

Designated Survivor

Chapter 9

by Jeff Somers

9.

Fifteen minutes before he sprained his ankle, Renicks stood with Begley in the kitchen, staring down at the floor.

“Here,” she said.

He shrugged. “According to the document, yes.”

She looked down at the tile floor. Back up at him. “Ronald Reagan ordered an escape tunnel installed in the kitchen of the Executive Suite in the Secure Facility.”

He nodded. “Yes.”

She stared at him for a second or two too long. The shriek of the magnetic locks being cut was muted, a low buzz. “You realize this would defeat the *purpose* of a panic room, right?”

He nodded again. “Are you suggesting a President can't make fucked-up decisions? He'd be in here with his family, if the worst came.” He pointed back over his shoulder. “He imagines the Russian army or some shit crashing through the front door of this place. Corridor fighting, Marines against ... against whatever. Bloody, brutal fighting. The slow retreat, the attrition of forces. Then they're outside the door. Cutting the maglocks, like right now. One lock every fifteen minutes, gone. Your wife, your kids, hugging your legs, screaming.” He shrugged again.

“Hell, I can see why you might think a secret escape tunnel wasn't such a bad idea.”

“But —”

He smiled. “You didn't know about it.”

“What?”

He liked her cocky posture, the jut of her hip, her arm akimbo, her back ramrod straight. “You're worried about the security risks. But if I read this right, this was installed *decades* ago via executive order using one-time contractors, but you don't know a thing about it.” He gestured at the floor. “It's been here for *decades*, and this is the first you've heard of it. Sometimes, security through obscurity works.”

They stared at each other in silence. He could tell she was fighting the urge to smile.

Without a word, she spun and stepped out of the kitchen. He watched her go, then looked down at the floor again. The big tiles, twenty-four inches by twenty-four inches. Huge. Available by special order, certainly, at any home improvement store, but not *normal*. He studied the pattern. There was a center tile, if you discounted the bottom cabinets. Perfectly center. They must have cheated a little under the cabinets. Half an inch, maybe. Enough to get a perfectly straight line in the center of the room.

A sound made him turn. Begley strode back into the kitchen, lugging the black plastic toolbox from the office closet. She dropped it on the floor and knelt, popping it open and pulling a flat blue crowbar from it. With a shove she sent the toolbox skidding across the floor, crashing into the base cabinets. She stood up. Looked at him, hefting the crowbar like she'd broken into a few cars in her time. Silently, he pointed at the center tile.

She nodded and knelt down, pushing the sharp, thin end of the crowbar into the line that separated the middle tile from the one to its left. Tapped the curled top of the bar with her palm a few times, pushing the blade down into the almost-invisible gap.

Renicks admired her efficient, no-nonsense manner. A lot of people, he thought, would have spent a lot of time talking, arguing. Instead of just trying it and putting the matter to rest.

She took a breath and pushed on the bar, giving it just a little force. Frowned. Cocked her head. Then put her back into it with a grunt, and the tile popped up a half inch or so.

“Damn,” she said in a tight, low voice. “It’s *heavy*.”

He circled around to the other side and knelt down next to her. Put his hands on the bar over hers. Her skin was cool to the touch, smooth. He eased his weight onto the bar and the tile rose upwards. Beneath it was a square opening, about an inch smaller all around. A damp, cool breeze rushed up from it.

“Can you hold it a second?” he asked.

She considered, studying it, then nodded. “For a second.”

He eased up off the bar, hesitated for a second. When she held the tile up, he moved fast, getting his hands under the lip they’d created and pushing. He tipped it up and over. It crashed down onto its top side, cracking the tile under it. The center tile was made of steel, with a coating on top to make it resemble the rest.

Panting, he knelt on the floor and peered down into a narrow tunnel leading straight down. After a second Begley leaned in close as well, producing a small flashlight. With a click it snapped on a bright bluish light, revealing a smooth metal tube that widened out slightly once you got past the twenty-two by twenty-

two opening under the tile, with ladder handholds bolted down one side. It looked just wide enough for a man of average build to climb down. Anyone overfond of cheeseburgers was going to have a hell of a time. Renicks and Begley looked up at each other simultaneously.

“You’re not an *I told you so* type, are you?” she asked.

