

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 15

by Jeff Somers

15.

She opened the door and her face was a marvel: Curiosity, then irritation, then melting horror.

“Jesus—”

“I’m in the wind,” I said, my words thick and slurry. “I just need to sit down for a minute.”

I stumbled into the foyer, forcing Rachel to scamper out of my way. I grabbed onto the wall for balance and left a streak of blood on it, finally bumping into the little console table she had against the wall for keys and cell phones, making everything rattle but finding my feet again.

“*Jesus*,” she hissed, grabbing onto me and putting herself under one arm, pulling me up a little and walking me down the short hall. It was the first time she’d touched me in years, and my head went a little gray again as her perfume and shampoo enveloped me.

“I’m sorry, kid,” I slurred. She kicked open her guest bathroom door and pushed me in. “I didn’t have anywhere else close.”

“Shut up,” she said, getting me to the floor the easy way: By just letting go of me. I sank onto the cool tile and found it to be surprisingly comfortable, like the porcelain had been transformed into tiny cushions. She pushed me onto my back, lifted up my coat,

and gasped, rocking back onto her heels. “Oh, fuck,” she said softly, then started to push herself up. “I’ll call Frank. Get him to—”

I flopped an arm out and grabbed her calf. It was the first time *I’d* touched *her* in years, and the jolt up my arm almost made me pass out.

“No,” I said heavily, letting my hand slide off her leg. “You call Frank and I’m dead. You call Frank and three guys with shotguns are here in fifteen minutes and we’re *both* dead.”

She sat down without ceremony or grace, legs folded under her, and stared at me. “Jesus *Christ*,” she muttered, then look up. “Hospital. Emergency Room. You’re *bleeding*.”

I shook my head, feeling peaceful and languid, like I’d been drinking for hours, but drinking something that didn’t give you a hangover, something that just made you feel good. “Even worse.”

“I have to do something. You’re going to fucking die on my fucking bathroom floor, goddammit.” She stared at me, looking angry, and then she jumped up. “I’m calling Rusch. She’s with Billy and ... your guy.”

She was out of the bathroom before I could say anything. I lay there and stared up at the donut-shaped fluorescent light fixture, and I drifted. Her bathroom smelled clean and fresh, like she’d just cleaned it, or never used it. I drifted. Nothing mattered, I was cool and comfortable and after the endless, terrible trip from the bar to Rachel’s place I was able to just lie there and breath, shallow, easy breaths. I imagined Rachel in here every day, in her pajamas, yellow dotted pajamas, her hair tied back. I imagined her brushing her teeth, taking a shower, toweling off, doing her makeup. It was peaceful. Sun shining in through the frosted window, a radio on, her dancing a little when a certain song came on.

Then I opened my eyes because someone was shaking me. It was Rusch, the creepy old hen, squinting down at me. She was wearing her usual wrinkled jacket, too light for the weather, and a white dress shirt that had never, as far as I could tell, been dry-cleaned, or even ironed. She waved a hand in my face until I grimaced and swatted it lazily away.

She stood up. "He'll be fine."

"Excuse me?" Rachel said from behind me, out of my field of vision. "He's going to *bleed to death*."

"No," Rusch shook her head. "He'll be fine."

There was a stretch of silence. "Are you going to tell me he'll be fine because he's *immortal*? Because if you are, I'm going to be fucking upset."

"He'll be *fine*," Rusch repeated, sounding amused. "The bleeding's just about stopped. Look at him: He looks like he's getting his color back, and his breathing isn't labored any more." She looked down at me and winked, like a favorite auntie being convinced to hand out candy. "I only had two years of med school, but I think he'll be *fine*."

"Doc," I said, pushing myself up to a nearly sitting position, my arms stiff behind me for support, both of them shaking a little with the effort. "I'm starting to get the feeling you're not as smart as you look."

She cocked her head a little and gave me a strange little off-center smile. "How are you feeling? Take a moment and truly consider the question, now."

I started to say something meanspirited, but realized I *did* feel better. The vibrating fuzziness was gone. I still felt weak, but I didn't feel like I'd pass out at any moment. When I put a hand on my belly to feel the wound, fresh pain sweeping through me like an invisible

laser cutting through me without breaking the skin, I kept myself upright with one arm, no trouble.

“All right,” I said slowly, feeling a strange foreboding fill me up, a dark sense of trouble. “I’m ... better.” I cocked my head to mimic the old bat and smiled. “Maybe you healed me.”

She shook her head. “You’re a Terminus, my friend. Whether you realize it or not, I’m sure this has happened before. You can be hurt, yes—possibly even rendered comatose or otherwise non-functioning. You could be paralyzed, or blinded, or your existence could be made a hell—but you will never die, because every other version of you in the universes has already met that fate.”

I heard Rachel behind me and spun in time to hold out my hand. “Leave it,” I said. “She doesn’t mean any harm.”

She stared at me. “You’re not bleeding any more.”

I paused and felt myself out. I was an expert in pain, a specialist in my own. The wound was still there, and it ached and sizzled like the blade was still inside me, broken off and working its way towards my heart. But I didn’t have the fuzzy, buzzing feeling like I was floating an inch above my body any more, and I was able to take a deep breath without wincing. I turned and looked at Rusch again, studying her. The old woman had picked up a tube of something from Rachel’s sink and was peering down at it with a furrowed brow, as if he’d spotted an ingredient that wasn’t supposed to be there, like plutonium.

