



**JEFF
SOMERS
COLLECTIONS**
a novel

COLLECTIONS

Chapter 8

by Jeff Somers

8.

I woke up into a splash of ice-cold water, lungs surging and tendons straining. Blinking water out of my stinging eyes, I tried to move and found myself tied pretty securely to a simple wooden chair. I tested my bonds once more, pulling hard, and then forced myself to relax. I'd been tied up pretty well, and no amount of grunting and flexing was going to make the knots any looser.

Blinking, I looked around. It was dark, but light leaked from under two wide automatic doors. I was up on a loading dock, the concrete shining damply in the dim light, the air heavy and rotten-smelling, like produce left sitting too long. I was up by the plastic sheets that led into the warehouse, with the driveway where the trucks backed in a few feet below me. A set of steps had been cut off to my left. It was cold; I'd been robbed of my jacket and sat barefoot in just my pants and undershirt. I approved of the theft of my shoes; it was a good psychological trick, to make me feel naked and unprotected. If they'd been serious they'd have spread broken glass around me to discourage any movement at all, but the floor was empty and felt cool against my feet. I wasn't scared, only because if people were planning on killing you they didn't abduct you in front of witnesses and then leave you tied up for hours while they planned

your murder—they just followed you to a dark lonely place and shot you. They were maybe planning to beat on me a little, but I'd taken plenty of beatings.

I leaned back on the chair, testing the balance, and it creaked under my weight. I settled myself again and took a deep breath, looking around the place again now that my eyes had adjusted. A pair of cherry pickers sat off to one side, dormant and cold, and a pile of wooden skids reached for the tall ceiling to my left, an abstract sculpture. A single skid piled high with boxes, wrapped in thick plastic, sat on the lower floor of the dock, forgotten or rejected. The boxes were blue and yellow, but I couldn't tell what was supposed to be in them.

I bent my head down and examined the rope on my legs. They'd tied me a little too high, up close to the knees. I worked my feet flat on the floor, shifting my weight forward, and carefully leaned until I was bent over and standing on my feet. It was a strain to keep from falling over, and my back complained, and my legs trembled as I moved my feet in tiny increments, turning myself around in place so my back was to the bay doors and the four-foot drop to the floor. My breathing seemed loud, but I couldn't hear anything else, and wondered if they'd wandered off to discuss the best way to beat information out of me.

It was slow going; each step was a tiny, wobbly project. Sweat dripped from my forehead onto the floor, and the trembling in my legs made me feel like I was dancing my way towards the edge, the blood rushing to my brain pounding and making me think of aneurysms. When I was just an inch or two away from the edge, I straightened up a little and took several deep breaths. I was going to make a racket, and had to be ready for my minders, whoever they

were, to come running the moment I dropped. I craned my head to try and gauge the landing; I didn't want a chair splinter to stab me in the fucking ass, though what arcane geometric equations I was going to use to prevent it were a mystery to me.

When my heart rate approached normal again, I leaned back until gravity grabbed on and pulled me down.

The chair splintered into five big chunks and pain shot through me, radiating out from my back into my limbs. My head smacked back onto the concrete and my vision swam, a shivery feeling of weakness swept through me, lightheaded and happy to just lay on top of a broken, splintered chair. I pushed myself up onto my elbows and kicked my legs free of the broken pieces. The rope on my wrists was loose, now, but still knotted together, so I leaned forward and slid my arms under my ass, then rolled back and put my legs in the air and bent at the knees, pulling my legs between my wrists.

I could hear commotion up above me, beyond the twin doorways separated from the dock by hanging sheets of thick, cloudy plastic. I didn't bother trying to work the knots; I leaped to my feet and had just enough slack between my knees to walk over to the dock and duck down, pushing myself as flat as possible against the edge. I heard the sheets being pushed aside.

"Fuck," someone breathed.

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

I looked up at the edge of the platform right above me, keeping myself still. I didn't know if there were more of them, the whole crew waiting just beyond the doors, but it didn't really factor into the equation. I couldn't huddle against the dock hoping they just left without checking the space out, so I was going to have to deal with them and if that brought more assholes, I was just going to have to

deal with more assholes.

A grin tried to twitch its way onto my face. My heart was pounding light and agile, my limbs were warmed up and ready. So far this had been the best week of my life.

The sole of a shoe appeared above me, just the very toe of it slipping over the edge, a distorted, elongated man in a suit rising up from it. He was one of the guys who'd been with Rusch in the limo with me, his suit a little too tight, his neck exploding from the collar like a mushroom.

I stood up and took hold of his belt, bracing my legs against the dock and giving him a twisting yank as I spun myself. He sailed out with a grunt, landing on his face, gun flying. I launched myself after him and landed hard, putting a knee into his kidneys and my fingers into the thick mop of dark hair on his head; I took hold, lifted up, and smashed his head down as hard as I could.

The second guy crashed into me, and I let out a whoop of sudden delight as we rolled on the gritty floor. I could tell it was going to be easy; he was a big guy but he didn't move well, and he'd been hiding behind a gun for a while, thought it could solve all his problems. He hit me hard in the face with something heavy and unforgiving, leaving a searing cut behind. I pushed him off me and rolled over on top of him, and with a quick jerk got the rope on my wrists up over his head and around his neck. Planting my knees in the small of his back, I pulled my arms back into my chest and choked him.

