

DARK INTERCEPT



A
SHEPHERDS
★ SERIES ★
NOVEL

"A masterpiece
of a military thriller
with remarkable heart
and depth."

MARK GREANEY

New York Times bestselling author
of the *Gray Man* novels

ANDREWS & WILSON

Wall Street Journal bestselling authors

PRAISE FOR ANDREWS & WILSON

“*Dark Intercept* is a masterpiece of a military thriller with remarkable heart and depth. No one in the genre writes grittier and more authentic action than these two authors, and yet *Dark Intercept* also deals with the intriguing questions of spirituality and the human condition, making it a spellbinding page-turner that will leave you both thrilled and enriched by the experience.”

MARK GREANEY, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Relentless* and the Gray Man novels

“A blistering page-turner of a thriller . . . that effortlessly transports the reader from the adrenaline-filled highs of the battlefield to the soul-searching lows that follow.”

JOSHUA HOOD, author of Robert Ludlum’s Treadstone series

“The characters are unforgettable and unique, promising a blockbuster Shepherds series. Andrews & Wilson write with the authenticity that can only be achieved through boots-on-the-ground downrange experience. Whether you’re military connected or not, reading this novel will make you want to enlist with these spiritual warriors. Un-put-downable.”

K.J. HOWE, internationally bestselling author of *Skyjack*

“In *Dark Intercept*, Andrews & Wilson flawlessly weave a tale of spiritual and natural warfare as riveting as it is inventive. By combining the grittiness and veracity of their bestselling military thriller series with an unabashed focus on the eternal struggle between light and darkness, Andrews & Wilson inject a shot of adrenaline into faith-based fiction. Frank Peretti has company!”

DON BENTLEY, author of the Matt Drake thriller series

“A thrilling and gripping ride through the eyes of those who strap on the uniform and serve, [this book] helps us see what true leadership looks like. . . . You’ll enjoy this crackling adventure and learn some valuable things along the way.”

DANIEL DARLING, bestselling author of *The Characters of Christmas* and *A Way with Words*

“Andrews & Wilson strategically position the physical realm with the spiritual in this edge-of-your-seat thriller. . . . This novel captures perfectly the spiritual warfare raging around us, in a way that is both entertaining and chilling. Expertly woven and crafted, *Dark Intercept* is sure to have you view the world around you with a different set of eyes. A must-read!”

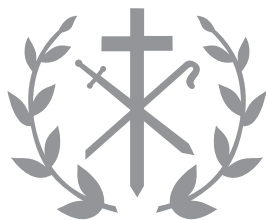
EDWIN E., military ministry leader and former Green Beret

“From the jaw-dropping opening chapter to the pulse-pounding climax, *Dark Intercept* is an emotional thrill ride of cinematic proportions. Expect to be blown away and entertained but also left thinking and talking about this book for weeks after you turn the last page. With *Dark Intercept*, Andrews & Wilson usher in a new era of Christian thriller fiction!”

CRAIG ALTMAN, lead pastor, Grace Family Church

“Shifting constantly between the fast-paced thriller and thought-provoking moments of personal challenge, *Dark Intercept* will take you to a new dimension of fiction that changes your reality. Take the journey!”

CHRIS BONHAM, senior executive pastor, Grace Family Church



THE SHEPHERDS SERIES

DARK INTERCEPT

ANDREWS & WILSON



Tyndale House Publishers
Carol Stream, Illinois

Visit Tyndale online at tyndale.com.

Visit Andrews & Wilson online at andrews-wilson.com.

Tyndale and Tyndale's quill logo are registered trademarks of Tyndale House Ministries.

Dark Intercept

Copyright © 2021 by Organic Machinery Media and Jeff Wilson. All rights reserved.

Cover photograph of man silhouette copyright © Silas Manhood/ArcAngel.com. All rights reserved.

