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survivor

Jeff  
Somers

# Designated Survivor

## Chapter 22

by Jeff Somers

**22.**

Four minutes before getting really scared, Marianne Begley was trying to notice everything she could.

She had no idea if she could escape, but if an opportunity arose she had already plotted out a route in her head. Out of the Security office, left. Pass the first two junctions, then right. Eight steps or so to a supply closet filled with janitorial supplies. If she felt she had the time, there would be a short ladder she could wedge under the door handle. That would give her some minutes to work with. An air duct in the closet was reachable by climbing the metal shelves. There would be something in there to pry the grate off with. She was pretty sure there was a straight shot of twenty feet of duct that would bring her to a service corridor, and from there she would be lost in the maze again.

All of this would have to be done with a broken leg that throbbed and lanced her with agonizing pain every time she shifted her weight. The light insulating buzz from the pills had worn thin. She thought if she could somehow get to the closet before being apprehended, she would have enough time to get herself into the ducts. But that was a big *if*. And she was handcuffed to a heavy rolling chair for the time being anyway.

She could move, pulling or pushing the chair along with her, but it weighed her down. Made everything awkward. She pictured herself limping through the corridors, being pursued, dragging the chair behind her.

Grit her teeth in frustration.

Still, if the opportunity came, she wanted to bring as many details of Amesley and his operation as possible. In case anything was useful.

There was also the elevators. She couldn't be sure they hadn't changed the operating codes to something she didn't know, but she had come to suspect that Amesley had just shifted the codes forward a day. Easier. Simpler. The elevators were closer, thirty or forty feet away. If she had enough of a lead, she could make it. If she guessed the codes correctly. And even then, they would know exactly where she went, and she would be trapped in an enclosed space for the duration of the ride.

Amesley was talking with two of his agents, young men with athletic builds, serious and humorless. They were very deferential to Amesley. Any doubts Begley had about their dedication to the odd older man evaporated: These people were true believers. Whether it was in Amesley personally or whatever he was working for, they were convinced. As she watched, one of the two nodded crisply and exited the office, moving with athletic ease.

She knew Renicks was still at large. If he'd been found there would have been more excitement, more activity. He would be brought to the Security Office immediately, as he had to be in physical contact with the football to order a launch. They had retrieved The Brick; she saw it sitting out on the console Amesley

was using as a desk. So they had the tactical calculators and coordinate sheets the President would use to select targets.

There was a team of agents still working on the football itself, obviously trying to undermine the biorhythmic security or crack the encryption. A hopeless task. But she understood why Amesley would order it pursued; it kept people busy, and you never knew when pure dumb luck would insert itself into an operation. While Renicks was loose, there was no reason *not* to try patently impossible things.

There were no other people in the office: Just three agents, herself, and Director Amesley. The rest, she assumed were out scouring the complex for Renicks. Not a hopeless mission, just a difficult one. Even without knowing the layout of the facility the way she did, it would be easy for Renicks to stay lost. A wandering child could evade pursuit for hours by sheer luck.

She thought of Renicks. Jack. A stab of worry pierced the artificial calm she'd managed to hold together. She liked the Secretary of Education, and she'd admired how well he'd held up. Stayed calm, Took orders, but offered suggestions. The sort of person, she thought, who was generally useful in any circumstance. But now he was alone, being pursued by ... she stumbled over the word *terrorists* even in her own thoughts. These were Secret Service. This was Martin *Amesley*. President Grant had trusted this man with his own safety — with his *family's* safety. The idea that these people were not only working to undermine the United States but were willing to murder thousands of innocent people in order to accomplish it was impossible.

She hoped Renicks was smart enough to just find a hiding

place and stay put. There was no way out. Their only play was to wait either for the army to bust in and take the complex — which her professional pride insisted was impossible — or for the local evacuation to complete and be vaporized along with the entire complex.

