

# DEATH AND REDEMPTION

A JACOB STEARNE THRILLER  
SABEL SECURITY #11

SEELEY  
JAMES

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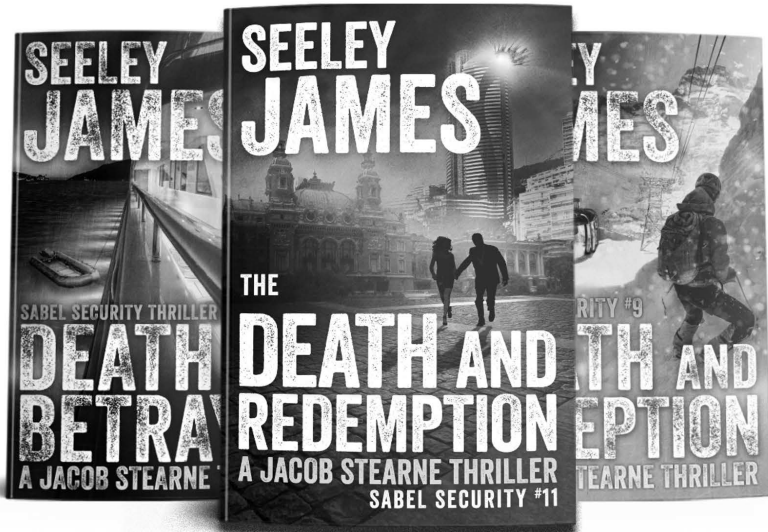
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*For my grandson  
Shaw*

# CHAPTER 1

THE LAST THING PROFESSOR RAFAEL Tum expected to see was a woman in a thin silk dress with her wrists chained to the floor. He blinked in the daylight that bent around his back, illuminating a cascade of golden hair. She glared over her shoulder at him. Shuffling forward, his shackled feet gained only a few inches with each step.

“Are you hungry?” he asked quietly. He held the tin plate in front of him like an offering to a goddess. “Are you hurt?”

Anton slammed a fist into Rafael’s lower back. He staggered a step and almost dropped the plate.

First in Belarusian, then in English, the young mobster said, “No talking.”

The woman looked away. But in that brief instant, Rafael thought he recognized her. A famous American. Not internationally famous, not a politician, but a celebrity of some kind. There was something in her ice-blue eyes that called to him. She longed for a champion to save her.

His aging ankles crackled when he squatted to set the food in front of her. He examined the side of her face. A blindfold covered her forehead, lifted by a guard for dinner. A lowered gag wrapped her neck. Dirty fingers with manicured nails. Bare feet. Rafael sensed her flinching under his gaze. Not wanting to make her shame worse, he pushed the food closer and rose.

Facing Anton, he shouted, “You’re an animal! You’re all animals.”

A fist landed in his stomach. Not as hard as he’d been hit by the junta’s goons in the old days, but a solid gut punch, nonetheless. Anton was just a teenager, Rafael realized on second look. About the same age as his students back at the university. Could the boy be as dangerous as

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he tried to look?

Yes. Rafael knew that all too well. How many of his revolutionaries had killed by that age?

Rafael set aside any notion of overpowering the boy. While he had some tricks left, he was too old to overcome the youth's vigor. He would think of another way to free the woman.

Anton pointed outside and shoved him toward the door.

Rafael lurched forward, shuffling toward the abandoned apartment building across the alley where the gangsters had held him overnight. They tracked across a gravel parking area, then through waist-high weeds to the entrance on the far side. Pushed by Anton's pistol, he trudged upstairs, one tread at a time, his shackles barely allowing each foot to gain the next step.

Back in the large room with the bare wood floor, three of Anton's fellow gangsters milled about, waiting for orders. Rafael headed toward the dark hole that had been his prison for the last twenty-four hours.

Before he could shuffle inside, a new voice called out to him. "Aye, Professor, a wee word, if you don't mind."

