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Designated Survivor

Chapter 30

by Jeff Somers

30.

Nine minutes and fifty-two seconds before she ran out of time, Begley was on the floor next to Renicks, feigning unconsciousness. She remembered her Emergency Situations seminar: identify and protect your advantages. She had two rounds to her name and was in no shape for a physical confrontation. She judged three pursuers coming in. She'd reset the complex, she was certain of that. But she still had to bring Renicks back from the edge of death. And somehow survive herself.

So she tore off her jacket while they were forcing the last few inches from the door and the rubble of the desk. Rolled up her sleeve. Secreted the syringe Jack had given her in her pocket, needle up, and laid down next to Renicks. Pushed the gun under the exam table, just out of sight, just within reach. Just in case.

Shut her eyes. Emptied her head and steeled herself.

They came in a loud rush, smashing the desk with one last swing of the heavy door. She heard them climbing over the debris, kicking the chunks of the ruined desk out of the way. Three voices. Two men, one woman. One of them Square Jaw with the too-tight shirt and the abundance of confidence.

“Ah, look at this shit.”

“Christ.”

“Fucking hell. Check them.”

She heard shoes on the hard floor. Sensed someone coming near. *Stay absolutely still*, she thought. *You move and you will have to go home and marry that guy Daddy set you up with and have babies. Six or seven babies. Babies until you die in childbirth.*

She heard a dull metallic noise very near her ear and imagined someone putting a gun down on the floor. Felt Renicks' body being shifted.

“He’s dead,” the woman said.

“Are you sure?” Square Jaw snapped.

“No pulse.”

“Jesus *fucked*. We’re into Cleanup now, you know that.”

“Shut up. Get the Old Man on the radio. What about her?”

She felt Renicks being shifted again, felt someone lean in close. Perfume. A light touch with it. Classy. Her head was shoved to one side and two fingers pushed painfully into her throat.”

“She’s alive.”

“I can’t decide,” Square Jaw said in an exasperated tone, “if that makes my job easier or harder.”

“Can’t get the old man on the radio.”

“Jesus *fucked*.”

She felt the woman moving away from her. She stayed perfectly still. The Old Man was Amesley; it was a common nickname for the Director. She wondered what was going to happen. The complex was offline. No missiles were going to be launched. Renicks was slipping away. She couldn’t discount the

possibility of feeling the barrel of a gun against her head one second before being killed.

“This is Cleanup, Tom. We have a clear protocol.”

“It’s not Cleanup until the Old Man orders it. I’m not going to waste her and then have to explain my thought process.”

There were a few heartbeats without words. She heard people moving. Breathing.

“Grab them both. We take them back to HQ and find the Old Man. Get our orders. Easy enough to pop her up there as down here.”

“Waste of fucking time, Tom.”

“Shut the fuck up, Mel.”

She heard them moving again. Felt Renicks shift again, then be lifted up from the floor. For a moment she felt the cold empty air where he had been. Counted back in her head. Eight minutes, twenty seconds left.

Then someone grabbed her by the shoulders. Pulled her up into a sitting position. Then she was lifted, slung over someone’s shoulders. She smelled aftershave and sweat, gun powder. Let herself hang limp. Every step he took her splinted leg banged into his chest, sending a lance of pure agony through her.

She was carried quickly to the elevator. Heard the doors shut. Heard the code being entered. Felt the shift in gravity as they rose. Heard the soft *ding* of the alert, heard the doors open again. She was carried briskly for a few more seconds and then a door was opened. She was dropped unceremoniously on the floor, hitting her head. She managed to resist reacting in any way. She lay sprawled where she fell, a shock of pain from her leg spreading through her like poison.

She heard the door close. She checked her internal count. Seven minutes, six seconds to go.

They hadn't searched her. She wondered if she was really alone in the room. If they weren't testing her, waiting quietly to see if she was really unconscious. But she had no time. Either she'd fooled them or she hadn't, and she had to revive Renicks and effect their escape before his time ran out, before they came back with a decision from Amesley. Before *cleanup* began in earnest.

Because suddenly, there was a chance she and Renicks might survive.

The complex was offline. Renicks had been removed as Acting President. If the plan was localized, if they hadn't compromised the *entire* Continuity Plan, that might mean the emergency was over, and President Grant might no longer have the option of blowing the complex. Even if no one suspected him. The complex was no longer locked down, either. They could walk out the front door, if they could *get to* the front door. She thought it was suddenly reasonable that if they could get away from Amesley's people, they might live.

If she could get to Renicks before it was too late. If she could bring him back. If he would be strong enough to climb back into the guts of the complex and climb. And climb. And climb.

