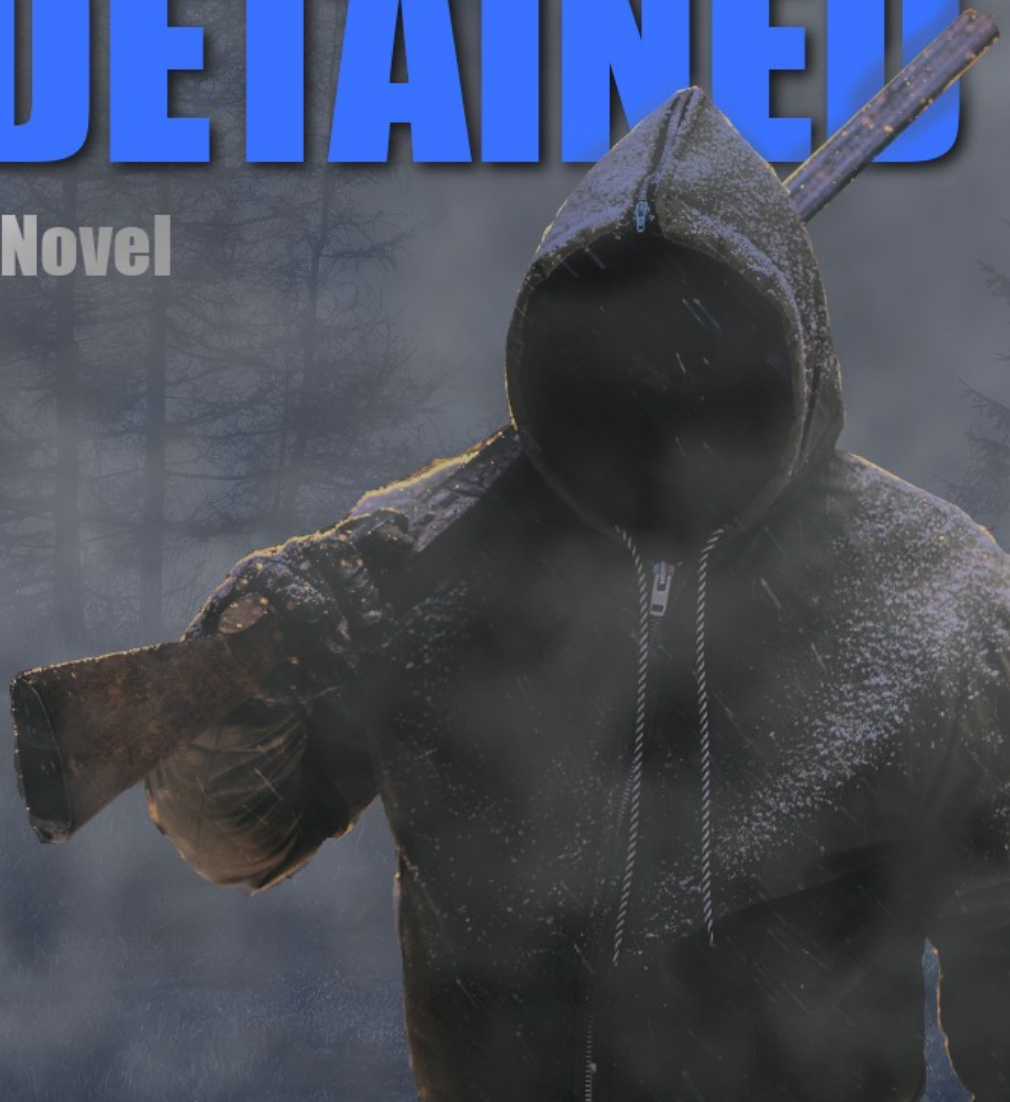


JEFF SOMERS

DETAINED

A Novel



DETAINED

Chapter 15

by Jeff Somers

15. Candace

She didn't know *how* to pretend to faint. She'd just dropped to the floor and then did her best to keep still, to keep her eyes closed, and not startle as people drew close, touched her, shook her, and yelled at her. She felt a vague sense of shame being a woman who'd just used the oldest trick in the damsel-in-distress handbook to solve a problem, but she'd had no time to think. And she *had* been in distress.

