

Tom Clancy's
NET
FORCE™

HIDDEN AGENDAS

Created by
Tom Clancy and Steve Pieczenik



BERKLEY BOOKS, NEW YORK

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TOM CLANCY'S NET FORCE™: HIDDEN AGENDAS

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“The greatest dangers to liberty lurk in insidious encroachment by men of zeal, well-meaning but without understanding.”
—Louis Brandeis

“Nothing is secret that shall not be made manifest; neither any thing hid, that shall not be known and come abroad. ”
-Luke, 8:17

PART ONE

A Little Knowledge

PROLOGUE

Wednesday, December 15th, 2010, 2:44 a.m. Baton Rouge, Louisiana

A cold and damp winter wind played around the windows of the building, a breeze not strong enough to rattle the still-pristine thermopane glass, but potent enough to tweak an occasional whistle from a art-deco protrusion, whistles that now and then came low enough to sound almost like moans.

Alone inside, the night watchman—*watchwoman* in this case—pored over the laptop on the guard station's desk, adding a few personal notes to the text of Professor Jenkins's long and incredibly boring lecture on the strata of rock formations in southern New Zealand. The lecture was from her auditorium-sized class Introduction to Geology, her final science requirement, and she'd put it off as long as she could, but graduation was fast approaching and there was no way around it. She would have taken Astronomy, supposedly a walk, but the classes had been filled before she'd ever logged on to registration. Too bad. Stars were much more interesting than rocks.

Kathryn Brant sighed, leaned back in the creaky chair, and rubbed at her eyes. Geology. Bleh.

She leaned toward the desk again and got another nail-wrenched-from-wet-wood noise. Lorn Brand-new, and already the chair squeaked as if it had been left out in the Louisiana rain for a couple years. But that was what happened when you bought everything from the lowest bidder—a bid that had probably been the low one because the company had bribed somebody in the Contracts office. Bribery was a normal way of doing business around here. Kat had taken two semesters of political science at LSU, where she was, thankfully, a senior. Studying politics was almost a necessity in Louisiana, where people still spoke fondly of Huey Long, the governor-turned-senator who'd been assassinated in the main part of the capitol building, just up the hall there, more than seventy-five years past.

Huey had been one in a long list of rogues who had run the state, and with the public's blessing. After all, the big oil companies had paid for everything for decades, there hadn't been any income tax—no property tax to speak of—and if you were going to elect somebody, why not elect somebody colorful, especially if it didn't cost you anything? Her political science professor had once told the class that when he'd been a teenager, he and his friends would catch a bus to the capitol and sit in the gallery, watching the House in action. More interesting than going to a movie, he'd said. People came from all over the country to study Louisiana politics, and rightly so.

She grinned as the wind howled at the glass doors that opened out onto the capitol grounds. Huey was out there, in spirit and in bronze, just around the bend, the spotlight from the top of the tall and pointed building—once the tallest in the entire South, and still pretty much the tallest in the state—again shining down upon the populist martyr's huge statue. Every now and then, the state tightened its purse strings and decided to turn the spotlight off to save a few dollars, but they always turned it back on again. Tourists still came to see old Huey out there, pigeons and all.

Working your way through school as a guard at the state capitol wasn't the best job in the world, but it left plenty of time to study, that was the main thing—

Her com buzzed. She grinned again and pulled the tiny unit from her belt. She knew who it was. Nobody else would be calling at this hour.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hey, Kat,” her husband said.

“How come you’re still awake?” Kat asked. “You’ll never make Lard Ass’s class.”

“Piss on him. I miss you. All alone here in this big, old bed. Naked under the covers. Full of lust for my new wife.”

Kat laughed. “You all talk, goat-boy. If I came home right now, you’d whine about how you had to get some sleep.”

“No, ma’am. You come home and I’ll show you. I have a big surprise for you.”

“Not so big as all that, honey chile. I’d say it was just an ... *average* surprise.”

“How would *you* know? Come on home and see. I’ve been lifting weights.”

She laughed. “I *am* tempted—” she began.

She never finished the sentence. The compression shock wave blasted her so hard that if the investigators hadn’t known who she was, they would never have been able to identify her, not even using dental records. When the various agencies finished combing the rubble—city and state police, fire department, ATF, FBI—they found in the bloody mush that had been Kat Brant only eight of her teeth still intact, none of which had ever been touched by a dentist’s laser.

The only blessing was that she did not suffer. She never knew what hit her.

