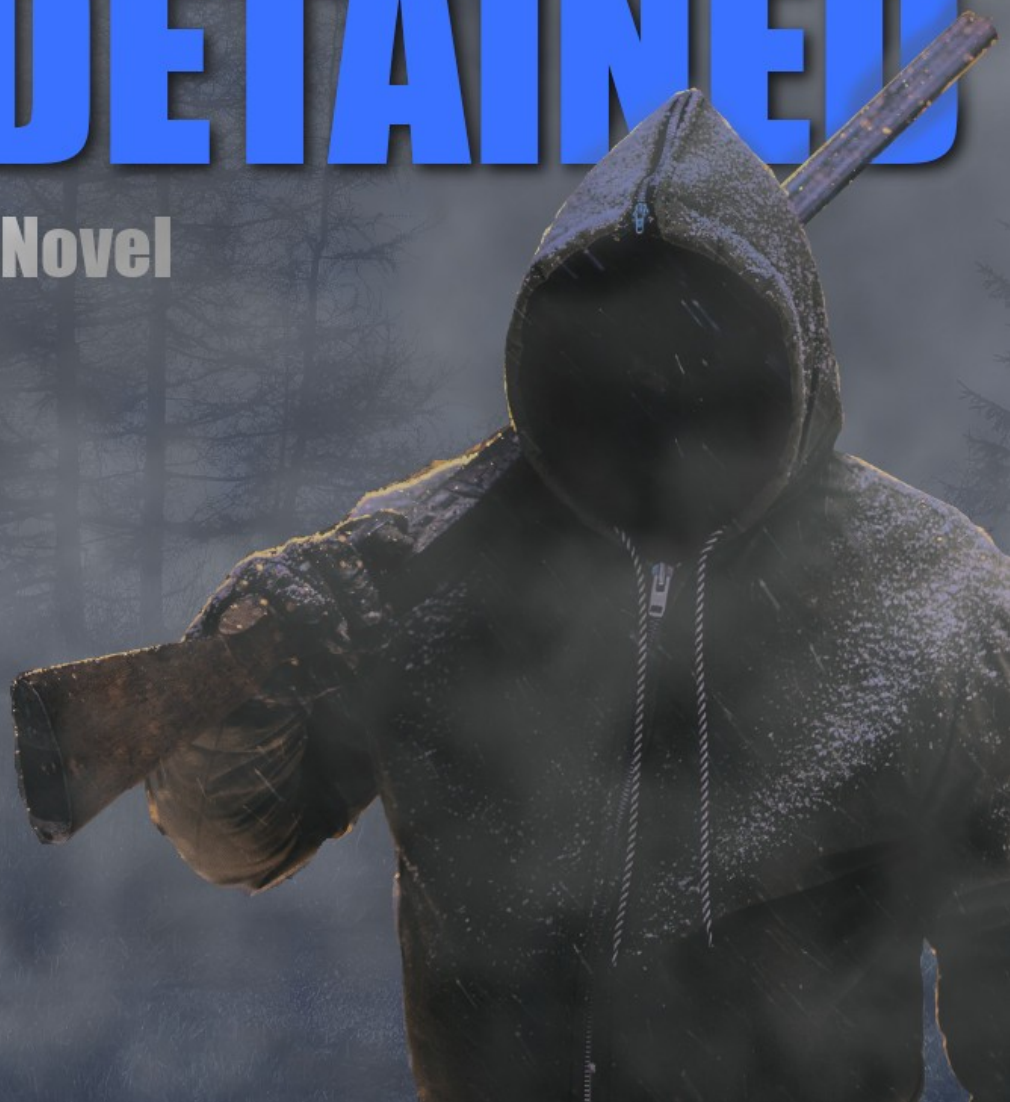


JEFF SOMERS

DETAINED

A Novel



DETAINED

Chapter 7

by Jeff Somers

7. Candace

For a moment, she stared down at the first aid kit and heard Mike a few moments ago, screaming for it while Mr. Simms bled out. She looked up at Mike, but he was just sitting on the floor of the bathroom, staring at the wall. His hands were covered in congealing blood, his knees were stained with it. At some point he'd pushed a hand through his hair and touched his face, leaving behind gore.

She heard him screaming for a First Aid kit, and saw herself standing there, frozen.