Begley considered her own death. A lump of fear tightened in her chest, but she was surprised to find it manageable. She would die. It would be instant. She probably wouldn't even know it had happened — whatever amount of time it took for sensory information to travel from her nerves to her brain, the invasion of fire and superheated air would be faster. One microsecond she would be here, tied to a chair in the Security Office, the next she would be ... dead. And so would Jack, and all these people. But hundreds of thousands of others would be alive, and the country preserved.

Worth it, she thought. This was what she had signed up for: Protect her country with her life. That was what she was doing.

*Dad, you'd be proud,* she thought. *And you'd finally shut the hell up about grandchildren, I bet.*

Somehow, a smile appeared on her face as Amesley turned away from his agents. He stopped, staring at her in surprise, and then walked over to her. She watched him as he approached. Amazed at how normal he appeared. She'd been in countless meetings with Amesley. Countless more times in the same room while he treated her like a stick of furniture. There was absolutely nothing unusual about Amesley's manner or gait. The man might have been chairing a weekly status update meeting.

"Agent Begley," he said quietly as he approached, pulling another chair over and seating himself close to her. Folded his

hands in his lap and slumped forward, his glasses sliding down to the end of his nose. "I apologize for the handcuffs."

"*That's* what you're apologizing for?"

He smiled slightly. A secret, muted smile aimed at the floor. "Agent Begley, I will not insult your intelligence. I will not torture you. Mr. Darmity has been ... placed under arrest for his actions. You are, in my estimation, a good agent. Patriotic, in your way. You deserve our respect even if you cannot bring yourself to understand and cooperate." He looked up at her from under his eyebrows. Even though he was the most unassuming man she'd ever met, even though he was sitting calmly, she felt alarmed at his closeness. "I *will* ask you, once, if you cannot be convinced to *listen* to my argument, and perhaps be persuaded to help us locate Secretary Renicks?"

She stared at him. Studied his face. The mild expression and folded hands made her angry.

"How can you *do* this, Martin?" she exploded, once again omitting *director*, purposefully demoting him. "You're going to kill, at minimum, thousands of people. Possibly *hundreds* of thousands. How can you betray your country like this? How can you betray President Grant?"

She expected a reaction to that. Amesley *worshiped* Grant, and even the hint of his disapproval would be intolerable. She waited. Watched his face.

He shrugged.

"The President would not approve of this approach, no," he said mildly. "His standing order is that no single person is more important than our mission. He would no doubt prefer Mr. Darmity's approach in all things." He shrugged. "You sometimes

have disagreements with your superiors. I must run my command as I see fit.”

She stared at him. It seemed to her that everything had gotten very quiet, as if the office had been suddenly wrapped in a thick blanket. There was not enough air. It was too hot. Everything muffled and far away.

his standing order

disagreements with your superiors

your superiors

He nodded at her. “President Grant is a great man, Agent Begley. You have not spent time with him. Had an opportunity to study his philosophy, his plan for America. A great man, held back by the accumulated minutiae of rules and procedures and tricks. A great man bound into ineffectiveness because he must endlessly dicker and deal to implement his plans. If you had ever been able to listen to him, I am sure you would be with us right now.”

“Oh, my God,” she whispered.

“You see, Agent Begley, it is not just a few random *traitors*. We are, in fact, not traitors *at all*. We are under orders from the Commander in Chief. Doing his work. Pulling this country, kicking and screaming like an *infant*, out of the morass of indecision and divisive politics. Setting its trembling feet back on the path towards prosperity and its destiny.” He spread his hands. She noted that they trembled slightly. “So, you *see*.”

Fear, real fear, seeped into her joints and muscles. Soured her stomach. She realized this was more than a small number of conspirators. She realized that she had no idea, really, *how big* this was. A film of sweat appeared all over her skin. *The President*.

The President had *ordered* this. And these people had *obeyed* that order.

Forcing herself to focus on Amesley again, she shook her head. “Martin, this is *insanity*.”

