



**JEFF SOMERS**

**THE  
BOUNCER**  
a novel

# The Bouncer

## 11.

The drive out to Paradise was dark and quiet. Jill drove with the headlights and radio off, following the prompts from her phone. I sat in the passenger seat staring straight ahead and trying to imagine what my father looked like now. I still had some old photos here and there, but I couldn't quite picture him anymore—or, more accurately, I could picture *parts* of him. The smile, crooked and charming, the one snaggle tooth always exposed on the left. His fingers, long and dexterous, capable of concealing playing cards and coins. His nose, because as a little kid I'd been able to look straight up and be shocked and horrified at the sheer amount of bristling nose hair.

But it wouldn't come together into a complete person. And I couldn't even begin to age him up by fifteen years. I thought it wasn't impossible that my father might walk past me and I wouldn't even notice.

My phone buzzed, a new text from Lisa: WHAT UP DOC? YOU OK?

FINE, I typed back. TAKING CARE OF SOME FAMILY BUSINESS. HOW'S THE 293?

GOOD. MARCUS CALLED 911 A DOZEN TIMES YESTERDAY. COPS CAME ONCE, TOLD US WE'RE BLACKLISTED.

I smiled. THAT'S MY BOY.

CARRIE AND ELLIE OK?

I hesitated a moment. FINE. VISITING A RELATIVE.

YOU HOME SOON? THIS WHOLE PLACE FALLS APART WITHOUT YOU. AND YOU KNOW YOU GOT FRIENDS HERE. WE'RE ALL WORRIED.

SOON.

KINDA SCARY. THE 293 IS ALL ALONE HERE, NO ONE ELSE AROUND. WISH OUR BOUNCER WAS BACK.

I didn't respond, and pocketed the phone. I loved that building. It wasn't the shitty old apartments, the permanent smell of curry or something in the halls, the suffocating heat in the summer and the frigid chill in the winter. It was the people. My neighbors had become a family. I felt responsible for them; this was the longest I'd been away from home in years, and it weighed on me.

I let my mind wander. Sometimes at the 293 I woke up worried. I would lay in bed for a few hours and stare at the pipes snaking along the ceiling, and then it was time for the rounds, the endless list of repairs and requests, complaints and chit chat the other tenants needed.

Lisa, her apartment wallpapered with police department recruitment posters, shooting range targets, and photos of her uncles and cousins in uniform, needed her toilet snaked regularly. I had no idea what that woman put down her toilet, and I didn't want to know. The Bekvalacs, always pushing pršunates on me, had a faulty thermocoupler on their gas-on-gas heat and it needed constant adjustment. Mrs. Pino, dark bags under her eyes, worked double shifts down at Carepoint changing colostomy bags and sometimes just needed someone to sit with Marcus and

play games with him, stop him from filling the tub until it overflowed. Kid loved doing that for some fucking reason. Or Mrs. Cortês, eighty-six and still making her own coffee, just needed checking on because she once left the burner on her stove on for three days straight.

Or Ivan, who shaved his head every day and sometimes played Descendents records way too loud, was constantly re-arranging his son's part-time bedroom, trying to win invisible divorce points with the ideal mystical arrangement of Ikea furniture.

Or the Quinones family, who had to communicate through their seven-year old daughter Loki because she was the only one who spoke English, and had a kitchen faucet that leaked unless the washers were replaced regularly.

Or Tony Butageri, seventy years old and sleeping off six decades of work on his hands and knees as a plumber. He'd apparently made a personal oath to never, ever do any plumbing work again.

They were a constant pain in my ass, and I missed them all. Coming home every night, walking out every afternoon, there was always someone on the front steps, and they always smiled, always asked me how I was doing, always thanked me for everything. I felt incredibly lonely, moving through the darkness in fucking South Dakota.

We found the access road precisely where Terry said it would be. It was covered in brush that had been tossed haphazardly everywhere; I thought it was probably pretty effective in obscuring it from the road. I hopped out and cleared enough away for Jill to steer the van carefully past.

