

Praise for *The Pawn*

“Riveting . . . a gripping plot and brisk pacing will win James some fans eager for his next offering.” —*Publishers Weekly*

“[An] exceptional psychological thriller. Steven James writes at a breakneck pace, effortlessly pulling the reader along on this incredible thrill ride. With this first installment of *The Bowers Files*, Steven James has left his mark as a writer to watch for.” —*Armchair Reviews*

“A very interesting story. This is the first of a planned series, the second of which is *The Rook*. If that is as tightly drawn and paced as *The Pawn* already is, John Sandford might have to start looking over his shoulder.” —*Crimespree Magazine*

“*The Pawn* is an intense, *CSI*-like thriller. This is not a story for the weak of stomach or faint of heart; the killers’ histories and crime scene descriptions spare no detail. With his first novel, James steps into Christian fiction with a bang.” —*Christian Retailing*

Praise for *The Rook*

“Best story of the year—perfectly executed.” —*The Suspense Zone*

“Fans of *CSI* and *Law & Order* will enjoy the police work and forensics, but this jacked-up read feels more like an explosive episode of *24*; it’s a wild ride with a shocking conclusion.” —*Publishers Weekly* starred review

“Steven James writes short, snappy chapters, and his action-packed book is filled with many twists and turns.” —*ChristianBook Preview*

“*The Rook* is suspense thriller writing at its highest level with complex storylines, unpredictable plot twists, and characters who engage the reader in many different ways.” —*TitleTrakk.com*

Praise for *The Knight*

“Top-notch suspense.” —*RT Book Reviews*

“There’s a nice balance to *The Knight*, from the intrigue of the cleverly devised plot to the thrill of the investigation, and from the tense courtroom drama to the loving relationship Bowers has with his stepdaughter. It’s a smart, thoughtful, and satisfying novel.” —*Mysterious Reviews*

“Page after page, the suspense never ends. This book is highly recommended.” —*Midwest Book Review*

“*The Knight* is a fabulous, fast-paced thriller full of surprise and suspense—and I highly recommend it.” —*5 Minutes for Books*

“If you haven’t read any of the books in this series, what are you waiting for? I’ve never had a more enjoyable time reading a suspense novel, and I am dying until book 4 comes out. VERY HIGHLY recommended.” —*Books, Movies, and Chinese Food: Book Review*

“I’m continually in awe of Steven James and his mastery of story. If you are looking for top-notch thriller writing laced with suspense, action, mystery, and emotion, then look no further. Steven James is your guy.” —*Fiction Addict*

Praise for *The Bishop*

“James writes smart, taut, high-octane thrillers. But be warned—his books are not for the timid. The endings blow me away every time.” —Mitch Galin, producer, Stephen King’s *The Stand* and Frank Herbert’s *Dune*

“Move over, Alex Cross, there’s a new FBI special agent in DC, Patrick Bowers. Steven James joins the ranks of James Patterson in his spine-tingling thriller *The Bishop*. Patterson fans are going to love Steven James.” —Kathleen Antrim, bestselling author, *Capital Offense*

“Steven James’s *The Bishop* should come with a warning: don’t start reading unless you’re prepared to finish this book in a single sitting. Riveting!” —Karen Dionne, International Thriller Writers website chair; managing editor, *The Big Thrill*

“*The Bishop*—full of plot twists, nightmarish villains, and family conflicts—kept me turning pages on a red-eye all the way from New York City to Amsterdam. Steven James tells stories that grab you by the collar and don’t let go.” —Norb Vonnegut, author, *Top Producer*; editor, *Acrimoney.com*

“Steven James locks you in a thrill ride, with no brakes. He sets the new standard in suspense writing.” —*Suspense Magazine*

“Incredible.” —Ann Tatlock, award-winning author

“Forget what you know. Steven James turns everything upside down in *The Bishop*. This is thriller writing at its absolute best.” —*The Christian Manifesto.com*

“Breakneck speed doesn’t even begin to describe the pace of *The Bishop*. Absolutely brilliant.” —Jeff Buick, bestselling author, *Bloodline*

