

**DEATH
AND
TREASON**

SEELEY JAMES

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

DEATH AND TREASON released Sabel Security #4 version 3.14

Original Publication, v3.13 January 23rd, 2018

This version is v3.14 12-April, 2019

Print ISBN: 978-0-9972306-7-3

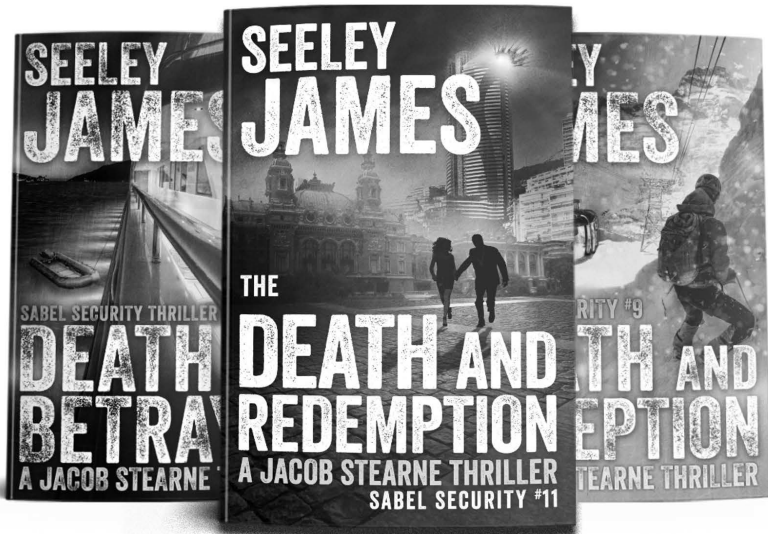
ePub ISBN: 978-0-9972306-5-9

Distribution Print ISBN: 978-1-9731911-9-3

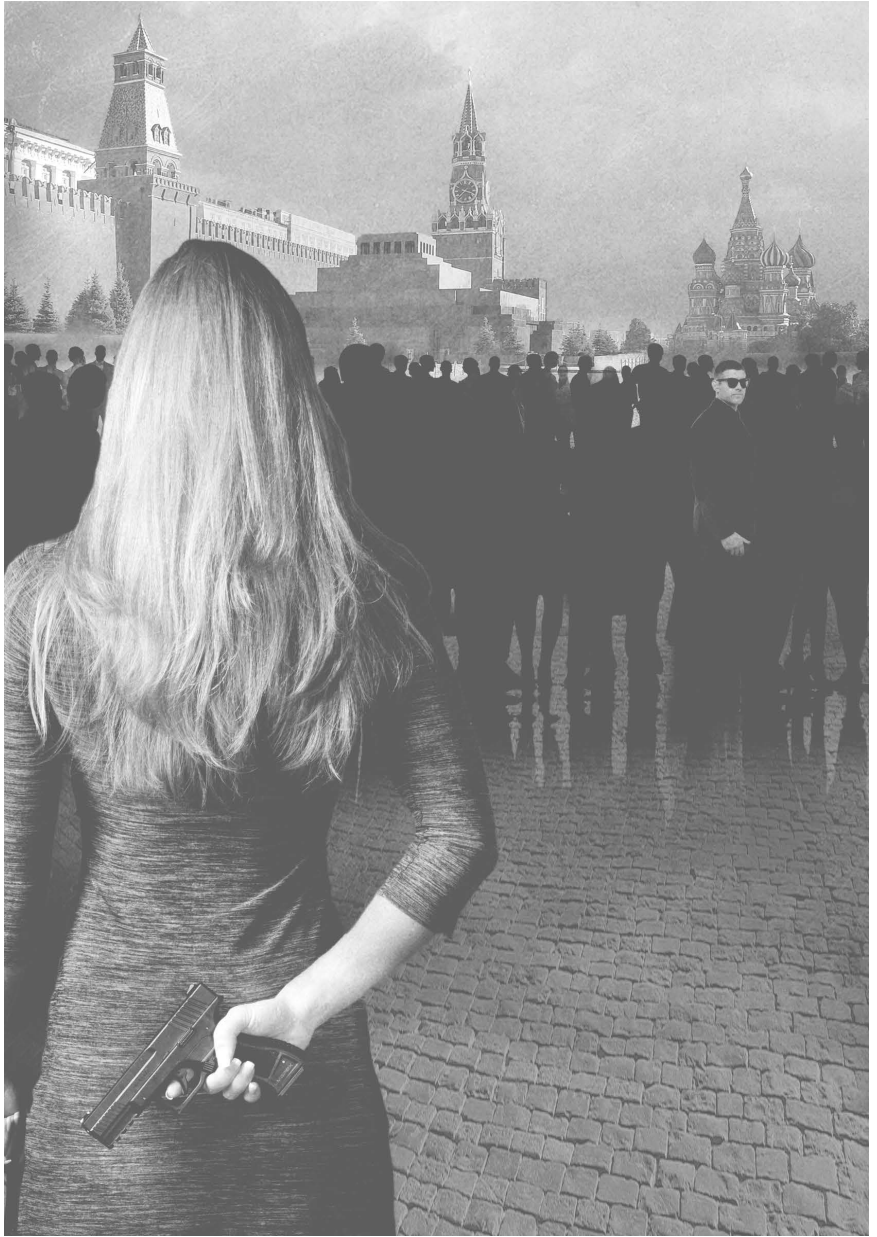
Formatting: BB eBooks

Cover Design: Jeroen ten berge

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FOR MY SISTERS
Margo and Susan

CHAPTER 1

I WAS WALKING MY PUPPY through Central Park on a beautiful summer day when I heard the President of the United States say, “Because rigging the election is illegal. Why? What’s in it for me?”

The conversation was live-streaming to my earbud from a mic I’d hidden in a billionaire’s library. Chuck Roche, the refinery king, had spent the last two minutes explaining how he could win the election if President Veronica Hunter would just do what he told her. The third person present, hastily retired FBI man David Watson, had advocated killing my boss to seal the win.

Bugging POTUS is illegal on a life-in-jail level so I wasn’t sure what I could do about it or even who I could tell. But that quickly became the least of my problems.

Mercury, winged messenger of the Roman gods—my friend and personal deity—snapped his fingers in front of my nose. *Yo dude, you see what I see?*

Walking toward me were two mothers with baby strollers, side by side. Their mouths were wide open in horror; their eyes focused on something behind me.

