



A
SHEPHERDS
★ SERIES ★
NOVEL

DARK FALL

ANDREWS & WILSON

USA Today and Wall Street Journal bestselling authors

PRAISE FOR ANDREWS & WILSON

“Action-packed. . . Andrews & Wilson thrill with their imaginative world building, edge-of-the-seat plot, and deeply felt characters. Fans of Frank Peretti and Ted Dekker will enjoy this.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY on *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, on *Dark Angel*

“A compelling story combining spirituality and the supernatural with tier one operators and hard-hitting action sequences, *Dark Angel* provides a front-row seat to witness the age-old battle of good versus evil in a way you likely haven’t experienced before. The dynamic duo of Andrews & Wilson delivers a stimulating faith-based military thriller that will take you on a journey beyond this world where anything is possible, and light must stomp out darkness to maintain the fragile balance of today’s society.”

STEVE NETTER, Best Thriller Books

“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

“*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, on *Dark Intercept*

“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*, on *Dark Intercept*

“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, [*Dark Intercept*] 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!”

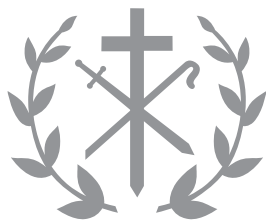
EDWIN E., military ministry leader and former Green Beret

“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 FALL

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 Fall

Copyright © 2022 by Brian Andrews and Jeff Wilson. All rights reserved.

Cover photographs are the property of their respective copyright holders from Shutterstock, and all rights are reserved. Cathedral © Andres_AP; sky © Triff; helicopters © Creativa Images; soldiers by fire © Getmilitaryphotos; tactical vehicle © Dimitris Leonidas; vintage letter texture © Henning Janos; old paper texture © Robyn Mackenzie.

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 Studio, Jeff Miller

Edited by Sarah Mason Rische

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

Scripture quotations 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.

Dark Fall 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

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN 978-1-4964-5144-6 (HC)

ISBN 978-1-4964-5145-3 (SC)

Printed in the United States of America

28 27 26 25 24 23 22

7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Karen Watson and the incredible team
at Tyndale House who made this series possible.

We are in your debt.



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.



PROLOGUE

HATUN Q'ERO VILLAGE

ANDES MOUNTAINS IN PAUCARTAMBO PROVINCE

CUZCO REGION, SOUTHERN PERU

1300 HOURS LOCAL

Dagan Meier stopped to catch his breath as he wove his way up the mountain. At fourteen thousand feet elevation, the air was thin . . . very, very thin. The rocky trail he took from the lower village, *Hatun Q'ero*, to the upper village, *Hapu Q'ero*, resembled a goat path. But so far he hadn't seen any goats. Only llamas.

Provided he didn't pass out and die from hypoxia in the next few minutes, he would meet with the village *paqos altumisayuyq*, or spiritual leader. The spiritual leader resided in the upper village and was in conference with the tribal elder, or *paqos pampamisayuyq*, who traveled regularly between the upper and lower villages. Together, they ministered to the spiritual needs of the villagers, listened to grievances, dispensed wisdom, and mitigated disputes.

Dagan couldn't help but smile at the thought: *Even here, in the most remote village in the world, bureaucracy is alive and well.*

That the elder was willing to meet with him seemed a good sign, though it didn't surprise Dagan. He'd found the Q'ero to be some of the most welcoming and accommodating people he'd ever met, more than living up to what he'd learned about them in his two months of training at Global Gospel Missions. Dagan felt joy and relief that God had led him here, to such a loving people, for his first assignment as a missionary spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ. He even felt a surge of confidence as he rounded the final switchback on the rocky path and the few scattered wood-and-mud huts came into view. The bulk of the Q'ero resided in the lower village, but up here the elders gathered in conference while the young men tended crops in rocky terraced fields with llamas. In winter, this village would be empty, serving only as a refuge for any traveling Q'ero trapped by snowstorms at the higher elevation.

Two young Q'ero waved to him from where they stood beside one of six structures surrounding a dirt courtyard. He smiled at the boy and girl and stopped to take several slow, deep breaths before waving back. When the heaviness in his head cleared, he said a short prayer for God to fill him with the Holy Spirit and guide his words as he shared the Good News with these people. Immediately peace came upon him, but there was something else, just out of reach. Not dread but . . . something.

