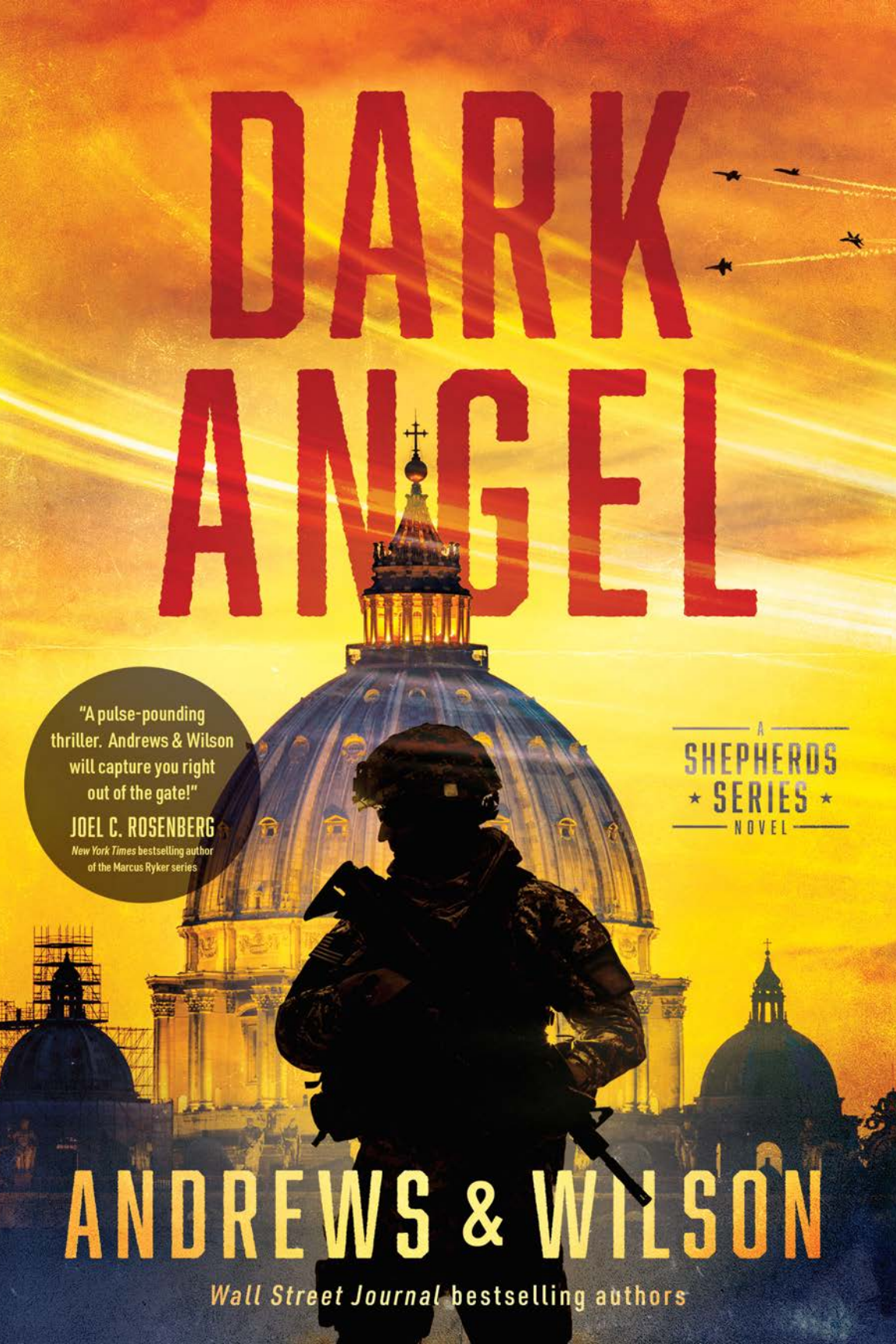


DARK ANGEL



"A pulse-pounding thriller. Andrews & Wilson will capture you right out of the gate!"

JOEL C. ROSENBERG

New York Times bestselling author
of the Marcus Ryker series

A
SHEPHERDS
★ SERIES ★
NOVEL

ANDREWS & WILSON

Wall Street Journal bestselling authors

PRAISE FOR ANDREWS & WILSON

“Fans of Frank Peretti will enjoy this action-packed inspirational.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY on *Dark Intercept*

“*Dark Intercept* is a fantastic blend of supernatural thrills, crisis of faith, and military thriller all rolled into one. . . . A unique crisis of faith novel that is sure to be a hit!”

