



**JEFF SOMERS**

**THE  
BOUNCER**  
a novel

# The Bouncer

## Part One: The Broker

### 1.

*“Hey Maddie.”* Perry’s voice was tinny and crackling in my ear over the noise of the bar. *“Need you up front.”*

“On my way,” I said. I could barely hear my own voice. Which was fine, since I usually didn’t have much to say. Talking just got me into trouble.

The crowd didn’t want to make room for me, but I was used to making my presence felt. The trick was to always stay to just the right side of polite. Most of the guys crushed in by the bar or on the edges of the small dance floor turned, outraged, and then hesitated. I wasn’t maybe the biggest guy in the room, but I was well-known.

It was a big night for Queenies. The bar had been here as long as anyone could remember. It might have been the original structure around which Bergen City had grown, the dirty pearl in that filthy oyster. When I’d been a kid it was a neighborhood place where all the Irish and German men lost their paychecks after work, a front for the Spillaine Mob that everyone in the neighborhood regarded with affection. In recent years it had reinvented itself under Carroll Mick’s benevolent ownership, posing as the closest thing to a nightclub we had. We attracted every connected asshole in the region because it still had that Spillaine shine, and the Spillaine name still meant something around here even if they’d lost most of their territory to the Puerto Rican and Dominican gangs.

I nodded here and there as faces rose up out of the gloom. I'd always been a solitary drinker, myself, and didn't really understand wanting the crowd, the noise, the trouble. I'd liked Queenies like it had been, the sort of place where you could walk in at any time and find a seat at the bar, and recognize each one of the dozen faces that turned to look up. But Queenies was progress. It was louder and shittier, but it made a lot more money, and Mick had to feed his silent partners, and his silent partners needed to kick up to the younger criminals who'd taken over the neighborhood.

We had a system going.

At the front door, Misha greeted me with a curt nod. He was almost as tall as me, and bigger in the shoulders. With his hair in a long, dark braid and the scar over his eye he looked like the meanest asshole you'd ever met. He was a teddy bear, but he knew how to act. No one got past Misha.

"Boss," he said, stepping aside to let me through.

Outside, the air felt icy cold and refreshing after the sweaty heat of the bar. Perry, bald head gleaming, stood with his clipboard in front of two guys in shiny, off-the-rack suits that I found personally offensive. The psychology of a man who walked into a store and saw that cloth and thought, yes, I'd like to wear that all over my body, was suspect. If you couldn't trust a man to buy a suit, how could you trust him with firearms? Or money? Or access to the closest thing the Heights neighborhood of Bergen City had to a nightclub?

I put a hand on Perry's shoulder. "What's up?"

"Yo, bro, are you the man?"

Perry glanced at me, eyebrow up as if to say *You seeing this shit?* I looked at the guys. They were typical Queenies Weekend Nightmares. Coked up to the gills and puffed up because they had some distant connection to someone, somewhere. There would be a name they expected me to recognize.

There would be an intimation that if I knew what was good for me, I'd let them in, I'd let them paw the waitresses and piss on the floor and do blow right there at the bar and say nothing.

I never knew what was good for me. My vast empire of debt and frustration was a testament to that. I thought of my old sponsor, Miguel, and thought *One fucking day at a time*. And Miguel would always say with a bitter laugh, *yeah but our days got fifty, sixty hours in them*. And I would say *Amen*.

“Yo, you the man or what?”

He was young, hair slicked back, his immense wealth on display in the form of several thick gold chains and a chunky watch, several rings. His shirt was unbuttoned and his chest hair was offensive. His pupils were the size of dimes and his face was sweaty despite the cold. He was grinning. Grinners were always a problem. When you're freezing your ass off and grinding your teeth outside Queenies and thought *this is delightful, I shall grin* your calibrations were off.

His buddy was a mirror image, an inch shorter with the same ledge of a forehead shadowing his eyes, but with thicker eyebrows. He stood there grinding his teeth, staring at me. They could have been brothers. Maybe they were. The Grinner and The Grinder.

I molded my face into the expression I called Cheerful Neutral, designed to be no expression at all so as to keep even the most murderously stupid people calm. “Depends,” I said. “What do you need?”