Friday, December 17th, 12:55 p.m. Quantico, Virginia

Alexander Michaels, Commander of the FBI's elite Net Force unit, fell on the floor, smack onto his butt. He hit harder than he expected; it knocked the wind out of him. Fortunately, the cheek that took most of the impact was the left one, and not the right where, two months ago, a bullet had exited after he'd been shot in the thigh. The wound was pretty much healed; it only tinged now and then.

The woman who had just slammed him to the floor was his chief deputy, Assistant Commander Antonella "Toni" Fiorella—all five feet five inches, one hundred and maybe ten pounds of her.

Before he could even try to recover his breath, Toni dropped to one knee next to him and threw her short right elbow at his face, slapping it with her left hand for emphasis—and to move her left hand into position for a follow-up wipe, did she deem it necessary.

It wasn't going to be necessary. Michaels had no plans to punch her. He could barely breathe. Smiling took everything he had.

Toni offered Michaels a hand, and he took it. She stood and helped him do the same.

"You okay?"

He managed to suck in enough air to say, "Yeah, fine." Holding the smile was one of the hardest things he'd done in a while, but he held it.

"Good. You see what I did?"

"I think so."

Generally, they practiced such takedowns on the nice, padded mat thoughtfully provided here by the FBI in the smaller of the two gyms in Net Force HQ. Now and again, however, they stepped off the mats onto the floor. Toni, who had been practicing this esoteric martial art since she was twelve, had explained why such training was necessary.

"If you practice on the mats all the time, you get used to that cushion. If you fall on the street or sidewalk, it won't be quite so easy. And since a lot of fights end up on the ground, you need to know how it feels."

Yeah. Right.

He could understand it, though he wasn't sure he was going to ever learn the stuff so well he could hit the concrete and bounce like a rubber ball. But after a month of training five days a week, at least Michaels could finally get the name of the system right: *Pukulan Pentjak Silat*. Or *silat*, for short. It was, Toni had told him, a slimmed-down and simplified version of a more complex art that had come out of the Indonesian jungles less than a century ago. She had learned it from an old Dutch-Indonesian woman who'd lived across the street from the Fiorellas in the Bronx, after she had witnessed the old woman use the art against four gangbangers who had tried to run the granny off her door stoop. A b

mistake, that.

Michaels had been impressed with what he'd seen Toni do. If this was the simple and easier stuff he could wait on the really nasty moves.

"Okay, you try," she said.

"You gonna punch left or right?" he asked.

"Doesn't matter," she said. "If you control the center like you're supposed to, it'll work either way."

"In theory," he said.

She smiled at him. "In theory."

He nodded, then tried to relax and assume a neutral stance. That was supposed to be part of it too, Toni had said. It ought to work from whichever position you happened to be in if an attacker jumped on you; otherwise—what was the point? You wouldn't have time to bow and get into your ready stance if the street thug decided to eat your lunch. It wasn't real likely a guy in an alley coming at you with a knife was going to allow you to run home to take off your shoes and put on your *gi* while he stood there waiting, maybe cleaning his nails with his blade. If a move wasn't practical, the Indonesian fighters didn't much like to pass it along. This wasn't a *do*, a spiritual "way." It was the distilled essence of anything-goes street-fighting. It was not an art of flashy, fancy moves, but an art of war. In *silat*, you didn't merely defeat an enemy, you destroyed him, and you used whatever you had at hand to do it: fists, feet, elbows, knives, clubs, guns—

Toni leaped at him.

You were supposed to block first, then step, and this defense was supposed to be a move to the outside of the attacker. Instead, Michaels, rattled, blocked and stepped to the inside of Toni's leading foot. In theory, as she'd said, it didn't matter, since anything that worked was the point.

His right thigh slid between Toni's legs and pressed against her pubis. His concentration on protecting himself just kind of... evaporated. He'd blocked the punch, but now he just stood there. He didn't follow up. He was very much aware of the warmth of her crotch astraddle his thigh, even through two sets of sweatpants.

Damn!

"Alex?"

"Sorry, I drew a blank."

Quickly, Michaels stepped back. He'd nearly been killed by that assassin a couple of months ago; it hadn't been for Toni, the killer would have gotten him, and it had seemed a good idea to learn more about how to protect himself, but right now this intimate martial contact with Toni might be bringing up more problems than it solved. It certainly was bringing up one problem in particular he could do without—

"Hey, Boss?"

Michaels shook off the erotic thoughts. Jay Gridley stood near the gym's entrance, looking at the two of them. The younger man was grinning.

“Jay. What’s up?”

“You said you wanted to hear about that Louisiana thing as soon as it came in. I just downloaded the packet from the field team in Baton Rouge, got vid and reports. It’s flagged in your incoming files.”

