

**DEATH
AND
BETRAYAL**

SEELEY JAMES

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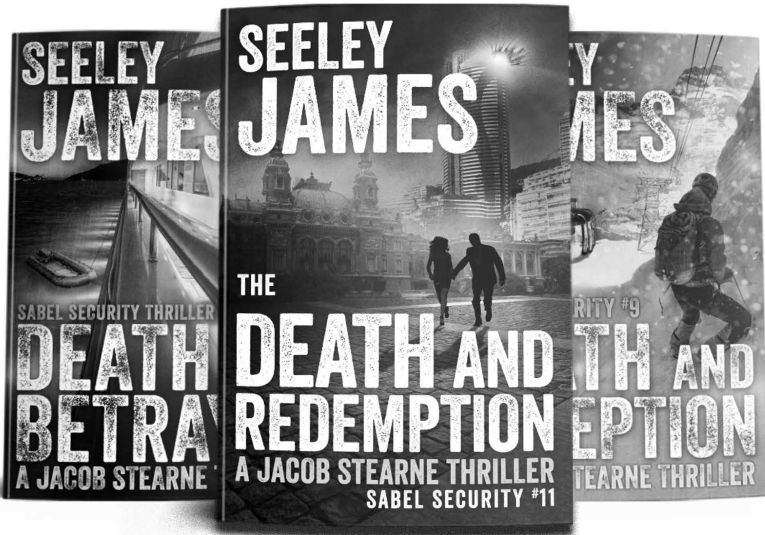
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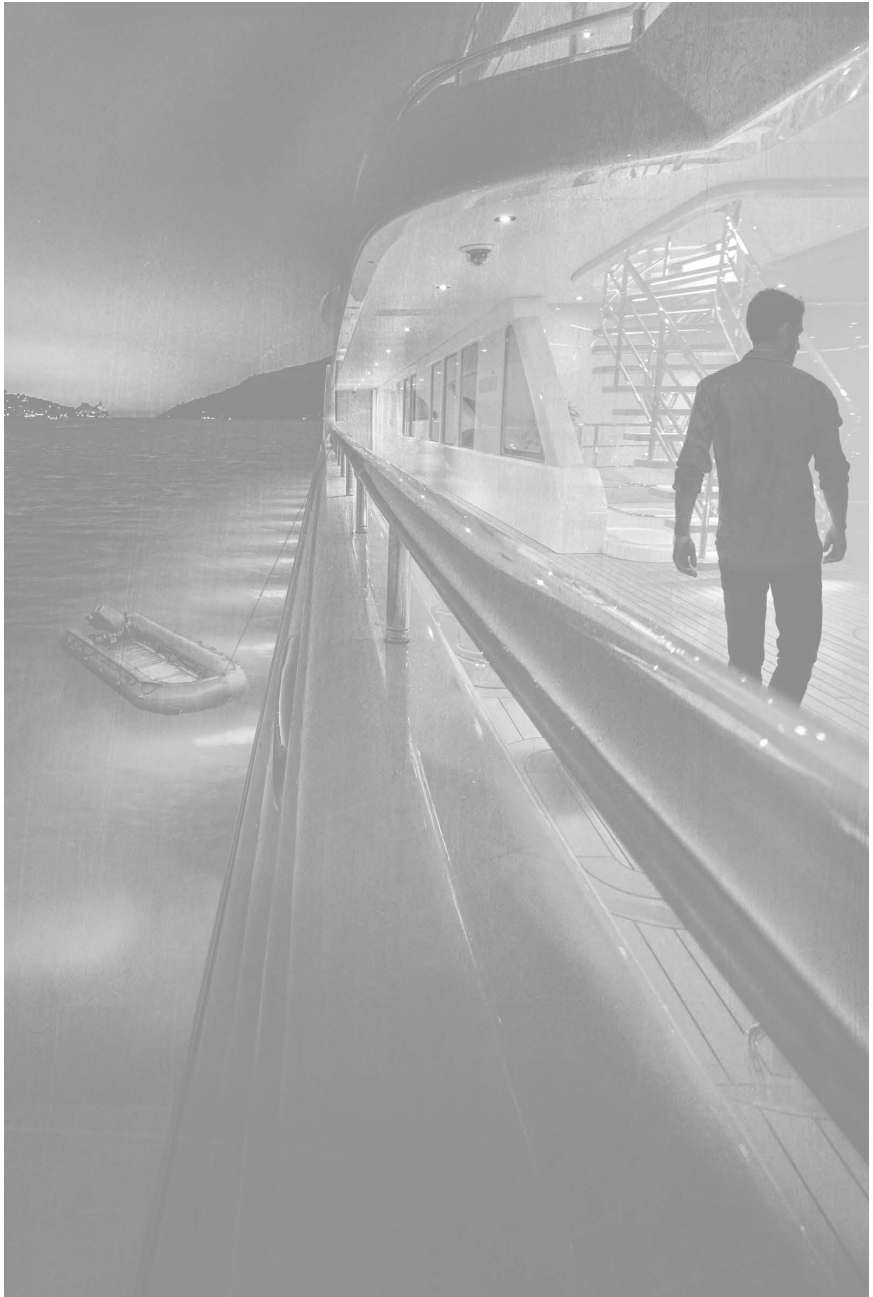
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For my granddaughter
Jenee

