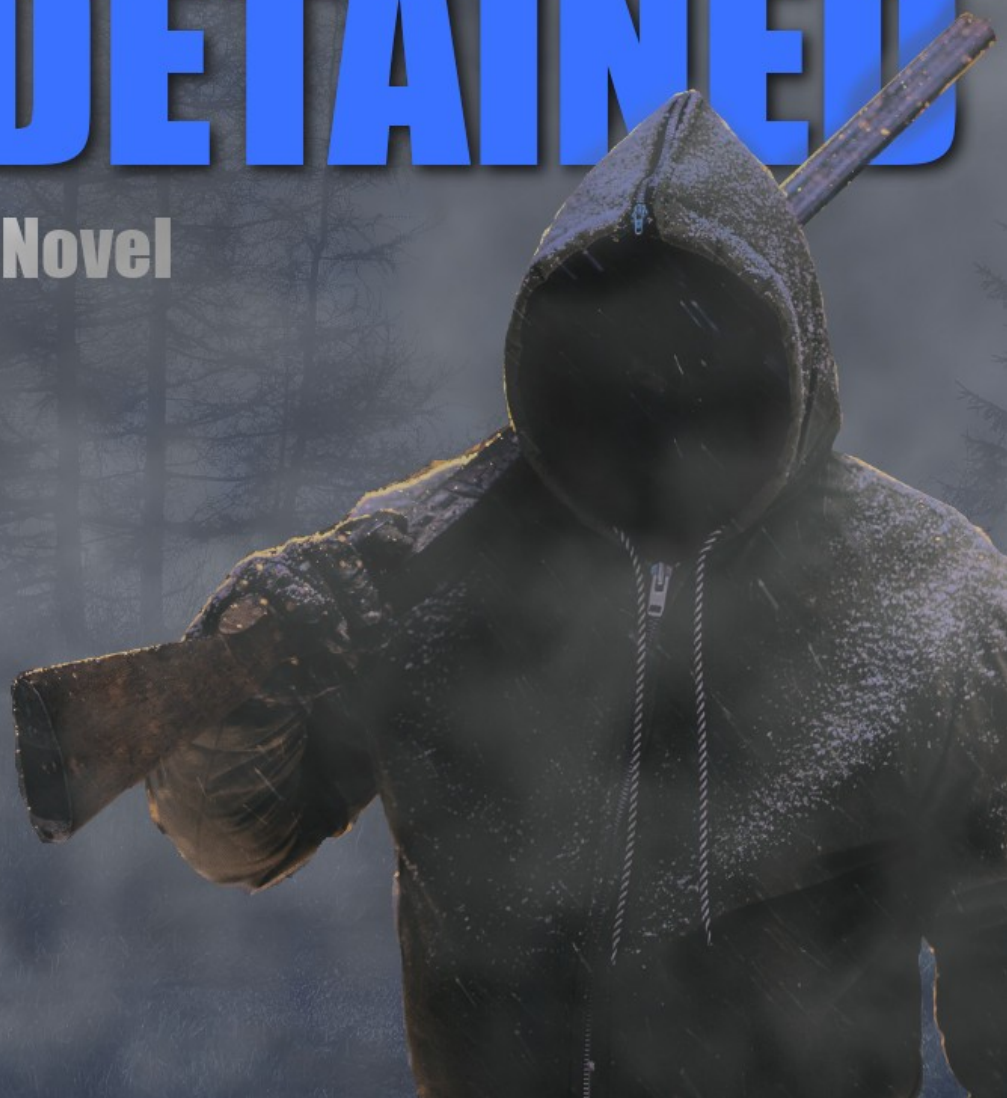


JEFF SOMERS

DETAINED

A Novel



DETAINED

Chapter 34

by Jeff Somers

34. Candace

She picked up the bottle and splashed whiskey into her glass, her hands shaking a little. She felt like everything was receding from her, like there was no ground, no floor. First there had been the visions and the false memories and the sense that her life wasn't real, wasn't what was supposed to be. Then there was meeting the man she'd been seeing in her head, a man she'd never met yet felt like she knew. But now he wasn't as she remembered him—or *didn't* remember him—and everything felt like it was spinning because *nothing* made any sense, not her real life, not her hallucinations, and not her present tense.

She gulped a swallow of whiskey. She didn't know anything about fine Scotch, but this was a smooth, slightly smoky dram and while she didn't think any whiskey was necessarily worth this much money, she had to admit it sure beat the sour mash she normally drank when in the mood.