The old Mine Road was a dirt track just wide enough for the van to creep along. After a few minutes we passed a wide clearing, an old gravel parking lot that overlooked the surrounding

landscape. The Moon lit up the broken glass and crushed cans like jewelry; this was where the local kids came to get high and seduce each other. When I'd been seventeen, this was exactly the sort of place I would have been lord and emperor of.

Jill kept creeping along at five miles an hour with the lights off, the dirt crunching under the wheels. I forced myself to unclench my hands again. After a few more minutes we crested the top of the hill; the road continued to wind downward, but Jill stopped the van and let it idle for a moment.

Paradise was laid out below us.

There was no obvious or easy way down to the walls, but we had sufficient elevation to peer down over them and into one section of the development. There was no gate, but also no guards that I could see.

"Looks quiet," Jill said.

I nodded. It sure didn't look like a gangster paradise, a refuge from the law and vendettas. It looked like a deserted assisted living space. "Kill the engine. Let's watch for a bit."

We sat in silence. After a few minutes, I saw a pair of guards walk along the wall. They looked like every low-level grunt in a crime gang that I'd ever seen in Queenies or working a job: Slouchy, potbellied guys with beards and mustaches, rifles slung over one shoulder, cigarettes dangling from their lips. They chatted amiably as they patrolled, barely paying attention to their surroundings.

*Situational Awareness.* These guys had zero. They assumed no one would dare take on the Outfit, no one would dare piss off every organized crime group in the country. And they were probably right, but it didn't change the fact that they were lazy.

I noted the time and settled back to wait.

There was no movement between the houses I could see, and only a few lights on. It was quiet; I could hear the wind swirling around us. I glanced at Jill, who appeared to be asleep, one leg propped up on the dashboard. I studied her for a moment. It was strange to know someone so well and yet not know them at all, really.

“I can see you, weirdo,” she said.

I smiled and said nothing.

My phone *dinged* softly. I glanced down and saw a photo of Ellie. She looked miserable—caught in a crying fit, face red, mouth open in a wail. I caught myself before I crushed another phone, but my whole body stiffened, my heart skipping a beat. For a moment I felt like my soul was leaving my body. I could feel her in my arms, her little warm body, so alive, so energetic. She’d been safe with me. Until she hadn’t been.

I took a deep breath, forcing the air into my lungs. SEE YOU SOON, I typed.

I settled back and watched the town. I wondered what it was like to be trapped in a place like this. Step outside, get your head blown off, or a van rolls up and FBI agents jump out to arrest you. But then you’re 24-7 behind a gate, peering out through your blinds and all you can see is the asshole across the way peering back at you through *his* blinds.

Thinking of my father, I hoped it was miserable.

I glanced back at Jill.

*Do it, Maddie!*

####

Frank always wore loafers. He'd been a tall, skinny guy, and he'd moved with a snakelike smoothness that had fascinated me as a teenager. His skin was dark and seemed thick, somehow, hairy and heavy. He was balding and kept his hair shaved down close to the scalp, making his hairline look like a gray smudge all around his head. He'd favored loose, billowy khakis and no socks, bowling shirts and loafers. I'd never seen the man wearing any shoe that required lacing.

Frank was fastidious. Hanging out at Jill's house was always surreal, her mother drinking vodka tonics in the kitchen while cooking—and Jill's mom was always cooking—music in the air, loud, and Frank always primping in the bathroom. The man shaved twice a day and spent what seemed like hours studying himself in the mirror, snipping stray nose hairs and rubbing in lotions and Lectric Shave. I could still smell it. There'd been so much of it in the house it was probably still there, embedded into the molecular structure of the place.

*Do it, Maddie!*

The precise events that led to me being on Jill's roof, holding Frank at the edge by the lapels of his bowling shirt were fuzzy. I'd lost some time.

After the fork incident, after she'd declined to come with me, she and Frank had settled into a new cold war. He didn't come into her room any more, but outside her room was fair game, he'd decided.

