



**JEFF
SOMERS
COLLECTIONS**
a novel

COLLECTIONS

Chapter 31

by Jeff Somers

31.

“Where to?”

I stared out the passenger window and watched Manhattan get classier as we moved through midtown, reveling in the lush agony that had spread all over me. I felt like I’d torn every muscle in my body, and it had settled into me like a pleasant burn, keeping me warm and awake. I turned to look at The Bumble and took a deep breath; the car smelled funny, though I couldn’t place the smell. It reminded me of burned plastic, but the interior was pristine.

I twisted around and glanced at Rusch and Rachel in the backseat, the old lady apparently asleep, Rachel staring coolly back at me, a half smile on her lips. They all looked like they’d gotten a shower and a change of clothes.

“The first Junior’s Papaya you see,” I said, turning back around. “Just pull over. I’m fucking starving.”

Billy frowned. “What?”

I waved a hand at him and closed my eyes. “Hot dogs, Billy, hot dogs.”

After a moment of dark silence, Rachel said “We need to make sure Falken’s all right.”

I closed my eyes and imagined a world where Rachel didn’t worry

about Falken. “He was okay when you decided to leave him *alone*, right? I mean, the situation was so calm and relaxed you didn’t even leave the old *lady* behind to back him up.”

“What?”

I held my bloody hand up behind my head. “Hot dogs, Billy. They came through with peanut butter sandwiches. No jelly, just peanut butter. Fucking jail.”

“I like Rudy’s,” he said after a moment, eyes locked on the road. Traffic was firming up around us, rush hour blooming.

“Oh, fuck *you*,” I groaned. “You like Rudy’s because the hot dogs are free, you cheap bastard. You don’t mind breathing in three or four decades of other people’s cigarettes while eating them?” I snorted. Rudy’s hot dogs were store brand bought in plastic packages at a supermarket, boiled endlessly and given away free to drunks. They tasted like dog food wrapped in plastic. I wanted that sizzling, greasy taste of real beef and spices, fresh buns, tart onions.

No one said anything to that, and I kept my eyes closed. I had almost dozed off when Rachel leaned forward and put her face between Billy and me.

“I really think we ought to check on Mr. Falken.”

“Just tell me where to go,” Billy said.

I sighed, something smart on the tip of my tongue, but then I paused. “What time is it?”

“Almost seven,” Rachel said after a moment.

I nodded, smiling, my lips cracking open, tiny slivers of pain shooting through them. “Chinatown,” I said. “Mott Street.”

Frank didn’t run any gambling in Manhattan; the city had made too much of it legal enough for it to be worth his time. Small gangs

worked neighborhood lotteries and after-hours card games, more or less running them straight just like the casinos and government did, taking their fair cream off the top and otherwise letting the odds go natural. Why not; you didn't have to sex the numbers to make gambling work for you. It was god's natural screw.

Frank *did* like a high-stakes game of old-fashioned poker. He didn't like Texas Hold'em—bellyached endlessly about how that's all anyone wanted to play any more. But put enough money on the table and you can find a bunch of guys willing to play you at anything, anywhere, and Frank's weird obsession with five-card stud was easy enough to cater to. A Dominican gang had a couple of basements rented under restaurants in Chinatown; one grand buy in, free cocktails, professional dealers, custom-made chips. Couple of mornings a week you could find Frank still playing as the sun rose, moving thousands of dollars back and forth between him and the house.

We pulled up outside Lee's Empire and I stepped out onto the sidewalk. The Bumble was in the street immediately, coming around the front. "Where is he?" he asked.

I waved him back towards the car. "Stay here," I said. "I'm just going to break Frank's balls a little. Bring it on home what we're doing. Make sure he sees it the way I want to, so he'll dance the moves I want." I smoothed down the grimy lapels of my jacket and smiled at the tall Indian man leaning casually in the doorway of the restaurant. I sensed Billy hesitating, and then fading back towards the car.

I spread my hands and grinned. "Henley," I said. "How the fuck are you?"

He smiled, extending a hand without shifting the rest of his body. "Hello, mate—you've looked better."