I spun around.

Kasey Earl, an old nemesis from my Ranger days, charged me, brandishing an eight-inch knife.

Mercury grinned. *You got this, right?*

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

I know what you’re thinking: *Mercury? You should go back on your meds, pal. It’s all Jesus versus Allah these days with the smart money on the Prince of Peace because of His advantage in nuclear warheads.*

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I get that a lot. My first Army-issued psychologist told me Mercury was a manifestation of my PTSD-induced schizophrenia. What did he know? The soldiers who lived and fought and died beside me knew Mercury's divine guidance made me the beast of the battlefield. Under his celestial direction, I rampaged through Afghanistan and Iraq and several other places that I'm not allowed to discuss until 2058. But the Army, in its infinite glory and wisdom, put me on meds. My life went downhill fast. Eventually, it became obvious that the godless life wasn't working for me. I quit the pills. Heck, he's the only god who talks to me. Just because he's been homeless for fifteen hundred years is no reason to make fun. He's not much, but he's mine. Does your savior appear before your very eyes, complete with period costume?

Yeah. What I thought.

Where was I? Oh yeah, Central Park. Guy with a knife.

The moms assumed Kasey was attacking them. They expected me to be their knight in shining jeans and t-shirt. Which was fine with me. I'm up for saving damsels in distress anytime, especially when the embodiment of evil is Kasey.