Other photographs are the property of their respective copyright holders from Shutterstock, and all rights are reserved. Nashville skyline © Anthony Heflin; vintage letter © Henning Janos; old paper © Robyn Mackenzie; grunge texture © EnsUPER; glow © Dmitriy Rybin; birds © Bachkova Natalia; sparks © GCapture; hand gun © Leo Stock Pix.

The Shepherds series logo designed by Andrews & Wilson and used with permission.

Authors' photograph taken by Wendy Wilson, copyright © 2019. All rights reserved.

Cover designed by Faceout Studios, Jeff Miller

Interior designed by Dean H. Renninger

Edited by Sarah Mason Rische

Published in association with the literary agency of Talcott Notch Literary, LLC, 276 Forest Road, Milford, CT 06461.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, *New International Version*,® *NIV*.® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

John 12:35-36 in chapter 5 and Scripture quotations marked NLT are taken from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked ESV are from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Dark Intercept is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the authors' imaginations.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Tyndale House Publishers at csresponse@tyndale.com, or call 1-855-277-9400.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Andrews, Brian, date- author. | Wilson, Jeff, date- author.

Title: *Dark intercept* / Andrews & Wilson.

Description: Carol Stream, Illinois : Tyndale House Publishers, [2021] | Series: A Shepherd series novel ; 1

Identifiers: LCCN 2021006522 (print) | LCCN 2021006523 (ebook) | ISBN 9781496451347 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781496451361 (kindle edition) | ISBN 9781496451378 (epub) | ISBN 9781496451385 (epub)

Subjects: GSAFD: Adventure fiction. | Christian fiction. | Suspense fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3601.N552625 D37 2021 (print) | LCC PS3601.N552625 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021006522>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021006523>

Printed in the United States of America

27 26 25 24 23 22 21
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For all those who have been on the pointy tip of the spear, fighting for freedom and all that is good, and have stared down evil in the world. We ask you to remember that while there is no promise of freedom from pain and loss, in surrender to God comes the good that is promised. We thank you for your courage in staving off the darkness.



AUTHORS' NOTE

Dark Intercept begins a saga we've had a heart and mind to tell for many years, but only recently did the stars align for us to do so properly. The Shepherds series is more than a series of books; it is a journey . . . one that mirrors the private, personal journeys of countless men and women who have worn the uniform in the service of our great nation. As veterans, we have served alongside countless true heroes—some of whom have made the ultimate sacrifice.

When confronted by true evil, be it during military service or as a citizen navigating the gauntlet of everyday life, a person's perception and understanding of everything he or she took for granted is shattered. Such confrontations force one to seek answers to questions that are difficult and often terrifying to ask—challenging, uncomfortable, raw questions about the existence of God, the nature of good and evil, and things we feel deep in our bones but can't see with our oh-so-rational eyes. And in the asking, we open ourselves up for a truth we weren't prepared to believe or even contemplate.

DARK INTERCEPT

In this series, we ask these very questions. We explore the idea of spiritual warfare and forces in the world that can penetrate our consciousness and change our lives dramatically—sometimes for the better but sometimes not. *Dark Intercept* is a work of fiction, but it is also a starting point. In turning the page, we invite you to come along on a journey. The characters in this story will ask tough questions about God and faith and evil in the world. And through them, maybe, just maybe, you'll discover answers to some of the questions you've been struggling with yourself but have been too afraid to ask.

SHEPHERD | 'she-pərd *verb*

1 to tend to as a shepherd

2 to guide or guard in the manner of a shepherd

3 colloquial: to serve as a pastor

PROLOGUE

PRESUMED AL QAEDA SAFE HOUSE

ANBAR PROVINCE, IRAQ

0132 LOCAL TIME

OCTOBER 2011

Tactical superiority, courage under fire, and unbreakable brotherhood—these were the traits that defined Naval Special Warfare.

It was a community where discipline eclipsed faith.

Where grit outperformed hope.

Rather than praying for divine intervention, Navy SEAL Jedidiah Johnson harnessed the cadence of combat to steel his nerves. As far as he was concerned, God had no place in covert

operations. With his brothers beside him, and a SOPMOD M4 assault rifle in his hands, he could do anything.

