



JEFF SOMERS COLLECTIONS

a novel

COLLECTIONS

Chapter 36

by Jeff Somers

36.

Alt James noticed me looking at him and winked, making my leg twitch with the desire to kick him in the teeth. I imagined there might be an alternate universe where that would be possible, where I might take someone's magic car through the noisiest invisible tunnel in the universe and track down some unsuspecting version of James and just assault him, but it wasn't *this* universe. In this universe I was unarmed and standing next to The Bumble, and we were surrounded by Frank's men on one side and the remnants of James' cops on the other, guns fucking everywhere, dead bodies still staring in shock, chaos and open wounds.

I wasn't entirely clear how Alt James had gotten his band of dirty cops to trust him, although having a dead body of his twin probably helped a little. There were only three of them left, led by the now-grimy and disheveled woman, short, a deep cut on her forehead and strands of dull brown hair hanging in her face. She watched everything from under her pale eyebrows, head tilted down, and looked fucking crazy, like she was going to go home and arrest some graffiti kids in her neighborhood and beat the living shit out of them just to relieve some stress.

It had started to rain, an annoying misty drizzle that you could

ignore until you realized you weighed an extra fifty pounds because of the water your clothes had absorbed. Everyone else stood like they had more important things to worry about, like a fresh gunfight breaking out and everyone getting killed, so it didn't seem smart to complain. I just stood there with the rain making me blink, getting in under my collar and dripping down my back. Everything had gone to fucking hell, but there was always hope things would go to hell again and all my problems would end up killing each other as planned.

About two blocks away, a car turned the corner, headlights washing over us. Everyone stiffened, but Alt James stepped forward immediately, hands up in front of him.

"These are my associates, is all. Mr. McKenna, let's stay calm and do some business."

Frank raised a hand and his crew did absolutely nothing, but that at least included not shooting at me, so I was pretty happy with the result. Everyone kept telling me I was immortal, but I had little desire to find out by direct experiment.

"All right," Frank said laconically, smiling a little.

We waited in silence as the car pulled into the lot, rolled to a halt, and killed its lights. Everyone twitched a little when the doors popped open, but no one moved as Alt Rusch and the young red haired woman I'd met in the back of a car outside the Templar emerged, looking clean and pressed. They didn't approach right away, just hung back.

"Go to this truck," Alt James shouted over his shoulder, keeping his smile on Frank, "and bring me that suitcase."

His version of Rusch glanced at the girl, shrugged, and set off, unlit cigarette dangling from her mouth. She looked thinner and more wasted than my Rusch, her skin looser, more brown spots on

her. She opened the passenger door of The Second Coming's SUV and rummaged around, finally emerging with his suitcase full of cash, holding it with both hands and dropping it at Alt James' feet like a lead weight. He grinned and glanced down at it.

"All right, Mr. McKenna, let's make a deal. I got a lot of money in this case you can have. It'll clear up your losses, and make up for your trouble to boot."

Frank's eyes flicked down to the suitcase and stayed there. "I'm curious what a bunch of civil servants thinks is a lot of money."

James nodded and kicked the suitcase, sliding it forcefully into Alt Rusch's legs. She yelped and jumped; all of the assembled goons snickered a little, eliciting a venomous glare from Alt Rusch I tried, and failed, to imagine on my own version of the woman. *This* version of Rusch would slit your throat for gas money, I thought.

The old woman knelt down and snapped the case open. The bills were still neatly stacked inside. Frank stared at it for a second too long, and then shrugged, looking back up at James.

"All right," he said with the same careless drawl. "What would you want for that kind of money?"

Alt James gestured at Alt Rusch without looking at her, and she closed the case again and stood up to kick it back over to him. He was an impressive sight, tall and armored up, a big chrome-plated auto tucked in his waistband, the god of fucking war. I saw the cops behind them exchanging some looks—not liking that James was giving away that much cash, not liking that they didn't know what the fuck was going on, not liking any of this shit.

"Wait a fucking second," the woman said, stepping around to cut between Frank and Alt James. "Wait a fucking *second*. Captain, you got *dead cops* back there. Right behind you. That your fucking *twin*

killed. And you're just conducting business as fucking usual with this piece of trash?"

She was livid, and a small fire of hope lit inside me. Maybe this was going to go off the rails and get bloody again after all.

Alt James didn't look at her. "Walker, we can discuss this later, okay? You all came into this knowing there was risk. You all are gonna retire young riding on my back. You got complaints, go talk to Internal Affairs, see where it gets you."

