

**DEATH
AND
SECRETS**

SEELEY JAMES

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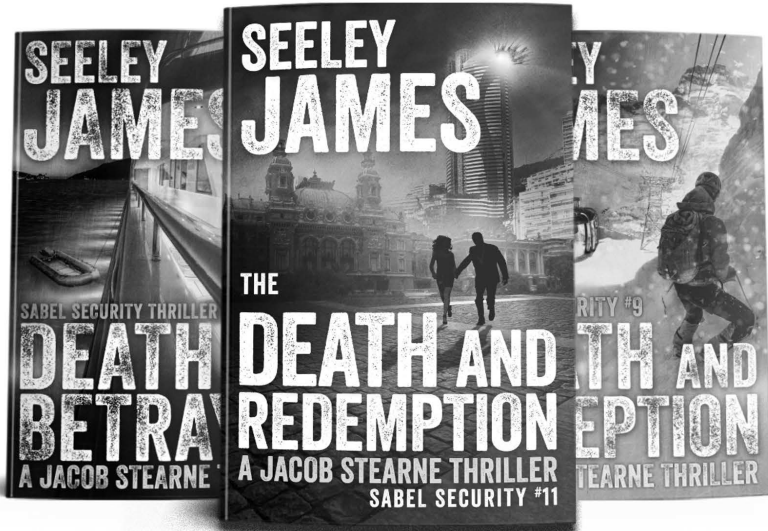
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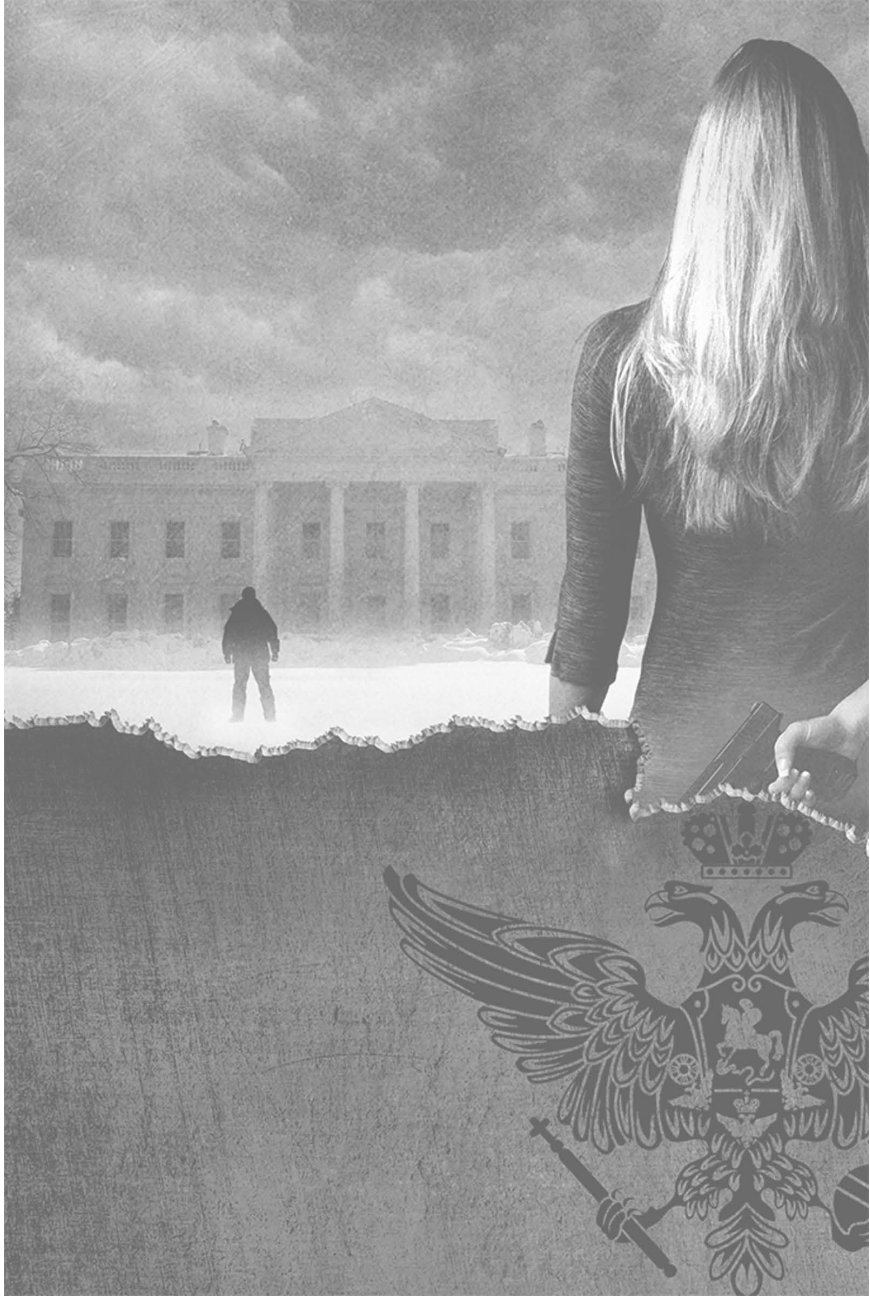
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FOR MY DAUGHTER
Nicole

