

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 24

by Jeff Somers

24.

The Holland Motor Lodge wasn't the worst motel I'd ever stayed in; the rugs were a horrifying green and yellow pattern that clashed with the drapes and bedspreads, which were tropical in flavor, and the whole place smelled like car exhaust, but it was pretty clean and the furniture was in decent shape. It was right outside the tunnel, five minutes from midtown on a good day, and since Frank's world ended at the borders of Manhattan it was as safe a spot as any.

My suits didn't fit right. They didn't fit badly, but they were off the rack and were snug in the wrong way and loose in the wrong way and I felt like I was eight again, taking my First Communion to make Ma happy and swimming in some cousin's hand-me-down suit. We'd taken three rooms and everyone but Rusch was in Falken's, the middle room, filling it with cigarette smoke and half-empty Chinese food boxes, everything mixing with exhaust fumes and honking horns from the cars trying to stuff their way into the tunnel's tubes, forming a brown haze that obscured everything. Falken was back to his overstuffed self, blooming out of a shiny green suit, his jowly cheeks shaved red and raw, digesting a disturbing amount of sweet and sour pork, forked endlessly and joylessly into his small, greasy mouth with robotic regularity. I didn't like Falken. My hands itched to slapped him around, but I reminded myself that he had a lifetime

pass.

I consoled myself by thinking of Alt James. That bastard had left me in an abandoned *world* to be *eaten* for the rest of eternity. My future was a bright golden vision of being able to do whatever I wanted to that son of a bitch without even a flicker of guilt.

Pacing, I pushed my foot down onto the sharp pebble I'd placed in my shoe. Walking around, it dug painfully into my foot, soothing me. Everyone was sitting around the tiny round table that wobbled in every directions, threatening to spill the mess of food, ashtrays, and half-filled glasses of booze everywhere. They watched me pace for a few seconds, patient.

"All right," I finally said, sending a plume of smoke into the brown air. "We don't have any muscle. Even if we had the money to hire an army—and my wad will carry us for a while but it isn't going to buy us an army—no one in this town would touch me now that Frank's put the kibosh on me. James is playing cop—who knows how long he can pull it off. He *looks* like Captain Stanley James, he *sounds* like him, but he's not a fucking cop and it's gonna get noticed."

"He'll pull it off for a long time," Falken said flatly. He looked like an overfed pig, his girly little hands steepled under his chin. I owed him my life. I hated that.

I nodded. "Long enough. And while he does pull it off, he's got the cops. He's got all the resources of the police department, plus the Feds if he takes the trouble to dream up something big to feed them. Not only the normal cops he would have under his direction for operations, but every fucking dirty cop in the city he can slip an envelope to is his now, too. And we got Frank McKenna standing on my balls, to boot." I put my cigarette back between my lips. "Thus I am in fucking Jersey."

“I was born in Jersey,” The Bumble said contemplatively, studying his cigarette.

I blinked. The Bumble, I’d always been sure, had been grown in a lab vat somewhere. The thought of him with a mullet in some suburban Jersey high school disturbed me.

The door opened behind me, and I turned to find Connie Rusch struggling with several overstuffed brown grocery bags. I’d been hesitant to trust the dotty old professor with our food supply, but it had gotten her out of the room and away from the cigarette smoke she deplored.

Ignoring Billy’s sudden moment of introspection, Rachel sat forward fiercely, setting her glass of bourbon on the table. I mashed my foot down onto my hidden pebble and forced myself not to wince.

“So, what, we hide out here, grow old together?” she hissed. “I go get a fucking job as a hostess at some Hoboken dive, get five dollar bills stuffed between my tits all night?”

I shook my head, trying to keep a straight face. Rachel’s rage was endlessly entertaining. She always thought I’d volunteered for all those drives because I wanted to hurt her—my way of hurting her, anyway. But I’d just liked seeing her angry, and she was always angry.

“We’re just here to stay out of the light,” I said. “James no doubt has us on the wire. Frank’s people all know me and Billy on sight. We walk around the city, we’re fucked in an hour, tops. But I have a plan. We’re going on the offensive.”

She shook her head. “What about Elias? How is he getting out of this?”

I frowned, putting all my weight on my one leg, letting the stone really dig in there, maybe even puncture the skin. “We take out James, he—”

“How does he get *home*? Get back?”

I looked at Falken. *Elias*. He was staring out the window at the traffic, all noble pain.

“I have an—an idea.”