She opened her eyes and sat up.

She was alone in one of the many tiny, generic offices. The room was probably eight by eight, with a small desk, a rolling chair, and a single cheap, metal filing cabinet. The door was shut and locked, but the lock was a simple deadbolt system. The complex had been designed as an emergency facility; all of the

office doors locked from the outside so they could be used as temporary detention rooms if needed. The complex was also a federal facility, funded by Congress, which meant everything had been done by the lowest-bidding contractor.

Seven minutes.

She crossed to the door and checked it. No sense wasting time if the door had been left unlocked. It was bolted. She stepped back to the desk and pulled open the drawers one after another. Found a pair of scissors in the middle drawer.

Six minutes, forty seconds.

She opened the scissors up and sat by the door, broken leg stretched out straight along the wall. Jamming the blade at an angle into the latch, she closed her eyes and tried to feel it. With a jerk she snapped her arm across her body, pulling on the door handle at the same time. With a pop, the door slid open.

Six minutes, twenty-seven seconds.

Pulling herself up by the door handle, she held the door almost shut for a moment, listening. Then she eased the door open slightly and peered into the empty hallway.

Sliding the scissors into her pocket, she stepped out into the hall. Looked up one way and then the other, judging where she was. Around the corner from the Security Office, she thought, on the third level.

Six minutes, eleven seconds.

She scanned each side of the hall. They would have put Renicks in a nearby room. No reason to carry his body any further. Crossing to the one directly across from her, she tried the handle. Open. She moved to the next one, tried the handle. Found it open too. The fourth one she tried was locked. Locking

the door on a dead man was exactly the sort of thing she would do herself — the crazier the situation, the more you relied on protocol, on procedure. Pulling the scissors from her pocket, she leaned down and repeated her operation and popped the lock, a few seconds faster this time. She took hold of the handle —

Gunshots froze her in place. Three. Rapid. Not far. Two almost on top of each other, then a beat, then the third.

Heart pounding, she pulled the door open and slipped into the room.

Five minutes, fifty-three seconds.

Renicks had been dumped on the floor too. He lay on his back, arms spread out from his body, legs spread. Aside from a yellow-brown bruise on his arm where he'd injected himself, he looked the same.

Two more gunshots made her jump.

“Shit,” she whispered. *Cleanup*, she thought. *Sounds messy to me.*

She yanked the syringe from her pocket. Hands trembling, heart pounding, she sat down next to him on the floor. Traced her fingers on his chest, trying to remember exactly where he'd pointed her to. She sucked in breath and raised the syringe about six inches above his chest. She knew she would need a little force to plunge the needle in deep enough.

Five and half minutes, she thought. *Ready, steady —*

She froze. Someone had opened one of the doors in the hall. Close by. She knew this because they had opened it via the simple expedient of kicking it in. She sat there for a second or two, listening, the syringe held just above his chest. Then another door crashed inwards. This time she heard the grunt of effort

and felt the vibration. It was one of the offices right next to this one.

Five minutes, fifteen seconds.

She scrambled up, wrenching her leg painfully and biting her lip. The syringe still in her hand, she limped behind the desk and dropped down, putting her back to the door and pushing herself under it, her leg stretched out stiffly before her. She was in shadow from the knee back; the rest of her leg was in plain view to anyone who simply walked close enough to the desk.

Five minutes, five seconds. She tried to control her breathing.

Five minutes. Silence.

Her leg began to burn with a steady, throbbing pain in time with her heartbeat. She bit the inside of her cheek. Drew blood. The new pain pulled her away from her leg. She was sweating.

Four minutes, fifty seconds.

With an explosive noise like a gunshot, the door crashed inwards. She jumped a little, knocking her head on the top of the desk, then went completely still, the sudden aching in her head doing a fine job of distracting her from her leg. She hoped the noise of her impact had been swallowed up and hidden by the noise of the door.

She held her breath.

She could hear someone moving through the room. Two, three steps. Then they stopped. She heard a creaking noise — leather or straps being stretched as someone bent down.

“Check out the big brain on Mr. Renicks,” she heard Frank Darmity say in a low, relaxed voice. “Didn’t get you too far, did it?”

She held her breath and listened intently. Tried to pick out

every creak of Darmity's boots, every whistles of air going through his nostrils.

Four minutes, thirty-five seconds.

"Where's your bitchy In-Suite, huh?" Darmity said in a low, easygoing voice. A man without problems, she thought, remembering the gunshots. A man who wasn't worried about anything. "In one of these offices, huh."

