



**JEFF SOMERS**

**THE  
BOUNCER**  
a novel

# The Bouncer

## 13.

“What’s this?”

Uncle Pal holding up the shitty revolver. Standing in my room, holding it like it might explode at any moment. I remembered offering him the blank expression I’d learned from Pills. *When in doubt*, she always said, *act like you’re congenitally retarded and simple concepts confuse and enrage you.*

“Come on, then.”

I was shocked that Uncle Pal knew how to handle a gun, but then I remembered that Uncle Pal for all his fancy manners and diplomas on the walls was my father’s brother. Sometimes it seemed like the two men couldn’t be any more different, but there would be these flashes—a turn of phrase, an expression, the way they salted their ice cream or put butter and brown sugar in their coffee—that confirmed their connection. Their similarity.

He’d set up a firing range in the backyard, a bunch of cans on stumps.

“All right,” he’d said, breaking open the revolver and shaking out the bullets. “I’m not going to ask you where you got it, or why. And I’m not going to waste my time telling you not to get

another one. I know you're the son of Mats Renik. So, first things first. This? This piece of shit? This piece of shit is worse than having no gun at all."

When Uncle Pal produced a gleaming 1911 from his coat pocket, I couldn't maintain the blank look. I was genuinely amazed, and felt that my uncle had earned it.

"You're eighteen," Pal said. "So you're gonna do what you're gonna do. But you're going to learn the right way to handle a weapon, got it?"

Looking back, I wished I'd given Uncle Pal a break a little bit sooner.

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It had been easy to follow the shitkickers and Jill; they were loud, joking around with each other, proud of their catch as they leered at her and joked about assaulting her. I recognized the type; you ran into them all the time at Queenies. Performers. Everything was a pose, everything was done at maximum volume. Confrontation only made them louder. The best thing to do with the Performers was to egg them on, keep turning up the volume for them until they were shouting themselves hoarse.

I could see Jill folding in on herself, becoming denser, the pressure building. I thought the first asshole to touch her was going to get a big surprise.

They pushed her and Mats into a house four doors down. Dozens of trucks were parked haphazardly out in the yard, as if this was the world's worst house party. Most of them were

rusting old behemoths, but a few were newer. One was enormous, a brand new commercial pickup, jet black with tinted windows. It loomed like a tank over the rest of them.

I followed, crouch-walking on the roofs, the wind pushing through me and making me shiver. I couldn't see any difference between this particular house and the others. I squatted for a moment. I could hear voices. Turning around, I saw a square of light in the middle of the roof—a skylight, cranked open. I walked over to it and lay down on my belly. I could see down into the living room.

Jill walked in, proud. I knew she could feel them leering at her, and I knew she wanted to hug herself, make herself small, less of a target. But she wouldn't. That wasn't the Pilowsky Way. Instead, she kept her head up and walked easy, as if a pleasant ramble with the surprisingly not dead Mr. Reniks and a dozen armed shitkickers was exactly what she'd had planned this evening.

The house reminded me of every shared house I'd ever lived in. It smelled like old Chinese food, body odor, and piss in equal parts, and looked like it had the vaguely sticky, greasy surfaces of a place where a lot of people touched everything and never cleaned or washed their hands.

The living room was already crowded when they arrived, the shitkicking guard staff all wild-eyed and *excited*, grinning and making jokes, carrying their rifles and shotguns like their dicks. I had the impression Paradise was usually a pretty sleepy job. A lot of aging crooks paying to retire in peace, their many sins and legions of enemies held at bay outside the walls.

Sheriff Batten was there, looking tired and angry, her uniform sloppy, her eyes red. She looked at Jill and shook her head, then turned back to a tall guy with slicked-back hair and a leather jacket, chewing a wad of pink gum with an enthusiasm that was kind of terrifying. He was middle-aged, the sort who'd once been pretty fresh-looking but was now kind of pickled. He'd been handsome—was still handsome, really—but there was a deep-lined roughness to him now.

I immediately knew the enormous black truck outside was his. He was exactly the type to feel the need for an enormous black truck.

