



**JEFF SOMERS**

**THE  
BOUNCER**  
a novel

# The Bouncer

## 7.

I took over the driving for my own health and safety. Back on the road, Pills drove with bags of chips and jelly beans in her lap, popping one or the other into her mouth with robotic regularity, washing them down with sips from a large metal water bottle that I suspected had something other than water in it. I felt caged. I wanted to be moving, to be doing things. Trapped in the passenger seat, I studied Pills just to have something to do and to stop myself from smashing everything in sight. Driving was better. At least I could imagine some of my energy was being pushed into the van, urging it on.

She didn't look good. Her hair was unwashed, and formed a greasy black cloud around her face. Her skin looked yellow, her eyes red. One leg jerked up and down nervously as we drove, one hand constantly drumming on the armrest. Her clothes looked like they would stand up on their own. When had I last paid attention—real attention—to Jill Pilowsky? Now that I was paying attention, I thought she looked unbelievably tired, as if she hadn't slept in weeks.

It reminded me of The Summer of Frank.

Frank had come into the Pilowsky home mysteriously. The way Jill told it, he was, initially, a smell—Lectric Shave, literally the poor man's aftershave. Suddenly it was everywhere. Jill

wasn't a stranger to new and vaguely distasteful men suddenly appearing at breakfast; she'd learned that monosyllables and vague gestures at lady problems and vaginal discharge worked well enough to shut them up while she stared at her phone pretending to text with the many interesting and delightful friends she didn't have. But she wasn't sure how to handle a ghost. It was weeks before Frank appeared in the flesh.

Frank didn't walk with the pinched, hungover shame of the other guys. He swaggered into the kitchen and talked. And talked. He called her *Legs* and *Cutie* and asked her questions without seeming interested in her answers, made jokes without seeming to care if she laughed, and stared at her in a direct, assessing way without seeming to care if Loretta Pilowsky noticed.

For the record, Loretta did not notice. Or if she did, she considered it one more asset in her campaign to keep Frank around.

Frank thought he was hilarious. Everywhere she went, Frank was there. She realized that even when he wasn't physically there, she could smell him. Lectric Shave. It got into everything. Her clothes, the furniture, her hair. No matter how much time she spent out of the house, with me, getting lit in the park or crashing on the floor of my room, Uncle Pal and Aunt Mary scowling, whispering, she could still smell Frank. No matter how many showers she took. Or didn't take, letting her hair get greasy, working up a serious funk, a grit on her neck.

It didn't matter to Frank. He loved an audience.

She shrank. She dried up. She had deep hollows under her eyes. She slouched and stared and ate junk food like they were power ups in a video game. And I had to just sit and watch it.

“You’ll just make it worse,” she said, when I suggested I try to make Frank go away. A week later, we both tried to make Frank go away.

*Do it, Maddie.*

I thought of all the times Pills had called or texted me and I’d ignored her. Carrie hated her, so it was best not to bring Jill up at home. Best to let things go to voicemail. Had she stopped leaving messages? I thought so. You stop returning calls, people stop bothering. Eventually your gravity spins you off into a whole other galaxy, and then the number stops showing up in your recents, and then you find yourself thinking of the person a decade later, wondering where they are.

But every time I called her to play backup for me, she answered. Every time.

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The highway stretched out and grew sparse. 78 turned into 24 turned into 202 turned into 80, a wide swath of blacktop pushing us west, the seams in the road hitting the wheels in a steady, hypnotic rhythm.

In Iowa we took Route 35 north until we hit 90, then turned west again. Just over the border from Minnesota, dark, blank fields on either side, Pills turned on the dome light and consulted her phone and a wrinkled paper map covered in her shaky notes, side by side.

“We’re gonna be on some pretty sketchy roads,” she said. “Take 229 to 29. About an hour.”

I nodded, putting the van in the left lane. It handled like a brick with three wheels, but we'd had about an hour to scrounge up a ride since Trim had refused to loan out the Blue Ruin for such a long time, visibly shocked that we'd even ask. The more time you spent with Damien the more you realized he was a man who lived in a pretty elaborate internal simulation of real life, complete with its own physics and rules of polite behavior. He was middle-aged and despite talking endlessly about his old friends, two guys he'd planned a robbery with, he didn't seem to have any contact with them any more—or any other friends aside from Jill, if she counted. But it didn't seem to bother him.

It was three o'clock in the morning, which suited me fine. I wanted to get a look at the town when everyone was asleep.