He sat back and leaned against the base cabinets. “Normally, I am. But I have to confess I didn’t really believe it myself.”

“Right.” She stood up and tore her jacket off. Her white blouse was crisp and neat. Her holster rode high on her hip. She dropped the jacket on the floor, sat down, and swung her legs over the lip of the hole. She looked at Renicks. “Stay here.”

He started to say something, but she put the small flashlight between her teeth and sank down into the shaft, catching a step with one foot and then disappearing from sight.

“Bossy,” he muttered, and stood up.

He walked into the living room. The sparks were halfway down one side. The noise was, if anything, even louder, and he winced, putting his hands up to his ears. Turning away from the door, he picked up his bag and quickly scooped all of his possessions back into it. Picked up the Kimber and stuffed it into his waistband, feeling foolish. Moving quickly, he went back into the office. He pushed the Brick and the towel into his bag, then went to the closet and retrieved two of the walkie-talkies, pushing them in on top of it.

In the kitchen, he opened the refrigerator and pulled four bottles of water out, adding them to the bag. Then he dropped the bag and stood over the tunnel entrance. He wondered what he would do if she never came back. He tried to imagine an

existence without the constant, high-pitched wine of the maglocks being cut and found it impossible.

She emerged a few minutes later, her hair coming loose from its clips. She was pink and sweaty, and sat on the floor with her legs dangling in the shaft.

“Jesus, it's not even hidden,” she said, breathing hard. “It leads right into a service corridor. A door, marked Access Corridor. *Access Corridor*, for god's sake.”

“You know the service tunnels?”

She nodded, looking up at him. “I know every damn inch of this drafty, stinking place. Or thought I did.” She paused, and suddenly reached out, snatching the Kimber from him before he could react. She studied it for a moment, then looked up at him from under her eyebrows. “My goodness, Mr. Secretary.”

Renicks tried to hide his surprise and embarrassment. “It was a gift from my uncle,” was all he could manage to say. He wanted to snatch the gun back, but felt this would undermine his dignity even further. He didn't know what to do with his hands.

She felt the weight, her eyes on his. “Have you ever fired a gun, Mr. Renicks?”

He smiled. “A few times. On a range.”

She stared up at him for another moment, then handed it up to him. “Keep the safety on and don't try to shoot anything while you're moving, okay?”

He took it back and tucked it back under his belt. “Thanks.”

“One minute.” She left the kitchen. Returned a moment later with her tablet, handing it to him silently. He slipped it into his bag. Pulling her jacket towards her, she threaded one arm into the sleeve. Paused, looking at him. “And don't point it at *me*

under any circumstances,” she said. “Come on. Keep your jacket. It’s cold as hell.”

The descent was claustrophobic. He could barely extend his arms enough to grasp each small rung in the ladder, and his bag slung over his shoulder cramped him even further. The rungs were slippery and his feet kept sliding free. And Begley was right: It turned freezing just a few feet below the lip of the tunnel. He started shivering almost immediately.

“Just how paranoid do you have to be,” he heard her say breathlessly from below, “to install a *panic tunnel* in your panic room?”

Renicks chuckled. He was breathing hard, and thought if he’d known what his future held he would have started working out long ago. He’d always thought himself in reasonable shape. He was beginning to question that assessment. “Maybe it’s a series of panic rooms and tunnels,” he offered. “Panic rooms all the way down. Eventually we end up back in the Executive Suite.”

The only light sources he had was the diminishing fluorescent glow leaking down from the kitchen and the scattered, weak bluish light leaking up from Begley. The walls of the tunnel were steel plate. The rungs of the narrow ladder were cold to the touch and his hands were going numb from constant contact with them. He wondered why a panic tunnel out of a panic room would lead directly back into the facility, instead of outside. He broke it down in his head as he worked his way down. A way of distracting himself from the sensation of being stuck, his bag wedging against the wall of the shaft, a surge of tight terror filling him every time.

The answer was simple. If the President is in the Executive

Suite in the first place, the worst has come. Nuclear war, massive terrorist attack, plague of some sort. *Outside* would have to be assumed to not be an option. The escape from the Panic Room, created in secret and not even shared with the group of people charged with protecting the President — the Secret Service itself — was meant to be used in the instance of a revolt. A coup. If the President or Acting President found himself under assault from *his own people*, he would need a way to regain control of the facility. A secret. A surprise attack, from the rear.

