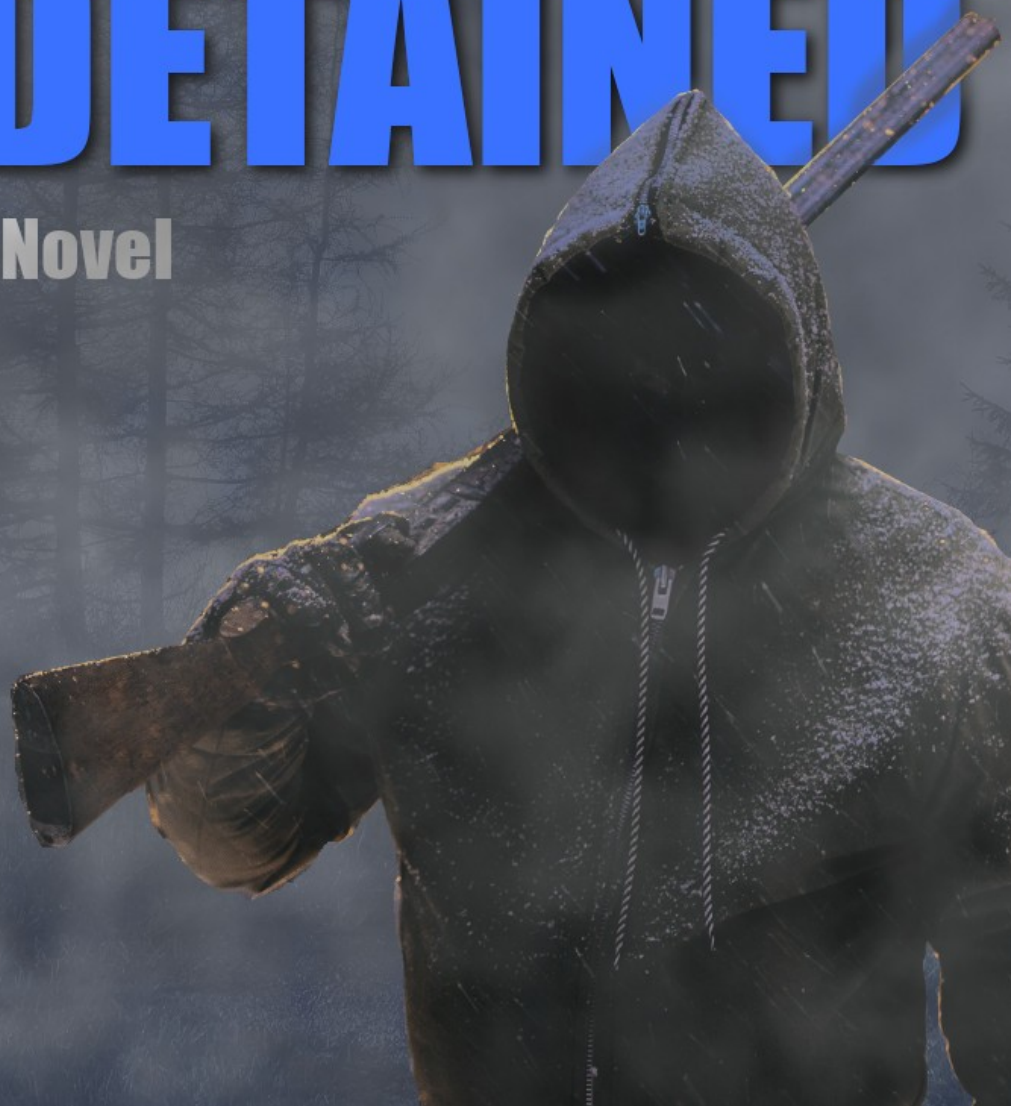


**JEFF SOMERS**

**DETAINED**

**A Novel**



# DETAINED

## Chapter 47

by Jeff Somers

### 47. Mike

For a moment, all he could articulate to himself was that Haggen looked incredibly rough, even otherworldly. There was something ... off about his appearance, something that made his eye want to skip right over him and look at an interesting spot on the floor. It was an uncanny valley between the Haggen he'd known—bright-eyed, red-cheeked, filled with a nervous kind of energy—and the man who was grinning up at him with fishbelly skin and dry eyes.

*I've run the numbers.*

Mike saw the flash of metal, and twisted away as Haggen stabbed at him with a long hunting knife that landed in the floor where Mike's foot had been a moment before. Dancing backwards, he tripped over a fallen rafter and fell, sprawling painfully.

Haggen sprang to his feet, and Mike had a moment of confusion, because Haggen looked like an extra from some TV show, something with a lot of makeup and dead people. He had been shot multiple times, and was as pale as a piece of chalk, so pale his lips looked

almost black. But he was alive. Or, Mike self-corrected, he was *in motion*; he didn't look *alive*.