You have done good work for the Kingdom of God. You have a pure heart.

The words were at once his but also not. He shook the strange feeling off and continued his trek to share the message with the two men inside the long hut, the only one with curls of smoke coming up out of the rectangular chimney.

"Hello, my friends!" he said in Quechua to the children, one of the few phrases he'd mastered in the ancient language, before adding, "How is the work up here today?" in Spanish.

Most Q'ero were bilingual, with children learning Spanish from a very young age. "How is the work," he'd learned, was a common greeting equivalent to "How are you" in English, and he liked using it.

"Hallo to you, Dagan," the older boy, perhaps ten or eleven, said in English, beaming with pride that he'd mastered the phrase, though he'd

substituted a *j* sound for the *y* in *you* and softened the first vowel of Dagan's name.

"Hello," he said back, smiling.

The two children laughed, then skipped off together toward another hut, where a large woman called out to them. Dagan watched as she beat a lovely, colorful tapestry with a flat stick, clouds of dust billowing around her. The Q'ero were known for their weaving skills, a style that some experts claimed linked them to the Incans, and Dagan was struck by the beauty and intricacy of this blanket or carpet—though often it seemed the tapestries were used interchangeably for both purposes. He waved to her, then ducked through the equally magnificent woven drape hung over the open doorway at the front of the hut he was visiting.

The spiritual leader smiled with his large gray teeth and gestured for Dagan to join him and the tribal elder seated beside him on the wood floor atop a brightly colored carpet. As Dagan approached, the former rose with a fluid grace, embraced him, and just as effortlessly returned to the floor, cross-legged. The frail-looking elder beside him gave the faintest of smiles and a long, deep nod, gesturing with a hand for Dagan to join them on the floor.

As he sat, Dagan reminded himself not to assume too much about the faculties of the old man—who looked to be somewhere in the neighborhood of two hundred years old. After all, the old man had climbed to Hatun Q'ero from another village six or seven thousand feet below them and more than twenty miles away. Dagan rather doubted he could make that hike very easily—if at all.

"It is a joy to have you with us, Dagan," the man said—in Spanish, gratefully—and placed a hand on his shoulder, squeezing it warmly. "Our *paqos pampamisayuuq* is quite excited to speak with you about your beliefs, as we share many similar ideas."

Dagan bowed—unsure what else to do—and said a quick, silent prayer for guidance. When the elder did not speak, Dagan seized the opportunity. "It is both my honor and my duty to share with you the Good News of Jesus Christ," he began. "We believe that Jesus—"

"Ahhhhh, yes . . .," the old man interrupted, smiling broadly with the teeth he had remaining and nodding. He continued in Spanish, "We know well your Jesus Christ."

The old man's words surprised Dagan at first, but then he remembered that missionaries had been visiting the Q'ero for decades.

"That is wonderful," he said, smiling back.

"After founding the city of Qusqu," the old man continued, "the Inkarri created Jesus Christ. Perhaps, when Inkarri returns, he will bring your Jesus with him."

The man smiled and patted Dagan on the knee. Dagan was amazed at the parallels to Christianity—a returning prophet, like a second coming, and the creation of Jesus from a god. Of course, this might be nothing more than the blending of religions. The first Christian Spaniards had encountered the Q'ero hundreds of years ago, and their missionaries had shared the gospel then before disappearing. Q'ero legend had it that the Spaniards had not been kind to the Q'ero, and their disappearance had been at the hand of the mountain gods, or Apus, who had buried the invaders in a rockslide caused by a massive earthquake.

"We believe," Dagan said, choosing his words carefully, "that Jesus Christ is not only the Son of God, but that He is God, who came to us in the form of man so that His sacrifice, by dying on the cross, would allow for our sins to be forgiven and our covenant restored with God. In doing so, we have a relationship with God, and by accepting Jesus as our Lord and Savior, we may have eternal life."

The older man leaned over, speaking rapidly to the younger *paqos* in their native Quechua. They conversed heatedly but without anger. Then the old man smiled at him again and nodded.

"We believe," he said, seemingly excited to give Dagan his spin on this, "that all things were created by Pachamama. It is to Pachamama we give our praise and who must certainly have created your Jesus Christ. By finding balance in all things we honor Pachamama and find peace and harmony with each other and all that exists—including your Jesus Christ."

