

JEFF SOMERS

DETAINED

A Novel



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Chapter 2

by Jeff Somers

2. Mike

When he'd passed the prison-like office park a few miles back, he'd worried that he'd been steered wrong, but the place was perfect. It was exactly what he'd asked for: Hyper-local, off the beaten path. The faded sign outside read MAD ONE JACK'S: Food | Liquor | Live Music and the place looked like it had been carved out of the trees a million years ago. He steered the rented Land Rover into a spot and shut the engine off.

He could hear music from inside: He recognized the twangy guitar riff, but couldn't place it. He felt tired. A Scotch, a burger, and some local color was exactly what the doctor ordered.

Entering, he felt awkward for a moment. The place was *dead*. Four, five people, including the bartender, who didn't look friendly, and the waitress, who did. She smiled at him, and he felt better, walking up to the bar and dropping his bag into one seat as he climbed into the one next to it. *You need this*, he said to himself. *Six months without human contact is too long. Have a conversation.*

For a split second, guilt flooded him. He saw her, on the floor, surrounded by trash. Her posture: She'd been crawling.

He shook his head and covered his momentary confusion by

reaching for his wallet. He pulled out the black card without thinking and tossed it on the bar, and instantly regretted it.

The waitress' eyes flickered to the card, hovered for a moment, then came back to him. "What can I get you?"

He was relieved to see the hint of a smile. She was pretty, he thought. Maybe even beautiful if you scraped off the long shift and did something with her hair. And the smile was pure gold, a natural wonder. He felt like an asshole throwing around his unlimited card, but it hadn't been intentional, and she didn't look impressed.

"You have anything that could legally be called *Scotch*?" he said.

Her smile expanded incrementally. "Ooh, top shelf. I'll alert the media."

She spun away. He watched her walk the length of the bar and circle around behind it, wave off the bartender, and pull out a small step ladder from an unseen nook next to the fridge filled with bottled beer.

Movement out of the corner of his eye made him turn his head. An old-fashioned Dipping Bird, the glass toys that dipped their beaks into a glass for hours and hours at a time sat on the bar. It had a pelt of dust on it, so it appeared to hold a place of honor, and it made Mike happy. If this was the sort of place, he thought, that had a silly little tradition like an old-school Dipping Bird that got reset whenever it stopped dipping, then it was run by people with a sense of humor.

The waitress unfolded the ladder and climbed up to reach the literal top shelf, where two dusty bottles sat. He smiled as she climbed down, spun pertly, and presented the bottle to him. When he looked down, his smile froze and he almost choked.

He looked back at her. "Is this a joke?"

Her grin finally took over her face, pushing her over the line into beautiful. “Is what a joke?”

He glanced at the bottle again. “That’s a 1955 Glenfarclas.”

“Yup.”

“That bottle’s worth ten grand.”

“Yup.”

He laughed. He couldn’t help it. He’d come in to force himself to socialize, and he’d seen himself making awkward conversation, being trapped by some blowhard local. Instead he had a nearly empty bar being blown away by a beautiful waitress who was mocking him.

He nodded. “Okay. A double. Neat.”

She nodded as if ordering \$500 worth of whiskey was a normal, everyday occurrence for her in her local bar. She picked up his card. “Open a tab?”

She was still smiling at him, so he laughed again. “Yes!”

He watched her walk towards the work station with the bottle. Movement in his peripheral vision made him jump. He turned to find the bartender standing there, holding out a hand.

“Jack McCoy,” he said. “Owner. Nice to meet you, Mr. —?”

He shook the man’s hand, which was like a shovel enveloping his own, huge and calloused. McCoy wasn’t big—he was no taller than himself—but he was *dense*. He was muscular and powerful and his grip said he would be capable of tearing phone books in half, if anyone still used phone books.

“Malloy,” he said. “Call me Mike. Great place you have here.”

McCoy nodded. “Thanks. You doin’ some hunting?”

Mike shook his head. “Passing through. Gonna climb the mountain, but just take in the local color, mainly.”

McCoy nodded as if this was a common response he’d heard

dozens of times. *The Mountain* was a local name for a glorified hill that offered decent-to-great views of the area. It was something to do.

Mike leaned in slightly. "So, how'd you come by a Scotch like that?"

Jack gestured at the bar in general. "It was here when I bought the place, if you can believe it. Old Henry Wallace used to run this joint. Found it in his office, in a drawer." He grinned. "I don't think old Hank knew what he had!"

The waitress returned and slid a tumbler towards Mike. "Bottoms up!"

"Nice to meet you," Jack said, turning away. "Enjoy the 'local color!'"

Mike lifted the glass and toasted the owner. "Nice guy," he said to the waitress. Setting his glass down, he held out his hand. "Mike Malloy."

She blushed a little and shook his hand formally, with a little half-bow. "Candace Cuddyer, at your service."

