

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 brick buildings and has various pipes and wires hanging from the ceiling. In the background, a restaurant sign is visible with the word "RESTAURANT" and some other text. The overall atmosphere is gritty and urban.

**JEFF
SOMERS
COLLECTIONS**
a novel

COLLECTIONS

Chapter 20

by Jeff Somers

20.

Startling awake, I let out a little cry and flailed my arms and legs, ridiculous. My arms were still numb, my shoulders aching painfully, and breathing had become painful, every inhalation sending a slice of burning red agony up and down my side and in the deep pit of my stomach. I wasn't sure how long I'd been hanging there, but my stomach also told me I'd been there at least past lunch, past dinner, and probably past midnight snack.

I hung there for a few seconds, smelling the clean air and listening to the lap lap, the plop plop, the creaking of the rope ... and slowly realized that the creaking had startled me awake, because it had shifted in tone. Instead of the dry, regular groan I'd come in with, it had transformed into something irregular and higher-pitched. Twisting my head up and around with some painful effort, savoring the tinges of fresh discomfort, I could see that at the edge of the crumbling walkway where the rope went over it had rubbed down to a few stubborn strands.

Just as I pictured myself falling into the river with my hands bound behind my back, the rope snapped and I plummeted.

I sliced into the water and sank, my form perfect, the water freezing, so cold I was amazed it wasn't just ice. I convulsed, the air

exploding from my lungs as I bent this way and that, trying to swim with my hands and ankles tied behind my back, water clawing down my throat. I thrashed and wriggled, sinking, the water like jelly around me, until my lungs started to burn and twitch, the sudden new pain burning through the panic and clearing my head, a rush of euphoria surging through me and making me light; I relaxed and stretched myself out flat, floating on my back, and closed my eyes.

Seconds, minutes, years later, I broke the surface, floating placidly on my back, drifting. I held my breath a few seconds more, savoring the burn, and then opened my eyes and mouth, sucking in the sweet, clean air and staring up at the blue-gray sky.

I floated for a while, trying to give myself little kicks that might steer me slowly towards the shore. I knew *my* river pretty well, and knew there was a small beach not too upriver where I could climb onto shore even with my hands bound, but I wasn't sure I could direct enough energy into my thrashings to propel myself there. And I wasn't sure if *this* fucking river had the same outline and personality. I took a deep breath and let it out, took another and held it, and curled myself into a ball, sinking slightly under the water but brings my fingers close to my ankles. In the water it was an easier maneuver than in the trunk, and the rope had been stretched out a little, so I managed to get my fingertips onto the knot that held my ankles together.

The rope had swollen, and the water was cold, and I couldn't see what I was doing, but I got the knot between my thumb and forefinger, paused for a moment to relax again, and began trying to worm one strand out from under the other. After a few seconds of fumbling, I managed it, one fat finger somehow worming its way into the middle of the knot, and a moment later my legs were free.

I rolled over again and popped back to the surface. Taking three deep, coughing breaths again, I oriented myself—surprised by how far from the Jersey side I'd drifted—and started kicking. For a moment I considered kicking towards Manhattan, which loomed on my left silent and massive, but I thought better of it. I *knew* Hoboken was more or less empty—I didn't know anything about *this* Manhattan. And Alt James had brought me in through Hoboken. On the off chance he was still there—car trouble, I thought with a smile—I wanted to be on his trail. A moment later I thought again, and tucked myself into a ball, sinking slightly as I pulled my arms up and over my feet, bending my knees and almost getting stuck in a ridiculous pose for a moment before popping free, my hands still cuffed but now at least in front of me.

I got on my belly and started doing the world's most awkward and horrible doggy paddle, slapping my bound hands in front of me, angling as best I could against the current towards Jersey. The current wasn't strong, a peaceful flow I cut through pretty easily, but I was blowing like a beached whale by the time I made it to the scrabbly little shore a few hundred feet from where I'd been trussed up. I crawled through the slimy sandy dirt and flopped onto my back on the rocks, gasping and groaning.

Suddenly, I caught my breath and froze. Someone was singing, not too far away.

