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Designated Survivor

Chapter 10

by Jeff Somers

10.

Twelve minutes before they ran out of things to say, Begley was impatiently picking her way down another concrete corridor, nervously squinting at every sign posted on the walls. Renicks struggled to keep up, limping more noticeably as they progressed. She was willing to grade him a solid B prior to the fall. He didn't have any training. But he'd remained calm, had thought ahead. Had helped more than he'd hindered. Now he was slowing them down. It maybe wasn't his fault, but she blamed him anyway.

"Agent Begley," he said.

She could tell by his voice he had fallen behind, and stopped. "Call me Begs," she said, turning to look back at him as he caught up. "That's what my friends call me. And for the foreseeable future, Mr. Renicks, you are my best friend in the whole world."

"Your only friend," he corrected, smiling. "And call me Jack. No one does, but I'm trying to start a new trend."

She couldn't resist smiling back. She nodded her chin at his foot. "How is it?"

He looked down at it. "Swollen like a balloon and throbbing, but I'll live. Where are we headed?"

Begley realized he hadn't been pestering her with questions. Had just followed her lead. Had assumed she knew what she was doing. She liked that. It was a rare personality trait to admit you didn't know better.

She resumed walking, holding back her pace a bit. "There's a redundant security office down on this level. Meant to be used when the main one is being refitted, or if it's damaged in some way. Hasn't been touched since the *last* refit twenty years ago. I doubt anyone up there knows it exists." They haven't been living in this dungeon for a year like me, she thought. "If it's still functioning, we should be able to get some idea of what's going on in here."

The corridor branched off again, offering three choices. Forward, left, right. She turned left without hesitating. Walked another ten steps, then stopped outside a substantial-looking metal door. The plastic sign read SEC CON SITE D. The letters had once been sharp black, but had faded and chipped. There was a now-familiar unmarked keypad mounted on the wall next to it. She stood for a moment, thinking. The sequence was encrypted on her tablet's hard drive, but she hesitated to power the tablet on. Even if she prevented it from connecting to the facility's network its radio might show up on the security matrix.

Renicks waited behind her. Said nothing.

She was surprised at herself; she normally had a good memory for things like this. But she was coming up blank. She had three tries. After three incorrect entries, the keypad would lock up and the door wouldn't open for twenty-four hours unless the security grid was reset. That would mean an alarm, and the redundant security office wouldn't be a secret for much longer.

She took a deep breath. Didn't want to admit to Renicks that she couldn't remember. Didn't want to admit to herself that she cared what he thought. She prided herself on being the ultracompetent one in the room, and had always feared moments like this.

She closed her eyes, reached out, and let her fingers work. Muscle memory. The pattern was in her head, she just needed to access it. Seventeen buttons, and when she heard the light *ping* of success, she opened her eyes and pulled the door open without looking back at Renicks.

The air inside the room was stale and dusty. It wasn't a large room. The wall on the left as they entered was filled with a bank of instruments and monitor screens, similar to the setup back in the Executive Suite but older, more outdated. There was a thin slab of desk and two large office rolling chairs. Everything was under a sheet of yellowing plastic which had at one time been taped to the floor with blue painter's tape. The tape had given up long ago and clung to the plastic as it rippled. The plastic and the floor were covered in a thick layer of yellow dust. She decided not to think about what, exactly, formed *yellow* dust.

There was an old yellow phone mounted on the wall. She snatched it from the wall and placed it against her ear. Heard nothing. She shook her head at Renicks and put the phone back in its cradle.

"Internet?" he asked.

She shrugged, eyes slowly wandering the plastic-covered equipment. "I'm sensing a pattern here. But one way to be sure."

A gray metal panel on the wall contained the circuit breakers. She pulled it open and shoved the master over to ON. The single

bulb in the fixture on the ceiling exploded with a loud pop, and a deep humming noise permeated the air.

“You sure they won’t notice that power-on?”

