

**DEATH
AND
VENGEANCE**

SEELEY JAMES

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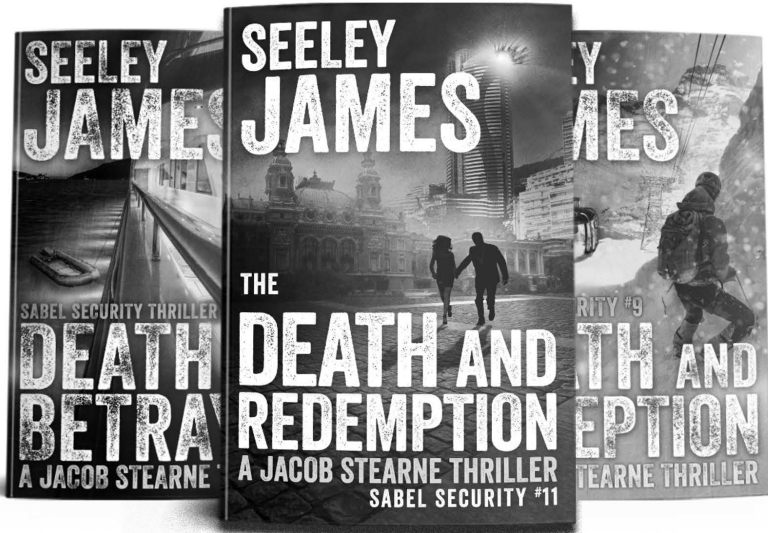
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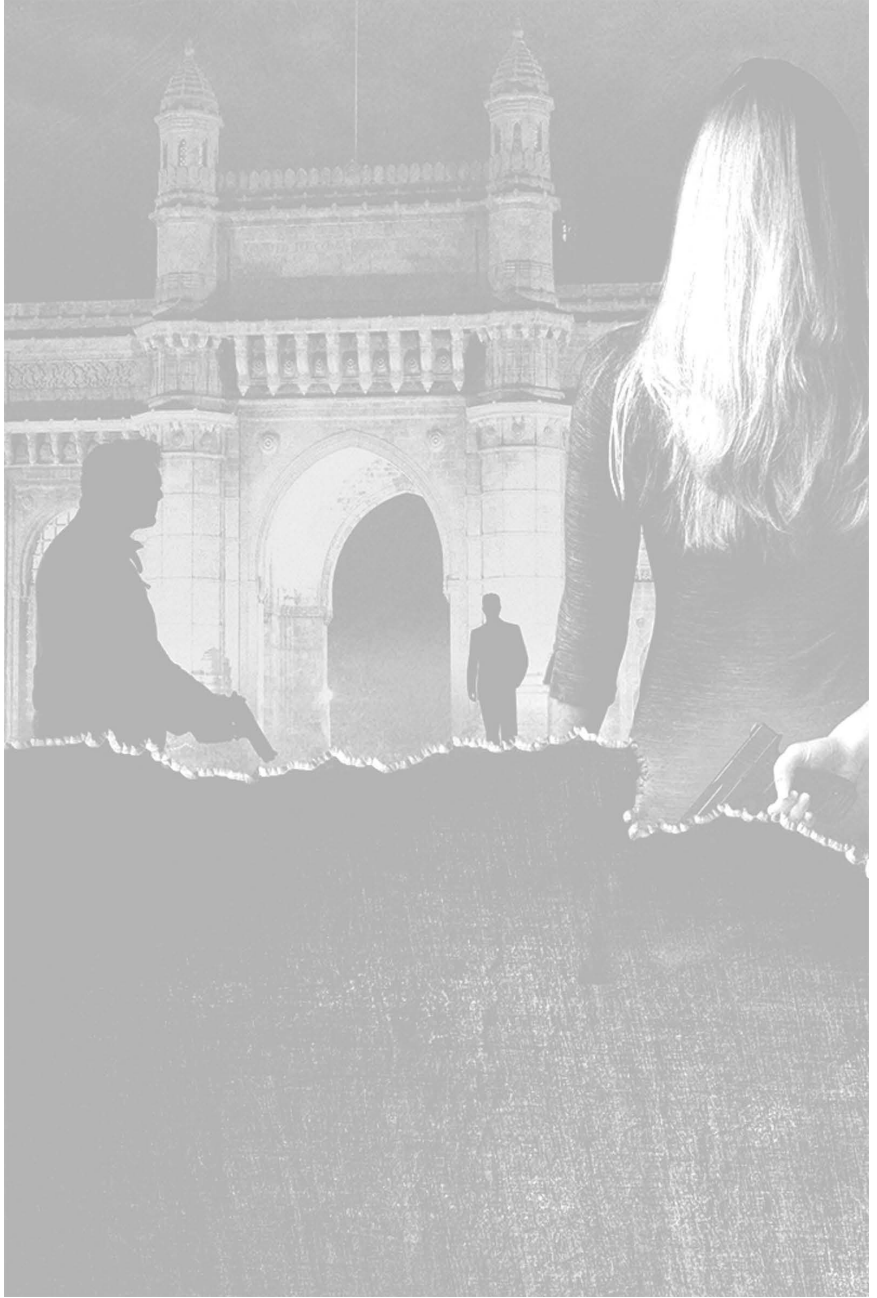
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FOR MY DAUGHTER
and our future president
Amelia

