



JEFF SOMERS

**THE
BOUNCER**

a novel

The Bouncer

5.

For a moment it was just me and Jill. She was sprawled on the floor, blood covering her face from her upper lip over her chin. She was breathing loudly through her mouth.

“I’m sorry,” she gurgled, coughing. “I tried to—”

I nodded. I stared at the seat where the Broker had been. The silence of the place was horrifying. The apartment was small and never quiet, filled with Carrie and Ellie’s voices, their movements, just the sense of their presence.

“Mads?”

Lisa. I heard them coming into the apartment, all of my neighbors. Then Lisa was next to me, kneeling on the floor. “Maddie? You okay?”

“What happened, man?” Ivan asked.

“Is Carrie okay?” Mrs. Pino asked.

“Maddie?” Lisa said, putting her hand on my arm. “Maddie, talk to us.”

I swallowed. I was angry. Angry at everything, and everyone. Angry at my neighbors, who didn't stop this. Who were here when Spillaine's people got here and didn't stop them.

"You know everyone in this building loves you," Lisa said, whispering. "You hold this building together. When they started tearing down everything on the block, half of us were gonna move, just get out, but ... I don't know, man, you make it seem possible. Whatever's going on, say the word and you got neighbors will stand with you."

"I'll talk to you later," I managed to say. The words came from far away. Outside, the sun was rising.

"Maddie—"

"Lisa," I said, grabbing her arm and looking at her. "Get everyone the fuck out of here."

She winced, and I forced myself to let go. She stood up. "Okay, okay, Maddie." She stood for a moment, rubbing her arm, then turned away. I heard her soft voice in a half dozen whispered conversations as she herded everyone out of the place, their concerned voices fading away.

Then it was just me and Jill again. "I'm sorry," she repeated. "I'm fuckin' *sorry*, Maddie."

I nodded. I felt like I was filled with lead. A moment before I could have torn the whole place apart. Now I slumped in the chair and didn't think movement was possible. I thought of Ellie. She was a special kid—everyone thinks their kids are special, but Ellie was the sweetest, quietest, happiest kid on the planet. She just giggled and smiled her way through every day. Everything delighted her. She had none of Carrie's hard edges or my rage, none of our bad moods.

Ellie, naming things. She liked to name things. She would run up to you with something, some random thing that had attached itself to her sticky hands via magic and the weak forces of the universe. She would hand it to you and smile and declare it was a *baba*. Or a *jujuter*. Or a *bingleberry*. And then she would laugh uproariously and run off on her tiny legs.

The idea that she might be spoiled, damaged, by these assholes sent a surge of anger through me again. I stood up, knocking the chair backwards.

I walked over to the sink and knelt down. Opened the cabinet and peered inside. The cleaning supplies, the little red bucket, the extra rolls of paper towels were all there. Had not been touched. I nodded, stood up.

“Come on,” I said, reaching down and grabbing Jill’s arm to pull her up.

“Where are we going?” she asked, dragging an arm across her bloody face.

“To go see my Uncle Mick.”

####

I remembered Carroll Mick, Uncle Mick, waiting for me after school. Taking my bookbag and walking with me. Fourteen years old, I wasn’t sure how to roll with it. On the one hand, only babies got picked up and walked home from school. On the other hand, despite his bowling shirts and enormous pot belly, Uncle Mick was a legit gangster, which was cool.

“Kid, your parents,” Mick said. “They’re gone.”

Later, I wouldn't remember how I got all the details, the burned-out car, Mats and Liùsaidh identified from dental records. The rest of the day—and most of the days to come—were a blur. But I remembered Mick saying *they're gone*.

“Your aunt Mary and your uncle Pal are gonna take you in,” Mick went on. “You’re gonna stay with them, at least for a while.”

I remembered being confused by it all, but recognizing the tone in Mick’s voice, even though he’d never heard it before. The tone was Serious Business, the tone adults used when they didn’t want any wiggle room around what they were saying.

