

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 23

by Jeff Somers

23.

The Bumble nodded once and turned for the entrance of my building. It was noon, the sun hidden behind a scum of dark clouds, the air still. He crossed the street and climbed the front steps without hesitation or even a glance back at me; Billy's greatest flaw and asset was a complete faith in everything he did. I'd told him I'd do my part, so he did his, and it never occurred to him to doubt success. It was going to get him killed someday, and I hoped today wasn't it.

I spun away and crossed the street, working my way around the corner and up into my apartment via the back yards and fire escape, swinging silently into my old bedroom and setting my feet carefully on the painted floorboards. I could hear voices from the kitchen—The Bumble, right on cue, raising his voice and making a scene, demanding to know who the fuck they were, who'd posted them here, sitting in my apartment like spiders. I listened for a moment, trying to recognize the voices, but these were either out of town talent or not Frank's guys at all.

Creeping on small feet, I walked over to the closet and stepped into it, feeling better once I was inside its darkened confines, the walls and floor muffled by my own clothes, torn up and dumped. I was showered and I'd bought myself a new suit, off the rack and

horrible for all it cost five hundred dollars. The five of us were living down in a motel by the Holland Tunnel on the Jersey side in three rooms, me and The Bumble fulfilling our destiny of platonic marriage. I didn't feel right, and the sight of all my beautiful suits in rags on the floor made me angry and sad.

I started to sweat. It was close and hot in the apartment.

Crouching down, I worked my fingers under the floorboards, catching splinters. The Bumble was giving it all he had—all I could make out were shouts, but I knew anyone in their right mind would hesitate to do anything more than shout at Billy Bumbles. He'd be able to stretch this out as long as he needed just by throwing around glares and pretending to not understand English, which was a favorite trick of his.

One by one the boards came up. I lay down on my belly, feeling exposed and vulnerable, and reached down into the void. Four canvas bags, heavy and thick, one by one. They came up with a cloud of dust and a musty smell, and I had to huddle for a moment on the floor, hand clamped over my nose, struggling against the strong urge to sneeze. In the kitchen, the voices had become louder, with three or four people shouting simultaneously. When I felt like I had myself under control, I started bringing the bags over to the window, and with a heave I sent them falling down to the overgrown yard one by one, silent. The voices had gotten even louder by then, and I turned, sweating, and crept back to the bedroom door, pulling it inward a half inch.

“—the fuck *down*, Billy. You think you just fucking disappear for a few days with your fucking pal and Frank ain't gonna *notice*? Fucking sit down, Billy. Frank put your name out.”

I recognized Mikey D's voice now, pictured the white-haired

bastard preening there, a jumbo softy, the sort of guy who had a lot of stories about the beatings he'd handed out over the years, but who never seemed to graze a knuckle in real life. I stole back from the door and got back down on the floor, reaching through the shredded clothes and torn-up books under the bed and casting about until I found my trusty aluminum bat. Fucking heresy for the actual game, but metal felt better when smacked across someone's back. I'd put a few layers of spiraling electrical tape around the grip, a callback to my days playing stickball on the corners at the Four Sewers over on North Street.

Bat in hand, I stepped back to the door and pushed my foot gently into the gap, pushing the door just wide enough for me to slip through. I knew my apartment well, and I knew that if no one was in the living room, I'd be able to slip to the left and approach the kitchen without being seen. I leaned my head out and looked forward: Aside from Mikey D I could see half The Bumble, standing with his hands up lazily, hovering in the air like he might change his mind at any moment. Assholes like Mikey liked guns, because there was no way they would ever take on a slab like Billy Bumbles by hand; Billy would turn Mikey into a memory. I couldn't see anyone else, but Mikey wasn't holding the piece, so that meant at least one other guy. And since Mikey liked to play cards while he did shit details like this for Frank, that meant at least one *other* other guy.

Moving slowly, I crept into the dim living room, bat held low. I looked around, but I was alone in my ruined living room. I kept glancing at the floor, picking my way through the debris, and angled my way left until I couldn't see Mikey any more.

