



**JEFF
SOMERS
COLLECTIONS**
a novel

COLLECTIONS

Chapter 26

by Jeff Somers

26.

I spun around and with a surge of glee I leaped onto Chino's back, both hands on his head, and slammed him down onto the bar, knocking him cold. He slumped under me like an avalanche, and I tried to surf him down and failed, slipping backwards with a tearing sensation slicing along my side and cracking my head on one of the tables, sending it up and over, its former tenants scrambling out of the way. Feeling like a knife had been shoved into my belly all over again, I pulled myself up to my feet and turned myself around, breathing heavy. The Bumble stood over the Dandy, who was crumpled on the floor unconscious next to Chino, his hands spread.

"Cops," I said, staggering forward. The place had gone quiet and staring as The Bumble and I walked briskly back towards our table, where Falken stood next to Rachel, their drinks untouched. I waved my hand back and forth, indicating the rear of the bar. "Out the back, out the back," I hissed.

Rachel spun immediately—I'd flushed her out of too many shitholes in our past life for her to ever forget the instincts that kept her alive—but Falken stood there gaping at me until she stopped a few steps away, spun, and took hold of him by the shoulder, giving him a yank that got him into motion. As we caught up with them, The Bumble and I simultaneously paused to kick over our table and the

empty one next to it, and a war whoop burst out of me. We crowded into the tight, dark vestibule outside the kitchen and the single toilet while Rachel struggled with the heavy steel door marked AUTHORIZED PERSONELLE ONLY, finally dragging it open with some help from a wide-eyed Falken, who appeared to be experienced the longest sustained elevation in his heart rate ever.

We burst into the alley behind the bar just as a blue and white police cruiser turned the corner, and we took off to our left, towards the pair of slimy green garbage bins set back against a high cinder block wall. I felt ridiculous. Normally when the cops took an interest, I kept my dignity: Let the motherfuckers frisk you, give you a few pokes, maybe even arrest you just to hold you for twenty-four hours and sweat you out a little. Here I was scrambling for a fucking wall climb like I'd just gotten caught tagging some car on the Bowery.

Falken leaped up on top of the dumpsters like an athlete despite his belly, like he was connected to some invisible wire, and was up over the wall in a flash. I didn't blame him. Billy, no stranger to rushing out of places just ahead of the heat, crashed into the dumpster like he hadn't seen it, bounced back, then heaved himself up onto it in a messy, awkward scramble that left his suit a stained, greasy mess. I took a little jump, hearing shouts behind us, and put my palms flat on the black plastic lid and vaulted up onto the slick surface, the smell, hot and rotten, enveloping me instantly. I got to my feet and glanced over my shoulder down the alley, where two fat uniforms were running towards us like their shoes were made of glue. I smiled—I knew these guys. In my business you met every cop in the world, eventually. Breathing a little heavily, I looked down; Rachel was still on the ground, looking at the Dumpsters like they were fucking Mount Everest, one hand on her chin like she was doing

equations in her head involving the curvature of the earth or some shit as our tiny window of advantage closed up.

I dropped back down next to her. "You fucking midget," I whispered, smiling at the cops and shooting my cuffs. I started towards them, spreading my arms wide and smiling. "Jesus, they're scraping the bottom of the barrel for uniforms, huh? All this for little old me?"

The cop in the lead was named Murray: fat, pale, and hairy, his face covered in a massive graying beard/mustache combination that swirled out into whimsical handlebars. No one ever made fun of his whiskers, though, or if they did they found out that a baton could be worse than a fucking gun in the right hands. His blue shirt was stained with sweat already, and I wondered how long it had been since the academy for him.

"Sorry, pal," he said, grinning, everyone friends. "The boss says pull him in, we pull you in. You got any complaints, file 'em with James."

I nodded. "You can let her slide, though, right? I mean, James wants me, right?"

