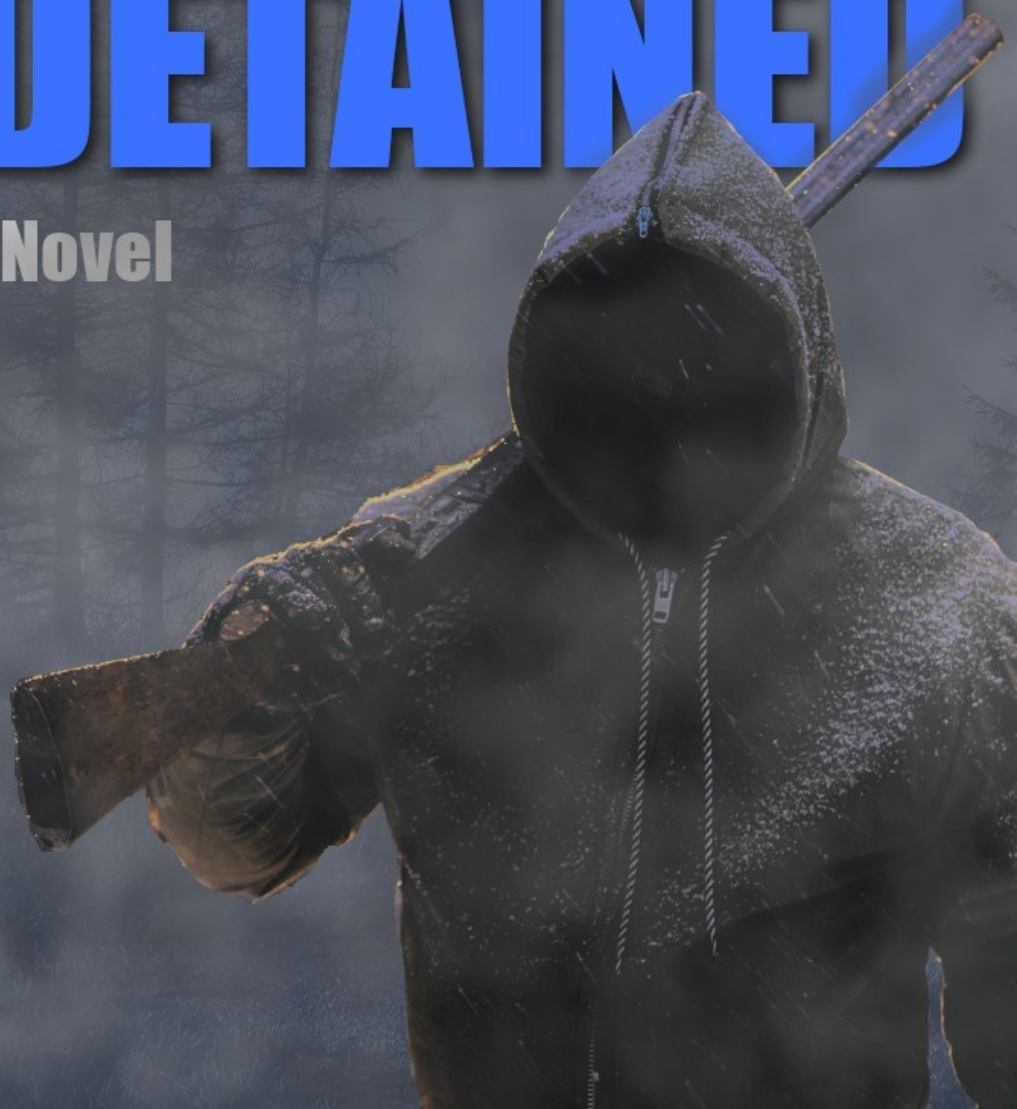


JEFF SOMERS

DETAINED

A Novel



DETAINED

Chapter 43

by Jeff Somers

43. Mike

“Slide over,” Hammond said.

Todd had been unceremoniously pulled from the driver’s seat. Glen Eastman pushed himself into the passenger side door, looking terrified, as Hammond slid behind the wheel. Mike was suddenly aware of Myra holding the gun in her hand.

“Boys,” she said. “Guns, please.”

Mike nodded and handed his weapon over. Eastman didn’t move for a moment, but when the Colonel turned to point her own sidearm at him he sagged a little, dug into his waistband, and produced his own gun.

Hammond put the truck into gear and started driving.

“Where are we going?” Eastman demanded.

“Haggen’s,” Hammond said after a moment. “That’s where he is, and that’s where the Raslowski Field Generator is.”

Mike frowned. “Not Jack’s for us? To be ziptied and yelled at?”

Hammond turned to look back at him. “The variables have

changed. Haggen's our main concern."

Mike glanced at Myra. "I'm not one of the 'Four Horsemen' any more?"

Myra shook her head. "Not according to the latest data. Something's changed. From what we can tell, if we eliminate James Haggen, we eliminate the threat."

"Eliminate."

"That was always a possibility," Hammond said. "We tried being ... patient. It didn't work out so well. And your little stunt bringing an army of assholes down here didn't help much. You set our time table back, and we've got to move *now*, decisively, to ensure that Haggen doesn't make things *worse*."

"He fiddled with forces he doesn't understand once and frankly we're lucky the whole universe didn't unravel as a result," Myra said. "He had the box for, what, an *hour* last time and you know as well as anyone how that turned out. Now he's holed up in a fortified space, and he's had years to study and research Raslowski's work." She snorted. "Years to convince himself that he understands even a tenth of what Dr. Raslowski has worked out. That idiot is going to destroy reality itself."

