

Jackson Starr stepped out of *The Roundabout* into the dawn of a new day. He lit a cigarette and took a puff. He caught an el train to head home. The train rang over the streets of the Second City as the Windy City woke up but Jackson was ready to sleep. He stood rather than sit to not miss his station. That shakedown with Ringo took almost everything out of him.

“Ticket?” It was the collector again. Jackson was haggard, cut, beaten, and bloodstained. He smiled and pulled out his ticket. It was the right date after a moment.

He arrived at the station which was a block away from his apartment. He stepped downstairs and headed for a storefront. Jackson lived above a general store. He frequented it and sometimes did them favors. He walked past it though and opened a side door leading to another flight of stairs. Upstairs he tramped his way to his apartment when a stocky man came up to him in passing to confront him. It was the landlord, Mister Peenman.

“Just the man I was looking for,” said Mister Peenman. Jackson knew what came next. “Rent is late Starr. Again.”

Rent was cheap here. No one but the lower classes, immigrants, and dregs like Jackson shacked up here. Jackson could afford rent but he could not pay it on time if his life depended on it which put him on thin ice with Mister Peenman.

“Look Peenman-”

“*Mister* Peenman.”

“Look, *Mister* Peenman,” Jackson rested his hands on Peenman’s shoulders and locked eyes with him. Peenman began to regret his earlier tone of voice.

“I had a rare night, Mister Peenman. I’ll pay up. You know I always do. In fact, I’m moving up in the world. I got a new job.” Jackson leered down with his toothy smile.

Mister Peenman gulped, “Wonderful. When will you have it?”

“This afternoon.” Jackson released his grip from Mister Peenman’s shoulders and moved on. Mister Peenman glared at Jackson but he moved on.

Jackson entered his apartment. He hung his hat on the hook again. He was ready to pull out his Murphy bed and crash but there was a knock at the door. He sighed but walked over and looked through the peephole. It was Spadowski again.

Jackson cracked open the door, “What is it, Spud?”

“Jackson, did you get roughed up again?”

“Look Spud, I’m ready to hit the hay here. What is it?”

“You should see a doctor you’re coming home bloody and bruised-”

Jackson got stern with Spadowski. “Spud.”

“Okay. Earlier today, around evening, there was a man who came by looking for you.”

“What?” Jackson unlatched his door and opened it up all the way.

“Yeah, he said he was looking for “Jackson Starr.” He was definitely looking for you. I don’t know who he is or why but I told him you left for work.”

“Did you get a name?”

“No. I didn’t want to ask. He didn’t look like the type to tell.”

“What did he look like?”

“Cleanshaven. gray suit, gloves. He wore a hat so I didn’t see his hair.”

“You know what Spud? Thanks. In fact,” Jackson reached down and grabbed his wallet. He handed a fiver to Spadowski, “Have this. Means a lot to me, Spud.”

Spadowski declined Jackson’s offering. “Oh I can’t take that. It’s just decency. We’re not on the Gold Coast here Jackson. I see a guy like him looking for a guy like you and I know it can’t be good.”

“Alright,” said Jackson. He pocketed the bill. “Anything else?”

“No, that’s it.“

“Well Spud, I’m beat. Rough night.”

“Well, have a good rest and have a good day. And 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 away and headed down the hallway as Jackson closed the door and locked it again. Jackson shook his head.

Jackson walked over to his chair and sat down. He took off his shirt and discarded it. He pressed his palm against his own flesh. The hole that Ringo put there quivered. Jackson winced at the pain. Skin and muscle sealed back together and pushed a lead bullet out of his shoulder.

He pressed his palms together. For a moment his hands became one as palm shared flesh with the other. Soon he parted his hands and they looked like new. He wriggled his fingers. One hand was more sensitive than before but the other lost a lot of sensitivity with the new top layer of skin.

Jackson stood up and walked over to the wall. He pulled down his Murphy bed and climbed in, pulling the covers over. This would be the first night’s sleep of a new chapter in his life. Jackson Starr was going places. The dawn of the new day gave rise to morning as he drifted off to sleep. It would be the sleep of kings.

* * *

Jackson woke up to the phone ringing. The afternoon sun penetrated through the shutters where any space allowed. He sat up and swung his legs out. He gathered his bearings before getting up and walking over to the phone. He put the receiver to his ear and picked up the mouthpiece.

“Yeah, who is it?”

“So how did it go, Jackson?” It was Triple Dee.

