



JEFF SOMERS

**THE
BOUNCER**
a novel

The Bouncer

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I watched Billy stalk towards me and thought of Louie Something.

For a long time I didn't understand myself. Before my parents didn't die and left me not an orphan, I'd always been terrified of disruption, of unpredictable events. My father was always in motion, always grasping and fidgeting, scheming. He was chaos in human form, as likely to be laughing and joking as screaming and pounding his fist on the table. We got rich one day, we were dead broke the next. I was his baby boy one day, I was a fucking leech the next.

Liùsaidh was worse. My mother never showed much emotion, it was always impossible to guess what mood she was in. But I worked hard to anticipate them anyway, to get in front of problems and make sure I was far away when all the signs of a dust up were there. There were rules, I was certain. They were changeable and invisible and written in obscure courtly languages, but there *were* rules, I was certain. If you learned those rules, you could make your life orderly. The crazier things got, the harder I worked to make everything calm and boring.

This is shit I figured out years later, sober and clawing my way back to that zero.

I also worked hard to keep calm myself. Calm was my spirit animal. In grammar school my friends joked that I was the Iceman, because I never showed much emotion. I had this sense that I was a counterbalance to my parents, that the crazier they were, the louder and more terrifying,

the steadier I had to be. I learned to always clench down on myself, to hold myself still, to never react. I curated a poker face and worked hard not to let my temper take hold, ever. I refused to be Mats, who was driven by nothing but anger, a free-form rage at everything and everyone.

And then, they'd gone, and in the ensuing silence I could no longer hold it together.

There are fish I read about once that live at the bottom of the ocean, under tremendous pressure, but they've evolved to survive. To move around under a dense weight of water pushing at them from every direction. They push back hard enough to survive. But if you take one and bring it up to the shallows, it explodes, because it's pushing back against a pressure that's no longer there.

Little things set me off unexpectedly. At Uncle Pal's house, I smashed the bathroom mirror when Aunt Mary informed me of the dire cereal situation in the pantry. On the bus one afternoon coming home from my new, horrifying school, a baby wouldn't stop crying, so I'd screamed at the kid's mother, calling her every name I'd ever overheard.

These moments came without warning, and they disturbed me, but I couldn't seem to control them. One moment I would feel like himself, calm and in control. The next it would be like waking up, slowly coming back to myself only to realize I was punching a wall or screaming at someone.

I took to hanging out with Pills in the parking lot behind school, at the bike racks. We smoked and talked, complained and made fun of everyone, everything. I'd never had a close girl friend before, so it was a novelty. Pills was profane, with a mean streak a mile wide, just as angry as I

was. There was a weird, inexplicable safety with her. Nothing offended her. It felt like nothing could make her think any less of me, and I loved that.

Everyone called the bike racks The Pit. I always assumed every school, everywhere, had a Pit where the delinquents hung out, smoking cigarettes.

There was this kid, a year older, a Junior, who hung out in The Pit. Louie Something, long curly hair, a nose of truly heroic proportions, always a ratty old army surplus coat. Something wrong with Louie, though no one could quite put their finger on it. He was genial, and usually cheerful, but always seemed to float just beyond normal, always a little off.

Louie cackled. Man, I can still remember always being a little irritated by that cackle, the way Louie would start off laughing like a hyena and then choke his own laugh off into a coughing, wet-sounding croak. This one day, in The Pit, Louie kept laughing, Over and over again, that wet, croaking cackle, like it was on a tape loop.

“Hey, yo, *shut the fuck up.*”

When Carlos Piata told someone to shut the fuck up, they generally shut the fuck up. He was a big guy, and loud, and pushy in a way I already found provoking, but I was just starting to do the math on people who used bulk and volume and aggressive assertions of both to steamroll other people. Carlos mainly used his bulk and volume to tell people to shut the fuck up, a campaign for silence that older, wiser Mads Renik could appreciate. Looking back, I wished I had a Carlos with me at movie theaters, or standing over me while I slept, making sure none of the cackling assholes around me sounded off.

That day, Louie didn't shut the fuck up. He cackled. And Carlos, sensing a challenge, surged up from his seat on one of the steps.

“Yo, I said *shut the fuck up.*”

Louie cackled, nervously, like it was the only sound he was capable of making under the circumstances.

I don't remember getting on my feet. I remembered moving in sudden jumps, like I was having a series of small strokes that stole seconds from me. When Carlos reached out to smack Louie—a smack, a soft, insulting attack—I grabbed his arm, spun him around, and punched him in the face as hard as I could.