“As thrilling and unexpected as any five-star action movie. James delivers a new take on crime and the criminal mind that’s both eye-opening and heart-pounding. A high-energy read that delivers a jolt to the senses again and again.” —John Tinker, Emmy-award-winning writer

THE QUEEN

THE BOWERS FILES #5

A PATRICK BOWERS THRILLER

STEVEN JAMES



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Grand Rapids, Michigan

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The quote on p. 233 is taken from P. Kreeft, *Back to Virtue* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 37.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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On October 1, 2003, at 03:25 a.m., hackers broke into the Naval Ocean Systems Center in San Diego, California.

An unknown amount of data was stolen.

Since that day, there have been over six dozen confirmed instances of malware and logic bombs found in the Department of Defense's Joint Worldwide Intelligence Communication System (JWICS), the United States military's most secure, dedicated intranet for sending critical and top secret information to combat troops and first-strike weapons systems worldwide.

The United States government continues to deny that these events ever occurred.

PART I

- ICE -

PROLOGUE

Present day
San Antonio, Texas
10:13 p.m.

Kirk Tyler turned the computer monitor to face his captive.

The video image showed a young woman leaving the Authorized Personnel Only entrance to Lone Star Mall. The mall had closed more than hour ago. No one else around.

Nighttime.

The girl was the man's daughter.

Dashiell Collet wrenched against his bonds, but the duct tape held him securely to the steel chair and he wasn't going anywhere. The empty warehouse loomed around him.

"This doesn't have to end badly for her," Kirk said, enjoying the view of the seventeen-year-old cheerleader sashaying to her car. Erin was obviously unaware that she was being followed, that she was being recorded, that her life was balancing on such a razor-thin edge. "Just answer my question."

Dashiell was silent.

"Well?" Kirk asked.

"If you touch her." Dashiell's teeth were clenched. "I swear to God—"

"Let's leave God out of this." Kirk stared at the screen. The video feed came from a camera hidden in the top button of the oxford of his associate, now twenty paces behind the girl. "I just want you to tell me the name of the person you've been in touch with at the Pentagon. That's it. Just your contact's name, and this will be all over."

“I told you before, I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“You worked at the facility for fourteen years.”

“What facility?”

“Dashiell, please. Enough. I want to know the name of the person in charge of the project.”

Dashiell shook his head adamantly. “You’ve made a mistake. I’m the wrong man.”

Considering Dashiell’s situation, Kirk was surprised by the amount of resolve in the man’s voice. Apparently his training was serving him well.

So, a little convincing.

Kirk’s partner was wearing a hands-free Bluetooth earpiece, and Kirk spoke to him, said two words: “Take her.”

On the monitor he could see the distance between the camera and Erin shrinking as his associate moved swiftly, silently, toward her.

“No!” Dashiell cried.

Erin was fishing her car keys out of her purse.

“This will stop,” Kirk said, “when you want it to stop.”

Dashiell strained heroically to get free, but the way he was bound, his struggles only constricted the duct tape more tightly around his ankles and wrists.

“I don’t know anyone at the Pentagon!” he yelled. “I’m telling you I’m an insurance adjuster! That’s all!”

Erin reached the car.

Opened the driver’s door.

The camera was a yard away from her back.

And then.

She must have noticed the person in her side-view mirror or heard the rustle of movement behind her because she turned abruptly and opened her mouth to scream, but Kirk’s partner was on her before she could.

“I don’t know anyone!” Dashiell hollered.

On the video feed, Kirk could see a hand clamped over the girl’s mouth as she was shoved brusquely into the car. The images became quick, jerky.

“I swear!”

“I don’t believe you, Dashiell.”

“Leave her out of this! Let her go!”

It was hard to tell what was happening in the vehicle. A struggle, yes, but for the moment everything was a blur of arms and colors and cries. Then, the screen showed the flash of a hand backhanding the girl and then, as she called out weakly for help, Kirk watched as her left arm was pressed down and punched with a hypodermic needle.

