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Designated Survivor

Chapter 4

by Jeff Somers

4.

Thirty seconds before he got off the elevator, Renicks was trying to do three things at once.

One, he was purposefully avoiding looking at Agent Begley, who was so attractive in her perfectly-tailored, sober, gray suit the idea of spending several hours locked in a room with her was terrifying. Two, he was picturing the teams of workers outside the building and trying to pin down what bothered him about them. Three, he was formulating his approach to speaking with Director Amesley about Agent Darmity, which, based on his impressions of Director Amesley, was probably a bad idea.

Despite his efforts, Begley floated in front of his thoughts. Well-off, he thought. Way above her pay grade, at least; her suit was Chanel and had been tailored to fit her perfectly. Her watch was modest and not decorative at all — a serious field watch, nothing fancy. But her shoes flashed bright red soles when she walked, and the slender gold bracelet around her other wrist was expensive stuff. She was either from a rich family or she had thirteen credit cards in a block of ice in her freezer. She had the impassive expression of someone very used to keeping their

thoughts to themselves, and had not looked at Director Amesley once since he'd walked into the lobby. This is someone who doesn't want to be here, he thought, and blames her boss for it.

He knew perfectly well that he had to be validated; it was clearly stated in his orientation docs that he was required to submit to DNA and voice print analysis (and any other validation process offered by duly appointed representatives of the Secret Service, The Central Intelligence Agency, the White House Staff, the United States Congress, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, or their duly assigned proxies — and, he assumed, just about anyone else who happened to have a fingerprint scanner and a copy of his voice print file).

He found himself thinking of Agent Begley's neck as it emerged from the fabric of her flattering white blouse, and forced himself to study Director Amesley intently while the elevator sank.

Amesley was older, past the mandatory retirement age, but he carried it well. He was short and slender, his thin white hair cut almost to a crew-cut, his scalp pink beneath it. He wore huge plastic glasses with thick lenses, a man who did not have vanity but wanted you to *know* he had no vanity so he underscored the ugly, perfunctory fashion decisions he made. Behind the lenses his eyes were brown and flat, without warmth or humor. He spoke in the declarative, short bursts of a man used to being obeyed — a type Renicks thought he might as well resign himself to meeting over and over again that night. Amesley's suit was sober blue and invisibly normal, modest without being cheap, new in the sense of not having been worn much. He did not wear

a watch, which Renicks found strange, but held his cell phone in his hand in a casual way that hinted he *always* carried his cell phone in his hand, because he was that busy. His shoes were old-fashioned wingtips, in good shape but also not new.

Based on the fact that his suit was at least four or five years old but still fit perfectly, Renicks assumed the Director was one of those small, wiry men who had not changed much physically since their school days. He would probably still fit in the various uniforms of the private schools he'd attended as a boy.

There was a tiny American Flag pin on Amesley's lapel, and Renicks studied it. He wasn't sure what conclusions to draw from an American flag pin, aside from the fact that Director Amesley considered himself a patriot, and wanted everyone to *know* this as well. He looked at Amesley's tie – phenomenally ugly – for a moment before turning to Agent Begley and smiling.

Begley ignored him, but glanced at Amesley. A glance which should have frozen the Director into an ice sculpture. Renicks found himself wishing the Director would be staying with them in the suite, simply for the entertainment value. He wondered if the time had come to date again. The divorce was five years old, the girls were in junior high. Maybe too soon to have a live-in, sure, but a few dates? He watched Agent Begley for a few seconds, pondering the possibilities. He liked the way she smelled. He didn't know the perfume, but he knew it was expensive.

Based on her carriage — shoulders back, ramrod straight, balanced and easy — he figured she was the sort of girl who walked around abandoned parking lots without a moment of

fear.

He was impressed at how well the entrance to the elevators was hidden, but he didn't give the building a very high score for secrecy. It was too small. You walked in, the lobby was eighty percent of the place. You had this nifty reception desk, but there was no room for offices or anything. If you thought about it for ten seconds you realized everything that made this building necessary was underground, and if you thought about *that* for ten seconds you realized the entrance to the Secure Facility, as the agents were fond of calling it, had to be inside.

