



[REDACTED] [REDACTED]
designated [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] survivor

Jeff
Somers

Designated Survivor

Chapter 21

by Jeff Somers

21.

Three minutes before he rediscovered gravity, Renicks was peering through the slats of a grate into the television studio. Trying to determine how many people were in the room below him. Whether Begley was still one of them.

He was bathed in sweat. Gritty from accumulated dust and dirt. Bloody. He'd pushed his bag, with the Kimber on top, in front of him as he'd crawled, following his own slime trail. Knowing that if he hadn't retraced his steps he would have become hopelessly lost in the dark, cramped airway. When he reached the first junction, he turned away from his original path and followed the new duct. It angled upward slightly, and he quickly found himself looking directly down into the room. He could hear voices. He couldn't see anyone, no matter how he angled his head.

Sweat dripped from him. He felt shaky. He imagined every breath, every twitch of his muscles to be incredibly loud.

He had no plan. It occurred to him that he was a terrible hero.

The murmur of voices was maddening. At least two people. A woman and a man. If they left, he could worm his way back around and re-enter the studio. The idea of staying in the ducts

any longer terrified him. He felt like he couldn't breathe. He wanted to scream and beat his hands against the tight, flimsy sheet metal walls.

He considered just hiding in the ducts. He could make his way back to the exchange he'd found; more room there. He had a bottle of water in his bag. And the Kimber.

He imagined himself making his last stand huddled in the goddamn air-conditioning. A twitchy, off-center smile crept onto his face. He stifled sudden laughter that threatened to convulse him.

Through the slats, he saw someone step into his field of vision.

A man. Wearing a suit. White earbud hanging from a wire over his shoulder. Renicks held his breath. One of Amesley's agents. Moving with exaggerated slowness, Renicks reached forward and took hold of the Kimber. Checked the safety. Pointed it downward. Wondered what would happen if he shot through the slats. He knew the Kimber would blow right through the thin metal. Would it send shrapnel back at him? Would it queer his aim?

Could he kill someone? In cold blood?

Paralyzed, he lay there trying to keep his breathing slow and quiet. He became aware of a low noise. It was a low creaking sound, steady. All the hairs on the back of his neck stood up. He didn't know much about ventilation systems, but he was confident this was not a good sign.

The whole duct shifted.

There was a loud wrenching noise, and he felt the thin metal jump under him, as if he'd dropped half an inch. Gripping the

Kimber tightly, he stared down through the slats of the grate. The agent below had turned. Stared up at him with a quizzical look on his face.

Renicks exhaled slowly.

With a snap like a gunshot, something gave way and the world tilted. The grate vanished, and for a second it was all darkness. Then a confused noise like cardboard boxes tumbling, and a square of light opened up below him. His bag slid down, dropping over the edge, and a second later *he* was sliding down, head first. The duct had crashed through the dropped ceiling, hanging on an angle.

He popped out six feet above the floor and crashed into the agent. They hit the floor in a tangle. The agent rolled Renicks onto his back and squatted on his chest. Took hold of his wrist with both hands and pointed the Kimber up at the ceiling. Chunks of drywall tile rained down on them. The silver ductwork swung up and down above them, vibrating. Renicks stared up at it for a split-second. Twisted free and flopped over onto his belly just as it snapped free and crashed down on top of them.

For a second, he thought he was pinned. Two hundred pounds of agent plus half the ceiling on top of him. With a painful twist he was able to pull himself forward. Scissored his legs and was free. The Kimber still in one hand, he got to his knees and stared at the carpet for a second. Head ringing. He felt heavy and slow, and thought he'd just stay right there for a moment. Let the world end while he caught his breath. He stared at the gun. Lifted it up. It was heavier than he remembered. Warm in his hand. He put his finger over the trigger and tried to remember what it felt like to fire it. The kick. The shockwave up

his arm. The involuntary jerk of his shoulder. The involuntary wince every time he fired it that had become a joke between him and the instructor.

A noise brought his head up from his chest. A woman, another agent dressed in a sober blue pantsuit, was sitting up on the floor, one hand on her forehead. She'd been knocked down when the ceiling had collapsed. He stared at her, frozen. She was young, about Begley's age. Pale white skin and reddish, messy hair that hung down just to her shoulders. A plain, round face with a short, flat nose. A competent face unused to passion. Her hair was almost purposefully without artifice, almost defiantly messy. She wore no makeup. Her crisp white shirt was buttoned to the top and betrayed almost no shape at all. Her nails were short and unpainted. She wore no jewelry. He couldn't see her shoes, but he knew they would be ugly, comfortable, and not new. A serious woman who wanted everyone to *know* she was a serious woman. Which Renicks thought meant she wasn't nearly as competent as she wanted everyone to think.

