

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 13

by Jeff Somers

### 13.

The world is filled with small fry, if you look close enough. Snitches and junkies and people who just generally don't have any character, willing to sell anything they had for a few bucks. If you walked around the city with a brick of money in one pocket, there wasn't a secret in the universe you couldn't have explained to you in painful detail.

Part of my job was detective work. People who owed Frank McKenna money generally didn't want to be found, so you spent a lot of time wearing the soles off your shoes, slithering through grimy shitcan bars and after-hours clubs asking questions and applying lubrication, either in paper or torn ligaments. I enjoyed it. Not many did. I knew who needed a smack to get them talking and who was better to just pay off; I wanted to smack everybody but I was practical. If a fifty would get things rolling in five seconds, spending an hour tuning someone up was just wasted time, even if I really enjoyed it.

I held up a bill folded between my ring finger and thumb and kept it in the air until Cecilia noticed and nodded at me. Then I put it back into my pocket and waited as he served up drinks to the throng at the bar. I got some dirty looks from people trying to push past me to the

bar, and I accidentally put two bridge and tunnel girls on their asses with a well-timed elbow, but I kept my real estate until Cecilia made his way down to my end, his wig kind of askew and his heavy eye makeup running down his face like twin rivers of sewage.

“Hey Big Man,” he sing-songed to me, loud over the din, leaning in to give me a kiss on the cheek. Cecilia was a man named Cecil who liked to wear skirts and wigs and be called Cecilia, and he'd found a place in the world where that was perfectly fine. He ran the bar at The Triage on Christopher Street four nights a week. He was built like a linebacker and refused to do mixed drinks at all. It was shots and beers and if you didn't like it you could go fuck yourself. “You want a drink?”

Cecilia made eyes at me. Him flirting with me was an old game we played. I shook my head. “Business,” I shouted over the din of angry patrons waiting for Cecilia to serve them. “I'm tracking down a bad debt. Guy named Falken.”

He grinned, his red lips shining in the dull orange light. “Oh, darling, that boy's been *everywhere*. Every damn shylock in the *world* is looking for his ass.”

I nodded. “The Phin?”

Cecilia nodded, ignoring his customers. He was making better money per hour talking to me, and he knew it. “Deep. The old Jew's tearing his hair out.” His eyes suddenly shifted over my shoulder and then back to me. “Looks like he wants to chat you up about it too.”

I made a face and sighed, pulling the bill from my pocket and holding it out to him. “Let me buy a credit,” I shouted as he took it. “I'll be back for the rest of the story.”

“Any time, sugar,” he smiled, blowing me a kiss. I smiled back, startled, and stood there for a moment, waiting for the tap on the

shoulder, trying to decide if I wanted to throw some punches, make a scene, or just go see what the old man wanted. Cecilia spun away and planted his feet, shouting in a voice that was all marine drill sergeant for a moment.

“You fucking cunts'll get served when I decide, and anyone doesn't like it can go fuck themselves!”

By the time the tap on my shoulder came, I'd made up my mind, and just turned around, putting my back against the bar, hands in my pockets. I recognized the two men standing there in expensive suits that had obviously been plucked from the back of a truck and tailored by way of cutting the tags off the sleeves. They were two men in someone else's clothes, the sleeves too long, the shoulders all wrong. At first glance you might take them for twins, each of them hairy and short and broad, with flat noses and single gold hoops in their left ears. The one on the left was Maurice, and he was an inch taller, a year older, and about ten IQ points smarter. The one on the right was his brother Michael, who hardly ever spoke; his one charming trait was an embarrassed knowledge of his own stupidity, and he chose to keep his mouth shut rather than humiliate himself.

“Mr. Lanzmann would like a word,” Maurice said, jerking his head to the side a little.

I nodded. “Hey, Mo. How's Tricia?”

He blinked several times at me and a sheepish, small grin hit his flat face. “Mad at me. 'Cause I play cards too much.”

I smiled. “Be careful, or someone in my line of work will come knocking at your door.” I pushed my hands into my pockets and crossed my ankles, leaning against the bar. “The old man in the car outside?”

