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# Designated Survivor

## Chapter 16

by Jeff Somers

### 16.

Thirty-one minutes before Begley passed out, Renicks was talking to himself.

She was heavier than she looked. He had one of her arms around his neck, and held both of her hands in his as he supported most of her weight. He half-dragged, half-carried her, retracing their steps as best he could remember. Shards of glass shot up his leg every time he put their weight on it.

“You’re not supposed to move a broken leg, dammit,” he hissed, breathing hard around his words. “You’re not supposed to move a *concussion* either.”

*They’re coming*, she’d said. He’d looked around the cramped, dark space. Not a place to be cornered by people like Frank Darmity.

Sweat streamed into his eyes. The service corridors had seemed cold before; now they were stuffy and hot.

“You with me, Begs? Stay awake, okay?”

She murmured something. Good enough. At least she was responding. He’d seen her head bounce when she’d crashed down, barely beating the seals. Blood was pouring down from a deep gash under her hairline, a sheet of it on her face. Head

injuries bled. Always looked worse than they were. He knew two stories about lethal concussions. One from his father, who'd been called to a woman's house. She was mid-thirties, in good health. Stepped on her son's toy truck, hit her head on the bathtub. Dr. Renicks, senior, had called an ambulance and sent her to the hospital. She was fine the rest of the day. High spirits. Complained of the fuss. Definitely concussed, but seemed fine otherwise. Died in the night. Just ... died.

His father had told him, quite soberly, that sometimes that's how it happened.

The other story had been told by Uncle Richie. Who had enjoyed shocking his nephew with terrible stories from his criminal life. Renicks remembered never being too alarmed by them, because Uncle Richie was such an easygoing, humorous guy. Just a thinner version of his father who chain smoked unfiltered cigarettes and wore leather jackets.

Uncle Richie had told him of a guy reluctant to pay back some debts he'd acquired from friends of Richie's. Renicks remembered that everyone in Richie's stories were friends of his. Even people whose names he didn't know were friends. The guy with the debts had been named Carlo, and Carlo had been snatched off the street by Richie and some others. The idea being to scare him into paying up. They took Carlo to an old warehouse and tied him to a chair. Richie had thought this story very comedic. He lingered on how fat Carlo was, and how his belly jiggled with anxiety. The elaborate plans they'd had to terrify him. Richie had sworn to his nephew that they hadn't meant to actually hurt Carlo. They were going to show him various instruments of torture and let him scare himself.

First up was a tire-iron. In demonstrating how painful it *would* be, Richie's friend Happy had swung it at Carlo's head, intending to make him wince and piss his pants. Instead, he hit Carlo right across the forehead. Carlo had passed out. But then came to a few minutes later, foggy, but promising to pay up as soon as possible. The mood had become jocular, and everyone asked if Carlo was feeling okay. He said he had a headache. They drove him home. Richie found this particularly amusing — after hitting him in the head with a tire iron by mistake, they'd given him a lift home in broad daylight. He'd stepped out of the truck, turned to wave like they were dropping him off after a date, and collapsed, dead.

The punch line was that Richie had left town, convinced he was on a hitch for manslaughter. But no one ever said a word.

Every few feet, Renicks shouted at Begley or shook her until she responded somehow. She got heavier and heavier. Her blood soaked into his jacket. But he didn't know where Darmity or his colleagues might come on their way to the airshafts. He kept moving because *not* moving felt suicidal. But he didn't know where to go. He didn't have a destination. Every direction might be a bad one, and now that Amesley knew — if he hadn't before — that they'd been using the service corridors to move around, Renicks felt like every junction would bring him face to face with Frank Darmity again. Or several Frank Darmitys.

"Begs," he said breathlessly. "Begs! Is there a medical office? A clinic? Someplace with medical supplies?"

She shifted against him and murmured something indistinct.

"Agent Begley!" He stopped and staggered back to lean against the wall. Sucked in painful, burning breaths. Sitting

behind a desk fondling a keyboard for twenty years, he was surprised to learn, was not a fitness regimen. He jostled her. She stiffened and screamed.

“I’m sorry!” he hissed. Everything seemed loud. Every breath, every moan, every scrape of their shoes reverberated with deadly volume. “Hospital, Begs, is there anything like a hospital?”

He reached up and turned her head towards him. She peered at him as if seeing him for the first time. Blinked. “Ninth level,” she said thickly. Blinked again, rapidly. Eyes fluttering. “Where are we?”