“Stop this!” Dashiell shouted. “Call him off!”

“Tell me.”

Erin’s eyes rolled back. She drifted down in her seat.

“Okay, I will! Just tell him to stop!”

Kirk spoke into the phone. “Hang on.”

An arm positioned the girl’s now limp body in the front passenger seat, strapping the seat belt across her waist and chest. The driver’s door clicked shut, then the video image remained stationary, the camera staring patiently out the windshield at the stretch of vacant parking lot surrounding the car.

“All right,” Kirk said to Dashiell. “Talk to me.”

“If I tell you, you have to promise you won’t hurt her.” Dashiell was unconsciously wetting his lips with his tongue, nervous. Desperate.

“I promise.”

“Swear to me that this man will let her go. That he won’t touch her. You have to—”

“Listen to me, Dashiell, I swear that if you tell us the name, I’ll let both you and Erin go. You have my word. I’ll have my man leave her in the car, and she’ll wake up in a couple hours with a headache, but other than that she’ll be fine.” He sat at the table and faced Dashiell, carefully steepled his fingers, and leaned forward. “However, if you don’t tell me what I came here to find out, he’s going to bring her back here, and I’ll make you watch as the two of us occupy ourselves with her for the rest of the night.”

Dashiell was breathing heavily, defiantly, but Kirk could see defeat in his eyes. “Rear Admiral Colberg.”

“Colberg.”

“Yes. Alan Colberg. He lives in Alexandria, Virginia. Works for the Department of Defense. You can look it up. Now, tell him to leave her in the car.”

“Just a minute.” Kirk tapped his laptop’s keyboard, verified the name against the list of potentials his employer had sent him. Yes, the rear admiral had been an employee of the Pentagon’s Project Sanguine, but based on Colberg’s work schedule and job responsibilities, the computer told Kirk there was only a 61 percent likelihood of a match. Not enough to go on.

“I need more.” He held up the phone. “Prove it or—”

“All right, listen. Colberg helped design the extremely low frequency technology back in the eighties. He was on the original team. The first one to man the station.”

“That’s not proof.”

“Check his background. He wrote a paper back in 1979 on 3 to 76 Hertz radio waves and the use of the ionosphere in transmission technology.”

It took Kirk a few minutes before he found anything online, but at last he was able to pull up a PDF of the symposium paper written by then Lieutenant (Junior Grade) Alan Colberg.

It wasn’t 100 percent conclusive, but in this business, very little was. He would confirm everything when he met with the admiral. Good.

The person who’d hired him for this job would be pleased.

Kirk spoke into the phone, to the man with Erin. “All right, bring her back and we’ll get started.”

“What?” The blood drained from Dashiell’s face. “You said you’d let her go!”

“Yes.” Kirk pocketed the phone. “I did.”

“I’m telling you”—Dashiell’s voice was taut with fear, with the revelation of what was happening—“it’s Colberg. You have to believe—”

“I do believe you.”

“But you swore you’d—”

“Mr. Collet,” Kirk interrupted. “Part of my job involves telling people whatever is necessary to convince them to give me what I want. It’s nothing personal.” Kirk unholstered his Italian-made .45 ACP Tanfoglio Force Compact and pressed the end of the blue steel barrel against Dashiell’s left thigh. “This is for wasting my time with your stalling.”

“No, you have to—”

Kirk squeezed the trigger, and Dashiell Collet screamed.

Then screamed even louder when Kirk fired another round into his other leg.

Judging by the position of the barrel, Kirk was pretty sure the second bullet had shattered Dashiell’s femur. The bleeding from both wounds was steady, not gushing, and Kirk didn’t think the femoral arteries had been torn. Untreated, he would eventually bleed out, but he should survive at least a couple hours. Long enough to watch.

Kirk set the gun on the table to his left. It took him only a moment to gag him. “You could have stopped all of this if you’d just told me right away what I wanted.”

Dashiell’s eyes were bleary with pain from the gunshots. His head sagged, and Kirk feared that the blood loss was affecting him more quickly than he’d anticipated. He slapped his cheek. “Look at me!”

