



**JEFF SOMERS**

**THE  
BOUNCER**  
a novel

# The Bouncer

## 22.

The gun jumped in the old man's hands and knocked him backward, staggering, while the shot went nowhere near us. Jill and I wasted some precious seconds checking ourselves, then looked at each other in wonderment.

"Slugs," she said, smiling her *can you believe it?* smile.

I turned and ran towards the old man. I needed to get that shotgun away from him so he didn't shoot us in the fucking ass as we climbed through the window.

"Fucking Viking trash like your fucking Da, eh?" Abban spat, breathing hard. He pushed himself upright and leveled the shotgun again.

I dove onto the landing. From below, shouts, getting louder. I pulled the Glock again and fired at the old man, too fast. The plaster wall exploded next to him just as he fired the pump again. He managed to keep it more or less straight this time, but he staggered backwards again, hidden for a moment behind the wall.

Steps behind me. With a curse I twisted around just as a bald head appeared from below. I sent two shells his way, wide on purpose, and turned back in time to see Jill barreling down the hall.

I heard the shotgun pump. I heard the blast. Jill jerked sideways and crashed into the windows, glass shattering everywhere.

I might have screamed. I heard my heart pounding in my ears and my whole body sizzled with sudden electricity. All the noise became muffled, yet perfectly clear and distinct somehow, like some kind of noise cancellation in my head. I lifted my arm and pointed the gun at the stairs, squeezing off three more shots and scattering a trio of Spillaine's people who were creeping up. I scrambled up and walked back into the hall.

Abban Spillaine was sprawled on the floor, his fancy jacket bunched up around him. He scowled at me and lifted the shotgun, pumping a shell into place. I ducked to my left as he fired and slid into him, tearing up the carpet. I got my hands on the shotgun and pulled it from him as easily as if he was a baby.

"Get," the old man said between wet, labored breaths, "outta my house, you fucking trash."

A noise made me whirl back towards the stairs. The shotgun went off in my hands as if it had a will of its own, and a broad-shouldered, dark-skinned guy with his black hair in a long braid went flying backwards, his belly exploding into red. He slammed into two guys climbing the steps behind him and they all disappeared.

I was still for a moment, feeling numb. I stared at the space where he'd been. I heard Mick in my head. *You'll never be able to step foot in this town again.*

"Maddie!" Jill shouted, her voice raw, a throaty croak. "Time to fucking go, princess!"

I nodded, but I felt like my body had been immobilized. I thought, yes, this is reasonable, time to go, let's go, let's turn and step and follow Jill through the window. But nothing happened. I just sat there.

"Maddie!" she repeated, dragging herself down the hall. She slumped into me, hanging on. "Maddie, come on, man, we got them out. They're out. Let's *go*."

I turned my head and looked at her. She was pale, and her forehead was dotted with sweat. I looked down and saw the red stain soaking the side of her shirt, the hot blood soaking into my jacket.

A surge of adrenaline burned through me, and everything snapped back. The sound came back, my control came back. I turned, lowering the shotgun, and grabbed her as she almost slid to the floor. "Jesus! Can you walk? Can you move?"

She nodded. "Sure, of course. Maybe. Sure."

I slipped my free arm around her waist and walked as quickly as I could to the broken window. Time to go in-fucking-*deed*, I thought. Time to find Carrie and Ellie and get in the car and just drive anywhere, somewhere. We could hash it out in the morning, from an undisclosed location. A fresh start, new names. Mick would lend a hand if he could. Damien would perform services. It wasn't zero—it was far, far, *far* below zero—but it would at least stop the freefall I'd been ever since The Broker had appeared in my own kitchen, telling me I owed an old debt, telling me that Mats Renik was alive.

Or had been. As I pushed Jill towards the window, I wondered if anyone would ever find old Mats. If one of those huge, ropy weeds that turned into trees would spring from his shallow

grave, hovering him up as it grew and spread. Or if the developers would finally settle the lawsuits and get their permits and variances and tear down the 293 and there he'd be, an embarrassing mystery for the Bergen City cops.

"Movement," Jill said, bracing herself against the window frame to stop me from pushing her through. "*Movement!*"

A gunshot punctuated the last word. I stepped back and she dropped down, regaining some of her sharpness as her face collapsed into a mask of agony at the sudden motion.

We were trapped. Goons on the stairs, goons outside.

Jill reached up and took my head in her hand, turning me to look down the hall where Abban Spillaine was sprawled on the floor, one of his leather house shoes dangling from one toe. "Golden ticket," she said thickly.

I nodded, even as a small part of me rebelled, said that this wasn't me. Because it *was* me, and probably always had been. I'd imagined I could be a citizen. Work a job, go to night classes, buy a shitty house in Greenville past the park, put my kids through some churchy school, retire and spend a few years taking photos of far away places before my marker got called in. But that would never happen. I was a guy who took frail old men hostage. I was a guy who'd killed someone as recently as five minutes ago.

Zero was a far away place.

I ran over to the old man, pulled him up, and pushed the Glock against his temple. I turned to face the stairs, freezing two goons as they stepped onto the landing. A moment later, Merlin Spillaine appeared behind them, stopping in his tracks. He was wearing a tight three-piece suit. It

was too small for him, but only just. Like he'd spent some money on it but it was still off the rack, not tailored. I noticed the neck tat, something black and spindly blocked by his collar. Underneath the ink his neck was flushed. His thick, greasy hair was combed back, one lavish curl dangling over his eye.

