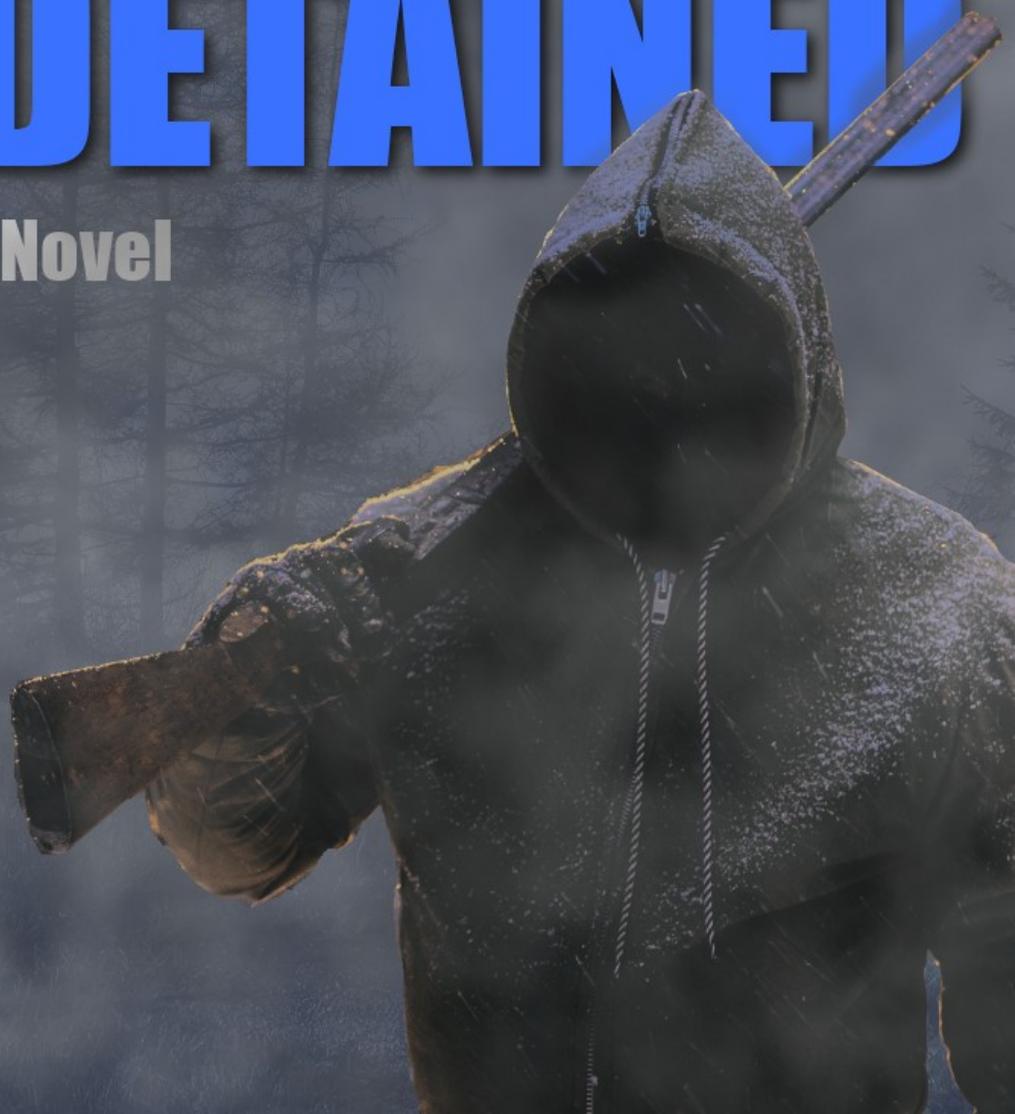


JEFF SOMERS

DETAINED

A Novel



DETAINED

Chapter 28

by Jeff Somers

28. Candace

She'd surprised herself with the detail she remembered: The back trail that ran from the old dump in a meandering line ending at The Sprawl, the little-known private road with the hefty gate that led very near to the old cabin, even the general layout of the trees around the structure. She had a moment of amazement that it had been years since she'd been there and longer since she'd actually partied there—for a short, intense period of her life everything had centered on The Sprawl, where every weekend and some weeknights there was a party, drama, and people.

She missed the people, she thought. Sometimes she missed the party. She didn't miss the drama. And after this evening, she thought, she wouldn't need any more drama, she'd gotten her fill.

She glanced at Mike, walking silently next to her, and wondered if they would have known each other if he'd gone to school here, lived her. Probably not, she thought. She liked him tremendously, now, but there hints that he'd been a terror as a teenager. The money, for one

thing. Had he been a rich kid? She couldn't quite remember and made a mental note to clarify that. But he had a preternatural confidence—she thought he was more comfortable in his own skin than anyone she'd ever seen before—and that meant he was probably one of those Golden Boys in High School, the kind, ironically, that she and Jimmy would have mocked.