The man seemed to refocus.

“You need to know that Erin’s death and everything that precedes it will have been your fault for inconveniencing me for the last three hours.”

Although obviously disoriented, Dashiell pulled against his bonds once again but then winced terribly as his leg tensed. He tried to cry out in pain, but the gag swallowed the sounds.

Kirk unlocked the side door so the building would be accessible to his partner. As he was returning to the table, he felt his phone vibrate in his pocket. Only one person had the call-in code for this number.

Valkyrie.

Precisely the person he needed to talk to.

Kirk tapped the phone's screen, but before he could speak, the electronically masked voice on the other end said, "I was watching the video feed. I saw your man take the girl."

"He does good work," Kirk said. "We got what we wanted. Dashiell's contact is Rear Admiral Colberg. At the Pentagon." Kirk arranged the items he would be needing for his time with Erin. The tape. The ropes. The cuffs.

"You should have left the girl out of this."

If there was one thing Kirk Tyler did not like, it was having to explain himself. "I wouldn't have done it unless I believed it was the most prudent course of action." He decided not to mention his plans regarding the girl.

"The most prudent course of action."

"Yes."

"That's what you thought."

A pause that made Kirk somewhat uneasy.

"You should have left the girl out of this," Valkyrie repeated. But this time the words had a tighter edge to them. "This was sloppy."

"It was efficient."

"Efficiency means limiting collateral damage, decreasing exposure—"

"You weren't here." He had never cut Valkyrie off midsentence before, but he wasn't in the mood for a lecture. "Don't question my decision."

A longer pause this time. "In lieu of what I've seen tonight, I've decided to have someone else finish the job."

Kirk felt his grip on the phone tighten. "That wouldn't be wise."

"I told you when we started that there would be consequences if anything was mishandled. This situation with the girl—I consider it mishandled."

A warning flared through Kirk's mind.

He's watching you.

Kirk drew his Tanfoglio again, scanned the shadows of the warehouse. "You do not want to do this." He clicked through the possible

places Valkyrie or one of his men might be hiding. Saw nothing. “You pull me from this and I’m coming for you.”

“Good-bye, Kirk.”

And before Kirk Tyler could respond, the cell phone he was holding beside his ear exploded, ripping off his forearm and most of his head, sending a frenzy of blood and brain and splintered skull across the table. As his body dropped clumsily to the ground, tiny globs of gray matter dribbled onto the concrete, and Dashiell watched in horror—thinking only of what would happen to Erin and to him when the dead man’s associate arrived.

Alexei Chekov was halfway through the Grand Inquisitor scene in *The Brothers Karamazov* when he heard from Valkyrie asking him to come in and clean up a mess.

“You remember Kirk Tyler?” the voice said.

“I’m familiar with him, though we’ve never actually met.” Alexei’s English was impeccable, as was his Russian, Arabic, and Italian. When Valkyrie had first contacted him, he’d noticed a sentence structure that suggested someone who’d either studied in or grown up in the States. Because of this Alexei had chosen American English for their conversations.

“I’m afraid you won’t have the opportunity.”

“He disappointed you.”

“Yes.”

Alexei placed a bookmark and set down the novel.

Valkyrie.

In early Norse mythology, a Valkyrie was a goddess who flew over the battlefields deciding who would live and who would die—a job strikingly close to his own. The myths evolved over time and turned Valkyries into beautiful, angelic creatures who rewarded fallen heroes in paradise.

Death and rewards. Who lives and who dies—the ultimate decision.

Valkyrie filled Alexei in concerning Dashiell Collet and his

daughter and all that had happened at the warehouse. “It’s not far from where you are,” Valkyrie explained. “I want you to dress Dashiell’s gunshot wounds, take care of Tyler’s body, then call an ambulance for Mr. Collet. I want him alive in case we need to speak with him again.”

Valkyrie’s comment about the warehouse being nearby told Alexei that his own location wasn’t as secret as he’d thought it was, and he realized that he might have underestimated Valkyrie, a person he had never met, didn’t even know the identity of.