“How long?” I’d asked, thinking of Uncle Pal’s small house that smelled like licorice, and the plastic on the furniture. “How long do I have to stay with Uncle Pal and Aunt Mary?”

Everyone named Mary. Mary, Elizabeth, Anne. All the girls with normal names, all the men with these ridiculous Danish names.

“For a while, kiddo,” Mick had said. “Because, like I said, you parents, they’re gone. And they ain’t comin’ back.”

After all the excitement, all the people I had to deal with, all the arrangements I had to make, I asked Uncle Pal if I could go back to the apartment. The latest shithole Mats and Liùsaidh had called our home. Alone, I said, I want to pick up some things, and have a moment to myself. I was still Mads Renik, Remarkably Mature Child who hadn’t inherited his parents’ insanities, so Uncle Pal agreed. Drove me there and waited in his big boat of a car, told me to take all the time I needed.

I walked through the place. It was a glorious mess, as always. No one in my family considered housekeeping to be a virtue.

I walked around in a daze. We'd only lived in this tight, hot place for a year, maybe thirteen, fourteen months. But it felt like home to me. I had my own room, for a change, and I'd spent a lot of time decorating it. New York Mets posters on the walls, pity me. Some books, lined up neat on the windowsill. My little twin bed, crisply made.

As I walked around, I realized I didn't really want anything.

I went into their bedroom. It was as small as mine, but they'd gotten a full bed in there, just big enough for the two of them to squeeze onto. My parents slept like animals, on top of the covers, sprawled, panting, mouths open. I walked around picking up the cheap jewelry and putting it down again, my father's odd collection of pretty stones, his chains with crucifixes, his cufflinks despite not owning any suits.

The drapes. Somehow, I noticed how the drapes had been hemmed—ugly black thread, too thick for the job. An unsteady, hackish job, and one of the threads already working loose. And I noticed something peeking out from the loose hem, something working its way out. I tugged at the thread, bored, numb, and worked the hem open to reveal money. Cash. A wad of bills.

A few more minutes work, and I'd undone the whole set of curtains, and a pile of bills lay on the floor. My parents' emergency stash, wrinkled currency—nearly two thousand dollars, once I'd sorted and counted it. I found a used old envelope, a sickly yellow color, and pushed the money into it. Folded it over and pushed it into my pocket. My inheritance, I thought. It was perfect: Soiled old money, hidden badly.

Fifteen years and change later, I thought about the words while Jill drove the Ruin over to Queenies in the dull morning light. *They're gone*, Mick had said.

Not, *they're dead*.

####

Queenies was open. Mick never actually locked up; he let the staff hang out as long as they liked, and in the morning the Prostate Gang showed up to drink coffee and read newspapers. Mick usually lingered, going home around nine or ten and showing up again in the afternoon. He liked to say that Queenies gave an old retiree something to do.

He was at the bar, reading glasses perched on his nose. All the old duffers were cackling at something, a roar of old-school laughter. I walked past them briskly. Jill trailed me like exhaust. I imagined her leaving bloody footprints on the floor as she sniffled and gasped, trying to breathe through her own blood.

“Hey, kid,” Mick said, laughing as he looked up at me. “What’s—”

“I just had a visit from Abban Spillaine’s kid,” I said. “He broke into my apartment and took Carrie and Ellie.”

The old man stared at me. Carroll Mick came up a stevedore on the old docks, and he had the wide, bulky build of a man who’d once been made of muscle. His face was a box, jowly now,

dominated by the caterpillar-like eyebrows that were still jet black even though his thin, long hair was salt and pepper.

He stared at me for a moment. Then he glanced over my shoulder. “All right!” He shouted, looking around. “Everyone out. Bar’s closed.”

There was a dull roar of protest. Mick stabbed out his cigar and stood up from the stool with a grunt. “Out!” he shouted. “Every fucking one. We’re shut.” He turned to me. “My office. Get her cleaned up. We’ll talk.”

