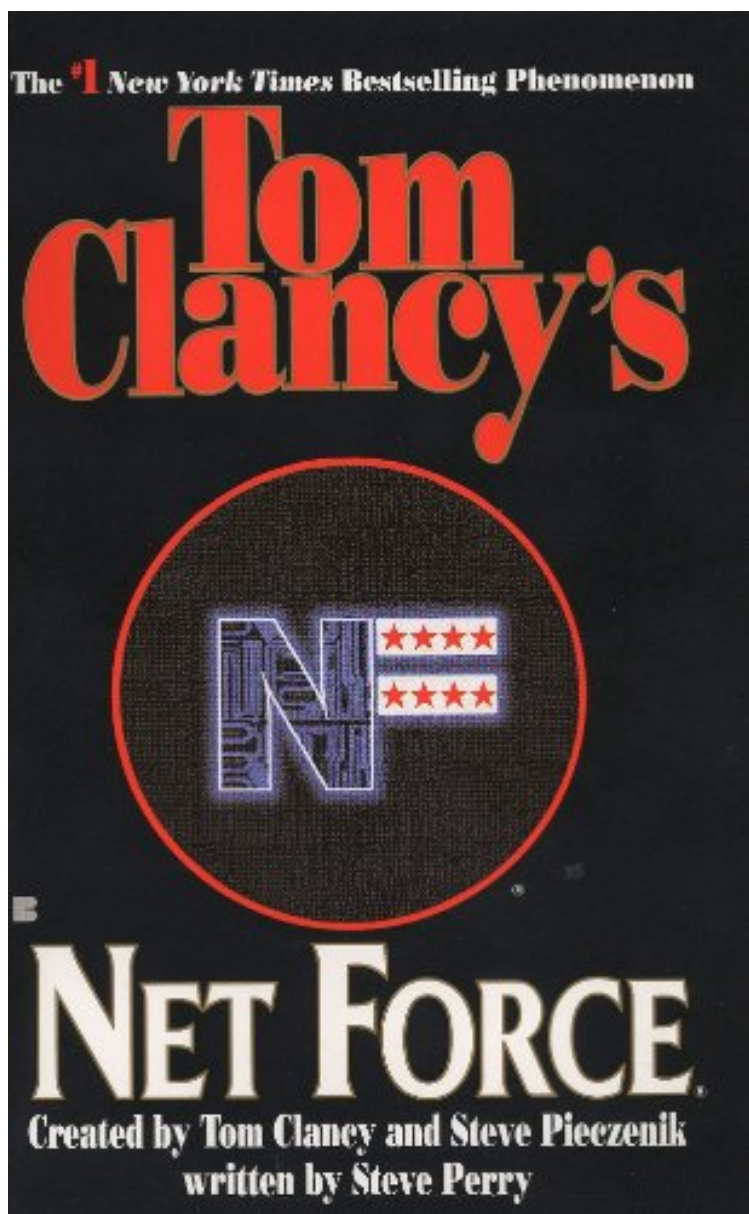


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Tom Clancy's Net Force



*Par Steve Perry, Tom Clancy, Steve Pieczenik
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Commander, Boyle said. Were 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, Days 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 discovered 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 beeped 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 shorthad 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 time sig. 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 shed 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 wireless 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 thumped metallically. The man turned and sprinted away, back into the darkness. Ou! 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 sub-machine guns used pistol ammunition and that the vests he and Boyle both wore would stop any handgun round. As long as they didn't bleed 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. Hed 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 hed been hit with a hammer, right on the sternum! Damn!But it didnt matter. He was up, he was movingA 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 wouldnt do now, no, no, the SIG .40 wouldnt hurt the attacker that way any more than the Uzis 9mms were hurting him!Still running, Day lifted the SIG, lined the glowing tritium dot of the front sight on the mans nose. Days vision tunneledall 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 hed 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 wasnt any street gang looking for somebodys wallet. This was a hit, an assassination, and they were goodIt 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 Ruzhy looked into the cargo compartment behind him at the body of Nicholas Papirsa. The body lay on its side, covered with a blanket, and the smell of death seeped into the air despite the covering. Ruzhy sighed, shook his head. Poor Nicholas. It had been hoped there would be no casualtiesit was always hoped to be sobut the fat American had not been as old and slow as expected. They had underestimated himan 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, Ruzhy 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 Nicholass birthday; he would have been forty-two.In the front seat, Winters, the American, drove, and Grigory Zmey rode in the passenger seat, mumbling to himself in Russian.Their last nameseven Winterswere not those bestowed upon them by their fathers. They were jokes. Ruzhy meant rifle. Nicholas had named himself cigarette. Grigory called himself after the Russian word for snake.Ruzhy 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.Ruzhy 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 bullet for Ruzhys taste. When he had been spetsnaz and involved in mokrie delawet affairshe had carried a little PSM, a 5.45mm pistol. The round it fired had been perhaps half as large as those in the Italian gun, and the weapon itself was much smaller than this piece. True, hed had the armorer tune it for him; but still, it had always been sufficient to do the job. It had never let him down. He would have preferred that weapon to this one, but of course, that would not do. This had to look as if the killing was by someone inside this country, and a Russian assassins weapon would ring enough alarms to raise the dead man. The Americans were not altogether stupid in these matters.He frowned at the Beretta. The Americans had this obsession with size; to them, bigger was always better. Their policemen would sometimes empty handguns containing eighteen or twenty high-powered and large-caliber rounds at their criminals, missing each time, what they called spray-and-pray. They did not seem to understand that a single shot from a small-caliber weapon in the hands of an expert was much more effective than a magazine full of elephant-killing bullets in the hands of an untrained idiotas many of the American policemen seemed to be. The Jews knew this. The Israeli Mossad still routinely carried .22s, weapons that fired the smallest commercially available rounds. And everybody knew Mossad was not to be taken lightly.But at least the FBI man had died well. He had taken one of them with him and that had been unexpected. He had hit Nicholas three times in the head. Once might have been an accident; thrice, certainly by intent. He had seen the body armor, known what it was, shot for the head. Had he been a bit faster, he might have gotten clear of the initial attack.In the front seat, the Snake muttered something, loud enough for Ruzhy to hear. He gritted his teeth. Ruzhy did not like Grigory the Snake. The man had been in the army in 1995, one of the units that had stomped into Ruzhys homeland of Chechnya to kill and rape. Yes, yes, Grigory had been a soldier, just following his orders, and yes, this mission was more important in the long run than any grudges Ruzhy might have against the Snake,

