



**JEFF
SOMERS
COLLECTIONS**
a novel

COLLECTIONS

Chapter 27

by Jeff Somers

27.

This was how it would happen. This is how it was done.

I sat in Pirelli's explaining it to Rachel, a cold cup of coffee in front of me, an uneaten hamburger between us. We'd shared not taking a bite. Instead of eating we'd smoked an entire pack of my cigarettes, the ashtray packed full of our butts and the air dense with the heavy blue smoke.

"He timed it," I said, staring down at the vaguely pink surface of our table. "He must have been watching us, and he called in the bulls just when it would be too late to be booked, so he won't go in the system until tomorrow morning. So only James and his team know Billy's on ice."

This was how it would happen. This is how it was done.

"During the dog watch, only a supervising sergeant on duty, James will just walk on in and flash his badge, and tell everyone Billy's a witness and he's got to take him upstate. No paperwork. It'll be weird, but there'll be nothing in the system, so no one's going to argue with a Detective. It's his badge, his career—if it was really James, he'd worry about that, about getting away with something, because the next morning there'll be an arrest report entered into the system and no criminal to go with it, and questions will be asked and six months, a year from now Detective Stanley James is charged with

something after weeks and weeks of newspaper stories. But what does Alt James care about that? It's not *his* job." I swallowed bile. "Detective James is already dead."

Rachel was staring at me with red eyes, her arms crossed under her breasts, looking puffy and beautiful. She was maybe thirty now, I wasn't sure. Some lines had crept onto her face, a gray hair here and there. She was beautiful and always would be, but she'd had some hard years, some traffic. I wanted to reach over and take her hand, but didn't. She didn't think I could be gentle. She was probably right. I could be gentle if I concentrated, but we moved in different ways, felt in different ways, and the fucking universe got its cruel jollies by having me show up as her driver all those years ago.

"Please stop," she said, her voice hoarse, one leg bouncing under the table. "I know. I get it. Billy's a friend."

I nodded, but I didn't stop. "So he'll walk Billy right out of The Tombs in a few hours and no one will bat an eye, say a word, ask a question. Cops do it all the time. Take someone on a ride, beat the tar out of them, get information, revenge, whatever, then slip him back into his cell, and no one ever asks any questions. Everyone knows, but no one says anything, that's how it works—the cops are worse than the fucking mafia. Except Billy won't come back: James'll take him somewhere and he'll make a call. He'll make me an offer: Falken for Billy. He won't accept Falken's location because he doesn't trust me. He'll want me to bring Falken somewhere physically, make a trade."

Rachel was shaking her head. "You can't do that."

"I *can't*?" I felt sick and sludgy, but wanted another cigarette anyway, just to have something to do with my hands. "Billy's ... important to me."

The words were oversized, and I had trouble speaking, my throat throbbing.

Rachel suddenly leaned forward. "He'll kill Falken. Falken is—"

I pounded the table with my fist. "Not my friend. *Billy's* my friend."

We stared at each other. She didn't blink. After a few seconds I leaned back against the vinyl. "All right. Then I have to go get Billy out." I stretched and fished into my pocket for cash, tossing some on the table without looking at it. "Tonight. Before James fetches him."

She nodded. "All right. Let's go."

We stared at each other again. I put my hands flat on the tabletop and took a deep breath. "You ever been in The Tombs?"

She shook her head. "I never did a bit. Not even overnight."

I nodded. "We'll have to hit it before the shift change, before James comes by for him, which means there'll be more cops to deal with." I paused and ran through my thoughts, getting them organized. "There's a cop, a kid, in deep with Frank and I been letting her ride a little, doing her a favor because cops got credit to burn other folks don't." I waved a hand. "I don't collect on Frank's book any more, but she don't know that. I can press her and she can get us in without notice." I closed my eyes. "There'll be at least eight or ten guards—this is the holding level, not the fucking booking office. We'll go straight down. So say—a dozen. A dozen fucking armed cops."

