



JEFF SOMERS

**THE
BOUNCER**
a novel

The Bouncer

18.

Trim said nothing when we climbed out of the Ruin. As I helped Trim carry Mats back to the old car's trunk, I pictured Liùsaidh's note. A final *fuck you* to the old man. He'd hidden funds from her, and she'd cleaned him out, and he hadn't known. He'd died thinking he'd gotten one over on her. And she was out there laughing at him.

No one said anything as we loaded Mats up and get in the car. Trim took his keys back with a minimum of attitude, which saved his life.

We moved down the road, dust swirling around us. I turned and looked back; the stolen truck was hidden from view. When Trim took the first left and the car waddled up onto pavement again, I sat forward and scanned the horizon, looking for signs of other vehicles.

"They're looking for a guy and a girl in a stolen truck," Jill sneered. "Not three assholes in a off-brand Skylark."

Trim's eyes widened. "*Off-brand*—? First of all, woman, this car is forty-seven percent Buick Skylark thanks to the junk yards of New Jersey and their generous donations after a series of accidents that were all in no way my fault. Second of all—"

I reached an arm around the head rest and pinched Trim's ear between my thumb and forefinger as hard as I could. Trim stiffened and went silent for a moment.

"If you're going to kill me," he said in a choked voice, "I am duty bound to remind you that I'm *driving* the car *you're in*."

I nodded. "Shhhh," I murmured. "Okay?"

"Friendo," Trim said with a sigh, "people have been threatening me because of my excess charm and toxic levels of charisma since grade school."

I released him and leaned back.

"You're the same guy," Jill said, staring out the side window and chewing her thumbnail. "You can tell yourself you've changed, but you're still the angry guy who wants to smash everything. You're still him, baby and sober chip and whatever else."

"Of course I am," I snapped. "That's the fucking point. I'll always be that guy. I'll always want to smash people in the face. I'll always want to get high and break some shit. I'll *always* have my father in my head. That's the *point*, Jill, for fuck's sake."

We drove for a few minutes in silence. As Trim navigated onto the highway and the traffic picked up, I felt my phone vibrate and found a new text from Lisa.

YOU ALIVE?

I hesitated a moment, looking up at Jill, then looked down and tapped out, YEAH. HEADING HOME.

A smiley face appeared on the screen along with the animated ellipses indicating she was typing. YOUR OLD UNCLE MICK WAS HERE LOOKING FOR YOU.

I frowned. MICK HAS MY NUMBER KNOWS WHERE I AM.

SAID TO TELL YOU THERE'S A CONSTRUCTION ON KENNEDY AVENUE, COME UP STUY WHEN YOU GET IN.

I blinked. This was Mick telling me that Bergen City was being watched—the outfit had figured out who'd come to break old Mats out of his gilded cage and were waiting on us. I pictured Chewing Gum, the guy in the leather jacket—Andy, they'd called him. He seemed sharp. Management. Someone with some experience. If they knew who I was, I needed to sneak in the back way. Old Stuyvesant Avenue was a crumbling old access road that had been left to ruin after the new freeway access roads had been built.

We were going to have to sneak our way in. There was nothing protecting Elspeth the moment The Broker and his ancient father discovered that Mats was already dead, and my inheritance was a sour note in my mother's handwriting.

I pocketed the phone. I studied the back of Jill's head, her hair pulled into two tails held by rubber bands. She would help if he asked, I knew. No matter how angry she was, no matter how I'd disappointed her, she would always help if I asked. Which made it a heavy ask.

I looked away. Who else? Mick, maybe, I thought. The old man didn't have much in the way of influence or muscle, but he still had some pull in some places in the neighborhood. And he'd always been kind to me. But Mick had always deferred to Abban Spillaine and doubted there was anything more than the occasional head's up delivered via Lisa Lisa's texts.

And Mick had lied to him. Not *they're dead*, but *they're gone*.

I thought of Carolina. She was the toughest woman I knew and I hadn't heard from her since they'd taken her and Ellie. I suspected I didn't really have a wife any more, and acid spread outward into my limbs, my chest. The Spillaines had taken everything from me overnight and given me a corpse in return, and I was going to find a way to make them pay for that.

Jill turned to look past me, then resettled herself. "How much gas you got?" she asked Trim.

"Half a tank," he said. "Why?"

"We're being followed."

"How do you know?"

I didn't doubt her. In all my time with Jill Pilowsky, every house we'd robbed as kids, every scrape we'd gotten into—every bar bill we'd run out on, every fight we'd picked against overwhelming odds just because we didn't like some guy's smug happiness in the dark light of our own misery—she'd never once been wrong about something important, something tactical.

"Black truck nightmare back there? Seen it in Paradise."

