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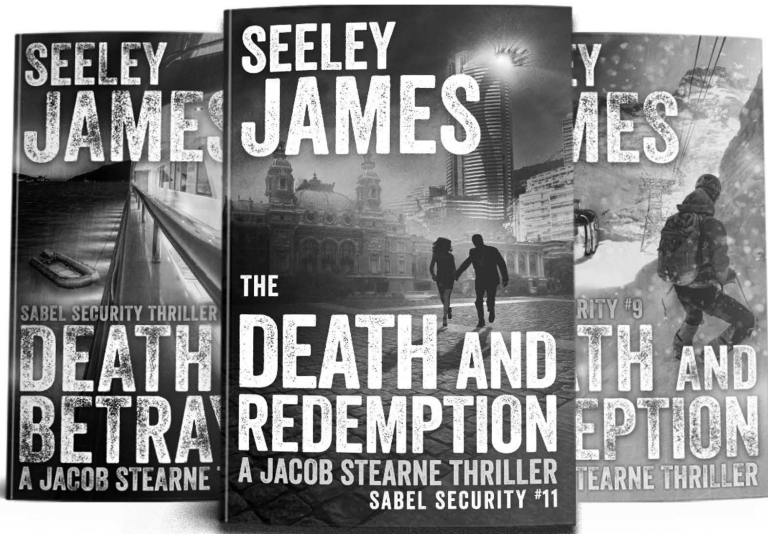
An excellent fast-moving action thriller

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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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**THE
MORPHEUS
DECISION**

**A PIA SABEL MYSTERY
SABEL SECURITY #10**

**SEELEY
JAMES**

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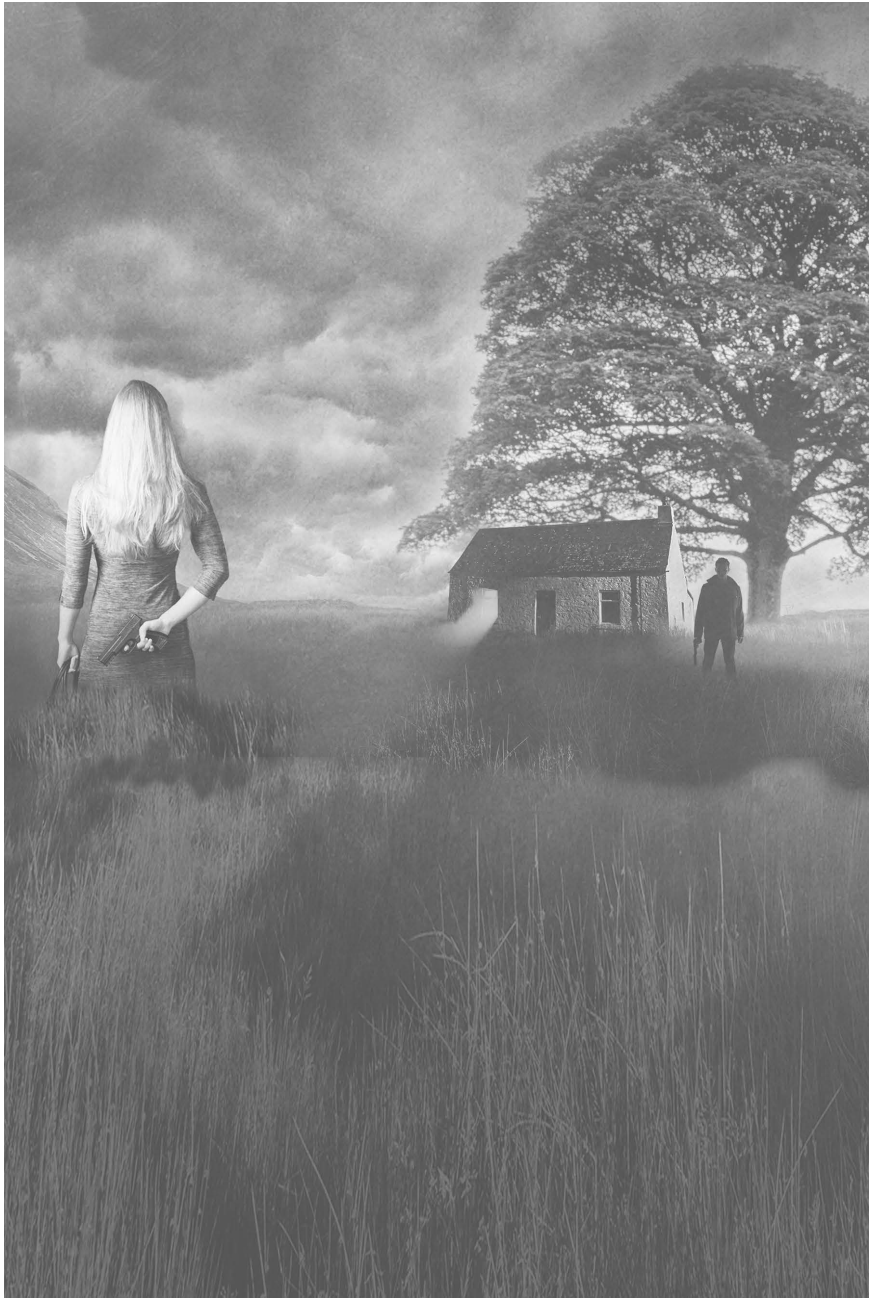
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*For my granddaughter
Sasha*

