



[REDACTED] [REDACTED]
designated [REDACTED]
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[REDACTED] survivor

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Designated Survivor

Chapter 6

by Jeff Somers

6.

Twenty minutes before Director Amesley ordered Agent Begley to open the door to the Executive Suite, Renicks stood in front of the television, frozen.

Begley was a whirl of motion, none of it involving him. She disappeared back into the office area. Emerged moments later, made calls on her walkie-talkie. Received no responses. Attacked her tablet computer, hand making sharp, impatient gestures. Disappeared into the office again.

He didn't know what to do. This was unusual. In his everyday life he was either considered the Expert in the Room by the people around him, or thought of himself as the Expert in the Room privately. Emily had cited this attitude many times as one of his most objectionable personality traits. Most of their late-period arguments had ended with her sarcastic refrain, *Well, you know everything, Jack.*

He didn't know everything. He'd had that sudden epiphany thirty seconds before, when the emergency lights started flashing.

Stepping forward, he examined the television, which was still pouring snow into the room with a muted buzz. The only way to

combat shock and ignorance was to investigate. He found the recessed panel of buttons along the top of the TV and pushed up on his toes to get a good view of them. Pressed the MENU button. Navigated using the volume and channel buttons until he found the INPUT screen and scrolled through all the choices. None of them resulted in any picture on the screen.

He was still feeling slow and buzzed. *Shock*, he thought. Endorphins and adrenaline dumped into the bloodstream. An automatic reaction to perceived danger.

Stepping over to the wall, he picked up the phone. There was no dial tone. He couldn't remember the last time he'd even seen a landline, but the amusement he'd felt towards it when speaking on it before had disappeared. He put it back in the cradle. Pulled out his cell phones. Just being thorough; he didn't expect a signal and wasn't disappointed.

Begley stormed in and out of the room within a ten-second period. He had no idea if he could offer her any help, and left her alone.

He considered the possibility that he was actually the Acting President of the United States. It was impossible to believe, because he was standing by himself, locked in a place that felt like a pricey hotel room. Ever since receiving the Continuity orientation after his confirmation hearing, he'd occasionally imagined actually becoming the Acting President. In his imagination there had been a whole team of people. He'd actually wondered how he would handle Generals and Admirals, CIA Directors — men and women with vast experience and expertise who would push him one way or another. How he would handle strong personalities who knew much more than he

did about every situation. How he would assert himself and avoid being a puppet.

Not once had he imagined he'd be standing in a room by himself, trying to get the fucking *television* to work.

Renicks shook himself and started moving.

He stayed in the living room for the moment. He sensed he was in Begley's way — it was not a comforting thought, but he trusted it and decided the best thing to do, at least for the next few minutes, was to let her do her job. He stepped sideways and ran his eyes over the bookcases. The top shelf held the government of the United States in written form: The annotated Constitution, the most recent congressional record, the entire United States Code in gorgeous leather-bound volumes, The Code of Federal Regulations.

The rest of the shelves were filled with DVD-ROMs. The first two replicated the entire first shelf in digital format. He scanned the others: State law codes, Supreme Court transcripts. Encyclopedias. CIA Fact Books going back to the 1960s.

He pushed himself into the small gap between the end of one bookshelf and the wall. Tested the gap between the back of the shelves and the wall. Tried to push the bookshelf. He didn't expect it to move and it didn't. He didn't expect secret passages, hidden niches, a battalion of soldiers hidden in a crawlspace below the floor.

The emergency lights clicked on. Clicked off.

He checked the other bookshelf. It was also firmly attached to the wall. Turning to the coffee table, he examined the decorative glass baubles sitting on top. Weighed them in his hands as potential weapons. Pictured the scene like a panel from a comic

book: Acting President hurls paperweights at Captain Socialism, locks himself in bathroom.

Grimacing to stifle a peal of inappropriate, shock-induced laughter, Renicks knelt down and pulled open the small drawer set into the table. It was empty. He shut it and knelt there for a moment.

