



JEFF SOMERS

**THE
BOUNCER**
a novel

The Bouncer

Part Three: The 293

20.

It was dark when we got to Bergen City.

Trim had pushed the Ruin as hard as he could, but it struggled to get past sixty miles per hour. It was smoking and shaking, and we were in danger of being pulled over. Which I had expressly forbidden Trim to do, on pain of having his hands broken and then splinted in unusual ways.

There was nothing to do. I couldn't will the car to go faster, and we couldn't stop longer than it took to gas up, engine left running because we doubted we'd ever get the Ruin started again. We were in a race.

I'd spent the hours sprawled on the backseat, staring at the fabric peeling off the Ruin's roof. At first I'd tried to think of what the next move, how we were going to salvage this. But there wasn't a way. Jill was right—Chewing Gum and his guys knew who we were. They'd no doubt noted Trim's license plate, so they knew him too. By now they knew the Spillaines had put this in motion to signal their intention to take back their share of Bergen City and get a seat back at the table. I'd spent enough time around Queenies, around Mick's old guard and the slick new

generation of gangsters, to know the Spillaines wouldn't suffer for it. The Spillaines might pay a price but they'd survive. They were insulated.

Me and Jill and Damien, not so fucking much. And the moment Merlin and Abban Spillaine learned that Mats was dead and we were worthless to them, Ellie and Carrie were dead, too.

My father was my only asset. As long as everyone thought he was alive, Ellie and Carrie would be okay. It was strange that after all this time my father was finally worth something.

Old Stuyvesant Avenue was purple and black, rows of empty old warehouses and dive bars leaking sludgy music. It was hard to believe Bergen had once been an industrial powerhouse, a place where people made things.

"I'm just dropping you two off," Trim said, running a red light with prejudice. "I'm not even stopping, just slowing down. I'm heading straight to the mall for a terrible haircut and a new wardrobe. My name will be Gustavo Mustache and I will be a Cinabonn manager in Topeka and I will take up the accordion."

"No one's pushing a button on you, Trim," Jill said, sounding tired. "You're not that important."

"*Pushing a button?*" Trim said, aghast. "Oh my fucking *god*."

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It looked like everyone was out on the front steps. It looked like a little mini block party, except we were the only building left on the block. I grimaced, watching them all notice the Ruin pulling up outside the yellow brick. When we came to a stop, I hesitated a moment, staring down at my hands. I didn't have time for questions, for explanations, for kindness. I sat there with the Ruin shaking and smoking around me, wishing I was invisible. That I was dead. That's I'd never been.

Miguel had told me, when you hear that dark invitation, when you want to disappear, narrow everything down. Forget about the day ahead of you. Forget about the next hour. Forget the next *minute*. Just keep moving for one more second, then another.

I took a deep breath and got out of the car, Jill doing the same. As I turned away from the Ruin, Lisa was already there, glaring at me. She was wearing a tattered pink bathrobe and she barely came up to my shoulders, but I was temporarily terrified.

"Jesus, Maddie, you *okay*?" Her eyes flickered past me for a moment. "Hey Jill."

"Hey," Jill said, slouching against the Ruin—mainly, I thought, to make sure Trim didn't just drive away in a panic with my father stiff and bloaty in the trunk.

"Maddie!" Mrs. Pinto shouted from the steps. "Where have you been, boy?"

"Come and grab a beer," Ivan added, holding up a tallboy. "We have just now realized there can't be any noise complaints if *we're* making the fucking noise."

I nodded, then leaned down towards Lisa. "I need your help," I said.

She nodded, frowning in concern. "Sure, Maddie, what you need?"

I glanced up. “Get everyone back inside. I need a little privacy.”

She studied my face for a moment, then licked her lips and looked around, stepping closer.

“Mads, what the fuck is going on? Real deal, now, fuck this bullshit.”

“Real deal,” I said, “I can’t tell you. Please, Lisa. Just clear everyone out.”

She chewed her lip, searching my face. Then she nodded. “All right. But this conversation ain’t over, Maddie.”

She turned without waiting for a response, and I felt a twinge of affection for her. For all of them. I’d lived most of my life with just Jill, no family or group or community. But I’d found something like that with these cheerful oddballs.

Lisa huddled with everyone. There were a few glances sent my way, but after a few whispered words the group fell silent. A moment later they started to get organized and head back inside.

“You sure about this?” Jill said quietly. “We should check with Mick, maybe. He’s got—”

“Can’t risk it,” I said. “I trust Mick, but do I trust everyone he’s got working for him? Everyone he deals with?” I shook my head. I thought of Mick’s side deal with Brusca. Mick did for Mick, and he had a lot of shit going on I didn’t know anything about. “We keep this tight. You, me, and Damien.” I looked up. “The 293.”

She nodded, dark circles under her eyes making her look like death. I tried to remember if I’d seen her sleep in the car. If I’d seen her sleep, period, at any time over the last two days. Or two years.

