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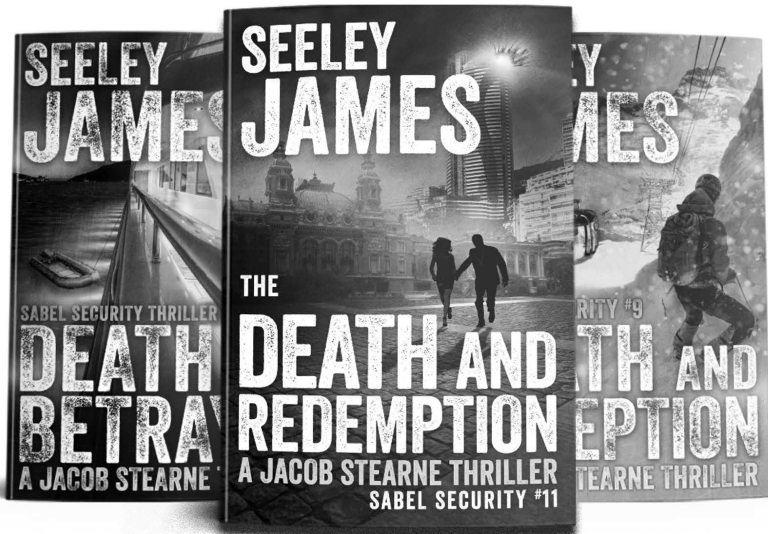
An excellent fast-moving action thriller

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I fell in love with the characters and can't get enough of them. I felt every ounce of rage and desperation.

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DEATH AND DECEPTION

A JACOB STEARNE THRILLER

SABEL SECURITY #9

SEELEY
JAMES

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In loving memory of my great grandchildren:

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CHAPTER 1

THE MAN KEPT HIS PISTOL leveled as he took the empty chair.

Captain Luis Vaquero froze, a forkful of *ropa vieja* halfway to his mouth. Had the Mexican cartels come to Cuba? He glanced around the deserted hotel patio for help. His sailors were gone. The staff had disappeared. In their place stood two black-clad gangsters.

Vaquero turned back to the concrete block of a man with a bald head, a black camp shirt, and a vaguely familiar green tattoo on his wrist. A warm breeze ruffled the palapa's palm-thatched roof. Twenty yards to his left, the surf rolled gently in and slid back out. He set his fork on the plate.

As calmly as he could, Vaquero asked in Spanish, "Who are you?"

The man replied in English with a British accent. "That is of no matter, Captain Vaquero. You will answer a few simple questions and then you and your people can go back to the shipwreck, pick up all the doubloons you want, and run off."

Vaquero's heart sank. Pia Sabel had promised the discovery would remain a secret until the Cuban government could bring in specialists. He thought it was under control. His ship kept watch offshore. There had been no overhead flights, no news reports, no influx of suspicious craft near the resorts on Caya Coco off Cuba's northern coast. Not even the few off-season tourists on the island had ventured out to the site. There had been no indication the news had leaked.

"What shipwreck?" Vaquero asked. He got a better look and recognized the man's green tattoo. A white crescent moon with five stars in the center of a green circle ringed with red. The military roundel of Turkmenistan. What were Turkmen doing here?

SEELEY JAMES

The man slammed a stiletto into the tabletop in a swift and alarming move that exposed a muscular bicep. The knife vibrated in place. The man said, "I ask the questions, Vaquero."

"Fine." Vaquero tried hard to remain calm and in control, but the stranger's violence shook him. "Ask."

"Who is the archeologist in charge then?"

"Archeologist?" Vaquero squinted, trying to reconcile the British accent with a Turkmen. "Cuba is a poor country. Our expert is an American who teaches at the University of Alabama. My orders are to secure the area until he can mount an expedition."

The bald man leaned back, looking a little confused. "How did you verify the ship was the *San Andrés*?"

"I verified nothing. The capitalist Pia Sabel brought her yacht here for an engagement party. They were the ones who found the wreckage. One of her guests claimed it was the *San Andrés*."

