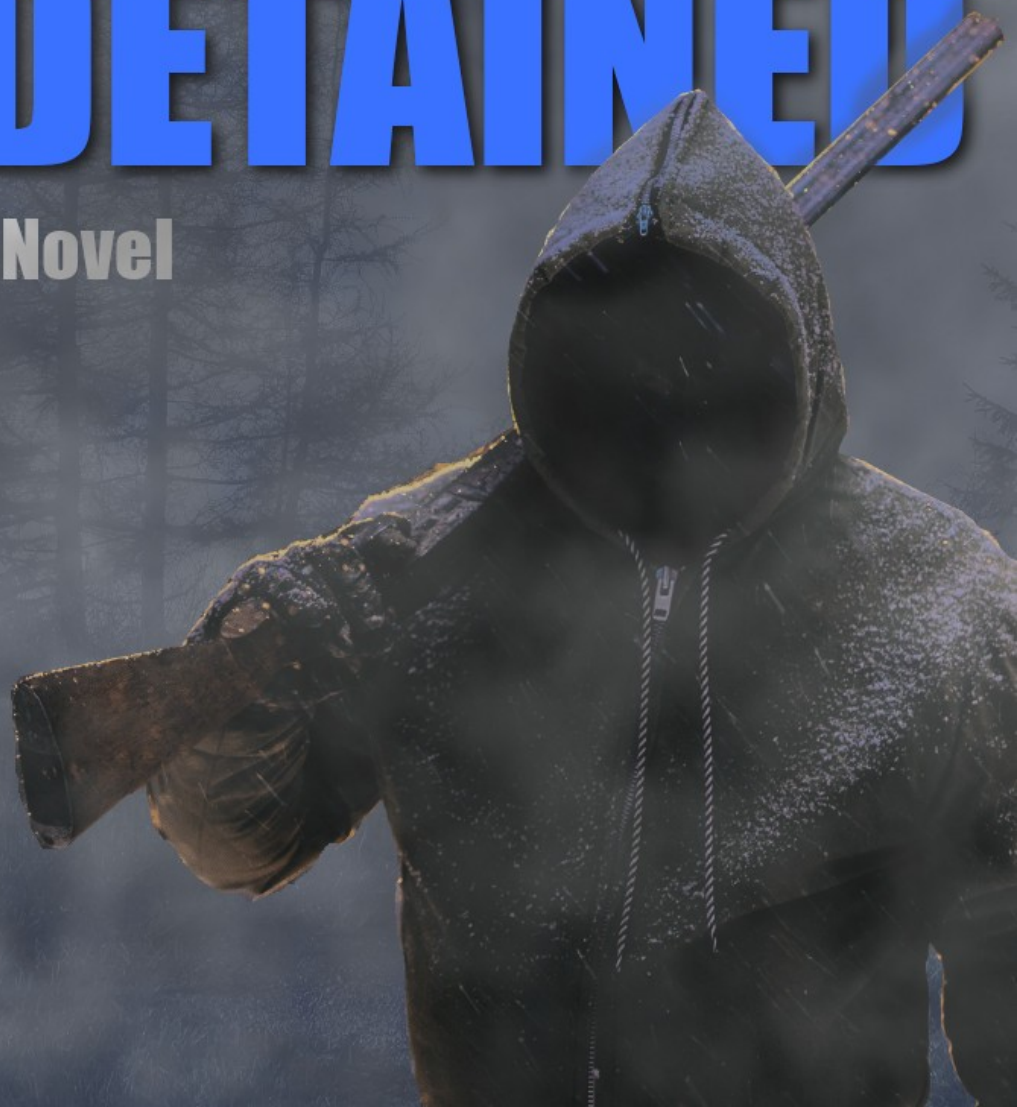


**JEFF SOMERS**

# **DETAINED**

**A Novel**



# DETAINED

## Chapter 26

by Jeff Somers

### 26. Candace

They took her Trailblazer and Mike's Land Rover, all of them packed in tight. Only Mr. Eastman—glum, eyes swollen—remained in zipties, everyone else had been released and armed. Candace had a moment of panic when Hammond and the soldiers had stepped over the bodies of their comrades and reclaimed their weapons and gear. If she and Mike had just made the biggest mistake of their lives, that would be the moment. A barked order, and they would find themselves tied up securely, and there wouldn't be very many opportunities to break free again.

Assuming Hammond and company didn't just shoot them dead. That would certainly be a way of guaranteeing they didn't somehow set off the apocalypse.

But Hammond had issued orders in a calm, steady voice, appointing King as her second in command. The soldiers didn't complain or protest as they geared up. Hammond ordered them to do as she and Mike suggested, and no one protested *that*, either.

As she drove, following Mike's taillights, she thought about Jimmy.

Her father had never liked Jimmy Haggen, Bobby and Miranda's son, for unspecified reasons that sank back into the murky past. Something had happened or been observed long before she herself was sentient and self-aware, and Mr. Cuddyer had carried this dark knowledge about James Xavier Haggen for the rest of his life, but only expressed it through vague disapproval and occasional murmured warnings.

