

**DEATH
AND
DARK MONEY**

SEELEY JAMES

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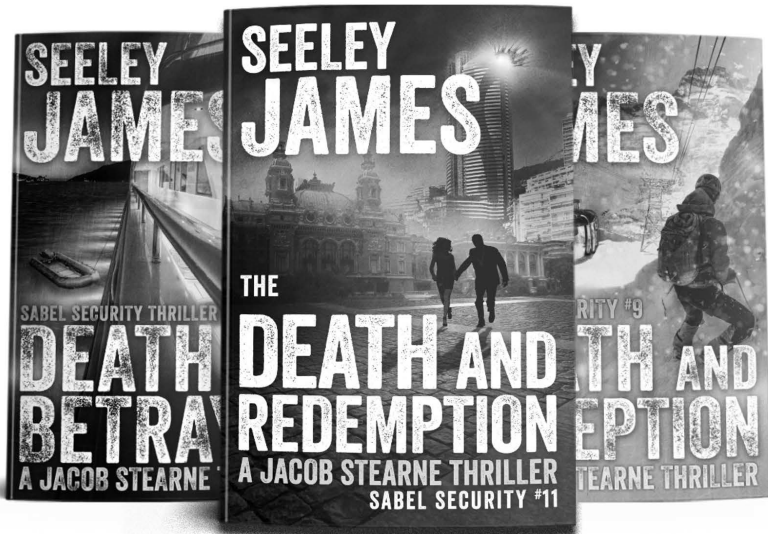
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FOR MOTHER
1924-2074

CHAPTER 1

BRENT ZOLA WAITED in a Washington DC diner on a frozen January evening, surrounded by the greasy smell of fries and the sharp clatter of dishes, unaware he was witnessing his best friend's last hour of life.

Through a crusty, frosted window, he watched David Gottlieb skitter on the salted sidewalk into a cone of light across the intersection. His short, plump friend stepped into the crosswalk and landed on his butt in the middle of the street.

Zola snickered and sipped his coffee.

A stranger gave Gottlieb a hand up and put him back on his feet. Gottlieb dusted off his top coat, doubled his caution, and tiptoed the remaining distance to the diner door. Inside, he pulled off his leather gloves, slipped off his porkpie hat, and scanned the interior.

Zola waved him over.

Gottlieb made his way through the packed space to the corner booth. He hung his coat on the hook, tossed his hat and laptop bag ahead of him, and slid across the vinyl opposite Zola.

Zola grinned and leaned back, spanning his arms over his side of the booth. "Ask me how it went."

Gottlieb, looking pale and sickly, thumbed the menu to soups and grunted his reluctant interest.

"We were jamming with the Three Blondes." Zola waited for a certain amount of adoration that didn't come. "Like they were waiting for us, man."

"Who?"

"The Three Blondes. Reporters from *Hummingbird Online*, *FNC*, and the *New York Chronicle*. Between the three of them, they own political coverage." Zola leaned forward, incredulous. "*The Three Blondes*,

SEELEY JAMES

dude.”

Gottlieb looked up at the waitress as she twisted her way between patrons. “Chowder and a pilsner.”

“Caesar with avocado, and another pilsner,” Zola said.

She nodded without a word, grabbed the menus, stuck them between the napkin dispenser and the ketchup, and twisted back again.

“You’re not impressed?” Zola asked.

“The last thing you want is press.” Gottlieb blew out a breath like a tired old man.

“They were there to intercept Koven. They’re trippin’ on the firm. They know we’re changing the political process.” Zola leaned across the table to play-punch Gottlieb’s shoulder. “It’s like a sign, bro! They know we’re ascending. They said Koven is the man of the year.”

“They spoke to you?”

“Straight up.” Zola leaned back again with an expansive grin. “They said Koven is the king of kingmakers.”

“Duncan is the senior partner.”

“Think about it,” Zola said. “Duncan is old school, Koven is new gen. And the Three Blondes know he’s going to the top. We’re his guys, David. We’re going with him. Remember that promise Koven made us? He took you, me, and Rip from the back alleys of Baghdad to the top floor of K Street—just like he said he would.”

