



**JEFF
SOMERS
COLLECTIONS**
a novel

COLLECTIONS

Chapter 37

by Jeff Somers

37.

Frank went down easy, collapsing under me like he was made of papier-mâché with an undignified squawk of shock. The gun went off between us, and then it was just gunshots in the air, a drumline of them like bombs going off, punctuated by shouts, like dogs barking. Frank was stronger than a lifetime of rare steaks and bourbon would have led you to believe, struggling beneath me, trying to bring the gun to bear on me again. I had no leverage; with both hands on his wrist I put my weight into play to hold his arm down. After a few seconds of this he reached around and took hold of my hair, yanking back suddenly and viciously, tearing a clump out by the root and jerking my head back painfully.

Then The Bumble crashed into my field of vision, leaping onto Frank's chest with surprising grace and speed, bending over him, big arms working. Frank started kicking and twitching beneath us like a madman, the gun in his hand leaping like it had a brain of its own, wriggling and twisting in my hands while the noise level grew and grew around us.

Then, with a sudden heave, The Bumble's shoulders rolled and Frank jerked beneath us, then fell still. His arm went limp under my hands and the gun slipped from his fingers.

I stared down at it, panting, sweat pouring into my eyes. I looked up at The Bumble's back; he remained turned away from me, shoulders heaving as he sucked in breath. I'd always known Billy had come up the ranks, just like any other big guy with no skills except his muscles and a willingness to take orders, but I'd never really thought about what that meant.

As I stared, Billy whirled and took hold of my arm, scooping up Frank's gun and dragging me behind one of the Rape Vans, bullets digging up the pavement at our feet as we scrambled behind it. We leaned against the van and struggled for breath, and suddenly The Bumble was laughing. We looked at each other, and I found myself smiling back into his red, boulder-like face.

After a second, his eyes started following something over my shoulder, and the smile faded. Silently, he pointed.

I followed his gaze and saw Alt James, suitcase in hand and Alt Rusch a few steps behind, struggling to keep up with the big man's long strides. They were just running away. The cops and Frank's boys were spitting bullets at each other, popping up from behind cover in a weird little ballet, oblivious, and Alt James was just walking away. I suddenly remembered the strange, distant noises I'd heard right before Alt James had shown up.

"Motherfucker," I breathed. He was using an alternate world to teleport around. Someplace like where he'd tried to leave me, empty and abandoned, with no traffic or cops to slow him down, but with the same infrastructure and layout. Zap himself over there, drive wherever he wanted to go, then zap himself back. Avoid obstacles, get the drop on people—he was going to disappear into the night like a ghost and show up again on my doorstep, grinning, implacable.

I looked up and grabbed the door handle of the van, hauling it

open and throwing myself inside, scrambling over broken glass to the driver's side. The keys hung in the ignition; as I turned them, the passenger door slammed and I found The Bumble sitting there, carefully buckling his seatbelt. I had a moment of affection for Billy: He smelled like onions and he thought hot dogs were food, and maybe he'd started off life as Frank's eyes and ears on me, but fuck if he hadn't turned out to be my best friend in the whole fucking *universe*.

The van started up, smooth and powerful. Trust criminals to always have tip-top vehicles. A spray of bullets ventilated the side door as I put it into gear, making me jump. I slammed my foot down on the gas and we lurched into a skidding, screeching motion, clipping one of the cops' SUVs as we staggered out of the OK Corral, another spray of bullets trailing us and shattering my driver's side mirror. I reminded myself that even if I was, in fact, some sort of weird immortal, Billy wasn't, and I didn't want to end our freshly minted love affair by getting him shot to death in Newark.

I eased up on the gas and circled the van around, searching for Alt James. I spotted him on the edge of the parking lot, a hundred feet away, getting into his Cadillac.

"Hang on," I said, and spun the wheel, goosing the van into a tight turn until I had the Caddy in my sights, then mashing the pedal down and fishtailing for a few seconds, the van leaping forward just as I saw Alt James and Rusch slamming their doors, brake lights popping on. The van felt like a coffin rattling towards the incinerator as the speedometer inched past forty, fifty, fifty-five, but I kept the gas on and clench the wheel until my knuckles hurt.

The Caddy leaped into life and immediately peeled out, turning sharply left and accelerating. I started to turn the van and cursed,

feeling it lose its grip, pulling my leg up and tapping the brakes a little, easing it into a wider turn and loosing seconds on the deal. The van ran like a top but it was a fucking box on wheels and didn't want to do anything strenuous. By the time I had the Caddy's brake lights in view again he'd gained twenty or thirty feet on me, and at sixty miles per hour I wasn't gaining on him. We were both, however, gaining on the fencing around the parking lot. We'd crash the chain fence easy enough, but I tried to imagine the van's suspension surviving the low concrete wall at sixty miles and hour and I couldn't do it.