I studied him for a moment, then nodded. I took Jill by the arm and led her towards the back. She moved like a rag doll, shuffling along without complaint. I brought her to Mick’s tiny office crowded with papers and ancient coffee cups. I pushed her down into one of the chairs facing his enormous old metal desk.

“Be cool,” I snapped. “Be quiet.”

She nodded, holding up one hand as if to ward me off.

Mick walked in. “Shut the fuck up,” he said. “Let me talk.”

“The Abban kid has my *daughter*, Mick,” I said. “I’ll fucking *talk*.”

He jabbed a finger at the chair next to Jill, his fleshy upper arm jiggling. “Sit the fuck down and listen!” he snarled. My hands clenched and unclenched. Then I sat down.

He nodded, and dropped into the big chair behind the desk. He took a deep breath and dragged both hands down his face. Then he leaned back, chair creaking. “All right,” he said. “Tell me what happened.”

I wanted to rip the desk off the floor and smash it to pieces. Instead, I took a deep breath and told him the basic story.

“Merlin Spillaine,” Mick said unhappily when I’d finished. “Fuck, I thought Abban decided to freeze him out, force him to do his own thing.”

I glanced at Jill. She frowned and mouthed the word *Merlin*?

“Are my parents alive, Mick?”

He scowled, looking at his fingernails. Then he sighed. “All right, kid. I’m sorry.” He looked at me. “Yeah. As far as I know, they’re alive.” He looked away. “Your dad asked me to keep you in the dark, because of this exact situation. I’m sorry, Maddie. I saw the wisdom of it when you were fourteen. Maybe I was wrong.”

I worked my mouth, but for a moment I couldn’t make any words come out. I’d pushed any thought of Mats out of my head the moment I identified it, or tried to. My mother, too, who I remembered as a darkly cheerful monster, a woman who had something cutting to say about everyone the moment they left the room, a woman who was never particularly impressed by anything, who was always dissatisfied, everything cheap and ugly. A woman who somehow magically made it very, very obvious that she would say something cutting about you the moment you left the room, as well. I remembered never being settled with my mother. Always on edge.

But with Mats, there’d been Queenies.

Liùsaidh had a nick-name for everyone, and her mean-spirited nick-name for her husband was Mats Renik, The Celebrated Genius of Queenies Tavern or, more often, just The Celebrated

Genius. Mats spent a lot of his time at Queenies, soaking up cheap drinks and making deals, borrowing money, laying bets, and accepting freelance burglary jobs. He enjoyed lecturing everyone there, imagining himself well-read and erudite. My father had once glanced in the general direction of a library, and that combined with his fascination with documentaries on cable TV made him think he was a self-taught genius.

Sometimes, Mats would scoop me up and take me along. I remembered the thrill of walking into a place like Queenies, usually reserved for adults, and being greeted with solemn politeness by Carroll Mick and the others. The bartenders doted on me, giving me all the free sodas I could drink, and the other afternoon patrons would press quarters into my hand for the video games and the jukebox. I would sit and sip my sodas and watch my father make the rounds, and if things were going well Mats would often glance over and wink, or even call me over to be introduced.

At Queenies, I'd felt settled with The Celebrated Genius.

"Where's Paradise?" I finally croaked.

"It's a town," Mick said, pulling a bottle of whiskey out of his desk drawer and setting it in front of himself. "In South Dakota. Called Paradise."

Next to me, Jill pulled out her phone and did a decent imitation of Jill Pilowsky, aged sixteen, in Algebra II.

Mick produced three not particularly clean glasses in another drawer and slopped whiskey into them. He passed the glasses to Jill and me. I stared down at mine for a moment, jaw

bunching, breathing in the peaty smell. Then I slid it over to Jill, who took the extra step of pouring its contents into her own glass.

“My father’s been hiding in South Dakota for fifteen years while I thought he was dead,” I said slowly.

“Your father *and* your mother,” Jill added.

