

A person wearing a dark hat and a purple coat is walking away from the camera down a narrow, dimly lit alleyway at night. The alleyway is flanked by buildings with various signs and lights. In the background, a sign for a restaurant is visible, along with a sign that says "HT BUS 16 SEATS". The overall atmosphere is gritty and urban.

**JEFF  
SOMERS  
COLLECTIONS**  
a novel

# COLLECTIONS

## Chapter 3

by Jeff Somers

### 3.

“Where are you headed?” White Suit asked. “We can drop you.”

I was crowded between the two big guys in the back of the limo. It was old-school, the limo; big and chrome-laden, an old car but in fantastic shape, the leather seats supple and soft. White Suit and the Ginger were seated across from us, a little more comfortable. I kept my hands in my lap and a smile on my face.

“The Porterhouse,” I said. “Columbus Circle. Steak and a whiskey. Good chopped salads. But I have my own driver—he gets emotional if I leave him in the car too long. And I should have cracked the window.”

White Suit smiled. “Do not pretend you do not know your driver is following us at a discrete three-car distance.” She nodded. “We’ll drive you there, and have a conversation.” She held up her hand to forestall an interruption I wasn’t going to give. “Just a conversation.”

I shrugged as the limo pulled into traffic. “All right.”

We all stared at each other for a few moments. It was cold in the limo, the crank air pouring in through a million tiny vents.

“You are searching for a man named Falken,” White Suit suddenly said.

I stared back at her and said nothing, and she smiled.

“The silent treatment?”

I shrugged again. “We ain't been introduced.”

She smiled. “I see. My name is Cornelia Rusch. Doctor Cornelia Rusch.”

Awkwardly, she leaned forward, extending her hand. I stared down at it for a moment, and then looked back at her. I lifted my head and sniffed the air, turning right and left, then leaning down to smell the big guy on my right. He smelled like aftershave. A lot of fucking aftershave.

“You don't smell like cops,” I said, straightening up. “And I don't recall too many doctors working a shield anyway. So who the fuck are you?”

Rusch seemed amused by this. “Police!” She said with an odd upturn on the pitch at the end. “He wonders if we are police. No,” she sobered instantly, looking at me seriously. “We are not police. We do not, in fact, have any authority at all in this. . .locality.”

“All right,” I said, looking at Ginger. She wasn't pretty.

Silence hung between us again. I sighed.

“Look, you snatched *me*. You want a conversation, you're going to have to supply it.”

She smiled and nodded. “Ah! Yes! Yes!” she clapped his hands and looked around. Her three employees were the worst audience ever; they didn't even pretend to give a shit, and I was momentarily glad that she at least didn't go for the dry-heave high-five. Lowering her arm, she beamed at me, unconcerned. “You *are* searching for this man Falken. I also seek an audience with him.” She spread her hands. “I am merely proposing cooperation.”

I nodded, and stared back at her. After another moment, she sighed.

“I do not care about the sum of money Mr. Falken owes. You are welcome to it, and I hope you recover it. If I can assist you in recovering it, I will gladly do so.”

She grinned at me. After a moment I realized she thought this was enough to get me talking.

She blinked. She'd switched her sunglasses for a pair of thick prescriptions in the same frame, her eyes swimming huge and bleary behind the epic lenses. Time was slowed down by those lenses, every blink taking an extra second to get to me, occurring in the past.

“So,” she said, sounding suddenly unsure of herself. “Since we both seek Falken, I am suggesting we pool our resources. Share information. I want Falken himself—his physical being. You wish only his funds. Therefore we are not at cross-purposes, and could benefit from combined strategy.”

I nodded and sat forward, jostled slightly by the smooth motion of the limo through the streets, zooming uptown on Third Avenue. “Is that it? That the pitch?”

She blinked again, Morse code from the future. “Well,” she said, twiddling her fingers. “Well.”

I gave her another few seconds, puzzling it out. She had muscle. Three heavy hands with barkers crowding their armpits didn't make an empire, but it was muscle. She had money. Not cops, but Feds, I wondered, or some *agency* maybe you didn't hear about too often. Or just someone with money who had a hard-on for Falken, although you didn't meet too many independently wealthy assholes who had time for shit like this—they had *lawyers* for shit like this. I turned and looked out the tinted window, watching the Mercedes containing The Bumble suddenly accelerate past us, and then leaned forward and smiled at Rusch again.

“Then listen: I don't give a fuck why you want Falken. I don't care to have terms dictated to me. When I find that motherfucker, I will need use of his *physical being* in order to extract my money from him, follow? When I'm done with him, if there's much of him left, you can scrape him up and do whatever you want with him, because I won't care any more. Until then, you better put on your fucking seatbelts.”

Rusch blinked again. “What?”

The Mercedes swooped into the lane in front of us and the brake lights came on red and angry as The Bumble shuddered to a sudden stop. The limo swerved and braked, spinning and slamming into the trunk of the Mercedes, sending us all tumbling violently around the back, smacking into each other. I hit my head on something that didn't like me, and everything went gray and woozy for a moment. A piercing, painfully loud noise erupted in my ears, a harsh buzzing that grew and grew until I wanted to twitch and shake and bang my head against concrete to make it stop.

And then, it stopped.

I realized I was on my back on the floor of the limo, the stink of spilled liquor everywhere, and when I pushed myself up my left hand found broken glass that sliced in, sending a burning spike of pain up my arm, which I ignored.

I blinked, something wet and burning in my eyes. I looked around. Aside from me, the limo was empty. Everyone else had disappeared.

