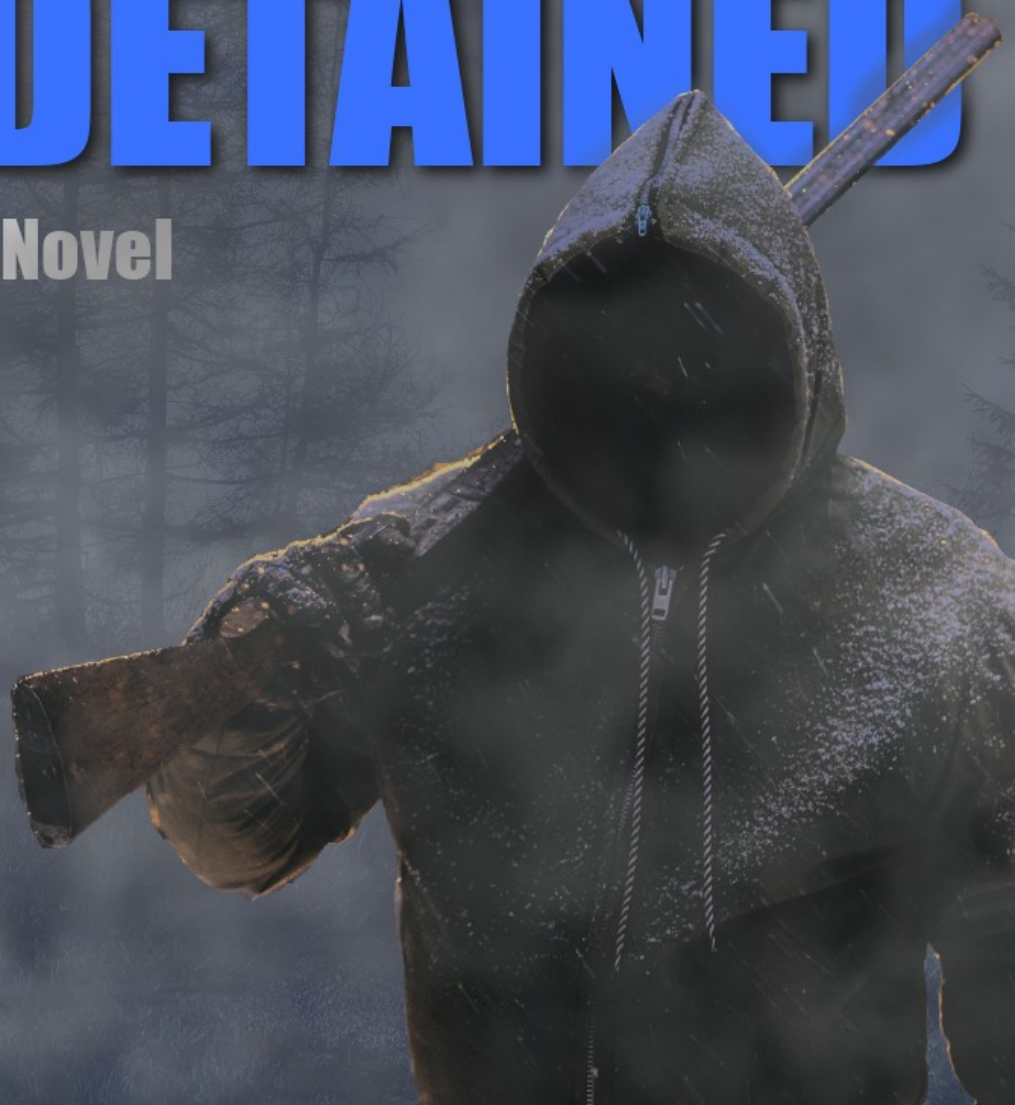


JEFF SOMERS

DETAINED

A Novel



DETAINED

Chapter 45

by Jeff Somers

45. Mike

“Motion sensors,” Hammond said, killing the engine and getting out of the truck. The distant whirring noise was muted but clear in the cold darkness. “Couldn’t be helped. Mr. Eastman,” Hammond said, beckoning him to slide over behind the wheel. She held the truck’s keys in one hand and one of the familiar zipties in the other.

Eastman hesitated. He looked from her to Mike and Myra in the back seat. Myra held her gun up.

“Mr. Eastman,” she said sweetly, “I’m not much of a shot, it’s true, but you’re *one foot away*.”

He looked at Mike, who shrugged. “Sorry, Glen. Your heart doesn’t seem in this.”

Eastman began hauling himself over to the driver’s side. “Fuck you, Mike. You think this is going to go well for you? You’re an idiot. They’re going to let you help them, and then they’re going to arrest you, *erase* you, and take their toy and do whatever they want to us, to *everyone*.”

“Mr. *Eastman*,” Myra snapped, leaning forward to speak directly into his ear. “May I remind you we came here because our models demonstrated that *you* were a threat. *You* were going to contribute to an apocalyptic event. And you and Mr. Malloy were both part of a conspiracy to utilize technology you do not understand *at all* to make arrangements for your own profit.” She snorted. “So spare me the outrage.”