There would be a name, and I needed to hear it before any decisions could be made. Because sometimes it was a name you had to pay attention to.

The Grinner leaned forward. Perry shifted his weight subtly. “Bro, what I need is to get *inside*. You the man who can make that happen, or am I wasting my fucking time?”

I waited on the name. Looking at them, I figured it would be Brusca or the Golden Cross. But these guys were nobodies. The suits told you the story. I'd bet my life on them being shitheel enforcers,

dealers on the side to make their weekly nut. I smiled my professional smile, an expression reserved for assholes and police officers.

“What’s the count?” I asked Perry.

He glanced at his clipboard. “238.”

I nodded, looking back at the pair. “Sorry guys,” I said. “Fire code.”

“Fire code?” The Grinner said, his smile curdling. “You serious, bro? *Fire code*? You know who I work with? You wanna find out? I walk away, I come back with an *army*, bro.”

I nodded. There would be no name, apparently. Apparently, I was supposed to let these two in based on their intimidating physical presence and the powerful force of their cologne.

No one knew true exhaustion until you got sober and had to deal with fucked-up people. There had always been gangsters at Queenies, and there’d always been assholes like The Grinner and his friend, The Grinder. Whether it was back in the day with the Morning Star Gang, old Irish bastards with Abban Spillaine on top, or the Denaros when they’d moved in, Brusca and the new blood—some things never changed.

“My advice?” I said. “Hoboken’s got a lot of bars. Go find one there.”

The Grinner’s smile froze. I kept The Grinder in my peripheral vision, because instinct told me he was the one barely keeping his shit together. When he moved, I was ready. I sidestepped the lunge and twisted to his side, letting him skip past me by a step, overbalanced. I wrapped one arm around his neck and lifted him up off the ground. It wasn’t hard. He was a balloon filled with cocaine and attitude.

For a moment I stood there, with the smaller man’s legs kicking in the air. Perry had stepped forward, ready to intervene if I needed him.

The Grinner relaxed, suddenly, glancing at Perry and putting his hands up. “All right, all right, bro, don’t get your panties all bunched up. C’mon, let him go, we’ll be outta your hair.” He sketched something in the air with two fingers. “Scout’s honor.”

Jesus Christ I hated this guy.

I dropped The Grinder and gave him a light shove, making him stumble into his friend. He turned and glared back at me, hands still clenched. Grinner pushed his hands into his pants pockets, still beaming as if this was all in good fun between friends. I had a sense of what was happening a second before Perry shouted “Knife!” and The Grinner lunged forward.

I tensed, bringing my arms up, ready to parry the blow. The Grinner didn’t raise his arms or lunge forward. He just stepped in close, pushing his face up into my airspace. His cologne made me regret so many life decisions all at once I didn’t know how to react.

“Not here, bro, naw, not here,” he said, smiling. “Not with all these people. But I got you. When you ain’t expecting it. I got you. You see it. You know what I’m talking about. You see it.”

I didn’t look down at the blade. I didn’t ponder how this genius had expected to get it through the metal detector. Geniuses never revealed their secrets.

I leaned back slightly and flashed my arm up, popping The Grinner in the nose. I didn’t have the leverage to make it really hurt, but it staggered him back a step, off balance, giving me the opportunity to rear back and land one sloppy haymaker on him. Which felt good. It always felt good to lay into people, to use my weight and height to make them feel me. It was something I used to do all the time, just for kicks, and it had fucked my life from front to end but I still enjoyed it.

Life was all about those simple pleasures. A perfect cup of coffee. A hot shower. Beating the tar out of someone who absolutely deserved it.

*Be present, Miguel used to say. Your life might suck, but be there. Own every moment.*

Meetings. I'd gone religiously for a while, and they'd worked, I supposed. But they drove me crazy, too. All that exposure, all these people listening to you, expecting confession. My skin crawled every moment I was there. They told you not to trust it when you felt stable, that this was when you regressed and fucked up. Keep going. It works if you work it. But I couldn't stand it, after a while. The way people stared at you when you said your piece, the limp way they applauded your humiliations and horrors.

