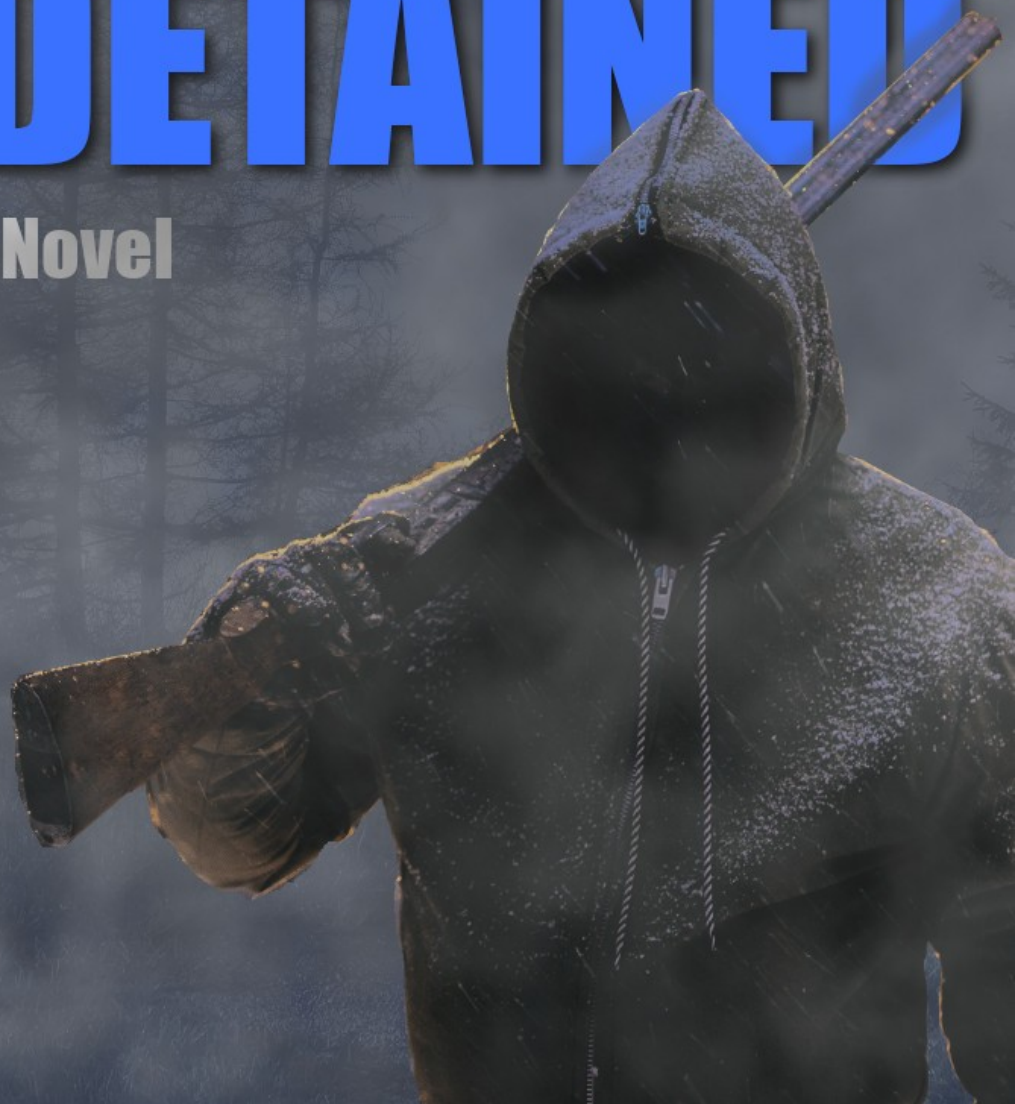


JEFF SOMERS

DETAINED

A Novel



DETAINED

Chapter 33

by Jeff Somers

33. Mike

It started after Julia.

At first he'd thought it was just trauma, just his brain's way of dealing with what had happened—imagining that it hadn't *really* happened, that maybe he was living in some sort of extended dream. The sense of unreality, the memories of things that had never actually happened—he thought he was losing his mind.

It sobered him up.

