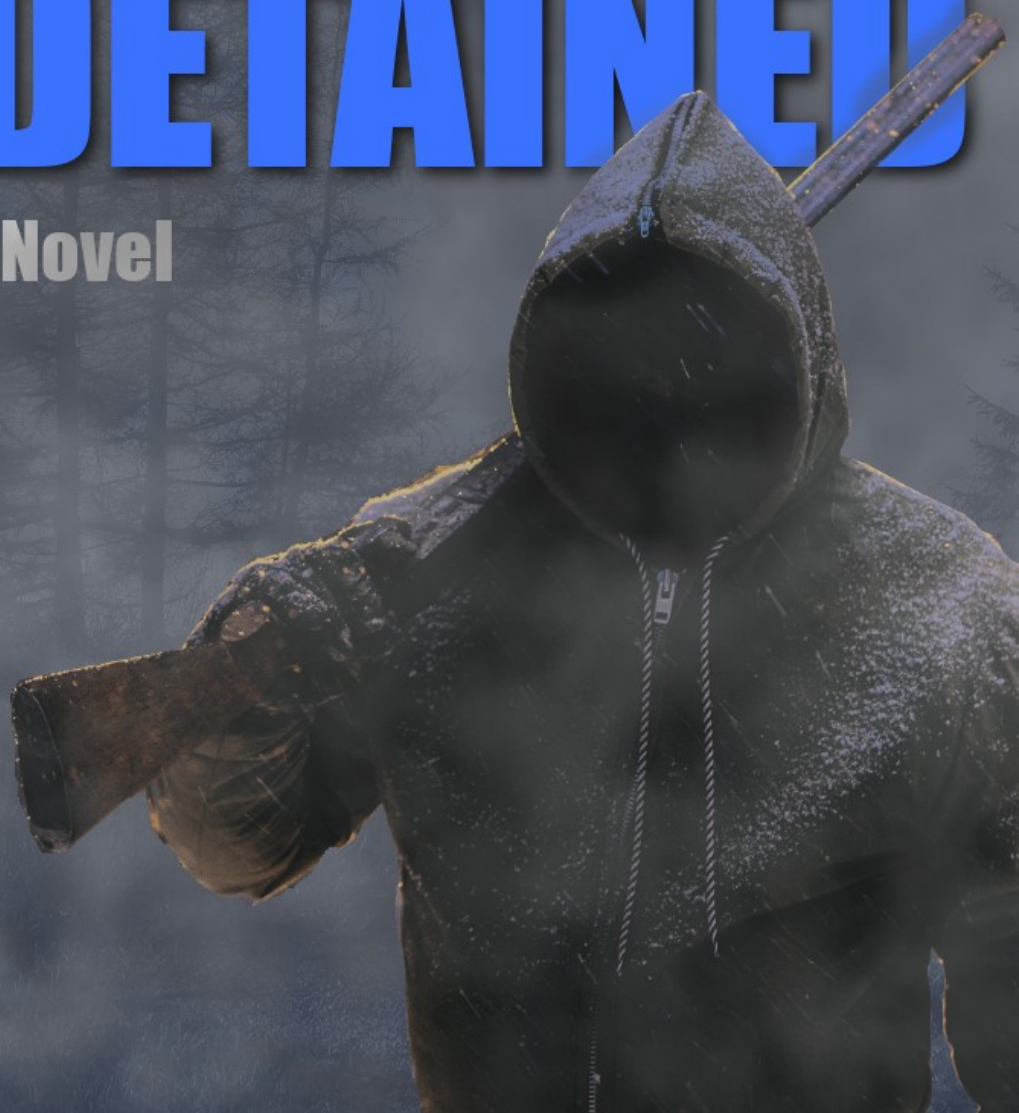


JEFF SOMERS

DETAINED

A Novel



DETAINED

Chapter 46

by Jeff Somers

46. Candace

She heard something, a scrape and a creak above her. Ziptied to the ancient, unused radiator against the inner wall of the room, she glanced up, then quickly down again, doing obscure existential math. She looked over at Hagggen, who was hunched over the keyboard, the monitor—its screen cracked but still functioning—glowing with white code on a black background.

