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Designated Survivor

Chapter 26

by Jeff Somers

26.

Ten seconds before crashing through the glass doors of the Security Office, Begley stared at Frank Darmity and thought, *he looks crazy.*

He was a little roughed-up, as if his fellow conspirators hadn't been too gentle when locking him up somewhere. He had a crooked smile on his face that looked like he'd forgotten it was there. His eyes were bright and glassy. Blood had stained his shirt and soaked into the waistband of his pants. She remembered shooting him in the corridor; he must have been bleeding since, a slow bleed.

In his hands was a light machine gun.

It was the expression on his face more than the weapon. It was simultaneously vacant and leering. As if he'd been waiting for this moment. Had imagined it in detail. And was pausing to savor it.

The threat had shifted from behind her to directly in front. She was still chained to a heavy rolling chair. But she was armed. And Darmity was standing so close to the doors his breath was steaming the glass. Her mind did instant calculations. No numbers involved. She knew the weight of the chair she was

cuffed to. She knew how weak her splinted leg was. The agents behind her might have hidden weapons, but that threat had just dropped down to second or even third on her list of priorities.

All this in a second. Then she twisted and took hold of the arms of the chair. Lifting it up in front of her, she launched herself forward, letting gravity and momentum make up for her bum leg. Crashed into the glass door. It swung out and smacked into Darmity with her weight behind it, shattering into hundreds of large jagged pieces that rained down onto the floor as Darmity staggered backwards and slammed into the wall behind him.

The chair rocketed out of her grasp and yanked her off balance. She fell to the floor. Glass sliced into the knee of her uninjured leg as she slid. Pain exploded in her splinted leg as it twisted stiffly under her. She grayed out for a second, two.

Vision fuzzing back, she looked up at Darmity. Saw the butt of the gun coming at her. Flinched a moment too late

It connected with her temple and she lost another five, six seconds.

When she came to, she was sprawled on the floor. The rolling chair was sitting on its wheels next to her. It had been chewed up, the upholstery torn and ripped. The armrest where she'd been handcuffed had snapped at a welded joint. Her arm hung by the wrist from the cuffs still, raised up in the air over her, but she could free herself easily.

Her hands were cut up and bleeding.

There was gunfire in the air.

She turned her head. Slowly, it seemed. Frank Darmity towered over her. His legs spread. The machine gun in his hands.

He was spraying quick bursts of bullets into the Security Room. His eyes were just as wide. Just as glassy. His face had the same expression on it as earlier, blank and joyous.

She turned her head and looked through the jagged, broken doors into the Security Office. The walls and consoles had been shot up. One hanging fluorescent light fixture dangled from the ceiling by a wire, swinging and flickering. She couldn't see any of Amesley's people, or the Director, or Renicks.

Darmity stopped firing and leaned forward along the rifle, squinting through the smoke and gloom.

She felt heavy. Her head buzzed. Her whole body seemed to vibrate, but her leg wasn't hurting her.

"Oh, *fuck* no," Darmity suddenly said. Pointing the rifle up into the air, he strode purposefully into the Security Office, glass crunching under his heavy boots.

Using her elbows, she pushed herself up to a sitting position. Coughing, she pushed the handcuff off the chair's armrest and staggered to her feet. Wincing with the pain, she pulled the gun from her waistband, checked the safety, and stepped over to the wall. Carefully, she leaned over to look into the office. Leaned against the wall to avoid falling over.

Renicks had gone for The Brick. He had it in one hand. His gun in the other. She could see this because he had both hands in the air. Darmity stood a few feet away from him, his back to her, the gun trained on Renicks' chest.

She raised the gun. Blood was dripping down the grip. She took a deep breath and sighted directly at Darmity's head.

Then sucked in another breath and lowered the gun slightly. The Remote Launch Interface. The Nuclear Football. It was

green across the board.

Her eyes flicked to Renicks. Two feet away from it. He'd activated it. All that remained was to key in the codes and coordinates, which were on The Brick. Which was in Renicks' hand.

She put her eyes back on Darmity's head. "Don't move."

She wished she'd had time to make sure of the location of the other agents. She knew Amesley was injured. The other three were unaccounted for.

"The bitch is back," Darmity said without turning. "You gonna shoot me again, Agent Begley?"

Shoot him in the head, she thought. *Remove him from the equation*. Killing Darmity might not enable them to stop the complex from being destroyed, but it might; free to move about the complex and use its facilities they would be able to contact anyone on the outside and possibly avert disaster.

She hesitated. How far did this conspiracy go? The Director of the Secret Service, agents within the service, the President of The United States himself — who would they call? Who could be trusted? It was overwhelming. And Darmity must have some of the answers. Amesley might know more — if he was still alive somewhere in the darkened room, under hunks of plastic and debris — but Darmity was a sure thing, in her sights. To shoot a potential witness to the greatest conspiracy the country had ever seen was impossible.

