



**JEFF
SOMERS
COLLECTIONS**
a novel

COLLECTIONS

Chapter 29

by Jeff Somers

29.

When I woke up, I was still in the holding cell. My back ached nicely, and my arms had both gone to sleep under my own weight, numb and useless. As predicted, Officer Hunt hadn't even looked at me when she'd finally come back to retrieve me from the interview room; I was the right size and physical type, wearing the same clothes. Two detectives had gone in, and two had come out. The math didn't worry her.

I sat up, suddenly, realizing that James had never come for me. Or if he had I'd slept through it, and he'd left me to rot. I looked around, a shooting pain in my neck my souvenir from the night; the cops had about fifty people in the cell now, everyone just taking up whatever real estate they could find, everyone exhausted. The steel toilet and sink combo on the raised cement pad in the rear had overflowed at some point and the whole place smelled like other people's shit. But it was quiet, and cool, and I sat for a moment chewing over the fact that Alt James hadn't come for The Bumble, or had decided to leave me be if he had. Both possibilities were distressing.

Moving quietly, I stood up and stretched, wincing. I felt like everything had been removed over night and shoved back in at a slightly wrong angle, wires connected to my muscles pulling in weird

ways. Limping a little, I worked my arms to try and get some feeling back in them and walked over to the front of the cell, where a payphone was just within reach. Keeping the greasy-feeling receiver a half inch from my ear, I dialed The Bumble's cell collect. When he answered, a wave of relief swept through me.

"I'm still here," I said, looking over the wheezing forms. "What fucking time is it?"

He told me it was four in the morning. He was with Rachel, Rusch, and Falken at an all night diner in Queens, keeping their eyes open with the worst coffee he'd ever tasted.

I sensed someone standing near me, looming, their gravity pulling at me. I turned and found a skinny piece of tatted-up trash at my elbow, looking hollow-eyed and jittery; a fucking junkie. He hadn't been in stir when I'd arrived, and I hadn't heard him sneaking up on me. He had yellow-brown skin stretched taut over his bones, and his face was all brow and chin, his nose receding into shadow, his limp black hair hanging like curtains on either side of his face.

"Need the phone," he mumbled.

I held up one hand towards his face. "If James doesn't collect me," I said, keeping half an eye on my new friend. "They're just gonna arraign me as if I was you. I doubt he's gonna show up to press the charge, so they'll probably dismiss the case in about five seconds. I'll let you know when I'm out. If you don't hear from me in a couple of hours, make some fucking inquiries, okay?"

The Bumble said he would. The Junkie suddenly leaned forward.

"Didn't ya hear me? I said—Frank McKenna says *hello*."

I let the phone drop and stepped back quickly, letting his weak jab with the knife slice the air between us as I reached out and took hold of his Adam's Apple, pinching it hard between my fingers. He

staggered backwards, coughing and heaving, his head down in his chest. I snatched the phone back from the air.

"Billy? Yeah, OK. Someone's trying to kill me. I'll talk to you later."

I hung up the phone and turned back to the skinny fuck. A couple of other people had woken up, but everyone just watched us sleepily, disinclined to worry about it.

The Junkie was still trying to remember how to breath, the knife held loosely in one hand. I stepped over, the wound in my side burning now as if in sentient sympathy, sized him up—weight, height, the extra drag the layer of dried sweat and dirt would cause—and gave him a jab to the ribs. He hadn't gotten his breath back, so he didn't make any noise as he smacked backwards into the bars of the cell. They didn't move or rattle for him. The knife popped out of his hand and I bent with a wince to pick it up.

It wasn't his, I figured. It was a good hunting knife with a sold wood handle, smooth to open and close, the blade sharp and oiled. Someone had cared for this knife until about three hours ago when they'd made the criminally neglectful decision to hand it over to Stinky Rodriguez here. I folded it up and slid it into my pocket, walking over to him. His eyes had bugged out of his head and his hands were wrapped around his own throat, his mouth open and pale tongue sticking out. He'd locked up and couldn't breathe. He'd pass out soon enough and wake up in a few hours feeling groggy, so I knelt down in front of him.

"Frank McKenna?" I said. He nodded, comical with his mouth open and his eyes wide, staring past me.

"Jesus, what's he doing, hiring shitheads like you. I'm fucking insulted." I wagged a finger at him and leaned forward, holding my breath as I pushed my hands into his pockets, coming up empty. I

leaned back on the balls of my feet and studied him, looking at his pain points. He blinked dreamily at me, still struggling to force his seized lungs to work. I brought out the knife and unfolded it, holding it in my hand and studying this asshole, tracing with my eyes where I could cut that would produce the most pain, the most blood, without really hurting him, where I could cut deeper and leave a scar, how I could approach it to keep him alive for a long, long time.

