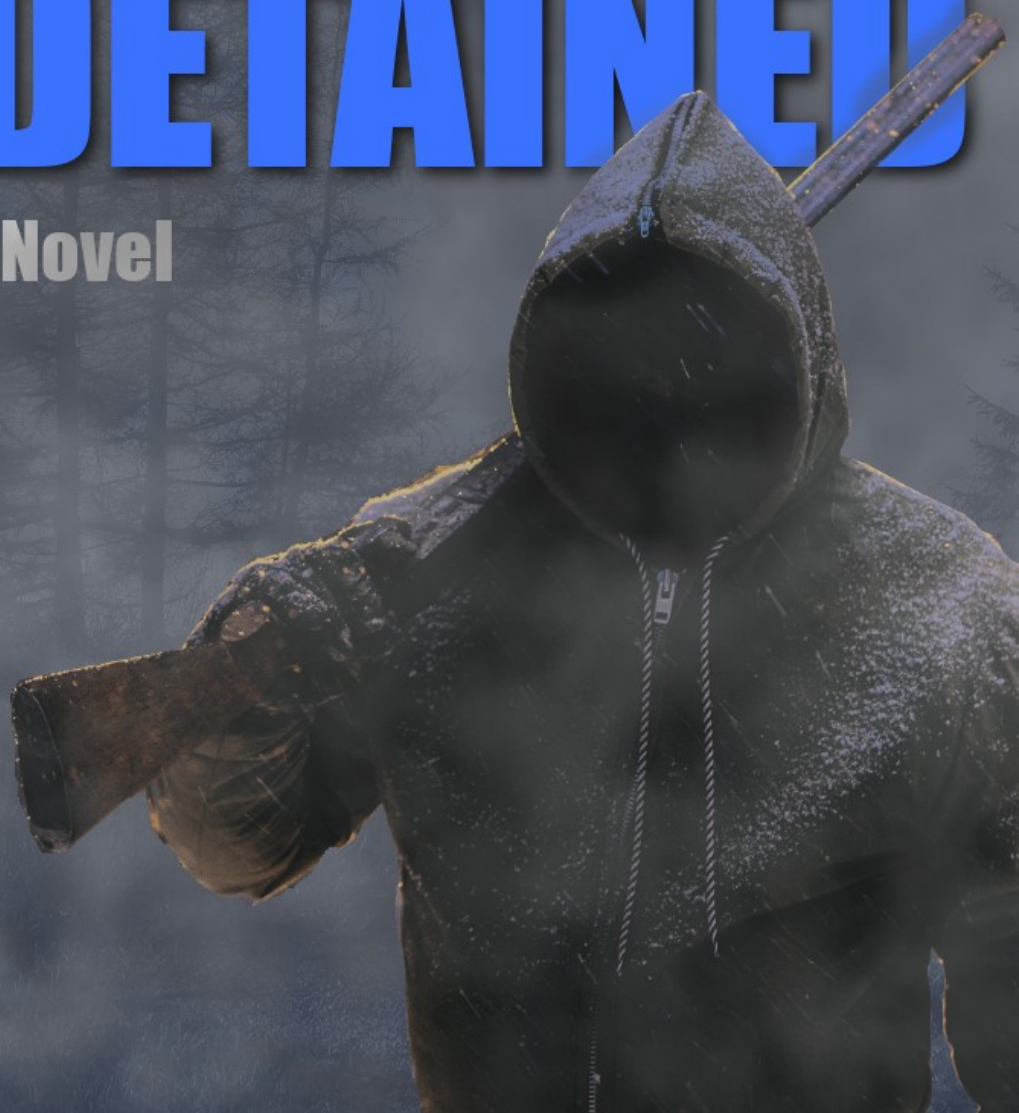


JEFF SOMERS

DETAINED

A Novel



DETAINED

Chapter 39

by Jeff Somers

39. Mike

He opened his eyes and was momentarily confused. It was hot, and he couldn't breathe. It was dark, and he couldn't hear. No—he could hear; all he could hear was a buzzing ringing that had somehow teamed up with the vibrating pain in his head, forming a rhythm section. For a moment he thought he couldn't move his arms and legs, that he was paralyzed.

Exit Mike Mallow stage left, he thought with a giddy sense of crazy joy, pursued by a bear.

Slowly, he came to his senses. He *could* move, he realized; he was just buried in soft dirt. It was smothering him, but as he worked his limbs he was able to pull himself up the slight incline of the tunnel he'd been racing down. The way ahead of him was block by a collapse of the ceiling—a collapse that had been triggered by some small explosives planted in the timber. He remembered running, chasing after Haggen, and the feel of something against his legs, and then an incredibly loud booming noise, and darkness.

Trap, he thought. Haggan laid a trap and almost killed me.

