

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 lights. 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 4

by Jeff Somers

4.

We sat, The Bumble and me, in the waiting room, on the little plastic seats bolted to the wall. I sat in continuous fear that the seat might collapse under The Bumble's bulk; a catastrophe like that would ruin the impression of blank menace The Bumble usually projected. The receptionist sat behind her cheap metal desk tapping dolefully at a keyboard, stealing glances at us. She was middle-aged and matronly, with no discernible figure, wearing a floral sack of a dress and big round glasses with bright red frames she probably thought were daring. She didn't like us sitting in the waiting room, but I'd made an appointment and this flustered her.

For his part, The Bumble was glad to be back on rounds. He didn't like uncertainty and breaks in our routine. He appeared to doze next to me, eyes half-closed, at peace.

The waiting room was just bare drywall painted an unenthusiastic shade of off-white; you could still see the tape on the seams. A single, gloriously terrible painting, huge, had been hung behind us on the wall, stretching the length of the bolted-on seats, and a tall potted fake plant a shade of green that was almost, but not quite found in nature squatted in the corner behind the receptionist. That was it for decoration, aside from the jerkoff's law degree in a frame on the wall

over her desk. There was no music, no magazines, and no conversation with a pretty thing—this was, I decided, the worst Reception Area I'd ever been in.

Rounds were tedious, most days. Most people paid up, making ninety percent of my job just a long boring errand. Even the ones who tried to get cute usually never pushed me to the point where I gave myself permission to have some fun, so the whole fucking day was usually me, blue-balled, reduced to glowering and making threats. I went home at night pissed off and grouchy, fantasizing about getting a real fight, someone my size with some training, some passion, who would simultaneously owe Frank McKenna money and be ready for me. It didn't happen often.

Then, there were days like this, where one name glowed hot and red on my list, a punk who was three weeks behind and thought he could get away with it. I wore my best suit, double-breasted and formal.

Something buzzed on the desk, and the Receptionist heaved herself forward to mash a finger. "Yes?"

"Send in my three-o'clock, Gladys."

Gladys. I smirked. Sometimes parents had a supernatural sense of exactly what their kid was going to be. I stood up, and The Bumble snorted and startled upwards.

"You can—"

I waved a gloved hand at her as we headed for the office. It was silly, maybe, to sit and wait for an appointment, but I liked the idea. I pictured Mr. Lawrence Teller, esq., in his office, having an afternoon cocktail and scrolling porn on his computer, thinking there was business in his lobby, happy and calm. And then we walk in. Keeping your subjects off-balance was a big part of the job.

I turned the knob and stepped into the office, The Bumble behind me like a ghost. The office was exactly the same as the reception area, just smaller. The walls looked like props, the carpet was stained and worn down to a theoretical layer of shag, and the desk was exactly the same sort of remnant bought from the back of a truck. Our guy was sitting ramrod straight, a big smile on his face, fat in a too-tight shirt, his tie knotted a bit too high up, sitting on his belly like a dead fish. He had a wide, florid face, perpetually pink, and a long nose, a mop of happy brown curls on his head. He would have been kind of good-looking when he'd been young.

Again, there was just one piece of decoration on the wall, this one right behind the desk, up a little too high. The frame was just barely not big enough to totally obscure the fact that something was set into the wall behind it.

“Mr.,” he glanced down at his desk, “Smith.” He heaved himself up and extended a hand. “How are you today, sir?”

I paused in front of the desk while The Bumble circled around behind him. I stared at him and made no move to take his hand. “Mr. Teller,” I said, pursing my lips. “You're a fucking deadbeat.”

He let his hand drop and glanced nervously around at The Bumble, then back at me, trying to frown all stern-like. “Who are you?”

“I'm Frank McKenna's nephew,” I said. “You owe him fifteen thousand dollars with interest due every week, and you're three fucking weeks late.” I smiled. “As a service to our professional white-collar clients who maybe don't have time in their busy days to troop downtown to make a payment, I show up and pick it up for 'em.” I nodded. “So let's have it.”

That was my due diligence. I eyed Teller clinically, looking for soft

spots, places he would hurt best. He was *all* soft spot, as far as I could tell, one big bruise waiting to happen. He looked like a guy who wore slippers in the house to spare his tender feet. Electricity buzzed through me. I was going to get the chance to beat the tar out of this bastard, and it would be entirely justified.

He smiled, looking at The Bumble and then back at me. “Ah, I see. Gentlemen,” he indicated the two dusty-looking chairs opposite his desk. “Have a seat. Let’s discuss the circumstances.”