CHAPTER 1

ADMIRAL ANNIE WILKES HAD BEEN expecting to spend the rest of the day handling emergency calls about the bombing. That changed when she stepped out of the ladies' room. A pistol peeked from under a jacket draped over a stranger's arm. She scanned the Mumbai Hilton's hallway for her security detail. Five yards away, her lieutenant lay face down on the floor. Farther away, her chief of staff struggled against restraints and a gag, his arms held in check by two men in business suits.

"I don't have time for this." She turned her angry gaze to the man with the gun. "We're on the verge of a world war. There's been an attack—"

"Change of plans, Admiral," the man hissed. "You're coming with me."

He opened his suit coat to flash a red silk square sewn on the inside. Three stars were bleached into the material, two small ones with a larger one above them. The symbol of a high-ranking Redjacket.

Her anger flared. "If you're one of Roche's toadies, you're already in more trouble than you know. Now get out of here."

"It's pronounced, Row-SHAY," he snarled.

"I don't care. You're obstructing an admiral of the US—"

"You've been summoned to a special briefing." He shoved the weapon into her ribs. "We need to get our stories straight about the Saudis."

Admiral Wilkes felt her anger explode. She knew President Chuck Roche was a double-crossing bastard, but the events of the day were rapidly spiraling beyond her expectations. A quick glance around the hall gave her no hope. Five men watched her without concern. None were in

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Navy uniform. More Redjackets. The hotel employees were nowhere in sight.

“A hundred twenty-five dead sailors are my priority.” She glared at him. “I’m on my way to conduct a full investigation of the incident. If you have any relevant information about—”

He smirked. “Before the investigation, we need to have a little talk. Like I said, you’re coming with me.”

Wilkes found ten eyes impatiently awaiting her compliance. She considered screaming for help, but the meeting room was around the corner at the far end of the hall. Too far to be heard. She pulled herself up to her full five foot four and tugged her uniform straight. She looked him in the eye. “In that case, I need to get my purse.”

“You don’t need a purse.”

She leaned to him. “Once a month, a woman needs her purse if she’s going somewhere for more than an hour. Are we going to be away for more than an hour?”

“Fine.” His gaze dropped to the floor. “Where’s the purse?”

“In my room. Fourth floor.” She stared him down.

“We’ll hold the meeting there.” He pushed her toward the elevator and nodded to his associates. They dispersed around the room, covering the exits and securing the perimeter. From the bulges in their jackets, she figured they were all armed.

Wilkes prayed one of her procurement officers would step out of what had been the Fifth Fleet Suppliers Conference to rescue her. Maybe they could overwhelm her abductors. After a little thought, she realized that would turn out badly for her unarmed people. It was supposed to be three days of brown-nosing suppliers to ensure the best prices for food and fuel for the Navy. Not a venue that called for a heavily armed security detail. Besides, her people were busy. Minutes earlier, the meeting room had been turned into an emergency command center for NAVCENT after the news broke that her flagship had been sunk in the Red Sea. Everyone was calling someone, getting facts, determining casualties, assessing threats, investigating—doing their jobs.

She could handle Redjackets. She’d have to.