“What about the girl?”

“She’ll wake up in an hour or two. I’m afraid the man who tried to abduct her won’t be so lucky.”

Alexei knew a little about the calculated synchronization of Valkyrie’s work, and he imagined that the would-be abductor’s Bluetooth earpiece had been wired to detonate just as Kirk’s phone had been.

He tried not to picture what the girl would see beside her when she awoke.

Over the years Alexei had developed a professional objectivity toward these things, but still, images like the one Erin would awaken to were deeply disturbing, and he found himself sympathizing with her, for the nightmares that would undoubtedly chase her for the rest of her life. Maybe he could get there before she awoke, move her someplace safe.

“Do you need me to clean that up as well?”

“I’ll have someone else take care of it. Just get to the warehouse. Tonight I’ll have a plane take you to Alexandria, Virginia. I want you to have a chat with Rear Admiral Alan Colberg. Tell him we need the access codes to the station. He’ll know what you’re talking about.”

“All right.”

“By the way, providentially, Tyler had a Tanfoglio with him. I know you lost one last year in Italy. Keep it. It’s yours. For the inconvenience of being called upon so late in the evening.”

Once again, impressive. How Valkyrie could have known about the incident in Italy was a mystery to Alexei. He had the sense that

Valkyrie had mentioned it just to show him that his past was no secret. “I don’t use guns,” he replied. “Not anymore.”

“Not since your wife’s death.”

How?

“Yes.”

A pause. “Of course. Contact me when you’ve finished with Colberg.”

“I will.”

The conversation ended.

Though Alexei did not carry a handgun, he did carry something else.

He slipped the cylindrical object into the breast pocket of his suit coat and left for the warehouse.

Valkyrie should not have known about the Tanfoglio or about Tatiana’s death. It showed Alexei that Valkyrie had pried into his past, and when people poke around like that, they inevitably leave evidence of their presence.

On the way out the door, Alexei put a call through to one of his contacts in the GRU, Russia’s military intelligence directorate, to see if he could find out who might be using the code name Valkyrie.

Based on the work Alexei needed to do at the warehouse, the flight time to Virginia, and the time change, he anticipated that the rear admiral would be just sitting down for breakfast when he arrived.

Hopefully, Colberg would be cooperative and Alexei wouldn’t have to put the object he now carried in his pocket to use.

1

18 hours later
Thursday, January 8
Lorelette Mobile Home Park
Merrill, Wisconsin
4:21 p.m.

I scanned the trailer park through the binoculars I'd borrowed from FBI SWAT Team Leader Torres.

Most of the task force had agreed that we should go in light, but FBI Director Wellington didn't want to take any chances. So, even though we hadn't been able to confirm that Travis Reiser was actually in the trailer, she'd ordered a full SWAT team present on site.

Now I was a quarter mile away with Team Leader Antón Torres, a rock-jawed jock I'd worked with on a dozen previous cases, by my side.

Eight inches of crusty snow covered the ground, but mounds at least four feet deep lay pushed up on the shoulders of the roads and at the ends of the parking areas.

A low pressure system was sweeping down from Canada, leaving a foot of snow in its wake. It would arrive tomorrow afternoon, and I was glad we were here today and not in the thick of the storm.

Most of the trailers in the park had paint that was faded or peeling, ripped screen doors, or rusted sheet-metal roofs telegraphing the economic demographic of the people living here. Nearly a third of the sixty trailers had abandoned toys, discarded sleds, or half-melted snowmen sandwiched in the tight quarters between the homes. A lot of children lived in this park. Not good.

The sun edged toward the bottom of the sky, lengthening the

late-day shadows around us. Nearby, Torres's snipers waited for his go-ahead to take up position before twilight swallowed the park.

"Well?" he asked.

Once again I directed my gaze at the yellow single-wide trailer where we believed Reiser was staying. "Still no movement."

"His car is there."

"Yes." An eyewitness had seen Reiser enter the trailer last night. I didn't need to tell Antón that. We'd gone over all this earlier.

