didn’t tell me much. 3? 4? I snapped on the light and blinked at the mirror until my reflection came into focus. I looked like hell.

I yanked the door open and Agent Tania, sleek and exotic, glared at me, her nostrils flaring.

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She was the real love in my life. I'd fallen in love with her when I'd pulled her from a burning Humvee in Nuristan Province. She refused to date me until after we'd both left the Army. It lasted fourteen glorious months. Then I blew it.

"I hope you're not paying for that." Tania pointed her nose past my shoulder.

"HEY!" Prama said.

"Wait, the hotel lady?" Tania half-asked. "Really. Never mind. Just MOVE."

"Yeah, I heard them down—"

Tania was already sprinting away. "Get the translator, we leave thirty seconds ago."

I kicked my t-shirt in the air, pulled my boxers up, and slipped into my shirt on its way down. Five seconds later, I had my trousers on and scooped a handful of ammo into my cargo pocket. I zipped my travel bag closed and kissed Prama on the lips while I pulled my Glock from under the pillow.

I said, "Happy birthday."

"Best birthday yet," Prama said. "Jacob Stearne come back next year?"

"Wouldn't miss it," I lied and bolted.

Tania tossed our duffels from the second-floor walkway into the alley below. Ms. Sabel, an Olympic athlete, caught them with ease and stuffed them into the back of our rented SUV.

Bujang, our translator—a pocket-sized Borneo local who was attending Georgetown when we hired him—looked a little stunned and sleepy when I dragged him out. He scratched his head and watched the women as if it were a tennis game. I picked him up and tossed him to Ms. Sabel. She broke his fall, landed him on his feet, and spun back so fast her ponytail hit him in the face.

The bang of an explosion echoed in the street, far side of the building. Tania and I vaulted the railing together. Ms. Sabel slipped into the driver's seat and racked the seat back. Tania lunged across Bujang. I took shotgun. Slingshotting our SUV through the mud, Ms. Sabel navigated the alley by moonlight before turning onto a jungle trail. Surrounded by dark



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green leaves and darker green shadows, the jungle was so thick that anything could lurk an arm's length from our shoulders.

We thudded through ruts and potholes, across a muddy rice paddy, and onto a cart path while tree branches slapped the truck like a drum roll. Finally she found an actual road, a single lane of soft mud. The back end slid wide when she made the turn and I shot Ms. Sabel a *slow down* glance that she ignored.

"This road goes to Bandar Udara Yuvai Semaring," Bujang said.

"Do they have an airport?" Ms. Sabel shouted over her shoulder.

"It's in Indonesia," he said.

"Shit." She slammed on the brakes, revved the engine, slipped the clutch, broke the back tires loose, and spun the truck around in the lane. Mud and bugs splattered in our open windows, bringing the smell of shredded leaves with them.

"What happened?" I said. "I thought we were here to donate a school."

"Later," Ms. Sabel and Tania said in unison.

I shot a glance at Bujang. He shrugged.

Apparently, whatever happened since Prama poured me that first drink involved Ms. Sabel pissing off two of the three countries claiming parts of Borneo. Maybe she'd offended all three, but I wasn't going to ask about Brunei.

"Where does this road go?" Ms. Sabel asked.

"Gunung," Bujang said. "It's a national park."

"Where'd we leave my jet?" she asked.

"Marudi, on the other side of the park."

"How far?"

"Four hours."

"It's only a hundred freaking miles to the coast," she said.

Bujang waved his hands at the dark, twisting road before us. "Four hours."

She took his estimate as a challenge and pushed the pedal down. I checked my seatbelt and gripped the A-pillar's grab handle. We slipped around corners, climbed up mountains, flew down slopes, bounced our butts through dips and bumps for over an hour before a hint of light

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began to creep through the murky, overcast sky.

“Bad news,” Ms. Sabel said with her eyes on the mirror. “Lights.”

I craned around to peer between the stacked duffels and caught a glimpse of cone-shaped lights moving through the trees in the dark valley below. Three vehicles by my count. They could carry four to six guys each, meaning twelve to eighteen hostiles.

Odds like those represented a serious tactical problem.

I signed onto this mission because it was supposed to be a Sabel Charities trip. A simple fly-in-fly-out deal where my only mission was to keep Ms. Sabel safe from over-enthusiastic admirers and the occasional kidnapper dumb enough to try something with the young billionaire. But once again, I’d underestimated how much trouble she could find in the middle of nowhere.

I glanced at her to gauge how deep a hole we were in. Her solid biceps, visible through her skintight Under Armour, flexed and strained through every shift. Her legs tensed and contracted as she worked the brakes and clutch. Her eyes, intent and determined, never lost their laser-focus on the curves ahead.

Mercury said, *I don’t know what she did in the Kayan village last night, bro, but these guys want your heads.*

# CHAPTER 2

THE FAINT LIGHT OF SUNRISE began to color the east, turning shadows into recognizable bits of jungle. Ms. Sabel slowed, her gaze fixed on a figure on the edge of the road. Ahead of us on the right, a girl carried a small body. Feet dangled on her left, a head and arms dangled on her right, everything unnaturally limp.