Hefting her weight back onto his shoulder, he staggered off down the corridor again. Every other step made him wince and suck in breath as his twisted ankle rolled under him. Level nine. That was four levels up. He didn’t know how to work the elevators. He was going to have to carry her up the access ladders. If he could retrace their steps. Everything looked the same. Every door, every junction in the corridors. Every sign. The service corridors were visually slick. Impossible to latch onto details.

As he moved, sweat soaking into his shirt, he looked down and stumbled to a sudden halt.

The floor was covered in dust. A thick carpet of dust. As gray as the floor itself. He could clearly see their footprints. Putting out of his mind the fact that this meant other people could also follow their prints, he took a deep breath and started moving again, following their own tracks back to the generic metal door that led to the access ladders. He set Begley down on the floor gently and slumped down next to her, chest heaving.

“Big baby,” she murmured. “I don’t weigh that much.”

He nodded, wiping sweat from his brow. "When I get you fixed up, we're finding a scale and checking it out."

"Fuck you," she said dreamily.

Taking one last deep breath he knelt over her and peered intently at her face. Wiped blood away with one shaking hand. She looked back at him with a strange sort of calm. He held a finger in front of her. Waited for her to focus on it. Moved it from side to side. Watched her eyes.

Nodding, he pushed her arm over his shoulder again and braced himself. "This is going to hurt like hell," he warned her.

"I know," she said.

He pushed up slowly, using the wall for balance. When he was standing she was sitting on his shoulder, braced against the wall.

"Grab the rungs," he said. "Pull yourself up as much as you can. I'll have you from below."

It was slow going. She pulled, he pushed. Twice, her hands slipped and her weight came back on him. She cried out in sudden pain. They waited a moment and then he coaxed her back into motion.

At the top of the ladder, they both lay on the dusty floor for a moment, gasping. Level thirteen. Three more to climb. He gave them five minutes, counting off the seconds in his head, then forced her up. Forced her to grasp the next rungs. Forced her up, pushing as hard as he dared. He felt better being off Level Fourteen, where they would start looking. But he worried about the tracks in the dust. Worried they'd just follow them. He didn't remember that kind of dust in the official areas. When they'd been going for the elevators, he was certain there hadn't been that level of dust.

They repeated the pattern: Up the ladder. Five minutes gasping on the floor of the next landing. Up the ladder.

On Level Nine, he inspected his foot. The ankle had swollen and pushed the leather of his shoes to its limit. He could feel it throb with every heartbeat. Every touch brought a spike of pain shooting up his leg. When he gave up and looked over at Begley, she was out cold, lying on the dirty concrete floor.

He dragged her.

He couldn't carry her any more. He took her collar in one hand and limped down the service corridor. Just like every other service corridor. Gray. Concrete. Obscure signs that told him nothing useful. The silence seemed untrustworthy, and every corner seemed ominous. How long before they just started sweeping each floor for them? Where would they start? He didn't have enough information. He didn't know how many people they had.

Turning a corner, his eyes jumped to a sign on the wall. A large red cross. And arrow below it. Relief shuddered through him.

A minute later he dragged her into a small but tidy-looking medical office. It was two rooms. First there was an examination room: A standard padded table, a small desk, a locked storage cabinet. Various instruments and supplies neatly placed on the counter tops. A doorway to the right led to a procedure room: Stainless steel table, operating height. The walls covered in cabinets. Big OR lighting rig sprouting from one wall. Behind the desk were two flags. A standard United States and a deep blue one with the seal of the President. He stared for a moment. His brain churned. After a second he snapped himself back into

motion. Stepped into the second room.

The floor under the metal table had gutters carved into it. So blood and whatever else spilled down from it would just sink into the plumbing and not stay on the floor to be slipped on. It was the sort of place you could perform a lot of basics in. A lot of meatball surgeries and other emergency procedures. Gunshot wounds came to mind as he lifted Begley up and draped her onto the table.

He searched the rooms quickly. Found scissors right away and cut her pant leg up to the thigh, tearing the fabric apart. Was relieved not to see any bone. The leg bent to the left in an unnatural way, the thigh discolored and bruised. He glanced at Begley's face and decided it was a good thing after all that she was unconscious.

