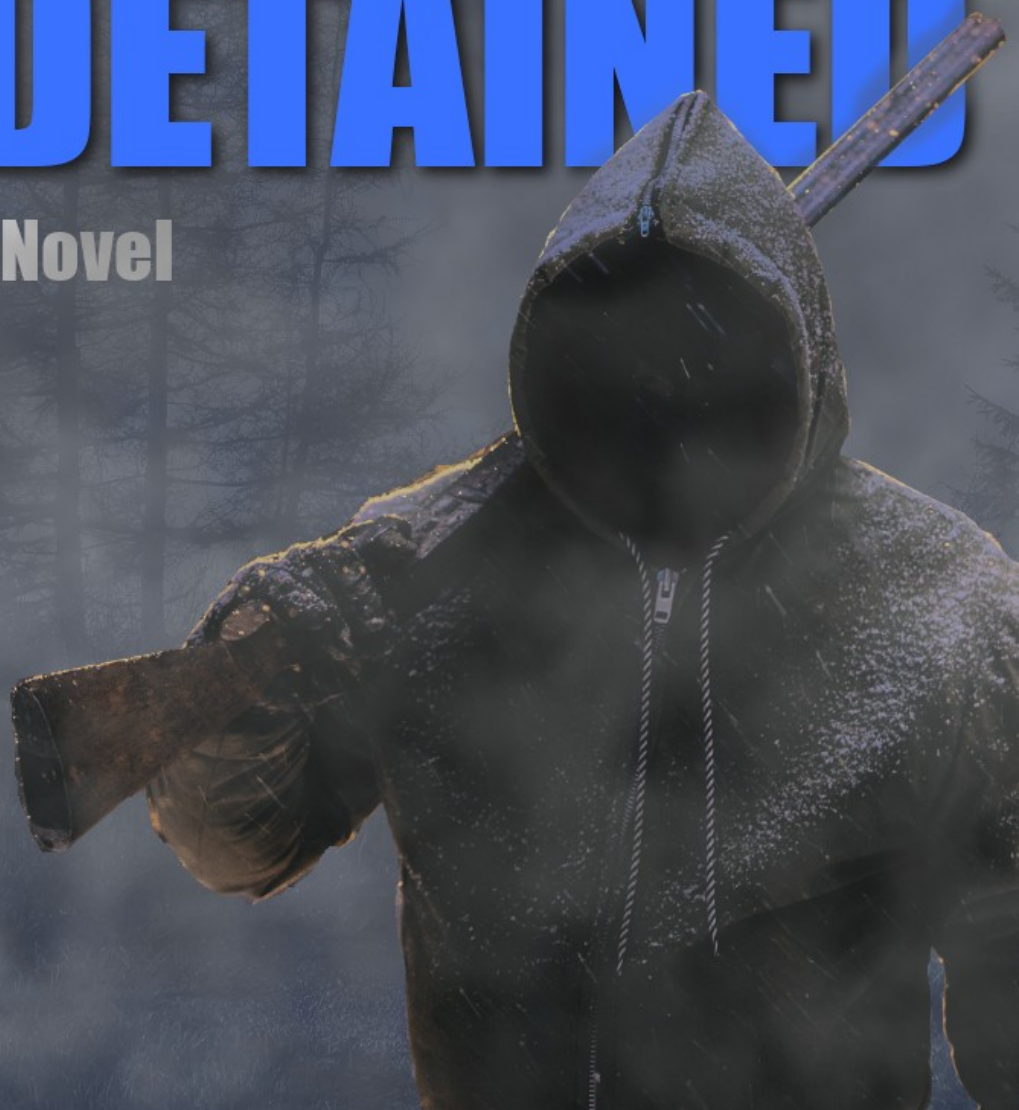


JEFF SOMERS

DETAINED

A Novel



DETAINED

Chapter 44

by Jeff Somers

44. Candace

There was too much blood.

No human body could possibly bleed as much as Jimmy Haggen and still live. And Haggen was not only still living, he seemed to be doing just fine. Gathering strength, shaking off five bullet wounds that should have killed him within moments.

She watched him wince in understated pain as he lifted the box onto a folding table. She knew she should be doing something, she should be hindering him, stopping him from accessing the field generator. But she couldn't move. Not because she was afraid, but because she was stunned. She watched Jimmy Haggen endlessly bleeding to death and her brain kept demanding that he *die* already.

