

**THE  
REMBRANDT  
DECISION**

**A PIA SABEL MYSTERY**

**SABEL SECURITY #12**

**SEELEY  
JAMES**

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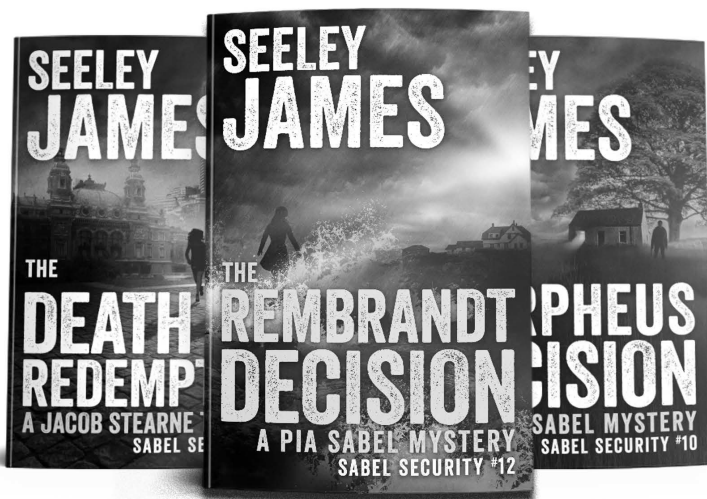
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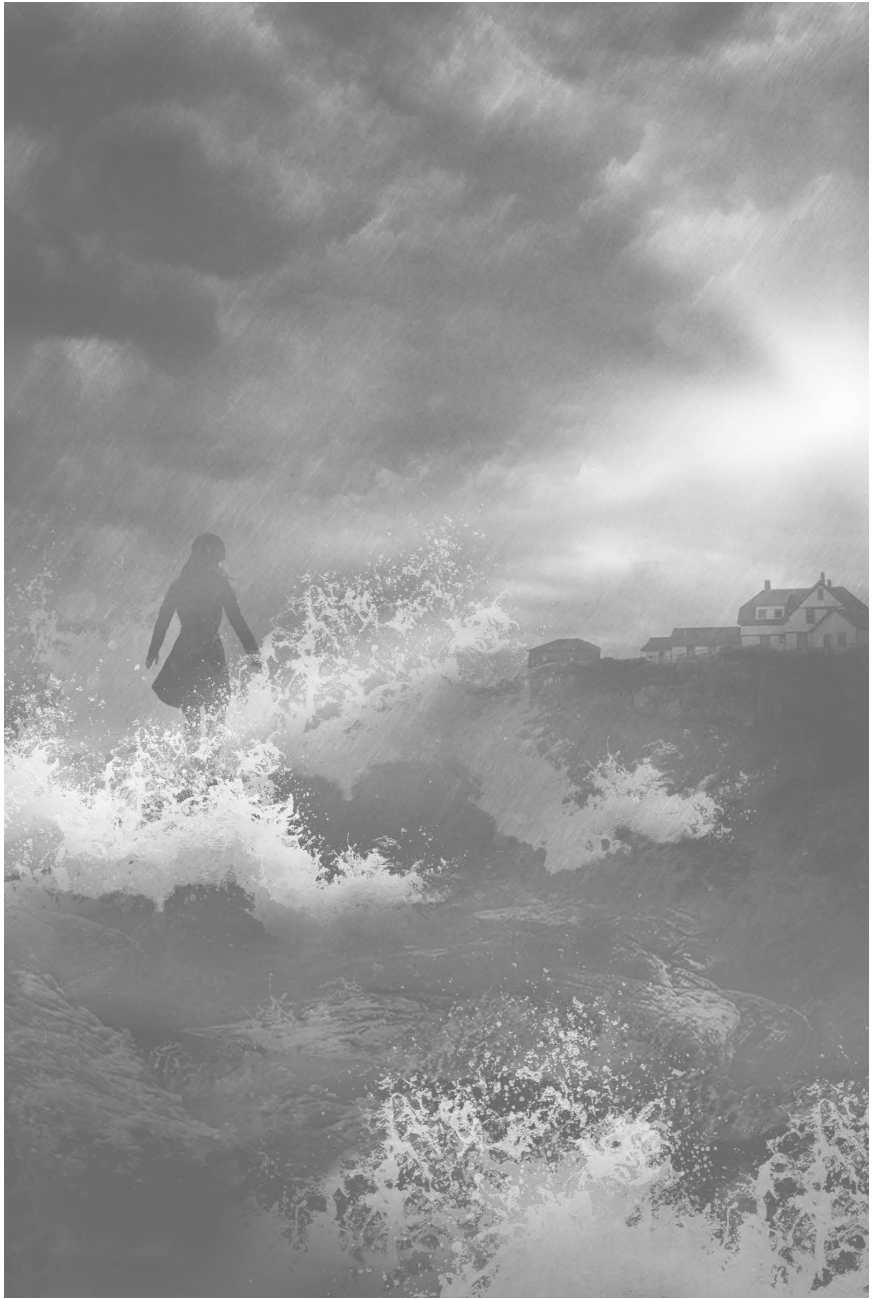
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*This book is dedicated to all the adopted families in the world, and in particular the three-year-old girl who adopted me when I was nineteen:*