Her stare was steady and dry. "Guns?"

I shook my head.

She blinked, slow and languid. I loved her. I could watch her blink and be entertained. "So, we're going to sweet-talk them into letting us walk out of there with him?"

“No one said you couldn’t shoot some people, you wanted.”
And there it was: She smiled.

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The face that appeared between the door and the jamb was old and wrinkled, squinting despite the darkness. “Who the fuck,” he said with a thick accent, a complete declarative sentence, not a question. Then his shrunken pale face puffed out suddenly into a balloon of surprise, and he tried to slam the door. He moved in slow motion, though, and by the time he got his body behind it I’d had my foot in the gap for about six hours.

“Be friendly, Anto,” I advised as he grunted and huffed, trying to shut the door despite my foot. “This, by way of reference, is not friendly.”

“You trying to get me hurt?”

“Anto.”

“You fucked up, you trying to get everyone in your trouble?”

“Anto,” I repeated patiently.

He gave up with a snarl and backed away from the door, throwing up his hands and turning away. “Fine. Come in and get me killed. Frank—”

“I know,” I said, stepping into the hot, dim apartment foyer, followed by Rachel. “Frank put the black spot on me. So I’m a customer, and I’ve got cash.”

The old man was short and stocky, the body of an old dock worker under a bright white button down shirt and a pair of dark trousers held up by fraying leather suspenders. His white hair spurted from his pink scamp in thin, wispy shrubs, like clouds circling his skull. He

paused just before the narrow entryway widened into his living room and cocked his head. “Cash, eh,” he said.

I turned my head and nodded at Rachel, who bit her lip and shut the door behind her. We followed the old man into his living room, a large green couch and matching chair facing a huge television that still flickered the news at us, the sound off. It was cozy, the tiny kitchen behind us and another short hall leading to the rest of the apartment—the bedroom, his office, the bathroom. A tidy place, excepting the office, no dust, no mess. No booze. I'd been in Anto's apartment plenty of times before, picking up packages for Frank in my spare time.

Anto glanced at Rachel as she stepped around me and straightened up. “Forgive me,” he said suddenly, the words mushy. “Welcome to my home. My name is Anto Picinich.”

She smiled a little shyly. “It's nice to meet you, Mr. Picinich. My name is Rachel Murray.”

He nodded, smiling, then looked at me and his smile fell away instantly. “Come,” he grunted. “I make tea in the kitchen for the young lady and you tell me why you have killed me.”

“No tea for me?” I asked as we followed his compact frame.

“Ha! You hear how he jokes about my execution. You watch, I will slip away and make a call and some men will come to take him off my hands, give me a reward.”

I shook my head at Rachel. Anto was always like this. You were forever waking him from a nap, or interrupting dinner, or getting him into trouble, or, if you were unfortunate enough to be black or Spanish of some persuasion, you were always stealing things from him.

The kitchen was so small Rachel had to work hard to keep from

touching me as we tried to stay out of the old man's way. I gave him a minute, and as he filled an ancient kettle with tapwater I said "Anto, I need to buy some documents."

"Running?" He said. "Frank has pushed your button, and you run. Passports? Driver's license? Birth Certificate? Very expensive. You have brought photos? If I must take your photos myself, it costs extra." He shut off the water and turned towards the stove. "And when you are found living in Mexico under an assumed name and they bring your documents back to Mr. Frank McKenna, they will say, no one but Anto Picinich does such quality work, and I will be in trouble."

"Not passports," I said, ignoring his ranting and glancing at the time on the battery-powered clock on the wall. "Badges. Detective, NYPD. Manhattan precinct, preferably way north – 34th Precinct, maybe." I held up my hand with fingers splayed. "Two. In an hour."

The old man turned from the stove and looked at me, then at Rachel, then back at me. "Jesus," he said. "How much cash did you *bring*?"