"I had access to this for a while, you know," he said, breathing hard, the strain in his voice both obvious and underwhelming. "Y'all assumed I managed a few shots in the dark, but I actually had a pretty good idea what to do. You think of it as regular old code, it's not so hard to see the patterns. I'm not saying I could write

something from scratch, but to figure out that a variable means *you*? Not so fucking hard.” He picked up a cable, his hand shaking, and began working it into the rear of the box. “I took some precautions. Didn’t know if it would work, but I tried to make myself ... essential.”

She blinked, heart pounding. The *wrongness* of Jimmy Haggen still moving, still breathing, was like an assault on her senses. It *aggressively* made no sense to her. Some part of her could tell on a primal, instinctive level that the man she was looking at shouldn’t be alive.

She licked her lips. “What does *essential* mean?”

“I linked myself to everything I could think of,” he said slowly, taking a deep breath and leaning down, reaching with one hand under the table for another cable. “To make my code difficult to remove. Like, and this is a random example, I embedded a link to me in The Moon. The *fucking* Moon, Candace! So, to remove me—to kill me—you’d be removing The Moon. I did that with everything I could identify that wasn’t, you know, transient. That would be around for a while. I figured it would be an insurance policy. Wasn’t sure it would work, but, well, here I am.”

Here you are, she thought. She tried to contemplate a universe where Jimmy Haggen was essentially immortal, unkillable, perpetual. Where he’d weeded his own existence into so much of the bedrock of the universe that reality simply couldn’t allow him to be removed.

Then she imagined this immortal, unkillable Jimmy Haggen with the box, with the power to rewrite that reality as he wished. Then she looked around the room again, seeking something that could be used as a weapon. She was the only one inside, the only one with access. She figured Powell was probably calling in some sort of reinforcement, but who would that be? As far as she knew, Hammond and her crew were locked down at the bar. She didn't know where Mike and Glen were, where *anybody* was. For all she knew—and what she had to assume to be the case—she was the only person capable of stopping Haggen.

Her eyes stopped on a pile of tools, including one large rusty crescent wrench. Why every crescent wrench in the universe was rusty, she didn't know. What she did know is that Haggen, if maybe unkillable, was obviously affected by his injuries, which made her think it had to be possible to incapacitate. And a crescent wrench to the head was a reliable way of incapacitating someone, even someone as famously hard-headed as Jimmy Haggen.

She watched him slowly, languorously working with the box. A pool of blood had formed under him, but the bleeding seemed to have stopped, and she wondered if he would simply heal up. Would the bullets remain inside him? Would his body form new veins and arteries around them, would they magically disappear?

She felt like she couldn't trust anything. Gravity. Would gravity

still work as expected in a world where Jimmy Haggan was unkillable?

“I wasn’t sure it would work,” he said, and she took a soft, careful step to her left, bringing her a little closer to the wrench. “I thought about, you know, *testing* it, but I was afraid. Next time through, I’ll know from the get go. But I won’t need it. I’m going to fix things.”

Fix things. A chill went through her. She took another step.

“Don’t worry, now, I’m not gonna screw you over. What would I do without Candace Cuddyer? I think I know what to do about your Dad, too. Though I can’t make any guarantees; the rule of unexpected consequences and all that. But we’re gonna try, okay?”

She took a step to her left. The wrench was near her foot.

“The rest of them I got no love for, Cuddyer. No love at all. And I know if they had their way right now they’d try to pull *me* out of the weave, try to *erase* me—not that it would work. Me sitting here right now proves it to me: If they try to change things and pull me out, the whole goddamn thing’s gonna collapse. The whole goddamn *thing*, you get me?” He barked an unsteady laugh. “I made myself a fundamental part of the universe, Candy! *Fundamental!*”

He appeared to be absorbed in setting up the box; he’d connected it to a monitor, but the signal seemed to be out of phase, the picture distorted and squiggly, constantly moving and squirming. He might be unkillable, but his wounds were obviously affecting him; he was

dreamy and slow, fumbly. She lowered herself to the floor and curled her hand around the wrench.

“So let’s just say that in the new, Jimmy-centric universe, there isn’t going to be a Dr. Raslowski or a Colonel Hammond or a Glen Eastman—or a goddamn Mike Malloy. So there won’t be a box, and there won’t be any of *this*.” He turned to grin at her. “I’ve got it all—”

He frowned, and his face twisted into a mask of anger. She stepped forward and with one smooth motion raised the wrench and brought it down.