The Redjacket pushed the elevator button. They rode in silence to her

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floor. She checked the man's reflection in the polished metal. Twenty-plus years younger than her sixty-three, and presumably stronger. She would need to be clever.

She marched down the hall. She swept her keycard across the lock. It clacked open. She stepped inside, eyes looking for weapons, advantage, anything. She walked straight to the bathroom. He followed a step behind, his onion-breath on her neck.

Opening the bathroom door with one hand, she spun around behind it, waited until he committed to following her in, then kicked it closed with all her strength. The door banged his head into the metal frame.

Momentarily stunned, he staggered back a step. His right arm remained extended, the pistol reaching into the bathroom. Admiral Wilkes grabbed his wrist and pulled it hard against the door. Slamming her bodyweight into the wood, she closed it on his arm. Leveraging the barrel, Wilkes pried the weapon from his slackened grip and, as his hand dropped, slammed the door on his fingers.

The man let out a howl and pushed back. He charged at her full force. He clutched desperately for the pistol. Soap dishes and lotions and makeup clattered to the floor. Some part of her uniform ripped.

Still holding the pistol by the barrel, she hammered the butt into his forehead as hard as she could. He staggered backward out of the bathroom and fell on the bed. She leapt on him, hammering a second and third blow. He spasmed with a concussion.

She said, "Menopause was ten years ago, moron."

His eyes rolled up, then back. He struggled beneath her.

She pressed the pistol to his forehead. "Before I blow your brains out, tell me what you thought was going to happen."

He gurgled. His eyes rolled forward and focused for a second on her. "Suicide."

She pushed the barrel harder into his skin. "You want suicide? Fine with me."

She started to squeeze the trigger, then stopped. The pearl grip felt familiar. It had her initials engraved on it. It was her pistol. A gift from her daughter. She'd left it behind so as not to scare the civilians. A quick scan of the room revealed her open suitcase, her belongings shoved

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unceremoniously into a pile on the floor. She'd left the place ship shape five hours earlier. Only an hour after the sinking of her flagship, someone wanted to fake her suicide?

Her ship at the bottom of the Red Sea, a recent run-in with President Roche, her ship's intelligence report, followed by this Redjacket attack told her all she needed to know about the enemy she faced. Of course, they wanted her to commit suicide. Bastards. She shuddered and brought the pistol down with all her might on her would-be killer's forehead. He spasmed again. Dead or severely concussed, she didn't care.

Voices called out from the hall. Most likely the other Redjackets. President Roche's paramilitary volunteers viciously attacked the press, anti-Roche protestors, and anything else that bothered them. For the past year, in every company and government agency, people had been secretly joining the Redjackets to do President Roche's bidding. Some were true believers in the Roche agenda—whatever that was. Others joined to bolster their careers. She had hated them from the moment they first cropped up in her command.

Wilkes pressed her ear to the door. The voices receded.

She dared a peek. Two men put their ears to doors at the opposite end of the hall with Berettas held at their thighs. Trying to locate their boss' voice, she presumed. They planned to help him stage her suicide.

If she could reach the meeting room, fifty officers would shield her with their lives. But how to get off the floor? She ruled out the elevator and calculated the steps to the stairwell.

At the end of the hall, the Redjackets were listening at the last door. They would be turning around and trying the other direction. It was now or never. She ran for the stairwell.

Bangs of pistol shots reverberated in the narrow space. Plaster burst in front of her, showering her in dust. She threw open the door and turned up one flight of steps. Her hand banged against the railing. The pistol fell from her grip. It cartwheeled down two floors. She cursed and kept going. Higher up, she heard the Redjackets entering the stairwell below her. They headed downward, misdirected by the echoes of her falling weapon.

She exited onto the eleventh floor and heard the service elevator open

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behind her. A surprised maid stood with her cart, half in and half out of the compartment. The admiral gave both the woman and her cart a shove and pushed the button for the ground floor.

Running to her people for cover was no longer an option. If the Redjackets would fire on an admiral, they would turn the meeting into a blood bath. She had to lead the danger away from her staff and let them run with the bombing investigation. Her top priority was to get back to NAVCENT headquarters in Bahrain. Her chief of staff had been working on her travel but hadn't updated her on the status. The airport was physically a quarter mile away, getting around the runway to the terminal was three miles, but it may as well be a hundred when you're outnumbered four to one.