Looking around, she saw everyone in a new light. All the people

were more or less in subtle uniform: Black shirts, jeans, boots, field jackets. Now that she was paying attention, they were all armed; she caught glimpses of shoulder holsters, ankle holsters, bulges under arms.

And none of them were drinking. Every table was laden with untouched drinks.

She swallowed the rest of the whiskey in her glass, willing the warm splash in her belly to spread, to steady her. She took a deep breath.

Sometimes you just gotta step in it, she heard her father say.

“Why do you need an army, Mike?”

Mike and Jimmy exchanged glances, and then they both looked at Glen. Irritation bloomed inside her. These three men had obviously been planning something, and now they shared secrets and she’d just witnessed a flash committee meeting deciding just how much they would tell Candace Cuddyer, who was apparently a junior member of the elite Reality Distortion Club.

“You know what ... well, I’ll use the word *happened* because there really isn’t a better one,” Mike said with a grin she found achingly familiar and endearing. “You know what happened here—right here, in this bar, on this exact night, right?”

“Jack McCoy, dead,” Jimmy said.

“All of us, confined and abused,” Glen added.

Mike leaned forward intently. “And why? Because they have a machine that reads the math of the universe and told them the four of us were a danger.”

“No due process,” Glen said, shaking his head.

“And then I changed everything,” Haggen added, picking up the bottle and examining it. “I changed a *variable* in a *line of code* and here we are.”

“Candace,” Mike said as softly as the low roar of the place allowed. “Isn’t there something you’d like to change? Something you’d like to make different about your life? This is a chance to do that.”

Something cracked inside her, and she felt herself tremble. *Don’t cry*, she hissed internally. *Don’t you fucking cry you stupid bitch*. Tears made no sense; she wasn’t sad, or scared. She was angry.

“You hired an army so we could steal the ... the thing. The black box. And change reality.”

“To what *we* want,” Glen said, leaning back and folding his hands over his belly. His expression was smug. “We each get to change something. One variable. Something that will make a difference.”

Julia. Candace suddenly remembered the name, remembered him telling her about someone he’d lost, someone he’d loved. *Something you’d like to change*. This was projection, she thought. This was Mike justifying his own selfishness. He wanted to re-write his own history, and he hoped she would have a similar motivation so he would be

able to say that he wasn't alone, that he wasn't driving this.

And she did, she guessed. She knew the black box worked, after all; she had the false memories to prove it. In another reality, a Dipping Bird had pressed the ENTER key on a keyboard, and everything had changed. One variable altered, and she'd left town instead of hanging around, and if things had gone more or less similarly since that point of divergence, that was *her* fault, wasn't it?

What if she changed something else?

She thought about her father. Of course, her father. Cancer was a death sentence unless it was caught early, and pancreatic cancer was worse than most, remaining in stealth mode until it was literally too late. But what if she had paid closer attention? What if she hadn't dismissed his exhaustion, his weight loss, the flat look in his eyes? What if she hadn't left to go to school, and had been in constant contact with him, able to detect the tiny changes that seemed to suddenly coalesce into a terminal diagnosis?

What if she had a whole false memory of his diagnosis and death warning her? She struggled to think about how her real life and her false memories lined up, when the break really was. Had it been after he was already sick? How far back would she have to push the reset in order to save him? And would it make any difference? If she managed to get him to the right doctor at the right time, get the right test, would it save him?

Did it matter? Didn't she have to try?

She looked at Mike. He was staring at her steadily, his expression hard to read. Except it wasn't, because they were both thinking about dead people they felt they could have saved, somehow, if only different decisions had been made, different choices taken. She saw her father, thin and yellowed, weak and without any sort of spark of life. Twice now, in a sense, she'd seen him die. Once she'd been here, in his life every day but she hadn't known to pay attention. The second time she'd moved away and he'd withered while she'd been busy wasting time. If she knew what was coming, and changed something ... some detail of her life that would keep her home but have her eyes open to what was happening, and she got him into the right care ... she knew from her research that the five-year survival rate for Stage I was more than 60%.

Five years. She thought about five more years with Dad. She heard him saying, *well, it ain't nothing*.

She looked at Jimmy and wondered what *he* would change. He'd already done it once, but under duress and maybe not quite believing it would work, or fully understanding the code. Then she looked at Mr. Eastman, and wondered about him. How far back would they go? What was their biggest regret? Mr. Eastman was in his sixties, she thought; his variable might go back fifty years. What kind of repercussions would there be?

And what if Jimmy's regret was *her*?

She swallowed a rusty, panicked taste. She and Jimmy hadn't been anything but terse friends for a long time. He showed up at the bar and drank until she had to drive him home. He called her "Candy" because he knew it annoyed her. He was a constant asshole thorn in her side.

