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designated [REDACTED]
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Designated Survivor

Chapter 19

by Jeff Somers

19.

One minute before finding himself in another air duct, Renicks stood, frozen. He watched Begley tugging ineffectually at the cabinet, trying to drag it. His eyes jumped to the door as someone crashed into it, making it jump on its hinges. The lock held. It wasn't much of a lock, though.

“Jesus, *Jack!*”

He blinked and sprang forward, dropping his bag and grabbing one end of the cabinet. He dragged it over to the door. Pushed it flush against it. Stood back and figured it would add another ten or fifteen seconds at best.

Repeated Stan's words to himself: *a U.S. President engineering a national emergency*. Pictured the crates in the storage room. Amesley, the man ultimately in charge of President Grant's security, running this show. The *ELIRO* document on The Brick.

Eliro. Renicks centered on the word again. It tugged at him. As if he'd seen it before, or ought to recognize it.

The door jumped again.

Begley turned and gave him a push. “Move!”

He stumbled backwards a step before regaining his balance. Suddenly decided Begley had grown up with brothers. Older.

“Where — ”

She pointed up. He turned to follow her arm and saw another air conditioning grate. Wide enough to wriggle into. He stood for a second, staring at it.

“Ah, *fuck*.”

She shoved him violently from behind. “*Move!*”

He whirled in time to receive several more blows to the chest. He whipped his hands up and grasped her by the wrists. The door jumped again.

“What about you?”

Staggering back, she surprised him. Pulled her weapon. Held it down against her splinted leg with her finger along the barrel. “I can't climb, Jack. Much less push myself through a fucking duct. *You're* the asset. You cannot be compromised, so climb up on the *goddamn* filing cabinet and get in the *fucking duct*.”

He stared for just a second. Brothers, he thought.

The door jumped.

He whirled and limped away, scooping up his bag and slinging it over his shoulder. Pushed his hand into his pocket and fumbled for his penknife. He pulled himself up on top of the filing cabinet, knocking the fax onto the floor. The grate over the duct was held in place by two small flathead screws.

The door jumped. There was a distinct cracking sound.

“Jack!” Begley shouted. “You don't have much time!”

“Thanks,” he muttered, sweat streaming into his eyes as he worked the screws.

The duct plate clattered to the floor. He shoved his bag in ahead of him and squeezed his shoulders in, pushing himself up.

“Jack!”

“Jesus fucking Christ,” he hissed to himself. For a split second of panic he thought he was stuck. Then, with a searing pain along each side as the sharp edges of sheet metal screws sliced into his skin he was in. “Does she think I'm *taking my time?*”

Then he was in the hot, gritty, echoing world of the duct. There was just enough room for him to wriggle his way forward. He was sweating immediately. Every move seemed incredibly loud.

Until the door smashed inward in the room behind him. Until gunshots. Until Begley screamed.

He froze. Realized he'd moved out of instinct. Terror. Self-preservation. He could pretend it was because he was the Designated Survivor, the acting President. Because he *had* to remain free, or people would die. But he suddenly wasn't sure if he hadn't run because *he* could die. Because he was afraid.

He lay there for a second. Paralyzed.

“*Mr. Secretary!*”

Darmity's voice. Other voices, then. Muffled.

Renicks pushed himself backwards a few inches. He couldn't leave Begley alone.

Then stopped.

“Mr. Secretary! Are you really gonna run from me? Are you gonna leave this gorgeous spitfire *in my hands?*”

What was he going to do? He couldn't even reach around to get to his own gun. He'd be emerging from the duct *backwards*. Going back was suicide. Going back was putting himself directly into their hands. Slowly, shaking with frustration, he began pushing himself forward again. Inches. He had to pull himself with his finger and push with his feet. Pushing his bag ahead of

him. Swollen ankle throbbing. Metal screws catching his flesh as he moved. Sweat and grime working their way into the wounds and burning.

The President. Charles A. Grant. In the third year of an increasingly disastrous term. Renicks ran it through his mind as he listened to his own hot, claustrophobic breathing. A president almost certainly playing out the string. A lame duck. He thought of the people around Grant, the people he appointed and hired. All of them had been with Grant for years, decades. All of them had been long time confidants. All of them had supported Grant in everything he did. There had been speculation in the papers that part of Grants' decline in popularity stemmed from the Yes-Men he had surrounded himself with, people of ability who nevertheless agreed with everything the President said or proposed. Even Gerry Flanagan. Grant with his crazy charm, a charm that inspired loyalty. A charm that inspired service.