“Oh, hey Dee.”

“So, does Ed have *The Roundabout*?”

“Oh yeah. Went well. Went very well,” Jackson got up to pace around his table. “That Ringo guy was a tough cookie but I talked him into it. Got a little banged up but I showed him who’s boss.”

“I knew I could count on you,” said Donovan. “I’ll send a kid to get you the five bucks later. You’re gonna go places. I’ll send a guy to collect the first payment tonight.”

Jackson’s eyes widened. “Hey, why don’t I collect that money?”

“Nah. Ed sent you to shake Ringo Styles down and secure the joint. You’re the legbreaker. You know that.”

“So why don’t I collect the money? Keep the pressure on.”

“Nah, that’s for men who proved themselves to the boss.”

“Wait, and that’s not me?” Jackson grabbed the edge of his table.

“Just a few more jobs, Starr.”

“Ed told me that he was going to find me something after this job.”

“Jackson this stuff takes time-”

“Oh cut the shit!” Jackson squeezed the edge of the table. The wood oozed between his fingers like wet clay. In spite of this the table was still solid.

There was silence for a few moments.

“What did you say?”

“I said cut the shit, Dorian. We all came up together. I did the dirty work while guys like you, Zack, and Ed took the credit every time.” Jackson released the table as his hand clenched into a fist.

“What’s gotten into you Starr?”

“Five years, Dee. Five years and you kissed up to the boss taking credit for all my work while I went nowhere. Five years and you got made his right hand man and you did nothing for me.”

“Stop it Starr. Don’t say anything you’re gonna regret.”

Jackson slammed his fist into the table, impressing a mold of it into the surface. He stood up and spoke into the mouthpiece.

“Dorian, I quit.”

“What do you mean you quit? You can’t quit Bononi.”

“You heard me, Dee. So long as I’m under you guys I’m going nowhere. Well guess what? I quit. I’m done. We’re done. I’m going my own way. I’m my own man from now on.”

“I’m giving you one chance to take it back Jackson.”

“You can take that chance and shove it. I’m a man of my word Ed. We’re finished. You got it?”

“Yeah, I ‘got it,’ Jackson.” Triple Dee’s breathing picked up.

“I’ll make my own way. I’ll go farther than any of you ever did.”

“You’re going further into the ground than-”

Jackson hung up on Ed. He took a few steady breaths. He stared at the shutters darkening his apartment. He grinned with a sigh of relief.

“Yeah. I did the right thing. I did the right thing.” Jackson walked up to the shutters and drew them to invite the light of day in. He looked over the streets again and thought about what he did. Ed Bononi was the kind of guy who employed guys like Jackson Starr. Saying such strong words would have consequences. There was a price for standing up to him like that. But Jackson already knew that he was about to pay a price before Donovan ever called him.

He knew who Spadowski met yesterday. Spadowski described Mick Hammer.

* * *

Edoardo Bononi sat in his his office a few floors above the streets of Chicago. It was over. He stared forward with eyes ready to spout flames at

any moment. Jackson caught onto the fact that he was nothing more than a disposable tool at long last.

Across from Ed Bononi sat Mick Hammer. Cleanshaven. gray suit, gloves. Hat. Mick brandished a Bowie knife. He sharpened it during Bononi's conversation with Donovan. He liked to keep things quiet while he went in, do the job, and leave without a trace. He packed a pistol if things did not go according to plan though.

"So, how did it go?" said Mick. He had a wide smile. A new job was coming his way.

Ed put the receiver back on the hook.

"That son of a bitch up and quit on me!"

"Oh did he?" said Mick.

"He finally snapped," said Bononi. "We gotta get rid of Starr before he rats us out or makes any moves against me."

"You knew he was going to blow didn't you?"

"It was a matter of time. You said you would scope his place out?"

"I got a good picture of the place last night."

"You did?"

"I can still smell the steak in his fridge. I bet he didn't even smell what I did to it."

"Mick you son of a gun! Guys like Jackson never go above and beyond like you Mick. You got initiative. I like that."

"So, what is he worth to you?"

"A dog like him? How's a thousand sound?"

"Two." The smile was gone on Mick Hammer's face.

"One and a quarter in cold, hard cash."

"I'd rather take that in bonds. We both know how dangerous Jackson really is. Cash won't cut it."

"Fine. One grand in bonds. I can find someone else otherwise."

Mick sheathed his Bowie knife. “Excellent.” He smiled, stood up, and shook hands with Bononi.

