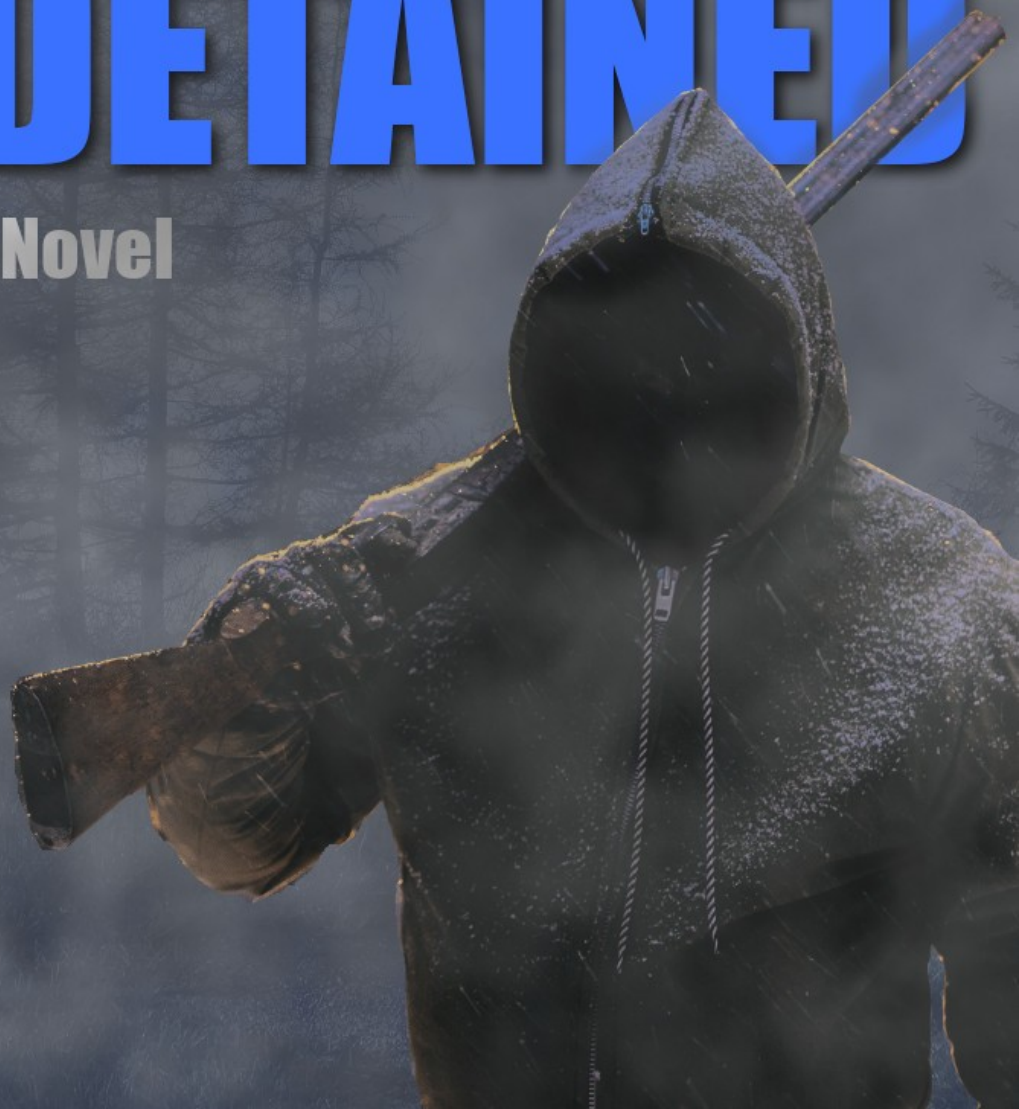


JEFF SOMERS

DETAINED

A Novel



DETAINED

Chapter 36

by Jeff Somers

36. Candace

The sense of *deja vu* was overwhelming. Two impressions of the back room competed with each other every time she glanced around. On the one hand she'd been back here every night for several years, collecting supplies, taking breaks, hauling kegs. On the other she knew they'd tied up prisoners and brought them back here, and she knew this had been the scene of some vicious fighting.