MYSTERY AND SUSPENSE MAGAZINE

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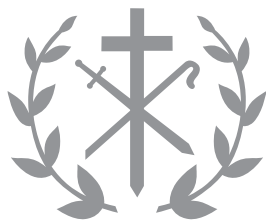
EDWIN E., military ministry leader and former Green Beret

“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 ANGEL

ANDREWS & WILSON



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Dark Angel

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Dark Angel 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.

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For Emma and Larkin



NOTE TO READERS

We've provided a glossary in the back of this book to define the acronyms, military lingo, and abbreviations used in this series.



PART I

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

EPHESIANS 6:12, ESV

CHAPTER ONE

LA SANTÉ PRISON

42 RUE DE LA SANTÉ

MONTPARNASSE, 14TH ARRONDISSEMENT

PARIS, FRANCE

1158 HOURS LOCAL

Nicholas Woland, known simply as “l’américain” to prisoners and guards alike, sat on the edge of his hard, narrow cot, hands resting idly on his knees. With eyes closed, he began four-count tactical breathing to ready himself—a practice he’d acquired in the Army, during his ten years of service as a Green Beret. Most of the things he’d learned in his former life he’d jettisoned, the way a space capsule rids itself of a booster rocket once attaining orbit. But *some* things he’d kept.

The tactically useful bits . . .

After two rounds, his pulse slowed and the knots of tension he stored in his neck and heavily muscled shoulders began to relax. Today was the day, and he needed to be both physiologically and mentally prepared to do his part for the plan to succeed. There would be no second chances, of this much he was certain.

His cell, located on the third floor of D-block, was spacious compared to most—a luxury he'd *earned* after his third cell-mate had been found dead on the floor at reveille. Directeur de Prison August Chauvin had ordered Woland placed in solitary confinement as punishment. But after forty-five days, he'd been relocated to D-block while retaining his *sans roommate* status. A simple white placard that read *Puni* was affixed to the outside of his cell door, a visible signal to all that he was being punished in perpetuity. It was nothing more than an administrative exercise, however, so Directeur Chauvin could satisfy the lawyers and the army of French human rights activists to whom he was obligated to bend the knee. Chauvin was a politician, not a true prison warden, and aptly named—his head as bald as an egg. That his infamous American charge had killed three inmates under his care was a potentially career-ending black mark for Chauvin. Woland knew the feckless director would do whatever it took to salvage his career, even if that meant leaving one rack permanently empty in Woland's two-man cell.

Before the renovations, living conditions had been far more barbaric at France's most storied prison. But calls for reform had put an end to the inhumane living conditions and brutal treatment of inmates at La Santé. Parisian sensibility, it seemed, was as tenacious as it was naive and had proven so by performing an HGTV

“home makeover” on the prison that housed France’s most dangerous criminals. Yet despite the reforms, he’d had enough of this place.

Nicholas Woland was no man’s caged beast.

And he would gnaw off his proverbial paw if that’s what it took to be free.

Footsteps echoed in the corridor, getting louder and closer until finally stopping just outside his door. A Klaxon sounded, loud and jarring, announcing that Woland’s cell door would be opening momentarily. He continued his four-count breathing, anticipating what was about to happen next.

André was about to happen next.

André was a holdover from pre-2015, a veteran prison guard who had somehow managed to survive the purge and La Santé’s reorganization into a kinder, gentler corrections facility. In the new system, Woland suspected that André’s chances to exorcise his demon came fewer and farther between, which meant he never wasted an opportunity to punish l’américain. Woland fantasized regularly about killing the man and had come close to doing so on more than one occasion. But self-discipline had stayed his fists every time, preventing him from crossing the one line—murdering a corrections officer—that would permanently seal his fate. And so he would respond as he always did, with silence and passivity, until André had had his fun and left Woland bruised and bloodied on the floor of his cell. Whatever punishment André meted today, Woland would absorb it with stoic indifference, because today was the last day the sadist would ever touch him.

The Klaxon blared a second time, followed by a magnetic snap signaling his cell lock releasing. Only then did Woland open his eyes and turn to see André smiling at him from the open cell door.

“On your feet, American,” André barked in French, smacking the baton in his right hand into the palm of his left. Woland stood, but André glanced back toward the entry at the end of the hall and shouted again, “I said on your feet!”

Then it began.

André whipped the baton around in an arc. It whistled through the air before careening toward him. Woland could have easily blocked the blow—could have taken the club and beaten the man to death in seconds, long before his fellow guards could reach them—but instead he tightened his core. The rubber baton slammed into his left buttocks, sending an explosion of pain into his lower back and down his leg. He resisted the urge to turn and glare at the guard—that would guarantee a second blow—and instead bowed his head in deference.

“That’s better,” André said for whoever he thought might be listening to their exchange, seemingly rewarding Woland’s compliance.