Lisa was the last one back inside the building. She turned to look back at us for a moment, holding the door. I stared back at her as steadily as I could until she turned and walked in.

Trim put the Ruin in park but didn't shut it off. The way it shook and gasped sitting there, the only thing keeping it in motion was force of habit at this point.

"Did I mention the Burying Bodies surcharge? Because there is *fucking absolutely* a Burying Bodies surcharge," he said, opening the trunk.

Mats hadn't traveled well. For a split second I experienced a frozen, paralyzed moment. This was my father. The man who'd called me *the wretch* and *an expensive mistake*. The man who'd sometimes acted, with utter plausibility, like he'd forgotten I existed and was not happy about the reminder. The man who'd stormed into our shithole apartments in the middle of the night, singing *The Leaving of Liverpool* at the top of his lungs, who'd danced me around the kitchen while Liùsaidh got made up in the bathroom, who'd winked at me when they walked out at three in the morning and left me for two days. Two days in which I poured my own cereal and went to school and did my homework and microwaved burritos.

This wasn't Mats. Not really. This was a prop. This was an old man I'd never seen before.

We wrapped him in the filthy old blue and white checkered blanket Trim had in the trunk, and Damien and I lifted him out of the trunk and carried him rapidly up the steps. Jill held the door, then raced down the hallway to the basement door. We carried him down into the darkness, past the storage lockers and the electrical boxes, past my apartment to the backyard.

It took Jill several tries to push the door open. The jungle of weeds and trees growing back there hadn't been groomed in years, maybe decades. It was a dense, spongy square of vegetation that was pushing against all four of its boundaries with slow, inexorable pressure.

We pushed our way into the jungle. Jill ran back into the basement and returned with two rusting old shovels, handing one to me and one to Trim. He held it in his hands like it was an extremely large centipede.

"Manual labor," he whispered.

We didn't go too deep. With Jill watching the door, we got down a foot or two, just enough to cover him up. It wouldn't survive the first big storm, but I didn't think the future was my problem any more. I wasn't even sure the next week was my problem.

Miguel advised watching the seconds, so that's what I did.

Mercifully, Trim stopped speaking. We buried Mats in perfect silence. He didn't seem concerned that someone would steal the Ruin, which had been sitting outside for more than an hour, keys in the ignition, engine running.

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I heard the door creak open as I was stuffing baby clothes into my overnight bag. I kept moving, gathering supplies. Reducing your life to something you could carry on your back while jumping onto a moving train wasn't easy.

“Your neighbor’s here,” Jill called from the kitchen. “She looks adorable. Like an angry doll.”

I kept packing as Lisa walked into the bedroom. I felt her staring at me. “All right, just you and me, *mijo*,” she said finally. “Tell me what’s goin’ on or go fuck yourself. Everyone’s worried about you. Mrs. Pinto’s about to have a fucking stroke.”

I tried to come up with something clever, something smart. Next thing I knew, I was telling her the story. It was the *go fuck yourself*. Lisa was one of those people, you knew she meant it. It was the *fatwa* of our people. And I couldn’t lose any more friends. Besides, I needed a favor.

When I was done, she sat there on the bed and stared down at the floor. “Fucking hell,” she finally said, shaking herself. She looked at me. “I’m sorry, Maddie. This is ... this is *fucked up*.”

I nodded, stuffing the wad of emergency cash I’d been balling up into the bag. It wasn’t much, just a few dollars I’d stuck in a drawer over the months, change in my pockets. It would get us out of the state, once I got a car. Once I got my family back.

She stood up. “What you need us to do?”

I shook my head. “Not *us*. I need one favor, and then you’re out.” I lifted the bag. “As of five minutes from now, I don’t live here any more. I’m gonna go get my family, and we’re gonna leave.” I hesitated, then looked at her. She was a hundred and ten pounds and had a collection of guns and was gonna be one of those cops someday, one of those cops that busted balls like nobody’s business. I leaned in and put my hands on her shoulders.

“I just need you to go find Carroll Mick and tell him I want to meet for lunch.”

She studied my face.

“He’s gonna be watched,” I said. “Strangers are gonna be there. They’re just going to be sitting around, having drinks, laughing. They won’t look like anything, but they’ll be watching. And listening, so get him alone. Don’t mention my name. Don’t mention Jill. Just tell him his nephew wants to meet for lunch. Then go home and lock your door.”

Lisa nodded. “Okay.”

I swallowed. “Thank you,” I managed to say. She leaned up on her toes and put her arms around me, and for one moment I just stood there and allowed myself to be held, closing my eyes tightly to keep from crying.

“Don’t worry, Maddie,” she whispered. “They’re gonna be fine.”

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Carroll Mick walked into Pirelli’s in his oversized bowling shirt and collapsed into the booth like an avalanche, mopping his brow with a handkerchief.