They both smiled, and then an awkward silence grew up between them. Mike grimaced inwardly. *This is what you get for cutting yourself off from everyone. For being alone too long. Robbie warned you about this.* The thought of his attorney, fat and always vaguely out of breath, took him out of the moment. He reminded himself that that had been the whole point, the whole reason he'd spent the last year on the road, going from place to place. To clear his head. To find his purpose. To find his way *back* to people. He looked at the waitress again. He liked her look, her smile. Her way of somehow seeming like she'd been part of his life forever instead someone he'd literally met five minutes before.

And he'd flashed the black card and ordered a \$500 whiskey. In

this place. He felt like a jerk. He was certain she thought he was a jerk, too.

“So,” she said. “What brings you out our way? *Local color?*”

It was his turn to blush. He looked down at the bar. “Sorry, that made it sound like an anthropological trip, huh?”

“Life among the natives. The mating rituals of the common people.”

He laughed. She laughed.

“I’ve been traveling,” he said when the moment passed. “I needed to ... clear my head. Get right. Leave some stuff and some people behind.”

He saw Julia again, on the floor in her underwear, her head turned away from him. When he’d walked around to her side, feeling shaky and fuzzy, her eyes were open and dry, and he’d jumped back in shock, twisting an ankle and landing on the glass coffee table. He cleared his throat.

“Anyway, road trip, I guess. An extended road trip. You? Local?”

“As they come,” Candace said. “Not that I’m all that proud of it, mind you. People being proud of where they happened to be born is just plain weird, you ask me. Anyway, I’m thinking ... actually, I just thought, literally tonight, of getting out of here. Leaving town.”

He raised an eyebrow. He *liked* this girl. “Oh yeah? Where to?”

She shrugged. “I haven’t gotten that far.”

He liked that too. “Wandering. I highly recommend it. I’ve been doing it for a year now.”

She glanced over his shoulder. Someone getting the waitress’s attention, he thought. “Yeah? Running or chasing?”

He kept his smile in place with care. “Running. Definitely running.”

She moved off to take an order, and he finally lifted his glass. She smelled a little like lemons, he thought. From slicing up garnishes, sure, but he liked it, that smell. He sniffed the whiskey and took a long sip. It was delicious: Some of the smoothest whiskey he'd ever tasted. Well worth the money, but then he had plenty of money to burn, even now, even after a lost decade.

He turned the stool and leaned with his back against the bar, holding the glass in one hand. Candace was taking an order from an older man in a fishing vest, looking at her over his glasses. The fisher said something and Candace laughed, her whole body getting into it. At another table, a round, balding man was sipping a drink and looking over at them, his eyes roaming Candace in a way Mike instantly didn't like.

Whoa, boy, he thought. You just met her. Don't go picking fights like you're in High School.

He turned his head and caught the other guy at the bar staring at him, even as he was talking to the owner, McCoy. Their eyes met, and neither looked away. Mike thought he looked painfully like an image the term *local* brought to mind: A rangy, skinny guy about his own age, scraggly beard, baseball cap, dirty jeans, white T-shirt, boots. A hardpack of cigarettes was actually rolled into the sleeve of the shirt, which Mike almost found incredible. Who actually did that?

He was becoming aware of something ... some noise or vibration.

"An ancient ex," Candace said, appearing next to him and signaling to Jack. "And now professional drinker."

He raised an eyebrow, liking the warm feel of her, inches away. She looked like one of those tall girls who was totally comfortable in her body. Whatever other problems she might have, he imagined she woke up every day feeling fine.

“How ancient?”

“Jealous?”

“Just wondering if I’ll have to fight him in the parking lot.”

She hip-checked him playfully. “If you play your cards—what the hell is *that*?”

He snapped out of his flirty fog. The vibration had been building for a while, he realized, and was resolving into a rhythmic, pulsing noise. Through the windows they could see bright lights bouncing around, filling the place.

Everyone had stopped to stare. The jukebox played on. Steve Perry was complaining about circus life.

Mike stood and almost unconsciously moved in front of her. He saw that the Ancient Ex had stood up, too, and the owner, Jack, somehow magically had one of the shortest sawed-off shotguns Mike had ever imagined in his hands. If he actually fired it, they would all take some of the shot, he thought.

Then the front door opened. He saw Jack raise the shotgun as two soldiers stepped into the bar, men dressed in camouflage, sidearms on their hips. They stepped to each side and stood at attention as a female officer, also wearing camou, stepped into the place, one hand on her sidearm.

The officer surveyed the place. Steve Perry kept singing about hating the road. She was very tall, and her eyes lanced out from a face that was almost, but not quite, traditionally pretty. Her uniform looked crisp and freshly laundered, down to the black armband on her right upper arm. A quick glance confirmed the other soldiers had similar armbands, like they were in mourning.

“All right,” the officer said in a voice that boomed clear and crisp through the music, a voice that was very used to making itself heard.

“Check every room, get me a head count. I’m sorry folks, but no one leaves.”