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Designated Survivor

Chapter 11

by Jeff Somers

11.

Seven minutes before sending Darmity down to Level Twelve, Director Martin Amesley practiced keeping his face blank.

It was a skill he'd developed as a boy, an awkward boy with thick glasses. Skinny. With a slight stammer. He'd found that reacting to bullies and verbal abuse only invited more depredations. Ignoring it, being *unmoved* by it, wore them down. It was a subtle skill. Not flashy. But satisfying in its own way. It was a skill that had served him well as he'd served to protect increasingly inferior men and women.

Right now it was a skill he was using on a constant basis when dealing with Frank Darmity.

Darmity tested Amesley's implacability. His trustworthiness was unimpeachable, of course. The man was a patriot, and had served his country well. Had come to his command with the best possible references. The best possible. He was not a military man, which Amesley could easily forgive as he himself was not comfortable with the military type. Capable, bluff men and women who always seemed at ease. But Darmity was also not Secret Service. He was corporate. A mercenary, Amesley supposed would be the right word. A contractor. With vast

experience, of course. But Director Amesley disliked working with anyone he had not trained personally.

He had no choice, when it came to Darmity. Darmity had been added to the team via direct order. Amesley had been practicing his Blank Face ever since.

There had been a hundred small infractions, but the altercation with Renicks on the road was the first major mistake Darmity had made. Amesley was not so much worried about the event in particular. It had resolved satisfactorily, albeit more from Secretary Renicks' professional attitude than from Darmity's efforts. What worried Amesley was Darmity's continued belligerence towards Renicks as a result of it. He seemed to expect some opportunity to exact revenge on Renicks for perceived slights and insults.

Darmity was violent and unpredictable. The other members of the detail were uncomfortable with him, and there had already been altercations. Under normal circumstances he would have chosen to keep Darmity separate from the rest of his team. A weapon under lock and key. Amesley had no doubt that Darmity had a skill set that would come in handy under a variety of circumstances, but he would have preferred to deploy him purposefully rather than have him wandering the complex with a chip on his shoulder.

But the technical team that had been working in the facility, shaping lines of communication and plugging the security holes they could, had exited the complex shortly after Renicks' arrival. As per plan. Which left him with a short detail of agents with half of them engaged in a difficult breaching operation. He could not afford to keep an effective tool like Darmity in a drawer.

Amesley eyed the security monitor. Sighed heavily. Reached over and picked up a walkie-talkie. Made sure it was set to the encrypted channel. Depressed the TALK button.

“Mr. Darmity,” he said crisply. “Please leave those men to their *work* and report to me in the Security Office.”

He switched off the walkie-talkie and watched Darmity, standing in the hall outside the Executive Suite, pick up his own unit and say something into it. An excuse, Amesley thought. A reason he should be standing in the hall. Waiting for access to Renicks. He watched Darmity speak into the walkie-talkie, frown and adjust the channel, speak again, then finally turn and walk out of the picture.

The second major mistake Darmity had engineered had been the Hallway Detail. He wasn't Secret Service. He wasn't familiar with the protocol. He'd pulled the detail and that had spooked Begley. And now they were cutting magnetic locks and racing against time.

Still, Amesley had no intention of punishing Darmity. Amesley wasn't sure he would be *capable* of punishing Darmity. Darmity was short, but muscular. Trained. He'd displayed no empathetic response that Amesley could determine. He recognized authority, but not *Amesley's* authority. The Director knew that Darmity had been ordered to follow his instructions, but it was only that order which kept him obedient.

Also: Darmity hated him.

Amesley wasn't alarmed, or surprised. Darmity, as far as he could tell, hated everyone. He had a high school education from a high school of no consequence. He'd come from a broken home of some sort; Amesley had not been moved to investigate too

closely. He'd spent much of the next fifteen years outside the country. A contractor. A mercenary. In the past, he would have been recruited into something. The CIA's less-savory portfolios, perhaps. In the modern age, an age when the United States of America had been bled dry by a series of inferior Presidents, corrupt cabinet members, increasingly stupid members of congress — in such a debased age he had naturally gone to work for a corporation.

“Sir?”

Amesley blinked behind his thick glasses and turned to look over at one of the groups of Agents in the Security Office. It was a large room, filled with banks of equipment: Computers, monitors, televisions, telephones, massive slabs of buttons and switches. There were only four people in it at present. The agent who had spoken was a young blond man, a doughy, breathless-looking man who had trouble keeping his shirt tails tucked into his pants. He was monitoring the security cameras, watching for anything unusual throughout the complex.

“Yes, Agent Killiam?” Amesley said. Face blank.