And when Carlos went down, making a soft, wheezing noise like a balloon suddenly losing air, I followed him, dropping to my knees and hitting him again. Or so I'm told.

I'm also told that when Carlos' buddies sprang into action, pulling me away and kicking and punching me, I kicked and punched back. I remembered a weird euphoria. It hurt, it was violent, but it was freedom, too. Pure, ecstatic freedom. When that fuzzy moment of pure violent joy passed, I was overwhelmed, three against one as Carlos rose from the dead and joined in. I curled up and put my arms over my head to protect myself.

And then realized I didn't have to, because Jill Pilowsky had joined the game.

She leaped onto Carlos' back and yanked on his ears so hard he screamed, spinning around, trying to dislodge her. His buddies left me and grabbed onto her, and the last thing I remembered before being in the principal's office was surging up and crashing into them all.

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I settled myself. You always let them come to you. Let them make mistakes. Let them be too eager. In my experience, defense always won when you were dealing with drunk, overconfident assholes, because they never planned ahead and had an inflated sense of their own power and competence. And any man who was still awake at sunrise after an evening spent in a place like Mikey's was *definitely* working with exaggerated power and competence.

Billy came first, of course. He danced up with his fists raised, which I assumed was something he'd seen in a movie, once. He telegraphed all his moves with the shifting of his weight, so when he feinted low and then tried to nail me with a haymaker, I had already leaned back, letting the fist sail past my chin. Billy, overbalanced, stumbled into the bar while I spun away, slipped and landed on his face.

Sometimes, you could get assholes to beat the shit out of *themselves*.

I had an idea that Sheriff Batten might be happy to charge me with aggravated assault, and since she hadn't just invented the charge I had to assume she was that special snowflake that drew some imaginary line between entrapment and simple deceit. So I wouldn't be the aggressor. At Queenies, I'd had to follow the same rules. Even if I knew someone was a complete asshole, I couldn't initiate. I couldn't be the aggressor. I had to watch and wait for the other person to come at me. Bouncing was 99 percent letting assholes beat themselves.

Billy's two friends came at me together, one from each side. I spun away and they stumbled into each other, pushing each other away and lunging after me, off balance. I kept dancing backwards, letting them chase after me, then I suddenly stopped. They both windmilled their arms and I reached forward and popped Beta in the nose—a tap with a little weight behind it. He went backwards, hands flying to his face, and for a moment I had some space around myself.

Billy tagged in, pushing through his two useless friends with a mask of blood on his face. I planted my feet and got steady. Billy had learned his lesson and came slow, watching me, careful. I knew that if I didn't take the initiative I would lose. I was already tired, breathing hard. In another minute or so my arms would start to feel like lead weights. But I figured that was the idea. I either lost and wound up in the hospital, or I won and wound up in the county jail.

Billy's friends skirted the periphery, plucking up pool cues as they went, careful to stay outside my reach. I kept track of them out of the corner of my eye, but concentrated on Billy. Billy was the only one of them that had any guts, that was clear. He was stupid, but he wasn't afraid to come back in after getting his nose busted.

Billy danced around, playing for time until his buddies could assemble on either side of him; I saw my opening, the moment when I could have stepped forward and clocked Billy pretty solidly, laid him out. I let the opening slide past me. Batten wanted me to take some lumps, she obviously wanted to impress upon me that our safety and security relied on her good opinion of my decision making process. Putting the three shitkickers to bed might feel good, but would probably cost me on the back end when it came to the sheriff.

So I wasted some time and let them come at me from three sides, Billy faking it, dancing in but not getting close enough, his two buddies coming forward with the pool cues, swinging wild.

I went down, wrapping my head in my arms. They began raining down blows, hitting my back, my arms, my sides. I tried to make myself as small as possible, tried to absorb the blows with my shoulders.

“Come into *my* town,” Billy snarled, stepping forward to kick at me, “and talk shit to *me*, bro?”

Everything went black.

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When I came to, everything was different.

I was staring up at a cracked cement ceiling, a skein of lines that widened out into larger fissures then narrowed down to spidery again. My head pounded with each heartbeat, and my back and legs ached with a steady, burning pain. The smell in the air was awful, like a full dishwasher that hadn't been run in weeks.

“Looks like your buddy is wakin' up, finally.”

I sat up and winced, the pounding in my head surging and filling it until I thought it might burst. Something caught in my back and stung me.

I took a deep breath, wincing again as something inside me stabbed me in the chest. I was in a jail cell. I thought the same contractors must build every local county jail; they all looked exactly the same. This one smelled a lot worse than usual, though, I had to admit.