His big, heavy arms flew up and beat randomly at the air. For a second I gave in and just enjoyed it: The exertion, the application of force, the dry creaking sound of the rope and his abused tendons, the wet noise he made as his tongue flopped around in his mouth. I could have done this all night, enjoying myself, but I reminded myself that I

had work to do.

“Go limp,” I said breathlessly. “Go limp, and let's talk.”

No more assholes had emerged from the interior of the warehouse, so I figured we were alone. He kept flopping his arms and legs, hoping for a lucky shot. I gave the rope a quick yank, getting a strangled, chewy grunt out of him in response.

“Go *limp*, you cocksucker,” I hissed. “You're making me sweat.”

After another second or two of struggle, he finally quit, dropping arms and just lying there. I counted to three and then loosed the rope slightly. He took a deep, shuddering breath that informed me he'd had too much fucking garlic for lunch, and started to cough.

“Where's Rusch?” I asked, my heart rate slowly returning to normal.

“Not,” he said, panting hard, “not anywhere near here.”

“What the fuck does she want from me?”

“Falken,” he sputtered. “We need this Falken.”

“Why? What's Falken got this freakshow needs so bad?”

He made more gurgling noises in his throat and then sucked in a deep breath. “Nothin'. We need *Falken*.”

I considered that. I'd only met Falken a couple of days ago and I had quite a grudge against him already; wanting him dead in a couple of more days wouldn't surprise me in the least, and these guys had the feel of people who'd been knee-deep in Falken forever.

I nodded to myself and tightened the rope around his neck again. Instantly he began flopping about, swinging his arms and legs around wildly.

“All right, all right,” I said, breathing hard and straining my arms. “I ain't gonna kill you. Just putting you. . .out.”

He went limp, and I relaxed my arms, muscles burning, sweat

streaming down my face despite the cold. I checked hi pulse and breathing, and pushed him off me with a groan. I wanted to lay on the cold floor for a while, but I didn't know what kind of window I had, so I sat up, rolled the fat kid over and went through his pockets, eventually finding a set of car keys and a dull penknife just sharp enough to cut my bonds. I thought about my shoes and coat, but decided to gift them; I wanted to be on the road heading somewhere immediately. I groaned up to my feet and climbed up to the dock again, pushing my way through the plastic sheets into a brightly-lit office area, where a coffee maker and two cups sitting on a steel desk, still steaming. I stopped, because my shoes and coat were sitting on the desk too, the coat neatly folded. As I took a moment to slide my bare feet into the shoes, I had a crazy moment where I wondered if they'd shined the fucking things, too.

Out in the parking lot, the limo sat, pristine, not a scratch on it. I stared at it uneasily as I approached. It was big and blocky, and old-style American steel behemoth extended back beyond its safe limits, black and shiny and it should have had scratches and dents, signs of the collision The Bumble had caused. Instead it was perfect. I wondered if there was a fleet of these old mothballed limos, battered ones swapped out as needed.

I slid into the front seat and turned the key, and the engine bloomed into life with a soft purr.

No one was sitting in my smashed apartment when I got home; dawn was just an hour away and the dark had taken on that anticipatory glow that preceded morning. I crunched my way through the debris and snatched up the bottle of Scotch Phin had left, took it into the bedroom, and lay down on the bed with it cradled in

the crook of my arm.

For a while I just enjoyed the pleasant feeling of strained muscles, throbbing bruises, stinging scrapes. Everything ached, and I reveled in not having to do anything else, of having no more labors for the moment, just lying there enjoying the pain.

My wrists and ankles burned where the ropes had been, and my lower back throbbed, overextended. I wanted a shower and a change of clothes, coffee until my kidneys floated and eggs, and bacon, and toast with butter. But if I showered my feet would get gritty from the dirt on the floor, and my suits had been tossed on the floor, my shirts wrinkled. And when morning came I was sure Frank would send someone to remind me about my debt, and the good Doctor might want to come and discuss the failures of her hired goons, and all I wanted to do was drink myself to sleep and start over some time after noon.

I didn't get around to lifting the bottle. I had almost fallen asleep when the phone rang.

I let it ring four, five times. I didn't have an answering machine or voicemail, just like I never carried a phone with me. If I wasn't there to talk, I didn't need to hear it. After the sixth ring I stretched out one arm, wincing happily at the sharp tug it caused in my back, and picked up the receiver.

"Where the hell have you been?" Rachel hissed.

I smiled, picturing her. "Getting kidnapped and beat-up."

She snorted, sounding fuzzy and distant. "Your preferred evening activity," she said. "They deserve it?"

I nodded, closing my eyes, liking the sound of her voice. "Of course."

"Of course," she sighed. Rachel knew me. I'd never touched her,

once, even though I'd wanted to. But she'd never done anything to deserve it.

"Well, put out the good china. I've been sitting on your gal down in the *lovely* burg of New Brunswick, and it's been a hoot. A lot of people in and out, a lot of equipment in and out. No limousines, one red-haired woman that might be the one you mentioned. Then about an hour ago the woman herself got into an Econo-Van apparently made of rust and started driving."

I nodded, probing the sensation of a darning needle thrusting down from my lower back into my upper thighs. "Where'd she go?" I said, thinking about the flash of a white suit I'd glimpsed in McHale's. The professor, or professors, got around.

"Better put on some pants," she said, sounding amused. "She just parked outside your building and I'm pretty sure she's on her way up."