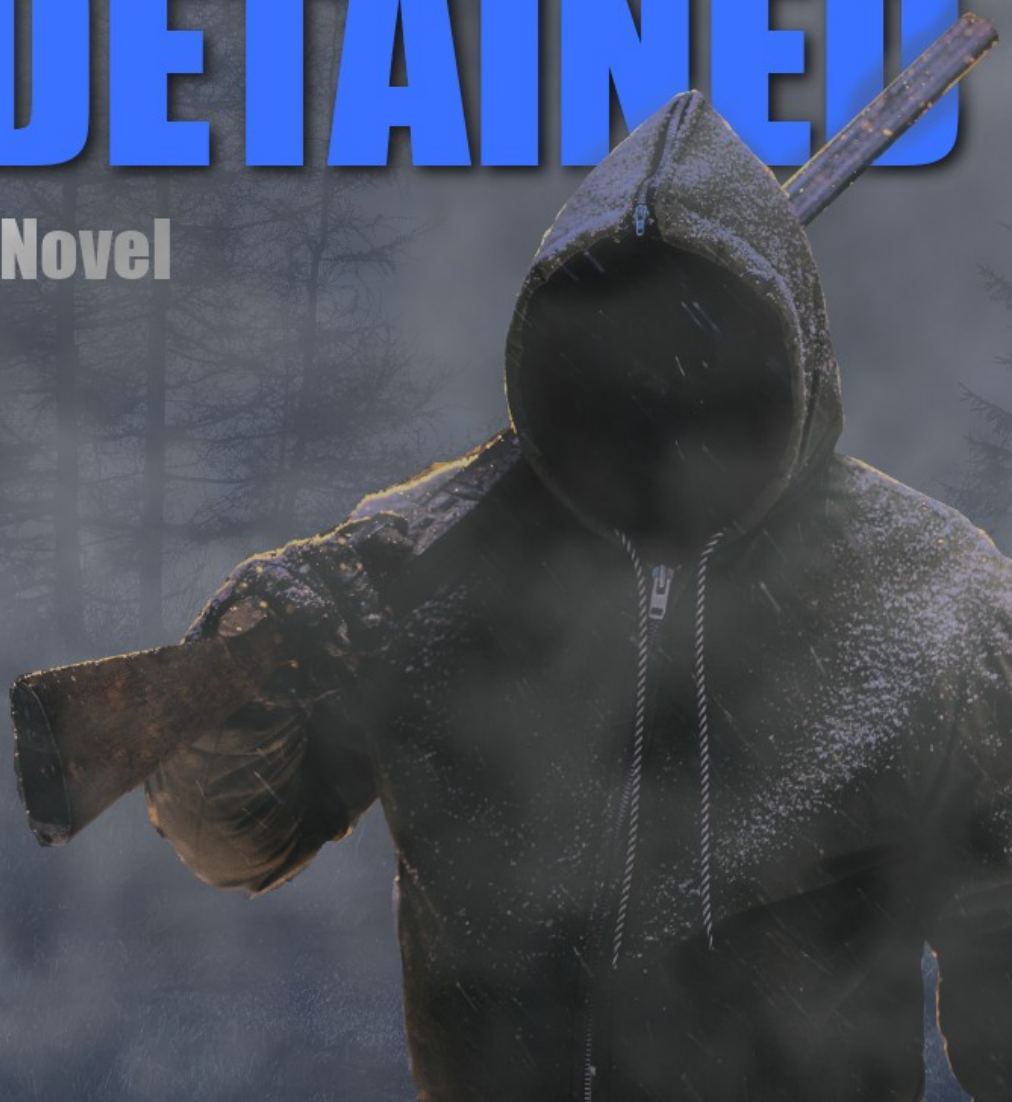


JEFF SOMERS

DETAINED

A Novel



DETAINED

Chapter 25

by Jeff Somers

25. Mike

“Mr. Eastman—”

“Shut up. Who’s this?”

Mike glanced at Myra and fought the ridiculous urge to apologize to her. She was, after all, part of the team that had—apparently—stalked them all for months, studied them, come to some terrible conclusions about them based on what seemed to him to be some seriously sketchy science, and then sat idly by while soldiers detained him and the others illegally.

“She’s ... part of the—”

“One of them,” Eastman said flatly. Mike felt a kind of mental whiplash; Glen Eastman had been kind of an old duffer, a little paranoid—he remembered what Raslowski had said about his politics—but more or less harmless. *This* Glen Eastman was cold, harder, somehow. Mike thought about Raslowski, tapping away at his keyboard, apparently altering reality itself, and wondered how far the ripples might go. Raslowski found himself dead instead of wounded,

and Mike wondered what else might have changed.

“All right,” Eastman said, using the AR-15 as a pointer. “In we go.”