He'd made sure he was behind everyone in the elevator, and studied them. Darmity stole a glance back at him and then snapped forward, red in the face again. Renicks had decided to hold off trying to complain about Agent Darmity; he looked like he was having a *terrible* day and Renicks had sloughed off the earlier tension and was willing to let bygones be bygones, for the moment. Maybe Agent Darmity had woken up to a personal hell and was barely holding it together. He'd had bad days himself, as an ex-wife would gladly attest.

The elevator ride took no time at all. His stomach pressed up against his diaphragm for a few seconds, his ears popped, and then the doors snapped open and he was following Agent Begley down what looked like a hallway in a nice hotel: Thick carpet, red and blue striped wallpaper on the walls, brass sconces every few feet. They walked in a muffled silence, the carpet absorbing every noise. He noticed the little black bubbles every few feet on the ceiling; cameras, probably aimed in order to eliminate any possible blind spots. At the end of the hall was an impressive set

of double doors. They were plain white metal doors with big polished nickel handles like huge staples inserted into them; a larger black bubble was mounted at the center of the lintel, a keypad with an astounding number of unmarked buttons was mounted in the wall to the left — not simply a plate screwed into the studs, either, but actually part of the wall as if it had been manufactured as one sheet and installed. Renicks guessed it would be very difficult to cut into the wall to get at the wiring of the keypad. Above it was a small video screen which was displaying the Great Seal of the United States in flickering faded colors.

“How is the retrofit going?” he asked in a tone of idle conversation as they approached the doors, thinking about the teams of workers up above when he’d arrived with Agent Darmity, men and women wearing blue overalls.

Director Amesley turned slightly as he walked, so that Renicks had his profile. “This facility is undergoing renovation and retrofit. Nothing to be alarmed about! The facility is fully operational and security systems are all green and online. The workers are actually leaving the premises right now, as per protocol.”

The cheer in the Director’s voice felt forced to Renicks, but he couldn’t be sure if this was because the Director was lying when he said *nothing to be alarmed about*, or because cheer was an expression that did not come naturally to him.

Begley turned slightly to smile back at him. “It’s been more than a decade since the last upgrade of systems here. That’s pretty much *forever* in terms of computer systems and security measures.”

Renicks nodded, picturing the workers he'd seen, chewing over the memory. Nine men, three women. Too clean, though maybe they hadn't started working yet. Every single one of them carrying what looked like identical tool bags, brown canvas, but not a tool to be seen, everything tucked neatly away — no hammers in loops, no screwdrivers in back pockets.

He was being paranoid. CIA everywhere, because he was, for one night only, next in line to become President of the United States. Emily, had called it his “always on” mode; he got distracted — obsessed — by little details and kept circling them. Emily had always told him this made her want to slap him in the face, and that had been when she'd still told him *I love you* on a regular basis.

At the double doors Begley stepped forward and punched a complex series of the unmarked buttons. A pattern, Renicks figured. No numbers or letters to remember and divulge. More like a combination to a safe. It had to be changed on a regular basis, so he was impressed with the easy, automatic way she entered it. There was soft click, and she immediately pushed one of the doors inward and stepped in, blocking the entrance for a moment as she scanned the interior. Making sure nothing had changed, that there was no sign of trouble. After a moment she stepped back out, pushed the other door inward, and gestured them in.

“The Executive Suite,” she said as he stepped past her. “Basically a panic room. All communications and control can be routed here in the event of an outer breach of the facility. Eleven hundred square feet, designed to house eight people comfortably and twelve uncomfortably.”

He looked around. It was like a pricey hotel room. There was a small foyer marked off by white tile on the floor and tiny table pushed up against one wall, a set of the saddest fake flowers he'd ever seen in an unremarkable blue vase. The tile ended three feet in and became more of the deep, industrial carpet: A living room. Two couches, a deep, plush-looking easy chair, a coffee table facing a wall of bookshelves with a mid-sized flat screen television hanging between. The wall opposite the TV, behind the couches, sported a glittering bar, piled with bottles and glassware. Renicks considered it the suite's most attractive feature so far. A set of curtains covered the far wall. Renicks was certain he would find cinder blocks and mortar if he pulled them aside, but they supported the illusion he was in a Holiday Inn somewhere for a convention. He was certain he would discover a mini bar in the main bedroom.