She didn’t look crazy. If I’d met her in a bar, I wouldn’t have paid any attention to her: A woman who made less than fifty thousand dollars a year, based on her clothes. A woman who didn’t value social interactions, based on the lack of care she put into those clothes, who was forgetful and easily distracted, based on her one black and one

blue sock. A woman who lived in her own head, but not crazy.

After a moment, I got my legs under me and pulled myself up to a standing position. Rachel didn't step over to give me any help, and I guessed without looking at her that we were back to normal, just like that. I pulled up my sticky, scabbing shirttail and examined my wound, then looked at Rusch again.

“So what you're saying is, I might not die, but it could get infected, right?”

She looked up from the tube as if she'd forgotten I was there. Then she nodded, smiling. “Miss? You have a first aid kit of some kind, you said?”

I sat at Rachel's neat kitchen table of blond wood, smoking a cigarette with my shirt off, watching Rusch as she hunched over my belly, packing on a thick bandage.

I felt almost normal. It still throbbed and burned, but no worse than a million other injuries I'd survived. I thought back on that, all the times I'd been bleeding and broken, which was plenty. I'd been stabbed before, and shot at, and beaten unconscious—that was my *job*. But I'd always come through it, and never come close to dying.

It didn't prove anything.

I studied the scalp showing through Rusch's thinning white-gray hair, then looked up as Rachel came back into the room, carrying her phone. “Everything kosher?”

She nodded as she dropped into the chair across from me. “Billy says Falken wants to leave and he's had to knock him down a few times, but he'll be okay.”

I smiled. “Billy's an expert at knocking people down. He can calibrate it exactly.” I looked back down at Rusch's head. “You about

done, Doc?"

"You are in a rush?"

I put the cigarette in my mouth and reached down to gently push her away. "Time to go have a follow-up conversation with your boy, Doc," I said, standing up and reaching for my shirt. I glanced at Rachel, who was staring at the bandage on my side, already blooming red with leaking blood. "Don't worry, I won't hurt him."

I felt weak and jazzed. Immortal or not, I'd lost a lot of fucking blood. I threaded an arm through my shirt, and grunted as I twisted around to thread the other one. I started to say something to Rachel, see if I could make her smile, when there was a thunderous knocking on the door.

Rusch was up on her feet like someone had stuck a needle in her ass. "What do we do?"

I sucked in smoked and shrugged, snapping my shirt into place and working the buttons with my fat fingers. I looked at Rachel. "Ask who it is," I suggested.

"It's Mister Detective Stanley James," he boomed, bouncing that big profundo voice off the hallway walls. "And he can hear every fucking word y'all say, so mind your words."

My heart leaped, pumping air and dust through my sagging, empty veins. Rachel and Rusch both looked at me, head's snapping around in sync. I ignored them for a moment, mind racing. If he'd come looking for his debt, things were going to get ugly, and I couldn't bring that down on Rachel, not in her home. "I'll come out, Detective."

"Naw, I'll come in, son," he boomed back. "You and I need to have a conversation."

I grimaced and looked at Rachel. "Take the doc and go inside," I

said. "This isn't your problem."

She smiled at me, sunny and wide and meanspirited. "Fuck you. You made it my problem by dragging your bleeding ass here."

"I thought I was dying."

"So you came to die *here*? Thanks." She stood up and crossed to the door, twisting the knob and tearing it open, turning away without a word and resuming her seat.

Detective James stood framed in the doorway, shoulders butting up against the edges, dressed in a gorgeous blue pinstripe that had been sewn by an artist. His gold tie pin gleamed in the kitchen light as he struck a pose and smiled.

"You're slippery," he complained. "For a moment I thought you were running."

I shrugged as he stepped into the room. "How'd you find me here?"

"Shee-yit," he drawled, nodding at Rachel. "It doesn't take a fucking genius. You and the lady here have a history, huh?" He frowned, looking me over. "Hell, man, what happened to you?"

"I took a meeting," I said, tucking in my shirt, "that I ought to not have taken."

He stared at me for a moment, then nodded. "All right. None of my business. We'll let it lay for now."

"You're here about your debt," I said. "I was current with Frank. I've still got better part of a week on that."

He frowned. "A fucking *debt*? What do I look like, a goddamn shylock?" He unfurled a long, dark finger at me. "That's your business, friend." He spread his hands and smiled. "I'm here doing what cops do: Keepin' track of the scum and filth that rots my beloved city." His smile faded. "I got a couple of dead bodies downtown, a

three-alarm fire. I know you had a meeting with Phin Lanzmann the other day; this joint happens to be owned by Phin fucking Lanzmann. It occurred to me to wonder where in hell you've been this evening, and as a courtesy I chose to ask you, like a gentlemen, instead of putting your name on the wire. I don't know anything about whatever debt you have with Frank McKenna."

I stood for a moment, racing over my conversation with Phin. "You didn't buy a debt from Frank. My debt. The Falken debt."

He looked from me to Rachel and back again, ignoring Rusch completely. For a moment I thought he was going to get angry, but then he settled himself and just shook his head. "No."

I looked over at Rusch, who had a twin running around. Then I picked up my coat, shook it out, and looked the blood-stained lining over critically. "All right, let's go."

James cocked his head and pushed his hands into his pockets. He looked like a millionaire. He was a cop who spent half his salary on clothes. "Go where, motherfucker?"

"To see Falken," I said, pulling on my sticky coat. "To see if he recognizes you."