He compared her to Begley, who made no special efforts to be attractive and yet was, who made no special efforts to appear competent, and yet *was*.

A lance of alarm startled him. These two had been with Darmity. Lazily, still feeling dopey and slow, he raised the Kimber and pointed it at her. Again he wondered if he would be able to shoot someone.

The motion caught her eye and she turned suddenly. Gaspd when she saw him.

For a moment, they stared at each other.

Her eyes dropped to the unconscious male agent for a second.

Then jumped back to him. He told himself she didn't know him. Didn't know anything about him. Didn't know he'd never fired the gun outside of a range, wearing protective glasses and earplugs. He'd stayed out of their reach and he'd come crashing from the ceiling, bloody and raw. He kept the gun steady. Tried to look calm and evil. And hoped to hell there wasn't something giving away his pounding heart, his sense of being exposed.

"Where's Agent Begley?" he said. His voice came out as a dry rasp. He was grateful for the dust.

She shook her head. "I don't know. Darmity took her." She raised one hand up towards her ear. "I'm going to reach for my radio and find out for you."

"Stop," he said immediately. He wished he could extricate himself from the unconscious agent and the ductwork without lowering the gun, but he didn't think that was possible.

Her hand kept moving. "I'm just reaching for my radio, Secretary Renicks," she said slowly. Her eyes were locked on his face.

He thought about clicking the hammer back for emphasis. But his instructor had told him years ago that this was a meaningless gesture you only saw in movies. He was afraid she would know that too and it would make him look like an amateur. His knuckles were white and his arm had started shaking from the strain of holding the gun on her.

"If you don't stop moving," he said carefully, "I *will* shoot you." She shook her head. "No, you, won't, sir."

Her arm jerked downwards. His finger spasmed. The gun roared and kicked back at him. The loudest sound he'd ever heard in his life. He sprang back up straight. His hand and lower

arm buzzed with the shock.

He couldn't see the woman any more. A light spray of red blood had appeared on the wall behind where she'd been sitting. He twisted his torso and used his elbows on the carpet to pull himself out from under the agent and debris. Scrambling to his feet, he ducked down, feeling ridiculous, and duck-walked his way around the rubble. His hand had gone numb but he still clutched the Kimber, aiming it down towards the floor as he moved.

The woman came into view. Dead. Her gun in one hand. Her chest still seeping blood that slowly soaked into her shirt. Her eyes open and staring up at the ruined ceiling.

Renicks stared at her. Heart pounding. She looked like someone he could have gone to school with. He stood over her. Knew he should move. Knew that the gunshot might have been heard, that more of Amesley's people might be on their way. Any second, they could burst in and take him. The man he'd knocked unconscious might wake up behind him. But he couldn't move. He stared down at the dead agent. She didn't look anything like his daughters. She reminded him of both.

Slowly, he moved to her side. Knelt down. Studied her face for a moment. Couldn't stand her eyes, so he reached down and after a second's hesitation moved his hand over her eyelids, gently closing them.

"I'm sorry," he said, voice shaking.

He could feel a breakdown somewhere in the near distance. Whatever this woman had done, or intended to do, he had shot her without knowing anything about her.

He fought an urge to reach down and tidy her up. As if

leaving her disheveled and bloody was wrong somehow. Like a little grooming would make up for it. He stared down at her, frozen. Then his eyes jumped to her arm, which was thrown over her belly. Like she was just resting.

He concentrated. Forced himself to move. To make tiny decisions. He flicked the safety back on the gun. Pushed it back into his waistband. Turned to make sure the other agent was still out. Stooped to retrieve his bag. The wrenching pain in his ankle as he did so made him pause and inspect himself for injuries. He was shaky from adrenaline, but aside from a million tiny cuts from his excursion into the ducts, there was nothing major.

He looked at the dead woman again. His stomach turned. He spun and staggered towards the back wall. Bent over and vomited onto the carpet. Stayed in that position for a few seconds, breathing hard, head pounding.

Then he spun away, looping the bag's strap over his shoulder. He hesitated over the corpse and stepped over to the other agent instead, kneeling down and searching him quickly, retrieving the man's walkie-talkie and gun. He hesitated for a moment, then pushed the radio and the new gun into his bag and went to the door. Still feeling shaky, a light film of grimy sweat all over his body, he opened it a crack and peered out into the corridor. Taking a deep breath, he opened it further and pushed his head out, looking up and down quickly.

"What they never tell you in school," he whispered to himself as he slipped into the corridor and shut the door carefully behind him, "is that being President of the United States kind of *sucks*."