

A person wearing a dark hat and a purple coat 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 6

by Jeff Somers

6.

We were inching down 30th street in the tunnel lane when the cherry-top bloomed into red life behind us, a dashboard model, dim and hard to see in the harsh daylight. I wasn't used to the sun; I spent most of my time crawling through bars and underground card parlors in the wee hours of the morning, lungs rough from cigarettes and poorly ventilated illegal clubs, my eyes squinty and red from smoke and low-watt mood fucking lighting. The car felt tight and hard, the radio droning on about something at the U.N. that had everybody hot and bothered, some treaty half the world wanted and half didn't.

"The Executioner," The Bumble muttered, putting the Beamer into park and making sure his hands were visible. "I'll bet you."

I shook my head. All my wounds throbbed deliciously, giving me a hard-on. "That's a sucker's bet."

He strolled over in a beautiful, understated gray suit, and when he put his hands on the door and leaned in I noted that his fingernails, yellowed and thick, were perfectly groomed. His rings clinked against the side of the car.

"Mornin' boys," Detective James said, grinning behind sharp sunglasses. "Takin' a trip?"

“Making a run for it,” I said, giving him a smile calibrated to match his own. “Gonna start a new life in New Jersey where no one will ever find us.”

James liked that. “Start a pizza shop,” he suggested. “Change your name to Gino. You’ll fit right in.”

I didn’t laugh. “Anything we can do for you? You yanking our passport?”

He shook his head, shooting his bright white cuff to check the time on his Rolex. “Naw, just making sure you know I’m paying attention. You gonna be gone long?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. But it ain’t a permanent change of address, if that’s what you’re worried over.”

He laughed again. “The idea of you and Billy Bumble here shacking up for the rest of your lives like the Pink Mafia don’t have what they call *verisimilitude*, so, no. Just remember, they got brother police on that side of the Hudson, too.” He straightened up and tapped the top of the car. “This is new, huh?” he said. “That Mercedes got all scuffed up, huh?”

There wasn’t anything to say to that, so we just sat there with our hands visible. James got testy if your hands got obscured. The fucking cops—they all played these little games. I didn’t mind, usually, but sometimes I couldn’t see the fucking point. We knew he was keeping his yellow eye on us, looking for an opportunity to profit from us or jam us up, he knew we were working angles. I’d prefer to just let us all do our fucking bit and leave it at that.

He tapped the roof again. “All right. Carry on, boys.”

The Bumble waited until James was back in his craphole Ford before putting the car back into gear. We got lucky at the light and were able to make the right turn without having to sit there with

James staring at our ass.

“Fucking cops,” The Bumble was moved to say. “Spend half their day wasting everyone's time.”

Those were the last words we spoke for the next two hours. Through the tunnel onto the Turnpike, through the toll booths, and then south, south, south, Jersey transforming from the oily smell of Elizabeth to trees and trees and trees. We took exit nine and coasted into New Brunswick, a scrubby slab of concrete with a university and a hospital and twenty thousand assholes to recommend it, and found Hamilton Street more or less by complete accident. The address Rachel had given me for Rusch turned out to be a big corner house, stained white siding and a slab of cracked driveway for a backyard. It sagged there in the sunlight like the fucking town in miniature: worn-down, mistreated, and not even that attractive to begin with.

“Stay in the car,” I suggested to The Bumble. He nodded, then got out with me and followed me up the sagging wooden stairs. The tiny front yard was filled with trash: broken furniture, three cases of empty beer cans, four or five warm and moist-looking trash bags of uncertain vintage. The screen door had no screen in it, so I just reached through to knock on the door.

The door opened and a tall, older woman blinked at me. “Yes?”

It took me a moment to recognize the woman in the white suit from the limo; she was wearing a baggy sweater and a pair of faded, torn jeans, and no shoes or socks. Her hair had somehow gotten about four inches longer, and hung in her face in a stringy mass of salt-and-pepper curls, wearing a different pair of thick glasses. I smiled at her, a weird feeling of sudden uncertainty gnawing at me. I'd been planning to just slap her in the face when I found her, but my internal auditor wasn't giving me the green light.

