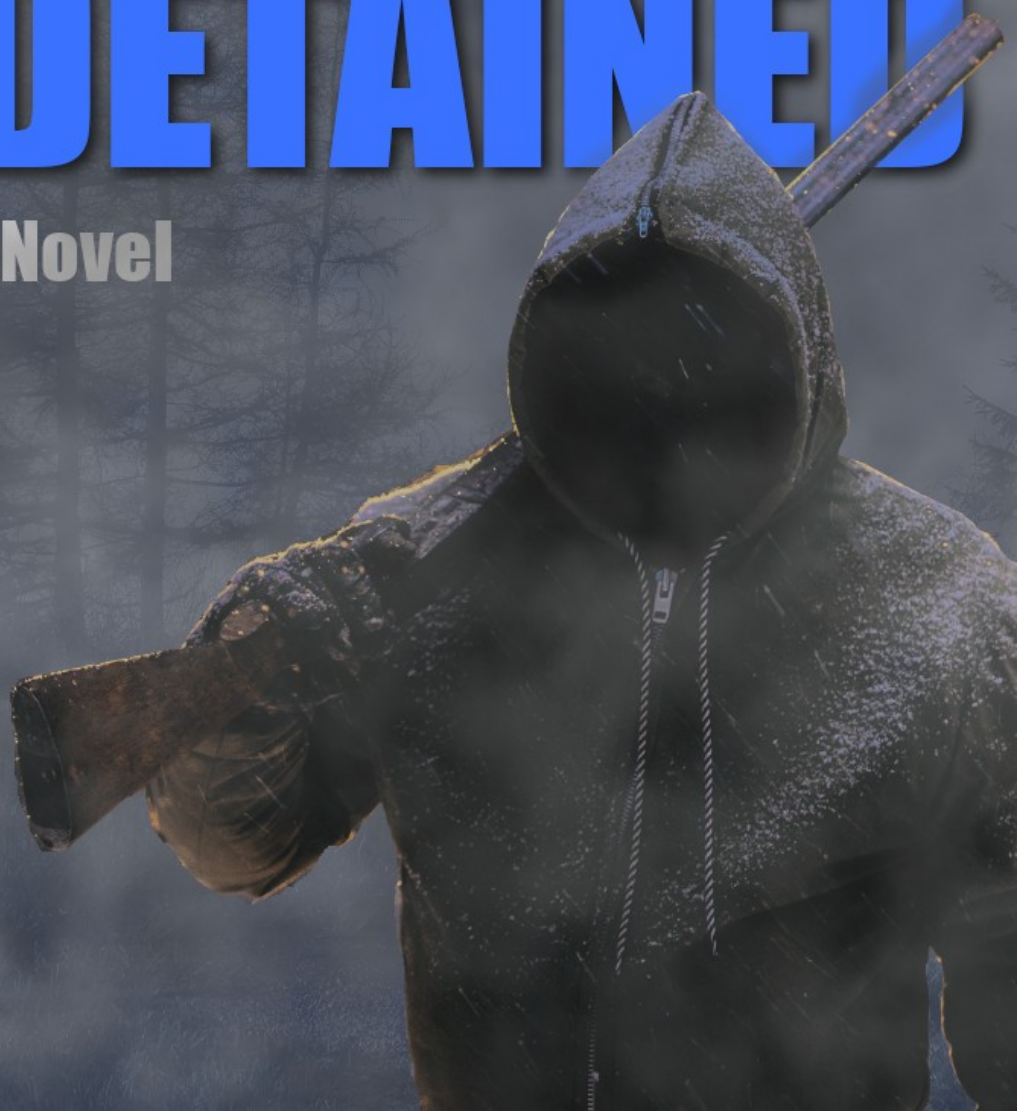


JEFF SOMERS

DETAINED

A Novel



DETAINED

Chapter 30

by Jeff Somers

PART THREE

30. Candace

She startled awake and for a moment didn't know exactly where she was. The swaying motion, the hot, stuffy air, the soft non-sound of people all around her was all disorienting for a moment.

Jim—

She heard the voice in her head, clear, crisp. Like it had just happened.

She blinked, taking a deep breath and sitting up straighter in the seat. The bus was dim, lit only by the few places where people were using their reading lights. It was hot and it smelled like a soup she'd had once and never wanted to have again.

"Finally awake, huh, darlin'?"