There had been the months of Jill's silence, her tight, self-hugging awkwardness, her bottomless anger and exhausting determination to never sleep in her own bed. There had been the late night calls for rescue, Jill sliding out a bathroom window and racing for the car, Frank shouting drunkenly from the front door, snarling and waving his arms. There had been the final,

tear-filled breakdown when she'd admitted to being terrified, and there'd been the trip home for clothes and supplies and Jill fleeing up the stairs with Frank in pursuit and that's when I lost a few minutes of time.

When I'd come back to himself, I was on the roof and the only thing keeping Frank from a very unfortunate fall was the quality stitching in his purple and pink bowling shirt.

And Jill, standing a few feet away, hugging herself. She'd looked at me and nodded. And said *Do it, Maddie.*

That day on the roof had been the start. I saw that now. Nothing had happened immediately. Nothing happened for a long time. I'd backed away from the roof and set Frank down. I couldn't speak. I could barely breathe. I just walked away, leaving them up there, Jill calling after me. I went home to Uncle Pal's and went to sleep. I went out that night with Jill and we'd gotten wasted, running through the park climbing trees, neither of us saying a word about what had happened. What she'd encouraged me to do. And so one and so on, for years and years.

But that day on the roof lingered. I found himself thinking of it a lot, usually when I'd let my temper get the best of me. I would stare down at my scabbed knuckles, head pounding from a hangover, and picture Frank's terrified face. And after a while, after hundreds of those nights and mornings and blurry afternoons when I wasn't even sure of the time, I started to think I needed to change.

####

"They're circling back."



I turned to look back down at Paradise, watching two guards stroll past going in the opposite direction.

“Same guys,” I said.

She nodded. “My guess is they just loop around their whole shift. Fucking jumbo softies.” She glanced at her phone. “Thirty-three minutes.” She chewed her thumb. “Too easy.”

I shook my head. “They don’t need much. This place is protected by, what did Mick call it—a consortium. Every big crime organization in the country guarantees this place’s security. No one’s gonna fuck with that. And the people here are *hiding* from shit. They’re free to go any time they want, right? It’s just that as long as they pay their rent, they can’t be harmed. Not by anyone connected, anyway.” I nodded. “Nope. These guards are for the occasional shitkicker or high school kid gets a hair up his ass to come cause some mischief. They don’t need anything heavier.”

She licked blood off her thumb where she’d torn a hangnail off. “Because no one would be stupid enough to piss off every fucking family, gang, and guild in the country.”

I nodded again. “No one’s that stupid. Or desperate.”

We waited. I dozed, forcing myself to think about nothing.

“Thirty minutes,” Jill said, her voice a rusty croak. “They’re not exactly Pinkertons, these guys.”

I shook myself alert. “That’s a lot of slack.”

She nodded. “I don’t think they’re gonna tighten up as the evening progresses, hoss,” she said, stretching. “You want to sit a night and make sure, or do we just go and snatch your piece of shit father?”

I thought for a moment. The guards might be back in half an hour, twenty minutes, or never—any time would be a risk. And every minute I waited was a minute my wife and daughter got further away. Properly, we would sit out here for a week, chart their routines, make notes. But I didn't have time for properly.

“Go.”

“Hot damn,” Jill said, opening the door and swinging herself out, leaving the keys in the ignition. “Finally, some good fucking action.”

I climbed out of the van and soft-closed the door. I met Jill at the back of the vehicle and watched as she transformed, becoming all business, pulling the cargo doors open and rummaging in the bags we'd brought. That *she'd* brought; this was her area of expertise.

“Like old times, huh?” she said, voice muffled as she dug into the equipment.

Jill had been a thief for as long as I'd known her. It was little wonder the hobby had bloomed into a profession. As I watched her extracting a heavy mover's blanket, a rolled-up, durable-looking rope ladder with heavy weighted ends, and two flashlights from the bags, I wondered what Jill Pilowsky might have been if she'd had a normal life. If she'd gone to college, drafted a resume, gotten a fierce haircut and a designer suit.

