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Tom Clancy's



NET FORCE™

Created by Tom Clancy and Steve Pieczenik

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TOM CLANCY'S NET FORCE™

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I

***Tuesday, September 7th, 2010, 11:24 p.m.
Washington, D.C.***

“Okay, Commander,” Boyle said. “We’re clear.”

Steve Day stepped out into the muggy autumn night from the cooler air-conditioned restaurant, surrounded still by the wonderful odors of exquisite Italian cooking. Already on the sidewalk, Boyle, Day’s chief bodyguard, spoke into his link. The limo was there, but Boyle was a very careful young man, one of the FBI’s finest. Only after he spoke did the limo’s electrically locked rear door click open. The whole time, Boyle looked everywhere but at Day.

Day nodded at the driver, the new guy. Larry? Lou? Something like that. As he slid across the cloned-leather seat, he was feeling pretty good. Nothing like a seven-course meal and three kinds of excellent wine to put a man in a good mood. Umberto’s was new, but it was at least a four-star eatery—or would be as soon as somebody got around to ranking it, though Day hoped that wouldn’t be anytime soon. It never failed. As soon as he found a new out-of-the-way place with decent food, it was quickly “dis-

covered'' and reservations were impossible to get.

True, he was the Commander of the recently established Net Force, still the flavor of the month in Washington power circles, but that didn't cut much ice when rich Senators or even richer foreign diplomats were in line ahead of you. Even restaurant owners in this town knew which backsides to kiss first, and top of the list sure wasn't a political appointee as far down the food chain as Day was. For now, anyway.

Still, the meal had been great: al dente pasta and artery-clogging sauce and shrimp, and salad and palate-cleansing ices. Day was both pleasantly full and slightly tipsy. Good thing he didn't have to drive.

His virgil cheeped at him.

Boyle slid in next to Day, closed the door, then tapped on the bullet-proof Lexan partition with one knuckle.

The driver started the car as Day unclipped the virgil from his belt and looked at it.

His Virtual Global Interface Link—virgil for short—had a flashing telephone icon in the upper right corner of the small LCD screen. He touched the icon and a number blinked onto the screen. Marilyn, calling from home. He looked at the timesig. Just after eleven. She must have gotten back from her DAR meeting early. Those gab sessions usually ran past midnight. He grinned, tapped the phone number twice and waited for the connection.

Not much bigger than a pack of cigarettes—he'd given *those* up twenty years ago, but he hadn't forgotten how big a pack was—the virgil was a terrific toy. It was a computer, a GPS unit, phone, clock, radio, TV, modem, credit card, camera, scanner and even a little weavewire fax, all in one. The GPS could tell you where you were anywhere on the planet—and because he was a ranking FBI officer, it didn't have the fudge-factor that commercial civilian units came with, so it was accurate to within five meters. You could

link to anybody with a phone or computer, via a scrambled hyperdigital channel so dense they called it a pipe and that would take an expert codebreaker a month of Sundays to tap into. This particular unit would, with the proper code, allow Day to access the FBI and Net Force mainframe DNAs, with their vast information stores. Had he been so inclined, Day could have grabbed a pinch of the powdered sugar that came on the cheesecake he'd had for dessert, dusted a fingerprint left on a plate by his waiter and had it checked, ID'd, and a full history on the man back to him before he'd finished eating.

It was great living here in the future, a mere decade after the turn of the century. If 2010 had such wonders, what might it look like in another twenty or thirty years? He was looking forward to finding out, and with advances in medicine, he could pretty much expect to do so.

The virgil's speaker said, "Hi, Steve."

"Hi, Marilyn. What's up?"

"Nothing much. We got done early. I was just wondering if you might want a late supper."

He grinned at the virgil. He didn't have his camera on, so she couldn't see the smile. "I just left Umberto's," he said. "I think I'll pass on eating for the next couple of weeks."

She laughed. "I understand. You coming home?"

"On the way."