CHAPTER 1

THE MAN THEY CALL RA took a deep breath and tamped down his growing agitation without betraying his emotions. The general controlled a good deal of money. Ra could put up with the general's emissary a while longer. Ra said, "We're talking about an auction for the most advanced weapon system the world has ever seen. An auction your general could easily win. What concerns could he possibly have?"

The emissary inhaled to create a dramatic and smug pause.

Ra resisted the urge to glance over the sea toward Monaco's harbor. He was dying to see if his darling's tender was on its way back from town, but he wouldn't allow himself to be distracted.

"The general does not believe you have what you claim." The emissary said in his heavily accented English. He gestured with his arms wide, encompassing Ra's superyacht. "I do not see it here on your little skiff."

Behind his left shoulder, the emissary's sycophantic lieutenant smirked.

The dig was childish. The *Savannah* was the biggest yacht in Monaco, a present to himself after making billions in commodities. An all-American yacht for his all-American success story. So American, in fact, it was too big to dock in the harbor. Sure, it was post-season, and the *Numina* would drop anchor due east of him in a matter of weeks. Until then, the *Savannah* reigned supreme. He felt like gutting the slimy emissary for his rudeness. Instead, he smoothed his Kiton sport coat and puffed up his thin frame.

"Don't be a fool," Ra sneered. "If I kept Alvaria onboard, sleezy generals from around the world would send commandos to take it from

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me. In case that's what you're thinking, rest assured, I have security. We call them 'the dogs.' You've met two of them." He gestured to two bulky men in black suits standing close by. "Fido and Rover. Spot keeps watch with a rifle in case someone approaches uninvited. There are more. Benjie, Yeller ... I have a whole kennel."

Ra turned his back on his guests and checked the harbor. He couldn't wait for his darling to return but he needed to conclude this delicate business before then. He didn't want her to see the kind of men he dealt with. The emissary wore a ludicrous uniform without insignia yet festooned with medals. His black hair was greased straight back with what might've been motor oil. The lieutenant dressed and groomed himself to match. The very definition of a toady.

"The general does not believe the system can do what you claim," the emissary said.

"Oh, my misguided friend. Alvaria is the stuff of autocrats' dreams." Ra laid his hands on the railing, keeping his focus out to sea. "Imagine what it can do. At the push of a button, a hundred drones leap into the air, locate their target, and annihilate whoever you choose. Each drone on a single-purpose mission, never stopping until one of them achieves the objective." He straightened up and turned to face the emissary. "No more political rivals. No more annoying reporters asking inconvenient questions. No more adversaries across your western border. Everyone doing as they're told, all under the general's control. As it should be. It's science fiction—and it's here today. Naturally, there will be a proof of concept arranged."

"The general is skeptical you can obtain this system." The emissary crossed his arms and widened his stance. "The Americans have impenetrable security."

"I stand on my reputation. Many times your poor general has failed to pay me in a timely manner, yet I have never failed to deliver what he needs. From rocket launchers to automatic rifles, they arrived on time and under budget. He would still be a lieutenant were it not for me making good on my promises. He knows damn well my word is gold. I have all the right people in all the right places. My plan has been in the works for years. Alvaria will fall into my hands at exactly the right

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moment. He doesn't need to believe in me. He can wait—" Ra paused for dramatic effect "—until his rival uses it to target him."

To his credit, the emissary didn't flinch.

"Imagine," Ra said, "if Iran acquires Alvaria, they could destroy the ruling classes of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in an afternoon. The next morning, they could annihilate Iraq's parliament. Your little corner of the world would come next. Then, they invade. The price of oil skyrockets because they would control 24% of the world's production. Sanctions are lifted under threat of an oil embargo. And just like that, the Persian Empire is reborn."

