

INTERNATIONAL AWARD-WINNING THRILLER AUTHOR

AVANTI CENTRAE

THE

LOST

POWER

VANOPS

CIBA GENRE
→ GRAND PRIZE ←
WINNER

"DON'T MISS THIS RIVETING DEBUT!"

—JAMES ROLLINS, the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Crucible*

Spain 1057: During a thunderous battle, the first King of Aragon wrestles Alexander the Great's priceless Egyptian weapon from the Moors, but finds it holds a terrifying and mysterious power.

Nearly a thousand years later, on a fog-shrouded Napa Valley morning, gunshots and the sound of breaking glass rip through the silence. Maddy Marshall, an app designer with special martial-arts abilities, and her twin brother, Will Argones, quickly run toward the sound. Horrified, they discover a sniper has cut down two members of their family.

Before the pool of blood on the living room floor is dry, their father sends the twins on a dangerous quest to recover Alexander's ancient weapon. Joined by a broad-shouldered friend who harbors a secret alliance with VanOps, an ultra-black covert agency, they soon discover the lethal sniper is from Russia.

They follow time-worn clues from a medieval Spanish castle to a lost warren under the streets of Jerusalem, racing to unlock the secrets that will lead them to an arcane power--before a hostile state seizes the power and cripples the United States.

To survive, they must go undercover and off-grid. No place is safe, a wrong move means death, and even a simple phone call is off limits. Because now, the sniper has his sights set on them.

Readers who love James Rollins, Dan Brown, Steve Berry, or Clive Cussler will devour the pages of this multi-award-winning novel.

Critical Praise for *VanOps: The Lost Power*

**Grand-Prize Winner in the
Chanticleer International Book Awards**

Honorable Mention at the Hollywood Book Festival

Bronze Medal Winner at the Wishing Shelf Book Awards

“Avanti Centrae’s *VanOps: The Lost Power* opens a tantalizing new series that combines historical mystery and cutting-edge science into a masterwork of international intrigue—with the promise of more to follow. Written with a dynamic, cinematic style and full of action and suspense, here’s a book that defines page-turner. Don’t miss this riveting debut!” ~ James Rollins, the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Crucible*

“A good ole’ fashioned rip-roaring adventure from start to finish. Enjoy the ride.” ~ Steve Berry, *New York Times* bestselling author

“*VanOps: The Lost Power* takes readers on a fast-paced roller coaster of a ride across the globe in a top-notch thriller with high-stakes and plenty of edge-of-seat action.” ~ Robin Burcell, NYT bestselling author of *The Last Good Place*, and (co-written with Clive Cussler) *The Oracle*

“A high-stakes, daring adventure charged with suspense and mystery!” ~ Ann Charles, *USA TODAY* bestselling author of the Deadwood Mystery Series

“The mystery of finding the weapon, the responsibility on the young woman’s shoulders, and the constant threat of being chased was a perfect combination that had me sitting on the edge of my seat and holding my breath. This is one of the best action/thrillers I have ever read and I can’t wait for the next novel in the series.” ~ Reader’s Favorite. Five/Five Stars

“Every family has its secrets, only some are deadlier than others.” ~ Chanticleer Reviews. Five/Five Stars

“The writing is superb. Easy to read and captivating. There is a mixture of mystery and action that keeps me turning pages. Readers who like Indiana Jones, or the books by James Patterson, Tom Clancy, and Vince Flynn, will enjoy Centrae’s first installment in her VanOps series.” ~ John Bernstein, Professional Reviewer

“*The Lost Power* was a very enjoyable read. It had some twists that I never saw coming!” ~ Jen Dulyanai, co-owner and instructor at Blue Lake Aikido, South Lake Tahoe

“I was really hooked by the pacing and intriguing story, and raced through it. I love the combination of science, history, and mysticism.” ~ Sara Stamey, Global Thriller Grand Prize winner for *The Ariadne Connection*

“I particularly enjoyed the exotic locations that the novel was set in, as well as how the author so cleverly blends techniques from ancient history with modern physics. This is a real page turner. Highly recommended.” ~ John Anthony Miller, author of *When Darkness Comes* and *In Satan’s Shadow*

ALSO BY
AVANTI CENTRAE

Solstice Shadows – VanOps #2
The Doomsday Medallion – VanOps #3

VANOPS: THE LOST POWER

AVANTI CENTRAE



GENRE: THRILLER/SUSPENSE

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VANOPS: THE LOST POWER

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For Mom

“I am part of a light, and it is the music. The Light fills my six senses: I see it, hear, feel, smell, touch, and think. Thinking of it means my sixth sense. Particles of Light are written note. A bolt of lightning can be an entire sonata. A thousand balls of lightning is a concert...

