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Jeff
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Designated Survivor

Chapter 28

by Jeff Somers

28.

Four minutes and ten seconds before toppling over a refrigerator, Jack Renicks was replaying the ELIRO memo in his head.

Dear Gerry — forgive this

The first line in English.

For a very long time now I have been plagued — blessed — with visions. They interrupt my sleep and dominate my thoughts.

He helped Begley limp to the front door again. A sense of sudden panic enveloping him. His bag was once again slung over his shoulder, the Brick shoved carelessly into it.

“How are we going to find him?”

At first I discarded the images I was being shown. Then, when I began to suspect they were not merely dreams, but rather glimpses of a future, I withheld them for some time. I feared they would not be taken seriously.

“The RLI is meant to be activated and used — if it’s closed up and moved, it will deactivate until you show up again,” Begley said breathlessly. She hopped to the keypad just inside the door and began punching keys. “He can’t risk moving it. He’ll barricade himself into the Security Office. That’s why he didn’t

pursue us. He *wanted* us to leave the Security Office, get out of his hair.”

“How long until he can issue the launch instructions?”

The images I am shown are not happy ones, Gerry. You and I have had many talks. We both agree what needs to be done. I know you are with me on this difficult journey to rebuild our nation and cleanse our people.

The magnetic locks snapped free again, and Renicks surged forward and pulled the doors inward.

“Depends. The RLI is preprogrammed with what are considered likely targets based on the most recent red band classified alerts. If he were using a pre-loaded target, five minutes. If he was going to change out the preloads and he had a secure dongle with the data, ten minutes. If he’s got to key everything in from memory or paper, thirty minutes. Maybe more.” She limped out of the suite, gun in hand, and surveyed the hall. Then turned to wave Renicks out. “Mr. Darmity looked like he had some pretty fat fingers on him, and the keyboard on the RLI is tiny.”

You are one of my most trusted friends and colleagues in this great mission. But all men are subject to weakness. We conduct simulated launches regularly, Gerry. We have a three percent failure rate due to human refusal to launch. High-ranking people who simply refuse to launch when they are ordered to. They do not know it’s a drill, Gerry. They think they are about to kill millions of people and they cannot do it.

There is no shame in this.

Renicks stopped. “Say forty minutes. Begs, it’s been at least fifteen minutes since we hopped the elevator. Maybe more like twenty. I wasn’t paying attention. Do we have *time* to get down

there?”

Begley spun awkwardly. “What other choice do we *have*, Jack?”

You may note there is a face on the team you do not recognize. Do not be alarmed. He is there as my personal agent. Martin did not know of his inclusion until this morning.

Renicks nodded. “You’re right, okay.”

They headed off down the hall, leaving the Executive Suite doors open.

The new man is there as insurance, Gerry. For both the mission and for your place in history. I do not doubt you, my friend. But I have been disappointed by others I did not doubt. So many others who seemed to be friends, who seemed to understand, but in the end did not.

They turned the corner and approached the elevator bank. Renicks felt his pulse pounding, his head throbbing with each beat. He regretted the wine. He regretted almost everything about the last twenty minutes.

I do not doubt you, but the new man is there to be certain that when the moment comes, we will fulfill our mission.

Begley stumped forward again and started keying in the code to summon the elevators.

The new man has all the information he needs to complete what I’d call a ‘rump’ of our mission. Your direct involvement is far preferable. Your glory is ensured; the new man only has the very basic data to ensure success. If you proceed as we have planned, we will accomplish far more. But if you choose not to proceed, for any reason, he will be able to at least achieve more modest goals.

She was still punching buttons when the indicator light came on, the soft *ding!* lilting through the air.

She straightened up, frowning. “I didn’t — ”

My man has been ordered to do nothing as long as our plans proceed. He will defer to you as long as you wish him to. He is reliable. He is a Fellow Traveler. He has been instructed, I must warn you, to use whatever tactics are necessary to ensure success.

Begley suddenly shoved Renicks to the side and hobbled backwards, bringing the gun up directly in front of the elevator doors.

They slid open.

Begley fired four times.

He will treat you with respect, Gerry. But he will need your physical presence to accomplish his mission, if you choose not to accomplish yours. And he will not be gentle. He is, in fact, incapable of gentleness. As he was trained to be.