CHAPTER 1

BLOOD DRIFTED OVER THE CURB on its way to the gutter as Chloe England tried to shift her gaze for a better look. Her eyes wouldn't respond. Not even a blink. Her vision was fixed on the chemist's across the narrow lane. Closed. And for a long time judging by the dirty windows.

Her arms and legs wouldn't move either. The blood felt warm on her cheek. Chloe had the strangest feeling it was her blood. After all, she was lying on her side with her face pressed to the cement, but she wasn't sure why. When she tried to think, all that came to mind was TS Eliot from a boring literature class long ago:

*I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker;
And in short, I was afraid.*

She'd rather have been on the pitch playing football than stuck in a classroom reading that drivel.

Chloe sensed a presence lean down over her. Maybe it was a good Samaritan who could help her up. Her muscles weren't responding. Someone reached over her shoulder and plucked the phone out of her hand. The person disconnected her call.

So, not a good Samaritan.

Chloe felt embarrassed. The stalker just cutoff the voicemail to Pia Sabel before she'd finished. What would Sabel think of the poorly worded message? Rambled on like a fool, she did. To top it off, she'd blanked before telling Sabel what she wanted. Such bad form.

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A throbbing pain came from the back of her head. Along with the throb came a dim memory of the previous few seconds. She'd been chattering on about the woman in the hospital and her ridiculous story about people who could kill your enemies through their dreams. For a fee. Had she told Sabel that part? It's what she'd intended to say. Now that she thought about it, she'd prattled on about their rivalry on the soccer pitch. Was that all the further she'd got?

Hardly a rivalry, though. Chloe did her best to defend for England in every game—but who could stop Sabel? Chloe remembered their first encounter. The young phenom was sixteen and out to prove herself in a friendly. Chloe had twenty-five caps by then. She'd considered the teenager a trifle. Young Sabel came straight at her, no fear. Charging in like a freight train. But she was ready. She herded the kid to the sidelines, making the only option to go out of bounds. Sabel played into it, dribbling into a rapidly narrowing lane with nowhere to go. Rookie mistake. Then Sabel popped the ball between them, waist high, smacked it with her knee, sending it over Chloe's head. Using her height advantage, Sabel jumped in the air like a rocket and headed a perfect cross to the American forward flying up the middle. It happened so fast Chloe could only laugh. *What the hell was that?* Thank god the game didn't count for anything.