He nodded. Didn’t seem upset in any way. “The country — the world — has been insane for some time. Perspective has been skewed. I don’t think you would know a sane course of action if it was presented to you, Agent Begley.” He leaned in towards her slightly. “This is not *random*, Agent Begley. We are orchestrating an *emergency*. It is precisely calibrated. The loss of life, the destruction of property is necessary. Regrettable, but necessary. We must have an emergency of sufficient scale to reduce opposition. We have the legislation written and ready. We have the Executive orders written and ready. As soon as we gain access to the launch system, as soon as we effect the collateral damage needed, the President will declare an emergency and request broad powers, suspension of Constitutional restraints, and can begin the hard work of making this country what it was always *meant to be*.” He sighed. “Unfortunately, we have seen our elected officials ignore arguments, ignore pressure. We are out of arguments, we have no time for pressure. All they will listen to is *damage*. And fear. For their own lives. Their families.”

He stared at her over the rims of his glasses for an uncomfortable few seconds. As if expecting a response from her. She had none. *Legislation*, she thought. Did that mean congressmen were involved? *Jesus*, she thought, *how many people were involved in this?* It was like a cult, with Grant at the head of it, handing out Kool Aid.

“All these people who will die,” she said slowly, “are *innocent*.”



“Yes.” Amesley shrugged. “I agree. Though that is the minority view, you should know, as many believe no one who sits idly by can be regarded as innocent. But you see, the damage is necessary. The deaths are *necessary*. A threat, no matter how real, that is averted may inspire some cooperation, some progress. But it will fade. When the World Trade Center was taken, there was a period of a few months when some of us had hope. Now, we thought, *now* the country will come together. Now we will change our disastrous course, because we have been shown the evidence of our own decline.” he shook his head. “Despite the thousands dead, the billions in damages, we forgot. We relaxed again. We lost sight of it.” He nodded. “So this must be calibrated to ensure it will *not* be forgotten.”

*He's insane*, she thought with a shudder. She shifted in the seat. Straightened up. Tilted her head back. “They’ll blow the charges under the complex,” she said defiantly. “The President won’t be able to stop that. Even if he issues an executive order, they’ll do it. All he can do is delay things, but he won’t be able to stop it.”

Amesley nodded. “Yes. But he *will* delay it as long as he can. We’re prepared to accept death as the price of success or the cost of failure.” He hesitated, glancing down at his hands. “I am sorry you and Dr. Renicks will have to make the same sacrifice. I know that you have made no such pledge.”

Amesley suddenly nodded and stood up just as one of the agents Amesley had been talking to dropped his walkie-talkie from his ear, spinning to face the Director.

“Sir! We have a situation.”

Begley strained forward slightly, studying him, trying to

catch every word. *We have a situation.* A phrase she'd heard a thousand times. The standard opening to any informal field report. He was a young man, perhaps her age. His shirt appeared to be slightly too tight. A man proud of his physique. Vain. He was vacation-tanned and his hair looked like he'd had it cut that morning, which might have been true. He was vaguely good-looking in a generic kind of way — square jaw, good nose. She thought she'd dated about six of him in college and immediately after. The sort of men who were charming as hell on a first date and exponentially less interesting on each subsequent date, until you realized you were sleeping with a man who was doing crunches in his head whenever you were talking.

“Agent Harris is dead,” Square Jaw said. “Shot in the chest. Killiam found her and Simmons. Simmons is unconscious. The TV studio's a mess.” He grimaced. “And Kennings is unaccounted for.”

A thrill went through Begley, a combination of dread and triumph. Renicks was not hiding in some ventilation duct — he was on the move. The knowledge made her inexplicably happy.

“Renicks?” Amesley asked. His voice sounded as calm and flat as always.

The reporting agent shook his head. A single, crisp jerk of his neck. “I doubt it, sir. I had Craddock check on Darmity. That goddamn animal's escaped.” The agent tilted his head. “I think we have a serious problem on our hands.”