



JEFF SOMERS

**THE
BOUNCER**
a novel

The Bouncer

Part Two: Paradise

8.

We found a town about twenty minutes south on Highway 41. As the sun was creeping up over the horizon, we cruised down the wide, empty Main Street. Tidy-looking businesses lined each side of the road, their signage cheerful, the sidewalks swept, the potted plants watered and green-looking.

The only place open was a tavern called Mikey's that had a small menu taped to the window next to the Budweiser neon sign. I recognized the distinct smell and sealed feeling of a bar that locked the doors at 2AM but let patrons stay, then ceremoniously unlocked the doors at 6AM when they fired up the grill. There was no music in the air and there was sawdust on the floor, a few old-timers barely conscious at the bar and a trio of shitkickers making noise by the pool table, a collection of empty bottles lined up on a shelf under the ancient cathode-ray television.

We took seats at the bar. The bartender was a skinny, leathery old guy with snow-white hair and a long, yellowed beard he'd tied off with rubber bands. He glanced at us with an expression of immense apathy for a long time, then slowly ambled over.

“Yeah?”

“Old Granddad, neat, beer back, whatever you have,” Jill said, taking off her jacket. Her T-shirt read *We The Heathens* with a list of tour dates.

The old man nodded and turned to me.

“Menu,” I said.

The bartender squinted as if this was an unexpected and unsatisfactory request, then bent down and retrieved a laminated sheet of paper from under the bar. He slid it in front of me and nodded.

“Ain’t no fries,” he said, his accent flat and broad. “Fryer’s down.”

I nodded and glanced down, absorbing the limited choices in approximately three seconds. “Coffee, eggs over easy, white bread toast,” I said.

The bartender seemed pleased by the speed of the order, plucking the menu back up with a nod of his head. “Comin’ up.”

I looked sideways at Jill. “You’re not gonna eat something?”

“You know how many calories in booze?” she said, stretching. “I gotta watch my girlish figure.”

I nodded vaguely, my attention drifting to the three shitkickers in the back. They’d taken notice of us. I knew body language and the invisible ether of bars and clubs, the taste of metal in the air when things were drifting towards ugly, the shifts in the air currents when shitheels suddenly noticed you and got that that mulish look that told you they thought you were looking down on them, and resented it, a resentment they generated all on their own, like a brain

chemical. I could feel that resentment, that stupid, boozy anger, like microwaves against my skin.

The bartender brought over two glasses and a bottle of whiskey. "I'll have one wit' ya," he said, showing us a set of green and yellow teeth. "Like folks who can take a drink in the morning and not faint." He sloshed whiskey into each glass, picked up one, and clinked it against Jill's.

"May we never get to hell but always be on the way there," she said, draining the glass and slamming it onto the bar.

The bartender cackled. "Love it," he said, shaking his head and pouring her another. "One beer comin' up."

Jill picked up the glass. "You want that breakfast, Maddie, better start flirtin'."

When the bartender returned with a pint, I forced my hands to relax, forced my face into Cheerful Neutral. Drunk assholes who thought they were somehow owed entry were easy to trigger, so I'd learned to be bland, to appear polite even when I was shoving them out the door.

I decided to see if I could trade a little on Jill's charm. "We got lost," I said with a little laugh. "How we ended up here. Got roused by the sheriff up by some weird gated community."

"Oh, ayuh, Paradise," the old man said with a nod, laying set of plastic silverware on the bar, wrapped in a paper napkin. "I wouldn't head back up there, I was you."

"Why not?"

"They ain't friendly," he said, leaning in close. "And they got protection. You wouldn't be the first to come back from there all banged up and afraid to say a thing about it. Or not come

back at all.” He straightened up, smiling. “Course, that never stops kids from takin’ dares about being up there, heading up the old Mine Road.”

“Oh yeah?” I said, and waited. When people wanted to talk, it was best to let them.

“Sure, sure,” he said, leaning against the bar and rubbing his nose. He had that leather-skinned roadie look to him, a guy who’d lived hard in a very narrow lane. “Paradise used to be a mining town, yanno. Fifty years ago. The old mine road leads from its ass end to the old Phillips Mine. Most folks don’t even know the road’s there. But fucking teenagers who want a place to get drunk and fuck? They’re fucking brilliant in their own way, huh?”

I nodded. Behind the bartender, the three shitkickers were approaching us, and I had a sudden intuition that I was never going to actually eat that breakfast.

They were in classic flying-V shitkicker formation, the lead shitkicker—Shitkicker Alpha—leading the other two. Alpha was tall and skinny, unwashed-looking in a way that probably worked for him—long greasy hair and a white t-shirt that had seen better days and rode up, exposing his abs. He was like a wasted 60s rock star before all the bloating. He flashed an easy smile when he noticed me watching his approach, a casual monster used to being in charge.

