



JEFF SOMERS

**THE
BOUNCER**
a novel

The Bouncer

4.

I charged, hands balling up into fists. I didn't get more than two steps in before gravity shifted in a strange way and the floor sawed away from me as someone plucked me up by my coat collar and casually tossed me against the wall.

I saw stars and hit the floor. For a moment my limbs wouldn't respond to my commands, which were all variations on *kill that asshole*.

With a screech, Jill flew into the kitchen and leaped up onto Patsy, the enormous man who'd just given me my physics lesson. Small, wiry, and stoned out of her mind, she clambered onto his back and wrapped one thin arm around his thick neck. The big hairless goon was wearing a big overcoat and baggy pants and a shirt made—incredibly—for a much larger man. For a moment, all I could hear was the ringing in my ears and her soft grunts as she had what seemed like zero impact on the big man's existence. She was like a single fly annoying an elephant, and Patsy endured it stoically, with the occasional grunt and twitch.

"Maddie," The Broker said, snapping his fingers. "You still with us?"

I climbed to my feet and swayed for a moment. "Yeah," I said. "Okay."

He brightened. “Good! Good. You gonna behave, Maddie? Because even with that bitch makin’ him miserable, Patsy here can still teach you another lesson. Though it’s his sacred habit that if he has to teach you *twice*, he breaks something.”

I nodded. Jill started to breath heavy as she continued to try to make Patsy notice her. He finally reached up behind his head to try and catch hold of her, but it seemed half-hearted. Like he was making peace with the idea that this was his life now, that for next few decades he would do everything with a tiny woman slapping at his face.

“You should know,” the Broker said, holding up his phone so the huge screen faced me, “that if you do actually manage to so much as touch me despite Patsy’s efforts, it won’t go well for them.”

I stiffened. Adrenaline washed the ringing and buzzing away, and I vibrated with barely-controlled rage, my knuckles popping as my hands balled into fists. On the screen Carolina held Ellie. Carrie’s face was wet, and she clutched our daughter to her so tightly it looked dangerous.

I swallowed a ball of bile and forced my hands to relax. “Okay,” I said.

He brightened. Patsy finally managed to grab hold of one of Jill’s arms and plucked her off his back like she weighed nothing, dashing her down on the floor hard enough to make everything in the kitchen jump.

“Ooh,” she slurred into the floor. “Fuck.”

“Good! Have a seat.”

His cologne was powerful stuff. It tickled my nose and made me want to find out if it was flammable. I'd never had the pleasure of getting to know Merlin Spillaine personally, but I was an Asshole Sommelier, thanks to my shitty parents, my lively orphanhood, and my time working at Queenies. I saw all kinds at the bar—the wannabes, the could-bes, and the dangerous sorts. They were hard to tell apart, sometimes, but I'd cracked the code. The wanna-bes were forever telling you what they were going to do, and never doing it. The could-bes never said a word, playing it close to the vest, but did plenty. The dangerous ones did both.

He was the dangerous sort. It was the high-octane quality of his muscle—Patsy wasn't cheap. It was the professional approach—quiet, patient, waiting for me in my own fucking apartment.

“My father's Abban Spillaine,” he said. “My father used to run this shit town. Used to be pals with your creaky old friend Carroll Mick, too. Better said, Mick used to work for my Dad, back in the day. Only reason he's got that dive is because pop gave it to him, gave his blessing.”

I didn't say a word. The kid was right. Abban Spillaine was the last of the old legends, the head of the Morning Star Gang that had once pretty much ruled Bergen City. All the Irish gangs had dried up, been supplanted by new blood, but Abban still had some pull because he still had a list of judges and cops in his pocket.

I remembered Carroll Mick talking about Abban. Mick and his buddies called themselves the Prostate Gang, all of them over sixty and some in their eighties, tough guys who needed canes and prescriptions to get through their days. I'd always thought of Abban as one of them, a frail old guy with a fancy cane and a habit of getting out of breath any time he moved.

“All right, so we understand who *I* am in reference to you,” the Broker said, leaning forward. “I am the sun in the sky and you are another bug crawling along the ground. Okay, good. We understand each other.” He glanced at the chair across from him and kicked it out from under the table. “I said, have a seat.”

Forcing myself to breathe, I sat down like a lead weight dropping from a vast height.

“You’re doing great,” he said. “Really spectacular. This won’t take long.” He leaned forward. His breath smelled like bubblegum. “My father is a great man, but he got old. He let things slip. He let the fucking animals nibble away his kingdom.”

