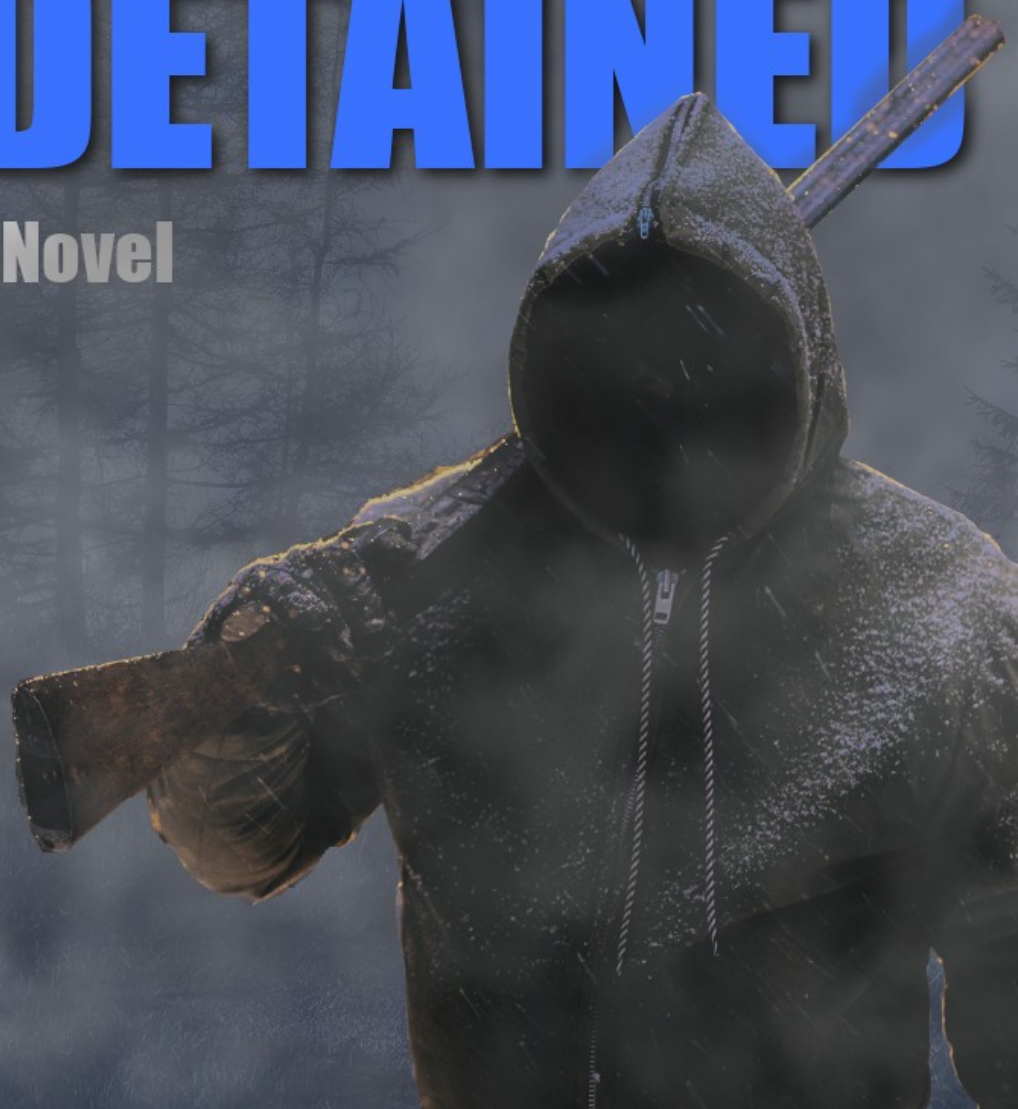


JEFF SOMERS

DETAINED

A Novel



DETAINED

Chapter 29

by Jeff Somers

29. Mike

He couldn't see Hammond or the soldiers; they'd crept up ahead and faded into the darkness, leaving him and Candace on their own in the gloom. He was impressed at how silently and completely they'd melted away at the sound of Haggen's voice, and he imagined them slowly deploying out there in the dark, choosing sniper locations, creeping around the perimeter. There were only four of them left, but he was pretty sure they would be capable of taking the cabin if necessary.