Mike blinked. Something had definitely changed in Myra.

Hammond secured Eastman’s hands to the wheel and stuffed the keys into her pocket. She opened Mike’s door and he stepped out while Myra slid out the other side. He followed Hammond around to the rear of the truck. As she lowered the tailgate, Myra shrugged off her white lab coat. Hammond pulled a large black duffel towards them and unzipped it. She pulled out a pair of black work overalls and tossed them to Myra. As the younger woman pulled them on, Hammond began extracting weapons from the bag.

“Mr. Malloy,” she said. “I realize trust may be a bridge too far between us. And I’ll be up front; if I thought I could do this without you, I would. But Haggren—even though he’s one man—has obviously been aware of his special circumstances longer than the rest of us. And he was much more aggressive.” She pulled an AR-15 from the bag and laid it on the truck bed next to it. “I’ll admit I was complacent. Even as I became aware of the divergent realities, I thought we would

be able to play the same strategy. I was proud of myself for putting backup resources into place to overcome another shitshow.” She shook her head and placed two full magazines next to the rifle, and then turned to face him. “As I said, trust may be a bit much, in both directions. But I feel like I don’t have a choice. Dr. Azarov is resourceful and reliable, but she’s not trained for this.”

She studied him, and he studied her back. She was handsome, a thin, dry-looking woman with not an ounce of fat or wasted space to her, everything about her sinewy and tight.

“So, Mr. Malloy, all I’m going to do here is ask you to give me your word that once we have Haggen neutralized, you won’t screw me over. Can you do that?”

Mike smiled. “Should we pinky swear?” he said, picking up the AR-15 and checking it over. “We’ve got a shared goal right now: Get in there without anyone else, neutralize Haggen, take control of the box. Once that happens, we no longer have a shared goal, right?”

Hammond shook her head. “I say we *do*, Malloy. We all want to have a say in what happens next. If we agree to that, everything else follows.”

He picked up one of the magazines and pushed it until he got the satisfying *click*. He nodded. “Colonel Hammond, I’ll give you my word. If things go sideways, it won’t be because of me.” He looked at her. “All I want is a seat at the table. We get in, Dr. Azarov gives us

access and the knowledge to do it right—without screwing everything up—and we all have a say. Fair enough.”

The annoying jingle of the motion alarms suddenly stopped.

Hammond pursed her lips, studying him, then nodded. “Very well. Mr. Malloy, I don’t know you, and yet I feel like I know you better than some people I’ve served with for years. We’re good. Let’s go have a look.”

The duffel bag contained another pair of rifles, more ammunition, some M67 grenades that Hammond took sole possession of, a brick of gray clay-like material Mike recognized as plastic explosive, and bright silver dart-shaped objects he assumed were detonators. Myra, he noted, took hold of the AR-15 with a practiced, comfortable posture, her eyes running over it with something that looked suspiciously like experience. He suspected they’d all been preparing for this moment privately, each of them nurturing ambitions and new skills in secret, thinking themselves brilliant.

He looked around at the dark, silent trees, and wondered how many people were aware of the “reset,” how many people had spent the last few years studying, training, building in preparation, certain they would be ready to seize control when the time came.

He shivered, then followed Myra to join Hammond. She was peering through field glasses.

“Haggen’s house,” she said, pointing. “About a hundred feet past

the tree line. Hardened, in a way; the man obviously didn't have any money, but he sure had a lot of time on his hands." She handed the glasses over, and Mike slung the rifle over his shoulder and looked through them, the night lit up a sickly green. The house looked sad and small, the sort of one-story home that would contain a lot of linoleum and formica, a lot of rust-colored carpet.

"Shields over the windows," Hammond said quietly. "He's not connected to utilities, the house doesn't have a basement, just a crawlspace I'll bet he's filled with gravel. Internal power and water collection and filtration. Motion sensors, at this line and probably another fifty feet in. Video surveillance. And if I were him, I'd have rigged up some IEDs around the perimeter. Not to mention a steel security door in the front—he's closed up the rear entrance."

Mike scanned the scene, impressed at how much she'd deduced from just observing the house—or, possibly, had already discovered before coming to this point, quietly laying her own foundation while she waited for everything else to fall into place.

"He knew this would happen," he said. "The Jim Hagen I know—knew—was paranoid as hell." He chewed his lip, studying the house. "So, he's expecting a frontal assault. He probably expects you to come with your army," he dropped the glasses and looked at her. "Or me to come with *mine*. So, a frontal assault would be a mistake."

"I agree, Mr. Malloy. So, let's imagine that Mr. Hagen is right

now coding in his changes. He's obviously been planning this for years, so let's assume he has—or thinks he has—a firm grip on the syntax and the structure.”

Myra snorted derisively, but said nothing.

“So, we're on the *clock*,” Hammond continued. “How do we get in there as quickly as possible?”

Mike brought the glasses back up, wondering if this was a test, if Hammond already had an assault plan and just wanted to see what he would say so she could gauge his usefulness. He studied the house again, then ticked up to study the trees. Haggen hadn't done much to clear the land. *Probably liked the natural privacy screening of the trees and brush*, he thought. He looked back at the house, then lowered the glasses and looked at Hammond as he handed them back.