~ Nikola Tesla

Ripped from recent headlines:

“The US Air Force has hit Iraqi TV with an experimental electromagnetic pulse device called the ‘E-Bomb’ in an attempt to knock it off the air and shut down Saddam Hussein’s propaganda machine. Iraqi satellite TV, which broadcasts 24 hours a day outside Iraq, went off the air around 4:30 a.m. local time.”

~ CBS News, March 25, 2003

“SOME METEORITES CONTAIN SUPERCONDUCTING BITS. FIND ENERGIZES SEARCH FOR EXOTIC MATERIALS THAT CONDUCT ELECTRICITY SANS RESISTANCE.”

~ Science News, March 7, 2018

CHAPTER 1

Napa Valley, California, June 25, 8:56 a.m., Present Day:

Through the crosshairs of his long-barreled sweetheart, Ivan scanned the wood-casement window of the vineyard's stone-walled residence, and waited for his intended target to walk into view. His movements were slow and meticulous.

Lying in the loft of an old barn, he calculated range, altitude, temperature, barometric pressure, wind speed, and humidity. His skin was irritated by the coarse hay that surrounded him, but he ignored the sensation and focused on his calculations. Click. He made a minor adjustment on his rifle to account for the drop of the round due to air density. And another for windage.

Although misty rivers of fog swirled into gray whirlpools around the winery, the computer-enhanced scope of his Springfield EBR allowed him to visually lock onto the home's large bank of windows. Human movement flickered behind the glass.

He didn't want to pull the trigger. Nevertheless, Ivan waited for the perfect moment, the perfect shot.

CHAPTER 2

8:57 a.m.:

As she headed toward her father's vineyard, Maddy drove as fast as she dared down a familiar tree-lined Napa country lane. Today, she didn't recognize the road. It looked eerie and unnatural. The area was draped in sheets of fog from yesterday's unseasonable rain, and the silver half-light gave the trees an ethereal patina.

"Sensei, would you kill someone if you had to?" AJ asked.

Surprised, Maddy frowned. "I'm not a sensei yet, remember?" She paused for a moment before she replied to his query. "Where did that question come from?"

"We were talking about it in the locker room at the *dojo* after class. We know *aikido* is about non-violence, but what if you don't have a choice?" His voice dropped to a dramatic whisper. "What if it was kill or be killed?"

Maddy shook her head. The things children thought about. "I would always look for another way."

She glanced over at AJ, glad she'd brought him along today. His ears stuck out and his face was dotted with freckles. She found him adorable.

"Okay. Can martial arts masters light paper on fire with just their hands?"

Maddy halted the car at a stop sign and peered through the swirling, patchy fog, trying to get her bearings while she figured out how to answer this question. The mist distorted everything. She turned right.

Without warning, a smothering mass of black, rustling feathers flew toward the car. She flinched in her seat and slammed on the car brakes. Her heart pounded. She stopped breathing and scanned the road ahead of her. After a long moment, she realized with

chagrin that she had just scared a bunch of ugly, red-faced black turkey vultures into flight by turning onto a new road after a stop sign.

She took a deep breath. It wasn't like her to be so jumpy. She was, after all, *shodan*, a first-*dan* black belt. But the sudden movement of wings, obscured through the morning's foggy haze, had pulled her off balance. Maddy gave the car some gas and it inched forward down the road.

Maddy looked over at AJ. "Are you okay?"

AJ laughed. "I'm okay. But that scared you!"

"Did not!" Maddy replied, twisting her ponytail.

"Did too—I saw you jump! And you smashed on the brakes."

Maddy grinned for a moment at the childish banter and AJ's creative language. It could be a happy day, in spite of everything. She loved AJ, she and Vincent had even talked about adopting him. Vincent, her *former* fiancé. Of course, that was before the breakup. Since then, she'd been feeling brittle, and the nightmare last night didn't help. The dream was gut-wrenching. Although the sensation had faded in the dim light of morning, much of it lingered like a bad relationship. That dream was probably why she was on edge and had jumped at the thrashing wings.

