



JEFF SOMERS

**THE
BOUNCER**

a novel

The Bouncer

10.

“What will you say to him? Your Dad, I mean.”

I shrugged. I was sprawled on the hard, aggressively stained couch, my arms spread along the back. The room was done in reds and oranges as if someone had wanted to hurt the eyes of anyone stupid enough to stay there; the carpet was a particularly offensive pattern of red octagons and orange circles, punctuated by green flowers of some sort.

“Nothing. If I can help it.”

There was a huge mirror on the wall across from me. It was tarnished and cracked in one corner, and I avoided looking at myself in it. All I saw was a shitbag who’d let his wife and baby girl be kidnapped.

“Dude, you have to come up with *something*. After what that son of a bitch did to you? You gotta script something ice cold. Or you’ll hate yourself.”

I looked at Jill. She was seated at the crummy desk, her boots up. A bottle of bourbon, still in the brown paper from the restaurant attached to the place, sat under the light. I estimated the bottle was half empty, and she still had a supply of ice in a bucket. I’d seen drunks like her

plenty of times in meetings; they were clear and bright right up to the moment they fell over.

This was the 'functioning' part of 'functioning alcoholic.'

I looked down at my hands, scabbed and swollen. "If I say something to him, I make him real," I said. "I kinda want to keep him a ghost, for a while."

I'd considered a meeting. I'd even searched the burner for local groups. But meetings had never been my thing. I went for a while, met Miguel and absorbed the man's wisdom, but I remembered that feeling of being trapped, the certainty that everyone in the room knew exactly what I was about to say. I couldn't handle the feeling of exposure.

Now I wished I'd found one, gone and soaked up the bitter coffee and the country-song stories, because watching Pills sink into that bottle was just as nerve-wracking.

She swirled whiskey in her plastic cup. "You're lucky you got rid of old Mats. I got stuck with Handsy Frank for fuckin' *years*. Had to fucking *stab* him to keep him out of my room." She snorted. "And Mom got mad at *me* because of the emergency room bill. She told me it took all her *arts of persuasion* to convince him not to press a charge, send me to juvie." She lifted her cup into the air. "But he never came into my room again."

"I remember," I said, smiling. A fork. She'd stabbed him with a fork, in the meaty part of the thigh. Got it in real deep, using her freaky unexpected strength. I remember her showing up at Uncle Pal's, red in the face, delighted, delirious, certain she was going to jail for the rest of her life.

And I'd pulled out the grimy old yellow envelope and I'd said, let's go.

"Where? What?"

I showed her the money. “Let’s go,” I’d said. “Let’s get out. Head West, maybe. We’ll find a place to live, we’ll get jobs, we’ll get away from Frank and all this bullshit.”

And for the first time in my life, I’d seen Jill Pilowsky scared. Fucking *terrified*. She’d stabbed her stepfather in the leg with a fork and walked away bright-eyed and excited. Now she was paralyzed. The idea, so bright and alive for a second there, died in the air between us. My inheritance went into a bank a few years later, and a few years after that it paid for my wedding.

I tried to trace back how I’d lost track of Jill, despite the fact that she’d never been more than a half mile away. Despite the fact that we saw each other all the time. But that was still a drift, wasn’t it? There’d been a time when Jill Pilowsky’s voice woke me up in the morning, barking at me that it was time for a wake and bake, a time when I’d spent most days with her just wandering the earth, a time when I’d fallen asleep whispering to her on the phone again as Uncle Pal prowled outside my bedroom.

I knew Jill felt it, too. She knew I was keeping her at arm’s length, and I felt her anger beating against me like a hot wind, unspoken but potent. She was an anchor. I’d been swimming for years, trying to break the surface, and if I let her grab an ankle I’d drown. But there was no way to explain that to her. It was a language she hadn’t learned yet.

She laughed suddenly, sloshing whiskey into her cup. “Remember that show we saw in the City? I took that off-brand speed and thought I was having a heart attack.”

