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# Designated Survivor

## Chapter 18

by Jeff Somers

18.

Eleven minutes before they barricaded the door, Renicks watched Begley struggle out of her chair and almost fall at him. Overbalanced. Excited. He let her snatch the receiver from his hand. Watched her face as she pressed it against her ear. Held her gaze when her eyes jumped to him.

“Jesus,” she said, smiling. “A separate line. Hell, I forgot there was even a fax machine in the *complex*. They overlooked it. It’s on its own dedicated line, and they *forgot* about it!”

For a moment, he thought she might start to jump around. She quickly deflated. Handed the phone back to him. Turned awkwardly and hobbled a few steps away.

“I can’t call any of my Emergency Numbers,” she said to the air. “Amesley set those up.”

Renicks looked around the booth. “I think we’ve left protocol behind, Begs.”

“What do I do? Call the White House?”

Renicks considered. “The FBI?”

She turned around and looked at him steadily. “If the Secret Service is compromised in this, why not the FBI?” She shook her head. “We have to go a different direction.””

Renicks spread his hands. “Call 411?” He shook his head. “All the info we need was probably in The Brick.”

She was still staring at him. “That is ... not helpful, Jack.”

He nodded, grimacing. Frustration flooded him. He felt buried. underground, trapped. He was the linchpin of the whole situation. But he had no control. All he could do was play hide and seek.

“The White House will be locked down,” she said, hobbling into a slow, shuffling walk. “We’re not getting in through the switchboard. And all Secret Service contacts will have to be treated as toxic. We also have to assume we only get one shot. Maybe that fax line stays unnoticed, or maybe a big red light turns on in the Security Office when we dial out. We have to make the first call count.”

Renicks nodded. He ran through his own office, his assistant, his Deputy Secretary. His staff of researchers. None of them would be of any use, assuming he even trusted them that far. He’d never doubted them before, but he’d never had the lives of tens of thousands of people — if not more — and the fate of the world on his back either. The Director of the Secret Service was involved. There were pallets of body bags and emergency signs in storage. That spoke of a large conspiracy. Dozens of people, at least, in positions to route shipments and blackline budgets. Would something like that bother to recruit from the Department of Education? Probably not.

But he couldn’t be *sure*.

He looked up at Begley. She was standing still in the middle of the room, chewing her lip. She was dirty, with dried blood in her hair, her clothes torn and stained. She was beautiful, he

thought. She was most beautiful when she was locked in thought. Her forehead crinkled. Her eyes distant. There was a stillness about her frame he admired. Feeling giddy with stress, he briefly considered appointing her to something in his official capacity as Acting President. Secretary of something.

He paused, memory flaring.

“I have an idea,” he said. “I have a ... friend. In the CIA.”

Her eyes flashed to him. She didn’t move otherwise. “A friend,” she said slowly. “I’ve got friends in agencies, too, Jack. What does *friend* mean here?”

He shrugged. Knew what she was saying. She was thinking through her list of contacts and coworkers just like he was, weighing them against the fact that Amesley was involved. Which meant anyone could be. “He’s the only person I *would* call right now,” he said simply. Spread his hands. “I can’t guarantee him. I’ve known him for more than twenty years. But if you have a better idea, say the word.”

She sighed and turned to face him. “What’s his name?”

“Stan Waters.”

Chewed her lip again. Was silent for a few seconds. “I don’t think I’ve seen his name.” She looked back at him. “I’m trying to remember correspondence. With Amesley. Which doesn’t mean anything, either way.”

Renicks nodded. “If you saw his name somewhere, you never know what that could mean.”

“All right. Call him. We don’t have any options. As long as you’re in the facility, it’s designed to stay online no matter what. We need to get you out of here immediately, and we need help. Call him.”

He turned and picked up the flimsy plastic receiver.

“But Jack — be on your toes. No offense to your friend ... but we don’t *know* anything. Keep your bullshit meter on, okay?”

He nodded without turning. Punched Stan’s cell number into the keypad. Watched the numbers appear on the tiny green LED screen. Heard a click, then a phantom ring in his ear.

“Stan Waters, X99-T. This is an unsecured personal line. You better have a fucking —”

“It’s Jack Renicks, Stan.”

There was silence on the line. Then a dry scrubbing noise. It took Jack a moment to realize Stan had dropped his phone.

“Jack?! Jesus, *Jack*? You still there?”

“I’m here, Stan.”

“Hold on. *Do not hang up.*”

There was a muffled sound of conversation. Renicks tried to pick out the words, the voices, but couldn’t. The ambient noise in his ear widened out. Like Stan was moving from a small space to a larger one. He heard hinges, then the echoed click of a door latch. Then a burst of static. It lessened immediately, but remained on the line. Stan’s voice came back sounding far away. The static made every other word a challenge to decipher.

“Jack!”

“I’m here, Stan.”

“*What’s going on?* The whole fucking government’s down here in the bunker. We’ve got two dead congressmen, we’ve got bombers in the air, and as soon as the Secret Service vets the route they’re getting Grant into a helicopter and getting him on Air Force One, where he may not ever return from the way things are going. That’s all. A typical day in my week, really. The whole

Continuity System is fucked up, won't go offline. You're hot. What's *happening* down there?"

Begley came over to stand in front of him, her face blank. Eyes locked on him. Renicks told the story in three sentences.