Sabel was a thorn in her side for the next four years. The Mexicans called her *La Tigresa*—the tigress—for good reason. And the international press adopted the nickname. But in the privacy of England's locker room, especially among the defenders, she was known as *that cunt*. When Chloe retired, she rejoiced that her endless nightmares of Sabel hurtling toward her would finally end.

Now they were both out of the beautiful game. Chloe had bounced around until she found her calling: police constable. Who would've thought? All those years leaving your blood, sweat, and tears on the pitch for your country and what career options await you? Sportscafter? A crowded field. Coach? Underpaid profession. Talent scout? Too many rows with desperate parents—whose children didn't know the difference between a football and a cheese loaf—kept Chloe out of that one. Then Dad suggested she follow him into the Greater Manchester Police, the illustrious GMP. It wasn't the bright lights and big stage she'd hoped for.

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It had even caused her some embarrassment when dialing Sabel. *How you doing, old frenemy? Running a huge company these days, I hear. Chilling with presidents and prime ministers, are we? Me? Oh, you know, constable. Still. Working on becoming a DI like Dad, though. So, what's new?*

Yeah. That was a tough call.

She hoped she hadn't botched it. It was important. Sabel's name was on the nutter's list. Even if *La Tigresa* had been hell to defend, she did deserve to know someone had her on a list. It might be nothing, but some of the names on the list were dead. And Chloe hoped Sabel would help her figure it out. Reconnect for some laughs. Maybe.

A warm hand touched Chloe's neck. Not in a kind way. The person who'd taken her phone feeling for a pulse? She tried to check her heartbeat, too. She wasn't feeling it. Or was she? Not strong, anyway. Was she dying?

Once, she'd run to the scene of a man hit by a car. It was obvious to everyone around him that he was a dead man with a few seconds of life left, yet he had no idea. He kept apologizing for being a bother.

That's when Chloe remembered the loud crack. The sound of metal connecting with bone. Big bone. Hollow. Like her skull. Is that where the blood was coming from?

She felt it now. Sliding down the back of her head, into her hair, onto the sidewalk. Someone had smacked her a good one with a baton. They could fix that in casualty, right?

The hand withdrew. Chloe heard someone walk away. The street was empty. Thick dark clouds obscured the remnants of twilight. The heavy sky closed in on her. It would rain soon.

It was her own fault, Chloe realized. She'd been so preoccupied with the call to Sabel—trying not to sound like one of those barking-mad fans—that she hadn't noticed where she was going. It was a mistake. She'd taken the shortcut. A short, dark lane lined with defunct businesses. Now she wouldn't have a chance to save Pia Sabel's life. She wouldn't be the heroic constable who solved the dreamland-assassins mystery.

Worst of all, there would be no security video of who killed Chloe England.

CHAPTER 2

PIA SABEL NOTICED DR. HARRISON had gone silent while she covertly—she thought—read her messages on the phone hidden in her open purse. Swiveling her eyes to Harrison without moving her canted head, she said, “I heard you.”

Dr. Harrison waited patiently, as he often did, for her to elaborate.

“But an overwhelming desire to win is what drives all successful people,” she said and tossed up her hands. “Ask anyone who’s gone after something big. I didn’t win the World Cup by going around thinking, ‘oh well, whatever.’ It’s something most people around me just deal with.”

When he didn’t say anything, she blew out a breath and did what he wanted. “Fine, I’ll turn it off for the session.”

She clicked her phone and dropped it back in her purse. He still wasn’t satisfied. Under his withering glare, she set the bag on the floor. While he continued to scowl, she pushed it out of reach with her foot.

“Thank you,” he said. “Pia, you’ve been seeking a good night’s sleep for years. That’s what we’re trying to do here. We’re not going to make progress if you’re not going to participate. Fully.”

“I get that. Go ahead.”

“So, once again, we must go over events from your childhood—”

“We plowed that field.”

“Those are issues we need to address. They have a bearing on why you’re so driven.” He sighed. “We will come back to that when you’re ready. Like always.”

