



JEFF SOMERS

**THE
BOUNCER**
a novel

The Bouncer

16.

“We really can’t think of anyone else?”

Jill tapped her vape against the truck window. “Think away, *mon frere*. Let me know if there’s a category on TaskRabbit or something for handling unexpected corpses and being hunted by the Outfit.”

I frowned. “How’s he gonna find us?”

“Trim has some unexpected talents. I know, you look at him and you think he gets lured into vans with candy. But he’s actually useful.”

I considered this possibility as a way to distract myself, to stop myself from pacing and shaking and harming myself to expend worry and fear and terror. Point in favor: Trim was old. Middle-aged, at least. And he was still alive, independent, and had all his limbs. Point against: He insisted on being called *Trim*.

She placed the vape between her lips and inhaled, the LED on the side lighting up green for a moment.

“When was the last time you were sober?” I asked, hands on the steering wheel as if the truck might magically roar back into life.

“Sixth grade,” Jill said immediately. “I remember because I was so fucking miserable.”

My hands tightened on the wheel and the knuckles popped. Then I lifted them off and rubbed them together, then wiped the sweat from my eyes. We’d pushed the truck into the corn, a few feet from the road. Even though there was a chill in the air, the sun was heating up the cab like an oven.

Sitting had been hell. Every minute dragged by, just thinking about the fucking mess. Ellie and Carrie still being held. My father, the only currency I had, was gone. We had a few precious hours before that story spread, a few hours to make some moves, figure out some way to salvage this. And so far I’d spent them sitting in a truck in the middle of a corn field, sweating.

Nothing for it. We hadn’t seen or heard any traffic on the road, but I knew there had to be search parties out in force looking for us. We’d skipped out on my father’s back rent, and I didn’t think you maintained teams of armed guards like that unless you meant to use them. But the road was a narrow dirt lane cutting through fields, so it might not be on their radar. We might be safe enough if we stayed put. Out and about, we’d be taking a chance. And then we’d have to figure out what to do with Mats.

I sat and tried not to think about him. But I’d spent most of my life thinking about Mats Renik, the Celebrated Genius of Queenies, and the ruin the man had bequeathed me. Now the old man was stretched out on the seat behind me, breaking down and swelling, slowly transforming from a living human being to a corpse, a hunk of rotting offal. I’d imagined my father dead many times, usually with a healthy dose of dark joy, usually with a satisfyingly grisly image of him burning up in the back of a stolen Cadillac. None of it had come with this flavor of awful grubby

ordinariness. My father wasn't an outlaw asshole, dodging bullets with clever plans. He was a striver and a thief who'd paid for a shitty retirement in a shitty townhouse and then ran out of money, like everyone else.

I paused. I remembered him saying *we gotta go back*. And I thought, would Mats Renik really wait until he was busted to make a run?

I turned and looked at Jill as she sucked on her vape again. I didn't know what to say to her. I didn't know her, not really, not anymore. I'd once spent almost every waking moment with her, but now this angry woman with the smartass response to everything was a stranger.

"Stop fucking looking at me," she said suddenly without turning her head. "Why do you give so many shits about my mental state?"

I grimaced, looking down at my hands and unclenching them with effort. I felt a violence brewing inside me I hadn't felt since sobriety, since meeting Carolina and getting married.

"Last week I got ditched by this guy at a bar out on the highway and I pulled out my phone and the only fucking person I could think to call was you," she said suddenly, "but I didn't, because if I hear that fucking voicemail greeting one more time I'm going to jump off a roof. I got that voicemail greeting *memorized*."

I swallowed. "I know. I'm an asshole."

She turned and punched me in the arm, then kept punching me, surprisingly fierce and strong. She twisted around in the seat and slapped and punched at me over and over, breathing hard. I just put my arms over my head and took it, letting her vent her fury.

Just as suddenly, she hurled herself back against the door. “No,” she said between breaths. “No, you don’t get to just call yourself an asshole and be absolved.” She moved her hand in front of her in a cross motion. “You treat me like I work for you.”

I settled myself and stared straight ahead. The anger had solidified, making it hard to breathe. “You abandoned *me*,” I said, surprised at the heat in my voice. “How dare I fucking get sober, how *dare* I—”

I paused, spotting a plume of dust approaching as a vehicle tore down the dirt road. Jill leaned down and picked up the gun from the floor, holding it in her lap as we watched the dust cloud get near, then stop.

“That’s him.”

We climbed out of the truck. I felt stiff, dehydrated. I moved slowly, like my joints were made of glass, pushing the stalks aside gingerly.

“You know when they say ‘middle of fucking nowhere?’” Trim said as we emerged from the corn. He was standing beside the ancient and rusting Blue Ruin. “It’s not here, because this isn’t even a place. This is a place *between* the places.” He looked up, shielding his eyes from the sun. “I haven’t had a cell signal in an *hour*.”

“Thanks,” Jill said, stretching. “For coming.”

