

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 22

by Jeff Somers

22.

“Well, Mr. Falken,” I said slowly. “Looks like you're my hero.”

He shrugged without turning around to look at me. “No. I knew where he was going to take you.” He looked around, as if he could actually see anything without the flashlight aimed directly at it. “I couldn't leave anyone in a place like this.”

I could just make out everyone around me as we made our way through this silent, dusty Hoboken. Falken was the same chubby schlub in a suit, his head shaved down to a fine point, his jowls just beginning to blossom. He'd be a fat fuck in a few years if he didn't cut down on the fruity mixed drinks and the steaks, the double lattes with whipped cream. Right now he just looked abundant. Moist and fertile, the sort of guy who had vast civilizations of bacteria growing in the darkened folds of his skin. He had a pinched expression on his face, very serious and unhappy, and I took it to mean he was really going out of his fucking way for me, breaking his stride to come save me from my own stupidity. I wanted to hit him, but owing my life to him made that seem impolite.

Rachel kept turning her head to glance back at me. In the old warehouse she'd stepped up to me suddenly, *oh! You're bleeding!* And reached out a hand, jerking it to a halt just before she actually

touched me. Since then we hadn't spoken a word to each other. She twisted back to look at me and then twisted back around, biting her lip.

Rusch was delighted. Fucking-A *delighted*. She more or less danced down the street, ogling this alternate world, a place she'd been and not been, recognizable but different, the apparent proof of every theory she had ever floated at a faculty retreat and seen laughed out of the room. I could see her looking out of the corner of her eye at everyone as we walked, trying to catch our attention and start a conversation, like an excited kid.

The Bumble had gone back to his blank-faced expression, walking steadily along with his hands hanging by his sides like shovels, his eyes sleepy. Since he'd just displayed more emotion to me than I'd ever seen in him before, I figured he was exhausted.

Rubbing my torn-up wrist to break the scab a little, the pain cutting through my overloaded nerves and soaking a little more adrenaline into my blood. I was jittery and achy, grinding my teeth, all signs that I was a few moments away from collapsing. I pushed myself to catch up with Falken, who didn't look at me as I matched his pace.

"What's he doing now?" I said quietly, not looking at him either. "James. The Executioner."

"Still looking for me," he said immediately. "He wouldn't think of me coming *here*, but he's still working me. Won't give up until I'm dead, either. Don't worry, he won't bother to check on you. Keep your head down and you're fine."

"Fuck that," I said, turning to accept a silently proffered cigarette from The Bumble. "That piece of shit put himself on my To-Do list." I inhaled smoke, letting it leak from my nose at its own pace. "What's

he *doing*? Where can I find the son of a bitch?"

Falken didn't turn to look at me as we walked, turning in towards the cliffs at the rear of Hoboken. "He's playing cop, pretending to be your James," he said suddenly. "He's using the cops to look for me. He's walking around pretending to be him, going through the motions, using the system to track me down."

I thought about that. I wasn't a scientist and I didn't know how to jump between universes. I did know how shit like that worked. "Why don't you displace?" I asked. "Get out of town. Get out of the fucking *world*."

"I *can't*, goddamn it!" he snarled, his hands bunching up into fists. He visibly forced himself to relax. "The energy needed for ... for traveling between—it's enormous. In some places it's easy to come by. Not here. here it's expensive and difficult."

I closed my eyes for a moment. "So you borrowed money. As much as you could get."

"And I managed to scrape together enough material to make two jumps." I opened my eyes again and forced myself to look at him. He was staring at the ground as we walked. "And I just used half of it."

I let that ride. I had nothing to say. He looked up and stared straight ahead, his jaw clenched, like he wished he could burn people to death with his eyes. After a second or two I nodded. "Playing cop. Sure. Everyone thinks he's Detective James, and he gets the whole fucking city to look for you. But it also means we know exactly where the motherfucker is."

I saw The Bumble nod his head in agreement. We were slowing down, approaching the fucking Beamer, parked right in the middle of the street. It looked scorched, black scars running along the sides, like it had driven through a fire.

“You *drove* here?” I said, then instantly regretted it, worried that Rusch might take this as an opportunity to give me a lesson in theoretical physics. “Forget it.” The Bumble and Falken stepped forward and opened the front doors, and then we were all getting into the car as if this was a trip to the fucking mall or something. I paused, my hands on the top rim of the door, feeling the heat of the metal.

“How much?” I asked Falken. He stopped, bent awkwardly, half in and half out of the car.

He told me. It was an amount of money I didn’t think you could actually amass in one place.