While he scribbled a note on his pad, he absently asked, “And you’re keeping in shape?”

She didn’t answer. Conditioning was automatic, like breathing. She

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completed an Olympic triathlon every morning before bakers heated their ovens. She could try out for the National Team in the morning and be a starter by lunchtime.

He wordlessly withdrew the question and tapped his pen on the pad. “All right, update me on your sex life.”

“Pass.”

“Answer enough.” He jotted a short note this time. “Pia, these things are interrelated. Your obsession with winning, your traumatic childhood, your romantic relationships, all drive a debilitating form of paranoia—”

“Only the paranoid survive.”

“Yes.” Dr. Harrison steepled his fingers. “You quote Andrew Grove a lot. Young women like you needn’t spend time reading the corporate philosophies of Intel’s long-dead CEO.”

This was where Dr. Harrison remained disconnected from Pia’s reality. She’d tried to explain it before but, like so many others, he lived in the safe world. A world where a few locks on the door gave people worry-free lives. For people with Pia’s wealth, paranoia was hardly abstract. When you have something, there is always someone who wants it. When you have a lot of something, there are a lot of people who want it—and will stop at nothing to take it. Where Roman emperors had the Praetorian Guard, today’s wealthy use bodyguards. The same reason ancient kings had food tasters. Not that it helped. Emperor Claudius was poisoned by Halotus, his food taster. The wealthier you are, the more sensible paranoia becomes. Do the people around you care about you or your money? When you date a guy, what is he really after? People always assume massive quantities of material goods will free them from worrying. It doesn’t. While she didn’t worry about the cost of calling a plumber, she worried about other things. Lots of other things.

“Pia, a woman of your youth and vitality should be out having fun, romance, adventure, not reading dry treatises—”

“What do you expect me to do when I wake up at three in the morning?”

“That’s what we’re working on,” he said, letting his exasperation heat his words. He inhaled sharply, recovering his calm. “Do you want to dial it back just enough to get a good night’s sleep?”

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“Yes.” She felt her molars grinding.

“Then let’s discuss the things that are driving your problem.”

They stared at each other while the old-fashioned pocket watch he kept on his desk ticked. Pia wondered how many times he’d delivered the same prognosis and how many times she’d ignored his recommendations. And how many times she’d come back out of desperation. How many times had she heard, *Insight doesn’t change behavior*. Some days, she felt like Plankton trying to steal the recipe for Krabby Patties from Mr. Krabs.

Or Sisyphus.

“OK, fine.” She rolled her hand.

“As I was saying, your overwhelming desire to win is driven by your need for endorphins. Your need to stand before a stadium filled with screaming fans grew out of your mother’s tragic death—”

“Murder.”

“—and your subsequent lack of her affection. At an early developmental age, you replaced your mother’s love with mass adoration. Since leaving the game, you’ve replaced those fanatic followers with the adrenaline rush of surviving deadly confrontations. As an example, you are the sole owner of a conglomerate with many divisions: Sabel Capital, Sabel Technologies, Satellites, Weapons—and yet you spend all your time with the most dangerous division, Sabel Security. Your headlong pursuit of this unhealthy desire ratchets your paranoid social cognition into the realm of full-blown—”

“Remind me,” Pia said. “Social cognition?”

“Paranoid social cognition is the everyday concern people have that others are trying to undermine them. Whispering behind your back, for example, or suspecting someone of damaging your career, or believing people are spreading rumors. These mild forms can be exacerbated by your perceived social distinctiveness, perceived evaluative scrutiny, or uncertain social standing. When this—”

“I don’t worry about those things.”

“You told me you do.”

“What? When?”

“Social distinctiveness takes many forms. For some it’s gender,

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ethnicity, or age. Your height and fitness make you stand out in ways you'd rather not. Several times you've told me some men are intimidated by your—"

"Fuck 'em."

His eyes closed deliberately and reopened quickly.

