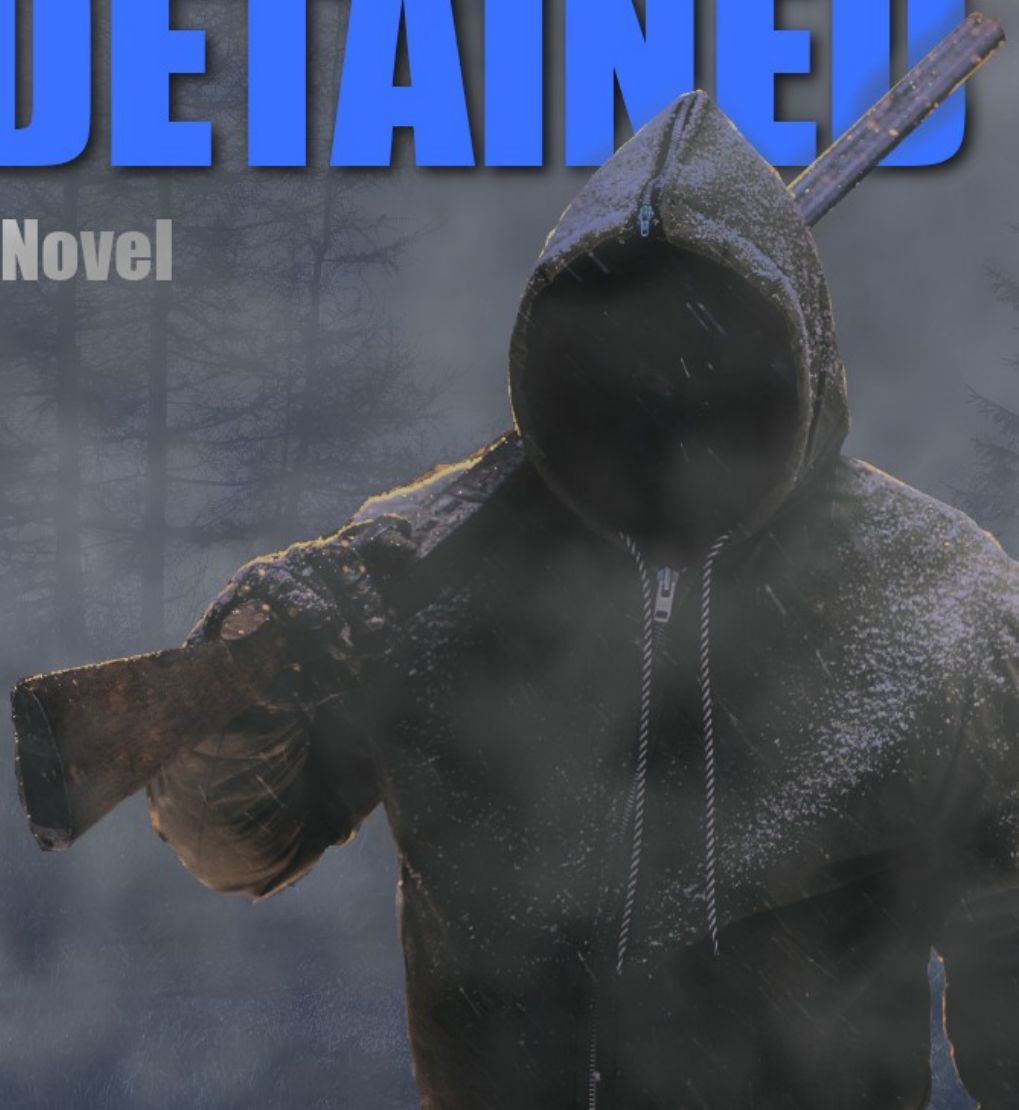


**JEFF SOMERS**

**DETAINED**

**A Novel**



# DETAINED

## Chapter 42

by Jeff Somers

### 42. Candace

She realized she knew him. She *didn't* know him. She'd never seen him before in her life. But she knew his name was Andy Powell. She knew he was a soldier, or a mercenary, or some other term for a person who trained with weapons and wore a uniform and took orders from Colonel Willa Hammond.

