

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 10

by Jeff Somers

### 10.

I'd had guns pointed at me before, but the trigger never got pulled. Guns were everywhere in my line of work, and assholes produced them regularly. It was the Asshole Punctuation Mark, really; whenever they felt like you weren't paying them the proper attention, they put a gun in their hands for emphasis. But throwing bullets around had consequences—I worked for Frank McKenna, and even if I hadn't been one of his best earners he would retaliate against any bullets thrown my way pretty harshly, just as a matter of policy. If you didn't get the sign-off from someone up the food chain, bullets had a way of coming back at you.

I stared at Rusch; she was eyeing me like I was on fire. “We're gonna perform a scientific experiment, doc,” I said, struggling to control myself. The bitch had *shot* at me. I felt light and nimble, every chemical my brain had at its disposal dumped liberally into my bloodstream. I knew I'd be sore and stiff tomorrow—not from exertion, but from overdrive. “We're going to see if you can convince me not to punish you for that. I don't like your odds.”

Rusch straightened up and looked wide-awake, finally, her eyes wide, her face hot and red. “I can *explain!*” She said. “Let me *explain!*”

I realized someone was hitting me in the back. It was like a soft

drizzle of rain. I turned my head and the redhead was there, tiny, beating her little fists against me. As I looked at her she hit me in the face a few times, like a gnat crashing into a window pane. I took one hand and put it on her head, and with a light shove sent her flying into the sink.

Then, suddenly, Rachel was there next to me, her arms akimbo, her face dark and red.

“Stop it!” She said steadily. “*Stop it.*”

A cold flash swept through me. I frowned down at her. “She *shot* at me,” I complained.

“*Let her speak,*” she commanded, actually stomping her foot. “Jesus fucking *Christ*, let her *explain.*”

I clenched my teeth. “She—”

Rachel stood up on her tip-toes and slapped me across the face, making my cheek sting and my eyes water. I whipped my head back and stared at her in amazement.

“You brought me into this,” she said. “I am not going to stand here and watch you beat another person to death *right in front of me.*”

I stared down at her, my throat working, my arms trembling. She was four-feet eleven inches tall in skintight jeans and shiny leather boots, but she stood there with her lip out and her chest pointed at me like she was certain of besting me in a fight. Which, considering I'd promised to never touch her, she probably would.

With a snarl, I spun away and punched a nice round hole in the wall between the kitchen and the bathroom. Turning back, I wiped my face with my hand, still trembling, and glanced at the front doorway. My neighbor, Mr. Mitra, was peering at me from his own door, his face, as usual, heavily lined and very brown and completely unreadable.

“Mind your business, Mr. Mittra,” I said between breaths. He jumped a little and shut his door. I figured the cops would be here in about three minutes.

I turned and looked at the girl, who lay on the floor with her back against the sinkbase, staring at me. I swallowed bile and stepped over to her, holding out a hand.

“All right,” I said thickly. “Sorry about that. But you were hitting me.”

She stared at my hand and then up at me. After a moment, I pulled my hand back and looked at Rusch and Rachel. The professor had recovered her posture and sleepy look. Rachel looked like a diamond was about to pop out of her ass.

“I’m pretty sure my neighbor just called the cops,” I said slowly, feeling slow and thick. “Let’s get out of here and ... talk.”

Rachel nodded. “It’s okay,” she said to Rusch. “He won’t do anything else.” She paused, biting her lip. “Just don’t *shoot* at him any more.”

Pirelli’s Diner was an ancient box of greasy laminate and cracked vinyl. It had a thick, sticky menu showing faded pictures of all sorts of interesting food no one had ever ordered. I’d never actually eaten anything solid in the place, wanting to remain alive. I ordered surprisingly good coffees and used their ashtrays.

I sat on the inside corner of the booth, smoking, a cup of coffee going cold in front of me, my arm stretched out along the back of the booth, an inch away from Rachel’s neck. There was air between us, but I could feel her warm and soft there anyway. Rusch and her girl sat across from us. The doctor had ordered a slab of cherry pie with ice cream, and I stared at her in amazement as he devoured it

happily, like he hadn't been terrified half an hour before.

Snuffing my cigarette out, I leaned forward, carefully snaking my arm out from behind Rachel without touching even a strand of hair. "All right, Doc—let me apologize for losing my temper. But my temper's short, and you did fire a gun at me."

She nodded, suddenly jolly, and dropped her fork to pick up a napkin and wipe her lips carefully. "I do understand, I assure you. I apologize for the trick. I assumed if I asked you would not consent to the experiment."

I kept my face still. "And if the experiment had gone badly?"

She shook her head, wincing a little. "No, no, no—impossible. I am almost certain of your quantum status. I've been working with this research for thirty years—ever since I received tenure." Her face darkened peevishly for a moment. "The university hasn't let me teach a class in years. They think I'm crazy. But I still have access to the facilities, and I have been working on my research, alone. Quite alone." She sighed, then blinked and looked at me. "I had done my due diligence on you and was certain of my findings, but I required a definitive test. I knew the gun would not fire."

I considered the odds of four or five misfires in a row, then a clean shot, then another two misfires. Certainly not impossible, but unlikely. "And if it fucking *had*?"

She stared at me for a few seconds, her face blank. "I—I admit I did not have a fallback scenario in mind."