CHAPTER 1

A VOICE IN A DREAM said, “Do you remember who shot you?”

Someone tugged me through a murky world. When the gray globs in my vision thinned, I recognized my sister. She kneaded my right hand and said something underwater. I blinked. Tubes hung down around me, metal rails on either side. A rack of machines with flashing lights towered over my shoulder. On my left stood a man in a white lab coat with the educated gaze of a doctor.

My eyes slid back to Joyce.

Something was wrong. My sister owned the biggest organic farm in Iowa. She didn’t hold hands with her little brother in Bethesda, Maryland. Last time we spoke, it ended sharp and bitter. Some kind of rivalry that didn’t matter anymore. Joyce kept talking. It sounded like, *this time better work*. She aimed her words and a mean glare at the doctor.

Noises sharpened a little and came in crisper.

She turned to me, “Do you remember who shot you?”

I looked around for my best friend and constant companion: Mercury, the winged messenger of the Roman gods. My divine protector and occasional savior—when he wasn’t too busy chasing goddesses—was not in the room.

A bad sign.

I pushed up on my elbows and tried to speak but only burped out a squawk. Black stars swirled around me. The doc put a hand on my chest and pushed me back down.

I took another nap. It felt like one of many. My dream state reverted to an oddly familiar sight: I looked down from the ceiling at my twisted

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body lying on the floor of a dark and shabby room. Flies. Threadbare carpet. A voice said, *Don't go to Tremé*. In a blink, I looked up at my twisted body lying on a water-stained ceiling surrounded by a pool of black ink.

“What’s the last thing you remember?” The doc’s penlight swung away from my eye.

“Christmas. Maybe?” I heard myself say. “Miguel brought—”

“Hell.” My sister’s voice came from the other side of the room. “You said this would work.”

“Amnesia is a mysterious thing.” The doctor’s voice was silky, understanding, patient. “He’s responding this time. He can talk. Let’s count that as a blessing.”

“Amnesia?” I asked.

“Due to the blood loss.” Doc sounded as if we’d had this conversation before.

I glanced around, hoping to see Mercury. I needed someone to tell me what had gone down. As gods go, he was a pain in the ass and a bad influence, but he made house calls. Which was more than I could say for the other deities I’d prayed to. Like any soldier who’d rounded out eight tours of combat duty, I’d prayed to every god I’d heard of and some that were mere possibilities. When a thousand Taliban rounds buzz your ears, you’re not so picky about which one is the *One True God*. Call ’em all. See who answers.

“Let’s start with something easy,” the doctor said. “Do you remember leaving the Army three years—”

“Pick it up, Doc. Something recent.” Joyce leaned into my line of sight. “Mardi Gras? Do you remember that?”

My mind spun off. New Orleans. Congo Square. The place where slaves spent the Sabbath in the late 1700s beating out their ancestral rhythms and trying out new ones that, over time, evolved into jazz. I asked, “Tremé?”

“What’s trem-MAY?” She pushed the pronunciation the way farmers will.

“Neighborhood. Due west of the French Quarter.” I was short of breath. “Where you played trumpet that time when—”

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“Mom and Dad took us to Preservation Hall.” She snapped her fingers. “Yeah. That was a great trip. What the hell were you doing there?”

