



JEFF SOMERS

**THE
BOUNCER**
a novel

The Bouncer

32.

We crept down the stairs. We were out of ammunition. Ivan limped, using his bat as a cane, and Tony kept breathing with his mouth open, looking like a gray, walking heart attack. Lisa led the way with her personal sidearm held down low by her hip like she'd been trained.

The building was silent. Our slow, deliberate movements seemed loud and excessive, and at every landing we tensed up and got ready for an assault. Every shadow in the dim halls was dangerous, every closed door had a group of Outfit thugs waiting on the other side, ready to pour out. But I was not going to leave Jill behind, not going to make a run for it without seeing her. If she'd survived the fall, if the branches had slowed her down, if she'd broken both legs or cracked her skull on a rock. I owed her a lot more than that, but that at least.

On the third floor, Tony broke away and walked to his apartment, unlocking the door and slipping inside without a glance back. A moment later, Ivan did the same thing, dragging the bat along the floor. I didn't blame either one of them.

Me and Lisa kept creeping. Every step creaked, and our breathing filled the space around us to deafening proportions. Her hand trembled slightly as she jabbed the gun at different noises she heard. My hand trembled pressed against her back—adrenaline and terror in equal parts.

On the first floor, the front door was smashed in, glass glittering in the industrial carpet. We hesitated at the bottom of the stairs, peering into the gloom, feeling exposed. The door to the basement was right there, but it felt like a long five seconds in a direct line of sight with the street and anyone Chewing Gum or Merlin Spillaine might have left behind to pay attention.

I gestured at Lisa to stay back, and stepped into the hall.

“You’re one tough bastard, I’ll give you that,” Chewing Gum said from behind a shiny chrome-plated nine-millimeter. He was leaning against the wall across from the basement door, one hand hooked into the belt loop of his jeans, one leg bent, the boot against the wall. He was effortlessly relaxed. He looked over my shoulder. “Come on out, darlin’, with that cannon in the air, or I’m going to have to shoot your neighbor here.”

I glanced at Lisa. She was soaked in sweat, streaked in blood. She and everyone else had done more than anyone should have for me. I nodded at her. This had never been her fight, and there was no reason for her to sacrifice any more. She hesitated, studying my face, then sighed. She put the gun up in the air and crept down to join me on the floor.

“Good girl,” Chewing Gum said. “Drop it and kick it over to me.”

Lisa complied, sending the gun skittering across the floor. Chewing Gum casually stopped it with his foot, then grinned.

“Okay, miss. Go on home, now. Lock the door, stay inside.” He looked at me. “Come on, Mr. Renik. Things have shifted on the ground, and you’ve got a meeting.”

Lisa glanced at me, looking ashamed. She reached out to squeeze my arm, then turned and went up the stairs. I didn’t blame her for that. She’d done more than most would have. And Luis

was cold and staring upstairs, a good man I hadn't known well enough for his death to make sense. I didn't need anyone else on my conscience.

"Come on, Maddie."

I walked down the hall and he swept his free hand towards the basement door. He picked Lisa's gun up off the floor and followed me down. My apartment door was still open. I stepped through.

"Take a seat."

I half-turned my head as I pulled out a chair and sat down. "Shifted on the ground?"

"Mr. Spillaine, Junior, has purchased your father's debt," Dubsey said as he sat to my left. "Gotta say, didn't think the Spillaines had that kind of cash, but who knows what they got salted away in this shithole of a city. So this is his show, now."

"You're still here."

He shrugged. "The Outfit told me to provide security, as a courtesy to our new partners. I got a couple of guys outside, making sure no one tries to skip the meeting. They hear a ruckus, they're comin' in, just a word to the wise." He shrugged a little, offering me a small-scale smile. "They don't give two shits about the Spillaines or you or any of this, now they got their money. But I was told to do this courtesy for Merle and his dad, and if something happens, it reflects badly on me. So I'm going to be courteous as all fucking hell."

Dubsey put the gun on the table and reached into his jacket. This looked casual and sloppy, but it was calculated; the gun was just beyond my reach, so if I made a grab for it I would have

to lunge out of my seat. Unless I was incredibly fast, he would have plenty of time to snatch it up and punish me. So I didn't move.

He produced a large flask, turned his head, and spat his glob of gum out onto my floor. For a split second I pitied the man who would have to explain this to Carolina Renik, but then I wondered if she'd still be using the Renik name, and realized I'd probably never come back here to claim my security deposit anyway.

"Where's your dad, Maddie?" he asked, affecting calm and easy. "That's all we want."

I shook my head. "Merlin—a known genius—thinks Mats had more money, huh?"

Chewing Gum nodded, his smile widening. "Sure does! Sure as hell *does*. He paid a premium for your dad's debt, kid. He figures, if Mats took X amount of money from a few bookies and associated legbreakers he knows about, he probably took X plus Y money from a bunch he *doesn't* know about. He's hoping to see the Y money out of this." He toasted me with a wink. "That kid's got vision."

"You know Mats was behind on the rent at Paradise."

Chewing Gum nodded. "Sure, none of the other tenants have ever hidden some Go Money anywhere, had visions of a midnight move out and leaving us holding the bag, tears in our eyes." He laughed a little. "C'mon, Maddie. Where's your ma?"

Liùsaidh. Suddenly, it clicked into place: Liùsaidh had left my father high and dry at Paradise. She'd robbed him blind—she had whatever nut was left.

In my head, I saw her elegant handwriting: THE CELEBRATED GENIUS ♥

I started laughing. It bubbled up out of me, uncontrollable, a natural, infinite resource. Chewing Gum studied me with an expression of alarm, and then he smiled, nodding, and started laughing with me.

