



**JEFF
SOMERS
COLLECTIONS**
a novel

COLLECTIONS

Chapter 38

by Jeff Somers

Epilogue

“Well,” Rachel said, glancing down at her watch. “I gotta run. Job interview.”

I blinked. “What happened to the library?”

She smiled at me, standing up and gathering her purse. I leaned back and stirred my civet coffee in its white cup. I reached up and touched the thick bandage on my nose, and wished I healed faster. Then I shot my cuffs in my new custom suit—full canvas, one-fifty thread count, double-breasted, notched lapels—and looked around McHales, which The Bumble and I had made into our unofficial clubhouse. We’d footed the bill for Falken to move on and still had plenty of scratch to live on for a while between what I’d scraped from my own apartment and what we’d picked up in Newark, though it wasn’t a retirement plan. We were the only people in it aside from the bartender, who was a young musician of the usual sort struggling to stay awake in the afternoon sun, a coffee cup on the bar in front of him.

The Bumble sat at the bar, engrossed in the sports page. A tiny cinnamon-colored kitten with long fur sprouting from its ears sat on the bar between The Bumble’s beer glass and a bowl of milk. Billy had found it out back and adopted it, and named it Stanley.

Rachel looked like a million bucks in a nicely-cut suit, big cuffs spilling out over her jacket, her hair pulled back in a long, shiny tail. She looked expensive, but that had always been Rachel's main grift: She just looked expensive, no matter what. "They fired me the third day I just didn't show up, dummy. That tends to happen. You can't take an unannounced vacation at the Holland Motor Lodge in New Jersey and just go back to your job whenever you're ready."

I nodded. "You need anything?"

She shook her head and slung her bag over one shoulder. For a moment she stood there looking at me. "No," she said. "Connie and I are having lunch next week, if you want to join us."

I frowned trying to place *Connie*. Then I blinked again. "You're having lunch with *Rusch*?"

Rachel smiled again. "Why not?"

I shrugged. "No reason. Just seems ... random."

"We spent days locked in a motel together. You get to know each other a little, that way. Anyway," she said, and hung there awkwardly for a moment. I had a feeling that with anyone else, this was where Rachel leaned down and kissed their cheek. Instead, after a moment she just nodded and turned away. "I'll stay in touch," she said as she walked out of the room, not meaning a word of it.

For a moment I sat there feeling blue, bored and restless. Then there was a noise out in the main bar and Billy stood up, glanced at me blank-faced, and went out to investigate, returning seconds later.

"It's the Jew," The Bumble said, resuming his seat at the bar and picking up the sports page.

As The Phin entered the back room of the bar, I sat up a little and pushed a smile to my face. He looked exactly the same and was trailed by Michael and Maurice, blank-faced in their standard-issue

black leather coats. They pretended they'd never seen me before and stayed up near the door, visibly irritated that The Bumble paid them no attention at all.

The Phin walked briskly back to me, carrying a stout-looking walking stick with a solid-gold lion's head as a handle.

"You look like someone tried to kill you, kiddo," he said, breathless, his face pink. "Can I have a seat? Talk a little business?"

I gestured at the chair. "Sure thing, Phin. How's tricks?" This was protocol: The Phin had tried to beat money out of me not so long ago, and I'd burned down one of his joints, but even so you started off every meet with polite chat.

He settled himself in the chair with some grunting and heavy breathing, setting his walking stick on the table and folding his hands in front of him.

"We're fine, thanks. Any chance of a drop of something? It's thirsty work, tracking you down. You're off the grid."

I shrugged. "There's a chance of anything," I said, gesturing at the bartender. "But he lacks a certain enthusiasm for his job, you know?"

The Phin waved his hand over his shoulder, and Maurice strode purposefully towards the bar.

I eyed him carefully, and produced a thick yellow envelope from my pocket. "This is what we took from your people during the, uh, disturbance," I said. "Plus fifteen percent over three weeks, to be fair. I thought you might think of it as a loan you forgot you approved."

He reached out and took the envelope, weighed it in his hand theatrically, and nodded, stuffing it into his coat pocket. I watched him carefully. The Phin could choose to view this as a closed episode, or he could decide I owed him a tax. I didn't have any backing any more, there was no one to intercede for me, so if The Phin put my

name in the books I was going to have trouble.

