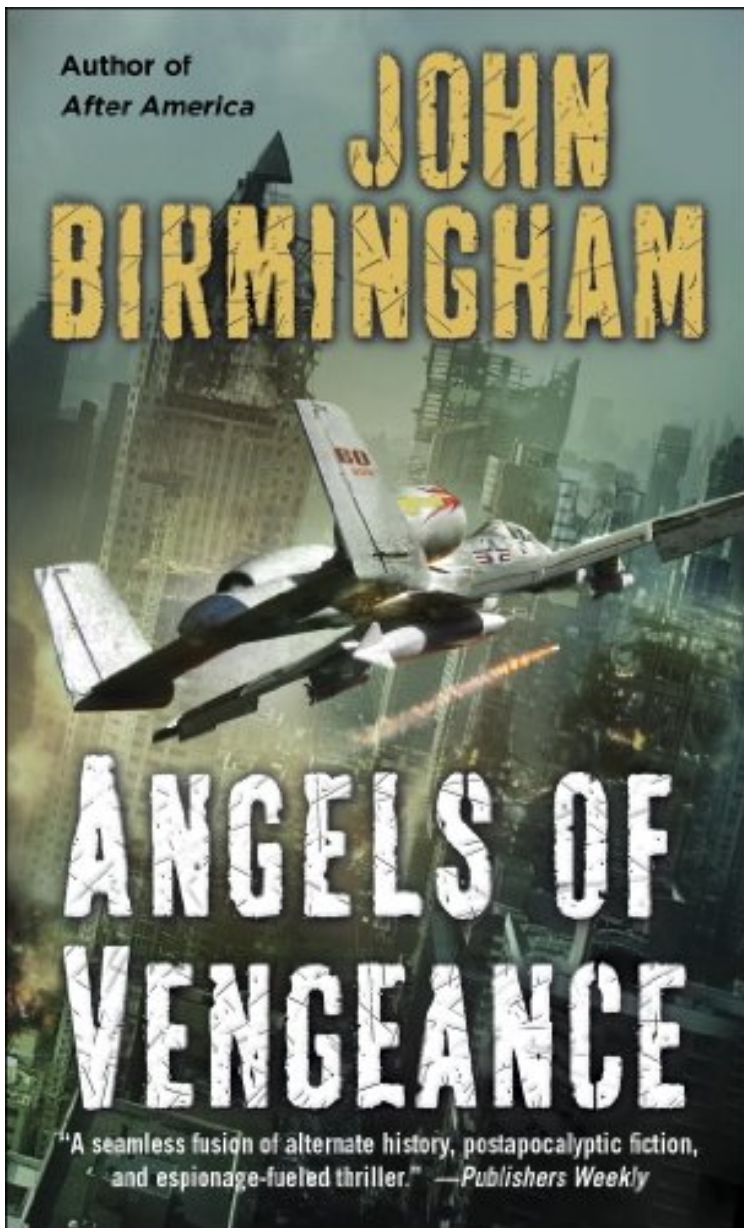


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# Angels of Vengeance



*Par John Birmingham*  
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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurA seamless fusion of alternate history, postapocalyptic fiction, and espionage-fueled thriller.Publishers WeeklyWhen an inexplicable wave of energy slams into North America, the world is plunged into turmoil as wars erupt, borders vanish, and the great and powerful fall. Against this dramatic backdrop, three very different women navigate the chaos. Deep in a South American jungle, special agent Caitlin Monroe will stop at nothing to discover how a master terrorist escaped a secret detention center in French Guadeloupe to strike a fatal blow in New York City. Sofia Peiraro, a grieving teenager trying to

rebuild her life in Kansas City, is drawn back to Texas by a vicious murder. And in the fashionable bars and boutiques of Darwin, the seething, growing freeport in Australias deep north, the British-born aristocrat-turned-smuggler Lady Julianne Balwyn hides a pistol in the small of her lovely back. She is hunting for the man who is hunting her. As these women fight for survival, justice, and revenge, humanity itself struggles toward its better angels and to purge its worst demons. Birmingham knows how to write action. . . . I enjoy world building stories as well as post-apocalyptic tales. This is definitely a little of both. Bill Lawhorn, SFRevuA rollicking ride . . . fast-paced and thought-provoking. The Sun-Herald (Sydney, Australia) Extrait 1

