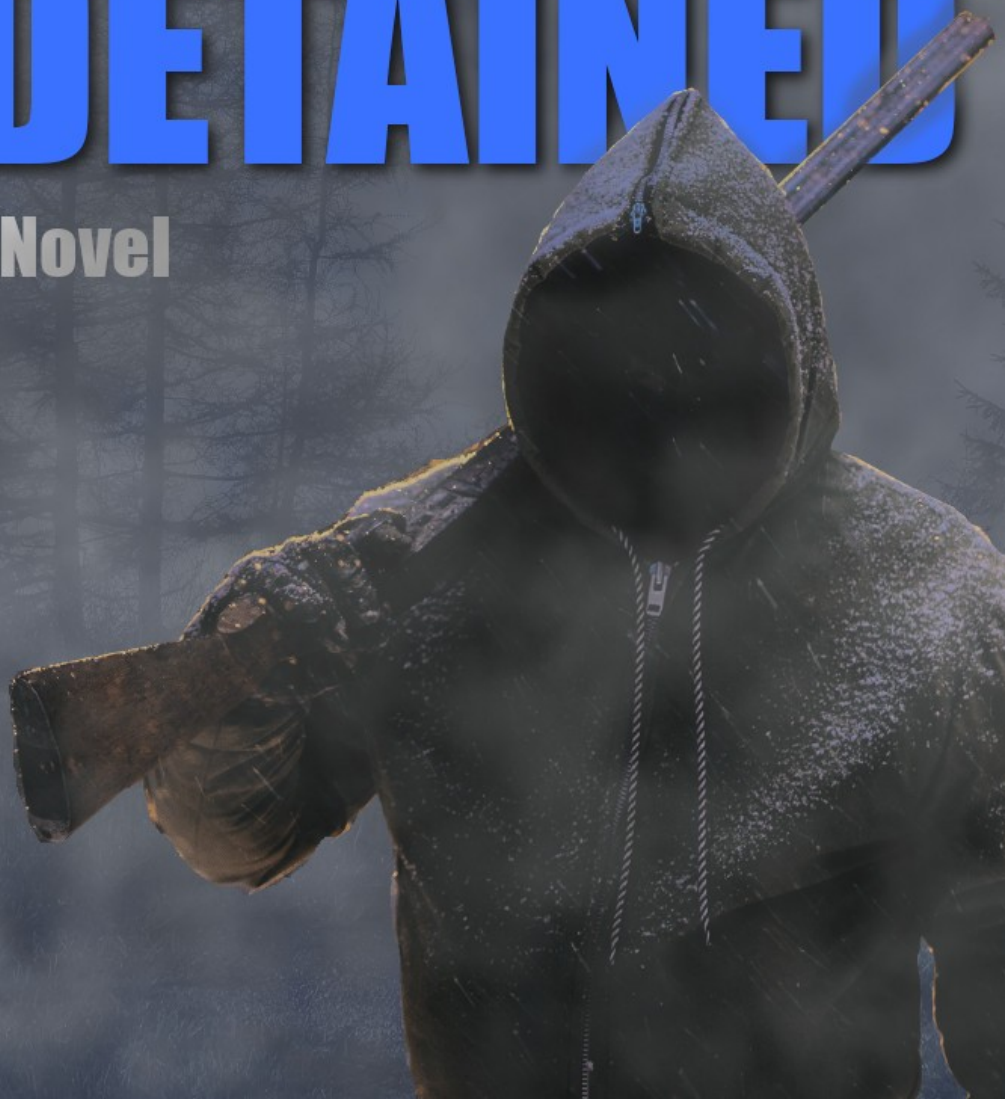


JEFF SOMERS

DETAINED

A Novel



DETAINED

Chapter 23

by Jeff Somers

23. Mike

He looked at Myra and smiled, trying to look friendly. “Not literally.”

She smiled back, and he was aware, dimly, of being uncomfortable with Candace watching him interact with the other woman. He tabled that disturbing realization for later unpacking, when perhaps he wasn’t being accused of someday destroying the world as he knew it.

“Actually,” Myra said, pointing to a black box about the size of a three car batteries tucked under the desk, “we do have the capability of limited direct variable substitution within a controlled field, generated by—”

“Myra,” Raslowski wheezed. “These people are not *cleared*.”