She dropped the stuff on the ground, turned back to the van, and emerged holding one of the Glocks out towards me. I reached out slowly and took it, feeling its weight. She didn't ask if I knew how to use it. Shaking himself, I checked it over. No external safety. I popped the magazine and checked the spring, then slid it back into place. Pushing the gun into my waistband, I nodded at her, not saying out loud that I had zero intention of using it.

I grabbed the blanket and the ladder and followed her down the incline. The walls loomed up larger and larger; what had looked so inconsequential from up above seemed really high when we were standing at the base. It was dark and quiet, though, and Jill didn't hesitate. She took the ladder and unrolled it. Picking up one of the weighted ends, she took a few steps back, judged the distance, then ran forward like a shotputter and launched the end up and over the wall; once it cleared the top gravity brought it down, pulling the rest of the ladder with it.

She tossed me a flashlight, stuck the other between her teeth, and picked up the blanket. She scrambled up the ladder in second, tossed the blanket over the wire, and was up and over in a blink.

I stared for a moment. What was it about the people who did nothing but drugs? They were always like Olympic athletes. Jill hadn't eaten a proper meal in years and her only exercise involved carrying liquor bottles from the store. Yet the only sweat I'd seen Jill break was from a hangover, but she'd just scaled a wall like she'd been taking lessons.

I took a deep breath, put my flashlight in my mouth, and leaped for the ladder, praying I didn't pass out halfway up.

The ladder felt insubstantial and flimsy, and it wriggled under me like a living thing—but it held my weight, and I was able to swing myself across the blanket and clamber down the other side. We were on a small island of overgrown grass between the wall and the road, everything silvery from moonlight. Jill held up a hand and rolled up her sleeve to read the house numbers she'd written there, along with a crude map. She turned slowly, glancing up and down, and then pointed up the street.

We took off at a run.

It was eerie. I remembered being seventeen and racing through rich neighborhoods at night with her—suburban islands of trees and blacktop that were just like Paradise. It was townhomes in rows, each identical—three stories, Juliet balconies, bizarre rooflines, dead and yellowed front lawns that were too small and too sloped to be anything but decorative, or the precise opposite of decorative. Each house had a driveway, but they were all empty—there were no cars anywhere, giving the street a strange, wide-open feeling.

This was hell.

The people living in Paradise might be safe from debt collectors and assassins, from revenge and arrest—as long as they could pay their rent—but the idea of living in such a place was horrifying. Never leaving. Being trapped with other people just as awful as you were. Trapped.

At the first intersection, Jill turned right. I followed.

The only sound was our breathing and the soft tap of rubber soles on the pavement. I began to see how run down the place was. The streets were cracked and crowded with potholes. The siding on all the houses was stained with mold and sagged. There were broken windows and garage doors that sagged outward like something was swelling behind them, pushing against the cheap hollow-body wood.

In the middle of the street, Jill stopped and turned. Hands on hips, breathing hard, she regarded one of the townhouses. I stopped next to her and squinted at the address: 83.

I looked at her and fifteen years fell away, shed like a snakeskin, and we were partners in crime again, in sync and communicating via subtle facial expressions and gestures. We ran towards the narrow alley between the houses leading to the backyards. It was like I was about to raid a medicine cabinet and then go pound some lite beers in the park with her.

The backyard was small and dead, a square patch of dirt with a rotten, half-collapsed wooden picnic table and a barbecue grill that appeared to be made of rust and dirt. There were lights on in the house. We ducked down and waited, watching, but there was no movement that I could see. Jill shrugged off her pack and extracted zip ties, duct tape, and the Glock. I left my gun in my waistband. One thing I'd learned bouncing at Queenies: A gun in the hand almost always went off, whether you wanted it to or not.

We walked to the glass sliders off the loose-stoned patio in complete silence. I leaned in close and peered through the glass; the kitchen was dark and empty. Jill reached out and tried the door, but it was locked. She stuffed the gun back into her own waistband and pulled a large folding knife from one pocket. Unfolding it with her teeth, she jammed it into the sliders' simple locking mechanism and with one savage twist popped it open.