André was unpredictable, and Woland put coin-flip’s odds on whether the guard would beat him into the ground. When a second blow did not come, he slowly turned and held out his wrists for André to cuff. Cowed and shackled, he shuffled out of his cell, with André repeatedly prodding him in the lower back with the baton. They continued down the hall to a large gate that clicked open and slid into the wall. A second guard waited for them, his own baton out of its loop by protocol but hanging nonthreateningly by the man’s leg.

“It is your day for some sunshine, yes?” the guard said, smiling at Woland and seemingly happy to practice his English.

Woland forced a smile. “This is the one and only thing I’ve been looking forward to.”

Given his conviction as a terrorist, Woland's meals were served in his cell, he bathed alone, and his outdoor exercise periods were limited to the company of only five other prisoners. He rarely saw the same prisoners more than once, and usually those he did encounter were the ones in solitary near the end of their stretch. Apparently if you were convicted of a terror attack resulting in the deaths of thirty-seven French citizens and you killed three inmates, you lost more privileges than ordinary murderers.

C'est la guerre.

The second guard, known as Pet—the origin of the nickname unknown to Woland—fell into step on his left. Behind him, André loomed, ready and willing to deliver a blow with the baton to Woland's kidneys at the slightest provocation.

"I hoping you are enjoying your outdoors time, Nicholas Woland," Pet said, recycling their only conversational option.

"*C'est magnifique.* It's going to be a soiree," he replied with a wry grin.

Pet laughed.

Poor fool . . .

They passed through another magnetically locked gate, then walked down two flights of stairs, emerging into a final, gently downward-sloping corridor. At the end of the hall, beyond a final gate, sunlight streamed through double glass doors—no doubt ballistic glass, based on the thickness. Woland squinted against the glare with his poorly light-accommodated eyes. Before the renovations, the prison had been even more dimly lit, but on D block lighting was still an issue. He blinked several times while the gate swung open and Pet removed his restraints.

“You are having one half hours of the outdoors exercising,” Pet said, still smiling at Woland’s soiree “joke.”

The man didn’t seem the prison guard type, Woland thought as a third guard issued firearms to Pet and André for the upcoming courtyard patrol. Perhaps Pet was better suited to running a florist shop or bookstore. Unlike André, who would not hesitate to gun down any inmate he perceived as a threat, Woland found it hard to imagine Pet pulling the trigger . . . even if his own life depended on it.

Well, we’re about to put that to the test, aren’t we?

André shoved Woland in the back to get going, and he marched out the double ballistic glass doors into the courtyard. The cool midday air contrasted sharply with the warm sun on his face and made him tilt his head back and smile at the sky like a kid. After briefly savoring the moment and reclaiming a modicum of his humanity, he drifted right along the exterior wall of the D-block building, one of four buildings sticking out from the center of the courtyard like the spokes of a wheel. During the renovations, the last of the guillotines—the most infamous and iconic feature the courtyard was known for—had been removed. The last execution by guillotine at La Santé was more recent than he would have imagined—November of 1972—after Roger Bontems and Claude Buffet had been sentenced to death for their escape attempt during which a number of hostages had been killed. For these men, being the last to have their heads separated from their bodies at the prison was their only real claim to fame. They had been mundane criminals, unlike so many other prisoners incarcerated here. Including the infamous terrorist assassin Ilich Ramírez Sánchez—Carlos the Jackal—who’d called La Santé home until 2006.

Before my time . . .

Woland stopped and stretched his back, noting the position of the third guard who'd issued rifles to Pet and André. Instead of lingering at the door, he walked into the crux formed by the intersection of two buildings. André stood directly beside the south wall, which ran along Rue Jean Dolent and separated the prison from the row of apartment buildings towering across the street. Woland was no expert on the matter, but he knew of no other maximum-security prison located in the heart of a city the likes of Paris. The security constraints imposed by La Santé's urban location—such as line of sight into the courtyard from elevated positions nearby—were about to be exploited.

Woland paced back toward the double doors, smiling and nodding at Pet as the third guard walked across the yard, heading for a cluster of three prisoners talking together. Per the rules, all prisoners were to be isolated from one another, and guard number three was on his way to break things up.

But he didn't make it.

The first explosion hit hard. The shock wave funneled through the courtyard, blowing out windows in a cascade of raining glass. The pain in his ears was so acute, Woland thought he might have burst his eardrums, but there'd be time for worrying about that later. He glanced left to see a gaping maw in the stone wall on the street side of the courtyard. The blast had also collapsed and mangled a ten-foot swathe of heavy steel fence that served as the inner barrier.