She thought it was amazing, though. He'd walked into the place just hours before, but she felt completely comfortable with him, as if she'd known him for years. Part of it was the stress, the trial-by-fire aspect. Part of it was just his personality; she'd never met anyone so quietly confident yet so *easy*. He wasn't a peacock, or a mansplainer (well, not much, which was itself a triumph).

Well, Dad, she thought. If the world ends tonight, apparently it'll be my fault, and for a girl who never got off her ass to go to school, that's got to be pretty goddamn impressive.

She had to swallow a laugh, thinking about how it might look on a resume: *Candace Cuddyer, high school diploma, ten years waitressing experience, poor taste in men, destroyer of worlds.*

Poor taste in men. The first time she'd been to The Sprawl, Jimmy had taken her. She'd been fifteen and she'd had to climb out of her bedroom window and climb down the trellis while wearing a skirt somewhat shorter than her father would have liked. She realized halfway down that she had planned badly: Not only was Jimmy

standing almost directly below her and no doubt getting a good look up her skirt, but she was getting pretty filthy climbing down and her carefully prepared outfit and makeup and hair were being transformed into a mess. Plus, it occurred to her that dignity was hard to come by when you came climbing out of windows for a boy.

But she was committed. Climbing back *up* not only increased the odds that Dad would hear her and wake up from his usual late-evening nap in the easy chair to investigate, but would also constitute a retreat. An admittance of failure. Not to mention doubling Jimmy's window of opportunity to see her underpants. She would have to emerge from the front door sheepish and admit that her plan to escape the house in stealth had been a bad one.

Sometimes you just have to put your head down, she heard her father say, *and eat the meal you've prepared.*

She managed to dismount with a modicum of grace while evading Jimmy's probing hands, which had become insistent. She remembered that they hadn't slept together yet; the Prom Night Massacree, as her father eventually called it, was a year off. At the time she wasn't even sure she *liked* Jimmy Haggan, for all his swagger. He was sarcastic and liked to tease her and got into fights. But The Sprawl was too good to pass up.

It was legend to two generations. For the older folks, her Dad's age and older, it was officially known as the Patterson Place.

Originally a modest hunting lodge built by Cornelius Patterson during the oil boom, it had been inherited by Sally Prentice Patterson seventy years before. Sally wasn't local; she'd been the bride of a Patterson boy brought to town, an unhappy, unhinged beauty who was famous for wandering into town and shoplifting small items from the stores, followed by men her husband had hired to pay for everything behind her back.

When her husband died, she inherited the sagging Patterson fortune, already quite diminished from poor business decisions, and proceeded to dispense with the remaining funds by adding onto, of all things, the nearly-forgotten cabin out in the country. For years she hired builders in waves, fired them, hired more, changed her mind, had brilliancies she sketched out on scraps of paper and demanded that contractors create for her. The small cabin began to *sprawl* into a complex of rooms that had little relation to each other. It had a plethora of doors leading to the outdoors or, in three cases, to walls. The sections of The Sprawl had little relation to each other in terms of design or materials. It was insanity, and had ceased to be useful on any level.

When Sally Patterson died, The Sprawl was abandoned, and forgotten, and, of course, rediscovered by teenagers. It became legend for the younger generations as a place to go drink beer, make noise, and be seen.

Candace remembered her first night at The Sprawl. She'd strutted in knowing her skirt was provocatively short. Hard rock and smoke in the air, she'd felt like she'd *arrived*, at the age of fifteen. She would make her mark. She was one of the Cool Kids, now. She proceeded to drink eight shots of something red and spent the majority of the night throwing up in the back woods while a sad, soggy boy wearing glasses and a dour expression nobly stood guard over her.

She realized with a wince of shame that she couldn't remember the boy's name. Or even what had happened to him. Jimmy Hagen, she remembered, and that was somehow wrong.

She hadn't thought of The Sprawl for years. She'd gone back once when she'd been twenty-three, a six pack of beers and a strange feeling of sadness hanging on her, and she wandered around for fifteen minutes or so. The Sprawl was a *dump*. Somehow she'd missed that during all the old parties in high school. It was filled with rot and mold, the windows and roof leaked, critters lurked in all the shadows, and decades of teenage parties had left it carved up and battered.

After that, there'd been no reason to go back.

She blinked at the fading fireball as it rose up into the night sky, fading into smoke. She heard shouts from just up ahead, and then King was rushing back past them, skidding to a halt and leaning in to whisper urgently at Hammond.

“Your friend Mr. Haggen is pretty handy with IEDs,” Hammond growled as she stormed forward. Mike launched himself after her and Candace struggled to keep up. “We just lost a man.”