Myra closed her mouth with a click and looked flustered. Mike looked at the older man, whose fingers were flowing over the keyboard. He glanced at the large screen on the wall and saw what looked like computer code scrolling down. “So let me get this

straight: You can decide we're going to do something terrible in *the future*, you can violate almost all of our civil rights and kill one of our friends—" he rolled past the exaggeration of calling Jack McCoy a friend of his "—but we can't hear about the process that initiated this chain of events?"

Myra smiled again, a fleeting, nervous tic of an expression. She looked at Raslowski, who said nothing. Mike sighed and lifted the Beretta. "Okay, then, point of order, but I have a firearm, and if you don't explain this as best you can in the next ten seconds, I'm going to go back out to the servers and start shooting."

Raslowski's hands paused. "Mr. Malloy, I know you don't yet believe this, but I know you are capable of terrible things, so I take this threat very seriously. Very well. Myra, give them the layperson's version while I work. I have agreed to analyze the revised scenario before we make any further decisions."

Myra nodded and smiled, wringing her hands nervously. "Well, uh ... in a nutshell, in this room we can ... change things. But that's it."

Mike looked at Candace and held her gaze for a moment, wordlessly trying to convey *are you buying this?*

"Your boss said *model*," Candace said. "I didn't make it to college, but *model* is kind of a passive word to me."

Myra nodded, warming to the role of tour guide. "Yes, it is! And generally speaking the data sets are too large to map all the possible

variables and their interactions. For example, you Four Horse—well, that’s just an unofficial ... anyway, you four at the bar. The model clearly showed your path—from this evening forward you would be on a course that ends with catastrophe, worldwide, global catastrophe. No matter what other variables we changed, it happened, and it involved you four—*unless* we changed your movements tonight. If we kept you in the bar, it all mapped differently.

“*But*, we couldn’t change that directly. Let me back up: Dr. Raslowski has been working with this for decades, and he’s developed a way of ... harnessing the equations that run the universe. The source code of reality. He can even plug in a new value for a variable, or two, or three. And when you change the value of a variable in reality, there’s a ripple effect. The systems here can analyze a limited data set and predict what a change to the variables will do—but only when you’re in this room, because the Raslowski Box generates an energy field that limits the variables. There are only so many possible futures in here, and so the systems can crunch the numbers in a reasonable amount of time. But *outside*, reality’s too big. There are too many variables and they interact in a far too complex way to track. So, we had to come to your location and physically, well, stop you from leaving. But in here we can *tweak*.”

Mike frowned. “How is that possible? Even on a limited scale?

Even if I accept that you can model reality itself—which I don’t, especially considering the insane prediction your system gave you—”

“Seriously,” Candace said, watching the code on the screen. It resembled every piece of code Jimmy had ever shown her, excitedly trying to interest her in whatever hack he was working on. “You’re like people who drive into lakes because their GPS told them to. This system says Candace Cuddyer, She is Become Death and you scurry over to murder my boss.”

“—all well and good, but actually *altering* reality? I know you won’t like this, but that’s not possible,” Mike finished.

Myra shook her head. Her eyes were shining, and her cheeks were flushed, and Mike realized she was *enjoying* herself. Warming to the argument. He supposed she didn’t have a whole lot of people to talk to, with a choice between a bunch of grunts and Dr. Raslowski, who appeared to have the personality of one of those college deans from an old 80’s teen comedy.

“It’s all about scale. The universe—reality—is just particles. In this room, in this limited space, we’ve mapped every particle. Every atom, molecule, element, photon, and everything else. And when we entered, we were scanned and uploaded to the model’s matrix. If you keep the data set relatively small, you *can* map it.”

“Every *particle*?” Mike said, racing through his limited physics knowledge.

Myra nodded, pleased. “In a small area, it’s possible. And once we know every particle in an area, we can trace connections, we can extrapolate consequences—and we can change values.”

“Because everything’s math,” Candace said, still watching the code.

“Because *everything’s* math,” Myra said. “It might imply we’re living in a simulation, a hologram, a matrix. Or it might imply that god is a mathematician. Whatever it means, we’re on the cusp of total control over our environment, our *universe*.”

She was, Mike, thought, clearly a true believer.

“Mike,” Candace said, pointing at the screen. “I could swear I just saw our names.”