**FORMER URUGUAYAN ARGENTINIAN BORDER REGION, SOUTH AMERICAN FEDERATION**

Staff Sergeant Michelle Royse of the U.S. Armys much diminished 160th Special Operations Aviation Battalion, scanned the northern banks of the river delta as the Black Hawk pounded up the narrowing channel over dark, choppy waters. Through her night vision goggles, the slightly fuzzy green imagery of heavily wooded banks was blurred even further by the shuddering of the helicopter as it roared along above the wave tops. A solid nor'easter was blowing directly up the mouth of the river, adding an extra thirty knots to their airspeed but demanding extreme levels of concentration from Captain Tim Lindell and his copilot as they guided the chopper through hostile, if poorly guarded, airspace. Far behind them, no one paid their improvised helicopter carrier much mind a battered and rusty container vessel salvaged from Mexico. Royse didnt like to ponder what would have happened if the vessel had been detected by the South American Federation Navy. Hell, probably not much to worry about, she consoled herself. Its just a paper navy at best. Most of their top ships laid up in docks anyhow, just rusting away. A bit like the U.S. Navy nowadays, she thought. Lindell had not spoken for five minutes, which still made him a hell of a lot chattier than their passenger: the spook. Michelle knew the woman had to be a spook because in spite of the faded summer-weight BDUs she wore, the kit they had loaded for her was all high-spec exotic stuff, the sort of gear the military simply couldnt afford nowadays. No way the army or SOCOM was running this operation. They were just providing a bus service for some ghost recon superwoman whod drifted down from far above the upper reaches of the tier-one food chain. Michelle snuck a sideways glance at the passenger. The woman wasnt unfriendly, not like some of the ego monsters shed met while shuttling T1 operators around. But she was entirely self-contained; she spoke only when necessary and had a way of discouraging questions without actually asking you to mind your own business. She stood maybe an inch taller than Michelle, but even in her BDUs, body armor, webbing, and equipment, she seemed . . . well, not slighter perhaps more wiry. There was a tightly wound intensity about this spook that made being in her presence distinctly uncomfortable.

Impossible to guess her age under all that kit, but Michelle thought maybe early to middle thirties. The womans physique looked totally ripped, but her eyes were old beneath a stray lock of dirty blond hair. Royse looked away quickly as their mystery passenger shifted position. She was happy enough to attend to her duties while Jane Bond sat in a furious still-life study of cold impacted rage. For the moment, those duties mostly involved scanning the shore-line north of the river. Nothing appeared to move out there on what once had been the Uruguayan side of the border. Not now, though. Now it was all part of la Federacin. A few bright emerald pinpricks of light burned in a cluster about ten miles inland, but the shoreline was dark.

The Black Hawk banked gently a few degrees to the northeast, taking them over land for the first time. Michelle craned her head to peer over her shoulder into the cabin, which glowed like a childs idea of a fairy cave in her night vision goggles. Far ahead of them, she could make out a faint dome of opalescent light on the horizon, marking the location of the Federation Navys fleet base. She would have sneered at the vanity of the pompous title fleet base if not for the fact that their own aircraft was held together with hundred-mile-an-hour tape, bailing wire, and promises and that most of the U.S. military bases shed flown out of in the close to five years since March 2003 had all suffered from the same air of neglect and making do. Salvaged gear left exposed to the elements or in compromised warehouses and storage depots took you only so far. Yep, two paper tigers staring each other down in a burning barn thats the world of tomorrow. What a fucking joke. Five minutes to insertion. Captain Lindells voice barely registered in her earphones over the roar of the engine and the deep thrumming bass note of the chopper blades. It was as though the tension had strangled his voice down to a clenched murmur. Royse held up her hand with all five fingers splayed and nodded at the spook. She was already preparing herself but nodded back, anyway. Michelle had watched the woman take inventory of her load before they lifted off from the container ship, three hundred miles off the coast.