Mo arrived with a full glass of whiskey and set it gently in front of him. The Phin waved him back to his perch with an irritated gesture and took a swallow, wiping his gleaming lips with the back of his hand.

“I’m inclined to go along with that, and here’s why,” he said. “Since Frank McKenna’s untimely demise, it’s fucking chaos. Where’s Frank junior? No one fucking knows. Chino’s dead, Mikey D’s dead, the kid’s *missing*. It’s fucking chaos.” He shook his head, then leaned back and laced his fingers over his belly, staring at me from under his eyebrows. “It’s also an opportunity.”

I raised my eyebrows. My nose throbbed. I wasn’t taking anything for the pain. I hadn’t seen Frank Junior after he’d entered the warehouse, and I didn’t know where he’d flown to. It hadn’t occurred to me to check up on him.

“Frank’s little kingdom is still there,” The Phin said. “It’s still in one piece, for a few more days, maybe. Because the kid’s missing. Frank Junior might come back with fresh muscle, put the house in order, so people are hesitating. Who cares if he comes back. Someone could step in there, and just take over.” He shrugged. “Wait another week and it’ll be five thousand kingdoms, each a fucking block long.”

I frowned. “You’re thinking *I* step in there?”

He threw his hands up. “Why not? You know Frank’s operations. You know *everything*. And you *collect*, kiddo.” he waved his hands again, leaning forward to reclaim his drink with a moist-sounding grunt. “We had our differences, sure, and you *do* fucking owe me restitution. But for years you paid that fat Irish bastard like interest on a bank account. He used to *brag* about you. You know how to make people pay you when the last thing in the fuckin’ world they want to

do is pay you. That's the secret, kiddo. You cracked the code."

I nodded, thinking it over. It was ridiculous ... but it wasn't. It was what I did, just writ large. "And you want to back me?"

He winked. "Sure. I can't take on Frank's territory, his people wouldn't like it. I'd spend more fuckin' money and time conquering neighborhoods than anything else. Fucking gunplay, body bags, my friends on the force getting cold feet." He made a disgusted noise and snorted. "You'll have some unhappy folks, but most of 'em know you and could work for you. But you don't have enough seed money, or muscle. You don't have political contacts. You were never sitting at the table, huh? So, I'll be your fairy godfather. I'll stake you. You need muscle, call me and I'll send you more legbreakers, gunmen, whatever. You get into a spot of trouble, I can clear it up. All you do is step into Frank's shoes and keep things runnin', and be my vassal."

I nodded. "And tithe to you. How much?"

"Thirty beans," he said immediately. "I'll be workin' *hard* for you, kiddo. Thirty off the top to me. But I'm *giving* you a fucking territory it took McKenna twenty-five years to build. All you gotta do is not fuck it up." He shrugged, slugging back his drink. "It's worth it, I think. You think on it. Let me know tomorrow."

He stood up, and the kitten suddenly leaped up onto the table in front of me and sat down, sniffing the creamer and trying to figure out how to get its snout into it. I watched The Phin huff his way through the bar towards his goons. At the doorway leading to the outer bar he spun, raised his cane, and winked.

"Good to see ya, Kiddo," he said. "If Billy Bumbles ever learns English, tell him I said hi."

Billy snorted and extended a crooked middle finger over his shoulder without turning around.

The Phin and his boys trooped out, and I picked up the kitten and leaned back in my seat, putting Stanley in my lap and dragging a hand over him. The cat rolled onto its back and grabbed my hand with its paws, pulling me to its tiny mouth and biting. Its tiny teeth didn't hurt at all, and I could feel it purring. I looked over at The Bumble, who looked back at me, shrugged and returned his attention to the paper.

It could be done. I hadn't thought about it at all, but now that someone had said it to me, I could see it, how it would work. I knew everything I needed to know. I thought about the work involved in getting everyone in line, everyone paying up the right amounts on time, and my heart beat a little faster, saliva flooding my mouth. It was bloody work, but it was work I was good at, it was work I enjoyed. And there would be a lot of it.

I looked down at Stanley, who had rolled back onto his belly and suffered me to pet him, still purring, his eyes almost closed and his pink nose wet and glistening. I rolled him around in my hands and felt their power, the energy I had in me. I could hurt the cat, I knew. It would be easy; I could feel him vibrating with energy, nerve endings and blood vessels. I opted instead to scratch behind his ear, making him rub his head into the palm of my hand with pleasure.

I could hurt him, but I chose not to.