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Designated Survivor

Chapter 17

by Jeff Somers

17.

Twenty-three minutes before they barricaded the door, Begs was trying to ignore the intense pain that exploded in her leg every time she moved. The pounding headache was helping, she thought. She felt shaky and dull, as if someone had put a piece of muslin between her and the world. She felt proud of having navigated two more access ladders without much help from Renicks, but felt exposed as they moved through Level Seven. It didn't make any sense; Amesley and Darmity knew they'd been using the service corridors. They weren't any safer there than in the main levels. But stepping out onto the carpet, the bright lighting, the wide hallways — it made her nervous.

She moved slowly. The splint was awkward. She had to swing her leg out in a wide, stiff arc and wobble from side to side as they walked. Renicks steadied her from time to time. She was impressed, though, by his quick first aid. She knew she needed better medical attention if she didn't want a crooked, painful leg and an ugly scar, but she was still doing her duty. He'd kept her operational in the field.

Despite her leg, she tried to move as quickly as possible. Without letting Renicks see, she'd already taken six of the pills

he'd given her.

“What are the chances we can transmit?”

She grimaced, losing her balance for a moment and staggering sideways into the wall. She bounced free and shrugged off his attempts to help. “I don't know, Jack. It's the only thing I can think of. Maybe they already thought of it. Maybe not. We were never supposed to get out of the suite, so maybe they didn't bother with the studio.”

She certainly hadn't thought of it right away, she reminded herself. The television studio in the complex had never been used. It was kept up-to-date as technology changed, and could both broadcast over the air and transmit to all satellites in active orbit. It wasn't fancy. It was meant to be used by the President to communicate with the surviving population at large.

Begley had not been trained on any of the equipment in the studio. She'd only been in the room three times, all for spatial briefing. She could tell Renicks how best to escape the studio under a variety of circumstances. She could explain the lines of sight. That the podium with the Presidential seal was designed to be bullet resistant. That there was no back way out of the studio because the assumption was that the President would not be making addresses to the nation unless the complex was secure. But she had no idea how to actually transmit anything.

Would Amesley be able to block a satellite transmission? Would anyone be *monitoring* the satellites for strange activity like that? She didn't know. She saw no profit in telling Renicks. He would just make some horribly calm joke about it anyway, a personality trait she found both irritating and comforting in equal measure. He reminded her, in some ways, of her father.

It was quiet. The complex was huge, and if she'd been right about The Brick, they had no way to track them any more. So she pushed forward. Didn't think about the possibilities. Focused.

The studio was small. A control booth on one end, room for three people, banks of equipment designed for live transmissions. Limited editing and delay capabilities. No storage. The studio itself was narrow and deep. A blue curtain. A podium with the seal. On a tight zoom the illusion of a larger room would be easy.

"It's 1979 in here," Renicks said softly.

She nodded. "The basic equipment's been kept up to modern standards. It's fully digital. But the support tech's low on the list for a retrofit."

The phones were clunky black plastic wall models with cords. The chairs were old, well-worn rolling chairs. The carpet in the booth was a deep rusty orange. It was, she thought, pretty much what she would have imagined a porn editing room in 1975 would look like. There was even a huge fax machine on top of the low filing cabinet against the back wall, installed circa 1985 and not used, she didn't think, in five years. If ever.

They each immediately crossed to one of the wall phones and inspected them. Looked at each other, shook their heads. She turned to regard the equipment.

"We've got to assume the second we try to transmit, they'll know," she said. "So we have to do our best to figure things out before we power anything on."

"There has to be a user manual or something," Renicks said, crossing to the filing cabinet. "The assumption has to be that a lot of these systems might have to be used by people not trained

on them. You're not going to chopper a goddamn studio team here if nukes are raining down on you."

She nodded, studying the controls. There were a million buttons and switches, toggles and jacks. Headphone-microphone combinations hung neatly on pegs between the work areas. She thought about cockpits. Huge, complex things, with hundreds of controls and gauges — but an experienced pilot only needed a few of them to fly the plane. The rest were usually useful but not crucial. I just need to boil this down to the crucial, she thought. It doesn't have to be pretty. It just has to be a signal. Audio-only would be fine. We just need to find out what's happening, share information.

With some relief, she lowered herself into one of the chairs, her leg resting stiffly on the floor, and studied the banks. There would be a simplified procedure, she thought. They modeled everything. They considered every possible scenario. A scenario where the President — or someone else — needed to quickly, *immediately* transmit something had to have been considered. There would be a Dummy Button for it. A push-once kind of basic setup that would fire everything up on a standard, generic profile. Even if it was a sole survivor, one person. Hit a switch, walk into the studio and stand in front of the camera, speak your piece.

She listened to Renicks pulling out the cabinet drawers and dumping their contents onto the floor. Tried to push the noise out. Tried to push the pain in her leg away. The aching pressure in her head. The fear. The panic. Leaning forward, she turned and started running her eyes over everything. Top to bottom. Shift over one row. Bottom to top. Repeat.

“Any luck?” She said without turning away.

“You know what’s in here? Canned, pre-written *speeches*. Filed alphabetically by *disaster scenario*.”

She nodded, still letting her eyes roam the controls. “They model *everything*, Jack. All day, all week, they think of new possibilities and start writing response flowcharts, press releases, draft orders for the military and civilian agencies, and, yes, speeches. The idea is, when the world is ending, the President — or acting President — may not have their writing staff with them. Or there may just not be time to come up with something.”

She smiled. She felt a little dopey — not high, just insulated. She could still feel the intense ache in her leg and the throbbing in her head, but it was distant and unimportant. The pills, kicking in. “You know those envelopes psychics used to hand out on TV to show they predicted what you were going to say? Until I was twenty-two I swear my father had a set of those for me. And he was right, every time.”

“Until what? Law enforcement?”

She shook her head. “No, he got that too. But the next envelope was me getting married. And the one after that was kids.”

Jesus, she thought. One smack to the head, broken leg, and mild dose of codeine and you’re telling him about your *father*.

“Holy shit.”

For a second she thought he was reacting to her. Then she spun the chair around. He was standing with the fax machine’s phone in his hand. He was looking at her.

“I’ve got a dial tone.”