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Designated Survivor

Chapter 3

by Jeff Somers

3.

Ten minutes before the Detail arrived at the Secure Facility, Special Agent Marianne Begley was riding the elevator up to the surface. The ride up took twenty-seven seconds. Twenty-three seconds going down. There were fifteen buttons on the panel, but only two worked under normal conditions; the others could be used to enter codes to modify the behavior of the elevator. There were escape panels in the ceiling and floor of the cab that could be released manually; the outer doors of each floor were wired into a numerical keypad on the inside of the elevator shaft and would open in response to the correct code.

Agent Begley knew this because she had ridden the elevator, based on her own bitter calculations, over one-thousand times.

She was a slender twenty-eight year-old woman with clear skin the color of light coffee, her dark hair in a neat bun carefully pinned to stay up under even the most physically stressful conditions. She held a tall cup of coffee brewed in the huge, industrial kitchen on the ninth level, light and sweet enough to make most people gag, and a thin tablet computer containing all the files she would need for the day's work. Most of it had to do with the Secure Facility itself, and she didn't need any of those

files, really, because in the thirteen months since she'd been assigned to Continuity she'd spent most of her time getting to know the old bunker complex better than she'd ever wanted to. It was huge, it was empty, it was a place designed for a series of events every sane person in the world fervently hoped would never come to pass.

It was like working in a sewer: No one ever wanted to think about how it worked or who was down there, making the magic happen.

Thirteen months. She'd spent fifteen months working vice, out of the academy. It had occurred to her how unfair it was that any female cop with a BMI under 25 almost automatically been assigned to vice in the mid- to large-sized cities, condemned to walk around in hot pants enticing middle-aged men to proposition them, or go into clubs wearing something short and skimpy, trying to make drug deals. But at least there had been a clear timeline: Vice was unpopular, and thus everyone got a tour through it for a time, usually one year. Then she'd spent three years working Major Crimes in Baltimore, which was like seven years working Major Crimes in any other city. Then she'd been recruited into the Secret Service and she'd seen herself running alongside Presidential limousines, smashing counterfeit rings, a good mix between easy posts and real action.

Instead, she'd gotten Continuity, and she'd been underground ever since. She'd had three live Survivors stay a total of sixteen hours in the facility, stuck with them down in the suite. All the other thousands of hours had been spent studying the place inch by inch. Ostensibly so she would know the place better than anyone, so she could do her job better. In reality it

had been a desperate attempt to stay sane.

The elevator doors snapped open and she stepped into the bland, short corridor leading from the elevator bank to the entrance of the above-ground complex. She glanced down at her tablet to check the time and started walking briskly. Too soon, but people were, shockingly, sometimes a little early.

Today was number four: The Secretary of Education, a man she'd never thought about much until she'd gotten her Alert Bulletin four hours ago. John Renicks, Ph.D., who had gotten about as much attention as any previous Secretary of Education, which was to say none at all. She liked his photo, was impressed by his C.V., and sincerely hoped he was not a chatty person. Bunker duty with the Designated Survivor was bad enough without hours and hours of small talk.

She also hoped he was not the type to make passes at women required by their jobs to be in an enclosed space with them. She would hate to be reprimanded again because it was apparently not acceptable to put cabinet members into submission holds until they apologized for things. That had probably bought her a whole second year of Continuity. She didn't want to buy a third.

Her shoes, comfortable flats that, she hoped, straddled some indefinite line between style and utility, made no noise on the cold cement floor as she walked, thumbing through screens and noting last-minute details. There were already five more emails since she'd last checked before stepping onto the elevator half a minute before; the Service did not like it when things changed at the last minute, even if the change was due to an Act of God like a heart attack.

At the end of the corridor was a steel maglock door with a

keypad mounted on the wall next to it. A blast door. Thick steel. Lock bolts embedded deep in the concrete and extending into the door itself. Impossible to open once engaged. She absent-mindedly entered seventeen digits into the keypad and the door unlocked with a deep thunk she could feel through the soles of her shoes. Passing through the doorway, the air temperature dropped a good five or six degrees as the sense of constricting space fell away. Behind her, the door swung shut on spring-loaded hinges and melted back into the wall, invisible to a casual glance and difficult to detect even under intense examination. The building that housed the only entrance to the lower levels was small, covering just about a thousand square feet. It had a few offices, a lavatory, and a storage closet, and a large lobby area with a front desk. Anyone who did find their way into the building, which had no sign on the outside, would be politely directed wherever they were actually going by the smiling person behind the desk.

Or, if the small unassuming building turned out to be their intended destination, arrested.

The lobby was nothing special. It had high ceilings and a large piece of modern art hanging against the back wall, but otherwise was just an oversized room with a reception desk. Standing in front of the desk, apparently staring out into space, was Director of the Secret Service Martin Amesley.

“You’re early, Agent Begley,” he said without turning to look at her. “I like that.”

