

**DEATH
AND THE
DAMNED**

SEELEY JAMES

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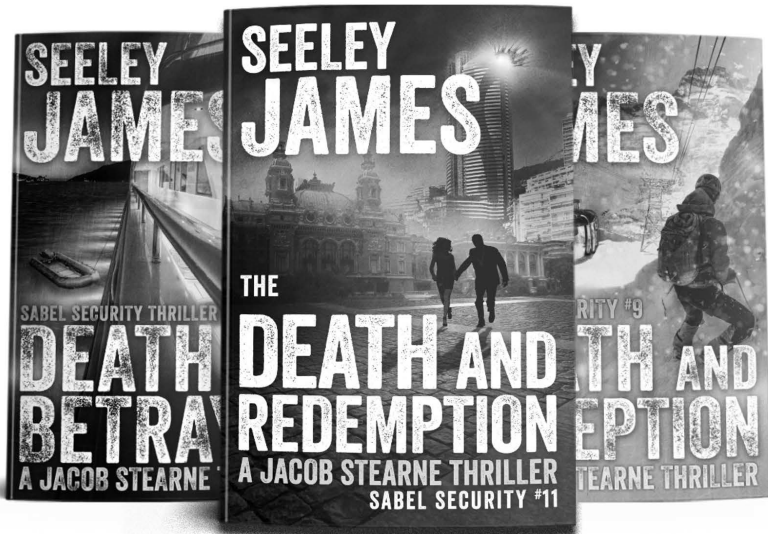
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FOR NANA

CHAPTER 1

WHO TO TRUST IS THE SCARIEST decision we make in life. I grabbed him by the hair, pulled his head back, and, cheek-to-cheek, we contemplated the sparkling stars dotting the moonless Syrian sky. I sensed his eyeballs strain all the way to the right to look at me. His fingernails dug into my forearm. Anxiety caused him to miss the grandeur of the moment. Too bad. It was stunningly beautiful. You don't see that many stars from over-lit American cities. But I tired of our two-second relationship and drew my blade across his throat, severing his carotid artery and larynx before he could scream a warning to the others. I dropped his carcass on the other jihadi at my feet. He trusted me because I speak Arabic. Bad idea.

I stared at the dead fighters and thought about how ISIL's perversion of Islam wasted so many lives.

But then, I'm hardly the guy to judge other people's religious beliefs.

Mercury, winged messenger of the Roman gods, waved to me from the narrow, dusty village lane. *Earth to Jacob. Ain't the time for contemplative yoga, dawg. That monster raped three women yesterday. C'mon now. Get your head in the game. You need to find that cowboy.*

After a decade guiding me through battles as a disembodied voice in my head, Mercury decided to make himself manifest. Some people would consider meeting god in person as a divine miracle. Others would encourage me to go back on my meds. Maybe I had taken a swan dive off the sanity cliff, but when I ponder how lucky I am to have god on my side—even if he's been surviving on unemployment benefits since the late fourth century—I count my blessings. And when he tells me to keep my eyes open for a cowboy in an ISIL-held Syrian town, I listen.

I clicked my comm link open and queried my mission teammates,

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scattered around the houses we were about to invade. “Anyone see a cowboy?”

Dhanpal, mission leader and former Navy SEAL, responded first. “Had him in my scope for a second. He ran into target house B.”

Miguel, best friend from our years in the 75th Rangers, said, “No cowboys on this side. Ready to take target house A.”

Tania, former girlfriend, former MP, and mission sniper on a roof two hundred yards away, said, “Cowboy moved from B to A; did not look like a hostage. Did not look hostile.”

Fawaz, former FBI SWAT team leader, said, “Ready on target house A. I have visual confirmation on six hostages in the basement.”

“Go on target house A.” Dhanpal’s order was the last word spoken.

Miguel blew the door open with C4. I rolled in and fired on two soldiers. One dropped, the other groaned. The survivor’s eyes flashed, his life still fired by the amphetamines coursing through his veins. He raised his weapon. Dhanpal barreled in the back door and finished off the wounded man. Fawaz ran straight to the basement. Miguel watched the street.