Haggen spun away, a spray of blood hitting her as the wrench crashed down on top of the box and bounced back, flying out of her numbed hand as a shockwave of pain shot up her arm. Sensing movement, she threw herself backwards, but Haggen caught her ankle and she slammed on the floor with a cry, teeth sinking into her tongue, blood filling her mouth. For a second she looked around at the metal-covered windows; no one was getting in and she wasn’t getting out, that was obvious.

She rolled to her right and scrambled forward and onto her feet, wincing as her arm tweaked with pain when she put her weight on it. Then she was running, off-balance, making a tight turn as she and diving behind the old green couch. She pressed herself down and scanned underneath, seeking anything that could be a weapon, the froze as the strangely familiar sound of a magazine being inserted

into an assault rifle.

She rolled towards the wall just as the couch burst into an explosion of foam and trash. Heart pounding, she pushed herself up and ran along the wall. Another quick burst of fire followed her; she launched herself at the table Haggen had set up, picked up the box, and with a twisting motion that tore something vital in her back tossed it directly at Jimmy.

He dropped the rifle and raised his arms, too late; the box smacked into him and sent him staggering backwards as it hit the floor. Back burning, she ran straight at him, tripping over the box and crashing into him. She rolled off of him immediately and crawled towards the rifle, sweating dripping onto the floor as she fought for breath.

Shoulda taken more spin classes, she thought, and had to fight the crazy urge to laugh.

Her hand closed on the rifle just as Haggen's hand closed on her ankle. She rolled again, bringing the rifle up and squeezing the trigger—she didn't have a second of hesitation, and some remote part of her was aware that instinctively she didn't even think of Haggen as a person any more. In some dark, deep part of her, some ancient reptilian place, she'd decided that Jimmy Haggen should have died, and this was a monster.

The rifle bucked just slightly in her shaking, sweaty hands and the

shots went wide.

Haggen surged up, growling, and she shoved the rifle up at him, connecting with his nose with a crunch she felt in her arm, a lance of pain shooting up into her brain. He staggered back, lost his footing, and landed on his ass, making the whole floor jump. She pointed the rifle at him again.

They each sat, breathing hard.

“Cuddyer,” he said between gasps, blood running down his face. She didn’t know how he could have more blood in him. She didn’t know how he could be alive. She felt her sense of gravity fading away again, lost to insanity. “Candace, don’t do this.”

“I can’t let you do this, Jimmy,” she said. “*Erasing* people. Setting yourself up as—what? King? God? Is that it? You can’t be killed, then what?” She blinked, a non-memory hitting her. “Jesus, you *wanted* them to kill you,” she said quietly. “You’d put in your code, you’d changed your variables, but you had to push the button, and you were *afraid*. You wanted them to make the decision for you.”

He smiled, blood in his teeth. “Cuddyer, I don’t mean this *mean*, but you’re out of your league here.”

She shook her head. “I can’t let you do it, Jimmy. They’re good people—”

“We don’t know them. Malloy? Hammond? Tourists.”

“Glen?”

Haggen shrugged. “I brought Glen in. He tried to screw me over, so he’s out.” He took a deep breath. “*You’re* here, Candace. And you and me—I’m not cutting you out. This,” he gestured at himself, “this I *get*. I *understand*.” He held up his hands. “No worries. Put the gun down, let me get set up. You get input on every decision. You don’t want something—you want, what, Malloy to be okay? Okay, he’s okay. I’m flexible. I’m not crazy.”

Jesus, am I negotiating to keep people from being erased? she thought, head spinning. Her back burned in agony, her arm was weak and shaky and aching. She felt like she couldn’t catch her breath. Like there wasn’t enough oxygen in the room.

She closed her eyes.

A loud, sour noise filled the air, startling her. She jumped and opened her eyes, but Haggen was already coming at her. He crashed into her, his blood soaking into her clothes, and then the rifle was torn from her slick hands and he shoved forcefully to the floor. She looked up and he had the rifle aimed directly at her, standing over her like a hunter over his kill.

They stared at each other for a moment.

“What’s that?” she finally asked.

He blinked and looked around. After a moment he stepped back, raising the rifle. “Motion sensors,” he said. Then he looked back at her, his expression terrifying. “Visitors.”