

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 12

by Jeff Somers

### 12.

“I’m not speaking to you. Just so we’re clear.”

I nodded. “Duly noted.”

Rachel let us walk in peace for another few seconds.

“I promised him you wouldn’t hurt him,” she said fiercely.

I nodded again. “Actually, you promised him I would be *reasonable*, and fuck, I’m being so reasonable it hurts.” I glanced at her sideways. “The Bumble’s not going to hurt him. He’s just keeping a pin in him, make sure he doesn’t disappear again.”

“Billy *Bumbles* is not going to hurt him,” she spat. “Billy hurts people when he coughs.”

I tried a bright smile as we crossed the slick, empty street that ran perpendicular to mine, streetlights spilling dulled orange light. The Bumble wasn’t a complex, unpredictable tool: he could be trusted to do what I asked of him and no more or less. Falken was about as safe as any man who owed that much money to the wrong people could be.

“Trust me, Rache,” I said, leading her to the low stone wall separating the backyard garden of the corner building from the sidewalk. “You’re the one made deals in my name without consulting me. Don’t fucking complain about the manner in which I honor

them.”

She didn't comment on that. “Why the fuck are we going to your apartment?”

“I'm buying time. Go around front and wait outside. If anyone looks like they're looking for me shows up, stall.”

“What?”

“I'll meet you around front in a few minutes.”

“Why are you buying time?” She asked, putting her hand on her hips again. “Aren't you immortal?”

I tolled my eyes. “You don't believe that horseshit any more than I do. Now go on. I promise you, I'm trying to find a solution to all this. But I need time.”

She nodded, softer than I'd expected, and turned to go. I watched her walk for a moment, knowing that if she caught me ogling I'd be in dutch. Then I put my hands on the surprisingly warm, painted stone and pulled myself up and over the low wall, landing awkwardly in the dense, fragrant garden. The corner building's basement apartment was inhabited by a cheery, crazy old woman and her sullen, crazy son, both fat as pears waddling around, doing half-assed superintendent work in return for reduced rent and drinking lite beer in surprising, disturbing quantities on the front steps just about any night it wasn't cold or wet. She was a waste of time, generally, except for the magnificent garden she kept in the back, toiling over it every day. I was sad, sometimes, thinking that someday the old bat would die and her son would let the garden rot and wither.

I crossed the garden and scaled the sagging chain-link fence on the other side, hidden behind an aggressive and strangely sticky-feeling wall of ivy. The next yard over was a neat, clean concrete box with a drain in the exact center. No furniture, no plants, nothing. The

wall between it and my building's back yard was about ten feet high, but someone had embedded thick eyehooks into the blocks, creating a precarious ladder up to the top. The drop into my own backyard was a little frightening, all the dark, overgrown weeds and trees, but I managed to not twist an ankle. From there it was an easy climb up the rusting fire escape to my bedroom window, and then I was back inside my tossed apartment without anyone knowing.

Whoever had tossed my place had found the cutout in the closet floor, probably within seconds of entering the place, but all it revealed was an empty wooden pit. I leaned down and pushed down hard on the bottom of the pit and the wooden panel clicked and came loose, revealing a second box beneath it. I fished out one of the duffel bags hidden in the cool, damp darkness underneath, and pulled two plastic-wrapped cubes of cash from it. Then the bag went back down, I pounded the panel back into place carefully, and slipped the bricks of money into my coat pockets, twenty grand. Then it was back out the window and back the way I'd come, dusting myself off on the sidewalk and straightening my cuffs before swinging around the corner and waving to Rachel. She looked radiant, a tiny sexpot in tight jeans giving me her Pursed Lips of Doom.

“What the fuck—”

“Sorry I kept you waiting. Let's go up. I need a shower and a change of clothes, and then I'll take you to breakfast.”

She didn't want breakfast. She wanted to stand in my ruined kitchen for twenty minutes telling me I was an asshole, and then she called a cab and left. It was a pretty typical date for me and Rachel: Abuse, no touching, me groggy and covered in silt.

