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[REDACTED] survivor

Jeff
Somers

Designated Survivor

Chapter 29

by Jeff Somers

29.

Six minutes and forty-five seconds before watching him die, Begley limped after Renicks, breathing hard and trying to ignore the settled, burning ache in her leg.

“This ... is ... not ... a ... good ... idea, Jack,” she said, sucking in breath between each word.

He didn’t slow his pace or turn around as he led her down the corridor of the Thirteenth Level. “We know where they are, Begs — right behind us,” he said, sounding just slightly less out of breath, which annoyed her. “They won’t be *on* the elevators. And we have three legs between us right now, so the less ladder climbing the better.”

She sucked in a deep, painful breath and surged herself forward to draw even with him. Was amazed he knew how to get to the elevators. Each level followed the same basic floorplan in the sense of where the access tunnels led out and where the elevator shaft was, but it was still surprising.

“I want to know how they found us,” she managed, swinging her arms to compensate for her stiff leg. “And why they’re even bothering. Darmity has the RLI. You say he has the codes. If we’re holed up in the Ex Suite, why not just leave us there?”

“As for finding us, might have been a good guess — it’s the one secure place in the whole complex, right? Perfect for a hiding place. Or maybe they can still track the Brick and we just don’t know it. As to why, the memo I just read indicates Darmity’s a last-minute drop-in. They don’t know him. He seems to have his own set of orders. And he didn’t mind killing several of Amesley’s people. I’m not sure the lines of communication are open.”

They turned the corner like birds, coordinated.

“And maybe,” Renicks added as they swerved in front of the elevator bank, “they were planning to just keep us bottled up, just in case we did realize what was happening and tried to stop it.”

Begs considered. She drew the borrowed automatic and checked it. One round left in the magazine. One in the chamber. As Renicks pressed the call button she held the gun ready, safety off, finger resting lightly on the trigger. She thought, *two rounds, Jesus.*

They stood for a few seconds, waiting. Silence all around them. She stood breathing hard through her nose, feeling every ache and scrape, slightly dizzy. Her stomach sour. A light film of sweat all over. It was so quiet. The lighting so flat. For a second she thought she might just be in a coma somewhere, sweating out a fever and imagining her worst possible work day.

The indicator light lit up. The electronic bell *dinged*. The elevator doors split open. The elevator was empty.

Relaxing, she limped into the cab. Started punching in a code. Renicks reached out and put his hand on hers.

There was a crash. Muffled by the corner and the walls, but distinctly coming from the direction they’d come.

“Ninth floor,” Renicks whispered, taking his hand back.

She frowned. Heart pounding. “Why there?”

“So we can stop this.”

She chewed on that. Voices down the hall. Whispers, careful. She punched in the code and stepped back, gun held down by her leg but ready. Stared straight ahead, heart pounding.

The doors slid shut. She thought she heard something just as they did, a rustle of fabric, shoes on the carpet. Then they were rising.

“You gonna let me in on the plan, or is this a teaching moment?”

The sense of bizarre calm had returned. There were armed people chasing them. The whole complex would be destroyed within the hour. A man was trying to launch a nuclear assault on his own country not too far away. But she was standing in an elevator, waiting calmly for it to arrive at their destination. The only thing, missing, she thought, was Muzak playing softly.

“No,” Renicks said as the doors split open. “Just play along. Pay attention.”

She limped after him, fuming. “We should be going after Darmity. We can’t know that they’ll trip the charges before he manages a launch — in fact, we know the President is probably stalling, giving Darmity as much time as he can. Jack — *Jack!*” She stopped and caught him by the shoulder. “We should be looking for Darmity. We should be trying to stop him. Millions of lives are —”

He nodded. “I know. Trust me. This is better. He might not be where we think he is. He might have found a way to displace. He might be barricaded better than we expect. We might not be able to get to him. Even if we can get in, he’s armed.” He shook his

head. “There’s a lot of leeway in that plan. But there’s one thing I can do that ensures we stop him.”

She swallowed frustration and nodded. “Okay. And that would be?”

“Take this complex offline. Come on. They’re gonna catch up to us soon.”

He turned and walked off down the hall. She started to limp after him, frowning. *Take this complex offline.*

Her heart thudded in her chest. She threw herself after him in a sudden anesthetic of alarm.

He was heading for the hospital.

“Jack! Jesus Christ, Jack!”

