



**JEFF
SOMERS
COLLECTIONS**
a novel

COLLECTIONS

Chapter 1

by Jeff Somers

1.

Take The Bumble, for example: A man designed for his job, as if his creator had known all along. Short, but broad in the shoulders, the sort of magic metabolism that took beer and fried sandwiches and turned it into a massive slab of muscle. A man who breathed loudly through his nose no matter how much exertion he was putting out. Shovels for hands. Not particularly bright—The Bumble was never going to write his memoirs—but not exactly stupid, either, and you treated him with contempt at your peril. People were designed for things. If you figured out what you were meant to do, you were happy. Otherwise you ended up doing the wrong thing and were miserable.

Me, I was happy.

The Bumble peeled off and took a seat at one of the fragile-looking wooden tables, the chair creaking under him as he planted himself. He immediately took out a pack of cigarettes and sucked one straight from the pack to his lips. In his suit and overcoat he looked like a fucking sausage packed in, his flat, expressionless face like a mask called Generic Russian Gangster you bought at a store: Bulbous, red nose, sad, sulky eyes, not even a hint of a smile line anywhere.

I went to the bar. McHale's was an old place, cool and dark inside

because back in the good old days bars didn't want windows. The bartender was a fancy gent in a clean white shirt and tight black trousers, thumbs hooked into the front of his pants as he chewed a toothpick, deciding on how to treat me as I slid out one of the stool and climbed aboard. To break the ice I pulled out my money clip and tossed a hundred bucks on the bar.

He glanced at it and kept his excitement so under control I thought maybe he was blind. Or that a Sultan had been through Hell's Kitchen the day before, leaving diamonds as tips.

Finally, he pushed himself towards me, floating slowly on currents only he could see. He picked up a towel along the way, wiped down the bar in front of me, and made the century disappear.

“What can I get you?”

I looked around. There were two other people in the bar at eleven fifteen in the morning: An old lady in thick, clownish makeup, sipping a straight gin with shaking hands, three bulging handbags arranged around her feet, and my dapper-looking fellow at the other end of the bar, drinking a Bloody Mary with a wilted-looking piece of celery sticking out of it. He was wearing a nice blue suit and his hair was combed back meticulously, but his cheeks were blue with a day's beard. He wore a huge gold ring on his pinky, simply absolutely fucking massive, and I decided I'd have to kick him in the balls an extra time for that.

I shot my cuffs, feeling the starch in my shirt and liking it. The suit had been made by a Romanian guy over on eighteenth, didn't speak a fucking word of English and wasn't too interested in anything you had to say anyway, but he cut cloth like a master. It was black and the lines could split atoms.

The rows of bottles behind the bar were depressing: Bad bourbon,

Scotch by way of Scotland, Pennsylvania, and dusty liqueurs, forgotten, reviled. And then, with a little patch of sun lighting it up like a diamond, way up high on a shelf over the ancient manual register, a squat bottle of dark whiskey, wide and flat on the bottom. I stared for a moment, and then looked back at the bartender; he was a softy, a fucking Jumbo Softy, six feet of beer gut and sweat stink. The guy would hurt, I thought. He'd hurt nice and easy, and my heart started pumping a little. He'd hurt without me breaking a sweat, and there was no fucking way he knew a Dalmore '62 when he had one in the bar with him.

I pointed, keeping one eye on the Dandy. "That," I said, pulling my gloves from my coat pocket and laying them on the bar. "A double."

He blinked and followed my finger, staring up at the bottle like he'd never seen it before. He probably hadn't. Someone had put it there years ago and it had been forgotten, a fucking shame. People who collected good Scotch were fucking assholes. I thought about breaking the bartender's legs and burning the place down around him and my mood started to get all giddy.

"I dunno," he said. "I don't even know how much to charge you for it."

