

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, and a sign above a doorway reads "RESTAURANT" and "21H". Below that, a sign says "HT BUS 16 SEATS". The overall atmosphere is gritty and urban.

**JEFF  
SOMERS  
COLLECTIONS**  
a novel

# COLLECTIONS

## Chapter 19

by Jeff Somers

### 19.

“There’s a couple of ways to deal with cats like you, a Terminus,” Alt James said, encouraging me to shuffle forward with his gun pressed into my back. “This is one of them.”

We were in Hoboken fucking New Jersey, which I knew well enough because Frank did plenty of business with the remnants of the old Italians who still worked out of the town. It was right across the river from Manhattan, it was where Frank Sinatra had been born, and it still had three or four old Social Clubs fronting crews. They’d seen better days, and they didn’t run City Hall like they used to, but they were there, and there was enough old money in suitcases lying around to keep Frank and Phin and the newer boys interested.

We were, I thought, the *only* people *in* Hoboken New Jersey.

Walking down the middle of the main drag, Washington Street, I could hear our steps echoing back at us. Most of the store windows had been shattered at some point, but aside from that and the sad state of the cars everything looked normal enough, though details nagged at me. On Fifth street, Sullivans wasn’t there, replaced with a place called Maroon. The cars were all old, too, big iron slabs from old Detroit, tiny little rice burners from Japan, the kind you didn’t see much any more.

The air smelled weird, sweet and thick.

“I could put a bullet in your head,” Alt James continued after a moment. “But it wouldn’t kill you. I could probably put you in a coma, leave you that way, sure, that might work. Coma ain’t *dead*, the universe might allow that. Except, I could never be sure. You can’t die, man. So let’s say you’re laying there in a coma, and I think I solved this little problem.”

“Let’s say,” I said, earning myself a prod from the gun into my backbone.

“A large caliber bullet in the back still going to *hurt*, man, okay?”

I nodded, moving my eyes from deserted storefront to rusting car to deserted storefront. “Okay.”

He’d adjusted the knots to give me just enough slack to shuffle along, bent backwards slightly so I felt like I was going to fall over at any moment. It was slow going, and the sun was making me hot and sweaty.

“You might be that way for years, decades. But then, something happens—the power goes out, and the machines breathing for you quit. Or the hospital catches on fire. The universe decides the only way you can survive is to *heal*, so you wake up, good as new. You’re a Terminus. Any time you might die, you’ll find a way to keep on truckin’.”

I didn’t say anything. I was enjoying myself, a little; my back burned and my legs ached and my hands were numb. I was fucking miserable. I didn’t feel immortal in the least.

“So, the problem is the fucking solution, kid,” Alt James continued, strolling along behind me. “There are infinite universes. There are universes where everything’s fucking different, universes where everything is practically the same. They’re *infinite*, so good luck

cataloging them, but as you come across them you can make notes. Like this one. Empty as a tin can. Completely fucking *empty*.”

I let that drift for a moment. “How come you're so sure I'm a—” my tongue tripped over the word. “A *Terminus*?”

“I can smell 'em. It's a talent I have.” He jabbed me in the back. “You're one.”

“How do you know you can even shoot me?” I asked, a pulse of excitement pounding through my chest. “Rusch pointed a gun at me and it misfired.”

He laughed, and it was awesomely strange: It was Detective James' laugh, the same deep, wet rumble I'd known for years. “Your Rusch is kind of a beginner, man. You get a feel for the odds. You got to know how far you can push the universe, you know? Sure, you put a gun to your forehead, you ain't giving the universe much choice—coma or death or misfire. Push it too hard, the gun blows up in your hand. Push it even harder, a fucking safe falls out of the sky and crushes you before you can pull the trigger.”

He stopped talking and I huffed and puffed my way through ten feet of street. I squinted my eyes and looked around. It sure felt empty. Everything was covered in a thick layer of white-gray dust, like ash. It swirled around us as we walked. “What happened here?”

“Fuck if I know,” Alt James said, sounding friendly. If I closed my eyes and ignored the misery, it was like me and the Detective were just having a friendly stroll. “Found it this way. No bodies, no bones. No dogs. No cats. No fucking *squirrels*. It's as dead as the world can get. It's perfect: I can't kill you, but I can *leave* you here. You can sit here forever, no way off, safe and sound.”

Rotting. The stillness and silence of the place was oppressive. Our voices echoed back at us and then fell dead and flat on the ground. As

we disturbed it, the air was getting choked with dust, and I could feel it on my skin, coating me, scratching under my collar and getting into my ears, my nose—I knew if I blew my nose right then it would be dark and muddy, filled with the fine mist. The stores with their empty, smashed windows and dark, shadowed interiors creeped me out. Anything might be hiding in there, watching us move past.

I didn't like begging, and had to swallow a few times before I could spit out more words. "Listen, this is ... this is fucking unnecessary, chief. I'm just looking to collect a debt. A debt you bought from my boss, so I don't even have to do *that* any more. I'm ready to walk away from this. Let Falken take his chances."

There was something about being hogtied and marched through a deserted town that smelled like dust and dry kindling that took all the sass out of you.