"I've been afraid," Haggen said. "I'll admit it. Shit, you *think* you've got it all handled, you *think* you understood, but do you push that button? Change a few variables and you're immortal—but are you going to fire a gun at your head to find out?" He smiled, and Mike flinched stupidly from the white gums almost the same color as his teeth. "Oh, I sat here, barrel in my mouth. I did. But I couldn't do it. But then, tonight, *bam!* it happens. And here I am. And that makes me think the *rest* of my changes might have worked out, too."

Mike thought stupidly, *other changes?*

Haggen leaped at him, faster than Mike could believe. It was almost like an insect, a sudden bouncing motion, and then Haggen was in the air, knife in one hand, his cold white face twisted into an expression that Mike's fatigued brain somehow interpreted as *delight*.

He managed to roll to his left a second before Haggen landed, the knife sinking into the broken rafter that hugged the floor. He pushed himself up to his feet and whirled, struggling with the rifle slung across his torso, which seemed to suddenly take on a sentience and a reluctance to assist. But Haggen was struggling to pull the knife from the rafter, both hands on the polished wood handle as he put his back into the effort. For a moment Mike stared at the pattern of bullet wounds on Haggen's back, the way they opened and closed slightly as

his back muscles convulsed. Then he swung the rifle forward, toggled the safety, and pointed it at the other man.

“Jim,” he said, “I don’t—”

Haggen spun and raced towards him. Mike squeezed the trigger, the rifle jerked in his hands, and then Haggen crashed into him and all he could do was thrust the rifle up at him, deflecting the knife blade as they both crashed into the table, which collapsed under them.

Mike struggled to keep the rifle under his control. Haggen was *strong*, and nothing made sense. His skin was cold and clammy, and Mike’s own crawled at its touch. Mike’s brain refused to process the way he grinned down at him as they struggled.

*He changed something*, Mike thought, sweating stinging his eyes. He had the ghostly non-memory: This room, the Dipping Bird. It had never happened, but at the same time it had. And when it happened, Jimmy Haggen had somehow made himself superhuman.

Haggen reared back, his hand curling into a fist, and Mike ducked his head down to avoid the punch. Haggen’s fist slammed into the remnants of the table, and Mike twisted free, scrambling into a crawl. Haggen whipped out a hand and grabbed Mike’s ankle, and with a roar swung Mike to the right, skimming him over the debris-laden floor as if he weighed nothing, finally letting go and letting his centrifugal force send him sailing into the wall.

Mike lay for a moment, eyes closed, suppressing a groan as an aching pain radiated downward from his head.

“God-*damn* this feels good,” Haggen exulted. Mike cracked open an eye and watched Jimmy pacing back and forth in the ruined room, an animated corpse. He kept himself still, assessing the damage—minimal, he thought; sprains and pulls, nothing he couldn’t overcome with a little sheer terror and adrenalin—and biding his time.

Suddenly, Haggen stopped and looked directly at him. “I see you, you little sneak. Mike Malloy, rich and good-looking and all the goddamn time in the world, huh?” He turned and walked towards him. “Well, guess what, Mr. Malloy? I made myself a *constant*, you hear? Not a variable. Not a changeable value, but a *fundamental*.” He knelt down right in front of Mike, peering down with his cadaver smile. “Change me, the whole fucking universe will collapse, how you like *that*?”

Mike pulled the Beretta from his pocket and pointed it at Haggen. He tried to ignore the way his hand shook holding the gun. Haggen stopped, then smiled.

“Can’t kill me, Mikey,” he said. “Like I just told you, I’m a *constant*. The universe can’t do without me. So it won’t let you kill me. Shoot me all you want, I’ll still be here.”

Mike believed it, based solely on Haggen’s appearance. He was

suddenly reminded of Spider Hamilton.

He'd met Spider at a bar in Kansas City, a bar that didn't have a name or permanent address, a bar that set up someplace new every morning at about 3AM, an after hours place where bouncers and bartenders, prostitutes, dancers, drivers, bodyguards, and assorted other creatures of the night gathered to wind down and relax. He'd found his way into the movable feast with the liberal application of hundred-dollar bills and bought drinks, and had been content to simply sit on a couch and sip a whiskey and watch a colorful cast of characters dance, get high, fight, and sing.

Spider Hamilton had walked in and the place acted like the whole party was for him. Mike had watched the man make his way in like a visiting dignitary, smiling, shaking hands, kissing cheeks. He was huge, a mountain of a man, his tan skin taut over muscles, marred by plenty of scars. His nose had the off-center look of the frequently-broken, and his hands were red, raw slabs of ground beef.