He glanced at the doors again. The handles were the same as those on the outside. If Uncle Richie had been with him, he would have said they were perfect for slipping a broomstick or metal rod through if you wanted to keep people outside. Renicks thought there was plenty of technology doing that job, but wondered for a second if those kind of emergency considerations had been part of the design. Security of the Last Resort, Richie would have called it.

Begley walked in like a Realtor. "Full kitchen through there. Two full bathrooms, though I have to warn you the fixtures are old and the showers both flood. Ten years is a long time between refits. Two other small bedrooms, and the office."

Renicks nodded, dropping his bag on one couch. "Twelve people?" he asked, turning to look at her.

She smiled. The first genuine smile he'd gotten from her, he thought. "I said *uncomfortably*," she reminded him.

He winked. "You sure did."

Amesley cleared his throat. The space felt dry and tight, sealed off.

"If we can, Mr. Secretary, we need to have you validated in the Continuity system prior to the speech."

Renicks nodded. He felt cheerful. He'd been dreading the speech: Standing and sitting, applauding constantly, keeping his face blank when Grant got to the education paragraph, probably whittled down to *forty*-three words by now. Given enough time he assumed The President would get that down to simply pointing at him and giving him a thumb's up, no words needed. The thought of being able to sit in this gloomy bunker with a cocktail, trying to impress the pretty Agent Begley with his witty remarks was undeniably more attractive.

Amesley smiled a twitchy smile and gestured at Begley, who stepped forward, tapping her tablet.

"Mr. Secretary —"

"Call me Jack."

"— we will perform the voice print analysis first," she said without breaking stride or looking up from the screen. She was good at ignoring men, he thought. "During your orientation you supplied a pass phrase which was digitized and kept on file. If you cannot remember —"

Renicks recited, "John Renicks. Above all, we must realize that no arsenal, or no weapon in the arsenals of the world, is so formidable as the will and moral courage of free men and women. It is a weapon our adversaries in today's world do not

have.” He shrugged, looking around the room again. “Ronald Reagan.”

There was a soft happy *ding* from her tablet, and Begley glanced up at him with a raised eyebrow. “You have a good memory, Mr. Secretary.”

He nodded. “It’s easy. There’s only six individual concepts in the phrase. The rest is unnecessary modifiers and grammatical artifacts.”

Her eyes shifted to the side as she considered that. Then she offered him a bland smile. “I’m afraid we’ll need to validate your DNA as well. A blood sample and simultaneous injection of a temporary transmitter into your bloodstream. The complex employs a simple biorhythmic algorithm to establish your presence or absence from the site.”

He remembered this from the orientation, but hesitated anyway. “My bloodstream?”

She nodded. “Don’t worry. It will be flushed out of your system in a few days. It doesn’t closely track your movements.” There was a beat. “That’s *my* job.”

He eyed her tablet for a moment. “So you won’t be able to see if I try to slip out the back, huh?”

She smiled again. “It’s not that precise. The biorhythmic tracking is mainly used to determine that you are *inside* the complex. If you become Acting President and this complex goes online, it will check for your presence on a constant basis. If it fails to detect your vital signs, it will assume you have died and go offline, transferring authority to another complex, or back to the White House, as appropriate.”

“Agent *Begley*,” Amesley complained. “Can you please

continue Dr. Renicks' education *later?*”

She looked at the Director for a second, then back at Renicks, still smiling. “That clear?”

He nodded. He thought, *she's pissed.*

She held the tablet towards him, and he saw a slight indentation in the top of it, the perfect shape to slide his thumb into. Without any further prompting he did so. After a second there was a click, a sharp pain, and then another happy *ding.*

Begley took the tablet back and glanced down at the screen, nodding as he pushed his thumb into his mouth and sucked. “Very good, Mr. Secretary. Congratulations,” she added, looking back at him with a smile he decided was friendly. “You are now officially the Designated Survivor for the next seven hours.”

He winked again. “Call me Jack,” he said around his thumb.