Nicole Marie

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# CHAPTER 1

## PHIL, THE DEAD MAN'S STORY

FROM A FEW YARDS AWAY, my assassin waits for me to die. The finality of this situation is terrifying. I'm taking my last few breaths of life lonely and afraid, and there's nothing I can do about it. I've already been through four of the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, and depression. Now I've reached acceptance.

Five years ago, a guardian angel pulled me from the wreckage after I crashed into a bridge abutment. Last year, a quick-thinking nurse helped me survive a massive heart attack. None of that's going to happen this time. No one can save me. I'm really going to cross over. Alone.

My body is stuck in an awkward pose, half falling over on the bench. My right shoulder is hooked on something keeping me from falling on the ground. My gaze is stuck on the spot ten yards in front of me where the harbor waters lap against the park's edge. I want to scream but I can't. A hollow panic zaps through me like lightning.

My murderer leans over sideways at the waist, trying to catch my gaze, searching for my last flicker of life. A phone splashes light in my pupils. The light comes closer. Cold, narrow eyes dart around my face.

I try to say, *Not gonna take the murder weapon, are ya? Nah, someone might see you with it. Or are you scared of touching me? Ya coward.*

Summer air dances and eddies around my neck like an angel of death toying with me. I'll miss these earthly sensations when I'm gone. Maybe they have new ones where I'm going. Yeah. I'll learn to like the snap and sizzle of burning flames.

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Damn it. Why kill me? Why not talk to me or threaten me or beat me up or chase me out of town? Why this?

The fingers of my left hand squeeze the bottle, a loving reflex, not an intentional command from my brain. The bottle. The signs were there from the beginning. No one in this town would ever willingly drink with me. When someone offers a fine bottle like this ... I should've known. But I couldn't pass up a chance like that, could I? No. Not Phil Jacobsen. When the finest tequila in the world is available, I gotta have a taste. Fell for it in a second. And it was definitely the best.

Until that last slug.

My lungs take in air by the spoonful. My heartbeat is slowing now. Slower and slower and slower. My mind slides back into a dark pit of fear. What's next? Is there a reckoning in the afterlife? Is that why I'm so scared?

What was that thing Kitty said at the party last week? She stood on my coffee table posing like the Statue of Liberty, crowing like an actress on stage: *Alas, how terrible knowing the truth can be when there is no help in the truth.*

I laughed then. I get it now.

I know a truth that is indeed terrible. One little truth could destroy so many lives. It's not my fault I found out. I try to look at my executioner, but my eyes still won't move.

I changed my mind, decided not to tell anyone. The assassin doesn't know that. Didn't ask. Damn. I'll take this truth to the grave—a lot earlier than planned. Why? Because no one trusts me.

Sure, I have a few drinks now and then and wind up saying the wrong thing. So what? Who doesn't do that? Sometimes the truth needs to be told, and the sooner the better. Other times, it's been hidden so long, you can't let it out. This is one of those things that can't be let loose. I get that now. No one needs to know. I took care of it. I made sure no one would find out.

In my head, I scream at my murderer, *I helped you! Ya just don't know it yet!*

Story of my life. Hauled to the altar and needlessly sacrificed for the greater good. No appeals. No chance for mercy.

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The storm passed by earlier. Rain washed the park, the bench, the sidewalk, the whole Town Harbor. The gales have calmed to a warm and humid breeze, heavy with salt and the ever-present scent of the sea. Helluva time to realize how beautiful our little town is. I guess there are worse places to die.

Beyond this little bench, invisible in the black of night, waves crest and burst over the wind-whipped granite breakwater like the slow beat of the Grim Reaper. Tons of water burst into the air with a boom before crashing back to the rock. It slurps back to the sea, where it silently gathers momentum for the next assault. Boom, crash, slurp, silence. The same boom and crash the secret will make when this town discovers the truth.

