



JEFF SOMERS

**THE
BOUNCER**
a novel

The Bouncer

19.

“All they had.”

I glanced at the foil package of peanuts in Jill’s hand. “Thanks,” I said. “I can’t believe a random rest stop in Iowa doesn’t have gourmet vending machines.”

She nodded, sitting down on the picnic table next to me and unwrapping the first of three candy bars. “I am already composing a fucking *fierce* letter of complaint.”

I looked past her to where Trim leaned down into the guts of the Nova’s engine. We’d pulled over a few miles down the road and cut the tracker off Mats’ ankle, tossing it into the trees. Shortly after that, the car had started belching black smoke, and then the shaking had begun. I could see Trim’s weird, pale face illuminated by the light of his phone’s flashlight. Beyond him, like sleeping mountains, a trio of big rigs were in for a few hours of sleep, one cab lit up with the blue flash of a screen, the others completely dark.

“They won’t do anything as long as they think Mats is alive,” Jill said, taking a bite of the first candy bar and leaning back on her elbows. “Ellie, I mean. She’s okay.”

I nodded. She meant to be kind. “Sure. Thanks.” I glanced at the candy bar. “You should eat actual food.”

“*Actual* food just makes me sick,” she said. “Don’t try to be my big brother, Maddie. That ship sailed a long time ago.”

I nodded, staring off into the gloom and shivering in the cold. “I think I’m divorced. No matter what happens here. Either way, I can’t see Carrie sticking around. And she’ll take Elspeth. And I can’t say she’d be wrong. My mother’s still out there, and who knows what other delightful prizes my father has left as my inheritance.”

She digested this for a moment.

“You hear from her?”

“No. Don’t expect to.” I laughed, a sudden bark. “I get a text from Lisa every time Marcus calls 9-1-1 again or when Ivan gets into it with the Bekvalacs over noise at night, but nothing from Carrie.”

Jill chewed silently. I swallowed and fell silent, thinking about the ruin of my life. I’d been so proud of my progress—a job, a family, my GED. No more hangovers, no more angry nights brawling. Now it all looked so small, so fragile. So easy for my father to just blow away like dust. I’d never really had anything.

“You hear from them a lot, huh? Your neighbors.”

I nodded. “We’re kind of close. Fuck that, we *are* close. We’re in this weird building all by itself. Nothing in sight for two blocks. They keep shutting off the power, the water, because they forget we’re still there. The cops won’t come any more because the kid keeps calling them. And we all know the letter’s coming any day now, where they tell you they’ve finally sold the building and the project’s back on and we have like a week to get the fuck out, and fuck all we

can do about it.” I sighed. “Sometimes it feels like a family. Sometimes I stop and I think, we’re all just *neighbors*.” I swallowed hard. “Sometimes I think, you’re all I’ve got.”

There were several excruciating beats of silence.

“That’s a fucking shame,” Jill said. She balled up the candy wrapper. “I’m sorry for it, Maddie—I am. And I’m *here*, right now. But just because your wife is gonna leave you doesn’t mean you get to call me in like a goddamn relief pitcher to make you feel less lonely.”

I nodded again, sliding off the table and pacing, the gravel crunching under my boots. “I know that.” I looked over at Trim. “He any good with cars? Every minute here is a fucking nightmare.”

She shrugged. “That heap is still running, isn’t it?” She turned to study him. “Damien is a custom model, sure, but he knows some shit. He’s gotten us this far.”

I said nothing. I thought of my daughter and clenched my fists.

“Come on,” Jill said, sliding off the table. “Might as well get some sleep while he works on the car.”

I nodded and followed her back to the car, nodding at Trim as we approached. Jill took the back and I took the front, each of us stretching out on the wide, unbroken surface of the old-school seats, like two cheap sofas in a car.

I stared up at the tattered cloth roof and couldn’t imagine falling asleep.

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“Maddie.”

I blinked, opening my eyes. The darkness had a different tone to it, a deeper, more solid. It was quiet.

“Someone’s here,” Jill whispered from the backseat.

I glanced at the driver’s side door and saw it was unlocked.

“Trim?”

“No idea.”