“What made them notice Koven? This town’s loaded with lobbyists.”

“We won two more accounts today—and we’re going to move Sabel from Duncan to our side of the house.”

“Moving Sabel is a bad idea.”

“Oh, dude.” Zola shook his head. “You’re so negative. What’s up with that? Alan Sabel RSVP’d to the symposium. He’s practically in our hands.”

Gottlieb studied the laminated tabletop and swept some crumbs to the floor with the edge of his hand. “Alan Sabel doesn’t own the company.”

“What are you smokin’ these days, crack or meth? C’mon, man. I said Alan Sabel will be chilling at the Future Crossroads Symposium. At the Château Malbrouck. In France. This week.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Gottlieb sank his head in his hands. “She’ll never

DEATH AND DARK MONEY

go along with this.”

“She?” Zola laughed with his mouth wide open, tossing back his thick, sandy hair. “Do your homework, buddy. Alan Sabel, CEO of Sabel Industries, will hang with us. Plus, we already have the Omani contract—”

“Sabel Industries is a holding company. All shares are held by Sabel Trust 301.” Gottlieb pulled a folder out of his laptop bag and tossed it on the table. “Do *your* homework.”

Zola frowned and picked up the folder. He flipped through a few pages and stopped on one with a sticky flag attached. After reading and re-reading it, he whistled. “When will she turn twenty-six?”

“Three weeks ago.”

“Holy shit. Why didn’t you text me?”

“I just came from the trust attorney’s office.” Gottlieb locked eyes with Zola. “Brent, we are *so* screwed. If she figures out why—”

“Relax, bro. Everything we do is legal. *Citizens United* is the law of the land.”

“Should it be?”

“We’re just doing what the court approved.” Zola adjusted the ketchup rack and smoothed his tie.

Gottlieb clenched his fists and leaned forward. “The Supreme Court did *not* approve what we’re doing and you damn well know it.”

“They approved it. Maybe not intentionally, but same difference.” Zola calmed himself, then spread his hands wide across the table, palms up. “OK. Chill. We’ve hashed this out too many times. I know that’s how you see it, but...”

Sleet pelted the window, drawing their attention for a moment. The waitress slapped their dishes on the table and dropped bent steel utensils wrapped in thin paper napkins. She turned and walked away.

“That’s how anyone who follows the money will see it,” Gottlieb said. “And believe me, when she finds the \$20 million, she *will* follow the money.”

“C’mon.” Zola took a bite of salad and spoke with his mouth half full. “She’s just an athlete and—according to you—a multi-billionaire. How would she even notice a hundred million contract, much less \$20 million

SEELEY JAMES

in icing?”

“She doesn’t need our deal.” Gottleib pushed his chowder away and tossed his napkin on the table. For a moment, he watched the sleet pepper the glass. “So what did the ‘Three Blondes’ tell you?” He made air quotes with his fingers. “Or did they just pump you for information?”

Zola’s grin reappeared. “It was unreal. Like a dream. There they were, in the flesh, wearing party dresses and drinking Manhattans.” He laughed. “It’s like they bugged our meetings, dude. They’re clairvoyant or something. They knew we landed the new deals before the ink was dry. Awesome.”

“You’re celebrity-drunk.”

“They called him, ‘King of Kingmakers’.” Zola closed his eyes, remembering the moment, then looked at Gottleib. “They knew we’d been promoted to junior partners. And they said my son would be running the firm someday. Can you imagine? Duncan, Hyde, and Zola?”

Gottleib scowled. “He’s fifteen and lives with his mother in California. You haven’t seen him in a year.”

“Ouch.” Zola crunched more of his salad.

Gottleib exhaled. “What else did they tell you?”

“That’s it. We danced with them on the Ritz’s fogged-up dance floor. When we came back with more drinks—poof—they ghosted on us.”

“Did you make any deals with them?”

Zola’s face pinched. “Of course not. We’re not going to do anything crazy just to get on TV.”

Gottleib stared at Zola with his mouth drawn tight.