She wasn’t, but saw no purpose in saying she was *reasonably sure* it wouldn’t be. Nodded crisply as she tore the plastic sheet away from the console. Leaned in and started turning the monitors on, one by one. LED lights were glowing green. She leaned in as one screen resolved into a black and white command prompt. She typed into the keyboard embedded in the desk. Hit return. Glanced up at the screen again and shook her head. Tried to keep the anxiety out of her voice.

“No gateway,” she said. “Let’s see what kind of signals are getting fed to the screens.”

The monitors all began displaying black and white images as they warmed up. Each was split into four smaller screens, with an overlay of white letters at the top right corner identifying the feed.

Most of the images were eerily still. Empty rooms. Empty corridors. Two of the screens showed motion.

The first showed the corridor outside the Executive Suite. The sparks and flashes of light from the door overwhelmed the screen’s contrast balance. The image would resolve to a glimpse of people gathered around the double doors for a second. Looking like a rugby scrum. Then it would flash to white, all the details lost. In one flash she recognized the agent who had driven Renicks to the complex, standing back a little from three others working the doors.

The second showed another control room. Much larger. Filled with monitors and banks of equipment. Filled with people. She

recognized Amesley immediately. Standing at ease. No indication of stress, of being a prisoner. He was part of it, whatever it was. There were four other people in the room. Begley couldn't be sure, but she thought one of them had been among the workers swarming over the complex, sans uniform. *Observe*, she thought to herself. *When collecting intelligence never discount your own observations*. She pushed her eyes around the screen, trying to take in every detail.

She froze. "Oh, *shit*."

She felt Renicks sink down into the seat beside her. Appreciated the fact that she'd forgotten he was there for a moment, because he was not screaming, or barking orders, or twitching with some horrible nervous tic. He was blasting *calm* into the air.

"What is it?"

She pointed at the corner of the screen, where something that appeared to be a suitcase sat on one of the consoles. It was open, the lid standing up at a ninety-degree angle. On the screen it was impossible to see in any detail what was inside.

"That," she said slowly "is the Portable Nuclear Arsenal Authorization and Deployment Platform. Otherwise known as the Nuclear Football."

Renicks sucked in air. "Shit," he spat out. "They can't *launch* anything, can they?"

She shook her head. Moved her pointing finger a precise number of inches to the left. "But look at that."

She was pointing at a console where two women leaned down close to a pair of monitors. A blur of text scrolled down one screen. One of the women appeared to be working the keyboard.

One was working something out on a pad of paper.

Renicks leaned forward. "They have the launch codes," he said slowly. "Those are in the briefcase, right?"

She nodded, slightly impressed. "They are. Although some Presidents have chosen to carry them on their person."

"But not Grant."

She shook her head. "Not Grant. Grant was a stickler for tradition. Weird about it, actually. Kind of a mania."

"So what are they doing?"

She took a deep breath. "If I had to guess, I would say they were recalculating target trajectories."

There was a quiet moment of dull horror shared between them.

"Can they *do* that?"

"They'd have to. The Brick contains pre-mapped targets for a number of scenarios. The common ones. The ones the Pentagon has run a million simulations on and come out with a 90%-plus likelihood. Russian aggression. North Korea. Iran and Israel. But they don't have The Brick, and you can never predict *every* possibility that might land the President on the run, in the air, in *here*. So sure you can enter new targets, if you can calculate them correctly. If you have time. It's not easy."

Renicks pursed his lips. "What happens when they have the new target data?"

"Nothing, unless you're there. They can't do anything unless they have the authorized and validated Acting President physically present. You have to be within a foot or so."

"So that was the idea. Set up new targets, have Gerry Flanagan launch missiles, somewhere." He smiled humorlessly.

“And now I guess the idea is, cut into the executive suite, take me by force. *Physically present* suddenly sounds kind of scary.”

Begley took another deep breath. Most people who hadn't been tortured thought they could withstand it. That they were special. She sometimes felt that way, too, but she knew intellectually that it was bullshit. Renicks knew the score, though, and that made her feel a little better. It was difficult to protect someone who didn't think they needed it.