She looked at the dash clock—only a few minutes late. Heart still beating faster than normal, she turned down the long shadowy driveway of the once proud vineyard.

CHAPTER 3

9:02 a.m.:

Up in the old barn, Ivan was close to the target, only seventy meters from the glass curtain that separated him from his quarry. Although the misty morning limited his visibility, he felt confident in his ability to execute the task Baron Sokolov had assigned to him.

Ivan recalled much longer-range kills. Two months ago, from a nearby skyscraper, he'd eliminated a traitorous spy during a French soccer match, piercing the man's forehead as directed. His record was just under two thousand meters, one hundred fifty meters shy of the longest recorded sniper kill in history. But he reminded himself to stay vigilant and cautious, traits that had earned him medals as one of Russia's most accurate shooters.

Being watchful was his nature. It was the silver lining of his disorder, congenital analgesia, which made him insensitive to pain. *My gift from Mother*, he thought.

Ivan wondered where on his body he would mark this job. His left arm was covered in sets of hash marks—scars, where he had marked his kills. He started scarring himself in school to impress the other children, and in time it had become a blood ritual after a task to remind himself to be careful, that he too could die. After this morning, it would be time to add another scar. At one hundred and fifty-five confirmed kills, he had scars on both thighs, both arms, and was running out of room for the marks.

Soon he would catch up to the kills his grandmother had recorded during World War II. After Germany had invaded, she had volunteered for the military and had one hundred and seventy-nine confirmed kills to her credit. Impressive. He remembered how she had taught him to shoot when he was young. She had a fondness for killing rabbits and he could still picture their crimson blood sprayed

on the bright Siberian snow. However, patience was her favorite lesson and it had served him well.

A puff of wind tugged at a windmill in the distance, and the melancholy creak of metal scratching metal disturbed the morning silence. He held his breath and listened for any sound to indicate he'd been discovered. There was nothing further, only an unnatural, muted quiet.

Focused on his breathing and the window, he continued to wait for a clean shot.

He was tired of killing, but he had to do his job. This last job. Or his son would die.

CHAPTER 4

9:05 a.m.:

Maddy's car hit a pothole on the vineyard's long gravel driveway. It annoyed her that Dad hadn't said what was so urgent, and she'd been too distracted with the breakup to call him back.

As she drew closer to the house, she was irritated to see Will was playing fog-fetch with the dog in the front yard. *What is he doing here? Did Dad call all the siblings? Bella, too?* Will waved, walked toward an obnoxious sky-blue convertible that must have been a rental, and opened the trunk.

Maddy parked by Will's car, near the house. She wished Dad would get the place painted. It was overdue and made the house look dilapidated in the gloom. Barking, her dad's middle-aged golden retriever ran up to the car.

"A dog! Can I play with the dog?" AJ asked, true excitement in his voice.

"Sure, just don't head too far into the vineyard," Maddy replied. "His name is Squirrel."

AJ bounded from the car and ran off, chasing the dog through the murky, fog-bound yard.

Will closed the trunk of the Mustang, moved around to the side of the car, and watched AJ and the dog playing. Dressed in his usual style, he wore tan cargo shorts, leather sandals, and a dark-blue Ralph Lauren polo shirt. Ever prepared for disaster, he had a small flashlight hanging from the front of his shorts, and she figured he had a knife in his pocket. He was holding two small travel bags and managed to cradle a book in his hand. Without a doubt, a geeky physics book.

Maddy had avoided prolonged contact with Will since their senior year in high school when he had pulled that awful prank. She

had turned her back on him then, and her face flushed with the memory. As she opened her car door, she stood and swung her hair out of her face. Then she shut the door and walked over to him. It was so foggy and quiet, she didn't even hear songbirds.

Maddy tried to keep the annoyance out of her voice. "Hello, Will."

After they'd spent time apart, she was always surprised at the strength of their emotional bond. She couldn't believe he was happy to see her—he had no shame! She had felt some connection to her boyfriends, Vincent included—*I hate you right now, Vincent*—and sometimes to her students at the dojo. But the connection was always strongest with Will, her twin, like it or not. He felt content now. She had almost missed his charm.