He remembered Begley's words about Amesley. *He loves this country. And he idolizes President Grant.*

Grant. Tan. Tall, *Charming*. He'd felt the power of the man's charm himself. Standing in the Oval Office, being grinned at. The grin. It never left. It never flickered.

Jesus, it was possible. A president, even a weak, failing downward president like Grant had immense power behind the scenes. Executive orders, protected from public scrutiny. Add in men in other positions of power ready to take his orders. It was possible. *Engineering a national emergency*. Someone becomes Acting President when Grant stages an attack on himself. An Acting President in an Emergency, without all of the encumbrances and obstructions of a peacetime President.

Launches nuclear missiles — where? Anywhere. A world war would be emergency enough. Or hit domestic cities, blame terrorists. Declare martial law.

And suddenly a weak and downward failing President doesn't have to worry about an election any more.

It didn't make sense, though. If that was the plan, why *him*? Flanagan, as part of Grant's inner circle, should have been the Designated Survivor. He would have done what the President wanted. Why have him murdered so that John Renicks, Ph.D., who wasn't part of the plot and who wouldn't go along with things, would end up Acting President?

Maybe, he thought, Gerry hadn't been as charmed by Grant as he appeared. Maybe there'd been disagreements. Maybe Grant didn't think he could rely on Gerry to murders hundreds of thousands of people in order to spur a *coup d'etat*. That might explain why Gerry had been taken out, but not why he'd been slotted *in*. Unless they didn't have that much control. They could eliminate Gerry, but there hadn't been time, perhaps, to do anything else. Maybe they'd just done the math: Gerry wouldn't give in, wouldn't break. Maybe – *maybe* – Renicks would.

He told himself that maybe he would never know why. And that he had bigger immediate problems.

Blood was staining his shirt from the dozens of shallow cuts he'd inflicted on himself. He came to a junction. Ducts branching off to the left and right. He chose the left randomly. Simply because it seemed to lead away from the studio. Away from Darmity. Behind him, he heard a hollow booming noise. Realized he was leaving a perfect trail behind. Like a snail. Oozing blood with every increment.

He tried to increase his pace. Tried to estimate his lead. When he came to the next junction, with a duct branching off to the right, he pushed past it for several seconds, moving as quickly as he could manage. Straining his ears. He pushed back at panic, forcing himself to continue forward until he'd counted to a hundred. Then he reversed direction and struggled back to the junction. Waiting for the shout, the slap of a hand on his ankle. The sudden pinpricks of light as someone shot upwards into the duct. When he'd backed up enough to make the turn to the right, he paused a moment to inspect his false trail. It wasn't long, but in the dim light he thought it would fool anyone following him. Long enough, anyway.

He pushed thoughts out of his head. Pushed with his toes, pulled with his fingers. Breathed. Pushed his bag. Pushed with his toes, pulled with his fingers. Breathed.

Grates began appearing at regular intervals on the bottom of the ducts. He could see through the slats into the rooms below. All empty.

The available light began to increase. He could make out a widening in the ductwork up ahead, which resolved into a large exchange, three feet wide and tall enough to sit up in. Up above, behind a heavy-looking mesh was a large fan spinning in lazy circles. He pushed himself up against the side, pulling his legs up against his chest, and pulled the Kimber out. Checked that the safety was off. He hadn't fired the gun in two years. Had never fired it anywhere but a range.

He waited. Tried to breathe shallowly. Ignored the burning scrapes oozing blood.

Nothing happened. There was no noise behind him. No sign

of pursuit.

He set the gun down next to him and rubbed his hands over his face, scrubbing. Checked himself visually. His clothes were stained with blood, but it was all superficial wounds. He was filthy and sizzling with low-level pain, but he wasn't badly hurt. He wasn't in the hands of someone prepared to put thousands, maybe millions of people at risk for his own purposes.

He swallowed and sat forward. Opened his bag. He had to help Begley. He had to go back.