The streetlamps flashed by like silver trees, the noise of their passing roaring in through the shattered door windows.

Suddenly I could see an arm poking out of the passenger side of the Cadillac, quickly retrieved. As I watched, the suitcase of cash was thrust out and held for a moment out the car window.

"Ah, shit," The Bumble said.

The suitcase flew back towards us, and I jerked the wheel but too late, the windshield disintegrating into a mist of shards. The suitcase clipped my shoulder and tumbled into the empty rear of the van as we went into a spin, tires squealing. We smacked into one of the streetlamps and everything came to a sudden stop, my internal organs swimming around with unspent inertia, the engine dying with a wheeze.

I looked over at Billy. He was looking back at me, his big calloused hands held up in front of him in a comical gesture of shock.

"That motherfucker just threw a half million dollars at us," he said.

I started laughing, grabbing hold of the keys and turning the ignition. After a gurgling hesitation, the engine roared back into life. I floored the gas pedal again and the van staggered forward with a

groan of tearing metal. Mashing my foot down hard on the pedal, I crept up on the Caddy, the whole van shaking and shuddering, air blowing in and moving around us like a living thing, connected and sinuous. We pulled up alongside the Caddy and I looked down at them; Alt Rusch stared back at me in abject terror, her wrinkled face white, her mouth open. She was saying something, her mouth just moving in silence, as she stared up at me. Her arms were spread, like she was trying to hold herself inside the car despite a pressure trying to expel her.

Beyond her, I could see Alt James' hand moving over something between the front seats, something with glowing lights.

The moment I saw it, the noise began: A deep, loud screeching noise that sank into my chest and vibrated my bones, smacked into my head and gave me a headache. I winced and the van veered and wobbled as I lost control for a split-second. Grabbing the wheel tightly, I checked the speedometer—ninety-five—and leaned forward, watching the fence approach at disturbing speed.

“He’s going to pop!” The Bumble shouted suddenly.

I looked back at the Caddy. It suddenly looked ... blurry, as if it was fading away. The noise got louder, piercing—I imagined it was shaking the van even more, that we were going to start popping bolts if I didn’t shut it down soon.

I looked from the Caddy to the fence. Then I looked over the Cadillac and saw one of the lampposts zooming towards us, a few feet past the Cadillac. I sucked in breath and wrenched the steering wheel to the left.

Tires screaming, we veered sharply and hit the other car with a hollow thud, bouncing me in my seat. The wheel jerked and moved under my hands as the Caddy turned with me, the lamppost right

there, immediately in front of it. The noise had reached a volume that made me want to stick pencils in my ears, and then there was an explosion, or the sound of an explosion, and the lamppost flashed by and suddenly there was nothing resisting the van and we spun.

In sudden silence, I felt my stomach lurch inside me and I realized we were in the air. The sky flashed by, and then a streetlight, like a dim, orange moon. The silence was wonderful, the sense of weightlessness was wonderful. It was like I'd hit a ramp at seventy-five miles per hour and launched myself into orbit.

We hit the ground with a bang and the steering wheel hit me in the face with a wet snap, pain flashing through my head like a spike being driven home, wonderful, clarifying. The van skidded on its side for five seconds or so, then smacked into another lamppost and stopped dead, glass shattering and raining down on me, my whole body flopping once like a ragdoll. Then we were still, and everything was silent.

I unbuckled my seatbelt as The Bumble pushed the passenger door up and open. He climbed up onto the side of the van and reached down, taking hold of my wrist and hauling me up. I felt jittery and weak, like I'd been in a coma for a year and was trying to walk. My head was ringing, and blood was pouring down from my shattered nose in a disturbing way. The pain felt good. I wanted to reach up and squeeze my nose, see how bad it was, but resisted. There would be time enough for scab-peeling and bruise-squeezing later.

Dizzy, I patted Billy on the shoulder and jumped down to the pavement. My legs gave out and I fell, hitting my head again and making my vision swim. I started to laugh a little, and tried hard to swallow it as I pushed myself back to my feet, my hands, I realized,

cut up and bloody. Glass clung to my coat and fell off in random showers as I moved, limping heavily towards the lamppost I'd steer him into.

The Caddy was gone. Tire marks started about fifteen feet away and stopped abruptly right before the concrete base—he'd managed to jump into some other place, some other version of Newark. Was there a lamppost there? Had he suddenly materialized out of nowhere and slammed into it at full speed and killed himself? He had to have. He would have been heading for a Newark he could still navigate, a Newark with the same streets, the same layout—the same lampposts.

I turned and staggered a few steps to my left, almost losing my balance. Billy was walking towards me, smiling. He looked like he didn't have a scratch on him, like he'd been sitting on the sidelines watching.

"Well," he said, "we got this, at least." He held the battered but still-closed suitcase up in front of him. It was silence for a second as I stood there shaking and laughing, no gunfire or shouting behind us. And then, dim, distant: Sirens.