“Jackson will be dead by dawn tomorrow or I’m half off.”

“Then get to work Mick. I gotta go to the bank.”

Mick’s smile widened, his teeth like a shark’s. “Dead. By. Dawn.” He left the office.

Ed lit a fresh cigar. This was the end of his relationship with Jackson Starr. They came up together but Jackson Starr was a dog who had to be put down. Mick would be his new pet. All dogs had to be put down someday. Now he needed to line up someone else as insurance for if Mick turned on him too. And so the game would go on as long as he was on top.

* * *

Jackson looked out at the streets of the city below. The train blocked his view as it rolled along past his apartment. It shook with the rumbling of tons of steel moving at high speeds. He drew the shades. He was going to hit the town and treat himself for this momentous occasion.

Jackson got his gun out of the chair and holstered it. He donned a deep red coat and hat. He unlocked the door and stepped outside. It was close to supertime but his day just started.

Jackson took the train over to Maxwell Street where he got himself a roast beef sandwich. He took his time eating it as he walked the streets. He savored the juiciness and tenderness of his food.

Jackson went to the park to relax and think of his next move. There was no way that Bononi was not doing the same while Jackson tried to keep calm and go on with his day.

The sun went down and the lampposts lit up. The streets cleared and the hustle and bustle died down. The night life began under the surface of Chicago. It was time to return to *The Roundabout*, this time on peaceful

terms. He had a verbal contract to honor. Now that he was out from under Bononi's thumb he needed to make this partnership work. He could not let this slip through his fingers. Ringo Styles was his way out.

Jackson hopped on the last trolley and headed for *The Roundabout*. The speakeasy life should clear his head. He would figure out what to do in the meantime.

* * *

Mick Hammer stepped outside from the building that Bononi kept his office. He gritted his teeth at the heat. Jackson would not be home until after the last patrons shuffled out of the speakeasies. He had time to kill.

Model T Fords were parked everywhere so he approached the closest one. He looked both ways and then opened the door and climbed in. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a key. Mick started the car and backed out.

"Hey that's my car," said someone running over. "My car! Stop!" He banged on the window.

Mick hit the brakes. He turned to look at the man.

"Sir, what is the matter?"

"This is my car! You're driving my car!"

"Oh. This is your car?"

"Yeah! Get out!" The man gripped the window frame.

"Oh! Sorry sir. You know how they all look alike. 'Scuse me." Mick pressed his foot on the left pedal and shifted the Model T to park.

The man calmed down. "Sorry I blew up on you. I just got this."

Mick reached down with his left hand.

"They're nice though, common as they are. I was gonna show this off to--"

A hand came out from the handle of the door. It grabbed the man by the shirt and pulled him against the car.

“Let’s go for a ride,” said Mick with a grin. He shifted to drive, dragging the man along.

“No! No!” said the man. He flailed about. Mick kept his eye on the road. He would get close to oncoming traffic in the opposite lanes. The man tried to keep up but the pace of the car overwhelmed him.

Men, women, and children on the sidewalks screamed as Mick dragged the man along the street. Mick let out rebel yells every block while the roar of the Model T drowned any noise his victim could make. Mick drove until he came to a traffic stop. He shifted to park and turned the car off, pocketing the key.

“Well, it’s been fun. Enjoy your new car,” he said. He shoved the man away from the Model T. The man fell to the ground in shock. His feet were broken. He was broken.

Mick got out, stepped over the man, and approached the sidewalk. An aura of terror cleared his path. Police sirens blared down the street. Mick strolled into a store to get out of sight. Before people could point him out he slipped back outside through the backdoor. He was fresh on an adjacent street where he climbed into another Model T and drove away.

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Across town, Mick parked by a train track that presided over the street. He stepped out of the car. There was a train station just a block or so away. This the train line that led to Jackson Starr’s apartment. He walked up to the second story where he got a ticket and boarded the next train headed for the apartment.

Mick knew that Jackson’s apartment was level with these train tracks. He considered sneaking through the window but he did not want to make

the leap unless he needed to. No, he would take the door. He got off at the station before Jackson's apartment building. He went around the building to the side door and walked upstairs.

Mick thought that Jackson might be in his apartment so he checked his revolver. Fully loaded. He put his six-shooter away and approached Jackson's apartment. He looked around before pushing his fingers where the door met the frame. His hand squeezed in between. Then his arm. In moments his entire body squeezed in. There was no trace of him having been in the hallway.

