



**JEFF
SOMERS
COLLECTIONS**
a novel

COLLECTIONS

Chapter 14

by Jeff Somers

14.

A splash of cold water brought me back online, shivering and drowning, trying to breathe through a thick wedge of snot in my nose, my mouth taped shut. The water stung my eyes, and I blinked rapidly, turning my head this way and that. I was still in the restaurant's bar, and I still had five admirers. Mo and his brother were seated at the bar with bar napkins balled up in front of them soaked red, tending to their wounds. The three Puerto Ricans were standing in the cleared area of the bar, in a loose group, conferring with each other.

I was tied to a chair pulled from the dining room, and it was a much better job than Rusch's folks had managed; a few experimental twists of my wrists told me I wasn't going to be dancing my way off the chair without a struggle. I rocked the chair a little and figured I could hop around a little if they'd let me, and took in as much of the space as I could, quick blurry flashes. The bar, bottles and decorations, all the tools of the trade. Unstable old wooden tables and barstools. The dead neon signs and framed posters on the walls.

As my three new friends turned back to me, I took as deep a breath as my nose would allow, trying to clear my head. I only got a thin stream of clear air through my nose, and my head was pounding

like mutant Mexican Jumping Beans were inside, trying to hatch. The bar, I told myself, was my only play.

“We were going to be friendly, *mamabicho*,” the leader said, stepping forward. My eyes trailed down his body and landed on the small blowtorch in his hands, the kind jewelry makers used. My eyes lingered on it for a moment, and then popped back up to his face. “Now we have to be serious with you.”

Adrenaline flooded through me. I could feel the icy touch of that flame, I could smell my own skin burning. My mouth flooded with saliva as I got a little lightheaded, and I told myself I didn't have *time*, this was no fucking place to stop and smell the fucking roses.

I put my eyes past him. His two friends were just standing there a few feet away, talking to each other in Spanish.

The leader reached out and snapped his fingers rapidly in my face. “Hey—hey, *mamabicho*, you look at *me*, okay?” He stepped forward and with a flourish snapped the torch on, a tiny blue flame dancing on its end. He waved it close to my face, and then leaned in close. “We gonna start with somethin' easy, somethin' that'll *heal*. Then we move on to more *delicate* shit. Eventually, we start doin' damage that won't *ever* heal, *entienda?*”

I winked at him. The hissing sound of the torch was like music, beatless and eternal. My heart pounded with anticipation. It had been a long time since someone had gotten me all hot and bothered, and I fucking missed it.

He nodded, once, and then leaped onto me, straddling my lap. With one hand he tore open my shirt, buttons popping, and then he pushed the torch in close and pressed the flame against my chest just over my heart, holding it there for one, two, three delirious seconds. The pain was clarifying and sharp, opiates dumping into my blood

and making me shiver with sudden ecstasy. I loved him. As the smell of my own burning flesh filled my nose, I would have fucked him right there on the floor. When he pulled the torch away a few seconds later, I shut my eyes and savored the burning.

He slapped me lightly on the face. “Hey. Hey, *mamabicho*, where is Falken? Where you keeping him?”

He hadn't taken the tape off my mouth, and it filled me with glee, this tough asshole who thought he was going to beat something out of me. I started to laugh, howling, and it took him a moment to get it, his face getting a little red. He reached up and tore the tape off me, taking most of my lips with it, the stinging pain delicious.

I kept laughing. “You ... fucking ... moron ...”

He brought the torch in again, savagely, angry now, and pressed the flame against my nipple, a flood of agony pouring into me, sweating popping up on my skin as he just left it there, teeth bared as he pushed his face down towards mine.

“What's that, motherfucker? Falken. Where ... is ... Falken?”

He pulled the torch back and pushed himself up off me. In the sudden relief I started to shiver, putting my head down to let thick yellow snot drip down onto my lap. I started to say something and choked on my own phlegm, spasming into coughs.

“What's that?” The Leader said, leaning forward and cupping his ear theatrically. “You want to tell me something about our friend Mr. Falken?”

“I said,” I spat, looking up. “I said I'm gonna kill you for that, and I'm gonna enjoy it, and then I'm gonna burn this fucking bar down.”

At the other end of the bar, I saw Mo stand up, say something to his brother, then reach over and pull Mikey up from his seat. They both walked to the front door and out onto the street.

“Oh yeah?” My new friend said, leaning forward. “I don't think so. I think you're going to tell me where Falken is before I burn off something, okay? Like—”

I rocked forward onto my feet and threw myself at him, smacking into his torso and knocking him to the floor, the torch skittering across the floor to the bar, my bones shaking on impact. I leaned down and took hold of an ear between my teeth and bit down as hard as I could, my teeth clicking together as blood poured into my mouth. He screamed, sending a shiver through me, and I rolled to my side and then onto my back, fast, panting. Using every muscle I had, I rolled myself onto my knees and quick-jumped back onto my feet, wobbling backwards a little before catching my balance.

