



JEFF SOMERS

**THE
BOUNCER**
a novel

The Bouncer

17.

We parked in the trash-strewn lot. The drive back had underscored just how far we'd gone in the darkness, and how far from any sort of civilization. It was about half an hour of steady driving before our phones woke up, hitting a signal and chirping with updates. I ignored them all while Jill got the maps up on her phone and began to navigate.

We walked down the Mine Road to the same spot where we'd stood just a few hours before. My whole body was thrumming with combined exhaustion and anxiety. Every snap of a twig or rustle of wings in the darkness made me jump. We had no idea what the place was going to be like. Crawling with an army of goons? The Outfit setting up a mobile command center run by Chewing Gum, smiling as he snapped into a cell phone and took tips from a universe of snitches and assets?

When we got to the overlook, Paradise looked about the same. Our blanket and ladder remained on the fence, surprisingly, and the front gate now had a truck parked in front of it to restrict access. Based on my jumbled, hazy memories of the night before, I expected more damage, but I couldn't see much of anything in the fading afternoon light.

"Wait for dark?" Jill said. "We got like an hour of sunlight left."

I checked the sky and did some probability calculations involving how long I thought we could rely on Trim to stay with the body before he wandered off, chasing butterflies or something. Then I scanned Paradise again.

“No movement,” I said.

She nodded. “Maybe the army of shitkickers are all out on the road, looking for us.”

I studied the place. It was possible. We’d made a lot of noise and scraped a lot of shit on our way out, we’d made them look bad, and as far as they knew we had Mats and were motoring back to Jersey. There wasn’t any hint of movement, no sign of life. The tenants of Paradise weren’t eager to leave—being inside those gates was the only thing keeping the wolves at bay—and it was the treaties between the families and the syndicates and the gangs that kept it that way, not any number of local hicks with long guns. And if they were behind on their rent, they were wearing an ankle bracelet. My guess was there weren’t a lot of staff on hand.

And I didn’t have a choice. Going back to Bergen City empty-handed wasn’t an option. If my shitbag father had money hidden in his shitbag house, I was going to get it and try to buy back my family.

I nodded. “Wait for dark.”

We settled ourselves, taking turns watching the town. We didn’t talk. I was in no rush to pick up our last conversation, because there was only one way for it to go. Paradise was a still life. As the minutes ticked by absolutely nothing happened. No guards patrolled the area, no one left their house, no cars approached. When it was still twilight, I turned to Jill.

“Let’s go.”

We went in the same way, since they'd left our gear in place. Getting up over the fence took more effort this time, because every muscle in my body ached. I landed on the other side and twisted my ankle a little, falling on my ass.

"Mediocre." Jill hissed merrily.

We jogged to the nearest house and hugged the walls, making our way through the yards—familiar now—to the rear of number 83. The back sliders were still sagging open as we'd left them. The blue light of the television still flickered and glowed. I hesitated just a moment. In the distance, a car horn, making me freeze.

Jill made a noise of disgust and stomped forward, slipping into the house. She was swallowed by gloom.

I jogged after her, hitching my stride a little, pain shooting up my leg. I pushed through the narrow opening in the slider and found myself back in Mats' filthy kitchen. The silence and stillness of the place crowded in and suffocated me.

The smell was worse.

"You really think your pops had money hidden in here?" Jill said doubtfully, poking at a paper takeout bag dissolving under a greasy leak from whatever it contained.

I nodded. "My father would have had a backup plan. He could have a million dollars and he'd still be begging you for a loan. In Mats' mind, money always flows *to* him, not the other way around."

She shrugged. "Okay. If I'm stuck in the world's worst retirement home, maybe I have an insurance sum, a go bag. Where should we look?"

I shook my head. "Fucked if I know."

Jill reached up and gathered her hair into a bun, a casual display of niche expertise I found momentarily fascinating. Her eyes roamed the kitchen, and she began walking slowly, stomping one foot on the tile every few feet. When she'd made a complete circuit, she looked around again.

"Not under the floor on ground level," she said. "Cement slab, no basement. He would've needed a jackhammer to carve out a bolthole. Walls, maybe," she said, looking around. "Fuck, could be in the goddamn freezer. Sometimes the best hiding places are the stupidest."

This I knew to be true. I was a man who'd spent two years stuffing wads of cash into a jar under the sink.

