

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 9

by Jeff Somers

9.

When Rusch stepped through the doorway, she was the same slightly nervous, badly-dressed woman I'd met down in New Brunswick. She was followed by the red-haired woman who'd been with her in the limousine—or who looked exactly like her, since she was also dressed like a schmuck: baggy tan pants, a shapeless T-shirt, a ratty old gray sweater, tennis shoes. If I'd passed her on the street I wouldn't have even noticed her. She was carrying a large, cheap suitcase made of an itchy-looking fabric.

I'd managed to put on shoes and a shirt. It was offensively wrinkled and dusty from the floor, but if these mopes weren't going to dress for the occasion—the good professor had on a tan jacket she might have found on the street moments ago—then I didn't give a shit. I'd also cleaned off my one and a half chairs and put on some coffee, the glass urn miraculously unscathed.

She came in tentatively, shoulders down, and I decided finally that there *were* two women who looked exactly alike. There had to be. Or else Doctor Rusch had a serious mental problem.

I pushed my hands into my pockets and leaned against the stove.

She looked around. “You must throw some parties, young man.”

I pulled one hand free and pointed at her. "You have a twin." I shifted to point at the ginger. "So do you."

They exchanged a long, blank glance. There was no fire in it, no spark of any kind. They might have met on the way up the stairs. They were either complete strangers or they'd been married fifty years. The girl was leaving youth behind, and she wasn't pretty, with a too-long, bold nose and just the wrong amount of freckles.

"We all do," Rusch said, looking back at me. "Everyone has a twin. Hundreds of twins. *Trillions.*"

"Does Elias Falken?"

Rusch nodded without looking at me, and began strolling around the kitchen as if nothing concerned her. "Oh, yes. Although I wouldn't say he has trillions of them any more. As a matter of fact, I'd say he's been narrowed down to about two or three." She kicked at the rubble that had once been my kitchen. "Hmmp. Gas-on-gas heat," she said, examining the stove with her baggy eyes. She looked sleepy all the time, like keeping her eyes open was far too much trouble. I looked at her and pictured her in a motorized bed, being zipped around everywhere with some silly sleeping cap on, muttering lazily now and then to communicate her thoughts. "Freezing in the winter in here, yes?"

I nodded, smiling a little. I was amused. So many people either tried to hit me, to beg me, or to run away from me. "Like a meat locker."

She nodded. "Pre-war tenement railroad. People used to shut up half the rooms and live in the kitchen and living room during the winter. If you close the door to the bedrooms, the heat's just enough to keep you alive." Suddenly she looked up at the cupboard over the sink,

which now hung slightly askew, one of the screws torn out of the wall. I waited a beat, but she didn't say anything else. She just stared at the wall.

Steps outside, and then Rachel was leaning against the doorway, arms crossed under her chest. She looked good in her librarian glasses, hair pulled back, in a lush black turtleneck, jeans, and gleaming black leather boots. We exchanged a glance, and she shrugged, somehow making the gesture beautiful, graceful. As usual I wanted to touch her so badly my hands curled up involuntarily, but that was the single, inviolable rule of our relationship: that I never touch her. The redhead glanced her way, but Rusch didn't take any notice of her at all.

“Dr. Rusch,” I said, tearing my eyes from Rachel and putting them on her. “I have no imagination, so if you came here to say something, say it fast. My conversations usually devolve into me beating the shit out of people until they start saying what I want to hear.”

She turned and blinked at me. “What? *Beatings?*” She said the word as if she'd truly never heard it before, and stared at me in undisguised horror. I controlled myself. I didn't know what was going on, and it wasn't right to just start swinging out of frustration.

“Mr. Falken,” I said slowly, turning away and searching for an unbroken mug. “You were about to tell me where he is so I can find *him* and beat the snot out of *him*,” I turned and smiled back at Rusch. “Instead of *you*.”

“But—but I don't know where Mr. Falken is!”

I picked up a white mug from the floor and blew into it to clean out some of the dust. It wasn't my favorite; it had little black specs

everywhere that always made me think it wasn't clean. I turned back and gave Rusch my sunniest smile. "Then I'm confused, because that's all I want to hear. Why are you here, then, Dr. Rusch?"

I grabbed the urn of hot coffee and poured some into the mug. Little bits of dust floated on top, and I stared down at them, unhappy.

"To try and explain what's been happening," Rusch said quickly. "I'll, eh, I'll admit you *frightened* me a little yesterday. I thought perhaps the best thing would be to remain uninvolved."

I braced myself and took a sip of coffee. It was not the worst I'd ever had, even with the grit; it did not, for example, choke me to death. I'd bought it in a tin can on the way home a few hours ago; three dollars and a tin can did not, it turned out, make a good cup of coffee. "Well, since you're involved, I have one question before you get started: Does the name *Falken* enter into whatever dissertation you're about to give at all?"

She blinked at me again. "Yes. May I have a cup of coffee?"

I shook my head, leaning back against the stove again and crossing my arms so as to hold the coffee up near my face. "No." I gestured with my free hand. "Proceed."

She stared at me for another moment, then looked at her girlfriend. Dr. Rusch had been pretty, once, eons ago. I saw her at twenty, short skirts and a simple, unfussy hairdo, and wanted to talk to that version of her, make her smile. Clearing her throat, she nodded. "I am a physicist," she began, then paused, cocking her head as if hearing her own words echoed back to her from some vast distance. Shaking her head, she looked at me again. "What do you know about the Many World's Theory?"