A well-dressed man with black hair gelled straight back over his collar sat on a wooden chair at the far end of the room. Behind him stood another well-dressed man with his back to the room and a phone to his ear.

Rafael approached the out-of-place pair. They didn't fit in with the Belarussian mobsters who'd kidnapped him.

The Scot said, "My mates here tell me you've not coughed up where you hide your gold, old man."

"I've no gold to hide."

"That's not what I told them." He grinned and tugged at the lapels of his sport coat.

The man behind the Scot clicked off his phone and turned to face Rafael. The old man's heart froze. He'd expected the well-dressed men to be gangster bosses—not his old nemesis.

The man's name spilled out of his mouth before he could stop it. "Joe Griffith."

Griffith twitched a smile while pocketing his phone. He said, "It's

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been a while.”

“Not long enough.”

Griffith turned to the Scot and barked, “Everybody out.”

The Scot relayed the message. Anton translated it to the other mobsters in Belarusian. They trudged out on command. The Scot turned back to Griffith with a satisfied and eager face. Griffith stared back without a word.

It took the Scot a few seconds to figure it out. He wasn’t needed. When it dawned on him, he tucked in his hubris and left.

Griffith crossed his arms and strutted closer to Rafael. He said, “Is that how you thank me? Come, my old friend, let us be reasonable and talk like adults. Remember, I am the one who expunged the war crimes from your days playing Che Guevara.”

Rafael stood still and kept his gaze on Griffith.

“As you no doubt surmised,” Griffith said, “we want your little secret society to turn over the Chaac Equation.”

Rafael shuddered when Griffith pronounced the Equation, named for the Mayan god of lightning, as *shock* instead of the correct way, *chalk*. He said, “I no longer belong to any society.”

“You left the Keepers? I don’t believe you. You are the Keepers.” He paced a circle around Rafael. “Keepers. Ridiculous name, really. You should talk to a marketing consultant.”

Griffith moved to the dirty window and peered through the grime. Rafael watched him. They were both silent while a neighborhood dog barked at some unseen threat. After a minute, the dog lost interest.

“Well?” Griffith prompted. “Not going to deny you have it?”

Rafael stood still.

“They won’t hurt you, you know, these local gangsters.” Griffith wheeled around. “Neither will Seamus. You’d die before you revealed anything about it, so I ordered them to lay off.”

Rafael didn’t believe him, not that it mattered. Griffith never let people walk away from an encounter. Long ago Rafael resigned himself to die for his noble cause. Now was as good a time as any. His thoughts returned to the chained woman and the dim glimmer of hope in her eyes. The best he could hope for would be freeing the unfortunate young lady



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before any encounter took place. A small objective in a long and tumultuous life, but he'd learned it was always good to have a goal to focus on before the beatings began.

Griffith paced another circle around him. Rafael didn't bother to follow but instead fixed his stare on the window.

"Ever regret walking away from the family fortune?" Griffith poked his shoulder. "You'd be the telecom king of Guatemala right now instead of your drunken brother."

Griffith stroked his chin and studied Rafael. He walked the length of the room. When he reached the end, he said, "Instead of torturing you and making all that mess, I have my people searching for something you value more than the Chaac Equation. We always look for the greatest point of vulnerability. Saves time. That brother of yours didn't even make the list."

Griffith held up a handwritten piece of paper just beyond Rafael's reach.

Struggling not to squint, Rafael took a mental snapshot of it to contemplate later. His eyesight had declined with his age, but he made out the names of several of the people Griffith threatened.

"I thought your gray-haired mother might fit the bill, but it turns out she died last month." Griffith slapped the paper back into his pocket. "And you didn't even bother to attend the funeral. Bad boy, Rafael. You taught me better than that, did you not?"

Rafael kept his gaze on the window, where a fly traversed the glass.

"Let the woman go," Rafael said.

Griffith's eyebrows raised in surprise. "Which woman?"

"The one in the storage shed."

"If you don't know her name, I know better than to think you'd tell me anything useful in exchange for her freedom. Come now, Rafael. There must be someone on this list you care about more than the Chaac Equation."