"C'mon," he whispered to Candace.

There was no reason they couldn't contribute to the cause. If the idea was to take Haggen alive if possible, then he thought that he and Candace could get close, maybe even infiltrate the cabin from the rear while Hammond kept him occupied. It was worth trying, and he found any sort of action a better alternative than standing around in the darkness with his thumb up his ass. And without asking he had a feeling Candace shared the sentiment, because she was the sort of

girl who didn't appreciate it when men treated her like she was made of glass.

The cabin—or complex of cabins—was closer than he'd expected, and in a few moments they were moving along the perimeter. The lack of upkeep was obvious from the way nature had crept right up to the place; it was impossible to move silently through the dry, knee-high brush. He got an immediate sense of the insanity of the place, too; the foundation kept zigging off in unexpected directions, changing style and elevation. It was a lot bigger than it needed to be, too; Mike hadn't done a lot of hunting or even recreational underage drinking in the woods, but neither activity required more than a few hundred square feet of dry, easily-heated space. The Sprawl was a nightmare of improbably roof lines and neglected, rotting wood. As they crept alongside it, Mike thought anyone might be able to punch their way in through certain soft spots in the exterior walls, sagging areas where rain had been leaking for decades. They might burst in, shouting *Oh, yeah!* and just tackle a startled Haggren to the floor.

He started to laugh, and had to clamp his mouth shut as a giddy, nervous sort of hilarity swept through him. Then he heard Haggren again—or *I'll erase you all*—and he sobered. Jimmy's voice had been rough and raw, unsteady. But something in it made Mike think he wasn't bluffing, or delirious. That he *had* somehow figured something out, had found a way to weaponize the Raslowski

equations and The Transmogrifier.

It wasn't crazy. Haggen didn't need to understand any of the math, he just had to be good with patterns.

As part of his epic attempt to learn a little bit about everything, he'd hired a few White Hat Hackers to teach him the fundamentals of hacking, as both an exercise in social engineering and the basics of computer systems, programming languages, and modern digital security theory. He chose his lessons more or less at random; deciding on whims and recent experiences what Mike Malloy the Mighty Curious should bury his head in next. He chose new subjects quickly, keeping himself endlessly busy so he wouldn't have to think about Julia, about the cushy nightmare that was his life, about what an asshole he was despite the money. Hiring a bunch of hackers who were genially happy to take his money for a few weeks while he put them all up in a hotel and outfit the suite with top-of-the-line servers, fiber connections, and desktop computers was just a way to stay busy when he wasn't blessedly asleep.

One of them, a thin, long-haired guy named Eugie who seemed more like a classic 1960s hippie than a hacker, told him that he got started because he had a brain that noticed patterns.

"Half of hacking is Pattern Recognition, dude," he said, drawling around a bottle of beer from the wet bar Mike had paid to keep stocked. "When I was nine, I didn't know shit about computers or

code. But I saw patterns everywhere, and when I played a video game, I usually beat it in a couple of days because I saw the patterns, because all code is just repeated loops and subroutines. So, an enemy will always do *X* after you do *A*, you see? So once you see that, it's a super power, because you know whenever you want the bad guys to do *X*, you just have to do *A*."

Mike remembered nodding, sipping Scotch and not really understanding. But then he hadn't started his Personal Improvement Tour because he actually wanted to learn anything. Getting drunk and being lectured to by a man named Eugie kept his mind off the darkness as well as anything else.