I studied her. I took a sip of coffee. I kept a grimace off my face.

“Multiple universes,” she prompted, gesturing at me encouragingly. After another few moments, she blinked. “*Alternate* universes.”

I looked over at Rachel. I liked looking at her. She was short and slim and still had that freshness to her she'd had when we first met. She smiled briefly and shrugged her eyebrows behind her fantastic glasses.

Rusch took another breath, and I held up my hand. “All right. I've heard the term.” I looked at her. “A million other earths with a double of each of us on 'em, right?”

She scowled. “Well, *no*, actually, not—” She paused and visibly collected herself. “All right. Except, not a million, but infinite. You know what *infinite* means?”

I stared at her. After a few seconds she swallowed and looked over at the ginger again, then down at the floor. She seemed to be figuring out, more slowly than I would have imagined for a professor of some sort, that she was in near danger of having her nose broken.

“Yes,” she finally said. “Every observable,” she paused and looked at me again, apparently assessing my intelligence and not liking the prognosis. “Forget *why*,” she finally said. “Infinite universes. Each diverging from a previous timeline, some running parallel for a while, some diverging wildly.” She glanced up at me intently. “This is the field I've worked in my whole life. The theory of it, but also the *application* of it, how to *touch* these other universes. To observe them. And by observing them create another infinite set of—” she paused again. “Yes. These worlds exist. And yes, there can be other versions of us, depending on when divergence occurs. Since the set is infinite,

the versions of us *can* be infinite.” She shrugged. “The math, however, proves these 'doubles' are, in fact, finite. For some of us, millions. For others, two. For others, *none*.” She nodded as if someone had agreed with him. “*That* is the interesting data.”

I sipped more coffee; drinking this coffee was quickly becoming one of my biggest regrets in life. “I have not heard the name *Falken* yet, doc,” I said. “I’m going to be upset if I don’t hear it soon.”

“Mr. Falken approached me,” Rusch said suddenly as if it had been her plan all along to introduce the subject at that moment. “He approached me some weeks ago concerning my work, and told me a fantastic story—that he was, in fact, a different version of Falken, a man born at the same point in another, nearly-identical universe, that he was completely normal, average, a nonentity, and that a gang of people had suddenly tried to murder him some months ago. He did not explain how, exactly, he transferred himself to this reality. He did, however, indicate that he had been followed here by those who wished to eliminate him.”

I thought about Rachel telling me Falken had been dead for two years. “So you’re telling me, Falken and this other Dr. Rusch I’ve been running into are *alternate* versions? From alternate universes?”

Rusch took a half step backwards, as if she could sense that she was about four words away from that punch in the nose. Maybe three.

“Yes! Though I would use more precise terms. While I believe such travel is possible, I do not know of the exact technology utilized, nor am I aware of any practical way to do so.”

I swallowed the last of the coffee with a sense of relief, set the mug down carefully on the scorched and greasy stovetop, and

straightened up, reaching up to unbutton my shirt cuffs. “Sorry, doc. I'm going to have to beat you a little extra for trying to lay that bullshit on me.”

She blanched, her face literally going white, and skittered around to put the ruined hulk of my table between us. “Young man, I assure you I am not—”

“Assure all you want. I want to know where in *fuck* Falken is, and I think you know.” I started working on the other sleeve. “And I'm going to convince you to tell me.”

I didn't know what to make of all of it—maybe she was crazy, and believed it all. I didn't care.

She sidestepped her way towards the girl. I glanced at Rachel again, but she shrugged. She wasn't going to step in front of this train.

I finished tucking my sleeves up around my elbows, and started to walk steadily around the table to get to her. Rusch touched the redhead on the shoulder and she dropped the suitcase onto the floor and began unsnapping the locks.

“I beg a moment's indulgence,” Rusch said quickly, inching back as I approached. “I can make all of this perfectly clear.”

I nodded. “I know you can, doc. I got faith.”

The girl tossed the suitcase open with a flourish, and plucked something out, handing it up to Rusch. She fumbled for a second, and then brought a gun up, held on me with both hands.

I didn't like guns. I didn't use them; they made you soft. But I came across my share of them, and by necessity I'd learned something about them. This one was an automatic, and it looked like a good one,

though I didn't know much about make and model. I stopped and let my hands hang at my sides.

"That necessary, doc?" I said. "The only thing happens when people handle guns, is someone gets shot."

Before I realized what she was doing, Rusch extended her arms, centered the gun on my chest, and pulled the trigger four times. Each time all she got was a dry click, a misfire, while I stood there frozen in shock, completely unconvinced that it was possible an old lady from New Jersey had just tried to shoot me to death. Then she shifted the gun a foot to my right and pulled the trigger again. A peal of thunder shook the whole room and something exploded into the wall behind me as I ducked reflexively, the noise finally getting me into motion. Then she put the gun on me *again* and pulled the trigger three more fucking times, again getting just a dry click.

"As I suspected," she said. "You cannot be killed."

I surged up and knocked the gun out of her hand, intending to do more, but the shriek of terror that she produced combined with a sudden, grandmotherly cowering brought me up short. I glanced over her at Rachel, who was just staring at me flatly, saying nothing. It was one thing to slap an annoying woman, it was something else to beat an old lady. It impossible to do either with Rachel watching me.

I forced myself to straighten up. "I *can* be pissed off, doc," I said, stepping towards her. "And we're there."