I put a smile on my face. Making this shitbag hurt would be a lot of fun, but I controlled myself: He wasn't on my list, and I was going to be able to exert myself on the Dandy in a few minutes. The urge to make him squeal was thrumming inside me like always, but I told myself I was better than that, smarter. I had discipline.

"I just paid you a hundred," I said. "Gimme a fucking double."

He thought about it, which was obviously not too easy for him, his Adam's Apple bobbing as he pushed his hand through his thinning black hair, dyed and bristly, a huge bald spot like the fucking moon

shining in the gloom of McHale's. Then he reached the end of his personal decision-tree, which was about three steps long, and shrugged, reaching up on his toes to pull the dusty bottle down. He examined it, suddenly cheerful, as he carried it over to me.

"You sure, man? This shit looks like it was here when they built the place. It maybe isn't—"

Bartenders who didn't know shit about liquor pissed me off. I saw myself taking a handful of his greasy hair and smacking his face down into the bar, felt the impact in my arm, heard the crack of his nose, smelled the geyser of easy blood, and I had to struggle to keep my hands down, my arms on their best behavior.

"I'm sure," I said as he flipped a tumbler onto the bar in front of me. With a smartassed smile, he worked the cork with something approaching skill and poured a sloppy double into my glass, a bit more than necessary, which didn't earn him any points. The smell was fucking heaven, and I closed my eyes to savor it, imagining what it was going to be like. A hundred dollars. I couldn't fucking believe it.

I opened my eyes and took the glass, swirling the booze around a little. I took another sniff, this time with my nose in the glass, and then I tipped the glass back and drank it off, the whole fucking thing, in one swallow. The waste felt wonderful. The whiskey tasted like gold.

I opened my eyes and made sure the Dandy was still sitting there. He'd made a dent in his Bloody Mary. Fucking mixed drinks. People who ruined good booze with mixes deserved what they got.

A flush spread through my middle, happy and warm, like autumn leaves in the sun. It even made me forgive the asshat bartender. I was filled with love and kindness. The Dandy, he was on my list, and that made me even happier.

I rapped my knuckles on the bar and picked up my gloves. “Thanks,” I said, and turned to nod at The Bumble. He rumbled up off his chair and followed me back towards the Dandy as I slipped my gloves on, crisp and black. My hands felt normal inside them, like they belonged.

He looked up as we approached and I put a big smile on my face, pointing at him. “Miiissteerrr Falken!” I said, throwing my arms out. I ran my eye over his suit: Expensive, but a piece of shit. Off the rack, something assholes bought because they didn't know what the fuck the word *tailor* meant. Gobs getting on and off the train every day to scrape themselves off behind a desk, that's who wore a suit like that. No self-respecting man would. The Dalmore baked in my belly, home at long last after its long bottled nightmare.

He looked up, his eyes going from me to The Bumble and back to me. He was a good-looking guy, a little chubby and suffering from a catastrophic razor burn under his fast beard, his fat face tanned and flushed. He looked prosperous enough, which made me happy. He had a dark face, with a heavy brow and an elegant nose I was jealous of. I rubbed the big round thing on my own face self-consciously as we approached: The Dandy was good-looking, and I was: Not.

“Do I know you fellas?” he asked, easy, leaning back and lacing his hands across his belly. The Bumble ignored him and scooted around behind him, sliding into the stool to his right and angling himself so as to block any attempted escape in that direction. I slid into the stool around the corner of the bar from him, which let me look right at him without twisting my body. I crossed my legs and put my hands in my lap, and pushed that smile.

“No, Mr. Falken, we never met,” I said, leaning forward slightly, crowding him a little more. Ease it on. I took my time. I could feel it

squirming inside me, wanting to take hold of him, feel his flesh and bones, make him hurt and *feel* that through his vibrating skin. I wanted to do it so badly. But there were rules, and rules were what had kept me sane all these years, so I stuck with them. Rules also let me do my job the right way, which so far had kept the black spot out of my hands. “But I represent someone you *have* met. Someone you owe a lot of fucking money to.”