Henley had a round accent that was sort of English, sort of something else. Each word fell to the ground like it had been carved from ice, melting through the air and tinkling around you, little tinny echoes everywhere. He was young and rakish, well-dressed in last year's suit and shoes shined to a mirrorlike finish. He was one of those rare people I'd inexplicably liked the moment we'd met and continued to like. He was Middle Eastern of some extraction I'd never bothered to clarify, and had perfect coffee-colored skin and a bush of thick, lush black hair that grew straight up and then did interesting things.

"I'm in the air," I said.

"So I've heard. Your former boss is downstairs. I suppose I shouldn't let you in." He put his hand on his chin and rubbed, looking off into the distance. "Then again, no one has ordered me to keep you *out*."

I grinned. "I'm supposed to be dead. I'm going to haunt the son of a bitch. Can I owe you the cover?"

He nodded. "Sure, darling, why not. They're closing up shop down there anyway." He pushed his hands back into his pockets and looked up the block. "Rumor is you're a dead man anyway. Can't stop a ghost."

I walked into the dim restaurant, through the empty dining room and kitchen and down the back stairs. As I descended I could hear the murmur of voices, and I could see a layer of bluish smoke literally hanging in the air around the halfway point of the staircase. The game room was a damp cellar, but it was done up in style, with a full bar at the far end of the room shining and glittering like a jewel, manned by a sleepy-looking black kid in a white dinner jacket. There were just six people aside from the barman: Frank, slumped at a

green felt table with a feeble pile of chips spread out in front of him, his two bodyguards, seated at the next table over and trying hard to look attentive, two old men in suits sitting opposite Frank and sporting large piles of chips I assumed had once been his, and the floor manager, a big dark-skinned guy in a terrible light blue suit. He was bald and heavy-chested, like a guy who worked his arms constantly in the gym and did nothing else. He glanced at me as I entered and closed his eyes.

“We closin’,” he said, and shook his head a little, murmuring “Fucking faggot shouldna taken yo’ cover.”

“I just came to have a chat,” I said. Frank went noticeably still.

The fat manager sighed. “Then I gotta take yo’ weapons,” he said, pushing aside his jacket to show his holster off. “Even if it’s jus’ for a second.”

I held out the knife towards him; there was no point in being fancy. I wasn’t a killer, anyway, even if slitting Frank’s throat was kind of an appealing option. Fat Man looked at the knife, then at me from under his eyebrows, and finally plucked it from my hand like it was made of dead spiders, dropping it into a strongbox on the table beside him. He didn’t bother frisking me, and looked disgusted.

I circled around and took the seat next to Frank; his security detail rippled a bit, but he held up a hand and they both sat down again. I smiled at them. I didn’t know them, but they didn’t look like anything special.

“How you doing, Frank?” I said, still smiling at his bodyguards. “How’s your cash flow?”

He didn’t look at me; he stared down at his cards. His hands were shaking. “You got a lot of fucking balls, coming here like some asshole, to clown *me*.”

I looked around at Frank's fellow players and winked. "What's the matter, Frank? You can't stand the competition?"

He slowly raised one hand and planted a finger on the green felt of the table and began tapping it slowly. "You had it good, kid. You earned, you were on your way up the ladder. Now you fucking steal from me. You work with that piece of shit cop. You *fucked* yourself up, kid. And now you come here and disrespect me?"

That pissed me off. Frank had fucked me over—needed my cash, maybe, or just didn't like me much, and the moment I had a hiccup collecting on someone he'd hung me out, tossed my apartment, and now he was rewriting history—but I reminded myself that I'd come in to bait Frank, to make sure he was primed to jump after me wherever I went. I leaned forward a little.

"I came here with a message: Back off, or you're gonna have more cops up your ass than you can handle. James will shut you *down*, Frank." I sat back and thought I'd done my bit, it was time to stop pushing my luck and get going. "Back off, and there's plenty of this city to go around."

I started to stand, but Frank twitched, one of his hairy hands diving to his shoulder and coming up with a small automatic, pointed right at me.