Hooyah.

Thigh muscles burning, Jed advanced in a combat crouch. Sighting over his rifle, he methodically swept his targeting laser across the buildings on the opposite side of the dusty street, looking for targets. His green beam crisscrossed alongside those of his teammates—an ever-evolving geometric malice sweeping over the crumbling stucco facades, searching for threats in every doorway, windowpane, and alley. Invisible to the naked eye, the infrared lasers from their PEQ-2 target designators shone bright thanks to the night-vision goggles that hung in front of their eyes like miniature binoculars mounted to their helmets.

Chief Danny Carroll—“Scab” to his teammates, thanks to some long-forgotten story—advanced two paces ahead of Jed. They worked together with silent, practiced precision clearing ahead, behind, and the rooftops above as they moved down the block toward the target house. Upon reaching the corner, Scab held up a closed fist, stopping the four-man fire team. Jed took a knee, his scan now intent on the corner forty-five degrees across the unpaved intersection. On the other side of the block, a second four-man team was converging in mirror image from the opposite direction. They would arrive at the target house simultaneously, one squad breaching from the front and the other from the rear.

Jed slid his NVG-enhanced scan over the rooftop of the building across the street, looking for movement. *That’s where I’d put a shooter*, he thought but found nothing of concern.

“Choctaw One is Budweiser,” Scab said, reporting his squad making the checkpoint.

After a two-second pause, the other team leader, Morales, answered, “Choctaw Two is Corona,” the distant voice perfectly clear in Jed’s Peltor headset.

With the checkpoints made, both teams would advance the final stretch to commence the assault on the two-story house where a terrorist bomb maker called Harim al-Abbas and his lieutenants were busy building IEDs to kill American and coalition forces throughout western Anbar.

“Choctaw, Home Plate—you are clear to the target,” came the report from their mission coordinator at the tactical operations center back at the forward operating base where real-time imagery was being monitored from a Predator drone in orbit above. “Eagle shows no thermals of concern between you and Miller Lite. Call Sam Adams.”

Miller Lite was the target house, and Sam Adams was the call they would make when the bomb maker was either dead or captured and the site had been secured. If they continued undetected and completed the mission without incident—as they nearly always did—then that call would come in just minutes from now.

Scab rose and chopped a hand forward, taking point. Jed fell in behind him, offset his right flank, scanning above and behind as they advanced along the narrow street. Scab vectored left, leading the fire team diagonally across the next intersection to the opposite side of the street toward the building Jed had imagined would be the perfect sniper hide for terrorist sentries. But Home Plate had reported no thermal signatures of concern from the Predator circling silently overhead. Jed felt the subconscious need to shift to Scab’s left side and gave his team leader a squeeze on the left

shoulder to let him know his position shift as he did. As they closed on the building, the unspoken need to divert back welled up inside him.

There was no voice in his head . . . no burning bush . . .

He just knew.

“Shift left, shift left,” Jed called and grabbed Scab by the arm, vectoring back across the intersection.

“On Four,” Scab commanded, using Jed’s call sign as Jed took the lead to make sure the trailing pair of SEALs understood the redirect. The four-man fire team quick-stepped back to the side of the street where they’d started.

“What did you see?” Scab asked, pressing against the wall and scanning the building they’d been approaching.

“Yeah, bro. What gives?” the SEAL called Reed chimed in—clearly confused at the random, unprompted redirect. No sniper had fired on them; no RPG had streaked over their heads.

Jed felt heat rise in his cheeks. How could he explain it when the knowledge came to him without words? He tried anyway.

“I just—”

The building across the intersection exploded, cutting Jed off midsentence. A storm of deadly shrapnel—glass, wood, and cement fragments—rained down on everything in a one-block radius as Jed and his fellow SEALs got small. A split second later, like a metaphorical exclamation point, what remained of the exploded building collapsed onto the sidewalk where they’d been just seconds ago. If they hadn’t been vaporized by the massive detonation, they would have been crushed in the aftermath.

