

Designated Survivor

Chapter 2

by Jeff Somers

2.

Seven minutes before threatening the driver, Renicks glanced up from The Brick and studied the back of his head. The car felt substantial and safe. It glided along the highway like it was on a pocket of air, almost perfectly silent. They were doing eighty-five, weaving through traffic with police cars around them, red and blue lights swirling. The agent behind the wheel knew how to drive. More importantly, he knew how to drive in formation, keeping an impressively steady distance between his own vehicle and the police escort. Renicks thought the man had experience driving under pressure situations, but wasn't comfortable in the driver's seat. He looked hunched and tight, and kept turning on the windshield wipers by accident. Renicks thought he was used to driving bigger things. Hummers, trucks. Ex-military, maybe, or ex-contractor in a hot zone.

Renicks smiled at his own vanity. Or maybe he'd been a garbage collector, he told himself. Like Emily said, you don't know *everything*.

He turned and stared out the window. Emily and the kids were just a few minutes away. Watching the other cars flash by, he was pierced by a sudden yearning to see them all. Even Emily,

who would be unsmiling and unamused at an unannounced visit. When gripped by the darkest frustrations earlier in the day he'd fantasized a form of pleasant professional suicide wherein he skipped the State of the Union and spent the evening with Emma and Jen, watching bad television and eating cereal.

The last time he'd had the girls he'd listened to their chatter about friends at school and the swim team and shows on television, and realized he didn't know most of the names they tossed back and forth, didn't know most of the activities they discussed. He was losing his girls. he'd been too busy, too preoccupied, too *divorced* to stay on top of things.

He suddenly felt like he was being driven away from them, not just to an unpleasant professional task.

Gorshin and the other SUV had peeled off the moment the cops had taken them on for escort, and they were heading off the big main highways onto the smaller rural routes, heading towards County Road 601. Renicks thought they were going too fast; the police cars were struggling to keep up. He didn't think it was necessary, but it was another thirty minutes to their destination, and he didn't want to spend it having a pissing match with his driver.

He looked back down at The Brick. It looked like a smartphone: A small screen, a stylus, a power button. It was lifeless and hadn't responded to anything he'd done. Gorshin had called it The Brick like that was supposed to mean something. Told him it would remain inactive until the emergency succession of the Designated Survivor inside one of the fifteen Secure Facilities that formed the United States' Continuity of Government system. The Brick. Renicks figured it was some sort

of Secret Service jargon.

“It only accepts a signal on a specific channel, and only a single instruction is accepted: Activate,” Gorshin had said as they’d walked towards the car. “If the worst-case scenario happens, Mr. Secretary, you’ll find everything you need here. Eyes-only, the President of the United States — which will be you, sir, if this thing turns on.”

He turned The Brick over; the back was embossed with the Great Seal of the United States, in fine detail, every feather of the eagle clearly etched. Renicks was amused. He was wearing khakis, a wrinkled old white Oxford, and running shoes; he was showered but not shaved, and as he worked his way through coffee cup number six he became increasingly aware that he should have insisted on a bathroom break while he’d been executing his smug little End of the World plan. He did not feel like Acting Presidential material.

At the moment, The Brick was basically a paperweight. He slipped it into his bag and returned his attention to the driver. Renicks sat there staring at the back of his head, his shoulders, his hands on the wheel.

The back of the driver’s neck was red, the square back of his haircut sharp and immediate — a recent cut. His suit was old, the collar showing some signs of fraying, the shoulders shiny. One of the mock buttons on the right sleeve was a mis-match, a slightly different shade of gray from the others. When he’d climbed into the driver’s seat, he’d spent thirty seconds struggling with the steering wheel, adjusting the angle, grunting in frustration as he worked at it. Renicks recalled the lingering look Gorshin had given the driver back at the house, and

concluded he was a recent addition to the detail — perhaps just that morning, after Flanagan had passed away.

Christ, Renicks thought. There would be a funeral. He remembered Gorshin saying *a widower, with no children*. He pictured Gerry again and felt a surprising pang of grief. They hadn't been close, hadn't known each other long or well. But Gerry had been funny, and for all his one-note dedication to Grant's policies he'd had his own mind and had a tired, sloppy series of facial expressions that made him seem like an exhausted grandpa more than a powerful man whose political beliefs differed sharply from his own.

He looked at the driver's wrist. His watch was more subtle than Gorshin's; instead of a macho monster, it was a simple old face, silver, analog, a wind-up model. Heirloom, probably inscribed on the back. A graduation gift or something. Not an anniversary as there was no ring, although Renicks had to admit that wasn't reliable. He glanced down at his own wedding ring, still there after five years, and smirked at himself.

His eyes shifted a little. The driver's knuckles were scabbed, as if he'd been in a fight recently.

As he considered this, his cell phone rang. Fishing it from his pocket, he glanced down at the screen. Stan Waters. He was thinking that it was probably best to let it go to voicemail. The driver looked up at the rear-view mirror.

"You shouldn't answer it."

Renicks looked up, noted with surprised irritation that the mirror had been angled so that it showed him, not the road behind them, and felt a stab of the old familiar defiance. *This is what got you into fights in high school*, he thought as he tapped the

screen and held the phone to his ear.

“Stan.”

