

## COLLECTIONS

## Chapter 33

## by Jeff Somers

## 33.

The door opened and I smiled at Rachel, hands in my pockets.

"Jesus," she said, making a show of looking me up and down. "You were in jail or the sewers?"

I smiled, making no move to enter. I glanced past her into the room; The Bumble was sitting on one of the beds, reading a newspaper with the frown of a the barely literate, and Rusch sat at the greasy little table, smoking cigarettes and staring out the window. "Jail's a lot less pleasant than you might think," I said. "And I wasn't sitting here, taking like fifteen showers a day."

She made a face. "Well, at least you're better at showering than *Billy*."

This last in a mock whisper, with a comic face of horror. I laughed.

"Got a second?" I said, stepping aside and waiting. She blinked, cocked her head in an adorable way I liked, and then nodded, stepping out and closing the door behind her.

"Let's get a coffee," I suggested.

The World's Tiniest Coffee Shop shared floorspace with the office in the motel; you turned around at the front desk and found yourself facing a strange kitchen-like area. In the mornings they set out a selection of continental fare—muffins, cereals, coffee urns. The urns were kept hot and filled all day and night, sluicing out a bitter, thick coffee that made me want ham sandwiches and cigarettes. There were two tiny little tables with squeaky plastic chairs in a space that was *just* too small for four people to occupy comfortably. We trooped there in silence, made our complimentary coffees under the eyes of the desk attendant, a skinny black kid with a blooming afro he spent a lot of time grooming, wearing a clip on tie that was almost, but not quite, the color of rust—and took them outside to watch the traffic worming its way into the Holland Tunnel.

"Wow," she said, sipping her coffee, the wind pushing her hair around. "New Jersey really is awful."

I shrugged. "This is just up here. It's been poisoned by New York this is where all the toxic runoff gathers. Down south its nice. Farms and shit."

"Which you know because of your extensive travels."

I didn't look at her. I sipped my coffee, laden with fake milk and fake sugar, sweet but horrible, and tried to feel my way around her. I'd been out of physical touch for hours and hours—long enough for Alt James to ferry in a pair of ringers to play head games, long enough, maybe, for him to ferry in some insurance.

"Do you remember," I said, watching a beautiful late-1960s Mustang convertible edge its way past us, the driver yelping on his cell phone, gesticulating wildly. "The first night I drove for you?"

She was quiet for a moment. "Now, why are you bringing that up?"

This was dangerous ground for us, I knew—and on top of that she didn't like being reminded of how she'd made her way. But I needed something that no one else could know.

"You remember what happened."

She nodded, not looking at me. "I remember." "Tell me."

She kept her face turned away from me, standing there with her arms crossed, her coffee held by her shoulder, like she was hugging herself. For a second I thought she wasn't going to answer me. "You didn't say two words to me for the first hour, just drove and ignored me. I liked you. Most of the guys driving always chatted us up, like they were going to get a tip at the end of the night, keep us company. Then that guy in the hat got frisky and I hit the panic button. And you almost beat him to death. Literally almost *to death*." She finally turned a little to look at me. "And you fucking *enjoyed* it." Away again, studying the gentle slope of highway on-ramps off to our left. "You looked up at me, blood droplets all over your face, and you were grinning. I've tried to get that grin out of my head, but I can't. Sometimes even today I look at you in the right light, or rain'll be shadowed on your face from the car window, and I see that grin again."

I nodded. "I saved you," I said.

She nodded without looking at me. "Yes."

Sipping coffee, I took three precise steps away from her. "Rusch, Billy, and Falken—any of them out of your sight?"

"What?"

"Any of them out of your sight for an extended period of time? Any of them acting weird?"

She turned back to me. "Weird?" She shook her head. "No. Everyone's been in and out, but no one for very long—coffee runs, cigarettes. We're fucking bored to death and Elias's terrified—he's trying to look tough but he jumps at every noise like James is going to appear in a puff of blue smoke and strangle him—but aside from *that*  everyone seems normal. Why?"

I nodded. "Last night I got picked up by you and Billy. 'Cept it wasn't you and Billy, right? It was *another* you and Billy."

She stared at me for a second, then bit her lip and looked down at the ground. "Oh, shit."