"We would have run," the redhead said calmly. "You're a criminal. The police would have assumed you were rubbed out by some other criminal. Can I have a cigarette?"

I raised an eyebrow. "*Rubbed out*? Did you really just say that without irony?" I tugged my pack out of my shirt pocket, took one out

for myself, and tossed it onto the table along with the matchbook. “What’s your name, darling?” I said, leaning back and sticking the cigarette into my mouth.

She just gave me a sour look while she picked up the cigarettes, examining them with a frown, but Rusch gave me a wincing grin. “Forgive Doira. She has been my research assistant for many years, and she is protective. And she knows I dislike cigarette smoke.”

The redhead rolled her eyes.

I smiled and turned my head to look out the window. The BMW sat in a shadowed corner of the parking lot, The Bumble’s squat form a blur in the driver’s seat. I was kind of relieved to have him there.

I looked back and nodded at Rusch. “You were saying?”

She paused, a pie-laden fork halfway to her mouth. Slowly, she set the fork down and cleared her throat.

“In small words,” I said, taking the matches Doira had dropped back on the table. “See if you can get through it in about thirty seconds.” I jerked my thumb at Rachel. “She’s the only thing keeping me polite right now.”

She looked at Rachel and then back at me. “Very well. As we discussed, observe—alternate universes. Yes, let us use that term.” She placed her fork on the table between us and pointed at the top. “Let us say here is our timeline. You and I, moving forward through time.” She traced a finger up the stem of the fork slowly. “You understand, I am criminally misstating the actual science.”

“Better than getting a bone broken,” I suggested, and Rachel turned to glare at me, adorable.

Rusch continued as if I hadn’t spoken. “Every second, every *nanosecond*, you and I, everyone, face decisions, yes? Coffee or tea, pie or cake, smoke or abstain, yes? At the moment of decision, *every*

possible outcome exists, because you have not made the decision yet.” She glanced up at me. “Clear?”

I sent a gale of smoke into the world. “As ... mud.”

She winced again, as if my words caused her physical harm. “An example: You could stop smoking that cigarette at any time. Any second, you could crush it into the ashtray. Every second, a world exists where you *do* crush out that cigarette. And this world, where you do *not*, also exists. Every second, universes split off, every conceivable possibility, infinite decisions and actions and non-actions from around the world, spinning off.” Her finger had reached the tines of the fork, crusted with pie and ice cream, and she spread the fingers of her hand. The skin on the back of her hand was thin and mottled by the blue veins beneath, rosy, sinuous. “In each of these universes, you exist. Or perhaps you do not—the actions of *another* person, or the inanimate chance of natural happenings, may have destroyed you, or caused you to not exist in the first place. Yes?”

I nodded, more for effect than anything else. “Okay, so every time I make a choice, there's another me out there. Maybe. At any rate, a lot of mes running around breaking bones out there.”

She hesitated. “Well ... let us leave it at that. Except that the other “yous” may not resemble you very much, depending. Certainly, at the moment of divergence, perhaps you are identical. But if you diverged thirty years ago, or in the womb, say, you may be very different people.” She picked up the fork again. “At any rate, I do not believe there are any other *yous* out there.”

I blinked. “Why is that?”

“You are what I term a Quantum Terminus.”

I smiled. “Oh, I am going to like this.”

She grinned back at me as if she believed me, as if I hadn't

terrorized her just a moment before. “Perhaps you will. As I said, every divergence *can* create an ... alternate version of you. Again, the terms are not precise, but ... However, there are not *infinite* versions of you. You may die. You may never be born at all in a divergent timeline. However, because of the splitting of timelines—consider: Every time you are in danger of dying, there exists one possible world where you die, and one where you live. As a result,” she hesitated suddenly, then leaned forward and spoke in a rush. “There exists, always, *one* version of a given person who does not die. Ever. Every time they face the possibility of death, they are the version that lives. Forever.”

I blinked. “What?”

“She’s saying you’re immortal,” Rachel said, in the same tone of voice as if she’d said I was fat, or smelled bad.

Rusch shrugged apologetically. I realized I kind of enjoyed her talking, and thought she was probably a good professor. “Yes.” She leaned forward again. “Imagine this: You sit in front of a gun fitted with an automatic trigger that randomly either fires or does not fire, every second. Each second, the possibility is that the gun fires and kills you, or does not. Thus in every second you split into two: One dies, one lives. Each split then also faces the next second, and splits in turn. Eventually you end up with *one* version that survives *every* second. This version is the Quantum Terminus, because it goes on. Forever.” She relaxed, picking up the fork again. “This is why the gun misfires when I point it at you. You are the last of, well, *you*. In every scenario where you choose between living and dying, you live.”

She plunged the fork into her pie and held it up between us for a moment, gesturing at me with a dollop of cherry filling and vanilla ice cream. “You’re immortal.”



I considered that for about five seconds, then leaned forward and held my cigarette up in front of my face, pretending to examine it closely. “Doc, I didn’t hear the name *Falken* once in that speech. And you know how that irritates me.”

Rusch actually seemed amused, still holding the pie in front of her face. “He’s not immortal, but there’s a version of him—an *alternate* him—that wants to be.”

I shifted my eyes from the coal to her face. “And how does he do that?”

Rusch pushed the fork into her mouth. “By killing all the *other* versions of himself, of course.”