Who could she turn to? How deep could the Redjackets reach? Who could she trust to help her get back to Bahrain?

Was Bahrain even safe?

The elevator door opened to a bustling staging area. On her right, a room service waiter stood ready to push a rolling table with lunch for two onto the elevator behind her. On her left, piles of laundry in rolling hampers waited for sorting. In the near distance, she heard a voice speaking English, "You cover the restaurant exits. I've got housekeeping."

She fled for the nearest door.

Outside, she stopped for a breath behind bushes meant to obscure the hotel's service bay from arriving guests. Wilkes put her hand in her jacket pocket for her phone. She found only torn fabric. Fearing the worst, she checked her medals. The special one was still there looking like a riflery ribbon.

Two men in chef's white rounded the bush. One lit a cigarette. The other texted on his phone.

She grabbed the phone out of his hand and punched in the US country code and number for Bobby Jenkins. She thumbed out a text. "It's me, Annie. In danger. Get that friend of yours, the guy with the security company to send help. Armed help. Trust no one. Borrowed phone. Leaving Mumbai Hilton. Will contact you when I can. HELP!"

She pressed send and waited until it read, "delivered." She handed back the phone and ran down the alley.

CHAPTER 2

MIGUEL AND I WERE PICKING off targets in the shooting range in my basement when Tania smacked me on the butt. I secured my Glock. Miguel did the same after a side glance and raised eyebrows. Tania's wild hair shook while she said something that wasn't registering; partially because I still had my earmuffs on and partially because Mercury, winged messenger of the Roman gods, was shouting over her.

Mercury said, *Check the Screaming Eaglet Tania's pimping.*

Mercury and his friends had fallen on hard times about fifteen hundred years ago. They've been getting by on handouts and hope ever since. He found me a split second before an Iraqi sniper's bullet plowed a furrow through my skull. He insisted I return the favor by evangelizing for him. He and his pals dream of returning Western Civilization to its former glory. A state in which all surrounding lands are conquered, all possessions seized, and all survivors paraded down the Appian Way. He wears a skimpy toga, a helmet with bronze wings and sandals. Oh, and he's black. He insists the Roman artists decided against realism in favor of fashioning marble and bronze that let the white population see what they wanted.

Mercury pointed. *Bro, you listening to me? 101st survivor over there. Tell him about me. Give him your whole Jupiter-saved-me-from-a-life-of-sin schtick.*

As the god of eloquence, Mercury decided to talk like a rapper because they represent the future of American culture. At least, he thinks he talks like a rapper. He comes off like my grandfather at Christmas dinner saying, "Let's get this party lit!" But Mercury was right about one thing. There was a new guy in the room.

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Three feet behind Tania stood a young man at parade rest, his alert, penetrating eyes fixed on me. Short and built like a bantam weight fighter, he seemed calm, relaxed, unconcerned. And yet his peripheral vision roved over everything in the room from the light switch on the wall behind him to the dead cockroach under the paper target on the left, eighty feet downrange.

There's no mistaking a soldier who's fought for his life. The experience leaves an indelible mark. The US Army is the best trained, best equipped, most invincible fighting force in the history of civilization. No one on Earth can survive its unleashed wrath. It's a smooth machine that never fails to achieve its objectives. But—every now and then—a guy radios in “left” when he means right, “northeast” when he means “north,” or “kilometers” when he means “meters.” One little mistake can leave a squad exposed to enemy fire. Plans evaporate, people make wrong turns, the whole machine breaks down. An unbeatable soldier loses his advantage over the ragtag locals. He reverts to caveman instincts for survival. The world around him becomes a universe of death. His eyes take in every object for miles around, evaluates it as friend or foe, threat or benign, useful or useless. He makes instant decisions that—if right—will keep him alive for one more second so he can take another step without dying.

The man I'd locked gazes with had just gotten home from the war. By my guess, he'd been separated from his unit in a nasty firefight. Might have taken some friendly fire before getting back. At one point in his recent past, he'd been convinced he was going to die and managed to survive on his wits alone. A day like that makes a man swear on his family Bible to never lose situational awareness again. Not for a second.