For a moment he was disoriented; the scene inside the bar didn't seem to have changed, except for Glen Eastman holding an assault rifle on them as he marched them inside. The soldiers all remained ziptied, sitting on the floor. The place was silent, still smelled like gunpowder, and still had a sizzling energy in the air of recent violence. The bodies still lay where they'd been left. A haze still clung to the ceiling.

But something was wrong, and after a moment Mike had it.

“Where's Haggen?”

Hammond glanced up and their eyes met. Hers was steady and clear. The remaining five members of her team stared down at the floor, and Mike thought they looked suspiciously cowed.

Eastman considered before answering, circling backwards carefully to keep the three of them in front of him. “He went after you. You didn't see him?”

Mike thought furiously over the last hour. He recalled seeing something flashing in the rearview, he recalled a few distant-sounding noises. Haggen, he thought, following them. It fit; Haggen seemed like the sort who didn't take orders easily, yet he'd accepted Mike's instructions without a peep of protest. Mike felt dumb for having simply assumed Haggen would do as he'd been told.

“Where’s Dr. Raslowski?” Hammond said.

“Shut up, you,” Eastman growled. Hammond ignored him, looking in Candace and Mike’s direction.

“Ms. Azarov?” Hammond said.

Mike looked at Myra. The assistant looked stricken. “He’s dead, Colonel,” she said. “He didn’t follow safety protocols, and—”

“He tried to use the field,” Hammond finished for her, grimacing. She looked back at Mike and Candace. “Looks like we’re both responsible for some deaths here tonight.”

He grit his teeth, but there was no time for regrets. He thought about challenging her, arguing with her. Pointing out that nothing would have happened at all if they’d simply been left alone. What would he have done? Had a terrible dinner cooked by Jack McCoy in what was certainly an illegal and uninspected kitchen in the back. Had a few belts of expensive Scotch. Gone home with Candace? Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe he would have found a motel a few miles away and slept it all off, headed for Oklahoma in the morning.

Maybe, as Dr. Raslowski insisted, he’d have started off on a path that led to the end of the world. He wouldn’t know, now; even if Raslowski had survived he probably would have to admit his models had been corrupted by recent events. They were all back in the unknown.

He took a deep breath and ignored Hammond for a moment. “Mr.

Eastman—Glen—we need to go back there. Jim doesn't know what he's getting himself into."

Eastman snorted. "*Jim*, huh? No one ever calls Jimmy *Jim*."

"Mr. Eastman," Candace said, taking a half step forward. Eastman brought the rifle up a little, and she froze, an expression of complete shock passing over her face. Mike held himself very still. He didn't think the old teacher was a violent man, but he thought maybe he was an *unreliable* man who might do something stupid, like twitch a finger and kill them all by mistake.

"Mr. Eastman," Candace said again, and Mike thought that was smart, still using his formal name like he was her teacher, reminding him, "Jimmy's not going to be prepared for what's over there. I know Jimmy—you know Jimmy. He's a great guy, but he's impulsive and he always thinks he knows more than he really does. What we just saw ... Jimmy's gonna do something stupid. We should go get him back so we can discuss what's happening here."

Eastman pursed his lips. "*What's happening here?* Jesus, Candace, what's happening here is dead simple: We've been assaulted. We've been detained illegally. Now you come strolling back here with one of ... of the *enemy* and you want to discuss things? All we're discussing is getting out of here, and then calling up some lawyers."

Candace shot a look of silent appeal at Mike, but he didn't have any better ideas. He suspected that any attempt to explain what they

understood to have happened would sound crazy, and Eastman didn't seem to be in the mood for crazy explanations. And did he even believe it all? Yes, he'd seen something ... inexplicable. And there was still that lingering feeling of the world not being totally real, not being the way he remembered it. But he didn't think he could explain it, or convince someone like Eastman of it. He wasn't even certain he believed it either, even after seeing Raslowski vanish, and finding him dead in a parking lot a mile away. All he knew was that spending a few hours holed up somewhere was a small price to pay for avoiding a possible disaster.

"All right," he said softly, putting up his hands. "All right, Mr. Eastman—Glen—you win. You—"

He watched for the moment of hesitancy, the slight relaxation, and then he surged. *Use your enemy's strengths against them*, he heard one of his many teachers say. *Use your enemy's weapons against them*.

He aimed his hand, palm out, at the rifle, knocking it up into Eastman's face. The retired teacher squawked, and tried to twist away, but the gun hit his nose with a wet breaking sound. The rifle clattered to the floor as Eastman staggered backwards, blood dripping from his face. Mike dashed forward and picked up the rifle, training it on Eastman, who was leaning back against the bar with both hands clamped over his broken nose.

"Jebus!" Eastman howled.

