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[REDACTED] survivor

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Designated Survivor

Epilogue

by Jeff Somers

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Thirty seconds before stepping into the room, Renicks heard the noise. He paused in the hall just out of sight. Holding the huge mass of flowers, damp and fragrant against his cheek. The sheer volume of voices was intimidating.

The two men standing guard outside the room looked at him and kept looking. They were both nice-looking men of indeterminate age in lackluster suits that did not hide shoulder holsters well. They were both big without being huge. Strong, athletic men in the prime of health. The one nearest to Renicks produced a small hand-held device and manipulated with his thumb in a familiar way.

“Name, sir?”

Renicks cleared his throat. “Jack Renicks.”

There was, he was certain, a ripple of recognition between the two men. He had not seen his name in any news item. Had not been contacted or recognized or in any way indicated. According to every newspaper, web site, TV channel, or radio program he’d seen or heard, he’d been nowhere near the Secure Facility when there had been a “malfunction” of some equipment that had put the country on high alert for twenty-four hours. He was

impressed at the thoroughness of the clean-up mission, in fact.

The focus of the story was Grant's suicide and the investigation into how long his mental illness had been covered up. Renicks had little doubt Mallory and her advisors were more than willing to withstand the humiliation of being accused of hiding a President's competence issues in exchange for being in control of the story. The bombings were also in every story, painted as the crisis that had pushed Grant over the edge. Speculation was energetic and colorful, and investigatory committees were sprouting like mushrooms. Renicks had no doubt they would get nowhere near the truth unless all of their members held the highest clearances.

For proof of this theory, he looked to the Secure Facility — which he'd started thinking of in capital letters. The events he'd been part of there had been masterfully downgraded to a "systems failure" that had merely contributed to a paranoid President's breakdown. He was impressed. Mallory and her people had taken three days to convince everyone that this was an isolated, if horrifying, breach of national security, and were working hard to pin much of the blame on an unbalanced President who had allowed "uncleared" elements access to his immediate surroundings against the sound advice of his Secret Service.

The man moved his thumb smoothly on the tiny screen, then nodded. Glanced at Renicks, then back to the screen. "Okay," he said. "Go on in."

He steeled himself. Glanced down at himself to make sure he was presentable. He'd worn an old pair of jeans, broken in but still serviceable, a white button-down shirt, and a blue blazer.

Had struggled with the choice of clothes like a kid going on a first date. Ironically trying very hard to land on some vaguely defined level of casual.

Concealing his limp, he forced himself into motion and moved forward, turning to his left and stepping between the expressionless men into the room.

At first, no one noticed him. The room appeared to be filled with women and flowers. Renicks watched the scene for a moment, wondering if it would be possible to flee.

Begley lay in the bed, looking small and child-like. She had her arms folded peacefully over her belly. A monitor was clipped to one finger, and an IV line ran from her left elbow to a pair of clear plastic bags hung above her. Renicks winced at how tired and drawn she was. But beautiful. And unbroken: She was laughing, her whole body involved, quaking with good humor. He wondered how many people would be able to go through what she had and still laugh like that. Open, without hesitation. As if they hadn't both just learned just how terrible the world was. Just how dark its secrets were.

Around her were four adult women and six small girls. The women were grouped loosely around the bed, finding floor space where they could amongst the dozens of huge floral arrangements. Renicks stared for a moment, struck by how much each of them resembled Begs. Her sisters were plumper than her, all older in small increments. They were rounder and less-defined, physically, but their faces had the same oval prettiness, the same clear intelligence. The same mocking eyes and glossy, dark hair, the same creamy tan skin. This was an entire family, he thought, that had never once gone to a

dermatologist in high school, begging for an acne cure. He imagined if he used the word *blemish* they would frown at him and shake their heads, unfamiliar with the term.

The children were all tiny Begleys. They were playing an obscure game involving toilet paper and tunneling between their mothers' ankles on a continuous basis, laughing so furiously Renicks thought it likely they were all hyperventilating. Their mothers were all talking with each other, a roundabout conversation that formed smaller sub-groups on the fly, mutating and shifting constantly.

He cleared his throat.

The conversation didn't stop, but attention shifted as all the adults in the room turned their heads to look at him. The combined energy of their attention felt like a physical force beating against him. For a second they continued to talk, the kids continued to scream and run.

"Jack!" Begley shouted.

The sisters all shouted *Jack!* in concert, and he was enveloped in perfume and fuss. The flowers were lifted from his arms and exclaimed over, transported to a heretofore unnoticed spot of clear space on the window sill. For a minute and a half he was closely *observed*, each sister reporting her findings in a loud, happy voice.

He's handsome!

So tall!

You'll have to take this man shopping, Annie. He's been single a long time, I can see.

These scratches! You poor thing.

As the reports were announced he was pushed through the

crowd. He stepped over more than one child, all of whom grinned up at him mischievously, shyly. He finally found himself standing at the edge of the bed. Begley reached up her arm and placed her hand on his forearm. He leaned in awkwardly and gave her a peck on the cheek. Then stood there, grinning stupidly. For a few seconds he and Begs were the eye of a chatter hurricane as her sisters continued to discuss him loudly.

Begs squeezed his arm. “Hey, guys,” she said in a surprisingly strong voice. “Give Jack and me a few minutes, okay?”

To his amazement, her sisters all nodded amicably and began the complex process of gathering their children. This took some time. Through it all they chattered on, sometimes addressing him, sometimes acting as if he’d left the room. He stood there silently, throwing smiles around. Couldn’t believe that he felt awkward. Being awkward with Marianne Begley should have been impossible.

When they were alone in the room, one of the two men guarding the door peeked his head in. Begley raised her arm towards him.

“Give us a little privacy, okay?”

He hesitated, glanced at Renicks, then nodded, pulling the door shut.

Renicks stood for a moment, looking at the door.

“Thanks for coming, Jack.”

He looked down at her and smiled. “I would have come sooner. First I was arrested, then you were unconscious.”

“Wanna see my scar? It’s *epic*. They told me they had to remove most of my insides and put them back like a puzzle. I’m going to win every scar contest for the rest of my life.”

“But you’re going to be okay?” He eyed the tubes running in and out of her, the monitors crowded around. The thinned, tired look of her.

“I’ll be fine, in time. The leg ... I’ll never run another marathon under five hours.”

He blinked. Realized he’d had no idea she ran. Wondered at this, that there were things — huge swaths of information — that he did not know about Marianne Begley. It felt wrong. It felt like something that should be corrected.

“You run marathons?”

“Three so far.” She sighed. “I had an idea about running one on every continent, some day.”

He nodded, impressed. Another silence swelled up between them. He cleared his throat, suddenly filled with emotion, suddenly aware that this person he’d just met, who’d saved his life, who had come to feel like a part of his existence had been very close to dying.

“They done *debriefing* you yet?” he said.

She laughed. “I get the feeling debriefing is going to be my new career. You?”

He took a deep breath. “They’re forming a group. Don’t call it a committee. Blackline funding, top-level clearance, reports directly to The President. Officially won’t exist. They asked me to be a part of it. Sort of an advisor.” He nodded. “You too. We’re first-hand witnesses. We interacted with them.”

She looked at him. Steady. Tired, but *there*. Committed.

“We’re still in trouble, huh, Jack?” she said.

He reached down and took her hand. Smiled. “Yep. I think we are.”