Poseidon alone knows what I left beneath those dark and surging waters.

I think my lungs have stopped working altogether now. How much longer do I have?

My poisoner gets closer still. A sharp tongue slithers out to wet the edges of that tight little mouth, then retreats like a snake into a lair. That brain, thinking, calculating, figuring the odds. With a turn toward the harbor, the killer straightens up and stretches. I hear a sigh. We both know it won't be long.

My vision dims. I feel dizzy. My mind tries again to speak. *I was gonna protect you—and this is how you treat me? You won't get away with it.*

That's a lie. I'm powerless. What can I do now?

A gust snaps the fabric of our clothes, the living and the nearly-dead. This is it. I muster all my faculties in one final effort. My last chance to say something. My last chance to even think something. I want to hurl the bottle. I want to scream. I want revenge. I don't want to die in vain. Fear hits me again with a harder fist, banging away at my conscious life. I feel as if I'm rising from my body, soaring into this dreadful night. I must try one more time. Try to leave a clue.

My right hand twitches in response to my mind's call for resources. My index finger is the last soldier willing to answer.

The oil of my finger will leave a water-resistant contrast on the wet

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bench, right? Like on a fog-wet window? At least, if they dust for fingerprints, they'll see it, right? I try to rub out a few words before my murderer faces me for the last time. I get one word scrawled out, *secret*. That won't tell the tale. I need more. I focus hard.

My last heartbeat thumps in my chest. The Grim Reaper's bony fingers squeeze me hard, letting me know I'm his.

I've been dispatched into the great unknown by a misunderstanding.

I must leave a better clue. I focus harder and get four letters. And that's it. My finger stops responding. I'm done.

Is it enough to be visible? Will someone see it? Will it make sense?

A big wave thunders across the rocky breakwater. A sign from the gods: time to go. My body remains on the bench while my soul slips under that retreating wave. I feel my consciousness disappear into the sea, down to the depths where I've hidden Uncle Vinny's treasure box, leaving behind all my worldly cares. I intended to keep the secret. But if murder was my reward, I've left half a clue. I hope someone will figure it out and unearth the sordid story. The truth always comes out.

# CHAPTER 2

## CHRISTINE, THE BAKER'S STORY

THERE IT IS AGAIN, THE rapping on the glass out front. More insistent this time. It isn't the wind after all. Someone is out there. At four in the morning? I shake the flour from my hands and grab a towel and push through the swinging door. I elbow the light switches as I pass them, illuminating the retail floor. Over the top of the cases, across the dining area, outside the front door, I see a tall young woman in stretchy athletic wear peering expectantly around the "Closed" sign.

Pointing to the earbuds jammed in her ears, she makes it clear she's on the phone. She gestures for me to let her in.

"We don't open 'til seven," I say.

"The police chief sent me," she says through the glass. "He told me to wait at Mom's Bakery until he can take my statement."

She steps back to double check the sign overhead.

I frown and think through how smart it is to let a stranger inside. If Scotty thought the woman was dangerous, he'd have kept her with him. Wherever he is. I see no squad car on the narrow street outside, so I guess I should let her in. Because Scotty said so. As if I have nothing else to do.

There is something familiar about the woman. Like I might know her somehow. I know everyone in our little village, but not her. Still, I recognize something about her. Twisting between the display cases, I make my way to the front. Before I wrench open the sticky deadbolt, I look up and down the street. The shops opposite mine are as dark and silent as tombstones.

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“I’m alone,” she says. Her gray-green eyes pierce me.

She’s tall, that’s for sure. Fit and strong as well. I snap the bolt back and let her in, shutting it quickly after she slips through. Her dark-blond ponytail swishes past my face. Walking with the silky confidence of a tiger, she reaches the room’s center and stops, concentrating on her call. Beat up running shoes cover her feet. Below her trim waist a fanny pack rides her hips, patterned leggings stretch to her ankles, and a purple racerback tank top doubles as a sports bra. Her outfit reveals every inch of her toned body without leaving room for interpretation.

I never wore anything more revealing than sweats in my prime. Couldn’t give the men an excuse to get grabby. But nowadays young women will wear just about anything. My gaze reaches her face, where her eyes watch me as if she’s reading my mind.

She holds up a finger, demanding my patience. Really? These millennials. Expecting us to wait on them hand and foot all the time. She says something to whoever is on the phone. You’d think she could take a moment to introduce herself or something.

