

It was after noon when there was a loud rapping at the door of Paddy's Roaring Twenties Tavern. A drop of sweat trickled down the frozen Patrick "Paddy" Brennan. He looked over and grabbed his revolver, a cheap five-shooter he got earlier that week.

The rapping picked up. A muffled voice shouted from the other side of the door. He would wake the dead or worse, alert the cops. Paddy pulled back the hammer and walked up to the door. He slid open the peephole.

Standing there was a tall man in his mid-twenties wearing a rich, dark red fedora and a feigned grin on his face.

"Paddy Brennan?"

"No. No one here by that name."

"Oh, that's strange."

"Strange?"

"Yeah, I been looking for a Paddy Brennan for a good hour and then what do you know I found this alleyway tucked back here away from the street. Maybe it's just a coincidence but I might suspect that something fishy is--"

"Okay. Fine. Just get in here." Paddy shut the peephole and opened the door. The man stepped in. He wore a rich, deep red vest with matching Oxford bag trousers. He turned around to talk to Paddy but Paddy had his gun out.

The man put his hands up, "Hey, whoa, aren't we in a rush?"

"I'm not paying out to nobody! This is my bar!"

"Look, Paddy, you know this is a war you can't win. You shoot me, bang, I'm dead. Then another guy comes in tomorrow. Then another. And on and on."

Paddy did not waver but the man used his hands to talk.

"I want to help you that's all. My boss wants to help you."

"Who?"

“Boss is Ed Bononi. I bet you heard of him. Me? Jackson Starr, at your service.”

“What service?”

“I keep the bad guys out of this joint. You join Bononi and he’ll have this place protected 24/7 and the cops won’t ever know.”

“I know what you’re trying and I ain’t falling for it.”

“Falling for what?” Jackson Starr reached over, “I’m-”

Brennan shot Jackson. Jackson stumbled back. His grin was gone.

“Why the hell did you do that Paddy?” There was a deeper hue of red forming underneath Jackson’s vest. Jackson ran up and grabbed Paddy by the wrist. The two men struggled. as more shots fired.

“You son of a bitch!” said Jackson. He pointed Paddy’s aim at a window, “You want the cops to hear us?”

“Get out of my bar!”

Jackson punched Paddy square in the face, knocking him on his rear. Jackson held the revolver.

“Hey Paddy! You could have said, ‘Yes,’ you know, but now I gotta do this.” Jackson took Paddy’s revolver and held it between his palms. Paddy watched in horror as Jackson squeezed the revolver and crumpled it like a wad of paper.

Jackson held the ball of crumpled revolver up, ready for an overhand swing, “So what’s it gonna be, Paddy? Me, or the boys in blue out there?”

Paddy threw his arms up to protect himself. “Bononi! I pick Bononi.”

“Damn right,” said Jackson. He threw the balled up revolver at Paddy square in the ribs.

Jackson winced as he went to the door. “The boss’ll send somebody here within the week. Better have that first payment and it better not be in lead!” Jackson slammed the door shut. Paddy curled up in pain, tears welling.

\* \* \*

“He shot you?”

“Yeah. Can you believe it? Didn’t even let me finish what I was saying.”

It was nighttime in the Windy City. Jackson Starr sat drinking with other criminal types like him. Smooth clarinet and drum beating filled the bar. It was a different speakeasy that Jackson long ago coerced into paying out to his boss, Ed Bononi.

A man walked by Jackson, patting him on the back with a laugh as he sat down with a bottle of beer. “Wow, Jackson, glad it was you and not me.” Mick Hammer.

“Yeah, but, I’m doing all right now. Need to take these duds to the cleaners though.” Jackson took a swig of his hooch.

“You gotta try harder Jackson,” said a big, tall, hoss of a man. “Triple D” Dorian Donald Donovan. He had more bottles in front of him than the rest of the gang combined.

“He’s paying up. I’m fine.”

“So you say,” said a suave man who sipped a mixed drink. Zack Bonnar.

“Way I see it, I got another cash machine thanks to you Jackson.” Edoardo Bononi. The Boss. He riffled through a wad of cash. He slipped out a five dollar bill and handed it to Jackson.

“Here. Get new clothes.”

Jackson grabbed the fiver with a sigh.

