



**JEFF
SOMERS
COLLECTIONS**
a novel

COLLECTIONS

Chapter 30

by Jeff Somers

30.

There wasn't a pay phone left in the entire city. The city woke up as I walked, carts appearing on the corners serving up hot coffee and buns, donuts and bagels, trucks pulling up to the curb and tossing stacks of newspapers onto the sidewalks, people out cranking up the metal shutters on their businesses. I kept walking, thinking I'd find a phone and give The Bumble a call, get a pickup, but by the time I realized there wasn't such a thing as a pay phone in the city any more, I'd noticed a pair of professionals tailing me, two middle-aged guys in pretty good shape, dressed casually in sports jackets and corduroy pants, ignoring me pointedly but always about a block behind. Out of town, I thought, freelancers. Frank spending a little money now trying to get his revenge, save his good name.

The bits of business impressed me. Every time I paused to check on their progress, they were buying coffees or browsing fruit at a bodega, or studying newspapers intently through the thick glass of a vending machine, or waiting for a bus. Waiting for a fucking bus every six or seven blocks when I suddenly noticed my shoe was untied. They were good at it, making it look almost natural, and I never caught them looking at me, or even moving towards me. There was an art to tailing someone on foot, and these guys were maestros.

The streets were still pretty empty. I'd made it to the meat-packing district where no one even owned an alarm clock, and I realized with a chill that if someone wanted to choose a neighborhood to abduct you off the street, this one was perfect. I headed east towards Hudson, and figured if I could hook onto Eighth Avenue I'd have plenty of people around me. For a few blocks as I cut up Greenwich Street I didn't see my new friends behind me, but when I got to the corner of Bank Street they were on Hudson already, somehow, fucking psychics. I squinted up into the brightening sky, looking for helicopters. It was creepy.

Lingering at a newsstand on thirteenth street, I took stock while amusing myself by watching their cycle of pantomimed business: Scanning magazine covers in a store window, buying packs of gum at another newsstand, having a conversation that involved a lot of hand gestures and very little looking in my direction. My blessings were refreshingly sparse: I had a knife they'd likely be surprised by, and I still had my clothes on. And I wasn't in deserted Alt Hoboken, being eaten one nip at a time. On the down side, I was tired and hungry and didn't have a friend left in the city, and I couldn't walk all the fucking way to Queens without getting into a spot where they'd have me against a wall. I had a quick, dirty vision of having my throat cut in a filthy restroom in some bar in Hell's Kitchen after an unsuccessful attempt to climb out the narrow transom window.

I remembered almost being run over by a car, as a kid. I remembered getting the Mumps and everyone telling me I almost died. There were worlds where that's what happened: I died. I wondered if now there was a world where I died exactly like that: Guttled like a fish in a bathroom somewhere. But I was already the only one of me left, Rusch had said. I was immortal.

Turning away from the newsstand, I looked uptown and immediately spotted another pair of shadows at the corner, two skinny guys in leather overcoats, one in a pink shirt whose cuffs ballooned out of the sleeves like flowers, his dark hair swept up in an Elvis bouffant, the other wearing just a sweater, a gold chain popped out of the collar so we'd all know he was an earner. They didn't make any effort to hide from me, and when I looked over my shoulder my original pair of tails were walking briskly in my direction. If they got close enough to pen me in, I was going to start my day in the back of a fucking Econovan with plywood nailed over the windows, and end it in a dumpster in the Bronx.

I was a fucking genius. In the course of two weeks I'd acquired an immense debt, had my apartment trashed, and had my button pushed by Frank McKenna.

I spun, ready to give them a chase, and slammed into two more of my fans who'd crept up behind me. I staggered back, off balance, and they lunged forward, each taking hold of my coat as a beat-up white van with blacked-out windows swelled up from the prophetic visions I'd been having for about thirty seconds now, screeching to a halt at the curb, the side door sliding open on cue. There was nothing but dark inside it.

I spun and let them have the coat, sliding it off my arms as I bent down and threw myself backwards under their arms and onto the floor of the van. Turning my head, I found a leg near the door and with a yell I rolled over and took hold of it, pushing up the pant leg and biting down hard into the soft skin just above the heel, rusty blood pouring into my mouth. The owner of the foot howled above me and kicked at me. I let go as the pair on the sidewalk got back to the open van door. Reaching up, I grabbed hold of the third guy's belt

and pulled myself up by it, pushing off from him and swimming up towards the front of the van, diving down just as someone took hold of my ankle and getting my hands on the gear shift between the front seats, pulling it down towards me.

The van, engine running, lurched into slow motion.

I clawed my way up the back of the driver's seat and clapped my hands onto the driver's face, digging my fingers into his eyes. People were mass-produced; they all hurt the same. He freaked out and began twitching and dancing, one leg stiffing out and slamming down the gas pedal, sending the van into overdrive for three seconds. Then we crashed into a signpost at the crosswalk, the van skidding sideways like some invisible giant had pulled a string taut and humping up onto the sidewalk. I bounced off the back of the seat, biting my tongue badly, and landed on the hard plywood screwed down to the floor of the van's interior.

They were on me, two of them, then three. I kicked both legs like a madman, just using my body any way I could to land blows; my left foot smacked into something definitively and one set of hands on my right arm fell away. I swung my freed arm around and laced my fingers into someone's hair and yanked for all I was worth, getting a satisfying scream in return and finding myself held down by just one guy. I rolled into him and reached up, taking hold of his belt and pulling him down onto me with all my strength, then rolling again, getting on top of him.

I spun away, throwing myself at the square of brightening daylight and rolling out back onto the street, knocking my head, hard, on the pavement. A hum set in, a vibrating noiseless sound in my head that spread out to my arms and legs, making me weak and unsteady. I got to my feet in a shuffling stagger, my legs struggling to

catch up with my center of gravity, and fell into telephone pole, splinters sinking into my palms and worming into my healing cuts as they skidded across the rough surface, catching my weight.

Someone was shouting. I turned my head dreamily and saw two men standing in the street next to their cars. Both were short, stocky Middle-Eastern-looking men, their cars black sedans. Car Service guys, cheap suits and bad haircuts, but they didn't care for this sort of daylight abduction-cum-beating thing and were making their feelings known.

I turned around and leaned against the pole. There were three guys on the street moving towards me, and one in the driver's seat of the van, turning the ignition and trying to coax it into running again despite the caved-in grill. The previous driver's legs were visible on the street next to the van—pulled out and dumped by his fellows. I had to hand it to them: They were still trying to make this work. I was obviously a point of pride with Frank.

With shaking hands, I reached into my coat and pulled out the knife I'd taken from the kid in The Tombs. I unfolded it and held it in front of me, grinning, running my bleeding tongue over my teeth.

"Come on, then, you cunts," I said, breathing hard. "First one to me wins a prize."

I hurt, and it felt good to hurt. Every nick and scrape, every cut and broken piece of cartilage felt like it was sucking energy, pure solar energy, from the air and feeding it into me.

The trio hesitated for just a second, and then kept coming. They'd seen knives before, and they'd seen shaking, bleeding desperation before. They did the math and liked the sum. I braced myself against the pole and tried to size them up through my sizzling, blurry vision. Before they got within five feet of me, tires screeched behind me. The

three of them paused, uncertainty passing over their faces.

I turned and found a dented-up Cadillac, dark blue, with Taxi and Limo plates pointed the wrong way down Eighth, a foot or so behind me. The Bumble sat in the driver's seat. Rachel popped out of the back, holding the door open, almost casually pointing a small caliber pistol at my attackers.

"Come on, beautiful," she said. "Time to go."