She heard her father laughing and saying *you're a card—you have to be dealt with*.

She heard Raslowski shouting at everyone to just leave her there until he got his sample, then a woman—King?—shouting for “the kit,” which Candace assumed was the first aid kit. Or at least she *hoped* it was the first aid kit; after just a few hours in the company of these people, she had to admit she couldn't be sure they didn't have something like a Suffocation Kit, or an Immolation Kit. At this point, lying on the floor and struggling to appear unconscious, Candace had to admit nothing much would surprise her.

She worried about how long to keep up the pretense; what was believable? She didn't like not knowing what all the commotion meant. Was someone pointing a gun at her? Was Raslowski preparing to stick her with a needle? What were the others doing? The lack of information was maddening, but she kept her cool and forced herself to remain still for what seemed like forever.

Until the worst smell in the world was suddenly thrust up in her face, seemingly directly into her nose. It startled her, and her eyes popped open as she convulsed, trying to scramble away from it, whipping her face this way and that. Someone took hold of her arms and legs, and that just made the panic worse, and she struggled even harder.

“Hold her! Hold her!”

Raslowski's voice had the same pitiless tone she remembered from before. She began imagining all manner of awful things being done to her—needles and scalpels and Raslowski grinning over her, telling her that its *doesn't matter* in that nerdy, clipped voice of his.

“Ms. Cuddyer!” Raslowski shouted, and she realized he was leaning over her, his pinched face red and his glasses reflecting the light back making him look eyeless, soulless. “Ms. Cuddyer! I must ask you a few questions! Please! Calm down!”

She would never overpower them, she realized, and wasn't even sure why she was trying. Although her performance was likely

distracting them all in a huge way, so there was that. She wasn't going to stop them from doing whatever they were going to do, she thought, so she should take a page from her father's playbook and meet whatever it was head on. She stopped struggling and took a deep breath. Then she forced herself to look Raslowski directly in the eyes.

He studied her. "You are calm, Ms. Cuddyer?"

She nodded. He wasn't holding anything alarming in his hands, nothing sharp or ominous. He still had rubber gloves on, which wasn't exactly encouraging, though.

"Ms. Cuddyer, this is *vitaly important*, when you appeared to lose consciousness just now, was the event preceded by a strong sense of *deja vu* or premonition, did you see what might be described as a *vision*?"

She frowned at him. "What?"

"You *lost consciousness*, Ms. Cuddyer. Before doing so, did you experience a strong sense of *deja vu* or what might be described as a *vision*?"

She frowned at him. "I—"

He leaned forward and slapped her across the face, hard enough to bring tears to her eyes.

"You fucking—" She struggled with the people holding her down, but was powerless, and finally surrendered, going calm again.

“This is *vital*, Ms. Cuddyer. Yes or no?”

She shook her head, eyes locked on him.

He sighed. “All right. I’m going to take a blood sample.” He raised his eyebrows. “I am going to keep trying until I succeed. If you fight, you will only injure yourself.”

She nodded.

“Good.”

It was very clinical, very professional. He tied off her arm, told her to make a fist, and moments later the needle was in. He hummed as the blood filled the tube. He switched it out for a second tube, then pressed a cotton ball against her vein as he pulled the needle out.

“All right,” he said. “If we let you up, will you cause trouble?”

She shook her head.

He smiled. She thought it looked like a grimace. “Very good.” He looked up and nodded. The hands were removed from her limbs, and King stood up and held her hand out to help Candace up. Then Raslowski was in front of her, proffering a bandage. She blinked, then reached out and took it. He winked and turned away.

