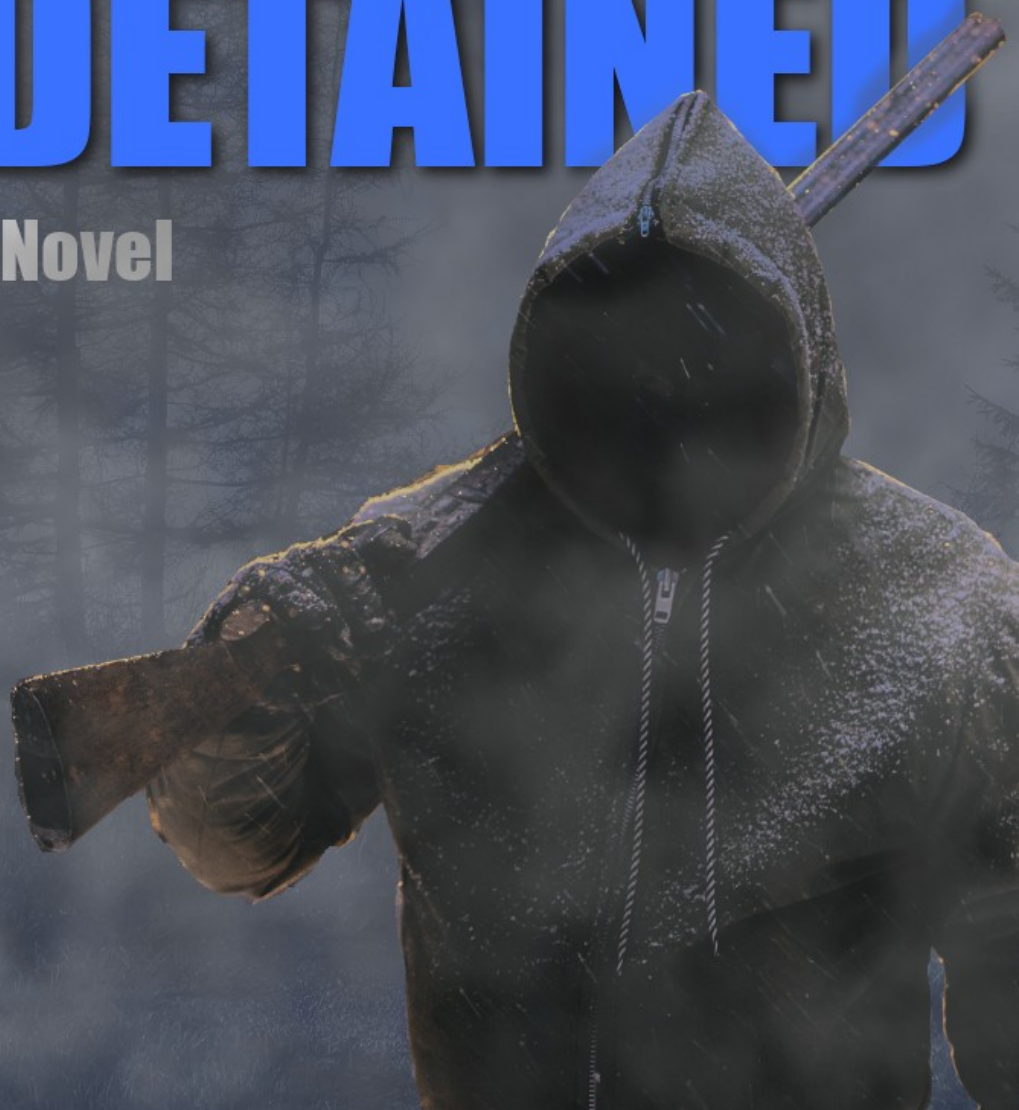


JEFF SOMERS

DETAINED

A Novel



DETAINED

Chapter 41

by Jeff Somers

41. Mike

“You’re going about this all wrong.”

Mike glanced at Myra and tried to retrieve a memory of her from the alternate life he knew he’d led. Had she been this businesslike? This sharp? He thought she’d been perhaps a little blurrier, a little *nicer*, although that wasn’t exactly the right word. The idea that people—people *directly connected to this*—might not be exactly the same as they’d been in the prior versions was infinitely disturbing. His entire plan had been based on being able to predict certain events, certain reactions. So far it had all gone about as well as could be expected when pursuing a batshit goal like this.

“How’s that?” he said, meeting her gaze as the truck bounced and lurched under the rough handling of Todd, who’d told Mike he only drove stick shift for a variety of paranoid and unspecified reasons, which in practice meant he kept trying to shift from drive into park.

She shifted around on her seat to face him, and he caught a citrus scent. She pushed a strand of red hair behind her ear with a practiced

gesture. “You’re trying to control events. You’re trying to control people. Trust me, I worked with Raslowski for years. My fingerprints are all over the code, the wiring, the field generator. Hell, it was my work in quasi-strings that made the field generation possible. If I know one thing, it’s that without a server farm, complex mathematics, and a couple of geniuses analyzing the data, you can’t just predict how people will react.”

He smirked. “Well, I predicted *you’d* be here.”

“No,” she said, smiling, “you didn’t, did you? You *knew* we’d be here. It’s not the same thing as a prediction.”

He pondered that. Maybe she had point. He’d assumed he had an advantage because he knew what *would* happen. But he didn’t, not really. He knew what *had* happened in an alternate timeline. As long as the variables remained very close to the same, it would turn out the same way—but there was no guarantee that things wouldn’t diverge. Or hadn’t already diverged.