“Remember me?” I asked brightly.

She frowned, cocking her head at me. “No,” she said, finally, and sounded like she meant it.

I wasn't prepared for this. I'd intended to just menace her until I felt better, then ask her about Falken, but I just hung there, unsure. Finally I decided on a half-measure, shouldering her aside with a brusque “Mind if I come in?” that made me feel like I'd regained the momentum.

The Bumble, silent as always, followed me into a narrow, oppressive hall, the wood paneling waxy-looking. A set of narrow stairs led upwards, covered in a dusty carpet, but I followed the hall until it opened up into a bright living room. Three windows faced me, giving me a glimpse of the side street we'd parked on. The kitchen squatted to my left, and a set of pocket doors hid another room to my right. The living room was furnished lazily; the couch was floral and ancient, the coffee table scratched and battered, the television old and dusty. *Dusty* was the word of the day: It hung in the air, covered everything, like she hadn't been in the room for weeks.

“What is this?” Rusch asked, rushing into the room to stand in front of us. Her puny fury was kind of amusing; I suspected she was a woman who had never been hit, not once in her life, and who imagined men did not strike woman. You couldn't be afraid of something you'd never felt, and I shrugged my coat onto my shoulders and peered at her. I'd hit plenty of women. It came up in the job.

“Cornelia Rusch?” I asked. Somehow it seemed possible there had been a mistake.

She nodded. “Yes!” she snapped with something approaching authority. “Now—”

“Doctor Cornelius Rusch?”

“Jesus, *yes*,” she snapped again. I looked at The Bumble, but he’d suddenly discovered the floor, and stood there staring down at it, swallowing a grin. I looked back at the good doctor, at sea. I couldn’t give myself a pass to beat the snot out of her—enjoyable as that would be—until I was sure what was going on.

“You’re telling me you weren’t in New York two days ago?”

She threw up her hands, her arms skinny and nonthreatening. “No. Now why are you in my house?”

I frowned. I believed her, for some reason. She really had never seen me before. “Well, shit, I’m not sure now,” I said, then paused. “You don’t have a twin sister, do you?”

Her whole manner changed. She went still, and glanced nervously at The Bumble as he pushed his hands into his pockets. After a moment she pursed her lips and rocked back on her heels. It was easy to picture her in front of a class, lecturing.

“Why do you say that?”

I caught the scent again and leaned forward, feeling myself swelling back to full size, sensing the hollow bones under Rusch’s skin, her soft, open stance, easy to unbalance.

“Because someone who looked just like you took me for a ride yesterday, *doc*, and poked her nose into my business. Which I do not approve of.”

Before I could transition to the threat portion of our conversation, she surprised me by stepping forward and leaning in, presenting me with a gorgeous glass chin that would shatter on impact in a spectacular and satisfying way. “Tell me,” she demanded, “did she look *exactly* like me?”

I paused, picturing the woman in the white suit sitting across

from me in the back of the limo, and then nodded. “She was wearing glasses, and had better fashion sense. But otherwise exactly.”

She nodded, looking off to his right in a dreamy way, letting out a noncommittal grunt. I let her hover for a moment until I was sure she wasn't going to volunteer anything useful, then I stepped to my left and inserted myself into her line of sight, putting a hand on her shoulder and grabbing hold.

“Now, let me explain something to you, Dr. Rusch. There's a lot of things I don't generally like. White shoes. Menthol cigarettes. The Second Avenue Subway. Number one on my list, though, I have to say, is *going to fucking New Jersey*.” I pushed her gently and she backed away from me towards the couch. “So I'm running out of patience. I don't care if you have a twin sister, or if it was *you* in that car with me in Manhattan and you're just being cute.” I pushed her down onto the cushions and she fell there easily, staring up at me. “I'm looking for a man who owes me a lot of fucking money, and in return for your help in finding him I will consider not breaking both your legs.”

She blinked up at me, then at The Bumble. “Jesus, what are you, *gangsters?*”

“I'm the guy who's going to break your legs,” I said, spreading my hands. “What else do you really need to know?”