She opened the kit and scrounged for some cotton balls. "I'm sorry you had to go through that," she said. "We should—I should have helped you."

He blinked and looked at her, for a moment seeming far away. Then he shook his head, looking down at his hands. "There wasn't anything you could do. There wasn't anything *I* could do." He snorted. "I've been traveling around, apprenticing. I thought I was ... I don't know, it seems stupid now. I thought I was learning a little bit about everything. Spend a few months fighting wildfires, a few weeks working in a car repair shop. People are always happy to bend the rules and let you just hang around, doing free labor, especially if you offer them a lot of money." He closed his eyes. "I should have

done something better with that money. Donated it. Started a charity, a foundation.”

She closed the first aid kit and put it aside and grabbed a handful of paper towels instead. She dampened them and began cleaning his face. He opened his eyes and watched her, calm, unashamed. His eyes were brown and she liked them, the steady way they regarded her. “I don’t know,” she said. “Traveling around learning—it sounds nice. A good way to spend your life.”

“It’s selfish. It’s arrogant. It presumes me knowing things is somehow important to the universe.” He swallowed. “I ... never wanted to feel helpless again. I lost someone, and I realized I had no idea what to do. I woke up and she was gone and I’d spent a decade doing nothing, being nothing. I guess I wanted to make up for that lost time and be everything, all at once.” He sighed. “It didn’t help Kevin Simms.”

“They didn’t let you help him,” she said, surprised at the bite of anger in her own voice. “They shot that poor man and then just stood there and let him bleed.” She paused and looked directly at him. “We have to do something. We have to get out of here.”

He nodded. “We don’t even know what’s going on. I wish you knew something about that facility down the road. Was lit up bright as Christmas when I drove by it, and I’ll bet you dollars to donuts that’s where our new friends came from.”

She tossed the towels into the garbage and grabbed another handful. She knew she wasn’t really doing anything—he wasn’t hurt and could clean himself up—but she’d felt a need to do something for him, to connect with him somehow. “I don’t know anything. Maybe Jack does, he’s—” She hesitated to say *older than me* for some reason. “It’s been closed for years, even before I was born, I think. Padlock on

the gates and everything. I don't actually know who owns it."

He shook his head. "When I drove past it just before I got here, it was definitely *not* empty. It was alive, and populated. Whatever was going on there is a big secret, and that makes me nervous." He accepted damp towels from her and scrubbed at his face. "What I wouldn't give for a working cell phone signal right now. I'm betting a lot of this stuff is classified, but we have a few names, a location—we might find out *something* that would help."

She nodded, something nagging at her thoughts. "Or we might find out it's happening everywhere, all over the place," she said. "Martial law or something."

He stared at her. "I hadn't thought of that," he said.

"You know what's strange to me," she said, leaning against the wall. "They don't have any walkie-talkies, radios, nothing. They have no way of communicating with the outside world."

"They've got Raslowski's laptops," Mike said, turning to the sink and running the water. "He seems to be connected to something."

"Maybe," she said. "But he's not talking to anyone else is he? He's not passing information that we can see. And what's his deal, anyway? He's not a soldier, but they obey his orders, and—" She froze. "Wait!"

He turned to her, still crouched over the sink, his face dripping. "What is it?"

"The office computer!" She looked at him, eyes burning. "It's *ancient*."

He frowned. "Okay."

"Like, *seriously* ancient," she said. "It's got an old dial-up modem in there. It's the only Internet connection he's ever had. Landline. *Hardline*."

She thought of all the boring nights without customers, surfing the web in there and hating every moment. She turned off images in the browser and everything else, and eventually even downloaded a text-only browser, which at least allowed her to read the news at a decent clip. Jack McCoy was probably the only person in a hundred miles who hadn't gotten a satellite dish.

Once again, Jimmy Hagggen figured into it; he was like a form of mold that had gotten into every single nook and cranny of her life, taking root in microscopic ways. He was the one who, one night when Jack had gone on a run for lemons—the Great Lemon Emergency—had taken her in to Jack's office and showed her the old box. *It's a fucking first-gen Pentium!* he'd cawed. *It's fucking amazing it does anything!*

And Jimmy had shown her how to make it go online, and made all sorts of tweaks trying to get it to run a little faster. He was the one who'd suggested she use the text browser, making inscrutable jokes about the Dark Web and onions. She wondered if there were any stories in her life that didn't somehow involve James Hagggen, and decided to table the thought for later contemplation when she wasn't being held prisoner.