Vaquero remembered the Americans fondly. They were gracious and helpful. They wanted nothing from him, the site, or the Cuban government. But they were ridiculously wealthy and crushingly unaware of the disparity between them and the average Cuban. Vaquero commanded the largest ship in Cuba's navy, yet Sabel's yacht, the *Numina*, was twice the size of his frigate. She and her friend took him to see the wreck in a plexiglass submarine that cost more than Vaquero would earn in ten lifetimes. They were so rich, they left millions in gold and silver untouched on the sea floor.

The bald man tapped the table with an impatient finger. "But the *San Andrés* sank with the *Espiritu Santo* and the *San Esteban* off Padre Island, Texas in 1554. The Spanish records are clear. The other two wrecks have been found."

Vaquero shrugged. "The woman who found the wreck, one of Ms. Sabel's party, had served in the US Navy and specialized in underwater recovery. She verified the find based on a lead-lined box containing the captain's log, charts, and instruments. And two cannons, I think. Maybe three. They looked authentic to me. But then—"

"You are not an archeologist." The bald man's voice betrayed his annoyance. "Well then, either someone forged the records four centuries

DEATH AND DECEPTION

ago or your find is a fraud.”

“This is not for me to determine,” Vaquero said. He stared at the plate of *ropa vieja*. The finest skirt steak he’d seen in months cooled on his plate. His mouth watered. His stomach growled. The scent of tomato sauce wafted to his nose. He picked up his fork.

The intruder casually laid the muzzle of his pistol on his forearm, aiming the barrel at Vaquero. The fork dropped.

“What did they take from the site?” the bald man asked.

“Nothing. We arrived the day after the discovery. They allowed a full search of the yacht. They didn’t care about the gold. The lady, Ms. Sabel, said it would cost her more in taxes than it was worth.” Vaquero laughed. What a problem to have. And Sabel had looked exasperated when she said it, as if the last thing she wanted was more money. Americans.

“What about this then?” The bald man held up his phone. On it was an Instagram thread with twenty-eight pictures. “On it, he says you made them take it with you.”

Pictures of that stupid box. Bigger than a shoebox, smaller than a microwave, and heavier than the stone it was made of. That’s what the bald man wanted? All the threat and posturing over that ridiculous thing?

“Are you serious?” Vaquero couldn’t believe the man’s stupidity. “I’m no archeologist—”

“Yes. Yes.” The intruder waved his pistol impatiently.

“—but even I know that is a fake.”

The bald man looked at his phone, then at Vaquero. “Why do you say that?”

“Please. It’s alabaster. Rare for New World art, especially for something so large. It has Latin writing on one side and Mayan glyphs on the other. I don’t know about those chicken scratches on the third side.”

“Mesopotamian cuneiform.”

Vaquero thought the man was joking. When he saw the bald man’s piercing stare, he realized it was no joke.

“If you say so.” Vaquero pointed to his meat, asking permission to eat.

The intruder shook his head. He asked, “Have you heard of the Poison Stone?”

SEELEY JAMES

“No.”

The bald man looked skeptical. “His post says you refused to take it. Why?”

“It’s a fake. They were trying to do something. I don’t know what. Go viral on Instagram. Play us for fools. Maybe there was a bomb inside. That guy just wanted to be famous. Pathetic.”

The bald man’s voice rose to incredulous. “You do not know who he is?”

“Of course. He’s that American war hero. Big deal. Maybe he misses the spotlight and wants someone to pay attention to him. Maybe he has PTSD or takes drugs. He’s crazy. That much you can tell from the look in his eye.”

“And you let him walk away with this?”

“Cuba wants no part of whatever game he was playing.”

The bald man rose, the pistol dangling at his side. He held his phone to Vaquero’s face, showing a picture of the American. “Where can I find this Jacob Stearne now?”

IN HER VANCOUVER STUDIO, GU Peng sensed the curve of the stone with her eyes closed. Sometimes the marble refused to speak to her gaze. When that happened, she allowed it to talk to her palm instead. And it did speak. The imperfection gently scraped her skin. Keeping her eyes closed, she ran the sandpaper over it, pushing the rough edge ahead of each stroke, one granule at a time. Gentle movements would inevitably force it to yield to her desires.