She looked glum. “I knew this would happen,” she muttered, and I stepped forward suddenly, looming over her. The couch smelled like stale dust. I was offended by the whole fucking room, which had all the taste and cleanliness of the college kids who'd lived here before my good professor.

“Dr. Rusch,” I said slowly, forcing myself to hold back. “I'm going to ask you this once: Where is Falken?”

She stared at me without any reaction aside from a slight

furrowing of her brow. She slowly shook her head. “I have no—”

I decided she needed a little more encouragement, so twisted back and kicked her in the left shin, light. She howled and collapsed forward, rolling off the couch onto the floor in a cloud of disturbed dust. I looked over at The Bumble as Rusch rolled on the floor, screaming and clutching her leg, and rolled my eyes. He shrugged back. The Bumble didn't understand anybody, or anything. The world was simple to him, and he got annoyed by anyone who found it otherwise.

“Dr. Rusch—”

“*You broke my leg!*”

I sighed. “No, Dr. Rusch, I didn't.”

“*You broke my leg!*”

I leaned down in a rush and took hold of her shirt, yanking her up and throwing her back onto the couch. People didn't know how this was done, professionally. Most people didn't experience violence in their lives, and when it was used on them their reaction was almost always fucking amazement. That was why assholes willing to take and dole out punishment were always in charge.

“Where the fuck is Falken?” I asked again, thrusting a finger under her nose. “And if your next sentence begins with *I have no I will break your leg.*”

She shook her head violently, her eyes closed like not seeing me might make me disappear. “I don't know! I don't know that name!”

I stepped back and threw my hands up for The Bumble's benefit. He was the only one in the room who might appreciate the subtleties of our profession anyway. Thing was, I believed the old bag. She wasn't the Rusch I'd met the other day—as impossible as that maybe was. She didn't know who the fuck Falken was. It didn't hang

together right, but I realized I wasn't going to feel right about beating the snot out of her unless I got rid of the itchy feeling that she didn't know what the fuck was going on.

“All right, Dr. Rusch,” I said, nodding over at The Bumble. “We'll leave you now before anyone gets curious about your screaming. But we'll be back. Think about I've asked you today, see if you can't jog something free.” I turned towards the door, and The Bumble preceded me down the hall again, retracing our obvious footprints in the heavy dust on the floor. If the good doctor actually lived in the house, or at least the main floor, I would be amazed, and I eyed the small, tight cellar door as we moved alongside the stairway.

The Bumble didn't say anything as we walked down the steps and around the corner to the car. “Gimme the phone,” I said.

He fished out the cell and handed it over to me. “What're we doing now?”

“We're going home,” I said, punching the numbers carefully, my fingers too thick, the phone feeling delicate in my hand, like it might snap into pieces if I twitched. Rachel answered on the second ring.

“Hey, Unc,” she said, sounding breathless. “Am I gonna need a restraining order?”

“I need another favor,” I said. “I need someone watched for a couple of days. The old rate, when you were freelancing steady, if you want it.”

There was silence for a few seconds while The Bumble and I stood around outside the car like a couple of assholes. “Paying expenses?”

I smiled. “You're gonna be sitting in your *car*, kid. What kind of expenses are you gonna rack up?”

“All right. Give me a few hours to make some calls, make some arrangements. I'll check in later.”

“Thanks, Rache.” I snapped the phone shut and tossed it to The Bumble. “Let's go.”

He grunted and the doors unlocked. “You're gonna have the *stripper* watch the house?”

I kept my face blank. “Hey, she *actually* paid her way through college that way. Besides, she's not a stripper any more. And you don't get paid to think, Billy.”

He shrugged and sank into the driver's seat. “And we're going home.”

The universe clearly made less sense now to him than it had thirty seconds before. “I gotta show my face or Frank's gonna fucking push a button on me,” I said, twisting around to look back at the shabby white house as we pulled smoothly into the street. I didn't tell The Bumble that I had exactly one friend to ask favors from. The Bumble didn't have any, and I didn't want to make him feel bad.