Inside of Jackson's apartment, Mick's hand emerged, then his arm, then the rest of him. Mick was inside. He took a look around. He found Jackson's bloody shirt draped over a chair. There was a radio. He turned it on and looked for evening updates. He was getting hungry. There was a knock at the door.

A muffled voice said, "Hey Starr! Answer the door!" More knocking. Knocking graduated to pounding. Mick sat there as he figured out a story.

Mister Peenman stood outside the apartment looking stern. He heard the locks being undone. The door opened.

"Who are you?" said Mister Peenman out of confusion.

"Oh, a friend of Jackson's that's all." Mick beamed. "Call me, uh, Ringo. Ringo Styles."

"Where's Jackson, Ringo? Why are you here?"

"I was just watching the place for him."

"Watching the place? Why?"

"Oh, you must be the superintendent Jackson talked about. Here, come inside," Mick gestured inside. Peenman entered. Mick closed the door.

"I was about to fix some supper. Jackson won't mind I'm sure," Mick opened the refrigerator and looked around.

“I know Jackson doesn’t make the best dough but I’m sure...” The top shelf food and drinks inside of Jackson’s refrigerator surprised Mick.

No way Jackson can afford this stuff, thought Mick. *Not on the money Ed pays him*. He pulled out something wrapped in butcher paper and butter and put them on the counter.

“I already ate,” said Mister Peenman. “Jackson told me this morning that he would pay the rent today and it’s dark out now. I’m here to collect or else I must evict him.”

“Right. He told me you’d be here. I’m holding down the fort.” Mick knelt down to look for a pan.

“Holding down the fort? He’ll be here soon?”

Mick placed a frying pan down on the stove. He thought about what that nosy neighbor told him the day before.

“Soon? You know he’s a night shift worker, right?”

Mister Peenman sighed and grumbled, “I knew that bum wouldn’t have the money. Well, this is the last straw then. I want you to leave.”

“Leave?”

“Yes. You’re not a tenant and I’m evicting Jackson effective immediately. Leave or I call the cops.”

Mick placed the pork chops over the melting butter.

“You don’t need to call the police.”

“No. Not if you leave right now. Stop cooking. Get out.”

Mick turned to Mister Peenman. He took a step towards him.

“I ain’t leaving here.”

Mister Peenman backed away a step, “Hey, let’s not get excited, Ringo”

“Excited? I’ll give you excited.”

“What are you doing?”

Mick charged at Peenman and stabbed him in the shoulder. Peenman stumbled back.

“No Ringo, wait!”

Mick kicked Peenman in the chest knocking him back onto the floor.

“This is what you get for messing with Jackson Starr!” Mick mounted Peenman and slit his throat. Blood spurt out as Peenman gurgled his last gasps of air and stopped moving.

As blood spread across the floor Mick stared down at his handiwork. The pork chops sizzled, giving the apartment a soundscape. His mouth watered. He walked around the gurgling Mister Peenman and grabbed him by the head.

Mick touched a gloved hand to the floorboards below. His hand squeezed into a space where two boards touched. His whole body went in with his hand still on Mister Peenman’s head.

As Mick’s hand went into the floorboards, the back of Mister Peenman’s head went in with it. The scalp of his head, his face, his neck, everything was pulled in with Mick. Even the spreading blood from his body was sucked into the floorboards. In moments even the body and blood vanished without a trace.

A pair of gloved hands oozed out of the floor boards. They parted and pressed against the floor. Mick Hammer emerged and pushed himself out. He stood up alone in the apartment and clean, save for a few flecks of blood across his gray coat. The price of doing business.

Mick turned on the radio. There was a whistled tune and then, “Good evening. The makers of the new Rinso bring you...”

He walked over to the stove and flipped the pork chops. The sizzle made him salivate as did the smell of them frying in butter. He listened to the radio, sharpened his knife, and sampled Jackson’s whiskey collection into the night.

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The clock struck two. The radio was off. Silence was golden. The dishes washed. The garbage disposed of. Lights out. Darkness reigned.

Somewhere, Mick Hammer waited for Jackson Starr to return home. A lone eyeball peeked out.

* * *

Jackson Starr stood outside of *The Roundabout*. He knocked on the door. The window slid open revealing his new business partner. Jackson's mug was password enough. Ringo shut the window and opened the door. Bullet holes, burn spots, broken furniture, and blood stains adorned *The Roundabout* but the customers either did not notice or they did not care.