When the sandpaper flowed like water over the stone, she opened her eyes and blew the dust off for one final examination. She rubbed her cheek on the marble. Beauty must glow from the details. The neck of the young woman’s bust had to be perfect before she could expect anyone to feel its power.

Peng experienced the bust returning her caresses with clarity and light. She had succeeded. Exhilaration filled her spirit. Her granddaughter memorialized in stone. Perhaps now she would find peace.

DEATH AND DECEPTION

Peng's phone rang with an odd trill. She grabbed her walking stick and worked her way to her phone on the worktable. A video call. A quick glance showed it was Danny calling on Chalk, the high-security voice encryption app he insisted the Cubans could neither ban nor hack. She checked herself before answering. White marble dust smeared her face and smock. Her hair fell past her shoulders, gray and bedraggled, the braid unraveling. She searched the buttons, hoping to answer it voice-only.

As her finger hovered over the button, she saw Danny's image. He looked so young and beautiful with his fashionable stubble and his long auburn hair gelled back. On closer examination, his rugged face appeared stressed. His eyes were alert and active, darting to one side then the other.

She answered, "Danny? You at Caya Coco?"

"They're here," he whispered. "When I arrived, they were duct-taping uniformed officers at gunpoint."

"Knight of Mithras?" Peng's blood ran cold. They were ahead of her. And by merely minutes. How had she let that happen? "You sure them not drug lord?"

"They have the Turkmen tattoos on their wrists. Six of them. Many more waiting at the loading dock. Three went to the patio, one of them just sat down with Captain Vaquero."

She hoped Danny hadn't heard her gasp. This was no time for weakness or fear. This was the time to act as she had at Tiananmen Square. That is, the way she acted before the tanks came. She waved the liberty flag through the crowd thirty years ago. She would wave that flag again one day. She took a deep breath and steeled herself. "Danny, you safe place?"

"Yes. Wait." Danny moved out of the camera's range. A moment later he came back. He said, "I can hear them when the breeze carries their voices this way. I'm moving to a better place. I'll have to call you back after they leave."

She clicked off. Her fingers squeezed the phone hard enough to hurt.

Gu Peng felt a stab of guilt. Danny had always been such a helpful

SEELEY JAMES

young man. But now that her best friend's only child had blossomed into full adulthood, she regretted bringing him into the Brotherhood of Claritas. In just a matter of days, the Brotherhood had transformed from a klatch of harmless mystics into a secret force of zealots on a dangerous path. She had prepared them as best she could, but they were untested. Were they ready to take on the ruthless Knights?

The unimaginable had come to pass. After 466 years, the Freedom Stone had been found. Peng had all but given up on the myth, her constant and singular dream since fleeing her homeland. Could it be real? Could it be harnessed? Could she navigate the rapidly changing dangers they faced? Or was she an old woman fooling herself with fantastic tales of witchcraft? She brushed marble dust from her cheek.

Waiting for Danny's call felt like an eternity.

While the minutes dragged on, she stared at the bust of her granddaughter. Shanshan would be proud. Peng cursed. Shanshan might still be alive had she not pursued freedom in her homeland. She had sacrificed everything. The Freedom Stone had to be real. It had to work. It was her last and only hope.

Her phone rang. Voice only. She answered.

"They shot him!" Danny's panicked and breathless voice echoed from the tiny speaker. "They just shot Captain Vaquero! Ohmygod."

"Danny? You safe?"

"Yes."

"And the other?" Peng blinked back tears. This was no time to break down. Danny and the Brothers needed her strength. But she couldn't help it, she saw the tanks again. Driving. Driving. Relentlessly forward, over every sleeping bag, every tent, every human being. Crushed.

"I'm fine for the moment," he said. "The hotel staff hid us in a storeroom. We think the Knights left. They're checking."

"Good," she breathed. "It good thing you safe. I wish same for Captain Vaquero. Poor man. You hear all they talk about?"

"Some. Vaquero told him a man named Jacob Stearne took it to Professor Hidalgo in Mexico. He's a Mayan expert. Stearne felt it belonged in a Mayan museum."

