

A person wearing a dark hat and a purple jacket 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 16

by Jeff Somers

16.

Wincing as a sharp needle sliced up my torso, I leaned forward towards the grating that separated the backseat from the front in James' car. The low squawk of his police radio was constant background noise, and no one had spoken on the drive to Staten Island, where The Bumble had an apartment for no reason I'd ever been able to suss out of him. It was creepy out here, everything damp and dark and lush, the houses spaced so far apart you wouldn't be able to hear your neighbors walking around. I couldn't imagine sleeping without hearing my neighbors.

"Stay in the car five minutes," I said to James.

He turned his head sharply and reached up to remove the gold toothpick he was sucking on. "What? Fuck that."

I nodded. "Let me set it up for him, okay?"

"I think I just said *fuck that*."

"Call it a favor," I said, opening the door and pulling myself out with a grunt, a wonderful shudder of agony slicing through me. Everything ached, deliciously, and I'd spent the ride over prodding the spots that hurt the most, just for the sudden sharp thrills they offered.

"Call it *fuck that*," he said as he emerged from the car after me,

buttoning his jacket and smoothing his lapels.

“At least let me do the talking. Don't say shit, we walk in there.”

Rusch popped out of the other side of the car as we circled around to the gleaming sidewalk. “I'll let you run for a bit,” James said mildly, completely certain he was in charge of the situation. “You tell me this is gonna pay off for *me*, I know you're a serious man, I'll give you some slack.” He put his hand out in front of me, a gentle motion that stopped me in my tracks. “*Some*, follow? Think of me as the Judge and Jury here, and I just told you your line of questioning had better be going somewhere, follow?”

I nodded, and he pulled his hand back. Rachel climbed out of the front seat and shut the door behind her, tugging her sweater down over her belly. James grinned.

“That's a fine girl you got hating your guts,” he said cheerfully. “A fine girl. Looks like she was a cheerleader back in school.” He turned and jabbed me in the ribs, making a red bolt of pain flash through me. “Limber, and shit.”

I swallowed irritation. “Come on.”

As we approached the dung-brown apartment building, a box with small windows and landscaping via overgrown weeds, I flipped open my phone and speed-dialed The Bumble. He never said anything on the phone, just pressed the button and listened; you had to pay attention to know he was even there.

“I'm outside. Don't fucking shoot me,” I said, and snapped the phone shut.

“You and Billy got a special relationship, huh?” James said, pleased with himself.

The four of us took the cramped elevator to the fourth floor, the machinery wheezing and whining; the cab smelled like cabbage.

Rachel stared at the doors with her arms crossed under her chest, a statue of a woman entitled Irritated. Rusch kept twisting around to smile at us as if we were all chums on some sort of grand adventure, which I supposed was true enough for her—up until a few months ago she'd been a tenured professor at a State University in fucking Jersey, the kind of cruft the school wished would just die to open up the budget slot. Now she was in goddamn *Staten Island*, running around with cops and legbreakers and hot chicks. I itched to make her hurt, to impress on her the way the world worked, but she hadn't done anything to deserve it.

There was nothing specifically wrong with the apartment building; the hallway was clean and neat, the place was quiet. The carpet was a hideous shade of mocha that made you feel like you were walking on a packed-down lane of shit, and the walls were a shade of green you normally didn't see outside of a toilet. The flickering fluorescent lighting added a spice of headache to the whole scene, and the floors under your feet felt soft, like the joists were rotted, and you might fall through at any moment. Every time we made use of Billy's secret place, I felt like I might not make it out alive.

The door opened when we were still a few steps away. The Bumble filled the doorway completely, a mountain of muscle and fat, his red nose almost as big as his face, everything being pulled down by gravity and making him look like a sad clown. He looked at me and shook his head slowly, looking up to the ceiling, and I knew he'd had a long night with Falken. For The Bumble, not being allowed to smack someone around was the hardest thing in the world. He didn't have any other social skills.

I stepped in, James close behind me, and found Falken sitting at the kitchen table, a cigarette burned almost down to the filter in his

mouth. The ash was heroic, almost the entire smoke, trembling there like the memory of a cigarette.

“Jesus fucking hell,” he said immediately, the ash collapsing onto the table. “He’s got me *duct-taped* to the fucking—”

He froze as his eyes landed on James, his whole body going absolutely still. I stepped between him and the Detective and grabbed one of The Bumble’s greasy, rickety wooden chairs, spun it around and sat down. Falken was, in fact, attached to his own chair by an amazing amount of silver duct tape. If the apartment had caught fire, we would have to throw him out the window as a unit. If Phin’s boys had used duct tape, I thought suddenly, I’d be dead.

I thought of Rusch again, and wondered if that still held true.

I reached out and snapped my fingers in front of his face a few times.

“Falken,” I snapped. “Falken—on me, buddy.”

He looked at me suddenly. “Why is—”

“Hey,” I slapped him lightly, a tap on his chin. “On me. Don’t talk except to answer my questions, okay?”