"You piece of shit!" Frank snarled, his face dangerously red. "You're gonna fucking *steal* from *me*?"

"Hey!" The useless guy working security in his borrowed suit said mildly, startling a little. "You supposed to hand over your fucking guns."

"Shut up," Frank spat.

"Hey!" Useless Guy said, a little more loudly, like he was actually getting pissed. "You can't fucking waste a guy in here. Faison'll

fucking *flip out*.”

“My guys’ll handle it. It’ll never touch Faison.” Frank said, his eyes on me. This wasn’t potbellied, lazy-looking Frank you couldn’t believe ran half of Manhattan’s numbers. This was Frank McKenna, suspect in thirteen unsolved homicides. This was Frank McKenna who, if you believed the rumors, had killed his stepbrother when they were nineteen years old because he’d gotten in his way. I forced myself to look back at him and kept still. I told myself I was immortal.

Everyone said so.

The gun looked bigger every time I glanced at it.

Useless stepped forward, producing his own gun, a nickel-plated cannon. He was smart enough to just show it, and kept it pointed down at the floor for the moment. “No way, Frank. Not *here*. Take it outside.”

“I’ll make it up to Faison,” Frank said, breathing hard. “I’ll pay him a tax.”

I promoted Useless as he rolled his shoulders—maybe a guy who’d earned his bones and a soft job because he’d done hard things. Because I suddenly very much believed he was willing to shoot Frank and Frank’s two slabs of muscle because those were his standing orders: Any trouble in Faison’s joint, put the fire out fast and heavy. “Sorry, Frank,” he said. “You want to waste someone in here, you talk to Faison, you get a permission slip. You got a permission slip?”

I took a deep breath. *Immortal*, I thought, and I stood up.

Frank twitched and pulled his trigger. There was a flash and a dozen sharp pinpricks of pain appeared over my face and neck, hot blooms. Frank was still sitting there, the gun in his hand smoking, fragmented, the hand itself a pulpy mess of blood. He just stared at it dumbly. My heart thudded in my chest as tiny rivulets of blood

dripped off me—shrapnel, I realize, tiny fragments of Frank's gun.

I stepped past him. I felt numb, like I was floating along—unreal. I'd stood up, with a gun two feet from my head, I'd stood up, and instead of being just another asshole mope killed while leading a dirty, criminal life, I was a Terminus. For the first time since I'd heard the word, I started to believe it.

Behind me, Frank started to scream, and then there were a collection of blurred, overlapping voices. I pushed myself up, floating on a humid cloud of numb air. When I passed Henley, still standing his post at the door, he didn't look at me. I could just hear the shouts from below, but if I were Henley I wouldn't want to know, either.

As I approached the car, The Bumble snapped his cell shut and turned to me expectantly, then blinked in surprise.

"What the—?"

I waved him off. Rachel leaned against the car with her hands in the tight pockets of her jeans, looking sleepy. Beautiful, warm, sleepy. The sort of thing you liked to wake up to. As I got close, I realized I was shaking. She squinted at me and then stepped forward.

"You okay?"

I shook my head. "I'm fine," I said. I did feel good—alive, energized, healthy. But I was shaking like a lead in the wind and couldn't stop myself.

She stepped up close to me and before I knew it she was pressed against me, her hands on my neck, her face close. The feel of her against me was electric, and a shock rippled through me, her hands burning on my skin. She smelled like soap.

"C'mon, baby," she said quietly, looking down at my chest. I wanted to lean forward and smell her hair. "Let's go check on Falken and get you cleaned up."

My eyes stung like there was smoke, and I pushed away from her, the unfamiliar feel of her hands on me lingering like burns. I spun towards The Bumble. "Give me your cell," I snapped.

He reached into his pocket. "Where we goin', boss?" he said, tossing the phone at me. I snatched it from the air and turned away from them, looking back at Henley. As I dialed Rachel's cell number, we stared at each for a moment, and then he shrugged and smiled a little, looking away. Enjoying himself.

Rachel's phone didn't ring anywhere near me. After a moment, Rachel answered.