Mike's smile came slowly, and then he nodded. "So not blocked by whatever's killing our phones," he said. "And maybe they overlooked it. We can call out."

"*And* look everything up online," she said breathlessly. "It's slow as heck, but it *works*."

"If they didn't notice it."

She nodded. "If they didn't notice it. But I'll bet they didn't. Who would think of a landline these days? Or a dial-up modem?"

"There's one problem: Hammond has set up in the office."

She deflated, kicking herself. Of *course*, she knew that. The Colonel had been sitting in Jack's office since she'd arrived, and called people in when she needed them.

He grabbed more towels and dried himself off. "That means we need to distract her, get her out of there for a few minutes. Then someone goes in and connects, does some searching. Or calls the police."

She shook her head. "No way, Mike. Seriously—Mr. Simms is *dead*. Anyone playing around at distracting Hammond or sneaking into that office could get *shot*. *Plus*," she continued, cutting off his response, "plus, the police around here is one guy named Werner who hasn't so much as pulled his sidearm from the holster in fifteen years."

Mike smiled. "My kind of cop."

"It's not worth it. There are too many moving parts."

He shook his head. "We have to, Candace," he said, his face intent. She liked the fact that he had not yet once called her *Candy*, which was usually irresistible to men of all ages and social standings. "We don't know what's going on, which means this *could* be a lot bigger than just us. It might involve who knows how many people—or the whole country, or the whole world." He nodded. "We have to try this."

"And what if it's everybody? What if it's everywhere?"

He nodded. "In that case, it doesn't matter, does it? If it's something like that, we're totally screwed. There would be no place to go anyway, no other authority to appeal to."

She had the sense that he was right, but she didn't want him to be. She *wanted* there to be someplace to go, some authority to appeal to. She wanted to get to tomorrow, when she could quit her job and pack a bag and leave town like she should have last year, or the year before.

She knew she might never be an artist, or be rich, but she would at least be somewhere other than this bar every single night.

It wasn't fair. She'd seen a man die, and suddenly the possibility not just of her own death, but her own death *in this goddamn bar* was all too real. She wasn't the morbid type: She didn't spend a lot of time contemplating her own mortality. But now that she could see her mortality in a very real way, she felt a near-panic to break out. Dying in the woods twenty feet outside One-Eyed Jack's would be better than dying *inside* it.

"All right," she said. "How would we do it?"

Mike looked off to the side, thinking. She liked his profile. "You've signed on. How long does it take, usually?"

She thought, imagining the hated little box on screen, the odd electronic noises. "A minute, probably."

He nodded. "Okay. We need to have a set of searches ready, mapped out. From most important to least." He started to pace, taking two steps in one direction and two in the opposite. "Even if we manage to get Hammond out of the office, we'll need to get you *into* the office. And even then we can't be certain how much time you'll have, so we have to have everything set from least to most important. And—"

"Wait—*me*?"

He stopped pacing and turned, taking her by the shoulders. "You know the system. The log on, everything. We can't risk wasted seconds. It has to be you."

She stared, fear dripping into her. She saw Simms lying on the floor, bleeding, the confused, terrified expression on his face. Her heart started to pound. She wasn't built for this. She was just a waitress, a girl past thirty who'd stayed in her hometown because her

father got sick and deferred any sort of dreams she might have had for herself. She had a high school diploma and a decent music collection and, everyone had always assured her, a good head on her shoulders. She wasn't a spy. She wasn't built to risk her life. She would crack, she would slip up, ruin everything, and get killed.

You'll figure it out, she heard her Dad say in his growly voice that strangers always thought sounded angry. *You'll be okay*.

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes for just one moment. What was the alternative? If she didn't do it, they would be right back where they began, sitting around waiting for whatever these people decided to do to them. And she doubted it ended with Hammond apologizing and ordering her people to leave without incident. And then she saw herself kneeling, hands tied behind her back, with a gun pointed at her head.

She opened her eyes. Mike was studying her, but with distance, holding back, giving her room.

"Okay," she said. "How do you get me in there?"