



JEFF SOMERS

**THE
BOUNCER**

a novel

The Bouncer

3.

The dry click of the hammer froze everyone in place for a moment. Jill, laughing unsteadily, climbed off the new guy and sank back onto her ass.

“Oh my god,” she gasped. “Your fuckin’ *face!*”

Everyone except the new guy moved, surging out of their chairs, guns leaping to their hands, everyone shouting. I put my hands up in an effort to survive the next thirty seconds or so.

The new guy remained on the floor, shook.

“What the *fuck?*”

Silence. The door banged shut, and Ricky walked in. He was a middle-aged guy with a shaved head, wearing a nice but not too-nice overcoat, a thick gold chain loose around his neck. He looked around, and everyone lowered their guns. He glanced at me, then at the new guy, then at Jill. Then back at me. He studied me for a moment, considering.

Softly, the new guy was trying to compose himself, sniffing and breathing hard. I imagined him furiously reviewing college applications he’d never finished, job offers from relatives he’d sneered at, a simple life with an early bedtime that had seemed kind of boring until ten seconds ago. I didn’t blame him.

Finally Ricky finished his equation. “You got something for me?”

I nodded, reaching into my jacket and pulling out the brick. I handed it over. He opened up the envelope and peeked inside, then nodded. “All right. We good. Get the fuck out of here.”

Jill popped up and walked with me. She ran ahead and opened the door, then ran to the car to do the same, all manic energy. It was a dark energy I recognized.

Jill had been a thief for as long as I’d known her. The third day after I’d met her at school, she’d invited me to a party. I’d gone to her house and she’d climbed out the bathroom window, then led me on a long walk through the dark streets as the neighborhoods got nicer and nicer, richer and richer. Finally we’d arrived at a large colonial-style house where a real rager was shaking the windows and bloating the place with teenage sweat and dense bass lines. Kids had spilled out into the street. A few girls were frantic in the driveway, where one of their friends had passed out, her party dress riding up over her thighs.

I remember thinking, there are people who are invited to parties like this, and there are people who have to crash parties like this, and now I know which one of those I am.

Instead of going in through the front door, Jill led me around back, where she took a ladder that was lying on the ground and set it against the house. She beckoned me to follow and climbed up to the second floor. When I got there, I found a window looking in on a bedroom. Inside, the music was muffled, but I was anxious and worried. I remembered feeling exposed.

Jill remained calm, though. She began going through drawers, looking under the bed, investigating the closet. She stole big and she stole little. Cash disappeared into her pockets. Trinkets that caught her eye, too. She was careful and methodical; she didn’t speak, communicating to me via gestures and expressions. We slipped out and ran off, and half an hour later the cash she’d snagged bought us a six pack of beer and a bag of chips.

It became our thing. Every couple of days she'd call on me and we'd go raid a place. She was smart—she chose parties because they provided cover; someone discovered something missing after a party, it could have been anyone. And we were invisible. We never went in through the front door, so no one even remembered them being there. And kids who threw parties while their parents were away were usually unenthusiastic about pursuing any investigations. And she scouted: She always knew the layout, how she would get in and out, the rooms she would hit. She brought any tools or materials she would need, and my role was mainly to be good company and lend a hand here and there.

It was great fun, back then.

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“His *face*,” she said dreamily, sipping her beer.

Pirelli's was a shitty diner, but it was open and never crowded. I sipped my coffee and grimaced. It was terrible. But bottomless. This is what old age did to you. At fifteen I was happy with everything. At thirty I was in a constant state of disappointment and dissatisfaction. The drugs, of course, might have had something to do with being so fucking happy as a kid.

“Don't ever pull that shit again.”

She smiled at me. I didn't smile back. “For fuck's *sake*, Pills, you could have gotten us *killed*.”

She pouted. “You used to be fun.”

I slammed my fist on the table, making her—and everyone near us—jump. “I *used* to be high as fuck all the time,” I said, keeping my voice steady by force of will. “And *angry* as fuck all the time. Jesus *Christ*, I got ten grand of Mick’s money in my pocket, we’re in one of Brusca’s cash drops—what the fuck were you thinking?”

She looked at the table, surly. “He was a dick.”

Jill Pilowsky’s crusade against the dicks of the universe was legendary. She was determined to leave the world a better place than she’d found it through violence and intimidation.

I sighed. Taking a deep breath, I reminded myself that I couldn’t let the old Anger, which I always thought of as a capital-letter entity, win. The Anger had fucked up my life—well, my fucking *parents* had fucked up my life. But The Anger was what kept shouting *do it! DO IT!* in my ear.