I thought of Chewing Gum, his leathery confidence. The way everything he did made it clear he considered himself the only real person in the room, the rest of us cattle to be herded, eaten, or ridden.

I twisted around and stared out the back window. An enormous black truck loomed two cars behind them. It's windows were tinted to an illegal level. I remembered it, too, now that it had been pointed out to me.

“If I have to jump a drawbridge or drive the Blue Ruin into the back of an 18-wheeler,” Trim said, adjusting his mirror, “there will be a surcharge, and it will be *significant*.”

Jill shook her head. “This guy’s good. I am impressed. I just wonder how they found us. It’s been eighteen, nineteen hours. We could be anywhere.”

“They knew the general direction you were headed,” Trim offered. “Spotters, maybe. You said they had law enforcement on their side.”

I closed my eyes. *Stupid*, I thought. *You’re so fucking stupid*. “The ankle bracelet. The invisible gate.”

“You’re fucking kidding me,” Jill snarled. “We never took it *off*.”

I nodded. “We never took it off. More than just an invisible gate, then. A tracker.”

“Why’d it take so long to find us?”

I opened my eyes and scrubbed my face. “I didn’t get a signal in that field, did you?”

She shook her head, chewing one nail.

“Dead zone,” I said. “Once we got back to civilization, some tower picked up the signal. Bam.”

Jill turned and stared past me. “They don’t know he’s dead.”

I nodded. My father would apparently continue to fuck me over from beyond the grave. I wondered at the malignancy of my parents, their selfishness. My father assuming I’d come to Paradise to *save* him after letting his son believe him dead for fifteen years, after abandoning me

to the system and Uncle Pal and a bottomless vein of angry bitterness, seemed like the final insult. Now I knew better. I would never escape the long shadow of Mats and Liùsaidh Renik.

I thought of Carolina. I'd worked hard to convince her I was a changed man. Sober. Steady. But I wasn't any of those things, not really. I was a Renik.

It was time to start acting like it.

"Hang on," Trim said, slamming on the brakes and steering the Nova into the breakdown lane as horns dopplered past us. I sailed forward and smacked into the back of the front seat, grunting and pushing myself back. The Nova rocked to a stop and stalled.

"Fuck," Trim said, cranking the ignition. "Come on, Rue, come on Rue," he muttered as the engine started coughed and wheezed.

I watched the black truck shoot past us, brake lights popping. I tracked it as it cut over to the breakdown lane up ahead. As I watched, the brakelights flickered, and the reverse lights came on.

"Oh, shit," Jill muttered. "Trim, baby, get this shitheap into gear."

"Calling Rue a *shitheap* will only slow things down," he hissed, pumping the gas pedal as he turned the key again.

"You'll *flood* it," I snapped.

"Hey! I've been massaging this shitheap into life for two decades. Go fuck yourself!"

"Gotta move!" Jill shouted. The black truck was picking up speed, hurtling backwards towards us.

Trim turned the key, lifted his foot off the gas, and the car roared into sputtering life, a burst of black smoke erupting from under the hood. He slammed the gearshift into drive and jerked the wheel, barely avoiding an oncoming car as he swerved into the lane and floored the gas. As we accelerated past the black truck, it swerved towards us, slamming into the side of the car and sending us careening into the middle lane.

Jill leaned over and came up with the Glock. I leaned forward and put my hand on her arm. Our eyes met, and I just shook my head. The last thing we needed was more attention, more police, more problems.

She made a face and nodded. “No fun, Renik. No fuckin’ fun.”

I turned and tapped Trim on the shoulder. “Big rig up ahead,” I said.

Trim nodded. “Don’t touch me literally anywhere, and yeah, I see it.”

The Nova picked up speed, making a grinding noise and shaking slightly.

“Fucker has ruined the alignment,” Trim seethed.

“Just get ahead of the truck,” I said quietly. My eyes flashed to the sign as it sped by: EXIT 1/4 MILE. I turned and looked back, picking the black truck out of the crowd of cars behind us. The Nova accelerated until it was shaking violently, passing two other cars before creeping past the truck. It veered into the left lane, earning an irritated blast from the truck’s horn.

“The exit’s coming up in a few seconds,” I said, gripping the sides of the headrest with both hands. “Take it. Take it *fast*. If you can clear the bend before the truck rolls past, they might miss us.”

Trim nodded. “If we fuck it up, we’re off this nice busy road with all these witnesses.”

“Gotta keep them off us,” I said. “Right now, the Spillaines think Mats is still alive, that we’re bringing him in. That protects my daughter, my wife. Word gets back to Bergen that my father’s dead—”

“I get it!” Trim snapped, all traces of snark gone, his knuckles white on the wheel. “Hang on!”