Years ago, on a secret base outside Karachi, he bragged that he'd raped an Afghan woman and got away with it. That pissed me off. I'd taught him a lesson by removing his left ear with a Fairbairn-Sykes knife. It's the classic dagger used by British commandos in WWII, featuring a double-edged blade for slashing back-and-forth and a needle-sharp point for stabbing.

I steeled myself for the fight. Anoshni, my puppy, chose the run-like-hell option and yanked the leash—and my arm—as he fled. My body twisted half-way around with my right arm fully extended by the lead, and my left arm flung opposite for balance. I looked as if I were going to welcome Kasey with open arms.

That would never happen, even if Orcus froze over. I live for danger. My adrenaline kicked up another notch at the prospect of putting down this man-animal once and for all.

Kasey launched himself into the air, holding his very own Fairbairn-Sykes knife over his head. I dropped on my back, raised my left foot, keeping my knee bent. As Kasey flew over, I kicked hard, hoping to use

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his forward motion to launch him over me. Didn't work. His body ended up a foot above mine, balancing on my foot and left hand.

I managed to grab his knife-wielding wrist before he drove it between my ribs and into my heart. He screamed four-letter words; his face was red with heat and anger. He strained and I strained and the knife slashed my shirt.

Anoshni realized someone was threatening his meal ticket and came back to join the fight, barking like a rabid animal. He sank his razor-sharp puppy teeth into Kasey's calf. Kasey howled.

Mercury said, *Dude! Nothing beats watching a death match. Ima get me some popcorn. Don't let him kill you before I get back.*

I said, *Could I get a little divine intervention here?*

Mercury, already several strides away in his cringe-short toga, replied over his shoulder. *You got this, my brutha. But you're not going to like how you get this.*

You might expect something more comprehensive from a god. Is the occasional lightning bolt too much to ask? He's kinda unpredictable about dispensing the divine assistance. Probably because he gets a kick out of watching the multitude of ways humans die. His favorite is when a man drinks heavily before cleaning his weapons.

Yeah. *That* kind of god. Hanging around on street corners gets boring after the first millennium. Apparently.

Still on my back, I wrenched Kasey's wrist, hoping to dislodge his nasty dagger. He fought hard. The blade nicked my shoulder before he freed himself from my grip and reared back for a death blow.

A gray mist shot between us.

I instantly recognized the small cloud for what it was: Oleoresin of capsicum—pepper spray.

Army Rangers are required to pass several OC training courses, all of them comprehensive and extremely painful. To this day, I can determine the strength and type of a spray the way a connoisseur of fine wines can identify grapes. This wasn't a simple self-defense pepper spray; it was a Level III formulation with 1.3% capsaicinoids—the highest level you can deploy before they call it a war crime.

Kasey and I choked and spluttered and cried like babies.

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He dropped the knife and rolled off me.

I could see nothing. My skin burned. My eyes swelled up. The tears flowed. I writhed and rolled over, face down, trying not to let anything touch my skin. I let my tears wash out enough irritant to let in little slits of light. I fought to catch a breath. Every inhale drew pepper deeper into my lungs.

A woman's voice screamed in agony. "Julie, what the fuck?"

"Cover your mouth," Julie said. "I'm going to shoot 'em again."

I jumped to my feet, peering through the tears gushing from my damaged eyes, and grabbed the woman's arm, wrenched the can away and tossed it. "Cover the babies. The spray will drift."

Too late.

Julie and her pal started choking. Two seconds later, the babies started crying. A short distance away, the shrill rattle of a police whistle raised the tension level.

"Do you have milk?" I asked. "Douse the babies with it."

"You're crazy," Julie cried.

"Base neutralizes acid. Trust me."

The authorities arrived en masse, even a guy on a horse. Cops and paramedics swarmed us. First, they took care of the babies and moms. Then the paramedics helped me.

AFTER AN HOUR, THINGS CALMED down. At least I could breathe. The police took statements.

"We can charge him with assault." The cop nodded his chin toward Kasey.