Do it, Maddie. I shivered.

I had a lot of experience with self-control. First of all, I was named *Mads*. A family name, a traditional name, and a name that led almost automatically to the nick-name *Maddie* which in turn led to schoolyard taunts and the same tired insults over and over again. I took the names, because I’d seen my father, Mats, stagger home with a bloody nose and bruised ribs far too often. And then Mats would sit in the living room with a fresh glass of beer and he’d sing old songs at the top of his lungs, in love with the world.

So fare thee well, my own true love! And when I return, united we will be!

Mats Renik, the Celebrated Genius of Queenies. The simplest rule I could follow in life was the Mats Renik Law of Opposite: Just always do the opposite of your father, and you’ll be fine.

Then there'd been baseball. I knew now that the world was full of lanky teenagers who could spin up a fastball in the nineties and strike out sixteen-year-olds, most of whom would never figure out how to make it do something more. But at fourteen, armed with a scholarship to Bishop Caribus Preparatory School, I'd entertained dreams of being the next Jacob DeGrom, and coach Pirelli at BCP was a guru of repetition and training. Diet and exercise. Practice and more practice. I applied the Law of Opposite. And so I gave up burritos and pot, basement keggers and lazy Saturdays.

After that awful hot August afternoon when some fat cop with a pornstache and a personal odor somewhere between Funyuns and sweet-tip cigarillos sat me down to explain that my parents were dead, were more accurately now melted into the upholstery of a borrowed Cadillac found burnt out under an overpass near the 287 on-ramp, the Law of Opposite had been repealed. I free-fell out of Bishop Caribus, out of school entirely, out of everything and into meth and coke, Adderal and Oxy, whiskey and the occasional wine cooler. For variety.

And then, crawling back, I'd had to give it all up all over again. You start to see how life is all echoes and reflections. It was repetition and training again. Go to the meetings. Drink the bitter coffee and eat the stale pastries. Spill my guts, then go out and drink more coffee and eat greasy slabs of eggs and buttery toast until my hands shook and my cholesterol was dangerously high. Had to stop smoking, because every cigarette tasted like whiskey with a beer chaser, and my hands shook even more. I had to do a factory reset on my phone to purge all the phone numbers.

Well-meaning assholes sometimes wondered why I didn't get my GED, go back to school. Meanwhile I was going to two, three meetings a day, becoming intimately familiar with church basements and public school auditoriums, the burnt-coffee smell of the former and the jock strap

stink of the latter. And every day I'd controlled himself, every day I'd walked past bars and parks where I knew you could score, stayed awake after sleepless nights in my car, alert for police patrols.

All that just to get back to zero. I didn't go to meetings any more, but I knew I'd probably find myself there again eventually.

"I'm thirty-one years old," I said, keeping my voice level. "I don't have a fucking high school diploma. I work as a bouncer and a sometime courier for a broken-down old gangster owns a bar. I got a two-year old kid and a wife who won't be amused she finds out I did this or that I took *you* with me. Help me out here."

She nodded, dragged her arm across her nose and wiped her eyes, looking away. "I'm sorry. Okay? It was stupid."

"All right."

She looked back me, eyes rimmed red. Then she smiled slyly. "How is the Shrew, anyway?"

"Don't call her that."

They tell you, in the programs, to avoid romantic relationships for a year. They tell you that you're too unsettled, your sobriety too fragile. They tell you that circumstance generally means that anyone you hook up with in that first year is also working the program, and the worst thing two addicts can do is get involved before they're fully baked. And it's even worse if you're attending the same meetings.

Carolina wasn't attending the same meetings. She wasn't even in the program. I met her on my first day working the door at Queenies. She was behind the bar, a short, skinny woman with

dark hair patterned with slashes of blue, a sleeve of tattoos running up one arm, an ability to pour a dozen shots of tequila in one graceful motion, with minimal spillage.

I'd watched her from afar. I knew that she would never pay me a moment's attention. I watched her whirl and spin, pour and slap. I watched her do shots with customers with a grin, and felt a pang of loss because I'd burned that pleasure circuit so badly in myself there was no going back.

My first night, Carroll Mick had obviously given me an easy shift to get started, to get acclimated. Only a couple of hard cases to 86, no serious crowd control issues to worry over. I had ample time to admire her, ample time to convince myself there was no way. When the goon made a grab at her, a clumsy lunge across the bar, there was an alternate universe where I rushed to her rescue and was her hero. It wasn't *this* universe, which found me halfway there when she side-stepped the asshole, took hold of his ear, and walked him down the length of the bar as he winced and bleated, thick arms waving in the air. When she was finished depositing him at the front door, the whole place erupted into applause, and she turned the walk back to her post into a strut.

