



JEFF SOMERS

**THE
BOUNCER**
a novel

The Bouncer

33.

The sound of the place was suddenly familiar again. I'd lived in the basement apartment for two and a half years, and most of the time it was filled with noise—with Ellie's cries, or Carrie's voice, or the television or music or the muffled sounds of my neighbors. But every now and then there had been nights I'd come home from Queenies with no chores, no missions from Mick, nothing to do but sit in the kitchen and sip some tap water and listen to the way the place burped and moaned. It was an odd mix of the furnace and the hot water heaters just outside, the creak and groan of the floorboards, the hum of the appliances, the way the wind rustled the leaves out back, the complaints of the old wooden kitchen chairs.

It was so quiet.

"No, no," I whispered, throwing myself down and skidding into Dubsey's blood. I grabbed her and pulled her towards me, fingers pressing into her throat.

There was nothing.

"No," I whispered.

I climbed unsteadily to my feet and dragged her clear of Dubsey. I stretched her out on the floor and straddled her with my knees. And I started humming *Staying Alive*.

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One of the first things they taught me when I took the job at Queenies was how to resuscitate someone.

“Happens couple times a month,” Perry said. “You take a piss break, can’t get into the bathroom, find some asshole in there fuckin’ dead. Mick thinks dead shitheads in the john is bad marketing, so he asks us to bring ‘em back.”

I looked around. Mick’s office was small, and three of us in there was a tight fit, especially when two of us were Misha and me. Perry wasn’t your typical bouncer. He wasn’t big. He was tall, but wiry, all tendons and cords, his shaved head threaded with veins. Perry always looked like he was about to have a stroke, bulging eyes and twitches. But he was smart, and balanced, and he used speed and deceptive strength instead of bulk.

“CPR,” I said, trying to be enthusiastic. “We got a dummy or something?”

Misha and Perry looked at each other and burst out laughing. Misha grinned at me and removed his jacket with a certain fucking *panache*, then got down on the floor.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I brush my teeth.”

It was a quick class. According to Perry, the main thing was the timing, and for that, you could use the rhythm from the song *Staying Alive*.

####

In the silence of the apartment, I half-whispered, half sung the song. *Oh you can tell by the way I walk ...*

Sweat dripped off my nose onto her. Her body just twitched and convulsed as I did compressions. Her face turned to me when I moved it, leaning down to force my breath into her.

I'm a ladies man, no time for

I crossed my palms on her chest and pushed, singing, breathing, heart pounding. We were in a void, an inky blackness all around us, and I knew one thing. I knew that either we both emerged from it, sputtering and cursing, or neither of us did.

And then I thought

talk

I had to come back because someone was going to have to go outside and kill everyone, every single one of them, every one of The Broker's people.

I leaned down to clamp my mouth over hers when she suddenly convulsed on her own, dragging in a rusty breath. She reached up weakly and shoved at me.

“Motherfucker,” she wheezed, “in your fucking *dreams*.”

I fell backwards and landed on my elbows. Breathing was an effort. After working so hard to fill hers, I couldn't fill my own lungs up enough.

“Ah fuck, Maddie,” she said from the floor, sounding distant. “I need a ... I’m in a bad way.”

I nodded. “I know. I’m workin’ on it. We’re surrounded, Pills.”

“My phone,” she said faintly. “Where’s my fucking phone?”

I crawled over to her and put hands on her in what felt like the first time in decades. I pushed into her pockets, soaked with blood, until I found it. The screen was cracked, but it powered on. I pushed it into her hand and she raised her head to watch herself slowly thumb-tap her way into her contacts. When the phone was dialing, she sagged back, leaving it on the floor near her head.

I looked up. Lisa stood in the doorway. She had a new auto in her hip holster and her hair had been tidied up into a pony tail again. She stared down at Dubsey and Jill, eyes wide, then looked at me.

“She needs a hospital,” I said. “We need to get her outside.”

Lisa nodded. “Okay. Okay, let’s do it.”

“We made a call.”

Lisa nodded. “So did I.”

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“Just hang back until it’s time,” I said, my eyes lingering on Jill. She sagged on Lisa’s shoulder like a sack. Or someone who was mostly dead, and would be completely dead really, really soon. Her icy skin screamed internal bleeding.

“How will I know when it’s time?”

I sighed, looking at her. “Trust me, you’ll know. He’s not subtle.” I reached out and put my hand on her shoulder. “Thanks, Lisa. I—”

“Save it,” she said, not unkindly. “Tell me later.”

I nodded, checked that Dubsey’s 1911 was tucked against the small of my back in my waistband, and walked out onto the front steps.

It was a view I’d seen every day for years. Empty lots, broken asphalt, a few scattered parked cars. This time, there were more cars. Dubsey’s truck sat like a dented-up shadow, two big guys in puffy coats leaning against it, smoking. The Broker leaned against an old-school Cadillac, a fucking boat the size of an asteroid, three guys I think I recognized from Queenie’s lounging next to him. When they saw me, all six straightened up and took a step forward.

“It’s all right,” I said, putting my hands up. “Andy told me to come out. We figured everything. It’s settled.”

The Broker flicked away his cigarette. He was wearing what I guessed was Wiseguy Casual, a black turtleneck, boiled leather jacket, fat gold watch on one wrist as if everyone present didn’t know he’d been forced to beg credit from Brusca to make his play. He looked around, hoping against hope that someone who outranked him was around. Then he squinted at me.

“What the fuck is this?”

He was confused, which was the goal. “It’s settled. It’s fine.”