"Nah." I glanced at my enemy, cuffed a few yards away. "He's just a brother-veteran with a grudge."

The cop looked skeptical. His buddy slapped him on the shoulder and leaned toward the boulevard. He wasn't interested in more paperwork. My cop shrugged. They uncuffed Kasey and left us to work out our tangled relationship on our own.

I checked my pockets. My phone had shattered in the melee. My earbud was lost in the grass. Roche, Hunter, and their goon Watson were

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plotting to throw the election without me.

I stared at Kasey. Kasey stared at me. Fifteen feet separated us. He flinched like a meerkat watching a circling lion.

I nodded at my adversary. “Heard you were some kind of big shot over at Roche Security.”

“It’s pronounced row-SHAY, not roach.” He looked angry for a second. “How come you ain’t gonna press charges?”

“You’ve tried to kill me plenty of times—and always failed. Why take another shot at me now when you know it’s going to put your fancy job at risk?”

Kasey stared at the ground.

Mercury walked up licking an ice cream cone. *Whoa, I missed you flexin’? Did you cut off his dick?*

I said, *Where the hell were you?*

No popcorn. Believe that shit? Then I ran into Sedna over there. Mercury pointed behind him and slurped a drip off his cone. *She and Kadlu are in town to see Hamilton.*

I said, *Who?*

Dude. Sedna. Inuit goddess of the seas? Like Neptune, only she’s got some cakes, ya feel me? Kadlu is heartbroken about the igloos melting, so they came here for a little downtime. When it comes to goddesses, they don’t get much hotter than the Inuits. Oh. Say, uh. Doesn’t look like you need any miracles right now, and they got an extra ticket ... so. Yeah.

Sometimes dealing with an immortal is more trouble than it’s worth. I said, *Where’s the ice cream?*

Kasey pointed at a cart across the grass. “Over there.”

My eyes swiveled between Kasey and the ice cream cart while I tried to figure out how long I’d been using my outside voice. “Want a cone? I’m buying.”

Kasey gave me the once-over. “What’re you playing at, Stearne?”

“Time to put our differences behind us, brother. We’re hardened veterans living in a world full of clueless civilians.” I stuck my hand out. “Tell me what’s going on in Earl-world.”

He shook my hand while maintaining an awkward distance. He kept his cynical gaze fixed on me. “You ain’t pissed about me almost killing

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your boss back in Germany?”

“Dude, you didn’t even singe her mascara.” I struck out for the ice cream vendor. “Last chance.”

He paused a few seconds, then followed.

“Yeah.” Kasey trotted alongside. “I was running Roche Security operations until that thing in California.”

“We caught you helping terrorists, and they fired you?” His motivation for trying to kill me was coming into focus. Every job he’d lost—and there had been a few—he lost because of me.

“Nah. They didn’t fire me. Nothing like that.” Kasey looked around while he thought up a way to spin his demotion. “They brung in this dude from the FBI. Said he had more experience or some shit.”

“Those idiots. They picked a desk jockey over a battle-scarred veteran?”

“Yeah, right?” Kasey grinned at me.

“They’re making a big mistake.” We got in line behind a boy and his dad. “You’d think corporate America would value a guy who’s killed terrorists. You don’t deserve to be treated like that, Kasey. Ever think about how you could get back at them?”

“Every fucking day.”

“Who’s the Feeb they put in charge? Some peckerhead from the reservations or something?”

Kasey looked over the menu as if it were a tough decision: vanilla, chocolate, or strawberry.

Agent Kayla from our NYC office slipped in line behind us. She shoved a replacement phone and a backup in my back pocket with a wireless earbud. Then she was gone. Kasey never saw her. He placed his order while I checked my phone. An updated version of the old phone was halfway downloaded to the new one. In a few minutes, I’d be up and running. Sabel Security is one smooth, professional operation.