"Jesus," Stan whispered, static blanking out the next few words. "... Jack, there are a lot of theories flying around here. Your name is in some of them. We can't get anyone on the ... hell, you're about ... minutes from ... being *blown to hell*. We can't get the complex offline, we can't get your biometric signature out of the system, and someone's got the fucking football online and passing packets back and forth to the fucking launch system and we can't shut *that* out until we shut down the fucking complex, which so far we can't do." He breathed heavily into the phone. It sounded like he it was right up against his mouth. "So it's the failsafe: We're turning you into a blast crater."

"What happened? At the speech?"

"Explosions. Two. Neither near Grant, though we found three more nearer the podium that would've turned him into dog ... The security detail hustled him out of —"

"Jesus, Stan, you can't leave him with the Secret Service. For all we know every agent there *protecting* him right now is one of Amesley's."

Stan said something that was lost to static.

Begley's eyes widened. She emphatically mouthed something at him, but Renicks just shook his head back.

"Stan, *tell them*. Tell them it's Amesley. Tell them we're free, but they're searching for us."

"Listen ... to, but fuck, Jack, no one's going to *care*. Someone murdered Gerry Flanagan. Someone is trying to launch

warheads. You will fall *easily* into the category of collateral damage if we have to blow up the fucking mountain to stop it.”

“Someone *murdered Gerry Flanagan?*”

Under other circumstances, Begley's expression would have been hilarious, he thought.

“Looked like a heart attack. ME is telling us it was drug-induced. Someone put him out of the way. That's one reason why ... one reason why your name isn't drawing any water around here right now, Jack.”

Renicks felt it. Panic. It was licking the edges of his thoughts. It was oozing into the space between them. He wasn't getting out of the complex. He was going to be trapped in it when they triggered the explosives buried underneath it. He was going to be burned alive. Killed. He thought of Emily. Of Elizabeth and Patricia. He thought, everyone calls Elizabeth Sissy because that's what Patty called her when they were very young.

He closed his eyes for a moment, feeling a wave of exhausted fear sweep through him. Then opened them again. There had to be *something*.

Begley's face mirrored it all back to him. “Tell him your ISA needs to speak with him,” she said.

“Stan — ”

“I heard. Tell your ISA I will brief everyone. My boss will brief their bosses, their bosses will brief everyone else, and someone will end up with the happy job of briefing Grant. Shit, what a fucking clusterfuck.” He sighed. “But listen, Jack. It won't change anything for you. We can't risk it. I'm ... shit, I'm sorry, man. I really am.”

Renicks nodded absently. He had picked a spot on the wall

across from and stared at it. Ignored Begley. Felt a cold despair washing through him. They'd actually found a phone that worked, and it hadn't changed anything. No one cared whether he was telling the truth. They were going to die anyway.

He started to drop the receiver, then pushed it back against his ear. "Stan! You still there?"

"Yes, Jack. I'm still here."

"You ever hear of something named *Eliro*? E-L-I-R-O?"

For a second, there was silence. When Stan spoke again, his voice had gone down to a hoarse whisper, static dancing on its edges. "Where did you hear that, Jack?"

"It was in The Brick — the handheld the Secret Service gave me. It went active when, when *I* went active. It was the name of a text file. It's in code. It's a routing code on a bunch of crates here in the complex. Crates of body bags and road signs."

"Hell," Stan grunted. "Hell and fucking *hell*."

Renicks waited, his pulse crashing in his head. His knuckles stood out white on the receiver.

"Jack, you ever hear of an ERM? An Emergency Response Model?"

"Something like it, sure." He thought of Begs saying *they model everything*.

"There are thousands of them. We do them, the FBI does them, the DoD, the Secret Service, White House flunkies, goddamn secretaries on lunch break in this town doodle ERMs on cocktail napkins. We encourage it. The idea is, whatever situation arises, once we know what's happening someone will have written a fifty-thousand word report on how to deal with it. You'd be surprised how effective it can be. Smart people sit there



and think of how things can go wrong and how to fix it, or at least minimize it, and sometimes they're so prescient it's kind of scary. ELIRO is an umbrella filing tag for a series of ERMs created on request about two years ago. It describes a U.S. President engineering a national emergency in order to declare martial law and seize power free from constitutional restraints."

Renicks blinked. For a second he thought he'd had a tiny stroke; he'd lost a second. "What?"

"The idea was, what would happen if a President sought to increase the powers of the Executive through non-Constitutional means? How would they achieve that? A State of Emergency. Scare the bejesus out of the population, scare Congress itself, and have all sorts of emergency powers voted in. Send out the National Guard. Suspend *Habeas Corpus* and a host of other protections. All temporary, of course. But in the scenario the aim was to use those emergency powers to make the power grab permanent."

Renicks thought of the crates in Storage room L-15. Body bags. Emergency signs. Ready to be trucked out. When Martial Law was invoked. Because terrorists had just nuked a few choice population centers around the country — from *within* the country. Panic. Terror. Chaos.

Stan said something else lost to a burst of static.

"Stan! Stan, what was that?"

"I said —"

Begley suddenly snapped her head around, holding up her hand just as the call went dead in Renicks' ear. As if she'd used psychic powers to cut the line.

"Did you hear that?" she whispered.

Renicks let the receiver fall slowly from his ear. He strained, listening. “I didn’t —”

The next moment she was moving. “Help me!” she hissed over her shoulder.

Renicks dropped the receiver and stepped forward. “With what?”

“Barricade the door!” she hissed back, grabbing onto the end of one of the filing cabinets and dragging it away from the wall. “They’re here!”