Her eyes found all the points of interest. The spot on the other side of the shelves where the trap led to the crawlspace. Mike or Glen or someone had taken the precaution, she noted, of removing the crossbow and other hunting gear Jack usually kept in the back. One of the benefits of hitting a REPLAY button on reality itself was making sure other people didn't play the same tricks on you that you played on them.

She turned and found Jack McCoy staring at her.

He was gagged and bound, so all he could do was bulge his eyes at her. She wasn't sure if he had any of the memories she and the others

had, if he also struggled with the sense that something had happened and then *not* happened, if he had any sense that on this night in another version of the universe where the equations had turned up different numbers, he'd been shot to death in the main room, just twenty feet away.

Based on his eyes, she thought maybe he did.

They were cheering in the main room, a wave of self-congratulatory noise signaling something had gone according to plan. Her heart pounded in her chest. She wasn't entirely satisfied with her life, that was true enough, but the idea that someone was going to change some code and press a button and a field of energy was going to change her existence fundamentally, without her input or control, was terrifying. She didn't want to go through the last six years *again*. She didn't want to go through some other random number of years, either, or never be born, or find herself married to Jimmy Haggan, or anything. She wasn't satisfied, she missed her father, she wished she'd done better at things—but she wanted to take that knowledge and start over. Because the last few years felt like she'd been wasting her time, going through motions. At the time, in the moment, it had felt real. Necessary. But now she looked back and it all seemed pointless. No matter what she'd done or hadn't done, she'd been hurtling towards this moment. When she'd left town for New York, she'd been heading here the long way. When she crapped

out and took the waitressing job, she'd stayed up all night three nights in a row smoking ill-advised cigarettes worrying about the decision. But it hadn't mattered. None of it had mattered, and she'd charred her lungs and deepened the sink around her eyes for no reason. She could have sat at the bar in Rudy's for six years, and she would have ended up exactly where she was.

She didn't want to waste another doubled-up track of years like that. She wanted her actions and decisions to matter.

Jack McCoy nudged her with his shoulder. Bugged his eyes at her.

"I know, Jack," she said. "I'm working on it."

He nudged her again and grunted, holding up his ziptied wrists. She looked at him, searching. He lifted his hands to his mouth and moved them back and forth.

"What?" She looked down at her own wrists, at the black tail of plastic snaking from between them. They were tight, but not uncomfortably so. She looked back at Jack, who continued to mime bringing his hands up close to his mouth. She mimicked him, then had a flash of epiphany. She took the leading tail of plastic between her teeth, looked at Jack for confirmation, and when he nodded eagerly she pulled the zipties tight, tighter, still tighter until the plastic bit painfully into her skin. When she let go of the tie, she looked at Jack and he nodded fiercely. Then he brought his knees up to his chest and raised his wrists up over his head and brought them

down onto his knees with some force.

She folded her legs like he had and raised her hands up over her head. She paused to check with him. When he nodded excitedly again, she brought her wrists down as hard as she could, and the ziptie snapped and fell from her wrists.

She stared for a second, then laughed and looked at Jack, who was grinning around his gag. He nodded. She leaned over and pulled the gag down.

“Oh, Jesus, thank you,” he said, working his jaw. Then he paused and looked at her. Really *looked* at her. Candace blinked in the onslaught of that direct gaze. She felt like it was the first time someone had really looked at her, had really seen her, in years.

“Candace Cuddyer,” he said. “Where the fuck did you come from?”

She began working on the ziptie around her ankles. “Jack ... Jack, do you remember—no, remember isn’t the right word. Do you ever have a sense of something that didn’t happen, but you feel like maybe it did, somehow? Like a life not lived?”

He frowned. “I dunno, kid. I spend eighteen hours a day in this place, and the rest I’m asleep. I don’t have any idea what you mean. Do you know what’s going on? Is *Jimmy* involved, for god’s sake?”