He tore through the cabinets. The ones in the procedure room were locked, but they were simple cam locks like you found on filing cabinets. He snapped them open using the scissors. The wall cabinets were filled with drug bottles, all clearly marked and dated. All fresh. All labeled with generic black and white laser-printed stickers. No brand names. He ran his eyes over them, startled by the sheer number of drugs available, and selected one small bottle of pills and a glass ampoule. Kept searching until he'd located a syringe, a suture kit, smelling salts and a roll of white plastic tape. Brought all of this back to the table and placed them on a wheeled metal tray. Then stood for a moment, looking around.

With a grunt he launched himself back into the exam room. Stepped around the desk. Plucked the American flag from its holder and examined the pole. Cheap, wooden. He bunched the



flag up to expose as much of the pole as possible, took it in both hands, and snapped it into two across his knee. Hands stinging, he jogged back to Begley.

“Good thing you’re still out,” he said, taking her leg in both hands and slowly rotating it. He was doing everything you weren’t supposed to do. He had even invented a few *new* things you weren’t supposed to do. But he need her to be mobile. He picked up the flag and tore it from the broken pole. Wrapped it around her leg, a little tight but not too constrictive. Her leg would swell. He placed each piece of broken pole on either side of her leg. Picked up the white duct tape and constructed a splint, taping the leg up as tightly as he could to hold the two pieces of wood in place.

Satisfied that he’d created the world’s ugliest functioning splint, he took a smelling salts capsule and broke it up her nose. Held it there. Counted: One, two

“Jesus *Christ!*” Begley shouted hoarsely, sitting up with a lurch. She grabbed onto his wrist hard enough to make him wince again. Sat there panting, staring around in confusion.

“You’re okay!” he said in something less than a shout. Aiming for reassuring. “Becs, you’re okay.”

“Define *okay*. Oh fuck, my head hurts,” she moaned. Stared for a moment at her splinted leg. Looked back at him.

“That’s next. But I needed to be sure you’d wake up.”

He broke the syringe out of its sterile packaging and filled it from the ampoule. Held it up and tapped it a few times.

“Procaine,” he said. “Topical anesthetic. We’re going to have to stitch up that gash.” He smiled a little. He could feel the sweat drying on him. The panic evaporating. Slowly. “It’s going to be

ugly as hell. I haven't done any suturing in years. But we need to stop the bleeding."

She nodded slowly. Her eyes on the needle. "You know what you're doing?"

"I used to help Dad out in the office on Saturday afternoons. Before I got older and started hating him for no good reason." He leaned in and pushed her hair aside, positioning the needle. "And I was a Boy Scout."

She laughed suddenly. He jabbed the needle in. She didn't even notice.

"I can see you," she said, sounding shaky. "In the uniform."

He smiled, a numb expression he didn't feel. He remembered his father. Always had that hazy half smile, that bland expression. He wore it like a shield — first in the office, telling people the bad news, the good news. Then always. His face blank no matter what, an expression calibrated to mean nothing.

The only time he'd seen the mask crack had been when the Sheriff had come around. A Sunday afternoon. They'd finished supper and were all sitting around the hot house, fanning themselves and digesting. Renicks remembered his father was listening to music on his stereo. He could remember the music, would know it if played for him but he'd never found out the title of the piece.

He remembered the Sheriff at the front door. *Maybe we ought to speak outside. It's about Lem Knowles, Doc. His family's makin' noise that ... that you helped him along a little.*

He shut his eyes for a moment, deleted the memory.

He worked as fast as he dared. He put in a dozen ugly stitches, closing up the wound. Found some basic antibiotic

ointment and smeared it on. Stood for a moment staring at the butcher job he'd done. Nodded. Best he could do, under the circumstances.

Stepping back, he held up the small bottle of pills. "Acetaminophen and Codeine. Won't be great once you start putting weight on that leg, but should keep you from screaming every time you have to move without knocking you out. Take two to start, see how it goes. Don't take more than six. Let me see your eyes."

He leaned in and took her face gently in his hands, angling it up towards the lights. Studied her pupils.

"Thank you," she said quietly. "For ... taking care of this. Of *me*."

He nodded. "I'm just glad you weren't awake to hear me crying like a child," he said, stepping back. "They know we're out, now. I ditched the Brick, but they must be searching every level for us. We have to assume they know we've been using the service corridors." He sighed. Shrugged. "Now what?"

She shook her head, opening the pill bottle and pouring two of the white capsules into her hand. Then she looked up at him. Almost smiled. "I've got one more trick up my sleeve, Mr. President."