“How does it feel to be sixteenth in line for the presidency, *mi amigo?*”

“I think I just got a taste for how little respect the position gets me. What’s up?”

“I’m calling to put in an early bid on being named ambassador to someplace cool when you come into power. How about Fiji?”

Renicks laughed. “Considering the only way I’m *coming into power* is if the world goes boom tonight, Mr. Waters, you might want to reconsider your definition of *someplace cool*.”

“Oh, I know it. We’re Bunker Buddies tonight, buddy. I’m in the goddamn Situation Room under the Capitol, all set up just in case only *half* the world goes boom and POTUS has to hide down in the basement for a while. Sometimes I think the CIA can kiss my ass. When they recruited me in college they never said anything about sitting in a damn *basement* all night, playing *solitaire*.”

“They probably did. Based on the stories I heard — from *you* — about being found in the bathroom with your head lodged in the toilet, I’m not surprised you don’t remember everything.”

“Ha! Every time my roommates came in to try and get me to go to bed, I said *no, I don’t want to drink any more!*”

Renicks laughed. “Maybe you’ll get lucky and there’ll be a disaster just big enough to entertain, but not big enough to keep you down there for years, eating army rations.”

“Holy Christ, RTEs! That’s a nightmare. You’ve given me nightmares tonight. Congrats, Jack.”

“Consider it payback for all the times you’ve used me as an unofficial, unpaid linguistics expert in your Field Reports.”

“Your code name is *Bastardo Gordo*.”

Renicks laughed. This, he thought, was the price you paid for making friends with a guy from the CIA who specialized in languages. He’d met Stan at a convention, spent it drinking in the hotel bar with him having conversations in several languages at once until they could no longer speak. He pictured him: Shaved head, ears sticking out like wings, sarcastic smirk. Laughed again.

“I should go. Listen, you do what the CIA does best, champ: Absolutely fucking *nothing*.”

“Remember: *Ambassador* Waters, okay?”

The phone went dead. Renicks reflected that Stan Waters was the only person he knew who ended phone conversations like they did in the movies: He just hung up.

The driver was still studying him in the mirror. Renicks set his phone to silent with a few practiced moves of his thumb.

“You want to watch the road?”

The driver’s eyes remained on him for a long moment. Renicks stared back, feeling an unwarranted flush of temper, until the driver looked away. Renicks kept his eyes on the mirror for a moment more, then returned his attention to his phone. He should call Emily, he thought. The divorce had receded enough that courtesy had become important, and he didn’t know if he’d be able to make calls once he was installed underground. He might be out of contact for several hours at minimum on a night she expected him to turn up on television in his best suit. He hit her autodial and put the phone to his ear, his eyes jumping back

to the driver.

Voicemail. Emily's familiar twang. Her outgoing message far too long, as always, rambling on and on.

His eyes flicked from the driver's collar to his hands on the wheel. White knuckled. He glanced past them at the speedometer. They'd hit ninety-five.

He rattled off a quick, no-nonsense message and ended the call.

"Slow down, please," he said.

The driver's eyes in the rear-view again. He didn't say anything. Looked away. The car didn't slow down.

Anger surged. Renicks controlled himself and fished in his memory for the man's name. Found it and fell back on the old psychological trick of *using* it. Letting him know he knew it.

"Agent Darmity," he said evenly, "slow *down*."

The eyes in the mirror again. The car didn't slow down. "We're on a schedule," the driver said.

Renicks stared back in irritation. Reminded himself that he only had to deal with this man for a short while; then he'd be ensconced in a bunker, probably with a whole other bunch of irritating Secret Service Agents. He dropped his eyes back to the phone. Pretended to work it.

"You know I fill out QA forms every time I have a Secret Service assignment, right?" he said flatly.

The driver said nothing. After a moment, Renicks glanced up. No eyes in the mirror. The car hadn't slowed at all. He swayed this way and that as they dodged through traffic. He looked at the steering wheel again. The man was gripping it like it was the only thing keeping him from crashing through the windshield,

sailing off into space.

Renicks hesitated another moment. He heard Emily's voice, telling him to *leave it alone*, telling him that his insistence on being *minded* always got him into trouble. Then he reflected that Emily had divorced him, and put him on a schedule to see his own daughters, and that meant he was done worrying about what she thought of his behavior. He nodded and held up his phone. "Agent Darmity, during my orientation after confirmation, I was given several 24-hour emergency phone numbers. One of them will connect me to the local field office of the Secret Service wherever I am. Via GPS. Ease your foot off the *goddamn* gas in the next five seconds or I'll be on the phone with your Field Supervisor in another five discussing your career. You understand?"

The eyes returned to the mirror, and Renicks held them. His heart was pounding, making his head ache. He didn't enjoy being a hard ass. He'd found you had to be, sometimes, and he'd gotten good at it ever since rising to the President's Cabinet: Washington was like High School, sometimes, with people almost eager to snub you if you let them, eager to demonstrate their power over you. He didn't know if the driver was having a bad day or what, but he knew he didn't want to be the first person in the line of succession to die *on the way* to the bunker.

Two seconds clicked by. The eyes flicked away. The car slowed down.

"I apologize," the driver said. There was a beat of silence. Two. Then: "Sir."

Renicks sighed, slipping the phone into his pocket. He hoped the rest of the day got easier.