“Roof,” he said, gesturing. “We use the trees to avoid the motion sensors and whatever other traps he has.” He pointed. “Look at how close the canopy is. Once we're in the branches, we can probably make it to the house without touching the ground. He put a lot of time into the walls and the ground-level defenses, but that roof looks old and worn-out. Shingles missing. A wavy roof-line that indicates rot. The chimney doesn't look properly flashed, at least not from this distance. We hit the roof, find a soft spot, set a small charge, and we're in.”

Hammond nodded, stuffing the glasses into her jacket. She

looked up and studied the branches above us. “Good. We have some stakes in the bag that we can use to climb up. Let’s go.”

Mike blinked. He hadn’t actually expected her to just take his recommendation without augmenting it, or at least discussing it. Time was pressing, but it still felt off. He glanced at Myra, who looked back at him placidly.

They know something, he thought, reminding himself that they had at least limited access to the future, to a matrix of information that allowed them to predict what might happen. Their discovery that he might be part of the end of the world had brought them in the first place. He frowned as Hammond fished out the stakes and a small field hammer. With a shiver, he considered the possibility, suddenly very real, that they knew *he* would get into Haggan’s house, and they were just drafting along behind him.

He was being used.

He watched Hammond start pounding a stake into a wide tree trunk nearby. She worked with the speed and efficiency of a trained soldier, someone who’d spent her life setting up and breaking down temporary shelters and structures. When she had the first two stakes in place, she looped some rope around the tree and tied it off around her waist, then climbed the first two stakes and began pounding in a third.

He considered his options. He needed to get into the house. He

had little doubt at this point that Haggen would not hesitate a moment to *neutralize* him, and when a man had control—even vague, untrained control—over reality itself, that didn't bode well. So he needed Myra and the Colonel—if for nothing else to feel out Haggen's defenses, set off a trap or two while he hung back. On the other hand, he was suddenly uncertain if Hammond wouldn't simply wait for him to wriggle them into the house and then shoot him in the head the moment she and Azarov had control of the box again.

Myra was next to him, handing him a length of sturdy nylon rope. She nodded, and approached the tree. He was startled to see that Hammond had already made it into the branches, six stakes driven into the trunk forming a ladder of sorts, like you saw on telephone poles for the repair workers. Myra looped the rope around the trunk as Hammond had and attacked the climb like it was something she'd trained for.

Everyone had been building tunnels, practicing skills, doing research.

So had *he*, he realized. He froze for a moment. Where had his compulsion to learn, to travel around taking classes and paying people to teach him their trades, their secrets, their skills, come from? What had actually inspired it? Julia? That had always made sense to him: He'd felt useless after Julia's death. He'd felt like a fraud adult, a man who'd been wallowing in his adolescent bullshit for so

long, a man who didn't even know how to administer CPR. Now he wondered: Had it been *this*? Some weird dimensional memory, some intuitive, baked-in knowledge in his DNA telling him that someday all these skills would be *useful*?

Was he his own puppet?

He walked slowly to the tree, trying to shake off the sudden sense of dread. Not for the first time, but most powerfully, he felt like he was just going through motions that had been stage-directed. Now he wondered if the invisible hand moving him like a piece on the board was *himself*.

He looped the rope around the tree and tied it loosely around his waist. He began to climb. As he did, feeling his muscles strain and burn, his breathing kick up, he shook off the dread. He saw himself climbing stealthily from branch to branch. He saw himself making the final short leap onto the roof. Sitting there with held breath for a moment, listening for reaction. Helping Hammond set charges around the chimney, where the worst of the rot was located. Moving a few feet off. He felt the bang of the explosive, too powerful because Hammond wanted to be certain of success, and then the whole roof caving in, the three of them sliding down into rubble. He saw himself breaking both legs. He saw Hagen walking towards him with a rifle in his hands, bloodied and bruised, but still in one piece.

He crawled out on the branch. Hagen's roof was just a foot or so

away, and easy swing. Hammond and Myra, difficult to see in their dark clothes, peered up at him expectantly. He made the last move easily, walking out on a stout branch that narrowed down over the roof, allowing him to make a simple leap.

He followed the other two to the chimney, where the roof was so badly rotted he could feel it giving under them, soft and ruined. Hammond knelt down and shrugged off her pack, fishing in it for the explosive. Mike moved off slightly to the side, making sure not to go too far or too fast, and slid his thumb under the loop of rope he still had cinched around his waist. He'd retied it to himself using a simple half hitch, and now he fed the slack out slowly until he had a loop in his hand.

The old chimney had never been rubberized or wrapped, and the crumbling brick had several iron clips embedded in it. He leaned over until he was able to slip the loop of rope over one of the clips, then tried to stand as casually as possible. He wasn't certain how, but he knew the roof was about to collapse under them. A buzzing sense of excitement spread through him. He felt like for the first time in a long time he was in uncharted territory.