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Designated Survivor

Chapter 20

by Jeff Somers

20.

Seven minutes before screaming in pain for the second time in an hour, Begley stared at the wrong end of Frank Darmity's gun. It was a Beretta ninety-two with no accessories attached. She could hear the other two behind her. Both dressed in sober blue suits. Both agents. She didn't know their names but she'd seen them before. The woman was tall and built, hours in the gym working the weights. The man was older. Forties. Still in shape, but with a belly starting to creep in from too many after-shift beers. Too many details sitting outside hotel rooms and in the backs of surveillance vans, eating pizza. Drinking sugared-up coffee. Smoking ill-advised cigarettes.

"Give me a boost again."

"You already tried. You're not going to fit."

Despite the throbbing pain in her leg she forced herself to remain standing. To prove to Darmity that he couldn't break her. Not with a blow to her injured leg. He might make her scream, an instinctual reaction. But it wasn't going to break her. She moved her eyes from the gun to Darmity. *He* wasn't going into the ductwork. He was one of those stocky men who wasn't exactly fat. Just broad. Muscular. Heavy. His knuckles, she noted,

were all scabbed up. Like he'd spent a few hours the night before punching a brick wall. Or someone's face.

He was looking past her. At his two companions.

Begley watched Darmity's face. Tried to feel out the physics of the situation. Two agents behind her. Distracted. Facing the wrong way. Darmity in front of her. Distracted. Holding his gun out in front of him like an asshole. The precise way you should never hold your gun. Straight out from you, easy to knock aside. Easy to snatch away. And if you were going to hold it that way, you should at least pay attention to the person you were covering.

She ran the possibilities through her mind: Reaching out. Fast. Could she pull the gun from his grip? He didn't have his finger on the trigger, at least. No knee-jerk firing into her belly. One less finger to hold onto the gun. She had no balance. No leverage. The chances that she'd fail to take possession of the gun and end up in a losing struggle for it were pretty high.

She was unarmed. Darmity had done that much right. Even if she managed to knock his gun away, she would then be a wobbly, off-balance woman weighing about half of this slab of doughy muscle with both feet planted firmly on the carpet. She looked him up and down. Was pleased to note the large stain of blood on his shirt.

"Leave it," Darmity ordered. "I know where Mr. Fancy's going."

Begley's eyes jumped back to Darmity's face. Did he? Alarm spread through her veins. Renicks had proven to be smarter than she'd expected. More resilient, certainly. There'd been no time to suggest a destination for him, and no way to help him find one

even if she had — she herself would be hard pressed to navigate the ventilation system reliably, and she knew the complex better than just about anyone else in the world.

Darmity shifted his gaze and looked right back at her. Smiled. It was a mean little smile. Smug and cruel. She flinched back a second before his free hand flashed out. Pushed into her chest. Shoved her off-balance. Her splinted leg went out from under her and she fell painfully to the floor, teeth clicking together.

“Stay here,” Darmity said. “In case Mr. Fancy comes back. But he won’t. He’s alone and he’s scared and he’ll go and do what’s familiar. He’ll head back into the service corridors. Find a place to hide. Curl up and wait for his little agent here to find him and tell him what to do.”

Begley propped herself up onto her elbows. Her leg throbbed and her head ached. She remembered the bottle of pills Renicks had handed her, in her pants pocket. She didn’t want to take it out in front of Darmity. Didn’t want to show him weakness. Didn’t want him to guess how much pain she was in. And wondered what would happen if she took more, hearing Renicks’ warning about topping out at six. The last thing she needed was to be stoned, nodding off or getting spacey.

She considered the general amount of pain she was in, and the likelihood she would spend the immediate future being hurt. Nodding off did not, after all, appear to be a real concern.

Darmity stepped around her. She kept her eyes forward and listened. A second later his fist grasped her shirt collar and with a sudden jerk she was being dragged across the floor. Her hands flew up behind her neck and grabbed at his wrist. She stopped. She felt the muzzle of his Beretta against the top of her head.

Froze instantly.

“Behave,” he said.

And then they were out in the hall. He dragged her for a few feet easily, without any sign of strain.

“Mr. Darmity?”

He laughed. It was disorienting. Sliding backwards, his voice behind her. “Funny how people start calling me *mister* at all the wrong times.”