The emptiness freaked me out. I'd spent my whole life in a dense, crowded city, sweating bullets in the summer and freezing in the winter, the walls so thin every noise made it through. The darkness all around us made it feel like the world was being rendered in real time by our headlights, everything else a void. There had been nights during high school and immediately after, before the fall, before Carolina and Elspeth and the grind of being a person, when Pills and me had spent our evenings driving around in her old beater Taurus, nick-named The Boat, just trying to beat lights and buying beer wherever we could. But the city had been filled with light and sounds and other people, no matter how late it got. Driving through South Dakota was like driving off the edge of the world into darkness.

Half an hour in, Pills roused herself and began blurrily giving directions, sending us through a maze of roads that got narrower and less universally paved as they went. I wondered what she'd

been taking and how much, how fucked up she was, if she could even read the scrawl on the map.

“Left,” she slurred.

I let the van cruise to a stop at the crossroads. There was nothing. A pair of stop signs, some power and telephone lines. To the left was a dirt road stretching off into gloom. It was so quiet the click of the turn signal was like a clap in my ear.

I hit the gas and turned the wheel, and then we were bumping down the road at a good clip. It started to grade upward, the darkness pulling at us as we climbed, the van’s engine grumbling about the elevation as we headed into some low hills. After a few minutes, I saw lights drawing closer. We turned up a long driveway marked by a relatively new PRIVATE PROPERTY sign. Thirty seconds later we pulled up outside what looked like a standard-issue gated community with haphazard landscaping—a few shrubs, a few bare trees, a lot of bare, brown dirt. The stucco wall stretched off into the darkness. A new-looking chain-link rolling gate blocked the entrance. I idled the Van and leaned forward to peer through the windshield. I could see a small, brightly-lit guard booth just past the gate, and the road continuing up into a neat row of trees. I couldn’t see anything else.

“Looks like the most boringest place on earth,” Pills yawned. “Except for the barbed wire.”

I angled my head. A curl of barbed wire snaked along the top edge of the wall. There was no sign, no identifying feature at all. A few scattered lights beyond the tiny guard house inside the gate was the only indication that this was a real place where people lived.

“Not exactly standard issue—”

Headlights bloomed to my left, and then the familiar red and blue flashers of law enforcement. I squinted into the glare, hands tightening on the steering wheel. A moment later, a car door opened, and then someone was walking towards us.

The figure resolved into a tall, dark-skinned woman in a tan and brown uniform, wearing a banged-up trucker-style hat with a gold star on it. She smiled, one hand on her sidearm as she gestured to me to roll down the window.

I did, noting the SHERIFF HARLEE COUNTY on her badge. The name plate pinned neatly above it read BATTEN.

“Evenin’ folks,” Sheriff Batten said. She had a cheerful twang to her voice, and a triangular face framed by deep smile lines. She was compact and held herself well, someone used to being physically in charge of most situations. “You might not be aware, but this is private property.”

I forced himself to smile. Rule *numero uno* with police was, if they were willing to play it polite, let them. “We’re a little lost, Sheriff.”

I watched as she did the traditional neck-crane. Her eyes roamed the interior of the van, lingered on Pills for a moment, then returned to me. “Where you folks from?”

“Jersey.”

She nodded. “Uh-huh.” Her hand was still on her sidearm. I didn’t let himself look, but I was willing to bet money that the strap was off. The safety, too.

*Eye contact*, I thought. The secret to every confrontation was eye contact. You had to control the space, the speed, and the shape of the interaction. I kept my smile in place and heard my knuckles pop as my hands tightened on the wheel.

“If I ran these plates,” the Sheriff said, looking down at the front fender, then sliding her eyes back to me with a playful little smile, “would they come back stolen?”

“I sure *hope* not,” Pills said. I didn’t react. I hoped fervently Jill was joking.

The Sheriff turned and leaned forward slightly, eyes roaming the interior of the van again. Then she made a *tsking* noise with her mouth. “All right, folks, free advice time. Turn the fuck around. Get the fuck *unlost*, and don’t let me see y’all up here again, you hear?”

That smile again. It was wide and friendly, a real shiteater of a grin. I had a momentary, insane urge to lift one hand off the wheel and pop her in the nose. Even seated, without leverage, I was certain I could put her on her ass and bust her nose wide open. For her part, Batten’s eyes told me she knew what I was thinking, like I had a thought bubble over my head. It was a truth universally acknowledged that being a dirty cop didn’t necessarily mean you were an *incompetent* cop. Experience told me that the reverse was true—the sharp ones got tired of risking their lives for peanuts.

Instead, I nodded. “You got it, Sheriff.”

She nodded and stepped back from the van, but didn’t return to her vehicle. I put the van into reverse, still smiling, and spun us around. I watched Sheriff Batten fade back behind us, framed by light. She’d just been sitting there in the dark, the fucking sheriff. I wondered whether she’d been elected first and then bought by the Outfit, or if it was the other way around.