"Sorry, hoss," Alt James said, sounding the exact opposite of sorry. "First of all, I'm aiming to become a Terminus myself someday—a hobby of mine—and you might get in my hair if I do it. Second, I'm a killer. It's what I do. I can't kill you, but I can come *close*. Besides, I didn't buy your fucking debt. I made a deal with your boss to get information, but he's gonna be sorely disappointed when next week rolls around and he's looking for all that money I promised him. Take this left."

I hobbled in a wide arc to the left, turning down third street. The pavement had cracked and crumbled, weeds poking up atop huge cairns of blacktop, and I had to sweat it to stay upright, my balance all fucked up as I tried to scale each lump in the road. *Hobby of mine*. It sounded like he'd done this before with other ... other assholes like me. I kept my eyes moving, looking for a chance.

I asked myself if I was ready to chance his gun, if I was starting to

believe everyone's sunny belief that I was the Ever Living. I ducked the question, and kept walking.

“What do you get paid?” I asked, instantly curious as I thought about it. “For killing people?”

“I don't just kill people. I make people immortal. It's tough work. Long hours. Research. Violence. They pay me whatever I ask. Sometimes it's money, sometimes it's something else. It's worth it, no matter what. I could ask them for their balls, they'd hand them over. Their kids. Their wives, husbands, daughters.” He laughed in a way that was completely different from Detective Stanley James—nasty and cold, no humor at all. “Sometimes I don't even do it for money. It's just revenge.”

I thought about that. Erasing someone from not just one universe, but *every* universe. Methodically hunting down every *version* of someone. “Jesus fucking Christ, how do you have *time*?”

“Most of us die young,” he said quietly. “Every other possibility is your fucking death, and then a second later you got another split chance at fucking death. By the time someone seeks me out, there ain't but a handful of you left.”

As this was quickly becoming the most depressing day of my goddamn life, I thought about *that*. About me, dying. Me at six months, suffocating in my crib. Me at twelve, chasing a Spalding and getting hit by a car. Me at twenty-two, stabbed to death in the alley behind Rudy's. Me at thirty, shot in the head by Chino over fifty fucking dollars lost in a card game. All these things could have happened, but hadn't—except everyone had been telling me for the past few days that they *had*, just to some other version of me, a version that had been dead since that moment.

The quiet was smothering. Our steps were loud scrapes that

rattled everything like earthquakes, and the wind was a constant mutter in the center of my ears. I could hear water, too, lapping, as we got closer and closer to the Hudson, crawling along Third Street. But there was no other noise. No sirens, no shouts. No dogs, no music leaking from fourth-floor windows. No car horns or tire screeches, no distant conversations bubbling out of the bars. It was just me and Alt James, and we weren't making nearly enough noise.

I could see the river as we headed downhill over the broken pavement. It smelled crisp and clean, not the oily scent I remembered. I could see from a distance that the esplanade had partially collapsed into the river, pavers dripping in after the edges one by one every few weeks. I walked with my hands cuffed in behind me and could feel time running out; I hadn't seen anything that looked at all useful, and the gun I got jabbed into my back every few steps still felt too fucking real for me to chance turning around and trying anything. The last two blocks floated by—a ruined building on my left, a jumble of bricks and iron that still held the ghostly outline of a building, like it remembered what it had been for so long, and a spectacular crush of bent-up, rusting cars completely blocking the street to me right.

“Head right on to the edge,” Alt James said as we got close to the water.

Across the river was Manhattan, looking more or less like I remembered it—something nagged at me, something missing or different, but I couldn't place it, and as I shuffled forward I had an uneasy, unhappy feeling of disorientation, like everything had been reversed in a mirror.

I almost lost my footing as the pavers gave way under my feet, and had to shuffle backwards hastily to avoid sliding right down into the

dark, steel-colored water. Most of the walkway was already in the river, but a thin line of it still clung to land, the old sidewalks next to it as broken up as the roads, the trees heavy and overgrown around us. The world turning back into one huge forest.

“Stop.”

I felt Alt James doing something behind me, tugging at the rope holding my handcuffs to my ankles, and then the gun was pushed into my back again.

“All right. Step off.”

I blinked. “What?”

The gun became more insistent. “Walk forward until you drop,” he said.

My heart raced, and my hands were shaking behind me. I couldn't see him, couldn't see what he was doing, and it got to me. I liked pain. I didn't want to die, and I didn't like not being able to grab everything in my hands, no matter how deep it bit into my skin, and wrestle it down. I took a step forward, and the fucking pavers let go underneath me without warning, and I slid down over a crumbling edge into the air.

I stopped with a jerk a foot or so above the water, and swayed there, suspended. I hung, panting for a moment, listening to the lap of the waves, the plop of chunks of the pavers hitting the water, and the creak of the rope I was suspended from. My side felt like it had split open while my shirt was made of salt, and I imagined kidneys and liver and lungs oozing out, draining me.

Craning my throbbing neck, I could just make out Alt James' dark silhouette leaning out over the edge above me.

“Got to be careful,” he said. “If I put you in any kind of mortal danger, fate will fucking *intervene*. I can fuck with you all I want, just



got to toe that line, you know. You'll work your way free of this soon enough, but by then I'll be gone, and you'll be ... *here*."

He waved. The motherfucker waved *goodbye*.

"So this is it—you're just gonna leave me here alone forever?"

He'd disappeared from view, but I heard him laugh. "Shit, I never said you were *alone*. I done this before."

I listened to his steps scraping away, greedily. After a while it was just lap lap, creak creak, and my own labored breathing.