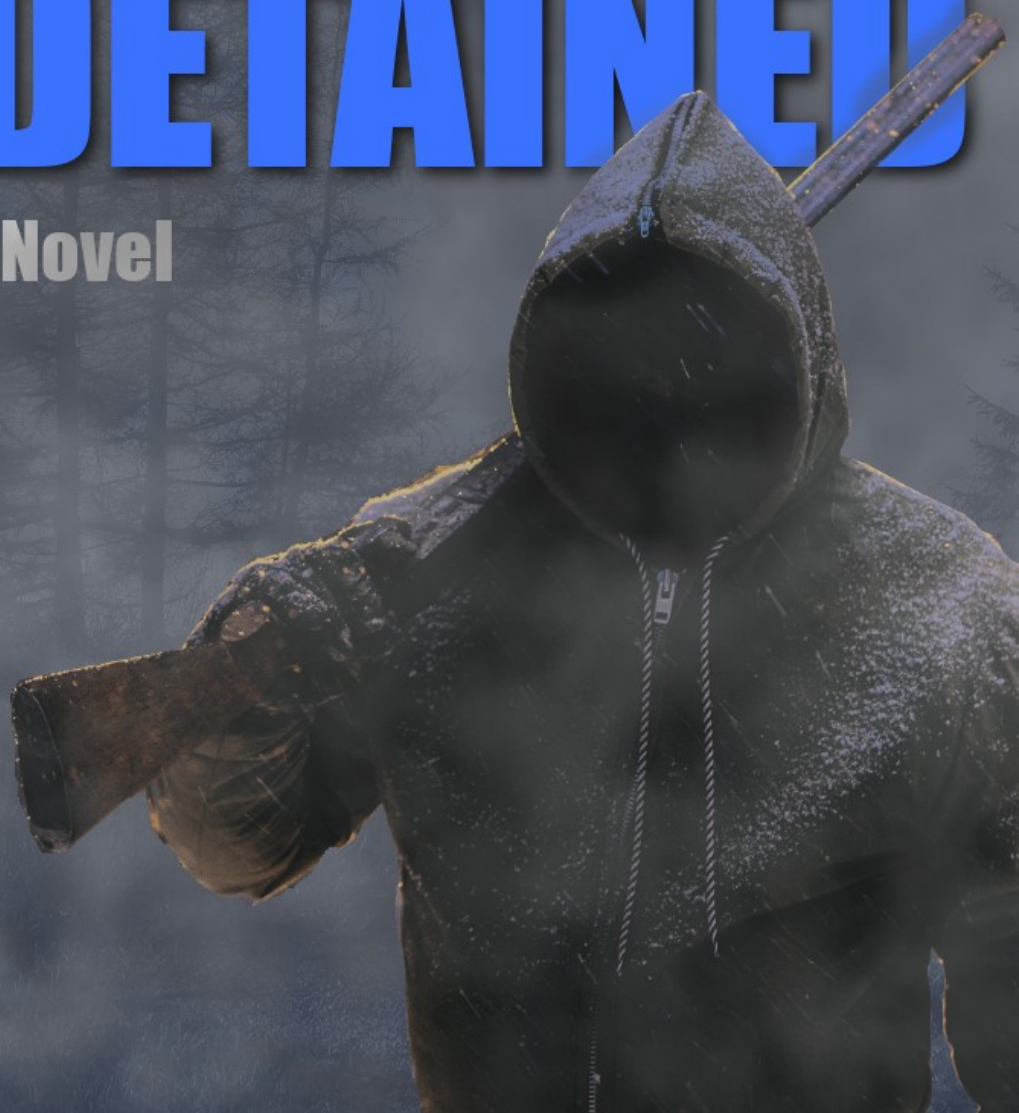


JEFF SOMERS

DETAINED

A Novel



DETAINED

Chapter 40

by Jeff Somers

40. Candace

She watched him setting up and wondered what he was going to do to her.

Not physically. Not in the moment. Even though she didn't recognize the Jimmy Haggan in front of her in any way, even though he was more or less a stranger to her, she still had the firm sense that he wasn't a cruel man. He wasn't going to hurt her like *that*. No, she was worried about what he was going to do to her *existentially*. As one of a handful of people in the world who believed you could rewrite reality using a box and a kind of programming language, she wondered if Jimmy was going to let her *exist*.

