

The background image is a photograph of a narrow alleyway at night. A person wearing a dark hat and a long coat is walking away from the camera down the center of the alley. The walls on either side are dark and textured, with some pipes and wires visible. In the distance, a brightly lit sign for a restaurant is visible, with the word 'RESTAURANT' clearly legible. The overall atmosphere is gritty and urban.

# **JEFF SOMERS COLLECTIONS**

**a novel**

# COLLECTIONS

## Chapter 34

by Jeff Somers

### 34.

The Bumble handed me the binoculars and leaned on his elbows, snapping gum in his mouth as he shifted his weight, leaning it all on the old yellow stone of the overpass, hunching down so that his head was even with my shoulders. The warehouse Frank had given us was a straight shot away, bathed in orangey streetlights, an empty parking lot out front, a single window glowing with yellow light on the second floor. A faded, splintered sign on the wall proclaimed it to be the home of Dawson Wood Treatments. I held the peepers loosely in my hands and proclaimed it to be the home of several million termites, cockroaches, and fat, lazy spiders.

Newark smelled like it was built on the dried up carcasses of their ancestors.

“You got the number for the motel, right?”

The Bumble snorted. “I got it, Boss. Don’t worry. I’ll check on ‘em.”

I opened my mouth, but as I did so two black vans appeared suddenly in the parking lot, moving smoothly to the center of our field of vision.

“Jesus,” I said, awed. “They’re fucking rape vans.”

They were cheap cargo vans, all the windows blacked out so that once you were inside no one would ever know. I couldn’t see, but I

was certain the windshields were tinted, and there was probably some sort of soundproofing too. The kind of vehicle designed for snatching people off the street and swallowing them whole. Billy chuckled as the two vans came to a stop. Immediately all the doors opened as if on one automatic cue, eight guys spilling out into the night. One, I could tell from his pot belly and sloped shoulders, was Frank. Chino and Mikey D I knew from the stiff way they moved, their bandages gleaming in the fake light. Frank Junior, of course, unfolded from the front seat next to his father and bobbed about, light and airy, smoking a cigarette with his hands in his pockets. Through the binoculars he looked bored.

They extracted several big green duffel bags from the vans and headed for the warehouse door, which opened mysteriously as they approached.

“Jesus,” I said again.

“They’re lookin’ to have a little fun with you, I’m thinking,” The Bumble said, then paused for a second. “Before killin’ you, I mean.”

This was The Bumble’s idea of a joke, I knew from bitter experience. I didn’t look at him, because I knew he’d have a sly, amused look on his face, holding in the mirth and wondering if I’d gotten the joke. Seeing it would make me want to hit him, so I kept my eyes on the warehouse.

As I watched, three more vehicles arrived, all black SUVs of some sort, with tinted windows. They screamed plain-clothes police, and the dozen or so men and one woman who emerged from them confirmed my suspicions: The guys were all in sloppy T-shirts and jeans, baseball caps, with handcuffs hanging from belt loops and neat little thirty-eights tucked into the back of their waistbands. The lone woman was short and had her brown hair pulled back into a pony tail

that erupted from the back of her own baseball cap, and wore sneakers instead of boots. Alt James had a squad of dirty cops on his payroll and I was looking at them all right now.

I didn't see James himself, though, and the cops all milled about around the SUVs like they were awaiting orders. I wondered if Frank's people would spot them from inside, if things were going to erupt a little too soon.

"Call the motel," I said. "Just make sure we're not missing something." I didn't like that he wasn't there, in sight. It made me jumpy.

The Bumble sighed and pulled the cell from his pocket. Flipping it open, he dialed the number, asked for our room, and waited a moment. "Me," he said. Another second. "Okay."

He snapped the phone shut. "They're fine."

We'd set up a simple code just in case: If everything was fine, whoever answered the phone would say they were *fine*. If there was anything wrong at all they couldn't talk about (say, Alt James standing there with a gun on them) they would say they were *okay*. It wouldn't sound weird to anyone else, but we'd know right away. I had a moment of terrible doubt that The Bumble could keep it all straight, but calmed myself down. If he couldn't keep a *two word* code straight, we had bigger problems.

I squinted back at the cops in the parking lot. They'd noticed the Rape Vans and were going over them, but showed no real initiative or ambition—they were waiting for James, I guessed, and since he'd told them to be there they didn't suspect anything out of the ordinary. That made me feel better; if they were waiting on James then I figured he was coming.