I nodded. “And for some reason you thought you had to keep moving or your heart would explode. Like a human version of that movie with the bomb on the bus.”

She laughed again, animated. “Man, that fucker in the mosh pit was *pissed off*. And he grabbed me, and, shit, you came out of nowhere and *physically lifted* him off the ground. I can still remember the fucking expression on his face. Bug-eyed in fucking *shock*.” She sipped whiskey. “I miss that guy,” she said, then shook herself and stood up. “We’re going to get Ellie back, Maddie. I promise you that. We’re going to collect your shitpeel of a father, haul his ass back to BC like cargo, and cash his old, skinny ass in for one adorable little girl. You got my word.”

She took her cup, opened the door, and stepped outside. I chose not to point out that she’d forgotten that my wife was *also* being held prisoner by gangsters. Everyone had their blind spots.

I stared at the bottle on the desk. I felt useless and heavy; I needed to be doing something, to be working towards the goal of bringing my daughter home safe. Sitting in a motel room was just wasted time, and made me want to burn the place down, to smash up all the furniture, to go back to the bar attached to the office and pick a fight with any six or seven randos who happened to be sitting around.

I heard my knuckles pop. A second later, the door opened and Pills breezed back in, leaving the door open behind her.

“Hey, yeah, you remember our good friend Terry from town who stood by and watched us get our asses kicked?” she said, dropping heavily into the chair by the desk. “He’s here.”

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In the yellow light of the motel room, Terry was somehow thinner and more leathery than he'd appeared at the bar. I found himself mesmerized by the way his long, yellowed beard bobbed up and down as he talked.

"I didn't like the way y'all were treated back there," he said slowly, swirling whiskey in the spare plastic cup. "Not so much Billy—you look like you can handle yourselves well enough in a fair fight. But Batten makin' it a *not* fair fight. That was fuckin' bullshit, and I'm sorry for it."

I looked at Jill. She pushed her lower lip out, her cheeks red and her eyes shining. "Ah, shit," she said. "That's okay. Wasn't your fault, right? What were you gonna do?"

Terry nodded. "That bitch. You know, I known her all my life. But if I dare call her *Evelyn*, she bites my head off. Always *Sheriff*, she insists. Always with the chip on her shoulder. Everything's racist for her. I slip up and call her Evvie, like in high school? I'm in the god-damn KKK."

I didn't say anything. I had a sense that Terry had come to talk. When the Terries of the world came to talk, it was usually profitable to let them.

"Fuck her," Pills slurred, getting into character, stretching out *her*. "That cunt."

Terry nodded and gulped down his drink. "But that's not the worst of it. The worst of it is how she's tied up with those fucking gangsters out on 40. That Outfit has fucked this town three ways from Sunday and Evvie just don't *see* it. Because it makes her a big swinging dick around here."

"Fuck *them*, too." Pills said.

Terry glanced up at her. “Y’all came here for them. That’s what’s got Evvie in such a state—you’re here to go after those fuckers in Paradise, and she’s charged to stop you.” He held out his cup for Jill to refill. “We’re not even supposed to say the word, *Paradise*. You let it slip and people give you a look, like some fucking mafia asshole is going to lean in from behind you and slit your fucking throat.” He watched her pour the whiskey. Then he stared down at his cup, jaw muscles bunching. “This place changed when they figured Paradise out. That old gated community got built forty years ago when there was a housing boom, everyone was going to be a yuppie. Place never sold all the units, and five years later it was empty. Then this investment group comes along and buys the whole place. We all figured, a mall, maybe, or a driving range. But they start renovating. Repairing. They make the wall higher. We never see anyone move in, suddenly there’s a couple dozen people living there. Armed guards at the gates. They never come into town, they send the guards. They’re assholes. Arrogant, never want to pay for anything, rough with everyone. They have everything delivered. Food, clothes—everything. No one ever leaves. The only people you actually see are the security guards.”

“How many of those do you see?”