After all, he thought, this little ride never happened. We’re in uncharted territory.

“All right, my advantage is gone,” he admitted.

“Someone’s isn’t. *Someone* is playing this game better than you.”

“*Obviously* Jim Haggan.”

Mike scowled. “We call him *Jimmy* to emasculate him.”

Myra looked away. “Mr. Malloy, you have to understand, we’ve

studied you. All of you. You may think you know what's happening, that you're in control, because you know a *tiny* bit of the data spread, and even that is compromised—and quickly becoming worthless as permutations reverberate, re-writing the math—but in actuality the people in control were the people who have *all* the information—or most of it. That would be—or *was*, until a short time ago—me and Dr. Raslowski.”

“And now?”

“And now it's no one. We've got you, operating on yesterday's information. We've got Haggen, who has control of the box and thus theoretically can change things as he wishes. And you've got me and Dr. Raslowski, who can run arrays through the servers farm but can't actually do anything without the box.” She turned to look at him. He was aware of the forced intimacy of the back seat; they were physically close to each other—so close he could smell her perfume. The darkness and the hum of the engine made the space feel private. They were talking close, in half-whispers, leaning in to each other's personal space. He felt like they were on a date discussing a bizarre sci-fi movie they'd just watched.

They rode for a moment in silence.

“So, “ she said. “Who are you trying to save?”

He startled. “Excuse me?”

“The four of you, you're all *here* again for a reason. I think we know

Haggen's—he wants to rearrange his life to his liking. Maybe that's Eastman, too, with a dash of politics. I think Cuddyer is hoping to save her dad—though her variables are tough to pin down, to be honest; her equations solve differently depending on what's happened recently. So what are you going to change if you got your hands on the box?"

Mike looked away, feeling his face turning red. "You already know, I'm guessing."

She sighed. "Julia Barnes."

He nodded tightly. "That's it. I don't care about being rich, or righting the world's injustices, or anything else. I just want to set that one thing right."

"It's noble, in a way, sure," she said, her tone of voice implying to him that she didn't think it was noble at all. "But you know what? We're still trying to figure out the damage Haggen did."

"You can ... you're aware of everything that happened—" he searched for the right part of speech to convey something that had actually happened and then not actually happened and gave up—"before?"

"We can see the math. We can see the variables left over, the equations that aren't solvable. What Haggen did is *messy*, and the universe heals from it, but not perfectly. It's like computer code: Screw up a line and the program might still work, but it might get

buggy, start crashing.”

Crashing, he thought, a feeling of sour tension blooming in his belly.

“What you should think about is helping *me*,” she said. “Because one of us in this truck is trying to *prevent* arma-fucking-geddon, and it isn’t *you*.”

“Comin’ up on the bar,” Todd said suddenly. “We should have hit a sentry point by now. I’m gonna try to raise them on the phone.”

Mike studied the dark road as it slipped past. Myra’s calm, the lack of sentries—a bad feeling crept over him. Something had happened. The equations had changed. Did Raslowski and Hammond have a backup Field Generator? Were they *tweaking* things to their advantage? How would he know—would he remember every little thing that shifted? He’d gone years without realizing what had happened to him; up until Julia had died, his life had rolled along with no sign that it was a do-over, a divergence. Even afterwards, when the nagging sense of *deja-vu* and pointlessness had started to grow, it had still taken him months to even begin ‘remembering’ things that had never happened. If they were adjusting reality in real time, would he even know?

He frowned. That didn’t jibe with everything Myra and Raslowski had said, past and present. They’d gone to great lengths to point out how it took a lot of time to trace all the possible problems. But then

he wondered, feeling a rising paranoia he recognized from his addiction days—the same formless, shapeless dread and panic that filled him whenever his supply was running low, the urge to just run and run and run until his heart exploded—what if all of that had been window dressing? So much bullshit?

Sweat broke out all over his body. He felt the gun's reassuring weight in his hand, took a deep breath, and turned—only to find Myra pointing a gun at him.

She smiled. "Hidden in-between the cushions two weeks ago," she said. "We didn't know specifically who would be in a vehicle or *which* vehicle, to be honest, so we hid guns in all potential vehicles involved in your matrix, Mr. Malloy, once we solved for what you were up to."

"Listen," he said, pointing his own gun at the roof of the car and putting his other hand up, palm forward to show no threat intended. He thought furiously, and reminded himself that they couldn't see his thoughts, and they couldn't predict his actions to this level—they could see what he would do over the long-term, but not in the moment.

Or at least that's what he decided to believe.

"Sounds to me like we're in the same boat," he said. "We both want the box. We both want Haggren to *not* have the box. Our interests converge. I can help us take possession—I've got a small army and other resources. You can help me actually *use* the thing."

Myra sighed. “Mr. Malloy, you’re missing the obvious.”

“Which is?”

She looked at him without turning her head, just a hint of a smile on her face.

“What the—” Todd said suddenly, slamming on the breaks. He twisted around to look back at Mike. “Boss, we got a problem.”

Mike peered around. Two trucks blocked the road, their headlights forming a blur of light that outlined dozens of people—uniformed, heavily armed.

Suddenly someone was at the rear door, tapping on his window. He turned and pressed the button, scrolling it down to reveal Colonel Hammond. She stared at him, her face impassive.

“Really,” Myra said behind him. “Did you think Haggen was the only one who’s been learning from past mistakes?”