"You guys think you're *clever*," Mikey was saying. It came out *clevah*. "You and your colored cop friend. I told Frank—Pinks, didn't I

say it?—I told him when your husband there came in and did his little dance about Falken, I said, bullshit. Bull-fucking-shit. You guys squeeze the tar outta everyone. You collect *everything*. And this skinny fuck from nowhere puts you off? Naw, ain't happening. I told Frank—Pinks, right?—I told him you boys were running a scam. And then this cop strolls in and buys the debt. The *cop* buys the debt. This fucking cop's been kneeing us in the balls for years, and now he's buying a huge debt, using his badge as collateral. I said naw, no fucking way. And here you *are*, Billy, and now the cop's dropped the debt and told Frank to suck it. So I don't know if it just fucking fell apart for you and your boyfriend, or if you're getting skulled on this one, and who gives a shit. So sit down and we're gonna call Frank and find out where he wants you.”

I pushed myself against the wall just to the left of the doorway and raised the bat up, feeling its weight and balance. Then I stepped around the doorway and swung, connecting solidly with Mikey D's shoulders.

It felt good. Sharp pain shot up my arms into my shoulders, and Mikey fell to the floor like he'd been held up by wires. I stepped into the kitchen; Billy was already moving, barreling into a stocky old man in a terrible, untucked western-style shirt that hung off his man-boobs like a dress, knocking him back into the sink with a crash that sounded like cracking laminate. I spun to my left and swung the bat without looking, catching a skinny, tatted mope in a wifebeater and a fucking *pork pie* hat on the shoulder and whipping him around into the stove. I rushed forward and slapped him hard across the back of the knees before he could recover, sending him down to the floor with a moan. I considered hitting him again a few times just because of the fucking hat, but stepped back, searching the floor for the gun. I

found it under what was left of the kitchen table, a much-used little thirty-eight that probably had a string of liquor store robberies tied to it.

I glanced at Billy, who was holding up his unconscious victim by the scruff of his flabby neck, then looked down at Mikey, who was crawling towards the front door, making about an inch a year, and pissing and moaning all the way.

“You fucking *broke* my fucking *back*,” he wheezed. “You *motherfuckers*.”

I walked over and put the barrel of the bat into the small of his back, pushing down like I was pinning a bug to a card. He wailed and thrashed his arms and legs.

“Stick around, Mike,” I said. “We can discuss your fucking skill set as one of Frank's best and brightest.”

He stopped writhing and twisted his head to squint up at me. “I shoulda known you wouldn't let your lover here out of your sight.”

I pushed down on the bat and he groaned. I liked that, so I lifted the bat up and brought it down hard on the spot right above his bony ass, making him howl. I liked that even more, so I did it again.

“Tell me something, Mike, did you bust out my apartment?”

He didn't say anything, just lay there breathing hard, sawdust scattering away from his open mouth.

“What the fuck did you have against my suits, you stupid cunt?” I ground the bat down into him, making him squeal, and smiled, sweat dripping down off my chin. “You think I had cash sewn in the fucking linings?”

Mikey made a noise that might have been speech, filtered through the floorboards. Fucking peacock. Put him on his face and he lost all his feathers.

I pulled the bat up and dropped down onto him, knees spread to either side. He groaned again, a drawn-out, rubbery sound. I got comfortable on him. "I got a message for Frank, you listening? Tell him he can stop sitting on my apartment. I'm not coming back again. Okay?"

Mikey made a noise I chose to take as acknowledgment. I gave him one last slap on the back of his head and stood up, hefting the bat. "Tell him we don't work for him anymore, either. If Frank's got a beef, he's gonna get a face full of cops." I smiled at The Bumble, who let the guy he'd been holding up crumple to the floor with a shrug. "Meet you round the side," I said, and turned for the bedroom.

"You're fucking dead," Mikey managed to spit up. "Frank's gonna push your fucking button."

I paused and half-turned back, flipping the bat into the air and catching the fat end. "Haven't you heard, Mikey?" I said cheerfully. "I'm fucking unkillable."