She stopped again. He was going to kill himself. Take the complex offline — by taking the Acting President off the grid. If his vitals flatlined, the system would transfer authority to the next Secure Facility in the system. Colorado, if she remembered correctly. Which had not been hacked and seized by conspirator — as far as she knew. Where no one was waiting to launch missiles. The threat would be removed immediately.

But the only way to do that would be for Renicks to die.

She limped half a step after him again, taking a deep breath. Stopped again.

They were dead anyway.

At some point, either before Darmity launched or after, the complex would be destroyed. They would be blown up with it, a sudden, searing death.

She stood for a moment, engulfed in sudden emotion. She didn’t know what to do. Everything felt backwards. She’d only known Jack Renicks for a few hours. *Didn’t* know him, really. But

he was her asset and letting him die — kill himself — felt so completely, totally wrong.

But it would save so many lives. Slowly, she struggled after him. *Jesus*, she thought, *I hope he doesn't ask me to shoot him.*

She watched him step into the tiny medical center. She pushed herself to rush after him, swinging her leg awkwardly. When she stepped inside after him, he was standing with his hands on the counter by the small sink, staring down at the floor.

“We should barricade the door, just in case,” he said softly. “They’ve shown a knack for finding us.”

She stared at him for a second. Felt she should say something. Couldn’t think of anything to say.

She turned and shut the door behind her. Turned the bolt. Turned around again. “Help me with the desk.”

They both hobbled over to the small, efficient desk at the far end of the room. Taking one end each they pushed and pulled it over to the door and upended it so it fell across the doorway. Begley, catching her breath for what felt like the millionth time, examined it; if they busted the deadbolt the desk wouldn’t hold the door. But there was a drywalled bump-out just past the door, and the desk would catch it and wedge against it as the door was opened. They wouldn’t get the door more than five or six inches open. It wouldn’t stop them forever, but it would slow them down.

“Come on,” Renicks said, picking up his bag and stepping into the exam room.

She followed him slowly. Her instinct told her to talk him out of this — this was insanity. Except it wasn’t crazy. She felt strangely numb and inert. The pain in her leg had become a dull,

permanent part of her. It felt natural. Watched him pull open all the cabinets, rifling through their contents. Plucking ampoules off the shelves as he went.

When he was done, he dumped seven small bottles filled with liquid and two plastic-wrapped syringe kits onto the metal table. Just as he did so, something crashed against the door in the next room, making them both jump. Then they looked at each other.

Renicks stepped around the table, unbuttoning his cuff.
“Come here. Listen closely.”

She felt the curious inertia pulling at her, holding her back. She felt like she could just stand there for years, unmoving. Like it was her natural state.

Then she shook herself free and pushed herself over to stand next to him as he rolled up the sleeve of his bloody, ruin shirt. His arm was covered in dozens of angry-looking cuts and scrapes, a skein of red lines.

He took up one of the syringe kits and tore it open with his teeth. Extracted the syringe, Took the rubber tip off and tossed it aside.

In the next room, they began banging against the door repeatedly, a fast rhythm.

Renicks began filling the syringe with small amounts from several of the ampoules, holding the needle up to the light each time and flicking it with his finger.

“What is that?”

He didn’t pause. “Something I learned from my father.”

“You learned ... *this* from your Dad?”

He continued to work. “I used to come into the office with him on weekends. He let me have a stethoscope and I helped

him, getting things for him. When I was a kid there was an investigation; the family of this old man my Dad treated for decades accused my father of—” He paused for a second, glancing at her, then set the syringe down on the metal table and picking up the second kit. “Of assisting his suicide.”

She blinked. “A mercy killing.”

“Yes. Nothing came of it. He was an old man, filled with cancer. The family wanted an autopsy. They said it wasn’t the first time. I don’t know exactly what happened, but it went away. There were rumors for years afterwards.”

He tore the second bag open and pulled out the second syringe. Tossed the rubber tip away. Began filling it the same way, from different ampoules.

“When I was eighteen, Dad took me to the office one day and told me it was true. He helped four people die. Suicide. They were all dying anyway, in a lot of pain, with nothing to look forward to except a few more months of more pain and less mobility, more pain and more humiliation. He wasn’t proud of it. He wasn’t ashamed. He considered it part of his job. To ease suffering.”

The door in the next room took a sudden heavier blow from outside, as if they’d found some sort of battering ram. Begley felt it in her feet.