“I was there?”

“Slowly bleeding out in a seedy motel.” She squinted at me. “What’s the last thing you remember?”

The doc put a cup with a bendy straw in front of me. I took a sip while I thought about it. “Tania gave me socks for Christmas. I re-gifted them to Miguel—”

“I mean after that.” She closed in with each word as if she led the Spanish Inquisition and would order the rack tightened one more notch if I didn’t answer right. “Do you remember your physical therapy? Rehab? Anything we talked about yesterday?”

I had no idea what today was much less yesterday, but I wanted to make her happy. My brain reeled through every moment in time. A couple new things came into focus. I sorted them for approximate dates and came up with my best recollection. “Ms. Sabel made me take her to the Epiphany service at National Cathedral. She cried the whole time.”

My sister reared back. “Fuck!”

The doctor inhaled as if he’d been smacked.

“Sorry, Doc.” She fisted her hips and turned to the window. “A hundred farm hands work for me. If you don’t throw an f-bomb every few minutes, they’ll think you’re weak. So, this is all we’re going to get out of your voodoo experiments, huh? Yeah. I’m taking him home.”

“Home-home?” I asked. “Or my home?”

“Your shack in Bethesda for now. But we talked, it’s been decided—you’re coming back to the farm. I need you to run the business side. Besides, if you don’t give up this ridiculous job of slaughtering people, you’re going to wind up dead. Not that I care. You can do what you want, but you’re killing Mom with this—” she flopped a hand at the beeping hardware “—getting shot all the time. So.”

My fingertips ran over a freshly healed wound. I’d been in the hospital for a long time. Maybe my brain hadn’t, but my body had healed.

Mom might have a point about my career. I had enough holes in me

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to double as a pasta strainer. Playing catch with bullets was a young man's game. But give it up? It was a tough decision because nothing satisfies like killing those who attack truth, justice, and the American way.

I didn't need to ask where my girlfriend was. Sylvia hated violence. Most likely, she dumped me. Amnesia can be a blessing sometimes. To win her back I would need a softer, gentler occupation.

But going home?

The farm. The family. The homestead outside of Donnellson, Iowa where generations of Stearnes had been born, lived and died without getting any farther away than Keokuk. It was home. A warm place that smelt of cookies and bacon and meatloaf and dust in the attic. It was Saturday night keggers behind Grafton's barn and Sunday morning breakfast at Agatha's Diner out on the highway. And the hayseeds I'd left behind when I joined the Army. I'd seen Paris, Nairobi, Tokyo since then. Going home would be like going to hell. It was predictable, and I probably deserved it, but I really didn't want to go.

"What happened to Dan Sweeny?" I asked. "I thought your genius-fiancé was going to—"

"Don't make this about me." She shook a finger at me. "Let's keep focused on you and filling in that gap in your memory. There's a cop with a name I can't pronounce asking questions all the time. Get him squared away, then you can be my farm manager. Get up. Let's get you home. We can talk there."

She pulled the sheet back and tossed a pair of pants and a shirt my way.

Doc slapped a bottle of pills on my chest. "Twice a day, every twelve hours. Like clockwork."

I read all sixteen syllables on the label. None of them meant anything to me. "What are they for?"

He looked across my chest at my sister. She met his gaze and gave a slow shake, no.

"Your recovery." Doc patted my shoulder. "Take them all. Don't miss even one."

I yanked Joyce's forearm. "I'm not crazy."

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“No one said you were.” She gave me that condescending big-sister look. “They help your brain with your ... amnesia.”

We left the hospital in my sister’s usual whirlwind. She barked orders at nurses and doctors and passers-by. She drove. I’d never won an argument with her, so I kept my mouth shut.

I stared out the window and wondered why I ever chose the soldier’s life. You get shot, tortured, killed, and all that. A man planning a future might want a less dangerous profession.

A welcome-back banner sagged across my front yard. Balloons. A crowd. Anoshni ran out jumping and barking and nearly knocked me down. The well-wishers ranged from division presidents to janitors. They shouted greetings and waved and hooted. A good number of my fellow Sabel Industries employees were dying to get a selfie with the boss’s favorite bullet chewer.

