

**DEATH
AND
CONSPIRACY**

SEELEY JAMES

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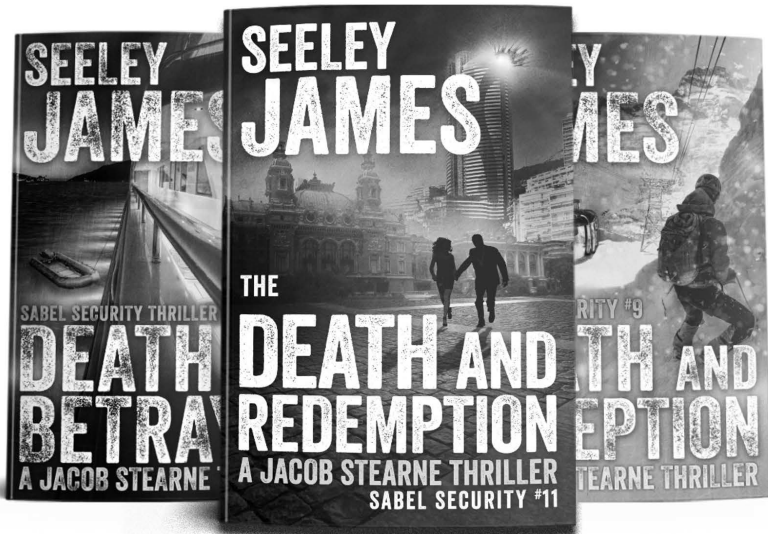
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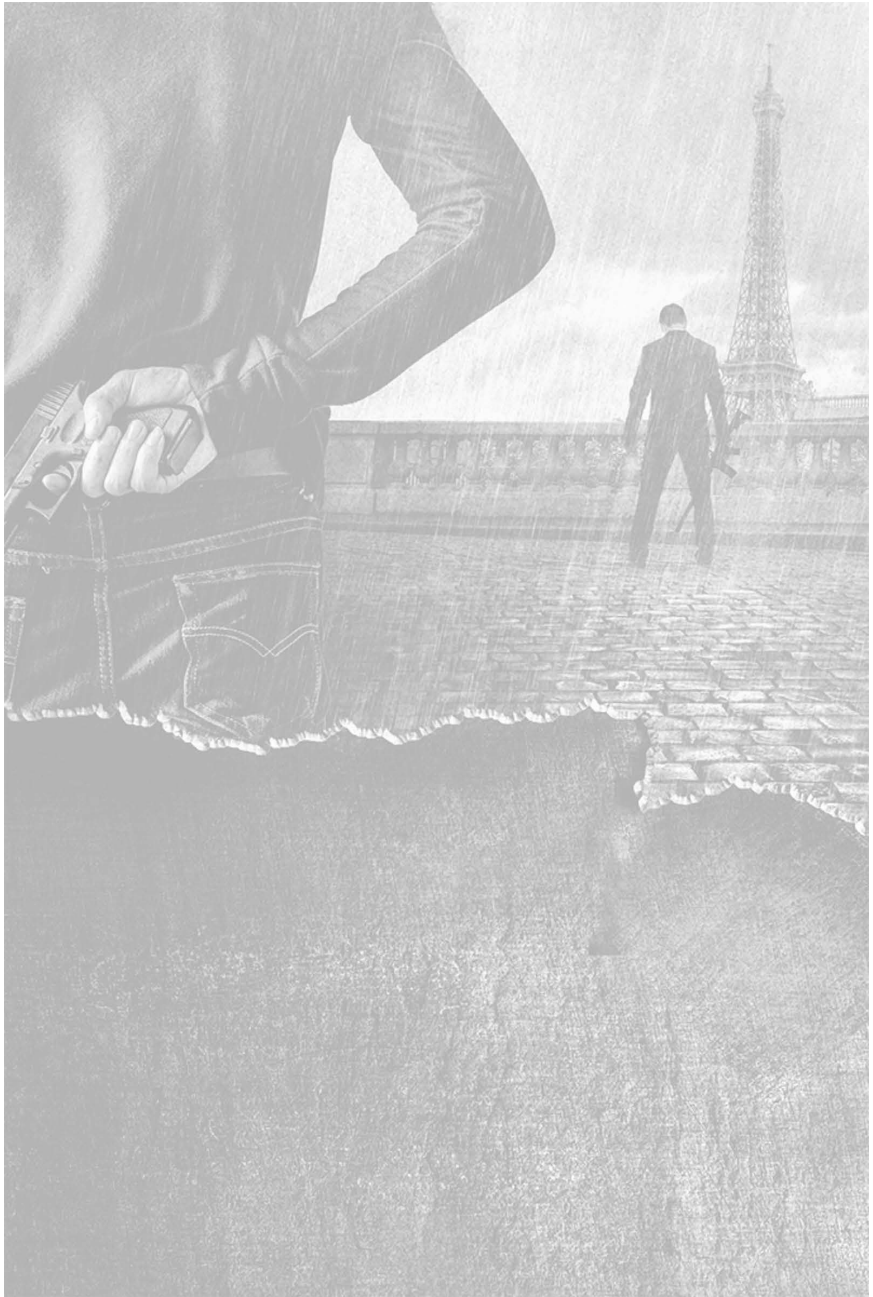
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FOR MY SON
and future conscience of corporate America
Christopher