I felt awkward, standing there, this huge black memory between us, like I'd pulled it, wriggling and alive, from a box and dropped it onto the ground, where it twitched and bled, begging for mercy. We'd spent the last few years burying it, long, slow work, and now here it was again. I remembered the look on *her* face as our eyes had met: A last glimpse of fading, electrifying admiration, affection, *joy*, crumbling and collapsing into a singularity of horror and disgust.

We walked back to the room in silence, that night hanging around us, heavy and immobilizing. When I'd delivered her to the first address of the evening, I'd taken her hand and helped out of the car. Her hand had been small and dry, the nails lacquered and softly pink. I could remember the feel of her hand in mine, the way her small fingers moved as she shifted her balance and got to her feet, the way they slipped out of mine. It was the last time I'd ever touched her casually, when I wasn't bleeding out from a knife wound.

I touched my abdomen where I'd been stabbed. I could feel the hard line of a scar, but felt nothing. It was like I'd been stabbed many years ago, in a another life.

When we stepped back into the room, everyone was standing and staring at us like they'd just been talking about us—about me. The Bumble grinned, conveying a general satisfaction that I was alive and at liberty. Rusch pursed her lips at me, eyes swimming behind her thick glasses, liver-spotted hands washing each other nervously. Falken, looking bloated and pale, like a guy on day three of a Vegas bender who's just realizing he's going to have to win big if he's going home to the wife, just stared at me with his mouth slightly open. He was at the end of his endurance, I thought. He'd been running between fucking *worlds*—for who knew how long, and this was the last bit of energy he had.

I smiled at The Bumble, I couldn't help it. "Make the call, Billy," I said. "Let's get this over with. I'm tired of being hunted like a dog."

He hesitated, then shrugged his eyebrows and fished for his cell phone. We all stood very still and quiet while his thick fingers worked the buttons, and watched him as he put the phone to his ear, looking around nervously.

"Give me Frank," he said, looking down at the greenish carpet. We all waited, making a dumb show of examining things, looking into dark corners, inspecting the housekeeping.

"Frank, Billy. Yeah. Yeah. Hey, fuck you."

I smiled down at my feet.

"Listen, I want out o' this. I got into—I made a mistake, Frank. Lenmme buy my way. Pay a fine."

I turned and walked slowly over to the window. The traffic seemed unchanged, as if the same cars were still sitting there, props for our amusement.

"Yeah, okay, I get that. Sure, I—I mean, I don't feel good about it, y'know. But yeah, okay, if I haveta I can give him up."

I nodded. Frank would have one price for Billy: Me.

The Bumble grunted a few times, assenting to terms. "Right. Okay, Frank, we'll be there. And me? I'm wiped clean, right?" He nodded to himself. "All right, Frank. Thanks."

I heard his phone snap shut and turned. The Bumble looked sad, his sagging eyes heavy, his face blank. He looked down at his phone. "Tonight. Ten-thirty, a warehouse Frank owns in Newark. I'm supposed to bring you out there for some reason, he'll grab you up."

I nodded. "Give me the address," I said, reaching for the phone. I pulled out the card Alt James had given me on the street outside The Tombs and dialed the number. He picked it up on the second ring, the familiar, smooth voice.

"Yeah?"

"It's me. You still want to hear from me?"

"Sure, why not? We can always do business. I'm a businessman, where I come from. Why not?"

I nodded, turning away from everyone and looking back out the window. "All right. Good. Let's make a deal, then, okay? I've got what you want."

He chuckled. "Oh yeah? Okay: You've got him. What you want in return?"

I shrugged. "You leave me and mine the fuck alone."

There was a moment of silence. "That's it? Shit, man, I don't trust fucking philanthropists."

"The money I'm out. The debt. That has to be paid off, with interest, so I can level everything off."

The chuckle again. "That's more like it. I'll even throw in a bonus. You take your lady out, show her a good time. How we do this?"

I gave him the address of the warehouse. "Ten thirty," I said. "I'm going to lie to him, give him a story, so we won't be coming in tied up and kicking, okay? Don't spook him."

"Sure, sure. I get it. Keep it smooth until the last minute. I'll be there."

The line went dead. I turned to face everyone, snapping the phone shut. They were watching me like I was supposed to do something dramatic. A smoke bomb, a flash of lightning, something. I grinned. "Well, we're all sold out."