



JEFF SOMERS

**THE
BOUNCER**
a novel

The Bouncer

12.

“Maddie,” Jill said slowly, reaching out one hand. “Let’s not—”

I didn’t hear her, not really. Everything had gone still and muted. I surged forward and leaped onto my father. I took hold of Mats’ shirt and lifted him up out of the recliner. For a moment, I stood there, trembling, breathing loudly through my nose while my father just stared down at me in shock.

The feel of the old man—how *light* he was, how frail and insubstantial—knocked the rage out of me. This wasn’t the man I remembered. The Mats Renik I remembered filled rooms. His booming voice was a constant source of jokes, insults, and provocations. He had been in constant motion, and he’d been *strong*. I remembered how strong his father was—his thin arms wiry, all tendon and willpower.

This was a shriveled, grayed remnant, and I couldn’t be furious with it.

I let Mats drop back into the chair. “You’re alive,” I managed to choke out.

“You call it that,” Mats croaked. He stared up at me. “Look at you,” he said with a faint sneer that was familiar and terrible. “All grown up.”

Jill bent down and retrieved the duct tape. “We don’t have time for this, Maddie. We got to *go*.”

Mats glanced at her. “Who the hell are *you*?”

I surged forward again, lifting him up out of the chair and spinning him so that he faced me. Jill stepped forward and slipped two pairs of zip ties onto the old man’s wrists. “*She*’s the person who saved my life when you skipped out on me,” I hissed. But then the rage leaked out of me again, just as suddenly as it had come. He was so *small*.

“So shut up and do everything she says,” I muttered, feeling exhausted.

Mats stood for a moment studying me. Then he relaxed, grinning. “All right, all right,” he said. “Pleased to meet ya, girlie. Don’t mean to be rude. Things been a bit *tense* around here—but you are *both* a sight for sore eyes. What’s the plan? Mexico? I got some leads there. Been laying some groundwork.” He looked at me, face darkening for a moment. “But thanks to your *Ma*, I’ve been workin’ with limited resources while they prepare the fucking firing squad. Listen, I gotta go upstairs and get somethin’”

Liùsaidh. Tall, loud, beautiful. My memories of her were dominated by moments when she walked into a room and everything paused a moment. As a kid I hadn’t quite understood, but looking back I knew it was all the men in the room pausing to look at her, and all the women in the room pausing to hate her. At home, it had been one infinite, endless fight—a spitting, acidic war.

I nodded, understanding. “She bailed on you.”

Of course she had. Liùsaidh’s main priority had always been Liùsaidh.

Mats nodded. “And Lucy took just about every red *cent* I had,” he said heatedly. “This ain’t a fucking charity, Maddie. We had heat on us—the fucking Spillaines. Her idea to rob ‘em blind, and it worked, Maddie—oh, it was glorious!” He chortled. “We took those suckers for a haul. How I wished I coulda told you all about it, but we fucked up and got fingered. Her fucking idea, we get here, she hates the place. Hates the house, hates being cooped up, hates *me*.”

Jill flashed me a look and tapped her wrist, but I couldn’t stop himself. “She robbed you,” I said wonderingly. A weird sort of dark glee flowed into me. My grifting mother convinced Mats to rob the Spillaines, then to pay her way into life insurance in the form of Paradise. And as soon as the heat had died down, she robbed him blind and left him for dead. *This* was what I’d missed over the last fifteen years. I was *lucky*.

“She *fucked* her way out of here like usual,” Mats said, voice dripping with anger. “Took almost every red *cent*, boned a guard until his brain melted and he got her out. She probably strangled the poor sap fifteen minutes down the road, who the fuck knows. I been scraping by on fumes, Maddie. I’m almost busted, and around here if you don’t pay your rent they hand you *over*.” He looked at me. “You get me? I don’t pay my rent, I’m a dead man. You’re saving my life, son.”

The word *son* hit me and I caught my breath. My hands clenched.

“I just gotta go up—”

“We ain’t saving your life, old man,” Jill said, snapping off a length of duct tape. “We’re *spending* it.”

She whipped the tape over his head and wrapped it around his mouth. Mats' eyes bugged out and he tried to shout through the thick tape, staggering back from me. Jill danced back and leaned forward, wrapping a second line of tape around his head.

"We got fifteen minutes," she said, looking at me. My father's breathing was loud and irregular through his nose. "We got to *go*."

I nodded. I spun Mats around and gave him a push towards the backyard. "Move."

Mats continued to moan and howl through the tape, and I had to shove him every few feet to keep him moving. I kept trying to reconcile this thin, gray ghost with the loud, braying man I remembered. *Son*. He couldn't remember my father ever calling me son. *Kid, pal, buddy, fucking piece of trash, numbnuts*—those were the endearments I remembered from my childhood, oscillating between queasy flattery as if I was a lazy employee or necessary colleague and outright abuse and disdain.

Son. The word echoed in my head and blotted out my thoughts. It made me angry.