He'd hung back, watching, and finally introduced himself, and discovered that Spider Hamilton was a street fighter—literally a man who engaged in illegal brawls in the street, taking on anyone who put up a purse. No rules, no protective equipment, each bout filmed and uploaded to his channel online. He learned that Spider Hamilton made a comfortable living at this, and that he'd never lost a fight. Spider, plied with expensive Scotch, had been happy to lecture Mike

on the ways street fighting differed from what he called Pussy Fighting.

So Mike bought a lesson.

For five hundred dollars, Spider promised he would teach Mike some basics, give him some pointers, and leave him alive, though he did have Mike sign a surprisingly complex and well-written waiver that inured Spider against being sued for medical bills.

As it turned out, the only thing Mike remembered from his lesson, aside from a new promise to himself to never try to engage in a fistfight when hungover, was that the only thing that really mattered in a fight was pain: If you made your opponent hurt it was much better than any skill move or complicated maneuver.

“I win most of my fights,” Spider had told him, “by kicking them in the balls as hard as I can as fast as I can. I make ‘em hurt.”

*Make ‘em hurt.* It was essentially the only takeaway Mike had from the experience. He looked at Haggan, who was still smiling at him, triumphant.

“Can’t kill you, huh?”

Haggan shook his head. “Fraid not, son.”

“Does it still hurt?”

Haggan frowned, and Mike squeezed the trigger three times.

He staggered backwards and lost his footing, arms flailing wildly as he hit the floor. For a moment he was still, not moving as Mike

levered himself up, wincing as he climbed to his feet, gun still held on Haggen. But as he stood up, Haggen started twitching, and after a moment Mike realized he was *laughing*.

Then he flipped over. There were three new wounds in his chest. They weren't bleeding, which Mike assumed was because Haggen literally had no more blood in his body, which raised so many questions regarding chemical reactions and basic biology his brain simply glossed over it.

"Yep," Haggen said, slowly climbing to his feet. "That fucking *hurt*." He rolled his head on his neck. "And I'm going to make you pay for it."

He launched himself at Mike. Mike pulled the trigger again, but a second later Haggen knocked the wind out of him, and then he was on the floor, Haggen sitting astride him. He reared back and brought his fist down, and Mike had the distinct displeasure of hearing his own nose break shortly before he lost consciousness.

He came to just a moment later, dumbly watching as Haggen picked up his own Beretta. Everything seemed to be coming at him in slow, confusing waves. He couldn't breathe through his nose and for a moment he struggled to get air, watching helplessly as Haggen rose unsteadily to his feet over Mike and pointed the gun at his head.

Just as Haggen squeezed the trigger, he twitched, convulsing. The bullet smacked into Mike's leg instead of his head.



The pain brought him back. He convulsed, half sitting up, opening his mouth and sucking in air to scream. Blood poured from his nose down his throat, and he collapsed backwards, choking, eyes watering.

“Goddamit,” Haggen growled. Then he licked his lips, bringing the gun back up. “By the way, you arrogant piece of shit,” Haggen said, no longer grinning. “I’m going to erase you. All of you. In *my* world, you never existed.”

And then Haggen squeezed the trigger, but got a dry click. The gun was empty. Mike passed out again, and gratefully.

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He came to in a rush of pain, his entire body throbbing with each ragged heartbeat. He stared up at the ceiling for a moment, dizzy and hot, then cold. He could hear Haggen breathing, he could hear the occasional soft curse under the man’s breath.

*Maybe I’ll just lie here until I bleed to death or he erases me,* he thought.

It was tempting.

Biting his lip in agony, he raised his head up just enough to see Haggen. The only living constant in the universe was hunched over, the keyboard in his lap, the box and nearly-destroyed monitor hooked up on the floor in front of him. He was carefully splicing the wires of the keyboard back together; the cord appeared to have been cleanly

sliced in half.

Mike managed, through the blurry burning pain and the hot weakness, to feel a sense of amusement. The Only Living Constant had been stymied by a lack of a fifteen-dollar computer keyboard.

He watched as Candace suddenly appeared, rising up from the floor holding a long piece of old pipe. He blinked, head trembling as he strained to keep his position.

She was covered in dust and splinters, bleeding from a deep gash on her head. But she was very much alive and in one piece, and held the pipe like a an old and very beloved baseball bat, the kind kids had in their closets, sticky from endless applications of pine tar, signed by teammates and wielded in countless epic battles. He thought she looked like a girl who'd hit people on the head with a pipe several times.

For one second, their eyes met. He blinked and tried to smile, tried to convey something, some kind of sentiment. She nodded, once, crisp and calm. Expressionless.

“Hey, Jim.”

Haggen startled and half turned around. Candace swung the pipe.