Tania, Miguel, and Dhanpal hugged me and patted my back. Bianca and Emily showed off their shiny new wedding bands with happy grins. The Major stood alone at the far end of the living room observing me with her analytical gaze. One after another, people shook my hand and told me they were glad I made it. Then they asked what happened. None of them waited for an answer. Seemed like they already knew.

No one mentioned the two important people who were missing from the guest list.

Everyone had a good time. None of it involved me. People like a reason to party and my survival was this week’s excuse. As the party raged, I wandered through the house looking for Mercury. When you come to rely on your personal relationship with god—even if he’d been reduced to panhandling for the last fifteen hundred years—you expect him to be present for your homecoming.

Void. Emptiness. Looming existentialism.

My best friend Miguel followed me around the way he did on his first deployment. Back then, he’d heard about my legendary survival rate and figured I was favored by a deity. He didn’t care which. When I left the Rangers to work at Sabel Security, he trailed along a few weeks later.

We stepped into my empty home office. He wrapped me in a bear hug. “Thought I lost you this time.”

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At six-four, two-forty, he wasn't the kind of guy you peeled yourself away from even when the hug was way awkward. We'd been through too many firefights together, lost too many friends, cheated death too many times. The stress was taking its toll on him. He choked down a sob and let go and turned away.

Emotions were a concept the stoic Navajo avoided. Everyone he'd befriended wound up dead. Except me. So far.

"Where's Sylvia?" I asked.

"Went back to Monaco." He checked the lock on my gun cabinet. "Cops said she left right off. She changed her phone number and ..."

I waited for him to finish his sentence. He didn't.

Yeah. Fine. None of my friends liked Sylvia. We'd had a strained relationship from day one. Fundamental differences tangled up in an unhealthy attraction. On again, off again, like a strobe light for over a year. We had no business being attracted to each other, a veteran and a movie star. TV star anyway. In France. She once demanded I give up the unusually violent job of protecting the company owner and Olympian Pia Sabel. Never an option. But then we rang in the New Year together in Paris. Totally lit and no arguing. At the top of the Eiffel Tower, we made plans for Mardi Gras. I remember thinking if we made it to Easter, I'd pop the big question.

My memory gets foggy between New Years and Epiphany. After that, it's all blank. Had she left me? Not that I could blame her. What woman would settle down with a man who landed in the hospital all the time?

The Major, Sabel Industries' CEO, leaned her head around the door jamb. "Miguel, could you give us a minute?"

He lumbered past her, glad to be out of there before any more *feelings* surfaced.

She stepped in, closed the door and backed against it, her hands still on the knob. Her gaze ran over me from top to bottom. I returned the inspection. She was an uptight, squared-away former MP who kept her Afro in a bun so tight she'd never need a facelift.

I asked, "Where's Ms. Sabel?"

Asking the whereabouts of our billionaire boss seemed a reasonable question. The Major looked at me like I'd passed gas in church.

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“Gone.” She looked at the floor. “She’s been getting worse, Jacob. One minute she’s doing fine, the next she swan dives into a canyon of suspicion. I mean, it’s understandable after all. It’s been a traumatic year since ...”

She took a deep breath. I didn’t need a reminder. Neither did she.

“It’s been building like a volcano.” The Major caught my wandering gaze. “The congressional hearings, the endless accusations, the daily stress of running a major corporation. She went into a tailspin in February. Do you remember any of that?” She waited for me to respond. I had nothing. She continued, “Depression, agitation, anxiety, lashing out—at you. At me. At Tania.” She sighed. “Dr. Harrison diagnosed her as ... well, he said she needed medications and therapy.”

Dr. Harrison had prescribed plenty of happy pills for my problems. I never took them. “What did he give her?”

“Don’t know. She took Stefan and the kids on a spiritual quest instead.”

Not her best traveling companion. Her boyfriend Stefan discovered more self-righteousness than religion after some serious trauma of his own. “Did that help?”

“Stefan came back from Nepal early. They’d had a fight. A series of fights, actually.” She blew out a breath. “He said she needed more help than he could give. Something about protecting his kids.”

“Where is she now?”

The Major grabbed my arm, her voice shaky. “Stefan found her phone, passport, all her ID—” she choked “—hidden in his luggage.”

The Major let that sentence hang in the air for a long time. Her eyes darted from my left cornea to my right and back several times.