Renicks heard a hissing noise and looked down in time to see Begley slide the last few feet of the ladder, just letting the sides of the ladder slide through her hands. She dropped lightly to the floor.

His left foot slipped from the rung below him, and his legs sailed out into the air. He squawked, a barking noise deep in his throat. Held on with one hand, his right arm wedged suddenly between his body and the wall of the shaft. He held on for a second. Then his numb hand slipped free and he was falling.

It was only a dozen feet or so. Somehow he avoided knocking his head against a rung. He slid down the shaft like he'd practiced it, training for the moment, one arm pressed against his side, one arm raised up. He felt the walls disappear and for a second he was aware of open air, and then his feet hit the floor. His left ankle rolled under his weight, pain shot up his leg, and he fell over, cursing. Landed hard on his ass. Leaned forward and grabbed his ankle, wincing.

Begley was there immediately. "Are you okay?"

He nodded. The pain had already receded to a dull throb. "Help me up."

She put her shoulder under one armpit and lifted as he pushed himself up. Standing with her for support, he tested the foot. Winced again. But was able to stand. He looked at Begley and nodded in response to her unspoken question. She looked down at his shoes. They were good walking shoes. Sturdy. Comfortable. Were dressy enough for emergencies. No ankle support whatsoever.

They were in an actual tunnel now. Bare rock. Not much light. A damp, sour smell in the air. Cold. He pulled his jacket tighter around him and limped after Begley. Ten steps and she opened a door, dim light flooding in. It was a regular-looking door, the frame set roughly into the rock wall. Begley inspected the hallway beyond it for a second and then nodded, stepping through.

He tried to walk normally. His ankle hurt like hell, but he managed to avoid more than a nominal limp. He wondered if it was pride or the simple urge to not hold them back. Tabled it for later examination, when he wasn't fleeing from unknown forces.

The corridor they emerged into was lit by a single fluorescent bulb that flickered and buzzed. The silent, yellow emergency lights blinked on and off every six feet. It had been finished in a perfunctory, industrial way. Cold concrete floor. Unpainted drywall on the walls. A thick yellow line had been painted on the floor. About forty or fifty years ago, by the look of it. There were other doors every few feet, some unmarked. The ones that were marked weren't very helpful, as far as he was concerned. They had signs like CORRIDOR A15 or MECH ACCESS 2.

Jargon Shields, literally. Jargon was designed to keep the uninitiated — the outsiders — in the dark. Signs were usually

written in ways that conveyed all necessary information to those who knew the jargon, but kept everyone else mystified. It was passive-aggressive, in a way. Looking around, he thought this facility might just be the most passive-aggressive place in the world.

Begley turned to shut the door behind them. “All right,” she said. “We have an advantage, then.”

He nodded. “They think we’re still in there.”

“Right. We’re deep underground, and in order to get *out*, we have to go *up*, through the complex. We don’t know anything. We have no idea what we’d be walking into.”

“We know they’re armed. We know they came prepared. We know they want *me*.”

She was in charge. He could sense it. Whatever equality had existed between them in the Suite, whatever hesitance she’d felt was gone. She was in her element, and he suspected he would be taking orders from her for the foreseeable future. He didn’t mind. He had to admit she knew more than he did, had been trained for this. All he would be able to do was comment sarcastically on the quality of the signage. He was content to let her lead.

Begley nodded. “And that’s the sum of our information. Come on.” She turned right and started walking.

He fell in behind her. The ankle felt weak and stiff, but he could walk on it, for now. Shock. Adrenaline and endorphins. It would swell and start to ache, become tender, if he didn’t stay on it constantly. He remembered his father, teaching him the “hurry cases” when he’d been in the Boy Scouts. Serious Bleeding. Internal Poisoning. Stopped Breathing. Heart Attack.

He particularly remembered *heart attack*, because the only instruction had been to make sure the victim was comfortable and wait for an ambulance to arrive. So much for first aid.

“Where are we going?”

She didn’t turn around. “To gather intelligence, Mr. President.”