The emissary shrugged.

Ra said, "North Korea wants it to bring Japan to heel. And vice versa. Ukraine wants the Crimea back and—"

"I get the picture." The emissary thought while he took a long, deep breath.

He pressed a finger to his lips and looked at the deck. After a long moment, he lifted his finger and shook it at Ra. "The general does not like the glimpses of the future you have illuminated. He does not want to participate in your auction. Instead of bidding for it, he demands you turn it over to him or he will report you to the Americans. If he doesn't get it, no one will have it." He paused and smiled. "There will be no resurgent Persian Empire."

So that was the general's play? To squeal on him? Ra's world turned red and heat flushed his head. He would have to send a message. A message so strong, no one on his list would misunderstand. He would not allow his endeavor to be seen as a trifle. He had a reputation to maintain. Ra flicked a quick glance at Fido, who sprang into action.

To the emissary, Ra said, "I am most disappointed to hear you say that. On a different subject, do you recall meeting my man Bonham in a café last month? Bonham is my second-in-command. He offered you money to turn against the general. Ah, I see from your surprise that you do recall the encounter vividly. Well, sport, the problem for you is that when you turned him down, your lieutenant did not."

As the emissary's surprise turned to shock, his gaze swiveled to his lieutenant. At that moment, Fido knelt at the emissary's feet and clamped

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leg irons on his ankles. In disbelief, the emissary looked down at his shackles, then followed the attached chain to find Rover standing at the railing, holding a very large, very heavy stone. “Do you think you can scare—”

“You’ve been paid,” Ra said to the emissary’s lieutenant. He held out an old, razor-sharp dagger. “Slit his throat.”

The lieutenant stared at Ra in disbelief. “Now?”

“Yes, now. Or die with him. Your choice. Ah. You’ve seen the light. Good man. Right here, above the collar. Stand behind him so you don’t get blood on yourself.”

As the young man weighed the knife in his hand and moved behind his former boss, Ra took out his phone, set it to video, and pressed record. The knife slashed through the stunned and wordless emissary’s neck. Blood sprayed forward. Rover dropped the rock overboard. The chain’s slack disappeared and yanked the emissary’s body with it, over the railing and into the deep.

The young man looked up at Ra, who kept the video rolling. The psychological weight of his first murder began to contort the young lieutenant’s expression. As he pondered his rapidly changing allegiances, he looked down to find Rover placing leg irons on his ankles. Behind him, Fido stood at the railing with another rock. He looked back at Ra and squeaked, “Why? I did what—”

“I think it’s obvious, isn’t it?” Ra asked. “You can’t be trusted.”

Over his shoulder he saw the tender bearing his darling returning from shore. She would be onboard in five minutes. No time for long goodbyes.

He turned back to face the lieutenant as Rover slit the young man’s throat. “There are four more of your kind in the general’s private guard. He’ll be dead by morning, so you’ll be in good company.”

The stone dropped. The chain tightened. The lieutenant’s body flew over the railing into the deep.

Ra looked at the pool of blood covering the deck. He snapped his fingers. A steward appeared. “You see this ugly mess? Scrub it clean.”

CHAPTER 2

MY BREATHING AND HEART RATE were as low as I could get them and yet the guard sensed my presence. The ambient glow of city lights from down the hill silhouetted his holstered pistol. He took a long look over his shoulder, stopping two degrees short of where I stood motionless in the blackest shadow of a stone parapet. Another guard watched from above on the bulwark, his gaze sailing into the darkness ten feet over my head.

The first guy turned away from me and sniffed the air. His partner said something in Greek. The first guy sorted through the scents wafting up the hill from the harbor—sea and fish and algae and boats—searching for a hint of something out of place. Something like me. But he didn't smell me. My quick dip off the dock had paid off.

After a long time, the suspicious one replied in their native language.

The human eye registers movement quicker than it recognizes objects, echoes of our primordial ancestors who fled wolves and bears every day. I was invisible as long as I could remain motionless. I let the mosquito crawl on my neck.

The guy in front of me snapped a mic on his shoulder and spoke. The only word I recognized was "Kostas." I'd seen the name on a badge. The guy wearing the badge was one of two guys taking a nap courtesy of the Sabel Darts I'd stabbed into their legs. Which meant alarm bells would start ringing shortly after the guy in front of me realized Kostas was having a bad day.