Ms. Sabel slammed on the brakes. We slid twenty yards past the girl and came to a stop. Before I could figure out what was going on, Ms. Sabel was out of the truck, running toward the girl.

She was losing focus on our hastily revised mission to get out of the country alive.

I said, “We don’t have time for this.”

“Don’t I know it.” Tania hopped out. “But it’s quicker to help than argue.”

With no other choice, I followed them. Bujang pressed his face to the glass.

The girl kept staggering toward us. In her arms was a string bean of a boy with long, scrawny arms and legs. His eyes were crusted shut and his mouth hung open. The girl kept walking, her face streaked with tears, and her eyes fixed on the distance ahead.

Ms. Sabel stepped into her path and held her arms out, a passive offer to help, but the girl didn’t slow or change direction.

“What’s wrong?” Ms. Sabel asked as she walked sideways with the girl.

Over six feet with sandy hair, Ms. Sabel was an unusual sight in Southeast Asia. The girl gawked as if a mythical giant had spoken.

I waved Bujang over. At the same time, I caught a whiff of an odd scent. I sniffed again and traced it to the boy. He had a strange acidic

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smell, like burnt vinegar.

“He’s sick.” Ms. Sabel said. “I can help.”

Bujang spoke in Malayo, his gaze darting to the road behind us. When the girl realized we were trying to help, her eyes fluttered and closed. Relieved and exhausted, her knees buckled. Tania steadied her and Ms. Sabel slipped the boy from her arms.

“He’s hot,” she said, looking at me. “Really hot.”

Not my area of expertise. I knew nothing about kids and less about sick ones. I shrugged.

Tania huffed and ran to the SUV to rummage through the back.

The girl spewed her language in a frantic voice with pleading eyes. Her voice broke up and she blubbered through a phrase that she kept repeating. Ms. Sabel and I shared a glance. We didn’t need Bujang to tell us the boy was dying.

“Uh, her name’s Kaya,” Bujang said, trying to keep up with the girl’s words. “Lost her grandmother two days ago. Grandfather too. Mother went for help yesterday but never came back. Her brother came down with it this morning.”

“Came down with what?” Ms. Sabel asked.

“I don’t know. She’s Melanau, a small tribe, hard to understand.”

Tania returned with a couple of wet bandanas. They wiped the boy’s skin.

“Where was she taking him?” Ms. Sabel asked.

“A clinic over the ridge.”

“Let’s go.”

“Wait a minute.” I held up my hands. “We have a ten-minute lead on—”

“Let’s go.” Ms. Sabel’s gray-green eyes stabbed through me, leaving no doubt who was in charge.

I drove while the women sat in back with the boy stretched across their knees.

Ms. Sabel and Tania made soothing sounds and reassured the kids, but I could sense the boy shiver and shake and gasp.

I stepped on the gas and charged up the hill. Bujang pointed to a break in the sinister depths of the jungle where two tire tracks

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disappeared into the bush. The trail was so tight that bugs jumped in our windows.

When we had a straight stretch, I took a look in the back. Ms. Sabel stroked the boy's forehead with the wet cloth and dragged her hand down his brown face. The burnt vinegar smell grew stronger. She wiped the gunk out of his eyes, tugged at the crusty bits, and dabbed at the corners. His eyelids fluttered, then opened.

They were blue.

Not the iris but the sclera. The part of his eye that should be white was robin's-egg blue.

I turned back to the road and blinked.

In another two hundred yards, the track opened into a clearing where two small trucks and a shiny minivan were parked on the left. A giant awning covered half an acre of folding cots.

Two musclemen in black, semi-official looking uniforms, with holstered guns on their hips, watched us from under the awning. They weren't Americans or Europeans, but they weren't Malaysian either. More men in black hovered behind trees in the jungle, just shadows in the dismal tangle of leaves. Off to one side stood several expedition tents. A short man in a lab coat poked his head out, then stumbled forward with a woman and another man in black right behind him.

The woman, a dumpy, home-dyed blonde in white shorts and a Lakers t-shirt, ran toward us waving her arms. "Go away. Go away. Quarantine. You have to leave."

Ms. Sabel, out of the car with the boy, headed straight for the woman. "He's sick. We need a doctor."

A man in black shoved the lab-coat guy. Lab-coat said, "I'm Doctor Chapman, what can I—"

"We don't know what's going on," the Lakers lady said. "There's been some kind of outbreak around here. You have to leave."

Ms. Sabel marched between them, headed for the cots. Chapman and the Lakers lady glanced at each other. Tania and I started to follow Ms. Sabel when Lakers lady pulled my shirtsleeve. I gave her my soldier look—*let go or die*. Her lips flopped as if she were going to say something but changed her mind. Her eyes dropped and so did her hand.

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One of the men in black tried to bump shoulders to slow me down. The guy smelled like a wet dog. With a quick twist, I avoided him and pushed on.

