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BROKER OF LIES

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Every Deadly Kiss

“James brings complexity and intrigue to his latest Patrick Bowers thriller, layering plotlines and unfolding characters in a way that keeps readers on the edge through the very end. . . . Fans of the Bowers Files will not be disappointed.”

—RT BOOK REVIEWS

“Unnerving and laced with breathtaking suspense, *Every Deadly Kiss* is a surprising and complex thriller that will keep readers obsessed to the final page.”

—FRESH FICTION

Checkmate

“A perfectly crafted hard-hitting, intense thriller that takes readers to the top of the cliff and dangles them over the edge. James is an author that every thriller reader should have on their bookshelf.”

—*SUSPENSE MAGAZINE*

The King

“His tightly woven, adrenaline-laced plots leave readers breathless.”

—THE SUSPENSE ZONE

“With a multidimensional quality, Steven James writes with a confident, assured ease. Just good old-fashioned, gimmick-free storytelling that pushes the envelope to the edge and beyond.”

—STEVE BERRY, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Kaiser's Web*

The Queen

“A masterpiece of a thriller.”

—SPECIAL AGENT R. WAYNE SMITH, FBI (retired)

“With a brilliant strategy, James manages a checkmate, and he seems to have many more moves in store.”

—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

The Bishop

“Breakneck speed doesn’t even begin to describe the pace . . . Absolutely brilliant.”

—JEFF BUICK, bestselling author of *The Krubera Conspiracy*

“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. An intense, intelligent thriller with characters as real as your next-door neighbors, *The Bishop* goes beyond the exploration of good and evil to what it means to be human. Riveting!”

—KAREN DIONNE, #1 international bestselling author of *The Marsh King’s Daughter*

The Knight

“Page after page, the suspense never ends. This book is highly recommended.”

—MIDWEST 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

The Rook

“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

“Readers will be on the edge of their seats.”

—ROMANTIC TIMES TOP PICK

The Pawn

“An exceptional psychological thriller.”

—BOOKSHELF REVIEW

“Riveting.”

—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“Seriously intense.”

—POP CULTURE TUESDAY

“Steven James writes at a breakneck pace, effortlessly pulling the reader along on this incredible thrill ride.”

—ARMCHAIR REVIEWS

“An exhilarating thriller that will keep readers up late into the night . . . In a word, intense.”

—MYSTERIOUS REVIEWS

Opening Moves

“*Opening Moves* is a mesmerizing read. From the first chapter, it sets its hook deep and drags you through a darkly gripping story with relentless power. My conclusion: I need to read more of Steven James.”

—MICHAEL CONNELLY, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Desert Star* and executive producer of *Bosch*

“Steven James has created a fast-moving thriller with psychological depth and gripping action . . . Full of twists and enjoyable surprise, *Opening Moves* is a blisteringly fast and riveting read.”

—MARK GREANEY, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Gray Man*

BROKER OF LIES

Also by Steven James



SCIENCE FICTION

Synapse

SUSPENSE

THE BOWERS FILES

Opening Moves

The Pawn

The Rook

The Knight

The Bishop

The Queen

The King

Checkmate

Every Crooked Path

Every Deadly Kiss

Every Wicked Man

THE JEVIN BANKS EXPERIENCE

Placebo

Singularity

YOUNG ADULT

THE BLUR TRILOGY

Blur

Fury

Curse

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STEVEN JAMES



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Broker of Lies

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Facilis descensus Averno.

VIRGIL

The Aeneid

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PART I

Fresh Corpses

CHAPTER 1

PROVIDENCE MEMORIAL HOSPITAL BURN UNIT
WASHINGTON, DC

Zoë Hughes eyed the door. “He’s in there?”
A nod from her supervisor, a nurse who’d been working in the burn ward for nearly twenty years. Kathleen Capron had seen it all. More than anyone should see.

“Is it true?” Zoë asked. She was just one semester out of college. Still adjusting to it all.

“About?”

“His wife.”

Neither woman moved toward the room. Kathleen shuffled one foot. “You mean that she was still alive?”

“Yes.”

“That’s what they’re saying.”

Zoë caught herself swallowing hard.