She shook her head. "This shit—"

"Fucking *cops*," Alt James snapped. "You're all fucking the same *everywhere*. Think you can take the money and still set the tone. But the money *sets* the fucking tone. You want to take a vote and walk on out, go on ahead, but be fucking quiet about it, huh?"

She didn't seem inclined to move. "This isn't what we signed up for. This isn't what *you* used to be all about. Now, we—"

With a fast, almost casual move of his arm, Alt James drew the shiny chrome automatic from his waistband, pushed it against her shoulder, and pulled the trigger. The noise was terrible, like a sonic boom, and her shoulder exploded, red pulp sprouting like a geyser. She seemed to think about it for a moment and then spin around from the impact, her other hand fluttering up to clamp down on the wound as she stumbled and staggered, falling over her own feet and landing with a wail of pain on the floor.

Behind him, the other cops all jerked as one. He pointed the gun at the sky and pulled the trigger again without turning around. "Any of you feel like you gotta express your displeasure, this ain't the time or place." He waited a beat, then lowered the gun and shrugged a little at Frank, rolling his eyes and grinning.

"What I want," he said evenly, like he hadn't just shot a cop in

front of witnesses, “is your boy. Falken. Bodily.” He shrugged. “Alive or dead, don’t matter.”

Frank glanced at the cop on the ground, being helped by two of the burly, bald cops in jeans and tight T-shirts, both of whom looked like they’d just lost their cherry on shitting their pants. I was enjoying the show, seeing these assholes who strutted around like their badges made them untouchable feeling a little heat. I liked watching them squirm.

“All right,” Frank said, looking back at Alt James. I could almost see the thought bubble above his head: He thought this was the easiest money he’d ever make. “That works for me. One little problem, though, Captain: I don’t have Falken. I gave up on that shithead a long time ago.”

A feeling of hot frustration started to burn in me. All this, and both these motherfuckers were going to walk away, and I’d likely end up with a bullet in my head for my trouble.

“These two know where he is,” James said, cheerful. He looked around. “Looks to me like you were planning on beating some shit out of them tonight anyway. Why not see if that shakes loose? I can wait. I’m a patient man.”

Frank looked at us, his face still. His Thinking Face, I knew. He chewed on something for a few seconds, and then smiled. “Chino,” he said. “Billy Bumble, bring ‘im over here, okay?”

I tensed up. Chino, daydreaming, took a moment to get his fat ass in motion, and came up to Billy gun in hand, which was bright. Under normal laboratory conditions, The Bumble could bend Chino into interesting shapes and use him as furniture. The gun evened things out. Billy gave him a shrug as he approached, and stepped over to Frank without assistance, his jowly face blank, his eyes sleepy. The

Bumble wasn't going to let some fat asshole like Chino manhandle him.

Frank nodded at The Bumble. "How you doin', Billy?"

The Bumble shrugged, massive shoulders rolling. Frank nodded cheerfully. "Chino, give me your piece."

Chino handed it over. Frank made a show of weighing it in his hand for a moment, then raised his arm, putting his shiny automatic against Billy's forehead. Everything got quiet; even the cops stopped their cursing and muttering to stare. I stiffened and started to take a step forward, but Chino and the rest of Frank's mutts turned and covered me, almost casually. Chino even had the balls to wag a finger at me, shaking his head with a grin.

"Billy," Frank said, sounding almost tired, his injured hand cradled up by his chest, his belly straining the faith of his shirt buttons. "I'm fuckin' tired of this, and I hate bein' in fucking *Newark*, so tell me where the fuck you got Falken stashed and then we all go home."

The Bumble's eyes had opened slightly when Frank had put the gun against his head, but now were their usual sleepy slits. He shrugged. "Can't do that, Frank."

I put my eyes on Frank and kept them there, trying to judge his body language. I couldn't believe he would fucking shoot Billy Bumbles like that, but then Billy had been cast out; he wasn't part of Frank's crew any more, so it wasn't against the rules or any bullshit like that. And then it occurred to me that this was a process: He'd ask Billy, and if Billy refused to answer he'd shoot Billy in the head, and then he'd *ask* me, and Billy would be proof that he was serious. He'd chosen Billy because he thought Billy was the tougher one between us. And he was probably right.

My heart started pounding.

Frank nodded, and shoved the barrel of the gun hard against Billy's forehead, making the big man wince. "Sure you can. One last chance, or I fucking blow the top of your head off."

Billy shrugged again, but didn't bother answering. Frank's whole body kind of sagged, a defeated sort of movement, and I realized immediately he was going to do it.

I took a deep breath, told myself I was immortal, and launched myself at Frank.