She knew that in some other version of events, he'd hidden in the bathroom at One-Eyed Jack's and pretended to be a customer just caught up in events. His ruse hadn't worked. Apparently he'd been reassigned to a different bathroom.

"Just hang tight, Ms. Cuddyer," he said with a soldier's blank-faced politeness. "This all will be over and done with presently."

She watched him checking his handgun. He was wearing body armor, and had a small arsenal with him—magazines, an AR-15, grenades, and a nasty-looking three-dimensional knife that was like three blades fused into a conical shape. He was far from the apparently frightened, friendly guy she dimly recalled from her

previous existence. This was a polite, calm, assured soldier. He was absolutely confident that he was in charge and would remain so despite the fact that he hadn't restrained her in any way, and that irritated her.

*This all will be over and done with presently.*

The arrogance of it. These people had been in charge the other time, and had fucked it up royally. But they thought they were in charge *this* time?

*Time to make a choice*, she thought to herself, biting her lip. Was Jimmy chasing after her? Coming in confidence through his own private space, or skulking, prepared for tricks? She could just let this happen. She could sit quietly and when Jimmy opened the bathroom door a man named Andy Powell would shoot him and take possession of the box. Was that a better outcome? A *different* group of people in charge of the underlying code of reality?

Her father had been fond of saying *better to be in the room than out of the loop*. He'd always meant it with a sense of futility: The taxes were going to go up no matter what he did, but being at the city council meetings at least meant he was aware of what was happening. She thought, better to be in the room with the box and Jimmy than locked outside it. It might not make any difference, but she might still have moves to make if she was at least *in the room*.

"Officer?" she said, trying to make her voice as soft and non-

threatening as possible.

“Hmmm?” he grunted, occupied with his weapon.

She took a deep breath, then leaned forward and with all her strength gave him a shove. The back of his knees hit the lip of the clawfoot tub and he fell backwards into it, gun sailing off, landing on the floor and skidding. She reached up and tore the filthy old plastic shower curtain down, then spun, picked up the gun, and tore open the door.

Jimmy was a few feet away, shadowed in the hallway, caught by surprise in mid-skulk.

“Run!” she hissed, shoving past him. *Shouldn't run with a loaded weapon*, she thought, years of gun safety lectures from literally everyone she'd ever known crowding around her. She kept running, and suddenly it occurred to her that if she beat Haggen back into the little DIY safe room he'd constructed, she'd be alone with the box.

She poured on everything she had. Behind her, she heard a roar as Powell extricated himself from the tub, then an angry shout, and heavy steps.

“Candace!” Jimmy shouted, sounding so much closer than she expected. “Candace! Don't do it! You can't do anything with the box! You need me!”

She didn't slow down. That was probably true. She had no experience with code of any kind, she didn't have Jimmy's natural

hacker sensibility. Where Jimmy had always had an affinity for systems and how they could be subverted or undermined or simply used—often without any deep understanding of the concepts or workings—she'd always found even simple technology frequently baffling or simply boring. She was a tepid social media user, hadn't bothered keeping up with the new networks her friends and co-workers kept jumping to, and her solution for just about every technical problem she encountered in the world was to turn the thing off and walk away, possibly have a cocktail. She *wouldn't* know what to do with it.

But she'd be in the room. Whoever *did* know what to do with it would need to negotiate with her—and she wasn't certain she would listen. Because it suddenly seemed to her that the best thing that could be done would be to simply destroy the damned thing.

She saw her father, withered and shrunken in his hospital bed. Still managing a smile for her while they waited for the hospice representative to come back with the paperwork. He was six days from death, and he smiled for her.

“Don't worry, hon,” he'd said. “This is just bad timing. No one gets out alive, right?”