This was better than working the program.

The Grinner went spinning into the small crowd waiting their turn, scattering them. He hit the pavement and lay there, out cold, the ridiculous little switchblade bouncing away towards the curb.

Hand numb, wrist aching, I turned to look at The Grinder. He was chewing his lip as if trying to work out what he'd just seen. "Drag your friend at least a hundred feet away from this bar or I will come out here with a baseball bat," I said. I turned to Perry, who was trying to hold back laughter but not putting much effort into the project. "You good?"

Perry knuckled his forehead with a grin. "Good, boss."

I turned and stepped back into the bar. Here I was, winning hearts and minds one successful customer service interaction at a time.

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"VIPs," Misha said in my ear. "The Broker and a trio."

VIPs were the bane of security's existence because they did, actually, have some juice to throw around. For example, The Broker, Abban Spillaine's only son. We called him The Broker because he

dressed in expensive, fitted suits and liked to carry around a leather portfolio as if his business powers were so potent deals might spring into being around him at any time.

His name, remarkably, was Merlin. The name inspired sympathy, because no one could walk this earth named *Merlin* and survive unscathed, but The Broker was one of those people who made it impossible to feel the softer emotions. Most of the emotional reactions Merlin Spillaine inspired were of the 'punch in the face' variety.

I didn't say anything. VIPs weren't my problem. Tish, the hostess, would have to find a space for them, because The Broker was on Mick's short list of people who always had a place. The Spillaines weren't much of a force in Bergen City any more, but they still had some old contracts, and they were still Mick's partners. A little shit-eating came with the territory.

I watched them roll in, following Tish with her one stripe of blue hair, her black blouse purposefully one size too small. The Broker was decked out in a pinstriped three-piece, walking proof of my private conjecture that suits—even tailored ones—only benefited thin people. He looked like a small, tasteless sausage—a link you found in the back of the freezer when moving out of an old apartment, gray and lifeless.

He was young, maybe my age. His dark hair had been shaved down on the sides and left long on top, and his skin was so white it was almost like marble, like alabaster.

He was accompanied by Patsy, Pin, and Rubes. The last two always gave me the impression they regretted not paying attention in school; they were flabby, loose-jointed white guys with sweaty faces and limp hair. Always vaguely unhappy. They gave the impression that even their orgasms were accompanied by hangdog looks and grunts of disappointment.



Patsy was a mountain. He was maybe six and half feet tall, shaped like a planet, almost an albino and hairless. He regarded everything with the same blank expression. It was easy to imagine Patsy, with his shovel hands and wet mouth, methodically murdering things in his spare time.

As I watched them cut through the crowd, The Broker looked at me and waved, smiling.

I didn't wave back. Know your place, I thought. Guys like Merlin Spillaine smiled at you to stir things up.

He said something to Pin, who nodded, looking at me. Then they were swallowed by the crowd as they claimed one of the sad leather couches and glass tables that passed for Queenie's VIP section.

Experience told me that The Broker would order a single bottle of mediocre vodka, to be polite, go to the bathroom sixteen times in the first hour, and hassle the ladies until someone made the mistake of complaining.

"Mish," I said into the mic, "Get ready for a cleanup in aisle four."

"Copy that," Misha responded. "You getting friendly with our boy? He asked me specifically if you were working tonight."

I looked over at the VIP section again, but couldn't see The Broker. "No," I said. "Maybe he just wants to feel safe."

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I sipped water with a slice of lemon in it, about as adventurous as I allowed myself to get when it came to beverages. Around me, Queenies settled into the too-bright business of shutting down. With the house lights on, it was just an old bar, the floor worn smooth from a million shoes, the bar worn smooth

from a million shots slid along its length, the walls covered in ancient photos and nostalgia. The servers and bussers scrambled around, cleaning and setting chairs on tables. The lights always made the place look like shit. Queenies was a spot that relied on mood lighting and alcohol for all its charm.

Not unlike myself.

