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Designated Survivor

Chapter 5

by Jeff Somers

5.

Fifteen minutes before checking the video screen installed above the keypad, Begley sat in one of the overstuffed easy chairs across from the couch, working her way through her Inbox, half-listening to the TV. The usual bloviating from commentators speculating on the State of the Union. She was not politically minded, which made her typical of the Secret Service. Disinterest made it easier to risk your life for whoever had the job that week.

She looked up at Renicks. He was sitting on the couch with his shoes off, talking on the landline phone — there was no cell signal at all once you went underground — while he watched the TV. She tuned in his conversation from time to time without really meaning to.

“I don’t know. A few hours. I brought plenty, but I’m playing hooky. Don’t tell anyone.”

It was strangely cozy. The suite had a sealed feeling, cut off from the world. It always reminded her of her parents' basement when she'd been a kid. She would sneak down to sit on the musty old couches and watch the ancient television, separate. Sometimes she'd pretend the world had ended and she was

living in the basement, and she'd catalog her survival strategy: Water in the boiler. Big bags of dog food piled up. She'd even kept a cache of dolls and books hidden in the basement, in case she ever had to shelter there.

“She is, actually. It's stressful, being on good behavior. There probably is, but that's not a good idea.”

She glanced at Renicks again as the fanfare began on the TV. *Mister Speaker, The President of the United States!* She was surprised by how relaxed he was, compared to some of the previous Designated Survivors she'd had. He wasn't barking into the landline, going through cell phone withdrawal. He hadn't yet treated her like a flight attendant or waitress. He didn't seem filled with self-importance, and not only hadn't he tried to impress her with all the people he knew on a first-name basis, including, of course, President Grant himself, he had not actually spoken much to her at all.

Turning back to her tablet, she surreptitiously brought up Renicks' background file. She was already pretty familiar with it. She just hit the highlights. Mother killed in botched robbery at a supermarket when he was eight. Father had been a small town doctor, dead of a heart attack when Renicks was nineteen. Some indication of a small-town scandal indicated by a flurry of footnotes attached to the main report, but she didn't drill down into them. If she'd been doing the profile she would have flagged him as a possible risk for foreign recruitment: Bright, no close family ties, no clear political beliefs.

Tunneling down some links, she found that an on-the-ball agent had in fact flagged this, but further reports had minimized that concern.

Father's brother Richard Albert Renicks, a.k.a Richie The Rail, was the only dark spot in the family tree: Ties to organized crime, sixteen arrests, a total of fifteen years served in various state and federal prisons. Thief, mainly, although a person of interest in two homicides. Black Sheep of the family, certainly, but there were clear indications the Secretary had maintained a friendly relationship with his uncle up until the latter's death in East Jersey State Prison.

Madam Speaker, Vice President Mallory, members of Congress, distinguished guests, and fellow Americans.

She glanced up at the screen in time to see a brief flash of the Vice President. Elizabeth Mallory was a regally tall black woman. She looked fantastic in a sober dark blue dress, her hair up in a businesslike bun. Begley always had the impression that Vice President Mallory would be a terrifying boss.

"Hey sugarbooger! How was school today?"

Begley glanced at The Secretary. *Sugarbooger*, she thought, smiling slightly. Renicks had the dopey smile of the doting father. She glanced at the door, at the small video screen next to it. The door was locked but not sealed, and could be opened by any authorized key card. That was protocol; you only sealed the suite in the event of imminent threat inside the facility. She couldn't make out the video screen from where she was. She considered getting up to visually check the hall outside — four agents were on duty at all times by the doors — but decided it could wait a few minutes. She looked back down at her tablet.

Education started getting impressive after his father's death. Degree in English from Rutgers College. Masters from Johns Hopkins, Cognitive Science with a side program in Education

Administration. Doctorate shortly after, his dissertation on the subject of language techniques to aid in absorption and comprehension in children from low-income backgrounds and challenged school systems. The dissertation had been widely published and made a stir in the sorts of circles a 300-page document with that sort of subject matter might actually be read. He'd also published an article about Esperanto's potential as a universal documentation markup language that had gotten a bit of attention in academic circles. Begley spent a few seconds trying to think of something more boring than Esperanto, and failed.

She glanced at the TV. President Grant, white hair, tan skin, white teeth. She'd forgotten just *how* unnaturally tan the man was.

Renicks stood up and placed the receiver back in its cradle, pushing his hands into his pockets and standing near the television. She looked at him for a moment, then closed her open apps and put the tablet aside.

“Disappointed you're not there?”

He smiled a little without looking at her. “Absolutely not in the least.” He turned to look at her. “What about you? Disappointed that you're *here*?”