Griffith pulled the paper out and flashed it in front of Rafael's face once more, trying to evoke a response. The professor refused to play the game. But he processed what he could see. Twelve names, three of whom were people he would indeed die to protect. Should he stop this

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madness and agree to talk? No. Griffith would kill them all anyway.

An unexpected name rose from the list. Jacob Stearne. The man who saved three finance ministers at the G20 Summit. The man who stopped a terrorist attack on a cathedral full of worshippers in Paris. A man who saved the life of Rafael's niece. A true hero in a world falling far short of them. A man who survived impossible odds with great regularity. Rafael would not feel guilty for betraying Stearne should it come to that. He could feign interest in Jacob and embark on a false narrative to keep Joe Griffith going in the wrong direction. By the time his ruse was uncovered, he would be rescued or killed. Either way, his secrets would be preserved.

But there was no point giving up Stearne to Griffith. They knew each other too well. He would see Rafael's move and counter it right away, just as he had with the woman. The other man, though; the arrogant Scot. What did Griffith say his name was, Seamus? He might fall for it.

Then what about the woman? Should he try harder to save her? No. There was too much at stake. As much as it broke his heart, he couldn't give Griffith anything. She may suffer, but in the end, it would be for the greater good.

"Well?" Griffith leaned in close. "I want the Chac Equation. Do you want to save someone the trouble of being tortured before your eyes?"

"Ultimately," Rafael said, "everyone has an appointment with fate."

# CHAPTER 2

I WAS THINKING ABOUT HOW you get these big expectations in life. You visualize a future with whole scenes built up around holidays and birthdays and vacations and children and growing old with someone. You figure you'll both be there when you have that big Mardi Gras blowout everybody comes to, including the cops. Or you figure one of you'll cook and the other will clean and it'll never be discussed, it'll just get done. You take for granted that every Sunday the two of you will cuddle on the couch and read books. Maybe you can picture how one of you will push the other in a wheelchair after twenty thousand days of good times and bad.

And then one day—without any warning from the gods—she's gone.

No more holding hands. No more picking restaurants for dinner. No more arguing about the right way to bake a potato. No more dancing in the kitchen. It's over.

Life is a sucker punch. One day you're on top of the world with everything in front of you.

Slowly, I became aware that I was sitting in Pia Sabel's office on the top floor of Sabel Towers in Bethesda, Maryland, where Tania was rambling on about our boss. She sat on the sofa across from me, being chipper on purpose. Annoying. I felt like telling her to shut up so I could sink back into my funk. But Tania wouldn't, so I saved my breath. We had served together in some wars everyone knows about and others we're not allowed to discuss until 2045. We knew each other too well.

“You get that, right?” Tania canted her head as if there were something wrong with me. A bushel of her wild hair swung across her shoulders. “She's wound up tighter than an actress doing her first nude

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scene. Hey, Jacob, you in there? You hearing me?"

"Yeah." I blinked. "Actress. Screen test."

"That ain't what—" Tania went on about what was wrong with the boss. She wanted me to visualize a more satisfying and engaging life for Ms. Sabel.

Why bother? It would all end in the lightning flash of a bomb anyway.

I couldn't see anyone's future. All I could see was the past. A line of black cars, her parents staring daggers at me, a closed casket, a dark rainy day, a chunk of marble with her name on it, people standing around muttering words I couldn't hear. Ms. Sabel stood next to me from beginning to end. Never spoke, just kept her arm looped through my elbow, her shoulder pressed to mine. I appreciated that.

Six weeks ago. It felt like an hour. The wounds still bleed.

Without warning, Ms. Sabel charged into her office like a freight train plowing snow. I came back to the present.

Tania was still talking. I tuned in to hear her say, "—is why she needs to get laid worse than any white girl in DC. Stefan's a platonic relationship that'll never work. When he looks at her, all he sees is the night he had to blow his dad's brains out to save her life. And when she looks at him ... what? Why you staring over my shoulder? Shit. She's standing right behind me, isn't she?"