She thought about all the times in her life when luck had simply gone her way. When an inch this way or a moment that way would have ended her. If you had the ability to change the variables, to switch something from a negative to a positive, to add or subtract some ineffable piece of the puzzle and ensure that someone you found personally inconvenient wasn't around in the new version of

the present, what would be the ideal moment?

There were plenty of candidates, close shaves and near-disasters. She'd been in a car crash when she was sixteen, a friend trying to film them all singing some stupid song while she drove, the car flipping and rolling. She'd emerged with a broken finger and some scratches. Everyone had lived to be punished mercilessly by their parents. How hard would it be to nudge a variable and see her sail through the windshield, her head smacking into a tree?

Alcohol poisoning when she eighteen.

The concussion she got when Christine Mooney cleaned her clock during the soccer playoffs, when the doctor kept her for observation.

There were so many moments that could have gone sideways, and she was suddenly queasily certain that she wasn't even aware of most of them. How many times had she missed death because she'd been five minutes late? Early? How many times had her reflexes or intuition saved her? It was impossible—you didn't know what you didn't know. But Jimmy, if he mastered the box, Jimmy would *know*. He would be able to see every possible variable in her life. One tweak, and she was long gone before she could start to realize she'd done it all before, twice, and start to remember things that had never happened. One tweak and he wouldn't have to worry about her complicating things.

She was freaked out. Jimmy's house hadn't helped.

Whatever hope she'd had that Jimmy might still be the same guy, deep down, might still be someone she could talk to, negotiate with, disappeared as they approached the old Haggen home. Candace remembered it—both in this reality and in the shadowy other world she knew she'd once lived in—as a broken-down old ranch-style house, but comfortable. Mrs. Haggen had kept the place spotless, so insanely clean that the shabby fixtures and ancient finishes had taken on a sort of weary grandeur in spite of their age and wear. Jimmy, remarkably, had been nearly as insane, and after both his parents were passed he'd kept the place in good repair, even after he'd taken it off the grid. The composting toilet and leaky rainwater collection system made the place smelly and damp, but it still felt comfortable to her. She remembered coming up the dirt driveway and that squat, off-white house with the roof shedding shingles like an old dog had always made her happy.

Now, it frightened her.

First was the gate. Jimmy had erected a pretty stout-looking wooden gate across the drive. It trailed off into the dark tree line, topped with razor wire. It wasn't electric or automatic or anything, but when he stopped the truck and made her get out to open it up, she saw how well-built it was. She believed it would keep anything but a tank from getting in close to the house.

Walking in the cool, dark air, she thought about running. But

what would it matter? Jimmy would then be alone in his fortress with the box, and she might find herself winked out of existence at any moment. Better to at least be on hand. Maybe she'd get a chance to do something, to intervene, appeal to him.

After the gate, the house itself frightened her. The windows had all been shuttered over with sheet metal. The yard, once the trim, neat province of Mrs. Haggen, had been torn up, the grass and shrubs gone, the little garden a memory. It looked like a war zone.

"Follow me *exactly*," Jimmy said as they climbed out of the truck. "*Exactly*. One wrong step, Cuddyer, and you might go boom."

That frightened her too.

She followed him to the door, carrying the Box and watching his feet to make sure she set her own in the same precise spots. The familiar old rotted wood front door that Mr. Haggen painted bright blue every Spring only to watch it peel and bubble through the Summer was gone. In its place was a steel security door with four massive deadbolts set into it.

"There're better ways," Haggen said as he handed her the keys and stepped back to cover her while she worked each lock. "I would've done it all wirelessly with an App, but you can't take the risk. Anything in the cloud can be hacked. The damn NSA would be in there, one day I wake up and my whole rig is turned against me." His voice took on a light tone. "Ironically, Cuddyer, in the modern day the

best defense is old-school metal and gears.”

The door squealed as she pushed it open. He nudged her forward, and she stepped into the hot, dark interior of the place. Haggren followed her and pushed the door shut, and there was a moment of disorienting total darkness.

If you're going to jump him, she thought. This would be the moment.

It might be her best shot. They were both blind in the dark, and he was distracted resetting all the locks. But she was disoriented. She couldn't see anything at all, and the sense of being in a strange space without being able to see even the vaguest outlines of objects made her feel dizzy, made her feel like any step would send her falling into an abyss.

The lights came on, and the moment passed. The electric lights were dim and weak and only in the entryway. He nudged her forward into darkness, and a moment later there was a scratching noise and then a weak, greasy light bloomed. She squinted and looked around, and was afraid again, because Jimmy Haggren had gone crazy.