After all, he'd tried to kill me.

Slowly, I folded the knife up and got to my feet. It didn't feel right. He hadn't come here for me personally; he'd been pushed into this cell by Frank fucking McKenna and told if he did this, he'd be forgiven something, something broken would be fixed. He'd have it hard enough when he got popped from the Tombs and had to explain me walking around.

I pushed the knife back into my pocket and turned around, feeling tight and sweaty, feverish.

Two hours later two new cops came in with a clipboard and shouted out fifteen names, including Billy's. We were herded into an elevator and then into another cell, where we sat for another forty minutes or so. Everyone just stared around, numb. Most of them had been arrested fifteen, twenty hours ago and had gone through hungover to angry to plain tired.

One by one we were called out. I was the sixth name called, and shuffled between two cops up a flight of stairs to the courtroom, an uninspiring place with a dropped ceiling, cracked plaster walls, and a few rows of dirty-looking pews filled with relatives and friends and curious gawkers. I stood for a few minutes while the judge, a fat woman with flat dark hair on her head like someone had ironed it

there, handled the case before mine, firing questions at the attorneys and the plaintiff. Then they were done and I was led to the big table, where a young man who looked like he'd borrowed his father's suit sat behind a huge pile of tan file folders, writing into a legal pad.

I stumbled a bit as I scanned the pews; all the way in the back, staring right at me, was James. He was huge compared to everyone else, wearing a blue pinstripe suit that looked like it had been painted onto him, the cut so perfect. He smiled a little and nodded his head.

"You have your own lawyer?" the kid asked as I sat down.

I shook my head, which was suddenly beating with an intense headache. "Nope," I managed to croak. I didn't know what James was up to, and it bothered me. After a second I twisted around to look back at him, but he was gone.

"My name's Simms, and I'll be representing you," the kid said, still scratching away at the pad. He finally looked up at me, his eyes red and tired, and I felt a rush of mellow feelings towards him this kid who was trying to defend five hundred morons from their own stupidity, for free. "In thirty seconds, tell me what happened."

I shrugged. "Don't sweat it, kid. They're dropping the charges."

He raised an eyebrow. "Humor me," he said with a faint smile.

I winked. "Watch."

He gave me The Stare for a few more seconds, then shrugged, clearly thinking he'd seen it all and if his own client was hostile, he couldn't be blamed. He decided to get caught up on some other casework, and we sat in silence for three minutes before the judge barked at us. Simms stood up and did his best, working from the file he had. There were paperwork problems, and the judge demanded that the arresting officer explain themselves, and was annoyed when none of them were present, and dismissed the case with a rap of her

gavel. As the guards undid my cuffs, Simms smiled up at me.

“You cheated. You’ve been in this room before.”

I laid a finger alongside my nose and winked again, and walked away, looking around for Alt James or Alt Rusch or anyone else who might be from another fucking universe, looking to kill Falken and make me a very poor man.

Outside, it was nearly dawn, everything getting bright, and James was leaning against a lamppost, smoking a small brown cigar and smiling.

“You were pretty cool in there,” he said, pushing off from his post and falling in next to me as I walked. “All certain you were getting the boot.”

I shrugged and kept my eyes open, made sure he was between me and the walls of the buildings, so I wouldn't get trapped. I watched the traffic, looking for a car that would swoop in and gobble me up.

“We should talk,” he said. “You could help me.”

I frowned, but kept my mouth shut. This was distraction. This was keeping my mind off what was happening around me. I was tensed and ready to move. We took a few steps in silence, and then a car *was* pulling over, a sleek big black SUV gleaming in the pre-dawn light. But it was coming up to the curb slowly, and when I stopped on the corner across from it nothing happened.

Alt James held a white business card out to me. “All right, playin' it cool, I understand,” he said, sounding reasonable, smiling at me. “Here's my cell. Call me any time, day or night, you decide you might want to help me out. I'll make it worth your while, no doubt.”

I reached out and took the card like I was in a dream. This motherfucker had left me for *eternity* in a dead world—a dead fucking

Hoboken, New Jersey, of all fucking places—and now he was all smiles and handshakes. I looked down at the card; it was just a phone number in bold in the center of the card: **PE6-5000**.

I looked up, and the SUV was pulling away, leaving me standing on the corner. I was starving. Shaking myself, I stepped to the curb and raised my hand to hail a cab; one that had been sitting on the corner idling pulled out into the street and zipped over to me in a moment. I pulled open the back door and paused to stuff the card into my pocket and found the pocket empty. I quickly patted myself down and sighed—someone had picked me clean when I'd been sleeping in the cell. I had the Junkie's knife and Alt James's calling card, and the clothes on my back.

“Sorry, pal,” I said, slamming the door. “Guess I'm walking.”