We reached the awning with the doc and his lovely assistant in hot pursuit. The place smelled of mud and jungle when we got out of the car, but under the awning it was all burnt vinegar. More than thirty cots were neatly arrayed in rows. Most had old people in them, but only a few were young like the boy. A growing sense of horror gripped me. I'd been in a few triage clinics on battlefields, but nothing like this. Judging by the stiff and uncomfortable postures, half the patients were dead and the other half were dying.

Mercury said, *Ebola. Let's go.*

I said, *It's not Ebola.*

Mercury said, *What, so you're a doctor now?*

*No puking or diarrhea.*

Mercury said, *Could be Ebola.*

Something tugged at the back of my brain, a subliminal observation not yet fully formed. I looked and listened. Green canvas flapped above us in a slow breeze, bugs and birds chirped and droned in the jungle, and some lone animal gave a dismal cry that echoed through the trees. None of the men in black were talking.

The cots had letters and numbers on them, lettered columns and numbered rows like a spreadsheet. At various intervals there were low tables with racks of vials and syringes and other doctor-looking things on them. Beyond the awning, a path ran into the jungle.

"These are very serious cases," Dr. Chapman said.

Ms. Sabel pushed the boy's limp body into Chapman's chest. "Do they all have blue eyes?"

Chapman squinted up at Ms. Sabel. He hesitated, took another look at her, then examined the boy. Ms. Sabel shifted the boy's weight and pulled his eyelids open with her free hand.

Dr. Chapman gasped.

"Put him down, um..." Chapman looked around for an empty cot, eyed one, and pointed. "Over here. Put him here."

They huddled around the cot and I backed away. Next to me, an old

man's hand flopped out from under a sheet and made a weak grab at my leg. His eyes were blue and lined with crusty gunk. The skin around his mouth and nose was gray and dirty under four-day stubble. He shivered as if suddenly freezing and opened his mouth. He mumbled words. Bujang stood behind me, stunned and scared.

"What did he say?" I asked.

"Bad cloth." Bujang shrugged. His eyes darted around the area, doing his best to avoid eye contact with the men in black.

Mercury said, *Yo homie! Do you feel the tension in the air? Do you feel the bullets in your future? Seven minutes until you become Jacob 'Swiss Cheese' Stearne.*

Tania tugged my shirt. "We've got to get out of here. Those guys were right behind us. You need to get Pia moving."

"Me?" I asked but she didn't answer. "Going to tell me who we're running from?"

"Local militia. We need to move."

"You notice anything wrong with this place?"

"Yeah, we're in it. We should be on the road to Marudi."

"No. I mean, something's off." I scanned the area again and crossed to one of the cots with equipment on it. There was a rack filled with vials of what I guessed was blood.

A few yards away, Ms. Sabel raised her voice. "Then what the hell is it, Ebola?"

Chapman said, "No. I don't think so. I mean, no, it couldn't be."

"Then what?"

"I'm not sure. I need time to ... um."

"Where are your diagnostics?" She scanned the cots.

I picked up a vial of blood for a closer look. Next to them was a paper pad with numbers all over it that matched the cot numbers.

"Don't be touching that stuff, moron," Tania said. "Don't you know what contagious means? Get Pia, we need to go."

Without looking, I could sense Bujang vigorously nodding his agreement. I grabbed a dirty gray cloth, wrapped up three vials, and stuffed them in my cargo pocket. I planned to confront our reluctant Doc Chapman with them. As I passed the old man again, I stopped. I'd seen

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enough dead men to know one at a glance.

Gruff, guttural noises drew my attention back to Ms. Sabel and Chapman. Two of the men in black were pointing guns at Ms. Sabel. Tania and I drew our weapons and fanned out. Tania had the guy on the left while I took the guy on the right, but an unknown number of men still lurked in the shadows. At the current rate of escalation, our chances for leaving alive were rapidly diving to zero. I gave Ms. Sabel the universal signal for retreat: wide eyes and a nod toward the truck.

Chapman turned to the guy I pegged as the leader and put his hands out, a feeble gesture to stand down.

The guy in black pushed him aside and spoke in a language I didn't understand. Then he pushed Ms. Sabel.

Chapman stepped between them. "It's OK. Everything's OK now."

"I asked what's going on here." Ms. Sabel's voice echoed in the clearing. "And I'm not leaving until—"

"You better leave," Lakers lady said. "These guys don't value life like we do."

Ms. Sabel turned away, leaving Chapman, Kaya, and her brother behind.

The two men followed close behind Ms. Sabel, their pistols locked on her. One guy sent a warning shot into the dirt near Tania's feet and she replied with a dart that grazed his ear. He lifted his weapon and put his hands up with a mocking grin. Three more men stepped out of the shadows, ready to kill.

Mercury said, *Dude, what did you notice about that guy?*

I checked out the leader. I said, *He has a scar where his eyebrow should be.*

Mercury said, *He's seen some shit, you feel me?*

Ms. Sabel brushed past me, making a beeline for the truck. Tania and Bujang ran ahead and jumped in. I held the gunmen at bay while walking backward.

My boss opened the driver's door, put one foot in, and glared back over the hood at Chapman. "I'll be back with the authorities, Chapman."

I still had one foot on the ground when she floored it. Mud spewed on my arm and leg before I could get all the way in.