Breaching charges are not stealthy tools. You lose the element of surprise the instant you blow up stuff. Your life expectancy begins to dwindle with each passing nanosecond as your operation transitions from covert to overt. Waiting for Fawaz to make sure the hostages in the basement were indeed the Yazidi women we came to liberate was like waiting for a bomb to go off. My spinal cord itched.

“Movement on rooftop B,” Tania reported over the comm link. We heard her rifle pop twice. “Two down.”

A board creaked over my head.

Dhanpal pointed up and moved to cover the ladder to the rooftop.

Desert architecture requires a habitable sleeping area when the interior becomes too hot in the summer. Tania killed the man on guard up there before we moved in, but our cowboy was still a phantom.

Mercury pointed to the ceiling. *Shoot right there and you’ll nail him.*

I fired.

A man’s voice howled in pain. He gasp-shouted, “American! American! Don’t shoot.”

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Dhanpal ran up the ladder. “Hands where I can see them.”

Out in the street, Miguel fired three pops at target house B. The local boys were stirring. No doubt the larger force on the other side of the village would be alerted and two hundred jihadis would drop by for a game of dodge-bullet.

“Fawaz, progress?” I asked in the comm link.

“Six hostages freed. Sending them up now. They have directions.”

As he spoke, the first shadow appeared from the basement, looked both ways, and ran outside. A stream of women’s shadows followed her. Women captured and kept as sex slaves by ISIL. A contingent from the Yazidi Brigade called “Force of the Sun Ladies,” made up of former sex slaves intent on revenge, waited on the outskirts to take them home. Fawaz emerged last and joined me by the front door.

“Ready for B,” Miguel said.

“Hold up a second,” Dhanpal said. “I have an American, wearing a cowboy hat and boots, claims to be a hostage. Jacob shot him in the leg.”

Mercury pointed to the ceiling. *Ah dude, you were off by half an inch. If you’d hit where I was pointing, the bullet would’ve gone through his groin, up his torso, and through his tiny, backwoods brain. Now you gotta drag his cracker ass back to the States.*

Mercury insists all gods are Africans, and points to the fact that humans became sentient in the Rift Valley. The way I see it, if he wants to appear as a young, buffed version of Will Smith in a porn-toga with copper wings on his helmet, fine. But jeez, you’d think just once he’d be happy I followed his directions.

“Not holding up,” Miguel said. “Three of us are moving on B. You drag the guy back to the Humvees.”

Miguel, broad-shouldered and as big as a bear, lumbered across the street, firing his suppressed H&K into the windows. Fawaz and I followed.

The distant screech of a siren stabbed through the desert night like an ice pick in my ear.

Miguel stood outside and fired in. I charged through the open door, over the body of a dead guy, and fired into a thin wall where Mercury pointed. Behind it, a body thumped to the floor. Fawaz ran past me and

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jumped down the basement stairs.

Target house B had no back door. Miguel went to the roof; I kept the street clear. Not even a cat's shadow crossed the street after the explosions, yet I kept my sights moving up and down the lane as the seconds ticked by in agonizing anticipation of the nasty firefight that was sure to come.

Sweat dripped down my temples. I could feel the approaching hordes of jihadis—their courage fired by fenethylamine, the drug of choice for ISIL fighters—creeping closer and closer.

At that moment, I lost concentration and pictured my one true love, Yumi Shibata. A Tokyo detective I fell in love with during a gangster slaughter in Japan. She was spending her medical leave at my Washington DC home. She wasn't happy when I signed up for Dhanpal's special mission. She'd said, "No one come back from Syria. Ever."

Mercury waved his arms. *And you're not going to come back from Syria either unless you pay attention, yo.*

A radio squawked in the corner of the room. A commander demanded an update from a dead man in Arabic. I dug through bloody pockets until I found the radio and answered in perfect Arabic. "Malfunction. Fawaz was playing with a grenade. We beat on him for it."

The commander screamed back at me. "Who are you? Where is Mahmoud?"

Fawaz was not as common a name as I thought. I should've used a derogatory name like numb-nuts instead of my teammate's name.

"Mahmoud waits for you in *Jannah*." I said, referring to Islamic heaven. "I'd be happy to send you there too, motherfucker."

I left the last word in English just to pour salt in his wound. The commander began swearing in Arabic.

Fawaz sent eleven hostages up from the basement. Two more than we counted on. The women fled into the street, running for their Yazidi sisters.