But he was always around. He was *always* around.

The idea that Jimmy Haggan's biggest regret, the variable he would change if he had time to think it through, was their Prom night breakup, his decision to pursue Sarah Mulligan's heavy tits filled her with a horror more pure than anything she'd ever experienced before. She knew on some level that if he hadn't abandoned her that night—and he wouldn't have had to be even *nice*, she would have gladly accepted *civil*—she would have slept with him. And stayed with him for some unknowable length of time.

Stealing a glance at Jimmy, she found him smiling at her as he savored his whiskey. She shivered.

She looked back at Mike and took a deep breath.

"No."

An expression of confusion flickered across his face. "What?"

She leaned back and crossed her arms over her belly. "No. I'm not going along with some insane plan to just randomly change something about our lives in the vague and creepy hope that all the

other variables line up and make our lives better.” She shook her head. “You—none of you—haven’t thought this through. You remember as well as I do what’s at that facility up the road—”

“Soldiers,” Glen Eastman snapped. “Coming *here* in a *little while* to take us *prisoner*.”

She turned excitedly towards her former teacher. “A goddamn *supercomputer* they used to make sure they’d calculated all the possible ramifications.” She pounded the table. “Dammit, don’t you *boys* remember that the reason they sent the soldiers instead of just *adjusting* our *variables* was because they couldn’t control the outcome? They couldn’t predict what would happen?” She turned to offer Jimmy a withering look that made him blink and sit up straighter in surprise. “And you think *you* can do that *without* the supercomputer?”

“Candy—” Haggen started to say, but she plucked the glass from his hand, slammed the whiskey, and stood up.

“You’re all crazy. All this,” she gestured around the room. “All *this* just to *fix* something? You’re such fucking *men* it’s incredible. You think you know everything. You think you can fix everything. And you think you don’t have to read the fucking manual. Jesus.”

She started to walk towards the door.

“You realize we each *had* our second chance and we fucked it up just as much. You think a third go will be any different?” she snorted. “You’re kidding yourselves.”

Mike was in front of her then, hands up in a placating gesture. “Wait! Wait, please?” He backed away from her, giving her space. She hesitated.

“Can we just talk for a moment?” he said. “Go outside, where it’s quieter, and just *talk* about this before you do anything?”

She chewed her lip. But there was still a lingering sense that this guy, this mysterious super rich Mike Malloy, was a good guy. She nodded. “I was going outside anyway.”

He smiled, and stepped aside, eyes sweeping the room. “Five minutes, he said. “It’s all I ask.”

Outside, she hugged herself against the chill and walked a few feet from the place. The noise level dropped, and when she turned to look at Mike she could say “You know Jimmy’s gonna drink all your expensive hooch while you’re out here” without raising her voice.

He grinned. “I’m getting used to the Haggen Way. He’s a smart guy, actually. Smarter than he looks.”

Candace nodded. “That should be on his tombstone. James Haggen: He was smarter than he looked.”

They smiled at each other. Then he cleared his throat. “I thought ... I thought if you came, if you showed up, you’d be on board. I thought, why else would she come?”

She frowned. “Mike, if you think you’re gonna be able to control this, to make it work for you, you’re kidding yourself.”

He nodded. “We’ve been thinking on this a long time, Candace. We’ve made lists of things to change, mapped out relationships.”

She studied his face. It was a good face, she thought, a face that had been through some stuff, a face she could get used to. But there was a confidence there that was off. It reminded her of her older, religious relatives, that certainty that they *knew*, that they had the answers when it made no sense. She thought Mike had spent a long time in the wilderness, and now he’d seen a way to make sure that the wilderness never existed in the first place. And he was going to grab it with both hands.

“Mike, you can’t possibly do the work that needs to be done. You *can’t*.”

He shook his head. “You wouldn’t take the chance? To have—” he hesitated a moment, then brightened, and she knew he’d gotten one of those familiar flashes of a life never lived. “To have your father back? You’re really going to walk away?”

She nodded. “I’m sorry, Mike. I really am. But this is crazy.”

He nodded, and his eyes flicked up, looking over her for a moment. She had the strange feeling he wasn’t nodding at *her*. “Then I’m sorry, Candace. But if we’re right—and I think we are—then Dr. Raslowski and Colonel Hammond and the rest are up at that facility right now. And they expect the four of us to be in this bar tonight, so they can come and detain us.”

She felt hands on her arms. She tried to twist away, but they were too many, and too strong.

“Which means I can’t let you go.”