Will flashed his irksome, boyish, lopsided grin. "Hey, Maddy, it's good to see you! Did you have a safe drive?"

To meet her, he walked around toward the front of the car. She noted his dark, curly hair looked ruffled and a little shorter than the last time she'd seen him. His green eyes looked pinched, as if he were worried about something.

Dad sometimes teased that they all had Spanish olives for eyes, but she enjoyed sharing the feature. She just wished she'd been blessed with Will's long eyelashes, instead of having to create them every day with mascara.

Maddy studied Will's face. She noticed that the scar on his chin was almost hidden by a fashionable new beard that he'd grown since she'd seen him last year at Christmas dinner. The scar was always a painful reminder of the childhood accident that killed their mother.

As he put down the bags, he scratched the beard, casually leaned back against the hood of the Mustang, and crossed his long, lanky legs.

She knew protocol called for a hug, and considered it. Rejecting the idea, she also ignored his worrywart question about the safe drive. "Did you leave Maria in Brazil?"

Maddy could tell from his eyes that Will didn't understand her cold shoulder, and she didn't care. He had never made amends for that thoughtless stunt back in high school and she wasn't going to let him off the hook.

"No, I brought her with me," he replied.

Remembering her nightmare, Maddy's gut clenched. She tried to ignore it.

"We've both been working too hard."

Instead, she lashed out, her voice rising more than she intended. "Was that wise? Bringing her? Do you even know what Dad wants?"

Will took a deep breath. "Gee, Sis, simmer down. I thought I was the worrier of the family." He met her gaze. "Maria was up for a change of scenery so we planned a romantic wine-country vacation. You know, the train, mud baths, that sort of thing? We might even stop by Safari West. Besides, you brought company." He nodded toward AJ. "Who's the little guy?"

"His name is AJ. He's a foster kid from the dojo and it's his birthday." She watched AJ and the dog play a spontaneous game of tag. "Is that all Dad wants with us? A vacation? He sounded concerned on the message he left me. And didn't mention you'd be here, or Bella. Is she coming? He didn't even say why he wanted me to come, which just seems odd. Did you talk with him?"

"Bella is on her way, but no, we didn't talk before I came up. I hope nothing is wrong. We just got here and haven't had a chance to visit much, but he did mention he had some disconcerting news." He paused. "You feel upset. What are you not telling me? What's the big deal?"

On days like today, Maddy hated that the emotional bond between them worked both ways. She didn't feel like telling him anything, especially about the dream. Irritated, she looked around for a way out of the conversation but didn't see one. The sun was hidden, the vineyard foggy and subdued, like it was holding its breath.

She clenched her teeth and took a deep breath of her own. "I had a dream last night."

Now his tone sharpened a notch. "What kind of dream?"

"A bad one. Maria was in it. I woke up early and it's stuck with me since."

"Tell me," he demanded.

"I don't know...there was blood on her face."

She remembered another dream she had when they were six. The night before their mom died. She knew by the look on his face that he was remembering that dream, too.

"Blood on Maria's face—" He frowned, thinking, questioning.

“Yes, it was horrible. Splattered like a Pollock painting. I don’t remember much else. But the feeling is still with me.” Her mood picked up a little, having gotten it off her chest. “It’s probably nothing. I just wish you hadn’t brought her.”

“Interesting,” he said. “You haven’t had one of those dreams in a while, have you? A real one?”

“No,” she said. “It’s been a few years and the last was about a boyfriend cheating on me. The dream ended that relationship.”

Will put his hands on his hips. “How is Vincent?”

She grimaced.

Irritated, Maddy turned and headed up the sidewalk toward the house. Will grabbed the bags and his book, and followed her, his feet padding on the concrete.

As they walked, she remembered the lush landscaping that had been here once. It had provided a jumbled, colorful contrast to the acres and acres of straight green vines in the fields. Her father’s landscapers, back when he could afford them, had done well in this entry area. She couldn’t see it, but she inhaled the light scent of gardenia, and she recognized remnants of some sort of native grass, night-blooming jasmine, pansies, and roses. Vincent had brought her roses only three weeks ago. *Bastard.*

“I see,” Will said. “So...maybe this dream was a reaction to whatever is going on there?”

