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Designated Survivor

Chapter 14

by Jeff Somers

14.

Twenty-one minutes before ordering Renicks to get rid of The Brick, Begley watched him make a spectacularly ungraceful exit from an air duct. It was about seven feet from the floor, and for a moment she didn't think he was going to squeeze himself through. He pushed with his arms against the wall, straining. Then popped free with a curse. Hit the floor flat on his back with a dull thud that sounded painful.

She stepped over and offered him a hand up. Ran a critical eye over him, checking him for cuts and other injuries. Lingered on his face as he brushed himself off. Looking for signs he was cracking under pressure. Running into Darmity, having a gun pushed into your back — it was disconcerting even to her. She'd seen him flinch when Darmity had fired his weapon. He was her asset, and if he was going to fall apart on her she wanted some warning.

“Do me a favor,” he said, glancing up at her. “Let's not ever do that again.”

She nodded, satisfied. Whatever Jack Renicks did in his normal every day life — and from what she knew about the position of Secretary of Education it could not be exciting in the

least — he handled the unexpected well enough.

They were back in the service corridor, dull bare concrete and harsh light. She considered the possibility that Amesley and Darmity knew about the service tunnels, but rejected the idea. Not because she didn't think it was possible, but because there was nothing to be done about it.

“Okay,” she said out loud. “They know we're out of the Executive Suite.” She looked at him. He was giving her his Full Attention look. It was an intent expression. Unnerving. She was acutely aware that everything she said or did was being noted, recorded, compared to what she'd done or said earlier. “We can't expect to get out of this complex, Jack. Darmity told us they've sealed it off. I thought they might hold off on that until the government got an assault force into position, but they're not taking any chances. We could fight our way up to the top level but we're just going to find six inches of steel between us and the rest of the world.”

“Maybe we should save some time and start assuming the worst.”

Irritation bloomed under her skin. She swallowed it down.

“Jack, the *worst* would be that we're all going to die in here in a very short time, so we might as well tunnel back into the Executive Suite and open up some wine. Have a party. Jesus, I don't need *smartass* right now.”

He looked down at his feet. Nodded. “You're right.” Looked back up at her. “Okay, so escape's off the menu. We have to be careful about our movements, now they know we're free, they'll probably search the place for us, right?”

She nodded. Thanked him silently for not being an asshole.

He leaned back against the wall. He was a sweaty, dirty mess. His face and clothes were stained and blackened. His posture was comically casual. Hands in his pockets. Bag slung around his back. Back hunched. She didn't think it would take much to imagine they were on his patio chatting. Maybe during a cookout.

“Okay,” he said, spreading his hands. “Escape is out. But we’re out of the suite. Our options still have to be better than they were an hour ago. We have to assume we can risk moving. We can’t stay *here* until the bunker blows up, right?” He smiled a little. “Seeing as it’s part of the bunker. And will be blown up.”

She nodded, ignoring his lapse back into Smartass eleven seconds after being admonished for it. “Of course. We just have to be careful. We can’t assume we’re invisible to them, and we can’t assume any area of the complex is empty.”

He nodded. “What about communication? Are there other security offices we can access, try to find an outside line?”

She shook her head, but an idea bloomed in the back of her mind. “I’m convinced now they’ve somehow cut the access overall. Not line by line. I think prowling from one security office to another would be a waste of time. But ... do you have your cell phone with you?”

“In my bag.”

She pursed her lips, thinking it through as she spoke. “We can’t get *out*, but maybe we can get *up*, maybe high enough to get a signal.”

He straightened up. “How?”

“This place is designed to be self-contained for months. Years. It’s designed to take in air from the outside under even the worst

conditions. Radiation, gas — it's got a complex and comprehensive air filtration system. There are several sets of air towers — shafts — that are designed to bring air down from the outside into the plant to be processed. Filtered. Tested. It doubles as an air sensor for the outside world, in case we need to monitor air quality or radiation levels. The shafts go up to the surface. Each one has a service ladder inside. There's no egress, but if we can climb up one of the ladders high enough, you might get a signal."

Renicks pushed off from the wall. "How high would we have to climb? We're what, a mile down here?"

"I don't know. The cell signal won't penetrate too far down, but we'd have to just check the signal every few minutes until we get somewhere."

She watched him consider. Found it remarkable how familiar he seemed already. Knew that he was going to make some unfortunate joke seconds before he did so.

"Best idea we've got," he finally said, shrugging his bag off his shoulder and rummaging through it. Came up with two bottles of water and handed one to her. "My orientation packet didn't tell me I'd need to be in Olympian shape for this Designated Survivor gig, you know. The entire thing could have been boiled down to: *pack a bag, be prepared to spend the night.*"

She smiled, unscrewing the cap of the bottle. Took a sip. "Well, Jack, if at any time you feel you are not physically capable of being the Designated Survivor, you are shit out of luck."

His booming laugh surprised and pleased her as she turned to lead him down the corridor.

Begley had a map of the complex burned into her memory.

Back down to Level Fourteen, easier than climbing up. Through another maze of identical concrete corridors. Through a heavy metal door marked VENT MECH ACC. Down a stretch of narrow, low-ceilinged hall that had no installed lights. Following the blue gleam of her flashlight, she led Renicks to another door, this one as narrow and low as the corridor. It squealed on its rusted hinges and took three solid jogs with her shoulder before it opened wide enough to admit them. The air immediately felt colder, and damper.

There was enough light to see by, barely. She had the immediate sense of the ceiling soaring upwards. Just open space above them. Every noise was dimly echoed.