A knife stabbed through my heart. My worst deployments cascaded over my soul in a tsunami of fear and desperation. My skyrocketing heartrate pounded in my ears, and adrenaline coursed through my veins like ice water, as if it were yesterday. In my peripheral vision, I saw Miguel—my fellow Ranger through five of my eight deployments—making the same calculation and coming to the same conclusion with the same reaction.

“What the hell are you doing?” Tania's hand gripped my bicep and

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yanked me to face her. “Is that a man?”

She pointed at the body we’d tied to a post between the targets at the far end of the space.

“No,” I stated the obvious. “That’s Yuri Belenov.”

Mercury said, *Shoulda shot him like I told you, homie. Now, she’s going to make you explain stuff like why you let Belenov play with your laptop.*

I said, *I had to sleep sooner or later.*

Mercury said, *Sleep it off, you mean.*

“Did you kill him?” As the words left Tania’s lips, Yuri raised his head and pleaded for salvation with his bloodshot eyes.

She pushed the table up and marched down the range. The accents of her multiracial heritage shifted from Asian to African to Latin as she moved through the stark lighting.

“Jacob Stearne.” I stuck my hand out toward the new kid.

His eyes were still on Tania but snapped to me quickly. He checked my hand for weapons, then checked that my pistol was still stowed, before shaking hands. “Cody Jefferson.”

Miguel stuck his hand out for his turn. “Did you say Cody?”

Cody glared up at the big guy. “We’re not all DeShawns, Darnells, and Trevons.”

“And we’re not all Two Feathers.” Miguel laughed and slapped Cody’s shoulder. When a six four, two hundred thirty-pound Navajo laughs, everyone breathes easier. “Chill, you’ll be fine here.”

“What the hell were you thinking?” Tania pushed the Russian at me. “He’s a human being. You could’ve killed him.”

“He hacked my car and won’t reset it.”

“I don’t give a damn about your car.” Tania looked back and forth at us. “Get packed and get over to Sabel Gardens. You’ve got a mission. You’re leaving on the hour.”

“It’s my day off.”

Mercury leaned over Tania’s shoulder. *Hey now, brutha, when Pia-Caesar-Sabel sends you on a mission, you warm up your Veni, Vidi, Vici speech—none of this day-off bullshit.*

I said, *I’m not going on any more of Ms. Sabel’s spur-of-the-moment,*

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unplanned missions. Too many people get killed doing that.

Mercury said, *That's what mortals are for, fool—dying at Caesar's whim. Quit thinking you have a right to the pursuit of happiness and grab your gear.*

Cody's eyes took in the Russian's cuffed hands and shackled feet without betraying his thoughts on kidnapping. He said, "Yo. A firing range in your basement?"

I turned to Tania. "Your kid's sharp."

"I mean, is that legal?" he asked.

I looked him over. "Probably."

Tania set to work untying the gag in Belenov's mouth. "You can goof off later. Ms. Sabel wants you there now."

"I broke up with you because you're a terrible liar."

She left the gag halfway down and faced me. "You broke up with ME?"

Miguel laughed.

"Stay out of this, Two Feathers." She spun to him and stuck her chin out. "You're going with him."

"This your first day, Cody?" I gave the new guy a smile.

Mercury waved his arms. *Hey, dawg. I think Cody can see me. Can he see me? Ask him.*

I said, *No one can see a figment of my imagination. PTSD-induced schizophrenia, the doctors said. I'm insane, you don't exist. Deal with it.*

"Yes, sir." Cody straightened up.

"101st Airborne?" I asked.

"Yes, sir." He did a doubletake, unsure how I knew. "Screaming Eagles."

"Good outfit. Two tours?"

"Yes, sir."

Mercury acted like a drill sergeant. He prowled around the young man. *Got into a jam in Somalia. They ran from Al-Shabaab fighters only to fall into friendly fire. He left some friends back there. But he fought with honor and distinction.*

"Somalia?" I asked. "Lose some guys?"

He tried to suppress his curiosity as he nodded. "You?"

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I pointed at myself and Miguel. “75th Rangers.”

He dipped his head half a millimeter out of respect. Which was a lot for Airborne.

I asked, “Did you hear President Roche wants Congress to declare war on Saudi Arabia?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You OK with that?”

“Circumstances be a bit suspicious, sir. Can’t see Saudis pulling off sinking a ship. But. Not my call, sir.”

