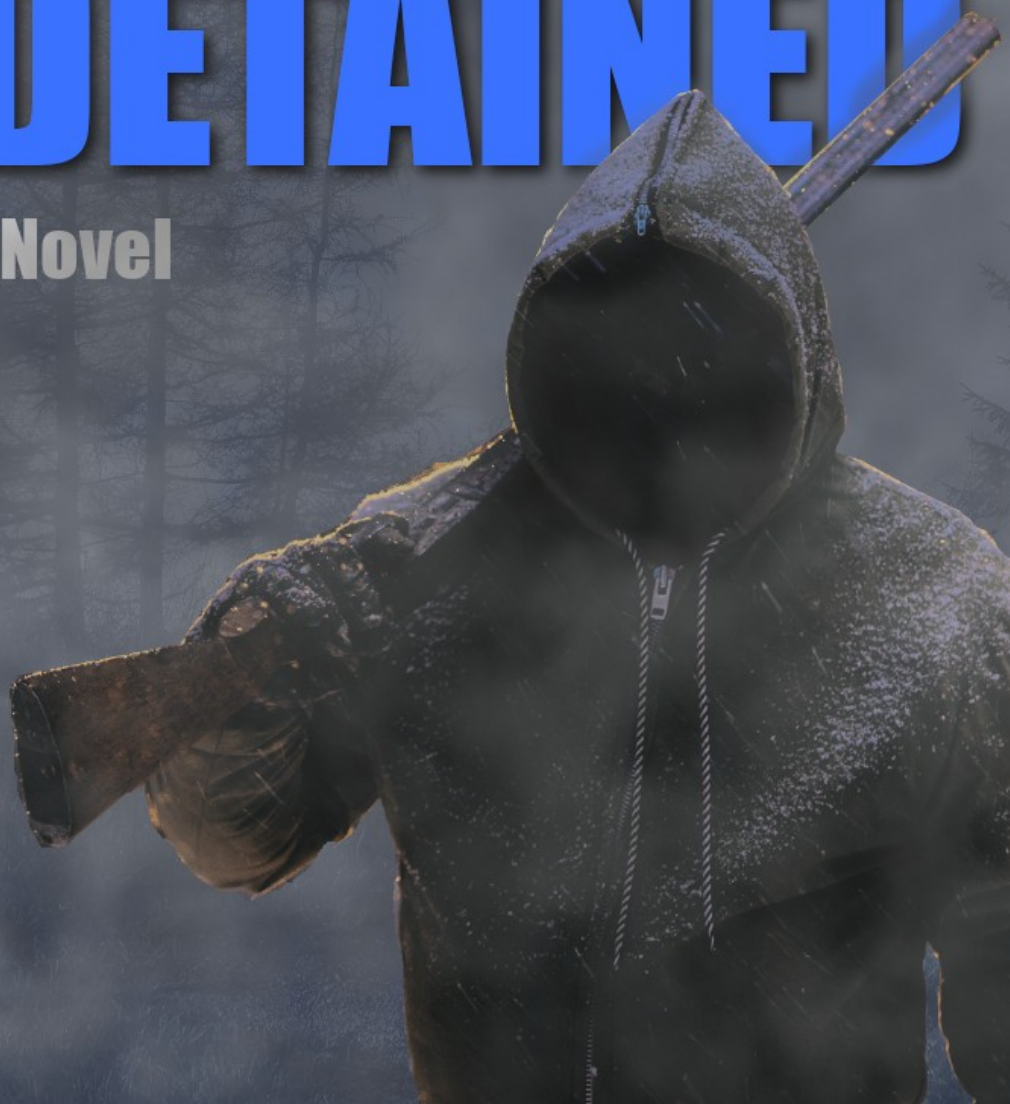


JEFF SOMERS

DETAINED

A Novel



DETAINED

Chapter 38

by Jeff Somers

38. Candace

The night was lit by moonlight, and the moonlight was very nearly not enough. Without headlights, she stayed off the road and stuck to old tracks that were nothing more than lanes carved by hundreds of trucks over the decades, DIY highways that didn't appear on any maps. You either knew where they led, knew where the big rocks embedded in them were, or you didn't and you wound up with a bent wheel rim.