“One hour,” Agent Killiam said.

Amesley nodded absently. “Do we have an ETA on the package?”

Killiam hesitated, then came to a decision and shook his head. “No, sir. The Grab Teams all report no contact.”

Amesley nodded again. “You did do advance work, Agent Killiam?”

Killiam paled, but kept his composure. “Sir, all research indicated they would be at the main property. We identified possible alternate locations as well, and have Grab Teams at

them all. We'll get them.”

Amesley said nothing. Even if that were true, there was a worsening situation outside the complex, and he wasn't sure if a team could make it in time, or if they'd be able to approach if they did. Amesley sighed. There were other ways. There was Frank Darmity. “Thank you.”

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Amesley glanced at the monitor again. Watched the sparks flying, melting the scene to white over and over again. He suspected it was going to come to that.

His stomach cramped, and he fought to maintain control. An acidic hand grabbed onto his bowels and twisted them, but he sat silently, staring at the security monitor. Drummed his fingers on the surface of the console in front of him. Didn't move at all.

“Sir,” a female agent from the other end of the room said crisply.

He turned his head and practiced his blank expression on her. She was a plain woman. Late thirties. Square face. Bad haircut. Her name was Wallace.

“We've cut the fifth lock.”

He nodded, swallowing bile. There were a few trailing spasms in his gut, and then he was left with just a pounding heart, sweat on his upper lip. Five locks down, seven to go. Another hour, at least.

He glanced over at the wall of monitors and picked out Darmity, riding the elevator. The man appeared to be talking to

himself. Lips moving slightly. If Amesley were pressed to offer a guess he would suggest that Darmity was repeating a mantra of some sort.

He would have preferred to have only his own people involved. He would have preferred a lot of things. Begley, for instance. He would have preferred that she not have appeared unexpectedly at the morning conference call, would have preferred Murray had hesitated three more seconds before crossing a street and not been hit by a speeding car.

None of this registered on Amesley's face. He sat, silent, completely still, and showed nothing.

“Sir?”

Amesley forced himself to turn slowly. Calmly. It was Wallace again. She had received nothing but high marks on all her reports and reviews. He disliked her anyway. Regretted placing her on the detail. But they'd been short of appropriate people.

“I've got a security alert,” she said slowly, studying a monitor in front of her. “It's ... it's strange.”

Amesley's guts twitched, but he merely tilted his head. “Yes, Agent Wallace?”

She hesitated another second, then looked up at the Director. “According to this, Secretary Renicks is on the eleventh level. Outside the Executive Suite.”

Amesley squinted at her. Then stood up, smoothing down his tie, and stepping around to stand next to her. He bent down and peered at the monitor. The biorhythmic tracking system had picked up Renicks' signature. It was unreliable tracking people through the complex, but did often indicate a general location. You could not rely on it to show you in real time where someone

was, but eventually it would note what level the DS was located on. Sure enough, it showed him on a lower level.

It was impossible. He straightened up and looked at Wallace. Said nothing. She knew as well as he did that it was impossible. There was no point in saying it. He glanced up as Darmity entered the Security Office.

The short man was wearing a Service-issued ballistic vest and carrying a light machine gun that was *not* Service-issued. A positively huge hunting knife was strapped to his hip. He'd shed his suit jacket and rolled his sleeves up over the elbow. Amesley imagined he'd done this to show off his musculature, which was, the Director admitted to himself, impressive. Amesley thought it likely that Darmity had been just the sort of kid he himself had feared and despised as a child. A bully.

Amesley glanced back at the monitor for a moment. Made a decision. This was the most important day in American History. In World History. He was not going to risk everything because he lacked flexibility of thought. Or lacked the wherewithal to apply the resources he'd been given, however noxious they were.

His face expressionless, he looked at the short, burly man. "Mr. Darmity," he said clearly. "Make a sweep of the lower levels, starting with eleven. Make sure they are unpopulated."

Darmity hesitated a second, annoyance flashing across his face. Then he mastered himself and nodded, turning back for the doors.

"Mr. Darmity!" Amesley said in a tone of voice that was precisely one degree louder and more urgent.

Darmity paused, but did not turn around.

"Remember, if you let your temper get the best of you, it is not

me you will have to explain yourself to. Understood?”

Darmity stood there another few seconds. Didn't turn around. Didn't say anything. Then stepped out of the Security Office. Amesley let his gaze linger on the empty space that had been Frank Darmity for a moment, then allowed himself a single shrug of the eyebrows to convey endless patience. For his own amusement. It was going to be a very long day, he thought, and comforted himself that at least he expected to be dead by the end of it.