Mike backed away slowly. “I’m sorry, Mr. Eastman—I really am. I know this all sounds crazy. I *agree*. But we saw a man vanish into thin air. And I think ... I think he altered something, changed something that had *already happened*. So I think we have to ride this out. Dr. Raslowski said this was all designed to keep us in the bar over night, to change the course of the future. I think we have to at least do that, based on what I’ve seen.”

He turned and looked at Candace. After a moment she nodded, and he was relieved, and surprised at how quickly he’d come to rely on her and to trust her. Having her back him up gave him confidence. He looked at Colonel Hammond.

“Colonel, your mission was to sit on us and ensure we didn’t leave this bar, right?”

After a moment, Hammond straightened up and nodded. Mike admired how unruffled she looked. Despite being ziptied, despite having lost control of her command and lost members of her squad, she looked pin-neat and completely alert, her face impassive, her blue eyes clear and sharp. “Our mission scope was to contain you—specifically Cuddyer, Malloy, Eastman, and Hagen. Satellite assets were to be contained as well if inside upon arrival. At Ten-thirty tomorrow morning, containment would be lifted. You would all be debriefed and asked to sign NDAs, then released.” She shrugged. “That mission appears to be well and goodly fucked at this point.”

The soldiers around her murmured agreement.

“We don’t know that, do we, Myra?”

Myra blinked in surprise, then cleared her throat. “We don’t *know*, true. Dr. Raslowski’s model encompassed approximately eleven hours at this location, involving the four specifics. As far as I know, that model did not detail anything similar to the events that have occurred.” She shook herself as if waking up, and looked around. “In layman’s terms, what I mean is I think we’re in uncharted territory. If the four of you stayed in for the rest of the night, it might have the same effect. Or we might already be on an alternative timeline. Whether it’s a *better* timeline I can’t say without running a full model, which would take some time.”

Candace snorted. “So we might still be on course to destroy the world, or *not*.”

Myra nodded, altogether too cheerily, Mike thought. “Yes. Or we might have accelerated it. Maybe you four are going to bring on the apocalypse even sooner, because of what’s happened.”

“How long to run a new model?” Mike asked.

Myra thought, her face scrunching up, deep lines forming around her mouth and eyes. “Without doing redundant checks and error analysis? Six hours for a preliminary model. Maybe six more for a second run to confirm everything.” She looked around. “That wouldn’t be totally reliable. Emory spent *months* crunching his model.

But the first few run-throughs were basically accurate in the outlines.” She nodded to herself. “Twelve hours.”

Mike looked at Hammond. “It’s close to midnight. If we get Haggen back here and sit on him for twelve hours, Myra can report back and let us know if the world’s still ending or not. If not, we all walk away. If it is ...” He trailed off, uncertain how to finish the thought.

“If it is, we’ll figure it out then,” Candace said.

Mike nodded. “Right. So, Colonel, what do you say? Can your mission parameters be adjusted? Want to come retrieve Jimmy Haggen and then we find a safe spot we won’t be bothered?”

Candace shook her head. “If this mission is right and truly fucked, why not call your bosses, Colonel? Call this project a failure?”

Hammond twisted herself awkwardly around to look at her remaining soldiers. Nothing was said, no one made any overt gesture or expression, but something passed between them. Hammond turned back. “Unfortunately, Ms. Cuddyer, only Dr. Raslowski had the authority to make parameter changes to the mission. Without him we don’t have a chain of command to appeal to. We were compartmentalized because having more moving parts complicated the models. In order to keep the math on a scale that could be processed in a reasonable amount of time, we had to ensure a small team with no possibility of outside influence. So it’s up to us. It’s up

to *me*. We'll help."

"Wait a goddamn minute!" Glen Eastman shouted, his voice pinched-off, droplets of blood sparying as he took his hands away from his face and took a step forward. "You're gonna *trust* the soldiers who *detained* us? Who killed Mr. Simms? Jack McCoy? *Seriously?*"

Mike nodded. "Think about it, Mr. Eastman. Based on what we—"

"Candace!" Eastman said, turning his swollen face to her. His eyes were blacking up, and his nose was a purple cauliflower in the middle of his face. "Candace, c'mon! This is *your* bar. They came into *your* bar without any legal authority and they *killed Jack McCoy*. You're gonna stand with them? You're gonna *help* them?"

Candace nodded. "Mr. Eastman ... yes. I saw something that convinced me these people might have a point. And all we have to do is sit here for twelve more hours."

Eastman shook his head. "Until their bullshit *model* comes back—surprise!—saying we all need bullets in our heads."

Mike thought, *maybe we do*. He thought of Julia. He thought of everything, all of it. Sometimes, he thought he'd gone on this crazy trip just to outrun a bullet to the head that he'd been waiting for ever since.

"Come on, Mr. Eastman," Candace said, holding a black plastic ziptie in her hands. "Time for a road trip."