They were never meant to be driven at speed. She caught some air a few times in Jack McCoy's surprisingly fancy truck, landing with a brain-rattling, fishtailing force that she knew came within inches of turning into a spinning crash. After a few heart-pounding moments she slowed and studied the rear-view mirror. There was nothing, no sign of pursuit, no sign that anyone was following. She didn't know if she'd actually made it out clean; she had to assume she hadn't, and that someone had radioed over to the facility to warn Mike and the others.

Mike. She found herself hurt and shocked that he'd turned out on the other side of this. It wasn't that she couldn't see the motivations—of course she could. There was a part of her that wanted to have those years with her father back, who wanted that chance of an early diagnosis and him still alive—thin and lessened, perhaps, but still *there*. She understood why Mike might be tempted to undo what he saw as the big, unforgivable mistake of his life. She just couldn't believe that he hadn't seen the downside, seen the chaos, the potential for destruction.

She was surprised he didn't understand that life always came with a downside. There were always regrets, mistakes, losses. If you took one back, you would lose something else. She was disappointed that he didn't seem to understand that, and it made her sad.

She chanced the headlights, lighting up the track. She knew it paralleled the road for a good way and then veered south; she would have to make her way up a steep rise to get back on the blacktop in a few minutes. The truck hummed under her; she thought she had plenty of power for the job. The question was whether or not they'd be waiting for her when she got there. She would have to ditch the truck a few hundred feet away, where the road turned and she'd be shielded from sight. Then she'd have to creep along, careful, and try to figure out how she might get inside undetected—and then figure out what she intended to do. Talk sense to them?

She smiled in the dim cab of the truck. Yes, she could see it: She would make an impassioned speech like they did in the movies and Mike would tear up and throw his arms around her and tell her he'd been blind. Why not?

There was a near-serenity in the cab. The dark, the hum of the engine, the crunch of dirt under the wheels, it all combined into a slur of sound that felt eternal. For just a moment she forgot what she was heading towards, forgot what her life had suddenly become. For just a moment she was lost in the beauty of the night, a weariness on the border of exhaustion making her feel calm.

Then the turnoff loomed up ahead, and she cursed softly, tapping the brakes. She knew she'd need momentum to get up the incline, so she steadied herself, studied the trail ahead, then hit the gas. If she hit too hard, she might flip the truck. If she hit it too slow, she might flip the truck. If she kept going, she'd slam into a tree. Hands tight on the wheel, she turned it gradually until the wheels bit into the incline, then grit her teeth as she steered an oblique angle all the way up. When the truck lurched and bounced over the edge and screeched onto the blacktop, she let out an explosive breath and felt the tingle of an adrenaline dump that made her shake.

The best thing to do is go straight at 'em, she heard her father say. She was pretty sure he'd stolen that from someone, but it had been his war cry for as long as she could remember, as much as a vague phrase

spoken in a soft voice could be considered a war cry. She didn't know what she was going to do once she arrived at the facility. She would trust to—

A figure suddenly loomed up in her headlights, a person standing in the middle of the road. She cursed, hit the brakes, and turned the wheel, feeling the tires lose contact with the road in skittery little intervals as the truck spun. She came to a stop perpendicular to the road, the truck stalled, engine clicking, headlights flickering on the trees.

Her hands hurt on the wheel. She felt frozen for a moment, her whole body tight with shock and stress.

“Candace!”

She jumped and turned to look left, blinking. Jimmy Haggen stood just outside the door, holding a gun on her.

That's a Beretta M9A3, she thought dully. How do I know that?

“Get out of the truck, Candace,” Haggen said, his voice shaking. “You're gonna have to give me a hand!”