She turned and blinked, memory coming back to her. This guy had gotten on the bus a few miles after her, had stood blocking the aisle for a full minute while he scanned his options, and had lit up like a horny Christmas Tree when he'd spotted her sitting by herself

in the window seat. He was forty-ish, jowly and going to fat but not *quite* there yet, and handsome in a pleasant, unremarkable way. He still wore a class ring, which was all Candace needed to know about him. Literally.

He'd tried chatting her up when he'd settled in, smelling of cigarettes and aftershave, which were strikes two and three against him. She'd managed to feign sleep, and then that had turned into an actual nap. But now she'd tipped her hand and he was eager to continue their non-conversation.

"If you'da told me your city, I woulda made sure you didn't sleep through it."

She swallowed, head swimming in a way that was like a migraine without the pain. "I'm good, thanks," she croaked.

"Where you headed?"

"Home."

The word satisfied him, and he asked her if it was just a visit or if she was doing something more there.

"Excuse me," she said, half-standing and indicating the aisle. "Bathroom."

He smiled and pulled himself out of his seat, stepping aside with a cheery grin to let her past. She imagined he was watching her walking towards the bathroom in the rear, and thought he must be disappointed, because she'd gained so much weight in the last few

months she was like a different person. Then again, she also had the feeling he was a guy who wasn't all that particular.

She stepped into the tight, disgusting bathroom, and shut the door behind her locking it. It was *incredibly* gross, and not for the first time in her life, she wondered how in the world other people lived. When you couldn't even manage to pee accurately into a pretty wide target, what business did you have even go out of the house?

Home. She thought about the word. It had been a long time—six years. She didn't count the trips to the hospital to visit Dad; that had been fifty miles north of what she thought of as *home*, and she hadn't come anywhere close to the old house—which she knew needed to be put on the market—One Eyed Jack's, or the Sprawl on those visits.

She looked at herself in the small, muddy mirror. Thirty-one, and worse for the wear, she thought; New York was supposed to be her reinvention, her big break from the rut. She'd left everything behind—her Dad, all the familiar faces and the safety net of knowing she would be able to work at Jack's for the rest of her life if she wanted. She remembered the bus trip going the other way, years ago, school enrollment materials stuffed into her backpack, everything she owned in a poorly-packed duffel bag stuffed into the luggage compartment under the bus. She remembered being excited, determined, a little frightened. She remembered being ten pounds lighter and able to fit into the pair of soft jeans she still carried with

her everywhere she went as a sort of totem of optimism.

“What are you doing?” she whispered, searching her own face through the tarnish.

She didn’t know. She’d felt it for a while now, the need to go home. She hadn’t consciously made any decisions, even though she hadn’t exactly made New York her bitch. She’d left a job waitressing at a dive bar among people she’d known all her life for a brief stint at school followed by a job waitressing at a dive bar in Hell’s Kitchen among people she still didn’t know very well—not the way she knew everyone at home—and which barely paid for her shitty room in the Three Bedroom Walk Up of Madness, where six girls paid various rents for variously-sized rooms, tepid hot water, no air conditioning, and a constantly-changing cast of roommates.

Except her. Candace had become the House Mother: Oldest, longest tenure, not going anywhere.

She’d drifted. She knew it, she could sense it and it filled her with a slow-motion panic. She was four years away from thirty-five, and she suspected that even in New York thirty-five was when you had to stop pretending you were a kid on an adventure. At that point you were an adult with no money and no long-term plan.

Everything had clarified two weeks ago. She wasn’t supposed to be in New York. She didn’t know how she knew, but there it was: She was supposed to go home. She was supposed to go home.

She kept seeing things—pieces of a dream. She'd had them for a long time, persistent images. The old Dipping Bird from Jack's. McCoy's old crossbow. Her ancient, beloved Trailblazer. All of these images came to her in flashes at odd times—sometimes when she was trying to sleep or just waking up, but sometimes when she was awake, working, even talking to other people. She saw them real as day, and every time she did she had that feeling: Go home.

So, she was going home. She'd stiffed her roommates on the rent and taken every dime she had, bought a bus ticket, and here she was, in the world's filthiest bathroom, forty minutes out from the bus station she never thought she'd ever see again, with the world's least charming pickup artist waiting patiently for her to return to her seat so he could feign interest in her life goals, though she didn't know what his endgame for her might be unless—and the thought chilled her—he was getting off at the same spot.

The only thing to do is to do it, her Dad used to say. She smiled faintly at her reflection. As usual, he was right.

