

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 5

by Jeff Somers

5.

I lay in bed smoking, which they tell you not to do, but they also tell you not to drink liquor, not to eat red meat, and not to gamble, have sex, or dance on Sundays, so fuck 'em. I'd taken off my shirt to keep from wrinkling it, and lay against piled-up pillows with my shoes and pants on in just my undershirt. The apartment was hot from the steam heat and I was sweating there despite the cold wind coming in from the window.

I was running the events of the last few days over in my mind. Falken, dead. Rusch from fucking *Jersey*. A limo stolen thirty fucking years ago. And me, suddenly and officially, owing Frank McKenna a boatload of money, because Falken, poor dead Falken who'd been nursing a hangover in McHales just a few days ago, had skipped and that was on *me*.

There was a knock at the front door. I frowned and didn't move for a moment, cigarette burning in my hand. It was a sixth floor walkup in an old building, it was quiet, stuffy, and I had an easy way out the bedroom window, up the ladder to the roof, across six buildings with easy jumps, and down the fire escape to the street. I glanced that way, watching the yellowed drapes blow in for a few seconds, and when another knock came I sat up, snuffing my

cigarette in the crowded ashtray as I stood.

Passing through the living room, they knocked again, harder and more rapidly, making the door jump. The kitchen was dark and I left it that way as I crossed to the door; the hallway would be dim and there was no reason to light myself up. I paused just inside the door as they pounded again. I squinted through the peephole and saw two men: One a round, big black kid with a dopey smile on his fat face, the other taller, skinnier, with a big bushy mustache like a caterpillar sitting on his upper lip. The black kid was wearing baggy jeans and a dark T-shirt, lots of gold chains hanging off his neck that I was pretty sure would turn his skin green soon enough. The other guy was wearing a black suit, all attitude, but he pulled it off. Black shirt, black tie, black pants, black jacket. He had the shoulders and posture to make it work.

As he reared back for another pound, I opened the door and stepped into the doorway, leaning against the jam and pulling my pack of cigarettes out.

“Evening, Miggsy,” I said. “Selling Girl Scout Cookies?”

Miggs settled himself, folding his hands in front of him. The kid kept smiling like something was tickling his ass. I thought about asking Miggs about his taste in muscle, but thought better of it. Miggs didn't look like he was in the mood to kid around. He was a little older than me, and worked Frank's lesser debts, but he was steady.

He pulled a toothpick from his mouth and shrugged. “You buying Girl Scout cookies? You buyin' 'em, I'll find some to sell ya.”

With the pleasantries over, I lit a match and sucked in smoke. “What can I do for you, Miggs?”

He winced a little, looking a little embarrassed. “Frank put

Falken's debt on you today, kid.”

I studied him. “And, what, you couldn't wait to come down here and break my balls about it?”

He shrugged, not looking embarrassed any more. “It's a lot of money.” He twisted his head until his neck popped, loud, like a gunshot. “You got the two weeks? Maybe the whole thing?”

I smiled, a golden ball forming in the pit of stomach. My heart started pounding, and I felt adrenaline and power pouring into my limbs, everything loosening up. I looked at the Smiler and then back at Miggs, who stood there with the easy posture of a man used to violence. He understood the equation.

I thought, for a second, of the money under my closet floor, and then pushed the thought aside. The easy thing to do would be to hand over every fucking dime I had to Frank McKenna and hope I found Falken and twisted the money out of him, that would let me get back to work, back to normal. It would save me money in the long run, too, because Frank was going to pile on juice to the debt every week no matter what I did.

I shook my head. “Go fuck yourself, Miggs. Tell Frank he wants his money, he can come here like a man and ask me nicely.”

It was hard to keep the smile off my face. Not only was this *allowed*, not only was this fucking okay, but Miggs was a man who could handle himself, and would give as good as he got. This was going to be *fun*.

He got sulky, frowning and letting his hands hang free in preparation. “Just business. No need to get sticky about it.”

I exhaled smoke and flicked my cigarette away. “Sticky? Fuck you, sticky. I own this debt for three goddamn hours you're here like a fucking roach to see what might fall out of my ass as I walk around?”

I stepped forward, into the hall, crowding them, the narrow, shadowy stairs a few feet behind Miggs to his right. “You know what you just did?”

Miggs didn't back away, just narrowed his eyes. His mustache was fucking majestic, with a healthy sheen, thick and glorious. “What?”

“You just gave me *permission*,” I said, and jerked forward, smacking my forehead into his nose.

He took it well, staggering backwards a step or two with a grunt and then putting his head down, meeting my rush with his shoulders, grappling my waist with his big arms. I pushed him into the railing at the top of the stairs, making it creak and lean outward dangerously, then sprang back half a step and clocked him nice and solid on the chin, spinning him onto the wobbly railing with his ass pointed at me.

He took hold of the railing and kicked, catching me in the stomach with a shot that felt like lead, knocking the breath out of me. I tried to laugh, uncontrollably, my whole body clenching and shuddering painfully as it tried to vomit up guffaws. Spots danced in front of me as my lungs burned.

He spun around and saw me just swaying there, shaking, and lunged forward with a haymaker. I ducked, easy, and he smacked his fist into the wall, old lathing and plaster that didn't even crack. He howled and danced back, clutching his fist, and I managed one wet, coughing breath as I reached out and grabbed onto one of his ankles, giving it a yank with my knees planted firmly on the floor. He toppled over and hit the floor with a crash, making all the boards jump, and I leaped atop him, smacking my fist down into his face, angels singing, the white light everywhere, truly happy for the first time all day. I was working his face, like an artist works clay, re-arranging it and putting

my stamp on it. It was what I'd been put on the earth to do.