She nodded and said nothing. His presence at Continuity Events was not common. He might like promptness, but he did not like *her*, she knew. Evidence being her continued purgatory

in the bowels of the bunker, cataloging air ducts, shortcuts, corridor lengths, and the long list of empty, unfurnished rooms. She'd even taken a few trips to the old mine shafts the complex had grown out of, a century old and smelling like rotting garbage. Amesley was taciturn and gruff and was well known to be of the opinion that the world in general, the United States of America in particular, and the younger agents of the Secret Service in *specific* had long been in a lamentable decline. She had the impression that no success on her part would convince him that she was not irreparably a member of an inferior generation. Inferior to his own, of course.

They stood in awkward silence.

The Secretary of Education was not considered a volatile asset by the Service; Begley wasn't sure why Amesley was there, and it made her nervous. Normally the Director of the Secret Service would be with the President at the State of the Union, overseeing the security detail. Amesley had a reputation of trying to be unpredictable to keep his people on their toes, though. Whatever the reason, his presence made her anxious.

There was a flash on her tablet, and she glanced down at her alerts. "Seven minutes, give or take."

Amesley grunted.

The front doors opened, and three maintenance workers started to enter. There were dozens of them crawling around the complex, engaged in what seemed like an endless retrofit. Trying to bring the systems into the current century. The workers noticed the two of them standing there, paused in surprise for a moment, and then backed out apologetically. She watched them go, keeping her face impassive. She felt uncomfortable with all

the workers, for reasons she found difficult to articulate. They had all been cleared by the Service, so perhaps it was the invasion; as much as she disliked admitting it, she owned this complex. It was hers. She knew everything about it, and she ran the show when a Designated Survivor was assigned. The workers were contractors, not under her authority, and were delving into her secrets. Her property.

They settled back into a stiff silence. Director Amesley checked his watch, crisply.

She went through a mental checklist. The Executive Suite on the Twelfth level had been prepared. The one-way lock on the door was operational and she had the current code, generated on her own tablet and input by her own hand. She'd cleaned and rebuilt her weapon the night before, it was loaded with a full magazine and she had a second mag in her pocket. She had her ID and access card.

Outside, police cars and a black sedan pulled into the circular driveway.

Begley watched the scene unfold. The cop cars idled, lights still flashing. The driver's side door opened and an agent climbed out. She didn't recognize him; he was short and burly and kind of unkempt, like he'd been sweating for a while. She thought it likely that Director Amesley would have something to say to him about the grooming and appearance guidelines issued by the Service.

Before the agent could open the passenger door, it opened on its own, and the Secretary of Education stepped out. She recognized him immediately from his photo, and while there would be several identity checks while working through the

protocol, she reminded herself that the initial visual confirmation should never be discounted. It was easy to over-rely on technological checks when your gut was usually right.

She watched Renicks through the glass. He and the agent spoke a few words to each other and it looked a little heated based on the body language: Renicks stiff and unbending, the agent with his shoulders ducked like he wanted to tackle him. Then the cop cars were pulling away and Renicks was walking towards them. She approved of his packing: He was wearing a dress shirt, a pair of tan pants, sturdy-looking shoes, and a sports jacket, and carried a single manageable bag, deep and square. They sometimes arrived packed for a six-month trip to a deserted island, and she certainly hadn't signed up for the Service in order to be a bellhop.

Renicks and the agent entered the lobby simultaneously. The agent let Renicks move ahead of him, glowering behind as they advanced. The Secretary stopped a few steps away from her and dropped his bag, extending his hand to Amesley. She ignored the fact that he automatically introduced himself to the man first. She was used to ignoring such things.

"Jack Renicks," he said. Begley realized he was chewing gum, and allowed herself a slight smile.

Amesley looked down at the hand for a moment just shy of rude, and then took it in his own and shook. "Secretary Renicks," he said, his voice deep and authoritative, gruff from the thousands of packs of cigarettes even ten years of not smoking couldn't erase. "This is Special Agent Marianne Begley. She will be your In-Suite Agent during your time here."

Renicks shook her hand with a smile. "I'll try not to be any

trouble,” he said, sounding friendly.

She nodded. “You won’t be.”

He tilted his head a little, still smiling, and then nodded, turning back to Amesley. “Director, do you have a moment?”

Behind him, Begley noticed the agent redden, his hands twitching at his sides. Something had happened on the drive over. She let her eyes linger on the driver for a few seconds. She didn’t like the look of him, and wondered how he’d gotten this detail. Amesley personally approved all assignments for Continuity, and he didn’t look like the sort of man Amesley would put his trust in.

Amesley looked at his watch. “Actually, things are running behind, Mr. Secretary. The refit of this complex — that is why there are so many workers running about — I am sure you understand. I will stop by the suite later, however.” He gestured at Begley. “Right now, if you don’t mind, I would like to validate you as John Renicks, Secretary of Education, Designated Survivor.”

Begley jumped, but before she could speak, Renicks was talking.

“Validate?”

He was smiling a little. Begley liked his smile. It was kind of crooked. His teeth were good, but not perfect; he had a chip in one of his front incisors he hadn’t bothered getting filled. For some reason she decided not to explore, she found this charming.