Thirty feet separated us. Too far to bolt out of the dark in a surprise attack. He would draw his gun and fire before I crossed half that, and I'd been a high-school track star. If he missed, the guy ten feet over my head

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would get a shot off clean and easy.

The guy above me said something in a tone that sounded anxious. Probably a concern about the health of Kostas and his companion. The guy in front of me faced his partner, which took his gaze directly toward me, up just a notch. He could see me if he tried. And he was trying.

A sneeze tickled my nose.

Mercury, winged messenger of the Roman gods, said, *Wait for it, homie. I gotcha covered.*

I said, *Just what I need.*

Hey now. No need to get all sassy. He stepped into my line of sight, blocking my view of the guard most likely to shoot me.

My snark was justified. On my last mission, Mercury bet the other gods I would die in a hail of gunfire. Why had he gambled with my life? He was short on heavenly cab fare. Apparently, the centaurs' trust funds ran dry fifteen hundred years ago and Uber hasn't reached Mount Whatever yet. He even lied to get me to step in front of armed assassins just to win the bet. With gods like him ...

Not that he hasn't helped me. The ratio of lives saved to outright betrayals might be a thousand to one, come to think of it. If he exists—and isn't a manifestation of PTSD-induced schizophrenia like the psychiatrists keep telling me—he can be a great friend. Over my eight tours of duty as an Army Ranger, he'd guided me to heroic victories so many times colonels would fight over which battalion could claim me. Plenty of soldiers, confronted by the existential absurdity of a firefight would glue themselves to my side, such were the legends surrounding my invincibility.

But, being tight with god, while comforting, can create complications. For example, he wears a shamefully small toga, the kind you might find on a male stripper. Thank Jupiter no one else can see him. His morals come straight out of the might-makes-right manual. He still thinks you get promoted if you kill your boss and take over his legions. He didn't catch the transition from "plunder" to "grand theft" either. In fact, if I took half his divine guidance, I'd be serving multiple life sentences. And he's a jealous god who demands thanks and praise at the most annoying times. Like right now.

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Thank you, I said. You're the greatest god of all, Mercury.

Satisfied, he smiled and floated out of the way on those flappy little wings on the side of his helmet. Physics be damned.

The guard in front of me tried his radio again, then waved his companion down off the wall. He pulled a SIG out of his holster and crouched in the kind of shooting stance you see on cop shows. The lights of Corfu twinkled around his dark profile. He looked like a target at a shooting range.

Above me, boots scraped back off the rampart and jogged to the stone steps fifty yards away. He dropped down them two at a time and ran to join his friend. Terrible tactics for them, but perfect for me.

What did I tell you, dawg? Mercury said. *I lined up your adversaries for you. Who's your favorite god?*

Yeah. I rolled my eyes in the dark. *Like I said, all thanks and praise to Mercury.*

Thank you. Now, was that so hard? Why do mortals always hesitate to thank the gods for the bounty—

I tuned him out as guard number two jogged toward his more alert and dangerous partner. The first guy glanced back to make sure the sounds were coming from the person he expected. I pushed off the wall and ran up behind the jogger. I stabbed a dart into his right butt cheek.

Sable Darts carry a non-lethal dose of inland Taipan snake venom that induces instant flaccid paralysis in the victim. They remain alert but unable to move for a couple minutes. The second stage of the dart is a powerful sleep medication that knocks them out for the next four to six hours. Sabel Industries developed them to compete with Taser but the occasional death due to allergic reactions scared off insurers and inflamed a few plaintiff's attorneys. They never reached the open market.

The man I popped went down like wheat under a scythe. I ran over his back as he face-planted on the hillside. The last remaining guard's brain pieced together things that didn't make sense. He worked out why a large shadow had just erupted from his friend's back as I reached him. He was a professional. His instinctive reflex was to aim the gun at any dark or threatening objects. I qualified as both. The muzzle wheeled around to my face.

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There wasn't enough time to land the dart in an unprotected location. He had a bulletproof vest and tactical belt. I changed tactics two strides out. I had never played football, but I'd seen it on TV. I did what any offensive lineman would do if the ref wasn't watching: I went for a cut block at his knees.

Bones and ligaments snapped and popped amid the noise of his pistol. All three of his shots went skyward as we rolled down a patch of grass. We banged into a tree. I tried to get the dart in his thigh. As we scrambled to right ourselves, I found an opening for my non-lethal weapon. His watch ended a few seconds later.