I stared down at the Ribeye and my double bourbon. Bourbon was a good, steady drink when your heart was pounding and your head aching; bourbon was basically moonshine allowed to age and thus was all natural and unfussy. When my stomach felt tender I went

with good old American bourbon instead of Scotch. I was on my third, double neat, and hadn't touched my steak.

Sitting at the bar at The Porterhouse, I felt confused and burned cigarettes one after the other, forgetting to smoke them. They'd tried to ban smoking indoors a few years ago, but cooler heads had prevailed. The noise of the restaurant and bar was subdued and mellow, just people having conversations. The bartender was a sweet young girl in black pants and a white shirt, her blond hair up in a bouncy ponytail, and most nights when she was working I tried flirting with her, just for the hell of it. Tonight I didn't have the mental energy and it worried her. The gash on my head and the bandage damp with blood on my hand might not be helping either.

On the other end of the bar, The Bumble sat with a newspaper, pretending he could read and glancing up at me from time to time, his face blank. I kept buying the impassive bastard drinks—he was, I knew, partial to Gimlets—but he hadn't touched them, all three just sitting there, sweating and wet. The Bumble didn't drink when he deemed himself to be on duty.

A tall black man in a really good suit, carrying a really nice black overcoat over one arm, stepped into the bar area behind The Bumble, who spied him in the mirror and nodded, once, politely. Detective James made a gun out of his massive hand and fired at The Bumble, once, grinning. James found The Bumble amusing, and so far had not had any occasion to be disabused of the notion. I watched him walk over to me in the mirror, his alternate self grinning as he slid into the stool next to me, the massive gold watch on his wrist glinting in the light, his diamond rings glittering like tiny flash bulbs. His tiepin, I noted, was a big ruby, somehow not gauche or oversize on him. It was probably because Detective James was the size of three men

forced into the same suit.

“Thought I'd find you here,” he rumbled as he leaned towards the bartender. “Hello, sweetheart. You're getting better-looking every time I come in here. Still not dating brothers?”

The blond, whose name I never learned on purpose, kept her face blank. “I date lots of *brothers*,” she said archly. “I don't date *cops*.”

He grinned, his teeth perfect, white and straight. “All right, then. A Coors.” He turned back to me, still grinning. “The fucking Banquet Beer, eh?”

I shrugged. Coors had tasted like dirty water a hundred years ago, and it tasted like dirty water today.

“Shit, you look like hell,” he said, folding those shovels in his lap. “Crawl out of any limousines lately?”

I shut my eyes. “Shit.”

“Someone noticed your plates as you fled the scene of an accident. I got a flag on that plate. I like to keep an eye on you. So you're lucky; I quashed the note for now. Thought I'd see what was going on.”

I nodded. Detective Stanley James, called The Executioner by his admirers due to an unfortunate shooting record, was the smartest fucking cop I knew. He wasn't adverse to bribery—took them eagerly—but he always chose the moment, the time, the place. McKenna had put hundreds of thousands into James' pocket, but we didn't really have a hold on him, at least nothing permanent. Nothing you could rely on. You could sometimes buy your way through things with him, but if he chose to jam you up, he just magically turned back into a real cop, and he was fucking unpredictable in that regard.

He had a philosophy: He figured a lot of crimes were self-induced. You borrowed money with a thirty-five percent interest rate, you got what you deserved, and he was willing to let someone like me operate

unobstructed. It all depended on victimhood with The Executioner. If he saw a victim, there wasn't an amount of money you could pay him to step aside.

The bartender brought his beer, a lot of spiteful foam on top. He stared at it unhappily for a moment.

“So?” he said, turning in his stool to lean against the bar, his long legs spread wide, surveying his new kingdom. Detective James annexed any room he entered, conquered it, and ruled it, then abdicated as he left, freeing the slaves. “Wanna tell me why I shouldn't release your name to the Dicks on the file?”

I smiled. “As a favor?”

He laughed. “Shee-it, kid. I don't owe you any favors.”

“You could set me up to owe you one.”

“Sorry, kid. The chances of you ever being in a position to help Mister Detective Stanley James out of a hole is fucking *unlikely*, so that cash ain't got no gold behind it.”

I sighed. “Then you're gonna have to arrest me.” Frank wasn't going to stretch out his arm for me on this, since it wasn't anything to do with him, and I wasn't going to waste good money on buying my way out of something that happened *to* me. I hadn't done anything.

He turned back around and picked up his foamy beer. He studied it unhappily for a moment, then drank it off in one gulp, setting the empty glass down with a smack of his lips and standing up. I watched him in the mirror again. Detective James was a good-looking guy, and he dressed well. His suits were midrange—expensive for normal cops, but not crazy. A man on a detective's salary who was careful with his money could conceivably own a few of those suits, and The Executioner had a reputation as a dandy, so no one raised any



eyebrows.

“All right,” he said. “I’ll let it worm its way through, so someone’s gonna come by and have a chat. But since you’re so fucking innocent, a virgin in the bad old world, I guess you got no worries.” He grinned down at me, but I still didn’t turn to look at him; I just watched him in the mirror. “You know that limo was stolen, right?”

I blinked, but kept my face blank. It wasn’t surprising, of course, but I hadn’t thought about it. Instead I’d been thinking about all those people in there with me, tossed around, and then. . .gone. I forced myself to shrug. “Cars get stolen, Detective. You know that ain’t my bag. I don’t carry a gun and I don’t steal cars.”

He shrugged his overcoat on. “It’s interesting.”

I frowned, touching my aching head. “That it was stolen?”

He grinned. “*When* it was stolen. Which was thirty-two years ago.”