"The hell happened to my bar?" said Jackson as he strolled in.

Ringo looked Jackson in the eye. "Our bar."

"Yeah, I'll get it later," said Jackson. A cocktail of tobacco smoke and jazz music greeted him. Ladies and gentlemen danced in the middle on the floor while Jackson and Ringo walked around to the bar. Ringo poured a beer for Jackson who dipped his finger into it.

"You look..." said Ringo.

"Good as new?" said Jackson. "Here, let me see your arm."

Ringo squinted and tilted his head. He presented his forearm to Jackson. Jackson grabbed Ringo's arm. The cuts from last night had been cauterized. Jackson twisted his hands around Ringo's forearm. When he pulled his hands away Ringo's arm was free of cuts.

"Like new," said Jackson.

"Nice trick," said Ringo. Jackson took a sip.

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Another night at *The Roundabout* drew to a close. Ringo barricaded the door and got out the mop, the rags, and the broom.

“Our bar,” said Ringo as he tossed a mop to Jackson while he held a broom.

“Hey, I have bigger fish to fry Ringo.” Jackson pointed at all the damage from last night.

“Just get to work.”

Ringo did the normal cleaning that night. Jackson removed bullet holes and restored boards. He put stools and tables back together and removed stains. Any other damage incurred by their fight the night before was undone. This speakeasy work may have been illegal but it was honest work. Jackson found comfort in that.

Jackson went home invigorated. This was a new chapter in his life. He entered the apartment. He put the gun away, took a shower, and slipped into a bathrobe. He pulled down the Murphy bed, ready to face the next day with a new energy now that he was his own man. But first, sleep.

* * *

In the dark of the early morning Jackson. A lone eye looked over him. The head of Mick Hammer emerged and around the corner an arm emerged, a Bowie knife in its hand. They slid along the trim of the wall and headed for the sleeping Jackson.

Jackson woke up with a start. He was upside down with his back to the wall of his apartment. The Murphy bed had sprung up during the night, trapping him in the wall. He struggled to move. Gravity would not pull him down enough but that would only make his situation worse. He needed leverage to push the bed down.

Something poked through the mattress but it was pitch black between the bed and the wall. Whatever it was, it was pulled back through.

Mick Hammer stood outside of the Murphy bed, Bowie knife in hand, grinning. He scanned left to right along the bed in search of Jackson. Since Jackson was upside down now he could have shifted from where he was while he slept. Mick took another stab.

“God damn,” Jackson said to himself. He shifted an arm up and tried to push himself away from the wall in vain. The knife stabbed through again, closer to him. It pulled out. Whoever was on the other side dragged the tip of the knife along the back of the bed.

Jackson had to be quiet as he maneuvered himself. He could not slam his hand into the wall so he turned his palms towards the wall instead. His hands sunk into the wall, then his forearms. His whole body began to sink in like the wall was made of mud. He heard the knife plunge through again. The tip of the blade hit him towards the base of his spine. It was a small prick but blood was drawn. The knife pulled back out.

Mick Hammer inspected his knife. There was blood but only on the tip. Confused, he stabbed the bed again. Still only the tip had blood on it. Jackson was up to something.

Jackson winced. That last stab poked him in the ribs but he sank deep enough into the wall that the blade could not do more than that. He warped the wall more. Jackson reached up and made a handhold to pull himself into an upright position. The knife plunged back in and stabbed the side of his calf. He winced.

Mick grew impatient and squeezed himself into the wall.

Jackson’s face was towards the wall. He needed to shift himself backwards to see his attacker. Not enough time though. An arm reached out where the bed and the wall touched. In its hand was the Bowie knife and it lashed out to stab Jackson again, this time in the foot.

“Quit Bononi will ya?” said Mick as he lashed out at Jackson again.

Jackson pressed his hands into the muddy slush of the wall. Now that he was upright the wall solidified and pushed him out, opening the

Murphy bed, tumbling him out. Jackson rolled off the bed. The dark shape of Mick Hammer disappeared as the bed slammed back up into the wall.

Jackson inspected his foot and calf. Mick got him good. He looked over at his chair and got up to hobble over to grab his gun. Jackson left a bloody trail where he walked.

“Come on out and face me like a man,” said Jackson. Footsteps emanated from an invisible space. Jackson kept still to figure out where the steps were going. He winced again as he reached down to repair his foot first.