I nodded. “Do you have the money?”

He shrugged. “I’m afraid not.”

I looked at The Bumble and made my face into an O of shock. “Hot Christ, he doesn’t have it, Billy. What the hell do we do *now*?”

“My secretary has already called the police,” Teller said calmly, sitting down in his big leather rolling chair and sweeping his hand towards his guest seats. “Let’s give up the tough guy routine and come to some terms—a payment plan. I fully intend—”

Joyfully, I leaned forward and punched him in the nose.

I didn’t have much leverage; I sent him rolling back into the wall behind him, made him yelp and throw his hands up to his face, but there was no satisfying crunch of broken cartilage. Grinning, I leaped up on top of his desk as The Bumble caught hold of his chair and sent him rocketing back towards me. I set my weight and lashed one foot at him, a steel toe smacking into his hands and sending him and the chair ass over tits. I jumped down on top of him, barking my shins on the chair’s arms as I got a knee on his throat, making him shoot his hands from his crushed nose down to my leg, where they grabbed on, sticky with blood, and feebly tried to push me away.

I felt light. I felt like I was weightless, floating, and everything around me was just made of sand: moldable.

“I don't give a shit about police, Mr. Teller,” I said gaily, raising one fist and just letting it hang there in the air. I could hold it there forever, for centuries, without getting tired. Power coursed through me, golden and liquid. “I've spent plenty of nights in holding cells, and I'm not a fucking lawyer like you but I've *got* lawyers who make, apparently a lot more fucking money than you do.” I feinted my fist down at his face, making him twitch and yelp again, spitting up bubbly blood. “Since you called this in, we've got about ten minutes. Ten minutes we can spend either beating you to a fucking raw pulp, or gathering cash from your fucking wall safe.”

He was moving his mouth, a grotesque, slithery sight. After a moment I realize I was putting too much weight on his neck and he couldn't breathe. I let up half an inch and he sucked in a damp, bloody breath. His nose pulsed like a swamp every time he breathed.

“Don't have ... don't—”

I leaned down a little. “Shhh, now, shhh. You don't have it all, huh? That's okay. You got at least a week's interest?”

He nodded miserably, and I smiled. “All right. That'll buy you one more week. Ups-a-daisy.”

I sprang up off him and held one gloved hand down to him. Slowly, panting hard, he took hold and let me pull him up. The Bumble took his cue and snatched the painting off the wall, revealing a pretty sad-looking wall safe embedded roughly into the wall. The Bumble tossed the painting aside savagely, smashing it against the far wall, and I leaned over and smoothed Teller's bloody shirt against his paunch, adjusted his collar. His nose was flat and leaking blood, and his eyes had already darkened to black circles.

“You're fine,” I said heartily, still high, feeling powerful and happy. I gave him a friendly slap to the cheek and indicated the safe. “Have

at it.”

Back out in the lobby, the receptionist watched us emerge from the office with wide, frightened eyes. I winked, stuffing the large bills into my envelope.

“You really call the cops?”

She nodded, slowly, tracking us as we passed her.

“Tell 'em you were robbed,” I said as The Bumble called for the elevator. We stepped into the cab and let the doors slide shut. I looked at myself in the shiny, scratched steel and couldn't see any bloodstains. I handed the envelope to The Bumble.

“Do me a favor,” I said. “Hand this in for me.”

He took the envelope, stared at it for a moment, then looked at me. “Where you going?”

“To the library.”

I watched her from across the huge room for a few minutes. For a library reading room it felt noisy, even though there wasn't much sound at all—but the sound there *was* felt layered and deep. Big wooden tables filled the floor, the walls two stories high covered in bookshelves. At the far end was a row of windows like in a bank—Teller's windows—but these handed out books. You filled out a form and handed it in, a few minutes later someone brought the books up and slid them across to you. Every few minutes I saw her: Beautiful brunette, her long hair pulled back into a silky pony tail, all curves in her ankle-length skirt and cardigan, smartassed glasses on the tip of her nose. She was beautiful, she was young, she was fucking brilliant, and she chose to work in the goddamn library.

I smiled as I walked up the wide center aisle, feeling noisy.

The place was pretty filled; you kept hearing about how no one read any more, how everything was going to the dogs, but here we were in the fucking library and it was packed. Most people were slobs, though, dressed like they were in someone's living room having a beer, watching the game. People didn't know how to fucking dress any more; they wore whatever they found on the floor when they woke up.