She watched her repeat the performance now that they were almost at their destination. A minute later, obviously having reassured herself that she had not forgotten her passport, wallet, or Gerber Mark 2 fighting knife, the woman closed her eyes and let her head loll back until her helmet touched the bulkhead behind

her. It was the first human gesture, the first intimation of weakness, or fear, or exhaustion that Michelle had seen her make, and as quickly as it came, it passed. Her head snapped back up. Her eyes blinked once. Two minutes out. The woman chambered a round in her HK417, a metallic Kerrchung that never failed to lay a cold finger at the base of Royses spine. The 5.56-mm HK416s she had seen here and there, but the 417 with the heavier 7.62-mm round had been a rumor until tonight. The spooks brand-new Heckler Koch was another sign that she wasnt your standard issue self-loving spec-ops asshole whispering, For I am the baddest motherfucker in the valley. No piece-of-shit M16 or M4 for this chick. Fuck it, she figured. Another day, another dollar. Michelle readied herself at the door, training the electric M134 mini- gun over the treetops, which rippled beneath her feet at 140 knots. Her knees bent to compensate for the sudden twisting, diving flight path as Lindell began to track the nap of the earth, heading for a small clearing marked on their maps as Objective Underwood. Thirty seconds. The Black Hawk pivoted, seeming to turn on a dime, as if Lindell were trying to throw them both out the rear hatch by way of momentum. The woman braced herself against the bulkhead, holding tight to a grab bar over her right shoulder. Roys sank deeper into a squat until her knees were bent almost at right angles. Then the inertia bled away swiftly as they came to hover over a patch of field between two clusters of trees. Michelle checked the ground beneath them and reported that the aircraft was clear. She signaled to the woman to step forward and hook up. The spook needed no help attaching herself to the fast-rope apparatus. Roys had one second to look into her eyes before she stepped out and dropped away into the night. The woman did not look scared, but there was something haunting her eyes. Something in the back of the deep, clenched lines that made her face appear unusually long and drawn in the low-light amplification of the NVGs. One brief nod. A thumbs-up gesture and she was gone, dropping down into the darkness. Caitlin fast-rope down to the clearing floor, which squelched under the tread of her canvas-sided jungle boots. She scanned the tree line for any hint of enemy presence without expecting to find it. If they were going to be fired on, chances were she would have seen the tracers arcing in while she was dangling, all but defenseless, in midair. Releasing the rope, she signaled to Staff Sergeant Roys that she was clear and hurried off to find cover as the chopper increased power and clawed up into the humid night. A flick of the wrist revealed the time: 0126 hours. She had four hours of movement before she would have to lay up for the day. It wouldnt take her all the way to her objective, but she planned to be well within observation range by the time the sun rose. The Echelon field agent moved quickly away from the drop zone, heading north by northeast, following the track programmed into her mil-grade Navman GPS unit. The brush wrapped itself around her, slowing her down as soon as she passed under the first tree canopy. Night vision goggles resolved the environment into a flat, eerily phosphorescent landscape of sinuous roots and vines, of fat nodding leaves and thick snarls of creeper, of rot and genesis. The smell of decay and of new life growing over the top of older worn-out vegetation was strong, almost cloying. Clusters of such flora dotted the grassland steppe behind her during this, the height of the South American summer. It combined the worst of all possible worlds: a main course of humidity with a side platter of wide-open kill zones, topped off with jungle-like collections of trees, brush, and other plant life. Caitlin was familiar with the fecund crush of the jungle. She spent a good year and a half tracking two targets through the old-growth forests of Sumatra and Aceh long before the Disappearance while posing as a Peace Corps volunteer helping to build schools. She knew the jungle. They had come to terms. But the problem now was more than one of terrain; this was a tactical nightmare. She proceeded to the nearest point of cover and pushed farther inside the forest. Two hundred yards in, she came to a small stream that was a couple of feet across and easily forded. Shallow water gurgled down a slight but noticeable slope, where Caitlin spied a small animal drinking upstream from her, a squat, barrel-shaped grazer of some sort. It sniffed the air cautiously a moment after she spotted it but returned to drinking when no obvious threat came charging out of the night. A couple of boulders, huge moss-covered menhirs, formed a natural fort. Caitlin decided to lay up there for a minute. The stream led most of the distance to her objective, covered by varying degrees of thick vegetation: it was the best bet for a concealed approach in the dark. It was also probably the most obvious . . . She pushed that thought away. Nothing could be done about it. Traipsing through open grassland in full gear was a sure way to get a third eye drilled into her forehead. Hundreds of bugs scuttled away as she laid her HK417 against the rock. A giant centipede reared up as if to strike. Caitlin swiftly killed the insect with one slash of a spring-loaded wrist blade and then flicked the two halves away with gloved fingers. The last thing she needed was to call in an extraction because of a bug sting. She let her senses expand out into the surrounding landscape, listening for human speech or footfall, the clink and rattle of poorly secured equipment; she sniffed the air just as the animal had, tasting it for the scent of man, or the last meal he had eaten, or the soap he

