

A person wearing a dark hat and a purple jacket is walking away from the camera down a narrow, dimly lit alleyway at night. The alleyway is flanked by buildings with various signs and windows. In the background, a sign for a restaurant is visible, along with a sign that says "HT BUS 16 SEATS". The overall atmosphere is gritty and urban.

**JEFF  
SOMERS  
COLLECTIONS**  
a novel

# COLLECTIONS

## Chapter 2

by Jeff Somers

### 2.

I went home and took a shower, changed clothes. Even when they gave you the slip, tracking down deadbeats was hot work. My apartment wasn't much—nice enough, but just five rooms and a nice terrace, and I'd never gotten around to buying any furniture. I had a card table in the kitchen, warped and unsteady from water spills and heat, a pile of bedding on the floor of the tiny bedroom. I spent about four hours a week in my place. All I had in the kitchen was booze and all I had in the closets was cash in sturdy canvas bags under a fake bottom beneath the floorboards.

I poured myself a drink to keep the three I'd had at McHales company and stood on the terrace with my shirttails out, feeling my hair dry as the sun sank in front of me. After the Dalmore my hundred-bucks-a-bottle Scotch tasted like piss and I got depressed.

I put on a good black suit and a pair of tough black shoes with special steel toes. You had to get them custom made if you wanted dress shoes with a steel toe, but all my clothes were custom anyway. I didn't look at myself in the mirror; it didn't matter what I fucking looked like. All that mattered was that I felt good in them. No one understood that. If you felt good in your clothes, you would *look* good in them.

Leaving, I paused to look around the kitchen, the floor covered in

dust except for the pathway from the liquor cabinet to the bathroom to the living room, and when I left I didn't lock the door. There was nothing obvious to steal, and if someone was coming for the cash, was going to tear up floorboards, then the fucking door wasn't going to stop them anyway.

The Templar Social Club was a run down old tenement on Spring Street, a sagging pile of bricks with a sad old iron sign hanging outside the door. Members only, with no membership process—you either were or you weren't, and if you had to ask about it that sort of answered itself. The club did nothing. It had sponsored a Little League team for a few years, and sometimes they put out a table during the street fair and had four or five fat old man stand there handing out cheap shitty toys to the kids. But mostly it was a place where the Friends of Frank McKenna—a large and diverse group of men and, these days, the occasional woman—gathered any night of the week to play cards, drink coffee, shoot the shit, and do absolutely nothing illegal whatsoever.

The goon standing guard outside the front door was doing his level best to look like a guy who'd stepped outside for a cigarette four hours ago and lost track of time. I'd seen him hanging around, probably someone's nephew or cousin, and guessed someone had finally given him a job. We hadn't been introduced. I was pretty sure his name was Bob, but I was also sure some bright bulb had already nicknamed him Tiny.

"Evenin'," he said, civilly enough. "Can I help you?"

I blinked, stopping short. He crowded the doorway like he'd been trained to it from an early age. A wave of tired irritation swept through me, and I found myself leaning forward, imagining this fat

fuck squealing on the sidewalk, but pushed myself back. The kid, I told myself, was just doing his job. He didn't know me, but he did know that he'd been told to watch the fucking door.

I breathed in deep and nodded at the door. "Gotta go in, see Frankie, okay?"

He nodded. Not completely stupid, at least. "Gotta frisk you."

I smiled, actually amused this time. "Ask around, kid. I don't carry a barker." I held open my coat and let him step up to me. Stupid after all, as he came in close like a sack of shit, all exposed arteries and soft spots. I let him move his tiny hands over me, imagining twisting his arm until his shoulder popped out of its socket, slamming his perfectly round head into the brick wall, the smell of his blood as it poured out of his nose, the feel of the gristle when I pinched it just to make him hurt.

He stepped back after the most spectacularly bad frisk I'd ever been party to. I could have had a fucking Howitzer hidden up my ass for all the good his hands did him. But he stepped aside with a sheepish grin that was almost charming and waved me in. I took a step and then paused, turning to put my hand on his shoulder. I could feel his blood pulsing under all that flab, all those nerves, sharp little buttons to push.

"Now you know me," I said. "Next time, you don't move the fuck out of my way I'll break your arms."

I didn't know if he believed me; I stepped inside. There was a moment, a split second, of suspension when I walked in, conversations stopped for just that half a heartbeat, then resumed with something approximating their original volume. I felt eyes on me. I liked to pretend it was the suit; no one saw a good cut any more, these days. A suit tailored for you, cut exactly for your build, it was

striking and people couldn't even put their finger on what it was about you they found striking. But it wasn't the suit.