DEATH AND DECEPTION

She felt hope returning to her. For once, there was a chance, a slim chance, they could get ahead of the Knights of Mithras. “Where we find Jacob Stearne?”

CHAPTER 2

JENNY LED THE WAY THROUGH the Mayan jungle deep in the Yucatán.

I found her presence mesmerizing. I'd follow her anywhere. At home, we lie on the sofa reading books together. Those are rare and cherished moments of peace in my life. I love that she tolerates my passion for jazz. I love that she showers my cooking with praise. I love that her recovery has progressed past the difficult stages and she was taking life head-on again. All of which reminded me of why I'd proposed.

Our relationship had been rocky for the first six months. We had made it through the worst rocks intact. Her belief that marriage was an outdated tradition was the least of those rocks. Once I presented her with a ring, she changed her mind. Her hostility toward the ancient ritual melted away.

Her mother and father didn't melt away when I asked for their blessing, separately, due to a nasty divorce many years ago. You'd think people would eventually be exhausted by the bitterness. But—humans. At least I presented them with something they could agree on. I'm just glad Jenny ignored their advice.

Three weeks later and we were out on an adventure hundreds of miles from modern civilization. When I announced the right thing to do with the alabaster artifact was to drag it out to Professor Hidalgo at his remote dig site, Jenny jumped right in. She claimed it was time for an adventure on our own. Our other adventures had involved people like the neo-Nazis who strapped her in a suicide vest and the arms dealer who held us hostage under the threat of sarin gas. We thought a little time camping and hiking would make for a relaxing and stress-free vacation. Even if one of us had to carry what felt like a hundred pounds of stone.

SEELEY JAMES

My bride-to-be pushed ahead of me through a tangle of vines.

“We’re going to have a wonderful life,” Jenny said, picking up the conversation we’d let sink into silence while we picked our way through an overgrown part of the path. “We’ll establish Stearne Security together. We can finally step out of other people’s shadows. You won’t be ‘Sabel Security’s top operative’ and I won’t be ‘the VP’s daughter.’” She paused, then snarled, “And we can prove Dad wrong.”

She was right about me. I didn’t want to be anyone’s operative but my own. I’d been hung out to dry once too often for one lifetime. From now on, I would do my thing, not someone else’s thing. But Jenny’s last sentence came out with such heat it worried me. I waited for an explanation. A hundred yards later, she hadn’t offered one, so I said, “Want to talk about your Daddy issues?”

She huffed. “You know how he is. I’ve never been enough for him. He cuts me off every time I start talking. He undervalues my opinion.”

“Undervalues?”

“You know what I mean. Demeans and dismisses it. Like, ‘That’s nice, honey.’ But he never heard what I said in the first place.”

For years, Bobby Jenkins and I had been best buds because I’d been assigned to his security detail and knew a few of his secrets. Then I asked permission to marry his daughter. Immediately, the drug kingpin—I mean, founder of Jenkins Pharmaceuticals—accused me of being a gold digger and told me I’d never see a dime of his money. Ever since then, he’d undervalued my opinion before I opened my mouth. I said, “Yeah, I do know what you mean.”

“And I’m not talking about recently. It’s been like that my whole life. Before the divorce, back when I was eight, he’d listen to my brother talk nonsense, then ignore me. I don’t mean he’s a misogynist or anything. He listens to Pia like she was preaching the Gospel. It’s just that I remind him of Mom. He can’t deal with the marriage he wrecked.”

Having a bit of background about her mom and a certain General Thompson—who Jenny resembles in an uncanny way—I had reason to believe her dad might not be entirely responsible for wrecking the marriage. But I decided to keep that to myself.

“Anyway,” she went on, “I’m looking forward to Stearne Security

DEATH AND DECEPTION

being a big deal. Maybe bigger than Sabel Security. Then we can champion the important causes. Fight for freedom, that kind of thing.”