Usually this was when they got real serious and pious, real polite. This guy just grinned.

“I owe a lot of money to a lot of people,” he said, that oily grin making him look like a goddamn monkey.

I lifted my hands a little and tugged the gloves on nice and tight, my heart singing in my chest. He was going to be an asshole about it. It was like a gift. “Frank McKenna,” I said. “That ring any bells?”

He nodded cheerfully. “Sure, sure. Frankie.” He twisted around to look at The Bumble, who sat like a sack of potatoes, staring at Falken with a steady, lifeless expression, chewing a toothpick. Falken looked back at me. “So you're the legbreaker, huh?” He put up his hands. “Let me guess,” he pointed at The Bumble without looking at him. “He's gonna break my fingers while you play Good Cop and tell me there's an easy way to avoid this sort of thing.”

I shook my head, trying to match his smile for insincerity. It was no challenge. “Mr. Falken, let me tell you something about myself.”

I paused and let him look back at me. I searched his face; he wasn't afraid, that was for sure. Because he thought this was just scare tactics. He thought this was just the first try, shake him up and see what kind of loose change fell out. Just when he lost patience and opened his mouth to ask me what the fuck I was waiting for, I spoke up.

“I was a big kid, Mr. Falken. And I was stupid as the fucking day is long, so I got left back in school couple of times. So I was a fucking giant in my class. When I was eleven years old I figured this out. Shit, I could pick up the other kids in my class and throw 'em around.” I leaned forward a little. “So I did. I beat the shit out of everyone. I *enjoyed* it. I got suspended, so I beat up the kids in my neighborhood. I liked sitting on some little shit's chest, my knees pinning his arms, I liked the soft crunch when I broke a nose, the wet sound, that lucky moment when a tooth went flying. I fucking *loved* it.”

He composed himself, leaning back a little, forcing a nonchalant attitude. An asshole. My mood was lifting with every hot beat of my heart.

“My Dad, he didn't like that. Took the stupid old fuck a while to figure it out, but once he knew what I was doing with my free time, he knocked me down and *he* beat the living shit outta *me*, and asked me how I liked it.” I shrugged a little. “What do you think?”

Falken was smiling faintly, but his eyes were wary. “You didn't.”

I shook my head, remembering that ecstatic feeling—I could *take* it, I could feel my own nose turned to pulp, my own arms pinned under his impossible weight, his whisky breath, and I could *take* it. It was a license to do it to other people, because I wasn't doing anything I couldn't handle myself.

“I *did*. I fucking *loved* it. It hurt, sure, but it's the way of the fuckin' world. But my Dad was a fucking huge slab, y'know, an' he put me in the hospital. Broke both my arms, my nose, three ribs, and I bled when I shit for weeks.” The doctors saying I should have died, it was a fuckin' miracle the drunk old bastard hadn't killed me. I made a comical face of horror. “Oh, Da' was fuckin' broke up. Felt terrible. An' he taught me, right there in the hospital, the only lesson I ever

needed to learn: You need rules. If I kept up just beatin' the snot outta everyone I could, eventually I'd hit into someone who could beat me back, and I might not make it. You had to have *rules*."

Falken had hooked on, and didn't say anything while I paused. I leaned back.

"I haven't hurt a fuckin' fly since then," I said slowly, "who didn't *deserve* it. Y'know how I know when someone deserves it?"

He shook his head in a hazy way. "How?"

I nodded. "Mr. Frank McKenna tells me. I get a list of Bad People, an' I go around and do what I love." I jerked my head at The Bumble. "He's here to *pull me off you*."

Falken blinked and we stared at each other for a moment, eye to eye. The color was fading from his cheeks, and I thought maybe I was getting through. He opened his mouth to say something, and I cut him off.

"The rules say, however, that you can buy your way off my list, Mr. Falken. You're two weeks over on your interest. You bring yourself current and pay up this week's, we walk away and I go home blueballed."