“I’m worried about her.” She squeezed hard. “Jacob, you have to find her.”

My most recent wound ached. It had torn through the scars from Fallujah, or maybe they were from Jalalabad. Maybe both. It reminded me that I’d served my time. My sister was right—my career path was leading straight to a party with Orcus, god of the underworld. If I hoped to win Sylvia back, start a family, have a normal life, something had to change.

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Someone else could save the boss.

Although. She did give me a Ferrari. And a bonus big enough to buy the house we were partying in. There was that. On the other hand, I'd been beaten, stabbed, arrested, shot, tortured, and gone through hell too many times to count for her. So where did that leave me? Golden-handcuffed to a billionaire? Did that make me the battered-partner?

I tried to give the Major a flat-out no.

All I could muster was, "Why me?"

"Times like this, she only listens to you. You're the brother she never had." The Major waited a beat. "I got word; Justice is going to subpoena her about the Popov killing. They claim Tarasov will testify against her." The Major dropped her voice to a whisper. "If she's feeling alone right now, imagine how low she'll drop when all that gets brought up again."

I chewed the inside of my cheek while I thought about the crowd of friends who were oh-so-happy to see me. My girlfriend fled New Orleans because she wanted to spend the rest of her life with a guy who had a good chance of waking up every morning. I considered my memory gap, my apparently-mythical god, and my boss ghosting on everyone when we needed her most. My ancestral home on the Great Plains loomed in my future like a dark prison silhouetted against the prairie at dusk.

I said, "I quit."

CHAPTER 2

ON THE SOUTHERN COAST OF France, EP Scott took a seat by the café window and dropped her purse in the other chair. A feral cat slithered down the narrow lane outside, staying low-key in the pre-dawn darkness. She pulled out a worn copy of *Death and Treason* and attempted to read. Useless. Visions of Stefan popped into her head. His shocked face, his adopted toddlers recoiling in fear behind his leg, her voice rattling the windows. She couldn't blow up like that ever again.

And that was only the latest in a string of explosive anger and corrosive distrust. She had to get it under control. She could do it. Screw Dr. Harrison and his diagnosis. She clenched a fist so tight her fingernails dug into her palm. What had made her think Stefan was in league with President Roche? Just because he said, *One person can make the difference. You are that person.*

Thinking she was the only person who could make a difference is what led to her current problems. Maybe she should give it up and go home. Maybe accepting Chuck Roche as president, murderous and duplicitous as he was, was better than the trail of burned relationships in her rearview mirror. Was the envelope worth everything she'd gone through to get it? Did it really hold the key to an international conspiracy based? Or, had her imagination blown everything out of proportion? She shuddered at the thought. Even if it was evidence, pursuing it had cost too much. Her stomach soured with a mixture of anger and regret.

Three teenaged girls came in from the street, babbling in French. Swimmers, she guessed from their physique. Out for a bite before early morning laps. Two of them ordered hot chocolate with a croissant and jam. The third, the one with a honey-colored braid, looked at the floor.

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EP instinctively knew the girl's problem. She'd seen it all over the world, in every country and culture.

EP took a hundred euro note from her purse, the smallest bill she had, crumpled it, rose, and crossed to the counter. She tossed the money behind the girl's left foot.

"You dropped something," EP said in her bad French.

The girl looked up quickly. She followed EP's gaze to the wrinkled bill then back, a touch of fear in her innocent eyes.

"I saw it fall from your bag just now." EP nodded at the note.

Vivian, the gray-haired proprietor and EP's landlord, repeated her words with the verbs properly conjugated. The girl looked at the bill again. EP turned away and picked up the complimentary newspaper from the counter and carried it back to her table. She kept the teenager in her peripheral vision.

The hungry girl picked up the wadded money like a found nugget of gold. A smile ripped across her face. She turned to Vivian and ordered a hot chocolate, croissant, and jam. Their chatter resumed as they took their pastries out into the dark streets. As she dashed out the door, the swimmer glanced back at EP and said, "Merci."

EP Scott ignored the girl and kept her gaze fixed on the headline. At first, she didn't trust her translation. She pressed on through the article. US President Chuck Roche had claimed Sabel Technologies spied on Americans by hacking their webcams. An outright lie that he didn't bother to back up with a shred of evidence. Despite his unsubstantiated claim, news outlets published his words which gave them credence. On top of that, Roche had referred the company to the Justice Department for criminal prosecution. His outrageous behavior inflamed her anger—which drove her mad.

