



JEFF SOMERS

**THE
BOUNCER**
a novel

The Bouncer

24.

Jill transformed into a Little General, something I'd seen before in scraps. She eyed Lisa Lisa's diminutive frame—Lisa was actually shorter than Jill—and nodded in approval. Then she looked the men over.

"You ever been in a fight?" she asked.

Ivan grinned. "I grew up *here*, kid," he said.

Luis nodded and twisted his neck until it popped. Tony shrugged. "I been chased by a couple of boyfriends and husbands, over the years," he said. "I can take a punch."

She considered, then nodded. It didn't matter. These were our resources, like it or not. "Kitchen knives," she said, pointing to the magnetic strip over the sink.

"I got hardware upstairs," Lisa said.

Jill nodded. "No time. They're comin'."

Jill looked like a wreck. Bloodied, pale, her hair an explosion of loose curls that had been held back by rubber bands and random ties for so long it no longer knew how to behave in polite society. Her black T-shirt read A GIANT DOG and had been torn almost in half, hanging off of her like a mistake. The bags under her eyes made them look like craters. If you saw Jill Pilowsky

walking on the street you'd cross to the other side so the crackhead wouldn't get their stink on you.

She took charge, though. In the bedroom, we overturned the heavy bed frame and pushed it up over the back door leading out to the yard. In the kitchen, we pushed the table over the door and stacked the chairs behind it. The apartment had never felt smaller. When we'd moved in, me freshly sober and working, the place had felt enormous. After years of bumming on couches and scrounging motel rooms, sleeping in cars and once or twice out in the air, having a place seemed like wealth—even an illegal apartment with no windows. I remembered walking through it at night while Carrie slept, just wallowing in having three rooms. Running water. Appliances.

That had been zero. And here I was, staring up at it.

Now the place was crowded. The ceilings, I realized, were low. It was damp, and dim. It was fucking basement apartment, the sort of place carved out of unused square footage and given to assholes like me who'd be grateful for anything.

"Guns at the front and the back," I said.

"*La Cerdita*, old man, tattoos, take the bedroom," Jill said. Tony and Ivan looked at each other, trying to decide who was the *old man* in this equation. Tony nodded, and he and Luis followed Lisa to the bedroom. Jill looked at Ivan. "You here with me an' Maddie." She looked at me. "You see those lazy fuckers? Those are crooks used to picking up envelopes. Glorified errand boys. No way more than one or two of them is going to come through the back. Guaranteed."

I nodded. I thought she was right. The Spillaine people—aside from Patsy—weren't worth much. I wasn't as sure about the Outfit's crew. They hadn't exactly shone with quality in Paradise, but Chewing Gum was one of those ruthlessly competent assholes, so I had to assume he knew how to hire muscle.

"How much ammunition you got?" I asked.

Jill grimaced. "Seven. You?"

"Nine. Lisa's got a goddamn armory upstairs," I said.

She shook her head. "They're comin', Maddie. Right now. We go for ammo, we get caught on the stairs with our dicks in our hands."

Ivan was grinning. "Jesus, Mads, I had no fucking idea. You were always so quiet. Head down, one of those day by day motherfuckers."

"I tried to be," I said. "Didn't work out. Genetics is a hell of a thing."

"Genetics," Jill spat. "Quit feeling sorry for yourself, Maddie. You got screwed by someone. Bein' related to them is coincidence. You survive this, start over. Try again."

You survive this. I kept sinking. Zero was so far above me it was hard to even imagine it. My tiny, shitty kingdom—a job, a family, a place to live—had been reduced to pure survival. Men were coming to beat information out of me, and when they got that information, they'd kill me to settle a debt. An entry in a ledger.

Upstairs, distant, we heard the front door shatter. I felt the impact, and imagined the glass everywhere, the bent and ruined frame. Back when the neighborhood had been populated, the

door had been a necessary security measure. The kids had scratched their tags into the glass over the years, making it cloudy, but more part of the place. Now it was gone.

Everyone fell silent. Heavy steps, then. Slow. Unhurried. Unconcerned. The floor above us creaking and groaning.

The basement door exploding inward, slamming into the wall. I could picture it, the old, soft wood, the bent, rusted nails.

The basement steps, old, squealing wood complaining of the load it was now asked to bear. The descent steady, unhurried. I could feel the three of us leaning back, instinctively putting more space between us and the door.

Footsteps, gritty with the basement's stone floor wearing away beneath them. Closer, and closer. Then a pause, a moment of silence.

The door shook with sudden impact. The frame leaped, and dust drifted down from above. The table bounced.

A few seconds later, another impact. The lock held. The hinges didn't. One popped free, and the door leaned inward at a skewed angle, shoving the table slightly. I looked at Jill. She looked back at me.

"Uh, guys!" she shouted without looking away. "I think we got an all-hands situation up front!"

With a muffled howl from outside, the third impact did the trick. The table bounced backwards, making us scramble out of the way, and the front door exploded inward, hanging

onto the wall by two twisted metal hinges. Chunks of wood flew past me as we all ducked instinctively.

And Patsy was in the room.