Her feet free, she turned her attentions to Jack’s bindings. “It’s ... complicated, Jack.”

He leaned in towards her. “Jesus, Candace, are *you*? Involved?”

“It’s complicated.”

She freed him from his restraints as quickly as she could. He grunted in pain and set to rubbing his wrists and ankles while she quickly toured the storeroom, looking for anything that might be helpful. It looked like Mike and the others had stripped it of anything obvious, and she felt a need for action.

“Jack,” she whispered. “Explaining this won’t be easy and would take too much time. I need you to trust me, okay?”

He studied her, his salt-and-pepper beard longer than she remembered. “Candace,” he finally said, the deep rumble of his voice comforting, “there are few people in this world I’d trust on a day like this, but you’re one of them. What do we do?”

She smiled, a rush of affection for her old boss—who was more like a beloved uncle—making her feel happy for the first time in a long time. “We—I—need to get up the road to that old factory. Which means I need to get out of here without being seen.” She glanced at the trap door. “I can use the crawl space to get to the bar, but if someone’s in view of the trap out there, I’m screwed. And even if I get there, if they’re blocking the door, I’m screwed. I need to know where everyone is out in the main room.”

He nodded. “Okay. Anyone in my office?”

She shook her head. “No idea.”

“Let’s go check,” he said. “We can use the security cameras to see

what's going on out there.”

She blinked. “*Security cameras?*”

He nodded. “I know, right? But a couple of years ago, I dunno, I started getting a little worried. Freaked out. Read about a robbery at some bar not far from here, people got tied up and left for days, almost died. So I couldn't shake the feeling that I needed to protect myself, so I installed some. These days, over the Internet, you can set up cameras yourself for next to nothing.”

Candace blinked, wondering if she'd actually heard Jack McCoy use the word *Internet* in a conversation. Then the rush of affection again, and she realized she was about to cry because Jack McCoy, who had never *really* been dead, was *alive*.

“Come on,” he said, grunting as he heaved himself up off the floor.

They crept out of the storeroom and down the hall towards the office. Candace had flashes of a life never lived, seeing herself in that office under various circumstances, seeing Hammond in there, Mike, Jimmy. She was relieved to see the familiar wreck of the place when they slipped into the room—the usual piles of invoices, books, and other stuff on the tiny desk, the shelves filled with old books and souvenirs from special nights, some of which dated back to way before Jack had bought the place.

Then she saw the computer.

For a moment she couldn't accept what she was seeing. It was a

brand new machine, and looked like a sports car compared to old hunk of silicon she remembered. And she *did* remember it; she'd used that balky old computer and its slow modem for years when she's worked there. But she'd also been certain it would still be there, because it *had* been there in her other memories.

Jack slipped behind the desk while she stood gawking, thinking of all the evenings she could have been watching movies online instead of painfully watching text scroll up an old, blurry screen.

She circled around behind him. He tapped on the keyboard, and the screen lit up, showing six smaller screens in a grid. Each screen showed a different area of the bar or an alternate angle in clear black and white. Jack pointed at the screen.

"None of those bastards behind the bar," he said.

She nodded. "Door's clear," she said, pointing. "But I doubt I can get through it without being seen. Any cameras outside?"

"Does a bear shit in the woods?" McCoy said, and clicked with the mouse. The grid changed to a collection of scenes outside the bar. A group of five or six of Mike's people stood out there. To Candace's eye they didn't seem very attentive. They were standing around smoking cigarettes and chatting, their rifles held casually across their torsos.

"If I make it out of the bar," she said, almost to herself, "they probably stop me. And at any rate they'll know exactly where I'm going and they'll warn Mike and them." She glanced at Jack, and had

a moment of doubling again as she said “I’ll need a distraction.”

Distraction, she thought. *That’s perfect.*

Jack leaned back in the chair and chewed his mustache. “You’ll need more than just a distraction, kiddo.” He sat forward again. “Here’s what we’re gonna do.”

