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Tom Clancy's Op-Centre:
War of Eagles

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Extract

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ONE

Charleston, South Carolina
Monday, 4:57 A.M.

When Jesse Wheedles was a young man stationed at the Charleston Naval Base, he had a very precise and accurate job description. The Athens, Georgia, native was chief mess management specialist. He was proud of that position. Wheedles was more than just a cook, more than just a bagger who put together MREs—meals ready to eat—for consumption by sailors in transit. Wheedles was a craftsman. His job was to make certain that whatever their rating, whatever their taste, when someone sat down in his mess hall, he or she had the best soup, hottest entrée, and finest cookies and coffee in the United States Navy.

He had a paper napkin signed, "Amazing food!" by Undersecretary Sabrina Brighton proving just how well he had succeeded.

Wheedles wondered what life would have been like had he stayed with the navy. After his hitch, he took over the family restaurant, a roadside diner that was struggling to survive in the face of fast food and coffee bars. They hung

on ten years, after which his dad sold the property to a developer, divided the profit among his three sons, and called it a day.

Wheedles lost his share of the $90,000 in an Internet start-up.

Now both the former mess chief and the naval base were doing something else. The base had been there for nearly ninety-five years, ever since President Theodore Roosevelt visited Charleston for its bicentennial celebration and decided that it would be a more suitable location for a naval facility than Beaufort. His decision didn't sit well with the citizens of that city, who sent a wreath and their condolences when the base finally closed.

Southerners forgave, but they did not forget.

The military presence here had a long and significant history. During the American Revolution it had been the site of a major British siege. The fall of Charleston resulted in the single greatest loss of troops for the American cause and had effectively left the Southern colonies in the hands of the Crown. The proud port had also been one of the lifelines of the Confederacy, dry dock for the submarine *H. L. Hunley*, and the home base for ironclad blockade runners.

Fort Sumter, the flash point of the Civil War, was located here. The martial history of Charleston, built and shaped by sinew and soul, was too important to end with the cold, blind judgment of a computer.

But so it had.

The facility had been shut down in 1996 as part of the Base Realignment and Closure Program. That was a day of great mourning for the city. There was concern at the time that the loss of the fleet and four thousand support jobs would kill the harbor and drag Charleston with it. But federal agencies and commercial enterprises sailed to the rescue, filling the base with tenants and barely causing a skipped beat in the economic pulse of the city.

The redevelopment project even saved the struggling

career of thirty-seven-year-old Jesse Wheedles. Thanks to his former navy CO who was on the harbor renewal advisory board, Wheedles got a job as the morning manager of Teddy R's, a new waterfront restaurant that catered to freighter and tanker crews arriving or departing on the early morning tide. It was a great position, because he got to do something he enjoyed and was good at, and he loved arriving before sunup to turn on the grill and get the deep fryer bubbling. He loved the feeling of literally firing up his day almost as much as he enjoyed the taste of the night sea air. Unlike the navy, where everyone had been groomed and uniformed in a kind of hive look and personality, the men who came to his restaurant were multicultural. They looked, spoke, and even smelled different. He welcomed the opportunity to experience a little bit of Bulgaria or Hong Kong, of Venezuela or Great Britain right on his doorstep. Wheedles was also delighted by the fact that when he left work at two in the afternoon there was still warm daylight to enjoy with his wife and young twins.

There was just one thing Wheedles had never anticipated: that one day a freighter might explode in the predawn blackness, destroying a significant section of the dock, Teddy R's, and ending his life.

TWO

Charleston, South Carolina
Monday, 5:01 A.M.

Charleston PD Harbor Patrol Sergeant Al Graff had the wheel of his small white patrol boat. His partner, Officer Randy Molina, was in the well. He was scanning the mouth of the Ashley River with night-vision goggles, watching for small vessels. Over the past few months drug dealers from the Caribbean had been making drops along the Southeastern seaboard, meeting local distributors who brought the narcotics to shore in rowboats. Graff and Molina had not had a piece of that action yet. They hoped they would. The snakes who piloted those boats were generally not good swimmers. Especially if one of the oars accidentally struck them on the head.

It was a warm morning with a soft westerly wind. The eight-year veteran was about to turn back toward the mainland when something exploded a half-mile behind them. Both men turned. The blast lit the historic waterfront rooftops and the ornate spire of Saint Phillips. The rolling cloud itself blew much higher, spawning a spray of yellow

and magnesium-white tendrils. They tumbled to earth tracing hot, jagged paths in the sky as the smoke roamed outward, thinning and growing darker. Within moments the surface shock wave of the blast had reached the boat, causing ripples that heaved the small vessel violently from side to side.