Beta and Gamma, on the other hand, were fatter and dumber, that was obvious from the fact that they were following Alpha around. But stupid could kick you in the balls when you were down, as I’d found out the hard way, so you had to factor them in. Beta had red hair and a lingering rash of acne, a reminder of his almost-certainly awkward high school years. Gamma was a damp sort, sweaty, open-mouthed, wet-eyed.

“Well, sweetheart, you sure are a sight for sore eyes,” Alpha said, smiling at Pills and acting like I didn’t exist. “If you’re lookin’ for a party, you found it. This bar never closes.”

“And I bet you never leave,” Jill said, leaning back. Alpha’s eyes went straight to her chest. “Based on the smell.”

He smiled, cocking his head a little as if uncertain what he’d just heard. “How’s that?”

“C’mon, Billy,” the bartender rumbled. “Leave ‘em alone.”

Billy held up a hand in the bartender’s general direction, but didn’t turn his head. He kept his dancing eyes on Jill. “I’m being perfectly nice, Terry,” he said. “She’s the one being rude.”

I kept all three in my field of vision, turning around. I knew better than to show any sort of agitation. Every confrontation I’d ever been, every bounce I’d had to make, had been this endless dance of fake smiles and affected relaxation, right up until you were ready to throw down. “That isn’t *exactly* true,” I said. “She was just minding her business, and you interrupted her.”

Billy waited a beat, then turned and smiled at me, holding up a hand like he had with the bartender. “Bro, I’ll get to you.”

Bro. Why every asshole in the world called me *bro* was a mystery for the fucking ages. I didn’t react. I was studying the guy’s body language; in my experience there are Tells for every level of a confrontation. It starts off nonverbal—posture and stare. Then it gets verbal, vulgar and insulting, trying to provoke, because people didn’t think straight when they were provoked. Then came an invasion of personal space, an attempt to dominate without crossing the physical barrier. And then would come the Touch, usually gentle, mocking. And all of these escalations were preceded by tiny movements, shifts in weight.

I'd seen a thousand guys like Alpha Billy try to provoke me at Queenies. They all thought that a lifetime of easy bullying made them tough, made them smart.

When Billy reached for Jill, I lunged forward, the stool clattering away as I intercepted his arm and jerked it towards me, slamming my forehead into his nose.

I staggered back, vision flashing purple, and then had the satisfaction of seeing the Alpha stumble backwards, blood gushing from his face, and fall, hard, on his ass.

Jill danced back, clapping her hands and erupting into a peal of unsteady laughter. In my head, I heard her say *do it, Maddie!* and I shivered. Zero kept drifting.

The other two helped Billy up. He wiped blood from his mouth and shoved them aside, surging towards me. I braced himself, bringing my hands up.

"Hey!"

The voice cut through the air with authority, the sort of voice that was used to being obeyed. Everyone froze in place.

"Ah, shit, Sheriff," Billy said, licking blood. *"This asshole deserves it."*

"Shut the fuck up, Hopkins."

Sheriff Batten stood just inside the door, her beat-up old hat still on her head, her hand still on her sidearm grip. I wondered if she walked around like that, ready to draw down at a moment's notice. So far hers was the only dark-skinned face I'd seen in this little shitburg, so that would actually fall under the category of *prudence*.

The old guys, who'd been watching the altercation with increasing enthusiasm, all stood up and moved towards the back of the bar as if a meeting of the Right Honorable Old Bastards, Lodge 49, had been called. I looked back at the Sheriff.

She sighed. "I told y'all to step the fuck out of town, didn't I?"

I nodded. "We stopped for breakfast."

"Uh-huh. I don't believe I said 'get the fuck out of town, but first grab some breakfast, see the sights, scrape a knuckle on some local idiots.'" She pulled the cuffs from her belt and gestured at Jill. "C'mere, missy."

Jill affected shock. "What?" She pointed at Billy. "These *assholes* were harassing me, sheriff."

Batten nodded. "Billy Hopkins was born to harass. It's all he fucking *does*. I said come here."

Jill looked at me. I did some quick calculus. We had no friends in town, and Batten was the law in the room. I nodded, then added a shrug.

With a sigh, she walked over to Batten. "I'd like to know what I'm being arrested *for*?"

Batten grunted, taking Jill by one shoulder and spinning her around. She bent an arm back with professional skill and slapped one cuff on her wrist. Jill swung her other arm behind her, but Batten ignored it, instead turning and tugging Jill back to the wall, where she threaded the other cuff through the metal arm of a wall sconce.

“No one’s arresting anyone, honey,” Batten said. As Jill spluttered, tugging at the sconce, Batten walked to the front door and slid the deadbolt in place. The dry click of it was suddenly very loud.

She turned and pushed her hands into her pockets. “The official report will state I arrived with the altercation *in progress*,” she said. “So, Mr. Hopkins, if you don’t mind—let’s get it in progress and show this man the fucking *sights*.”