The exit raced towards us. Trim turned the Nova and we hit the deceleration ramp without decelerating, forcing him to jerk the wheel as the curve came up almost immediately. The tires squealed and two hubcaps went flying off. I was thrown against the opposite side of the car while Jill clung to the handholds on the door with a grimace.

A moment later we were around the bend. The road straightened out and the highway vanished behind a copse of trees and a sound barrier.

Trim let up off the gas a little and the car stopped shaking. I twisted around in the back seat and stared out the back window. I counted, *one, two, three, four*.

The black truck appeared, sun flashing off the chrome.

I turned around and found Trim’s eyes in the rear view. Trim nodded and the Blue Ruin accelerated. It felt familiar, this sudden camaraderie. I’d experienced it sometimes at Queenies with a new hire—things got tense, and you found yourself relying on someone you didn’t know or necessarily trust—or *like*—and just fell into a natural rhythm. I didn’t think I’d ever like Damien, but I suddenly understood why Jill trusted him.

“Take me home, country roads,” Trim sang out. “Hang on!”

He steered the groaning, protesting car into a sharp, illegal left, bumping up and over a meridian to pop onto the highway on-ramp heading back towards the road. Jill and I bounced on the wide seats.

Behind us, the black truck followed, appearing to swallow the curb under its wheels. I stared at it as Trim tried to coax more speed out of the Blue Ruin. It was the story of my life, trying to get back to zero. The depths had a peculiar gravity to them that kept sucking at my heels. My parents had used me as a stepping stone, pushing me down into the shit so they could escape, and I’d been trying to get back to baseline ever since.

Jesus. I’d almost made it. *Almost.*

I watched the truck slowly creep up on us like doom.

“Don’t get pulled over,” Jill said. “Don’t forget we’ve got a surprise in the trunk.”

Trim nodded. “Pray for Mojo, kids, because this next bit is fucking-A dangerous.”

“What are you thinking?” I shouted over the roar of the engine as Trim accelerated and slotted the car into traffic.

“Seatbelts,” Trim shouted back. “I am thinking about the seatbelts and how I’ve been buying inspection stickers from a guy down on Baldwin Avenue for thirteen years so who knows if they still work!”

I looked at Jill. She shrugged, looking bored. I turned and spotted the truck behind us. With no other cars in-between, it began to make rapid progress.

The car slowed down.

“What are you doing, Damien?” I asked without taking his eyes off the truck. “What are you doing, man?”

“Hang on!” Trim shouted. I thought he sounded *happy*.

The truck surged towards us. When it was still three or four car lengths behind, Trim slammed on the brakes.

With a noise that sounded like metal tearing in half, the Blue Ruin shuddered and shimmied to a stop, a trail of black rubber on the pavement behind it. It stalled, again, with a sound that resembled a sigh, an exhalation.

The truck swerved to the left, almost dancing on its tires for a few feet as it fishtailed sideways. A moment later a rusted green van smacked into it, spinning it back into the lane behind us.

Trim turned the key, and the starter made a distinctly unhealthy whining noise.

“Stay calm,” Trim said, voice shaking. “Everyone just stay calm.”

“Don’t flood it,” I said again, my voice a whispered rasp. I watched through the rear window as someone tried to open the passenger-side door on the truck, which had been warped by the impact.

“Stay calm!” Trim repeated. “Come on, come on!”

The starter whined, and the driver-side door on the truck opened as three people emerged from the green van. I watched as a burly guy in a leather jacket—*of course a leather jacket*, I

thought, *of fucking course*—climbed out of the truck. He was bald, but sported an epic set of muttonchops that frizzled out from his face like electricity in hair form. He was wearing enormous mirrored sunglasses that made him look like a cartoon character, something with a round, barrel-shaped body and enormous, blank eyes.

He glanced back at the truck and began advancing on us. As I watched, he reached into his jacket and left his hand there.

“Must go faster,” I whispered. “Must *go*.” I cleared my throat. “Pills, you might want to have that cannon handy.”

Jill twisted around in the seat and brought the gun up in one hand. “Got it. Trim?”

Trim had leaned forward to press his forehead against the wheel. “Come on, honey,” he whispered. “Come on, you’re making me look bad in front of my friends.”

He turned the ignition off and waited two heartbeats with his eyes closed.

I watched Muttonchops get closer, his hand still buried in his shoulder.

Trim turned the key, and the Blue Ruin coughed back into life. I turned in time to see him sit up and look at Jill, grinning. My eyes went over her to the passenger side window, where Muttonchops appeared, leaning down to peer in. Jill glanced at me, then spun around, bringing the Glock up.

“Oh, *shit!*” she gasped, and squeezed the trigger.

The window shattered, and Muttonchops dropped away. Trim slammed the car into gear and hit the gas, and I was thrown back by some angry physics.

“Hot damn,” Trim shouted over the rush of wind pouring in through the shattered window. “I am *good* at this!”