"Drop the weapon," she said, straining through pain and sweat to make her voice steady and implacable. "Step back towards me. Hands on your head. Don't turn around."

"How 'bout I just shoot Professor Fancy here?"

“You can’t do that. Drop the weapon. Hands on head. Step back towards me.”

Darmity nodded. “We had this conversation before, Honey,” he said. “I can’t *kill* Professor Fancy. But I can *hurt* him.”

In a blink, he surged forward. Jammed the gun into Renicks’ belly. Renicks doubled over and Darmity clamped one huge hand around his neck, jerking him up and around. Held him in front of him, now facing Begley. It had taken just a few seconds. She felt fuzzy and slow.

“Better ‘n body armor,” Darmity said with a grin. “Now, we gonna continue our *negotiations*, or —”

He paused, eyes shifting suddenly. Alarm surged within her. She knew what he was looking at. The Remote Launch Interface. Lit up green like a Christmas tree. She saw it all going straight to hell in ten seconds. Darmity with all the pieces: The launcher, the codes, the physical presence of the Designated Survivor.

She was moving before he took his eyes from the RLI.

She saw the opening: Get in behind Renicks. Jam the gun into Darmity’s ear, his neck. Push Renicks up against him to trap his arms. Just like that, the situation had changed. Keep going, she told herself. Kill him. Don’t stop.

She slammed into them and pushed the gun up into the space between Renicks’ head and shoulder, but Darmity flinched away and spun out from behind Renicks. She pulled the trigger a second too late and fired into the drywall.

She clawed her other hand into Renicks’ shirt and dropped to the floor, pulling him on top of her.

“Down!” she hissed. “Stay —”

A burst of automatic fire split the air for a second, scattering

into the wall. She heard Renicks curse and rolled him to the side, crawling awkwardly forward.

Quiet, then. Their harsh breathing. The sound of Darmity's boot on some broken plastic.

She grabbed Renicks' shoulder. He looked at her. He had The Brick clutched in one hand, his bag in the other.

“Make for the door! *Run!* I'll cover you!”

He nodded back. She didn't wait. There was no time for a deep breath or a momentary reflection. She got herself into a painful crouch, her splinted leg extended in front of her, and leaped up awkwardly.

“Go!”

She swung the borrowed gun out and fired three times. Across the room, Darmity ducked down behind the bank of consoles.

She stayed up. Began limping towards the exit. Gun up. Eyes scanning the opposite wall. Took a step, sweeping her leg along with a rolling gait. Moved faster.

Darmity's head appeared across the room again, trailing a few feet behind her pace. She squeezed off one careful shot and he dropped down again.

She turned and limped for the ruined doors. Renicks crashed through and made the turn to the right. Thick shafts of intense pain exploded in her leg each time she slammed it down on the floor. But she kept going. Felt the glass crunch under her shoes. Two steps from the door she heard something behind her and she leaped, knocking some slabs of glass to the floor as she scraped through the empty door frames.

She tottered, off-balance. Renicks flashed out a hand and

pulled, yanking her out of sight and pushing her roughly down into the rolling chair she'd been cuffed to.

“Sit and use that gun,” he said. A second later she started rolling backwards, dragged behind him.

She steadied herself as best she could. Brought the automatic up. Watched the hallway behind them. It scrolled away as Renicks pulled her in the chair behind him. Heart pounding, she watched for Darmity to emerge.

“Where am I going?”

“Elevators! Take your first right. The bank is just a few feet after that.”

The hallway swung to the right, and then she was looking at an empty corridor. Pristine. Untouched. She rolled to a stop and the world spun again as Renicks oriented her so the elevator's keypad was directly in front of her. She reached up. Noticed her hand shaking violently. Hesitated a second, then keyed in the next day's code. Immediately there was a soft *ding!* and the doors split open. Relief swept her — they'd just rotated the codes forward a day, as she'd suspected.

Renicks spun her again and she sailed backwards into the elevator. Sat for a few second feeling her pulse, holding the gun ready, waiting for Darmity to leap into view.

The doors rolled shut. She blinked. Leaned forward and keyed in another complex sequence.

“Where are we going?”

She licked her dry lips. Forced herself to drop the gun in her lap. “Down. Twelfth Level. I have an idea.” The Security Office had been shot to hell; she didn't think anyone would be able to track them effectively any longer. They had The Brick and the

launch codes and coordinates it contained. Renicks was with her. Darmity couldn't launch without The Brick. All they needed to do was stay away from him for perhaps an hour. A half hour, even. It wouldn't be long before the complex was destroyed.

She turned and looked at Renicks. He nodded and reached down, taking her hand. Smiled what she thought might be the least believable smile she'd ever seen. "Thank you," he said.

She squeezed his hand and looked at the elevator doors.