Things had gone better than expected. The Broker had left after just half an hour, taking Patsy with him but leaving Pin and Rubes. That was fine. Pin and Rubes weren't much trouble under normal circumstances. They sat on the couch drinking with the steady determination of doomed men, looking like two stranded turtles, flipped onto their backs, their stubby legs waving in the air.

The waitresses counted out the tips, bills emerging from bras and pockets, augmented by packets of powder slipped to them by grinning goons in too-tight shirts. Mick, sitting behind the bar going over the receipts with his reading glasses perched on the end of his nose, didn't pay any attention. He was fully insured through the expensive graces of Abban Spillaine, who paid tribute to Esmundo Brusca. The cops weren't going to bust down the door.

Me, I just kept my head down. I'd had enough excitement for a lifetime.

"Maddie."

I glanced over at Mick. He'd been my Uncle Mick back in the day, a better and more present uncle than my actual Uncle Pal, a better and more present everything that my father, Mats, may he never rest in peace. When a man gave you a job after drinking and thieving your way through the better part of a decade, you owed that man some respect. I picked up my glass and walked over to where he sat behind the bar. His eyes flicked to the glass as I set it down in front of him and slid onto a stool.

"Got a job for you," he said without looking up, licking one finger and turning the page in the old-school ledger he used. "A drop."

I suppressed a yawn. I was tired down to my core. "Tonight?"

He looked up at me over his glasses. His eyes were watery and Mick had gotten rounder and more slump-shouldered, but he was still strong as an ox. His hair was still mostly black, and he still greased it and combed it back like he had forty years before, cat-calling the girls. “Gotta be tonight,” he said in his cigar-burned voice, the low rumble of a dormant volcano.

He slid an envelop across the bar towards me, thick and rectangular. A yellow sticky note on the outside had an address. I took it and made it disappear inside my jacket. “All right.”

“Hey,” he said as I turned away. “Don’t bring that girl in on this.”

I affected confusion. “Who?”

Mick had a great hangdog, jowly face that conveyed bland irritation perfectly. “Pilowsky. Don’t be cute. I know you still run with her. Don’t bring her in on this any more.”

I nodded. “Okay, Mick. Got it.”

“Thanks, kid,” Mick said. Then he looked at me. “Say hello to The Shrew and the little one for me.”

I smiled. “I’ll give ‘em your best.”

I waved my way out into the night, pulling my jacket close against the chill and walking into the darkness. Queenies wasn’t in the best, most prosperous area of Bergen City. Developers had been circling the neighborhoods for years, buying up lots and condemning them, forcing people out. Then the money had dried up in that mysterious way money had, and now half the town was empty lots and abandoned buildings, and half the streetlights didn’t work. Anyone who could had gotten out, and maybe that had been the point all along.

Walking, I thought about getting back to zero.

I'd been good at school. I'd been good at baseball. There'd been a scholarship, a way forward, a way to leave my crazy father and my crazy mother behind. And then they'd died, and I sank. And it had taken me ten years just to get back to zero. Just to get back to stable.

I turned a corner and felt the usual sense of open space where there shouldn't be any. I'd never gotten used to the missing buildings, the demolition from a half dozen development projects that had stalled, leaving a mass of empty lots around 293 Howell Street. For years we'd watched every other building on the block vanish, and knew our time would come. And then the crash and everything just stopped on a dime, and The Two Nine Three was still standing. The yellow brick building rose up six floors from the street with a single working streetlight directly in front of it, everything around it dark and empty. Someday the economy would spike upwards again, and the developers would reappear like imps, and new buildings would finally sprout up. Until then, I supposed I just had to get used to living in a bubble of empty urban space.

Two people were sitting on the front steps.

"Oh, man, it's late if Maddie's home," Ivan said.

"Be cool," Lisa said with a laugh. Everyone called her Lisa Lisa.

"Want a blast?" Ivan asked, holding out a tarnished flask.

I shook my head, pausing at the bottom step. "That kind of night, huh?"

Lisa scowled. She was wearing an oversize white T-shirt and cut-off sweats, clothes you changed into after a long day. "My mother called today," she said. There was no elaboration necessary. Across generations and cultures, the phrase *my mother called today* reverberated with portent and danger. People burst into tears upon hearing it, even if it was spoken in other languages they could not understand.