She swerved, her leg jolting her as it banged against a wall. He was taking her towards the elevators. *At least he's not going to try to pull me up the service ladders*, she thought sourly. The pain in her leg had dialed up fifty or hundred times from the rough handling. Beads of sweat had popped up all over her skin. “Why are you doing this? Why kill so many people?”

Without warning his hand let go and she dropped backwards, hitting her head dully on the thick industrial carpeting of the hallway. Then he was crouched over her. Knees on her arms, pinning her painfully. The gun under her chin. He had a dark shadow of beard already growing even though he'd been clean-shaven that morning. He was smiling in a precisely *unhappy* manner. His eyes were bright and heated.

“Because people like you and Mr. Fancy have *fucked this country up*, you stupid bitch. And there's so much bullshit it can't be fixed within the rules. Because you have to amputate a diseased limb. We've been waiting for it to happen any other way — for even a *sign* that it might be *possible*. Fuck that. We're past that point. Change is *at hand*, Agent Begley.”

He straightened up and stepped around her again. She saw herself catching hold of his ankle. Pulling him off-balance.

Scrambling for the gun. She did nothing. Let him hook his calloused hand into her shirt again. Resume dragging her. They were only a few feet away from the studio and a struggle would bring the other two on her before she could master the situation. And her goddamn leg. She couldn't be sure of having enough torque to bring down someone Darmity's size.

So, she let herself be dragged.

Change is at hand, he'd said. It stuck with her. She'd heard that phrase before, recently. She filed it away.

"What we need is a dictator," he said suddenly. "Like in Rome. You know Rome? You read books? No one does any more. No one knows anything. Fucking Congress, supposed to represent the people. Don't represent anyone I know. Can't pass a goddamn nonbinding resolution any more, just endless arguing and tricks. We need someone to cut through the bullshit. The Romans had it right, they had that in law. When the Republic was threatened, pick someone who could handle it and make him Dictator. Get past the tricks, clean shit up. We don't have that law, so we gotta make it happen. Gotta get Congress to pass the laws, to make themselves irrelevant. Gotta *scare* them." He chuckled.

In the elevator, he punched in a sequence of buttons she didn't recognize. They'd changed the code sets. Which meant she didn't even know the correct codes to use, unless they simply switched to the next day's set. She knew the next day; she made it her business to start memorizing them a few days in advance.

"I used to go to meetings," Darmity said as the doors slid shut. "Like minded people. Pissed off people. And I'd sit there and listen. These were good people, you know? Citizens. Patriots. A lot of veterans, but not the smug kind. And they would talk,

and talk. Campaigns and fundraisers and voter registration and targeting one asshole in Congress with another asshole who *wanted* to be in Congress. Shit, I couldn't take it any more. So I started standing up, telling what we needed was to be teaching folks how to shoot, teaching them history, getting them angry. This country, when things go wrong we have an inalienable right to bear arms and make it right again. So they asked me to stop coming to meetings. I was making too much noise. Telling 'em shit they did not want to hear. That's what we're up against. That kind of stupidity. Cut through it. Just slice on through it. Get someone emergency powers and let them spend a few years fixing it all, one executive order after another. The right man, with emergency powers." He sighed almost dreamily. "But to get emergency powers, you gotta have an *emergency*. That's where I come in."

Just outside the Security Office, he let go. "On your feet," he ordered, pulling open the door and holding it. He stood there and watched as she struggled upright, using the wall for balance. With an exaggerated gesture he ushered her through the door.

She stopped right inside the familiar room. Five men and women she'd never seen before that morning were working the Security Office: Jackets off, sleeves rolled up. Hunched over monitors. Two were standing around the remote launch interface,. They glanced up at her for a second, then returned to their work. Director Amesley was standing in the midst of them, crisp and neat. His large, thick glasses made him appear to goggle at her, but she knew this was an illusion.

"Agent Begley," he said, inclining his head slightly.

For a moment she stared at him, anger flooding her. She had

served under Director Amesley. Had feared his temper. Been impressed with his knowledge and experience. Had even conceded that his passionate beliefs were inspiring for their depth and fire even if she did not always agree with his politics. And now he was instrumental in committing what could be the worst terrorist act in the nation's history.