CHAPTER 1

BRADY BLED OUT RIGHT WHERE he dropped, slumped against the bed with his knees bent and his feet against the wall of the tiny room. Ace stared at the blood. On the other side of Brady, Diego did the same. More blood poured out than Ace had ever seen before. It flowed down Brady's chest and onto the floor where it pooled around his butt. They kept watching as his face faded to lifeless gray. Then they couldn't look anymore.

Ace wiped the razor on Brady's shirt, folded it, and slipped it back in his pocket.

"Had to be done," Ace said.

"Si," his partner replied.

Ace looked up at the small window, canted into the attic roof. He pulled the thin curtain and peered through the gap. Four feet of sheet-metal roofing separated them from their nearest neighbor. In Paris, cheap hotels huddled together like homeless people around a barrel fire.

He checked their surroundings. Nothing moved. No lights. No sounds.

"Clear." Ace nodded. "Nobody's up at this hour."

Diego nodded. Their eyes dropped to Brady again.

"Hell." Ace tugged at his beard. "We'll deal with it. How much did he tell them?"

Diego fished Brady's phone out of the mess, wiped it with his shirttail, and checked. In his thick Spanish accent, he said, "He say not knowing *destino*, ehm, destination."

"Turn that thing off. They could trace it."

Diego checked the nightstand and found a sewing kit. Using the

SEELEY JAMES

needle, he pushed the SIM card out.

They looked at Brady again. Then at each other.

“Should we abort?” Ace asked. “What am I thinking. Everyone’s counting on us. We recalibrate, that’s all. We got this.”

“*Si*, we got this.” Diego nodded. “We walk instead. Much traffic anyway.”

“We use the alternate. We can make it work.”

“No difference. We die before hour of lunch anyway.”

“Don’t be saying that shit.” Ace pushed Diego’s shoulder. “We go in, spray some lead, run for the river. On foot, that’s all. Extra thirty seconds. We got this.”

Diego looked down at Brady’s blood spattered down his shirt and pants. “I shower.”

He handed the phone and SIM card to Ace and slid into the tiny bathroom.

“Yeah, I’ll put it on a delivery truck,” Ace said to himself. “They’ll chase it all over town.”

Ace grabbed the duffle bag of their old clothes.

“Hey, give me your stuff.” He knocked on the bathroom door and opened it. Diego stood staring at a pocket-sized picture of a pretty girl with short hair. Ace said, “Hey, gimme that too. No trace, remember?”

Diego kissed the girl’s picture, then handed it and his clothes to his partner. He said, “Go fast. They find us. Day terminate, ehm, before we commence.”

“Just get in the damn shower.” Ace regretted his sharp tone the instant he said it. With only hours to go, this was a time for unity. “For ROSGEO.”

He held out his fist.

Diego observed him for a moment, apparently forgiving him as he did. Then he bumped Ace’s fist. “*Para el* ROSGEO.”

Ace marched through the hall and creaked down the worn, ancient stairway to the lobby. Outside, he started looking for an unlocked delivery vehicle. The streets were empty. The scent of baking pastries wafted his way. So did the smell of garbage as he passed trashcans set out for pickup. Which meant there had to be a garbage truck somewhere

DEATH AND CONSPIRACY

nearby. He kept walking.

The tension in the back of his mind came to the fore as he strode down the cobblestones. He couldn't believe Brady was a snitch. How had that gotten past everyone? Maybe someone in the leadership knew about him. Maybe there was another traitor in their ranks who'd protected Brady. He pushed it out of his mind. Useless to ponder that question at this point. When he and Diego returned, hailed as heroes, they'd ask questions then. And there would be hell to pay.

He concentrated on the task at hand. Everyone was counting on them to put things in motion. They had a contingency plan in case Brady didn't show. They always knew the car would be risky. Cops. Blockades. Breakdowns. They'd just do it on foot. No problem.