She'd known Jimmy her whole life. When they'd been small, he'd always been around, a dirty boy in torn overalls and long hair who played tag and always shoved her to the ground when he was It. She'd never thought much about him except when he was right in front of her, back in those days.

In high school Jimmy Haggen had somehow miraculously transformed into a Hot Man. Skinny but muscular, he played baseball and smart-mouthed the teachers and was always in trouble in some sense of the word, but he was also funny and confident. He stalked the halls of the school with a perpetual lopsided grin, and his occasional flashes of raging anger and emotional outbursts—at games, where he would throw his helmet and scream, at school dances, where he would sometimes be found sitting in the dark of an empty classroom, monosyllabic and brooding—only served to make

him seem tragic, which made him the most attractive boy within ten miles to most of the girls.

And, she admitted, to her. Suddenly at fourteen Jimmy Haggen stopped being the dirty pushy kid her father vaguely disapproved of and became an obsession. She saw him, once, emerging from the practice field with his shirt off, his skin white and sheened in sweat, the muscles moving under his skin with implied power and assurance, and he'd glanced up and grinned at her, tossing his head as if to say *what's up?* No embarrassment, no shyness. And she began seeing that torso in her thoughts as she lay in bed at night.

Their romance was a legend of whispered gossip. They never, she realized, officially dated. Jimmy Haggen had always been in her life, and when their games of tag and Running Bases became sweaty make out sessions, it didn't feel like a new chapter but rather a simple evolution. But they never dated, they never went on a *date*. Jimmy would show up, and they would hang out. They would kiss or talk for hours on end, and then he would go home. As Senior Prom approached, she realized he'd never once asked her to be anything—not his girlfriend, not anything else. She'd just been there, all his life, and he'd wandered over to her when it suited him.

She thought about pushing him to ask her—officially, publicly—to prom. And he'd been squirrely about it, and that made her angry, and the gossip started to fly. And then he asked her, and he was very

sweet about it, and her father had been glum and just sat there blowing out his cheeks and shaking his head and saying *well, if you're sure, sweetie.*

She remembered her dress. She still had it, though it represented a sort of fashion sense she didn't really ever want to be reminded of.

She remembered driving over to Ronaldos with everyone beforehand, and ordering a big dinner just so they could order wine, because Ronaldos made most of their business off the fact that it was an open secret they would serve a carafe of wine to anyone, even if you appeared to be three kids stacked on top of each other in a trench coat, with a beard drawn on your face with a Sharpie.

She remembered looking for Jimmy, and she remembered finding him and Sarah Mulligan's feet in the air. And she remembered being sick and ... whatshername ... holding her hair out of her face in the school bathroom. She concentrated, seeking the name of that girl. She hadn't been her closest friend, but she'd been the one in the bathroom stall with her as her eye liner ran down her face. Big girl, dyed blonde hair, round shoulders. Great skin.

She couldn't remember.

Over the years after high school Jimmy had gotten weird. His parents died and he worked a series of jobs that involved dirt and sweat, and that was her prevailing memory of him in recent years: Dirty and sweaty, a beer bottle in one hand. He would work for a few

months and then quit—or not so much quit as simply stop showing up. He left paychecks behind and never picked them up, and would disappear for weeks, only to reappear working the graveyard shift somewhere or pestering folks for odd jobs and manual labor. When she saw him at Jack's, he was always friendly enough, but his trademark sarcasm had soured over the years, and he wasn't fun to talk to any more.

And he got paranoid. His house, which he inherited from his parents, had been converted into an off-grid compound. He'd put up a fence all around the property, and no one got inside any more. You rang a bell and Jimmy came out to you—or didn't come, more often than not. He talked a lot about being prepared, about not having to rely on money or government services. He installed a rainwater collection system, solar panels, a composter. He collected old computers and took them apart, creating his own systems. About the only times she'd had a decent conversation with Jimmy Haggan over the last few years the subject had been his house and how he was making it so he would be able to retire at forty and never have to rely on anyone else, ever. How he was writing his own automation code to control the heat, the locks, the security cameras. He would hunt for himself and take care of himself, and he would be free to tell everyone and anyone to kiss his ass.

Standing outside the facility, Hammond and her troops checked their guns and equipment. Candace found it hard to believe that she'd been in this exact spot with Dr. Raslowski just an hour before. The moment she thought it, a strange feeling came over her, a nervousness. She *hadn't* been here with Dr. Raslowski, had she? She'd killed him, by accident, back at the bar when he ran for it. She'd *meant* to wound him, but she'd shot him through the chest and his body was still lying there.

She had a headache, suddenly. How had they gotten inside the facility? Dr. Raslowski ... hadn't ... been with them to key in the code.

There was a hand on her shoulder, and she turned to find Myra, who had somehow contrived to put her hair into perfect order, who somehow seemed to smell and look better than when they'd initially met.

"I let you in," she whispered.

"What?"

"You're having trouble—remembering, right? You think something happened, then you realize it couldn't have."

Candace nodded.

"It'll pass. For the moment, remember that you and Mike arrived here because you found Emory's ID on his body. I heard the car pull up and came out to investigate, and let you in."