She had to choose between continuing her costly mission and giving in. Going home and accepting Roche as a legitimate president might calm her obsession and save forty thousand jobs. Or she could stay on her mission and risk destroying herself chasing sketchy evidence from a stolen envelope. One that, in the end, might prove worthless.

Her fists clenched again.

She took a quick survey of the room, worried she might be muttering

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out loud. In the kitchen behind a thin wall, Vivian moved through her morning routine. Cupboards slapped open, racks of buns slid into place.

The Texas BBQ Café was the only place she'd found with strong American coffee in Antibes, a humble town halfway between Cannes and Nice. Vivian opened early and kept a light French breakfast going until the crowds came in for the pulled pork lunch.

Someone came in the back door and stopped in the kitchen. They spoke in English. Expat Central, she recalled from her brief conversations with Vivian. Behind her, she heard the newcomer grab two mugs and pour coffee in each. His footfalls marched straight to her table.

She sank back into her decision to go home or stay. Would the secrets hidden just a few blocks away produce the evidence to take down the most important—

He said, "What do you want?"

"To get that idiot out of the White House." While her finger stabbed at Roche's picture in the paper, she looked up to find a lean, older man with a cup in each hand. "How could anyone vote for that lying, racist, misogynist bastard? I had proof that he hired hitmen ..." She blew out a breath. "He's torched it all by now, I'm sure."

"I meant the coffee." He set a mug in front of her and sat on her purse. "Sugar? Cream?"

"Oh. Black." Her face flushed as she watched him pull her purse out from under him and set it on the table. "Sorry, Roche gets me worked up sometimes."

He smiled and warmed his fingers on his mug. "It's pronounced row-SHAY. You don't have to like him but do him the courtesy of saying his name right. He is the president."

"Why? What courtesy has he shown anyone else?" An awkward silence followed before she remembered her manners. She picked up the mug. "Thank you."

She took a long look at him and blew across her coffee. He was older, wrinkled, weathered and gray. Then something clicked. She tilted her head, observing him closely, then turned to the framed photo on the wall. Martin Luther King led a crowd down a wide boulevard. Five faces to his left was a young likeness of the man sharing her table.

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“William Koller,” he said when her gaze returned. “But you can call me Willy-Mac like everybody does. And. Yes. That’d be me.” He nosed at the picture. “Long time ago.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m,” she hesitated because she hated lying, “EP Scott.”

He stared at her without saying anything. The silence unnerved her. She said, “Do you think one person can make a difference against tyranny? I mean, would the Civil Rights movement have happened if not for Dr. King?”

His brow knitted, he canted his head. “The Civil Rights movement was not the result of one man. It was the result of a nation waking up after the nightmare of the Holocaust and realizing it was time to come clean about racism. The movement began long before Dr. King came to the front. But that one man made a difference. A big difference.”

He waited a moment. “So, you don’t like the world as it is and you’re waiting for someone else to change it?”

EP didn’t answer. She sipped her coffee.

“Some people in my community are waiting for another Dr. King,” he said. “These people didn’t vote because none of the choices were perfect. So, they waited. And while they waited, racists took over the state legislatures. Now we have gerrymandering, voter suppression, purged voter rolls.”

She thought about his words while looking out the window. She could feel him watching her every move.

He said, “Why would a rich girl lie about her name?”

“What? I need ID to buy coffee?”

“I was in Paris when you rented the apartment from my wife.” His gaze was cold and unwavering. “You showed her ID. Anyone can get ID.”

He let the statement hang in the air while he stirred cream in his coffee. His unrelenting gaze never left her eyes.

After a long silence, she said, “I paid in advance.”

Finally, his intense scrutiny lifted. He sipped his coffee. He smacked his lips in enjoyment, then brought the cold glare back to her. He leaned forward. “You didn’t lock your door.”

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The shock made her inhale quickly. She sipped from her mug, hoping to avoid his inquiring look. Common routines were foreign to her. She once had people who locked doors, carried things, drove limos, fetched sunglasses.