They were standing on a metal grating. Could feel air moving past them, sucked down into the floor by huge spinning fans. There was a hum of almost sub-ambient noise. Embedded into the wall were a series of metal rungs, stretching up endlessly.

“One of us should stay on the ground,” Renicks said, dropping his bag and kneeling to rummage through it.”

Begley considered. He was right; if they both climbed a slip by the leader could send both crashing to the floor. “You,” she said immediately. “It’s safer.”

He shook his head. Smiling. Casual. As if this was some sort of academic disagreement. She vacillated between finding his calm annoying or comforting, between wanting to smile back or knee him in the groin.

“My phone. I’m going up.”

She sighed. Affected resignation. When he stepped toward the ladder, she took hold of his arm, twisted it slightly, and caught the phone as it slipped from his fingers. He made a

squawking protest — not really words so much as *noises* of outrage.

“Jack,” she said, pushing his phone into her pocket and striding purposefully for the ladder, “you’re the asset. You’re the acting President, for god’s sake.” She pointed. “About twenty feet up are the emergency seals. Iris seals. At any time Amesley could engage them and they will spin shut in three seconds. Anyone who happens to be on the wrong side will be trapped. Anyone who happens to be twenty feet up this ladder will be *cut in half*. You don’t climb the goddamn ladder, okay?”

Before he could argue, she jumped, grasped a rung, and swung her foot into position. Began climbing. Passed the iris seals with just a second’s hesitation, imagining the instantaneous severing of her legs. Being cut in half. Surviving for a minute as she bled out. Not even any pain, just the conscious awareness of her own death.

She swallowed sudden fear and kept climbing. Hand over hand. After a minute, her arms started burning. Another minute, and she was breathing hard. Decided she was high enough to check the signal. Hooking one arm in a rung, she dug Renicks’ phone carefully out of her pocket and squinted at the tiny screen. No signal. She pushed it back into her pocket, extracted her aching arm from the rung, and started upwards again. There was a persistent breeze pushing down at her as air moved into the exchange system. At first it felt cool and refreshing. Then made her shiver.

After another few minutes of climbing, she paused again. Checked the phone. No signal. Caught her breath.

Directly across from her, a yellow hazard light clicked on.

A distant, hollow-sounding noise filled the space around her. Far below, she heard Renicks calling to her.

For a moment, she froze. *They were sealing the complex.* It was impossible. There was no *reason* for them to do so, unless the army had shown up outside. Which was ridiculous. She'd seen the models herself: Any force sufficient to lay siege to a rogue secure facility like this was two, possibly three hours out at minimum. And the conventional wisdom was that no one would bother sending an assault force. They'd just trip the explosives, make the complex into a crater, and apologize to the citizens of Virginia later.

She blinked. *Amesley knew they were in the air shaft.*

A flash of inspiration. The biometric chip couldn't be tracked this closely, she knew that. She'd run enough tests on it herself. Seen it in action three times before. It couldn't be done. Something else had been planted on them ... given to them ...

She blinked, frozen for a second. Saw it in her mind. It had to be. It was the only explanation that made sense. There was no other reason to cut off the facility from fresh air at this stage.

"Begs!"

Renicks sounded far away.

She started climbing down.

Down was slower. Going up she'd been able to see where her hands needed to go, going down her feet were hidden and finding secure footholds was a slippery process. The yellow lights gave her more illumination, which helped, but the sudden thud of her heart and the adrenaline dumping into her bloodstream made her shaky, which didn't.

As she descended, she tried to figure how long before the iris

seals closed the warning lights came on. Thirty seconds? How long had it taken her to climb where she'd been?

Renicks shouted again. She risked a glance down and saw the dimly lit opening below. She could almost see the floor. Another ten, fifteen seconds of fast climbing and she'd be down.

The warning lights turned red. She didn't know exactly what that indicated. It had to be the final warning. Seconds left. Five? Two? She didn't know. Unless it was closer to thirty, the iris seals were going to snap shut before she cleared them and she was going to be trapped in the air shaft.

She closed her eyes. Let go of the rungs. Felt herself falling.

She tried to relax. She wrapped her arms around her head and bent her knees. Tried to picture the small area under the airshafts, to judge whether she had any room to roll. Wondered if she would bang up against the iris seals after they snapped shut. If she would be cut in half by them as she passed through.

For one second, it was peaceful. Air rushing past. A sense of weightlessness.

She smacked into the ground. Heard her own leg break. A pop like a shotgun, but drier, shorter. She screamed and bounced once, scraping to a halt on the gritty floor.

She lay there. Took a few selfish seconds. Her right leg throbbed in ragged time with her heartbeat, but the pain was surprisingly low-key. Muffled. Like it was far away. Her head pounded, something sizzling on her scalp. Warm and wet.

Renicks was kneeling over, then. She opened her eyes and looked up at him without moving her head.

"My leg," she whispered.

He nodded. "It looks bad. You beat the iris by a second. You

might have lost some hair as it closed.” He touched her head and she winced. “You’re bleeding, too.”

Feeling drugged, she smiled slightly. Closed her eyes again. Thought she might sleep through the rest of it. Then a spike of adrenaline jolted her, and the pain in her leg ramped up.

“The Brick,” she said, rising a little and then wincing with pain. “Drop it.”

He shook his head. “I might —”

“They’re tracking it,” she said. She was breathing hard, her face twisted into a mask of pain. “That’s how they knew we’d be here. They’re coming. We have to move. And you have to ditch The Brick.”