The Templar was just a big empty room, cheap wood paneling and ancient, horrible greasy-looking plastic tables and folding chairs. Four televisions rumbled in different spots, and a couple of radios battling it out too. The TVs were all tuned to different news stations, reporting about riots in Chicago where some bigwigs were meeting, deciding the next ten years of pork futures or whatever it was rich fucks from all over the globe got together to decide. The National Guard, bunch of assholes had nothing better to do with their time except play soldier, had been called in and the city was under curfew.

Framed pictures lined the walls: Every President of the United States, with a tiny brass plate under each one with their name. Kennedy's twice as big as everyone else's, with a tattered black armband still pinned in one corner after all these fucking decades. A deep haze of smoke filled the whole room, the smell of cigarettes mingling with the smell of cheap booze and burnt coffee and stale sandwiches.

As I walked, everyone stole glances at me. A couple of guys nodded at me, and I nodded back, but no one said anything, which was how I liked it. These mopes were fucking Lifers, and they had all the imagination of houseplants. I walked steadily down the center aisle towards the back office, a half-smile on my face, my black gloves on. The door was open, and I put myself in the doorway and leaned against the jam.

Frank was, as always, behind the big metal desk. For a guy who pulled in half the dirty money in the city, he looked like a mope. He was heavysset, with a bush of dark hair sprouting from his head and a perpetual shadow of a beard linking up to his uneven mustache. He

had dark bags under his eyes and a belly that made him look like he'd swallowed a small animal whole, like a python. He was wearing a pair of cheap slacks that rode up too high when he sat, exposing his pale calves, and a dark red shirt over a cotton T-shirt, buttoned haphazardly. Frank McKenna was worth fucking millions, but if you passed him the street you'd have the urge to give him a dollar, tell him you hoped he straightened his life out.

He was sitting with his cheap black shoes up on the desk, his fat fingers laced over his belly. His main people were standing around with him: Chino, fat and smiling with these delicate metal-rimmed glasses perched on his nose, his long dark hair epically braided, his big oversized white dress shirt untucked, as always, as if we couldn't imagine his gut if we couldn't see it outlined in Rayon. Mikey D—there was *always* a Mikey D, in every crew—who was better-dressed, his white hair cut short and combed, his face clean-shaven, wearing a sportsjacket but no tie, burning a cigarette between his lips as usual. Frank's kid, Frank Junior, a slightly thinner version of his Dad except where Frank smiled all the time, made you feel good about him picking your pocket and then slapping you in the face, his kid always looked sour, and wore a diamond earring his Dad didn't approve of. It was flash.

The three of them shut up and looked at their shoes when they noticed me, but Frank smiled and threw out his arms.

“What, you lose a bet, that suit?” He shouted, grinning.

The other three eyed me from under their brows as I stepped forward, pulling a thick manila envelope from my jacket pocket and tossing it onto the desk.

“Today's collections,” I said. “I hit everyone except Falken.”

Frank put his hands back on his belly, protectively, like he was

proud of that monster. “He was the big tuna today,” he said philosophically. “You can't reel him in by Friday—”

I nodded, dropping into one of the cracked vinyl chairs across from his desk and pulling out my pack of cigarettes, unfiltered, Gauloises. “I'm on the hook for it. I know our fucking arrangement, Frank.” I crossed my legs and tapped the pack against my palm. “He gave me the slip, is all.”

Frank nodded. “I know. Bill gave me the word earlier.”

That The Bumble served as both my backup on runs and as Frank's snitch on me was not news, but I still didn't like hearing it. The Bumble was a good egg, though, and we'd long ago agreed he'd just tell Frank nothing and we'd be friendly about it. I looked around the room. No one was looking at me yet. These were tough guys, each of them, unafraid of a fight. But I knew how to break them, each one. The kid was easy: Take that fucking earring and tear it out of his ear, he'd go down like a princess. I'd seen Chino get hit in the head a dozen times and just shrug it off, but go for his eyes and he freaked out. Mikey was the easiest: A solid kick in his balls and you had a punching bag in human form. These were guys who weren't much without a gun, or three of their guys standing behind them.

“Give us a moment, fellas,” Frank said, looking at me steadily. Frank was another story; he didn't bother with the hardcase bullshit. He *looked* soft, but Frank was tough. Frank knew that you gave in just once, you tagged out just *once*. You never got back in.

The other three still didn't look at me as they filed out of the little office. I was used to it. Junior shut the door behind him with a glance at my shoes, probably wondering what they were, since I'd never seen the kid anything except running shoes. Not that he *ran*.

With the door shut, Frank leaned back tapping his belly and

staring at me. I stared back, lighting my cigarette.

“We lost the kid today,” he finally said, wiggling his nose and reaching up to scratch it. Frank always gave the impression of being out of breath. “Aubrey whatshisname. Got a fucking straight job.”