“Hey!” Rachel hissed. I heard her move, and I heard The Bumble move, and then everyone was still again. I held one hand up behind my head.

Falken opened his mouth, and I gave him another gentle tap on the chin. “Okay?”

Most people I dealt with didn’t have to deal with violence in their lives. The world was a violent place, seemed like it was falling apart even if the news was always telling us it was only a matter of years before every country united under one government, but in the city, behind money and drywall and buzzers on your front door, people managed to go decades without taking a beating. It made them

pretty easy to intimidate. A little violence went a long way; a lot of new kids in my line of work set about breaking thumbs and peeling back fingernails immediately. It got results, sure, but it was unnecessary effort. I was an old man now and if I could convince someone to give me what I wanted just by staring at them, then that's what I would fucking do.

He swallowed, eyes flicking from me to James and back. "Okay."

I kept my hand in his field of vision and curled it, pointing a finger at his nose. "I'll tell you what I think, Mr. Falken. I think you've got money. I think you've been fucking with me for a few days now, and I am irritated."

He shook his head, eyes wide. I remembered seeing him for the first time in the flesh, back at McHale's. He looked exactly the same: A little chubby, his beard already getting thick on his jowly face, his hair thinning and his right hand weighed down by a huge gold ring, plain and thick. His suit had been woefully mistreated, and was wrinkled and disturbed, but it was of a fine brown cloth with a nice sheen to it, and cut well. He was still a shiny penny, but he'd been tarnished.

"I swear—"

I tapped him on the chin again. "You got one chance to say it," I said, leaning back. "Don't blow it."

He licked his lips and stared over my shoulder at James for a moment. Then he looked back at me. "I guess it doesn't fucking matter any more." he shook his head. "I don't have a dime. Not one dime left."

I squinted at him. "You're in deep with at least The Phin and Frank McKenna," I said. "No doubt you barnstormed the block, hitting up as many loan shops as you could, probably in the same fucking day,

right? Using someone's name as a reference.”

He nodded, sagging in the chair. “Maury Levns, out of the Bronx.” He looked at me again. “I knew him. Back where I ... come from.”

I nodded, pulling out cigarettes. “If you tell me you’re from an alternate universe, I’ll hit you for real and take my chances with her.” I fed a butt between my lips and held one out to him, close enough for him to lean forward and take it with his mouth. “Maury’s dead. A month ago.”

“In this world, yeah,” Falken suddenly struggled mightily with his bonds. “Goddammit! If he’s going to do it, just fucking *do* it! I don’t have any money left, you fucking bloodsucker. He probably paid you plenty to roll on me, though, didn’t he?” He suddenly stopped. Sweat had broken out on his forehead. “Can you believe it?” He looked at me, his eyes hollow. “I’m killing *myself*. Can you fucking believe it?”

I struck a match, let it burn a bit, then lit my cigarette and held it out for him to light his. He hesitated, and the flame burned down to the tips of my fingers, but I just held it there, waiting, the sizzling pain wonderful, head-clearing. It was a favorite trick. After a moment he leaned forward and puffed the cigarette into life, then leaned back and laughed.

“Last smoke for the condemned, huh?”

“Shut up,” I said, “and tell me how it is you’re broke after you borrowed every dime this city has.”

“For equipment,” he snapped back. “For fuel. This shithole of a universe hasn’t figured out passing from Alt to Alt, okay? I have to fucking buy components. Generators. Cable. CPUs. I can do the work, but I need to fucking *reinvent* everything everywhere I go, being chased down by my cocksucker self like a goddamn roach. I got it all in a warehouse in *Hoboken*, of all goddamn places. I finally got the

fuel in, I'm finally ready to stay one step ahead of him, and I run into *you*." He started pulling at his duct-tape bonds again. "All right? Okay? You got your information, you greedy piece of shit. Let him shoot me and get on with it."

I frowned, leaning forward a little. "Calm down, Mr. Falken. What I want is money. Who exactly do you imagine is going to fucking *kill* you here?"

He looked at me, and then jerked his chin at Detective James. "Him."

I winced my way into turning around to look at James. He loomed over me stroking the fuzz of mustache over his lip, his eyeballs reddened, the palms of his hands thick and pink. He glanced down at me and smiled, bringing his eyebrows up comically. "Don't fucking look at me, man. I killed some motherfuckers this morning, so I'm good."

I grimaced as my side bit at me, and looked back at Falken, thinking of a man who looked like James buying the debt from Frank. "I thought Rusch was trying to kill you." I shut my eyes and took a breath. "The *other* Rusch, I mean."

I opened my eyes and Falken was shaking his head, smoke all around him from his cigarette. "Rusch is just the bloodhound. Rusch just *finds* us poor shits and marks us out."

I jerked a thumb at James. "For *him*?"

"For *me*?" James said, sounding amused. "What the fuck is this shit?"

"If it isn't Rusch we should be worried about," I said. "Then who is *he* supposed to be?"

Falken looked at me like I had horns growing out of my head. "He's the guy they hire to hunt down their alternates and murder

them, so they can become Terminus,” he said. “He's The Executioner.”