Amesley smiled back, disconcerting Begley. He was a man who’d been born already fifty years old, scowling owlshly around the Delivery Room, and never meant to smile.

“Mr. Secretary, we employ a dual validation process to ensure that you are, in fact, Secretary John Renicks, and thus the duly appointed Designated Survivor today. A matter of DNA — a pinprick on your thumb — and a voice print analysis. Agent Begley can —”

Begley cleared her throat loudly. Amesley was her boss’s boss’s boss, but the Secure Facility was her pond, and she was not going to let him piss in it.

“Director, I must insist protocol be followed. The DS is not supposed to be validated until installed in the Executive Suite and confirmed safe. The reasons for this precaution are —”

Director Amesley turned his smile on her. It was a terrifying husk of a smile, something that hadn’t been too healthy to begin with and should have been carried away and buried. He was a short man, wiry, his head too large for his body. His hair was a brilliant white, cut short against his scalp. He wore large, thick glasses that sat on his small, slender nose like he’d accidentally taken the wrong pair at the gym or something. The glasses seemed to be part of him, as if his eyes had grown out of his face, forming a bony framework that *looked* like glasses.

“Agent Begley is, of course, correct,” he said. The icy tone of his voice made his lingering smile even more horrifying. “I should know, I helped *write* the protocol. You’ll find her to be very dedicated to the *letter* of the protocol, Secretary Renicks.”

Renicks grinned at her. “I wouldn’t want my Doppelganger running amok in here either.”

Begley nodded, glanced at the glowering Amesley, and thought, *well, that probably bought me another three months down here.*

Renicks suddenly gestured at Director Amesley. “I love your tie, Director,” he said.

Begley kept a frown from her face by force of will. In her limited experience with Martin Amesley, she predicted this conversation was not going to go well. Amesley had old-fashioned ideas about — about just about everything, she thought. Men’s suits, the quality of younger generations, *women* working field details, and certainly, she thought, about the proper look and behavior of a member of President Grant’s cabinet. Begley was certain of two things: One, Renicks did *not* fit Amesley’s requirements for the position, at least not visually, and two, in Amesley’s opinion that was not President Grant’s fault. Director Amesley thought Grant’s election was the sole beam of light during the country’s otherwise disturbing decline.

Thinking it was too bad for the old man that the rest of the country increasingly disagreed with him, she smiled noncommittally at Renicks.

“What?” Amesley appeared to ponder the situation for a few seconds, frowning, and then fingered his tie. It was dark blue and had red lines criss-crossing it. “Ah, yes. Ah, thank you.”

Begley glanced at Renicks and he winked at her. She blinked, startled, and then settled herself. A joker, she thought; just what she needed. She downgraded him from *charming* with a little regret. It was going to be a long night.

“If you’ll follow me, Secretary Renicks, I’ll get you situated.”

Amesley and the other agent followed them, which Begley didn’t like. She could think of no legitimate reason to exclude them from the elevator ride down, however, and so silently waved her magnetic ID card at the hidden door in the rear of the

lobby, enjoyed the slight gasp of surprise it elicited from Renicks, and stood aside as the three men entered the small elevator cab. She checked the hall behind her before entering the elevator, and let her eyes stick on the floor and ceiling of the cab for a moment, looking for anything unusual.

She didn't find anything, and let the doors slide shut. She pressed the lowest button on the panel, an unmarked white piece of plastic, and the elevator began moving.

"By the way," Director Amesley said in a quiet, almost gentle voice. "I understand this was supposed to be a vacation day for you, Agent Begley. I'm sorry you had to come in to work this detail."

She blinked at her blurry reflection in the stainless steel elevator doors. Unsure how to respond, because she was unsure of her own motivations. Her first vacation in years scheduled, booked, double-checked, paid for. Her, delighted to be free of the mountain for a few weeks, to actually miss a State of the Union Continuity Event! Delighted.

Then Murray landed in the hospital. Car accident, intensive care, random flex of the universe, and the scheduled In-Suite Agent was off the roster. When she'd seen the alert, she'd volunteered to cancel everything and go back to the mountain. Volunteered. Scrambling to cancel two flights, two hotel rooms, a rental car, a bikini wax, a half-marathon she'd already paid for, and six separate lunch and dinner dates with parents, stepparents, siblings, stepsiblings, and two college roommates.

Volunteered. She didn't want to think too hard about her motivations. Didn't want to imagine that the Secure Facility had become her home, that it had gotten a hand on her.

She looked at Amesley without moving her head. Murray had been one of the Director's Favorite Sons, one of a group of agents the Director tended to assign to his own details over and over again. She imagined Amesley hadn't been pleased to see her name slotted in for the evening instead, too late for him to make any other arrangement without jeopardizing preparations. Maybe made the Director angry enough to use harsh language. The idea of Amesley cursing amused her, and she struggled to contain a smile. Amesley had seemed irritated at her presence all day. No sense in making things worse.

"That's all right, sir," she replied with careful politeness. "That's the job."

"Well," Renicks said cheerfully as the elevator began dropping into the earth, "that makes two of us: I'm not supposed to be here, either."