Trim sketched a little bow. “Thanks,” he said, “for your surprisingly detailed and coherent directions. As we discussed, it will be expensive.” He nodded. “Mads. You’re looking well.” He clapped his hands together. “So! I understand we have a dead body! Exciting!”

“Is he your *only* contact?” I asked.

Jill turned and spat onto the road. “Not a lot of people you can call when you need to transport a corpse over state lines, Maddie.”

Trim was wearing a pair of denim overalls. His bare arms and shoulders made me uncomfortably certain he had nothing on underneath. “Point of order, kids, can I ask *why* we’re transporting the body? Seeing as it’s the single most difficult thing to do with a body, being my point.”

I sighed. “We need it.” I said. “The body.”

Trim accepted this and followed us into the corn. When we stopped at the truck, he leaned down and peered in through the windows.

“I take it back. The single most difficult thing to do with a body is to sleep overnight in a truck with one in the back seat,” he said, straightening up and leaning against the door. “You two are my new favorite people.”

I felt the urge to hit Trim in the face rising. “What’s the plan?” And I thought of my father saying, *we gotta go back*. I thought about touring the old apartment, that last apartment, after they were gone.

Trim smiled. “Well, if you would consult your Crimes Handbook, Mister Renik, you’d see that the standard way to deal with a dead body transportation challenge is to first avoid having a dead body in the first place.” He hooked a thumb over his shoulder. “Since you have failed this first—crucial!—step, the next move is to put the body in the trunk of a car and drive it where you need to go.”

My hands bunched into fists. Jokers. Always thought they could bluff their way past you, always thought they could cut you down with a withering remark, put you in your place. The trick with them was a poker face. Never once admit they'd made you wince or laugh. "Just ... drive it. Across state lines. A 20-hour ride."

Trim nodded. "I am afraid my corpse teleportation machine is out of order."

I turned and looked over his shoulder. "In a ... 1978 Chevy Nova?"

"Don't you mock the Blue Ruin. Don't you do it." Trim pushed off from the truck and turned to open the door. "Come on, give me a hand." He paused, blinking. "Shit. No resell value on a truck that smells like dead guy," he said, leaning in.

We carried him to the Ruin. I stared down at my father's face as we walked, the deep lines in his skin, the jowliness of his jawline. I tried to reconcile the man I'd found in Paradise with the towering, loud rooster I remembered. And I saw myself, reduced, sucked dry, worn down. This was what I would look like when I was old. When I was *dead*. I had so little of Liùsaidh in me, only a hint around the eyes, in the endless exhausting energy that was always fidgeting inside me.

We put him in the trunk. I imagined the old man swelling and cooking in there.

"All right," Trim said. "Rules of the road: The Blue Ruin does not smoke, has legit plates and inspection stickers, and all the lights work. We're not speeding. We do the speed limit, stay in the right lane except to pass, and if I miss an exit we go on to the next and calmly make a U-turn. This," he added, "in case you haven't memorized your Crimes Handbook, is to avoid interactions with the local Smokies as we smuggle Long Pork back there back to incredible Bergen City."

“Jesus, Damien,” Jill said, crossing her legs under herself in the passenger seat.

Trim glanced at her. “You look awful, Pillgirl. When was the last time you slept?”

“Sixth grade,” she said with a glance back at me. “Right before I got boobs. After that it was a real sleep-with-one-eye open situation at my house.”

“And now I’m uncomfortable,” Trim said. “The radio is jammed with a mix tape I made in seventh grade,” he announced. “So I encourage you both to either simulate a podcast or start singing.”

Jill pulled open the passenger-side door, but I put a hand on her shoulder. “Wait.”

Trim pushed his hands into his overalls in a way that suggested he was not *not* fondling himself. Jill just stared at me, red eyes, the white streak in her hair dancing in the breeze.

“I gotta go back.”

Jill turned to face me. “The shit you do.”

Trim nodded. “For more bodies. I understand everything.”

I looked at him. The anger was gone. I had something to do, some way to channel it. “Give me the keys.”

Trim shook his head. “I say this with the knowledge that you are probably going to hurt me if I say no, but I would rather not.”

I glanced at Jill. “We’ve got to go back. We put Mats back in the truck. Trim, you wait here, keep an eye on him. Two, three hours, max. I’ll pay you a bonus.”

Jill stepped over to me and crowded in close. She smelled bad. I could feel her body heat pushing against me. “Dude, are you fucking insane?” she whispered, even though I could see Trim leaning over and blatantly listening in. “I know this has gone wrong in every possible way —”

“Mats is dead,” I said. “He’s all the leverage we had. We go back to Bergen City without him, I got nothing, and who knows what that psychopath does to my wife, my daughter.”

She flinched. I looked past her at Trim. “Wait here. Few hours. Like I said. I’ll pay you.”

“With what?” he asked.

“What’s back there?” Jill asked.

I answered them both. “Money.”