Town hadn't changed much. It was still a single block of two lane highway lined by stores, the tiny police department-cum-jail, and a post office. City Hall was the house of whoever happened to be mayor (it took forty-three votes to win). People came to 'town' to pick up their mail and put in orders, and even that had slowed down in the

Internet age. The bus stopped in front of the post office, waited for her to pull her immense duffel out, then roared off to better, more interesting places. She thought she could see her seatmate staring out the window sadly as it pulled off, but couldn't be sure.

In Herb's Hunt and Tackle, you can get just about anything. There might have been a time when they were just a place for bait and rods, guns and camping gear, but they'd expanded into general hardware, car and equipment rentals, dry goods, maps, guide services, and anything else that didn't have a local business servicing it, which was just about everything. She recognized Herb Junior behind the counter, but he didn't recognize her; he'd been about sixteen when she'd left town, and their families had never been close. She played the role of tired tourist and rented an ancient old Land Rover. Herb Junior tried to steer her towards a newer Tahoe, saying that the Land Rover had seen a lot of miles, but something about it called to her. It felt familiar and comfortable. She paid cash for a three day rental, tossed her duffel into the back, and took off.

She drove by the house, first. She knew it wasn't hers any more; there was still a mortgage on it when Dad had died, and selling it wouldn't leave much for her as an inheritance, but despite the mounting tax bill she hadn't done anything. Nothing had been done. Nothing looked different. Even the rusting, decades-old swing set her parents had erected when they still hoped for another child and

envisioned her playing with her sister or brother was still there, slanted just like always, a lawsuit waiting to happen.

She sat in the car for a moment, studying the place. Had she really lived there for twenty-five years? She tried to think of the last time she'd been there. Before she'd moved, before Dad had gotten sick. It probably hadn't much of a day to remember. Coffee. Packing. Dad moping about, pretending not to be sad. TV. A beer or two, then bed. She wished she could summon the memories, but they were gone like they'd never happened.

She contemplated the irony that she could easily recall Jack McCoy's crossbow in perfect detail, but the last day she'd spent in her father's house was lost.

One Eyed Jack's was lively. She pulled into the gravel parking lot and let the car idle. A sense of foreboding came over her, and she didn't want to get out of the car. For what purpose? To see Jack McCoy? She loved the man. She smiled as she thought of him, standing proudly behind his bar, laughing at some joke, a big bear of a guy who always smelled like hamburgers. But she didn't want to go back in there. She realized she never wanted to go back inside, ever again if she could help it.

Music. The sign had always read MAD ONE JACK'S: Food | Liquor | Live Music, but there had never been any music as long as she'd

known the place. But as she sat there she could hear the beat and the spark of guitars. *Good for you, Jack*, she thought. *Don't ever stand still.*

She put the Land Rover into gear and hoped it could handle dirt roads and brush, because she suddenly knew exactly where she was going. Why she'd come back.

Was it a love story? She didn't think so. It was more than that. Different.

The night closed in and the world became her headlights and the squeak of the old suspension. She remembered the way without any difficulty. Some places became part of your DNA.

When the Sprawl came into view, she was surprised for a moment, because someone appeared to have taken some care with the place. Weak yellow light filled the windows, and smoke chugged from the chimney. The area right outside the main entrance had been cleared, and a neat pile of fresh firewood was piled up against one side. The bulk of the insane cabin stretched away into the darkness as ever.

Three trucks were parked outside.

She parked and killed the lights and the engine. Leaving her duffel in the truck, she got out and walked to the front door, liking the familiar crunch of twigs and dry scrub under her boots.

The door opened before she got there, and Jimmy Haggen, looking skinny and old, somehow, his hair graying, leaned against

the jamb.

“Well, heck, Cuddyer,” he said. “Welcome back. Come on in. We been waiting for you.”

She smiled. It was good to see Jimmy, she had to admit. As eager as she'd always been to escape him, as happy as she'd been to have escaped him once, she never went more than a day or so without thinking about him. Why hadn't she called? Or written? Jesus, she could have at least Friended him, she thought.

“James,” she said, pecking him on the cheek awkwardly as she stepped past him. “I have to admit, I have no idea why I—”

She froze. Standing in the front room of The Sprawl, where she'd partied and made out and danced and smoked illicit cigarettes, was a man. He was about her age, maybe a little older. Nice-looking, but unremarkable. He was wearing a leather coat that looked to cost a few thousand bucks, and he had a worried, sunken expression that was familiar to her because, she realized, she'd been watching it gather on her own face for years now. A certainty that she was not where she should be. Not doing what she should be.

He smiled, and she knew him.

“Hey, Candace,” Mike said.