



**JEFF
SOMERS
COLLECTIONS**
a novel

COLLECTIONS

Chapter 25

by Jeff Somers

25.

“You okay?”

Falken nodded without looking at me, eyes fixed on the road, hands tight on the wheel of the clunker. “I’m ... great,” he said slowly, licking his lips. “It feels good to be moving, to be doing something other than running.”

He was driving the burner, an orange Chevy with more rust than paint, four tires whitewalls out, blue smoke leaking from the rear. Four hundred bucks as-is and a ripoff at that: its seats more springs than foam, the radio nothing but static, the heater a thing of the past.

I nodded and turned back to look at the street. “You,” I said to the windshield, “should not be here.”

“Too bad,” Rachel said from the back seat, sounding chipper, relaxed. “You should not have walked into my apartment bleeding like a stuck pig. I’m going to help Elias and you can quit worrying about me, because I can handle myself.”

I grimaced, jealousy shooting through me. *Elias*. She didn’t even use *my* name. I glanced at Falken and then righted myself, forcing my hands to untense. “I know you can handle yourself, Rache. That’s why you have the shotgun.”

I put my palm against the hard, inflamed slice on my belly. Still

red, still angry, leaking yellow pus from time to time, but it looked like I'd been stabbed weeks ago, with something that had been sterilized first.

She snorted. "You didn't need to take care of me five years ago, and you don't have to take care of me now."

I left it at that and watched the traffic. I could see the Lincoln two cars ahead of us; Falken was a quick study and he'd taken my instructions on staying with the car to heart. We were coasting up St. Nicholas Ave, passing the Four Stars, the main drag heavy with people at night, the side streets empty, shadowed.

"Hundred forty-seventh," I said softly. "Be ready."

Falken nodded but didn't say anything.

"Remember, if someone turns in front of you, don't panic, we're just gonna go with it."

He nodded again. "I was *there* at the meeting, remember?"

I controlled myself. "I don't know you," I said simply. "I don't know what you can and can't do. So fucking keep your mouth shut and just nod when I ask you if you *understand* me, okay?"

Behind me, Rachel leaned forward suddenly and flicked my ear with her fingers, a shock of pain cheering me up.

"Be nice."

At 147th Street, the Lincoln turned left like I knew it would. The street was tight, with double-parked cars lined up along the right side, forming a narrow lane for traffic. We rolled a few doors down the street when the beamer suddenly pulled out of a doubled spot, cutting off the Lincoln. Billy hit the brakes hard, the Lincoln hit the brakes hard, and Falken threw the burner into park, and then we were all on the street.

The driver of the Lincoln was a guy named Bernie Spaz, younger

than me, blacker than me, and a much worse dresser than me—he was standing behind the Lincoln's door wearing a tan turtleneck and a creamy coffee-colored leather trenchcoat, the collar and cuffs of his sweater pillowing out from under the coat like fucking cake icing. His head had been shaved shiny and single gold hoops hung from each ear. His partner, who was probably Leon Hines, a nobody whose only recommendations were that he could give and take a beating, sat in the passenger seat.

“What the *fuck* is wrong wit' you?” Bernie shouted as we walked up behind him, Rachel on the right between the cars, shotgun still in its brown wrapping paper and held low, me with Falken trailing on the left. Bernie paused and leaned forward slightly. “Jesus, is that Billy fucking *Bumbles*?”

“Hullo, Bernie,” I said.

He spun, and I smacked my palm into his nose, feeling oiled up, like I'd been drinking some good stuff, some Glenlivet 40 year so light it floated out of the glass onto your tongue. He staggered back into the car door, and I heard Rachel say *Sit—sit down* nicely, not shouting it, just saying it.

Blood spurting between one hand clasped over his face, Bernie moved his free hand towards his coat, so I stepped forward and kneed him in the groin as hard as I could. It wasn't kung fu, it wasn't a pretty move, but it was effective and we were on a public street. There wasn't *time* for pretty.

He doubled over, sneezing blood everywhere, and I knelt down and helped him slide to the street. I pushed him up against the door and slapped his face.

“Bernie, I apologize for this. I do. But listen to me, we're taking your collection.”

He squinted at me, his eyes already puffy and red, his nose flattened, blood streaming down from it over his lips and chin. His head was an oval on its side, like Charlie fucking Brown. He worked for a consortium of Harlem gangs—some Latin Kings, some just neighborhood clubs—and usually had an easy time of it. I couldn't remember the last time he'd broken a sweat.

“What?” he said, sounding all sinusey. “Frank McKenna is fucking *robbing* me?”

The Bumble could be heard going over the car professionally with Falken, grunting instructions, as they searched it thoroughly. In my head I counted down the seconds: Only forty-three of them since we'd hit the brakes.

“I don't work for Frank,” I said. “I work for Stanley James, and Detective James says anyone owes money in this town, they owe it to him.”

He stared at me for a beat. “That is the fucking most bananas thing I ever heard, man.”

I winked. “I heard worse.”

“Got it, boss,” Billy grunted.

I stood up, keeping my eyes on Bernie. “Sorry about the smack, really,” I said. “Someday we meet in a bar, I'll give you a free hit.”

