

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 18

by Jeff Somers

18.

For the third time in as many days, I came to, this time in darkness, jostled gently this way and that. Pain radiated nicely from the wound in my side and filled me, yellow and thick and wonderful. For a split-second I just stretched against it, enjoying the feel of a controlled burn, all my nerves like embers, red and angry and floating inside me.

I was in the trunk of a car, my cuffed wrists pulled down tight behind me, my ankles pulled up, hogtied like a fucking pig. I wasn't gagged, but the hum of the car was loud, and a thick, bouncing bass line filled the air in-between the thud of tires hitting potholes. I figured screaming would just amuse the alternate Detective James, if he could even hear it.

Alternate. The word flamed red in my mind as I thought it.

The man I'd spied in the doorway, the man who's stormed in, stepping over the detective's body, pointing his monstrous gun at me, looked exactly like Stanley James. The face, the haircut, the suit—he could have sat down at a bar and forced me to buy him drinks all night on threat of arrest and I'd have bought it, completely.

I only had that panicked, amazed glimpse; Alt Detective James had stepped over himself, crossed over to me, and cold cocked me

with his gun, my last image his white teeth, perfect and straight, the gums bloody red.

We hit a bump, and I leaped inside the trunk, landing on something hard and unyielding, lighting up my belly like a pitchfork three inches deep, making me shiver and salivate. The beat from Alt James' speakers ate into me, making my pulse skip and my eyes bulge.

I figured, fuck, if I really am immortal, I was probably about to find out soon. In my experience waking up hogtied in the trunk of a car was the beginning of a very bad end.

My eyes adjusted to the gloom, lit by the faint red light bleeding in from the brakes, and I craned my head around, trying to see what I had to work with. I doubted my innate ability to escape from car trunks, but it felt like I was going to have a lot of time on my hands so why not make a study of it, see if I couldn't do some groundbreaking research on the subject.

The trunk was barren, but roomy, and I found I could roll myself over onto my belly easily, freeing my fingers to at least stretch and strain, their tips brushing against the slick nylon rope he'd used to connect the handcuffs to my ankles. I tried to bend myself backwards, straining to find the knot and maybe, somehow work it open, at least get my legs free. I didn't know what that was going to get me, but it was better than counting seams in the highway or pretending I could hear the difference between a bridge and a dirt road, map it all out in my head.

I rolled my eyes down and saw I was lying on top of the spare tire well, the piece of carpet that fitted over the space curled up and out of place. I stretched my head down and took the edge of the carpet between my teeth, grit and dust suddenly in my mouth, and rolled

myself over, taking the carpet with me. With a jerk of my head I tossed it aside and rolled back onto my belly, peering down into the spare well. There was only an undersized solid rubber donut wheel, bolted down. Sitting next to it, embedded into the soft felt, was the lugnut wrench and the jack.

The thought of having the weight of that wrench in my hands, and sinking it into Alt James' face, made me happy. My imagination served up the crunch of his delicate facial bones and cartilage, the grunt of pain, the sudden shock up my arm as I bit into real bone, hard and thick, the spray of blood from burst capillaries and torn surface skin.

A pleasant burn had settled into the muscles of my back and arms, the steady strain biting in and holding fast. I bent my attention back to straining my fingers towards the knots, even though I wasn't at all convinced I'd be able to manipulate them in any way even if I managed to get the very tips of my fingers near them.

The ride suddenly got rough, the car banging over something and everything getting jumpy and filled with vibration, my belly spiking and burning and clearing my head pretty thoroughly. I was bleeding all over his trunk, I was pretty sure, the coppery smell of my own fluids thickening the air. The bouncing action made it even more difficult to make any progress, and sweat began to stream down the sides of my head and neck, tickling me excruciatingly.

At least Alt James hadn't known Falken was nearby, I didn't think. For all I knew he'd taken the time to hunt the poor fuck down and put a shell in his ear, but I suspected Falken had bolted the room just in time, and Alt James didn't know he'd missed him—or maybe he shared his twin's resistance to running and had just let him go. Either way, I was glad for it. I didn't want Falken dead—I didn't want

anyone dead. I wanted his fucking money. Though I guessed if Frank had sold the debt, that wasn't even my problem any more.

