



JEFF SOMERS

**THE
BOUNCER**
a novel

The Bouncer

14.

In the distance, shouts and horns. Only two trucks were left parked outside, the enormous black monster and a beat-to-hell Ford. I took the short drop onto the garage roof and crossed to a dormer with a window that rose up like a mistake. Peering into the window I found a small, empty room set up as a mother-in-law suite with a tiny kitchenette and a small three piece bathroom. It looked dusty and unused.

I tried the window and it lifted with a groaning protest. I climbed into the tiny apartment and paused, listening.

Then I allowed myself to get angry.

I'd spent most of my life tamping that anger down, controlling it, employing every trick I could to pretend it wasn't always there like a molten core. Now I dived into it. I let my hands clench up into fists and imagined my father a few feet away, behind a few walls, miserable but *still alive*. For the first time in years I allowed myself to consider how my father—and my mother—had fucked up my life. *Purposefully* fucked up my life. I'd always known, on some level, that my parents regarded me as an inconvenience, an afterthought. That any tokens of parental concern or responsibility they'd ever offered had been compulsory, performative—to avoid CPS scrutiny, to avoid neighborly concerns, to appear normal.

And when they needed to save their asses, they fled without even leaving me a note. They let me think I was an orphan for 15 years. And when I replayed the moment I'd walked into Mats' house a few hours ago, I could tell that that it was the first time my father had thought of me in ... 15 years.

And the worst of it was that I'd been a *great* fucking kid. A *dream*. I went to school. Got good grades. Excelled at sports. Stayed mostly out of trouble. Just sort of moved through my life on autopilot. I made it *easy* for them. Until they'd ruined my life.

I shook myself. I had to focus. Batten was in the garage. I couldn't be certain there was no one else in there with her, but I had to take the chance. The longer I left Jill in there the more danger she was in. The longer I was delayed in bringing Mats back, the more danger Elspeth was in. I was the guy who was supposed to keep all the bad stuff outside.

I crossed to the door and opened it, slowly. A narrow staircase led down to the garage. It was mercifully carpeted. Pulling the gun from my pants, I crept down, finger along the barrel. As I neared the bottom where the wall opened up, I crouched down and peered through the balusters.

The garage was largely empty. Plastic sheets had been spread on the floor, and what looked like a weight bench sat in the middle of the space, two pairs of handcuffs hanging from the back. Framed against the open door, Sheriff Batten squatted over a rusted, red metal tool chest, rummaging through the implements within.

I swallowed bile. I'd spent enough time around the hard cases and wannabes at Queenies to know what plastic sheets on the floor usually meant.

I scanned the rest of the garage. The big door was closed. There was a door leading into the main house. I had Batten cold—but I waited.

Take a breath, take your time, Uncle Pal had said in the backyard. *You miss every shot you rush.*

It was the same at the bar. The assholes, they always rushed. Tried to talk fast to get past me, tried to move fast to get past me. Like it was a game they could win. It was my job to show them there were only degrees of losing. Here, I wanted to move just because moving felt better—felt like I was doing something. But I was outnumbered and in unfamiliar territory. Better to have as many of my enemies in sight before I tipped my hand.

I settled myself, gun ready but finger anywhere but on the trigger. Batten began laying out tools, and I watched in mounting horror as pliers, knives, and what looked like surgical instruments appeared one by one, placed in a precise pattern near the weight bench. You think, after two encounters that ended in threats and violence, that you know someone, and then they turn out to be capable torturers.

Take a breath, I thought. *Take your time.*

The door opened and Jill and Mats appeared, shoved along by two guards. One I immediately dubbed Clown Hair was tall and painfully skinny, his red hair like a cloud of cotton candy rising off his head. The other was dark-skinned and serious, a natural-born frowner. I'd seen his type before at Queenies: The Perpetually Aggrieved. The Perpetually Aggrieved were always full of complaints, always convinced they were being disrespected.

They shoved Mats, making the old man stumble. Aggrieved took Jill by the shoulders and pushed her roughly to the bench. “Andy says he needs a name.”

“Honey,” Batten said, picking up one end of the handcuffs. “I ever fail to get a name?”

“No ma’am.” Aggrieved said as Batten cuffed one of Jill’s wrists to the bench.

I watched Jill, because I knew she would move.

I felt a familiar excitement, because Jill *always* moved. She was the one person I knew who’d never frozen up. She believed pretty strongly that when in doubt, the best thing to do was *move*, to do something, anything. That the element of surprise was the most powerful thing in the world, and the moment your enemies thought you were stuck was exactly the right moment to just do *anything*. I loved her for it, and as I watched her silently coil up, ready to spring, I wondered how in the world I’d let her drift so much. She was a goddamned force of nature.

As I watched, Jill studied Aggrieved, who had his attention on Batten.

Sensing motion, Aggrieved turned just in time to meet Jill’s fist as she surged forward, knocking Batten backwards and launching herself at the guard. They fell to the floor, the cuffs jangling as the bench followed her, falling down on top of them as she grappled with Aggrieved, both their hands on his handgun.

Clown Hair spun, hand going for his own weapon. I shook off the shock with a surge of electric adrenaline and moved, leaping down the last few stairs. I charged at Clown Hair and hit him with the gun, swinging my arm in a wide arc. The shock of the impact sent a lightning bolt up my arm, the Glock flying. I spun and threw myself at Batten, wrapping my arms around her as she tried to pull her sidearm.

The Sheriff was surprisingly strong. I locked wrists, trapping her arms at her sides. She snapped her head back and tried to tip me over, but I was too heavy.

I thought of Elspeth and closed my eyes. I squeezed tighter until I heard something crack.

Batten tried to howl. She stiffened and thrashed, but all she managed were strangled, choking noises. This was when a lot of amateurs relaxed, gave up. But I knew better. My early days at Queenies, I'd fucked up and gone soft on assholes when they seemed sedated, only to see them spring up with a sudden surge of Asshole Energy, the most destructive force in the universe.

I held on and turned my head. Jill had straddled Aggrieved and was punching him methodically in the face. The bench was still attached to her left arm, so she just pounded at him with her right, her hair hanging down, her breathing heavy and phlegmy. She paused, staring down at him. He was no longer so much *aggrieved* as *unconscious*. She turned and looked at me and Batten, who was still struggling and trying to free her arms. With a shake of her head, Jill climbed to her feet and dragged the bench over to us, punching Batten once in the face. The sheriff went limp and I relaxed, breathing hard as she slid to the floor.

The silence was eerie.

"You okay?" Jill asked, sitting on the overturned bench, sweat streaming down her face.

I shrugged. How do you answer that? "You?"

She nodded. "I gotta start some cardio, though."

I laughed. For a few seconds, it seized me and I couldn't stop it. I struggled to contain it, to stop the braying, insane giggling my body wanted to do. I looked at Jill and she smiled and looked away.

“Jesus, man, not now,” she said, choking on her own laughter. She glanced back at me and we stared at each other. I wondered at the gulf that had sprung up between us, how huge and insurmountable it had appeared just a few moments ago. Now it was gone and we might have been sixteen again, getting high in the parking lot and plotting to rob some house where we knew the family was on vacation.

Then my father shuffled past us at what I belatedly realized was a run, his hands flopping uselessly behind him as he grunted through the tape on his mouth.