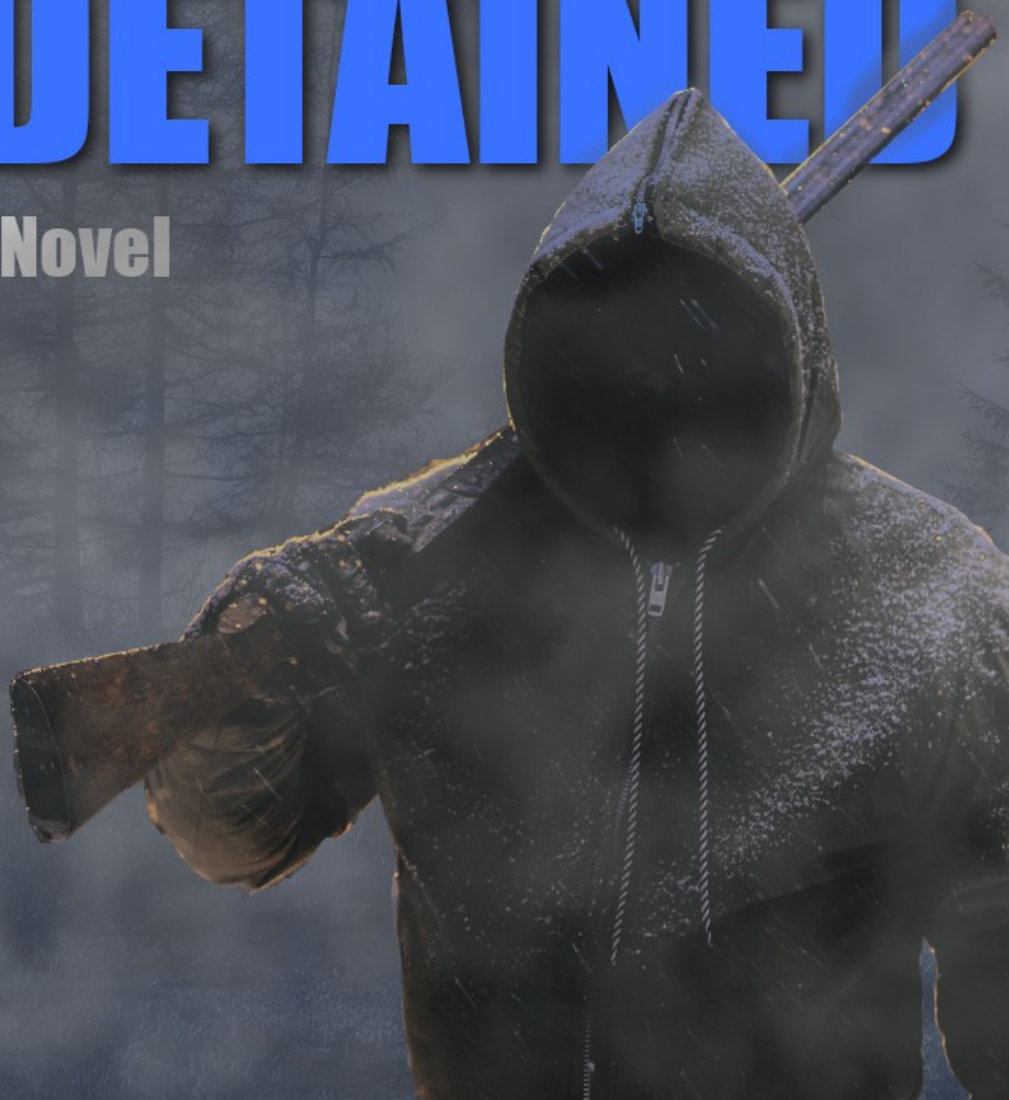


JEFF SOMERS

DETAINED

A Novel



DETAINED

Chapter 37

by Jeff Somers

37. Mike

Mike was mildly freaked out pulling up to the facility. He remembered it well despite never having been there before, and the scene is exactly how he expected it to be, down to the weather, the quality of the darkness.