had washed with, or not, as might be. When she was certain no immediate danger existed, she relaxed fractionally. Or rather, she redirected her energy to her first lay-up procedure. Again she inventoried her equipment. Nobody wanted to be the guy who turned up at the beach without his towel, or the state-sponsored killer who forgot her ninja throwing stars . . . Okay, she conceded, I dont have ninja throwing stars. But it would be totally bad-ass if I did. Caitlin flipped up the monocular night sight on her PVS-14s to check the digital map Velcroed to her left arm. As was so often the case nowadays, Echelon resources didnt stretch to a live overwatch link. No one had thatnot even the Russian SVR had the resources for live overwatch anymore. She was on her own, which was not entirely a bad thing. Nobody was recording her every move for an embarrassing moment with the media farther down the road. Nobody was barking at her through a headset, telling her to do shit that made no sense. She had good data, though, and with that and her experience, there wasnt much else Caitlin needed. The little stream beside which shed laid up ran through the center of the dimly illuminated screen. Her position was marked with a blue dot. She hoped to follow the stream upslope for at least three clicks before it began to veer away from her intended destination, one of Robertos many detention facilities, this one tucked away in an old police station about ten kilometers inland. The best intelligence they had placed her target there. Wales had called it a memory hole: a dark place where the regime stuffed away its mistakes, embarrassments, and occasional secrets. Caitlin wondered if they understood the nature of the secret they had stashed down here in the back forty of the former Uruguayan Republic. She picked up the 417, resettled her pack a little more comfortably, and took a mouthful of chilled Gatorade from the camelback bladder woven into it. The brush reappeared in eldritch green as she snapped the PVS-14 back down over her dominant eye. The potbellied beast (was it a tapirwas that what they were called?) scuttled back into the undergrowth as she began to move. Youre a long way south, Caitlin thought about the tapir. Maybe it had gotten loose from a zoo or something. Time to move on herself. Quickly setting the GPS unit to vibrate when she had covered two and a half kilometers, Caitlin carefully stepped down onto the sandy creek bank from the small grassy bend on which shed been resting. She was her own point and cover, responsible for her flanks and rear guard. She was alone, her natural state of being. Consciously pushing away thoughts of her husband and baby back at the safe house in Scotland, willfully forgetting the life they had tried to make for themselves on the farm in Wiltshire, Caitlin Monroe, Echelons senior surviving field agent, let her true nature take over. A predator, she stalked through the primordial heatclaws out, fangs ready, all her senses twitching and straining, searching for prey. It didnt matter to her that this part of the country, thinly populated before the Disappearance, was even more sparsely peopled now. She had been trained to assume the worst, to prepare for ill chance and disaster as a certainty. There were no large townships within thirty kilometers, and the terrain between here and the objective was undoubtedly deserted. El colapso had emptied it, and Roberto Moraless regime kept it that way. But still, she would move forward as though snares blocked her path at every turn. She advanced in a creeping crouch, her knees bent, her thigh muscles and core strength tested by the weight of her equipment and the unnatural movement. Her body had recovered well from pregnancy and childbirth, however, and from the rigors of hunting and fighting in the huge open mausoleum of New York last spring. Three months back home with Bret and Monique had helped with thatthree months in which she regained her strength and bound it tightly with new layers of resolution and a fierce will to lay her hands on the man she blamed for nearly destroying her family. Bilal Hans Baumer. Al Banna. Or whatever he was calling himself these days. In Manhattan he had been known as the Emir. Now he was the target. Her target. As he had been for a year before the old world had fallen. The barrel of Caitlins 417 swept back and forth in a tight arc as she moved up the creek like a nightmare black arachnid. The burbling splash of the stream covered the sound of her boots. She took care to step where the flow of water would erase any sign of her passage quickly. Mosquitoes hovered around her in a cloud, drawn by the opportunity to feed but thwarted at the last moment by the odorless insect repellent she wore. As the environment adapted to her presence, it also disguised her advance, enfolding her in the shrill, creaking chirrup of a billion insects, the shriek of bats and nocturnal birds of prey, the rustle of larger animals moving through the undergrowth, and once, as she ducked under the limb of a half-fallen tree, the dry hiss of a viper slithering languidly along. Caitlin dropped a hand to the knife at her hip and with one fluid motion threw it at the snake, spearing it to the branch. While it was fixed in place, she crushed its skull with a swift stroke of the Heckler Kochs buttstock. Pythons didnt worry her, but vipers were incredibly foul-tempered. Best not to take chances. After forty minutes the Navman on her forearm began to vibrate ever so slightly, warning her that the stream was about to veer away from her intended heading. She slowed to a stop and took her time absorbing the signs . . . She listened for the slightest

