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Designated Survivor

Chapter 13

by Jeff Somers

13.

Four minutes before opening the first crate, Renicks watched Begley spin, hauling her gun from its holster and leveling it in his direction. He recognized Frank Darmity's voice with a stab of sudden horror. Those eyes in the rear-view mirror, hard and humorless.

"Step away!" Begley shouted. The gun in her hand was steady. It suddenly looked huge to Renicks. The one in his back felt larger. He considered scenarios. Twisting away, spinning and shoving the gun aside. Forcing himself backwards, knocking Darmity off his feet. He ran through the possibilities quickly. They all ended with him shot and bleeding.

He'd never been shot. Not once in his life. He tried to picture himself taking it manfully, wincing a little and shrugging it off. It was impossible. He stayed perfectly still.

Begley started moving very slowly, angling herself to get a better shot.

"Stand down, Agent Begley," Darmity said. He sounded amused, Renicks thought. Relaxed. In control. He had a vague Bostonian accent. Broad A, non-rhotic, but softened, like he'd spent a lot of time among people with different accents, or like

he'd spent a lot of time trying to chisel it off his words. "And stop moving right now, or I'll panic and shoot the Secretary. Who I don't like much to begin with."

"You won't," Begley said, taking another small step. "You need him. You kill him, this whole complex goes offline."

"I got impulse control issues," he said. "You'd be amazed at the things I've done when under pressure. Sure, I kill him, that's a mess. I've pissed people off before. I survived. And there's a lot of daylight between *dead* and *fucking hurt*, right?"

Renicks indulged in a quick, one-second fantasy wherein Frank Darmity was crushed under falling concrete blocks.

"Besides, where do you think you're going? This whole place is locked down. We tagged the elevators right away. Watching 'em. You ain't going nowhere that way. Even if you got up to the top this place is buttoned *up*. Nothing in, nothing out."

Renicks took a long, deep breath. Looked at Begley's face. It was a hard mask, determined and unflinching. Her eyes flicked to his and she shook her head slightly. Just a tiny movement. Telling him, he thought, to stay put. Stay still. Not to complicate her job by doing anything stupid.

He imagined himself calm and clear. Forced himself to try and see the scene as if from a camera. Outside his body. Objectively.

Suddenly, the gun disappeared from his back. Immediately there was a gunshot, so loud his ears rang and he jumped involuntarily. At the shooting range he'd always worn protective headgear, and the shots had been muted. Distant. The noise stayed in his ear even as the gun reappeared in his back.

Begley stopped. Still had her gun trained on them. "Okay," she

said. “Okay, let’s take a moment.”

Renicks swallowed and took another deep breath. His heart was rattling in his chest, swamped by adrenaline. His legs felt weak. He forced himself to stay alert. Calm. He pictured the hallway behind him. Picked out the junction where another corridor cut across and figured that was where Darmity had emerged from, moving softly behind them. The corridor was exactly like all the others Begley had led him down. The elevators were at a T-junction; one corridor terminating at the two sets of doors, another running left and right from there. The one elevator was still open.

“You got a *moment* to drop your fucking gun,” Darmity snapped.

Renicks considered the elevator. Played with the idea for one second. Saw himself shoving Darmity back and diving for it. Begley picking up on it immediately and diving after him. Hitting a button, the doors shutting just as Darmity fired, bullets slamming into the steel. Then rejected it. He didn’t have any leverage. Wouldn’t be able to make Darmity move much. And Darmity had said the elevators were being observed — of course they were. More likely they’d dive into it, hit a button, and then sit there like targets.

He looked at Begley again. She’d stopped moving, but still had her gun aimed right at them. He was standing in front of Darmity. Had the gun in his back. But Darmity wasn’t holding onto him. In the movies, when people had hostages they always draped an arm around their necks, or held onto their arms. But Renicks supposed that if you knew what you were doing you could use that against an attacker.

He was right in Begley's line of fire. Which meant Darmity was in Begley's line of fire, with the potentially unfortunate caveat that any bullet would have to first pass through *him* before hitting Darmity.

But Darmity wasn't holding onto him. He stared at Begley and willed her to look back at him.

"You drop him, I drop you," Begley said. Her voice was flat and the gun was steady in her hands. Renicks considered the worrying possibility that she might actually consider shooting him an acceptable sacrifice. It would solve the major problem.

Darmity laughed a hard-edged, humorless sort of laugh. Renicks remembered similar laughs from bullies when he'd been a kid. He'd been in plenty of fights with kids who thought it was fun to torture smaller, younger kids

"Listen, Agent Begley, I'm gonna reach for my radio and let 'em know I've got you. And then in one minute —"

Begley's eyes flashed to Renicks. He winked at her, and looked down at the floor, then back up. After a second, she nodded.

"— it won't matter anymore, okay?"

Still looking at Renicks, Begley nodded. "Okay."

He just let himself drop, sagging over to the left and hitting the floor hard, teeth bouncing in his mouth.

Two gunshots, one after the other. Darmity grunting, breath knocked out of him. A bone-rattling impact against the wall.

Then Begley was shouting at him, her hands digging into the fabric of his shirt and jacket, hauling him up. He stumbled into a staggered run as she dragged him behind her. After five or six steps he found his balance and she released him, pushing him

ahead of her as she spun around. At the next junction she shoved him to the right, and he ran. Another junction and she pushed him left. Everything passed by him in a blur of panic. When she shouted his name and grabbed his shoulder, pulling him to a halt, he spun to face her and realized he had no idea where they were in relation to anything.

“In here,” she said, breathing hard. She pulled open an unmarked metal door. Fire rated, heavy as hell, but no lock. He ducked into nearly-total darkness and heard her step in behind him, pulling the door shut.