Michaels nodded. “Thanks, Jay.” He looked at Toni. “I need to check that out.”

“We can pick up where we left off Monday,” she said. “Unless you’re working tomorrow?”

“I wish. I was hoping to work on the car, but I’ve got to bone up on financial stuff. I’m supposed to appear before Senator White’s committee on Tuesday.”

“You get all the fun,” Toni said.

“Don’t I just?”

They bowed to each other, the intricate *silat* beginning and ending salute, and Michaels headed for the dressing room.

Sheldon Gaynel Worsham was sixteen years old, a student at New Istrouma High School. He looked about twelve, was thin, and had black, oily hair slicked down all over, save for a wavy lock that dangled greasily over his left eye. He wore blue parachute pants and a black T-shirt with a putrid green pulse-paint logo. The logo was a stylized badge with the word “GeeterBeeter” in jagged letters across it. Whatever that meant.

The kid slouched in a cheap chair next to a heavy castplast table that was scratched and battered by years of abuse. Somebody had carved a heart with initials inside it on one corner, something of a surprise, since this was obviously a room where knives or other sharp objects were generally forbidden.

The man seated across the table from Worsham was heavysset, florid-faced, in a cheap, dark business suit, and he might as well have had “cop” flashing in neon over his head.

“So tell me about this bomb,” the cop said.

Worsham nodded. “Yeah, okay, okay. So we’re not talking semtex or C4 or crap like that, we’re talking RQX-71, a top-secret chemical used in conventional missile warheads. It’s an analog of some old stuff called PBX-9501. You want to know about anisotropic elastics or isotropic polymeric expansion rates or like that?”

“Why don’t we just skip over that for now,” the cop said. “Where did you get it, this explosive?”

The kid grinned. “I made it in the chem lab. Swiped a keycard from the janitor’s desk and duped it. Got the alarm codes, snuck in at night. Only took a week. Got a little tricky at one point, I thought I was gonna blow myself up, but it worked out okay.”

“You made it. And took down a brand-new, three-story, steel-framed addition to the capitol with it?”

The kid grinned wider. “Yeah. Something, huh?” Worsham sat up straighter in the plastic chair.

“And that blast killed a woman guard working her way through college.”

“Yeah, well, I’m sorry about that part, but it’s not really my fault. The coozers shouldn’t have fired my dad, you pross?”

“Your father worked on the construction of the building.”

“Until the stupid coozers fired him, yeah. I wanted to make a point, you pross?”

The cop nodded. “I guess you did that.” He shifted in his chair. The thin plastic squeaked in protes

“And how did you happen to come up with the top-secret formula for this—RAQ?”

“RQX-71.” Now the kid favored the cop with his biggest grin yet. “That was the easy part. I scarfed it off the net.”

Michaels leaned back in the conference room chair and glanced at Toni and Jay Gridley. Gridley touched a control and the holoproj of the interrogation faded.

“Full of remorse about killing that young woman, isn’t he?” Michaels said.

“Kids don’t relate to death,” Jay said. “Too much entcom, too many vids, too much VR slaughter rooming.”

Toni said, “And the formula?”

“Just like the little bastard said,” Jay said. “Right in the middle of a public net room. We pulled as soon as we found it, but it was posted anonymously. We’re trying to backwalk it, but it looks like came from a recaster somewhere.”

“Who would do such a thing? Why?” Toni said.

“And how did they *get* the formula to do it?” Michaels added.

Jay shrugged. He tapped at the portable and the image of the destroyed building shimmered and came up on the holoproj. It basically looked like a pile of concrete and metal rubble, beams sticking out, shards of glass glittering under the searchlights, and smoke still coming from sections of it.

“Jesus,” Toni said.

“Yeah,” Michaels said. “Only this one is in our lap and not His. We’ve got to find whoever is responsible for putting this formula onto the net where our sociopathic teenager could find it.”

“According to the counter, there were more than nine hundred hits on that file before we cleaned off,” Jay said. “We better hope nobody else who downloaded that formula has a grudge against somebody.”

Michaels shook his head. Nine hundred hits. Nine hundred chances for someone to try to concoct this stuff. Nine hundred chances for someone to succeed, and take out a building like that Worsham kid or—and this was maybe even worse—blow themselves and a whole school full of kids up in the process.

What kind of scum would do something like this? The Worsham boy was obviously bent, missing a few key neurons in his brain, but whoever posted the formula for the explosive was really sick. They needed to find him fast.

