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Designated Survivor

Chapter 25

by Jeff Somers

25.

Forty-five seconds before Renicks walked into the room, Begley saw one of the warning lights on the main security console light up bright red. A second later the buzzing noise of an alarm filled the room.

Amesley glanced down at the console. “There is a fire alarm on —” he paused to examine the screen embedded in the console, “— Level Four.”

“Renicks?” Square Jaw said, stepping over to stand next to Amesley.

She watched them while she worked on the bolts of her chair. The handcuff had been simply but effectively looped around the support of the armrest. There was a simple bolt holding the arm onto the chair, and she’d been working it with her fingers every moment that Amesley and the others were distracted. Which was most of the time. She wasn’t making fast progress. The bolt was tight and she had only her fingers to work with. She also had to keep her movements concealed, which limited her leverage.

She estimated it would take her nine hours to loosen the bolt enough to slip off the arm and free herself.

She kept working at it anyway. Waited for a better idea to

occur to her.

“Killiam, check out Level Four,” Amesley said. “He’ll have displaced when the alarm went off, but see if there’s a trail.”

Killiam was chubby, and his wrinkled shirt looked like he’d stolen it from a laundromat that morning, but he nodded sharply enough and headed off, checking his weapon. Moving with purpose. *Jesus, Jack, what are you doing down there?* she wondered, picturing all sorts of scenarios that could result in a fire alarm, few of them good. The longer she’d been separated from him, the less confident she was that Renicks would be all right on his own. Notwithstanding that neither of them would be *all right* in the strictest sense, since the scenario now pretty much ended with the complex destroyed and them dead.

She looked the room over as she worked her sore, stiff fingers on the bolt. Amesley and the three remaining agents — Square Jaw, another man with a circle of curly brown hair around the edges of his head, and a plain woman with the worst haircut Begley had ever seen in real life — were poring over the systems, seeking signs of Renicks in the complex’s alerts and systems. A few feet away was the Football, left unattended.

Stay alert, pay attention, she told herself. She was trained for this. No matter how limited your options were, they could alter at any moment. Being ready was the most important thing.

She moved her eyes around the room. Most of it was still dormant and swathed in plastic. They’d dusted off only the parts of the Security Office they needed to use. The Brick caught her eye. It was forgotten, sitting on top of an unused console just a few feet from her. She kept moving her fingers over the bolt as she looked around. When she saw Renicks standing outside the

glass doors, she froze. Blinked. Smiled half a smile before alarm shot through her.

Renicks pushed his way into the room, leading with his chrome-plated gun.

She surged to her feet and almost overbalanced, catching herself on the nearest bank of screens and keyboards.

“Don’t move!” Renicks shouted. He looked faintly embarrassed.

“Stop!” Begley shouted. Pushed out her free hand towards him, palms up. “Don’t come any closer!”

For a moment, there was no movement in the room.

Renicks flexed his hand, changing his grip on the gun. Licked his lips. “What?”

For a second Begley stared at him. He looked terrible. Covered in blood. His arms a maze of tiny scars. His clothes dirty and wrinkled. This was not the calm, slightly sarcastic man she’d met a few hours ago. The goddamn Secretary of Education.

Amesley turned towards Renicks with his hands up by his shoulders. Begley scanned the room, making sure none of Amesley’s people were moving.

“All right, Mr. Renicks,” Amesley said in his flat, pinched voice. “Do I believe you will shoot people? I do not.”

Renicks met Begley’s eyes and held her gaze as he spoke to the Director. “You’ve got your hands up.”

Amesley shrugged. “Plenty of people have been shot by accident, Mr. Renicks. Let’s talk like reasonable men, before you get yourself hurt.”

To Begley’s horror, Renicks smiled. “You can’t kill me, Mr. Amesley. If my vital signs flatline this complex will assume the

Designated Survivor, the Acting President, is dead and will go offline, transferring executive power to another facility.”

He sounded calm and confident, but Begley could see his hand was trembling, the barrel of the gun moving in a tiny arc. He took a step forward. Begley stiffened again.

“Jack! Don’t get any closer to the RLI! It’ll activate if it senses your physical presence!”

To her relief, he stopped immediately.