“Calm down,” Zola said. “They can’t make us commit felonies.”

“We already have.”

“You’ve got them all wrong.” Zola’s eyes opened wide. “They’re sucking up to Koven because he has \$100 million set aside for Super PACs. And Super PACs control the elections.”

“Do they know about the sources, Brent?” Gottleib balled up his fists. “Remember why we joined the Marines? Why we went to law school? We wanted to make a difference.”

“Take it easy, David.” Zola struggled for words. “We don’t make the rules, we use them.”

DEATH AND DARK MONEY

Gottlieb frowned.

“If we don’t control the candidates, someone else will.” Zola spread his hands wide again. “You and I can keep tabs on these guys. We can drive this country.”

“Not me.” Gottlieb sighed. “I texted in my resignation. I’m done.”

Zola’s mouth fell open. “We’re partners. We’ve been through some serious shit.”

“Not anymore.”

“That’s crazy. Do you even have a job lined up?” Zola watched his friend gravely shake his head. “Then, what’re you going to do?”

“Remember Jacob Stearne?”

“Everyone in the 3/2 remembers that whacko. Is he still alive? What’s he doing now?”

“Works for Sabel Security. He can save us.”

Zola grabbed his wrist. “You’re not going to do anything stupid, are you?”

Gottlieb gripped his beer so hard his knuckles turned white.

Zola let go.

After a long moment, Gottlieb pushed the beer away. He put his hat on and started to say something, then bit back his words. He scooted out of the booth, pulled his heavy coat off the hook, grabbed his laptop case, gave Zola a curt nod, and wound his way through the tangle of diners to the exit.

CHAPTER 2

SIXTEEN MINUTES BEFORE David Gottlieb died, I was alarmed that a nearly-naked black man leaned against my refrigerator with a casual grin. It wasn't because he was tall with supernaturally chiseled muscles. Nor was it the lone fig leaf he sported over his substantial manhood. It wasn't the leather sandals or the bronze helmet with small bronze wings either. What alarmed me was that I could see him at all.

No one can see a god.

At least, no one with a shred of sanity left.

The baking sheet in my hand fell to the stove top.

I closed my eyes and wished he would go away.

Behind me, Bianca kept talking. "So, I appreciate that you invited me over for dinner, Jacob. I'm flattered, actually. Um. But there's something I think we should discuss before you open that bottle of wine. You know what I mean? Like. We should have a clear understanding of... expectations. You know? Right? Jacob?"

I couldn't take my eyes off him. He looked like Will Smith from his Fresh Prince days. My brain dialed up an instant replay of my last session with my psychiatrist. He told me, "Remember, you're only in trouble if you hear more than two voices talking at the same time or if you see someone who's not there. Either of those things happens, restart your medication and call me right away."

"Jacob?" Bianca's voice drifted to my ears from a million miles away even though she was sitting at my in-kitchen table. "Are you OK?"

Mercury said, *Bro, if you're planning on hitting that tonight, you should talk to her. Never ignore a woman. Besides, she's got something important to tell you.*

I said, *You're black.*

SEELEY JAMES

Mercury said, *Duh.*

Bianca said, “Jacob? Are you spacing out on me?”

I craned over my shoulder to look at her. Bianca Dominguez defined gorgeous. Like most women at Sabel Security, she took her fashion tips from the boss in the form of a burgundy pullover with a Vinyasa scarf artfully draped around her neck. Washington’s most beautiful Latina was the focus of my renewed search for a soul mate and life partner. Her long, black hair curled around her perfect face, swooped down her strong shoulders, and rested on her small, perfect boobs. Her athletic legs were minimally obscured by her multi-colored yoga pants but remained eternally visible in my imagination.

I said, “Uh, yeah. I’m trying to remember the recipe.”

“Don’t you just put them in the oven?” she asked.

“Sometimes.” I looked at the baking sheet with four homemade brioche buns on it. “Um. I meant the main course.”

I brushed imaginary crumbs from my Henley and opened the preheated oven. I placed the buns on the rack and closed the door and stole one more look at Mercury, the winged messenger of the Roman gods.