"Martin," she said coldly.

"Come on," Darmity snarled, taking hold of her arm and pulling her roughly after him. She lost balance and stumbled, pain shooting up her leg. He kept her from falling through sheer arm strength and almost threw her into a chair. It rolled backwards, spinning, and crashed into an unused rack of monitors and phone lines.

"Mr. Darmity!" Amesley said loudly. It was not exactly a shout. Simply a higher level of volume than his voice normally utilized.

"Shut up," Darmity said. "You've been puttering around here for a goddamn hour and he's still wandering around the complex free as a fucking bird. We're gonna cut to the chase." He holstered his gun and stood for a moment, looking around the security office. He spotted a walkie-talkie lying on one of the panels and stepped over to it, picking it up and turning several of the switches in small, precise increments. Then he stepped back to loom over Begley. She forced herself not to flinch away from him as he leaned over her and pressed two buttons on the panel behind her.

"Mr. Renicks!"

Darmity's voice, spoken into the receiver, boomed throughout the room and echoed in the hall outside. Begley

jumped in spite of herself. He'd patched in wirelessly to the PA system. His voice was in every room of the complex, including the service corridors.

Everyone else in the office had stopped. Stood staring at Darmity. Amesley was blank-faced as usual but Begley thought there was something in his posture, his attitude that hinted he did not approve — whether of Frank Darmity in general or this new tactic in specific, she couldn't tell.

"I know you can hear me, buddy, so listen carefully. I could spend all goddamn day trying to track you down in the goddamn crawlspaces where you're hiding from me like a coward. I don't have time. So you gotta know something."

"I've got your bitchy *In-Suite Agent* here. You prepped her nicely for us, so we won't have to go through the trouble of breaking her leg to begin with."

Begley stopped breathing for a moment. Amesley scowled and looked down at the floor. Pushed a hand into his pants pocket.

"Renicks, I'm not some polite agent, trained like a puppy to hold your hand while you piss, okay? You know what I was contracted for with the company? Involuntary Extraction. You know what that's a *euphemism* for?"

Contracted. Begley nodded to herself. A mercenary. Blackwater, Goldhawk, XCE Incorporated — a company like that, handling military-type operations the military didn't have manpower for. She'd worked with some of those types before. Darmity confirmed a lot of her prejudices about them, a lot of her experiences with them. Cowboys. They operated between the cracks — they weren't under military or governmental discipline,

and their corporate bosses didn't much care what they did as long as the missions got done and everyone got paid. The problem was, you couldn't just ignore them, have contempt for them, because a lot of them were ex-military, ex-CIA, and usually high-grade. Even the ones with no formal background had skills. She'd shot Darmity from five feet away and he was still there, operating.

"It's a euphemism for *this*," Darmity said. He took two brisk steps towards her and kicked her solidly in the leg.

She spun off the chair, screaming, and hit the hard floor of the Security Office, which sent a second shockwave of agony throughout her whole body. She screamed again, one final bitten-off howl, and then got control of herself. She lay as still as she could, face-down on the concrete, panting. Sweat dripping off her forehead. She watched it be absorbed by the stone.

"You listening, Renicks? I don't know if you give a shit about your cute little *In-Suite-Agent* here, but imagine this was your daughter, man. Imagine that. This is just to give you some sound effects for your imagination, okay?"

Through the agony, Begley fixed on that. *Your daughter*. What did that mean? Darmity didn't sound desperate. Didn't sound like a man spinning bullshit in hopes of shaking something loose. He sounded smug and mean.

Begley heard him turn. The scrape of his boots on the floor. She twisted herself around to look over her shoulder, trying to manage it without moving her leg at all. Watched him striding towards her, the walkie-talkie in one hand. She clenched her teeth, determined not to make a noise. *Not a sound*. No matter what.

Darmity filled her vision. Then suddenly froze, one leg off the ground. His eyes rolled up in his head. He fell forward, landing on his face, unconscious. Right next to her. Close enough for her to feel the breeze of his passing.

Behind him, holding a small black device whose edge crackled with electricity for a second, was Director Amesley. He stared down at Darmity for a second, expressionless, and then looked at her.

“My apologies, Agent Begley,” he said flatly.