He scowled. “Fuck *you*.”

Falken pushed past me and I followed him towards the Beamer, Billy already hustling into the driver's seat. I turned in time to see Rachel, tiny, pretty little Rachel, step in front of the Lincoln, brace the shotgun against her hip, and fire once into the Lincoln's grill, the paper dissolving into fiery embers, the car making an ungodly noise as steam shot up out of the engine. She backed up to the Beamer with the shotgun still braced against her hip, then we all crowded in and

Billy hit the gas, screeching down the street.

“Fucking *ouch*,” Rachel said, panting. “I think I broke something.”

The Ear Inn was almost as old as Charly, the grizzled bartender who greeted us with a snort and a tick of the head at an empty table in the back of the room. It was wobbly, sticky, and meant for no more than three people, but we crowded around it and ordered drinks from the waitress. I knew that in The Ear if I ordered Scotch I'd get Dewars, so I ordered another Wild Turkey instead, neat, warm and flat.

There was a low buzz in the room, no music, just some after work imbibers and a few old codgers shooting everyone nasty looks. There were two small televisions on elevated platforms on either end of the bar, the volume off, both tuned in to the news, which was reporting a revolution somewhere in Africa, everyone terribly concerned.

“Everything's going to hell in a handbasket,” Rachel said, staring up at the screen.

“Nah,” I said. “We're all gonna be under one government soon enough, and that'll be that.” I paused, looking at her, letting my eyes roam, taking in everything I hadn't been able to lay a hand on for years. “You did good out there.”

She snorted without looking at me. “Ain't the first time I've handled a gun.”

Falken leaned forward, a lit cigarette magically between his fingers. “Are you sure this is going to work?”

I shrugged. “What am I, a fucking criminal mastermind? Fuck if I know if it'll work.” Leaning forward, I put my hands flat on the table. “We don't have any muscle. James has the fucking police, for a while, until they figure out he's not right any more. We've got me, and The

Bumble, and Rachel and you and the old man. We need muscle.”

He frowned. “And pissing off every criminal in the city helps us?”

I put up a finger. “One, it gets us money, and money makes up for a lot.” Another finger. “Two, Frank thinks I’m working for James, that we screwed him somehow—he can’t even figure out *how*, but he’s certain of it—so let’s let him think it. Let’s let him think we’re *still* screwing him over. And let’s invite everyone else to the party. Pretty soon they’re lining up to take on The Executioner.”

Falken nodded slowly. “Muscle. All right. But not working *for* us.”

I shrugged again. “Working in our *interests*, though. Ride the lightning, kid.”

As I spoke two more people entered the bar: A distinguished-looking older man with dark, leathery skin and gray hair, a pencil mustache unfortunately cultivated on his face, and Chino, wearing an oversize red polo shirt and tan work boots, looking like some streetcorner runner, this piece of shit handling my collections, giving me and Billy Bumbles a bad name.

Our drinks arrived, conveyed by a broad middle-aged woman with the fiery fake red hair of a much younger if equally classless woman. She stood between us and Chino as she handed the glasses down. I snatched mine and swallowed it in one breath, and stood up, The Bumble popping up and buttoning his jacket, falling in beside me as we crossed over to where Chino and the dandy with the porn star mustache were bellied up to the bar, accepting a thick yellow envelope from Charly.

We crowded in behind them. “Hi Chino.” I shot a hand out and pushed his shoulder as he tried to turn around.

The dandy tried to whirl around, but The Bumble had him pinned close to the bar, and surged forward, slamming the Dandy’s gut into

it. He made a *whooshing* noise and his eyes bugged out of his head, his arms trapped between his own body and the bar.

"Behave your fucking self," Billy whispered.

Charly was scowling with the complete lack of fear only idiots and really, really old farts possessed. "The fuck," he muttered. "None o' this shit in here. I'm payin' my tab."

I nodded. "Nothing to do with you, old timer," I said. "You're marked off for the week. Isn't he, Chino?"

I gave the fat man a little shove.

"I marked him off," he said without trying to turn around. "I marked *you* off, too, shithead. You step out on *Frank*? You ain't gonna have no friends any more."

I nodded, reaching around and taking the envelope from his chubby hand. "Yeah, I had friends last week and it was fucking great. My apartment got tossed, I got beat on, half-eaten, and insulted. I'm trying out living without friends for a while, see if the number of beatings gets less."

"Fucking funny," Chino growled. "You're *hilarious* when you get the drop on people, huh? Have them pinned to the wall."

I stepped back a foot or so, tucking the envelope into my jacket. "Turn around, then," I said, smiling, blood pouring into my arms, my hands. "No one's pinning you."

He didn't turn. "Fuck you."

I nodded, and The Bumble released his friend, who I didn't know. "Tell Frank if he's got a complaint, he can bring it up with Detective Stanley James," I said, winking at Rachel and Falken. "Until then, you don't need to work collections any more, understand?"

"You're fucking dead."

I turned for the door and paused. Outside, through the misty,

melting windows, blue and red lights flashed, a million of them.

“Cops,” The Bumble whispered, sounding strangely satisfied.

“Shit,” I muttered, and turned back to Chino. “You may be right.”