He also remembered that Eugie seemed to sense he wasn't getting it. He set the beer bottle down and sighed—Eugie's sighs became quickly familiar to Mike, and they all translated to a sour comment on the intellectual capacity of everyone else in the room.

"You ever hear of Mike Larson?"

Mike shook his head.

"Mike Larson won more than a hundred grand on a stupid daytime TV game show in 1984. At the time it was the largest prize won on a game show ever. It was *Press Your Luck*, and he won it because he noticed a pattern. The game involved an electronic board that would light up different squares that offered different prizes, enhancements, or penalties. The light flickered around and you chose

when to stop it. The idea was that the boxes lit up randomly, so every time you stopped it you took a chance.

“Except Larson saw the patterns. The boxes lit up in the same five patterns over and over again in a loop. He studied them, memorized them, and when he got on the show he ran the board—he could play on as long as he liked because he would never land on a square that would end his turn.”

Eugie picked up his beer bottle again. “Forget code, Mr. Monopoly. *That’s* hacking. Pattern recognition. You see the patterns, you can hack anything.”

Mike thought about that. If Haggen had a similar mind—and based on what Candace had said about him, he suspected he did—then it wasn’t inconceivable that he’d seen a pattern in Raslowski’s code to control the Transmorgrifier. And just like a kid trying to beat a video game by looking for patterns in the behavior of the enemies, he might be able to make something happen just by seeing a relationship between a value and something happening around him. Change a variable, a pen disappears. Change it back, the pen is back.

Or, Mike thought grimly, he was bluffing, and if he changed anything the whole damn universe would disappear, like a program crashing.

Candace tapped his shoulder. When he turned to look at her, she indicated she should lead. He nodded and made room for her to push

past him, then followed her. Nothing but chauvinism and his own healthy self-regard had made him take the lead. He grinned, laughing at himself. *Only you would take the lead in unfamiliar territory where you have no expertise or local knowledge to offer*, he thought.

She led him along the perimeter. The cabins split off into two directions, one lancing off to their left into the tree line, the other to their right, forming an alley. She led them right. After a moment they came to a large picture window that had been boarded over. She felt along one corner, slipped her fingers under the lip, and pulled it away from the wall. It came away easily, revealing an opening large enough for anyone to slip through.

“The cops occasionally tried to shut the Sprawl down,” she whispered. “We had a million ways of getting in even when they padlocked the doors.”

He nodded, and climbed inside. He turned and held the board up so that she could follow. When he let the board fall, it was pitch dark. After a moment, he felt her take his hand and start leading him.

The experience of being led through the dark in near-perfect silence was disorienting. Glass crunched under their feet as they moved, and the whole place was stuffy and smelled bad—mildewy, rotten. He tried to imagine what it must have seemed like to Jimmy and Candace fifteen years before, a mysterious maze to get lost in, to do things away from private eyes, a retreat.

As his eyes adjusted, the silence became more oppressive. Things had been loud for a long time—from the moment the soldiers had arrived, he thought, it had been nothing but shouting and gunshots and running. The sudden absence of noise made him feel like something even worse was about to happen, as impossible as that seemed.

The place was just as crazy on the inside as it seemed on the outside. Candace led him past corridors that didn't seem to go anyway, down a passage that sometimes seemed like a very narrow hallway but sometimes widened out into a strange room. Windows looked in on interior rooms, and stairs sprouted from the floors and led to nothing but wall.

They turned a corner and they were in one of the front-facing rooms, with several windows of different sizes and styles facing out into the pitch darkness. A feeble propane lantern provided some light. Jimmy Haggen sat on the floor in front of the Transmorgifier and its monitor, hunched over the keyboard. He and Candace froze, and for a moment all Mike could hear was a soft clicking that repeated slowly.

“Don't make any sudden moves, kids,” Haggen said, his voice unsteady. “We're dealing with a *literal* Dead Man's Switch here.”