I blinked, and then we all turned as one to look at Connie Rusch. She was standing by the bathroom, which was doubling as a completely unsanitary kitchen, holding in each hand a jug of milk. She was wearing a floral print dress that hung on her like a sack and had probably cost about thirty cents for two or three South American children to sew from a pattern, no stockings, and sensible black shoes, the kind they put on senile old men who liked to wander the grounds. Her eyes were made ridiculously huge by her thick glasses, which had sunk down to the tip of her nose. The old broad had proven tougher than I'd imagined, but looking at her now I couldn't believe she was even in the same room.

“I think I can help Mr. Falken with his energy needs.” She hesitated, then rushed on. “This has, after all, been my life's work. Although seeing the practical application of it so advanced in other, other *dimensions* is frustrating and demoralizing. I understand the concepts. I have contacts in the scientific community, and the use of such synthetic elements in research is not unheard of. I can make inquiries.”

We stared for another moment, and then Rachel clapped her hands together. “Oh, *Connie*,” she sighed happily. I grit my teeth.

“We can't afford it,” I said bluntly. “*Elias* borrowed enough fucking money to run New York for a week. We can't buy what he bought.”

Rusch shook her head. her arms were trembling from the weight of the milk but she didn't seem to notice. “We won't need to *pay* for it,” she said in a horrified tone. “These are scientists I'm talking

about. We'll beg, borrow, and trade. Darling, in my field *none* of us have any money."

Rachel clapped her hands again. I wanted to slap her. And then throw Falken out the window.

I pushed a smile onto my face for Rusch's benefit. "All right. How long is that gonna take you?"

She frowned, obviously considering the question for the first time. "A week. Perhaps two. To make inquiries. Another week or two to make arrangements. I may have to do some cross-trading, pull some strings, apologize to certain folks ..."

I snapped my fingers at her viciously as she looked down at her feet, doing sums in her head. "A *rough* idea, Connie," I said. "Give it to me in a round number in the single digits."

She looked up at me and blinked. "Perhaps three months." She did a little wince-shrug. "This stuff is closely tracked, you see."

A thick silence fell over the room. I turned back to the table. "All right—it's a time line, at least. It doesn't change anything. We still need to deal with James."

Falken didn't look away from the window as he spoke, softly. "I can't go back, go *home*, unless James is gone. He'll just follow me. And then he'll be on familiar ground again."

Rachel sat back again, her hair a delicious mess around her face. "All right. We have no muscle, not enough money, and he has the whole city to hit us over the head with. What do we do?"

We make them hurt, I thought. Swallowing an unformed anger I didn't want to explore too closely, I pressed the sole of my foot against my pebble and took a breath. "We sic them on each other."

They stared at me.

"Billy," I said suddenly, pointing at him. "You know every

Collection run in Manhattan, Queens, Brooklyn, right?”

He blinked. “You mean Frank’s? Or everyone’s?”

“Everyone’s,” I said, feeling excited. “Frank’s, The Phin’s, Durby uptown, The Marcos Brothers, Perez and Hildy—all of them.”

He nodded slowly. “Yeah, sure. We gotta stay out of each other’s way, so I know.”

I nodded. “We’re going on a spree. We’re gonna hit them all. Fast, two or three a night, all in one week. We’re gonna clean them out.”

He blinked again. “We’re gonna *rob* them?” He blinked again, a faint slick of alarm spreading over his rocky face. “*All* of them?”

I nodded. “Frank already thinks we’re working for James. Let’s make it true. We kick him in the balls, we tell him James told us to. We tell him James is fucking with him, taking over, his worst fucking nightmare: A cop using his badge to run the fucking rackets.” I smiled. “What’s Frank gonna do?”

Billy’s face was comical, a mask of contemplation sitting uneasily on it. “Go after us.”

“After *James*. All we gotta do is lead him there, let him take the Executioner out.”

Rachel was shaking her head. “He isn’t going after *cops*,” she said flatly. “He can’t. He’d have every cop in the country on his ass, he did that.”

“Shut the fuck *up*,” I hissed, my hands balling into fists “Jesus, you don’t know shit about shit here. You don’t *know* Frank.” I uncurled my hands by force of will. “You go after cops, you have to. He thinks James is going to take everything from him, he’ll go for him.” I nodded. “I know Frank McKenna. You don’t.”

I looked at The Bumble. If he was with me on it, that’s all that mattered. If Falken wanted in, I had to let him, I owed him, but this

was about me surviving the week, and I needed Billy.

He smiled. "Well, shit," he said, reaching for the Wild Turkey.
"Let's make 'em hurt, boss."