I took a deep breath, filling my lungs with oxygen. The best thing to do was take the initiative. It happened, sometimes, when I was working the floor or the door—some asshole thought he’d been disrespected and decided to follow me to the bathroom, and I’d find himself trapped in a vulnerable position. So I’d learned, the hard way, that when I heard someone come into the bathroom at Queenies, quiet and stealthy, it was best to be first through the stall door.

I reached up over my shoulder and found the door handle. I pulled until it clicked and the door sagged open behind me. I slowly raised my leg and braced one foot against the steering column, pushing myself into the door. It creaked open an inch, then another. I slid down onto my back and rolled under the car, reaching up to gently close the door with one hand.

I rolled onto my belly and scanned around. By the rear passenger door, I saw a pair of black pants and steel-tipped boots. A second later I heard a ring tapping against the window.

And then, a gunshot.

The rear windshield shattered, and the boots skittered back from the car, disappearing from his view.

“Jesus, kid!”

The boots returned, joined by two other pairs. I backed out from under the car just as someone grabbed onto my ankles and dragged me free, scraping me raw on the rocky dirt.

I rolled himself over and launched myself upward, crashing into what felt like three hundred pounds of someone. I landed a solid punch on the big guy’s crotch. He was short and barrel-shaped, wearing a motorcycle cut and leathers. I was rewarded with a soft, wheezing exclamation. He staggered back and sat down on the ground, hard.

I whirled and found a gun in my face.

“Settle down, Renik,” Chewing Gum said, holding up his hands. He looked like a bookie—rings on his fingers and that thick-skinned look you got from sitting under fluorescent lights all the time. He snapped a thick wad of pink gum with a horrifying open-mouthed technique that would have seen him denied entry at Queenies on principle alone. He leaned over and looked past me to where the big guy was still sitting, doing breathing exercises with a wide-eyed enthusiasm. “Jesus, Milky, have some fucking pride.”

Four of them. Chewing Gum just stood there with casual authority, relaxed and unconcerned. Two other men I might have recognized from Paradise. One had a gun pointed at Jill, on her knees between them. Our eyes met, and then she glanced at Chewing Gum.

“How’d you find us?”

He smiled. It was an easy smile, an automatic and meaningless expression. I'd seen tons of guys like him, Smilers. They were always happy, always laughing. But it didn't mean anything. There was no joy there. It was just for show.

He gestured, and I looked past him at the trio of trucks slumbering away. The black truck, busted up and dented, sat next to them. "The Outfit and the Teamsters are cozy, in case you hadn't noticed," he said jovially. "Our brothers on the roads been bird-dogging y'all the whole way. Now, come on. Where's your Da, kid?" He turned to glance at Jill and winked. "Good to see you again, sweetheart."

Jill looked like she was contemplating the thought process of a man who would flirt while a woman was on her knees with a gun to her head. I thought it pretty likely that Chewing Gum hadn't had a voluntary date in a looooong time.

He looked back at me like he could hear my thoughts. "Come on, kid. You can't pay the toll and we can't just him walk out on his arrangement, okay? We'll let you and sugartits here skate." He spread his hands and grinned, the immense wad of gum appearing in flashes behind his too-white teeth. After a moment he sighed and grimaced, cocking his head. "You should know, if I gotta put more effort into this, it's ... not gonna go well for you."

I was impressed. I'd met a lot of criminal middle managers, and few of them had this guy's slick cheer. Most of them went straight to beating the shit out of you. I got the impression that this guy didn't like wasted effort. Or breaking a sweat.

I took stock. The fat one, Milky, was still on his knees cupping his balls, breathing steadily and staring straight ahead as if he could see Death on the horizon, coming for him, as if he'd just

now considered his mortality and didn't like the general concept. The skinny guy with the hardware in his hand was focused on Jill, staring at her in an intent way I didn't much care for.

There was a window. There was always a window. Guys like Chewing Gum controlled situations by simply asserting they were in charge. And there was a window between that assertion and any sort of action, a moment when someone like Chewing Gum would wait to see what happened and hold his fire.

I reared back and kicked Chewing Gum in the stomach.

He sailed backwards into the Blue Ruin. I used my moment of surprise and spun, charging at Leathers, grabbing onto the gun with both hands and shoving it upwards as I crashed into him. We both went down to the ground, the gun dropping and skittering away. I grabbed blindly at the cut and took hold with both hands, shoving the man down and straddling him. Letting go with one hand, I brought my fist down twice, pain lancing up my arm as I made contact with bone.