She saw me as she brought a stack of books up to one of the windows, and looked over the head of the tiny old man who collected them, staring at me with a half smile on her lips. She turned and said something to the people working with her and when I stepped up to the window she turned and smiled at me.

“Well, if it isn't my favorite Uncle who isn't my uncle,” she said. “How have you been, Unc?”

“Alive,” I said. “How are you, Rache? Got a minute?”

She hesitated, then nodded. “Sure. Come on back.”

I stepped over to the heavy door on the side of the windows and a moment later she opened it and passed me through. I followed her back to a tiny office, keeping my eyes off her ass, and ignored the looks from everyone we walk past. She dropped into the squeaking chair behind a pile of paper in the general shape of a desk a computer screen poking out from one end and glowing ominously. I barely had space to lean against the wall across from her. I put my hands in my pockets for safe keeping. The office smelled like her, some flowery perfume.

She leaned back, her straining cardigan somehow worse than if she were naked. “Been a while.”

I nodded. “I figured you'd let me know if my company was ever wanted again.”

“Have I been sleepwalking again? Dropping postcards in the mail in the middle of the night?”

Looking down at the floor, I shook my head. “No. I came to ask a favor.”

She didn't say anything. When I looked back up, she was chewing on her glasses and studying me, cool and collected. After a moment, she nodded. “Okes, maybe. Depending on what you need. For old time's sake.”

I nodded, pulling a slip of paper from my pocket and handing it over the desk to her. “Two names.”

She smiled, taking the paper. I imagined a spark of static electricity as our fingers almost touched, but it was probably just the dry office air. She looked at the two names and quick bullet lists of information I'd printed on it. “They have this thing now called the Internet, you know.”

I shook my head. “Too random. I could spend all day running down bullshit. You're good at this shit, Rachel.”

She looked back at me, raising one eyebrow. She'd always been a cool kid: She never laughed or reacted unless she wanted to, and getting her to react had always been a thrill for me. Finally she stood up, graceful.

“All right. Wait in here. Don't step outside this office, and if anyone says anything to you, you're mute. Got it?”

I smiled. “Can I make one of those signs begging for money because I can't speak?”

She turned and walked out of the office, but I was pretty sure I'd made her laugh. As a reward I watched her ass as she walked away.

When she came back about half an hour later, I was still standing

there where she'd left me. She had a bunch of papers in one hand and paused in the doorway, squinting at me, as if she thought maybe I'd rifled her desk while she'd been gone. But she'd know that was ridiculous—I played by the rules.

“All right,” she said, breezing in, sassy. She dropped back into her chair and held onto the paper for a moment. “You gonna break their legs or something?”

I shrugged. “One, maybe. The other put me through some trouble,” I touched the bandage on my forehead, “and I just want to find out why before she shows up again.” I decided not to mention that each one had pulled a disappearing act on me.

She studied me again, fanning herself with the paper. “All right,” she said finally. “First, Rusch. I found three women who fit the general data you gave me.” She leaned forward and handed me three sheets of heavy photo paper. The second one was a good crisp picture of the Doctor, without her thick glasses. She was smiling and looked a little younger, but it was her. I handed that one back. “That's one.”

She nodded, glancing down. “That one's down at Rutgers University in Jersey. Physics Department. Published a lot up until about a decade ago, then dropped off the scene and if she wasn't tenured probably would have been let go.” She shrugged and handed over a single sheet of copy paper, several bullet points and paragraphs of information, including a phone number and address. I smiled and folded it up.

“You're a goddamn angel, you know that?”

She looked up at me from under her eyebrows. “And you're a violent asshole, you know *that*?”

I stiffened and looked away. She would tear like paper. I swallowed a surge of adrenaline, imagining, for one quick, dirty

moment how she would just disintegrate in my hands, like tissue. Then I forced a smile onto my face and locked down my breathing, forcing steady, deep breaths. “You wouldn't know, Rache,” I said. “Remember that, okay?”

We held each other's eyes for a moment, and then she looked back down at the last bit of paper in her hand. “There's only one Elias Falken who fits your description that I can find. Which is too bad for you.” She leaned forward, giving me a view of her neck as she handed the page over.

“Why's that?” I said, glancing down. The photo was exactly right: Falken smiled back at me in what looked like a Driver's License shot.

She finally gave me a full-on smile, her whole face lighting up as she cocked her head, eyes shining. “Because he's been dead for two years.”