



JEFF SOMERS

**THE
BOUNCER**
a novel

The Bouncer

6.

I called Lisa while Jill drove us back to her place. There was no time to waste—Ellie and Carrie had already spent three hours as prisoners.

“Maddie?”

“Hey, Lisa, I—”

“Jesus, Mads, are you okay? Are Carrie and Ellie? What the fuck is going on?”

I took a deep breath. “It’s better if you don’t know. I just need you to tell Mrs. Pino I can’t help her with Marcus this week—I’m really sorry, but I just can’t. And tell Tony I won’t be able to help him with the furniture like I’d promised. Maybe Luis Quinones has some time.”

“Mads—”

“And tell Mrs. Bekvalac I’ll help her with Andy next week. Tell her I’m sorry.”

“Mads,” Lisa said. “You need help, you know all you have to do is say the word. And I *know* you need help.”

“Thanks, Lisa,” I said. “I’ll be back in a few days.” I hung up, thinking *or I won’t be back at all*.

We pulled into the parking lot of Jill's building and I followed her up to the apartment. Trim wandered in from the bedroom, still wearing his tattered bathrobe, eating from an enormous plastic bowl. He gave every appearance of a man who had not left his squalid apartment in years. Or removed his robe.

"Hey guys," he said with his mouth full. "What are you two lovely examples of the public school system up to?"

"Need some help, Damien," Jill said, grabbing a green bag and heading back into the bedroom area.

Trim made an "O" face at me, and smiled. "Sounds like an adventure!" he said. "What can Trim get for you, Ms. Pilowsky?" He made the face again. "Don't let me find out you two are plotting crimes again!"

"Guns!" she shouted. "We need a couple of guns. And some info, if you have it."

"Guns and info," Trim said, stepping around me with exaggerated caution and heading into his grimy kitchen. "Specifics on the guns?"

"Niners," Jill said, walking back into the room with the bag on her shoulder. "An M&P or a double-S P938. No fucking Glockes."

I blinked. I knew Jill was a full-time criminal, but I'd imagined lightweight stuff—a little pot, a little light thievery. "Jesus," I said. Timelines were scrambled. You could spend time with someone, like, *all* the time, every moment of your life for weeks, months, years. You could entwine your timeline with them so thoroughly future time-traveling scientists will have an

impossible job of unscrambling things, and it doesn't matter. You drift, your paths diverge, and they become strangers.

Trim put the bowl on the counter and mimed jotting down notes on his hand. "No ... *fucking ... Glocks ...*" He leaned down and opened the oven, pulling out a baking sheet with four gleaming pistols on it. "I got Glocks."

"Shit."

Trim placed the tray on the counter. "G21s, full size 45s, 13 round magazines."

Jill nodded. "I'll need two on credit, an extra mag for each."

Trim nodded. "Sure, sure. Credit, sure. Of course. What's money anyway but a societal construct? Fine. You'll owe me, assuming whatever it is you're doing with these guns is totally safe and your continued survival despite doing things with guns and having a long-standing reputation as a girl who never met a recreational drug she didn't adore is assured. Fine. You said something about information? Trim lives to serve."

I exchanged a glance with Jill as Trim bent down and produced two magazines from a kitchen drawer. Then I turned back to him. "You ever hear of a place called Paradise, South Dakota?"

Trim began assembling a surprisingly complex cocktail from the bottles sitting on the kitchen counters. "It's my retirement plan for when I want to finally commit suicide." He picked up his glass and held it up to the light, squinting at its content, then paused. "Wait—are you idiots going to *Paradise? Paradise South Dakota?*"

When a man like Trim knows more than you do, it makes a man reconsider his opinion of himself.

“You’ve heard of this place?” Jill asked.

Trim blinked several times rapidly, then tipped back the glass and swallowed its contents. A second later he convulsed, eyes bulging, and he turned to spit the drink into the sink. For a few seconds he hung there, coughing and groaning. Then he turned and leaned against the sink, eyes red and watery. “Yeah. I used to fence for a guy who bought in. Showed up here one night covered in blood and saying his life was over, told me if he didn’t make to Paradise, South Dakota before the morning he’d probably be dead.” He pulled a hand over his face. “Shit, I wonder if Roscoe is dead.”

I glanced at Jill as she nodded her head in an exaggerated way and wagged her eyebrows as if to say, *oh, Roscoe’s dead all right*. “What can you tell us about it?”

Trim thought for a moment. “It was a while back, but I remember a few things. One, everything beyond the initial phone call had to be done in person. Like, you call and say, whoopsie, I fucked up and some kind of organized crime *fatwa* has been issued against me, I need a shitty condo in a ghost town. They say, great, we have a one-bedroom with mold and several ghosts, come on down. After that, no more calls, you just have to show up with your buy-in—and that had to be cash. Everything, cash. All the details handled in person.”

“He say how much it cost?” Jill asked.