Miguel dropped down from the roof.

"Couple surprises." Fawaz pointed at two scared young men in the hall. They asked rapid-fire questions in an Eastern European dialect I didn't understand. "*Kim jesteš? Co robimy?*"

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“*Polskie?*” Miguel asked.

They nodded. Miguel pointed to Dhanpal, staggering in the street with the cowboy—an average-sized redneck in jeans and denim shirt—over his shoulder. They got the hint and ran to help Dhanpal.

The ISIL commander said something rude on the radio.

“Hey, want to hear the worst part?” I switched back to Arabic for him. “Mahmoud says the *Houris* are actually Catholic nuns. He must’ve gone to the wrong heaven.”

Miguel tapped my shoulder. “What’s a *Houri?*”

“The heavenly companions these clowns mistake for ‘seventy-two virgins’.” I left the radio mike open for the commander to hear. “But then, these guys don’t know the Quran.”

Fawaz gestured, *time to go*. We ran in the opposite direction from the women.

A squad fired on us as we rounded the corner. We fired and ran, leapfrogging each other down the alley.

We reached our staging area and jumped in our Humvees. Tania, Miguel, and I found the cowboy laid out in the back of ours with a makeshift pressure bandage on his leg. The wound was a clean through-and-through. Nasty and painful, but not worth bawling about.

His boots caught my eye. They were cowboy boots made for someone who worked with large animals. Solid and sturdy, no designs, a heel big enough to keep your foot from pushing through the stirrup but not big enough to pretend you’re any taller than you are. Any soldier this guy’s age, early thirties, would wear combat boots with double stitching, heavy soles, and thick-as-hell leather. The last thing you want to worry about in a firefight with the Taliban is your boots delaminating. Oil workers wore biker-boots with steel toes because they were always dropping big iron things on their feet. The locals wore cheap-ass knockoffs because they never lived long enough to understand their footwear mistake. This guy was from the western US. Not Texas, where fancy stitching and three-inch heels are a minimum requirement. Not the hardscrabble corridor west of there either, like New Mexico, Colorado or Wyoming. They weren’t prosperous enough to worry about shoes. I was feeling Oklahoma, Kansas, on up to North Dakota.

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Mercury said, *This here white boy's too lazy to work, my man. Look at that hat, a Larry Mahan, 500x felt. Hats like that are for rich folk.*

My abandoned deity was right. A silver buckle glinted moonlight in my eye. Pure silver, with "Freedom" in the middle.

Mercury said, *Whoever he is, he's an oxymoron: a rich working man. Keep your eyes open. Gangstas like this don't show up without a damn good reason.*

A bullet zipped past my ear.

Fawaz and Dhanpal took the other Humvee and the Polish boys.

I grabbed the wheel and floored the big diesel in low gear, spewing rocks and gravel at our pursuers.

It was first light, about an hour before dawn, so I turned on the headlights. We circled the town, firing RPGs and throwing their scrambled response into a state of confusion while the Yazidi women made their escape. If things went according to plan, the women would drive straight across the uninhabited desert for an American intelligence outpost a hundred miles west of Haditha.

We would wreak as much havoc on the locals as possible before leading the stragglers to a different patch of desert where a pair of Apache attack helicopters waited to end their contribution to the Caliphate.

We bounced over a rutted dirt road on the town perimeter.

Tania fired an RPG, reloaded, and fired again. Then she turned to the cowboy. "Who the hell are you?"

"Michael Larson. Oil field contractor, Energy Outfitters," he said. "Somebody shot me."

He spoke with a slow, confident drawl. Not a Southern drawl, not Western drawl, but the kind the farm boys back in Iowa affected after watching too many John Wayne movies.

"My bad," I shouted over the engine noise. "Welcome to the world of collateral damage. But cut the bullshit, you're not in the oil business."

"Who are you guys? You're sure as hell not Army. Did the Artist send you?"

"The who?" Tania asked. "No, we're Sabel Security. We came to rescue some friends of ours."

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“Stop the truck.” He gripped his leg. “I need medical attention.”

“We stop, we die.” Tania turned around, reloaded, and fired an RPG.