Kathleen placed a reassuring hand on Zoë’s forearm. “I know this is your first time, but follow my lead. And don’t look into his eyes when it happens.”

“Why do you say that? Will it frighten him?”

“It’ll frighten you.”

Zoë nodded quietly.

Kathleen rapped gently on the patient’s door and, without waiting for

an answer, announced herself. “Mr. Brock? It’s Kathleen, your nurse.” There was no reply from inside. She nudged the door open. “It’s time to change your bandages.”

She angled through the doorway with Zoë behind her. “Today I have Nurse Hughes with me. She’ll be assisting me.”

Zoë smelled the man’s wounds before she ever saw him. The stench of burnt flesh lingered in the air despite the cleaning agents the custodial staff had used in the room.

She knew from reading the thirty-five-year-old man’s charts that the burns covered over a third of his body, from his left leg up and across his torso to the side of his face. Though the wounds were mostly on the left side, both of his arms had been burned when he reached into the flames.

She also knew that with severe-enough full-thickness, or third-degree, burns—when the nerves were damaged—the patient didn’t feel any pain. But this man’s burns hadn’t affected his nerve endings. He would feel it when they removed the bandages sticking to him.

He would feel it all.

They say it’s one of the most painful experiences a person can go through. Like peeling off your skin whenever it’s time for fresh bandages. And debridement—scrubbing the burns when necessary to keep them clean and free from infection—was perhaps the worst part of all.

“How are you doing today?” Kathleen asked him, a question that Zoë thought could not possibly bring a favorable response.

The man said nothing, but nodded faintly. Only one of his eyes was visible; the other had been bandaged over.

“Good.” Kathleen consulted his chart. “We need to give you something to dull the pain.”

This time, instead of nodding, he shook his head and whispered a single, coarse word, the swelling in his throat no doubt making it hard to vocalize: “No.”

“It’s necessary.”

Now his reply was firmer, more adamant. “No.”

“Don’t worry, it also serves as an amnesiac. It’ll help you forget all this when it’s over.”

“Can’t forget.” His voice cracked as he replied.

“Mr. Brock. It’s protocol for us to give patients—”

“No drugs.” There was steel in his response.

Zoë waited to see what Kathleen would do. With what this man was going through, why would he be refusing pain medication? Maybe he was delirious. Probably that’s what it was. He wasn’t thinking clearly.

Still, they needed to clear this up. She couldn’t imagine what it would be like trying to change his bandages without him being medicated.

Kathleen stared at Mr. Brock for a moment, then signaled for Zoë to come with her and told the man, “We’ll be right back.”

Zoë followed her into the hall, closing the door half-shut behind her.

“He expressly stated his wishes,” she said softly to Kathleen.

“But he’s in no state to understand what he’s asking.”

“How do we know that? I mean, how—?”

“He’s not in his right mind, Zoë. He wouldn’t deny the pain meds, not if he knew what was coming. We give them Veldexin for a reason.”

“Yes,” Zoë said, “to forget the pain, I know, but—”

“That’s not the only reason. It’s also for the next time.”

“The next time?”

“If we didn’t give it to them—if they remembered everything—when we returned to change their bandages, they would fight us off. Believe me, I’ve been there. The last thing you want to have to do is strap someone down while he writhes and screams for you to stop as you prepare to peel the bandages off his burns.”

Zoë gulped. “Then what do we do?”

“We go back in there and we do our job.”

“But—”

“We do it.” Kathleen raised an authoritative finger. “And don’t question things once we get started. Remember who’s in charge.”

“You are.”

“Yes.”

Back in the room again, the man muttered as they approached his bed, his words breathy and forced. “Don’t touch me until I speak to a doctor.”

“It’s time to change these bandages, I’m afraid,” Kathleen told him sternly.

Zoë eased closer to him, and all at once he reached out and grabbed her wrist. “A doctor.”

He stared into her eyes with arrant determination and clutched her with unnerving strength. She wanted to pull away but didn't want to hurt him, and she knew that if she jerked her arm, it would definitely jar him, maybe rip some of his wounds open again.

At last, Kathleen sighed. "Fine."