Todd was waiting for them, Myra Azarov standing next to him, also exactly as Mike expected to find her except perhaps with a slightly more freaked out expression. A dozen other men and women, all armed, all wearing black, milled about outside the place.

He got out of the car, accompanied by Glen and Jimmy. Todd was grinning at him, but when he spoke he addressed Glen. Mike knew Glen was the one with the political cred. He was just the Bank, a fellow traveler none of them trusted nearly as much as Glen.

“Just as you said,” Todd gloated. “No resistance to speak of, found this one hiding in a bathroom.”

Todd was a tall, gangly man in a sweat-stained T-shirt and baggy black jeans. His hair was white and his red face was always grinning.

Mike thought he looked like a man who had once been very fat, now reduced.

“I wasn’t *hiding*,” Myra said, her voice shaking. “I was *going to the bathroom* when you assholes barged in.”

“Be careful with her,” Mike said. “We’ll need her.”

Myra looked at him. Mike was momentarily surprised that she didn’t recognize him; he expected her to blink, her eyes to widen, for her to say *You!* in an amazed tone. Then he remembered: They’d never actually met. And as far as he could tell, so far only the four of them—himself, Jimmy, Glen, and Candace—had any purchase on the reality that had been discarded. Jimmy claimed he wasn’t certain *what* he’d done when monkeying with the code, only that he changed something in his own equation, some value that applied to him. Whatever it was, it had reached back about six years into all their lives and changed things to different levels. For himself, he only started to notice the difference after Julia had died. Glen reported a similarly recent sense of wrongness. Candace, though, had left town, missed her father’s illness, wound up in new York, lonely and unhappy.

“Come on,” Jimmy said, turning to spit. “Let’s go find the damn thing.”

The place was lit up but empty, and their steps echoed as they walk, Todd and two of his people in front with rifles, two trailing

behind.

“What do the Constitution Boys think we’re doing here?” Jimmy asked. Then he leaned in close, and Mike could smell the whiskey on his breath. “*Do they actually think we’re stealing the fucking Constitution?*”

He laughed, loud and wild. Mike reflected on the fact that he couldn’t get a purchase on Haggen. He liked him and disliked him simultaneously. He wondered if ghat had something to do with having known the man in two distinct realities.

Glancing at Haggen, he wondered what he planned to do, planned to change. If he was telling the truth about not really understanding what he’d done the first time, then it was an open question. They were all here for the same reason: The power to change their existence by changing a variable. One value, flipped from negative to positive, or increased or decreased. Mike had no idea how he would ever figure out what to change, but Haggen had told him he’d spent the last six years studying and trying to note down everything he could remember, every impression he’d carried with him into the new reality. He’d read as much as he could about Raslowski’s work—which wasn’t much—as well.

He was totally reliant on Jimmy Haggen, he thought, and Jimmy Haggen was drunk.

Jesus, he thought.

“Damn,” Todd said as they passed through the security door—the

combination was exactly as they'd pieced together, the two of them sitting in The Sprawl going over the fragments they'd retained—into the server farm. The humming machines were lined up just as Mike remembered, and the heat was exactly the same, too. It was like stepping into August in New York, stuck behind a cross-town bus. And that was *with* the air-conditioning running.

Todd twisted his portly torso around to grin back at him. “Boss, this here is some surefire waste of our tax dollars, ain't it?”

Boss. Todd had called Mike that when he'd paid him for the visit a few months ago, and he found it oddly annoying. He *was* the boss, after all. He was funding everything here, and he suspected that the tens of thousands of dollars he was spending for his private army was going to wind up being detailed in a joint FBI/ATF report on a massacre. He didn't like Todd assuming they were in any way *simpatico*, in any way on the same side.

He decided he liked *Boss*, then. It implied a separation.

Then he paused, because the layout had changed.