"Moving on," Dr. Harrison said. "Evaluative scrutiny for most people is when an asymmetrical relationship, such as teacher and student, becomes pressurized before a big test. In your case, it used to be when coaches critiqued post-game videos of your performance. Today, that would be the company's performance compared to how well it did before your father's untimely—"

"Murder. I get it. Go on."

"Patience, Pia." He paused to make his point. "That leaves uncertain social standing. Everyone, especially those most successful in their field, feel uncertain about their social standing. Even Maya Angelou suffered from imposter syndrome. You let certain people's assessments, whether warranted or not, affect—"

"Wrap it up, Doc. They need me in a meeting at nine."

Dr. Harrison closed his eyes and breathed in slowly. She sensed he was counting to ten.

Finally, he said, "Some people consider it a virtue, Pia."

"Not the people who have 60,000 employees expecting them to keep the company profitable so they can keep their jobs and get year-end bonuses."

He leaned forward and met her gaze. "Uncertainty about social standing, right there. You're worried people think you lucked into owning the company and that you're not qualified to—"

"They'll get over it. What's the bottom line?"

"You're not dealing with these issues, Pia. You're glossing over them. 'They'll get over it' is a prime example. It is you who needs to get over them and what they think of you."

"Great. How do I do that?"

"These minor things, when not dealt with, grow into true paranoia, the mistaken belief that everyone wants to destroy you. And it is that misguided thinking that keeps you worried all night. It is the source of

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your insomnia.”

They stared at each other for a long time. Pia thought about *Stearne’s Law*, the axiom her best friend and longtime bodyguard told her: *Paranoia is the result of acute situational awareness—everyone really is trying to kill you.* His maxim had saved her life several times. She considered telling the good doctor. But then he would argue that a philosophy of that nature led to deepening her crisis, not helping it, so she skipped it and waited for him to finish.

He said, “From the endorphins of winning, you’ve turned to adrenaline. You keep putting yourself in these dangerous situations because—like an addict—you need it. You ignore your personal problems by trying to solve those of others. That leads you to dangerous situations. You can’t save everyone. You must relax. Learn that trusting people will not lead to an early grave. Find pleasure in simple things that don’t involve life-and-death decisions. To yourself, you must renounce the need for danger. You must repeat it like a mantra, ‘I no longer need to risk my life to save others.’”

That sentiment nearly made her choke. She wondered what he would’ve been like on the *Titanic*.

“You know where that leaves me? In boring corporate boardrooms. We spend all day buying companies and integrating them. It takes five years to figure out if it’s going to work. Can you imagine kicking a ball and waiting five freaking years to see if it went in the net? Who would watch that? And when we’re not doing that, we’re ‘energizing’ the employees. Don’t get me wrong, I love motivating people, but the Major is better at it than I am. She knows their metrics and can say, ‘Great job hitting your goals for return on assets.’ I still don’t know what *return on assets* means—and they’re *my* assets!”

“Yes, yes, Pia,” he said. “Take a deep breath. No need to get worked up.”

“How about skydiving? I’m working on my 30,000-foot certification. Can I keep up on my skydiving lessons?”

His mouth dropped open before his face formed a perplexed frown. “For now, yes. First, let’s focus on the dangers involving firearms. You needn’t compete with Bruce Wayne. There’s no need for a young lady—

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just because she owns a security firm—to carry a semi-automatic pistol in her purse. It practically invites a violent response when a perfectly passive solution would be—”

“Great theory, Doc. When you find yourself surrounded by a militia on an abandoned pier in Mumbai ...” She blew out a breath. “Yeah, I hear you. I shouldn’t have been on that pier in Mumbai.”

The appointment alarm on the phone—the one she hadn’t actually turned off—buzzed in her purse a few feet away. She glanced at the purse. Dr. Harrison glanced at the purse. Their gazes met in the middle.

Pia said, “Thanks. Great session. I’ll work on it. Um. Gotta go. See ya.”