A hand with a knife sprung out from between the floorboards. It sliced across the backside of Jackson’s wrist. Jackson shot the hand. The bullet burst through its forearm. The hand dropped the knife and withdrew from sight. A disembodied scream resonated throughout the apartment.

Jackson looked around. He kept quiet to not give away his position. He crept towards the door but stopped. If he escaped the apartment then Mick would have more hiding places. Jackson turned on the lights instead to give himself a better chance to spot Mick.

The disembodied voice spoke again, “It’s just business Jackson. You understand. You had your job and I have mine.”

“How much did Ed offer you to kill me, Mick?”

“One grand.”

Jackson heard the click of a revolver. The radio turned on to pure static. Mick could not hear Jackson but he would not be able to hear him in turn. Jackson knew that he should not turn the radio off. A gun could pop out and shoot him for all he knew.

One grand? Jackson had no more regrets.

Jackson cocked back the hammer of his pistol and looked around the apartment. Mick crept around sight unseen, footsteps unheard.

Jackson threw on a bathrobe. He might need to make a run for it and he did not want to be down to his skivvies if he did. A hand reached out

from inside of Jackson's bathrobe to grab him by the throat. Mick Hammer strangled Jackson from the inside of the coat.

"You don't quit Bononi, Jackson," said Mick, "You shoulda known you wouldn't last a day. That's how dumb you are. That's why Bononi never moved you up."

Jackson could not speak. Mick's other arm emerged with a six shooter, lining up a head shot. Jackson, losing breath, fell to his knees. He gritted his teeth. He could not wrest control from Mick.

Mick took a shot at Jackson who thrust his hand out and pushed the gun hand upward as it took a shot. Mick tumbled out of the coat. Jackson caught his breath while Mick got to his feet.

Mick looked down at Jackson as he gasped for air. Jackson looked up. Mick shot him in the chest. Jackson slumped against the wall in shock and slouched. Mick panted in relief. A loud bell rang and an engine roared.

"Well, I have a train to catch," said Mick. He walked up to Jackson's window. His body squeezed into the space between the window and the window frame. Mick slipped outside.

Blood trickled to the floor. Mick had shot Jackson and took off for the first train of the day. Mission accomplished.

Jackson snorted. He placed his hands on his head. The blood stopped trickling. A bullet pushed out of his head. He clenched his fist around Mick's Bowie knife and picked his pistol back up. Jackson was not finished. He would take out Mick Hammer. Vengeance would be his.

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Mick Hammer ran down the tracks to reach the train station. He bought a ticket and boarded a car. He looked around at the other passengers. His hand bled from Jackson's gunshot. He might attract attention.

The collector approached Mick, "Ticket?" Mick flashed him the ticket with his good hand. The collector moved on.

Mick had four shots left in his revolver. He should have shot Jackson again, right in the head. The further he got away from Jackson the more assured he would be that the job was done. He felt around for his Bowie knife. It was gone. He forgot it at Jackson's apartment. He wanted to go back.

Before Mick could make his next move, the metal above the passengers crunched and folded. He looked up and saw the impression of a left foot in the ceiling of the car. Mick gritted his teeth.

"Jackson..." He readied his revolver. Jackson fired one shot in the apartment and knocked the knife out of Mick's hand. There was no way that Jackson did not plan to stab him with it out of revenge. Mick had to finish the job.

There was another crunch of metal from above. The impression of a right foot and leg sunk into the roof of the car. Mick blasted at it. A hole punctured through and the dawn's early light shined through it. Jackson had no time to get up from out of that. How did he avoid getting shot?

Another footstep, this time the left foot and leg sunk in again. Mick fired again with the same result. He was messing with Mick, getting him to waste his remaining shots.

Mick backed away from the footsteps in the roof. A hand reached down and shattered the glass of the window behind him. Shards flew into his back like small daggers.

"Gotcha!" Mick spun around to fire but Jackson was gone. Mick did not fire. He backed away from the window.

An armed man wearing only a bathrobe entered through the shattered glass. It was Jackson Starr and he was ready to take down Mick Hammer if he could find him.

“Come on out, Mickey,” said Jackson. There were no passengers on this car. They had all evacuated to surrounding cars. All that remained were him, lots of places to hide, and a spreading pool of blood.

Jackson went to investigate the pool of blood. A man in a tee shirt and denim jeans lay face down on the ground. He had been shot in the face. Mick must have shot him during the frantic chaos. Jackson looked behind himself and saw the bullet hole through one of his foot impressions in the ceiling. If he had not messed with Mick, this innocent man would have escaped to another car.