She blinked and shook her head a little, and somehow that seemed to help clear it. Jimmy was filthy; covered in muddy dirt, his clothes torn in place, a trickle of blood leaking over one eye. He looked like he'd been running through heavy brush, or a defensive line. She shifted her eyes and registered the fact that he was holding a gun on her. Jimmy Haggen. A gun. On her. When she'd been sixteen, her

father had confiscated her phone as a punishment, forcing her to take all her calls on the home's old landline, which he monitored without subtlety. So she'd played this game where she would call her friend Amy at a pre-arranged time, and when her father checked the line he'd hear girly chitchat. Then, at a second pre-arranged time, Jimmy would call, clicking in silently over the call-waiting, her father unaware.

She remembered those whispered conversations. She remembered how he was kind of bored and distracted, but somehow she hadn't noticed. The intimacy of lying under her covers in the dark whispering, imagining his flat, taut stomach as he played touch football in the school parking lot—that was all she was aware of. And now that boy was holding a gun on her.

"Jimmy," she said, prying her hands from the wheel with a grimace of arthritic pain. "What the *fuck*?"

"Get out," he snapped. "I'm sorry, I really am. But get out of the truck, Candace."

She waited a beat, studying him. Would Jimmy Haggan really shoot her? Or hurt her in some other way? With a chill she realized she didn't know. This was no longer the Jimmy Haggan she remembered. It was more than just having moved away years ago. Like so many things she had a strong sense of the world, of what things should be, the *way* things should be, and increasingly all those

certainties were turning out to be memories of a reality that had never actually happened, a past life, an alternative existence. The memory she had of being able to trust Jimmy Haggen implicitly not to hurt her—even when he was being a jackass—vanished the moment she actually examined it.

Wordlessly, she got out of the truck.

“Come on,” he said, gesturing with the gun.

She followed him off the road, into the tree line opposite the incline she’d just come up. She could see the evidence of him coming this way: broken branches, footprints, crushed grass. They stopped at a handtruck that had been left in the brush. She gasped when she saw the box, the Raslowski Box. There was a large hole in the ground nearby, a fragile-looking wooden ladder descending into the darkness of it.

“Jimmy,” she said, looking at him in disbelief. “You built a *tunnel*?”

He nodded. “You grab the handtruck, help me get it into the back of the truck.”

As she lifted the weight and started to push, having trouble in the soft dirt, he kept talking. “I had years, Candace. I knew what had happened a long time before the rest of you. I was the first to realize, I think. I knew everything was off. The whole world seemed fake, a put-on. I had all these memories and impressions that made no sense. As I got older I thought I was going insane, and then one day it

just clicked. Clarified. I had years, and I knew what I wanted to do.

“Me and Glen, we planned it all. We knew they’d come back. Just like they had the ... the last time. The *other* time. The time the four of us remember even though it never happened. So we started preparing. We researched it. People have been digging tunnels for thousands of years—out of prisons, into banks. We researched it. Hired people. Hired a *lot* of people, because we didn’t want any of it to be obvious. So we’d hired a team for one small part and then let them go, wait a few months, hire someone else. We had the time. Glen emptied his pension, borrowed against his house. So, yeah, we built a tunnel. And I stole this thing because I’ll be damned if some rich asshole from two thousand miles away from here gets a say in what happens next.”

Candace was already breathing hard, struggling to push the handtruck through the brush and dirt. “And you were going to, what, *walk* this thing somewhere?”

Haggen cursed. “Fucking Glen was supposed to have a car waiting for me. Someone fucked up. Or Glen’s trying to screw us.”

“Us?”

“Cuddyer,” he said, echoing the way he’d always referred to her by her last name when they’d been dating, “I have full faith in you. I am steadfast in my belief that you’re gonna come around to my way of thinking. You’re a native. You’re one of us.”

Or, if not, she thought, I'll use my recently stolen magic reality warping machine to make you one of us.

A chill swept through her. Sweat dripped down her back, freezing in the night air. The box was surprisingly heavy; she tried to remember if she'd ever tried to move it in the ... other reality, but couldn't pin the detail down.

She thought about the time and effort, the dedication and commitment involved in building a tunnel. Years of effort, all for a minute's worth of surprise, and if Mike was on the ball he was already in the tunnel, following, which meant Jimmy didn't have that much of a lead.

She grimaced and slowed her progress, playing up the effort required.