He kept snapping his gum. It was weird—the gum made him. Him chewing away like a little kid did more to sell him as a tough guy than all the fucking posturing going on around him. When Chewing Gum turned to look at Jill, following Batten's gesture, he smiled and winked, mouth working. I knew Jill Pilowsky better than anyone. The expression on her face told me that Chewing Gum could probably get it. And pretty easily.

*Him*, I worried about. Batten, too, I thought. The rest of them looked like the same old assholes who hung around Queenies, who ran with the crews out East. Wannabes. Tough guys. Shitkickers living in trailers and spending all their money on beer and meth and telling themselves they were *connected* because they had jobs as glorified security guards.

For a few seconds the room buzzed with excited conversation. Then Chewing Gum turned away from Batten with a friendly nod and looked around, snapping his gum.

“Y'all *happy*?”

He didn't shout, but his voice carried, and there was something in its tone. The room fell quiet in about two seconds, and Chewing Gum looked around, his expression bemused.

"Y'all proud? Of the job you've done?" He inquired. It was a challenge, and I could see at a glance that no one was going to step up and take it. Chewing Gum nodded, holding up three fingers on his right hand. "Three."

The shitkickers waited a beat, then began looking around in confusion.

"The good Sheriff says there were *three*," Chewing Gum said, smiling as he chewed. "Y'all are in here giving out handjob participation trophies, and your job is two-thirds done. So what the *fuck* are you doing in here?"

There was a perceptible reduction in the levels of testosterone and exuberance in the room. I watched Chewing Gum work. He wasn't a big guy. Not scrawny, but not big. You could tell he had a gun in a holster under his jacket, but I got the vibe that it hadn't come out of that holster except to be cleaned and maintained in a long time. His hair and the jacket indicated a man who cared about what he looked like, about his brand, but he wore both with such comfort and confidence I wasn't mad about it. *This* guy, I decided, *was* connected. This was management.

After a second, Chewing Gum pursed his lips and looked down at his boots, which were sturdy biker boots that were also, I thought, a *choice*, but one that he somehow managed to pull off. "I'm gonna look up in five seconds," he said. "Anyone still standing here with their dick in their hands is gonna have their card pulled. There's one more out there, or on the run. Get out there and drag their ass back."

The room exploded into activity as the guards hustled out, all of them wearing expressions I was comfortable interpreting as *fucking terrified*. When the crowd was gone, six people remained. Chewing Gum and Batten, Mats Renik and Jill, and two other guards who looked like they'd recently checked their pay grade and were unhappy with the results of their investigation. Very few people enjoyed being reminded of their true position in life.

"Shoulda taken my advice," Batten said to Jill. She looked tired and disheveled, her uniform shirt unbuttoned, her face puffy. "Could have saved us all a lot of trouble."

Chewing Gum turned to her. "Bats, do me a favor and get the garage in order in case we need to kick this into a higher gear."

Batten nodded, staring at Jill. "Sure," she said. She turned and walked towards what would be the kitchen if the house had the same layout as my father's.

Chewing Gum looked up at Jill, then gestured at the broken-down old couch. "You two, have a seat. Let's have a chat."

They sat. *Good girl*, I thought. Know your audience. Read the room. Chewing Gum seemed cheerful again, smiling as he sat down in the overstuffed chair across from them, leaning forward and steepling his hands.

"Now what," he said cheerfully, "am I gonna do about you?"

Mats leaned forward, trying to speak through the tape. Chewing Gum held up a hand.

"Not *you*, for fuck's sake. *You* we got squared away. You're three months back on your rent and you were gonna get the eviction notice soon anyway. This just accelerates that a little." He

glanced at Jill. “No, I mean *you*. What’s the story? Why are you here helping Old Man Winter here scam out? Daughter?”

She made a face. “The *fuck*.”

I suppressed a sudden, deranged laugh.

Chewing Gum smiled. “Well, I know it ain’t money, ‘cause Old Man Winter ain’t got none. So why are you risking life and limb to spring him?” He leaned back and pointed at her. “Unless he’s *got* money?”

