

A person wearing a dark hat and a purple jacket is walking away from the camera down a narrow, cluttered alleyway at night. The alleyway is illuminated by warm, neon-like lights, creating a moody atmosphere. In the background, a sign for a restaurant is visible, with the word "RESTAURANT" clearly legible. Other signs include "HT BUS 16 SEATS" and "21K". The overall scene suggests a gritty, urban setting.

**JEFF  
SOMERS  
COLLECTIONS**  
a novel

# COLLECTIONS

## Chapter 11

by Jeff Somers

### 11.

Somehow I ended up with Doira, the redhead, sitting in the back seat with The Bumble pretending we didn't exist, which he was good at. The Bumble, I was convinced, believed we all disappeared every time he closed his eyes, or that we at least relaxed, going out of character, smoking cigarettes and talking shop, waiting for him to come back to us. It wasn't egotism, it was simplicity: The only thing The Bumble understood was himself. The rest of us were perplexing.

"Why is she so sure Falken's here?" I asked, making conversation. The actual process behind the good doctor's intuition didn't matter to me.

"Why is she so sure you won't kill him if he is?" she asked without looking at me. Her voice was sharp and nasal, but there was a grit to it that would be sexy if she took it down a pitch and breathed a little into her words. One of my first jobs for Frank had been security for whores, driving them around, busting noses when guys got too frisky or wouldn't pay. The whores all talked that way to their customers. To me it was their real voices.

I studied the freckles on her neck. The woman was made of freckles, like she would explode into a million pieces if you hit her the right way. "Because I said I wouldn't." I looked out the window at the

wet street. “Of course, my promise was based on Dr. Rusch’s word that Falken would have the nut, and be willing to pay it out to me.”

I felt her turning to look at me. She didn’t say anything for a few seconds, and I pretended to brood over the shitty weather.

“You just found out you’re an amazingly rare event in the history of the universe,” she said steadily, biting her words off so fiercely I felt bad for her boyfriends, past, present, and future, “and all you care about is *money*?”

“You know what else is an amazingly rare event?” I said, turning to look back at her. “Me hitting a woman in the face. But, it happens.”

She snorted through her nose and looked at the back of The Bumble’s head.

She was my hostage, though I was pretty sure she didn’t know it. Rusch and Rachel had gone into the place—an old sagging brownstone in The Village, under renovation, everything roped off and boarded up, permits slapped everywhere like wallpaper—to go scare up Falken and talk him into coming out to have a word with me. Rusch assured me Falken had thought I was with the *other* Rusch, the one trying to kill everyone, that’s why he ran. If I’d been dealing with anyone with a brain and some balls, it would have been a hostage swap—Rachel for the Ginger, everyone behaves and no one gets hurt. But since I didn’t see Rusch as a threat to Rache, I was in charge, even if the only one who realized it was me.

“Ask you a science-y kind of question?” I said, leaning slightly towards her. She smelled nice. Not pretty, but not unattractive, really. *Sturdy* was the odd word that came to mind when I looked at her. I was starting to think I might ask to buy her a drink, if she ever got over hating my guts.

She sighed, but didn’t say anything.

“Falken—how’d he just disappear? I chased him into a room with no windows and just one door. I saw him go in. And then I get in there seconds later, and he’s gone.”

“You got the part where each alternate universe is different, sometimes a lot, sometimes a little, right?”

“Sure,” I said, nodding, going along with it. “Like, in one universe the World Trade Center burns down, or the Red Sox win the world series, or something else incredible.”

She gave one curt nod. “Okay, sometimes it’s a single concrete thing like that, but every time something happens there are consequences. Like in one universe you get hit by a train when you’re fifteen, riding a motorcycle drunk, and because you’re dead, all the people you’ve hurt or killed in your life *don’t* get hurt or killed, and maybe one of them cures cancer.”

I kept my face straight. I’d almost been killed by a train when I was fifteen. I’d come within seconds. A cold feeling seeped into my bones.

“So, this Falken, this *version* of Falken, comes from a universe where knowledge of the alternates is common, and exploited. He can move between them. That’s why he ran, when they came for him. So when you came for him, he ... went elsewhere. Another *version* of that room, a version where you weren’t on the other side of the door.”

My head was aching. “Uh-huh. Glad I cleared that up.” It made sense to me, in a Saturday-morning cartoon kind of way. Falken had come to our little pond in the multiverse trying to hide from Alt Rusch’s murderous intentions, and had come to *our* Rusch because he figured the professor might be able to help. It was fucking confusing. And she wondered why I chose to concentrate on my money. At least money made *sense*. I looked at the back of The Bumble’s head.

“What do you think, Billy?”

He grunted. “I think we’re workin’ fucking *hard* for this debt, boss.”

I grinned and looked at Doira. “He’s right.”

She gave me a snort.

People were emerging from the basement apartment of the brownstone: one, two, three. I recognized Rachel’s tiny frame and watched them approach the car. I kept my eyes on Rache; I was surprised she’d stuck around this long, stayed involved, but appreciated it, and if anything was wonky I knew I could trust her to give me a sign.