I didn’t say anything.

The Broker leaned back. “Now I got the keys to the kingdom. It’s a fucking *shrunk* kingdom, but I got plans. It’s not too late to put my family back on top where it belongs. So I went over the books, looking for crumbs. And I found a thread and started tugging at it, and your father fell out.”

I didn’t say anything. Mats Renik was at the end of a lot of fucking threads. When the man died half the criminal economy of Bergen City took a hit.

“There’s a lot of red with your father’s name on it,” the Broker said. “It’s a *big* number, not because your dad was a big dick, but because he was a fucking master at being a shitheel. Let me tell you, he was good. A grade-A grifter, him and your mother. They were *masters*. So what Mats did was, he went around to every bank in town at the time—my father’s, the Puerto Ricans, the Joon-Hos, the Bianchis—and he hits every single one of them up for a big loan. Takes the murderous juice on each one, smiling. No worries. Tells each one a different story, a different

tale of woe. And he walks away. And when he gets baked in that Caddy, it sells. Everyone knew Mats Renik was gonna get murdered eventually, right? And here we are, fifteen years later, and they've all still got this stain on their books."

I tried to control my breathing. Miguel used to say, *don't worry about shit you can't control*. Even at the time, shivering from the desire to get high, I understood that some people found comfort in the idea that they were powerless. But I wanted to ask him what you did when suddenly you couldn't control *anything*. What would an astronaut do if she got shot into the inky black, low on oxygen, spinning out into the infinite with no thrust, no way to change her velocity? What can you do aside from scream?

The Broker sighed. "You believe that shit? Your dad, man. A legend." He shook his head. "Then I have a bright idea. Like I said, my father let things slip, but I'm taking it back. I'm taking it *all* back. And to do that I need to remind people who the Spillaines are. And so, I need money."

He smiled. "I went to college," he said. "Business. So I know numbers. For money, I start digging. Like I said, crumbs. That's what my fucking father left me to work with. Okay, he had to earn his way, so do I, that's fair. So I start digging. And I come across this. I come across Mats Renik, genius, in everybody's books. Small numbers, medium numbers—but a *lot* of them, and long overdue." He smiled, putting his hands up. "So I buy them. I buy *all* your father's shitheel debts. Pennies on the dollar, because who wouldn't want to dump an ice cold debt on some idiot?"

"My father's dead."

The Broker leaned forward. “Is he?”

All the air in the room seemed to turn into hot gelatin.

“See,” the Broker said, lifting one gloved hand up and tracing some unknowable pattern in the air, “the day your father and mother—that last week, they racked up a shitload of debts. They hit every shark and numbers man in the neighborhood, and a few outside the bubble, too. They ran up a shit ton of credit. *A shit. Ton.*” He waved his hand around lazily. “And then *poof!* they got all burned up. Which was convenient.”

I realized my hands were fists again.

“My father’s dead,” I said tightly. “My mother’s dead. I’m an orphan.”

The Broker’s face pulled into a comical frown as he nodded. “It’s all very tragic. Except, they’re not. They pulled a grift, Maddie. They ripped off every shark in the city and then they bought a get out of jail free card and took off.”

I shook my head. My brain was full of static. “No.”

The Broker nodded. “Yep. So, the deal is, the debt is live. It’s retroactive, too, which means the juice on it is fucking *major.*” He pointed one finger at me. “Your dad stole from us. From a lot of people, but we own the debt now, so from *us.* You got a couple of options.” He stood up. “One, you can scrape up the cash and make the debt right. But, seeing as you’re a shithead working as a bouncer at a shitheel bar, I doubt you’ve got the assets for that. Sorry.”

He shot his cuffs. “Two, you can go get me Mats Renik. Go bring your father back to face his music. Bring whatever’s left of the money he took from us, and I’ll consider a public execution

as payment in full. It'll show everyone around here that the Spillaines are back in business and not to be fucked with."

He began walking to the front door. I didn't turn to follow him. "Three," he said, "you can do nothing and we'll kill your family. It's up to you, Maddie. You got a day to figure it out."

My hands were white-knuckled and trembling. I wanted to tear the kitchen apart with my bare hands and beat him to death with a table leg. I thought of Carolina and Ellie, her terrified face on his screen. "Wait!" I said, pushing the words between my teeth. "Wait," I repeated, trying to breathe. "I don't know any of this. I don't know where he is."

The Broker snorted. "Oh, we know *exactly* where he is. That's the problem. Go ask your Uncle Mick. He'll tell you. Your father's in Paradise."