Mercury said, *What’s the matter, bru-THA? You worried about something?*

I said, *Mercury was Roman, not African.*

Mercury said, *Oh, that is so racist. With a capital R, dude. I can’t believe that a man, even a man of your limited intellect, would stoop so low. Well get this, homie: the Creator made man in His image. And the first human beings evolved in what part of the world? That’s right, the Rift Valley. On what continent do we find the Rift Valley? That’s right, A-F-R-I-C-A. Which means, Adam and Eve were what? That’s right—*

I said, *But the paintings and statues—*

Mercury said, *Were made by Romans, dawg. Guess what kind of revisionist crap they threw down. But, I don’t mind ’cause I’m bigger than that. Oh, but you should hear Jesus going on about his portraits. Is there even one painting of a short Jew, plump with curly black hair and a bald spot? Not.*

Bianca said, “Were you smoking dope before I came over?”

DEATH AND DARK MONEY

Facing her, I smiled. “Sorry, babe. You were saying?”

She crossed her arms and leaned back in the chair. “Now that we work together, I thought we should have a clear understanding of, uh.” She forced a smile.

“Sure, sure, babe. Working and dating can be awkward if not handled by mature adults, but I think we’re both qualified to handle it. Whatever it might be.”

She squirmed in her chair and leaned her forearms on the table. Her necklace swung free, reflecting golden sparkles on her soft brown cheeks.

Adorable.

“Well, that’s the question, isn’t it?” she asked. “Whatever it might be might not be what you expect it to be.”

I opened the refrigerator door in the face of my ancient deity and retrieved the salads for our first course. A dressing of extra-virgin olive oil, lemon juice, and Maldon salt sprinkled over hand-trimmed snap peas mixed with a pinch of mint on a bed of delicate arugula. Placing the dishes on the table, I grabbed my lighter and lit all five candles in one fluid motion.

Her hands fell in her lap, her back straightened.

“Wow,” she said. “You put a lot of effort into this.”

“Oh, not really. Hand trimming peas and cleaning hothouse lettuce only takes an hour.” I sat, pulled my napkin from the ring, and put it in my lap. “Most of my day went into the main course.”

Impressing the ladies played a big role in my decision to attend the Culinary Institute after leaving the Army. My dream of becoming a world-class chef had gone on hold while I sorted out Ms. Sabel’s security, but I could still whip up a dish or two for a special occasion.

“You shouldn’t have gone to all this trouble.” She picked up the wrong fork and speared a pea pod.

I watched her lips close around her first bite. Her eyelids dropped, she inhaled, and her face froze mid-chew.

Why do I love to cook? That perfect moment when you know the meal won her over.

Bianca Dominguez was mine. I could see her in a bridal gown,

SEELEY JAMES

flowing up the aisle to me. The deal would be sealed in a few moments, when I brought out the lobster tacos. I'd spent all afternoon mincing fresh lobster with parsley, tarragon, chervil, and hand-picked black peppercorns which I then stuffed into the most delicate handmade taco shells. She would experience multiple culinary orgasms.

"Mmm." She finished her bite. "But, still, we need to discuss—"

Mercury said, *Are your ears are open, dude? Do you hear what's going down at the back of your crib?*

Through battle after battle, Mercury had warned me about my future. He told me who was coming for me and where to aim, even in the dark. He told me when I could rest my war-torn soul. He made my ammo last longer than everyone else's. He guided me along the paths where others fell to their deaths. He calmed me when the absurdity of war and the certainty of death closed in around me and shut out the light of day. He saved my life, time after time.

But I never pictured him naked—or black.

Not that I had anything against black gods, they just didn't dominate my religious experience.

Huh. I guess that says something.

Mercury said, *Are you listening to me?*

I said, *Could you put some clothes on?*

Mercury flapped his fig leaf in my face. *What's the matter, homeboy? Feelin' some homo-tingles? Can't think about Bianca when you have a god to worship?*

I said, *Knock it off.*

Mercury said, *Oh, don't worry, homophobe. I'm not Greek. Bacchus is always surprised by whom he finds in his bed, but the rest of us are pretty sure about our sexuality.*

I said, *I do not want to hear about your sex life. What did you say about something going down out back?*

A strange scratching sound came from the back bedroom. It sounded like glass cracking.

