

COLLECTIONS

Chapter 7

by Jeff Somers

7.

When I got home, it was dark again, and I knew the place had been ransacked the moment I stepped onto the landing. Miggs' blood was still there on the floor, dull and brown, and my door sagged open, the lock blown and one of the hinges torn off. I stepped into the kitchen and something crunched under my shoes. I wasn't surprised, although when I turned on the light the sheer violence of the search seemed excessive: Everything had been torn up and dumped on the floor, the cabinet doors torn off the hinges and thrown, the fridge left open, all my booze smashed up. The living room hadn't had much to toss and was just a jumble of overturned garbage and torn-up paper. I couldn't even get into the bedroom, easily; I climbed over the overturned bed and cut-up mattress and poked into the closet. They'd found the cut out floorboards sure enough, but the false bottom was still in place. Then I went back into the kitchen, found the one chair they hadn't broken into kindling, sat down and lit a cigarette.

Word moved fast. Frank speculates like a fucking old lady about my thrifty lifestyle, assholes show up and toss my apartment looking for a leprechaun tied up in a cupboard with a pot of gold. I wouldn't move the money now; I had to assume I was under someone's watchful eye. They hadn't found what they were looking for, and they'd expect me to panic and either bolt for where the money was hidden, leading them to it, or pull it out of its hiding place to move it elsewhere, leading them to it. The safest thing to do would be to leave it right where it was, and let them assume they could scratch the apartment off the list.

I spent a few pleasant minutes fantasizing about what I would do to whoever it had been when I found out. Broken fingers and toes, smashed kneecaps, paper cuts on the tongue—all for starters. It was fun, coming up with thing to do to someone I had permission to beat bloody. I usually had to work within parameters, when on the job. Parameters were the whole *point* of the job. These rare moments when I could just let my mind roam over someone's pain points were fun.

I heard the feet on the stairs, and waited with legs crossed, leaning back with one arm draped over the back of the chair, watching the dark hall behind the sagging door. The man who appeared in my doorway was short and round, red in the face from the walk up, his thin white hair looking pink, lit from below by his scalp. He was wearing a good suit wasted on his pudgy frame, tailored for some other man, his cuffs swimming around his shoes, his overcoat a bit too snug around the middle. He stood there breathing hard for a moment, and then smiled.

"Got roaches, huh?"

"Hullo, Phin," I said. "Funny you showing up like this."

He blinked and frowned. "Crikey, you don't think I sent the demo team here, do ya? Fuck. I'm here on friendly business."

I shrugged. "Frank wouldn't like me talking to his competition."

Phin's smile returned. He was sixty or seventy years old, I thought, but his face was smooth and pink like a baby's. If you just saw his face, and if he colored his hair, he could pass for forty years old, maybe younger. "I hear you and Frank maybe aren't the best of friends right now."

I shrugged. "Frank and me ain't never been friends, Phin."

He stepped gingerly into the apartment on his tiny feet. Phin Lanzmann was a man who should have stayed thin. He didn't have the legs to be fat. "I just thought I'd pay a friendly visit, see if an old man could offer some advice," he said, breathing hard as he made his way carefully over to the sink. "You're an excellent asset, kid. You clear debts like nobody's business, and I could use someone like you. You're steady, you don't kick up dust, you tithe like a Catholic." He started pawing through the cabinets over the sink, his back to me. "I came here personally to let you know that if you were thinking about employment opportunities, if you were, maybe, unhappy with the way that ape of an Irishman treats his people, my door's open. And I could make sure there were no repercussions."

I smiled, bouncing my leg. "I'm touched, Phinny. Though I don't think Frank would see it as the same thing as me changing jobs like a civilian, y'know? More like treason."

He plucked a miraculously preserved glass from the cabinet and spun back to face me. "I didn't say I could make sure he'd be *happy*, kid. I said I could make sure he couldn't *do* nothing about it."

He began picking his painstaking way through the room again, breathing hard enough to worry me a little. I didn't doubt there were three or four of his guys downstairs, standing around alarming my neighbors, and I imagined me going down there to tell them their boss had a fucking heart attack in my kitchen.

I decided to play along a little. "Frank'd want my debt paid off either way."

Phin shrugged. "I'd cover that for you. Not for free, but no juice on it, you pay me back off the top of your take."

That was a real offer. I was surprised; I thought Phin was just here to stir shit up. I watched him as he moved, scanning the floor, and suddenly, like an ice fisher with a spear in one hand, he knelt down and came up with a half-full bottle of Scotch, Glenmoranjie, 10 years old. He held it up and beamed at me. Why all the crooks I knew were so fucking happy all the time was a mystery. Still huffing and puffing, he overturned a half-broken chair and dropped onto it across from me. He uncorked the bottle with his tiny yellow teeth, spat the cork across the room, and poured three fingers into the glass—and Phin's finger were fat and sausage-like, meaning the glass he handed me was heavy. I clinked the glass against the bottle and took a sip as he tipped the bottle back and swallowed a healthy dollop.