fluctuation in the wall of sound thrown up by the insects in her immediate vicinity, the splash of water across the creek bed, which was slightly rockier here. Her eyes took in the noticeable brightening of the world in her goggles under a thinner canopy as a strengthening breeze opened a hole in the silver-gray cloud cover to let moonlight and starlight spill through. But nothing human. Still she waited. The slight delay gave her an opportunity to measure her endurance against the task at hand. She ignored the humidity, which lay on the landscape like a wet woolen blanket, making breathing difficult and leaving her with clammy sweat on the backs of her thighs. No one in her right mind would have been out in this, Caitlin realized, but it was a thought that neither eroded her attention to detail nor made her lower her guard even marginally. Satisfied that she remained alone, the Echelon agent moved off, carefully climbing the northern bank of the stream. Old mineral survey maps had indicated that the soil was thinner here and the vegetation less dense. It was still thick enough to slow her progress. With no natural track to follow, she was forced to push and occasionally hack her way through while trying to keep all noise to a minimum. As much as she could, she traded caution for speed, keen to make as much ground as possible on her objective before the sun climbed over the horizon. Screaming. It began sometime before dawn as a feeble, plaintive wailing, a trembling warble of utter hopelessness. Caitlin recognized the exhausted protests of a man who thought he was close to the limit of what he could endure. She knew from personal experience that he was wrong. In the hands of a capable torturer, you could endure far beyond the point where you'd first thought you wanted to die to escape the pain and humiliation. The humiliation of torture was the surprise for most people. They expected the pain, at least intellectually, although unless they'd been trained for it, the shock was enough to send most over the edge very quickly. The humiliation and shame, however, clung to them for years after the pain had subsided. And that was the jangling note she recognized in the screaming: the shame of someone who'd already broken and given up whatever he had, to no avail. The torture had continued. It was no concern of hers except from a tactical viewpoint. She didn't want her target, Ramn Luprico, checking out before she'd had a chance to interrogate him. She exhaled slowly, took a sip of fluid from her camelback, and peeled the wrapping from a mocha-flavored protein bar. Breakfast of champions. The detention facility a grand name for an adobe hut at a straggling, muddy crossing of the two main local roads was a single-story off-white building fronted by a slumping shaded porch. A high stone wall ran around a compound at the rear. From her position on a small hill two hundred meters back into the woods, overlooking the site, Caitlin couldn't see the prisoners enclosure, but she'd studied the satellite images closely at the pre-op briefing. A well appeared to provide drinking water, and a beaten-down path marked the circuit the inmates were allowed to walk for exercise each day. Assuming they were allowed any, of course. She'd half expected to see wooden poles driven into the earth for the traditional blindfold and last cigarette, complete with bloodstains from the coup de