Batten was sitting on a metal chair in the corridor outside the cell. The chair was tipped back against the wall as she stretched her legs out in front of her, feet propped up on the bars. She had a bottle of beer in one hand, her hat tipped back. Jill sat on the floor next to her, handcuffed to the cell bars.

“You regretting any recent decisions, my friend?” Batten asked.

“Maybe,” I said. I probed a loose molar with my tongue thoughtfully.

“Sorry things took a turn. I came into town and saw your fucking van, I kinda got sore about being ignored.” She shrugged, taking a sip of beer. “I might maybe have handled that better.”

I waved it away. “Bygones,” I said.

She laughed. “You’re a corker. I bet you think I’m six kinds of asshole.”

I waved again. I felt like one big bruise.

Batten studied me for a moment. “My daddy,” she said, taking a deep breath and leaning forward, the chair tipping back onto all four legs. “He moved here fifty-seven years ago. Came up from Georgia, had a job offer, working in the old bottling plant.” She shrugged. “We did okay. He rented a little house a few miles outside town, because no one would sell him anything. Every day, we woke up and there was a noose in the mailbox. Every damn day.” She shook her head. “The energy required. The *disciplined* hatred. Every damn *day* for fifteen years.” She

looked at me. “We got called names a lot. On Mischief Night, teenagers would drive out to our house and throw eggs.” She sighed. “I enlisted and turned out an MP, and found I loved it. Police work. Isn’t so different in the army, really, and when I came home I thought I might make it a career. But I was *informed* that there were no positions available, and then they hired two new deputies.” She killed off the bottle in one fast gulp. “An offer came my way. The sheriff didn’t want to hire me? Fuck ‘im. I could *be* sheriff. All I had to do was tow the company line.”

“You sold out,” Jill said.

Batten shrugged. “Maybe. All I know is, life’s better with some muscle behind you. Not too long ago if I went into Busby’s and ordered lunch, Terry would have spit in it. And maybe he still does, but they don’t fucking dare do it out in the open any more. And I *enjoy* the bowing and scraping.”

“You know who that muscle is, right?” I said, my voice a croak. My headache had settled into a deep, predictable groove in time with my heartbeat. “The Outfit is the worst fucks in the country. Killers, drug dealers, traffickers.”

Batten nodded, standing up. “Ayup, so I understand. And I figure, they were here before me, and they’ll be here after I’m gone. In the mean time, they don’t fuck around in the town, and that’s the oath I took.” She walked over to the desk a few feet away. “Now, I’m gonna take you to your vehicle. I’m gonna watch you get in, and then I’m gonna escort you to 41, where you can go north or south, as long as you go.” She turned back, a set of keys in her hand. “That sound good?”

I studied his hands. There was a big, black scab on one knuckle. As I looked at it, my hand began to throb in time with my headache. “Sure.”

“I’m gonna put the word out with the deputies and some of the local sheriffs,” Batten added, unlocking Jill. “If you or that vehicle turns up in town again, something unfortunate has to happen. Okay?”

I nodded again. “Got it.” I looked up from under my eyebrows at Jill, and our eyes met. I knew she was thinking about taking some crazy chance—jumping Batten, probably. But putting aside the fact that Batten looked like she might be a tougher fighter than her short, not particularly toned body indicated, it was the wrong move. Stealth was blown. Our presence had been noted, and anything we did would be immediately noticed. The smart play was to leave town, looking sheepish, and come up with a fresh approach, because we’d screwed this one up.

I shook my head, a small, microscopic movement. Her jaw tightened, and then she nodded.

“All right then, children,” Batten said, unlocking the cell. “I hope you have enjoyed your stay. Please don’t forget to answer the brief survey about your customer service experience when asked.” She stepped aside to let me squeeze past her, her hand on the butt of her weapon but evincing exactly zero fear. “And when you speak of me, remember that time I saved your lives.”

I stood for a moment blinking in the afternoon sun. Shielding my eyes, I scanned the street as Pills pulled her jacket on angrily. The town looked dead. Not a single other soul on the street. Batten stood in the doorway until we limped over to the van and climbed in side. Then she walked over to her SUV and got in, popping on the flashers just to be an asshole about it.

I put the van in gear. “Let’s find someplace to crash,” I said, head ringing. “Figure out what we do next.”

“Next?” Jill said, pulling her vape from her pocket and inhaling with what could be described as *violence*. “Shit, Maddie—you forget who I am. What I do. I steal shit for a living.” She started walking. “Next, we *break in*.”