Jackson might have a chance to save him though. Jackson put his hand to the man. Flesh blown apart by a speeding bullet returned to something like a normal human face. Jackson had no idea what the man used to look like. The open wounds closed. The bleeding stopped. He would need to go to a hospital but there was a chance he would survive. Jackson could be a killer but he was not a maniac.

Jackson rose back up and readied his pistol. He walked about the car with caution. This train had all kinds of hiding spots for Mick. After walking up and down the train car there was no sign of Mick Hammer though. He must have slipped into another care somehow.

A new surprise greeted him. The pool of blood drained into the train car floor. Mick was nearby. Jackson covered the area where the blood was being drained.

Mick’s disembodied voice spoke, “I knew I should have shot you one more time. Glad you came here to let me finish the job.”

“Does Ed know you do things by halves? You panicked didn’t you?”

“Watch what you say Jackson.” Jackson heard Mick’s disembodied footsteps again.

“I got nothing to lose with you Mickey.”

“Don’t call me Mickey.”

“I’ll call a man who wants to rub me out what I want. Now come on out and face me.”

“Oh, I don’t think so. Give up my advantage?” The footsteps stopped above Jackson. Jackson looked up.

“I know you’re up there. You can’t get to me without coming out so just do it.”

There was a pause. Then something fell onto Jackson. It was wet, a drop of something. He wiped it away with his palm. Blood. It was the blood from the passenger. Jackson saw more drops forming.

Human blood showered over Jackson. He opened his mouth to curse but he got overwhelmed by the blood shower. Mick cackled.

Behind Jackson, a hand emerged from between the closed lips of the body of the downed passenger. Mick’s head oozed out of the tiny space that was the man’s mouth. He pointed his revolver to the passenger’s head.

Jackson, drenched in blood, spun around and trained his gun on Mick, “You asshole!”

“Don’t shoot,” said Mick. He wore a desperate smirk, “Let’s call a truce. I let this guy live and you let me go.”

Jackson glared at Mick, “You came to my home to kill me in my sleep. All because Ed wants me to keep doing his dirty work for peanuts. I freed myself. You’re still his lapdog, Mick. You finish the jobs you accept. I did.”

Mick wrinkled his nose at Jackson. “It ends here Jackson. I kill this guy or I kill you. Someone dies.”

“Come on, Mick. This is between you and me. You don’t need him.”

Mick stared at Jackson. He had to buy time but he noticed that Jackson was barefoot. His feet touched the rail car. Did he not need hands? A piece of the train car stretched out and lanced Mick in the hand. Jackson shot at Mick, clipping him in the shoulder. Mick disappeared with a disembodied shriek.

One car ahead, Mick dropped down to the floor to the shock of the cramped passengers. He turned around to look back. Mick saw that Jackson had stepped outside of the car and was kneeling down. Something rattled. Jackson was unhitching his car at the coupler head.

Momentum carried Jackson's car but it would not last. The hitch stretched as the cars drifted away from the train. Jackson stepped off of his car and walked along it like a tightrope.

Mick did not stick around. He bypassed the passengers by squeezing into the floor and resurfacing in the next car.

"Good idea Jackson," he said. Mick slipped down towards the coupler head and unhitched the cars. Jackson would get away but Ed would back him up, Mick was sure of it. He watched in relief as Jackson's car faded into the distance.

Behind Mick, a shape descended from the ceiling. A hand tapped him on the shoulder. Mick turned around. A metal fist clocked him. He stumbled back.

"Let's finish this, Mick. Winner talks to Ed," said Jackson.

Jackson and Mick stared each other down at the rear of a train car. One wrong move and a twenty foot trip to Hell awaited either man.

Mick lunged at Jackson. Jackson sidestepped and drove an elbow into his back. Mick went down. Jackson grabbed Mick to pick him up but Mick squeezed himself into the car. Jackson let go. Mick stood up inside the car.

"Not so fast, Mickey," Jackson punched the back door. A metal hand formed on the other side and punched Mick in the midsection. Mick lost his breath. The door returned to normal. Jackson slid the door open and walked through with his pistol leading the way. All eyes were on his bloodsoaked form.

Mick scrambled backwards

"You wouldn't shoot with all of these people around would you?"

“You coward,” said Jackson. He did not shoot though. Mick grabbed a young woman. Mick pointed his revolver to her head. His eyes were frantic, his breath rapid.

“This is between us Mickey,” said Jackson.