The operator in Woland took over, and he scanned the courtyard for threats. Instead of running for freedom and risking being shot by the riflemen still manning the two corner towers,

he double-timed it to where Pet lay motionless on the ground, covered head to toe in blood. Woland suspected that most of the blood was not Pet's and instead had come from the trio of prisoners and guard number three who'd been standing in the blast zone and whose body parts were now scattered about the courtyard.

"*Qui est là?*" Pet said, staring up with unfocused eyes.

"It's me, Nicholas," he said, taking a knee beside the man.

A heartbeat later, both guard towers exploded in beautiful, simultaneous precision—struck by RPGs from the apartment buildings across the street.

"Are we under attack, Nicholas Woland? I cannot see anything," Pet said, a tear spilling onto his cheek.

Gunfire erupted in the courtyard as two other prisoners, sprinting toward the hole in the fence, were gunned down from behind. Woland glanced over his left shoulder and ID'd the shooter. André stood ten yards away, rifle up and a mirthless grin on his face as he unloaded his magazine.

Woland picked up Pet's rifle and, with practiced fluidity and precision, put three rounds in André's torso. Then he stood and looked down at Pet.

"It's okay, my friend," Woland said, smiling pitifully. "Help is coming."

"*Dieu te bénisse,*" Pet said and squeezed his eyes shut. "God bless you, Nicholas."

Woland leveled the muzzle at Pet's forehead, squeezed the trigger twice, and watched the man's skull deflate like a torn basketball on the ground.

"I rather doubt that," he said with a chuckle, turned, and sprinted toward freedom.

He passed through the inner and outer barriers easily, ditching his rifle on the sidewalk after clearing for police threats. Just as he'd been told, a utility van was parked a half block away, its passenger-side panel door hanging wide-open. He ran to it, jumped in, and slammed the slider shut. Inside the cargo compartment, he stripped off his La Santé uniform and changed into jeans, a sweat-shirt, and leather jacket. He stuffed his uniform inside a large toolbox and then crawled through the gap into the driver's seat. He turned off the van's hazard lights, opened the driver's door, and exited onto Rue Jean Dolent.

Across the street, as promised, an idling ambulance waited. Woland walked around to the back, climbed inside, and shut the door behind him. A middle-aged man wearing paramedic attire sat beside the treatment cot, waiting for him.

Woland greeted the man in French.

"Take off your jacket and lie down," the man replied in German-accented English as the ambulance swerved from the curb, sirens blaring. "I'm not French, in case you were wondering. You prefer English, *ja*?"

"Yes," Woland said, shrugging off his jacket and then stretching out on the cot. "But I also speak French, Pashto, Arabic—even your native German."

Unimpressed, the man simply grunted and taped an IV catheter to Woland's arm, though he did not actually break the skin nor insert it into a vein. Next, he tore open Woland's shirt—buttons popping and clattering to the floor—and taped a bulky, blood-soaked dressing to his chest. Lastly, he sprayed Woland's face with water, mussed his hair, and had him don an oxygen mask.

"When we arrive at hospital, I want you awake, but do not

speak. You should appear confused and in pain. The pulse oximeter will display very low oxygen, so they will roll you into the trauma bay. But don't worry; we have someone waiting to take you where you need to go."

The German placed a large pistol, equipped with a suppressor, into Woland's hand, then covered him with a thick green blanket. "Just in case things don't go according to plan."

"And what is the plan?" Woland asked.

"The attendant will wheel you past the doctors' locker room. You roll off the gurney and go inside. Locker number four has everything you need, including new clothes, keys to a car in the pant pocket, and a wallet with new identification. Go to Hotel Henri IV, Rive Gauche. I have programmed the location into the car's GPS to make it easy for you, but it is located on Rue Saint-Jacques, north of Boulevard Saint-Germain and across from the Église Saint-Séverin cathedral. Park the car on the street. You have a key card in the wallet for room 415."

"Got it," Woland said over the wailing siren. "Then what? Where do I meet Victor?"

The German laughed, his expression softening for the first time.

"What's so funny?" Woland said, irritated.

"You must be important, *ja?* This is above my level. Check into your room, order room service, have a drink. Someone will come and tell you what to do next."

As the ambulance swayed into a right-hand turn, the German looked up and glanced out the small, square windows in the back doors.

"We are arriving," he said and, with an evil, twisted smile,

slipped an additional magazine under the blanket and into Woland's right pant pocket. "If you are detected, kill everyone who sees you at the hospital."

"My pleasure," Woland said, then let out a theatrical groan, changing personas into the role of a confused, injured patient.

As the ambulance braked to a stop, he adjusted his grip on the weapon under the blanket and, for the first time in his life, actually hoped that this time, he wouldn't have to shoot anybody.