She hit something. A fireball as big as a house rose into the sky. The shockwave knocked us into the ditch. My wheels spun in the dirt, catching and slipping, and catching again. We traveled slowly forward, half in and half out, skidding and sliding. An RPG flew by us, exploding fifty yards to our left in a cotton field.

Miguel emptied a magazine in their general direction.

“Damn it. They found us.” Tania opened her door, stood on the footstep, and fired her RPG over the roof while holding onto the interior with one hand. Not an easy trick. Not exactly effective either. Her grenade sailed over our attackers.

The tires caught something solid, thrusting the truck forward. Tania fell from her precarious perch in the open door and landed on her butt in the ditch while I fought to get the ungainly machine to stop fishtailing down the dirt lane.

AK-47s opened up on her position.

I wheeled the beast around, making a large circle that almost drove me back in the ditch. Halfway through the arc, I saw fifty oil tankers lined up half a mile away. I thought the US Air Force had blown up all the ISIL tankers from drones. But here they were, big and shiny. What kind of business was our cowboy in?

Bullets brought my attention back to the road. I pulled in to block Tania from the onslaught of lead. Miguel leaned out the back door and grabbed her hand. She vaulted in like a ragdoll tossed by a giant, dove between the back seats, and landed on the cowboy. A grenade exploded over our heads, shredding our thin, sheet metal roof.

My foot slammed down on the accelerator. The Humvee is not known for acceleration. We lurched forward at an excruciatingly slow pace for a battle, but slightly ahead of the foot speed of our jilted hosts.

“Get off me,” the cowboy yelled.

Tania rolled off slowly. “Dumbass, my body armor just saved your life.”

I glanced over my shoulder and saw a dozen shards of metal stuck in her back.

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“What were you doing in As Sukhnah?” Tania asked.

“They held me for ransom. I was working an oil field in Arar.”

“Arar, Saudi Arabia?”

“Right.”

Tania punched him in the face and ripped out the pistol he had taped behind his back. “If you’re a hostage, why did they let you carry a gun?”

In the side mirror, I saw the headlights of two vehicles come into our lane. ISIL uses Toyotas, which aren’t as well armored but are a lot faster than Humvees. My only advantage was rough terrain.

I turned our truck toward the southeast and crashed across the barren desert as an RPG sailed past our windows. “Hey, Miguel,” I yelled above the racket. “I don’t think they liked your hostess gift.”

CHAPTER 2

PIA SABEL JUMPED ON THE low retaining wall along Falls Road in the village of Potomac, Maryland on a warm morning in late June. She ran to the end and dismounted with an aerial walkover. Landing alongside Bianca Dominguez, her former high school soccer rival, she slowed to match the shorter woman's pace.

Pia had asked Bianca to stand in for Tania and Jacob, Pia's usual bodyguards, while they ran a rescue mission for old friends from the wars. Outside of Sabel Industry's mandatory two-week training, Bianca had zero qualifications for personal security. She had been a top-notch geek for the NSA until she did a favor for Pia that got her fired. Now she was Sabel Technologies' top-notch geek.

Pia had requested Bianca to fill in, hoping they could become better friends. Tania and Jacob had proven themselves as great friends. But it was time to expand her circle.

Forging new friendships always comes with unexpected first steps and Bianca proved the rule. Bianca was a bared-soul personality.

"No matter how many times it fails," Bianca said, "you still have to love someone. That's how humans operate."

"Maybe I'm not human."

"You know what I'm talking about. 'Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.'"

"Shakespeare?" Pia asked.

"Tennyson."

They ran in silence long enough for Pia to hope Bianca would change the topic.

But no.

"It's understandable," Bianca said. "After all, that thing with your

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parents had to be major trauma. It's obviously taken a toll on your love life. It's time to let go of the past and fall in love..."

Bianca's voice waned in the distance as Pia resumed her usual cruising speed.

People had no idea how much it hurt to bring it up. Just a casual mention, like Bianca's, hurled the memory of that heartbreaking morning into her head. The angry man stood in front of her, his booted feet planted firmly, his muscular arms extended in front of him, her mother's body dangling from his hands, choking and sputtering—and then the gunshot in the other room.

"PIA!" Bianca's shout brought her back to the warm summer morning. "I can't run that fast."

Pia slowed and waited. "Sorry."