We were a few feet apart by now. Rachel, smart even if she wasn't tall, remained back by the dumpsters. I hoped she was shedding a tear for me, manfully acknowledging my sacrifice, because I was about to flush a decade of good will between me and the crushers down the fucking toilet. Cops were all just failed hoods, people who wanted to crack heads and walk into rooms and make them go quiet. All your average cop wanted was respect: If you treated them well, shook their hand, and let them run the show, they loved you. Piss them off once and you arrested every Thursday for drunk and disorderly like fucking clockwork.

Murray shook his head but his partner answered. Ruiz was a slimmer version of Murray but with just a porn mustache hanging on his upper lip like a well-fed caterpillar that matched his eyebrows in fucking disturbing ways. "Sorry, word o' God is, take everyone," he said.

I shrugged. "All right," I said, stopping a foot or so away from Murray, who was fishing out his handcuffs. All very gentlemanly, all very civilized. A week ago that's exactly what would have happened: I'd have let them cuff me, we'd have cracked jokes all the way to The Tombs, and I'd have asked them to order me Chinese food around seven, and they would have been happy to do it.

As it was, I stepped forward and punched Murray in the gut.

There was a lot of gut to try and impress, but I'd compensated for every pastry Murray had absorbed in his career and he doubled over like he was on a spring, letting out a wet moan and suddenly becoming a dead weight hanging on me. I drove him forward and crashed his bulk into his partner, knocking them both to the ground. I sprang back and danced around to the left, aiming a solid kick at Ruiz's face.

This was fun. This was exercise. Ruiz's head snapped around and sent a spray of blood onto the greasy pavement, and I was eleven again, breaking Tommy Dukone's nose, feeling the cartilage break, the gummy gritty feel of it against my knuckles, the sad squeaking noise he made in the gutter. And every time I kicked him, I got a spray of blood and a squeak. I kicked Ruiz and I got a spray of blood and a squeak. I turned to see what I could make Murray do, Murray who probably thought we were fucking friends or something up until ten seconds ago. I took his head by the mustache and gave it a yank, slamming his skull back down onto the uneven pavement.

I kicked Ruiz and got a spurt of blood straight up into the air, beautiful in its way. I could feel every part of me working in concert, every system and vessel clicking in, smooth and strong. It was like dancing, floating, like I weighed nothing, like all my mass and fatigue was transferred to Ruiz with every kick.

Then Rachel's hand was on my shoulder, weighing me back down until my feet were back on the ground, and I was panting, my chest burning, my suit jacket sweated through, my hip sore and stiff. It had only been thirty seconds.

"Jesus," she hissed. "Come on, you fucking psychopath."

She sounded exactly like she had all those years ago, me saving her life, her horrified at the manner in which I was saving it. I wanted to laugh, but I swallowed it and followed her, feeling so good I actually stared at her ass as she hustled ahead of me. I settled my jacket onto my shoulders and felt good, young. We took a left at the mouth of the alley, next to the empty cruiser with its doors open like wings, and walked around the block, circling back around to The Ear on the other side of the street, ducking into a shadowed doorway, our collars popped up and our chins down in our chests. Three cruisers sat at crazy angles in the street, lights flashing, three uniformed cops standing around chatting. As we settled in, an ambulance pulled up to add its own shade of cherry to the lights, the EMTs scurrying out and around the back.

"*Psychopath*," she breathed suddenly, but it sounded affectionate, or so I told myself. I smiled, but then we both froze, watching as six cops, looking angry and sweaty, led Billy in handcuffs up the street towards the cruisers.

"Shit," Rachel breathed.

James emerged from The Ear smoking a cigar. He looked the

same: Flash, a beautiful dark green suit and a gold watch you could see from the fucking Moon. He glowed. He stood for a moment, watching as Billy was pushed into one of the cruisers. He scanned the street, his eyes moving right over us, and then flicked his smoke into the street, said something to the cops around him, and climbed into the back of another car. We watched the cops drive off, lights going dead, a small crowd of The Ear's regulars emerging to gawk on the street.

"They can't charge him," Rachel whispered. "They can only hold him for twenty four hours."

I shook my head. "Hell, Rache," I said. "He's the fucking Executioner. In twenty-four hours Billy'll be dead."