"What was that?" The voice came over my comm link slathered in panic. "Mr. Jacob? Mr. Jacob?"

"Fine, Dimitris. I'm fine." I rose and took a deep breath. "Going inside now."

I patted my side pocket to make sure I hadn't lost the ring stashed there. It was still secure in its protective robin's-egg blue box. I made sure the pocket's zipper was closed.

I jogged up the steps to the parapet. Flashing colors from a large screen TV lit up the curtains in the master bedroom on the second floor. The owner hadn't heard the shots through his soundproof windows. Those windows had kept me from eavesdropping the night before. His line of work required a hefty dose of paranoia that usually served him well, hence the windows. Tonight, they sealed his fate.

Entering the house, I took the stairs to the ten-car garage. Everything was right where my informant had told me. In the second bay from the end, next to last year's Bentley convertible, sat ten stacks of wooden crates.

I pried one open at the cost of a splinter. A small, blond toothpick of cheap pine stuck in the base of my thumb. I pulled it with my teeth and peered inside the crate. A rack of Beretta 70/90 fully automatic rifles awaited me. The same model used a few months earlier by a group of deranged murderers hoping to kick off a worldwide religious war through a series of coordinated mass shootings. Ten rifles per crate, ten crates. Where were they going? I snapped pictures of the serial numbers, then tapped my comm link. "Dimitris, I found them. Just like he told us."

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“The European Union is in your debt, Mr. Jacob.” Dimitris Bakakis, prosecutor for the Corfu prefecture, lowered his voice to a whisper. “Be sure to make the call.”

“I’m on it,” I said. I dialed 112, the Greek equivalent of 911, identified myself as a guest of Baron Konrad von Frieden, and reported discovering the cache of weapons on his premises. Minutes later, Dimitris’s friends from the Hellenic Police SWAT team stormed the Frieden mansion armed with a legitimate, albeit somewhat staged, search warrant.

I stood outside the garage with my hands above my head forming a circle, the prearranged signal that I was one of the good guys. The heavily armed SWAT team swirled past me, securing the sprawling estate and dragging the owner away from the German-dubbed version of *Breaking Bad*. They propped him in a chair at the dining room table, surrounding him with men in full battle-rattle.

Dimitris took a seat opposite Konrad and stared at him for a long, quiet, uncomfortable minute. I stood in the back row, watching the proceedings over some well-armed shoulders. Dimitris hoped to get a blurted confession but expected a silent demand for legal representation from the Baron. His expectation proved prophetic. Dimitris didn’t speak the Austrian’s native German and Baron von Frieden refused to speak Greek, so they carried on in English.

Dimitris painted a clear, realistic picture of life in prison and offered leniency for information leading to Konrad’s superiors in the arms business. Konrad, who chafed at the Greek’s informal use of his first name, insisted on a lawyer. Dimitris ignored the request and continued to detail his bleak picture for the millionaire.

Eventually, Konrad leaned in. “You don’t understand. Everything in life is a transaction of value. You are inviting me into a transaction whereby I give you names I do not know in exchange for promises you cannot keep. This is of no value to me. I patiently await a different transaction. I will give a man money in exchange for something quite valuable: the truth of my innocence in a court of law. This is what separates little civil servants like you from important men like me—understanding the value in a transaction.”

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Mercury tapped my shoulder. *Dawg, did you forget about the guest quarters?*

I said, *The Greeks have it handled. Their turf, their search. I've got a date back in the States.*

Mercury said, *Before you try slipping that ring on her finger, you got something important to do. They missed someone special. You need to get your butt down there and see who's crawling out from behind the linens.*

I said, *It doesn't matter who's hiding—*

The officer in front of me gave me a disapproving look as if I'd spoken out loud. I shrugged, backed out of the room, and wandered through the house. There were guest rooms on the ground floor the size of my home back in DC. Outside, a free-standing guesthouse stood a short walk from the main entrance.

Mercury said, *No, homeboy, not the nice guesthouse. Check the little one he uses for relatives.*

Behind the pool cabanas stood an ancient one-room cottage, four stone walls covered in white stucco. Approaching the only door, I heard a scratching noise inside. I opened the door and flipped on the lights. A man was trying to flee the room through a window on the opposite wall. Static cling held a pillowcase to his back. He looked over his shoulder at me with a frantic expression. I recognized him at once.

I said, "Lieutenant Hale?"