“Your family,” he said, “is *fucked up*.”

I held up a hand as I struggled for breath. “I know,” I said between gasps. “But the ... funniest part? Is you ... thinking I know where that monstrous bitch *is*.”

I wondered if my parents would ever stop haunting me. I reached for the bottle of whiskey, miraculously untouched on the table. It had been a long time, but my hands moved along its distinct lines with an ease born of familiarity. The smoky sweet smell filled me up, and the swallow was the most amazing thing I’d ever tasted in my life. Why, I suddenly wondered, had I ever stopped doing *that*?

“Well, kid,” Dubsey said, placing his big, calloused hand on the gun, a weathered old 1911 that gleamed with oil. “Sad to say that this courtesy call means if you can’t pay the debt with cash, you’re gonna have to pay in other ways. The kid was insistent on that. Blood or money, either way.” He shrugged again, making a face that implied he was just slightly embarrassed by this. “And it’s gonna have to be kind of fuckin’ *public*, so he gets his credit.”

I took another swallow.

“You don’t have a play left. I mean, you didn’t really have a play in the first place, but you took your shot, okay. I admire it—you brute-forced a play. Well done.” He sighed. “The deal is, we’re all willing to walk away. Bygones. That’s the ruling out of Kansas City, and the kid here and his dad are gonna respect that. You give up the old man, or your mom, or the money, an’ we

part friends. Otherwise, we got to clear the ledger in other ways.” He held up one hand. “Nothin’ personal.”

I looked at him. His grin was charmingly off-center. I took another deep pull from the bottle. I believed him. I remembered him saying *a business, an accountant*. He just wanted to clear this up and get back to whatever the fuck Chewing Gum Dubsey did on his days off.

“He had to borrow,” I said slowly, teasing it out. “Merlin. The Spillaines don’t have that kind of money. So he had to borrow to buy him out of Paradise.”

Chewing Gum’s smiled widened. Like he was thinking *Jesus, this guy!* I had the strange feeling that Andy Dubsey liked my work.

I smiled. “Brusca,” I said. “The stupid bastard opened a line of credit with Esmundo Brusca. The Spillaines are his vassals, these days. They wouldn’t be able to get credit anywhere else.” I laughed a little. “When he can’t cash out on this, he’s gonna be stuck owing Brusca. It’s gonna go bad.”

Dubsey nodded. He raised his eyebrows. “Very likely, young Renik,” he said. “And I do not care. That will be a local matter, outside my jurisdiction.”

“Because the courtesy will have ended.”

“It ain’t a forever kind of situation,” he said. “Sweet fucking lord, it’s not like I *work* for these assholes now. So here’s what’s gonna happen. You’re gonna give up your dad. Lead us to him, hand him over. You. *Personally*. And if you don’t, we’re gonna kill you. I don’t wanna do that, but that’s what’s gonna happen.”

My hand tightened on the bottle I thought it might shatter. I wondered if I could manage to kill him with it. I kind of doubted it.

He made a waving gesture with his hand. “If it’s the kid—like I said: Word down the Mountain is the wife and kid are out of it, they’re officially civilians,” he said mildly. “Just so you know. Put your mind at ease. Word down the Mountain is, they’re off limits. The kid and Abban made that agreement t’ get us here.”

Alarm shot through me. Dubsey was trying to reassure me, give me the noble word that even when my brains were all over the place, Ellie and Carrie would be safe because the all-powerful Outfit had told Merlin Spillaine to leave off. But it wouldn’t work. Merlin had mortgaged whatever remained of his family’s pull to Brusca to fund this play, and when Mats Renik fucked him one more time from beyond the grave, he would go after them. I knew it. Just for petty revenge, he’d do it.

And he’d be sneaky. Just like he’d tried to be sneaky about Mats, got me to break him free so he wouldn’t be directly connected. The Mountain said Carrie and Ellie couldn’t be touched, but all Merlin Spillaine would care about is them linking *him* to the noise.

I had a bottle in my hand and I had physical proximity. And I’d sat down ready to die anyway. The dull flush of alcohol, familiar and welcome, pushed at me like wind in sails, gently urging me on. Do it, Maddie. Swing the bottle, see how far you get before they kill you.

“Hey.”

We turned. Jill stood in the doorway. She looked like she'd come back from the dead, covered from head to toe in deep, bloody scratches, her clothes torn to hell. She had the little peashooter in her hand, pointed at Chewing Gum. The Mosquito.

There was a popping noise, barely loud enough to notice. Chewing Gum's hand slapped at his neck, and for a moment he just stared around at us like he'd been bitten by some sort of invisible bug. Then blood began to pulse out between his fingers, and he made a gargling, choked noise as he staggered up, hand sliding off the 1911 as he kicked the chair out from under himself.

I leaped to my feet, but couldn't make myself move. Eyes bugging, he stumbled towards her. Jill just watched him impassively, holding the tiny gun out in front of her with remarkable steadiness.

Dubsey fell forward and grabbed onto her with his free hand as his knees gave out. He coughed blood all over her as he sank down. She just stared at him like he was an interesting bug that had fluttered through the window and landed on her, like she was trying to figure out if he was going to dissolve her with his corrosive vomit and then cocoon her or rub his back legs together and perform a symphony.

He gurgled again, his weight forcing her down onto her knees. Her face tightened as she stared at him.

"Poor baby," she whispered.

I stood for a moment, my breathing rattling in my chest like it didn't belong there, like there was no oxygen in it.

Dubsey slid to the floor, slick with his blood. Jill blinked slowly and looked up at me. She mimed doing a vague little curtsy. “You’re welcome,” she slurred, then slumped over on top of him.