While Molina simultaneously radioed the Coast Guard and the CPDHP dispatcher for assistance, Graff swung the patrol boat toward the rising crimson cloud. It was obvious that a freighter had exploded. Graff could see the outline of the hull against the flames. The vessel was spilling oil into the harbor, which fueled the fire. There wasn't a lot of it, since the ship had just arrived and not yet been refueled for the return trip, but there was enough to keep the area around it flaming.

A pair of CPDHP helicopters arrived within minutes to drop fire-retardant foam around the outside perimeter of the blaze to form a floating barricade that would keep it from reaching other ships. Big canvas hoses were rushed over by the harbormaster's dock crew to keep embers from igniting buildings or wooden structures on neighboring vessels.

It appeared that only two structures had been damaged on the waterfront: the Southern Bells music shop and Teddy R's. It looked to Graff like the restaurant had taken the bulk of the hit.

Trucks from the Charleston Fire Department, North Battalion, arrived just a few minutes later to help hose down the remaining structures and to mount an immediate search and rescue for survivors in the freighter or in the two burning buildings. The joint CPD/CFD antiterrorist task force was next on the scene, arriving moments after the main firefighting unit. While specialists from Fire Station 3 used their mobile hazmat lab to test for signs of radiological, bacteriological, or chemical agents, their CPD counterparts rushed to secure and search other ves-

sels. The highway patrol blocked roads around the sector to keep perpetrators from escaping, while spotters directed patrolmen to buildings that had a direct line of sight with the afflicted vessel. If this was a rocket-propelled grenade, they might be in time to stop the attacker from leaving.

It was a slick, tightly coordinated operation that had been rehearsed numerous times. There were no rivalries, no competition between the departments. Everyone knew exactly what to do, and they did it with unflinching courage.

Graff and Molina had two jobs: to watch the coast to make sure this wasn't a distraction created by smugglers, and to search for anyone who may have survived the explosion.

A quick circuit of the blast perimeter did not produce any survivors. It did produce body parts, however, limbs with charred skin and remarkably clean, unblemished white bone bobbing on the choppy river. There were pieces of clothing that did not sink with the rest of the ship and tangled mats of hair and fresh blood. Graff was not equipped to retrieve the evidence, but he did photograph it, along with the target itself.

The pictures, taken with a sat-link digital camera, were automatically sent to the CHP and to the FBI field division in Columbia and to Bureau headquarters in Washington, D.C. There, the images would be compared to a database of shipyard attacks to look for similarities. The remains and clothing would be studied to try to isolate distinctive national, cultural, or obvious blast characteristics. If this were a deliberate event, laboratory examination would determine the nature of the explosive used. If they found a fragment of the container used to house the explosive, scientists might be able to locate and read skin cells shed by the individual who had placed it. That would not tell them his identity, but it would tell them his ethnicity.

Graff documented the scene unemotionally. He did not know who these people were or what they were doing on

the vessel or dock. He did not know which of them had families. Since terrorism had become a daily possibility on every American calendar, Graff's default setting was to protect the harbor, the city, and the nation. He was emotionless about his work but passionate about his responsibility. He was also thinking back as he took pictures, running through the first two hours of his shift to make sure there was nothing he might have seen that did not seem suspicious at the time: a light on the water, an unusual sound from the hull of the freighter, movement somewhere along the dark wharf.

Molina informed him that the "scoop sloop" would be there within a quarter hour. That was the patrol boat with the nets and freezers required for evidence recovery. Graff acknowledged the update as he stood on the prow and continued to take pictures. He took each one twice, one through a night-vision lens and another with a flash. Comparing the two would help forensics experts construct a true-color image of the remains, something that would help them to pinpoint skin tone.

As they neared the hole in the vessel, Graff saw something that punched through the professional detachment. Something that put the nature of the vessel, if not the explosion, in context.

He saw a little bead bracelet floating on the choppy waters.

With a little girl's hand still attached.

THREE

Washington, D.C.
Monday, 7:33 A.M.

The call came as a surprise to Paul Hood. He was just sitting down with a cup of coffee and a power bar when his assistant put through Lorraine Sanders, chief of staff to President Dan Debenport. The forty-six-year-old director of Op-Center was being asked to breakfast in the Oval Office at the White House.

He ate the power bar anyway. The china at the White House was Jacksonian—old and delicate—and the less he used the happier he was.