My puppy Anoshni barked up a storm. I tossed him a treat and hushed him.

"Jacob?" Bianca snapped her fingers. "Did you hear me?"

DEATH AND DARK MONEY

“Sorry, I thought I heard something in the other room.” I pushed back from the table and rose.

“But you get that, right?” she asked.

It was the quiver in her voice that stopped me in my tracks.

I dropped my napkin on the table and cocked my ear to the back room. “Sure. Um. Get what?”

“I’m so glad to hear you say that. You’re cool with it, then? We’re good? No hard feelings?”

I looked down at her. “No hard feelings ... what?”

“Jesus, did you hear anything I said at all?”

My mind raced through the possible directions the conversation might have gone while I dealt with my derelict god and his disturbing sense of humor. “You don’t want anyone at work to know we’re dating. I’m cool with that.”

“Sit down and look at me.”

Torn between investigating the noise and my future bride, I retook my seat. She reached her hands across the table. I took them in mine. I looked into her eyes. She was beyond gorgeous. She was the one. I’d never been so sure of anything before in my life.

“We had sex once, but that doesn’t mean...” She stopped talking.

So that’s where this was going. “No problem, I understand. You want to take it slow—”

She pulled her hands away and threw her napkin on the table. “Damn it, Jacob. What part of *lesbian* don’t you understand?”

Another noise came from the back room. I glanced at the hallway where Mercury stood in a short, white toga with only one shoulder exposed. Male strippers would blush. It was a modest improvement to be sure, but I appreciated the gesture anyway. He shrugged.

Bianca’s words pulled my attention back to her. “Lesbian? No way! We had sex.”

Suddenly, serving lobster tacos seemed like a bad joke.

“Yeah,” she said, “that was wrong of me. I’m not proud of that.”

“But. You had a great time—I thought. Oh no. Did you fake it? That’s so wrong.”

She blushed. “The only thing I faked was the intensity. You were OK

SEELEY JAMES

as long as I thought about someone else. But you heard me, you know why I did it. Do you forgive me?"

Mercury laughed like a maniac. *Well, lover boy? Did you hear? I don't think you did.*

I said, *Help me out here. What did she say?*

Mercury said, *She only slept with you to get to Pia Sabel. She thought all female athletes were gay. Her plan almost worked except for that one little problem—Pia isn't gay. And now that Bianca's working for Sabel Security, she doesn't want her new boss to get creeped out. She wants you to be her beard. And that means the "Stearne-Dominguez" wedding just went out the window—unless she marries your sister.*

Mercury howled.

My heart broke in half and fell over. I was crushed and speechless. She used me. Despicable.

I have never used someone in that way.

Probably.

The distinct sound of breaking wood came from the back room.

I bolted down the hall and threw open the door to my home office. I flipped on the lights. One drawer in my wall-sized gun cabinet stood open, the lock pried out with a crowbar. My rare 1972 Walther PP Ultra was missing along with a magazine and a box of the equally rare 9x18mm Ultra bullets. A framed set of replica guns was missing from the wall as well.

Anoshni followed me in and started barking. I leaned down and scratched his ear. He cocked his head and watched me.

An icy breeze came from the window. The glass was missing.

Mercury said, *Get out front, you've got company coming in.*

I said, *Who took my Walther?*

Mercury said, *Get out front, something important is going down.*

I pushed past Bianca and ran down the hallway.

A car's headlights swung into my driveway. The engine cut off. The car door opened at the same time I opened my front door.

BANG.

A silhouette near the driver's door grabbed his chest and dropped to his knees.

DEATH AND DARK MONEY

The distinct pop of a Walther PP Ultra reverberated in my tight Maryland suburb. I dropped to the ground and rolled behind an elm tree, reaching for a weapon I'd left inside.

Behind me, Bianca switched off the lights and took cover in my living room. She peered around the jamb with my puppy under her arm, breathing hard.