I texted Bianca Dominguez, the chief sorceress of Sabel Technology, who helped me set up the bug in Chuck Roche’s home. She texted back right away. The transmission had broken when Kasey tackled me. She patched the system during my wrestling match and recorded it straight to the cloud. I could catch up on it later. I asked her to set up my backup

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phone for undercover use. She didn't ask why just transferred the info so it looked like a burner with no trace to Sabel Security.

Kasey took his vanilla scoop on a sugar cone and waited for me. "The man was some kinda Mister Big from FBI Counterintelligence. That's the spies and shit. Says he turned down a job at Sabel."

I ordered. While the guy scooped chocolate into a waffle, I gave Kasey a sympathetic look. "Older guy, thinks he's all that, gray crew cut?"

"Yeah." He squinted a suspicious glance my way. "You know him?"

"Counterintelligence sounds cool, but he wasn't James Bond. He ran the economic espionage division. Copyright infringement, intellectual property theft."

"You shittin' me?" Kasey stomped a boot and almost threw his cone. "Paper-pusher? He never fired no gun?"

"At the range, maybe." I licked my cone.

Kasey looked off into the distance, his mouth drawn tight, his face pulsing red with his rising heart rate. He ignored a drip that rolled down his fingers. "I gotta go."

He chucked his cone in the trash and started to walk away.

"Kasey, hold on a second." I attempted to look conflicted, then reached for the undercover phone. "Here. Take this. It's secure, encrypted. In case you ever want to talk or something. Just dial 6-1-1 and ask for me. They'll connect you. No questions asked."

He looked at the phone in my outstretched hand. His gaze rose to mine with a degree of suspicion.

Anoshni cocked his head and gave Kasey a you-can-trust-us look. He instinctively knew what I was doing.

Good dogs are watchdogs. A great dog is an accomplice.

"It's my undercover phone." I kept my hand extended. "You call me. You know, if you ever want to talk to someone who thinks veterans matter more than pencil-pushers."

His face softened, and he took the phone. "Any chance I'd get hired on up at Sabel?"

I sighed and shrugged. "You tried to kill the boss a couple times. That might be—"

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“Only that once. Them other times, I never got the chance.” Kasey was never quick-witted, but even he knew how off-key that sounded. “Well. Y’know how it is. It’s just business. Ain’t it?”

“Ms. Sabel’s all about forgiveness.” I whistled and looked skyward. “I’ll sound her out next time I see her. First thing she’s going to ask is, why should we trust him?” I patted his shoulder. “How could you prove yourself? Think of something, give me a call.”

“Yeah. I can think on that some.” He gave me a weak smile, then shoved the phone in his pocket. “Maybe we can grab lunch, talk about it.”

“Sure.” My stomach turned at the thought of spending another second with him. “I’m open. Give me a call.”

I walked away without looking back.

WITH THE NEW EARBUD SCREWED in and the puppy sniffing along the sidewalk, I resumed my tour of Central Park while listening to my illegal bug. The whole reason for eavesdropping was to uncover who killed Ms. Sabel’s parents. This stuff about the election was a whole new headache. Especially since I could get myself, my boss, and her company in a world of trouble just for having it. Only Bianca, Ms. Sabel, and I would listen to this recording, but secrets always end up in the FBI’s lap eventually.

I pictured the three of them in Roche’s library. Chuck Roche looked like an old lunch sack taped together with willpower. He wasn’t a guy to mess with, though; people who knew him claimed he’d blow up your life if you crossed him. President Hunter reminded me of a Roman statue, her broken and weathered marble held together with foundation and lipstick. Her yearbook probably had her tagged as, “most likely to start a war just to get reelected.” David Watson was a short, angry man with a grey crew cut and a colossal Napoleon complex who blamed the failure of his FBI career on everyone around him.

I backed up the recordings of the co-conspirators and caught up with where I left off. The audio had a gap before Bianca switched everything to the cloud. In that break, something major had happened between the

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three schemers. Their voices strained just short of yelling.

Hunter was in the middle of a sentence. "...sell all your refineries, investments, everything."