“Maybe—” she said. “I hope so.” Then she added, “Let’s go see what Dad wants.”

CHAPTER 5

9:15 a.m.:

Ivan tugged on the two-stage trigger, testing it. He was used to his Soviet bolt-action SV-98, but in the interest of time and ease of entry into the country, he had purchased a black-market rifle in the States. He was pleased with his choice, and glad it had come with a suppressor. The Enhanced Battle Rifle was decent—he tested it out yesterday in an isolated vineyard he found for the purpose. The rifle was a little heavy, but he liked the trigger-shoe modification the prior owner had done, as it gave the pull a more natural feel.

He drew his attention back to the wood-casement window and twice glimpsed the oblivious inhabitant, dancing his way to death. A minute ago, the sound of car tires on gravel had come to him through the fog, so his partner, on lookout, should be reporting in.

On cue, a voice in his head broke the morning stillness, “Green Prius has parked at the front of the house.” The sniper appreciated that he could hear his partner’s Russian voice clearly through the high-tech device, as he was old enough to remember missions without such advanced technology.

“Driver?” he subvocalized the question, also in Russian, into the tiny molar microphone that had been custom formed to fit his teeth.

“She’s female, young, maybe thirty. Slim, with an olive complexion. Has sexy long, dark hair in a ponytail, and is tall. Pretty tall for a woman. Rape-bait if you ask me. Dressed in jeans and a snug purple T-shirt,” his partner said.

On this job, his partner was here as much to keep an eye on him as to help, Ivan knew. The man’s simple mind and cruel nature were evident every time they worked together. The idiot had caused them to run late this morning. This part of the job should have been over an hour ago. Now it was getting complicated.

“That’s not what we’re here for,” Ivan hissed.

“Maybe. If so, you need to take your shot.” A few beats later his partner continued, “She was talking to the tall man next to the blue sports car. They look alike. Now they’re headed to the front door.”

There was a long pause. The sniper adjusted his hold on the rifle, concentrating. He’d read the dossiers on Maddy Marshall and her twin brother, Will Argones. Argones was an engineer, no real threat. But the Marshall woman. A world-class athlete and national ski champion who had been a favorite for Olympic gold, she’d used her lightning-fast reflexes to become a warrior in an unusual martial art. And she was gifted with a keen intelligence. A dangerous combination. In another time and place, he’d have been interested in her as a mate.

He swore. Based on his orders, their arrival meant he had run out of time.

A low whistle pierced his ear.

“Ivan, she’s got long legs. You know I like long legs, right? Why don’t we stick around and have some fun?”

“You’re a pig and the baron was clear in our instructions,” the sniper replied, with heat in his tone.

“You’re a bore. Oh, she had a kid with her in the car.”

“A kid? What kid?” The dossier didn’t mention a child! That wasn’t part of the deal. *I may go down in flames if the baron makes me shoot a kid. This target is one thing but—*

“How do I know what kid? He looks like he’s eight or nine. Red hair, big ears. He’s playing with the dog in the vineyard.”

Ivan hoped the kid and dog were off in a different direction. At home, Ivan’s son might be playing with his own dog. But that thought was dangerous. “Just make sure they don’t come this way.”

His attention back on the window, Ivan finally got a complete look at one of the other inhabitants: a short, dark-skinned woman. She wore a pale pink blouse above a blue skirt and Ivan prayed she would get out of the way. He didn’t like killing women. However, he knew that, whether he liked it or not, the latter part of the baron’s plan already called for its share of female bloodshed.

The older man, near a black sofa, came into Ivan’s sights for a brief moment. It appeared that he and the younger woman were moving into the room with all the windows. Ivan knew it was time.

Ivan was glad now they’d chosen a fast getaway car. “I must focus—go get the car ready.”

The older man came completely into view. He was tall, clean-shaven, tan-skinned, with owlsh glasses. His receding black hair was streaked with gray, and he wore slacks and a white button-down shirt. *Yes, finally.*

But the woman was directly behind the target! *Move*, he willed to her. *Please.*

This was the best shot he had. Time had run out! He had no choice but to urge her to move at the last minute.

He took a slow, steady breath and tugged again on the two-stage trigger. Only this time, it wasn't a test.