I took a shower with my shoes on the bathroom floor, stepping

into them to walk through the ruin of the place to my bedroom, where I spent a distressing twenty minutes trying to find a shirt that didn't look like someone had used it as a towel recently. I'd fallen behind on my dry cleaning. And my housekeeping. And my dance lessons.

Dressed, I called and checked in with The Bumble, who reported that Falken didn't seem to like him very much but wasn't causing any trouble. Then, still damp from the shower, I caught a cab downtown to Rowdy's to have breakfast, careful on the steep stairs down into the basement of 86 Barrow Street. Dumb Benny was working the door, and greeted me with his wet, toothless smile and an awkward, unwanted hug. But Dumb Benny was an avalanche of a man, sixteen tons of jovial weight, and in enclosed spaces you did whatever Dumb Benny wanted you to do.

Inside, I walked quickly through four small, empty rooms that appeared to be dust-filled and long-unused, emerging into the subdued din of Rowdy's gaming room. It was a low-ceilinged affair with no windows and poor ventilation, six round poker tables, a bar, and about twenty men and women playing cards with the sort of grim, loveless determination usually reserved for hunger strikes.

Clarence was behind the bar, thin and Filipino and happy enough to see me. I ordered steak and eggs and a Belgian-style beer. Rowdy's kitchen was a secret; it only existed for a select few. They made their eggs light and fluffy with a pinch of Adobo and Rowdy's cousin was a butcher. The steaks were fucking *gorgeous*.

"My credit here still good?" I asked Clarence as I lit a fresh cigarette. I didn't want to pay for breakfast by breaking open a brick of hundred dollar bills like some asshole kid trying to impress everyone. Not to mention advertising, in a room filled with criminals,

that I was flush. I'd been awake forever and felt scratchy.

Clarence nodded, pouring beer from an amber bottle expertly. "Sure, sure," he said, grinning. Clarence grinned a lot. It was almost a permanent expression.

That was good. Aside from breakfast, it meant Frank hadn't queered me on the street, cutting me off. It wouldn't make sense for him to do that, since I owed him money and to get money I needed to work, but Frank was a vindictive bastard, sometimes. Sometimes he just liked flexing his muscle on you.

As I ate, I puffed my cigarette and considered. Falken said he didn't have the money, and I believed him; if he had resources he wouldn't have been hiding with the roaches in a basement. No one who borrowed money from Frank had money, that was the point. But you could get money *out* of them. It was amazing how people found money, people who'd felt compelled a few weeks earlier to go to Frank McKenna and put up with his bad jokes and acrid cologne to beg for money. You pressed their pressure points hard enough and they found old friends to touch, valuables to sell, houses to mortgage. People didn't borrow from Frank when they had no resources, they borrowed from Frank when they didn't want to liquefy the resources they *had*. My job was to clarify that for them. So I considered Falken to still be an okay risk, and I was going to hang onto him until I figured out how to squeeze him without breaking my word to Rachel.

I considered Rusch and Doira and Falken and their crazy story: Multiple universes, our doubles running around—Doppelgangers, my old grandad would have called 'em in his thick accent. Graps, I'd called the skinny dried-up old drunk, and that was the only thing he'd ever taught me, that one word. Bullshit, had to be, but they sold it. When I'd been a kid, I'd joined the Boy Scouts for all of two weeks, on

my Dad's insistence, seeking to socialize me or something. I'd gone on a weekend camping trip, nothing major, just a bunch of shitbag kids in a state park getting dirty water diseases and mud in their underwear. The older kids had a hazing tradition, and all the new kids were given chores as we set up camp; mine was to go around to the other campsites and ask for a gallon of striped paint. I was a kid, I was an asshole, I spent an hour going from camp to camp asking for striped paint. When I finally figured it out I went after all of them at once, just kicking and punching, and I'd broken two noses, knocked five teeth loose, and cracked a half dozen ribs before two adults pulled me off them.

What I remembered, aside from the sweet happiness of beating on the motherfuckers, was the completely straight faces they'd had when sending me on my way. They *sold* it, and I'd believed it, and Rusch and Falken and Doira had the same game faces on when they started in about Quantum Terminals and shit.