Squinting through sweat and adrenaline, I saw the other two shitheads just standing there, gawking. Their fearless leader had slapped his hands over his mangled ear and was just rolling there on the floor, screaming. I felt like I had all the time in the world, that I could go make a drink, wait for termites to eat away the stool I'd been trussed to, have a smoke. I could take my time and enjoy myself.

I looked down at the leader, fixed him in my mind. Then I took two hobbled steps forward and threw myself down at him, landing my knee on his chest with all my weight behind it, giving me the satisfying snare of cracking bones. I'd missed his throat, but there was no time to correct course. Staggering up and back just as his two friends arrived, I spun around and threw myself at the first one, smacking into him as hard as I could. He staggered, grabbed onto me, and we both went down, the stool shattering against the floor.

My hands were still twisted up in rope and the fragmented remains of the stool. I danced back as the third guy, shorter and broader than his friends, crouched down, digging a hand into his

baggy pants and pulling up a butterfly knife. A ridiculous weapon, but he handled it expertly, flipping it open and lunging forward suddenly, forcing me to jump backwards. My feet landed on some piece of the shattered stool and went out from under me, sending me down onto my own hands like dead weight, pain splintering out through every finger, up my arms, stabbing into my chest. It brightened everything, made me clear, and I rolled away as he jumped at me, blade flashing.

I pushed myself back onto my feet and spun back to face him, and he was already there, a foot away. With a sudden dart he was right up against me, and his arm dove forward, plunging the knife into my belly.

At first, I didn't feel anything. Then it was cold, like someone had pressed an ice cream against me. It was disappointing; I'd expected something searing, something incredible. A wave of tingly exhaustion swept through me, making me feel leaden and slow, and a fresh sweat popped up all over me. He yanked the blade out and then the pain came: A deep, orange throb that felt like it originated in my spine and leaked downward like rust, like rot. As he stepped back I staggered backwards again, working my hands free of the rope and bringing my arms up just in time to catch the bastard trying to sneak in and stick me again. Feeling the warm blood running down my leg, I let him slip a few inches past my arms and took hold of his wrist, angling his arm away from me as I pulled him close and put my knee into his balls.

The pain filled me up, inflating my arms and legs, making me light. I swept a leg under him and yanked with everything I had on his arm, spinning him off-balance and sending him to the floor with a crash that made everything in the place jump. I took half a step

back, elated, like the blood leaking out of me was heavy, and every drop shed made me nimbler, faster. With a yelp of happiness I kicked him in the face, everything going gray and shaky as the blood drained from my head. I steadied myself with a hand on the bar and took a deep breath, and everything slowly steadied, the wonderful lancing pain in my side settling down to a dull ache, pleasant but unremarkable.

I looked around. The leader was still, just lying on the floor; I wasn't sure if I'd killed him or just knocked him out, and didn't care. The second guy was staggering towards the entrance, one hand over his face, blood running down his neck and soaking his shirt. I let him go. I was lightheaded and wobbly and probably would have fallen if I'd tried to go after him. I elected to stand for a moment and breathe; if I sat down I was pretty sure I'd never get up again.

I looked down at the floor. A small puddle of my blood had formed under me. I waited to catch my breath, and slowly realized I wasn't going to.

On the floor near the first guy, the blowtorch lay by itself, gleaming new. I pushed off from the bar, half-fell backwards before righting myself, and walked slowly over to it. Getting on my knees to pluck it up was easy. Getting back on my feet took some unknown amount of time, but I came back to myself leaning over the bar, panting, the exquisite pain settled into my bones now, deep and abiding. I liked it there, and hoped it stayed.

Unsteady, I circled around to the other side of the bar and started pulling some of the bottles off the shelves, dropping them onto the floor. When I had a good, deep puddle of booze, I circled back outside and turned my attention to the torch, squinting at it. I couldn't concentrate, my thoughts slipping away, and getting it lit took longer

than expected, and no time at all, my vision swimming in and out. When I looked down and found it burning, the bright blue flame friendly, asking me to press it against the palm of my hand to wake myself up a little, it might have been hours later, or seconds.

My breast throbbed at the sight.

I turned and oriented myself on the front door, and tossed the torch over my shoulder. A warm breeze pushed past me as I shuffled for the door, the shadows of the room warping and dancing into new and disturbing shapes. I found my coat hanging neatly just inside the door, as if they were planning to stroke me into it, hand me cab money, and pat me on the head when they were done. I pushed myself into it with a twinge of guilt at getting my sticky, warm blood all over it, and fell out the front door, managing to fall without hitting the ground until I found an obliging car to lean against. I flipped myself around and stared back at the restaurant. Through the tiny window in the door, I could see the flames. With a dull rumble, something exploded and the flames laced higher.

I fumbled in my coat and smiled when I found my pack of cigarettes. I stuck one in my mouth but couldn't find a lighter, so I just pushed off from the car and started walking.

"Told you," I muttered, grinning. I felt fantastic.