I rolled away and scrambled to my feet. A moment later, the skinny guy slammed into me, cursing. I clipped the Blue Ruin as I went down, pain exploding in my side. I reached up and got my hands on the guy's face, pushing my thumbs into his eyes. One thing I'd learned working the door: If you gave an inch, they would swamp you. You had to push and shove and never let up. You had to overwhelm them and never let up.

The skinny guy screamed. A moment later, a gunshot ripped the air, and everything stopped. I stared down at Skinny, then slowly pushed myself up. Skinny rolled up into a ball and cupped his hands over his face.

Chewing Gum had a shiny chrome automatic in his hand. He stood over us with a deeply bored expression on his face, then winced a little, one hand going to his belly. I sincerely hoped I'd caused some kind of internal bleeding. "Now, you don't want to do any of that," he said. He sounded kind of amused, as if getting kicked in the stomach was just part of his usual day, and winked at Jill, whose superpower had always been the ability to charm leathery old men. "I got what the grown-ups call *latitude* when it comes to delivering you alive or dead, so the next time one of you moves without my permission I'm just gonna shoot you. Okay? Just gonna shoot you and see what happens. Okay?" He nodded, grimacing. "Now, where's Mats Renik?"

I swallowed. Over at the other end of the rest area, one of the big rigs roared into life, the engine settling immediately into a loud chugging as the driver prepped to get back on the road.

I thought furiously. They wouldn't think of the trunk right away, because they didn't know Mats was dead. They'd think of it *eventually*, though.

"Let me help clarify things," Chewing Gum said, regaining some of his weird, dark cheer. "No one gives a shit about you two. No one cares if you live or die. But there's a profit and loss on Mats Renik, and the more effort I have to put into retrieving that piece of shit, the less profit there is for me. So I'm looking to be efficient rather than elegant. Bottom line, if I don't hear some good news in the next few seconds, I'm going to pick one of you randomly to shoot in the head. If that doesn't inspire the other person to help me out, then fuck you both."

He said this with a blank lack of emotion. I believed, in that moment, that he truly didn't care about us beyond how much trouble we were going to be for him. We both stared at him. Chewing Gum's face flowed into a deformed smirk and he shrugged as if to say *that's all I got*.

I closed my eyes. I had no good choices. If I handed over Mats' body, word got back to the Spillaines and that put Carrie and Ellie in danger. If I stayed mute, they killed me and eventually searched the Ruin and Carrie and Ellie paid the price anyway. So that meant I had to make a move, which was probably going to end terribly, which brought us right back to the start again.

Still, nothing to lose. Miguel used to preach the higher power stuff. You weren't always in charge. You had to accept your powerlessness. *When all your choices were bad*, he'd say, *just pick one*.

Chewing Gum sighed. "Fine. Let's take a walk."

Hands slipped under my armpits, and I was pulled to my feet. I opened my eyes and stared straight ahead as we were marched back towards the black truck. It was in sad shape from the accident, the passenger door caved in, the finish scraped. The noise of the rig got louder but everything else seemed to recede from me. The moment was approaching. I was curiously impressed with Chewing Gum.

Why walk us to the truck?

Because Chewing Gum was smart. And experienced. And lazy.

Because he didn't want to have to carry us there after putting a bullet in our heads.

I didn't look at Jill. I didn't have to. After all these years, after all the bitter voicemails and angry moments, I felt her. I felt my connection to her, a thin spider line that had survived all the years. When we reached the truck, they turned us around and Chewing Gum mimed at us, pushing the palms of his hands down towards the ground. *Kneel*.

With the roar of the rig's motor around us, we knelt. I stared at the Ruin a few hundred feet away and waited for the moment. I would have one chance. I knew Jill would move when I did, I didn't even have to wonder about that. But if we were going to rush them, we needed the—

Behind Chewing Gum, the Blue Ruin's trunk noiselessly opened.

It lifted up slowly, like in a dream, and a silhouette crept out. A skinny silhouette shaped just like Trim. As Chewing Gum made a little speech about how little he cared what we did, I watched Trim creep around to the driver's side door and climb into the Ruin.

"Last chance," Chewing Gum said, ostentatiously checking the gun over.

