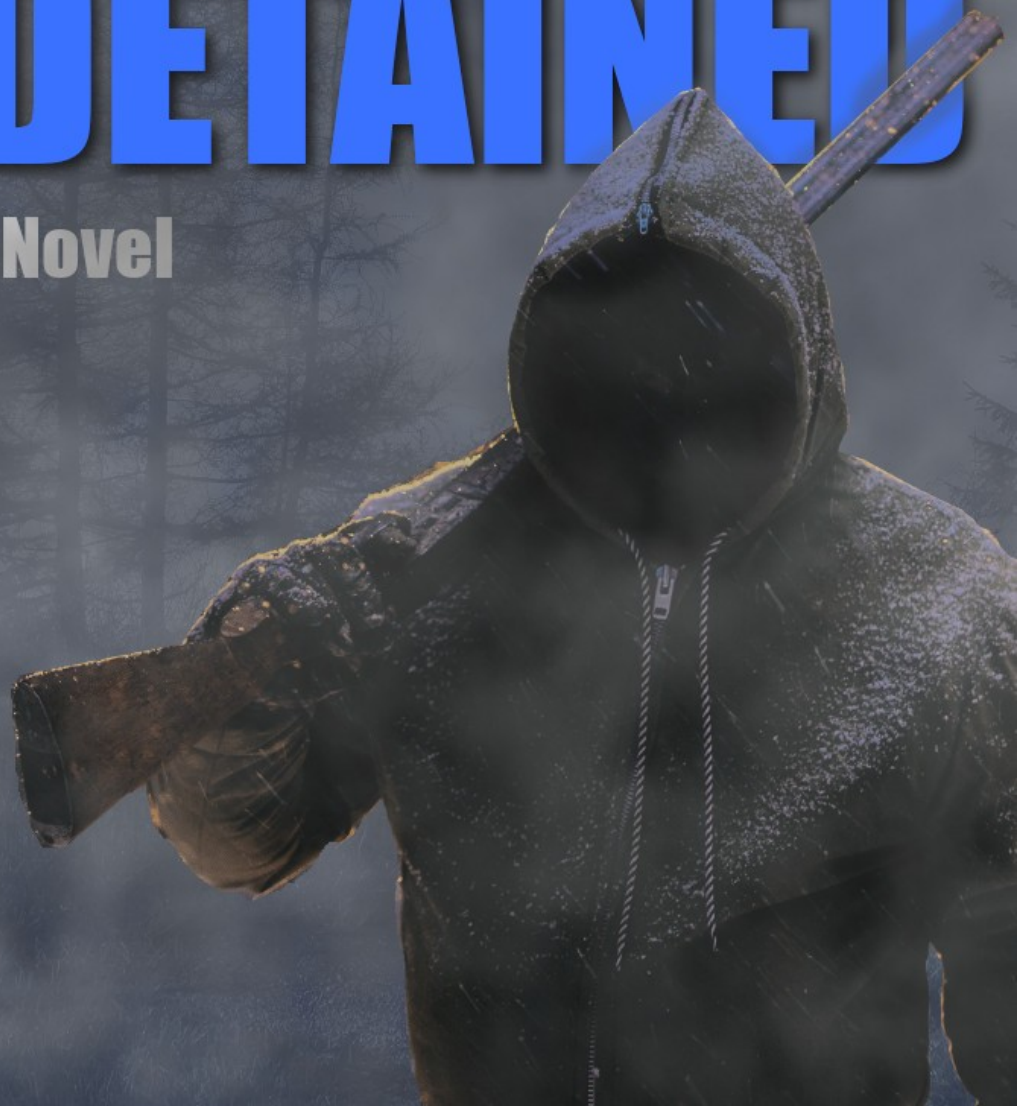


JEFF SOMERS

DETAINED

A Novel



DETAINED

Chapter 27

by Jeff Somers

27. Mike

“You’re certain he’s heading out that way?”

Candace shrugged. “My father would say, *Certain’s a word for morons. Nothing’s certain in this world, Candace.*” She glanced at Myra. “Guess we didn’t know how true that was. No, I’m not *certain*, but I’m pretty sure I know Jimmy. He thinks he’s being smart. A place to hole up for a few days, evade pursuit. Shelter, probably some supplies stashed there because Jimmy’s all about surviving, these days. He won’t go home because he knows they know all about him, his address, he’ll figure they’ll have someone there already. But he’ll think no one who’s not local will know about this place.” She took a deep breath. “I know Jimmy Haggan. He’ll be at the Sprawl.”

Mike nodded and exchanged a look with Hammond, who appeared to be operating at some sort of miraculous level of stress and irritation, visibly vibrating from it. The tall, skinny officer made a face, but nodded, pulling a sheaf of papers from inside her jacket. She unfolded them and turned them over, offering the blank side and

a short, stubby pencil. “Can you draw a map? All the detail you can remember. Approximate scale—I don’t need a work of art, I need some idea of what the approaches are like, back and front, sides too, if you can.”

