



[REDACTED] [REDACTED]
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[REDACTED] survivor

Jeff
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Designated Survivor

Chapter 7

by Jeff Somers

7.

Fifteen minutes before figuring out that they wanted him alive, Renicks was digging through his bag.

Behind him, he could hear Agent Begley having a heated, half-shouted conversation with Director Amesley via the intercom. He listened with half his attention as he searched his bag for the palm-sized Brick Agent Gorshin had given him. He could hear it buzzing.

“Agent Begley,” Amesley’s tinny voice, warped by the small speaker, “this is a direct order: Open the suite’s doors!”

“I’m sorry sir, I must refuse that order,” she repeated, her voice even. “Until I am certain that this facility is secure, my responsibility is to the DS and his safety.”

Amesley started to shout something, but was cut off mid-sentence. He heard Begley moving. She disappeared into the office again. He watched her in his peripheral vision.

The emergency lights clicked on. Clicked off. Begley returned from the office.

“Secretary Renicks,” she said briskly. “Come with me, please.”

“One second.”

He picked up his bag and turned it upside-down, dumping

the contents onto the couch. The TV was still spilling snow and white noise into the room. The Brick and gun both bounced onto the cushions. The Brick's screen was bright. It danced a little each time it buzzed.

Picking up The Brick, he followed Begley into the short corridor that lead to the bedrooms, bathrooms, and office. He was shaking a little. He told himself it was excitement. He found her in the office, typing on the keyboard embedded in the large desk. The desk was placed up against the far wall; behind it were a half dozen large flat screen monitors. Five were blank and dark; the sixth displayed a standard kind of computer desktop with a dock along the bottom and shortcut icons littered everywhere. Instead of a mouse there was a trackball embedded into the desk's surface. A headset was plugged into a bank of inputs at the back.

Along the other walls were two smaller computer work stations and a small table on which a fax machine and hi-speed laser printer sat, blinking placid and green.

"I don't have any connections to the facility," she said as he stepped up behind her. "That's impossible."

"That word gets overused. You mean *improbable*."

She didn't turn away from the desk. "This suite is a panic room. It's meant to be the Alamo if things go very badly wrong — like, an army-at-the-front-door wrong. When the Continuity Program activated this facility and this suite was sealed, all authority and communications should transfer *here*. So the President or Acting Commander In Chief will have complete control over all networks. The power lines are designed to be redundant and uncuttable. The communication fiber is designed

to be redundant and uncuttable.” She tapped a final key, muttered a curse, and turned to look at Renicks. “When I sealed this area, Secretary Renicks, we should have immediately gone live and superseded the control center of the facility.”

“But we’re cut off.”

She nodded. “Somehow. It’s imp — improbable, but somehow I have no tunnel to the outside world from here.”

He looked around the room. Seeing a phone extension mounted to the wall, he stepped to it and picked up the receiver, pushing the TALK button and placing it to his ear. There was no dial tone, and he shook his head.

“Agent Begley,” he said, replacing the phone in its cradle. “Walk me through it.”

She turned and leaned back against the desk, looking down at his shoes. She took a deep breath, her arms crossed over her chest. He liked that. No rushing, no panic. She *was* panicked, he could tell, but panic was like fear: Everyone experienced it. How you reacted made the difference. Her reaction was to slow down, to think for a second. He was impressed when she looked up at him, her eyes clear, her voice steady. He was trying to decide if she was going to be someone he could rely on. He wasn’t sure, yet. His own heart continued to pound, and his hands were still shaky; he needed to be able to rely on her, because he didn’t know squat about the bunker or the facility or what might be outside the doors.

“I don’t know the details, but the Continuity Program of this facility has been triggered. This facility is online, and you have been elevated from Designated Survivor to Acting Commander in Chief. Protocol states that the four agents outside this suite

exchange pass-phrases with the In-Suite — that’s me — and I would grant two of them access to this area. One of them would be carrying the football — the Nuclear Football, the remote launch interface — and you would formally assume control. After that, protocol ends, really. You would be considered the CIC, you would make contact with other entities and departments. Depending on the responses you received, we would proceed from there.”

“But something’s wrong.”

She nodded. He could tell she was thinking this through as she spoke, and that was why he was asking questions, letting her talk, letting her work it out. This was her home field.

“Something’s wrong. The other agents on this detail broke protocol. Director Amesley broke protocol. *Something* happened at the State of the Union Address, something that triggered the Continuity Program. This program has been in place in its current form since 1963 and has never been triggered before.” She looked around. “That means you are the acting President, Mr. Renicks —”

“Jack.”

“ — and you should be in complete control. But you’re not.”

He glanced down at The Brick. He remembered Agent Gorshin telling him it had no way to connect to the outside world beyond its activation signal — it wouldn’t be able to access any networks, even if there were some to be found.

Begley stared at him, her eyes steady. He felt her weighing him. She’d known him for an hour, but she had his entire life as sussed out by the best investigator’s in the business at her fingertips. He wondered what kind of impression he’d made.