Dagan nodded, wondering how to politely suggest that what the Q'ero called Pachamama could simply be another name for the one true God. He'd been taught to find commonality in both culture and religion while doing missionary work. Sharing new knowledge was easier if it didn't require others to abandon their tightly held beliefs entirely.

“If we can agree that God and Pachamama are names given by our different peoples to the one true God of the universe—”

A scream cut him off.

Then came a sound much like a muffled explosion, and the smell of sulfur filled the air.

Dagan was on his feet but a beat behind the elders. He fell in behind them, lunging for the door as his heart accelerated in his chest. The old man pushed aside the brightly colored tapestry over the doorway, which fell back into Dagan’s face. When he pushed it aside, he froze in place, mouth dropping open and hands trembling.

Where the hut beside which the woman had been cleaning dust from the tapestry had been he now saw only a deep, scorched hole with flames coming up from the bottom like a firepit back home in Pennsylvania. The entire hut had been consumed, and beside the crater he saw a smoldering pile of dark, charred clay, perhaps two or three feet high.

With horror, Dagan realized the smoldering pile was all that remained of the woman. His brain refused to accept what the two smaller smoldering piles probably represented.

A high-pitched squeal made him turn, and he watched a streak of light stretch from the sky and a pillar of flame erupt where a man had been standing just fifteen feet away. A second hut caught fire, and a half-dozen villagers of all ages ran out screaming. Frozen with fear, he watched while yet another figure was incinerated from heaven, leaving behind nothing but a pile of char.

The spiritual leader and the village elder turned to him, their eyes wide with fear and condemnation.

Is your God doing this? their faces asked.

And then they were gone too, consumed by light and heat.

And Dagan was running.

All he could think of was the book of Genesis, where God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah for their violence and hatred. He’d read that the destruction might have been from fiery meteorites impacting in and around the cities.

Is that what just happened here?

He turned his back on the carnage and ran at a full sprint down the rocky

path, fleeing the village. He became aware of a weeping sound and realized it was coming from him, but the sobbing quickly morphed into hyperventilation. Gasping for breath, he dropped to his knees on the rocky mountain path. Tears streaming down his face, he looked to heaven and asked the only question his mind could formulate . . . the only question that mattered.

Why, Lord? Why?

PART I

Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. At that time, many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other. . . .

MATTHEW 24:9-10

CHAPTER ONE

TRINITY LOOP COMPLEX

15 MILES WEST OF NASHVILLE

SOUTH OF ASHLAND CITY, TENNESSEE

1514 HOURS LOCAL

Faith and firepower . . . those were the two things Jedidiah Johnson thought about from when he woke in the morning until his head hit the pillow each night. While some people might find the pairing troubling, as a combat team leader for Shepherds North America, worrying about faith and firepower was literally in Jed's job description. Because without an abundance of both, the enemy his team faced would prevail.

Battling evil, it turns out, is complicated.

Before Jed enlisted in the military at age eighteen, he'd aspired to become a pastor. In those naive, carefree days he'd only contemplated faith. Later, while serving as a Navy SEAL at the pointy tip of the spear, he'd measured his worth by the skillful and judicious application of firepower. But over the

past several months, those two versions of himself—men he'd always viewed as distinct and separate people—had reunited to become one. The reunification process had not been easy, with both the operator and the man of God not fully trusting each other. Thankfully, he'd had plenty of help along the way, from his Joshua Bravo teammates, from the Shepherd commander Ben Morvant, and from an unlikely teacher—his “adopted niece” Sarah Beth Yarnell.

As he climbed into the driver's seat of his Silverado High Country pickup truck, he made a conscious decision to jettison the emotional baggage he made a habit of carrying around. This afternoon was about living in the moment and having fun. Today would be the first time he'd visited Sarah Beth at St. George's Academy, the special boarding school for children with the gift of second sight. The Watchers, as the children were known, functioned as the Shepherds' eyes and ears in the invisible war raging around the globe for the hearts, minds, and souls of humanity. Where the Dark Ones spread chaos, hate, and death, the Shepherds and the Watchers battled tirelessly to stop them.

Jed piloted his pickup through Trinity Loop campus to the main entrance, where he nodded to the guard at the main gate on his way out. The sunglasses-wearing, no-nonsense security officer had grown on Jed over the past few months, and he couldn't help but wonder if Sanderson might have what it took to be a Shepherd.