He had a condo in the city, but most nights he tried to get across the river and to the house. The kids were grown, but Marilyn and the dog still liked to see him now and again.

He tapped the virgil and re-clipped it to his belt, which needed a little attention. He loosened the buckle a couple of holes and slid the Galco paddle holster with his SIG .40 around toward the front a little so it wouldn't dig into his right hip. He could have carried one of the new-model wire-

less KTs—kick-tasers—that were supposed to be better than a gun, but he didn't really trust them. Yes, he was a political appointee for the current job, but he'd been in the field a long time to earn the spot. He trusted his old-fashioned pistol.

Moving the gun helped. While he was at it, he undid the Velcro on his Kevlar vest's side panels and re-tabbed them a little looser, too.

Next to him, Boyle fought to keep his grin under control.

Day shook his head. "Easy for you to laugh. You're what—thirty? Still bulking up at the gym three or four times a week, right? Us fat old desk jockeys don't have time to stay in shape."

Not that he was *that* much out of shape. Five-eight, maybe 190? He could drop a few pounds, but hey, he was fifty-two last June and he was entitled to carry a little extra baggage. He'd earned it.

They were on the narrow street behind the new projects, the shortcut toward the expressway. It was a dark and dreary part of town, with streetlights broken out and dead, stripped cars lining the road. Another of the instant slums, going down fast even before the original paint had dried. In his opinion, the current welfare philosophy needed major work; of course, it always had. Though things were getting better, the future still had a way to go to pick up all of its passengers. There were streets in D.C. he wouldn't walk alone after dark; gun, vest, and virgil notwithstanding. An armored limo made him feel a little more secure—

There came a terrific bang, a flash that strobed the limo's interior a sudden bright orange. The car rocked up on the driver's side, hung for what seemed like forever on two wheels, then fell back and hit the street hard.

"What the hell?"

Boyle already had his pistol out as the limo fishtailed, slewed and slammed into a streetlight post. The post was

fiberglass. It snapped off at bumper level and fell on the limo, spraying shattered glass in a tinkly rain upon the car's trunk.

Day saw a bulky man in black run toward the car from out of the sticky night. The man wore a watch cap pulled low but not covering his face. He had blond hair, a scar running through his right eyebrow. He was smiling.

Day thought he caught a flash of movement at the rear of the limo, but when he looked, he didn't see anything.

"Go!" Boyle yelled. "Go, go!"

The driver tried. The engine roared, the wheels screeched, but the car didn't move. The stench of burning rubber filled the car.

Day thumbed the emergency scramble button on the virgil, and was already reaching for his own pistol when the man in black reached the limo and slapped something on the door. Whatever it was thunked metallically. The man turned and sprinted away, back into the darkness—

"Out!" Boyle screamed. "He's stuck a limpet on the door! Out!"

Day grabbed the door handle on the driver's side, jerked it up, dove out and hit the ground in a sloppy shoulder roll.

There came the repetitive bark of a submachine gun, followed by the *spang! spang! spang!* of jacketed teeth chewing at the wounded limo.

Day rolled again, looking for cover. Nothing. Nowhere to hide!

He glanced back at the car. Saw and felt time become mired in heaviness. Boyle exited the car, gun working, tongues of orange fire stabbing into the dark, but it was like a slow-motion scene in a movie.

Boyle jerked as the small-arms fire beat at him, slammed into his torso.

In a small corner of his mind, Day knew that most submachine guns used pistol ammunition and that the vests he

and Boyle both wore would stop any handgun round. As long as they didn't—

—blood and brain matter sprayed from the side of Boyle's temple as a bullet exited there—

—as long as they didn't think to shoot for the head!

Damn, damn! What was going on? Who were these people?

In the limo, the driver kept trying to pull away, the roar of the engine continuing. Day could smell the exhaust, the burned tires—he could smell his own fear, too, sharp, sour, overwhelming.

The mine attached to the rear door of the limo went off—*blam!*

All the glass in the limo blew out. It sleeted in all directions—some of it hit Day, but he was only dimly aware of it touching him.