*No one gets out alive.*

She might re-arrange the universe to her liking. She might give her father a few more years or even decades. But no one was getting

out alive no matter what she did, so what was the *point*?

She slipped through the doorway, spun, and took hold of the door. Jimmy was three or four steps behind her.

“Candace!” he shouted. “*Candace, no!*”

She put everything she had into sliding the door into place, grunting with the effort, something tearing in her back as the heavy steel door resisted. An inch away from latching, Haggen slammed into the door just as a drumbeat of automatic fire tore the air. She hung onto the door as it swung back into the room, Haggen dropping to the floor and sliding a foot or so, sprawled and bloody. She screamed, putting everything she had into pushing the door shut, and felt Powell crash into it a second after the bolts shot home.

She spun and dropped down to crawl over to Haggen. He was face-down on the floor in a spreading pool of blood, his back torn up by several bullet wounds.

“*Jimmy!*” she screamed, reaching for his shoulders to flip him over and then freezing, uncertain. There was so much blood. He’d been shot four, five times in the back with a high-powered weapon. He was dead. There could be no question. For a second she just knelt there, frozen, hands extended towards him. Jimmy Haggen was dead. She felt the same confused paralysis she’d felt when her father had passed. He’d been sleeping, it seemed, for a week, just a shrinking body barely breathing, mouth open, never conscious. And then she’d

startled awake in the darkness of the room at the hospice, and he'd simply been gone, and for a long time she'd just sat there, back aching, staring up at the ceiling, unable to think or move or make a noise.

As she stared, Jimmy convulsed and flipped over.

Blood sprayed her face. The bullets had blown clear through him, and blood poured from the wounds. He sat up and stared at her. His face, somehow, had avoided all the gore and was like a white mask.

"Candace," he said, his voice rough and unsteady. "Candace, I'm shot."

She stared. It was impossible. There couldn't be anything left of him inside. She'd seen what regular hunting guns did to a deer or an elk—and she had no doubt the 223 rounds from an AR-15 did much, much worse. He'd been shot five times. He was already sitting in a lake of his own blood.

"Candace," he repeated, looking at her with wide eyes, his face ashen. "I'm shot."

She nodded, running through possibilities. It was possible, she thought, *possible* that every single bullet had missed something vital. No organs, arteries, or bones. It was *possible* that she was overestimating how much blood he'd lost. That maybe he'd somehow just had the luckiest moment anyone in the history of the world had ever experienced.

She turned her head slightly. She looked at the box—the Raslowski Field Generator, the Transmorgifier.

“Oh, shit, Candy,” Haggren moaned, lifting his hands up. Blood and gore dripped from them. “Oh, fuck me. *Fuck me.*”

She snapped her head around and felt the paralysis break. If he was the recipient of a miracle that had saved all his vital organs, he could still bleed to death. Looking at him, she thought he *would* bleed to death, and fast. She’d never seen so much blood.

She spun and grabbed a handful of T-shirts from the the floor, then sank down and undid the buckle of her belt. She wadded up one of the shirts, examined Haggren for one frenzied moment until she thought she’d identified the worst of the bleeds.

“Arms, up, Jimmy,” she hissed, pushing the shirt against the gaping wound. “Hold it,” she ordered, and he silently put his hand on the shirt while she looped the belt around his torso, pulling it tight. Then she wadded up a second shirt and reached around, pushing it through the looped belt on the other side.

She leaned back, panicking; she’d staunched one bleed, but the rest of his wounds continued to seep and pulse out blood. She couldn’t do anything truly effective like this.

“Goddammit,” she spat, feeling tears rushing up. “*Godammit.*”

“It’s okay, Cuddyer,” Jimmy said, and she blinked; he sounded ... normal. He sounded a little strained, maybe, but certainly not like a



man who'd just been shot five times, a man who should have bled to death moments ago. She blinked tears from her eyes and stared at him. He was *smiling* slightly.

“It’s okay,” he said, looking down at himself. Then he looked back up. “I think ... I think I might have made myself immortal.”