Her voice is a bit strained and frustrated. She’s in the middle of saying, “... and if that’s the case, Madam President.” She listens intently for a moment. “Is that a German expression? I’m not exactly fluent.” She listens again. “Ah, *Die Daumen drücken*, to press the thumbs. I like that one. We say, *keeping our fingers crossed*. Well, as I said, something’s come up and my people will call to reschedule later today. Please extend my apologies to the entire EU Council for me. I’ve got to go. Bye.”

As I’m catching up with what kind of call that was, she pulls the earbuds out and shoves them and her phone in a thigh pocket. Her glass-smooth skin is taut over the muscles and bones of her face. Ah, to be young again.

I want to hate her until she flashes a warm smile full of white teeth. She leans forward, her eyes greedy for personal connection, and extends her hand. “Pia Sabel. Sorry for the intrusion, ma’am. I’m sure—”

Holy shit!

That’s why she looks familiar. And why she’s so fit. Her pictures don’t begin to capture her presence. She was a soccer star before she inherited Sabel Industries. Now that I know who she is, I’m gaping up at

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her like a speechless, open-mouthed moron. But she's a day early. And it's four in the morning. And she's dripping sweat on my nice clean floor. Why the hell is Pia Sabel standing in my little bakery dripping sweat an hour before dawn? She's still talking.

“—and please, don't let me interrupt your day. Carry on with—”

“Why did Scotty send you over here?” I croak when my voice comes back. My neck hurts from looking up at her while she answers. I'm still reeling in shock when her words reach my brain. A murder. A body on the park bench by the harbor. She found him on her morning run. She called the police. Scotty came and took over the scene. Told her to wait in my humble bakery, the only place he knew would be open and dry at this hour.

Why would he do that to his poor mother? Why wouldn't he call me first? Let me know Pia-fucking-Sabel is here—AND SHE DISCOVERED A DEAD BODY! This is not good. Not good at all. We were supposed to impress her, not let her find a dead body.

She stops talking.

I fill the awkward gap. “That was an important call you were on. Do you need to get back to whoever that was?”

I'm dying to know who *Madam President* is, and it was the only thing I could think of to pry it out of her.

“That can wait.” She sighs. “I was rescheduling, and it didn't go well. You know, my competitive nature ends up pissing people off and I spend most of my time smoothing ruffled feathers and soothing scorched egos.”

“If it's any consolation,” I tell her, “a bakery isn't about yeast and flour, it's about smoothing feathers and soothing egos.”

We share a polite laugh. Sweat is pouring off her.

“Would you like a towel?” I ask.

Her eyes fall to the floor as if she just noticed the puddle around her shoes. “Oh, I'm terribly sorry. Starting to cool down here. Yes, please, that would be great.”

I consider giving her the one in my hand, but it's covered in flour which would turn to paste on her skin. Trotting into the back, I grab a clean towel along with my phone. There's a text on it from Scotty. I

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reach for my glasses, get flour on them, and put them on anyway. It says he's sending Pia Sabel over to wait for him. *Try to show her some respect, Mom.* Nice. Text me too late and tell me how to behave. That's what I get for not spanking the kids when they were little. I drop the phone in my apron pocket.

I hand Sabel the towel and the first thing she does is squat to wipe the floor.

I say, "Oh, don't bother with that. I'll get it—"

"My mess," she smiles up at me. "If you have a mop, I'll finish up."

She rises and wipes her face, elbows, and other points where sweat runs off her.

Retrieving the mop and bucket, I bring it out of the back. She takes it from me without a word and mops as if she's done this before. How could that be? Who taught her to mop floors? But she does it as well as a union maid: first drenching the affected area with soapy water, scrubbing several times, before shoving the head into the wringer. Muscles pop out of her arms and shoulders as she shoves the handle down with force. She extracts a desert-dry mop and uses it to soak up the dirty water from the floor.

I've spent countless hours trying to teach that simple task to the help. They just snap their gum and roll their eyes.

"Sorry," she says. "I didn't mean to be rude when I came in, but I was in the middle of a call with Brussels. It's nine over there."

"No problem. I'll get this. Go on back to your call."

She waits until I meet her gaze, then says, "You're more important right now."

She turns back and scrubs some more, extending her work all the way back to the front door where she first tracked in. She leaves a clean swath on my floor that makes the rest of the space look less so. Pulling her phone out of the thigh pocket, she pushes the mop and bucket back toward me on its squeaky wheels, eyeing her phone the whole time. She wipes her face and neck again and tosses the towel on the wringer.

