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Designated Survivor

Chapter 33

by Jeff Somers

33.

Five minutes before making a plan, Jack Renicks was trying to remain standing. The very slight vibration of the elevator made him feel like he was standing on a piece of plywood riding a giant wave to the beach. Sweat poured down his back at a steady rate. His heart thudded against his ribcage like it was trying to escape his chest. Waves of dizziness swept through him, making him have little gray moments, near-blackouts.

He supposed being dead for nine minutes or so would knock anyone on their ass.

“Isn’t riding the elevator dangerous? What if the doors open and there are six people with assault weapons waiting for us?”

“They can’t have beaten us down here. There’s only one elevator — if they were going to surprise us it would have been on Level Three when we got on. They’re going to follow a protocol, Jack. First step is, make sure the top level is clear. That we’re not hiding in a bathroom or something. Step two, probably, secure the elevator on the top level so we can’t use it.”

The elevator stopped. The doors split open. There was no one there.

“Jack,” Begley said. “Go grab a waste basket or something we

can hold these doors open with.”

He stepped into the hall. Turned as Begley stepped forward and held the doors open. “What for?” he asked as he moved off.

“So we can secure the elevator before they do.”

He rounded the corner and headed towards the Executive Suite again. Had a gray moment, and a strange feeling of déjà-vu settled over him. It was like a terrible dream, repeating over and over again. He kept heading to the Executive Suite and awful things kept happening.

He stepped around the equipment Amesley’s people had abandoned in the hall and stepped into the suite. It was exactly as they’d left it. He went into the office and grabbed the plastic trash bin, breathing harder than should have been necessary, and carried it back to the elevator.

“Jack,” Begley said briskly, “this is what the best training in the world gets you: High-tech solutions to problems.” She stepped out into the hall and released the doors. Jammed the garbage basket between them. They bounced open and stayed open.

“If we hit the emergency button, or put it into fire mode,” she said, turning and leading him back towards the suite, “that can be reversed remotely if you have the codes. Which we have to assume these people do. The doors will read someone blocking the doors and will not close under any circumstances. And the elevator won’t move if the doors are open. So if they’re sitting up on the top level calling the elevator, they’re going to have a long wait.”

Renicks smiled. “They’re going to find another way in.”

“Of course they are.”

They entered the suite again. Begley limped through the living area and headed back towards the bedrooms. When he caught up with her, she had the closet open and one of the rifles in her hands.

“This is an M16A2 Rifle,” she said. “I’m going to give you one and as many magazines as you can carry, Jack, but I don’t have time to give you any training, and you’re going to be goddamn dangerous with it.” She looked at him. “I know you’ve had some experience with small arms, Jack, and the M16 is pretty idiot-proof, but until you fire it live you don’t know it, and if you don’t know it you won’t hit anything you *want* to hit with it, and probably hit plenty you *don’t* want to hit. Like me. Okay?”

He nodded, fighting to remain standing. “So you’re saying me squeezing that trigger is a last resort.”

“That is *exactly* what I’m saying. I’m going to set it to a three-round burst. Not full auto. That should help you retain control and keep you from spraying the ceiling with bullets.”

She checked the rifle in her hands again, slapped a magazine into place, and handed it to him. He took it and had to catch himself.

“Heavy,” he said.

“It’s a pig,” Begley agreed. “Here.”

She pushed five magazines at him. “Put these in your bag. Did you see how I released the magazine?”

He nodded. “I think so.”

“Try it,” she said without looking at him, reaching in to select another rifle from the stock.

He tried it. The magazine slid into his hand. He slapped it back into place and felt the satisfying catch.

“There’ll be noise and smoke and a kick if you fire it,” she said, looking down at the rifle she’d chosen. “Never try to fire it without bracing it. Your shoulder will hurt like hell. It’ll get hot after a few sustained bursts.” She bent and came up with four more magazines and handed them to him as he slid the tough-looking fabric belt over his shoulder. “Here ends the instruction on the weapon. Your takeaways?”

He smiled. “Don’t fire it, but if I have to don’t fire it at *you*.”

“Congratulations,” she said, slamming the closet shut. “You graduate.”

He followed her back out into the living area and on to the kitchen, where they pulled some lukewarm bottles of water from the unplugged fridge. He was shivering.

“So what’s our plan?”

She closed her eyes and leaned back against the wall. Renicks thought she looked as tired as he felt, which was terrible. “They’ll spend some time trying to override the elevator. Not long; they’ll figure out we’ve manually disabled them quick enough. Say, ten minutes. They’re here to clean this mess up. Make sure no one knows exactly what’s happened here. And now that we’re offline and the crisis is over, they have a very short window before legitimate authorities show up. FBI. Marines. Hell, *everyone’s* on their way here right now.”

Renicks nodded. “Everybody involved so far seems to have walked into this with suicide as an option.” He thought of Grant. Smiling, smooth President Grant.

Begley nodded, eyes still closed. “They won’t waste time, and they won’t worry about someone coming in after them. I saw only six. They’ll leave one up top, in the lobby, just in case

someone slips past the others. They'll be aggressive."

Renicks swayed on his feet. The rifle was heavy. It pulled at his shoulder like someone was pushing down from above, making him strain to remain upright. Every muscle ached like he'd been beaten up three or four times. He was nauseous and worried what vomiting all over Agent Begley might do to her opinion of him.

"That assumes you saw everything. Just six. There might be more. They might be crowding in up there."

Begley frowned. "Sure. They might have tanks, or laser guns. But if I'm running this show from their end, it's a small team. The legitimate authorities can't be more than half an hour out. Marines. Secret Service. FBI. Racing here, now that the danger's over. They don't have *time* for a huge operation."

"So — they're here to clean this up, to stick with that charming phrase," he said slowly. "Based on the actions of our resident psychopath Frank Darmity, that appears to be a really, really bad code for *kill everybody*." He paused, working through his thick, slippery thoughts. "I can't imagine six professionals in body armor are here to escort Mr. Darmity to freedom."

Begley's eyes popped open.

Renicks nodded. "We've got two problems. We've got Darmity hunting us, and we've got, I don't know, Ninjas? Mercenaries? Hunting us."

Begley stared at him. "Ninjas?"

He waved it aside. "Let's put them in the same room."

Begley nodded slowly. "Worse case scenario: Only Darmity gets killed."

"Best case scenario? They all kill each other."

She pushed off from the wall. “Or, we stick to the access corridors again, work our way up. Maybe we skip all of them, end up with just one person to deal with.”

He thought of climbing. Climbing and climbing in those tight, hot shafts. He shook his head. “And if you’re wrong — maybe you turned away from that video screen just before five hundred more showed up. We show up in the lobby and there’s an army waiting. Or they’re already *in* the access corridors.” He took a deep, shuddering breath.

She thought about that. “How do we get them in the same place?”

“They’re both looking for us, no matter what else they’re doing,” he said. Each word took individual effort. “Let’s make some noise.”

She studied him for a moment. Then nodded. “All right. Let’s make some noise.” She pushed off from the wall and didn’t ask him if he was okay, if she could rely on him not to pass out or stumble. He was grateful for that. Grateful she didn’t make him say that he didn’t know. That he felt weak.

“Come on, Jack,” she said, limping out of the kitchen. “Between us we have three legs, multiple contusions, and one near-death experience. I’d say we’re due some fucking *luck*.”