“Impasse,” Amesley said, spreading his hands. Begley imagined his face: Blank and inscrutable as always. “Let’s see; I will assume that you have enough ammunition in the magazine to kill each of us, shall I? And I will assume you have an exfiltration plan, because you are a smart man, Dr. Renicks. I will also assume that it will be at least another minute or perhaps two before Agent Killiam reports in via radio and will expect a response. Very well. For the next two minutes, perhaps, you have the advantage of us. What is it you plan to do?”

“Jack — get out of here!” she shouted. Emergency vibrated throughout her body. The Designated Survivor was the key to the whole plan, and here he was, within inches of unlocking the nuclear football. “Just go!”

Renicks stood there for what seemed an eternity, eyes moving over the room. He saw The Brick and his eyes lingered on it for a moment. Then he looked at her and held her eyes again. She pantomimed, throwing her arm at him and mouthing *Go!* He smiled and looked back at Amesley. She did not like the smile, and the sense of emergency soured into panic.

“She’s coming with me,” Renicks said. “No one else move.”

Begley hesitated. She was handcuffed to a chair. Her leg was

splinted. She would have to stand up and limp, dragging the chair behind her, passing within inches of Amesley's people. She looked back at Renicks. She felt time slipping past them, imagined the fat agent, Killiam, hurrying back. Renicks could order Amesley and the agents to move to the side, but that would make it difficult to watch them. But she knew they had to get out of the room immediately. Every second they remained narrowed their chances of escape.

She considered telling Renicks to leave her. *He* was the important thing. He was the asset. She found herself reluctant to leave him on his own. He was *her* asset. She was pledged to protect him, and without her he would be at a disadvantage in the complex. He had to stay free until ... until it ended. Until the order was given and the evacuation was complete and the complex was blown to hell. That's what it had become: They couldn't stop that, they couldn't save their own lives. But they could keep him out of Amesley's hands until the facility was neutralized.

She considered trying to immobilize Amesley and his people and rejected it. There was no time. They needed to get away before the other agents returned. If they were trapped in the Security Office it would be an untenable situation.

She stood up and cleared her throat. "Guns. Radios. Slide them here."

Amesley turned his head slightly, but didn't turn to face her. No one else moved. She felt the tension in the room. Time was slipping through their fingers. And she didn't know what Renicks —

Renicks straightened up, moved his ridiculous, huge gun

down slightly, and shot Amesley in the foot.

The Director screamed and dropped to the floor. Begley froze in place and stared as Renicks moved the gun again so it pointed in the general direction of the three agents.

“You heard the lady,” he said. His voice shook, but she noticed his hand was now perfectly still. “Guns and radios on the floor. Slide them to her. And keys to the handcuffs.”

There was another second of stillness. Amesley gasped and rolled on the floor, clutching his bloodied ankle. Begley was momentarily fascinated by the sight of Amesley expressing something other than mild disdain or courteous blankness.

“Do it,” Amesley hissed. “We can’t risk a firefight. We need him —” he gasped in sudden agony “— alive.”

The woman nodded and slowly pulled her gun and radio from her belt. Holding them up, she soft-tossed them towards Begley. The other two did likewise. She knelt awkwardly and gathered the weapons and radios, checking over one gun and pushing it into her pocket, dropping the rest into the chair.

“Come on, Agent Begley,” he ordered. His voice was still shaking. She didn’t know how long he was going to hold it together. Rushing wouldn’t do them any good. She stepped behind the chair and started pushing it ahead of her with one hand, pulling the appropriated gun from her waistband with the other. In the silence she could hear the cooling fans of the consoles.

If she’d been ordered to surrender her weapon and radio, she thought, she would have a backup.

When she reached Renicks, she leaned in close. “You know what you’re doing, Jack?”

He didn't take his eyes from the agents. "Nope."

"You should have stayed hidden."

He nodded. "With you screaming on the fucking PA system? I'm not that smart, Agent Begley."

She sighed. "If we were going to survive this, Jack, I'd be planning how to pin this disaster on you when we get out of here. All right. We back out. I —"

She looked over his shoulder at the corridor. Stared in shock. Frank Darmity was standing there.