“I saw my kid today,” Ivan added. “And he told me my apartment’s shithole.” He raised the flask. “So I’m drowning my sorrows. Here’s to 293 Howell Street, officially a shithole.”

I snorted, looking up at the yellow brick of the building. “So that’s what I’ve got to look forward to with Ellie, huh?”

Ivan shook his head. “Not if you don’t get divorced. The secret ingredient to my kid’s attitude is the former Mrs. Blanko.”

They chuckled. I glanced at Lisa. “How’s your ceiling?”

She nodded. “Holding up. Thanks for jumping in there. I talked to Mrs. Quinones about her son falling asleep in the bath and flooding my apartment, and she told me he’s been smoking dope in there. I told her the only reason I wasn’t all over their ass about the damage was because you came in and fixed the place up.”

“So dope smoking in the tub is what I have to look forward to,” I said.

“No worries,” she said. “Marcus called 9-1-1 again. A cop car cruised by to tell us they were blacklisting the address, so smoke all the dope you want.”

I sighed. Marcus was Mrs. Pino’s boy, twenty-five but like a little kid in the head. He was sweet, though he was stronger than he looked and could be rough to deal with. He liked me, though, and I figured I’d get a call tomorrow to come down and have a talk with him. “I thought cops were supposed to take shit like that in stride. Protect and serve and all that.”

She held up her hands. “Hey, when I graduate the academy, that’ll be me.”

I nodded. Lisa wanted to be a law enforcement professional so badly she’d bought all the gear already. She had her own body armor and a brand new Glock 19. It was a little disturbing. I stepped past them. “Lemme know if you need any more help.”

Lisa nodded, accepting the flask from Ivan. “Will do. See you tomorrow? I’m working table service at Queenie’s.”

I nodded. “See you then.” I grinned. “Stop telling everyone there you’re gonna be a cop. It upsets the regulars.”

I left their laughter behind, walking through the cracked outer door, the small vestibule, and the stout inner door into the building proper. Lisa and Ivan were good people. All of my neighbors were good people. Honest people. They were all living there for the low rent, making it day to day. We took care of each other. Shit, there was no one else around—fucking literally.

I walked past the mailboxes and Mrs. Pino’s door. Opening the door under the stairs, I went down to the basement, past the fuse boxes and water heaters, the grubby little storage stalls. Two doors in the back, one leading out to the wild backyard, the other the tiny apartment snuggled in the rear. I let myself in. I didn’t have it half bad. It was four rooms, but it was cheap to begin with and I got half off for doing repairs and other maintenance. When you were crawling out of a train wreck of a life, shit like this looked like winning.

I turned the key carefully and tip-toed in. I reached into my pocket and extracted a wad of filthy cash, my share of the tips. I knelt in front of the sink and opened the cabinets, carefully pulling out the cleaning supplies and lifting the bottom. In the hollow behind the toekick was a metal security box. I opened it and added the cash to the pile already in there, then quietly put everything back the way it was.

Retirement planning, poverty-style. Carolina called it her ‘Fuck You Money.’ The amount of fucking we’d be capable of with this amount of grubby paper was nominal, but you had to start somewhere.

I scribbled a note to Carrie and left it on the kitchen table. The bedroom door was closed. I pictured them in there: Ellie sprawled in her crib like a skydiver, her tiny body twitching, her chubby legs kicking. Carrie wrapped up in blankets like a mummy, her head a tiny spray of hair. I didn't go in, because Carolina was the sort of woman for whom sleep was theoretical, and an opened door brought her surging up out of the sheets, demanding to know who was there, what was going on, why was Ellie *crying*? I'd long ago given up taking any risks when it came to my wife's sleep.

I crept out of the apartment, locking up behind me.

I went out the back, cutting through the overgrown, jungle-like yard and hopping the ancient, rusted chain link in the back. It was dumb, maybe, but I didn't want anyone in the building to know about my extracurriculars. They would understand, I was sure. We were all hustling to survive. But they didn't need to know.

Thinking of what Mick had said, I went to go find Jill Pilowsky.