"Listen, kiddo," he said when he came up for air, more breathless than before. "I've always liked you. You know why?"

I smiled, shaking my head. "Everybody likes me, Phin. I'm charming."

"No. I like you because you know your fucking place. You know how to interact with people. You're friendly to me, but you don't cross lines. You can beat the tar outta just about anyone—I'm not flatterin' you, it's just the truth, I've never seen someone with shovels for hands like you who knew how to use 'em like you do—but you *don't*. Most shitheads in your line of work they beat on everyone, all the time, because they're afraid people will forget to be scared of them."

I shrugged. "Anyone wants to refresh their memory on what I can do, they're always welcome to take a swing."

He chuckled. "Yeah, I hear Miggs Bender was the last one to take *that* ride." He leaned forward. "Listen, like I said, I like you. So here it

is: Let me buy you out. Change religions and let me settle this with Frank for you, because, kid, you ain't *never* gonna collect that debt. Follow?"

I frowned and took a swallow of my own whiskey which he was so generously doling out to me. "You saying this is a set up?"

He shook his head and thrust out his lower lip. "No. It wasn't on purpose. Frank lacks the imagination. Frank got played, you got played, y'all got played. You're never gonna find Falken."

I smiled suddenly, something dropping into a slot in my head. "Because he's dead, huh?"

Phin leaned back again and smiled. "You're no average bear, kid." He handed me the bottle and stood up with a groan, planting his fat hands on the small of his back and stretching. "Welp," he exhaled, waddling towards the door. "I don't want to keep you from your housecleaning, kiddo. Think about my offer. It's sincere." He paused in the doorway and looked back at me over his shoulder. "I would never let my goons treat you like this over a debt. Frank's a lot of things, but *smart* ain't one of them."

With that, he stepped into the shadows of the hallway and I could hear him making his graceless way down the stairs.

Dead. Rachel had told me Falken had been dead for years, but I'd seen him a few days ago. He'd taken the loan from Frank's boys a month ago. He hadn't been dead for two years, and I wondered if he wasn't dead now.

It was just my luck that the same bartender was working at McHale's when I walked in. He blinked at me, his eyes still puffy around the yellowed bandage across his nose, and then snatched up the phone behind the bar. I put up my hands. "Hey, it ain't like that, huh? I paid for the drinks, didn't I?"

He didn't drop the phone, but he didn't call anyone either. The place was a little more lively, a dozen people sitting around listening to Johnny Cash and smoking cigarettes, drinking beers. The old lady with the half inch of makeup troweled on was in the same spot, looking slightly more bleary. I kept my hands up as I approached the bar, then slid into a stool and pushed one hand into my pocket, producing a fifty and sliding it over to him.

"For the trouble. And I apologize."

That was good enough for him. He made the bill disappear professionally and I relaxed, settling in. I'd left my collar unbuttoned and hadn't bothered with a tie, but I'd changed into a fresh shirt and a pair of brand new silk socks. You simply could not overestimate the power of new socks.

"Rye," I said, in a mood. "Whatever you have. A double."

He poured me a healthy dose and I nodded, taking a long pull and setting the glass down carefully. I made another fifty appear on the bar. "The guy I was after the other day, he comes here. He ever here on your shift before?"

You had to start somewhere.

The kid nodded. "Sure." His voice was pinched and nasal.

"What do you know about him?"

He shrugged. "Girl drinks. Fruity shit, Bloody Marys when he's hungover. Doesn't talk much, I don't know his name."

I nodded. "When'd he first show up?"

"Far as I know, couple months ago. Just comes in, reads the paper, sips a drink. Stays a few hours, then leaves."

I sighed, letting my eyes roam the bar. I saw myself in the big

brassy mirror across from me; I was slumped and tired, the bump on my forehead still angry and pronounced. I looked around the whole place in reverse, trying to scare up a sensible follow-up question, but I couldn't think of anything. Falken had come here and had a few drinks, said nothing, and gone home, and I wasn't going to walk in and find him sitting there waiting for me, eager to get that beating he'd missed out on. I was no professor of human thought, but when someone came looking for you to break some bones, you displaced.

I paused, studying a figure in the mirror. I leaned forward a little. "Hey—is there a skinny old lady in a white suit behind me, or am I going fucking crazy?"

The bartender glanced over me and then nodded, looking back at me. "Skinny old woman, white suit, check. She's got two guys who might as well have MUSCLE tatted on their foreheads, too."

It never ceased to surprise me: You broke someone's nose, half the time it made you best friends.

"Thanks," I said, spinning myself around and crossing my legs. "Doctor Rusch! So good to see you again. How was the drive north?"

She'd either changed into an identical white suit, or she had only one and just wore it whenever the occasion seemed to justify some form of ridiculous formality. She frowned, making smacking sounds with her lips. "North?"

I started to say something smart in reply, but it was robbed from posterity by a half-glimpsed rush from the corner of my vision, an explosion of pain and white noise inside my head, and the floor, rushing up to greet me like an angry old friend.