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The Friends of Eddie Coyle

Written by George V. Higgins

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THE FRIENDS *of* EDDIE COYLE

George V. Higgins



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Jackie Brown at twenty-six, with no expression on his face, said that he could get some guns. "I can get your pieces probably by tomorrow night. I can get you, probably, six pieces. Tomorrow night. In a week or so, maybe ten days, another dozen. I got a guy coming in with at least ten of them but I already talk to another guy about four of them and he's, you know, expecting them. He's got something to do. So, six tomorrow night. Another dozen in a week."

The stocky man sat across from Jackie Brown and allowed his coffee to grow cold. "I don't know as I like that," he said. "I don't know as I like buying stuff from the same lot as somebody else. Like, I don't know what he's going to do with it, you know? If it was to cause trouble to my people on account of somebody else having some from the same lot, well, it could cause trouble for me, too."

"I understand," Jackie Brown said. People who got out early from work went by in the November afternoon, hurrying. The crippled man hawked *Records*, annoying people by crying at them from his skate-wheeled dolly.

"You don't understand the way I understand," the stocky man said. "I got certain responsibilities."

"Look," Jackie Brown said, "I tell you I understand. Did you get my name or didn't you?"

"I got your name," the stocky man said.

"Well all right," Jackie Brown said.

"All right nothing," the stocky man said. "I wished I had a nickel for every name I got that was all right, I wished I did. Look at this." The stocky man extended the fingers of his left hand over the gold-speckled Formica tabletop. "You know what that is?"

"Your hand," Jackie Brown said.

"I hope you look closer at guns'n you look at that hand," the stocky man said. "Look at your own goddamned hand."

Jackie Brown extended the fingers of his left hand. "Yeah," he said.

"Count your fucking knuckles," the stocky man said.

"All of them?" Jackie Brown said.

"Ah Christ," the stocky man said. "Count as many of them as you want. I got four more. One on each finger. Know how I got those? I bought some stuff from a man that I had his name, and it got traced, and the man I bought it for, he went to M C I Walpole for fifteen to twenty-five. Still in there, but he had some friends. I got an extra set of knuckles. Shut my hand in a drawer. Then one of them stomped the drawer shut. Hurt like a fucking bastard. You got no idea how it hurt."

"Jesus," Jackie Brown said.

“What made it hurt more,” the stocky man said, “what made it hurt worse was knowing what they were going to do to you, you know? There you are and they tell you very matter of fact that you made somebody mad, you made a big mistake and now there’s somebody doing time for it, and it isn’t anything personal, you understand, but it just has to be done. Now get your hand out there. You think about not doing it, you know? I was in Sunday School when I was a kid and this nun says to me, stick out your hand, and the first few times I do it she whacks me right across the knuckles with a steel-edged ruler. It was just like that. So one day I says, when she tells me ‘Put out your hand,’ I say, ‘No.’ And she whaps me right across the face with that ruler. Same thing. Except these guys weren’t mad, they aren’t mad at you, you know? Guys you see all the time, maybe guys you didn’t like, maybe guys you did, had some drinks with, maybe looked out for the girls. ‘Hey look, Paulie, nothing personal, you know? You made a mistake. The hand. I don’t wanna have to *shoot* you, you know.’ So you stick out the hand and—you get to put out the hand you want—I take the left because I’m right-handed and I know what’s going to happen, like I say, and they put your fingers in the drawer and then one of them kicks it shut. Ever hear bones breaking? Just like a man snapping a shingle. Hurts like a bastard.”

“Jesus,” Jackie Brown said.

“That’s what I mean,” the stocky man said. “I had a cast on for almost a month. Weather gets damp, it still hurts. I can’t bend them fingers. So I don’t care what your name is, who gave it to me. I had the other guy’s name, and that didn’t help my goddamn fingers. Name isn’t enough. I get paid for being careful. What I want to know is, what happens one of the other guns from this bunch gets traced? Am I going to have to start pricing crutches?

This is serious business, you know. I don't know who you been selling to before, but the fellow says you got guns to sell and I need guns. I'm just protecting myself, just being smart. What happens when the man with the four gives one to somebody that uses it to shoot a goddamned cop? I gotta leave town?"

"No," Jackie Brown said.

"No?" the stocky man said. "Okay, I hope you're right about that. I'm running short of fingers. And if I gotta leave town, my friend, you gotta leave town. You understand that. They'll do it to me, they'll do worse to you. You know that."

"I know that," Jackie Brown said.

"I hope you do," the stocky man said. "I dunno who you been selling to, but I can tell you, these guys're different."

"You can't trace these guns," Jackie Brown said. "I guarantee it."

