



**JEFF SOMERS**

**THE  
BOUNCER**  
a novel

# The Bouncer

15.

“Keys!” Jill hissed.

I blinked stupidly for one second, and she rattled the handcuffs against the bench. I turned and rolled Batten over, searching through her pockets until I found the ring of keys. I tossed them to her and she snatched them out of the air with her free hand.

“Keys to the truck!” she said as she unlocked herself and launched into motion.

I spun and dug through Aggrieved’s pockets, coming up with a set of keys. I climbed to my feet and scanned the room, looking for the Glock, but couldn’t see it anywhere. With a muttered curse I knelt again and took Batten’s gun from her holster, checking the safety and stuffing it into my waistband. I paused to listen to the silence, searching for any sign of alarm. There was nothing. I figured they’d sent Jill in to be tortured, so some scuffling was to be expected. Chewing Gum or whoever might be listening in the main house wouldn’t think twice about a few shouts, a couple of thuds.

I turned to find Jill returning from the darkness with my father literally in hand—two fingers pinched his ear, the old man stooped low and wincing as he struggled to keep up. He was sweating; the tape hung from one end of his open mouth as he breathed rapidly. I had no more anger for the old man. I’d believed him dead for fifteen years. The man I’d known *was* dead. The

huge, loud presence I remembered was just a shrunken thing, and I couldn't be mad at this small, sad man.

Aggrieved's truck was the beat to shit Ford with an extended cab, but it started up with a slick hum that whispered of oil changes and frequent tuneups.

"Just drive," Jill said from the rear seat, where she sat with Mats. "There're trucks all over the road."

I nodded. "You don't know guys. They know each other's trucks. It's like fingerprints," I said. "This thing's thirty years old. These guys make small talk about spark plugs, trust me, and they know every inch of each other's vehicles."

"Go slow," she insisted. "You burn rubber, they'll be on us immediately. And put on the lights. A fucking truck creeping along dark is gonna be suspicious."

I grimaced, but flicked on the lights and put the truck into gear. "Yes, boss."

"Dude, if you'd followed the plan and just let me run your life, you wouldn't be out in Bumfuck, North Dakota kidnapping your own father." She leaned forward. "Fucking slow down!"

I shook my head. "These assholes are out tearing it up. They're hunting, excited. Most fun they've had in *ages*. We crawl around we're gonna be noticed."

Pills couldn't be objective about shitkickers, because she *was* a shitkicker, still. I'd pulled back, I'd had the chance to observe our kind from a distance. Got some objectivity. She was still buried in it.

She chewed her lip and glanced at the old man. I looked at him in the rear-view mirror. He wasn't doing well. He sat with his mouth open, staring ahead, breathing hard. "You know where you're going?"

My hands tightened on the steering wheel. I was disoriented; I couldn't make the road sync with my mental map of Paradise.

"Lights," Jill whispered.

We were coming up to an intersection, a pair of too-bright headlights approaching from the opposite way. Before I could react, the other truck blasted past us, honking its horn.

The night closed in around us.

"Take a left," Jill said.

"You sure?"

"Nope."

I turned left. The houses were all identical. There were no street signs.

"Maddie," my father croaked from the back seat. "Hey, Maddie. We gotta go back. I gotta get —"

"Shut up," I muttered, leaning forward.

"Lights," Jill said.

Another set of headlights—two sets—crept over the rise in the road. I could see at a glance there wasn't enough room for all three trucks to pass. I gripped the steering wheel and kept my foot on the gas.

"Maddie," Mats slurred from the backseat. "It was your mother, you know. Your mother wanted a kid. A daughter. You know how she gets."

I blinked, heart pounding. *You know how she gets.* I wanted to steer the truck into a pole and turn around to punch him in the face, but I forced myself to watch the road.

As the trucks approached, they flashed their lights. I glanced down, but couldn't locate the highbeam lever. My eyes raced over the dash and the truck swerved just slightly. I snapped my eyes back to the road as the two trucks roared past us.

Jill whipped her head around, peering out the back window.

"Maddie," Mats said, his voice thick.