He knew if he searched he'd find the trip wire. It had probably been ankle-high, nearly impossible to see in the darkness. He was lucky he hadn't been one step faster, or he'd have been caught in the blast and injured—or more thoroughly buried. As he sat there sucking in breath with a wince, he could hear a creaking, dry grinding noise. He looked up, squinting to make out the timber that was holding up the ceiling over him.

Won't last long, he thought. The whole tunnel was going to come crashing down.

Sweaty and grimy, he turned and started to stagger back. His left leg hurt when he put weight on it, and breathing was painful. Sprains, he thought, not breaks. He'd live. He'd just limp around and grimace a lot.

Assuming he made it out of the tunnel before it completely collapsed. He tried to quicken his pace, grunting every time he put weight on his injured leg. Dust sifted down as he moved, and the creaking and groaning grew louder and louder. He thought he could feel a vibration all around him, like an invisible wave rolling up behind him.

When he burst out of the tunnel into the shattered wreck that had been the glass room, he was gasping for air and flailing, his leg ready to give out completely beneath him. Instead of a dramatic collapse

directly behind him, he just lay in the crater on his back, breathing hard, his whole body aching.

He couldn't believe he'd been so easily outmaneuvered. He should have looked at Haggen harder, but he now realized his opinion of the man had been clouded by his non-memories of a Haggen that had never actually existed. A Haggen who drank too much and was sloppy and unreliable. And definitely a Haggen who didn't plan things in advance. The Haggen he thought he'd known had been impulsive. The idea that he would spend years planning something like this was impossible.

Mike blinked dust out of his eyes, suddenly seeing Glen Eastman stepping out from behind the wall of servers. Not a scratch on him. Eastman and Haggen, locals, men who'd known each other their whole lives.

He hauled himself to his feet. Todd rushed over with one of his people, slinging an arm over his shoulder.

"Jesus, you okay, Mike?"

Mike nodded. "Glen?"

"Right out here," Todd said, supporting him. Out in the server room, the air seemed impossibly cold. Glen Eastman broke away from talking to a few members of their little army.

"You okay, Mike? What—"

Pulling away from Todd, Mike stepped forward as steadily as he

could. “You knew that tunnel was set to blow, and you let me go in anyway.”

Eastman pulled up short, eyes widening. He hesitated, and Mike felt a surge of anger. He knew, without any doubt, that Eastman had been in league with Haggen. All along, they’d been playing him.

“Mike,” Eastman said. “Listen, I—”

Mike’s hands balled into fists. “I could have been *killed*, you son of a bitch.”

Eastman scrambled back, his face going red. “Todd—keep this crazy asshole under control.”

Mike glanced at Todd, who was standing with two of his own people, his rifle slung across his bulging belly, his hands resting on the stock. Looking like a mobile home Santa, he looked from Eastman to Mike and back again.

“Well, listen, Glen—”

“Mike Malloy isn’t here for the right reasons, Todd,” Glen said, voice tight with tension. *Fear*, Mike thought. *Eastman’s not used to being threatened*. “He’s not here for *our* reasons.”

Todd nodded slowly. “Yeah, you’re right on that, Glen. But he’s payin’ the bills, and he owes us one more balloon payment that ain’t scheduled until he has the box. Which he don’t. So, for the time bein’ at least, you ain’t in charge here.”

Eastman stared at him, then looked at Mike. “Until you have the

box, huh? You were going to screw us.”

Mike advanced on the former teacher, ignoring the pain in his leg and side. “No, actually, I wasn’t. I’m paying the bills, like he said, so I stipulated I’d be the point of contact for everything, including taking possession of the box. I fully intended to work with you and Jimmy on this. Candace, too, if she came around. We were the Four Horsemen, after all. All of us have a right to this.”

Glen backed into one of the humming servers and jumped as if kicked. Mike trapped him against it and pushed a finger into his chest.

“Don’t worry, Glen, I’m not going to hit you. Way I see it, you just screwed *yourself*, anyway.”

Glen’s eyes, magnified by his thick glasses, blinked several times rapidly. “How so?”

“Jimmy Haggan has the box. *You* don’t. So I don’t think Jimmy thinks of you as a partner any more, is my guess. And if you’re Jimmy and you think you can gin up the math to change things any way you want, what’s the easiest way to ensure this pattern doesn’t repeat? What’s the easiest way to make sure you and me and Candace don’t turn up in the next version of reality, remembering half of this and looking for revenge, or just to screw things up for him?”

Glen opened his mouth and then shut it with a click. He seemed to deflate. “Oh, shit,” he said.

“Oh shit is right,” Mike said. “If I’m Haggen and I’m looking to screw everyone, my version of the code kills the rest of us, preferably a few years before today.”