“How did you know?” Reed said through a cough, but Scab didn’t give Jed time to answer.

“Up and move,” the team leader commanded, surging forward up the street and cutting off Reed’s question. “Choctaw Two—go now.”

“Two,” came the clipped and simple acknowledgment of the order from the Bravo fire team leader on the other side of the target.

Boots churning, Jed and his teammates sprinted north toward the target house, spreading out in a modified arrowhead and scanning every window, rooftop, and doorway as they closed the fifty-meter distance. The sound of a breacher charge going off echoed faintly in the night, confirmation that Bravo element was about to enter the target house from the rear.

“Single tango by the gate,” reported the cool voice of their coordinator from the TOC, relaying real-time bird’s-eye visuals. “Two has breached. Expect tangos flushing toward the front, One.”

“One,” Scab answered.

The terrorist sentry stationed at the front gate turned to face them, belatedly realizing what was happening. Eyes wide, the shooter raised his rifle, but Jed had already slid his PEQ-2 green targeting laser onto the man’s forehead. He squeezed the trigger, and his M4 burped twice, dropping the enemy guard. Bursts of AK-47 fire reverberated inside the house, followed by more precise, controlled pops of M4 return fire, announcing to all that the fight was on. Jed kicked the iron gate hard, breaking the locking bolt free from the crumbling stucco perimeter wall.

Scab surged through the gate and into the small courtyard at the front of the house. Jed followed, clearing right as his team leader cleared left. His other two teammates shot the gap between them and rushed the front door, which hung open on its hinges.

A backlit al Qaeda fighter stood just inside the doorway, unaware of their presence as he backpedaled, firing his weapon at SEALs already inside the house. Two pops sounded as Reed engaged, dropping the jihadist in his tracks. With his two teammates clearing left and right, Jed and Scab surged up the middle—in a role-reversal instant replay of how they'd breached the courtyard just seconds ago. Jed flipped his NVGs up onto his helmet as he crossed the threshold, since his night vision would be washed out by lights glowing inside the house.

Movement to his left drew his attention and he spun that way, sighting now through the holographic sight mounted on top of his rifle, the green laser no longer visible off NVGs. A bearded man stood on a staircase, and Jed placed his red dot in the center of the terrorist's chest. Instead of engaging, the bearded jihadi terrorist threw his hands up in surrender and his AK-47 clattered down the stairs. Reed ascended the staircase halfway, jerked the terrorist down, and forced the bearded man facedown on the ground. With a knee on the jihadist's neck, the SEAL scanned up the staircase for emergent threats.

"Two is clear in the rear of the house," came the call from Morales. "We have the package. No squirters."

Jed grinned. Mission accomplished—their HVT, al-Abbas, was on-site and had apparently surrendered.

"Five and Six," Scab barked. "Clear upstairs."

The two SEALs nodded and moved quickly up the staircase, scanning over their rifles.

Jed followed Scab to the rear of the house to meet up with Morales. Al-Abbas, whose visage Jed had burned into his memory from photographs presented in their intel briefs, sat silent and

still in a wooden chair. Cigarette smoke swirled toward the ceiling from butts burning in three different ashtrays atop a small, square dining table. Jed surveyed the modest kitchen, noting three dead terrorists on the floor and two captured terrorists flex-cuffed and waiting. One fighter leaned against a cabinet in the corner of the room, and the other was on his knees, forehead pressed to the floor, murmuring.

“Five and Six are clear,” Reed called in Jed’s Peltors.

“Choctaw is Sam Adams,” Scab reported, victory in his voice. “Exfil from primary in five mikes.”

“Choctaw, Home Plate—copy.”

“Choctaw, grab anything of value. We’re out of here in three mikes.”

Double clicks in his headset told Jed his teammates understood. He and Scab would provide cover on al-Abbas and the captured jihadists while the rest of the team gathered cell phones, computers, and anything else of potential value. Morales, the Bravo fire team leader, began the unpleasant task of photographing the dead terrorists’ faces, which they would compare for matches against the database back at the TOC later.