I'll have to talk to Ben about that, he thought and made a mental note to bring it up the next time he saw Morvant.

After leaving the complex, he made his way to Sams Creek Road, where he headed south for eight miles to pick up State Route 70. As the crow flies, St. George's Academy was just ten miles southwest of Trinity Loop, their proximity not accidental. In a spun-up helo, a quick-response security team from Trinity could probably get to the school in under five minutes. But for Jed in his pickup truck, the rural roads of Tennessee turned that ten-mile distance into twenty plus, all on roads with forty-five miles per hour speed limits. It would take him every bit of thirty-five minutes to make the trek—assuming he didn't get stuck behind a combine en route.

With the radio blasting Big & Rich, Jed carved up the winding country roads. Smiling and singing along, he even rolled the windows down and

let in some fresh Tennessee air. A handful of hit songs later, he arrived at the access road to St. George's. The school itself was set back on a large and sprawling campus with sports fields, a swimming pool, and even an equestrian center. But as he pulled up to the security checkpoint, he couldn't help but notice that the academy's perimeter defenses paled in comparison to what was installed at Trinity Loop. The only countermeasures he could see were what looked like retractable security balusters in front of the guard shack, an iron gate on a swing arm, and a fenced berm that ran the length of the southern property line.

Hmm, he thought. I'm surprised they don't have a bigger security presence.

Jed fished out his Trinity Loop CAC card, the ID for the nonofficial cover for Shepherds North America, and presented it to the guard at the gate. Even though he couldn't see them, Jed assured himself that a heavily armed, rapid-response force waited hidden and at the ready, twenty-four hours a day, to protect the very gifted and vulnerable young people living on this campus. The gate guard scanned the card and, after getting a green flash on his tablet, waved Jed through.

He limited his speed to twenty-five as he meandered to visitor parking. As he took in the scenery and activity around him, he felt like he'd driven onto the set of a movie. To his right girls' lacrosse teams were playing on green manicured playing fields. To his left some kids were playing Frisbee next to a man-made lake replete with a wooden dock, a family of ducks, walking trails, and park benches. A two-story redbrick cathedral-style building dominated the landscape with a spire-topped clock tower that drew the eye up to heaven.

Quite a place to get an education, he thought, remembering his dumpy old middle school in Murfreesboro.

He parked in the front row of visitor parking, slipped on his Trinity ball cap, and followed the sidewalk to the main entrance. An armed security officer wearing a charcoal-colored uniform and black kit gave him a quick once-over, then the bro nod of approval as Jed approached the set of double doors leading into the main building. Through the glass he could see Sarah Beth smoothing the pleats on her plaid uniform skirt while she chewed gently on her lower lip, a habit he knew she was trying to break. He sensed both her excitement and her nervousness. They'd not seen each other since

the barbecue at the Yarnells' house—one that had been cut abruptly short by the sudden deployment of Joshua Bravo team to Rome to stop the fallen Shepherd Nicholas Woland as he led a team of Dark Ones trying to kidnap the pope from the Vatican.

She looked up a heartbeat later and flashed him a beaming smile.

“Uncle Jed!” she said, running to him as he pulled the door open and stepped across the threshold.

Before he could even respond, she'd jumped up and wrapped her arms around his neck. He chuckled as he hoisted her up in a bear hug. “How are you, kid?”

A sudden tsunami of memories and emotions washed over him—fear and dread when she was trapped at the Dark Ones' compound, relief and strength when Jed found her hiding in the tree hollow in the woods, panic when black-clad assaulters broke into her old house trying to take her a second time, guilt and self-loathing when her parents argued about whether to move away or send her to St. George's, shame and embarrassment on her first day of school when a girl named Darilyn made fun of her Target brand shoes, repugnance watching Rector Senai executed by a glowing-eyed Nick Woland in the Vatican, worry and shock seeing Detective Maria Perez show up on Jed's arm at the team barbecue . . .

With each flashbulb memory he felt the accompanying emotions as strong and powerful as if they were his own. Lump in his throat, he lowered her to the floor and took a knee in front of her.

“Wow, you've got, um . . . a lot on your mind, kiddo,” he said, reaching up to wipe a tear from her cheek.

“I don't know why that happened,” she said, powering a smile onto her face. “When I hugged you, it was like a floodgate opened and all the stuff I'd been bottling up came to the surface. I'm sorry I pushed in on you. Apparently that's what you get for being friends with a weirdo.”