“Jump or she gets it,” said Mick. The woman looked between the man with a gun to her head and the man in a bloodsoaked bathrobe.

Jackson lowered his gun. “Alright, Mick. You win.”

Mick glistened with sweat. He kept the barrel of his revolver on the woman. Jackson opened the back door. He looked down on the train tracks speeding by and jumped.

Mick shoved the woman away and rushed forward to fire his last shot at Jackson, hitting him square in the back. Jackson tumbled along the tracks and fell behind the train.

“Yes!” said Mick. He laughed in relief. He got away and he even killed the bastard. He closed the door and daydreamed of the one thousand dollars in bonds waiting for him.

He looked down at the woman he took hostage, “I hope you don’t take that personally.”

Jackson stood up. The metal around his fist shrank and transformed back into a Bowie knife. He arced his arm back and threw the knife at the back door. The knife soared through the air, stretching out into a long, thin, metal spear.

“What is your name, miss?” said Mick. He offered his hand to the woman.

“Joan,” she said. She looked around at the other passengers but she reached out in terror. Mick helped her up.

“You’re quite the looker Joan. You don’t mind if I sneak a kiss would you?” Mick pulled her close. Joan rapped her fists against Mick. He ignored her and reached for the wall.

“Let’s go somewhere private, honey” he said. Mick’s hand started squeezing between two sheets of steel.

Jackson’s spear penetrated through the door and impaled Mick Hammer in the back and out through the front of his belly. Joan escaped Mick’s clutches. Mick coughed up blood and looked down, his mouth agape. The spear curved into a hook

Mick groaned. The hole in the back of the door expanded outwards by fractions of an inch at a time. He could not pull himself out of it.

Outside, Jackson’s feet glided along the tracks while he held onto a wire attached to the spear tip. It was no spear though. It was a harpoon.

“No!” said Mick. His back pressed against the door. The wire grew thicker moment by moment, the tension stronger. The metal of the door and the metal of the spear formed a seal in the hole. Mick passed through to the back of the train outside. This move unhooked him. Jackson fell behind. He uncurled the hook into a straight spear again. It slipped through the hole. Mick looked down and realized that he still had a hole in him.

“Oh,” he said.

The spear bifurcated and curled into two hooks. It pulled Mick off the back of the train. Mick slammed face first onto the tracks while Jackson tumbled along as the train left both of them behind.

Jackson got up first. He retracted Mick’s Bowie knife and returned it to its original shape as he walked up to Mick.

“You dropped this.”

Jackson picked Mick up off the ground by his jacket. He lifted Mick up and walked him to the edge of the tracks. Traffic resonated below them as cars threatened to trample anyone in their way.

“Wait, Jackson!”

“No.” Jackson threw Mick off the tracks down to the streets below. Mick screamed before he crashed into a parked Ford. The glass shattered. The top of the car ripped off the frame.

Jackson Starr hopped to a steel pole. He glided down as he shifted himself down like a conveyor belt. He approached the downed Mick Hammer.

“Jackson, please. It’s just business.”

“You knew the risks, Mickey. Ed wanted me dead for standing up to him and you gladly offered to do his dirty work didn’t you you sellout?”

“You’re right Jackson. Bononi was using me. He was using me like he used you.” Mick gasped and winced.

“I wasn’t the first was I?”

“No.”

Jackson saw the lower part of Mick slipping into the hood of the car. His hands were squeezed in too.

“No slipping out of this Mickey.” Jackson took aim. The Ford started up. Jackson raised his eyebrows.

“Let’s go!” said Mick. The Ford slammed forward and struck the car ahead. Jackson fell over and shot by accident. Mick squeezed himself into the driver’s seat. He cut off traffic and blazed ahead while Jackson could only hang on and whip around to face oncoming danger. He pressed his hands against the hood of the car and warped it back into shape.

Mick slammed the brakes. The car behind him collided. The force of the two sent Jackson rolling off the hood. Jackson stood up but he lost a spring in his step. Mick revved the engine and surged forward.

Time froze for both men. There was another steel pole behind Jackson. Mick’s foot pressed the accelerator. The car surged forward. Jackson dove out of the way.

There was no crash. Jackson turned on the ground and looked over. Mick drove away. He was going back to Bononi. Mick Hammer was the beginning. Ed Bononi would more killers.

The price for freedom would be in blood. War was declared. Jackson had to warn Ringo Styles. He had to get to *The Roundabout*.