At the sidewalk, Mats stopped and planted his feet, his muffled voice hoarse as he tried to force it through the tape.

I looked around. Paradise remained silent as a tomb, the streets abandoned. The windows facing us were all either dark or covered up, the light behind them weak and filtered. No way to live. I did the math as we walked, realizing that if Merlin Spillaine had waited just a few more weeks, Mats Renik would have lost his lease in Paradise and been up for grabs, and none of this would have been necessary. That was most criminals, I thought. They were mostly not very smart. Twice the trouble and danger for half the payout—Merlin Spillaine wanted to show how

dangerous he was, how powerful his family remained, and didn't care who got hurt or killed as long as he managed it.

"Come on," I hissed, grabbing my father's arm.

Mats tried to pull away, but Jill shoved him from behind and he stumbled into the street. A second later, a high-pitched alarm sounded from inside the house.

Jill and I looked at each other.

"Fuck," Jill snapped, stepping over to the old man and leaning down. She hiked up one pant leg, revealing a small black box strapped to his ankle. She looked over at Mads. "Fucking invisible gate. Guess he's a flight risk."

Noiselessly, all of the street lamps suddenly flared into bright light. A siren began wailing.

"*Move!*" Jill shouted, grabbing Mats by the shoulder and shoving him into motion.

We ran down the still-deserted street, dragging and pushing Mats between us. The old man staggered and breathed unsteadily through his nose, sweating and groaning. When we turned the corner and had the wall in view, we staggered to a halt.

"Fuck *me*," Jill hissed. "We are *officially* pear-shaped, in case there was doubt."

A truck was parked in the street, headlights illuminating the ladder and blanket where we'd climbed over. Three men dressed in jeans and T-shirts, each carrying a pump-action rifle, stood in the grass gesturing. One was talking into a phone, looking around.

“Back!” I hissed, leading my father into the shadows of the nearest house. We knelt down in the dead grass, each of us with a hand on Mats’ shoulders. A second later another truck roared past, two armed guards in the bed hanging on for dear life.

“The yards,” I whispered. “Stay off the roads.”

By the time we got to the fence in the back, Mats was struggling to keep up. The old man kept falling, letting out piteous whines whenever he did so, his breathing ragged, his nose running, snot all over the tape. I considered removing it, but I knew I couldn’t trust my father—we didn’t know all the details of this place, of his deal with the Outfit, all the moving parts. If Mats screamed for help we’d be done for.

We lifted Mats over the low fence between the yards, the old man grabbing ineffectually at us with his hands, then dragged him into the dark, dead expanse behind the next house over. We cut directly across the dark yard. The siren was muted by distance, but I could hear more trucks on the road, and now there were shouts as Paradise came alive, disgorging a hidden population into its desolate, empty streets. Then, distant, police sirens—Sheriff Batten bringing her badge to the party.

I thought of Elspeth and Carolina. Whatever it took, I was going to bring my father back to trade for them.

We pressed ourselves against the stucco wall of the house, breathing hard. I held onto my father and looked at Jill, who gestured up and mimed climbing. *The rooftops*, she meant. I looked up, considering. There were two choices: climb up and try to make our way to the front gate, wait for a moment when we might make a run for it, or hold up inside an empty house. The place

looked rotten with them. If we could hide out long enough, the Outfit's guards might decide we'd slipped off and move the search. Or begin a door-to-door that would eventually drag us out.

Suddenly, there were lights and voices at the other end of the yard.

That made our decision easy. I nodded back at Jill, pointing up. She took hold of Mats, and I turned to examine the house. A few feet away a rotting trellis crawled up the rear wall of the garage. It looked about as strong as Papier-mâché, but I threw myself up against it and began climbing, the gun digging into the small of my back. Every other slat broke free, but I kept climbing even as it disintegrated beneath me. When the lip of the roof—cracked, ruined rubber and tar—came into view, I threw one arm up and over, hauling my body up by sheer strength.

I spun around and leaned down, extending an arm. As I did so, shouts erupted from below as a dozen men and women, heavily armed with rifles and shotguns and handguns, converged on the house and formed a semicircle around Jill and Mats.

Jill glanced up at the roof and our eyes locked. As they crowded in around her, she shook her head slightly. *Stay*, she was saying. *Hang back*.

I watched as they spun her and Mats around, disarming her and making no move to remove the tape or the ties from the old man. None of them looked up.

“Jesus, Renik,” one of the guards said, giving the old man a shove. “This was your fuckin’ escape plan?”

The rest laughed. Another one said, “A man, a van, and a plan!”

They laughed again.

“Take ‘em to the House,” the first one said. “Bats and Andy will want to have a chat about the rent.”

I watched as they shoved Jill into motion. She didn’t glance back, which made it worse to watch. I sat with hands clenched, hidden up above. She knew I was there. Knew I would follow. Knew she could trust me.

I imagined Ellie and forced myself to take a deep breath and hang back. To think. To make a plan. To burn Paradise to the ground if I had to.