Candace blinked. That *was* how it had happened, she suddenly

recalled. “Th—thank you,” she stuttered.

“It will all fall into place, don’t worry.”

Candace frowned. “Do I eventually forget the ... old version completely?”

“Only if you choose to. You can hang onto the *knowledge* that things changed, and how they changed, if you put a little effort into it. People doublethink their way through stuff all the time. It’s an evolved survival skill for humanity.”

Candace was glad for that. It was bad enough thinking that reality might be changed around you at any time. Not even being aware that it had happened would be infinitely worse.

“Everyone ready?” Hammond barked, striding to the front. When everyone nodded silently, she turned to look at Candace. “Ms. Cuddyer, anything you can tell us about Mr. Haggren? Anything that might be useful in the next ten minutes or so?”

Candace thought. “He’s paranoid. He likes to set traps.”

Hammond nodded. “Good to know. Thank you. King, take point. Eyes open, be sure of your footing. Ms. Azarov, if you would join her. You’re most familiar with the office layout, and you’ll have a better chance of noticing anything that feels off.”

“All right,” Myra said, and Candace hated the cool way she strolled gracefully forward. She would have thought anyone with legs that long would have trouble keeping her balance, but Myra was like a



dancer.

“Let’s go,” Hammond said.

Myra and King went first. Myra keyed in the entrance code, and then led the way. Hammond and the other four soldiers followed, rifles in their hands but aimed at the floor. Finally Mike pushed Glen Eastman ahead of him, and Candace brought up the rear. She had one of the Berettas tucked into her belt, and she hoped like hell she wouldn’t have to use it. She wanted things to go easy: They would find Jimmy trying to do something stupid and crazy, they’d talk him down—or hit him over the head, the long-dormant Ghost of Prom Night giggled crazily in her ear—and then it would just be twelve hours of sitting around with everyone.

She intended to spend those twelve hours getting very, very drunk, then sleeping it off. In a perfect world, she would wake up to find everyone gone: The gear packed, the bodies buried, her Trailblazer waiting. She would leave an anonymous tip for Sheriff Werner, and never look back.

Walking down the corridor was strange; she felt like she’d been there years ago, instead of an hour before. Everything looked the same, but her memory of following Myra into the security office and then into the server farm felt fake, somehow, like the Moon Landings: Staged at great expense. She followed the soldiers with an increasing sense of unease, as if nothing she saw could be relied on.

“We can’t all fit in there,” Myra said when they arrived at the door that led to the tunnel and the Field Room. “Might I suggest Colonel Hammond, Mr. Malloy, and Ms. Cuddyer accompany me inside? Colonel, your people can mind Mr. Eastman.”

Candace was pleased to be named, then resented Myra’s assumption that she was in charge and could make arrangements for her. Then felt silly for resenting someone she’d met an hour before, and who was, in this situation, far more qualified than she was.

Myra entered the key code, and Candace followed Mike down the tunnel and into the familiar room. The moment she entered, she could tell something was wrong. Mike and Myra stiffened, and she followed their gaze to the little desk.

Everything was gone.

The keyboard. The mouse. And the black box—what Myra had called The Transmogrifier.

“Jimmy,” she breathed.

“*Haggen?*” Colonel Hammond said quietly.

Mike nodded. “I’m pretty sure now that he followed us here. He probably observed Dr. Ras—Myra here enter the key codes for the doors, then slipped in behind us.” He looked around. “Heard the whole thing.”

Hammond let out a stream of quiet, eerily calm curses. Then she looked at Mike and Candace. “You keep telling me how crazy it is that

you might be worth all this trouble. How you couldn't possibly be the threat Raslowski calculated you to be. But all I see is a bunch of people who are just a *little* smarter and a *little* more resourceful than they ought to be."

Candace thought, *Well, maybe not Mr. Eastman.*

Hammond closed her eyes and sighed deeply, then opened them again. "Well, any idea where he went with it? So we can try to stop him from erasing the universe or something?"

Mike shook his head. "I have no idea where he might be."

"Not his house," Candace offered. "He always thought of it as his safe haven, but like I said, he's paranoid. He'll assume you know where he lives, and that you'll have ninjas or something waiting for him there."

"It doesn't matter, does it?" Myra asked, smiling what Candace thought was an effortlessly charming smile, white teeth and red lips. "He can't possibly use it. Even if he had access to a power source sufficient for the Field Gen—The Transmorgrifier, he couldn't possibly know how to operate it." She looked around. After a moment, her smile faded. "Could he?"

Mike and Hammond turned to look at her. After a moment she realized they were waiting for her assessment of Jimmy Hagen as it related to a device that could manipulate reality itself.

"Well," she said slowly, "Jimmy's always been *technical.*" She shook

her head. “But no, I doubt this is at his pay grade.” She hesitated, because she realized she wasn’t sure. Jimmy had been deep into computers and programming and even building his own machines and simple robots. And in the ensuing decade and a half she didn’t know what he’d been up to out at his fortress-like house.

Then she smiled and looked around. “You might be wrong about one thing.”

Mike frowned. “What’s that?”

“I might know *exactly* where Jimmy would go.”