Abban was light and his breathing was a high-pitched, pinched whistle through his nostrils. I felt like I was becoming an expert on the death rattles of old criminals. "Let the fuck go a me," he wheezed.

"That's a mistake," Merlin said from behind his men. The two guys weren't anything special. They were flabby, loose-jointed guys with sweaty faces and limp hair. One held a double-barreled shotgun, the other a generic automatic. They stood there, uncertain what to do.

Jill shuffled in next to me.

"You just signed yer own death warrant, boyo," Merlin said. "You fucking touch my *father*? You're fuckin' *dead*."

I wondered what my previous status had been. Before touching Abban Spillaine, was on my way to Employee of the Month? Was Merle planning to send me to an all-expenses paid spa trip? Perhaps we would have been friends.

"Come on," I said to Jill. I jerked my chin at the goons. "Back it up," I said.

They hesitated. I looked past them at Merlin Spillaine. I remembered him sitting in my kitchen, kicking all of this off, and wished fervently that it was him under my arm.

I pressed the gun into Abban's temple. The old man grunted in pain.



“All right,” Merlin said, tapping one of his guys on the shoulder. “Okay. Don’t make it any worse for yourself than it already is, Renik.” They started backing down the stairs. Behind us, I heard someone climbing in through the window.

“I feel a hand on my ass I’m gonna panic like a woman and jostle his arm,” Jill said. “So tell your guys to stay the fuck back.”

Merlin nodded, eyes locked on me. “All right. Pin! Rubes! Keep a safe distance. We’ll have our chance.”

We began to descend the stairs in silence. Abban breathed into my face, whiskey and cigars and possibly animal turds or something rotten, based on the bouquet. Jill wobbled with each step with a goofy grin on her sweat-sheened face, but she managed to stay upright and mobile despite the blood that had soaked her shirt.

“All right,” I said as we reached the next landing. “Y’all give us some room, so I don’t have to push the old man down the stairs.”

It came naturally, this violence.

“You’re fucking dead,” Merlin said conversationally as they backed down the steps. “Your whole fucking family is dead. Your friends. Everyone you know. People you once smiled at on the subway. I’m going to contact trace your whole fucking life and burn you out of existence.”

Now The Broker was writing checks he’d never cash, that was for sure. I’d met a lot of people who imagined themselves gangsters, and you could do a fast initial screening simply by listening. The true threats said very little, and when they offered a threat it was feasible. It was frightening because you could instantly imagine it happening. Some hard case says they’re gonna

break your arm, you believe them because it could be done. The non-threats, the jumbo-softies who like to take a deep breath and swell up to an enormous size but were filled with hot air, they promised to track down your old kindergarten teacher and punch her in the mouth.

“You’re not giving him much incentive not to make your dad squeal,” Jill slurred. “I mean, his family’s already dead. Why *not* make your dad cry a little?”

Merlin’s face went red. “You—”

“And see, now you can’t escalate. What, are you going to kill our family *twice*? You’ve totally fucked this up.”

As we stepped into the first floor, I glanced around. We had three more of Spillaine’s people behind us—but no Patsy, who I remembered as a sort of moon that had crashed into me a few days ago. The absence of the enormous man and his gravitational tug was worrisome. I felt like he might crash through a wall at any moment like the Kool Aid Man and flick me out into space.

“All right,” I said, jabbing Abban again to make the old man wince. “Over there. Kitchen. All of you.”

“Fuckin *dead*,” Merlin said as all six of them walked over to the kitchen. “How far you gonna get, Renik?”

I ignored him. With them packed into the kitchen, we had an open lane to the front door. “You steady?” I asked Jill.

“Dead,” Merlin hissed.

“Oh capitán mis amigos,” she said. “I am aces.”



“Check for traps.”

She saluted. “Rolling for initiative,” she said, and walked over to the front door. She seemed steady enough, pulling open the front door and leaning out carefully to look around. She offered me a thumb’s up.

“All right,” I said. “Stay the fuck in the kitchen.”

I began walking the old man backwards. The whole group of them followed, keeping a steady distance between us. Merlin, I noted, stayed behind them, glaring at me, puffed up, eyes wild. The mighty Spillaines. A half dozen thugs, a creaking old house, ancient debts they couldn’t even collect themselves.

“Clear,” Jill said as I passed out through the door. “I’m gettin’ the car. Don’t kill the old man by accident.”

Abban grunted.

I stopped and stood where I was. They crowded the doorway, but didn’t come out of the kitchen. Merlin and I just stared at each other. I heard the car start up, then the crunch of wheels on gravel. I felt the car creep up behind me, then heard the sound of the passenger door opening. Guitars and trumpet spilled out from the shitty radio.

“Old man,” I whispered into Abban’s horrifically hairy ear, “watch who you call trash.”

I shoved him to the ground, lifted the Glock, and sent a trio of shots in the general direction of the house. Then I half-turned and threw myself into the car. Jill hit the gas and I almost bounced right back out again before catching hold of the seatbelt and hanging on.

Everything sizzled with pain. I reached over and shut the door. For a moment I just sat and breathed, listening to the terrifically awful music Jill had located on the radio. She was hunched over the wheel as if it hurt her to concentrate. She was doing about eighty on city streets, and every pothole threatened to send the car airborne.

“Where to, *capitan*?”

“Home,” I said, shivering with sudden reaction. “The 293.”

She grimaced. “That wise? First place they’ll look.”

I nodded. “That’s where Carrie will be.”