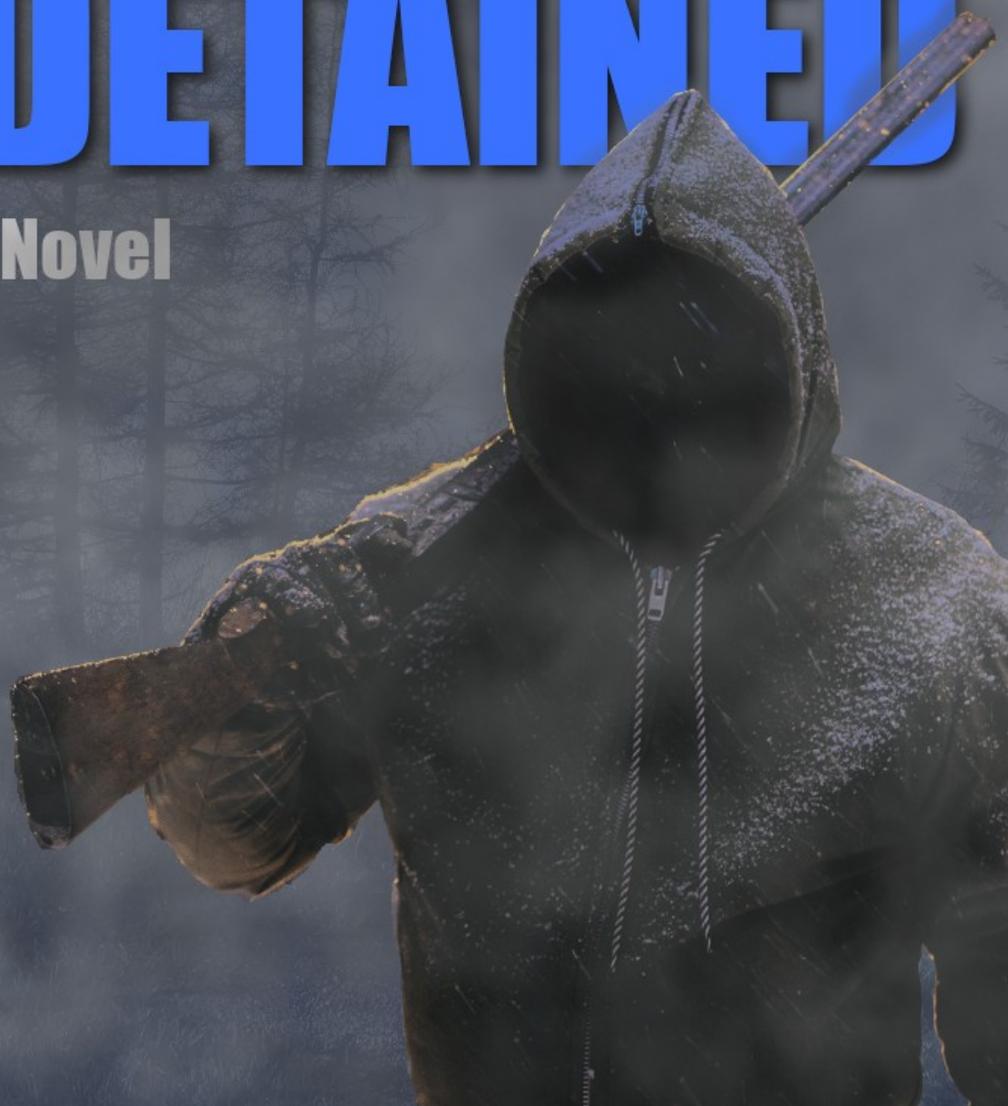


JEFF SOMERS

DETAINED

A Novel



DETAINED

Chapter 21

by Jeff Somers

21. Mike

There was a moment of silence. Mike looked at Candace. The moment their eyes met, she dissolved into laughter. For a moment, Mike was horrified, and then he couldn't help but smile.

“So let me get this straight,” she said, struggling for self-control. “Me, Candace Cuddyer, thirty-one year old high school grad waitress, Glen Eastman, retired, kind of pedantic schoolteacher, Jimmy *Haggen*, layabout, conspiracy theorist, and drunk, and Mike—”

For a moment, she had to fish for his last name.

“—Malloy, millionaire wanderer seeking *wisdom*—”

Mike winced internally, but decided it *did* sound ridiculous when you vocalized it.