Instead of the blank wall with a door leading to a short tunnel, there was a glass-enclosed room at the rear of the server farm. The room itself looked very similar to his non-memories, and his heartbeat sped up. There it was. The box, a black cube. He imagined he could feel it humming, pulling at him with its peculiar gravity.

He glanced at Glen Eastman. The portly old retired teacher looked

smug and happy, which was to be expected, Mike thought, considering that this was, in some ways, exactly what he'd expected. Governmental overreach, economic waste, violations of civil rights—all counteracted by a group of well-armed, well-regulated patriots who had the guts—and his money—to take a stand. Mike found Glen Eastman frightening, not because he was in any way intimidating, but because of what he represented. Here was a guy who'd been this quiet, overlooked cog in the local machine, a teacher considered not particularly bright or interesting, an old man with a whiff of the ridiculous around him. And yet he was a true believer in undermining everything, and when time came to rustle up some racist, ignorant hillbillies with guns, Glen Eastman had been eager to be their mascot.

“All right,” Mike said. “Todd—we’re going in. Keep a guard and alert us *immediately* if you see anything or anyone coming. *Anything* unusual, let us know.”

Todd nodded, grinning. “You got it, boss.” He turned and gestured at his people and they took up positions facing in each direction, peering into the hot, gloomy server farm. Mike paused for a moment, looking around. The humming boxes formed a maze, really; the center aisle led straight back to the security office and the exit, but the servers provided plenty of cover. Anyone could be in the side aisles, crouched down. And if he had to make his way with the

center aisle blocked, he could see himself becoming disoriented in the heat and the low light. He suddenly felt nervous.

He glanced at Hagen, and saw him putting something in his ears. Headphones? No, there was no cord, though he supposed they might be wireless.

“What’s that?” he asked.

Hagen turned his head and plucked one out of his ear. It looked like a blue piece of rubber. “What?”

“What are those?”

Hagen smiled, popping it back into his ear. “Earplugs!” he said, his voice suddenly a bit too loud. “For the noise!”

Mike frowned as Jimmy turned his back on the glass office. “What —”

The glass room exploded.

The force wasn’t too much; he was knocked off balance and fell backward, skidding a few feet on the slick concrete floor. There was a bright flash that made him turn his head, and the noise felt like an invisible punch to the gut. His hearing flatlined, and for a few seconds it was just smoke and darkness and a buzzing sound that drowned out everything else.

Bomb, he thought.

It hadn’t been enough to hurt them. He sat up, and glass shards sprinkled from him like jewels. But the blast hadn’t been powerful

enough to do any real harm. It hadn't been planned to kill or destroy this facility.

He struggled to his feet and squinted around. Todd and his people had also been knocked on their asses, but were getting up, looking around. Todd himself had a trickle of blood running from his scalp, but Mike didn't think it looked too bad. As Mike looked around, Glen Eastman emerged from behind some of the servers, without a scratch.

Haggen was nowhere to be seen.

Alarm burned off the static hesitation, and Mike ran for the remnants of the glass room. The metal framing remained, but all of the glass had been blown out. The desk was gone. No—not gone, he realized as he crunched through glass and concrete chunks into the space; it had fallen into a hole blown in the floor, only one edge sticking up above what had been the floor line.

He scrambled down into the hole, ears still ringing. His eyes searched the space for the black box, the field generator, but it was nowhere to be seen. His eye caught something and he picked it up, then dropped it because it was hot enough to burn. But he'd seen what it was; a fragment of an LED screen, like the kind you saw on clocks and timers.

Then he froze.

Timber. He crouched down and stared in shock at a tight tunnel,

shored up with timber like you saw in old movies. It stretched away into darkness, tall enough for a man to move through on his hands and knees or a crouching walk if he wasn't too tall.

A tunnel.

Mike felt an odd sort of smile twitching on his face, because there was something to admire here, he thought. The tunnel must have taken Haggen years. Years of planning, of quiet work, all timed perfectly.

The whole time, Haggen had been planning to steal the Raslowski Box.