And there she is. The real Pia Sabel. Here's the billionaire I expected to see. She's dismissing me like a servant. Privileged and aloof, treating the rest of us like we're hired help. Cleans up after herself to feel good



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about it, then hurls the dirty stuff back at me to deal with.

I reach for the mop handle but her hand flies out and grabs it in front of my nose. She's thumbing something on her phone and holding the mop firmly with her other hand.

She finishes her text, pockets the phone, then gives me another smile. "Sorry, just had to tell my VP where I am. I'll be overdue in a few and I don't want her alarmed. Where is the sink? In back?"

I nod and gesture meekly, but she's already gone.

She pushes her way through the swinging door. With one hand she swings five gallons of mop water over the lip of the sink and empties it. Sensing the laundry bag in her peripheral vision, she tosses the wadded towel into the hamper like a basketball star. She rinses the bucket and rolls it back in the corner.

I lean my hip against my pride and joy: my solid maple butcherblock kneading table. My large and spotless, flour coated workspace. The heart of my operation.

As Sabel turns around, her eyes absorb everything in my kitchen and storeroom like a spy. I took over an oddly shaped space that used to be a speakeasy, giving me an expansive kitchen. Her gaze takes in everything as if she's committing it to memory. When she glances up at my secret ingredients shelf, I feel a little defensive. I keep the labels turned away to foil prying eyes. Can she see anything up there? I get the impression she has X-ray vision. Does that sound crazy paranoid? Yes.

Sabel catches me watching her and continues her sweep of my back room until she stops on Scotty's high school hobby: a framed insect collection. He gave up on it by tenth grade, so I had it framed and put it where I could see it and remember the inquisitive boy who grew up to be our Police Chief. Nosing in, she examines it as if she were a collector. She looks up with a smile.

Next, she turns to my little shrine to Sara tucked in the corner of my tiny desk. She examines the picture in the center. It's surrounded by paper flowers and hearts. It's the two of us taken too many years ago to count. We're grinning with the confidence of teenagers before the world hits you in the face with a baseball bat. And—I just now notice—we're wearing incredibly short cut-offs and skimpy halter-tops. Lots of skin

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showing. Lots.

“That’s you?” she asks, pointing while turning to me.

“And Sara Vitelli.” There’s a moment of silence.

“I have a tribute like this to my mother,” Sabel says. “Sara was someone special?”

“Best friend back in the day. I was going to be her campaign manager, make her mayor, then governor.” I stop talking so I won’t choke up.

Sabel touches my shoulder with caring fingertips. My first reaction is to shrug her off. I don’t like sympathy. It pisses me off. But I don’t do anything. It’s a nice sensation to have someone care about you for a moment. Even if she is a stranger.

“Lost her to leukemia senior year in high school,” I say. I have no idea why I’m telling her this. “Everybody loved her.”

I take a deep breath. Sara’s memorial has become background scenery over the years. I haven’t really looked at it in a long time. I’m not keeping her alive. Truth be told, I don’t want to think about her anymore. Too many things in this town went to hell after she died.

Sabel says, “I feel like I’ve added some stress to your morning. Can I help with the brioche?”

Somehow, the way she says brioche reminds me of our family trip to Boston’s Little Italy when the kids were young. Scotty couldn’t get enough of the Sicilian buns, so I learned to make them. It was the same trip where he took up bug-catching. I crane over my shoulder toward the balls of unfinished buns on the kneading table.

Sabel’s eyes had been on the secret ingredients shelf when she asked. Why was that? Am I being crazy paranoid again? I need to calm down. Just because this young lady can make or break the future of this town shouldn’t make me nervous.

Suddenly I remember the croissants are done and the buns should’ve gone in five minutes ago. I grab a pair of mitts, fling open the top oven, pull the first tray out, and toss it on the kneading table. They’re dark. Not burned. The second and third trays are in the same shape.

“Thanks,” I say as I work. “I’ve got this. Go on up front and wait for Scotty.”

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Grabbing the milk and egg wash, I slather it on the brioche.

Sabel hesitates a moment, as if considering challenging me. Baking is therapeutic. She gets that. Satisfied, she leaves. When I hear her scrape back a chair in the retail space, I peer through the glass in the swinging door. Facing the street, she twists in earbuds and makes a call.

I have an important call of my own to make.

I dial the mayor. He doesn't pick up. I click off and dial again. He picks up this time, groggy and pissed. I don't care. I say, "Rick, we've got a huge problem."