“Shit,” Mike whispered.

Candace felt a cold wave of shock wash over her. “An IED?” she whispered back.

“You can make one from a gas can, a battery, and a fucking clothespin,” Mike whispered. “If I know that, bets are good Jimmy knows that. And a lot more. We’re going to have to be careful.”

She shook her head even though he wasn’t looking at her. It wasn’t the IED itself. She totally believed Jimmy could build a bomb using just stuff he found in his car. He’d always been that way, the smartest idiot she knew, a guy who could fix your car and figure out what was wrong with your computer but who couldn’t hold a job. It wasn’t that—she found it hard to believe that Jimmy Haggen would risk killing people, would just casually make a bomb and sit back waiting for someone to step on it.

And it could have been *her*.

She didn’t think he could have made too many explosive traps, unless—and this was no longer as crazy as she would have expected—he had them pre-made in the bed of his truck. He’d known they would come this way, and to her mind that meant that he knew *she* would be the one leading everyone to The Sprawl. No one else—not

Glen Eastman, even—knew the back ways and hidden trails the kids used the way she and Jimmy knew.

And that meant he'd set a bomb to go off even though she might have been the one to step on it.

The shock soured into anger and hurt. Jimmy Haggren had always been an asshole, she knew that. An unhappy asshole, too smart for everyone around him, too unstable for any sort of sensible life, too angry to admit he was the cause of many of his own problems. But he'd been *her* asshole. She'd had little patience for him, but she'd loved him in an obscure way, a primal way, the way you loved people who were fundamental parts of your life, even if you hated them on a higher level.

She'd gone to *prom* with him. And sure, that hadn't gone well, but not many girls could say their prom dates had not only slept with another girl on prom night, but thirteen years later had tried to murder them with an improvise explosive device.

Hammond came stalking back towards them. Candace was impressed with how calm and stone-faced she was. "We keep going," the Colonel said. "My bet is Haggren didn't have the resources or time to plant more than a small number of these devices, so he likely spread them out along several possible approaches. Odds are this one is now clear." She turned to look over her shoulder, then back at them.

“Haggen is obviously not going to go quietly,” she said. “I’ve ordered my team to use force. We won’t be trying any negotiation. This is now an assault on a known hostile. If either of you has an objection, this is the time to voice it.”

“You’re going to kill him?” she asked. She saw Mike turn to look at her out of the corner of her eye, and she willed him not to say anything.

Hammond pursed her lips slightly. “Not if we can help it. I want to have the new models finished before we make any crucial decisions. That means for the moment I am following the previously established protocols: You four should be kept alive and in place until tomorrow. I’ve pushed the Mission End Time to noon as discussed with Mr. Malloy, but I don’t want to change any other parameters until we have data. So if we can take Mr. Haggen alive, we will.” She looked at Candace. “If not ... we won’t.”

Mike studied her. His stubble made him look shadowed. “You ready for that?”

She started to react, to be defiant. Who was he to worry about little old her? She thought furiously that she’d probably had a lot more experience with death than he ever had. She’d skinned enough animals, buried enough uncles—then she froze, remembering him saying *she died and it was my fault* in that soft, hopeless voice.

You really can be a hopeless bitch, she thought. *He’s just being decent to*

you.

“I’m okay,” she said. “Really.”

He smiled, and she liked it. Unlike her father, who would have frowned in worry, or the boyfriends she’d had—including Jimmy Hagen—he wasn’t going to treat her like she might break.

They crept forward in a line, and she was aware of the tension, of the fact that they might encounter another IED despite Colonel Hammond’s conclusions. Any one of them might end up dead. She wondered why Hammond’s orders hadn’t included just shooting one of them—or all of them. If she, Jim, Mike, and Mr. Eastman were supposed to spark the end of the world, somehow, why not just kill them all?

Because Raslowski’s models said, if they did that, something even worse would happen.

The realization hit her and she stumbled a little. Of course—if she found out someone was going to end the world, her first thought would be to just eliminate them. The fact that instead of just sending someone with a gun to kill them all they’d sent a platoon and built a secret computer lab told her that killing them would only lead to something *worse*.

No wonder Hammond’s willing to go to all this trouble, she thought. The alternatives aren’t good.

She saw them running models—model after model, tweaking

details, always coming back to the same conclusion: The only way out was to keep the four of them in the bar. Break whatever chain reaction had been quietly happening all their lives.

“Stop!”

She stumbled into Mike. Jimmy’s voice, booming out in the darkness. Except, she realized as she got her bearing, not *quite* darkness: She could see the eerie glow of a propane lantern. They were close.

“Don’t come any closer!” Jimmy shouted. “Or I’ll erase you all.”