“Jesus fucked,” he said, turning his coffee cup over. “I got so many wiseguys up my ass it’s like a goddamn convention. I got Andy Dubsey in my office. You know who Andy Dubsey is?”

I pictured Chewing Gum, all dark competence. “Maybe,” I said.

Mick snorted. “Thief by trade, banks and freight. A fucking legendary earner. Made Kansas City so much money they had to make him management. He’s got KC’s seat at the Outfit’s board. He’s major. And he’s sitting in my office, sweating me.” He pointed. “About you.”

I nodded. “I didn’t ask for this, Mick.”

He nodded, scraping his face with one massive hand. He looked at Jill and then gestured at the waitress. “You’re eatin’ something,” he rumbled.

“No,” she said thickly. “Food just makes me sick.”

“Fuck you,” he said, smiling at the waitress. “Hey, darlin’, let’s get three scrambles here, white toast, sausage, some hashbrowns on the side. And coffee. All the coffee you got, every drop.”

He scrubbed his face again. “Jesus Christ. I got Andy Dubsey in my office.” He shook his head. “It’s like the goddamn pope showed up.” He laughed. “You shoulda seen Abban’s kid. Merlin almost fuckin’ shat himself. Got on his belly to beg for mercy faster than you can say ‘grovel.’ Truth is, he’d be in the shit except they’re layin’ off out of respect for Abban.” He sighed. “Don’t doubt for a second he blames you. You really fucked this up sixteen ways, you know that?”

I nodded. “I know.”

He sighed. “Dubs is gonna want his pound of flesh, and the kid is gonna wanna make an example of you. All you can do is hand over Mats and let me beg on your behalf. Where is he? Your Da?”

“He’s dead.”

Mick stared at me, his face impassive. His watery eyes flicked to Jill, then back to me. He leaned back. “Christ.”

I put my hands flat on the table so I’d know what they were up to. “All I need is where they’ve got Ellie and Carrie,” I said. “I’ll take care of the rest.”

He was breathing loudly through his nose. The waitress came and filled up our coffee cups, and we just stared at each other. I knew what I was asking.

“You know,” he said suddenly, “I should of done more. For you. After your shitheel parents left, I told myself I was gonna take you in, make you my protégé. And when the time was right, I would tell you what happened. But your uncle, he stiff-armed me. Said it was better if you got away from our thing, away from the streets. Said your Da had done enough damage with this life, and he wasn’t wrong.” He shrugged. “I thought, maybe it’s better. I’ll keep tabs, help out where I can, but maybe your uncle’s right. You go straight, you forget all about your criminal pedigree.” He sighed. “But maybe I should of done more. Pushed harder.” He nodded. “All right. I got an address. You’re gonna have to move, Mads. Dubs is gettin’ ready to issue some papal bulls, and your name is on fuckin’ all of them.”

I patted the bag next to me. “I’m going straight there.”

Mick shook his head. “Nah, kid, that ain’t gonna cut it. Your girl here is feral, sure, but two of you? The Spillaines ain’t what they once were, but they got more muscle than that. Your family’s under guard. The two o’ you ain’t gonna cut it. You’re gonna need some help.”

“No time to make friends, Mick,” I said. “It’s us.”

Jill suddenly roused herself, clearing her throat and sitting up. “We got friends in this town,” she said. “They don’t.”

“Hmmp. *Friends*,” he grunted, glancing at her. Then he stared at me again, chewing his lip. I’d known Carroll Mick my entire life. He was a massive man, huge, but it was all soft and loose. You didn’t think he was a threat until he grabbed you and you felt the strength in those arms, and you remembered how Mick made his bones in this town.

“Listen,” he said, reaching out and putting one slab of hand on my arm. “The one you gotta worry over is Patsy. At Merlin’s. You met Pat?”

I nodded, thinking of the chalk-pale mountain who’d introduced me to my walls.

“I seen that man take a shot to the belly and just keep comin’. I seen that fella eat a blade in his back and *just keep coming*. They say he don’t feel pain, and I believe it. He’s been with the Spillaines since birth. Was kind of adopted, raised like Merlin’s one-eighth brother or something. Which is all my way of sayin’ that Patsy is your real problem.”

The waitress arrived with three heaping plates and side dishes of toast, butter, and hashbrowns. We sat in silence as she delivered them, sliding them onto the table with polished skill.

When she’d gone, smiling, Mick slid his over to Jill and pointed at her. “Eat, you fucking wastrel,” he said, sliding out of the booth. He put his hand on my shoulder. “Gimme half an hour, I’ll text you the address. It’s my going-away present,” he said. “Because you’ll never be able to step foot in this town again.”

I nodded without turning to watch him leave. I picked up my coffee and took a swallow.

Jill picked up her fork and speared a link of sausage, holding it up in front of her face and sniffing at it. “Half an hour, he said?”

I nodded.

She dropped the fork. “Come on. Just enough time to steal a car from the parking lot.”