Sometimes they made a move here. It happened, and I thought I was ready for it. This was a desperate moment; these shitheads didn't *have* the money, or they'd have paid their juice. They saw a beating in their immediate future and some of them had the spirit to run, to try and get in a sucker punch, to scream and yell and try to get the attention of some Bull wandering around on the street. I made a show of checking my watch, and for a second I was distracted, because it was twenty minutes behind. I was frowning down at the glinting diamonds on the face when Falken surged forward and shoved me in the chest, overbalancing me on the stool and sending

me crashing to the floor.

I scissored my legs and kicked myself free, rolling over and pushing myself up into a low crouch. The Bumble was just sitting at the bar, all alone, looking bland, his hands folded in front of him, like a newly erected statue of The Bumble.

“What the fuck?” I asked.

The Bumble shrugged. “He was fast.” He jerked his hand over his shoulder, indicating a flimsy swinging door marked PRIVATE.

The urge to hurt The Bumble sang in me, sweet music, but I leaped up and pushed past him with just a slap on the shoulder, because experience had taught me that The Bumble could not be hurt.

The door led to a short hallway, white plaster and scratched-up wood paneling, at the end of which was a more formidable-looking door. Falken was crouched over the lock, working it, and twisted his head around to look back at me as I ran. It was only a flash before he turned away again, but he didn’t look scared. He looked like he was enjoying himself.

I was three steps away when he popped the lock and spun behind it, yanking the door shut behind him. I crashed into the door and bounced back, staggering back a few steps, off balance. A sudden piercing, keening noise filled the air. I couldn’t place it, but it hurt my ears. I started laughing, launching myself forward again. This was just giving me permission to hurt Falken *extra*, and my mind was churning with ideas. I was getting *creative*.

I tore the door open and the noise stopped suddenly, like I’d tripped a switch somehow. I dashed into a small office, cluttered and dark, and skidded to a halt, spinning around and smacking into a huge old wooden desk that almost filled the room completely.

The fucking room was empty.

I stood there, panting, a dumb grin on my face. There was no other door, there was no window. The room was paneled in horrible dark wood, and had a low dropped ceiling of white foam, speckled everywhere with brown water stains. Aside from the desk, which was piled with papers and phone books and manila folders and a fucking ocean of gray dust, there were four wooden filing cabinets that looked like they were holding together out of ancient habit. The walls were covered in framed newspapers and photos. I started to choke; the room was a desert of dust and wood.

I adjusted my tie as I burst back into the bar. The Bumble was still sitting at the bar, happy as a clam. I pointed at the fucking skinny fuck behind the bar, who was staring at me with the phone pressed against his ear, calling it in.

“Oy! Skinny Fuck!” I shouted.

He dropped the phone and backed up into the back of the bar. “Wh-what?”

I stepped up onto the footrest and threw myself over the bar, taking hold of the skinny fuck’s shirt and pulling him forward as I dropped back to the floor. Then I took hold of his hair and smashed his face down onto the bar, medium style, not hard enough to knock him out.

He screeched like a pig, and I smiled.

“How do you get out of that back office?”

He stood there swaying, both hands flat on the bar. “Wh-what?”

I took hold of his shirt and yanked him forward again. “The back office. In the *back*. Exits.”

He blinked. “Just one door!” He shouted. “I swear, man. There’s no

way out from it!”

I stared at him, trembling with the sweet desire to tear into him. He was soft. A Jumbo Softy ripe for a bust out, and I wanted to put my hands on him in the worst way, and if he was lying he would be on the list. I searched his face, careful. He wasn't lying. He was terrified.

I let him go and leaned back against the bar, breathing hard. I looked at the skinny fuck, and waved him off. “Give me another double,” I said, pulling cash from my pocket and dropping a dollop on the bar. “And one for yerself, eh?”

I looked over at The Bumble. The motherfucker shrugged. “What you gonna say to the boss?”

I blew hair out of my face and shrugged back. “The fucker disappeared.”