“Disappointed is the wrong word.”

I do not stand before you tonight unaffected by these past few months. I do not deny the challenges this administration, this country has faced. But I do tell you that a change is at hand.

He nodded. “You want to be kicking in doors and hauling in counterfeiters. Babysitting politicians is not what you want to be doing.”

She cocked her head and kept her face blank. No sense in doubling down on being an open book. “No?”

He hesitated a moment, and then ducked his head, pursing his lips. “You’re efficient and very good at your job. You stick to protocol like its a flotation device after you’ve gone overboard. And every time any little detail goes wrong, your first reaction is superficially identical to *excitement*. I think you wish something *would* go wrong, so you could have some fun.” He shrugged. “Besides, you use weak modifiers when you describe anything having to do with this bunker or your duties. You use strong modifiers when you talk about anything else.”

She made her smile very bland as she tried to recall the words she’d used when going over everything earlier. He was right, and she didn’t like it, being read so easily. “You’re kind of smug, aren’t you?”

“Smug — or right?”

It should have been irritating, but he said it with such obvious cheer she smiled. “All right,” she said. “I’m bored to death in this tomb. What’s your excuse?”

“Fifty-three words.”

I stand here tonight and tell you, we as a country remain —

They both paused. There was a second of perfect silence from the television, and then shouts of confusion. She turned towards the TV in time to see a glimpse of people moving around the president, and then the TV went to snow with a pop.

For another second, they both stood there.

“Did you see that?” Renicks asked.

She spun away, heart pounding, and crossed to the door. She ran her protocol in her head. *Check your perimeter. Contact your*

upteam. Be sure of your weapon.

She reached across herself and patted the holster snapped to her belt. Didn't draw the weapon. You only drew a gun when you expected to fire it.

At the front door she pulled her transceiver from her pocket and toggled it as she leaned in to the video screen.

The hallway outside was empty.

There were supposed to be four agents outside at all times. The gray, empty hallway on the screen was all wrong.

"Station One status."

There was a moment's white noise, then an unfamiliar voice. "This is Station One. All green, Station Gold."

She froze for a second. Weighed the possibilities. She had not seen anything explicit on the TV, but there *had* been a disruption. The TV had lost signal. Something was wrong. And there were no agents outside the suite.

Her transceiver crackled into life again. "Agent Begley, this is Director Amesley. On my way to you. Stand by."

"Director, what's going on? Why is the Hallway Detail gone from their posts?"

There was no response. Just the white noise of an open receiver.

She stared down at the tiny walkie-talkie, so small it fit in the palm of her hand. *This* was a complete deviation from protocol. It was also a direct instruction from her superior. For a second she stood chewing her lip, unsure. Heart pounding. She could not reconcile *all green* with Director Amesley making a personal visit to the suite.

A single blast of an alarm, a deep angry buzzing, made her

jump. Flashing emergency lights came on immediately after, silent and yellow. On the plush chair where she'd left it, her tablet beeped insistently.

“Holy shit,” Renicks whispered.

She turned and looked at Renicks. He was standing right where she'd left him, alert and attentive. Watching her. The Designated Survivor. In her charge. They stared at each other for one, two, three seconds, the only sound the sterile clicking of the emergency lights.

She nodded to herself. Protocol. “Stay back.” Turning back to the door, she reached up and tapped seventeen buttons on the keypad, rapidly. The magnetic locks on the suite's only entrance slammed into place. She felt their impact through the floor, through her shoes. She took half a step back before catching herself.

Calm down, she thought, furious. *You've been trained for this*.

Except it had never been live. And in her mind, it had never been like this. Protocol broken, nothing proceeding according to the clear path outlined by the Continuity Plan. Which she had memorized. In her mind, in all the exercises, if nothing else the first *step* of the protocol — making contact with the Hall Detail and securing the Portable Nuclear Arsenal — had always been executed.

Instead, she had seen — what exactly *had* she seen on the television? A second's confusion, nothing more. A second's confusion, then a loss of signal. And then the Executive Suite had come online. Which only happened if the Continuity of Government program had been activated.

Which only happened if every single person in the line of

succession above the Designated Survivor was believed to be dead. Which made Secretary Jack Renicks the Acting President of the United States.

Turning around, she tried to look confident and calm. Behind her, Director Amesley toggled the intercom again. Renicks raised an eyebrow.

“Are we okay, Agent Begley?”

She took a breath. *Boil it down to basics*, she thought. *What's your core mission? To keep him safe.* “Until we know what’s going on, Secretary Renicks,” she said slowly, “we have to keep you in this bunker.”