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Jeff
Somers

Designated Survivor

Chapter 32

by Jeff Somers

32.

Three minutes before watching the agent be killed, Marianne Begley was trying to get Renicks to stand.

The silence oppressed her. The door hung open in exactly the way she'd found it, exactly the way Darmity had left it. The air seemed to sizzle with unused acoustics. She kept imagining she could hear someone out in the hall. A soft step outside the door. Heavy breathing. And everything she and Renicks did seemed incredibly loud to her. Every whisper a shout, every movement like boulders rolling across the floor.

She had no gun. Every few seconds she thought back to the gun she'd left on the floor of the clinic. Longed for it like a lost love.

"Can you stand? Jack, you have to be able to move. I can't drag you."

She whispered. Her throat hurt. Like she'd been smoking cigarettes. She hadn't smoked since high school.

Renicks nodded. He looked awful, she thought. Pale. Dark bags under his red, swollen eyes. A film of sweat covered his forehead. "I can walk, I think. I'm gonna slow us down, though. You should go on without me. Get topside, send down help."

She shook her head. *Cleanup*, the agents had said. “Darmity’s still out there. I leave you here, you’re dead. Come on, up.”

Renicks smiled. “If Darmity’s out there, what are we going to do if he comes out of the bathroom while we’re awkwardly limping down the hall? Karate moves?”

She paused. He was right, she thought. For a goddamn academic, Renicks had a sense for survival she had to admire. She thought again of the gun she’d left on the floor. It wasn’t worth it. Two rounds. If she knew where to get more ammunition ... her thoughts shifted to the Security Office. She saw herself gathering up guns and radios. Darmity was out looking for her. There was a chance he was nowhere near the Security Office.

She looked down at Renicks again. “Stay here. Be quiet. Gather your strength and be ready to stand up and move,” she said briskly, turning for the door. “I’m going to get us some weapons.”

“Get big ones,” Renicks said tiredly after her. “We already shot that bastard with a normal gun.”

She slipped through the busted doorway without touching the door, leaving it in exactly the same position as before. If Darmity trawled down the hall again, she hoped he would psychologically discount that room because he’d already checked it. That he would assume they would be on the move immediately, running from him. Bullies, she thought, always assumed you were terrified of them. Always assumed you would run like a scared rabbit when you heard them coming.

The hall was empty.

She started moving towards the junction; the Security Office

right around the corner. She moved slowly, listening carefully and marking the busted-open doors Darmity had left in his wake. Every few steps she paused and turned her head to make sure nothing was creeping up behind her. The silence made her skin crawl. The pain in her leg had become commonplace, though, as if her threshold for suffering had been buoyed up by the constant agony. It hurt like hell but she didn't mind too much.

When she turned the corner, she stopped for a second in shock, staring at the bodies.

She recognized Square Jaw. He was slumped against the wall. Hands clasped weakly over his torn-open belly. Blood splattered all over him, all over the wall behind him. His eyes were open, his mouth was open. The top of his head had been blown open by a bullet and a flap of skin and hair stood up from his scalp like a cowlick.

Begley stood for a moment. Listening. Her gut told her there was no one nearby, but the bodies strewn in the entrance of the Security Office confused her. Who'd killed them? Darmity? But weren't they on the same damn side?

Cleanup, she thought. The word was pretty generic. Might encompass anything. And Renicks had made it clear from the memo he'd deciphered on The Brick that Darmity was not part of the team here in the complex. He'd been dropped in. Inserted by the President himself. It stood to reason he might have a whole set of *cleanup* instructions separate from everyone else.

Slowly, she walked up to the Security Office. The bodies were warm. The blood was still fresh — already sticky, but it hadn't been more than a few minutes. She remembered the gunshots

she'd heard. Pictured it. Darmity in the office. Probably trying to figure out what had happened to the Football, why the lights had flickered. The other agents come to report in ... Darmity has complete surprise. Takes them down. Comes to find her and Renicks.

She pushed herself against the wall across from Square Jaw and leaned slowly forward to peek into the office. Froze again. Director Amesley lay slumped against the wall, looking small and dry, like a puppet. Something you would prop on your lap and throw your voice with. He was a bloody mess. Anger boiled up inside her. Martin Amesley was a traitor, yes, but Begley had been proud to work with him up until a few hours ago. Whatever he had done, he had dedicated his life to the Service. He had ensured the safety of countless people, run countless investigations and run them well.