The ladies got into it, and I stayed out.

When women get snippy with each other, the smart men hide. There's lots of places I could go that didn't involve women. Not that there's anything wrong with them, it's just ... they remind me of Jenny.

The Mercury medallion Jenny had given me waited in my pocket for a chain. When we got engaged, I gave her a ring and she gave me a coin with an image of Mercury on one side and the planet symbol on the other. We were going to pick out a chain so I could wear it around my neck. We never got that far. I kept it in my pocket where I could rub it between my fingers at times like this.

I sank back into thinking about meeting Jenny in the hereafter. Ancient Roman views on *Romana Mors*, Roman death, or what we call suicide, came to mind. Virtuous suicide was an honorable path in certain

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circumstances. Cato the Younger committed suicide rather than face the tyrant Julius Caesar's subjugation of the Republic. Ethics over enrichment. While the Epicureans and the Stoics, philosophical rivals, agreed about Cato, they also made it clear that killing oneself for love or passion was not a noble end. Ancient Romans valued their *dignitas*, the accumulation of respect, charisma, and prestige in life. A wasted life, a pointless suicide, would destroy all of one's amassed *dignitas*.

And that's where I was stuck. Death in battle to preserve the nation held the greatest *dignitas*: *mortis honore*, death with honor. Or, as the officers at the back of the column used to tell the men at the front, *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*. How sweet and decorous it is to die for one's country.

That kind of sentiment carried me through my career as an Army Ranger, where they gave me medals and commendations. But I survived the wars. I left the military and joined Sabel Security. I met and fell in love with a wonderful woman. She died a death that would've had Cicero and Horace agreeing on something for first time since Cato. Even Zeno and Epicurus would've consented that she died with more *dignitas* than anyone in recent memory.

Jenny had moved on to the next world. I remained trapped in this one.

I needed to catch the next boat off this plane of existence. My only hesitation: It had to be the right boat, going in the right direction in case Dante was onto something about all those circles of Hell. But I had no wars to fight. I had no civilians to protect from the world's monsters. And Ms. Sabel wasn't letting me go look for any, either.

Before I could interrupt the ladies to discuss the operational topics of the day, Ms. Sabel got a call about the murder of an old friend.

She stumbled around her desk while she talked to a detective in Manchester, England. Devastated, Ms. Sabel staggered through her conversation with the detective. Then she needed air.

Ms. Sabel had been there for me when I needed help, so I escorted her to the coffee shop across the street.

We talked about why some deaths hit us harder than others. Why we'd both killed people in dire need of being killed without an ounce of remorse. Yet there were others who were innocent and should live a long

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and healthy life. People who lived in the safe zone. Ms. Sabel's friend was one of those. Someone in her safe zone.

Jenny should've been in mine.

She got her coffee and we sat in silence while we caught up with the messages on our phones. A handsome guy came in, distracting her momentarily. I was glad to see it. Tania wasn't wrong: the boss deserved a good fling, if not something more.

That's when I got the alert. Perimeter alarms were going off at the Sabel Security Operations Center. Only one group I could think of had the resources and motivation to attempt a break-in at our secure facility. If the legends were accurate, it was an ancient order of rich guys who supported each other with money, soldiers, anything it takes to keep the peasants toiling in the fields and the politicians under their thumbs. They had their own version of a special ops battalion called the Knights of Mithras. Knights who had traded in lances and shields for automatic weapons and body armor. They were every bit as tough as Navy SEALs and almost as tough as Army Rangers. Taking them on in a pitched battle might let me catch up with Jenny in the afterlife. Honorably. With *dignitas*. I considered asking Ms. Sabel to let me track them down to the ends of the Earth and extinguish them once and for all.

But she'd say no.

She wanted me to live here and now with the same pain and grief she lived with. Because she didn't want to be alone. She thought she was saving me from hell. Instead, she was holding me in it.

I know how to defeat those who want to save me: go looking for trouble.