She spun and slammed herself against the wall. Amidst shouts and cries from within, the elevator doors shut again.

“Amesley’s people,” she said, pushing off and limping back the way they came. “Come on!”

“Jesus,” Renicks hissed. “Stop a second!”

She didn’t. He moved up quickly behind her, hearing the elevator doors open behind them again. Scooped her up. Carried her around the corner and moved as quickly as he could, a lurching, gasping sort of run.

You, of all people, understand the necessity of our timeline. There can be no records. No evidence. No witnesses to crack under questioning. No impurity can ever attach itself to the events of today. Martin has accepted his role. If necessary he will wear the mask and play the part. But when I am pressured to act, as I will be, I cannot hesitate or the image we are painting will be tainted.

Renicks heard voices. Tried to picture them stepping out of

the elevator. Careful. Slow. They'd just been ambushed. Begs had reminded them that she was armed too. They would creep for a few steps, afraid she was waiting right around the corner. His lungs burned. His ankle felt like it had been replaced by broken glass and small bits of stone. Sweat had instantly appeared all over his body, soaking him. The double doors of the Executive Suite seemed to remain at a fixed distance.

Move quickly. Move with certainty. Do not hesitate.

When he was still three or four steps from the doors, a gunshot. A section of wall over his shoulder exploded into dust. Begley wriggled in his arms. Put her arm up and over his shoulder as if to hug him.

“Watch your —”

She fired twice, the first shot incredibly, painfully loud in his right ear. The second shot sounded distant, muffled. She jerked in his arms from the recoil. They crashed through the double doors.

Good luck to you, my friend. Tomorrow will be the greatest day in our nation's history. No matter how it unfolds, your name will be on the statue. Your name will be considered one of the Second Founders. You will be remembered as a true patriot, and that is reward enough for all of us.

There was another gunshot as Renicks dropped to the floor and set Begley down roughly — not quite dropping her, but not exactly *easing* her down. He spun around without getting off his knees and slammed the doors shut, hearing them latch.

“How do I seal it!?”

I promise that to you, Gerry. Even if you fail. Even if you hesitate and my agent must step in to do your duty for you, your memory will

never be tarnished.

Begley didn't respond. She lurched up and hopped deliriously towards the keypad, wincing. The doors leaped behind him. He pushed back, his feet slipping out from under him. He fell to the floor with a grunt and immediately pushed himself back up. Strained back against the door as it jumped again.

“Uh, Begs?”

She pounded the wall with one hand. “They keep bumping the fucking sensors. The seal won't engage unless the door's flat in the frame!”

Good luck.

He let his eyes scan the room. “The lamp! Begs, get the lamp base!”

She turned and followed his pointing finger. Looked back at him. Up over his shoulder. Nodded.

“Won't take them more than a minute!” she shouted as she limped over to the lamp. Tore off the shade. Ripped the power cord from the wall.

He nodded as the door jumped again. “We won't need more. Out through the kitchen.

She carried the metal rod over. Slid it through the door handles. Staggered backwards, unsteady. Renicks looked at her.

“Go! I'll be on your heels.”

She nodded. Turned and stumped off. Faster than he thought she could. He waited. Strained back against the doors. Waited.

The doors jumped again. He pushed back against them, legs and back burning. When they sagged back again, he pushed himself up in a pathetic imitation of a jump and ran after Begley. Passed her just before the kitchen and ricocheted around her.

Gathered some speed and slammed himself into the refrigerator, which he'd pushed and pulled into position over the tunnel entrance. It tipped over and slammed into the countertop with a crash he barely heard, his ear ringing. He knelt and got his hands under it. Rolled it over just enough to open a wedge of darkness they could both fit through.

He turned as Begley dropped to the floor, sliding a foot or so to the entrance. Dangling her legs over the edge, she handed him the gun. He leaned back against the fridge and held it in front of him. He wasn't familiar with it, but he assumed all guns worked basically the same.

Begley dropped into the hole and disappeared. Renicks could hear them slamming into the door again. The lamp base was made of heavy metal, but it wouldn't last long. He gave Begley a count of ten, then pushed the gun into his waistband and dropped his legs over the edge.

Heard the door crash in as he began lowering himself down, hand over hand.

God bless.