Outside, a truck roared past, engine as loud as an airliner. Probably souped up to roll coal and make as much noise as possible. The headlights swept the place and we stood very still, listening to it fade away.

Jill sighed, then wrinkled her nose. "Fuck. Only thing for it is to start looking."

We looked. I started in the kitchen, she hit the living room. The cabinets were mostly empty. I found a salt shaker, some peanut butter, and a box of saltines, some roaches, some spider webs, and a collection of ant traps, some soy sauce packets, some plastic cups, and an empty plastic pitcher. In the fridge, some beers. In the freezer, some ice. Under the sink, nothing but dry rot and a trap that had been leaking since approximately ten years before.

I moved on. In the living room, Jill was pulling up carpet. I took the stairs up to the second floor, which had two bedrooms and a bathroom. The hallway was filled with trash—empty boxes, swollen black plastic bags, clothes tossed into damp piles. One bedroom had been used as

storage, filled with more and more boxes. I stepped in, finding a narrow lane between the towering canyons of cardboard.

I remembered, suddenly, when the Quinones family had moved into The 293. The previous occupant of their apartment, Mr. Ludlow, had lived there for forty-seven years. By the time I'd arrived, Ludlow hadn't left his apartment in five, and it was considered kind of lucky that he'd died on the first floor, collecting the mail. Otherwise he might have ripened in his big easy chair for days, weeks.

The day of the move-in, I encountered Luis on the stairs, and we'd smiled and made vague gestures at each other. My Spanish was restricted to insults, and his English was restricted to sitcom catch-phrases. He managed to make me understand that he wanted some help, so I followed him to Ludlow's old apartment. I stood in the doorway for a moment, stunned.

The place was filled with crap. Boxes. Bags. Piles of magazines. Newspapers. Figurines and bric-a-brac, palettes of canned goods and 12-packs of paper towels. There was a narrow lane from the bathroom to the bedroom, with branches heading to the sink, the stove, the sofa, and the bed. Everything else was the hoarded wealth of Mr. Peter M. Ludlow, deceased. I generally had a good opinion of our landlord, Carmine, because he'd been good to me. But in that moment I cursed the motherfucker's name, because standing there I knew I was going to have to help Luis clear it all out or not be able to sleep that night.

It took all day to shift everything out to the sidewalk. During the long trips up and down the stairs, Luis and I worked out a passable vocabulary of words and expressions that proved to be quite useful. I had dinner with the raucous Quinones family that evening, understanding nothing but enjoying myself immensely.

Now, I looked at all the boxes piled to the ceiling and the idea of searching through them was impossible.

And unnecessary, I thought, because there was no way Mats would hide anything someplace he'd have to work to get at. It was his emergency fund, his Go Money. He'd have it ready, at hand, someplace he could grab in a moment's notice. Someplace a snooping guard wouldn't think to look.

I paused, blinking. I thought of the old apartment, desolate and empty in the wake of my parents' non-death.

The Master was dense with cheap furniture and a thick carpet the unfortunate color of urine that was stiff and crunchy under my feet. My parents had always been disinterested in housecleaning. As a kid, I'd been the one to take out the garbage and do the dishes, wash my own clothes. Mats never seemed curious about how his dishes were cleaned; he just placed them carefully wherever he happened to be and accepted as a minor miracle that they would later be found neatly stacked in the cabinets again.

I walked through the room to the windows, where heavy gold drapes hung, making the room dark and forbidding. Using the flashlight on the phone, I examined the hems. The sight of the thick, amateurish thread made my heart rate skip up a few beats. I picked at it with my thick fingers and bitten-down nails, slowly working it free and opening up the hem.

After a few minutes of work, I extracted a thin yellow envelope, folded in half, from the hem. I stood for a moment, staring at it. Behind me, I heard Jill walk into the room just as another pair of trucks rocketed past outside.

"Whoa," she whispered. "Your dad was a straight up hoarder, Maddie."

I nodded, turning. Her eyes dropped to the envelope in my hand.

“Okay,” she said. She sighed, pushing her hands into the pockets of her black jeans. “He was more broke than you thought.”

I nodded. I unfolded the envelope and slid my finger under the seal, opening it up. It wasn’t empty, I realized. There were two pieces of paper inside. I fished them out. One was a money band, gold and white, reading \$10,000.

The other was a piece of torn-off notepaper. On it, written in my mother’s huge, showy handwriting, was

THE CELEBRATED GENIUS ♥