

JEFF SOMERS

DETAINED

A Novel



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Chapter 1

by Jeff Somers

Part One

1. Candace

She heard her father's voice, warm and amused. *You'll figure out, sweetheart. In due time.*

She blew the hair out of her face and smirked to herself as she collected tumblers with the watery remnants of cocktails swirling at their bottoms. She had the round metal tray balanced perfectly as she took the not-entirely-clean rag from the back pocket of her jeans and wiped down the wobbly little table. She straightened up and reflected for a moment on the futility of cleaning anything in Mad One Jack's, then turned to carry the empties to the bar.

Her father: Three years gone and she could still hear him, sometimes, like he was right there. Always with the warm, useless advice he'd always offered: Supportive, cheerful, essentially empty. When she'd come to him after the Jimmy Hagen incident at Prom, crying, humiliated, certain life was over, he'd soothed her and given her a beer from the fridge with a delightful sense of somber rule-breaking, and he'd told her that *these things happen*. When she'd agonized over going to college, uncertain she had the grit to leave

home and go off on her own, he'd bought her ice cream and told her she *had a good head on her shoulders*. When she'd cried after he'd told her about his diagnosis, he'd patted her back and said *you'll be okay*.

That was Mr. Cuddyer, hunter, Master Plumber, her father: Soothing, content-free. And now, gone. Along with anything keeping her in town; she thought of the brush and the paints, the books. She thought of art school, all those brochures from ten years before. She'd been thinking about a lot of things, but it had all been thinking. No *doing*.

She dropped the tray on the bar and walked around to collect them, loading them into the plastic washer tray. Someone had left a damp dollar bill on the bar, so she peeled it up, flattened it out, and pushed it into her pocket. She looked around the place, her employment for five years now. She'd been able to convince herself she was still young when she'd been twenty-six, lying to Jack McCoy about having waitressing experience—which, since everybody around here knew everybody else, he knew perfectly well to be a web of deceit—but now she felt old. And she felt the gravity of the place sucking at her feet. Pretty soon she wouldn't be the hot waitress all the self-described Mountain Men, Big Game Hunters, and Ladies Men hit on. She'd be the old biddy who all the boys liked because she gave as good as she got.

That was another of her dad's phrases: *Gave as good as she got*. He applied it to any woman he found challenging, which was all of them.

The place was dead. There was nothing special about the date: Just another Wednesday in a long string of them, some not even landing on actual Wednesdays, because *Wednesday* was a concept, a mood. Three customers, the same Duane Eddy song on the juke, Jack at the other end of the bar chewing the fat with Jimmy Haggan himself,

who could generally be found at Mad One Jack's most nights, haunting her and reminding her that leaving her on prom night for Sarah Mulligan had been a lucky break, not a heartbreak.

He was the only one at the bar. Seated at one of the other tables was Glen Eastman, wearing his usual fishing vest and cap, tinted glasses, and khakis. None of it meant anything. Glen dressed exactly like that every day, and she didn't think he'd ever been fishing once. He was reading, of course, because Glen was always reading, and spent most of his evening nursing exactly two martinis, extra dirty, extra olives, while poring over a book, though she knew it was possible to entice him to put the book down and to have a third drink with conversation, assuming you were prepared to hear a lecture about the constitution and how the government was out of control, which was Mr. Eastman's version of conversation in his retirement. His white hair grew in tight curls, and the white had invaded his beard recently, making him look even more like a retired schoolteacher than usual, though he'd actually been the PE teacher, football coach when there'd been enough kids for a team, and local marathoner.

She eyed his expanding belly. Glen didn't look much like a runner any more.

Town, such as it was, amounted to a few buildings on either side of the highway—a post office, a school, city hall, the Londoner Motel, a feed store and Hallie's Diner—and the scattered and largely remote homes in the woods. And, of course, Mad One's, positioned off a dirt track in such a way as to be inconvenient for everyone to get to. It was still successful, by local standards, because it was still the only place to get a drink within twenty miles.

The other patron she didn't know. Which also wasn't unusual.

They got their fair share of hikers and hunters, some folks pounding down the trails to see the local fauna, some folks coming to hunt Elk. Or drink beer and pretend to hunt Elk, which is what patron number three looked like: A round, balding man with metal-rim glasses, working on one of Jack's rubbery chicken-fried steaks and his third Jim Beam in Coke, which Candace considered a girl's drink. He was dressed in hunting gear, and she figured him for one of the tourists that found themselves, sadly, in Mad One Jack's on a regular basis, usually because their Guide or travel agent had recommended the place as "local color."