She heard the creak again. She didn't know who, but *someone* was on the roof. It didn't matter who it was, she thought. She was tied up and anything that would shift the balance was welcome. She needed to distract Jimmy.

Hagggen was spectral. For a moment she studied his back, the oozing bullet wounds, the pallor of his skin, and marveled at the idea of an unkillable James Hagggen. It ruined so many of her teenage proclamations that she would, indeed, kill Jimmy that she felt cheated, somehow. When he'd made her angry during their ill-fated love affair all those years ago—which had been more or less a daily

occurrence—she'd often entertained herself by imagining how she would kill the smug son of a bitch, fuming over his latest bit of assholery. Now that option appeared to be gone, and without the option of just killing him she wasn't sure how to emotionally deal with him.

She watched him typing. His hands shook. He was essentially a corpse that had failed to stop living.

“Is it difficult?” she asked, surprising herself with the croaking, cracked sound of her voice. She was exhausted. She felt like she'd been fighting a fierce tide for the last six years or so, beating her way back to a distant shore that kept receding no matter what she did.

He kept typing. “Dr. Raslowksi's early work is public,” he said. “Getting some of the basics was easy enough. I took some online courses—did you know that MIT has every course it offers for free online? Shit, they even have all the materials for download. You can't get a degree that way, but you can self-study until you pass out. I managed to dig up some other stuff—one stupid sonofabitch at the DOD left a presentation deck on an FTP site, and the Dark Web has a shitload of leaked materials. More fucking anarchist's with security clearances than you think. And Raslowski and Azarov, for convenience and speed's sake, based the structure of their language on existing programming languages. And the compiler is built-in. I've pieced together a lot of it.”

“A lot? For re-working reality, you think *a lot* is gonna cut it?”

He shrugged, his wounds oozing more. “I’m kinda out of time, here, Candace. I became aware six years ago. I’ve had six years to prepare. At this point, best I can do.”

Dust sifted down onto her, getting into her eyes. She blinked and twitched, forcing herself to keep talking. “And you’re ... you’re *okay* with the risk? Jesus, Jimmy, you might delete everything. You might erase *existence*,” she said quietly. “I want you to just stand up, unplug that thing, and maybe *destroy* it.”

“They’d just build another one,” he said, twisting around to look at her. “Besides, I’ve already put all the work in: I’d written out my changes ahead of time like a good Worker Bee. It’s all in there, Candace. So here’s the last chance, okay? The final one. I press the button, everything’s gonna change. The variables will refill with new values. Those new values will ripple out in quantum states backwards and forwards in time, reality will self-correct, and we’ll all be in a new version of everything. You want to have a say in what that new version is, you want to make a *suggestion*, now would be the time.”

She felt tired. She felt like she’d lived the last six years twice and only gotten the sleep of three. “Jimmy, you—”

Up above her, a loud explosion made her scream, and then everything was chaos: The ceiling collapsed above her, plaster and wood coming down in chunks that shook the floor under her as they

hit. There was a rush of hot, burning air and a flurry of sparks and flaming chunks of what had once been the ceiling. Bodies crashed down with the debris, bouncing on the floor. With a loud tearing noise, another section of the roof snapped, dropping down on top of the green couch.

She took a deep breath and started to try and get her feet under her. Something heavy crashed down onto her shoulders, and everything went black.

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She came back to consciousness in slow, sticky waves, hovering somewhere between awake and asleep for a long time. She imagined she was back in New York, she imagined she was at home doing her homework, her father puttering around downstairs, irritating her because he wouldn't just go doze off in the easy chair in front of the TV so she could sneak out. She imagined she was working a double shift at Mad One Jack's, buzzing on caffeine and desperation, angry because of all the one-dollar tips the Great Hunters were leaving.

She knew she was dreaming, but couldn't shake it.