Candace nodded back, and the Colonel stepped out of the room to confer with her remaining unit.

He liked the officer, despite a distinct lack of warmth or humor. Hammond was competent, not cruel or petty, and after what they’d done in their attempt at escape, she appeared to hold no grudges. That more than anything else had brought home to him that this was *real*: The deaths of her people weren’t important enough to react to, in light of the real crisis.

He watched Candace working on the map for a moment. She was concentrating, and had actually stuck her tongue out like a kid in a cartoon. It struck him, because Julia used to do that. He could picture her now, clear as day, concentrating as she rolled a joint or cooked in an old bent spoon, her tongue sticking out from between her chapped lips. Julia had never worked harder than when she was getting high.

“Hey,” he said softly, looking at Myra, then at Candace. When she looked up, he leaned in closer. She smelled terrible, he thought, but then he was coated in sweat and dirt and dear and panic, too.

“Haggen—do you think he can do anything with the ... the whatever.

The Black Box?”

She pursed her lips and looked down for a moment. Then she looked back at him. “I don’t know, honestly. I mean, this is some next-level shit, here. But what I saw on the screen looked like code—computer programming. Jimmy was always good at that stuff. Really good. Could have designed video games or worked for Microsoft or Apple, if he’d had any discipline.”

He glanced at Myra, who was pretending, he thought, not to hear them.

He considered. Something as godawful complex as this would require ... simplification. A layer of abstraction, which was all computer programming languages were. A set of instructions that were slightly easier for humans to understand that would later be translated into machine code. Abstraction made working with computers easier. It made sense that there would be a similar layer of abstraction on this. The only question, then, was whether someone had based their abstraction, their instruction set, on existing programming languages. Whether what Haggan had in his hands right now would be familiar enough for him to figure out how to use it.

“He can’t use it,” Myra said, sounding tired. She was standing at the glass wall, arms wrapped around herself.

“Why not?”

She shrugged. “Because he doesn’t have access to the array. He can’t crunch the variables, the implications. He’d be flying blind, even if he can gin up instructions based on what he can read.”

Mike nodded. “You’re forgetting something. I’ll bet anything Haggan doesn’t *care* about running the numbers.”

Myra turned and stared at him. The idea that someone might not worry about details seemed to horrify her. One thing—maybe the only thing—he’d learned in his travels over the last year was that people tended to assume everyone else thought along the same lines that they did—at least if you looked like them. If you looked different, they assumed the opposite. But he wasn’t surprised that Myra would assume that they all respected science and causality and the virtue of diligence and thoroughness just because she did.

When Candace finished her crude map, she signaled to Hammond, who came back into the room with her people trailing behind her. She accepted it wordlessly and huddled with her people, studying it.

“All right,” Hammond snapped, looking up at Candace. “Can you get us to that back-trail? We don’t have time to cut all the way down to the dump here,” she jabbed a finger at the map, which Mike could see was impressively detailed and obviously drawn by someone who knew not just the terrain, but the basics of *reading* a map too. “Can you find it through the brush, straight-line?”

Candace thought about it. “Yes,” she said. “I can.”

Mike had figured as much. She knew the country as well as anyone else who’d grown up there, he thought. She could probably find her way in the dark, blind drunk, in a rainstorm in the same way he’d once been able to navigate the New York City Subway no matter his sobriety or physical condition.

“I’ve done just *that* plenty of times when heading *home* from a party at The Sprawl,” she said, grinning at Mike. “So all I have to do is reverse the polarity or something.”

Hammond nodded and turned to the remnants of her unit, running her cold eyes over them. “Rowland, you’ve got babysitter duty. Sit here with Ms. Azarov in case anyone wanders in somehow. You’re authorized to use force on anyone, including Mr. Haggan if he suddenly decides he does want to use the array to vet something. Azarov, get started on the new model. The sooner we know where we stand in terms of causality and the success or failure of this mission, the better.”

Rowland, his black face shiny from sweat, nodded curtly. After a moment Myra, who seemed lost in thought, looked up and nodded crisply. “I’ll start loading in the new data and get the algorithms humming,” she said.

Hammon nodded and glanced at her watch. “Rowland, in two hours, if we’re not back, you follow General Order One, clear?”

Mike considered the words *General Order One* and thought it sounded ominous. “What about him, Colonel?”

They all followed his gaze through the glass to where Glen Eastman sat on the floor. He looked glum and unhappy. Mike decided he had a right to be. From Glen’s perspective he’d done nothing wrong.

“Secure him,” she said to Rowland after a moment’s thought. “He’s under your discretion, soldier.”