Trim shook his head. “But he had a fucking *suitcase* of cash.” He mimed the size of the case. “You do the pseudo-math. *A lot.*”

“How was he supposed to make contact once he got there?” I asked.

“Drive up to the gate, give your name, he said.” Trim shook himself and went back to the counter, picking up a bottle and pouring its contents into the glass. “They either invite you in or shoot you in the head, I think.”

I exchanged another look with Jill.

“All right, Trimbo,” Jill said, gathering up the guns and ammunition. “We got a long way to go and a short time to get there.”

Trim offered a salute. “You’re gonna do what they say can’t be done.”

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Jill drove for the second time in a few hours, which was a testament to how fucked up I was. Normally, I refused to let Jill drive me anywhere. Even when she was sober, which was infrequent, she drove using what appeared to be about fifteen percent of her attention, constantly checking her phone and fiddling with the radio, exclaiming over dogs being walked on the sidewalk, and driving with the wheel between her knees while she did other things.

The cargo van was just a metal shell with wheels. It smelled like bleach, which was always a bad sign. Nothing *good* ever required bleach. Jill had scrounged it up from her vast network of drug addicts and parole officers, working several phones at once until someone finally agreed that they owed her a favor.

My phone buzzed. Turning away from the cargo van's grimy window and the view of Route 78 streaming past, I glanced down and swiped my thumb on the screen. A text from an unfamiliar number turned out to be a photo of Elspeth, scowling at the camera. There was no message.

A pulse of rage swept through me. My hand spasmed, and the phone suddenly bent, the screen cracking with a loud *pop*.

Jill glanced over. "You still doing that, huh?"

I closed my eyes. As a kid I'd done hand exercises, stretching my fingers, training my hands to throw a split-finger fastball because I was gonna be in the Hall of Fame. It had unexpected side-effects. "I'm gonna need a new phone."

"No sweat. I got like fifteen in my bag."

I went back to staring out the window. I thought about getting back to zero. Twenty-four hours before, I'd had a family, a shitty apartment, and a shitty job. And I'd felt sorry for myself. I'd felt like a loser, thirty years fucking old and nothing more to show for it. And now I was racing and scraping to get back to that, to claw it all back. I remembered the old dude in high school, pushing a rock up a mountain.

I started to think about my mother and father, and my hands balled into fists again. So I forced myself to think about my hands instead.

My hands got me the scholarship. I remembered sitting in the hallway of Uncle Pal's house, on a little cushioned bench right inside the front door, and my uncle telling me that they'd arranged for me to attend Bishop Caribus Prep.

“We wanted to help more,” Pal had said, hands pushed deeply into his pockets. “But your da makes it difficult.”

All I did these days was remember the weak sauce shit adults had told me when I’d been a kid.

Uncle Pal’s house had been dizzyingly nice. Mats and Liùsaidh had us living in a series of places—apartments and houses, all run down, all temporary. Some had no heat, others no hot water. Most had bugs of one sort or another. One had a whole family of possums living in the ceiling. Pal’s house was all dark wood trim and deep, plush carpets, everything kept dust-free and gleaming by an army of cleaning people. It felt clean and permanent, and I remembered being uncomfortable and itchy in it.

“Coach Hanson spoke for you,” Pal said, smiling. “He showed them video of you.”

Uncle Mick had paid my Little League fees, conspiring with Coach Hanson of the Queenies Royals. I remembered my father, who regarded any flow of cash to be his by right, was livid, but it was done. Coach Hanson had played Triple-A ball, and he took the game far too seriously to be coaching a bunch of twelve-year olds, but he watched me work out at the first practice with the expressionless intensity that intimidated the kids and their parents alike, and took me aside afterwards.

“You got hands like shovels, kid,” he said. “And you’ve got arm strength. You know how to throw a forkball?”

I didn’t, but I learned. And I practiced. And I started lighting up the opposing hitters, sending them into embarrassing corkscrews, off-balance, bats flying.

Good times. From below zero, they looked impossibly distant, now.

Presented with a baseball scholarship to Bishop Calrbus that covered the full ride—not to mention a kinda-of, sort-of veiled threat from Carroll Mick—Mats had no option but to give me permission to attend, though his sneering contempt for a Jesuit institution and education in general was palpable. Years later, after my parents had not actually died, I remembered the look in Uncle Pal’s eyes when I lost the scholarship and got booted out of BCP, having shown up to practice and games still drunk from the night before one too many times.

Maybe, I thought, I’d had this whole thing wrong. Maybe that had been zero. Maybe zero was really decades in the past, forgotten, lost. Maybe it was so far back I’d never see it again. And maybe I wouldn’t recognize it if I did.

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After Bergen City’s grit and heat disappeared behind us, we stopped at a convenience store. I took a moment to text the unknown number from the burner Jill had given me, and then watched as she purchased a heroic number of snacks, carrying them in her arms to the register and dumping them onto the counter without ceremony.

I looked back down at the phone. *Keep her safe*, I typed. *I’m coming for her*.