She was in the hospital, then, the day her father died. He hadn't been awake. She knew that. He'd slept the last few days, breathing shallowly, and shown no awareness of anything. He'd died without saying a word. She knew that.

But now she was back in the dark, silent room, and he was awake.

She knew she was dreaming, but then what was a dream when you knew—*knew*, in some inexplicable way—that you'd lived a whole other life. That instead of going to New York, you'd stayed in town. That one night soldiers had detained you. And instead of having to fly in when your father took a turn, you were home, caring for him, right up until the bitter end.

And now he was awake, and telling her he was about to die. He was telling her that life didn't have to be this way. That there were options she couldn't see. He was smiling and telling her that she didn't have to do things just because she'd already done them, that there were less-traveled roads. He'd always said that: *Less-traveled roads*, and she'd always tried to correct his quote and he'd never listened.

And then she was back in Jimmy Haggen's destroyed safe room. The roof was missing, the trees visible, outlined by the stars and the soft glow of the unseen moon. The kerosene lamp still burned, throwing its weak yellow light. The debris from the collapse was everywhere, shingles and drywall and the huge, cracked joists, bricks mixed in. Where the couch had been, two legs emerged from a pile of wreckage, one leg bent at the knee as if the person was just taking a nap under a ton of house.

She tried to move, and a sharp pain lanced through her. Her arms were trapped, and she struggled, panic setting in. She was pinned

under a huge piece of wood, ancient and cracked, almost black; she was able to breathe, but any attempt to move brought pain and futility.

Sound made her look around. Another body lay on the floor—she recognized Colonel Hammond’s short, severe blonde hair—near the couch. The box had been knocked off the table and lay on its side, still connected via a long black cable to the monitor, which was still on the table, flat on its back, and the keyboard, which had landed on the floor.

Jimmy was crawling towards it.

He was a corpse. She couldn’t think of any other possible description. He was fishbelly white, his lips gray and thin. The wounds on his back were dry and jellied, opening and closing as he pulled himself towards the keyboard. She could hear him breathing, but couldn’t comprehend how he had any blood left to oxygenate. If she didn’t believe he was unkillable before, she believed it now.

I’ve already put all the work in.

A jolt of adrenaline flooded her. The keyboard was still connected. She had no doubt the box was still operational. All he had to do was press the ENTER key and load his changes.

She clenched her teeth and closed her eyes, pushing against the weight of the rafter despite the pain that shot through her. She couldn’t let him. She couldn’t let him erase people, she couldn’t let

him remake the universe as he saw fit, she couldn't let him mess everything up worse than he already had.

She pushed. The pain became intense, a fire inside her, and she screamed. She thought the rafter had moved a fraction of an inch. Just a fraction.

She remembered, in another reality, an old-fashioned Dipping Bird.

She watched Haggren crawl another inch towards the keyboard.

Tears sprang from her eyes as the pain became intolerable. The rafter hadn't moved at all, she was pinned under it completely. With a gasp she stopped the effort, sobs wracking her as frustration soured into horror.

In the strange silence of the ruined house, she heard a slight, sharp noise, then something like fabric rubbing. And then a man dropped into her field of vision. He was disheveled, but appeared to be unhurt; he didn't even have much dirt on him. She recognized Mike Malloy and stared in wonder for a moment: Had he flown in? Parachuted from a plane? Materialized from another dimension?

After the day she'd had, any of it would have made sense.

She watched as Mike walked over towards Haggren. He didn't rush. He had a rifle slung over his shoulder, but his hands were free and hung loosely at his sides as he walked.

Be careful, she thought, trying to make the words but finding her

lungs locked, *he's immortal, unkillable.*

When he reached Haggen, he extended one leg and gently put his foot on the younger man's hand.

Haggen stopped crawling, sagging down onto the floor.

"I think you've done enough damage," Mike said.

For a moment, Haggen just lay there, and Candace wasn't even certain he was breathing. Then he twisted his head around to look up at Mike, and Candace could see his cadaverous face smiling.

"You know, Malloy," he said, his voice like gravel under wheels, "I've run the numbers on you."