And when she'd looked at me, I'd realized I was staring at her with a goofy smile on my face, and she smiled back. There was no bolt of lightning or moment where I knew it was love. It was only later, when we were established, when she was pregnant and we were married, that the moment became clear. By that time, I felt like I knew Carolina Mueller better than anyone I'd ever known in my life, with the possible exception of Jill Pilowsky.

Jill softened. "How's Ellie?"

I smiled a little. “Adorable. My one comfort is that she doesn’t appear to have inherited any of the Renik genes.”

Jill picked up her beer again. “Mats and Liùsaidh sure did a number on you,” she said, peeling at the soggy label.

I nodded. “Funny thing is, I knew they were useless when I was a kid. Fucking *knew* it, and was okay with it. Mats would drink every dime away and get caught up in these stupid schemes, get arrested. Ma would disappear for days, for weeks, then show up again like nothing happened. I raised myself, and I was doing a good job of it.”

She nodded. “The prep school,” she said. “You were going to be a big deal.”

“And then they got themselves killed, and fucked everything up.”

“You ever tip to what they did?”

I shook my head. Being burned up in a dumped car was a message. It was a button, pushed with determination and prejudice. “Mats was always scheming,” I said. “He thought he was a genius. He thought he could get over on everybody.”

The waitress slid two platters onto the table: A cheeseburger for Jill, a BLT for me. A plate of fries in the middle. It was ancient custom when Jill helped with my occasional minor-league criminal jobs.

She raised her beer. “To useless fucking parents, and the damage done.”

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I'd once tried to explain Mats to Carolina.

"Imagine someone really smart," I'd said. "Like, a genius. Can do complex math in his head, remembers everything he reads. Now imagine they're funny, too, and kind of charming."

"So, the opposite of you," she said with a snort. She traced one finger along my chest. "Sounds awful."

I'd smiled. I remembered smiling. "Now imagine he's a degenerate gambler. Imagine he's a drunk. Imagine he drinks this sweet wine, cream sherry—tastes like sugar went bad—by the fucking bucketful—won't touch anything else. No whiskey for Mats, no beer, no regular wine. Cream fucking sherry. He never holds a steady job once in his whole life. But he's so fucking charming people keep giving him second and third chances, even people he already owes money to."

"So ... an asshole."

The smile had disappeared, and I'd nodded, feeling the old corrosive Anger singing in my veins again. "Now imagine he tells you he can't bear to stay in one place, that he's a wanderer, so he disappears for weeks at a time and leaves you with your psychopathic mother, then comes home with his pockets full of hundred dollar bills and bottles of pills and your parents disappear for a couple of days and you have to feed yourself and go to school all on your own."

Carolina said nothing.

“And somehow, when teachers and neighbors call CPS and people show up to investigate, he charms them. He sings and he dances and somehow—*some fucking how*—the report always leaves him in charge. And he has this power everywhere. People who should punch him in the nose just smile and wave their hand—”

I remembered lifting one tired arm and waving my hand around in a lazy pattern.

“—and say, that’s just Mats. Good old Mats, the celebrated genius of Queenies.”

“I’m sorry.”

“So am I,” I’d said. She wanted to get it. Everyone wanted to understand. But unless you’d grown up with Mats and Liùsaidh, you couldn’t.

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The drive back to The 293 was silent. Jill nursed the last beer as she drove, and I was too tired to admonish her. I was so tired I bit my cheek to keep myself from falling asleep. I figured there would be fallout from Brusca in the morning, but I’d worry about it then.

“We got a problem,” Jill said as we cruised to a stop outside my building.

I turned and followed her gaze. The front door, thick glass, had been smashed in. The vestibule door hung open on warped hinges. Lisa Lisa and Tony Butageri stood outside, talking animatedly.

I was out of the car and moving fast before Jill could say another word. Vaguely, I heard the other door slam shut.

“Maddie!” Lisa shouted as I passed them. “Wait—!”

I burst through the smashed door and bounded for the basement door. I took the stairs two at a time and almost rolled down the last few, crashing into the wall. I righted myself and ran past the storage areas and the breaker boxes.

My apartment door was open.

I stopped just outside and listened. Then I stepped forward.

The Broker sat at my kitchen table. He had a glass of water in front of him.

“Mads Renik!” he said, smiling. In my peripheral vision I saw someone step out of the bathroom, behind me and to my right. “Have seat. Let’s talk about your father.