Rowland nodded crisply. Mike tried to get a sense of how the man would react to Glen, of just how much danger Eastman might be in, but the soldier was blank-faced and not easy to read.

“Come on, then,” Hammond said. “Let’s go stop James Haggan from destroying the fucking universe.”

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The walk reminded him of the night Julia had left him out in the Meadowlands. They’d been driving—shouldn’t have been driving, considering how stoned both of them were—and they’d gotten into an argument. One of those arguments no one had when sober, the kind of argument you only had when you were so fucked up nothing made sense. She’d pulled over and told him to get out of the fucking car, and he’d been stupid-angry enough to do just that. And she’d peeled off and was gone down the highway before he could think, before he realized he’d left his wallet and phone in the car.

So, he'd walked. It had been a humid, windy night in New Jersey. He couldn't remember why he'd been in New Jersey—he couldn't remember much—but he remembered the way the wind blew like it was part of some epic storm, but there was no relief. It wasn't a cool wind. It was just as heavy and wet as the air around him. He'd started walking, sweating and unsteady. A car would occasionally speed past him, but it never occurred to him to try and flag one down. He felt too sorry for himself, and if he was being honest he remembered kind of enjoying the quiet and the vastness of the wetlands and the solitude.

He also remembered wishing Julia would have an accident and die. He remembered imagining the flames, and while he'd told himself it was the drugs and his screwed-up mindset, he—

He stumbled a little, his thoughts catching on something. After a moment he hurried up to where Candace was, her attention on the woods around them.

“Hey,” he whispered, matching her stride.

“We're close,” she said. “Should be right up here, the trail, and then just a few hundred feet to the cabin.”

He nodded. “Listen, something you said—something about Haggan and his house. You said *Jimmy's all about surviving, these days*, something about supplies.”

She nodded. “Jimmy got weird. I mean, he didn't have much going

on. Shitty jobs, he was getting paunchy, drinking too much. He was getting paranoid, kept talking about how he couldn't catch a break. It was all the government—this was after he got nailed on tax problems, had to cough up a couple grand in fines. Always said that was why he couldn't get ahead. He started to blame the government for a lot of other stuff, after that. Started stocking up on guns, canned food.”

“Survivalist, kind of,” Mike said. She nodded.

“Sort of. Kind of like a *lazy* survivalist, you know? Had all the talk and a lot of guns, but still showed up at Mad One Jack's every night and twice on Saturdays.”

“You think he had security on the house? Like, crazy survivalist security?”

He'd spent two weeks in the Utah desert, to learn about survival living—growing food, building shelters, weapons and other gear. He wanted to see what people did when they went off-grid. At the time, at the height of his wandering, this had seemed like essential knowledge—if the Zombie Apocalypse came, he would have skills.

He'd been put in touch with a man named Todd, and he remembered being driven out into the middle of nowhere, up a trail, and to a hidden drive that led to a massive metal gate where two men carrying AR-15s had patted him down, searched his bags, made a few jokes, and passed them through. The place was an old ranch, running

on well water and solar power, and housing about thirty men and women and their kids. Everyone armed, everyone genial and friendly (mainly, he discovered later, because he was white), everyone happy to teach him about the world as if he was a child who's suddenly realized there was no Santa Claus.

And he remembered the booby-traps.

The fact that the Federal Government would send in troops at some point to take them down and destroy what they were building was a matter of faith at the ranch. It wasn't a question of *if*, but rather *when* the jackboots hit the ground and the FBI or the ATF or black helicopters and wetwork agents stormed the place. The fact that there would be no attempt at arrests or negotiations was accepted as well: The government would come for them and it would gin up an excuse to execute everyone—this was what had happened at Waco, at Ruby Ridge. Those people hadn't died because of their own illegality and recalcitrance. They'd been executed.

So, steps had been taken. The whole place was a minefield of traps: IEDs in the road, electrified fencing linked to batteries buried in the sandy soil, explosives wired into every building. Nothing was too primitive: The window sills all had broken glass and ragged pieces of tin glued to them, to cut hands hoisting invaders inside, and the floors under the windows always had nails driven upwards from below to catch those jackboots as they slipped inside. Mike

remembered wondering how in the world the whole population of the ranch didn't wind up with Lockjaw.

"Probably," Candace said. "Yeah, sure, he mentioned a few 'measures' he'd taken. Some of it sounded kind of crazy, to be honest. Like, I always wondered how he didn't kill himself when he came home from Jacks' drunk as hell, in the dark."

Mike nodded. "You think he might be able to set some traps at The Sprawl?"

She stopped, hesitating in the darkness. "That's—"

There was an explosion up ahead, the night suddenly lit up orange and red, the noise shaking the ground under their feet, making them both stagger and struggle for balance. In the instant silence that followed, there was a soft rain of dirt and debris.

Candace looked at him and grimaced. "Shit."