"Where is he?" she asked, referring to the shooter.

"Left, in the street, I think," I whisper-shouted. "Grab my pistol on the kitchen counter."

She scrambled around inside the house, came back, and whistled. I crouch-ran to the front door, grabbed it from her, and pointed it in every direction. I found nothing. I stepped closer to the street, aiming at anything that moved.

Nothing moved.

Bianca called 9-1-1.

Mercury said, *Now's the time for gallantry, bro. Step out there and see if he takes a shot at you.*

Even though it was a dangerous and stupid idea, I stepped into the street, tracking down the narrow, tree lined lane. My heart beat zoomed up to top speed, filled with adrenaline and ready for battle like a race car on nitro. A shadow flickered between trees, eight houses down, running away. Beyond my field of vision, a car door slammed, an engine started up, headlights snapped on aiming away from me. The killer pulled out and drove away.

I stuck my weapon in my belt and ran up my driveway.

A body lay crumpled against the front tire of a new Audi, breathing in wet, ragged gasps.

Kneeling in front of him, I grabbed his wrist and felt a weak pulse. I knocked his porkpie hat off and felt his clammy forehead. His life spilled out of a two-inch chest wound and flowed down his top coat. He had ten minutes to live, tops. "Hey, buddy, you're going to be OK. Hang in there, ambulance is on the way."

Bianca slid to her knees next to me. "Who is he?"

"No idea." I whipped off my shirt and held it to his chest. The winter air stung my skin and sleet strafed my back.

SEELEY JAMES

Anoshni crept up and sniffed at the blood. I stared him down. “Don’t you dare.”

The pup gave me an innocent head-tilt.

The dying man grabbed my neck and tugged me in close. “Jacob?”

“Save your strength, pal. We’re going to get you to the hospital.”

“Remember me? David Gottleib, 3rd Battalion, 2nd Marines, the 3/2, Glory Platoon.” He coughed up a chunk of blood and spat it. “Nasiriyah. You saved us.”

“Sorry, friend, you’ve confused me with someone else. I was a Ranger, not a Marine.”

He fumbled for something in his pocket. Under the heavy coat, he wore an expensive suit with a starched shirt and sleek tie. After a few seconds, he pulled out a bloody .50 BMG cartridge, a bullet from an M2 machine gun, and pushed it in my face.

“You gave us these.” He gasped. “To remember you.”

Something rang familiar about handing out bullets. The Battle of Nasiriyah was a hazy memory over a decade old and shrouded in fear and confusion. But the bullet dragged fragments out of my past into the present. I was nineteen and fresh out of Ranger School. I’d been awake for three days and lived through four nasty firefights. My Humvee took an RPG that killed my sergeant. Dazed, I ran through narrow lanes trying to find a friendly face who could point me back to my company.

Instead I ran into a squad of Saddam’s Republican Guard on a cigarette break. They were as shocked as I. We stared at each other, eight of them and one of me, for an eternity lasting two whole seconds. Before they could level a rifle, I took off through alleys and backyards faster than I’d ever run before. I stumbled into a Marine platoon. I thought I was saved—but they had it worse, pinned down on all sides and taking casualties.

“I modified it for you,” Gottleib said and pushed the bloody bullet against my cheek. He coughed with less strength. Bloody bubbles formed on his lips.

“Take it. Keep it.” He tried to breathe but couldn’t get much air. “Important.”

I knew what the bloody bubbles meant: his lungs were filling with

DEATH AND DARK MONEY

blood. Internal bleeding or a collapsed lung or something else beyond my limited medical knowledge. I revised my estimate of Mr. Gottlieb's lifespan to a few seconds.

"You saved the Glory Platoon. Now you have to save..." His eyes opened wide, he gripped my shoulder.

His first death throe.

I'd seen too many of those.

"Just relax, they'll be here any minute."

"No. Listen." He wheezed more blood, breathing shallow and short. "You have to stop them. Save the country. You..."

He spasmed again, the pain wracking his body like an electric shock. His fingers dug into my shoulder, then relaxed.

David Gottlieb slumped and exhaled his last.