

Tom Clancy Chain of Command

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Washington Air Route Traffic Control Center

Leesburg, Virginia

Time to decide: sixteen minutes.

Tim Goode grabbed the edge of the desk and pushed his padded chair away from the radar console, rolling it forward and back, bleeding off nervous energy while he took a scant moment to study the electronic blip moving northeast. At least once a day some clueless pilot flew their little Cessna or Piper or Beechcraft across the imaginary line that fenced the United States capital.

"Bewitched, ballsy, or bewildered?" Goode muttered under his breath, rolling his chair all the way forward again. A low growl rumbled in his chest.

Seriously, dude? All you gotta do is look at the chart . . .

Dozens of blips and corresponding transponder codes moved across his scope. It wasn't like this moron was the only aircraft he had to worry about at the moment.

Goode adjusted the mic on his headset-as if that would do any good-and tried the radio for the third time.

"Aircraft on a sixty-degree south of Nokesville, identify yourself on this frequency."

Nada. Nothing. NORDDO.

Aircraft were not permitted within thirty nautical miles of the Washington Reagan Airport VOR-the SFRA, or Special Flight Rules Area-unless they met three specific criteria. They needed a flight plan. They had to be in communications with air traffic control. And their transponder had to squawk on the assigned frequency.

This inbound numbnuts was batting zero for three-and making a beeline for the capital at a hundred and twenty knots, covering two miles every minute.

Goode waved over his shoulder for a supervisor with his left hand. His right moved for the computer mouse on his desk, activating the red and green signaling lasers located around the SFRA. Aided by radar tracking, the intense beams were aimed directly at the offending aircraft, warning the pilot to make an immediate one-hundred-eighty-degree turn.

See it-flee it.

This guy continued inbound with no response, undeterred by the warning lights.

At this point, Goode reported this Track of Interest to the Air National Guard duty officer at the Eastern Air Defense Sector, or EADS, 390 miles to the north in Rome, New York. Her name was Lieutenant Mary Wong. Both were frequent fliers when it came to SFRA incursions, and the two have had spoken many times before.

"Got another TOI for you," Goode said, getting down to business with the particulars. "Bullseye two-four-zero degrees for thirty-one nautical miles. Airspeed 120 knots."

Bullseye was the VOR at Reagan National Airport, the center of the restricted airspace circle.

Lieutenant Wong kept Goode on and notified her commander, who had a direct line to the United States Coast Guard Blackjack helicopter crews at Reagan and the F-16s with the 121st Fighter Squadron at Andrews. Both of these units were immediately placed on a heightened state of alert.

It cost the American taxpayer over fifty thousand dollars to scramble a single F-16, so no one took the action lightly-nor would they hesitate once certain trip wires were crossed.

"Who is this guy?" Lieutenant Wong said. "He's bullseye two-four-zero degrees for . . ." She paused, then spoke again. "Still NORDO?"

Goode tried the offending aircraft on the radio once more before answering Wong. "Correct," he said. "Either he's having radio problems or he's ignoring me altogether."

Wong was in deep conversation with her supervisor, ticking down the checklist of responses for an incursion into restricted airspace. Goode watched the green dot, expecting to see a Coastie MH-65 launch on his screen at any moment.

Time to decide: twelve minutes.

The inbound Track of Interest met the criteria for an immediate Operation Noble Eagle (ONE) conference call. Lieutenant Wong began by contacting 601st Air Operations Center at Tyndall Air Force Base-Continental U.S. NORAD Region (CONR) headquarters near Panama City, Florida, where Lieutenant General Rhett Farrer served as the CFACC, or Combined Forces Air Component Commander.

The commander of NORAD/NORTHCOM, four-star general Mike Hopkin, was enduring a root canal at a specialist off base in Colorado Springs at that moment, so his J-5, Major General Steven Armstrong (the joint director of policy and planning), stood in for him on the phone in the N2C2-NORAD/NORTHCOM Command Center. In this capacity, General Armstrong was armed with Civilian Aircraft Engagement Authority-a benign way of saying he'd been delegated the responsibility from the secretary of defense through General Hopkin to give the shutdown order so an F-16 Falcon could blow this little four-seater civilian airplane out of the sky.