Agent Begley entered the room again. She was frowning. The way she held her hand up to her face and twisted her mouth to the side made him think she'd had long hair up until recently, and had been in the habit of chewing on it when thinking. Their eyes met for a second. She nodded and put her hand up, miming *give me another moment*.

He nodded back. Decided Begley was someone whose advice he could take.

They stood there, ten feet apart, for another few seconds. The emergency lights clicked off. Clicked on again. Then the intercom on the front door *dinged*, and they both jumped a little.

“Agent Begley.” Director Amesley’s voice, tinny and small.

Begley crossed to the door immediately. Leaned in to peer at the tiny screen. Toggled the intercom.

“Director Amesley,” she said.

“Agent Begley, I need access to the Executive Suite. Something’s ... happened.”

Renicks frowned. *Something’s happened* seemed like the least appropriate phrase possible.

Begley hesitated, then turned away and looked back at him for a moment.

“Secretary Renicks,” she said. “Join me in the office for a moment.”

A thrill of excitement shot through him. He hurried after her. She led him into the office and turned to face him.

“First,” she said immediately, with an air of authority he liked, “let’s establish we’re on the same page. As far as we know based on the data available to us, something has happened to trigger the Continuity Program and therefore we must assume you have been elevated to Acting Commander in Chief.”

She stared at him. Her face was impassive. After a second he realized she was waiting for him to say something. He nodded.

“Sure,” he said. He immediately felt foolish. *Sure*.

She nodded. “My role here is to interpret the security status of your person and your immediate area, apprise you of my assessment, and then await your instructions. Do you understand?”

He nodded again. “I do.”

She started to pace. “I don’t like this,” she said flatly. Sounded irritated. “We have no information. The agents that *under no circumstances* are ever supposed to leave their post are not in the hall. Right there, protocol states I keep this suite sealed until we have more information.” She stopped. Turned. Looked back at him directly. She had beautiful green eyes. “My recommendation is that we keep the suite sealed for the time being. Not even Director Amesley gets in.”

He studied her face. Forced himself to think for a moment before responding. Behind him, he could hear the muffled, flimsy voice of Amesley through the intercom. “What do you think is happening, Agent Begley?”

She shook her head immediately. “I have no idea. This may be an exercise, for all we know. What’s our data? What did *you* see

on the TV?”

He thought back. “I was only half-watching. I saw motion. I heard a yell. Then a crowd noise, when a lot of people get excited all at once. Then people were moving around Grant. Secret Service, Senators, someone else — I don’t know. Then the screen went blank.”

“We don’t know *anything*. Except something happened and the Continuity Program was activated. And my team has broken protocol. Dr. Renicks, we profile everything. We simulate everything. We have terabytes of data about every conceivable scenario, so that every agent will at least have some plan of action no matter what happens. I can’t cite a specific simulation, but I *can* tell you that under the general category of *your team fails to follow protocol*, every single simulation starts off with sealing the Executive Suite and maintaining control of your asset — that’s you — until you *do* know what’s going on.”

He thought about it. It made sense. The second the TV had gone to snow all the old rules had been suspended. The protocol was in place to provide new rules when that happened. If the protocol had been ignored, he thought, she was absolutely right to assume all rules were off.

“I agree,” he said. He tried to make it sound firm and resolute.

She nodded and stepped past him. He followed her back into the main living area. The intercom buzzed as they entered, and Director Amesley’s voice sparked into the room.

“Agent Begley, I am ordering you to open these doors immediately.”

Begley took a deep breath. Glanced at Renicks. He gave her a quick nod, and felt like they were in conspiracy together. He

liked the idea, being teamed with her.

She toggled the intercom, hesitated a moment, then paused again, leaning forward suddenly to peer intently at the video screen. The intercom open, capturing her breathing. Then she snapped to attention, looking down at her shoes for a second.

She saw something, Renicks thought. Something that bothers her.

Finally she looked back up and leaned forward again. "I'm sorry, Director Amesley," she said clearly. Slowly. "I am afraid I have to disobey that order."