



JEFF SOMERS

**THE
BOUNCER**
a novel

The Bouncer

35.

The ancient tile next to my face exploded into dust, making me wince. I turned, almost tripping over the low step again, and pulled the inner door open, pushing myself through. This is what I'd come to: Running away from a homicidal child dressed like a college kid playing Jersey Gangster at Halloween, feeling each of my thirty-one years as I took the stairs two at a time, legs weak and lungs burning. The roar of gunfire out in the street faded behind me.

I wondered how committed the BCPD were to ignoring the 293. Because the noise out there was going to take a *lot* of effort to ignore. This wasn't Macus calling 9-1-1 twenty times a day to ask how their day was going. This was Carroll Mick coming out of retirement and launching a gang war to save my sorry ass.

I rounded the first landing. I'd come up these stairs just about every day of my life these last few years. I'd come up with plungers to unclog toilets, with wrenches and hammers to kludge half-assed repairs, with six packs of beer to donate to casual dinners and spontaneous get-togethers. I knew every dip and worn spot on the old steps, every splinter on the old handrails, every shiny spot that would slide under your shoe in betrayal.

The second floor hall was dark, each doorway shrouded in shadow. For a second I considered ducking into darkness, see if I couldn't clothesline Merlin as he raced after me, but then I heard

him grunting breathlessly on the steps behind me. I rounded onto the next flight, heading up as fast as my exhausted legs would take me. I wanted as much space between me and him as I could so I could position myself, and I had two more floors to waste.

“Fucking *stairs!*” The Broker hissed from below. “Fucking godfuck *stairs!*” As if this were some final humiliation I’d inflicted on him, one final reason to shoot me in the head that had nothing to do with the money he imagined my asshole father had salted away, nothing to do with the supposed reputation of the Spillaine family he intended to rejuvenate, apparently by being an asshole to a level science had previously believed humanity incapable of.

I leaped onto the third floor landing and caught movement out of the corner of my eye. I twitched, and my momentum sent me crashing into the wall, skidding through the sticky blood where Luis had died. Someone had moved his body. I assumed it was part of the white glove service Chewing Gum had been performing for the Spillaines before his unexpected retirement.

I spun around. Ivan Blanco was pressed against the wall outside his apartment, his bat poised up in the air, wiggling. He met my eyes and winked, once.

The Broker appeared, red-faced as he took on the last flight of stairs. I nodded at Ivan and the aging punk swung for the fences just as the Broker topped the stairs and stopped, leaning down on his knees as he gasped for breath. The bat sailed over his head and smacked into the old plaster, sending an explosion of dust and lead paint everywhere.

The Broker snarled and brought the gun up, twisting around to point it into the darkness, but his feet betrayed him and he slid backwards, windmilling his arms to stop himself from falling down the stairs. The gun fired wildly into the ceiling.

“Come on!” Ivan shouted, turning and opening the door to his apartment. I dashed across the hall. The Broker lunged forward, trying to catch my ankle, then slid backwards again, cursing.

I crashed through the door and Ivan slammed it shut, setting the three deadbolts in rapid succession. We kept moving. When we were in his tiny, stuffy living room, three thunderous gunshots indicated the Broker’s preferred lockpicking technique.

Ivan hustled past me into the bedroom. I followed, finding him lifting the sash of the window.

“He’s got people back there!” I hissed, hearing the door splinter inward. “It’s no good!”

“Lisa’s place!” Ivan shouted, climbing out onto the fire escape. “The guns!”

The blanket on her bed, her collection. “I thought you didn’t need a gun?” I asked, following him through the window and climbing the rusty stairs of the fire escape.

“I was younger then,” he said, breathing heavily as he climbed. “So much has changed since the last time we hung out, Maddie.”

Life was patterns. That was something I’d learned going to meetings, sitting in the back with Miguel. *Life is shit you do*, he would say. *You do something a few times, it becomes pattern. A fucking habit. Keep doing it, it sinks in, gets into your programming. Your instruction set. Only way to get out is to change the pattern. Do something different.*

It had worked. Miguel said that bad habits, because they typically felt good, took just a few times to become permanent. Good habits were harder. You had to do something for two weeks straight, really work at it, for it to become a habit. It had worked. I’d told myself, don’t drink for

two weeks. Go to a meeting twice a day, smoke cigarettes, eat junk food. Anything. Just don't drink for two weeks.

Every alcoholic in the world went through dry periods. Every one of us woke up covered in vomit, shaking and blacked out, maybe bloodied knuckles or no memory of the last four days, and found it pretty fucking easy to not drink for a few days, a week, maybe a few months. You got religion. But without the fresh memory of brain damage, those were the longest two weeks of my life. But it had worked. Day fifteen, I forgot. I woke up and went about my day and didn't think about changing patterns or booze until three in the afternoon.

Now I was hauling myself onto the fire escape and climbing in through Lisa's window for the second time that day. My merry band of warriors had been reduced to a fifty-year old punk covered in hazy black and blue tattoos and a bed covered in random weapons, and I was grateful to have both.

Outside, I heard The Broker shouting. *Get your fucking asses up here! They're in the fucking building, you fucking morons!*

I didn't know if the muscle out back were Spillaine's or if they'd come with Dubsey, if Chewing Gum's death would dampen their enthusiasm for their work. As Ivan and I crowded into Lisa's bedroom, I could hear gunfire still going on outside.

It smelled like sandalwood. Clean and woody.

Hearing the kid on the fire escape behind me, I leaned down and swept a Beretta 92 into my hand, spinning and squeezing the trigger as he appeared in the square of the window. He ducked to the left, but all I got for my efforts was a dry click, because Lisa aspired to be a professional

and so didn't leave loaded weapons lying around. She was the sort who cleared every chamber and checked every safety religiously.

"*Fuck,*" I muttered as The Broker reappeared. I reared back and threw the Beretta at him as hard as I could. It smacked into his chest and he spun back, discharging his gun into the air again as he staggered.

My eyes scanned the bed again. I grabbed a second 92 and dug into the shoebox, finding a loaded magazine and slapping it into place.

When I swung my arm back to face the window, The Broker was there, gun aimed directly at me, and we both squeezed the trigger simultaneously.