Dead Man's Switch, Mike thought. He knew the term: A piece of code that was designed to be reset on a regular basis. If the reset was

missed, it executed a payload. There were physical examples as well.

“Jimmy,” Candace said softly. “What have you done?”

Mike let go of her hand and stepped slowly, carefully, around to the front of Jim. He saw that Jimmy had, strangely, taken the Dipping Bird from the bar. He had it set on the floor, the beak positioned over the ENTER key on the keyboard. He was holding his hand over the keyboard, however, so that the bird’s beak tapped his hand and not the ENTER key.

“If I take my hand away—or it’s moved *for me*,” Jimmy said with a short, bitter laugh, “then what I’ve set up on Dr. Raslowski’s little toy will execute.”

Mike tried to swallow, but his mouth had gone dry. He knew that Dr. Raslowski had been killed by Candace in the parking lot, accidentally. He *knew* that. But he also knew that somehow that hadn’t *always* happened, and he knew that Jimmy Hagen was playing with the most dangerous thing Mike had ever encountered in his life. With a *Dipping Bird*.

“Jim,” Mike said. “What are you doing?”

“I just wanted to be left alone, Candace,” Hagen said, not looking up. His long, greasy hair hung in his face. “That’s all I ever wanted. These sons of bitches just barge in and kill people—and they’ll kill us, mark my fucking words, Candy—and then they’ll just blow town, and Cleaners will show up and torch the place and scrub it clean and it’ll

be this mystery. We'll be a Wikipedia page, you know? The mysterious disappearance at One-Eyed Jack's. The McCoy Group."

Candace exchanged a look with Mike, a lingering stare. He wasn't sure what she was trying to convey to him. He was trying to tell *her* that they were in serious trouble.

The Dipping Bird dipped and tapped Jimmy's hand.

"Jim—"

"Y'know, Malloy, I don't like you. It's irrational. You're everything I wish I was." Haggen continued to stare down at the floor, hair in his face. "Rich, mainly." He laughed. "But you just sort of do what you want, don't you? Swing into a podunk place like this, bang the waitress, go on your way. Writing checks. Having *experiences*."

The Dipping Bird tapped his hand.

"Jimmy," Candace said. "This is crazy."

"What's crazy, Candace, is that you chose to leave me and went off with Mike Moneybags here," Jim growled. "That hurt. Not because we're some great love story. Because he's not from *around* here. And so I followed you. And I saw something ... fucking *impossible*."

"We all did," Mike said. He let his eyes roam over the room, looking for other traps, other weapons.

The Dipping Bird tapped Haggen's hand.

"This thing—" Haggen jerked his head at the black box, humming with its own power. "I don't understand it. But the lazy fucks, you

know what they did? They gave all the variables that are *us*, that are *people*, our *own fucking names*.”

Candace took a step towards him. “Jimmy, don’t. Whatever it is—*don’t*.”

“I saw what happened at the lab, with the old bastard. I think I did. I remember it different. So it *worked*.” Candace took another step towards Haggen. Mike tried to catch her eye again, wave her off. Then he looked back at Haggen and froze, his stomach clenching into a tight wad of ice.

A small dancing red dot had appeared on Haggen’s forehead.

Sniper, Mike thought. Adrenaline and panic splashed through him. Hammond was changing the deal. Hammond was taking out some fucking insurance, because she didn’t have eyes inside the room. She didn’t know.

“So I figure, I can make a change. To my variable. To *me*.” Haggen said, nodding. “Why not? What’s to lose? If I guess right, all this never happens. We go back, except maybe we can remember, like we remember Raslowski being in that room and *not* being in that room, all at once. Maybe we remember and we do things differently. And if not—well, fuck, so what? I fuck this up and I’m not here any more, Candy, what did I lose? What’s lost?”

Mike took a step forward. “Jim—”

The window shattered. Jimmy Haggen slumped to the side. It

happened silently, suddenly.

The Dipping Bird leaned down and softly tapped the ENTER key.