So you are the one who saw me. Interesting . . .

Jed flinched at the voice and flicked his gaze to the bomb maker, al-Abbas, who still sat unmoving in his chair, wrists bound behind his back. Their eyes met and Jed felt a powerful and visceral hate seep into his skin, the way cold ocean water floods a wet suit after the splash.

You might have the gift, but this is our time . . .

Death is my victory.

The voice could only belong to al-Abbas, but it spoke to Jed

in English, and the man's lips never moved. Jed felt a lump form in his throat. His trigger finger twitched. And as he stared at the bomb maker, a second visage—distorted and grotesque—appeared superimposed on al-Abbas's face. Then an amber ring, like dying embers in a campfire, flared around the terrorist's dark-brown irises.

“What did you say to me?” Jed said, his breath catching.

“Huh?” Scab said from beside Jed, confusion in his voice. “I didn't say anything, dude.”

Jed took a step back and raised his rifle, placing his red targeting dot on the center of the bomb maker's forehead. The demonic double-face smiled at him, and a memory—one he'd spent the past eight years trying to forget—clawed its way into his mind's eye.

This isn't happening, he told himself. It's not real.

He pulled tension on the trigger and squeezed his eyes shut for a split second, chasing the horrible memory away.

“Jed,” Scab barked, but with genuine concern in his voice. “You good, bro?”

Jed let out a long, shaky breath and eased his finger off the trigger and outside the guard.

“Yeah, man, I'm good,” he said, forcing a smile onto his face—a smile that he didn't feel on the inside.

Scab reached to grab the laptop computer resting on the table beside the bomb maker. “Morales is in the other room. Tell him to wrap up. I'm ready to get the hell out of here.”

Jed nodded and headed out of the kitchen. Three paces later the voice was back to taunt him in his head. It uttered a single word:

Boom!

Jed whirled and looked at the devil in the chair.

The amber rings in the bomb maker's eyes flared. He smiled at Jed, and the kitchen exploded. The shock wave hit Jed like a semi-truck and blew him backward through the cased opening into the other room. And as he flew through the air, as the black curtains closed all around him, a single thought echoed in his head.

I let it happen again.

PART I

THE TAKING

Stay alert! Watch out for your great enemy,
the devil. He prowls around like a roaring lion,
looking for someone to devour. . . .

1 PETER 5:8, NLT

CHAPTER ONE

VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY BOOKSTORE

2501 WEST END AVENUE

NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

SATURDAY, 1730 HOURS LOCAL

“To one who has faith, no explanation is necessary. To one without faith, no explanation is possible,” quoted Father Philip Maclin, gently tapping his index finger on the wooden tabletop.

“That’s easy,” said the brown-eyed teenage girl sitting across from him. “St. Thomas Aquinas.”

“Okay, smarty-pants, then how about this one: ‘If the highest aim of a captain were to preserve his ship, he would keep it in port forever,’” he said with a dose of playful superiority.

“That’s the oldest trick in the book,” Corbin Worth answered.

“Oh, really?”

“Yes, really.”

“Then who said it?”

“St. Thomas Aquinas too.”

“St. Thomas Aquinas *two*? Who’s that? I only know the first one.”

She laughed at this—a real laugh, and by now he could tell the difference. Getting that laugh was always his goal with Corbin. He watched her shoulders sag a fraction of an inch and felt her aura change. Now she was relaxed. Now she could do the thing he had asked her here to do.

It got harder for the kids with each passing year—using their gifts. And like all Keepers, Philip could empathize. For most, the power faded gradually as one grew into adulthood, but not him. A couple of weeks after his eighteenth birthday, it had simply left him. A clean break. Very unusual, Tobias had said. That year had been the most difficult of his life. It was faith that saw him through the storm. But even now, twelve years later, there were times when the emptiness swallowed him. As hard as learning to live with the gift had been—harder because of how young he had been when it arrived—it was much harder still when it disappeared. After a decade of intimate connection to the world, and the people in it, he’d tumbled into a dark pit of isolation, where only his *own* voice filled his head. He’d felt so utterly alone, so disconnected. Paralyzed. But now when the desolation struck him, he would think of Corbin and Josh and Michaela, and one of them would always find him—with a cheerful text or an unexpected phone call—and rescue him from the abyss. Yes, he was their Keeper, but at the same time, they were often his.