"Shut the fuck up," I hissed, eyes on the rearview watching the brake lights. I started counting in my head. *One, two, three—*

One set of brake lights glowed brighter, and then the truck swung around, its headlights coming into view behind us.

*Fuck.*

"You missed the secret handshake," Jill said.

The lights settled in behind us and matched our speed. We rolled up to a T-junction, the community wall looming up in front of us. I turned left, figuring I could follow the perimeter road until I found the gate.

The truck behind us followed.

“You see radios?” Jill asked, turning to study Mats, who sat loose-limbed and open-mouthed, looking gray.

“No,” I said. “But they have them, right?”

Jill nodded. “Of course.” She frowned at my father. “Mr. Renik, you okay?”

The older man shook his head. “Maddie,” he said, “Maddie, listen to me.”

“Shut *up*,” I hissed again. The lights remained precisely three car lengths behind us, and I could imagine the conversation being held, the radio calls going out, trucks maneuvering along the streets of Paradise to block our way.

I pressed my foot down further on the gas and the truck jumped forward smoothly. Our only chance was to get to the gate first. The truck lights behind us faded for a moment, then raced up behind us.

“Maddie, you gotta get me out of here,” Mats said in a shaky voice, breathing hard. “You don’t understand. They’re fucking vampires. I had to get out of town, I had to get away from a ... a lot of things. You don’t know what it took to support you and your mother. You don’t know. I did what I had to, and I pissed off a lot of people. I needed a place. I needed someplace to hide out. And these bastards, they held out their hands and said, come on in! Just pay us rent! But they

don't tell you you gotta pay and pay and pay, until you're bled *white*, and when you're *whited out* they just turn you *out* and all the fuckin' sharks who've been waitin' on you are right there. You gotta get me outta here. So we gotta go back."

He was breathing hard by the time he finished. Behind us, a second set of headlights had appeared.

"Lights!"

I dragged my eyes back to the road ahead, where a pair of bright white lights had appeared. "Fuck," I muttered. "They're gonna pin us up. Hang on!"

I jerked the wheel and hit the brakes, taking the truck on a sharp left onto an intersecting road. Jill and Mats were slammed against the side of the cab, then rocketed back as I hit the gas again, tires squealing.

"You know where you're going?" Jill shouted, shoving Mats away from her. The old man slumped against the narrow rear door.

"No time to be smart! Gotta come at the gate on a straightaway! Brute force it!" I shouted back, watching as two sets of headlights swerved into place behind them. We were out of time. Any moment now they'd find a way to block the exit, and then we were fucked.

I pushed the gas pedal down and the truck began to shake.

"There's no seatbelts back here!" Jill shouted, sounding delighted at the discovery. "What kind of fucking deathtrap do Midwest shitkickers *buy*?!"



“Fix or repair daily!” I shouted, feeling crazy, a strange, shaky mania sweeping through me. I leaned forward and scanned the road ahead for a right turn that would take me parallel to the perimeter again. The houses, shrouded in darkness, flashed by like shadows.

“Lights!”

Two more pairs of headlights appeared up ahead. I glanced back at Jill and saw that expression again, that smile, calm in the eye of any storm because the storm was so fucking entertaining.

*Do it, Maddie!*

“Hang on!”

I turned around, scanned the row of houses to my right, and put the gas pedal to the floor.

“Old man!” Jill shouted, grabbing hold of the fold-down handle on the roof of the car, “might want to hang onto something!”

I killed the headlights and took a deep breath. The trucks raced towards us. I stared into their lights and counted, silently, to myself. When my vision was completely filled with the cold white light, I jerked the wheel to the right and let up on the gas. The truck hit the incline of dead grass and took to the air for a moment, a sudden calm as gravity twisted around itself. When we landed all three of us slammed up and down violently, and the truck fishtailed, sending a plume of dirt and dead grass into the air.

Then it stabilized, and we shot past the two trucks.



I hit the gas again and steered back onto the road, bottoming out with a spray of sparks. The truck handled like a rock, like it was requiring physical effort from me to keep it moving. A moment later I saw a break in the line of houses, a narrow alley. I didn't think. I knew if we stayed on the roads, eventually enough of the guards arrived to box us in. We had to break out, and it had to be *now*.