“Names aren’t necessary,” Myra said, still in eager beaver helper mode. “We often used your names as variables in the high-level code, but those are just for operator convenience. You not an individual identity, you’re just a *variable*—and a variable made up of a nearly-infinite number of particles that conspire together to be your reality, and cooperate with each other to form *everyone’s* reality.”

Mike studied the screen for a moment, watching the code scroll by. He caught a flash of his own name, *Malloy*. “I see it,” he said.

“It’s just because you’re in the room,” Myra said. “Those tags are in the system, so you’ve been automatically marked. Again, it’s for operator convenience. No one can keep track of billions of particles,

so the system applies easy labels. This,” she gestured at the black box again, “is what makes it possible. It only has a range of a few dozen square feet, but within that cone it can aggregate every particle and trace the values and equation relationships of those particles, and thus within that area, we can alter variables in reality.” She gestured at the door. “We can then use the cloud out there to compute the potential ramifications of those changes. See if something bad or unexpected will happen if we, say, change something that *seems* innocuous. Early tests, we did things like change the color of a plastic cube. Usually nothing happened. Occasionally there was an ... *unexpected* result.”

“Like a bug in a computer program,” Cadace said slowly.

Myra frowned, then shrugged her eyebrows. “Maybe a *little* like that.”

Mike leaned down a bit. “There’s a handle on that thing,” he said, noting the sturdy-looking piece of black metal on hinges. “It’s *mobile?*”

“Everything has to be transported somewhere, Mr. Malloy. When our initial trace-throughs on the Raslowski Equations pointed to you and the others, there was skepticism, of course. Repeated analyses came to the same conclusions forty-seven times. So we decided the best thing to do was move the whole operation here, to be nearer to the Four Ho—you four.”

Mike nodded, straightening up. “But it *can* be moved.”

Myra nodded. “Of course. And powered on and operated. It would take some time to analyze the new area and generate the Raslowski Field—”

Mike smirked a little. Dr. Raslowski had a fondness for naming things after himself, he thought. *But then, if I discovered a way of altering reality itself*, he said to himself, *I might feel like naming everything after myself too.*

“—but it would then be operational, yes.” She smiled. “It’s got a self-contained power source—powerful enough to light up a small city, actually. And it’s designed to be shock-proof and as near to indestructible as we could manage—it’s based on the design of the Black Boxes they put in planes. We could drop it out of one, in fact, and it would bounce when it hit the ground but most probably remain functional.” She smiled. “When you’re messing with reality, it’s a good idea to ensure uninterrupted function. Of course, severed from the cloud array in there, it wouldn’t have the data sets to solve for the ripple effects. That generally takes a long time—for our colored cube experiment, it took the array six days to crunch the numbers just to ensure against Butterfly Effects.”

Candace looked over her shoulder and smiled at Mike. “Sure,” she said. “And even then you had a few *unexpected* results, you said.”

He grinned, and for a moment he was conscious of a real

connection, something he hadn't felt ... since Julia. The thought of her sobered him, but the connection was still there. And now that they appeared to have triumphed over their captors, he was starting to think maybe there was a future there—once they got done with the cleanup. With the prosecutions, the investigations, the lawsuits. He looked at the black box. "Jesus Christ, what do you call it?"

"And if you say The Raslowski Box, I'm going to scream," Candace added, and he laughed.

To his surprise, Myra laughed too. "Oh no, it has a very technical name, of course, but most of us around here just call it The Transmogrifier."

Mike let that hang for a moment. He'd been informed, in short order, that he was one-fourth of the end of the world because of a chain of events stretching twenty-seven years into the future, that the universe was just math that could be changed and molded, and that a humming black box gave Dr. Emory Raslowski the limited ability to alter reality, if only inside a small field it generated. His head ached.

"All right," he said, turning to look at Raslowski. "You basically collate so much data you can literally model reality. And in a small area you can manipulate that model directly and change things." He lowered the gun. If there was a secret horde of soldiers in the facility, or if Myra was a *Manchurian Candidate*-style sleeper agent about to unleash kung fu on them, it would have happened. "It's a little

difficult to believe, actually, Dr. Raslowski. Any chance we could have a demonstration?"

Raslowski ignored him for a moment, his hands swirling over the keyboard. Just before the silence became awkward, he paused and looked at Mike, one hand hovering over the ENTER button.

"Of course," Raslowski said, and brought his hand down. A moment later, he disappeared.