And Christmas was also fast approaching. The holidays would slow things around here to a crawl, and he had to go back to Idaho to see his daughter, Susie. And his ex-wife, Megan, too. A prospect that brought forth mixed emotions in Michaels, to be sure. At eight, Susie was the brightest spot in his life.

but it was a long way from Washington, D.C., to Boise, and he didn't see her nearly as much as he wanted to. And Megan? Well, that was another whole can of worms that didn't bear opening just at this moment. The divorce had been final for more than a year, and if she called and asked him to come home right now ... Up until recently, there hadn't been any question, he'd go. But the torch he'd been carrying had dimmed a little when he'd found out Megan was dating somebody. Being with another man. Enjoying it.

“Alex?”

He looked at Toni. “Sorry, I slipped into the void. What?”

“Joanna Winthrop is coming in at two-thirty.”

Gridley snorted. “Lightweight Lite? What's she want?”

“Lieutenant Winthrop is going to be assisting us on this matter,” Michaels said. “Colonel Howard has graciously allowed us to borrow her from the field. In fact, she will be working with you.”

“What? I don't need her, Boss.” Jay said. “I can run this dweebo to ground without some airhead sim-bimbo—”

“Jay.” Michaels's tone was sharp.

“Sorry, Boss. But she's only gonna get in the way.”

“As I recall, her grade-point average was higher than yours straight across the board,” Toni said.

“Sure, where *she* went to school.”

“MIT, wasn't it?”

“Yes, ma'am, but their standards have gone way down. CIT is acme now.”

Alex just shook his head and said, “Jay, whatever your differences with Lieutenant Winthrop, you just have to find a way to get past them. We need all the help we can get on this mess.” He waved at the holoproj.

Gridley nodded, but his jaw muscles flexed as he gritted his teeth.

Great, Michaels thought, one more brick on the load I don't need. A computer prima donna jealous of his territory. Just great.

His temporary secretary came into the conference room. “Commander, I have Director Carver on the phone.”

Michaels stood. “I'll take it in my office.” He waved at Jay and Toni. “Get busy, folks.”

Friday, December 17th, 1:45 p.m. Washington, D.C.

Thomas Hughes strode into the senatorial offices as if he owned them, the building they were in, and the city around them. He waved at the receptionist. “Bertha. Is he alone?”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Hughes.”

Hughes nodded. He’d known Bertha for more than a dozen years. She’d been with Bob since his first term, but she still called him “Mr. Hughes,” and he had not encouraged otherwise. He walked to the inner office door, rapped once, and pushed it open in the same motion.

Jason Robert White, fifty-six, the senior United States senator from the great state of Ohio, sat at his desk. He was playing a computer game. He looked up and started to frown at the interruption before he realized who had dared barge in.

“Hey, Tom.” White did a fingerwave over the sensor on his handpad and the small-scale holographic images froze. It looked like two guys in hand-to-hand combat, one of whom was green and scaled like Jesus.

“Bob. How’d the lunch with Hicks go?” Hughes moved to the pale gray leather couch, sat, and looked at the man for whom he worked.

White appeared ten years younger than his actual age, with a deep chemical tan under his perfectly styled, artfully graying hair. He wore a dark-blue tailored Saigon suit, a pastel-pink silk shirt, and a striped regimental tie for a regiment that had never existed. Hughes couldn’t see his feet, but the shoes were doubtless Italian or Australian, and handmade. Altogether, the outfit the senator wore offhandedly was worth what Hughes made in salary each month, easy. He was the image of a successful senator, handsome, fit, and comfortable in his custom clothes, no doubt about it. He could play a Viennese waltz on the piano, speak passable French and German, keep up with a so-so tennis pro, and break a hundred on a bad day at the country club golf course. A man who could walk the corridors of international power with ease.

Hughes, on the other hand, knew he looked every day of his fifty-two years. He was twenty pounds too heavy, wore a decent, but not expensive, Harris Tweed sport coat and gray wool slacks from Nordstrom, both off the rack, and his shoes were Nike dress casuals. Total cost of his outfit was maybe a twentieth that of White’s.

White leaned back in his chair and wagged his left hand in a so-so gesture. “Well, Tom, you know Hicks. He never gives a nickel but what he wants a dime. If we want to get his support, the honorable senator from Florida wants to see the Naval Air Station remain a fixture in Pensacola from now until the end of time.”

Hughes nodded. He had expected no less. “Fine. Give him what he wants. What do we care? He’s a critical vote. We get him, we’ll get Boudreaux and Mullins. We get them, we’re out of committee and

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