In silence, I watched the two nurses walk away. Because of the bandage covering my left eye, I had to turn my head in order to do so. When my neck flexed, the burns on it sent tight streaks of pain shooting down my spine, and I had to stop and stare upright again, trying to catch my breath and quiet the pain stabbing through me. Beyond the open doorway I heard the incessant beeping of a monitor in another room and the irregular sound of a squeaky cart being rolled down the hallway.

Then the door closed as they left me alone in the room. Sterile and stark. A bone-white tomb. As I lay there waiting for the doctor, my senses seemed to become keener. The charred smell of my burns hadn't gone away, and I wondered how long it would take before it did, or if the odor would be locked in my memory forever.

Probably locked in.

Forever.

It made me think of the fire, and though I tried my best to forget—something that never worked and seemed to always bring the opposite result instead—I remembered it all as if it were happening right here, once again: Awakening to the smell of smoke. Sitting up and feeling beside me on the bed, but finding it empty, my wife gone. Smooth sheets. Cool to the touch.

"Sienna?"

Instinctively, I'd fumbled for my glasses on the nightstand, but they fell to the floor behind it.

I rushed to the door and felt the wood.

Blazing heat.

Flames snaking in beneath the door.

"Sienna!"

No reply from the hallway, just the crackling hiss of the blaze.

Wrapping my T-shirt around my hand to protect it from burning on the

doorknob, I opened the door just enough for a strip of flames to lick in at me, hungry for fresh oxygen.

I pushed it shut, sealing them out.

With the fire trapping me in the bedroom, the only way out of the house was off the balcony beyond the French doors.

I hurried through them and peered down into the night. It had to be at least twenty-five feet to the downward-sloping hillside, but there she was, standing beneath the oak tree in the front yard. *Thank God, thank God, thank God.*

But why didn't she wake you up?

Trying not to overthink things, I glanced behind me. Through the gathering smoke, I could see the fire already trying to climb up the inside of the bedroom door.

I faced the neighborhood again and took a deep breath.

And leapt.

And dropped through the air, sliding through the narrow slipstream of time before impact. The descent seemed somehow both brief and long, and when I finally hit the ground, my left ankle buckled.

I collapsed to the grass, then pushed myself awkwardly to my feet and hobbled toward her. "Sienna? Are you okay?"

However, when the woman turned, I realized that it wasn't my wife but one of our neighbors, Claire, standing there in pajamas. She held a cell phone to her ear and looked shocked and terrified.

"Have you seen her?" I gasped. "Is Sienna out here?"

A wide-eyed headshake.

I turned toward the house again. By the intensity of the flames shooting out the windows, I could judge which rooms were already ablaze and which ones weren't yet fully engaged. It appeared that, although the fire had found the upstairs bedrooms, the east side of our home was still mostly intact.

Go.

Find her.

A fire truck raced toward me down the street and turned onto our driveway, its siren pulsing, screaming in the night.

"Tell them I went after her!" I yelled to Claire as I limped toward the garage, mentally reviewing the layout of the house, trying to calculate where Sienna might be.

Go through the garage. Then check the kitchen. The living room. The basement if you need to.

The garage's side door was locked. Obviously, I didn't have the key, so I punched in the entry code and the garage door rattled open, taking forever, smoke pouring out and circling around my legs as it did.

"Sienna!"

The word echoed sharply off the garage walls, but brought no reply.

I pressed forward, rounded the car, fought my way through the smoke, and burst into the kitchen.

Fierce heat. Acrid air that made it tough to breathe, tough to think. I tugged my shirt up over my mouth and scanned the room, searching for Sienna through the shimmering, hypnotic skin of the flames.

Nothing.

Our fire alarms. Why aren't they going off?

No time to worry about that. The living room. Go!

As I stumbled into it, the front door flew open and a firefighter appeared. He gestured for me to join him, but I waved him off as I scrutinized the other side of the room for her and, there, yes, there, there, there, through the flames, I made out a vague form, prone on the steps, maybe fifteen feet away.

As I rushed toward her, a ribbon of fire caught hold of my sweatpants' left leg, but I kept going. I felt the fireman's heavy hand on my shoulder, but I pointed to the steps. When he shook his head, evidently believing it was too late for her, I tore free and started toward the stairs.