When she caught up, they ran on, passing grand houses with acres of front yard demarcated by white rail fences. They crossed the small creek called Rock Run before Bianca picked up where she'd left off.

"Seriously," Bianca said, "you should be thinking about a real lover. Someone to take your mind off the past. Someone to get into fights, have babies, snuggle up with. You need someone to take you into the future."

"Someone like you?"

"No, *flaca*." A Spanish endearment: *skinny-girl*. "I don't do crushes on straight girls anymore—but if you ever want to switch teams, let me know."

Pia laughed. She had standing offers from a couple players on the women's national soccer team too. She might've been Miss Popular had she not been born straight.

"Seriously," Bianca continued after they negotiated fifty yards of torn-up sidewalk. "Anyone can see it. You're running from your traumatic childhood. You're afraid to get close to anyone."

Pia had heard that same diagnosis from everyone, professional therapists and armchair psychologists alike. The wives of her father's friends, the old ladies who staffed their sprawling estate, her teachers and coaches through the years; everyone believed she was trapped in her childhood tragedy. Everyone believed they knew why she only slept three hours a night. Everyone believed they knew why she had a temper.

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Everyone believed they knew why this and that.

Knowing why didn't solve anything.

She sighed. "I'm twenty-six. I have plenty of time."

"Plenty of time before you get married," Bianca said. "But everyone has to have a crash-and-burn love first. You can't appreciate true love until you've been fooled by bad love. You know what I mean?"

"That's enough about me. What about you? Do you have—what did you say—someone to fight and have babies with?"

"You sound like my mother."

"Oh, is that it? Your mother wants you to settle down and so you figure I have to settle down?"

"Don't put this on me. Tania wants you to settle down too. And the Major."

So. It was a conspiracy of the three women closest to her. All three of them single and childless. And none of them involved in great relationships. Bianca was a notorious womanizer. Tania couldn't keep a relationship exclusive for more than a month. And the Major—she kept secrets even the NSA couldn't hack. And these women wanted *her* to settle down?

They ran in front of the Giant grocery store, heading to the intersection of Falls and River Roads, the center of town.

Pia had to admit, the triumvirate's analysis was spot on. She was afraid to love. Everyone she'd ever loved was dead. Except her adopted father—and that was a strained connection on a good day. Watching her parents die when she was four had a lasting effect on her psyche. Killing her mother's killer only compounded the issue. Thinking about the situation brought back another moment in time: her four-year-old self, stabbing the man with a kitchen knife. Stabbing and stabbing and stabbing his leg. The highest point she could reach. A voice in her head telling her higher and deeper might save her mother. Then she hit something. Blood poured out. The image that woke her up every night. Blood pouring out in a pulsed stream.

Pia stumbled and regained her stride.

Some people suffer traumatic childhoods and survive—and others go mad. Pia threw herself into sports, trying to outrun the voice in her head

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urging her to win the gold medal that her mother would have won had she lived another year. That hard-won gold now hung on her mantle, next to the only photograph of her biological parents.

But winning never helped reel in her endless fear.

Without noticing, she was back to her usual pace. Bianca ran several yards behind her as they approached River Road. Pia was on the sidewalk, facing traffic, the light ahead was green. She could cross without breaking stride. Her lucky day. The retaining wall on her left obscured cars in the near lane.

Likewise, it restricted the view for drivers turning right.

A Ferrari 488 Spider rolled into the crosswalk.

Two strides away, she ran straight toward him at sixteen miles an hour. Too fast to stop.

She jumped. Her left foot hit the hood above his right front tire. Her right foot landed on his windshield frame. Her left foot cleared the glass and the driver's head to land deftly on top of the convertible's roll bar. Her right foot landed hard on the ground. Her knee absorbed the impact. Her momentum carried her several staggering strides to the middle of the street before she could stop.

Wheeling around, she stabbed a finger at the careless driver. "Watch where you're going, asshole!"

"Oh, ma'am, I am terribly sorry. My apologies. I—"

As she drew a breath to yell again, she saw his face.

Her heart stopped. Her insides twisted into a knot. Her mind blanked.

It was him. Stefan.

And he recognized her. "Pia! Ohmigod. Are you all right? Are you hurt?"

Bianca came up behind him and navigated around the car.