Mercury, messenger of the Roman gods, floated up alongside me riding on his ridiculously tiny wings. He said, *Y’know what, homeboy? If you don’t find this woman something to champion, she’s gonna champion you.*

I said, *We’re just dreaming about the future, that’s all.*

Mercury said, *A hundred aurei says she has you whipped in a week.*

I said, *We’ve been over this. No one’s used aurei in two thousand years. It’s dollars now.*

Mercury said, *Whatever, brutha. She’s gonna take your manhood and stuff it in a jar. You’ll be painting pink polish on her toenails before you know it.*

Oh. Hold up. I might have left something out. See. Most guys come home from the wars and reintegrate into civilian life with minimal problems. But. Some guys come home and live in mortal fear of open spaces. Other guys come back wound up tight like a grenade with its pin pulled. A few guys self-medicate their way back into society. There’s a US Army study known as *Red Book* that says soldiers serving three or more combat tours are a “growing high-risk population.” I pulled eight.

But I didn’t have any problems. None at all.

Because I had a god on my side.

I’m not talking about some mute and invisible deity that preachers and rabbis and imams talk about in hushed tones. I’m talking about a black, toga-wearing, foul-mouthed god in the flesh who smacks the back of your head when you don’t listen. I’m talking about a god revered for thousands of years by millions of people. A god who helped me out when I most needed it. Don’t go shaking your head like that. Open your mind. Expand your reality.

Why am I so special? Because he and his buddies—Jupiter, Saturn, Minerva, Juno, Venus, the whole lot—fell on hard times back in 390 AD when Emperor Theodosius decreed everyone had to worship Nicene Christianity. Mercury’s temple, the biggest in Rome, was trashed that year. Terrible way to treat the gods. He and his buddies have been trying to sell tickets to their reunion tour ever since.

SEELEY JAMES

I know what you're thinking: Jacob's insane. You're not alone. My caseworker back in the Army said the same thing. He and a bunch of fancy psychiatrists labeled me "problematic" and "a catastrophic nightmare waiting to happen." Their diagnosis? PTSD-induced schizophrenia. The fact that Mercury's black and tries to talk street sends them over the edge. I don't know why. It says right there in the Bible, Genesis 1:27, "God created humankind in his image." And we all know homo sapiens originated in southern Africa, so there you have it. God is a black African. Spelled out in the Good Book whether or not it upsets your religious sensibilities.

Apparently, no one else can see or hear him. I'm the only one blessed—or cursed—with his heavenly oratory.

Lost in thought like that, I missed where Jenny had taken the conversation. Something about how we could make our marriage last.

"That's what I love about you," she said. "You're the order to my chaos. The yang to my yin."

"Is that a good thing? Chaos? And who's yang?"

"Of course, it's a good thing," she laughed. "Yin and yang are the Chinese concepts of duality. I'm talking about balance. The forces of order and chaos are not in conflict; they create a balance. You keep me balanced."

I kill bad guys for a living, I don't get all that stuff about duality. When I hear that word, I think of books without pictures written by dead Germans. But I'd sure as hell figure it out for Jenny. I want my marriage to last a lifetime. Like my parents, not hers.

"We were both in the military, that's an orderly world." She stopped hiking to face me. "You thrive on that. I didn't. I made it work, but I thrive on chaos."

She didn't like the way I was squinting at her, confused. She added, "When I say chaos, it's not the kind you're thinking of. Not like a terrorist throwing a bomb in a bazaar. It's chaos as in unstructured creativity. Like when you're solving a problem. You need chaotic thoughts to discover a unique solution. Or as Nietzsche said, 'One must still have chaos in oneself to give birth to a dancing star.' There are other times when you need order. Like. Hmm. Like when you drive down the

DEATH AND DECEPTION

street, everyone has to obey the rules of the road or else you have ...” She tried to come up with an analogy.

“Rome?”

“Exactly.” She laughed and resumed the trek. “You are my balance. Yin and yang, negative and positive, male and female. We fit together.”

“Oh, I get it. Like tunnels and trains?”

“Jacob! Is that all you think about?”

“Yes.”

“Nine more miles to the professor’s site,” she said. “Then, if you’re a good boy, and we can find a secluded spot ... did I mention you have to be a good boy?”

“How about a bad one?”