He did not deserve to be left like *this*.

The office appeared empty aside from Amesley and the bodies of other agents. Biting her lip, she took the risk and stepped around the empty frame where the glass doors had once been. Shattered glass crunched under her feet. She stopped just inside, near enough to the hall to dive at an angle out of the line of sight.

Nothing happened.

She stepped inside briskly, then. The chair with guns and radios piled on the seat was still there. Right where she'd left it. She checked them over — all P229s. She selected two and dropped the magazines from the other two, pushing it all into her pockets. The quiet clashed with the state of the room — shot up, screens smashed, blood on the walls. Most of the equipment had gone into maintenance mode when the complex had reset.

Screen savers. Generic login screens. A few of the screens displayed some of the same security cam feeds she and Renicks had seen in the auxiliary Security Office down below. She took a moment to examine them, on the off chance they might show her where Darmity was.

They all displayed static, unmoving stilllives from all levels of the complex, most flashing from one scene to another every few seconds in a pre-programmed cycle, others showed just one room endlessly. One showed the exterior of the Executive Suite, the cutting equipment abandoned, the double doors now hanging slack after the reset. She let her eyes sit on each screen for a moment. The last one was turned off. After a second's hesitation, she reached out and turned it on.

It sprang to life immediately. It was the same news feed they'd seen earlier, down below. There was no sound, again. It showed an aerial view of the White House, marked FILE FOOTAGE. A nifty graphic of a map of the USA with the word EMERGENCY imprinted on it blazed in the corner. Begley spared a moment's thought on the absurdity of the graphic, of putting thought into that graphic. She looked at the picture on the screen in tired incomprehension for a moment, then remembered to focus on the crawl at the bottom of the screen.

Stared in shock.

unsubstantiated reports from the emergency bunker beneath the White House say President Charles Grant has committed suicide ... no word yet from official sources ... there are reports of increased Secret Service activity in the

Suicide. She'd never been introduced to Grant, though she'd been in the same room a few times. He'd been tall and thin,

unnaturally tan. His white hair a perfect, gauzy coif. An easy manner, but weightless, like there was nothing behind anything he said or did. He didn't seem the type.

Movement on one of the other screens caught her eye. It was showing the lobby way up on the surface, where she'd met Amesley, Renicks, and Darmity that afternoon. A man — she recognized him as one of the agents who'd been with Amesley in the Security Office earlier, a pudgy, disheveled boy of a man — was standing with his arms in the air. He was standing with his arms in the air because he wasn't alone in the lobby. There were six other people, five men and one woman. They were wearing what looked to Begley like military-grade body armor. They had night-vision goggles propped on their heads. They each had a sidearm holstered on one hip and a compact hunting knife on the other, and slim, hardshell backpacks. They each had what looked to Begley like a variation on the Herstal F2000 assault rifle, though she couldn't be sure.

They didn't look like US military to her. They didn't look *military* to her.

The woman was out in front, pointing her rifle at Amesley's man and shouting something. The agent shouted back, waving his hands in the air as if to stress his compliance. She kept yelling at him.

Then she gunned him down.

It was eerily silent. The woman, who looked pretty on the blurry security monitor, rocked on her feet, absorbing the recoil. Amesley's agent jiggled in place for a second, his shirt and chest tearing themselves open, and then fell to the floor. The five other troops stepped forward, fanning out and eventually moving out

of the camera's field of view. The woman stepped forward slowly. As she passed the dead agent's body she casually drew her sidearm, fired once into his head, and re-holstered the weapon.

Then she too was out of the camera's range.

Cleanup, Begley thought again. The word had come to terrify her. Whoever had almost — but for a heart attack and a car accident — nuked the United States with its own missiles in order to engineer a Presidential coup had clearly planned for failure just as they'd planned for everything else.

Moving as fast as her leg allowed, she retraced her steps. The silence crowding her was balanced by the sudden roaring in her head. Too many things had gone sideways. Several dozen things she'd believed her entire life had proved false within the last few hours. She was relieved to slip back into the office and find Renicks standing. Leaning with his hands on the desk, gasping for air, but on his feet. So far she'd been able to rely on Jack Renicks all day, and it steadied her.

She held a gun out to him, holding it by the barrel. "Safety's off," she said as he took it, standing up from the desk and wobbling a little. "Come on."

She turned and limped back towards the door. "Where are we going?" he called after her.

"To get bigger guns."