He visualized their secondary route. He could see the scene as if he were a bird just over their shoulders. They walk into the narthex, calm and easy. They shed the tan overcoats. Now they're raising their rifles, flipping the switch to full auto, down the center aisle, firing left and right and behind. All the time, keeping a wary eye out for hero-wannabes. Put people down quickly. The magazines run dry. Toss the empty rifles. They shout their phrases for the survivors to remember and fear. They run out through the north transept. Dumping the second overcoat, the black one, they run hard across the sidewalk. A right on Rue Saint-Sulpice, left on Rue Mabillon, through the little mall, walking now, crossing Boulevard Saint Germain, to Rue de Seine. From there, five hundred yards to the river on a sunny spring morning. Their man waits in a red boat. They step aboard. Done.

Should they save time by skipping the overcoat ruse? Nah. People see men in tan come in, they see men in black do the shooting, they see men in t-shirts leaving. The key to survival is not looking like the guys who killed a hundred people.

A hundred people. Ace liked that. They'd be at the top of the list. Above Oslo. Above Christchurch.

Ace came out of his meditation and looked around. No garbage trucks. A street sweeper the size of a Mini Cooper rounded the corner ahead of him. It moved as slowly as an old lady with a walker.

He put the SIM card back in Brady's phone and turned it back on. He

SEELEY JAMES

lifted the flap on the back of the sweeper as he rounded it. Without breaking stride, he tossed in Brady's phone and watched it drive away. Two blocks later, he dumped the duffel full of their old clothes and their phones in a dumpster. He took a circuitous route, checking for anyone following or watching. He was clean by the time he got back.

Diego leaned against the window. He had his gear on. His rifle was neatly concealed inside the tan overcoat, the black coat underneath that. He fingered a string of beads and mumbled to himself in Spanish.

Ace's overcoats and rifle lay on the bed. Diego had set it all out for him. Nice, but with six hours to go, he didn't feel like suiting up.

"Where'd you think we're going, huh?" Ace waved his hands in the air. "You think we're gonna walk around like that until it's time?"

Diego nodded at the gear. "No stay here." Then he looked at Brady and sniffed.

Ace checked out the corpse. Brady smelled like shit. Literally. He'd forgotten, dead people crap their pants when they die.

Diego held out his fist. "ROSGEO *por siempre*."

Ace knew his partner was right. If they were committed to the cause, staying in the room was a risk that could jeopardize the mission. He bumped Diego's fist. "ROSGEO forever."

CHAPTER 2

SOMETHING WENT WRONG WITH MY girlfriend.

I trudged along the stone-paved streets at dawn wearing my blue jeans and black leather jacket over a t-shirt that read, “That which does not kill me—should run.” I was thinking things over. There were no real indicators I could put my finger on, but when I said we should step out for coffee, Jenny offered to join me “later.” Something in her tone of voice. Something in her distant gaze.

What happened? Last night we were thirsty for each other. I did my Julius Caesar impression, *Vini, Vidi, Vici*. She channeled the Whore of Babylon. Laughter and romping ensued.

This morning, she was different.

A shop lady dragged a stand filled with bouquets onto the sidewalk in front of her store. Figuring flowers might perk Jenny up, I picked one. The lady took one look at my face, smiled, and told me they were free for lovers. At least, I think that’s what she said. I studied Arabic and Pashto to get through my eight tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan. French never came up. I thanked her, sniffed the bouquet, and kept strolling.

We’d had a storybook romance, the kind you read about in romance novels. If you read that kind of thing. Which I don’t. So, I guess it was how I imagined a storybook romance goes. I’d saved her mother’s life, which led to Jenny getting a pardon. As soon as she got out of prison, she came to my house to say thank you in person. Come to think of it, that doesn’t sound like a storybook romance at all. Anyway. One thing led to another. Two weeks later, I invited her for a getaway weekend. I was thinking something like a bed-and-breakfast in the Shenandoah Valley.

SEELEY JAMES

Cozy and affordable and nearby.

Then I made the mistake of telling my boss, Pia Sabel, about my plans. She thought Jenny Jenkins would prefer Paris. After all, Jenny's the daughter of Bobby Jenkins, the billionaire drug lord—I mean, founder of Jenkins Pharmaceuticals. Since no one can say no to Ms. Sabel, especially when she insists on paying and providing a private jet, the next thing I knew we were in Paris, staying in the Hotel Lutetia on the Left Bank.