She didn't know who to trust, or whose side to be on—or if there was a side, other than her own, that made sense. So she simplified: The man holding a gun on her was her enemy, even if he was named Jimmy Haggen, even if she did know that he sometimes woke up crying because of his dreams. Keep it simple: Whoever was holding a gun to your head, or tying you up, or otherwise mistreating you, they were your enemy at that moment. The rest of it would take care of itself.

She stumbled and lost a few inches, waste a few seconds getting her footing back. She wasn't sure who's side she should be on.

Neither, she supposed; all the men were crazy, thinking they could somehow control things, somehow understand the permutations of what they would do. But she knew if she got in the truck with an armed Jimmy Hagen he would take her someplace she didn't want to go.

Simplify, she thought. You don't have to have it all figured out. Concentrate on the most pressing problem. Right now, that's Jimmy forcing you into the truck.

"Step it up, Cuddyer," Hagen growled.

She got the handtruck moving again. She could feel it vibrating in her hands, some internal force in the box itself, a primordial hum. For a moment she imagined the whole *universe* in the box, like some sort of complex simulation being projected out around them, and if she stumbled and broke it everything would just blink away like someone turning out the lights.

"James," she said, out of breath. "James, listen to me." When they'd been dating, she'd called him *James* when she was angry with him. She hadn't remembered that in years. She had the sense that there were a million tiny details that she'd forgotten, that were sitting there in her mind, jarred loose by the events of the last few days.

"Keep pushing, Cuddyer."

She struggled to look like she was giving the handtruck her all, and hoped that someone was pursuing Hagen down that tunnel.

Suddenly, there was a deep booming noise, and the ground shivered under her. She lost her footing and went down into the dirt, the handtruck rolling over her hand painfully.

Haggen laughed. “Oops. Seems like Mr. Malloy wasn’t expecting a booby trap.”

She stared at him. “Jesus,” she said, struggling to push the handtruck off her hand and get back on her feet, “you didn’t kill them, did you?” She was out of breath and felt filthy, like all the dirt around her had somehow worked its way under her shirt, into her bra, her underwear.

He shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. Once I reset things, none of this will have happened.”

Doesn't matter. The phrase filled her with dread for some reason.

She heard a strange sizzling noise and turned to see a ghostly cloud of dust billowing out of the tunnel’s entrance. *Well*, she thought. *Guess help's not coming.* As she turned to put her back into the handtruck again, she glanced at Jimmy. Could she do something? Get the drop on him, wrestle away the gun? Jimmy was lean and looked fresh. He’d always been improbably athletic, and despite a decade-and-a-half of seeming to do nothing but drink beer and complain, he was in shape.

Suddenly she realized her impression of Jimmy was out of date, or from a different reality. He’d been *training* for this day. While the rest

of them had been confused and vague, he'd been drawing up plans, digging a *tunnel*, setting traps, and getting himself into shape. She wondered how long he'd been aware, how long he'd been plotting. Had he known what was coming when she left town? Six years ago, she remembered being irritated and disappointed because Jimmy hadn't paid much attention to the fact of her leaving. He'd acted as if her taking off from his life forever was no big deal, and she had a clear memory of leaving in a huff, refusing to even admit she was angry. Or why.

Now, the whole memory seemed sinister. Now she imagined Jimmy had a meeting scheduled with Glen Eastman to discuss tunnels or some other, impatient to get her out of his hair so he could start his secret plans to unintentionally destroy the universe.

With no help coming through the tunnel, she let the handtruck sag back to the ground. "I'm not going to help you with this, Jimmy. It's insane. *You're* insane if you think it's going to work."

He stepped over to her. His face was impassive, and she felt a spark of real fear come to life inside her. This wasn't Jimmy. This wasn't the man she'd known.

"Like I said, Cuddyer," he said slowly, "none of this matters. It's all going to be reset. Whatever I do here, now, it's going to be *erased* when I'm done. So it's meaningless. So if you think I won't *hurt* you, Candace, think again, because I won't really be hurting you. Not

really. Not permanently.”

She blinked, going cold. Then she nodded, and lifted the handtruck again. Put her back into it.