The slider didn't want to move along its track. I put some shoulder into it and managed to get it open far enough to push through.

For a moment we stood in the kitchen. The smell was sub-optimal; it reminded me of the bathrooms at Queenies on a Sunday morning when Ramon and Bert failed to wash them down after closing—stale piss, smoke, the tangy bite of vomit. It wasn't hard to see where the smell was coming from; the kitchen was a nightmare. Takeout food containers were everywhere, stacked on every available flat surface, on the floor, in the sink. The cabinet drawers were all broken, and the refrigerator door was kept shut with a piece of duct tape. Over the stove there was a toothless gap where the microwave should have been. Every step crunched under my boots. The whole place seemed to be moving in an insectoid wriggle, and I envisioned a billion squirming segmented bodies in the walls.

Jill put a finger to her lips and nodded towards the living room. Stale blue light flashed from a television, the sound of a laugh track skimming through the air like glitter. I took point, following the wall around, one arm bent backwards to keep a hand on the pistol as I moved.

As I turned the corner, the smell, improbably, got *worse*.

The carpet in the living room was an off pink and deep, a crunchy shag that hadn't been shampooed in a long time. More garbage was strewn everywhere—plastic bags overflowing with it, piles of it in every conceivable place. Bottles had tipped over, liquor and beer and mixers soaking into the already-ruined carpet. The television was old—two decades ago it would have been the top of the line, a flat screen model with an enormous, bulbous back—and tuned in to the local public access channel, where a sweating, balding man in a red and white checkered flannel shirt stiffly recounted high school football scores with funereal gravitas.

It soaked the oft-repaired recliner in silvery light that flashed and danced. The recliner had been patched with duct tape in several places, and the lever controlling the recline and footrest had been replaced with a large wrench tightened onto the nut.

The old man in the recliner looked dead.

I froze at the sight of him. He was both obviously my father, Mats Renik, and simultaneously not him. My father had been vibrant, winking, always in motion, his dark black hair slicked back and perfectly combed. He'd been rail thin, his large nose and Adam's Apple preceding him into every room by several minutes.

Mats Renik had never fallen asleep in a recliner his life. Mats Renik never *slept*. He was a restless man, always striving, plotting, sketching out plans and working stolen goods with tools at the kitchen table, or sipping a drink, or slipping out the back window onto the fire escape with

a wave and a grin. When he'd sat down at home, after a bender, after being gone for days, he would make himself a drink and sing the same fucking song over and over again.

*It's not the leaving of Liverpool that grieves me! But my darling when I think of thee!*

Even sitting down, my father had been a ball of noise and restless energy.

The old man in the recliner was fast asleep, his mouth open, his yellowed teeth crooked and ugly. His hair was thin and gray and stood up in random cowlicks the way old people's hair did. He was too thin and wore a pair of cheap work pants and a blue shirt, both too large for him, which made him seem even more shrunken.

"Jesus Christ," Jill said, dropping the duct tape and zip ties onto the carpet. "He's fucking *alive*."

The old man snorted and sat up with a strangled cry, his eyes opening. He started to settle back, then stiffened, leaning forward, his hands tightening on the chair's arms.

"What—" He blinked rapidly, his mouth working. He looked confused. Time had taken my father and ruined him, made him old.

I stared, the anger welling up inside me a terrifying thing, an alien intelligence I didn't understand, that I didn't think I would be able to control. My hands were fists again, the knuckles creaking. "Hey pop," I managed to say, my voice so tight and flat Jill glanced at me in sudden alarm.

Mats stared for a moment. His mouth worked, as if his teeth had gotten loose and he was trying to suck them back into place. His whole face seemed to twitch and undulate.

"What—*Maddie*?"

He sagged back into the chair and put a hand over his face. After a moment, I realized the old man was sobbing—jerking, shaking convulsions.

This was confusing. I looked over at Jill. Her eyes, wide and unblinking, flicked to me. She shrugged in confusion.

“Oh fucking thank god,” Mats Renik said between gasps. “Thank fucking *god*.”