“—are gonna destroy the world? I'm sorry, Dr. Raslowski, but if you've caused all these people to be killed because your computers told you *that*, you've fucked up *massively*.”

Dr. Raslowski didn't seem fazed in the least. “I assure you, the modeling was checked and double-checked and then *triple*-checked.

The math is sound, and the math doesn't lie. We've confirmed our ability to predict outcomes and behaviors on smaller-scale subjects. It's true the data set involved here is more profound, but the math scales." He glanced down at his arm and moved it slightly, testing the discomfort. "Keep in mind, this is not something that happens *overnight*. The algorithms go years, decades into the future." He looked back directly at Candace. "I assure you, Ms. Cuddyer, if left to your own devices, over the course of the next twenty-seven years you, Mr. Eastman, Mr. Haggen, and Mr. Malloy would, through a series of events, come to be responsible for the worst disaster the world has ever seen. *Billions* will die. Civilization itself is snuffed out."

Mike and Candace exchanged a look again. Again, she burst into laughter.

Mike looked back at the scientist, who now seemed, if not *friendly*, at least approachable. "You know ... that's just *nuts*, Doc. I'm sorry, but ... first of all, I just met these folks, and if you hadn't come crashing in here, I'd have left by tomorrow—"

Raslawski looked pointedly at Candace. "No, Mr. Cuddyer, you wouldn't have."

Mike felt himself flush. He felt like an idiot, like a schoolboy. The fact that Candace began laughing even louder didn't help at all.

"I *would* have," he insisted, trying to reassert himself. "And no offense to anyone, but the idea that *any* of us would be capable of

something of that nature—at that *scale*—is *ludicrous*.”

Raslawski shrugged, then winced. “Is it? You’re a wealthy man, Mr. Malloy. You have resources and connections. Mr. Haggen is a survivalist; he has a remote property that is off-grid and booby-trapped extensively, he has an arsenal of weapons and a larder filled with rations. Mr. Eastman, you might be interested to learn, is actually very heavily involved in radical politics—secessionists, actually, groups that believe states, cities, even individuals can legally declare themselves autonomous political entities—the FBI has a file on his online activities a mile long. And Ms. Cuddyer—well, I’ll admit Ms. Cuddyer’s role is less clear. Perhaps she’s merely the catalyst that brings you and the others together—”

“Oh, fuck *you*,” Candace groaned.

“—but the math is correct. If we allowed you to go about your business tonight, the model showed disaster. In twenty-seven years. So I started changing variables—in the models only, of course; using our technology to actually change the variables *directly*, as I’ve said, would be most likely disaster. I sought something we could change, something we could effect, that would remove the disaster without changing other fundamentals—and without requiring direct intervention, something that could be effected more ... naturally. It took some time—and four backup generators—but I found that variable, and it was, I admit mysterious: Keep you here. Detain you

for one night. When I ran the model with us securing this place and keep you—all four of you—from leaving, well, the future got much better.”

Mike shook his head. “There’s a glitch. Your math is wrong.”

Raslowksi opened his mouth, but Candace cut him off. “It doesn’t matter,” she said. “We broke your experiment, didn’t we, Doc? Don’t tell me your ‘model’ took into account all these deaths, our mutiny, your own injury and imprisonment.”

Raslowksi didn’t respond right away. Mike felt an overwhelming weariness, and suddenly found himself struggling to stay upright. He replayed Candace saying *oh, fuck you* to Raslowksi and suppressed a smile.

“It’s impossible to say,” the scientist admitted, “without running the models again. Every action has a reaction—the Butterfly Effect, as you called it. So, yes; perhaps Mr. McCoy’s death and the other events here have changed the model. Perhaps. Or perhaps those altered variables have had other effects—speeding up the time frame, perhaps, perhaps we’ll see disaster in five years instead of twenty-seven, or thirty-seven years. Or perhaps the precise nature of the end is changed. It’s impossible to say without an analysis.”

Candace was shaking her head, but Mike chewed his lip. He was thinking about Julia, for some reason. He was thinking about the chain of events that led to her death, to him waking up stiff and

hungover, and her on the floor, frozen in mid-crawl. There were gaps in his memory, but he knew the chain was long and complicated: Several places, dozens of people, random strangers. Taxi cabs and bars and restaurants and bathroom stalls and someone's apartment. He thought about all those tiny variables, and how if he'd been able to see it all laid out before him—if he'd been able to *model* the events—he might have seen that precise moment when it all went sideways, when one more hit was one too many, when deciding that four a.m. was late enough would have saved her life. And his.