Well, it had *helped* sober him up. Robbie basically kidnapping him into rehab had helped, too. For twenty-eight days he'd seen twin visions as he shook and sweated and shit himself: Julia, prone on the floor, convulsed in mid-crawl, and another woman, a sturdy, pretty girl in tight jeans, looking at him like he was crazy. The specificity of the expression he saw was what made him think it wasn't just a slow-motion stroke, or creeping insanity. He *knew* that look.

Everyone, including Robbie—who, in addition to being his lawyer and financial advisor was also pretty much his only friend—thought

he should stay in rehab. It was a luxury facility, more like staying at an expensive hotel than a treatment center, especially once he got past withdrawal and could eat solid food again. The doctors all said the same thing: The standard four-week stay was just the tip of the iceberg, and some huge percentage of people who checked out right away relapsed within a few months. The math was simple: The longer he stayed, the better his chances of staying sober.

The math. Every time he heard the word, something inside him went *click*.

He didn't want to stay sober, though. He just didn't want to be an addict any more. No one seemed to believe him when he said there was a difference.

He left anyway, but one piece of advice from his doctor he agreed with was that it would be best to get away from the old familiar haunts, the clubs and bars, the hotel rooms, his old apartment off of Central Park. Too many familiar faces eager to sell him something, eager to invite him out, eager to share their own stash, eager to introduce him to women who might take his mind off of Julia.

He didn't want his mind taken off of Julia. He wanted to remember her, and he forced himself to remember her on the floor, in her panties, crawling. *That* was what would keep him straight.

And so, he'd made arrangements through Robbie, and hit the road.

He laid awake a lot of nights thinking about her and trying to pinpoint where it had all gone wrong. Because him and Julia had started off good. Fun. They'd both been pretty wild, twenty-five, and if Julia wasn't rich she was pretty and in Manhattan a pretty girl could live a wild life without a dime to her name. But she was up front about it. She didn't pretend. She knew it was a transaction every night in every club, every bar, every penthouse party. Not sex, necessarily, but her presence, her looks, her flirting. He liked that she saw herself honestly and didn't make any attempt to kid anyone.

And for a long time, years even, they'd had fun. It had been a party, and he'd felt young and smart, smarter than everyone else. He knew all the secret codes, the names for everything, the places it could be acquired, the pricing and the people to trust. Even the epic hangovers, sitting miserable in coffee shops and diners with sunglasses on, everything making him nauseous, felt like a secret club. He prided himself on his recovery. No matter how bloated and sweaty and sick he was in the morning or afternoon, by midnight he was right as rain and ready to hit it hard again, and Julia not only kept up she often set the pace.

And then it got a hand on them, and it became a job. The hangovers got worse, but there was always an easy cure. Slowly, everything began to revolve around supply and demand, with the

demand getting deeper and deeper and the supply never enough. Everything became a blur and he knew that on some deep intimate level he'd been aware of the irony that he was rich enough to not need a job but he was working a hundred hours a week just to feel normal.

Julia used to talk about leaving New York. On their bad days, the mornings when they were both sick but couldn't get anyone they knew on the phone and had to start putting out desperate feelers to strangers and once-met acquaintances, she would pace around the apartment in her underwear, chain smoking, and chatter on and on about getting out of the city. She thought the city was sick and was infecting them. The bad air, the evil people, the easy drugs. She would say, let's go to a cabin. Let's get in a car and go to a cabin and dry out together and then go around the country, the world. Travel. The secret, she said, was keeping busy. If you were always on the move you couldn't get *bored* and if you weren't *bored* you wouldn't need anything else.

And then they would finally score, make a connection, and the idea of travel and leaving the city would go away. He *made* it go away, because he couldn't imagine being away from the city, from his apartment, his friends, his connections.

The apartment. He remembered the first day back at the place after rehab. The state of it had shocked him. The grime and the smell, the disarray. The rotting food in the fridge. He'd left everything. He

made arrangements for a cleanout and a cleaning service, told Robbie to sell the place for whatever he could get for it, and never went back.

He knew he'd killed her. If he'd said, yes, let's go to a cabin, let's leave the city, let's travel they might never have changed their lives, but she wouldn't have died on the floor of that disgusting, dirty apartment. If he'd just been willing to leave, to change, to get off the roller coaster for five minutes and catch his breath, they'd probably be getting fat and ugly in some hotel in Budapest right now, irritated because no one was selling anything worth taking. Sick, maybe, unhappy maybe, but alive.

