

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 32

by Jeff Somers

32.

I hesitated, a fuzzy feeling of shock and indecision settling over me like something heavy, hot, and wet. Behind me, I could hear steps coming up—Frank and his boys, guns reclaimed, and Frank so fucking enraged he might even pop me right on the sidewalk in full view of everyone. I looked at The Bumble, an eerie feeling of displacement rippling through me—he was standing right in front of me but it wasn't *him*, and even though I'd spent the last two weeks with my head in this situation I still felt dizzy thinking about it. If this wasn't Billy Bumbles, who the fuck *was* it? Doubles, brought by Alt James to trick me, sure, but that didn't feel like an answer. It felt like a story.

Angry voices pushed at me from behind, though. I could run, but my legs felt rubbery and blood dripped onto the sidewalk where I stood, a dozen tiny wounds sizzling nicely, making me look like a lunatic. I still didn't have a dime to my name, though I had a phone—I saw myself sprinting somewhere and hiding until Rachel and Billy—*my* Rachel and Billy—came to get me. Then I saw myself being shot to death in some booth in a dive bar, and leaped for the car.

"Let's go," I said without looking at either of them. "I think I may have irritated Frank a little."

Just as Alt Rachel slammed the door and Alt Billy put the car in gear, three loud bangs made us all jump. Alt Billy gunned the engine reflexively and the car darted out into traffic, smacking into a beat-up old SUV with jersey plates.

“Go!” I shouted, mashing my foot into the carpet, gunning my phantom accelerator. “Go fucking *go!*”

Alt Billy steered the Caddy smoothly around the SUV and its screaming driver and punched it into traffic, goosing it up to fifty in a matter of seconds, eating up blacktop. I twisted around to look through the back windshield and saw Frank and his guys standing just outside Lee’s Empire, getting small. At the red light he tapped the brakes once for luck and popped through the intersection, and made his first right. I sat back and felt my heart pound, thinking if nothing else these fucking doppelgangers knew what the fuck a gunshot sounded like.

“Pull over,” Rachel said from the back seat. “Come on back here, let me clean you up.”

“Don’t stop,” I said immediately. I sucked in air and tried to look relaxed. “Frank’s got the word out,” I said, plausibly enough. “He’s got guys in cars trying to spot us.” I thought of Alt Rachel’s hands on me again and shivered at the memory: I could still feel where she’d touched me, like she’d left a slime trail.

“Where we going?” Alt Billy said again. On to me, a little; he’d nonchalantly locked all the doors when he’d put the car in gear. Falken, I thought. Alt James had set me up here so I could lead them to Falken, thinking we were all friends, that I’d just lead them straight there. I knew I couldn’t string them along forever; I needed to think of a place to take them where I could give them the slip, now

that we'd shaken Frank for the moment. I'd done a pretty fucking good job of baiting Frank; I figured when he got the idea I'd be somewhere, he'd come running for some personal revenge, and that was exactly how I wanted him.

I pictured Alt Rachel in the back seat, the spitting image of my girl, but different. She was wearing makeup, for one, dark eye shadow and fake lashes, lip gloss—lip gloss, for fuck's sake. And her manner—hard edged but sexy, fake sexy. I'd met a lot of girls like Rachel back when I'd been driving them around, and seeing her like that was fucking depressing.

The Bumble was more or less the same. More beard. A scar under his right ear that shouldn't be there. A little more nervous in his manner than I was used to. But basically the same guy, it seemed. That was depressing, too, for some reason.

"Back to Queens," I said, trying to make it sound casual. "Take the 59th Street bridge, I think, this time of day."

Alt Billy nodded, steering smoothly. I settled back into my seat and hoped I looked sleepy and relaxed. I didn't want to talk to them, and I had the feeling they didn't want to talk to me, to try to guess what I was thinking, keep dancing. We floated along in uncomfortable silence, each one of us pretending it wasn't.

The silence became almost unbearable as I pretended to nap. I wanted to open my eyes and make sure we were going where I'd told them to go, that I wasn't going to find myself in another fucking deserted alternate world. I rode it out, my whole body tense as I strove to make it roll and pitch with the car like a disconnected puppet, ignoring every shift and noise they made even as I imagined them slitting my throat. Every time the car stopped I slit my eyes and tried to gauge where we were, and when I thought we were paused

right outside the toll booths on the bridge, I sat up and stretched, looking around. Traffic was just a little clogged; Alt Billy inched the car forward a few feet here and there, never coming to a complete stop.

I realized with a start that I'd never gotten my knife back from Mr. Useless back at the restaurant.

I wrote a eulogy to that knife in my head, a second or two of powerful regret. Then I leaned over and put both hands on Alt Billy's knee, mashing his foot down on the gas pedal.

The Caddy surged forward three feet and smacked into the bumper in front of us, a rusty old Nova from a previous age. Not hard enough to cause any real damage, but hard enough to jerk us in our seats and get the guy in front of us to pop out of his car, red in the face, arms in the air. I looked around, satisfied—unlike the streets of Manhattan, there was no place for Alt Billy to drive us, keep us moving, gain some speed. We were blocked in on all sides by the traffic.

“Pop the fucking lock,” I said, reasonably enough, I thought.

The Nova guy was outside Alt Billy's door, tapping on the window gently, but calling him a motherfucking asshole in a stern if controlled voice. Alt Billy ignored him, smiling at him in such a perfect imitation of The Bumble I almost wanted to hug him. “Ah, shit,” he said. “How long you knew?”

“Fuck you, and open the fucking door.”

He looked around, tapping his fingers on the wheel. Stalling for time. I clenched my teeth, pulled my arm in towards me, and with a gleeful expectation of pain I slammed my elbow into the passenger window, shattering it. My arm went numb, fuzzing and vibrating, and the Nova guy shut the hell up, taking a cautious step back from

the car as he realized with a sudden pulse of brainpower that this maybe wasn't a routine fender bender.

I flipped myself around and pulled myself up and out of the car ungracefully, half expecting them to grab my feet. But we were in the middle of the highway, surrounded by people and cops just a short jog away. Grunting and twisting, I got my feet under me and staggered back from the car. I had a long way to go, but at least I was under my own power again. I looked around—the sun was up and the skies were clear, the air was crisp and smelled like gasoline and asphalt. Horns, a sad chorus, had started blaring around us as traffic choked up.

Before I could turn away, the back window slid down, and Alt Rachel leaned out a little, looking up at me.

“Too bad,” she said. “I woulda laid you. For free.”