The car's roof peeled up a little in the back, leaving a fist-sized gap. Smoke, bitter and acrid, washed over him in a hot wave.

The driver hung partway out of his window, boneless.

Dead. The driver and Boyle were both dead. Help would be coming, but he couldn't wait for it—if he did, he would be dead, too.

Day came up, took two or three quick steps, jinked right for two more steps, then cut left. Broken-field, came back to him from football in high school thirty-five years ago.

Gunfire tried to catch him, but failed to connect solidly. A bullet tugged at his jacket, punched through under his left arm. He felt a sense of outrage. The goddamned jacket was Hong Kong silk, it had cost him six hundred dollars!

Another round smashed into his chest, right over the heart. He'd never worn the titanium trauma plate, had just used a trifold of Kevlar stuffed down in the trauma pocket over the heart like a lot of agents did, and the impact hurt

like a bastard! Like he'd been hit with a hammer, right on the sternum! Damn!

But it didn't matter. He was up, he was moving—

A black figure appeared in front of him, waving a flashing Uzi. Even in the night and murk of his fear, Day saw the man wore bulky combat armor under his black jacket. Day had been taught to shoot to the center of mass first, but that wouldn't do now, no, no, the SIG .40 wouldn't hurt the attacker that way any more than the Uzi's 9mm's were hurting *him*!

Still running, Day lifted the SIG, lined the glowing tritium dot of the front sight on the man's nose. Day's vision tunneled—all he could see was the face. The green night-sight dot bounced around, but he squeezed off three shots as fast as he could pull the trigger.

The armored attacker dropped as if his legs had vanished.

All right! All right! He had taken one of them out, he had created a hole, it was just like in football when he'd been the quarterback so long ago.

Now, go through the hole, fast, head for the goal line!

He caught motion peripherally, glanced to his left, and saw another man, also in black. The man held a pistol in two hands. He was as still as a painting. He looked as if he were at the range, ready to practice.

Day felt his bowels clench. He wanted to run, shoot, defecate, all at the same instant. Whoever these guys were, they were professionals. This wasn't any street gang looking for somebody's wallet. This was a hit, an assassination, and they were good—

It was his final thought.

The bullet hit him between the eyes and took away everything else he might ever think.

In the backseat of the Volvo station wagon, Mikhayl Ruzhyó looked into the cargo compartment behind him at

the body of Nicholas Papirósa. The body lay on its side, covered with a blanket, and the smell of death seeped into the air despite the covering. Ruzhyó sighed, shook his head. Poor Nicholas. It had been hoped there would be no casualties—it was always hoped to be so—but the fat American had not been as old and slow as expected. They had underestimated him—an error. Of course, it had been Nicholas who had been responsible for the intelligence about the FBI Commander, so perhaps it was fitting that he was the only casualty. Still, Ruzhyó would miss him. They went back a long way, to the days in the Foreign Intelligence Service, the SRV. Fifteen years. A lifetime in this business.

Tomorrow would have been Nicholas's birthday; he would have been forty-two.

In the front seat, Winters, the American, drove, and Grigory Zmeyá rode in the passenger seat, mumbling to himself in Russian.

Their last names—even Winters—were not those bestowed upon them by their fathers. They were jokes. Ruzhyó meant "rifle." Nicholas had named himself "cigarette." Grigory called himself after the Russian word for "snake."

Ruzhyó sighed again. Done was done. Nicholas was dead, but so was the target. The loss was therefore acceptable.

"You doin' okay back there, hoss?" the American said.

"I am fine."

"Just checkin'."

The American had said he was from Texas, and either he was or his accent was a passable fake.

Ruzhyó looked down at the pistol on the seat next to him, the one with which he had killed the man who had killed Nicholas. It was a Beretta 9mm, an Italian weapon. It was a fine piece of machinery, well made, but it was also big, heavy, with too much recoil, too much noise, too much