A chill went through me. The last thing we needed was for an actual professional to start thinking there was fucking dollars involved. That kind of energy could scale up fast, and we needed to keep this local. But then, it would be just like Mats to have something stashed away. An emergency fund, something he could run with. Something he would deny until the moment came.

Jill sneered. “I look like someone does shit for money?”

Chewing Gum’s smile was bright and charming. He was a guy who never doubted himself. He might admit fault later, but he never doubted in the moment. “Lady, you look like your whole *life* is doing shit for money.” He snapped his gum. “Let me tell you something. Me, I’m an accountant. I count things, and I tell people higher up the food chain how many there are, if there’s too many, not enough. That’s what I do, because this is a business. That’s all it is. Old Man Winter here, he made a deal. Maybe it was a bad deal.” He shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. He made the deal. I’m just here to hold him to it. That’s fair.”

Jill nodded. “You and two dozen shitkickers.”



Chewing Gum laughed. He pointed at himself. “Like I said, a business, an accountant.” He smirked. “These guys, they think they’re tough because they carry a rifle, get to swing a dick around here.” He shrugged. “But they jump when I say jump. That’s because *tough* is a tactic. Power is a strategy. Trust me when I say this: *I’m* the person you need to worry about, okay sis?” He looked away, rubbing his chin, then looked back at her sideways. “I got just one question. You here on behalf of Abban Spillaine?”

Jill kept her face blank. She reached down and toyed with a piece of duct tape repairing a tear in the couch.

He nodded, shifting his weight. “Yeah, you see, I’m thinking maybe you are. Because, first of all, Abban and that dopey kid of his are just the right kind of old-school stupid to do it this way. And just the right kind of timeless greedy to do *this* the *wrong* way. So: You wanna buy him out?”

Jill blinked. “What?”

*What?* I echoed in my head.

Chewing Gum shrugged. “Like I said—an accountant, a business. Old Man Winter is in arrears, which means we take the hold off the buttons that have been out on him for the last fifteen years. He’s out, and we don’t owe him any protection any more. Normally, we’d just dump his ass outside, let the fates take him by the hand. But, shit, you’re here. If you’re bein’ staked by the Spillaines, take this back to them. Make a call. Get me a number. I’ll see if it’s enough to get you premium access to his bony old ass. I’ll hand him over to you and you do

whatever you want with him.” He clapped his hands together softly. “What do you say? A fuckin’ bargain. Everybody wins.”

I admired Chewing Gum’s good cheer. He seemed like good company. I marveled at Merlin Spillaine’s incompetence. It sounded like one phone call would have spared us all the fucking trouble.

“Bonus,” he said, lifting his eyebrows as if this was a sudden, startling thought. “You buy out Old Man Winter’s rent, we stop looking for your third wheel. You walk away. I guarantee it.”

I wondered if he was being serious, or if he was just probing, seeing what her reaction was. If we had the money to buy him out, we would have. But then I didn’t understand all the rules of this place.

Jill shook her head. “No deal,” she said. “I came here to rob the place. I’ve never met this old bastard before in my life. I’m in his place, picking through the *trash* and *shit* everywhere, and this disgusting asshole comes tottering out and starts *chasing* me.” She shrugged. “I figure he wanted to fuck me, right? Seeing as any guy over the age of fifty always seems to think he’s just my type—and the older they are, the fucking worse it gets—so I’m busy checking to see if his *pants* are on—because *pants off* is kind of their signature move, these assholes, right?”

Chewing Gum smiled, eyes shining like this was the best thing that had ever happened to him.

She shrugged. “As if the sight of their shriveled little weiner is going to just drive me mad with lust—and so I don’t even notice he’s tied up and gagged until he’s following me out the door and across the goddamn yard.”

I smiled. Jill was a fucking gem.

Chewing Gum seemed to agree with me. His smile kept widening as she spoke. When she finished he blew a big pink bubble and then collapsed it with his teeth, chuckling. He looked at his hands, studying his cuticles. “All right.” He looked up over her shoulder. “Take ‘em both to the garage, tell Batts to find out who we need to blame for this little clusterfuck.” He winked at Jill. “And tell her to be *thorough*.”