Pia turned and resumed her run, albeit at a slower pace. Years of sports injuries taught her to walk off minor injuries. Which, normally, she would've done, but suddenly, she found herself in a hurry to leave. The result was a slow jog across the street. She wondered if Stefan thought she was trying to keep his attention.

She didn't care what he thought. She picked up her pace.

Behind her, the Ferrari's engine revved. She imagined him. Probably

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trying to attract the attention of other women in the area. No doubt he drove it with an air of privilege that, when combined with his natural charm and good looks, could seduce women up and down the street. Good for him. Who cares?

“Pia, are you OK?” Bianca ran to catch up with her. “Are you limping?”

Pia waited up the street half a block. Behind her several cars honked. She looked up in time to see the Ferrari inching its way through a traffic snarl to turn left from the right lane. Typical Stefan. Forcing the sea to part for him.

“I’m fine. I hope I dented his fender.”

“Yeah.” Bianca tried to keep up. “I can’t believe that guy pulled into the crosswalk like that. I know it’s hard to see around the corner, but still. Hey, wait, you know that guy?”

“No.” She ran on. “Sort of. Stefan Devoor, scion of Royal Devoor Oil.”

The Ferrari’s roar charged up the street behind her. Stefan drove up beside her in the center lane. He shouted something. She ignored him. He gunned the engine and pulled into a driveway twenty yards in front of her. He parked blocking the sidewalk. He opened his door, unfolded his tall, thin frame from the small cockpit, and stepped forward.

“You’re blocking the ... oh, whatever.” She stopped and crossed her arms.

“Are you OK? I am so sorry, Pia. Really.”

“Get your car out of the way, Stefan.” She leaned forward. “Or is it Daddy’s?”

“Mine. Actually.” He backed up half a step. “I came home six months ago. I left several messages for you when I arrived. Dad forced my hand. If I want the family fortune to keep flowing, I have to keep Royal Devoor profitable. I hear your father did the same to you. You’re running Sabel Technologies now, right?”

“She *owns* Sabel Industries,” Bianca snarled.

Pia tossed a withering glance her way. Bianca winced.

“Sorry,” Pia said. “I missed your homecoming parade.”

She charged at him as if to tackle him. He backed up and fell

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backward over his door. He crashed across the seats, his legs in the air. She landed her right foot on his near fender, and her left on his far fender, and ran down the street. She didn't look back. She didn't care what happened to him.

The anguished memory of her first love felt like a two-by-four to the face. It all came back at once as she ran. The rush of Stefan's first kiss on her lips. Her panicked waits for his call. Her constant check of the Sabel Gardens gate for his arrival. The small, thoughtful gifts he ignored. Dressing and changing and changing again. Hours of makeup applied and wiped off and reapplied. Texting followed by endless hours waiting in purgatory for his reply. Hours spent agonizing over the appropriate signals to give—or not. None of it made any difference. He never appreciated her.

And then the horrible night of Saint Albans' prom.

She cringed as she recalled in instant and perfect detail every second of his angry, soul-crushing, public dismissal.

Ten years later and, as the fates would have it, he had grown more handsome. His big brown eyes and long lashes were disgustingly perfect. His curly black hair remained thick and full. Sadly, cosmetic surgery had Americanized his distinctive Roman nose.

She'd lived with the satisfaction of having stabbed her mother's murderer to death. But for this arrogant, overprivileged stick figure with the galvanized frat-boy smile plastered on his face, she'd never felt the satisfaction of retribution. Yet.

The Ferrari's high-revving engine note came up behind her. No other traffic remained on the road.

Stefan drove into the oncoming lane and pulled alongside her. "I'm practicing for driving in England."

"Funny."

"I'd like to apologize; make amends. Can we get a cup of coffee?"

"You apologized." Pia sensed Bianca catching up behind her. "You're forgiven."

"No, seriously. I want—"

"Why is it men always talk about what *they* want? Do you have any idea what I want?" She waited until he shook his head. "I want you to

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leave me alone.”

He tightened his mouth, nodded, and looked down. After a moment, he shrugged and drove away.

“Harsh, *flaca*.” Bianca watched his taillights. “He’s funny-looking to me, so I assume he’s handsome in the straight world.”

“I don’t care what he is.”

“Then why did you blush so hard?”