I handed him the binoculars, and while he studied the trailer I surveyed the area, noting entrance and exit routes and evaluating their relationship to the roads that wandered through this part of the county.

"All right." Torres set down the binoculars. "What are you thinking?"

"I see four possible exit routes." I gestured toward the west end of the park. "There, near the quarry, but if we put Saunders and Haley on the ridge, they'll have that one covered; the main entrance, one sniper can take that. There's a break in the metal fence to the south, but it looks like Reiser would need to cross the field behind his trailer to get there, so, unlikely." I pointed to the east. "I'd say that based on the layout of the park, if he rabbits he'll most likely head south, past that home—"

"With the snow angels."

"Yes."

Torres's jaw was set. "Kids are easier to handle than adults."

"And Reiser is experienced. He'll know it's a lot harder for snipers to take a shot if they see a child in the scope along with the target."

"They'll hesitate."

I nodded.

He studied the park. "I'm telling you, Pat, you have an instinct for this. You should've been SWAT instead of all this theoretical geospatial bull—" He cut himself off mid-curse, no doubt realizing that he was inadvertently turning his compliment into an insult. He corrected himself: "I'm just saying."

"I appreciate it."

Actually, the FBI's SWAT program wouldn't have been a bad choice, but I was born to work for the Bureau's National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime, or NCAVC, and the last ten years had been a perfect fit for me.

"I'll go in first," I said.

He shook his head. "The director was clear. She wanted us to send in SWAT before you or Jake access the trailer."

"That's not the way to play this." This was not the only thing I disagreed with the director on. "People react in kind. When they feel threatened, they respond accordingly. You go in heavy, he's going to respond to meet the threat. I can talk him out." My experience as a field agent and as a homicide detective before that gave me street cred with Torres, and he didn't argue with me, just took a moment to peer through the binocs again. "Those are trailer homes," I added. "A shoot-out would mean—"

"Yeah. Rounds flying through the walls," he said grimly.

While he considered what I'd said, Agent Jake Vanderveld, the NCAVC profiler who was working this case with me, sauntered toward us. Broad shoulders. Blond hair. Meticulously trimmed mustache. I was thirty-seven, he was a few years younger. He nodded a greeting and slapped Torres on the shoulder.

"Where're we at?" Jake asked.

"Still deciding." Torres lowered the binoculars.

"Play it safe, Antón," I said. "Have people in place, but then—"

He made his decision, shook his head. "No. I'm not comfortable with it. I want my men in there first. You can follow close, right after the team, but I want to secure the premises first."

"Hang on," Jake spoke up, a little too authoritatively. "This is all a game to Reiser. He'll want to taunt Pat." Jake had helped lead us here and knew Reiser's file better than almost anyone. "If we send in a man in civilian clothes, Reiser'll think he has the upper hand. Play to his weakness, his arrogance, and you'll get close."

It was unusual for me and Jake to agree about anything, but apparently this time we were on the same wavelength.

Torres worked his jaw back and forth for a moment, then let out

a small sigh. “All right. Listen. I go in with you, Pat. But I enter the trailer first.”

“Plainclothes?” I said.

He nodded.

“Agreed.” I stood. “And Travis Reiser might be the only key to finding Basque, so tell your team minimum force. We need to take him alive.”

“That’s not the priority here.”

Basque had eluded us for six months now, and if we were right about Reiser, he might flip on Basque, turn him in. “Keep him alive, Antón.”

“If this little prick takes any aggressive action, we’re dropping him.”

Though I wanted more reassurance that the SWAT team would hold off from taking Reiser down, they’d been trained, as I had, to fire at a target until it’s no longer a threat. That wasn’t the outcome I was looking for, but I knew Torres was right. You don’t take chances, especially with someone like Reiser.

“All right,” I said. “Let’s go.”

We all quieted our cells, one of the SWAT guys distributed radios to us, small, nearly invisible patches you wear just behind your ear, and while Torres changed into civilian clothes, I went to get some body armor.