grace, but there were none. The guards most likely executed their victims in the cells and ordered any surviving captives to clean out the mess. The wailing spiraled up through the old familiar stages. Horror. Denial. Rejection. Pleading. Shock. Then the abject surrender. All in less than two minutes. There was no way to know if the screamer was Luprico. A quick recon of the former police station confirmed the position of two guards outside: only half dressed in uniform, sipping some sort of drink probably coffee under the portico. She thought she could even smell the brew. Hard to get good coffee these days . . . She made a note to snag a bag of beans if the opportunity arose. Black tea with milk and sugar at four in the afternoon with a fistful of cucumber sandwiches just didn't cut it. She was sure the guys on her extraction chopper wouldn't object to a little extra cargo. So, two men outside, at least four inside. Possibly six. Plus the three prisoners intel said were inside, only one of whom was of interest to her. All of Caitlin's training, all of her experience, everything, told her to wait this out, to lay up until nightfall, then strike under the cover of darkness. But she had reason to ignore the training and experience. Somewhere down there was Ramn Luprico, the man who had re-leased Baumer from imprisonment in Guadeloupe. He was a prisoner now himself, and it was a righteous certainty that he could tell her how al Banna had effected that release from his custody, possibly even how he then came to control the pirate gangs and jihadist militia that had infested Manhattan back in April 2007. She did not fool herself that Luprico would know how or why Baumer had chosen to reach out and lay his malign touch on her family, but that hardly mattered. She was here because Echelon had tasked her with securing whatever information she could extract from the target. The coincidence of her personal and professional interests created an impetus toward immediate action. The South American Federation was little better than a mafia state, but it was the only reliable authority south of the Panama Canal Zone. It would no sooner collaborate with Seattle than its self-proclaimed president for life, Roberto Morales, would present himself in The Hague to answer the many charges of crimes against humanity that now stood against

his name. In the anarchic, violent world that arose in the wake of the Disappearance, such diplomatic impasses proved less frustrating than they once had been. The states that survived tended to be those which acted to secure their interests directly, expediently, and swiftly. It was a perfectly complete return to Hobbes state of nature, and Caitlin Monroe, a survivor and a killer, was an instrument of that universe. She crouched down, motionless and unseen in her hiding spot on the small rise overlooking the crossroads, and resolved to give herself one hour to gather as much intelligence about the situation on the ground here as she could. And then she would act.

Revue de presse A seamless fusion of alternate history, postapocalyptic fiction, and espionage-fueled thriller. Publishers Weekly Birmingham knows how to write action. . . . I enjoy world building stories as well as post-apocalyptic tales. This is definitely a little of both. Bill Lawhorn, SFRevu A rollicking ride . . . fast-paced and thought-provoking. The Sun-Herald (Sydney, Australia)