For a few seconds it was just darkness, a sense of being crowded, and the sound of their hitched, painful breathing.

“Jesus fucking *Christ*,” he finally hissed. His arm hurt where he’d fallen on it, and his ankle throbbed terribly. But he didn’t think he’d been shot, and decided that was about the best outcome he could have expected. “Thanks for not just shooting me dead and calling it a day. They’d probably have given you a medal for saving the world.”

She snorted. He realized he’d become quite familiar, and fond of, the sound of Agent Begley snorting in amused derision. “I’m Secret Service, Jack. My job is to *protect* my asset. Now shut the hell up for a few minutes.”

He listened to their breathing slow. Hers faster than his. Within a minute she’d dropped back to an easy, quiet respiration while he was still struggling to regulate his breathing. Out of shape. Too many glasses of Scotch with too many rich dinners. Everyone in Washington wanted to hold meetings over steaks and cocktails.

They sat in the darkness and listened. There was no sound.

No footsteps, no shouts.

“Do you think you killed him?” Renicks finally whispered.

Begley stirred. He heard her moving. Smelled her perfume. “I don’t know,” she whispered back. “At that distance the five-mils can penetrate Kevlar, but depends on the rating of his armor. And I’ve never *seen* a penetration, just read about tests in labs.”

The weak blue light of her flashlight appeared. He saw her outlined in it, the weak light giving her face odd shadows, making her look alien. He spun around, searching the shadows. The room was much larger than he’d suspected, the walls shooting up at least fifteen feet.

“Where are we?”

“Storage L-15. Come on. They know we’re on this level, we have to get out of here. Sooner or later they’ll come to this room.”

She moved briskly towards the rear of the room. Renicks looked around as he followed. The large, square room was filled with crates. The wooden boxes had stenciled lettering on them. It was too dark to read. The crates were stacked on top of each other, forming canyon walls they squeezed between. At the rear of the room she stopped, standing in a narrow corridor formed by two parallel walls of crates.

“Up there — ”

Renicks gasped.

Begley spun, poised and alert. “What?”

“Look.”

He took the flashlight from her and pointed it at one of the crates. Stenciled on the side was

CL-TOP

S/N 9900-RT-88Y-7

ELIRO_TRACK

REF: OWH-00992

Begley crowded next to him, leaning down. “What?”

He shook his head and snapped back to the present. Told her about Eliro, about the file on The Brick. Took the flashlight and turned until he spied one of the crates sitting on the floor, nothing on top of it. “Come on. Let’s see what’s in these things.”

She grabbed his arm. “Jack, we don’t have *time*. Darmity might come through that door at any time. A *team* might come through that door. We have to get off this level. Back into the service corridors.”

He shrugged her off. “One minute. We need information. We’re running around in the dark, here. literally.”

He heard her follow him to the crate. He dropped his bag and knelt down with the light, yanking it open and digging through, extracting a pair of scissors from his toiletry bag. Standing up, he worked the scissors into the lid of the crate until it was halfway in, then put his weight on it until the lid lifted up a fraction of an inch. Repeated the operation five, six, seven times until there was a uniform quarter-inch gap all around. Pushing his fingers into the gap, he flexed his hand and slowly forced the lid up, splinters digging into his finger. With a final grunt the lid popped up and he pushed it all the way up, holding it with both hands.

They stared down into it.

“Fuck,” Begley said in a low voice.

Body bags. It was filled with tightly rolled body bags. He'd seen a few in his father's office, or their occasional trips to the hospital or morgue. They gleamed like black jewels in the weak blue light.

"That's not *encouraging*, Begs," Renicks said softly.

He found the shipping manifest folded up between some of the bags. Squinted down at it.

"Shipped last week," he whispered. "This is a drop shipment from a Tennessee location. Looks like a lot of similar shipments went out the door to a lot of other locations." He looked up at Begley. "Why do you ship *body bags* to a dozen places around the country? All at once?"

Begley stared back at him, chewing her lip. "Body bags. Because you expect *bodies*." She stood for a moment, eyes wandering the dark room. "Wait," she said, kneeling down and peering at the stencil on the crate. She stood up. Pointed. "Put the light there."

He followed her arm and shone the light on another crate a few feet away.

"Come on," she said. "Different serial number. Different contents."

Scooping up his bag, he followed her, handed her the light and worked the scissors again. A minute later they looked down into the crate.

"Well ... *fuck*," Renicks whispered.

Emergency road signs. A variety of them, describing an immense disaster: Quarantine. Martial Law. Authorized Access Zones. He found another manifest that told a similar story. A huge shipment of emergency materials to various locations

around the country. A preparation for something. For what he had no idea, but he didn't think it took a genius to figure that nothing good required body bags and quarantine signs to handle.

They stood for a moment in silence, contemplating. Renicks admired the design of the signage: They conveyed authority and doom clearly. He was depressed looking at them. Body bags and disaster signs. Whatever they'd been shipped in preparation for, there was no doubt it was expected. *Planned*. Just like his own adventure had been planned, by someone. Renicks believed coincidence was just a lack of data.

He wondered at how his day kept hitting new bottoms. Then Begley shook herself.

“Come on. We have to *move*, Jack.”

He nodded and dropped the scissors back into his bag, slinging it over his shoulder and following her back to the rear wall. She took the flashlight from him and played it along the concrete wall in front of them, up high, near the ceiling.

“Where are we going?”

She stopped moving the light and pointed. “There.”

He looked up. Didn't like what he saw. It was an air duct grate. He did some quick math and judged it to be precisely big enough for someone of his height and weight to get stuck inside.

“You're kidding.”

Begley shook her head. “Jack, I *never* kid about air ducts.”

As she leaped up onto a nearby crate and started climbing up the jumble of wooden boxes, he fought a smile and swallowed crazy, inappropriate laughter.