“I didn’t know what to think. I was shocked. But I knew my father always did what he thought was right, no matter what. So I asked him to show me how he did it. I wanted to know that it was painless as he said it was. So he showed me. He made a cocktail of drugs, explained each one to me. Explained how it worked. Explained what would happen to the patient.”

She studied his face. It was impassive. “And you remembered that? Every detail?”

He nodded. “Every detail. I remember things. Always have.”

He set the second syringe down. Pushed the ampoules off the table into his hands and threw them onto the counter. Picked up the syringes and held them out to her, with his right hand forward.

“Take this one.”

The door boomed again, with a distinct cracking noise at the end. She reached out and took the syringe from him. It was filled with a small amount of clear liquid. Her hand, she noted with annoyance, was shaking.

“Adrenaline,” he said.

She looked into his eyes. “You’re fucking kidding.”

“Nope. We’re going with a bit of a brute force approach. But forgive me if I’m going to try and stack the odds a bit. The idea is, I die. I’ll have to *actually* die in the sense of my vital signs stopping. This place goes offline. Then you bring me back to life.” He tilted his head and smiled what she thought was the most charming smile she’d ever seen, under the circumstances. “If we’re *not* going to blow up, and we’re *not* going to wake up to a nuclear nightmare, well, hell, I want to *be* there.”

The door boomed again. The cracking noise again, louder.

“Do you know CPR?”

She nodded. She was re-certified every six months. She was watching the syringe shake in her hand. That couldn’t be right. Her hands did *not* shake.

“Good. I’ll self-administer the cocktail. It’s effect will be almost immediate. I assume there will be an obvious sign that

the complex is offline?”

“It’ll be obvious, yes.”

“All right. As soon as you’re sure we’re in the clear, you take that syringe, you push it into my chest, here,” he pointed at a spot off to his left of his chest and above the rib cage. “You push the plunger all the way. All the way, Begs. Then you pull it out and you do chest compressions. CPR.”

She nodded, staring at his chest. Then she looked up as the door banged in five inches and smacked into the desk. She could hear voices. Three or four, men and women. “That’s *it*? CPR? That’s your plan to get back?”

He nodded. “You got about ten minutes, give or take. Ten minutes from when I go flatline. After that it’ll be much harder to bring me back, okay? Ten minutes.”

She smiled thinly at him, listening to the shouts and banging just a few feet away. “But no pressure, right?”

He stood up. Pushed past her and sat down on the floor. “What pressure? I’m the one saving the world here. Come on. Let’s get this over with.”

The attempts on the door had become rhythmic and steady. They were ramming the door inward into the desk, pulling the door closed, then ramming it again. Trying to break the desk into pieces. It wouldn’t take long, she thought, judging by the weight of it: Particle board and wood screws, maybe a steel brace somewhere if they were lucky. The last time she’d felt lucky had been yesterday.

She set the syringe on the table as he used a piece of rubber tubing from one of the kits to tie off his arm. When he had his vein plump and firm he held the syringe in his hand. Paused.

Looked up at her. Their eyes met.

She nodded. Moved awkwardly behind him and slid to the floor behind him, her splinted leg sticking out along his side. Leaned into him and wrapped her arms around his middle, pushing her cheek against his back. Closed her eyes. He was trembling, slightly. Tiny little tremors deep under the skin.

“Begs,” he suddenly said, his voice hoarse. “Marianne ... I have ... my daughters ...”

She closed her eyes. “I’ll ...” She stopped. She didn’t know what to say. What promises she could make that she had any hope of carrying out. She swallowed. “I’m here, Jack.”

He took a deep breath. She felt him moving. Imagined him pushing the needle in. Imagined him pressing the plunger. Imagined something hot and terrible leaking into him, racing around his circulatory system, heading for —

He jerked. Her eyes popped open. She felt his body tense up for a second. A tightening of every muscle. And then he relaxed. Slumped. Raising her face from his back, she hesitated, sitting there. Tears in her eyes suddenly.

The door banged inwards. There was a sharp cracking noise.

He sagged sideways. She tried to catch him, to brace him. He’d gone utterly limp. The lights flicked off. An alarm began blaring out in the hall, distant. The yellow emergency lights came on for a moment. There was a chorus of shouts from the next room. For a moment she was in the near-dark, listening to the rise and fall of the alarm.

Then the lights came back on.