When God starts us on a path, He equips us for the journey.

“Ask me another one,” Corbin said with a grin. “But by somebody *besides* St. Thomas Aquinas this time.”

He feigned consternation. “Okay, one more and then we really should get back to the War of 1812. Try this one: ‘We shall steer safely through every storm, so long as our heart is right, our intention fervent, our courage steadfast, and our trust—’” He stopped midsentence. Corbin’s expression had changed.

“What is it?” he said.

“She’s here,” Corbin whispered. “She seems excited.”

“Okay, good,” he said, hoping his calm would be infectious. Corbin was gifted, and her gift no longer frightened her, but this was something new. “How close is she?”

“Um . . . less than a block away, coming from the west. No, south,” she said, squinting. “I can’t tell.”

“No problem. Locating is difficult, I know.”

“Much harder in the field,” she said, glancing around the bookstore nervously. “It’s different than being in the center. There are so many distractions here. So many other voices, Father.”

He admonished her with his eyes and she quickly corrected herself.

“I mean, Phil,” she said, dropping the priestly title but still using his fictitious cover name. Her cheeks flashed crimson and she looked down at her notebook.

He liked Corbin. He liked all of them, and not just because he had once been like them. This new generation was better—stronger, more attuned. At first, he thought they were more adept at sifting through all the noise to find “signals” in a world of ever-increasing informational traffic. But it was not their proficiency

with tweeting, texting, and social media that made them better . . . The difference was spiritual. These kids took the responsibility that came with their abilities very seriously. More seriously than he had, that was for sure. They believed in the mission, and they courageously volunteered to put themselves in harm's way. He had come to admire them as the heroic youth of the next generation, taking a stand for God and country.

Or maybe it was that they sensed the dark menace in a way he no longer could—creeping, creeping, creeping into the light—and they were afraid.

A phantom itch chased along the line where his collar was supposed to be, reminding him how vulnerable he felt. When he had first been frocked, the stiff, starched fabric had irritated his skin to no end. Then over time, it had become an extension of him. The collar was more than just the uniform of his profession; it was his spiritual Kevlar. Since taking it off two years ago, he felt naked. He scratched his neck out of habit, but it offered no relief.

I am still a man of God, he told himself. Faith is the only garment I need clothe myself in.

A group of college girls breezed by their table, laughing as they headed toward the line for the coffee bar. One of the girls glanced in their direction, but the others paid them no mind. To the store's patrons and staff, he and Corbin were just another tutor and student studying in the bookstore.

He glanced at his watch and then at the door behind his protégé.

The girl should be here by now, he thought. Something's wrong.

"You think so too?" Corbin asked.

"Don't do that," he whispered.

“What?” she asked innocently.

“You know what,” he said a bit more sternly. “Don’t read my thoughts in public.”

“I thought it was my job,” she grumbled at him over her notebook. “And anyway, I was just—” Her voice caught in her throat. She looked up at him, mouth open, all the color drained from her face.

“What is it?”

“They’re here,” she hissed, her voice a tight, quivering chord. “They’re going to take her.”

“Close your mind,” he said and squeezed her wrist, harder than he meant to. “Stop watching or they’ll find you.”

“Oh, God,” Corbin said through a breath. “She doesn’t see them. Oh no . . .”

He shoved Corbin’s notepad and history book into her backpack and yanked her to her feet. He glanced around quickly, but no one seemed to be paying them any mind. He lifted her face by the chin and looked into her terrified eyes.

“Don’t leave me alone,” she said, her voice desperate.