I sat up suddenly, panting, my chest tight and feeling like someone had pushed splinters into my lungs. Miggs lay there moaning, his nose and mouth bloody and soft, his face already swollen. I looked up, feeling my shirt clinging damply to my torso, and found the Smiling Fool still just standing there. He wasn't smiling any more; his face was concentric circles of fucked-up shock.

"You're the worst," I managed between heaves, "fucking muscle ... I ever saw." I gestured down at poor Miggs, for whom I was already feeling sorry. "Why didn't ... you jump in?"

He looked at me and blinked. "Shit, he didn't tell me to."

I nodded. "You and the fucking Bumble ought to form a club." I pushed myself up to my feet and pointed at him. "Stay here."

I staggered back into my apartment, blowing like a beached whale, and grabbed my shirt and overcoat from the bedroom, then went back into the hall, where Miggs had rolled himself onto his belly and had pulled himself a few inches towards the stairs. I shut and locked the door behind me and fished for my cigarettes again. Stepping over Miggs with a cigarette in my mouth, I glanced back at the Smiler and pointed at Miggs.

"Don't help him," I said. "Make him crawl down."

The streets were empty and the cab dumped me outside The Oak Room off of Central Park in about half an hour. My chest still felt like I'd strained some fundamental muscle and stabbed me every time I moved, but I'd stopped panting and trembling. I'd smoked three cigarettes along the way and discovered four open cuts oozing blood on my face, but felt fantastic. I needed to get into fistfights more often. The problem with the people I worked with was their

disappointing tendency to pull a gun on you if you pushed them too far.

I paid the driver a fifty and told him to keep it, and pushed my way past the flunkies at the front and stood in the dining room a moment. I saw Frank just as his mopes did, and they rushed forward to meet me when I was still a few steps away from his table, where he was eating alone. They were just two kids, fat assholes who had all the imagination of the cheap suits they were sausaged into.

“Touch me and I’ll break both hands so bad you’ll never be able to jerk off again,” I said, putting another cigarette in my mouth. Bad for me, but so was getting into fights outside your own fucking apartment. I looked past them to where Frank sat leaning back in his chair, napkin tucked into his collar, studying me with a grin on his face. “You seriously want a scene, Frank?”

He shrugged. “I can cover the damages. And I can get ten more guys in here in thirty seconds.”

My heart leaped in instinctive joy. I smiled. “Do it.”

Frank studied me again, then leaned forward to his plate again, shaking his head. “Fucking crazy bastard. Let him come.”

The mopes stepped aside, shooting their cuffs and giving me their best hardcase looks, and I pushed past them and dropped into the chair opposite Frank, lighting up. I stared at him until he looked up from his steak dinner. He blinked and leaned back again.

“Jesus, you look like hell. You want somethin’? Hey, Ginny, get him a bourbon,” he said, waving his hand in the air randomly. “Get him a Wild Turkey, neat.” He looked back at me and spread his arms. “What?”

I waited a moment, then leaned forward, pushing smoke out through my nose. “Your cash flow drying up, Frank? That why you

sent that fucking grocery clerk to try and collect on *me*?”

He popped his eyes at me. “Send him? Send who?”

I controlled myself with effort. I felt so good I wanted to leap across the table and keep my adrenaline up. “Miggs. Miggs Bender.”

Frank smirked. “That moron. Look, you inherited a debt. You inherit the juice on it too, and you don't get a reprieve just because it's got a new owner.” Someone crept up behind me and placed a nearly-full tumbler of whiskey on the table in front of me. Frank shrugged. “I didn't *send* anyone after you. But you can't be surprised. Miggs has got you on his list now. He don't get you to pay, *he's* in dutch, right? So he's just bein' enterprising.”

I leaned back and picked up the tumbler with my bandaged, aching hand, crossing my legs and pursing my lips. It could be, I figured. Miggs was greedy and ambitious like everyone else, and he maybe just thought he might find me soft. I sniffed the whiskey and took a gulp. “All right,” I said. “Maybe.”

Frank nodded and picked up his knife and fork, bending over the plate. “Besides, you bring it on yourself. You earn good, kid. You don't bet, you don't spend. The fuck you do with all your money, who knows? So it's natural to think that you've got a nut hidden away, that you could clean up a debt like that easy.”

I stared down into my drink, going calm and still, knowing the truth: I'd been chucked over the side for money. It was a big nut, sure, but nothing compared to what Frank McKenna pulled in every day. But he figured I had money stashed somewhere and he'd let Miggsy come at me hoping to break something loose. I took a deep breath and bolted the glass of whiskey, forcing it down and sitting for a moment, making sure it stayed down.

“I'll handle it,” I said. “No need to send fucking poodles to bite my

ankles, okay?”

I stood up, but Frank reached out and put a hand on my arm, making me pause. “Listen,” he said, letting his hand slide off me and picking up his fork again. “No hard feelings. You pay off the debt, all is forgiven, everyone's friends.”

I nodded. “Yeah, okay.” I wanted to smash the tumbler into his head, make him bleed.

He nodded without looking up. “Until then, Billy's gonna stick closer than usual. No offense.”

“Fuck you, no offense.” I took a few steps away, then paused. Without turning back to him, I said “Fine. Tell Bill to pick me up tomorrow around nine. We're taking a trip.”

“A trip? Where to?”

I grimaced as I pushed my way through the mopeds again, giving them both some shoulder. “Fucking *Jersey*.”