“All right,” she said in a tone of clipped decision. “When I went to the door earlier to deny Amesley’s request, I saw something. The picture’s pretty grainy, but you get a good view of the whole corridor. Everything looked OK. Amesley looked like he always did. Big glasses, blank face. I don’t know the agents on detail but they looked right. They had the football with them. Except ... way down where the hall turns at a right angle towards the elevator. The way we came up. I thought I saw something.”

“Something?”

She frowned. “Movement. It’s hard to make out details on that old screen, but I saw something move. It was as if ...” She looked up at him and shrugged. “As if someone was hiding around the corner. As if someone knew the field of the camera and was purposefully standing in the blind spot.” She looked back up at him. “If I was on the spot I would say it looked very much like a man holding a weapon.”

He thought about that. It felt unreal. Like this was some sort of academic exercise, a spitball session during *Paranoid Delusions 101* or something. He was lightheaded and could feel his whole body humming. *This is mania*, he thought. *This is how religious delusions happen. You get worked into a state of delirium with adrenaline and terror, and you start believing things.* “Maybe waiting for the door to be opened. Because everything right in front of you looked *right*.”

She nodded, then suddenly took a deep breath. “Then you have to follow the logic. They’ve triggered the Continuity Program. They’ve broken protocol. You break protocol because it’s the only way to protect your asset, or you break protocol because you’re *not* protecting your asset. Which it is?”

“Maybe I’m supposed to be dead too.”

“No. If that’s what they wanted, don’t break protocol. I let them in once we exchange pass phrases, they murder us. Or kill you when you walk in the door. They wanted you to be activated as acting CIC. Why?”

Renicks weighed The Brick in his hand. “Like I said, I’m supposed to be someone else. *You’re* supposed to be someone else. We both get pulled in at the last second, they can’t have expected us. Maybe the people who were *supposed* to be in here were part of this.”

He looked up and they stared at each other.

“You have every power of the presidency,” Begley said. “They have launch codes and chart books outside.”

“Jesus.”

“You could transmit coded orders to any number of people. Mobilize armies. Scramble fighter squadrons. Order the FBI to detain people. Issue executive orders.”

Renicks pulled one of the workstation chairs over and sat down, his knees almost touching Begley’s. “They want me alive because they want me to do something.”

Begley shrugged. “The system wouldn’t know if the Acting President had a gun to his head.”

“Jesus.”

They sat for a moment in silence. There was such an absence of sound Renicks’ ears began creating white noise, an imaginary sizzling. Renicks held up The Brick.

“The Secret Service Agent in charge of my pickup handed me this. Everything the new Acting President needs to know in one handy phone-sized device.”

Begley smiled thinly. “It used to be six binders of documents and fifty-four CD-ROMs.”

“Progress. I’m going to see if there is anything useful on this. You try and think of any way we can contact the outside world, or at least hook into the bunker’s communication lines.”

She nodded distractedly, tapping her cheek with one finger as she sat. He glanced up. Her profile was fine; he admired it for a second and then sat forward.

“Hey.”

She looked at him without moving her head.

“We’re not supposed to be here, but when we dropped into place, they didn’t cancel anything.”

She didn’t react.

“They must have considered the possible ways everything could go off the tracks, right? Amesley’s the Director of the Secret Service, he must have considered the possibility you’d seal the suite.”

“Probably. Amesley would have known you were being substituted for Flanagan about twenty minutes after the Attorney General died.”

Renicks leaned back in his chair. “If I were him, I’d have thought about how I’m getting in here.”

She considered. “There’s an override code. Only I know it; I set it myself this morning.” She frowned. “If you don’t have that, you’re shit out of luck. You can’t cut those mag locks easily. There are twelve of them, and you have to cut them all to get that door open. He’d need some serious hardware to do that.”

There was another beat of silence, and then a sudden strident, keening noise erupted. They both flinched. Renicks

realized he was crouching with his hands curled into fists as the noise penetrated his skull and drilled down. He grit his teeth and forced himself to straighten up as Begley dashed out of the room. One hand on the butt of her still-holstered gun.

He followed at a run, almost crashing into her back in the common room of the suite. She was standing in the midst of the couches, staring at the reinforced steel doors of the entryway. A rain of bright white sparks spewed into the room from the upper left corner of the doorway.

“Cutting the maglocks?” Renicks shouted.

Begley nodded, once, and said nothing.

He watched her for a moment longer. Her facial expression wasn't hard to decipher: *Pissed off* was more or less a universal thing.

“How long?”

She looked up at the low popcorn ceiling for a moment. “If we assume they have the best possible tool! A few hours!”

Renicks watched the sparks. He already had a headache from the unrelenting noise. He ticked off the situation: No communication, no way of issuing orders, two handguns between them, and a few hours of time. Not exactly what he'd expected when he woke up this morning, irritated at his fifty-three words.

Begley looked at Renicks, her face an impassive mask. She stepped over to him and leaned in, her smell clean and soapy. “The Acting President has to be in the Secure Facility as long as the emergency status continues,” she whispered fiercely. “If you leave the Secure Facility, you will be logged out of the system and authority will pass to the next link in the Continuity chain.”

Stepping back, she took a deep breath. “Secretary Renicks, we have to get you *out* of this bunker.”