Mick picked up his glass and studied it in the dusty light of his windowless office. “Shit, kid ... I don’t know what to say. I thought I was protectin’ you. Your parents ... ” He sighed. “Listen, your parents were no good for you, you know that, right? You know it. I knew it. *Everyone* knew it. And when they pulled that stunt, Maddie, Jesus fucking Christ—they couldn’t have thought for one fuckin’ minute it would fool Abban Spillaine. Or *anyone*.” He laughed. “Shit, they hired *local*. From Spillaine’s crew!”

“Fooled me,” I said, thinking back to that day. *They’re gone*.

Mick looked down at his glass again. “Shit, sure. The point is, I figured they might not be dead right at *that* moment, but in a day or three, Abban was going to put together a crew of hard cases, go after them, and then they *would* be dead. It was a whatyoucallit—a formality. I didn’t see the point in stretching it out for you.”

I nodded without taking my eyes from the glass in front of Pills. “Paradise.”

“A town. Was a ghost town, some mining operation out there, company built this place for its workers, and then it limped along for a while after the mine shut down. Then got abandoned. So the Outfit bought it.”

Jill held her phone up to me. The map showed a dot in a field of green: PARADISE.

I frowned. “The Outfit?”

“A consortium. All the gangs in the country, meeting in the middle. New York, Chicago, L.A., Kansas City, Miami. Each family’s got a rep, they get together, they make truces, they pass resolutions, fund a fucking *budget*, they set rules. Keeps things civil.” He drained his glass in one muscular motion. “Paradise is a shared place, every major operation in the country owns a piece, gets a share. It’s a safe haven. You buy in and pay the rent, you can’t be touched.” He shrugged. “Your ma and da aren’t the only people hiding out from execution orders in Paradise. It’s fucking lucrative.” He snorted. “Fucking *brilliant*. You push a button on someone, you have to pay. Then they pay to hide out in Paradise. Everyone pays. It’s a criminal’s dream.”

I tried to piece it all together. I knew, better than most, that organized crime was run like a shitty company. You had the C-Suite, the dons and the *jefes* and the bosses. You had your middle management, like Carroll Mick. You had your floor workers, who took the bullets and ate the shit in exchange for low, unreliable wages. There were tax deductions and layoffs. The idea that the idiots and sociopaths who populated most crime outfits could pull their shit together long enough to make a deal like that was incredible.

“They can’t be touched,” Mick said. “Mats got wind that his fucking idiot kabuki with that burned out car didn’t go over like he expected, so they bought in. And in there, they can’t be touched. If Abban or Merl went after them, the Outfit would come after them with everything they got. There’s so many truces and agreements in effect to make Paradise happen, something like that would trigger a goddamn world war. And it makes so much money off the rents, no one

wants to see it go. They can't be touched." He shrugged. "As long as Mats and Liùsaidh are current on their rent."

I nodded. The fury I was feeling was like electricity inside me, but I wasn't sure who to be angry at. Mick? He'd taken care of me, and what he said made sense. Mats and Liùsaidh? Sure, but I'd been angry at them for so long—for being shit parents *and* for leaving me—that it was an organic shift.

Merlin Spillaine. The fucking Broker had touched Elspeth.

"Where is it?" I asked. "You know exactly?"

Jill flashed me her phone again, but I ignored her.

He leaned back and stared at me, folding his big hands over his belly. "You go out there, you'll wind up dead," he said.

"Oh, fuck you, old man," Jill snarled, waving her glass around and sloshing whiskey everywhere. "They got Ellie. You'd sit here on your ass? Go fuck yourself."

Mick's hangdog eyes slid to Jill for a second, then back to me. Hidden in their depths was a judgment on me for being the sort of person who brought Jill Pilowsky into things despite her consistent poor performance. "I can get you there," he said. "Paradise is fortified—no one gets in or out without a pass. Some of the people in there got multiple contracts out on them. You're gonna need help. A team. Some real soldiers."

I nodded. "I got Pills."