

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

An el train ran by with its blowing horn. The rapping picked up. A muffled voice shouted from the other side of the door. The el train was gone and the voice became louder by comparison. Whoever it was, 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. He pointed his revolver at the door but out of sight.

Standing there was a tall man in his mid-twenties wearing a rich, dark red fedora and a feigned grin on his face. He looked down from the last step before the door to the bar.

"Paddy Brennan?"

"No. There's 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 the first thing to meet his eyes was Paddy's five-shooter.

The man's eyebrows perked up. He raised his hands to his shoulder, palms out, "Hey, whoa, aren't we in a rush?"

Paddy clenched his teeth. "I've had enough of scum like you coming here trying to cut into my business."

Jackson turned his chin up. His eyebrows perked. “Well what a coincidence Paddy. I want to help you that’s all. My boss wants to help you.”

Paddy leered. “Who?”

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

“What service?”

Jackson pointed to himself with his thumb. “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.” Paddy backed away from Jackson for his bar.

“Falling for what?” Jackson Starr followed Paddy, “I’m-”

Brennan shot Jackson. Jackson stumbled back. He caught a pool table to keep on his feet. His grin was gone. His eyes could have glowed red.

Paddy kept his aim on Jackson. “I’m not paying out to nobody! This is my bar! Get out of here!”

“Why the hell did you do that Paddy?” A deeper hue of red formed underneath Jackson’s vest. Jackson ran up to Paddy. Paddy took another shot but Jackson grabbed Paddy by the wrist. The two men struggled for control of the revolver. More shots fired.

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

“Get out of my bar!”

“You made me do this, Paddy!”

Something in Paddy gave. For a moment he did not understand what. He let go of the pistol. Jackson had it now.

Paddy looked at his fingers. They bent completely backwards, each knuckle popping out of place. The pain left him with no voice for the first few seconds.

Jackson punched Paddy square in the face, knocking him on his rear. Jackson pointed the revolver at Paddy. Paddy broke and cried at the pain of his hand.

“You could have said, ‘Yes,’ you know, but then you had to shoot me.” Jackson clenched his teeth and squeezed his eyes shut for a moment. “You made me do that to you. Now I gotta do this.”

Jackson held Paddy’s revolver 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! Bononi, dammit, Bononi!”

“Damn right,” said Jackson. He threw the balled up revolver at Paddy square in the ribs. It would leave a bruise but Paddy’s hand was another matter. Every joint was in pain and Jackson did not look like he was in any hurry to reverse it.

Jackson clutched his chest. He winced as he walked to the door. “Bononi will send somebody here within the week. Better have that first payment and it better not be in lead!”

Jackson slammed the door shut. Paddy heard him walk up the steps and vanish into the hustle and bustle of Chicago. Paddy curled up in pain, tears welling. He stood his ground like they told him to and now he had a broken hand and he would pay out to a protection racket.

* * *

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.

“He shot you?” A man walked by Jackson, patting him on the back with a laugh as he sat down with a bottle of beer. “Better you than me.” Mick Hammer. When the boss wanted a guy to pay he sent Jackson. When he wanted payback he sent Mick.

“Yeah. Can you believe it? Didn’t even let me finish what I was saying but now I need to take these duds to the cleaners though.” The bartender handed Jackson a pair of whiskey shots. He would not meet anyone’s gaze. Jackson dipped his finger into his whiskey before knocking it back.

“You and your blessings,” said a big, tall, hoss of a man with more bottles in front of him than the rest of the gang combined. “Triple D” Dorian Donald Donovan.

“I gotta stay sharp,” said Jackson. He knocked the shot back.

“You’ll be six feet under at that rate, Jackson” said Donovan, “Gotta use your words better.”

“Because you are such a smooth talker,” said a suave man who sipped a mixed drink. Zack Bonnar.

“Way I see it, I got another cash machine thanks to Jackson.” Edoardo Bononi. The Boss. He riffled through a wad of cash. He slipped out a five dollar bill, folded it, and flicked it across the table to Jackson. “There. Get some new clothes. I got a job for you tomorrow night”

Jackson grabbed the fiver with a sigh. He smiled with gritted teeth and pocketed it.

“New job?”

“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 another money making machine. Nothing like it.”

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

“Nah.”

“Legbreaker like Jackson. The skin on the side of his face looked like it melted off his skull.” Donovan ran his fingers over the side of his face. Zack clutched his own 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. Jackson sat up. “And you think I’m the guy to shake him down?”

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

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 you think?”

“Five?”

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

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

Bononi leaned toward Jackson to touch his shoulder. “Jackson, you’re like a brother to me. You had my back. We 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 raised his eyebrows and showed off his teeth.

Donovan pulled out a piece of paper and wrote something down. “All right. Like Ed told you, *The Roundabout*. Guy who runs it is named Ringo Styles. When you get there, tell him that, ‘you get around.’”

“I get around.”

“Right. Here’s the address.” Donovan handed the note to Jackson.

Jackson read the note. He closed his eyes and recited the address to himself. He read it one more time and then shredded the piece of paper. 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.”

Jackson raised a whiskey glass to the boys and took one last shot. He got up and paid the bartender who still would not look him in the eyes. As he walked out, Bononi, Bonnar, Donovan, and Hammer’s eyes all followed him before they returned to talking.

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Lampposts lined the midnight streets of Chicago. The air was warm and humid with summer. Jackson lit a cigarette and started the march to catch an el train. The streets were quiet, the only sound being his footsteps against the concrete.

Tonight marked the fifth year that Jackson acted as a legbreaker for Ed Bononi and 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.

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.

Jackson rested his chin against his fist. *You're a kid again. You're right back at the orphanage.*

"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 had not bought a ticket in over ten years. So long as he used this line, he never planned to buy one ever again.

Jackson's mind drifted to that earlier meeting with Bononi and the boys. 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."

No. You're not a kid again. You never stopped being one.

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

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?

Inside of Jackson's apartment the doorknob clicked and turned. The dark of the apartment gave way to the dull, blinking light of the hallway as

Jackson stepped inside and hung his hat from a hook next to the doorway. He took out his gun and reloaded it. He slid the muzzle back to make sure there was a bullet in the chamber before walking over to place his hand to his armchair.

The fabric of the chair came undone, threads unsewing themselves. A pocket of fabric ripped away where he placed his gun. The rip reversed and swallowed up the gun as the fabric sealed again.

Jackson opened his refrigerator and pulled out a raw steak. Despite his pay, Jackson bought high quality foods from across town. He unwrapped it, crumpled and tossed the paper, slapped the steak onto a plate, and lit the stove.

While Jackson waited 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?”

Spud’s eyes widened. “What happened to you?”

“Look, I don’t have time to-”

“D’you get roughed up by one of those gangs?”

“Spud...”

“You got blood on your shirt, pal.”

“It’s nothing serious.”

“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 their portly superintendent. “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 this. Anything else? I’m beat. Rough night.” Jackson pointed at his shirt.

“All right all right. But if you have any more 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. He took his bloodstained shirt off. He would need to buy a new one for the job tomorrow. Not a big deal in terms of money but having to do it was a pain in the neck. Instead of a being red with blood all over his chest and belly, Jackson was clean with not even a scar to signal a gunshot wound.

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. Jackson would not sleep much that night. His body would toss and turn only half as much as his mind would. A spark was lit, he only needed to give it fuel and accelerant. *I’ll never make it working under Bononi like this. I need to make my own way in this city. But how?*