Driving around, ditching rental cars and hopping on trains, walking and hitchhiking, he had a lot of time to think. People were always trying to start up conversations, but he preferred to just sit and think. Being sober was a novelty at first. He'd hesitated about alcohol, and then one night alone in a ski resort hotel in Alaska, almost completely empty, he'd gone down to the bar and ordered a whiskey and when it didn't kill him or send him running in the snow looking for someone to sell him a few rocks, he'd had another, and then gone to bed.

Everyone told him that control was an illusion. They told him at the center, you're an addict. You think you can control it, but you

can't. Sobriety is an all-or-nothing proposition. You're either sober or you're not.

That night, in the nearly-empty resort, he'd decided to not be sober. And it didn't kill him.

Clearheaded, he thought the visions would start to fade. The faces he saw, the places, the violence that came in flashes, guns and blood and bodies. He thought they were either trauma-related, and would fade as he distanced himself from that awful, terrible moment, waking up and seeing her on the floor and knowing somehow immediately that she was dead. Or that they were an extension of his drug-augmented reality, a stretching of his brain cells that had become semi-permanent, and that would fade as boring normality settled back in.

But the visions persisted. Grew stronger. He found himself doubting reality, expecting to be able to reach out and peel away what he saw, revealing a near-empty bar out in the woods, men and women in uniforms with no insignia, carrying assault weapons. He felt like he was in some sort of simulation, a *Matrix*. He would close his eyes one day and see the source code, glowing and green, and be able to manipulate it.

He came across One-Eyed Jack's by accident.

He'd been sitting in a diner, empty plates turning cold and crusty,

nursing a fourth cup of coffee while he read idly on his tablet. His next adventure, he thought, would involve hunting. He'd never been hunting, never killed an animal or learned how to skin it and butcher it, and that seemed like a handy skill to have. He wasn't sure how he felt about killing and eating something that you saw with your own eyes, alive and aware, and he thought that was something everyone should have as well. If you were going to eat the breakfast sausage, you should at least be settled in your mind whether killing something for food was okay or not.

Light research led him, somehow, to a web page offering the Ten Best Hidden Bars, and number eight on the list was One-Eyed Jack's, "... a perfectly hidden dive where the bartender/owner will sit down at your table and tell you tall tales about his hunting exploits, the beer is cold, the music on the jukebox at least twenty years out of date, and the burgers only so-so, but the atmosphere and location can't be beat for off-the-beaten-path interest."

The photo of the place hit him like a punch: He *knew* the place. He'd never been, but if he closed his eyes he was able to imagine it, and even picture the owner, Jack McCoy. Except when he pictured him, he was dead, lying in a pool of his own blood.

He paid the bill and was on the phone before he got back to his rental car, working on hiring a guide to take him around for a hunting lesson, that would end at One-Eyed Jack's. He had a buzzing

feeling of energy, as if something he'd been planning for his whole life was about to come off.

On the road a day later, the name Jimmy Haggren ringing in his head after being connected to the man as a potential guide, he'd called up Robbie.

"Jesus, Mike, where are you?"

"On the road. Heading south, going hunting."

Robbie paused. Mike knew his lawyer, his friend, was running out of patience. "Look, Mike, you know I'm on your side and I want to help. But it's been thirteen months. Thirteen months I'm opening your mail and fielding your phone calls, transferring funds, putting people off. I want to help, but I'm not your secretary? Okay?"

Mike grimaced. "Robbie—I'm sorry. I hear you, I really do. And I'm sorry—I apologize. And I'll make it up to you. But I have one more thing I have to ask you do for me. Something I can only trust you to do."

There was silence on the line, and Mike could picture his fat, red-faced lawyer, his black hair too long and hanging in his face, breathing hard, biting his chubby pink lip as he thought. Mike could picture the tiny wood-heavy office that Robbie lived in, piled high with paper despite repeated announcements of "going digital," the walls covered with framed photos of Robbie and everyone he'd ever had a conversation with. Robbie, big, friendly, reliable. He'd known

Rob for twenty years and they'd been through some adventures together.

“All right, Mikey,” Robbie said, using the diminutive he favored whenever he put aside his professional demeanor and treated him solely as a friend. “All right. What do you need?”

Mike remembered steering with one hand, the phone in the other, watching a storm approach on the Interstate. “An army, Robbie,” he said. “I need to hire an army.”