It was a song I remembered from when I'd been a kid, though the title and band escaped me: *Come on, baby, set me free ... you know you ain't afraid of me*. The voice was female, low and smoky, a woman who'd smoked unfiltered cigarettes for years, I thought. A few blocks away. I sat up and stared down at the handcuffs and thought about Rachel. About never touching her again—different, somehow, from

simply being forbidden to. At least I'd had the option, the mad option, of breaking the rule.

My wrists were already sore and scabbed from the cuffs, but I started working them anyway, tucking my thumb and pinky in order the other finger and pushing my hand backwards through one loop. The pain felt good, and kept my head clear as I worked the metal back and forth, stealing centimeters of skin back each time. I had nothing better to do but sit and listen to the off-key singing and the water lapping, tearing up my wrist, blood dripping onto the sandy dirt.

Come on baby, set me free ... all this talk don't satisfy me.

After ten minutes or so the pain washed out, everything going numb and senseless. If I'd been doing this just for fun, passing the time, I would have stopped and changed it up—salt in the wounds or a different material. As it was it just made it easier to stare at the blue-gray water and work the cuff up and down, tearing the skin and smearing blood everywhere. I started matching the rhythm of my movements to the lapping of the water, back and forth, push and pull, until suddenly the cuff slipped off my hand and dangled from my other wrist. My whole arm throbbed, my palm slick with my own blood, but I had my arms back.

I realized the singing had stopped, and stood up, blinking, looking around and coming back to myself.

There were signs of erosion and age everywhere. Aside from the crumbling walkway by the river, rust and collapse was every other thing, once you started looking for it. I left my wrist bloody and raw, enjoying it again, and started climbing back up towards the street. I knew which way we'd come; I was going to retrace my steps and see what I found. Probably nothing, but it was a place to start.

I got back on Washington Street and walked right up the middle,

weaving around the occasional old rusted-out car or pile of debris. The stillness and quiet was like being in a box at the bottom of a very deep closet, insulated and forgotten.

I heard the steps a few seconds before she appeared and was ready for it, but when she caught up with me all she did was match my stride and walk alongside me for a while. I turned and looked at her, then quickly looked around, checking for an ambush, but it was just her: a middle-aged woman, stick-thin, gaunt, with sunken cheeks and long, stiff-looking white hair. She was wearing a pair of ragged, torn jeans, several layers of torn-up, fraying T-shirts and a pair of Converse Chuck Taylors, blue and looking like they stayed on her feet because they didn't have any better ideas.

I kept looking around. It was an old mugger trick—you started walking with someone, strike up a friendly chat, and when you turn a corner or pass close to a wall, someone comes from another direction, fast, and jumps you. But I didn't see anybody else. It was just her, and she was so skinny, her skin so thin and pale, I couldn't take her seriously.

"I'm so *hungry*," she said suddenly, sounding almost cheerful. "You know how long I been here? Four years. You know what there is to eat here? Nothing."

I kept walking, keeping my eyes moving. I didn't say anything. I didn't know what the Rules of Polite fucking Society said about conversations with ghostlike women in alternate universes, and I figured I could always claim ignorance if it turned out I was being rude.

"Nothing," she continued. "Not a dog, not a pigeon, not a fucking plant. I'd eat fucking moss if I could find any."

I turned left at eighth street, and she turned with me like we were

a flock of birds or something. I was still braced for an attack, still keeping my eyes open, but she just kept walking, not looking at me.

“There’s not even canned stuff,” she said. “Fucking stores are *empty*. Wrap your head around *that*.”

We walked down eighth for a while, chummy.

“I can’t wait to eat *you*,” she said quietly.

I stopped and watched her take two steps without me. When she spun around, startled, I pointed at her. “Walk some other street,” I suggested. “Or I’m going to have to break your legs.”

She smiled, and I wished she hadn’t. Her teeth were green and moldy, a few missing, her gums a bright red. “I’m going to wait until you fall asleep, and eat you,” she said happily. “I’m going to eat you *forever*.” She clasped her hands together in front of her chest.

“Forever.”

I snapped my arm out and smacked her in the face with the free end of the cuffs, hard enough to make her yelp and stagger back, but not hard enough to even break the skin. “Walk some other street.” I looked around and listened. If this was a distraction, if she was just freaking me out to help some partner sneak up on me, I was going to be ready.