I pictured the kid: Seventeen, skinny, friendly and not too bright. “Best thing for him. He wasn't good for this.” I shrugged. “Too nice.”

He nodded. He was breathing through his nose, and it was loud and rapid. Finally he pointed at me. “You sure you got Falken? He's given you the slip twice now.”

I blinked, picking tobacco off my tongue. “THis time I at least got eyes on him. Closer and closer every time, Frankie.”

He shrugged, grinning a little, amiable. “It's a big nut. You get socked with it you're going to have some fucking trouble payin' it off. You got a perfect record all these years, be a shame to crap it out.”

I shook my head. “I can handle it.”

“You salvage a lot of money. If we called it earnings, you'd be my top guy. You don't kick up dust and you do what your told. But that don't mean you can piss on my shoes. Close that shit out.”

I shook my head. I got five points on every dollar I brought back from the cold for Frank, which meant he got ninety-five percent of what would otherwise be complete write-offs. Getting people to pay their debts was always an uphill battle, but I always won.

I pointed my cigarette at him. “I said I can handle it. I'll find that cocksucker.” I smiled. “And I'll *beat* every dollar outta him.”

He stared back at me for a moment, breath whistling. Frank stared. It was a management technique; as a younger man he'd preceded just about every savage beating with one of these coldhearted stares, and it made tough guys search for the exits. I stared back, sucking in smoke, until he finally smiled, throwing up



his hands.

“All right, you stupid cunt. Tell you what, you bring in the white whale here and I'll give ya ten points on it, if you bring it in—no arguing. Ten.”

I nodded and stood up. “Good. The Bumble out front?”

Frank nodded, amused. “Yeah. Doing whatever it is Billy Bumbles do on their own.”

“Burn ants with a magnifying glass,” I said, spinning away and waving over my shoulder.

“Hey!” Frank shouted, and I turned with my hand on the door. He had his hands on his belly again, his favorite possession. He nodded at me. “You don't find him, you can cover the nut?”

I shook my head, thinking of the bags under my floorboards. “Nope.”

The Bumble was dozing in the driver's seat of the Mercedes, his flat ugly face peaceful, kind of childish. I tried to imagine The Bumble as a kid and could only see him as a shorter version of himself, dressed in short pants. The image made me shiver. The idea of getting into the car and betting my life on his driving again kept the shiver going.

I scanned the street, drawing on my cigarette. A few tourists and strollers were making their way down the sidewalk, unaware of all the fucking tough guys cheating at penny-ante poker inside the Club. There were four people I didn't like: Two hispanic guys wearing sunglasses and tight suits, trying to look casual as they stood in the street between the Mercedes and a rusty old Ford Van, a tall, gangly white girl in the same outfit, her red hair in a tight bun on her head, and the old maid in the white suit. Also in sunglasses, pretending to

read a newspaper in the dark. With sunglasses on. She leaned against the metal vending machine, grinning down at the paper like there was something funny in it, old enough to be my grandma, her gray-white hair loose and curly.

I didn't like them at all. When I stepped for the car, the matron in the white suit let the paper drop and cut me off, tucking the paper under her elbow and reaching out.

“Excuse—”

I had never been impressed by old women. I didn't help them across the street and I didn't pay any attention to their opinions of me. I took hold of her outstretched arm with both hands and pushed down, hard, forcing her to bend down slightly, a squawk escaping from her. I stepped to the side and twisted her arm cruelly behind her, getting a knee into her back and pressing her down. She screeched in sudden pain, and then went nice and limp, panting on the sidewalk. A thrill went through me: I had an exact calibration of how easy it would be to cause this bitch more pain than she could stand. And it was a *low* number.

I glanced to my right and left. I had a gun in each ear. If I had to be psychic, I'd guess the third was somewhere behind me. I also had a holy vision of The Bumble, still dozing in the car, twitching one leg like a dreaming dog.

“Ease up,” the younger woman hissed in my ear. “Ease on up.”

I looked down at the top of White Suit's head. No one was going to come pouring out of the Templar, muscle to back me up. I wasn't liked, and their interest in gunplay that didn't involve their money ended at the door. So I nodded, accidentally ashing on top of White Suit's head.

“Easing up, boss,” I said, letting go and putting my hands up.

White Suit sprang up from the sidewalk with surprising agility and bounded a step away, turning to smile at me, rubbing her shoulder. I expected to be grabbed and manhandled, but nothing happened, except the guns slid away and disappeared.

“Please,” White Suit said, her lips twitching, rubbing her arm. “I merely wish to speak with you.” She sounded smooth and educated. “Haven’t you ever heard of bone thinning?”

I nodded, flicking my cigarette away and exhaling smoke into the air. “What in fuck could we have to talk about?”

She nodded as if I'd just agreed with something he'd said. “Mr. Falken,” he said.