Bononi moved on, “So, it looks like we got a tough nut to crack and you’re the guy to do it, Jackson.”

Jackson took another sip, “All right, what?”

“Place called *The Roundabout*. Guy named Ringo Styles. The stuff I hear about this place makes it sound like a money making machine. Nothing like it.”

“Yeah but did you hear about that guy they found in the river the other day?” said Triple D.

“Nah.”

“Legbreaker like Jackson. The skin on the side of his face looked like it melted off his skull..”

Zach clutched his face and clenched his teeth. Jackson and Mick widened their eyes.

“Yeah, like boiled chicken or something. Bullet in the noggin too.”

Everyone looked over at Jackson.

“And you think I’m the guy to shake him down?”

“To be frank, no, but you’re the first guy I would send,” said Bononi, “Low man on the totem pole.”

Jackson wrinkled the side of his nose. “If I bag this guy, get this joint to pay out to you Ed, think we could find someone else while I move up with you guys?”

Bononi, Bonnar, and Donovan all exchanged glances. Bononi broke the silence.

“Sure, Jackson. Sure.”

“How much for this job then?”

“How much do you think?”

“Five bucks.”

“Five?”

“Yeah. You’ll get your big break soon enough Jackson. No more fives when that happens.”

“Look, Ed, you had me for the past five years and I paid my dues. I want to run work for ya.”

Bononi touched Jackson on the shoulder and leaned in toward him. “Understand this, Jackson. You’re like a brother to me. You’ve had my back. We’ve all had each other’s backs at one point or another. We gotta have structure. Heirarchy. This stuff takes time. I’ll see about fitting you in somewhere. Kay?” Bononi pushed away and leaned back in his chair.

“Fine, Ed. Five bucks for *The Roundabout*,” Jackson got up and pulled out some money to pay for his tab, “I gotta head home and hit the hay. You’ll hear back from me soon enough.”

“Don’t I know it,” said Bononi, who raised a whiskey glass to Jackson as he headed out.

\* \* \*

The streets of Chicago were lined with lampposts. The night air was humid and warm with summer. Jackson lit a cigarette and started the march to catch an el train.

This marked the fifth year that Jackson acted as a legbreaker for Ed Bononi. Not a thank you or a compliment or a bonus to be had. *You’re going nowhere*, thought Jackson. *He’s lying like he always does. He won’t find another enforcer, another legbreaker. He’s gonna keep you under his thumb as long as you let him.*

On his travels Jackson heard skittering in an alleyway. An angry man cursed. He took a detour to check out the noise. A man stood over a small dog. He cursed at it and kicked it. The dog who let out a sharp yelp.

Jackson approached the two.

“Hey, what’s your problem?”

The man kicked the dog again, hurtling it at the alley wall. He looked up and breathed a sigh of relief.

“Nothing.”

From the light of the lamppost the dog looked like some kind of a bulldog. French? Boston terrier maybe? Jackson would check it in a moment. First he walked up to the man.

“Why did you do that?” Jackson said with a stern look.

The man cocked an eyebrow, “Why do you care?”

“A man shouldn’t kick dogs. You should treat ‘em nice.”

The man pushed himself away from Jackson. He lifted his jacket to reveal a revolver tucked behind the waistline of his pants. “I treat people like people and dogs like dogs. Got a problem with that?”

The man turned to walk away but Jackson grabbed his shoulder, spun him around, and punched him across the jaw. The man’s jaw slid sideways. It stayed that way. The man started to cry out in pain and shock but Jackson bent him over with a swift knee to the midsection. Jackson applied a headlock and threw the man into a trashcan. The man crashed and rattled along the ground. He groaned but he was done.

“Not anymore,” said Jackson. He knelt down next to the dog. The dog wheezed and winced as Jackson picked him up. Blood trickled out of his nose and mouth. The dog wanted to snap but he lacked the energy. Jackson pressed his hand against the dog.

“You’ll be alright.”

The dog closed his eyes. He steadied his breathing, his chest expanded, his legs straightened and lengthened out. The dog felt like new. Jackson stood up and looked down at the dog.

“You need a name. Come with me.”

Jackson turned and left the alley. He whistled. The dog cocked his head as the tall man in strange colors walked away. After a few moments he followed close behind as well as his elongated legs would allow him.

A few blocks down, Jackson walked up a flight of stairs that led up to a train station. He hopped aboard the first el train of the day. Jackson was heading home. The train rang over the streets as the Windy City pretended to sleep. Jackson wished he could stay up longer but The Boss already gave him his marching orders.

“Ticket?” It was the collector. Jackson smiled and pulled out a ticket. He looked at it. It was from earlier that day. However, as he looked at it, the ink on the ticket shifted. Numbers and letters changed. In a few moments, the time and date were accurate. This train line only checked tickets, no tearing.

The collector moved on. Jackson sat down and pet the dog on the head. It looked up at him. He grinned and looked out the window. Jackson had not bought a ticket in over ten years. So long as he used this line, he never planned to buy one ever again.

And speaking of never doing things again, his mind drifted to that earlier meeting with Bononi and the boys. The dog looked up at Jackson. His smile was gone. However, he did not look angry. He was thinking now.

*I handed that bastard another cash machine for a measly five bucks and he hands me another job that the others are too scared or too lazy to take care of. Rat bastard. Not a “Thank you Jackson.” No, “Great job, Starr.”*

*To hell with Ed. To hell with all of them. If they won't give me what I deserve then I will take it for myself. But how?*

\* \* \*

Jackson arrived at the station which was a block away from his apartment. He and the dog headed down the stairs to walk the street below.

Inside of Jackson's apartment the doorknob clicked and turned. The dark of the apartment gave way to the dull light of the hallway as Jackson stepped inside. The dog strolled in ahead of him and sniffed around. At some points he stopped and cocked his head to the side but then he moved on.

"Casing the joint out, huh?" said Jackson. He removed his hat and placed it on a hook next to the doorway. He took out his gun and reloaded it. After a brass check he touched his chair. A pocket of fabric unwound and ripped away. He placed his gun into the area. The rip reversed and swallowed up the gun as the fabric sealed again.

Jackson took his bloodstained shirt off. He could burn it but that meant he would need to buy a new one. Not a big deal in terms of money but having to do it was a pain in the neck. The dog looked up at him with its distorted face and whimpered.

"You gotta be starving. Let's see what I got." Jackson opened his refrigerator and pulled out a raw steak, "This one's on me." Despite his pay, Jackson bought high quality foods from across town. He planned to eat this steak the night before but he liked this goofy-looking pooch so he would treat it. He unwrapped it, crumpled and tossed the paper, slapped the steak onto a plate, and placed it on the floor. The dog ran over and started to devour it.

While Jackson watched there was a knock at the door. He sighed but walked over and looked through the peephole. It was his

tall, curly-haired neighbor Spadowski waving at him before knocking again.

Jackson unlocked the door and opened it, “What do you want, Spud?”

“What happened to you?”

“Look, I don’t have time.”

“D’you get roughed up?”

“Spud...”

“You should see a doctor you got blood-”

“It’s nothing serious-”

“What happened?”

Jackson broke the flow, “Spud, why are you here?”

“Oh, well, Mister Peenman was looking for you earlier.”

Mister Peenman was Jackson’s portly superintendent.

“Oh?”

“Yeah. He was talking about you being late on your payments. You need a hand?”

“No...”

“You’d owe me but I can help you out.”

“No, Spud. I got it. Anything else?”

“Nah, that’s all. Hey, what’s with the pooch?” Spadowski pointed at the dog. “You know pets aren’t allowed here.”

“I know, I know. Taking care of that too. Look Spud, I’m beat. Rough night.”

“All right all right, if you have trouble, you come to me.” Spadowski prodded his chest with his thumb and gave a stern look at Jackson. He turned to head down the hallway. Jackson closed the door and locked it.

Jackson looked at the dog. The plate was empty.

“You ate all that already?” Jackson picked up the plate and put it in the kitchen sink. He did not wash it. That could wait.

Jackson walked over to the wall and pulled down his Murphy bed. He undressed and climbed in. There was no bullet wound in his chest. The dog hopped up onto the bed. It made a circle and then curled up next to him.

Jackson would not sleep much that night. His mind was on fire with thoughts he never had before. He would never make it working under Bononi like this. He had to make his own way in this city. But how?