She began backing past me, smiling, her hands clasped in front of her again. “Oh, *yes*,” she said in a breathy little whisper. “Forever.”

I watched her back away from me, taking her time, her hands clasped, her thin face screwed up into a terrible smile. She just kept backing away until she’d disappeared beyond the rise of the street, and I turned away and started walking again, heart pounding.

By the time I arrived at the beat-up old warehouse on Monroe Street, the sun was sinking and I had the uneasy feeling I’d be spending a pitch black night in an empty world with just the Gray

Ghost back there for company, waiting for her to show up with a fucking bib on and a jar of barbecue sauce in one bony hand. I'd emerged from within it some unknowable time ago with Alt James at my back, but I didn't remember much about how I'd come there in the first place. I stood for a moment in the middle of Monroe Street staring at it: Two buildings, really, squat square lumps of concrete and rebar, connected by a shattered bridge that started off on one side filled with promise and exuberant optimism and ended about four feet later in shards of rock and metal, only to spring up again on the other side as if nothing had happened. The buildings sat on a scrubby patch of gravel and crabgrass, weeds shooting up in odd spots like trees, taller than me, swaying slightly in every weak breeze.

It looked dark inside. I circled around, finding plenty of hollow, sagging doorways leading into complete darkness. My wrist had gone from the searing, clarifying pain I liked to the dull, throbbing kind of pain infections heralded, and which I enjoyed less. My head was starting to ache in sympathy, as well as my back, and the idea of stumbling through the darkness inside that building was about as attractive as going to church.

I suddenly wanted a cigarette very, very badly.

Rushing, I stepped through a wide double-doorway and into the greasy shadows. The dimming sunlight illuminated a few feet, and then it was all grays and blues and shadows. A wide, empty lobby led to a narrow hall, then to a small elevator room with two yawning holes where the elevators had once stood. I kept walking down the darkened hall, following my vague, sleepy memories, and found my way to the loading dock. My life had brought me into more loading docks than usual, lately, and I was starting to take it as a bad sign.

When Alt James had pulled me from the trunk, his big black

Cadillac had been parked right there on the cracked concrete pad. I jumped down and walked back to the metal garage door that hung by force of habit, heavy and rusted but very much in place. I gave it a good shove and found it difficult to even shake, much less get up off the ground. I didn't see how Alt James had pulled the car in or out unless he was carrying a fucking generator around in his pocket and could wire the ancient motor up.

I stared at the corrugated metal for a moment, one hand resting on it, handcuffs dangling from my wrist. I'd never felt so fucking alone in my life.

I heard her breathing a moment before she moved, a squeaky kind of low-volume mewling as she crept towards me. I forced myself to wait a moment in the failing light, forced myself to stay still and keep one hand on the garage door despite my screaming nerves: She was there, behind me, swallowed in blackness and creeping, but I knew that it was never the right move to give in to panic, to move the second you wanted to. Your brain was ancient and dumb. You had to be smarter.

When I couldn't take it any more, I dropped into a squat and fell back onto my hands, sweeping one leg out and catching something. She went down with a yelp and I pushed myself up and tried to spring forward onto her, managing something more reminiscent of falling. She was already scrambling back away from me but I managed to get a hand on her ankle and drag her back to me—she didn't weigh anything. I gave it all my strength and she flew up towards me like she was made of paper.

I realized too late that she'd let me pull her, and then she was on me, light as a feather, her bony hands pulling at my clothes, and before I could change gears and start *pushing* instead of *pulling*, she'd

bitten into my neck, hard, pain lancing up into my brain, direct route, no detours, my vision flashing red and every hair on my body suddenly standing up on edge.

I half screamed, half growled and pulled her from me so hard she flew down and away. I heard a crash off in the shadows and felt blood pouring down my neck, soaking into my clothes. Trying to keep on her trail as she melted into the darkness, I staggered forward but caught my foot in something and slammed down onto my knees, panting.

For a moment all I could hear was my own breathing. I couldn't believe I'd just gotten my ass handed me by an old woman who's clothes weighed more than her, and was momentarily glad The Bumble had not been here to see it.

Then, faintly, out in the hall, I heard her whispering. At first I couldn't make out what she was saying, then something clicked in my head.

She was saying: *"Delicious."*