Tires on the road made Billy and me startle. We turned and

watched a black SUV, part of the same litter as the ones down by the warehouse, roll slowly towards us, lights on, music dimly thumping out of the microscopic gaps between the steel. I watched, dumbfounded, as it rolled to a stop directly across from us, and just as I managed to think *how in fuck did he know we'd be up here* the driver's side window rolled down, revealing Alt James, his teeth white and straight.

"Hello, boys. I thought we were meeting down at the spot. I came up here looking to park, and here you are. That's fucking *fate*."

My brain felt like it was in slow motion, filled with syrup. I looked around, but there was no sign that anyone else had followed James here. I spun around, trusting Billy to keep an eye on James' doppelganger, and looked back down at the warehouse with the binoculars. Nothing had changed; the cops were still milling about, chatting, Frank and his people were still inside, apparently oblivious. I looked around again, but there was absolutely no sign that James had brought anyone else to the ambush.

Paranoid, I just watched as James opened his door and stepped out onto the cracked pavement of the overpass, lugging out a sizable briefcase as he did. He slammed the door behind him and then started walking towards us, his posture relaxed, still smiling.

"I don't see my boy anywhere. Maybe he's invited to the party down there?" He cocked his head. "You didn't maybe plan on me walking into a trap or anything right?" He stopped a few feet away from us and stood there, shaking his head, grinning. "Naw, you're a straight shooter, I can see that. That's why I said to myself, when I saw you in court, I said, just hand this man your card, Stanley, just hand him your card and go have a good dinner, get some sleep, because he's gonna call you and make a deal." He set the briefcase

down on the ground and pushed his big hands into his pockets, spreading his coat back enough to reveal a pair of shoulder holsters, each crowded with large guns. The cut of his suit was dramatic. I liked the way it moved on him, and wondered if the tailor lived here or ... somewhere else.

He made a show of looking around. "So, where's my boy? I brought your cash." He nudged the briefcase with his foot.

I looked at the briefcase and then back at James. I started to say *wait, you actually brought money?* and then stopped myself. I swallowed and shrugged, struggling to kick my brain back into gear.

"I didn't trust you," I said slowly. "So I thought I'd play it safe and see what you did."

James smiled. "Well, see, you ain't a fucking bitch. That's clear. Not going to wander in like some five-and-dime hood from Bayonne or some shit, thinking you're tough. I get it. So, here I am. I'm keeping my end of the deal. Where's my boy?"

I licked my lips. I was trying to see the angle. He wasn't possibly *really* just going to pay me and walk away. There was something I was missing. "Let me see the money," I finally said.

He laughed. "My *man*," he said, shaking his head and bending down to pick up the case. He flipped it over and popped the clasps, revealing neat stacks of crisp-looking bills. If it wasn't just cut-up newspaper with a single bill on top, it looked like plenty to cover Falken's debt and even leave me something left over as a reward or a finder's fee. I stared at it until he snapped the case shut again, trying to figure this out. Alt James had gone to some extremes to get rid of me, and now he was polite as hell and offering to buy me off. Maybe it made sense. I reminded myself that I didn't know this man.

"All right," he said, setting the case down again, relaxed and

completely confident that any attempt by The Bumble or me to take it from him by force would fail. “Where’s my man? I drove all the way to *Newark* for this shit.”

I hesitated one more second, luxuriating in it, and then shrugged. “Falken’s not here,” I said, figuring I’d see where he took us from that, play for time. In the end, I could lead him to the warehouse myself, hope my supposed immortality kept me alive.

He nodded, thrusting out his lower lip and looking around, as if considering things carefully. “Falken’s not here,” he said slowly, then snapped his eyes back to me, his face blank and hard. “Who the fuck,” he said slowly, “is *Falken*?”

I blinked. Whatever Alt James’ game was, I waved at it sadly as it sailed over my head. “The man you came here to kill,” I said slowly. “He isn’t here. He’s—” I hesitated again, trying to think through the possibilities, and suddenly decided to take the risk. “He’s down in the warehouse.”

James nodded again. “Okay, Falken’s in the warehouse. That’s good news. But I don’t give a shit. I ain’t here to kill anyone named Falken.” He pulled one of his guns from its holster slowly, smoothly. “So let’s quit the bullshit, right? I’m here to become like *you*, to become a Terminus. And to do that, I need to kill Stanley fucking James.”