Rusch and Falken followed her. Falken looked a little worn-out; the dandy I’d found in McHales looked tired and wrinkled. He was wearing the same suit as before, and had a stunned, glazed look on his face. I looked from Rachel to him and back as they approached. I wondered if he’d run for it, and was prepared to let him; there was nothing more ridiculous than me chasing someone through downtown New York at two in the morning. I had my dignity to protect.

He didn’t run. Rachel stopped a few feet away and indicated the car, and I rolled down the window, staying in the car to reassure him. I didn’t care about intimidating him or being tough. I wanted my money, Frank’s money, and if Falken was going to hand it over I was prepared to be polite.

“Evening,” I said, giving him a smile. “No hard feelings, huh?”

He hesitated, looking first at Rusch, who gave him a motherly, encouraging nod, and then at Rachel, who smiled warmly at him in a way she never did at me, hardening my heart towards Mr. Falken, who, I reminded myself, was a deadbeat I had every right to tune up

to my black heart's content.

She looked at me, the traces of that smile misting away. "I promised him your hands would stay in your pockets."

I smiled. "What if I have an itch?"

She shook her head. "Don't fuck with me."

I looked back at Falken. "All right," I said. "My hands stay in my pockets. We can talk like fucking animals or you can switch places with Doira here and we'll talk like civilized men. Or we can go somewhere, have a drink. You could have people around, make you feel safer."

He stared at me. "People? Jesus. *Safer?*"

Rachel was shaking her head anyway. "He's not getting in the car with you and Billy."

I glanced at her again, getting a little irritated. She was presuming a lot on our friendship, on our deal. I got the feeling she thought the balance of power was permanently in her favor. I'd have to think on that and make sure she understood otherwise, my promise notwithstanding. Then I smiled at Falken again.

"Look, it's up to you. I'll do this any way you want. Tell me how you want to talk, and let's talk. Hands in pockets, I promise."

He looked around. A night or two spent living in an empty, gutted house breathing drywall dust and listening to the roaches scamper over the concrete would make anyone tired. Finally, he nodded. "I'll get in the car."

Rachel opened her mouth, then thought better of it and shrugged. She'd known the man for five minutes. If he was going to be, in her opinion at least, an idiot, she wasn't going to stand in his way. It was a stupid thing to do, really, except that I'd given my word. But he didn't know me. Stupid.

I looked at Doira. “Do you mind, honey?”

“Jesus,” she sneered, opening her door. “You’re a walking stereotype, you know that?”

I shrugged, examining her ass as she stepped out, and thought that at least my entire ensemble didn’t retail for twenty-seven dollars, *total*, at a local Rainbow Shop.

Falken slipped into the seat a moment later, pulling the door shut. I rolled up my window, and we were snug, the outside world nicely muted.

“You’re a hard bastard to track down,” I said. “You’ve caused me a lot of fucking trouble.”

He snorted. “*You?* Listen, man, those bastards are trying to *erase* me. Or *I’m* trying to erase me. You know what it’s like to have someone want you dead, to *hunt* you?”

I nodded. “Sure. Sure I do. I work with deranged, violent people, Mr. Falken.”

He shook his head. “Not like this. Not just me. Every *version* of me. Someone hunting me down in every universe, erasing me.”

I nodded again, trying to be friendly. “The whole quantum whatsit thing.”

“Yes,” he said, and got quiet. We sat in companionable silence for a moment. “Can you imagine, yourself—*you*—trying to kill yourself, to murder yourself, so you can be immortal?”

I thought about it, and shrugged. “Why not. It’s not you. It’s some mope who looked like you, maybe has your taste in clothes. It’s not *you*. Only you are you.”

“That sounds kind of philosophical.”

I sighed. “You want to hold my hand, take a long walk on the beach, get me drunk and fuck me at some dim motel, Mr. Falken? We

going on a date here, spend a few hours discussing our inner turmoils and regrets while Billy Bumbles here plays the fiddle real slow and heartachy?" I rolled my shoulders, trying to work out a persistent, stabbing discomfort that had plagued me ever since my loading dock adventure with the Worst Kidnappers in History. "I'm here to collect the money you owe, Mr. Falken. I understand you thought I worked for Dr. Rusch's evil twin and wanted to murder you. A misunderstanding. Now that you know I am merely a representative of Mr. Frank McKenna, from whom you borrowed a large amount of money, be kind enough to bring your fucking account fucking current and let me get on with my fucking life." I turned to look at him. "Okay?"

He stared back at me, eyes wide, face slack and shadowed. "Jesus, I'm not here to *pay* you," he said, sounding panicked. "I don't have the goddamn money."

I blinked. "Then why are you meeting me?" A small spark of joy sprang into life in my belly, and I imagined myself breaking his thumbs, justified and free from Rachel's disapproval.

He looked straight ahead, and put a hand up to his face as he sank down in the leather seats. "I thought you were going to *protect* me."

I looked at him, then turned my head and smiled through the window at Rachel, who stood on the sidewalk with her arms crossed under her boobs, scowling. "Well," I said, giving her a little nod, cheerful, "you thought wrong."