This was obviously not a crisis. That was not something a new president discussed over bran muffins. Also, an official car usually arrived within moments of the call. It was also not a social visit, since those invitations typically came with more than ninety minutes' advance notice. It was certainly not a get-to-know-you meeting, because Hood knew Debenport well. The senator had been chairman of the Congressional Intelligence Oversight Committee, the group that controlled the budget of Op-Center. The

fact that it was being held in the Oval Office indicated that it was to be a working breakfast. Moreover, the timing could hardly be coincidental. The White House knew what was happening this morning.

As an intelligence officer, Hood knew when he was in what analysts called "the twilight zone." He had enough information to stay engaged but not enough to tell him why or with what. Op-Center's FBI liaison once described it as working on a crossword puzzle where you have scattered answers but not enough connective tissue to help solve the damn thing.

Which is pretty much the state of American intelligence, Hood thought. Traditionally reactive, using the military fist to squash an enemy instead of surgical subterfuge to cut him out. Destroy the entire puzzle, and you don't need to worry about this one across or that one down.

Maybe it was just as well Hood did not know what was going on. He would find out soon enough and, besides, he was too exhausted to think. Hood was not just sleepy but sapped of energy, of imagination. It had been a long and difficult nine months since an electromagnetic pulse explosion had all but destroyed the National Crisis Management Center. Hood and his staff had not only been working around the clock to repair the facility and protect national interests, they had been looking for ways to streamline and economize, to reinvent Op-Center in the wake of severe budget cuts.

Hood also had a personal mission. He needed to find a way to fall in love with his job again. Op-Center was not just a place but the beating heart of American crisis management. Hood had been present for its birth, when the mission was uncorrupted and clear, and opportunity was boundless. He was also there for death and loss in Korea, Russia, Spain. It was odd. Triumphs, of which there were many, were short-lived. That was what professionals were supposed to achieve. Failures, of which there were fewer,

hit harder. These included the deaths in the disbanded military unit Striker and the assassination of political liaison Martha Mackall.

It also included the painful budget-induced firing of Hood's number-two man, General Mike Rodgers, over a half year before.

Hood had done the best he could; he knew that. He had a shattered marriage to prove it. What he felt was that this place had somehow let him down. Like a child you love and raise and who falls short of what you expected or wanted or did not know you needed.

Hood had not seen the exhaustion coming. Rodgers had, though. Before he left, the general suggested Hood read about the British officers who had been hunting the German battleship *Bismarck* during the Second World War. Hood went on-line and found out why Rodgers had recommended it. In May 1941, when aerial reconnaissance informed the British commanders that the modern, fast, and very powerful vessel was in Grimstadfjord, Norway, they knew they could not afford to let it slip into the open sea. Despite the ultimate toll of hardware and manpower, the officers of the Royal Air Force Coastal Command and the Royal Navy threw every plane and ship they could muster at the *Bismarck*. They did not rest for the six days until it was sunk.

Those men knew the kinds of decisions, effort, loss, and attention that combined to flatten a man's spirit. Rodgers had seen it coming better than Hood had, the work it would take to resuscitate Op-Center. The effort required to inspire the people doing two or three jobs instead of one, learning new equipment, being unable to turn to associates who were no longer there. But then, Mike Rodgers had been in bloody battlefield combat. He understood sudden, often debilitating loss. Hood had only been in politics, the kind of combat where injuries could be repaired or ignored.

Scholarship had been Rodgers's way of putting the

world in perspective, and it was valuable to Hood during the years they had been together. Op-Center's intelligence chief Bob Herbert had a different way of seeing things. Herbert fired from the lip, which was hot-wired to the seat of his pants. Early in the rebuilding process, Herbert put Hood's life and labors in sharp perspective as only the candid, politically insensitive Mississippian could.

"You know what a bombshell can do," Herbert reminded him. "With just a look she can both fog your brain, clear your eyes, show you reality, and inspire a new one. But a bomb, Paul. That's pure destruction. It will break your spirit and body and will resonate through your soul. You'll hear the explosion and feel the shock wave every day for the rest of your life."

Like Rodgers, Herbert knew what an explosion could do. The former CIA field operative had lost his wife and the use of his legs in the Beirut embassy blast of 1983. But Herbert was right about the damage the bombshell could cause as well, and there was a reason he made the comparison. Several years before, Hood happened to meet his former fiancée, Nancy Jo Bosworth, in Germany. The great love of his life had turned Hood's head, literally, and when he looked back at his life, it was no longer the same, no longer comfortable or satisfying. It took a trauma—a United Nations hostage-taking involving his daughter Harleigh—and a few more years for his marriage to Sharon to end. Bitter though it was, at least there was time to adjust, to make the inevitable crash landing as gentle as possible.