She'll be okay. She'll make it. You've got this.

I brushed away a flurry of cinders singeing the back of my neck, then covered my face the best I could with my blistering arms and dashed toward the stark wall of flames separating us, but my foot snagged on the edge of the carpet and I went down hard in the heart of the blaze. The firefighter grabbed one of my ankles and pulled me back.

"No!" I cried. I struggled to tug free, but I was weak, dazed, coughing, gasping for breath.

And then, as the man hefted me up into a fireman's carry, I saw movement on the stairs as she raised her head and reached a trembling, scorched arm toward us. A woman burned beyond recognition, now engulfed in flames.

She's alive! You can save her! It's not too late!

But he was carrying me out the door.

I tried to tell him to stop, to take me back, but if the words actually came out, even I didn't hear them. I was plunging into a pit of confusion and terror as the world spun in a dizzy, bewildering arc around me.

Someone helped me to the ground and threw a thick blanket over me to quell the flames on my clothes. The firefighter who'd carried me outside removed the mask he'd been wearing to keep the smoke out of his lungs and knelt beside me.

"Go back!" I shouted. "You can save her!"

"Is there anyone else in the house?"

"Just her, just Sienna on the steps. You have to go!"

"It's too late, sir."

"No. Please."

"I'm sorry." He sounded like he truly was.

"No!"

This couldn't be happening. It wasn't. My love for her would keep her alive long enough. It had to. I could do it. I could rescue her.

I tried to push myself to my feet, but didn't have the strength. Adrenaline must have been masking the pain earlier, but now its effect began to fade. I felt my consciousness wavering. As I collapsed backward, I couldn't tell if the firefighter was sending others into the house to try to get to Sienna or not.

All the images overlapped like dark waves pounding against the shore of my awareness—a tide of agitated currents passing across each other: the pain, the smoke, the questions, the image of a burned arm reaching toward me, a shade of unspeakable grief already edging in. I tried to think, to process things, to reason my way to a solution, but death was the only conclusion. There she was on the stairs, in my memory, in my heart, being burned alive.

You were too late. You could have gotten to her.

Desperate, I prayed that somehow God would rewind time and bring her back to me, but no miracle split the day in favor of Sienna's life and our love for each other. Instead, I was left with the simple, brutal, jagged truth of my loss.

Before I passed out, I saw the fire eat the roof and lift a triumphant fist toward the black sky, and the last thing I thought of before unconsciousness overtook me was Sienna and how I had failed to save her.

So now, here in the hospital, I did not let the nurses give me any drugs. The pain would be part of my penance, reminding me of Sienna whenever they changed my bandages.

Also, because of my job, I couldn't in good conscience allow the medical personnel to give me any drugs that might negatively affect my memory. I needed to trust it implicitly. Forgetting anything could prove fatal to the people I served.

I was blessed with the curse of an eidetic memory. It was why I had the job that I did.

And now it would make the memory of this day my constant companion.

My constant enemy.

It took me a while to convince the doctor, but finally she acquiesced regarding the drugs. "Alright, Mr. Brock, I'll let the nurses start, but as soon as the pain gets too intense, let them know immediately and they'll give you something for it."

Then the nurses bent over me, fresh bandages in hand.

And they did what they were paid to do.

And as they set to work, though a tear leaked out of my right eye, I somehow managed not to cry out. With clenched teeth, I held back. I held it all in. Even when the scrubbing began.

In the aftermath of the fire, while I was recovering from one of the skin grafts, I met with a detective from DC's Metro Police Department and my supervisor at the Pentagon, Colonel Oden Clarke.

"It was arson, Mr. Brock," Detective Caruso told me gravely. A keen-eyed Black man with a stocky frame, he looked to be in his early thirties. All business. Always arrived with a notebook and pen in hand. "We found evidence of accelerants."

"But who?"

"We don't know yet."

Then Colonel Clarke, a true Scotsman through and through, who was career military and probably twice as old as Caruso, spoke up and said to me in his gruff and direct manner, "We're moving forward with the hypothesis that it's because of your job."

"No one's supposed to know about my job."

"It looks like someone found out."