Four minutes, twenty-seven seconds.

Lungs aching, she let her breath out in a silent stream, slow and steady despite the burning in her chest. Forced herself to breathe in at the same slow rate. She heard Darmity moving again. Heard him cough. Lingering. She imagined him standing in the room looking around. Sniffing the air. Then the sound of the door swinging on a broken hinge, squealing.

Then nothing. Static. Dust hitting the carpet.

Four minutes, fifteen seconds.

She counted another ten seconds in her head, holding herself still. Heard nothing. Moving slowly, she pushed herself forward out from under the desk. Reached up and used it to pull herself back up onto her feet.

The door hung open, sagging inward on a slight angle. The door jamb had been bent. She could see a slice of the hallway outside.

Four minutes.

She moved to her left, staying in the blind side the door provided; anyone out in the hall would be unable to see her. She moved as quietly as she could to the door and stood behind it. She squinted through the gap between the door and the jamb. Strained her ears. She heard nothing. No sign of anyone moving

around. She bit her lip and wondered if Darmity had left the area. Had no way of knowing. He would be back, though. He would ascertain that she wasn't in any of the other rooms on the third level. He might assume she'd fled back into the guts of the complex, but she knew he was smart enough to think of double-checking this room.

Limping back to Renicks, she bent down and grabbed hold of one wrist. It was cold. She pulled it up and worked her way around to his other side, leaning down and taking hold of his other arm. She took one hobbling step back, pulling Renicks, and put some weight on her broken leg to gain enough leverage. Pain exploded, shooting up her side into her head, making her wince and almost overbalance.

She stopped. Breathed deeply once, twice, three times.

Three minutes, forty-seven seconds.

Tried again. Calibrated how much weight she could put on the leg, how much pain she could take before it overwhelmed her. She dragged him. Slowly, inches at a time. Arms shaking. A low growl of agony in her throat, swallowed. She pushed the door open with her butt and dropped him, leaning out to check the hall.

Empty. She sucked in air. Grabbed hold of him again, and dragged him out.

She chose one of the offices Darmity had kicked in, gambling on the pop psychology of it. Gambling he would think she would feel exposed in one. She pulled Renicks until he was just inside, then tried to push the door back into its exact position. The exact angle it had been hanging open.

She tried to move quickly, but she felt sweaty and shaky,

unreliable. She lowered herself back onto the floor next to Renicks. Checked the syringe. Held it an inch or two above his chest again.

Three minutes, three seconds, by her count.

Taking another deep breath, she brought the needle down with a sharp jerk of her arm. Pressed the plunger all the way in one spastic motion. Yanked the syringe free. Sat there for a moment, panting. Staring at Renicks. Who looked just about as dead as he had before.

She tossed the syringe aside. Leaned over him and thought back to her CPR classes. She leaned forward again. Placed both palms of her hands flat on the center of his chest. Pushed down with most of her strength; she had no leverage and weighed half of him. Did Thirty compressions as fast as she could, trying for a steady force and speed.

Two minutes, forty-seven seconds.

Pushing one hand under his neck, she tilted his head back. Cupped open his mouth and pushed one finger inside to make sure his tongue wasn't blocking his airway. Leaned forward and took two deep breaths to bring her own oxygen levels up. Put her mouth over his. Pinched his nose. Breathed out, pushing air into his lungs. Leaned back and took two more deep breaths. Leaned forward and repeated the process.

Tilted his head. Put her mouth on his. Breathed into him.

Two minutes, thirty.

Straightened up and positioned her aching hands on his chest again. Thirty compressions. Sweat dripped from her forehead onto his undershirt.

Two minutes, two seconds.

She straightened up again and slipped her hand under his neck ... and leaped backwards with a startled grunt when he suddenly convulsed, a whole-body twitch. He raised his head and made a deep choking sound in his chest, eyes fluttering open. Then he melted back onto the floor and lay there shivering, breathing rapidly with a loud, scratchy buzzing in his chest.

Alarm swept through at all the noise he was making. She scrambled up onto her feet and stumped for the door, pushing it as far closed as it would go, then spun and sank down to the floor again, grabbing his hand. Ice cold. She leaned in close.

“Jack!” she hissed. “Jack, *shut up!*”

He turned his head slightly and looked at her. She was relieved to see the spark of recognition in his eyes. To see he was all there. A smile spread across her face, spontaneous and, she thought, ridiculously inappropriate. He licked his lips with a pale, yellowish tongue. Moved his lips. She leaned in close.

“Fuck,” he whispered, “*me.*”

She tried to stop herself, but burst into muffled, strangled laughter.