“You're not a weirdo, Sarah Beth.”

She bobbed her head from side to side theatrically. “Give it time—you'll come around.”

This candid comment got him laughing. “I missed you, kid. Sorry I couldn't get here sooner for a visit.”

“I missed you too, Uncle Jed,” she said with a self-conscious smile.

Jed stood up and made an exaggerated show of looking around the vestibule. “Wow, this is quite a place.”

“Come on,” she said with a jolt of buoyancy. “I want to show you everything!”

She grabbed his hand and took off, dragging him behind her.

Are you really okay, Sarah Beth? he asked and felt himself probing to make sure.

“I’m really fine, Uncle Jed,” she assured him, out loud. “But let’s either talk or Watcher snapchat. It’s confusing to go back and forth.” She gave him a stern look. “I didn’t mean to push all that stuff on you, but it’s also rude to mine my thoughts without my permission. I mean, thoughts deserve to be private, right?”

“Yeah, of course they do,” he said, grinning. “But I told you I can’t really control it very well. Sometimes I just reach out. I’m sorry.”

“Actually, you know what,” she said, glancing at him with a sly smile. “Try again. See if you can get what I’m thinking.”

“But you just told me not to.”

“I know, but now I’m telling you to try. I want to show you something.”

“Okay,” he said and reached out for her with his mind, but this time instead of reading her thoughts and emotions, he hit the equivalent of an invisible brick wall. Screwing up his face, he tried again and bumped into it again.

“Boom, that just happened,” she said and snapped her fingers at him with a smackdown attitude.

“What was that?” he said, his curiosity seriously piqued.

“I blocked you, dude. With my invisible wall.”

“Ooooooh . . . teach me to do that you must, Jedi Master Yarnell,” he said, doing his best Yoda impression.

She smirked. “We’ll see . . .”

As she dragged him around, she explained that the main building—which housed the dormitories, classrooms, dining hall, chapel, and administrative offices—was designed in the shape of a cross. It clicked firmly into place in his mind, but on a subconscious level the SEAL in him had already been constructing a mental map of the floor plan. For the operator, situational awareness was a life-or-death proposition.

“. . . originally, this was the only building,” she explained, “but they expanded when they ran out of room. So now there’s the pool house, the equestrian center, and they’re building a new student center because the commons here are super lame. The new one is going to have a movie theater, a food court, and even a bowling alley. How cool is that?”

“Sounds pretty cool.”

“Supposedly they were going to build a skateboard park, but I think that’s on hold now,” she said, leading him outside to show him the grounds. “Olivia says that there would be, like, tons of liability if someone got hurt.”

“Probably true,” he said with a nod as he took a seat on a bench along the path that led down to the lake. “Who’s Olivia?”

“Oh, she’s my best friend I’ve made since I’ve been here.” She sat down beside him. “I wish I could be roommates with Olivia. But no, my roommates are . . . never mind.”

“Darilyn and Elizabeth?” he said, their names coming to him like a breath.

“Yeah,” she said.

Her wall was down again, and her raw teenage angst hit him like a sledge.

They don’t like me because I’m different. They’re jealous, especially Darilyn. They all have their stupid little cliques, and nobody wants to hang out with me. Mandatory one-on-one meetings twice a week with Pastor Dee don’t help either. It just draws more attention to me instead of less. Grown-ups are so clueless . . .

Jed leaned forward and rested his forearms on his thighs. “I know it’s easy for me to say, as a grown-up, but the things that make you feel left out now—those things that make some kids a little distant from you—are the same things that will someday draw those very kids to you. Right now they want to be like everyone else, but with time they’ll admire you for being yourself. They’ll follow you because you are a natural-born leader.”

Sarah Beth chuckled. “Yeah, right. I’m a leader that nobody wants to listen to, follow, or even hang out with. . . . Darilyn, she’s the natural-born leader. Not me.”

Someday you’ll see, he thought. *When it matters, you’ll be the one they look to for strength, not her.*

They sat in silence, watching the sun paint the sky fire red as it dropped below the western horizon. As the night crept in, so did a hint of melan-

choly . . . in both of them. He thought he sensed her poking around inside his mind for a second, but then the feeling was gone.

“Does he come to you at night?” she asked softly.

“Yes,” he said, knowing exactly which *he* Sarah Beth referred to.