so he would endure the man. But perhaps one of these days, the Snake would speak of his beautiful Medal for Action in Chechnya once too often, and if that day came near enough to the end of the mission so he would not be vital, Grigory Zmey would go to join his ancestors. And Ruzhy would smile while he throttled the stupid oaf. Not today, however. There was still much to be done, bridges to be crossed, objectives to be achieved, and the Snake was still necessary. Which was lucky for him. Alexander Michaels was only half asleep when the small monitor on the nightstand next to his bed lit. He felt the pressure of the light against his closed lids, and rolled toward the source and opened his eyes. The screens blue Net Force background came up and the computers vox said, Alex? We have a priority-one com. Michaels blinked, and frowned at the timesig on the monitors upper right corner. Just past midnight. He wasn't awake. What? Alex? We have a priority-one com. The computers voice was throaty, sexy, feminine. No matter what it said, it always sounded as if it were asking you to go to bed with it. The personality module, including the vox program, had been programmed by Jay Gridley, and the voice he'd chosen for it was, Michaels knew, a joke. Jay was a great tech, but a better cook than he was a comedian, and while Michaels found the vox irritating, damned if he would give the kid the satisfaction of asking him to change it. The Deputy Commander of Net Force rubbed at his face, combed his short hair back with his fingers, and sat up. The small motion-sensitive cam mounted on the top of the monitor tracked him. The unit was programmed to send visuals unless he told it otherwise. All right, I'm up. Connect com. The vox-activated system obeyed his command. The screen flowered, and the somewhat-harried face of Assistant Deputy Commander Antonella Fiorella appeared. She looked more alert than he felt, but then she had the graveyard watch this week, so she was supposed to be alert. Sorry to wake you, Alex. No problem, Toni. What's up? She wouldn't be calling him if it wasn't vital. Somebody just assassinated Commander Day. What!? His virgil sent out an alert. D.C. PD rolled on it. Time anybody got there, Day, his bodyguard Boyle and the limo driver, Louis Harvey, were all dead. Bombs and submachine guns, looks like. Maybe twenty minutes ago. Michaels said a word he seldom used in mixed company. Yeah, Toni said. And the horse it rode in on, too. I'm on my way. Virgil's got the address. A short pause. Alex? Don't forget the assassination protocols. She didn't need to remind him of that, but he nodded. In the event of an attack on a senior federal official, all members of that unit had to assume it might not be the only attack planned. I copy that. Discom. His assistant's image vanished, leaving the Net Force blue screen.

He slid off the bed and started pulling on his clothes. Steve Day was dead? Damn. Damn. 2 Wednesday, September 8th, 12:47 a.m. Washington, D.C. Red and blue lights from the D.C. police patrol cars strobed the street with primary carnival colors, an effect appropriate to the circus of activity now going on. It was pushing one in the morning, but there were dozens of people lining the road, held back by police officers and bright plastic crimescene tape. More curious onlookers peered down from nearby buildings. There was something to see, too, what with the blasted limo, the litter of shell casings, the three bodies. It was a bad neighborhood to die in, Toni Fiorella thought. But then, when you got right down to it, any neighborhood was a bad one to die in when death came from a hard and sudden sleet of submachine-gun fire. Agent Fiorella? Toni blinked away her thoughts on mortality and looked at the police captain, who had, judging by the size and shape of his sleep-wrinkles, been roused from his bed. He was an easy fifty, nearly bald, and certainly, at this moment, a most unhappy man. Dead federal agents in your yard, on your watch, were bad things to wake up to. Real bad. Yes? My men have come back from their initial canvass. Toni nodded. Let me guess. Nobody saw anything. You should go into law enforcement, the captain said. His voice was sour. You have an eye for detail. Somebody in this crowd must have outstanding warrants for something, Toni said. She waved one arm in accusatory benediction. From Publishers Weekly Clancy's newest collaboration takes us to

2010, when the virtual Web looks like a stock-car race and gadgets and gizmos abound. Net Force, a computer security agency created by Congress, patrols the technological etherworld and those who hook into it. When the agency's director is assassinated, Deputy Director Alex Michaels suddenly finds himself in command. Diverted by the Chechen mastermind in Russia, Michaels and his forces are soon battling the New Mafia and an Irish assassin named "The Selkie." Out in the field, the Special Forces carry advanced armor and weapons systems while joshing around in cartoonlike jargon. The computer jocks drive their virtual Vipers to investigate "roadblocks" and "pileups." The equipment is interesting, but the action doesn't bear up under the ponderous exposition and flatter-than-a-floppy-disk characters. (Feb.) FYI: Net Force is soon to be an ABC mini-series. Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc.