



JEFF SOMERS

**THE
BOUNCER**
a novel

The Bouncer

34.

The scene was bizarre. Me, bloody and sweat-soaked, on my knees in the middle of the street, hands on my head. The Broker, pink and shiny in his expensive clothes, holding the gun to my head, execution-style. His people, a half dozen hard cases, all with guns in their hands behind him, ready for the word. Carroll Mick, jowly and out of breath, standing there in his bowling shirt, his huge hand making a well-loved nine milimeter look like a toy. Behind him, a group of old men whose scars were faded, whose broken bones had long healed badly, making them walk with a lurching, shuffling gait. And getting out of the third car was Perry and Misha, looking terrified. But they were there, which was more than I could have expected, from anyone.

“What the fuck is this, Carroll?” Merlin said. His voice shook. I wasn’t sure if it was rage or fear, or just fucking pique.

Mick reached into his pocket like he didn’t have a bunch of guns aimed at him and pulled out a handkerchief. He mopped his face with it. “We got a problem, kid,” he said. He gestured at me. “That’s my employee.”

In my head, I heard Lisa Lisa say *I made a call*. She sure did. I wondered what she’d said to activate the Prostate Gang. Was ‘Maddie’s in trouble’ enough?

“Are you fucking kidding, Carroll?” The Broker said. “You know better. You know we cleared this through the Outfit. Kansas City gave its blessing. Get the fuck out of here while I finish my business.”

Mick nodded. “I’m in a world of hurt, no doubt,” he said. “They’re gonna send another fucking cabinet member out here to call me names and tax me until I bleed.” He made a face, wagging his head. “Maybe I get popped for it. We’ll see. But it don’t change anything. You grease Mads Renik, I’m here to grease *you*.”

Under the fat, the jowls, the fucking bowling shirt, here was Carroll Mick, killer. Carroll Mick, legbreaker. Carroll Mick who’d been born into nothing and built a tiny empire with blood and sweat and his bare, scabbed hands.

The Broker took the gun from my head and raised it up. On cue, everyone stiffened, a dozen guns coming up. “Are you fucking crazy? You got any *idea*—”

“What I *got* is a dispensation,” Mick said mildly, his own gun still down by his thigh. “From Esmundo Brusca.”

The Broker stepped around me and stalked over to Mick, his shoulders tight, the gun held down low—but with his finger on the trigger like an asshole. Mick was old, but put them side by side and the difference between the old man’s physical presence and the kid was obvious. Mick had come from a generation before body sculpting at the gym. He was a mountain of flesh. The Broker was toned and fashionable, but I put my money on Mick, who’d learned how to take a punch from his own father at the age of five or so. Even with a monster like Abban Spillaine for

a father, I didn't think anyone had ever touched The Broker with anything less than gentle servility.

"Brusca?" Merlin hissed. "The fuck I care what Brusca wants here? The fuck *you* care, Mick? You're my father's vassal, right? You think you can set up on your own—at *your* fucking age—under cover of this bullshit?"

Mick shook his head. "No one's setting up," he said with a shrug I recognized as the disinterested sign of a true killer. You saw the shrug at Queenies, you had to decide right then and there if you were going to risk a fight. Loosely translated, it read *I'm answering this question as a courtesy, because I can afford to.*

Slowly, I got to my feet. No one paid me any mind. The air crackled with hidden electricity. The center of gravity had shifted, drawing everyone's attention.

"I owe the kid," Mick said. "I fucked up and he paid the price for it, and now I owe him. So that kid's not yours to kill," Mick said. "That's it. You went into Brusca for the cash to buy him. That means Brusca's got a say, and I got his proxy on this. Cost me a fuckin' fortune—it's a *banner day* for Esmundo Brusca as people keep showing up at his office in that fucking meatpacking plant downtown to drop bags of money on his desk—but I got his proxy on one thing: Killing Mads Renik." He squared up, chucking his chin truculently at The Broker. "And I vote *no*."

I looked around carefully. I had The Broker's guys lined up behind me in a loose semi-circle. They weren't paying attention to me now, but if I moved, my chances of getting tripped up or

fucking shot to death before I got too far were pretty good. Even if they got distracted, making a run for the intersection was probably a death sentence.

“I own this debt, Mick.”

“You own the *debt*, son. You don’t own fuckall else.”

“Don’t call me *son*, old man.”

Mick smiled. It was a ferocious, humorless expression. “Yeah? What should I call you? Shithead?”

Merlin Spillaine flinched. You got the impression he’d never been called a *shithead* before, which was, frankly, impossible.

“How about *bitch*?” Mick added. “Or Daddy’s Boy?”

A couple of the old-timers snickered, smiling down at their feet. The Broker raised the gun, then thought better of it. But it was too late.

Criminals, Mick was fond of saying, were usually morons. *Who else would choose this fucking life?* he’d say. *People with brains, people with money, people with options, they go to school. They start a business. They don’t go into a career with a life expectancy of about five years, and all-cash business that requires you to fuckin’ spend every thin dime as soon as you palm it because you can’t put it in a bank.*

The Broker’s hand went up with the gun, and an old codger behind Mick raised his shotgun. An impulse, an instinct, a reflex. A second later, one of Spillaine’s idiots twitched and fired a single shot into the asphalt.

And all hell broke loose.

Gunfire erupted around me as every went for cover, diving behind cars and hitting the ground. For a second I was frozen—a deer in the headlights, so exposed I couldn't comprehend what I should do.

Then I ran.

I ran for The 293, my home, the only cover available to me and someplace I'd been safe for three years now. I launched myself and was off-balance from the start, stumbling diagonally, falling but never hitting the ground. I righted myself and made for the steps. TV and movies never prepared you for the sound of gunshots—up close it's like bombs going off right next to you. The noise can make you stupid, a fight-or-flight reaction. I ran in a ragged, exhausted sprint, and I knew I was relying on the legendarily bad marksmanship of criminals. Professional crooks hardly ever learned how to use their guns. Based on the sampling I'd seen at Queenies, the mystery was how more of them didn't accidentally kill themselves, just walking around living their lives.

I staggered up the steps and tore the door open, throwing myself inside and tripping over my feet. I crashed onto the grimy old tile of the vestibule, smacking my head on the half-step leading up to the inner door. Head ringing, I pushed myself up and looked back.

The Broker was right behind me, face a red mask of rage. As he ran up the steps, he lifted his shiny gun, squeezed the trigger, and the glass door exploded.