He clicked the mouse and the security cameras disappeared. He clicked again and brought up a web page with a login box. He tapped in a username and a password, and a moment later a web page resolved on the screen showing a photo of a Ford F150.

She blinked again. “You got a *new car*?” She felt like the universe was sliding away from her. Jack McCoy in anything but his rusted-out old Datsun pickup was just ... incomprehensible.

He chuckled. “Insurance. Got T-boned a few years ago. Coulda lost my arm; I was driving beating time to Jimi Hendrix on the side of the door and only pulled my arm inside a second before I got hit because I had to scratch my fucking nose. Anyway, new truck, and it came with this remote start business. Don’t use it often, but it works a charm.” He gestured. “I click that button, the truck will start up. I click *that* button, the doors unlock. *Capisce*? I’ll cause a distraction, see if I can get those fellas standing around out there to come in. You go on through the crawlspace like you said, make a dash for it. The headlights’ll be on. With some luck, we might get you out of here and no one notices.”

She nodded slowly. “Until they bring you back to the storeroom and I’m not there.”

He winked, standing up. “Come on, Candace, you think I only got *one* trick up my sleeve? Look, I don’t know what’s going on here, kiddo, but I’ll do my part for you. You say you gotta get out of here, I’ll get you out. You let me know worry about the rest, okay?” He opened a desk drawer and pulled out a keyring with an enormous green rabbit’s foot. He held it out for her and dropped it into her hand. “You’ll need the fob or she won’t shift gears. Once you’re off the key will start it like always.”

She nodded and impulsively threw her arms around him. “Thanks, Jack,” she said softly. She pulled away and rubbed her nose. Then she looked at him sharply. “Don’t do anything to get yourself shot,” she said, a sense of foreboding settling over her, a certainty that in her other reality *distractions* hadn’t always gone as planned.

He patted her awkwardly on the back. “Aw, shit, kiddo, I kinda wish you hadn’t *said* that.”

As she crawled, she counted. When she got to three hundred, Jack would start his distraction and when she got to three-twenty he would start the truck and unlock the doors. At that point, whether or not he’d cleared the parking lot she had to make a break for it.

The sense of being on a completely new timeline, doing

something she'd never done before, was electric. She was certain that in neither of the lives she could remember had she dropped into the crawlspace, become completely gummed up in spiderwebs, and pushed her way up through the trap behind the bar. It felt good to be free of the doubled-images, the sense at she'd done everything before in a slightly different outfit. But as she carefully crept up out of the crawlspace, she realized she was slipping back into a groove. She had a distinct sense of having been behind the bar, firing a weapon, maybe, or struggling to evade someone.

She wouldn't be free of this dark sense of *deja vu*, she thought, until she got the hell out of town. But first she had to stop Mike, Glen, and Jimmy from doing something terrible.

She crouched behind the bar and counted. *Two-ninety five, two-ninety six.*

She took a deep breath.

The lights went out. And suddenly the air was filled with screams. Anguished, howling screams.

It took her a moment to recognize the recording that Jack McCoy pumped through the sound system every Halloween for One-Eyed Jack's annual Spookfest. It was a tradition to cut the lights and play the tape at midnight as Mischief Night turned into Halloween, scaring the pants off of any tourists or locals who'd forgotten the date.

She counted.

She heard the commotion—shouts, heavy footsteps on the old floorboards. She heard the front door opening, and then dozens of phones blinked on and transformed into flashlights. She considered the hilarity of militia men and survivalists on Mike's payroll relying on *smartphones* for their emergency lighting, and then she was at three-twenty and she leaped up and sprinted for the door.

She expected to crash into someone, but she sailed through and then she was in the open air. Jack had killed the outside lights too—she wondered if he had the whole place linked wirelessly to a web control—and she could see the truck clearly, just a few steps away. She didn't look around or pause; she barreled for it, slammed into it, and tore the door open. Once inside, she killed the lights, dragged the gearshift into drive, and hit the gas.

The truck fishtailed. She thought she heard gunshots. And then the truck leaped forward and she was racing into the darkness.