He sank into the leather seats and I ducked in too, finding myself next to Rachel, Rusch sitting up straight and excited on the other end. There was a good three inches between Rachel and me; it would have been completely natural and easy to lean my leg out and let it touch her thigh, but I didn't. She might excuse it, she might not. It didn't matter. I'd promised never to touch her, and until she released me from that promise there was going to be three inches between us.

Falken twisted around in his seat, holding out a pair of what looked like white gumdrops. His face was still stiff and shadowed, his eyes distant. “You're gonna want these,” he said, dropping them into my palm. “Earplugs.”

I remembered being tied up in Alt James' trunk, and nodded, stuffing them into my ears along with everyone else. I felt the Beamer fire up, the low rumble in my bones, and settled back, enjoying the near-total silence the earplugs offered. I shut my eyes for a moment, wondering when the last time I'd slept had been.

“Wake up, slugger.”

I opened my eyes and was awake instantly. I felt raw and bruised; every part of me ached. It was bright sunlight outside of the car, making Rachel into a tiny silhouette.

“We’re back?”

“We’re back,” she said, stepping back as I pulled myself, slowly, like an old man, from the car. We were on Hudson Street downtown, crowded with people having lunch and shopping, just strolling in the sunlight. When I got to my feet I wobbled a little, everything going hazy, my joints stiff and my mouth filled with cotton. I felt like I’d been in a coma. When I felt steady enough I climbed onto the sidewalk and leaned back against the door to shut it, sweat pouring down my back. My side burned like someone had injected my wound with acid.

We were parked right outside the White Horse Tavern. I pushed off from the car and staggered over to Falken, The Bumble, and Rusch.

“Jesus Christ, who’s buying me a drink?”

A kid named Carlos was working the bar—slow this time of day, old codgers sopping up domestic beer, mostly—who I knew from a few collections last year. Nothing major, and the kid had cheerfully handed over what he owed, apologizing for making me come out and find him, and I’d let him go with some slaps and shoves. He didn’t exactly smile when Billy and me walked in, but he slapped napkins down onto the bar as the five of us settled in and waited politely to hear what we had to say. I ordered boilermakers for everyone, and an extra one for myself. Rachel made a face, Falken ignored me completely, and Rusch steeped her fingers in front of herself as if expecting a delightful new experience.

When our drinks arrived Billy and I dropped a shot glass each into

our pints, clinked glasses, and downed them as fast as we could. We were old pros, and didn't spill much. Rusch watched us, smiling, her whole face lit up.

I picked up my second shot glass as the alcohol warmed me up, eased my nerves. I felt like I could sleep for days, but there was no time. I stepped out and around Rusch and leaned in to Falken.

“Bygones,” I said slowly. “You and me, we're even, right? We start fresh. I can't cover or forgive your debt—Jesus, it's too much fucking scratch—but I can *help* you. I know this town, I know the players. I'm on your payroll now.” I popped a finger free from my grip on the shot glass and wagged it at him. “That's for swinging around to pick me up back ... there. Wherever *there* was. Okay?”

He looked me up and down, then nodded. “Okay.”

I nodded back and swallowed the second shot: Wild Turkey, rough and country, swagger and burn. It wasn't sophisticated, but it had character, and sometimes that carried you through. “James, The fucking *Executioner*, is on my list now. I can't have that fucking doppelganger running amok in *my* town.” Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Carlos on the phone behind the bar, his back to us. I twitched my head and focused on Falken. “You got your own troubles, but I could use your help, if only because you're the only one here who has any fucking idea what's going on. I'm *asking*, not telling.”

I'd left my beer by The Bumble, which had been a mistake. I really wanted it before whoever Carlos was calling arrived, and I knew from bitter experience that The Bumble considered abandoned alcohol up for grabs. I'd seen him snag glasses when I was standing a foot away.

Falken stared at me silently for a moment, then nodded. “All right,” he said. I translated helpfully for myself: *I've got nothing to lose*. He was anchored to this world for the time being, he had no more

money, and no friends. If I was going to step up to the line with him, why not let me? I might draw some bullets my way. And fuck, I'm supposed to be immortal.

I turned and tapped The Bumble on the shoulder, and he turned around, grinning, and my goddamn beer was in his paw, already half gone. "Billy," I said, and his grin disappeared. "What I'm planning to do might go against Frank's wishes, I don't know," I said. "At any rate I'm not asking the old man for permission. You still in this with me?"

He shrugged and nodded. "Fuck Frank," he said. "Asshole hasn't skinned a knuckle in fucking decades."

I smiled and looked back at Falken. He looked at The Bumble and back to me. "What do you plan to do?"

"What I get paid to do, Mr. Falken." I winked, feeling jolly and limp, ready to fall over at any moment. "Make them hurt."