I spent a pleasant few seconds imagining what I would do to each of them if it turned out they were lying to me. Then I snuffed my cigarette, swallowed the last of my beer, and thanked Clarence. With my bricks of cash weighing me down, I headed over to the Templar Social Club. Traffic was a snarl because the President was in town, speechifying at the United Nations on some atrocity that had occurred in Bogota the other day, so I walked.

Bob was working the door, dressed in the same flashy leather duster and smoking the same pack of cigarettes, it seemed. His round, bald head was turning an angry shade of red. I guessed he'd never heard of sunblock, or he didn't think you could get skin cancer when it was cold out. As I approached he adjusted his stance to block

the door, and I stopped in honest shock.

“Mornin’,” he said, looking at my neck. “Can I help you?”

I swallowed my urge to hook my fingers into his nostrils and pull. I’d give him the benefit of the doubt. “We met already, a few nights ago,” I said.

He shrugged, in a worse mood. “Gotta frisk you, first.”

It was him not looking at my face that did it. Just being a little shit I could handle, but being a little shit and not even looking me in the face was fucking irritating. I shook my head. “You touch me, and I’ll break all ten fingers. Right here.”

That brought his fat, round face up. Big guy. Blubber, but big, sort of guy who filled doorways and crowded rooms. You could outrun him, dance away, but if he got you cornered he could smother you, and he was used to it. He rolled his shoulders and stepped forward. “Just—”

I stepped into him and kned him in the balls, hard, the easiest move in the world. He tried to crumple up, protect himself, but I caught him under the left shoulder and took hold of his wrist, spinning behind him and bending his arm backwards, my knee in the back of his, sending him into a gasping kneeling position with me on his calves. I took hold of his pinky with my free hand.

“You remember me next time, yeah?” I said, and with a jerk snapped it back until it broke, the sharp sound making me giddy, a rush of pleasure sweeping through me. I could feel him struggling senselessly, could feel his howl through the clothes and our skin. Could sense his heart rate climbing, dangerous, the delicious quiver of his bones under all that thick, red flesh.

He was making an odd huffing noise, wet and vocal, and I realized after a moment’s concentration that he was trying to say *yes*.



“Good,” I said, and with a thrill I took hold of his ring finger.

“Well, Jesus fucking Christ, it’s the prodigal son,” Frank bellowed when he looked up from the desk. “Come on in. Have a drink.”

I sailed in, floating, feeling like I’d just come in from a body massage, or a fucking orgy. Alive and flushed. Chino was the only one in the office with Frank this time, and we nodded at each other quick and then ignored ourselves. Chino in his untucked dress shirt, even untucked not loose enough to obscure his gut.

Frank put a bottle of Bushmill’s on the desk with his fingers in two old glasses. I didn’t think he ever washed them, and hoped to hell the alcohol killed whatever might be trying to make a living on them. He poured sloppy fingers into each and handed it over to me; we clinked our glasses, spilling some onto the desk, and drank.

“I was worried you might never be seen again,” he said, putting the bottle up.

I frowned. “Over a fucking debt?” I blew air out through my lips. “Fuck that. Time comes, you can break my legs, I won’t holler.” I pulled a thick manilla envelope out of my pocket and dropped it on the desk. “Brings me current on Falken.”

Frank studied me, then leaned forward and picked up the envelope without looking at it, holding it up for Chino to take. The fat Puerto Rican tore the envelope open and began counting, fast, holding up random notes to the light.

“I’m surprised,” Frank said slowly, leaning back.

I put a smile in place. “What? That I’m keeping current or that I didn’t run?”

He shook his head. “That you couldn’t squeeze it out of him.” He grinned, pointing at me. “You’re goin’ soft.”

“We're good,” Chino said flatly, dropping the restuffed envelope back onto the desk.

I nodded and stood up. I kept the grin in place and wished for another shot. “By the way,” I said, turning for the door. “You're gonna need a new doorman. The one you have is broken.”

Time: It never came fucking cheap.