The impact of the EMP was much different. It took everything from Op-Center in a flash. And the explosion didn't just necessitate the long and difficult rebuilding of Op-Center. The power of the electromagnetic disturbance showed Hood and his colleagues how vulnerable modern technology was to a lone gunman with the proper tools. They realized how important it was to get all of American

security resources up to speed to protect the nation. That weakness made the rebuilding process seem even slower.

Now Op-Center's reconstruction was done, and however tired Hood felt, the real work was just beginning. Though he was eager to undertake it, he was also struggling to motivate himself for what was coming next, the Monday morning senior staff meeting. There was a curious and surprising conflict taking place in Hood's head. The NCMC had done some significant work over the years, but that was in reaction to events, not prevention. Running Op-Center was like bailing a rowboat. Success still left them deep in cold water with the sea pouring in.

Hood was unreasonably, inexplicably angry at Op-Center for that. Nothing like this had happened when he was mayor of Los Angeles. He got frustrated, yes, with the city bureaucracy but never enraged. But then, his staff in city hall were mostly career politicians more dedicated to themselves, to advancement and power, than to their responsibilities. The people of Op-Center were different. They had to be: they were ready to die for their work. It was as if their dedication, their sacrifice, had given this place sentience, a soul. A target for his frustration.

Op-Center was not supposed to get sick. The NCMC had been designed to be a constant in a world of changing dynamics and new challenges, with experts in every field and the technology to support their activities. Hood's people were devoted, and they were the best, but they required a support structure. They rallied after the explosion, but they were not able to do their jobs effectively for over half a year.

Not that Hood had discussed this with them. It was all rah-rah as technical genius Matt Stoll supervised the electronic recovery and upgrades. There were heavy doses of can do as they borrowed intel and data from other agencies so they could watch national and international hot spots. But through it all Hood was crying inside. Staff psycholo-

gist Liz Gordon probably would have told Hood that he was having a serious bout of transference, laying what he felt about his failed marriage onto Op-Center. Sharon Hood had let him down, too, in his mind. She had failed to support his dedication to his career, his responsibility to the staff and the nation.

Maybe it was true that Hood was shifting his feelings from one situation to the other. It did not change the fact that Op-Center had taken on water, and the man in charge was angry and disappointed.

To make matters worse, the bailing pail was smaller now. Fewer hands, less money. All Hood had wanted to do this morning was get the place on its feet and running. Instead, he finished his coffee, told his assistant Bugs Benet where he was going, and headed toward the elevator.

Benet rose inside his cubicle. "Do you know when you'll be returning?"

"I don't," Hood said. "Tell Ron to start the show without me."

"Yes, sir. Good luck."

"Thank you."

Op-Center was housed in a two-story building at Andrews Air Force Base. During the Cold War, this nondescript, ivory-colored structure was a staging area for flight crews known as NuRRDs—nuclear rapid-response divisions. In the event of a nuclear attack on the nation's capital, the job of the NuRRDs would have been to evacuate key officials to secret bunkers built deep in Maryland's Blue Ridge Mountains. With the fall of the Soviet Union and the downsizing of the Air Force's NuRRDs, evacuation operations were consolidated at Langley Air Force Base in Virginia. The building at Andrews was given over to the newly chartered National Crisis Management Center.

The two floors of upstairs offices were for nonclassified operations such as finance, human resources, and monitoring the mainstream news services for possible hot buttons,

seemingly innocent events that might trigger crises. These included the failure of Third World governments to pay their troops, accidents such as a submarine ramming a foreign fishing vessel or yacht—which might not be just a fishing vessel or pleasure cruise, but a spy ship—the seizure of large caches of drugs that could harm the black economy of local provinces, and other potential domino-effect activities.

The basement of the former NuRRD building had been entirely refurbished. It no longer housed living quarters for flight crews. It was where the tactical decisions and intelligence crunching of Op-Center took place. This executive level was accessible by a single elevator that was guarded on top twenty-four/seven.

Hood acknowledged the guard with a nod. The red-cheeked kids were rotated every week to keep any of them from being tempted by foreign agents looking for access. Ironically, it was an individual with seemingly perfectly legitimate credentials who had been able to deliver the EMP bomb. In an era when a smart teen with a computer could shut down power grids, phone systems, banks, and military installations, passwords and swipe cards seemed quaint relics of a very distant time.

Hood stepped into the parking lot. The day was warming quickly. It helped to invigorate him. Hood knew it was partly a radiant effect of all the asphalt on the base, but he let himself think it was the sun. And it was a glorious spring morning, one in which the scent of the flowers that lined the security fence was actually stronger than the smell of the jet fuel coming from the airstrips.

Hood hoped the day stayed warm and welcoming.

In Washington, the weather had a way of changing unexpectedly.