It turned out Jenny had been to Paris so many times it was like going to Walgreens. Her dad rented out Napoleon's Tomb for her ninth birthday. For my ninth, Dad filled a barn bin with dried soybeans so we could jump in them. Things are different for farm boys in Iowa.

There was an upside. Instead of going to see the fire damage at Notre Dame or visiting the Louvre, she wanted to spend the entire trip in bed. I was fine with that.

Then this morning happened.

My brain came back to the street in front of me. Two men hauled tables and chairs out of a café and placed them on the sidewalk. I put my flowers on a table and dropped into a wicker chair. One of the men said something about not being open yet, but the other guy pulled him away.

I said, *What did I do wrong? I made sure she was satisfied several times over. Wait. She wasn't faking it, was she?*

Mercury, winged messenger of the Roman gods, pulled up a chair next to me. *If she be faking an orgasm when you're going downtown like a Detroit rapper, who is she cheating?*

Sometimes it's nice to have a god you can chat with. Most of them are invisible and mute. I enjoy our little chats. Sometimes. But every now and then, the diagnosis of my Army psychiatrists rolls through my head like a thunderstorm. "PTSD-induced schizophrenia," they said. Yeah. Well. What do they know? The guys who served with me in combat considered me divinely inspired.

Mercury first came to my aid in a battle where a company of Iraqi Republican Guards had pinned down a Marine platoon. I'd been separated from my Army Ranger unit and had snuck through the combat zone lost, scared, and confused. Then, with Mercury whispering in my

DEATH AND CONSPIRACY

ear, telling me where to aim, I took out half the Iraqis attacking the Marines and scattered the rest. The Marines loved me. I got medals. From then on, my heavenly powers on the battlefield made me the soldier's soldier. Everybody wanted to transfer to my platoon.

All Mercury wanted was to return to his former glory. Just kick Christianity to the curb and reinstate the whole Roman pantheon. No problem. After fifteen hundred years, he and his buddies were done with living on food stamps and desperate for a reunion tour.

I said, *Is it me? Too much of a socio-economic divide?*

Mercury leaned in. *You want a woman like that, brutha? Really want a woman like that? Then you gotta think like a Caesar.*

I said, *I'm her master and commander in the bedroom.*

Sheeyit, dawg. Mercury rolled his eyes and leaned back. (Did I mention he's black? He cites the Judeo-Christian Bible, where it says God made man in His image. Mercury points out that the Great Leap Forward happened in Southern Africa. There were no white people in Southern Africa in the days of Adam and Eve. Therefore, all gods are black. Yeah, took me a while too—but facts are facts.) *I'm talking real Caesar, not just another white dude whipping out some cheap leather gear in a hotel room. I'm talking invading nations, burning villages, raping, pillaging...*

And that's where I tune him out. Certain aspects of civilized behavior have changed a good deal since he whispered in the ears of the rich and powerful.

I texted Jenny that I was waiting for her at the *Café de la Mairie*. She didn't reply.

Ever listen to some old guy go on about winning the state championship back in high school? Try spending an hour listening to a used god talk about the good ol' days when Julius Caesar defeated the official Roman Army under Pompey—not because he should but because he could.

Mercury said, *And that's how Julius Caesar became emperor. The lesson here is: Kill everyone who defies you.*

I said, *How'd that work out for ol' Julius in the end?*

The streets began to fill with enough vehicles to start the rhythmic

SEELEY JAMES

honking cycles peculiar to big cities. It sounded a lot like that Broadway tune by George Gershwin. What was it called? “An American in ...” somewhere.

There were no texts from Jenny on my phone when I checked for the three hundredth time. I sent her a picture of the menu and asked if she wanted me to order for her. No response.

Mercury said, *There they go again. Those two clowns been circling the block all morning, dressed like Siberians.*

I had a croissant with jam and a coffee. Alone.

Are you listening to me, homie?

Mercury’s supposed to be the god of eloquence, but tutoring William Shakespeare four hundred years ago didn’t work out for his resurrection, so he tried channeling inner-city kids. He thinks he sounds like Dr. Dre, but he comes off more like Eminem will in forty years. Desperately dated.

I’m telling you, Mercury said, those two are your ticket to fame. You kill them, and the press will love you. Glory will be ours!

Having lost track of which two people he wanted me to kill, I said, *Jenny doesn’t care about glory.*

The sun rose higher in the sky. The waiter brought more coffee. People going places began to fill the sidewalk. Singles, couples, families. It was Sunday, and many of them were filing into one big-ass church across the street.