“Analysis,” he said slowly. “An analysis you could do back at your facility?”

In the corner of his eye, he saw Candace look up sharply. He ignored her.

Raslowski looked from him to Candace and back again. Calculating, Mike thought. That was okay; he had to assume that the good doctor would make a break for it, or try something to regain control over the situation. He would do the same in his place. “Yes,” Rasolowski said, looking back at him. “At the facility I have access to the mainframe cloud and ... other equipment. I could do a through model run and determine the new outcomes.”

“The new *future*,” Mike said.

“Yes.”

“Mike,” Candace said curtly. “A moment?”

He nodded and they stepped over to the doorway, turning away from Raslowski.

“You’re not taking this bullshit seriously?” Candace whispered. “Changing reality? All of us just variables in an equation? The four of us—*us!*—somehow bringing about the end of the world? I mean, c’mon, Mike.”

He nodded. “I know how it all sounds. But, Candace, these people went to a lot of trouble to lock this place down and hold us hostage. There has to be a reason. Say you’re right—he’s bullshitting us, making up a wild story. Okay, why not check it out? We find out it’s bullshit, we might be able to start digging up what’s really going on.” He rubbed his eyes. “Besides, look who’s out there—these *are* the authorities. If we call the cops, what happens? More *authorities* show up. I wonder how that will go?”

She chewed her lip. He let her think. He didn’t suppose you could push Candace Cuddyer into much, and suspected any attempt to do so would result in her planting her long legs and getting stubborn as a mule about it—it was just his sense of her.

A sound drew his attention to the dark hallway outside of McCoy’s office. A soft, split-second squeak or scrape. He froze, straining to listen, but it didn’t repeat. He decided he’d imagined it.

“Okay,” Candace said. “Fine. You’re right: We need information. If the good doctor wants to take us to that facility, we should go and at

least get some more information.”

He nodded. He liked how she thought: Calm, no panic, and logical. “Come on, Dr. Raslowski,” he said, taking the older man by the arm. “Let’s go to your lab.”

“What do we tell Jimmy and Mr. Eastman?” Candace asked as they walked the scientist down the hall.

Mike liked how she still called her old schoolteacher *Mr. Eastman*. It said something about her, though he wasn’t sure *what*, but he liked it nonetheless. “A version,” he said. “I don’t think we should start talking about changing reality and modeling the universe until we know for certain what we’re talking about. Let’s just tell them we’re going to get more information.”

“Jimmy’s gonna want to come,” she said, sounding resigned.

Mike nodded. “We’ll figure it out.”

In the main part of the bar, Mike recognized the stink of tension. Haggen was seated at a table with a bottle of whiskey in front of him, one hand resting on a Beretta as he took a pull. Eastman was seated at the bar, looking, Mike thought, old and tired, his face flushed, his mouth open.

“Keep an eye on our stormtroopers,” Mike said, affecting a casualness he didn’t feel. “Dr. Raslowski has offered to give us the full story back at his facility, and we’re taking him up on it.”

“Dr. Raslowski, you are absolutely *prohibited* from disclosing any

data or information about the project!” Colonel Hammond snapped, surging up from the floor unsteadily, her hands bound behind her back. “Furthermore, you are—”

Haggen surged forward, snatching up the gun and hitting Hammond across the face with it, sending the officer spinning around and crashing to the floor with a strangled cry.

“*Furthermore*,” Haggen said, sounding drunk, “you can shut the hell up.” He turned and looked back at them, offering a smile that Mike was surprised to describe as *shy*. “Go. We’ll keep an eye on things here. You go and find out what’s going on.”

Mike studied him. He was surprised that Haggen was taking things so well. Candace had expected fireworks and difficulty, and Mike’s limited experience with the man confirmed that expectation. It felt wrong, but there wasn’t time to sit and contemplate and interrogate Haggen about his motivations. He glanced at Candace, and when she shrugged her eyebrows in a way he suspected was meant to be translated as *that’s Jimmy being Jimmy* he nodded.

“Come on,” he said, taking Raslowski by the elbow. “We’ll take my Land Rover.”