I watched the Ruin begin to creep, the brake lights flashing. It turned towards us and began to move. Under cover of the big rig's rumble, the car moved in disorienting silence, a shadow growing larger while Chewing Gum counted to some random number in his head before shooting one of us.

The rig's horn blasted. The driver leaned out of his cab and shouted something. Chewing Gum tried to ignore him, but after a few seconds he turned and threw his hands up in the air. "What, for fuck's sake?" he shouted.

The Ruin plowed into him.

It wasn't going faster than twenty, twenty five, but it knocked him over with some prejudice. I dove to my left and rolled on the rocky ground. The Ruin smacked into the black pickup with a hollow bang that briefly cut through the noise, bouncing back with the familiar sound of the engine stalling. I wondered if the Blue Ruin had somehow been *designed* to stall at the slightest discomfort, if that had somehow been a selling point for the engineers.

When I got to my feet, Jill was already pulling open the rear passenger door. I sprinted for the car as Trim hunched over the wheel, the starter once again grinding like it was made of glass and pebbles. The big guy called Milky surged up, gun in hand, and I swerved, throwing myself at him. I knocked him down as he squeezed the trigger, the sound of the gun cutting through the noise. I landed on top of the fat bastard and pushed my knee into his arm, pinning it to the ground.

Milky howled. Behind us, the big rig slapped into gear and began to rumble towards the exit.

I brought my fist down into Milky's jowly face, feeling a thrill, an old, familiar sense of exultation. As a kid, orphaned and alone, I'd surveyed the ruin of my life—my shitty room at Uncle Pal's, my public school debut—and I'd taken comfort in trying to destroy it further. A furious orgy of destruction. Punching a hole in the wall gave me five seconds of this peaceful, suspended sensation, like my own internal gravity had been turned off. The worse things I did to myself, to others, to anything, the better I felt.

It never lasted.

I'd spent a long time trying to turn that part of myself off, but after all these years and all those meetings and all the work it came roaring back like a sponge dipped into water, expanding to fill me and take control of my limbs. I smashed my fist into Milky's face and felt everything click into place for a second. A puzzle piece fitting perfectly.

A footstep behind me made me whirl around. Chewing Gum crashed into me like a linebacker, driving me backwards into the pickup. My head bounced on the metal, adding a dent to it and filling me up with a screeching ringing noise that resolved into the mating call of Jill

Pilowsky as she leaped onto Chewing Gum and slapped at him with her bare hands, a rain of blows that confused the shit out of him, making him curl up with his arms over his head for protection.

The sound of the starter grinding sent me crawling back to Milky. He'd been the one driving on the highway, and sure enough I found the keys to the black truck in his front pocket. I tore them free and hurled them as far as I could throw.

Skinny was on his feet then, with Chewing Gum right behind him. They both charged from different angles—and then two shots rang out, splitting the darkness.

We all froze. For a moment it was just breathing and the grind of the Ruin.

“Fuck me I need cardio,” Jill said, breathing hard. She gestured with the gun. “Assholes to the left, Mads to the right.”

Behind her, the Ruin's engine caught with a belch of black smoke. I decided to found a cargo cult centered on that car, which was apparently unkillable.

We backed towards it. Chewing Gum and the skinny guy watched us with their arms half-raised. Chewing Gum didn't look particularly scared. Or amused. He stared at me like he intended to make me regret the last twenty-four hours.

I climbed into the back seat of the car. Trim leaned over and pushed the passenger door open, and Jill backed gracefully into the seat, keeping the gun on our new friends.

“Hit it,” she said.

Trim hit the gas. The Ruin sounded like a thunderstorm on the horizon and shook like a nervous kid at a school dance, but we moved. Jill lowered the gun and leaned over to pull the door shut, some fragments of glass raining down her from the shattered window. She swiveled and pointed the Glock backwards, aiming through the absent rear windshield as Chewing Gum and his two minions shrank.

“Jesus Christ,” Trim said, his voice shaky. “I thought this was going to be a fun bring-a-corpse-back-to-Jersey jaunt. I need to renegotiate my rates.”

“Sure,” Jill said, staring into the wind. “Doesn’t matter. The fucking Outfit knows who we are. We’re all fucking dead anyway.” She turned her head to look at me. “What now? Where to?”

I nodded. “Home.”