He glanced at me and thought for a moment. “If I had to guess? Maybe two dozen. You see different ones in town. They don’t wear a uniform or nothin’, but you can smell ‘em. Plus they’re always carrying. Long guns, handguns. They’re like a fucking militia.”

Long guns. “Rifles? Semi-autos?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Guns ain’t my bag, man. But, fuck them. You came here to hurt those bastards, and I came *here* to help you do it. This town was never anything great, but it used to be *decent*.”

Jill was leaning forward and grinning up at Terry. “Fuck *yeah*.” Jill was good at this, at the revival-tent hype *hallelujah!* bullshit. I half expected her to leap up and start running around the room, hands in the air as she shouted *praise be!*

“They order stuff from you?” I said suddenly, a memory clicking. “You said the guards come into town—they coming to pick up orders? They come to your place for liquor? Packaged goods?”

Terry nodded. “Yeah. They call in, then the muscle shows up. Everything’s marked by house number. I’ll get this order for number 70, this order for 72, like that.”

I licked my lips. He hesitated for a few seconds, rubbing his hands. “You get orders for cream sherry?”

Terry smiled. “What? Jesus ... *yeah*, like fucking clockwork. I have to special order a case. Number 83 drinks that rotgut like water.” He shook his head. “Fuckin’ *cream sherry*. It’s like goddamn cough medicine.”

I looked at Jill. She was grinning. “Number 83,” I said.

“I told you about the old Mine Road,” Terry said. “I can guide you to it.”

I sat forward. “They don’t know about it?”

Terry shook his head. “Naw. This goes back, way back, deep magic kind of stuff. Can’t see it from the main roads; the kids keep a bunch of old branches and shit over the entry.” He sipped from his cup. “Sure, I’d bet Batten knows about it. But she knows the kids party out there, so she don’t pay much attention to it.”

“You’ll show us?” I asked.

Terry nodded. “Hell, yeah. You got a map?”

Jill shot her whiskey and stood up. “Do I have a *map!*” she said enthusiastically. Then she paused, looking around the room. She poked feebly around her possessions for a moment. “Well, fuck, *no* I don’t have a map. Who has a map? I got a *phone.*”

Terry held out his hand. “Good enough.”

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“You believe him?” I asked, studiously ignoring the smell of whiskey. We were seated on the uncomfortable plastic chairs on the cracked concrete patio outside their room, shivering in the cooling air.

“You don’t?”

I shrugged. “It’s awfully convenient of him to come find us and offer that bit of information.”

She nodded. “It’s convenient when you don’t die in your sleep, too. If Batten or whoever wanted us dead or in prison, coulda been done already, pretty easy. I read him as a resentful

cracker who wants to spit in the Sheriff's eggs but doesn't want to be in the room when she takes a bite. I think it's a lot of trouble to go through just to lure us to some remote area and fuck our shit up."

I chuckled. The smell of whiskey was killing me. The easy, relaxed way Pills was sitting was killing me. I knew the feeling, the dopey, warm feeling of a little too much booze, just sitting there sinking down into yourself. I missed it. I missed it so badly my hands kept twitching, like a dog having a dream while it napped on the couch.

Like every other addict in the universe, starting was the easiest thing in the world. The problem was *stopping*. That's why I'd backed away from Jill. She might think it was because Carrie hated her—which was true—or because I didn't want her near Ellie, which wasn't. It was because all I heard from Jill was *do it, Maddie. Do it, Maddie.*

The rooftop flashed through my mind. The smell of tar and Lectric Shave. *Do it, Maddie!*

I looked at Jill. "Why are you here?" I asked quietly. "Why are you helping me like this?"

She looked down as if I was too bright to look at directly. "You always save everyone. You always saved *me*. So it's my turn to save you." She looked around and took a deep breath, pushing him aside. "Couple hours, it gets dark, we'll head out there," she said. "See what can be seen."

She went back into the room. I sat there with the lingering smell of whiskey. I thought me and Pills had hit rock bottom together all those years ago. And then I'd left her behind there.