Maurice shook his head. “Nah, we gotta drive ya.”

I considered this. I didn't want to get into a car with The Phin's guys, let them take me wherever they wanted, and I was pretty confident they could be handled. I'd known Mo and his brother for years, and their pressure points were pretty standard stuff. But if I did that, the Phin would likely send a dozen guys and would make a point of tagging me for disrespect, and it would get complicated.

“All right,” I said, stepping forward.

The old man was at one of his restaurants in Brooklyn; we had a scenic ride over the Williamsburg bridge, lights twinkling. The place had been shut down for code violations a few months ago and Phin didn't seem to be in any rush to get it going again; he'd been using it as one of his meeting spots. Phin didn't have an office or a regular place; he moved around all day, doing business over breakfast, lunch, dinner, and every cup of coffee and glass of wine in-between. You didn't like it you could shut the fuck up.

The place was officially closed, but a bartender and waiter were on duty, just standing there in their white shirts and black trousers, patient with their only customer. Phin wasn't eating, just lingering at the bar over a tiny glass of something dark and ominous-looking, five of his goons standing around burning cigarettes and giving the big man space. I was left in the doorway and waited politely to be noticed and gestured over, so as not to get everyone excited.

“You look positively exhausted, kid,” he said in his damp, flattering way as I bellied up to the bar. “What can I get you?”

“Coffee,” I said. “Hold the water. Just give me the grounds to suck on.”

Phin laughed, sticking his little pink tongue out between his teeth. “That bad, huh?”

I nodded. “I haven't had to work for a living in a long time, Phin.” I watched him pick up a teacup and sip daintily, this old fat bastard wearing five thousand dollar shoes and a coat you could stake a mortgage on, surrounded by guys who would break both my legs if ordered to, no questions asked.

The bartender set a cup of black coffee in front of me, a second short glass of dark wine in front of Phin.

“Word is you've got Falken pickled up somewhere, and you ain't sharing.”

I picked up my cup and pretended to take a sip, put it down, thinking. I hadn't expected my possession of Falken to be secret for long, but this was setting fucking records. I realized I'd put myself in a windowless room surrounded by The Phin's men, with nothing to negotiate with. I blamed lack of sleep.

Affecting calm, I shrugged. “Someone had to get to him.”

Phin nodded, not looking at me, hunched over the bar like the weight of the fucking world was piled on top of him. “Your boss,” he said gently, like he was afraid what the words might do in the air, “sold that debt today. Few hours ago.”

I blinked, cool, dry shock sprinkling down my back. Frank sold debts all the time, taking pennies on the dollar as a sure thing and handing a headache off to someone else. It wasn't surprising. Except now that put me up against Frank McKenna—because I had Falken, and he'd sold the debt in good faith, and I'd be expected to turn the poor guy over to his new owner without complaint.

I didn't think Rachel was gonna like that.

“Who bought it?” I asked. It was a stupid question, because it wasn't any of my fucking business, but I was stalling, letting my thoughts catch up.

Phin hesitated, then tilted his head a little. “No official word from that Catholic dungeon you call a *club*, but eyes on the scene say it was the cop. The black one. Detective James.”

I blinked again. James sometimes dabbled in dirty shit; he'd bought a few small debts in the past. This wasn't a small debt. This wasn't something a police officer could hide in his back pocket, and it wasn't something his fellow cops could just ignore with a grin—this was serious loansharking, and it didn't feel right. It didn't make *sense*.

“That cocksucker's worth a lot of dubblooms to me, kid,” The Phin said after a moment. “You turn him out, you turn him over, there won't be any left for me.”

I forced a laugh. “I don't think that son of a bitch *has* any—”

The Phin turned and looked at me, his face pulled down in a terrible mask of anger, and he reached up and slapped me across the face. It was like a soft spring breeze had slapped me, but a waterfall of icy cold shock went through me anyway. The fat old man pushed a finger into my face. “Shut the fuck up before you fucking insult me. You turn the screws better 'n anybody. I been *nice* to you, kid. Made you a good offer. Brought you in like a friend when I coulda had Mo hogtie you and strip you, bring you in like a side of beef. And you stand there and *grin* at me because you've got *my* fucking fatted pig in a poke somewhere and you're gonna turn the screws on him and get all the fucking grease for yerself and yer Mick boss.” He shook his head. “No.” Slowly, he collapsed back into himself, becoming the dizzy old man I knew. The whole place was silent. I could hear the hairs on my face sizzling. Phin was breathing hard. “No, what yer gonna do is share 'im out. I guarantee you a piece of him. You got my word on that.”

