

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 17

by Jeff Somers

17.

The Bumble kept a bottle of shoe leather gin in one of the kitchen cabinets along with his antique collection of mouse droppings. Detective James had stood quietly for about twenty seconds, taking it all in, and then he'd turned to The Bumble.

“Billy, man, do me a favor and take the professor and the girl home, okay? I'm gonna have to have a talk in private with these two gentlemen.”

“I'm not going anywhere,” Rachel snapped.

James grinned at her. “Darling, I admire you. I do. Damn, I need more women like you in my own life. But, sweetheart, I'm asking you to step out for a while. I'm no killer. And I'm making this *police* business, okay? You want, I can have a couple of officers who don't ask too many questions and haven't read this year's procedural handbook come by, book you on suspicion of *something* and hold you for our twenty-four, okay? And I wonder if your jacket comes up clean.” He winked. “I only ask once.”

When The Bumble had herded them out the door, James let out an explosive sigh and pulled out one of the kitchen chairs, dropping into it recklessly, the old wood creaking under his weight. He pulled a silk handkerchief from his breast pocket, snapped it out, and mopped his

face.

“Well, fuck,” he said. “Cut the poor man loose.”

I considered it, then shrugged. “Why not.” I got up and scavenged through the kitchen, finding an old steak knife in a drawer that sagged crazily in its tracks, knelt down, and began sawing at the tape around his ankles.

“Now that your audience is gone,” James said slowly. “You wanna give me the straight version of this? This motherfucker here owes money, right?”

I nodded, my belly burning with pain, sweat running into my eyes. I felt lightheaded, the dull knife taking forever to cut through the tape. “A fucking mint. To everyone.”

“And you got his file, huh, for Mr. Frank?”

I nodded.

“And the rest of this bullshit is what, trying to convince him to pay up? You too fancy to break a leg these days?”

Falken was free, so I sat back on my feet, wiping sweat out of my face and breathing hard, breathing like a man who'd been stabbed non-fatally not so long ago. I looked up at Falken. “Well, you want to answer that one?”

Falken scowled. “So if this isn't The Executioner, what the fuck is he here?”

James shrugged. “I'm the man who can tell him to tie you the fuck back up, baby, so why not play along?”

Falken scowled, but settled himself and told him the whole ridiculous story in about four sentences. Detective James sat through it all with a stone face, then sat back and rubbed his chin, the scratch of his beard against the palm of his hand audible in the creepy silence that had filled the tiny room. He lifted his hand from his chin and

pointed at Falken.

“You're from an alternate universe,” he said, and a wave of weary amazement swept through me.

Falken shrugged. “One way of putting it, yes.”

James shifted his long finger to me. “And you're fucking immortal.”

I shrugged. “I don't feel it.”

The finger went back to Falken. “Because he's the only *him* left in all the fucking world out there. And one of your other selves wants to kill you so *he* can be the only one, and be immortal too.”

Falken stared back at James like he'd expected to be dead ten minutes ago and wasn't convinced it hadn't come to pass. “Yes.”

The finger came back to me. “And he owes you shitloads of cash, because your boss is a fucking moron.”

I nodded. “That's about the whole of it.”

James made a hissing noise between his teeth, raising an eyebrow. “Shit, kid. I'm beginning to wonder if you just wasted a couple hours of my time.” He leaned forward, rings glinting on his hands. “You ever wasted my time before?” he shook his head. “I don't recommend it. I look all jolly and shit, I know, like a guy who could be pushed around, but I can unleash fucking *hell* on you and yours in the form of the uniformed police officer of this great city, pulling over your cars, searching your shit every place you go, fucking carding you at bars. You dig?” He planted his finger on the greasy table top. “I put your name on the list, motherfucker, they're going to be pulling you out of line at the airport. Fucking security guards at the mall gonna be pulling your ass into little windowless rooms for strip searches. It ain't official or anything, but I put your name on the list every cocksucker with a badge is gonna know your name and face, we

understand each other?”

I nodded, lifting my hands up to spread them. “I needed to see if he recognized you.”

“And why is that?”

“Because it kind of makes me think he isn't crazy.”

James stared at me for a moment, nostrils flaring, and a second or so before he leaped to his feet I knew I'd taken a wrong turn and things were going to get sticky. Then he was up on his feet and his gun, a huge honker that looked like it would turn me into a fine mist if he pulled the trigger, was in one hand and his handcuffs in the other.

“Up,” he snapped. “On your feet. I've had about enough of this shit.”

I got my legs under me and pushed myself up. “Look, I know—”

“You know shit. Dragging my ass out here to listen to bullshit. Spin around, hands on the counter.”

I turned to face the sink and put my hands on the counter top. It felt oily under my hands. The Bumble never lived here, so I didn't know what in the world could be coating it, and didn't want to think about it. I felt dizzy and hot, and could tell my bandage was soaked in leaking blood. I shut my eyes. “Listen, Detective—”

“Shut up.” He was behind me, shoving his knee between my legs to spread them, yanking my arms behind me and slapping the cold cuffs on, too tight. “I got bodies and a tear-down, and I can clear a case for someone by bringing you in, and that'll make this trip here worth it, so we'll be even, and when you get out of jail in thirty years we can be friends again, okay?”

I winced as he put his weight into the small of my back, pressing me painfully against the sink base. I didn't have time for foreplay.

Someone owned Falken's debt, and if I didn't keep it current I was going to get knifed in jail, and if I was really immortal like everyone had been telling me for the last twenty-four hours it meant I was going to get knifed in jail a *lot*, which might be kind of fun but fucking *exhausting*.

He spun me around. He wasn't smiling. He glanced over at Falken.

"Don't worry, we're taking you in too."

Falken snorted. "I'm dead anyway. You put me in your system, he'll find me, and I won't be able to run."

James considered him. "All right, let's play You're Not Fucking Crazy for one minute. If someone's after you, let's hear it. Whatever else you got hanging on your collar, I'm not in the business of letting people get killed. Just leave the bullshit out of it, okay?"

Fucking Detective James.

"Forget it," Falken said, his voice hollow. "He's fucking *you*. He'll walk in and smile at everyone and shoot me in the fucking head."

James was silent for a moment. "Kid, someone really—"

Someone pounded on the door, hard, and we all paused. "You forget something, Billy?" James shouted.

Someone pounded on the door again.

"Jesus fucking Christ," James hissed, spinning away from me.

I turned around, finding James heading for the door. I took a step after him and paused. "Don't," I said. "Look, I know we sound crazy, but—"

"You don't want to take a fall on your way to the precinct," he said, reaching for the doorknob, "you're gonna want to shut up now."

With a grunt, Falken was up out of the chair and sprinting, disappearing into the next room as James tried to wheel around and

catch him by the collar. The detective stood there for a moment while someone pounded the door again, hard, making it jump on its hinges, then he shook his head.

“I haven't broken a sweat in fucking fifteen years,” he muttered. “I'm not starting with *that* piece of shit.” He stepped over to the door and glanced back at me. “*You* get your running sneaks on and I'll take out my frustrations on you, okay? You used to know better than to fuck with police.”

Detective James turned back and opened the door. Detective James stood in the doorway, face blank, eyes red. Detective James shot Detective James in the belly twice.