“I didn’t pry,” he said. “I took a glance inside to make sure you weren’t in trouble. Called out your alias a couple times. Locked up and left. You’re accustomed to having a maid.”

“I’m messy.”

He looked her over, not in a nice way.

“What’s with all the questions?” When he didn’t answer, she asked, “Why do you think I’m rich?”

“You left ten days’ worth of dirty laundry on the floor and bought new clothes. Us regular folk tend to wash the old ones. And your new stuff doesn’t fit as well. Your old stuff was, what do they call it? Bespoke. Custom-made.”

She stopped her lips before they formed the word *ooh* and recovered by blurting something out. “It’s hard for tall women to find right-sized fashions.”

“Your passport made you thirty, but a hundred bucks says you’re twenty-eight.”

He was good, she had to give him that. She was twenty-eight and three months.

“And men go by initials.” He dropped his volume a notch as he leaned in. “JD, SC, whatever. Women don’t go by EP.”

“JK Rowling.”

“Only on the covers.” He shrugged. “Otherwise, Joanne or Jo.”

“It’s Eva. Eva Pamela Scott, if you must know. You can call me Eva if you’d rather.” The relentless questions annoyed her. “What are you doing so far from home?”

“Retired a few years back and visited here a few times.” It was his turn to look away while he sipped his coffee. “Being a curiosity is a pleasant change from being second-class.”

She flipped the newspaper over to hide Roche’s infuriating face and returned to her book. Pressing the pages to make it stay open, she pretended to read.

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Willy-Mac sat very still and moved slowly, like a hunter waiting for game. Even when he tilted back for the last drop, his gaze remained locked on her. “I don’t rent to criminals.”

The accusation took Eva by surprise. It gave her reason to rethink her choices. She could stop her masquerade, go back to the USA, and pledge fealty to the new king, or stay and take a chance on the slimmest of leads. Facing Willy-Mac’s hostility pushed her toward going home and making the best out of a horrible situation. It was the most pragmatic option. One that made her gut flip over.

“Don’t let him bother you none.” Vivian came to the table with a croissant and a cup of yogurt topped with blueberries. “Old men tend to get cranky in their old age. Being retired means being out of power.”

The couple froze, locked in a long, hard stare at each other. A silent power struggle, decades old and never resolved, stretched for an uncomfortable moment. Vivian cut it off with a *humph* and left for the kitchen.

Willy-Mac tossed the rent check on the table between them. “A shell company in the Seychelles smells like money laundering to me. I won’t have trouble or tenants who cause it. We rent our apartment to law-abiding citizens who tell the truth. Just tell me who you really are.”

She pressed her book flat again, trying to ignore him. It didn’t work. She felt his hot glare on the side of her face like a heater.

There was no sense in blaming him for thinking the worst. She’d set up the bank account months ago, the first time she’d felt the urge to flee her native country. Not even her accountants knew it existed. It was legitimate, but it didn’t feel that way. Hiding, lying, using an alias was not in her nature.

She faced Willy-Mac. “I’m Eva P. Scott like it says. It’s my money. Legal and clean.”

He chewed his bottom lip for a minute while she pretended to read. “If you’re in trouble, girl, let me help you.”

Who the hell was this guy? Maybe Chuck Roche sent him to make her life even more miserable. She didn’t know anything about Willy-Mac. What kind of name is that anyway? Just because he marched fifty years ago didn’t mean she should tell him anything.

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“I don’t need your help.” She tried to rein in the anger rising with her voice. “I’ll rent some other place. Just leave me alone.”

As soon as the words left her mouth, she regretted them to the point she wanted to crawl under the table. She kept her eyes on the page she wasn’t reading.

Vivian approached with a coffee pot.

“If you can’t tell me who you are and what you’re doing,” Willy-Mac said in a calm and soothing voice, “I can’t take a chance that danger might rain down on my family again. You’ll have to go.”

Vivian refilled the cup slowly. Then she turned and refilled Willy-Mac’s cup even more slowly.

Vivian said, “Twenty years with the Texas Rangers and you don’t know who you’re talking to? Some detective you are. It’s because you don’t pay attention to women, that’s why. Not in sports or business leastways, or you’d know her on sight. If Pia Sabel wants us to call her Eva Scott or Mother Teresa, she has her reasons.”