Neither Goode nor Lieutenant Wong spoke the words aloud, but both knew that if this pilot continued on the same course, he would have his choice of the Pentagon, the Capitol, or the White House as targets.

Nine hundred miles north of Tyndall and sixteen hundred miles east of Colorado Springs, the scramble sirens sounded at Andrews Air Force Base. Captain Scott Hill and Lieutenant Rich Waggoner sprinted across the flight line to their waiting F-16s.

Time to decide: eleven minutes.

Twenty minutes earlier:

Early mornings were George Cantu's favorite time for flight lessons. His wife would drop their three-year-old daughter at daycare about now, and then head to Culpeper Middle School, where she taught seventh grade—a far more dangerous endeavor than instructor pilot, to George's way of thinking. The air was crisp and dense enough that the little Cessna would leap off the runway when the time came. Cooler mornings meant new students didn't have to deal with much turbulence during the period in their training when they were still trying to get past the notion that the wings might spontaneously fall off the airplane during flight.

Stainless-steel tumbler of coffee in one hand, flight bag in the other, Cantu went straight from his old Toyota Tundra to the apron behind the hangar where his red-and-white Cessna 172 squatted on the tarmac, dazzling anyone lucky enough to look at it in the bright morning sun. He wanted to perform a quick preflight inspection before Mrs. Szymanski arrived.

The cell phone in his hip pocket began to buzz, shattering the reverent solitude of the flight line. It wasn't his wife or Mrs. Szymanski, or any other number he recognized, so he ignored it and shoved the device back in his pocket to continue the preflight.

Good news could wait and bad news found you one way or another.

Mrs. Szymanski would, of course, do another complete check of the airplane as part of her training, but in the end, he was pilot in command. The aircraft was his responsibility, no matter who happened to be sitting in the left seat. Besides, it gave him a few minutes alone with the 2006 180-horsepower high-wing baby he loved only slightly less than his wife and daughter.

A whisper of wind from the north brought the earthy root beer smell of sassafras from the nearby woods. The day was bluebird clear with not a cloud to be seen. Pilots called it CAVU—ceiling and visibility unlimited. To the west, the Blue Ridge Mountains were clear and bright, without a hint of their usual haze. Once in the air, Cantu would have an unimpeded view toward Chesapeake Bay, some ninety miles to the east. This was the kind of superbly flyable day that made him yearn to get airborne as quickly as possible.

For him, the preflight of his little airplane was a labor of love, a way to connect, to let his bird speak to him, tell him about any complaints or issues.

He gave each wingtip a little tug to make sure they were still secure. The fact that only two bolts held each wing in place was always an interesting topic of discussion between instructor and any new student.

Working his way around the plane, Cantu checked the control surfaces, the tires, ran his hand along the propeller to feel for any nicks or cracks that might be invisible to the naked eye.

His cell phone rang again when he was under the wing draining a small amount of fuel into a clear vial to check for water. Annoyed, he fished the phone out of his pocket with his free hand. Same number as before. Important enough to keep bugging him, so he answered.

The glass vial of fuel slipped from his hand and smashed into the tarmac before the caller had spoken two sentences.

Cantu swayed in place. Sweat ran down his back and beaded on his forehead despite the cool air. This was all wrong. He couldn't have heard correctly.

"What did you say?"

The electronically distorted voice repeated the horrific instructions, oozing cruelty. "Georgie, if you want your wife and child to live, get in your airplane and taxi to the south end of the runway. Do it now."

Cantu leaned against the Cessna, attempting to steady himself. His voice was breathy, impotent. "Wait . . . What?"

The phone fell silent but then rang again a half-second later. This time, it was a video call. His wife knelt in their driveway, examining a flat tire on her Subaru. The footage was probably being shot from across the street. His little daughter stood beside her mommy, holding the fuzzy blue bath towel she dragged with her everywhere she went.

"Theresa!" he shouted. "What is happening?"

"She can't hear you, Georgie," the distorted voice said. "We took the liberty of putting a little bullet in her tire, you know, to slow her down. But hey, it's just as easy for us to put a bullet in her or the snotty kid." The voice darkened. "Now get your ass in the plane. I'm not gonna tell you again."

Cantu moved on autopilot, quickly but woodenly, scanning the surrounding buildings and trees for any sign of watchers as he climbed into the Cessna.