The tone of the ride changed again, going smooth and quiet, a low hum the only noise from the wheels, like we were gliding along. After a few seconds of this the car jerked to a stop, tumbling me up against the back seat and then rolling me forward again. Then quiet, the music gone, just the ticking of the engine and my pinched, tight breathing. I heard the car door open, and then nothing. I lay perfectly still, head pounding, side burning, and strained my ears but couldn't hear anything at all.

And then I heard everything.

The noise was unbelievable—a droning, piercing blare that made the whole trunk—the whole *car*—vibrate around me. My teeth chattered involuntarily, and I felt like parts of my insides were boiling off, turning to steam and leaking from my pores. One of my shoes began working its way off my foot, vibrating off my heel in tiny little increments. I clenched my jaw shut as hard as I could to stop my teeth from shaking loose and shut my eyes to keep them in my skull, every muscle in my body taut. It was the same as the noise I'd heard in the limo with Alt Rusch, similar to the noise I'd heard just before Falken had disappeared on me in McHales.

And then it got *louder*.

I pushed my head down into the scratchy, thin carpet of the trunk, trying to block off at least one ear, but the lower pitch of the murderous whine around me bled up through the metal of the car, bouncing into my ear and tunneling into my brain. I couldn't enjoy it, couldn't pick out the nuances of the agony, the specific nerve endings being burned out and browned, sizzling away like candle wax. It was just more than my nerves could handle. I opened my mouth to make

my own noise, but I couldn't hear myself, or even feel the vibration in my chest. It was like I'd disappeared into the noise.

And then it stopped.

I lay there with my mouth open, my ears ringing, every muscle taut and painful. I kept myself tight and still for a moment, waiting, and then slowly let myself relax, my muscles twitching. There was a muffled bang I felt more than heard which took me a moment to identify as someone getting back into the car. A moment later we started moving again, and I felt the steady thump of the bass line jumping under me.

Shivering, I lay still for a while, eyes closed. Then I set about relaxing my muscles one by one as the car took on the old familiar rhythm of street driving. When I'd forced my body to unclench, I opened my eyes again, and spared a few seconds to revel in the burning in all my muscles, like an acid stain on my bones, etched in deep. I was back inside a normal trunk, the bloody glow of brake lights seeping in and offering me the only light, my hands still pulled cruelly down towards my ankles, the thumping beat mixing with the rhythm of the road seams into a complex song that seemed kind of familiar, probably entitled *Fucked Three Ways from Sunday*.

Breathing hard and blinking the sweat from my eyes, I started bending my hands back again, seeking the elusive knots in the rope. I had a goddamn cigarette jingle from the television commercial in my head, running on a doubletime loop, high and squeaky: *feeling down need a lift Luckies'll fix ya in a jiff*. I didn't even smoke Luckies.

My dad had smoked them, I suddenly remembered. I remembered he'd smelled like smoke all the time, a strangely earthy and acidic smell that had fascinated and repelled me at the same time. Nicotine, alcohol, and aftershave, the smell of adults. Dad had shown me once

the circular burn marks on his forearms, starting just above the wrist and ending at the elbow, where he'd pressed his cigarette against his skin for as long as he could stand it. It was a standard bar bet he liked to trot out when he'd run out of cash. Sometimes he'd spend the whole night burning himself for shots, and wake up the next day stuck to the sheets, his arm leaking and inflamed. I remembered the feel of pushing the cigarette into his skin, the satisfying way he would suck in his breath and tense up. I remembered smuggling a pack into the hospital, risking our lives to light them up and burn him.

Alt James drove slower this time, the car inching along, and hit a lot of potholes, tumbling me around. I tried to redouble my efforts at the rope, trying anything that came to mind, my wrists burning nicely where the cuffs bit into them, bending myself backwards as far as I could manage. I tried to clear my head and get all zen on the fucking problem, but before I could take some deep breaths and center my thinking, the car stopped, the music cut, and I heard the front door opening and slamming.

Shoes on gravel, a key in the lock, and then the trunk lifting up. Framed against a burningly bright, cloudless blue sky—somehow we'd skipped some hours and arrived at noon—was Alt James, gun held slackly in one massive hand, disturbingly white teeth bared for me.

“All right,” he said cheerfully. “We're here.”