"Tell me how come," the stocky man said.

"Look," Jackie Brown said, "these're new guns, follow me? Proof, test-firing's all they ever had. Brand-fucking-new guns. Airweights. Shrouded hammers. Floating firing pins. You could drop one of these pieces right on the hammer with a round in the chamber—nothing. Thirty-eight Specials. I'm telling you, it's good stuff."

"Stolen," the stocky man said. "Serial numbers filed off. That's how I got caught before. They got this bath they drop the stuff in, raises that number right back again. You better do better'n that, neither one of us'll be able to shake hands."

"No," Jackie Brown said. "They got serial numbers. Man gets caught with one of them, perfectly all right, no sweat. No way to tell it's stolen. Brand-new gun."

"With a serial number?" the stocky man said.

"You look up the serial number," Jackie Brown said, "it's a

Military Police model, made in 1951, shipped to Rock Island, never reported stolen. But it's a brand-new Detective Special. Never reported stolen either."

"You got somebody in the plant," the stocky man said.

"I got guns to sell," Jackie Brown said. "I done a lot of business and I had very few complaints. I can get you four-inchers and two-inchers. You just tell me what you want. I can deliver it."

"How much?" the stocky man said.

"Depends on the lot," Jackie Brown said.

"Depends on what I'm willing to pay, too," the stocky man said. "How much?"

"Eighty," Jackie Brown said.

"Eighty?" the stocky man said. "You ever sell guns before? Eighty is way too high. I'm talking about thirty guns here now. I can go into a goddamned *store* and buy thirty guns for eighty apiece. We got to talk some more about price, I can see that."

"I'd like to see you go into a store and order up thirty pieces," Jackie Brown said. "I don't know who you are and I don't know what you got in mind and I don't need to know. But I would sure like to be there when you tell the man you got some friends in the market for thirty pieces and you want a discount. I would like to see that. The FBI'd be onto your phone before you got the money out."

"There's more'n one gun store, you know," the stocky man said.

"Not for you there isn't," Jackie Brown said. "I can tell you right now there isn't anybody for a hundred miles that can put up the goods like I can, and you know it. So no more of that shit."

"I never went over fifty before," the stocky man said. "I'm not going that high now. You haven't got that many guys around

waiting to take thirty, either. And if these work out all right, I'll be coming back for more. You're used to dealing in twos and threes, that's why you want to deliver three or four times."

"I can sell fifty tomorrow without ever seeing you," Jackie Brown said. "I can't get my hands on them fast enough. I can sell every gun I can get. I bet if I was to go down to the Shrine there and go to confession I'd get three Hail Marys and the priest'd ask me confidentially if I could get him something light he could carry under his coat. People're desperate for guns. I had a guy last week that was hot for a Python and I got him this big fucking Blackhawk, six-incher, forty-one mag, and he took it like he'd been looking for it all his life. Should've seen that bastard going out, big lump under his coat, looked like he was stealing melons. I had a guy seriously ask me, could I get him a few machine guns. He'd go a buck and a half apiece for as many as I could get, didn't even care what caliber."

"What color was he?" the stocky man asked.

"He was a nice fellow," Jackie Brown said. "I wouldn't be surprised if I was to be able to get something for him in a week or so. Good material, too. M-sixteens in very nice shape."

"I never been able to understand a man that wanted to use a machine gun," the stocky man said. "It's life if you get hooked with it and you can't really do much of anything with it except fight a war, maybe. You can't hide it and you can't carry it around in a car and you can't hit anything with the goddamned thing unless you don't mind shooting out a couple of walls getting the guy. Which is risky. I don't care much for a machine gun. The best all-around item I ever saw is the four-inch Smith. Now that is a fine piece of machinery, you can heft it and it goes where you point it."

“It’s too big for a lot of people,” Jackie Brown said. “I had a man that wanted a couple of thirty-eights a week or so ago, and I come up with one of those and a Colt two-incher. He liked the Colt all right but he was all edgy about the Smith. Asked me if I thought he was going to go around wearing a fucking holster or something. But he took it just the same.”

“Look,” the stocky man said, “I want thirty guns. I’ll take four-inchers and two-inchers. Thirty-eights, I’ll take a three-fifty-seven mag if I have to. Thirty pieces. I’ll give you twelve hundred.”

“Balls,” Jackie Brown said. “I got to have at least seventy apiece.”

“I’ll go fifteen hundred,” the stocky man said.

“Split the difference,” Jackie Brown said. “Eighteen hundred.”

“I’ll have to see the stuff,” the stocky man said.

“Sure,” Jackie Brown said. His expression changed: he smiled.