I shifted my weight a little. No one had frisked me on the way in,

but everyone knew I didn't carry a gun. I could hear men moving around behind me, shifting positions, but I didn't turn to look. I kept smiling at Phin, partly because I was trying to sell innocence and partly because it was a soft spot he'd shown me, something that irritated him, and I enjoyed irritating him.

"You must be in *deep* on him," I said slowly. He'd come selling me a job offer, and I'd been stupid enough to bite the flattery and think he really thought well of me. He was just sniffing around after Falken. "Jesus, Phin, how deep?"

He pounded a fist on the bar. "Tune 'im up," he snapped at the room in general, snatching up his glass and draining it in one wet gulp. Spinning away, he picked his hat up off the bar and strode off without looking at me. "Don't kill him, but make him tell you everything, starting with the first cunt he sniffed in school and ending with where our man is right now."

I looked at the bartender, a big guy with a gut that stuck out from him like he had something basketball-sized growing inside him. He had thin white hair, a blood-red nose, and a whispery white beard and mustache that drooped off his face, yellow at the edges. He looked back at me with wide eyes, terrified. I leaned forward a little.

"I'm about to get my ass kicked," I said. "Can I get a double Wild Turkey, neat?"

He nodded without blinking, turned, pulled a full bottle off the shelf, and handed it to me wordlessly. I took it, unscrewed the top, and toasted him with it. "Gracias, mi amigo," I said, and took a deep pull.

"Sorry about this," I heard Mo say behind me. "Ain't personal."

I nodded, coughing a little. "Christ," I said, turning to face them. "I know that."



There were five of them, Mo and Mike and three others, Hispanics with long pony tails tied back from their faces, the Puerto Rican flag tatted on the sides of their necks. The Puerto Ricans didn't apologize, but they didn't look like it meant anything to them, either. I put the cork back in the bottle and gave it a tap with my fist. I held it up. "Not for nothin', guys, but the first one into my airspace is getting this on the head."

Michael came first, ducking down and trying to get his shoulder into my belly. I twitched my ass to the left and let him smack his head into the bar with some fucking prejudice as I swung the bottle up with a sweeping motion, smashing it against Mo's head and knocking the poor stupid son of a bitch off his feet. The bottle disintegrated in my hand and sliced it all to hell all over again, deep hot pain lancing up my arm, blood welling up and making my grip slick. I felt a humming inside me, like I was a well-maintained engine of a classic car, all the moving parts oiled and perfectly cut, precise.

Two of the Puerto Ricans got my arms and pushed me back against the bar with the third one coming up the middle with a blackjack in one hand and bored, bland expression on his face. When he stepped into my sphere of fucking influence I used his two friends as anchors and lifted myself up a little, kicking him sharp in the nose and making him stagger back, bloodied and cursing. My shoulders and wrists ached and my hand throbbed and I couldn't help but smile through it all. I was fucking *alive*.

With a sudden jerk, I tore my uninjured arm away from the guy on my left, spinning myself around and pulling his buddy down to the floor. The silence was shattered, now; there was yelling and moaning—some of that was me. I rolled my new friend until I was on top of him. He punched me in the face, opening up the cut over my

eyes again, blood seeping down into my vision, but I hung onto him and slammed my head down onto his nose. I loved breaking noses. So fucking easy, and so rewarding—visceral, the cracking cartilage, the spurting blood. And most people howled when you did it, giving it some lung.

This guy didn't howl. He punched me again, his fist like a wedge of granite, making my head ring, my vision swim. I brought my head up again, ready to smash it into his face until he quit punching me. Then someone hit me over the head with a barstool.