Roche said, "I won't have to sell anything after I'm elected. What're they going to do, un-elect me? So what if I take investment capital from companies like Santalum? No one's ever heard of it, much less who owns it."

"You're dreaming if you think you can take over the Republican Party two weeks before the convention, Chuck." Hunter sounded confused. "Teddy VII has the nomination wrapped up."

She was talking about Teddy Roosevelt VII, a guy who believed in family dynasties.

"I've got that handled."

"You'll get your ass kicked by the press," Hunter said. "You'll look like a fool in the debates. Why endure the humiliation?"

"Someone has to clean up the country, and you're not getting the job done." Roche's volume nearly blew out the mic. He brought it down a notch. "I'll bring sound business principles to the table. I'll clean up all these damned treaties and sanctions and regulations. I could run this country with my eyes closed. But don't worry, I'll take care of you. My word is good."

Hunter sounded angry. "I don't want the Supreme Court."

"Yeah. I know what you want." Roche scoffed. "Forget it."

Watson chimed in quickly. "You're forgetting Sabel."

"The hell I am." Roche didn't tone it down for his lackey. "We need her. We'll get her onboard. I'll promise her funding for foster care—whatever stupid charity she's crying about this week."

"You want to bring her onboard?" Hunter was screeching now. "What does Pia Sabel have that you need?"

Roche blasted back. "She has a hundred million bucks to spend."

"Hey," Hunter said. "She's giving that to my campaign."

"Wrong," Roche shouted. "She was going to give it to Maddox, not you. Good thing those terrorists took him out. Saved the country from holding hands and singing campfire songs for four years—like a bunch of losers. You've got nothing to offer her. I can make her the Secretary

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of Education or something. Hell, why not? No one cares about that shit.”

Hunter said, “The Senate will never confirm someone without a career—”

“That’s why you’re a failure,” Roche barked. “You don’t know how to make deals.”

“Bad idea, boss.” Watson sounded like he was cowering in a corner. “Sabel’s a time bomb. She finds out what we did and she’ll—”

“She won’t do anything to a candidate or a president. She’d never do anything that would hurt her precious little country. As long as we win, we’re safe.” Roche dropped his voice to a whisper I could barely hear. “If she doesn’t get onboard, you’ll be inside her organization. You take care of it for us. You have more reason than the rest of us to kill her.”

“Uh.”

“How did the interview go?” Roche asked.

“She liked me.” Watson backed off. “I think. She offered me the job anyway.”

“Well,” Hunter snapped. “Whatever happens, I insist you do nothing to harm Pia.”

“I would never hurt her.” Roche lied like the salesman who sold me my last car. “That’s just our last resort. Don’t get hung up on her. She’s young and naïve. I’ll convince her. Easy.”

“OK, then.” Hunter sounded satisfied.

There was some crosstalk I couldn’t decipher. Then Watson broke out in a panic.

“You guys are underestimating her.” Watson’s voice rose. “She’ll never stop coming after us. Our only option is to infiltrate Sabel Security and kill her—now.”

Roche blew a gasket. The windows rattled with his bellowing. “How many times do I have to tell you two? I’m bringing her inside the campaign. She’ll come around. But, just in case, you need to be close to her.”

There was a long silence in the recording. I checked my phone twice to make sure it hadn’t disconnected.

The voices picked up again with President Hunter, her voice low. “What if I win?”

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Roche: “Have you seen your approval ratings? Not a chance.”

Hunter started to object, but Roche and Watson laughed over her. The noises in the room indicated they were moving toward the exit. Pleasantries were extended in muffled voices. Social-laughter followed a few attempts at humor. *Ha ha heh.*

The last thing audible was Roche: “Work your way into her inner circle. Don’t make me regret picking you, Watson.”

Back in the real world, three teenage girls were oohing over Anoshni. He was eating it up with his nose in the air as they stroked his back. Not bad work if you can get it.

I texted Ms. Sabel. “Do not hire David Watson under any circumstances.”

A second later, she texted back. “He starts Monday.”