The house had always been small; a large front room that had served as a living room, rumpus room, sitting room, and media room, a small closed-in kitchen, a Master Bedroom that had been split into two small bedrooms with a flimsy wall and a new doorway, and a third small bedroom. One unfortunate, tiny bathroom.

She'd never known why the Master had been split, because Jimmy

was an only child.

The bathroom she remembered best. The window over the tub was just big enough to wriggle through, and during the many times that Jimmy was grounded or otherwise punished they'd made a mockery of these attempts at discipline when she would park in the trees, creep up in the darkness, and climb in. Jimmy would come and convey her to his room, and later she would escape through the same route. At the time it had felt incredibly daring, grown up and dangerous.

The front room was where the Haggens had lived most of their lives. They ate their meals there, watched TV, played board games, video games, had coffee and cake, and held meetings and conversations there. She'd spent countless hours in that room, making awkward conversation with Mr. and Mrs. Haggan, watching movies with Jimmy, playing games.

It had been transformed into a cliché. The windows had been covered with metal on the outside, the room was lit by the greasy pale glow of kerosene lamps, the fuel's sweet-sour smell making her feel sick. The walls were covered in paper—diagrams, notes, reams and reams of printouts, pages covered in the odd patterns of code. Books were strewn all over the floor, most dog-eared and well-used, covered in yellow highlighter and dense blue ink. Three beaten-up old laptops were open and running, white text on black screens, and wires ran

criss-crossed on the floor. It looked like the set dressing for every bad TV show when a “conspiracy nut” was introduced.

Clothes littered the floor, along with dirty plates and trash. Old t-shirts vied for floor space with dirty jeans and socks. It took a moment to realize that the old green couch she’d spent so many sitting on was buried under a pile of trash, boxes, and clothes. The television, which had been a huge old flat screen from the days before they were thin, had been removed, and the whole wall had been turned into a gun rack and ammo dump. She stared at a neat line of AR-15s, shotguns, hunting rifles, full magazines, grenades, and knives. She began to have serious doubts about her ability to affect the outcome of Jimmy’s plans, unless she wanted to find out just how paranoid he’d become.

She turned to look behind her; the front room had once been open to the entryway, the natural place for visitors to move into. Haggen had built a wall, and put a new door in place. It was a security door, with a magnetic lock, similar to the ones she dimly recalled at the facility up the road. The magnets meant it would lock tight even if the power was cut.

He’s made himself a Panic Room, she thought. Jesus, half the house is a panic room.

“Sorry about the mess,” Jimmy said. “Also, sorry that I’m about to tie you up.”

She glanced at him and did some math. She was in the house, three feet from the box. She might be able to affect the outcome. But if she let him shut the door, seal her in, and tie her up, she'd just be a prisoner. She needed to be able to affect things. To take action.

Jimmy was between her and the door. In a moment, he would turn and shut that door, then restrain her, and then she'd just be a piece of furniture in the room, watching as he remade—or *tried* to remake—reality, with or without her.

She took a deep breath and launched herself at him.

She took him by surprise. He was half-turned from her as she started running, and swung back just in time for her to slam into his torso, head down and arms bent in front of her to turn herself into as much of a battering ram as possible. He lost his balance under the assault and his legs went out from under him. She crashed into the wall with uncontrolled momentum, but rolled away and slipped through the door into the inky darkness of the rest of the house.

She closed her eyes and relied on her memories of the place. She'd once known the layout of the Haggan home as well as anything else in her life. Every twist and turn, every hiding place, every spot ideal for a quick makeout while Mrs. Haggan was in the kitchen. She could hear Jimmy yelling, hear him lumbering in pursuit. She made for the bathroom, because she knew the door locked—or at least it used to—and the window didn't.

Straight. Left, left. Spin. Grab the knob, pull the door shut. Turn the lock, throw the deadbolt. The deadbolt Jimmy himself installed on the bathroom door when he was fourteen after the third time his mother walked in on him masturbating. The deadbolt she'd mocked him mercilessly about.

She spun and opened her eyes, reaching for the shower curtain. She'd climbed in and out of the window so many times she knew the measurements by heart, but as she reached out a hand grabbed her wrist and spun her around. The other hand clamped over her mouth.

“Quiet,” an oddly familiar voice whispered. “Quiet now, Ms. Cuddyer.”