I spun the wheel and the truck bounced as it hit the incline of the front yards. Dirt flying, we sped towards the gap.

"It's too tight!" Jill shouted.

"No," I said. I didn't sound too convinced.

We had inches to spare, sparks flying on each side as we threaded the needle. We smashed through a row of garbage cans, trash shooting into the air and splattering the windshield, and then we were in the backyard, the sudden openness unnerving.

"Holy *fuck*," Jill said, leaning forward between the seats. "Are you a fucking *wizard*?"

I floored it, the truck fishtailed, and then we were bouncing across the yard. The wooden stockade fence separating it from the next block loomed up. We crashed through it with an explosion of noise, a chunk of wood smashing into the windshield and starring it, breaking my view into a million tiny universes. We raced across the second yard towards the opposite alley, scraping along stucco walls until we burst onto the next street, fishtailing again as I swung the truck around.

The entry gate was two blocks away, directly in front of us.

I hit the gas as two guards stepped out of the little guardhouse, pulling handguns from holsters and leveling them at us. As we neared the gate, the sound of gunfire was comically distant and tiny, like little pops. I sensed more than saw headlights approaching, fast, from my left and right, trying to cut us off.

As we smashed through the chain link gate, Jill let out a screech that sounded like pure joy.

I hit the brakes and jerked the wheel, but the gate was trapped under the truck and we went skidding into the tree line trailed by the *pop-pop-pop* of small arms fire. We hit a tree going sideways, just hard enough to feel a shudder go through the chassis, but the truck's engine didn't die. I turned the wheel again and hit the gas, and we jerked forward, fishtailing back up the shoulder and then bouncing onto the blacktop.

Jill twisted around to look behind us. My eyes flashed to the rearview. Two sets of headlights immediately appeared.

"I see them," I growled. At the intersection I jerked the truck to the left, heading up to the old mine road. I put the gas pedal to the floor and the truck began to shake again, every pothole in the old road sending us into the air and then down again with a bone-rattling impact. When the turn loomed up on our right, I took it at speed, coming within inches of flipping over or smashing into one of the trees. I hit the gas again, a half dozen lights blooming on the dash as the engine began making a curious grinding noise.

When we reached the parking area, I swung the truck to the left and slammed on the brakes. We spun into the dark, empty space, and the engine finally stalled.

We sat in the darkness, listening to the engine tick.

“How long do we wait?” Jill whispered. Then she eased the Glock out of her pocket and held it against her belly.

“If they’re on our ass, we’ll know in a minute,” I whispered back.

We waited.

“Well, if we’re about to die, I guess it’s time for truth talking,” Jill said quietly. “So here goes: Mads Renik, you’re a fucking *terrible* driver.”

There was a moment of tight silence, and then we burst out laughing. In the back seat, Jill collapsed onto herself, swallowing the laughter with effort. I punched the seat next to me, mouth clamped shut in an effort to control the outburst. Slowly, silence crowded in again. I took a deep breath.

“I guess we lost them.”

Jill nodded. “They assumed we made for the highway,” she said. “Now what?”

I turned the key in the ignition. The starter screeched, and after a few seconds the engine roared back into life, running choppy, the whole truck vibrating. I put it into gear and crept back out onto the road, gingerly adding speed. The old mine road led us back to the narrow local roads, and I made my way to the highway by instinct. The road turned into a winding two-laner framed by towering stalks of corn on either side.

After a few minutes, the engine began to knock and wheeze. The lights on the dash were joined by others. When the truck gave up, it coasted to a stop in almost perfect darkness.

“Shit,” I said.

Jill didn't say anything for a moment. Finally she said in a small voice, "Maddie."

I twisted around and looked back at her. We stared at each other in silence, the quiet deep and insulated, the only sound the wind moving through the corn. We might have been the only people in the world, stranded on some far off planet of wind and corn and darkness.

After a moment, I sighed and looked down, then turned to look at Mats. The old man lolled in his seat in a loose, unnatural way, his mouth open, his eyes staring up at the roof of the truck.

He was dead.