“Going to re-enlist if they approve his declaration?” I asked.

“Lotsa good people could go down in that.” He shook his head as if he already felt the pain of losing brothers still in the service.

Exactly how I felt. Not that any of us could stop it.

“Hey,” Tania stepped between us. “Don’t be ignoring the topic. I gave you an order. Get moving, soldier.”

Cody’s gaze never wavered from mine. I asked over Tania’s head, “Are you on Ms. Sabel’s personal detail now?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What’s your impression of the boss?”

He looked at the three of us, wondering how to give an honest answer without sounding like a brown-noser. “She’s yoked, sir. Never seen a woman that big before.”

“Tall,” I said. “Never call a woman big. Especially one who could rip your arm off.”

“Yes, sir.” He glanced at Tania with an expression that said, will never happen again.

“Were you there when Ms. Sabel asked Tania to go on whatever mission she’s trying to dump on me?”

His gaze slid to the back of Tania’s head before coming back to me. “Yes, sir.”

Tania slinked into the corner.

I asked, “What was the mission?”

“Ms. Sabel ask Agent Tania to get busy finding someone named Admiral Wilkes in Mumbai.”

We all turned to Tania, even Belenov.

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“Can’t face going back to Mumbai?” I asked her.

“Did you mess with his car?” she asked Belenov.

“We were negotiating,” the Russian said with his light accent. “I’ve been pardoned, but Jacob does not care—”

“I don’t care about your pardon either,” she snapped. “Get his car going again.”

Belenov wiggled his zip-tied wrists behind his back. “I need a laptop.”

Tania made a beeline for the stairs to get cutters.

“You can send Dhanpal,” I said to her back.

She stopped in her tracks three steps up. “He’s covering a shortage in Vancouver.”

“His grandparents live in Mumbai. He speaks the language. And, Vancouver’s closer.”

I thought the ethnic advantage would tip the scales. No one cared about having a second generation Mumbaikar—who also happened to be a decorated Navy SEAL—on staff. People want quantifiable data. Everyone in the room whipped out their phones to check my math. A few begrudging grunts of admiration escaped my doubters.

“Not as dumb as you look,” Tania said. “Closer by three hundred something miles.”

Cody asked, “How did you get that?”

“He gets messages from god,” Miguel said.

Cody did another doubletake. I frowned at Miguel. Whiplash would claim the kid if we kept telling him things he wasn’t ready to hear.

“Teamwork,” Tania said. “Pia’s all pissed off about the country getting polarized. She doesn’t want that happening in her company. I could sell it to her as teamwork. Dhanpal’s the best on the team for the job.”

“And—bonus—it’s actually true.” I nodded at Tania. “But you’ll have to go back to Mumbai sooner or later.”

“Not today.” She blushed and looked away. With a touch of pride, she added, “Jaz is taking me to the Inn at Little Washington tonight.”

I wondered if her boyfriend understood what dinner at the fanciest restaurant in DC did for her expectations. He was a rich kid from the best

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side of town. She escaped the street gangs of Brooklyn by joining the Army. Jaz Jenkins, son of pharmaceutical king Bobby Jenkins, was a prize catch. For a second, I considered calling Jaz and telling him to bring a ring or change the destination to a place with plastic-coated menus, but it wasn't any of my business.

"Make you a deal." Tania thumbed at Cody. "I'll dump this mission on Dhanpal if you take numb-nuts here."

Cody took the insult without showing any emotion. He glanced at me and said, "I can un-hack a car."

Tania didn't make deals that easily. Maybe there was something wrong with the new kid. If it were just back-from-battle adjustment issues, she would've been there for him like a mother hen. She could've told him about coming home after I pulled her out of a burning Humvee. She wouldn't dump the kid on me for anything simple.

Mercury said, *Betcha Cody's got dirt on Tania, my brutha. Dirt on Tania could come in handy in the event of any future negotiations.*

My used god was right, there had to be a story in there somewhere. New guys were assigned as tag-alongs until they were ready for going alone. Tagging behind Tania, who had no boundaries, probably led to dirt of some kind. Maybe he witnessed something embarrassing to my lovely and constant ex. And Cody was green enough to talk about it.

I turned to Tania. "Deal."