She turned, holding the bandage in her hand. She started walking towards the bar, then stopped. Jack McCoy was nowhere to be seen, but Mike was behind the bar, leaning forward with his arms crossed, staring at her.

She walked over rapidly. “Everything okay?”

He nodded. “We’re just picking our moment,” he said quietly. “You okay?”

“You went down like a sack of potatoes, Candace,” Glen Eastman whispered, looking around exactly how Candace imagined nervous conspirators looked. “What happened?”

“I’m fine. I needed a distraction. It was the best I could do.”

Mike smiled. “Smart girl.”

“What did that bastard do to you?”

She shook her head. “Just took some blood,” she said to the retired teacher. “Asked me some questions. He seemed really worried that I’d—that I’d seen *visions*. Hallucinations, I guess.”

“Symptoms,” Mike said quietly. “He was worried you were showing symptoms of something.”

Eastman frowned. “A *disease*? Doesn’t make sense, Mr. Malloy. None of these people are in any sort of protective gear.”

Candace shook her head. “He seems freaked out. And who *wouldn’t* be—I mean, I don’t care what his experience is, or his career, no one’s prepared for this scenario, right? You don’t think he’s under stress, ready to lose his mind at any moment?” She shook her head. “My bet is, they aren’t 100% certain what they’re dealing with. Raslowski’s worried he might have missed something.”

Mike nodded, scanning the room. “Doesn’t change anything. We’re not going to get a perfect moment to do this.” He looked at her.

“You up for a little more risk?”

She didn’t hesitate. She hated the feeling of being trapped in here, of being pushed around. Someone had just held her down and taken *blood* from her for the purpose of running a DNA check of her identity—she was ready to fight back. She nodded. “What do you need me to do?”

“If we can get them to gather someplace, when McCoy starts shooting he’ll have a good chance of taken more of them down if they’re clumped up. They’re too spread out now. Think you can figure out a way to make them come together? At least a few of them?”

She turned and followed his gaze around the room. There were ten soldiers in sight, and Raslowski. Mike was standing there, so the one named Warner was already neutralized. And then, of course, there was Hammond, sitting in Jack’s office. The ten men and women were posted at intervals; two on the front door, two at the hallway that led to the office, the bathrooms, and the back room, and the rest around the perimeter.

“We should at least get the two away from the hallway,” she said quietly. “If Jack shows up there, they’d be out of his line of sight and able to intervene without even exposing themselves.”

“Good,” Mike said, and she was pleased to hear approval in his voice. “That’s good thinking. If you can get them to leave their post, it’s a huge advantage for Jack. We’re gonna get one shot at this. If we

blow it, if they overpower us, kill some of us—there won't be a second chance. Anyone not dead will be restrained, imprisoned. So far they've been more or less polite. Forgiving. Tolerant.”

Glen Eastman snorted, and Mike held up a hand.

“Okay, Mr. Simms—but since then Hammond had made it clear she's willing to let us have a modicum of freedom as long as we don't get in her way. But that's on *sufferance*. We pull this and we fuck it up, all that changes.”

“Maybe then we *don't* do it,” Glen said in an urgent whisper, leaning in behind her. “Maybe we take a little time to work it out, have, I don't know—a *plan*?”

“Every minute we wait makes the odds they discover what's happening in the back room better,” Mike said. “We can't wait. It has to be now.”

Candace's heart was pounding. She saw all the bad outcomes, all too clearly. She saw herself knocked down, a knee in her throat, plastic zipties around her wrists. She saw herself shot, blood exploding from the entry wound. She saw *everyone* shot, Hammond lining them up facing the wall and ordering her soldiers to execute them all. She imagined standing next to Mike and hearing the report of the gun and the sound of bodies dropping, getting nearer, nearer, right next to her. She saw it all going off the rails and all of them dead. But she also saw the same outcome if they did nothing, and she

thought it would be better to get shot trying to stand up for themselves than just sitting and waiting.

She nodded. "Okay. I've got a plan."