"Yes, Georgie," the voice said. "We have eyes on you, just like we can see your pretty little family."

"Please-"

"Do you have an earpiece?"

"I . . . an earpiece? . . . Yes. Earbuds."

"Put them in and keep me on the line. The wind is from the north, so I assume you'll take off on 32?"

"Um . . . yes. Runway 32. That's right," Cantu said. "I'll do what you want. Just . . . please . . . don't hurt them."

"It's not up to me, Georgie," the voice said. "You hold their salvation. Follow my instructions to the letter or you may as well be the one pulling the trigger. That's not what I want. But I won't lose sleep over it."

"No, no, no!" Cantu said. "I'll do whatever."

"Put in the earpiece. You speak only to me on the phone. No matter what happens, do not use the radio. Understand?"

"Yes. I understand."

"Then move your ass," the voice said. "Once airborne, assume a heading of northeast by east until I tell you otherwise."

"Roger, northeast by east," Cantu said mechanically, angry with himself for speaking so calmly to the man who had threatened to murder his wife and child.

Dispensing with any run-up, he increased throttle and let off the brakes, steering with shaky legs to the south end of the runway. The voice had instructed him not to talk over the radio, so he made do with a visual check out the windows. He could see no other traffic, so his takeoff roll was short. Instructor pilots were not easy to rattle, but Cantu felt certain he was about to throw up. He was airborne in an instant. The cockpit of his little airplane, the place he'd always felt at home, was now an uncertain hell.

He gained altitude quickly, glancing down to see his student, Mrs. Szymanski, shielding her eyes from the sun, no doubt wondering why her crazy instructor had taken off without her.

The monstrous voice spoke again, jarring Cantu out of his trance. "You're tempted to press the mic button on your yoke. That would be a fatal mistake. We would know. And then . . . Well, Georgie, I don't have to tell you what would happen to your kid."

Cantu banked quickly, leaving the undulating green of the Shenandoah behind him, heading northeast by east as instructed-directly toward Washington, D.C. His heart beat wildly, rattling the prison of his ribs.

The bright orange United States Coast Guard MH-65 Dolphin helicopter appeared out of nowhere. The surprise appearance surely on purpose to elicit fear and compliance from the pilot of the offending aircraft. The chopper cut a path in front of the Cessna, banking hard and coming around as if on a strafing run.

Sweat stung Cantu's eyes and glued his back to his seat. He'd known it was only a matter of time before they sent aircraft to intercept.

Heavily armed aircraft.

Air traffic control had been bending his ear on the radio without letting up for the past ten minutes. He ignored them, too terrified to answer but nauseated at the thought of what was going to happen when he did not. He pushed thoughts of exploding fireballs out of his mind and stared straight ahead, watching the ribbon of the Potomac River grow increasingly large off his nose. The warning lasers had hit him as he approached the SFRA-red and green flashes he knew were meant specifically for him.

Teaching would-be pilots in the skies around Washington, D.C., he spent a good deal of time discussing the Special Flight Rules Area that surrounded the capital with an invisible ring. He warned students of the nightmare of response aircraft and the real-world possibility of getting blown out of the sky.

Now he found himself living the scenario he'd warned so many others about.

Cantu knew exactly what the caller wanted as soon as he'd been given an azimuth. But he flew on without thinking, willing his hands to stop shaking on the yoke. Would he kill others to save his family? What wouldn't he do? He'd considered purposely crashing into the forest south of Manassas, but these monsters would probably kill his wife and daughter out of spite.

The Coast Guard Dolphin called him by tail number on the radio, direct, but much friendlier than the voice on his phone.

". . . United States Coast Guard helicopter off your left door. You have entered restricted airspace. Turn south immediately and follow me. Acknowledge by radio or rock your wings if you hear me."

An electronic marquee similar to a bank clock in the helicopter's side window displayed the same instructions in scrolling red LEDs.

Cantu clenched his teeth, resisting the overwhelming urge to answer. He chanced a peek at the Dolphin's pilot, who stared back at him buglike behind the dark visor of his helmet. The helicopter seemed close enough to reach out and touch-sleek, official, and fast. Cantu didn't see any weapons, but fully expected the chopper's door to slide open at any moment and reveal a machine-gunner.