She half-stood and leaned over towards some of the equipment. “This monitor over here is designed to scan for frequencies on the complex's feed. I'm going to see if they're getting anything from the outside. Police transmissions, military channels. If anyone's beaming television we can get that too.”

“You mean actually know what's going on?” Renicks said, leaning back in his chair. “Crazy.”

She smiled. Flicked on the monitor and pushed three buttons on the stack beneath it. Green lights. White noise. She put her hand on the big dial and started turning it, slow, careful. Like she was trying to crack a safe.

A moment later, a picture resolved on the monitor. No sound. It was local news.

They both stared at it.

It was strangely normal. The commentator was a middle-aged man with a terrible haircut and a worse suit. Begley thought he should be fired for the suit alone, but the haircut made it a capital offense. After a moment, they cut away to a long shot of the Capitol Building. The title read BOMBING AT STATE OF THE UNION.

“Fuck,” Renicks said from behind. Then he leaned forward,

jabbing his finger under her nose. “Hey! The crawl!”

She shifted her eyes down. At the bottom of the screen was a crawl of words, slowly moving from the right edge of the screen to the left. They both leaned forward, reading.

“Grant’s alive,” Renicks breathed.

Begley nodded, frowning. Reading. The crawl had switched to a report about a possible chemical attack in Virginia. No one knew if it was related or not.

“He’s not even badly injured. *Stable condition.*” Renicks stood up. “*Conscious.* Jesus Christ, President Grant’s *okay.* What the fuck am I still doing here?”

Begley was intently reading the crawl. “Because they’ve somehow kept this complex online. They’ve somehow locked out changes, and you’re still in the system.” She turned to face him. “Normally if the all-clear is signaled, this complex goes offline, and you’re taken out of the system as the chief executive. If that signal is somehow *blocked*, you stay in. They would have to crawl through every node and remove your credentials. It’ll take days.”

He stopped. “Days.”

“That’s not the worst of it,” she added, pointing to the screen. “See here, where it’s reporting that Bluemont, Virginia and the surrounding area are being evacuated because of a ‘potential chemical attack’, possibly related?”

Renicks nodded. “Bluemont’s a few miles from here.”

Begley nodded. “It’s in the blast radius.”

Renicks started to say something, then stopped and stared at her. “They’re going to bomb this place.”

She shook her head. “They don’t have to. This situation’s been modeled, Mister — Jack. *Everything’s* been modeled. They pay

bright people from Ivy League schools to sit in rooms and come up with hilarious scenarios and to plot likely responses to them. This one's a classic: The Continuity Program gets compromised, a rogue Acting President attempts to launch missiles. So, the whole complex is wired to blow. Charges buried deep below, designed to make this place come down like a pancake." She pointed at the screen again. "Just in case the engineers got a little too happy with the TNT, they're evacuating."

"Jesus," Renicks said. Begley thought it was becoming his favorite word. "They're going to blow us up."

"They can't know that you're not cooperating. They have to assume you're part of this."

He looked at her and smiled. It was a gray, ghostly smile. "I can't even get my ex-wife to give me my daughters' cell phone numbers, and I'm supposed to be masterminding *this*?" He shook his head. "How do we know the people we're running from haven't cut those lines as well?"

She shook her head. "No lines to cut. It's all wireless. Satellite feeds. Encrypted." She paused. Was it *possible* they had seized control of the charges? Yes, she thought. For people who had done all this, yes, it was possible. No profit from that vein, though.

"All right. How long?"

She liked that. It made her feel like there was something positive to be done. "Based on evacuation pace and the normal chain of command," she said slowly, reluctant to tie herself to an estimate that had no basis in clear evidence, "two hours. Maybe less." She hesitated, then decided to pursue a policy of Full Disclosure with Renicks. "If they either crack the football's

security and gain access, or if you come into contact with it and activate the launcher, they'll know. In Washington. And they'll blow this place *immediately* at that moment."

He nodded, looked back at the screens. They stood side by side, studying them, silent. There didn't seem to be anything more to say.