It was an obscure lesson that bouncing taught you, but pretending to be incredibly stupid was often your most effective defense. When assholes showed up at the front door demanding to be let in, pretending you just couldn’t wrap your head around their bizarre requests exhausted all but the most determined. You just kept repeating the same shit, and smiling pleasantly. It drove asshole fucking *crazy*.

Merlin Spillaine was a *huge* asshole, so it totally drove him bonkers.

He cocked his head slightly. It was like watching a dog do math. “Where’s Dubs?” he finally said.

I’d been standing on the sidewalk for a whole minute, and no one had told me to do anything. I nodded, pushing out blank stupidity. “It’s all done. It’s figured out,” I said. I stole a word from Chewing Gum. “It’s been *adjudicated*.”

The Broker looked around at the goons. They were all practicing the ancient art of appearing to be laser focused on something far beyond the perception of normal humans. Muscle was a blunt instrument. There was no margin in being creative, so guys like this learned early to just keep their heads down and to never do a fucking thing unless someone up the ladder told them to.

There was a distant roar, getting closer. I was obviously going to have to teach The Broker his job. I started walking towards them, hands still up. Everyone reacted, reaching for weapons.

“What? No, it’s okay—Andy *told* me.”

The Broker held up a hand, studying me as I approached as if waiting for a thought bubble to appear over my head. I moved deliberately, smiling.

“Steady, boys,” Merlin said. He chuckled his chin in my direction. “You giving up your pops?”

I nodded. “It’s all settled.”

The roar had resolved into a car engine, a slurry beat under it. Living in Bergen City you got used to that exact sound profile: Souped up car, overjacked sound system, too close to ignore, too far away to do anything about. It sounded like Saturday Night. It sounded like home.

“Take him,” The Broker said as I got close. “Get his arms.”

The kid with the cloud of hair pushed his gun back into its holster and strode out to meet me. He took one wrist in his hand and bent my arm behind me, then reached for the other. He paused—noticing the 1911.

A screech of tires made us all turn.

The Blue Ruin appeared at the far end of the street, something seriously wrong with it. There was a hole somewhere in the muffler, making it incredibly loud. Black smoke poured from the exhaust. And Trim had the stereo blasting—a lurching hip-hop beat over a broken piano.

Ooh la la, ah oui oui

Ooh la la, ah oui oui

I looked at the 293. The door opened. A moment later Lisa was on the steps, Jill hanging limply off of her. But everyone was watching the Ruin as she made her way down the steps.

It was time to be a distraction.

I twisted away from the kid, spinning and pulling the gun. I pointed it up in the air and fired a single shot just as the Ruin crashed up onto the sidewalk, two wheels on the concrete and two wheels on the pavement and not slowing down. It screeched to a shuddering halt right in front of Lisa. Everyone ducked instinctively.

Trim waved at me from the front seat.

Lisa dragged Jill towards the car, tearing open the rear door and pushing her in like a sack of laundry. I squeezed the trigger again, firing into the air, and Lisa threw herself into the car behind her. Trim floored the Ruin, the roar so loud I thought the engine was about to pop out of the hood and achieve escape velocity. The car lurched past me and The Broker's frozen army, who only recovered enough to take a few potshots at the old Nova as it accelerated, clipping Dubsey's truck as it made the intersection and wrenched itself right, one side briefly lifting off the ground.

And then the Ruin was gone. I stared at the fading cloud of black smoke and hoped we'd moved fast enough. That I'd saved everyone I could.

Then several people slammed into me, knocking me down.

"Pin that son of a bitch!"

My arms were held down and the 1911 pried from my hands.

“Get in there and find Dubsey. Bring that asshole here.”

I was yanked up roughly off the ground, my element of surprise gone. I was walked over to The Broker, who stood holding his own chrome-plated automatic like he was going to toss it as far as he could, shotput-style, which I assumed was something he’d seen on TV.

We stood for a moment, staring at the 293. It looked like a sad little yellow-brick building. It looked like a place that probably smelled like curry all the time, a place that had one searing hot room in each apartment in the winter, the rest of the rooms ice cold. It looked sad and lonely, the only thing standing for two blocks in any direction.

The kid with the cloud of hair emerged from the front door and shook his head. The Broker looked down at his feet.

“Get ‘im on his knees!” he shouted, and someone kicked my legs out from under me. I was pushed into a kneeling position, and I felt the barrel of the chrome pushed into my head.

I didn’t know what was going to happen next. I just knew it was going to hurt.

“You just made yourself too fucking expensive,” The Broker hissed into my ear. “I’m going to fucking splatter your brain all over the road, and then we’re going to find your fucking father anyway, and we’re going to pay ourselves back. So you can go *fuck yourself*.”

“Boss!”

More squealing tires. I looked up, afraid that something had gone horrifically wrong and Trim was bringing Jill and Lisa back in some fucked-up, catastrophic stupidity. But the sound was coming from the wrong direction. I whipped my head around and saw two cars screaming down

the street. They were old-school boats, Continentals, black, shining like new pennies. They screeched to a halt in a V-shape halfway down the block.

“Now what is *this* shit?” The Broker breathed. For one moment, the illusion was broken and I felt sorry for the kid. His voice was suddenly buried under decades of frustration, a stupid kid born just in time to watch his father fritter away whatever passed for a criminal empire in Bergen City.

The engines cut, and the doors opened. Carroll Mick emerged from the back seat of one. Behind him, the cars disgorged six older men in bowling shirts and baggy pants.

The goddamn Prostate Gang.