His drink was empty, so she walked over to him, wondering if she'd remembered to charge her phone before her shift. If she hadn't, and the place emptied out, it would just be her and Jack's ancient 56k modem in the office in the back for entertainment. Cable didn't reach out there, and Jack was too cheap and too disdainful of technology to spring for a satellite connection.

"How we doin' over here?" she asked, smiling. Thousands of Wednesdays just like this one had shown her that smiling and a slightly exaggerated accent improved her tips by at least 50%. "Can I freshen you up?"

He looked up at her, chewing, grease gleaming on his lips. "Sure can, darling," he said, picking up his glass and holding it out to her.

She took the glass and smiled, relieved, at least, that he wasn't a groper or a flirter. While she told herself she believed in true love and instant attraction, she hadn't experienced either yet, and preferred to concentrate on busing tables and delivering drink orders.

At the bar, Jack McCoy noted her presence at the waitress station and said something to Jimmy, who cackled.

"Jim and coke," she said.

Jack busied himself. He was a stocky, gray-haired man, powerfully built, but he moved stiffly. He'd owned the bar when she'd been a kid, and had once been Mayor of the town. Which wasn't much of an accomplishment, as election required exactly thirty-four votes and a group of older residents had passed the job back and forth for as long as Candace could remember.

"What's Jimmy got to say about himself tonight?" she asked, and then regretted it, regretted being so transparent.

"You know," Jack said, laughing as he slid the drink towards her, a generous pour. "The translation is that he's the smartest guy in the room because he doesn't have a job and never has."

She sighed, thinking of the near miss. Part of the tragedy of that night thirteen years ago had been her intention to sleep with Jimmy, without protection, making him her first. The girl who'd fever-dreamed *that* plan was a stranger to her, now, and she was happy for that. She now regarded his betrayal of her as the Immaculate Non-Conception, a miracle that spared her from James Haggan, who lived by hunting and various scams, mostly benign in nature, and lived in a shithole house in the middle of nowhere without power or running water, unless his propane generator and the rainwater collection system he'd rigged up counted. Which, she thought, it certainly did not.

He *was* a good hunter, she thought. He got hired sometimes by the tourists, and he knew the country like no one else. Which was funny, because he was—and had always been—a huge nerd, the kid who spent his free time in the sad, run-down computer lab at school, the kind of kid who cracked video games for fun and who routinely broke into the school's servers. If Jimmy hadn't gone total Survivalist, living with four hours of electricity every night from his solar panels, he

might have been one of those App Millionaires. As it was, she wouldn't have starved, her and her sixteen babies, had her plan for a First Time come off, but there would have been no episodes of *The Bachelor*.

As she carried the drink back to Bald Man with Glasses, she took the place in. Mad One Jack's had been a bar in the woods long before Jack. It had been Lowell's before him and The Locker before that. It was wood on wood on wood, with ancient road signs and random posters from various eras on the walls. It was ice in the trough-like urinals in the men's room and a women's room that had once been a closet, back before the 1970s, and was now a toilet where your knees touched the door when you sat down. The jukebox was a time machine, and while she hadn't exactly hated her time working there, she suddenly knew it was time for a change. Like her Dad had said, she'd figured it out: It didn't matter what she did. She had to leave right away, that night. She had to give notice, collect her pay, and get into her rickety old Trailblazer with the hole in the floor, put on some Violent Femmes, and head south. Or north. Or East or West or Up or Down. Anywhere.

Feeling suddenly lighthearted, she placed the drink next to Balding Man with Glasses' plate. He beamed at her.

"Thank you, darling!"

She might have bristled at the toothless sexism, but instead she just smiled, and even gave him a little extra hip as she walked away. She was leaving. Nothing else mattered any more.

She tallied everything up in her head. She had five hundred and sixteen dollars in aggregated tips at home. Jack owed her about two hundred in wages. She had fifteen in tips from the shift, the cheap bastards. The Trailblazer, which had been her Dad's, had three-

quarters of a tank. She could pack just the essentials in fifteen minutes and be on her way, figure everything else out on the road, listening to *Blister in the Sun* on repeat, a song she'd once danced to in her bedroom, flipping an imaginary finger at the world.

She had a high school diploma, she was thirty-one years old, and her only skill—if you could call it that—was waitressing.

She was excited.

The front door opened just as the song ended. In the brief moment of silence before the next song, a man walked in, peeling off his gloves and looking around. And she thought, *goddammit, no! Don't send in someone interesting now.*