“In your dreams?”

“Yes.” He looked up at her. “You too?”

She nodded. “He’s the reason I learned how to build the wall. To keep *him* out. It works when I’m awake, and I think being here at St. George’s helps too. It’s weird, but I feel stronger here, with all the other Watchers around, than I did before I came. But at night, when I’m asleep and relaxed . . . he sneaks in and he tortures me in my dreams.”

“Me too.”

“Sometimes I wake up screaming.”

“Me too.”

“I think Victor really hates me. I think he wants me dead, Uncle Jed.”

He took her little hand into his bear paw and gave it a gentle squeeze. “He’s afraid of you,” Jed said softly. “He’s afraid of your gifts, and that fear makes him lash out and it also makes him very dangerous.”

“Do you think he’s going to come for me again? I mean, he’s already tried twice. What’s to stop him from trying a third time?”

Jed took a moment to decide how to answer before simply saying, “It’s good that you’re here, Sarah Beth, at St. George’s. You’re safe here.”

“Are you sure?”

“Are you kidding me? A school with hundreds of Watchers and Trinity Loop ten miles away? It will be a cold day in hell before he can step foot inside these gates,” he said with all the SEAL bravado he could muster.

She seemed to like that answer because she smiled and popped to her feet. “C’mon,” she said, grabbing his wrist and giving it a tug.

“Where are we going now?”

“To dinner so I can show off my Navy SEAL uncle. It’s pizza night and the pizza here is, like, legit better than even DeSano’s. No joke.”

“Well,” Jed said, following her back toward the main building, “I’ve never had DeSano’s, believe it or not, but everyone says it’s incredible, so if you say this is better, then count me in.”

“And so long as it doesn’t rain, we’re having outdoor movie night with

the high school kids tonight, too,” she said, looking over and chewing on her lower lip. “I mean, unless you have a date with Detective Perez or something . . .”

Jed sensed a flash of something dark regarding Maria, but when he tried to suss out what it was, he bumped into her invisible wall.

“Nope, I’m all yours,” he said quickly, wondering if she could feel when someone bumped up against the wall. “I can stay for the movie . . . I mean, if guests are allowed to stay that late.”

“Visitors can definitely stay for the movie,” she said. “Mom and Dad stayed for one once, and you’re on my guardian list, so there ya go.”

“There ya go,” Jed said with a laugh, but he was surprised by the revelation that Rachel and David would afford him guardian status. Maybe it was more like protector status since he was a Shepherd.

I’ll have to look into that one.

A few paces later, his mobile phone rang, interrupting Sarah Beth as she yammered on about the time she’d tried paddle boarding in the lake.

“Sorry, Sarah Beth, I gotta take this,” he said, retrieving his mobile phone and glancing at the caller ID.

“Sure,” she said, visibly deflating.

“Johnson,” he said, taking a step away from her.

“Jed, it’s Ben,” the Shepherd commander said, his voice all business. “There’s been an incident.”

“What? Where?” he said, his stomach going sour in anticipation of what could only be bad news.

“Peru.”

“Huh?” Jed said, genuinely confused.

“I’ll read you in on what we know—which isn’t much—when you get back. Wheels up at 2200. You’re taking a red-eye to Lima. Think about who from Joshua Bravo you want to take with you,” Morvant said and the line went dead.

Jed lowered the phone from his ear and looked at it in disbelief.

“You’re going to *Peru*?” Sarah Beth said, crossing her arms and giving him the stink eye. “Tonight? Really?”

He shook his head and winced, deciding not to point out she’d broken her own rule—taking things from his head without permission. “I’m sorry,

kiddo . . . I don't like it either, but duty calls. If the boss says I gotta go, then I gotta go."

"Typical," she said, turning her back on him, but before he could step close enough to give her shoulder a squeeze and apologize, she turned around with a resigned smile. "It's okay. I'll be okay. I get it. Somebody down there needs your help, and I—of all people—know what that feels like."

Her strength and mature response assuaged the guilt he was feeling. "Thanks, Sarah Beth. That means a lot to hear you say that."

She nodded.

"We'll do pizza and a movie when I get back, even if it has to be on the TV in the common room. Cool?"

"Cool," she said.

They stared at each other for an awkward moment, but she broke first and ran in to give him a goodbye hug. "Be careful, Uncle Jed, and come home safe."

Hugging her back, he said, "Always."