“Listen to me,” he said. “It’s crowded in here right now. There’s safety in numbers and it’s easier to hide in the din of many minds. Guard your thoughts as I taught you and listen only for me. They have two unisex, single-stall bathrooms here. Go inside one and lock the door. If anyone tries to break in, call the police.”

“Okay,” she said. “And what are you going to do?”

“I’m gonna try to save her.”

“Alone?”

“Of course not,” he said and forced a smile. “I’m calling a team. If I can make a scene and draw a crowd—enough to give the Dark

Ones pause—it might give her a chance to get away. When it's over, I'll come back for you. I promise.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

“Go now,” he ordered.

Corbin did as he instructed, while he retrieved his mobile phone. As he hurried toward the exit, he pressed *1* on his speed dial.

“Operator,” a calm voice said in his ear.

“I need Shepherds,” he said. “Priority one. My location.”

“Identify?” the woman’s voice asked with a slight edge to it now.

“Zechariah four-six.” He paused at the door, just long enough to scan through the glass panes and verify he wasn’t going to be ambushed upon exiting.

“Confirmed,” the operator said. “A team will be at your location in nine minutes.”

“Too slow. The Recruit is at risk, and my Watcher needs to be secured.”

“Stay with your Watcher,” the voice instructed.

“I can’t do that. In nine minutes, it’ll be over.” Philip clicked his phone off before the tactical coordinator could object. Then he pushed through the double doors and stepped onto the sidewalk. He turned right, and at the corner he looked down the street toward the Vanderbilt campus. He saw the girl a half block away, her mother walking beside her. He had inhaled to shout a warning when a gloved hand gripped his upper arm.

“You’re too late,” a raspy male voice hissed in his ear.

Philip turned, his gaze drawn instantly to the faint amber glow around the other man’s irises.

“You can’t hurt me,” Philip said, jerking his arm free.

“You’re right. I can’t,” the Dark One said, taking a step back.

Philip whirled back to face the girl and her mother, who were less than twenty yards away now. He watched a white van pull along the sidewalk next to them and the rear cargo doors swing open.

“Noooooooo!” he shouted.

“Watch out!” screamed a woman nearby.

For an instant, he wasn’t sure who the woman was calling to, but then he heard the squeal of tires. The black Dodge Charger hit him in the pelvis and sent him sailing backward into the corner wall of the Barnes & Noble. His body stopped, but the Charger kept coming. In the split second before impact, he made eye contact with the driver through the windshield. A college student no older than twenty, who looked catatonic. Philip had seen this look before. Then his entire body erupted in pain as the front end of the car smashed him into the wall. His forehead hit the hood of the car and his nose flattened. His vision flashed brilliant white, and the pain, so loud and all-consuming, suddenly turned off like a switch.

With great effort, he lifted his head and looked at the driver. The young man’s expression had changed and was now one of terror and confusion as he registered what he had just done. *Poor kid*, Philip thought. *This will haunt him for the rest of his life. Dear Lord, give him comfort.* He turned his head left as his vision began to bleach gray. He watched the young Recruit’s feet kicking wildly in the air as strong arms dragged her into the white van. The girl’s mother was screaming, ten feet away and impotent where she’d been knocked to the ground. But he couldn’t hear her screams. He couldn’t hear anything, except the rasp of breath coming from his crushed chest.

DARK INTERCEPT

His mind went to Corbin and he prayed she was still tuned in and listening to him.

Stay inside. The Shepherds are coming. Don't unlock the door until they arrive.

Her answer came swift and strong, a scream inside his head. *Where are you? What's happening? Sarah Beth is so scared.*

With all his remaining willpower, he answered her. Just forming the words in his mind was impossibly difficult. *She's been taken. Be brave and remember what I taught you. Find her . . . before it's too late.*

Then he rested.

Corbin would be fine. She was strong . . . the strongest he'd trained.

The world was black now.

He tried to open his eyes but realized they were already open. He felt himself shift.

The tether snapped, and he was adrift.

There was light, though he couldn't see it. But he could feel it, and it was warm and tender.

His lips began to move.

“Bless me, Holy Father, for I have sinned . . .”