Mike nodded. "You had years, too, and you let him walk off with it again."

Hammond grunted. "We didn't see you coming, Malloy," she said.

“We knew you’d show up, we knew you’d cause trouble. We didn’t know you’d be bringing *force*. You surprised us. So did Haggan. A fucking *tunnel*. A tunnel he built years before we even selected the location.”

“You and Mr. Eastman are here because we’ve just figured out that letting any of you out of our sight is a mistake,” Myra said. “And to try to talk you into helping us.”

“Why would we do *that*?” Eastman growled. “Missy, you all *created* this dumpster fire. We’re just trying to swim through the tsunami.”

Myra looked at Mike. He sighed. “You know why, Glen. Jimmy knows—he *knows*—that patterns repeat.”

Eastman didn’t say anything. Mike looked at Glen Eastman’s profile, and thought for the first time he was seeing the man for what he really was: A small town mediocrity. A man who had never done much, gone anywhere, or thought deeply. A man who’d gotten used to the low, low bar of being the smartest man in Mad One Jack’s on any given evening.

“Now that Haggan has control of the box, why leave us *in*?” he said quietly.

“In *what*?”

“The world, Mr. Eastman,” Myra said. “He’s saying, why wouldn’t Haggan, once he’s created a new reality to his liking, eliminate any chance that one of us might haunt him? That we’ll just pursue the

science again, build the box again, and y'all will come, claim it and eliminate *him*?"

"An endless loop," Mike said, imagining it playing out, over and over again, with different people claiming the box each time. He wondered, chillingly, if this had already happened, if maybe they weren't always aware of the resets, if he'd lived several lives and only recently become aware of the repetition.

The truck bounced along in silence for a moment.

"Right," Hammond said, forcefully. "We've taken your people into custody, Mr. Malloy. As Dr. Azarov implied, we've learned from past mistakes and had resources in reserve in case of unexpected twists." She glanced at Mike. "I'll admit I didn't expect you to take the initiative like that. But we were prepared to let you have your moment and step in with our reserve when needed."

Mike swallowed thickly. *Have my moment*, he thought bitterly. He pictured Julia—this time alive, young and healthy, early days. She'd been beautiful in an off-kilter way. Not a girl you crossed a room to meet, but a girl you couldn't get out of your head the next day. He'd always known the idea of seeing her like that again was always going to be a long shot, but it had been worth a try. One more time he offered up a wordless apology to whatever was left of her in the universe, whatever scattered atoms or variables still in some weak way represented her. He'd had an idea of making things right, and

he'd failed.

He would go along. He would help them against Haggan, if they wanted his help. He would—

He paused, looking around. Something was wrong. After a moment, it fell into place.

“Why are you driving a truck?”

Silence filled the cab. He saw Hammond's eyes flick to the rear-view mirror. “What?”

“You've got troops. Equipment. Vehicles. We're heading to Haggan's house, but it's just you and Myra here. Not even Dr. Raslowski.”

Silence. Mike could see Eastman frowning, puzzled.

“You're making your own play for the box.”

He heard Myra gasp slightly, and he knew he was right. Who could resist? Hammond, whatever she'd originally thought of her orders, she knew now the box was for real. She knew as well as he did that it *could* alter reality, change the variables that underlay your life. Everyone had regrets. Everyone had something they wanted to change—or they wanted to change everything. Why should he be surprised that Hammond let temptation get the better of her, that she was abandoning her post and making a play for the most powerful piece of technology that had ever been developed.

“No one else knows where Haggan is, do they?” he said quietly.

After a moment, Myra snorted. “No, Mr. Malloy. The only people who know where the box is right now are in this truck or in the room with it. The colonel and I have an arrangement. She gets me in the room, I can calculate and code the changes we both want.”

“Jesus *Christ*,” Eastman hissed. “Are you going to erase us *too*?”

“That depends *entirely* on your behavior, Mr. Eastman,” Hammond said grimly.

“Your troops,” Mike said. “How long before they catch on?”

Hammond shook her head. “Not long. They’re fully briefed, and anyone who was here ... last time will have *memories* or whatever you call remembering something that never actually happened.

Suspicion’s been running high for a while now. If I don’t check in—in person—soon, rumor central’s gonna crank up. After that, it won’t be long before they mobilize.”

“And us?”

Another heavy moment of silence. He caught Eastman’s eye, but the older man didn’t give him any sort of signal or reaction to work with.

“Haggen’s tried to fortify the place,” Hammond finally said. “And he’s proven to be tricky. You help get us in, help us take possession, we will take your desires into account when programming the box.”

Mike nodded. He didn’t think he could trust Hammond, of course—in fact, based on this new wrinkle, it was obvious he couldn’t—but

he also was very conscious of having very little leverage. Hammond wanted to keep the conspiracy she was forming on the fly as small as possible. That was good sense. But she also needed soldiers, people to help with the heavy lifting. Adding Glen and himself at least gave her two people who could handle a gun. And on the flip side: With his people locked down by Hammond's, he and Glen were in the same boat: They needed Hammond to even have a chance at getting into Haggan's, and they would need Myra's expertise to do anything with the box once they had it.

It was the only chance he would have to do right by Julia. If he said no, he figured he'd be shot, or knocked unconscious and then the only certainty would be that whoever wound up with the box, it certainly wouldn't be him.

"Deal," he said.

Myra grinned. "Welcome aboard, Mr. Malloy," she said. "Let's go change the world."