Slowly, Eastman’s face drained of color. “That’s ... that’s ...”

“Your pal, James Haggen,” Mike said, stepping back from Glen. “Where’s he going? Where’s he setting up shop? Assuming he hasn’t lied to you about all that?”

Glen visibly pulled himself together, pushing off from the servers and shrugging his shirt on more firmly. He pushed his hands through his white hair and then wiped one hand down his face. “His house,” he said. “Unless he’s ... no, gotta be his house. I know he hardened the place. Took it totally off grid so no one could cut the power or water or anything, put in security doors, reinforced the walls. Something he’d been talking about doing for years, when he got on his rants about things. But once we started ... this project he started that, too.” He looked at Mike. “I can’t believe he’d waste all that money and effort and time just to throw us off the trail. He just thinks he’s safe there, that we won’t be able to get to him. He’s got that place booby-trapped, as well. IEDs and stuff.”

Of course, Mike thought. Haggen wouldn't need to hold out long. If he could keep them outside long enough to complete his coding, he won.

He had a newfound respect for Haggen, who’d gone from

annoying layabout to evil genius in literally no time at all. All it had taken was a complete reset of reality, a change in the fundamental variables underlying existence itself. That sounded about right, he thought; the Jimmy Haggen he'd originally known hadn't been stupid, and had even been quite competent in certain ways, but it would take something like the rewiring of the whole universe to make him into an evil genius.

"Todd," he said.

"Yeah, boss?"

"Glen's gonna show us the way to Haggen's place, but I'd feel more comfortable if he was restrained."

"You got it, boss."

"What?" Glen sputtered. "But .. wait a second, Malloy! I've just been screwed over, same as you. I want to make that punk suffer a little for what he tried to do." When Mike turned away, the schoolteacher looked over at Todd. "You know me, Todd," he said.

"You can't cut me out like this. If you cut me out, I won't have any *say* in what happens!"

Todd nodded, gesturing at two of his people. "Here's what I know, Glen," he said, sounding like a wise country father. "I know that you knew there was an explosive device set up in there but you let us all walk in without sayin' a word, and if you think you know how an explosive is gonna behave you're kiddin' yourself, so as far as I'm

concerned you just put all our lives in danger. And sure as shit I don't understand what the *point* of all this is aside from fucking up a Federal boondoggle. So let me restrain you, Glen, nice and easy and don't cause any trouble, okay? We'll sort everything out when the shouting's over."

"Goddamit, Todd—Mike! Mike, of *course* I'm going to help! I've just been screwed, too!" As Todd's people grabbed his arms and began to tie his wrists with a ziptie, he shouted "The tunnel came up in the woods just off the road! He's expecting a truck to be waiting, but I never parked it! He's on foot!"

"So you screwed him," Mike said over his shoulder. "And that's supposed to convince me to *trust* you?"

They were a grim and silent quartet walking back through the servers. Mike chewed his lip. Would he even be aware if Haggan flipped the switch? Would he have any sense that reality was being replaced, or would it take years again like it had last time?

I'm sorry, Jules, he thought as they made their way through the security door. *I was going to fix everything, but I got taken by a hick hustler.*

"Todd, let's take your truck," Mike said. "You, me, Eastman, and one other. Can you peel anyone away from the bar?"

Todd chewed his lip as he opened the door to his rusty red SUV and pushed Glen into the back seat. "Four, five, without too much

trouble.”

“Call ahead and have them ready to follow us when we swing by the bar,” Mike ordered, opening the passenger side door. He didn’t know what he was going to do, or if he’d have the chance to do anything at all. But if he was going to be erased and replaced with another version of himself—or just erased completely—he wasn’t going to just sit idly by, waiting. Better to vanish in the act of fighting.

“Mr. Malloy!”

He turned, half in the truck. The red-haired woman, Myra—Myra Azarov—was waving at him with her free hand. The other was handcuffed to the metal railing on the stairs leading to the green security door entering the facility.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Azarov, but you’re going to—”

“Don’t be an idiot, Mr. Malloy!”

He blinked. “Excuse me?”

“Mr. Hagen has the Transmorgifier—er, I mean the box, the Raslowski Box, yes?”

Slowly, he nodded. She smiled, her round, pale face turning impish. “You know why we called you lot the Four Horseman, right?”

He nodded again, fighting the urge to smile back. She radiated a confidence he’d never seen before. It wasn’t embarrassed for itself, or smug. It just *was*. As if confidence had been woven into her DNA. He

wondered if she'd been like that in the other version, but couldn't be certain.

She rolled her eyes. "Then you need *me*, Mr. Malloy. None of you have the *slightest* idea what you're doing. I'd better come along to make certain you don't *accidentally* destroy us all."