Mercury said, *What’s the big deal about this here girl has you so distracted, brutha?*

I said, *Remember when I rescued her mom from the assassins? Back when she was an admiral. The brass tends to expect a concierge rescue. But not Admiral Wilkes. She fought and ran and knocked out bad guys like a superhero. That woman was determined to get out of there. I was impressed. When Jenny showed up, I realized the apple didn’t fall far from the tree. She was just as determined and driven as her mom. A woman like that, you can build a life together. A real partnership. We could grow old without the flame dying out.*

Mercury said, *Determined? Driven? You really want a woman like that, dude? Nothing but trouble if you ask me. In my day, women didn’t*

DEATH AND CONSPIRACY

read, they didn't vote, they didn't talk back. We had a good thing going and y'all messed it up.

My phone's screen was blank. Still no word from Jenny.

I said, *Maybe she needs something more than just sex?*

Mercury said, *What else is there?*

I dunno, I said. Like therapy or something. She had a traumatic year. Maybe she needs help with her mental health.

Mercury said, *What would you know about mental health?*

The waiter brought a vase for my bouquet. It was wilting. I gave him a nod. *"Merci."*

Pretty much the extent of my French vocabulary.

I was stuck. If I went back now, I'd look insecure, worried. If I kept my cool, acted unconcerned, maybe she'd come around. Maybe she'd text me back.

Ugh. I hate playing games. Unless I win.

See here now, bro. You need to take down those terrorists with the two coats. Mercury nodded at the men he'd pointed out earlier. *You can be a hero again.*

I said, *What makes you think they're terrorists?*

Mercury said, *They radiate hate.*

Across the lane was a large, open plaza. In the center stood a massive chunk of marble with statues of ancient Frenchmen in niches surrounded by water splashing from a central fountain. The Frenchmen were probably important at some point in the history of the area, but now they were just a backdrop for selfies.

Two guys stood next to the fountain. They stole glances at the cathedral doors. They had black hair and beards. One had a swarthy, Mediterranean look. The other looked distinctly American. They kept their heads down, their hands shoved in their coat pockets. Their overcoats were heavy enough for winter, but it was a sunny spring day.

Maybe Jenny was worried about the paparazzi. We'd been swarmed outside our hotel. Again later when we went out to dinner. Neither of us is a celebrity, but her divorced parents are minor tabloid material. Jenkins Pharma sold a questionable number of opiates, and her mom is now the Vice President of the United States. Which is why there'd been

SEELEY JAMES

plenty of controversy over Jenny's pardon.

The paparazzi couldn't be it. I'd shared Ms. Sabel's advice for dealing with tabloid photographers with Jenny. Ms. Sabel told me to smile for the cameras because (a) they hate that, and (b) they'll print it anyway so you may as well look good. Jenny still hated them.

I thought about going to church. I checked the name of the one across the street. *Église Saint-Sulpice*. I invited Jenny in a text. We hadn't discussed religion, and she didn't seem the type, but if she was mad at me, where better to work things out? She was the kind of woman worth working things out for. The kind worth having an intimate relationship with. Someone you could tell all your secrets to. Or is it, someone to whom you could tell all your secrets? I never get that stuff right. Maybe she didn't like my grammar.

Mercury grabbed my hair and pulled my head up out of my phone. He pointed at the two guys. *Quit thinking about getting laid and ask yourself the million-dollar question: why two coats?*

Shoplifters wear overcoats. It gives them room for all their stolen merchandise. So do mass shooters. Coats cover weapons.

The shorter guy fiddled with a string of beads. Sweat dripped from his forehead. He mumbled to himself. The American looked calmer, yet significantly more agitated than your average churchgoer. My military training included a good deal about recognizing terrorists. They often say prayers. They're often quite nervous. They often sulk to avoid notice.

Either these two were sinners in desperate need of redemption ... or they were terrorists.

I found myself crossing the street, heading for the fountain. At the same time, the two men headed for the church. As he pushed off, the short guy tossed his beads into the water.

It was a wide plaza, and they had a shorter distance. I changed course to intercept them. Being unarmed put me at a disadvantage. But they had the terrorist's tunnel vision. Their eyes remained glued to the entrance. Nothing around them mattered anymore.

A few people in nice clothes funneled up the steps and filed through the massive front door, each taking a bulletin from the greeters. None of them wore more than a light sport coat.

DEATH AND CONSPIRACY

The overcoat guys slowed and hung back. When the funnel cleared, the greeters at the door waited. The overcoat guys trotted up the steps and entered without taking the offered bulletin. Without a bulletin, they would have no idea which hymns to sing. Definitely terrorists.

I bounded up the steps, full throttle.