

Eddie Lombardi's first case might just be his last.

Rough & Ready in Brooklyn: An Eddie Lombardi Mystery

by Douglas DiNunzio

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Rough & Ready in Brooklyn

Douglas DiNunzio

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First Edition

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I used to let just about anybody walk into my office. Pimps, hoodlums, wife-cheaters, exhibitionists, thieves, murderers. Even people who drank Ballantine, rooted for the Yankees, or voted Republican. I wouldn't necessarily agree to work for any of them, but I *would* let them in. Now I realize that was far too generous and naïve a policy for Lombardi Investigations to follow, but I didn't know it at the time. Especially on that damp, overcast morning in June 1946, when a certain Mr. Jack J. Orlando walked into my office on New Utrecht Avenue in Bensonhurst, the pride of Eye-talian Brooklyn.

I was just nine months invalidated out of the 101st Airborne Division, still limping after a stint in the VA hospital, still mourning the loss of four little toes — two on each foot — to frostbite, but happy that toes were all I'd lost during the Battle of the Bulge. The war had interrupted my career as a shamus just as it was getting started, and now I found myself playing catch-up. I wasn't used to playing catch-up, and I wasn't very good at it. I wasn't even sure if my investigator's license and gun permit were still valid. My shamus skills were certainly not up to par. Nonetheless, through a combination of pluck, sheer dumb desperation, and naïveté, I'd set myself up in a musty little room over a tailor shop run by a Mr. Gambino. It was more a broom closet than a room, but it was all I could afford with my GI bonus, and it was somewhere to go and sit during the long daytime hours.

I was still living in my parents' old house on 17th Avenue — they were both dead now — and since my three kid sisters were all married, I pretty much had the place to myself. I wanted my own place, of course, but I had to settle with my sisters and their idiot husbands before we could sell the house. My share wouldn't be enough to buy a place of my own, so I had to wait for better times to arrive. That meant paying clients, of whom I'd had

exactly none. But now, here was Jack J. Orlando, the only person to set foot in my musty new office for any reason at all since I'd rented the place in March, standing right in front of me.

"Lombardi?" he asked.

"In person," I answered. "Can I help you?" He just stood there, so I took a moment to size him up. He was memorable for all the wrong reasons, the kind of guy you could describe in detail even if all you had to go on was the sound of his voice: crude, ignorant, and not quite reaching triple digits in the I.Q. department. I'd heard bits and pieces about him from before the war, but if he knew me from anywhere, he didn't show it.

"You're Eddie Lombardi, right? Eddie Lombardi, the private dick?"

"That's two for two," I said. "You're on a roll."

"Huh?" he said.

"Yes," I said. "I'm Lombardi."

I smiled ingenuously, but he didn't smile back. It was possible that he'd never learned that social skill, that he'd somehow missed Learn to Smile Day in kindergarten, but I didn't press him on it.

"Well?" I said. For a moment, he just gave me a lost little puppy dog stare. I thought he might even whine or growl, depending on how advanced was the state of his puppyhood. But he was still making a vain attempt at what he thought were manners, and I didn't want to spoil things for him.

"You were saying?" I prompted, a smaller, more mocking smile escaping my lips. Again, he didn't answer. His dark, dull eyes scanned the room as if he were looking for a place to sit. There was only one chair, right in front of him, so I pointed at it. He looked at the chair, and then at me, with equal puzzlement.

"You can stand there if you like," I said, still trying to smile. "But if you do it much longer, I'm going to have to charge you rent."

"Huh?"

"That was a joke," I added quickly. "Just a little joke, that's all."

"Joke?" he said.

"Is there something I can do for you?" I asked. "Just anything at all?"

"You know who I am?" he asked. "You know me, right? You've heard of me?"

"By reputation," I admitted.

"And?"

"Are you asking *me* to tell *you*?" I said.

"Jack Orlando. My name is Jack Orlando. I run an establishment in Bushwick. You know that?"

I smiled. "Yes, I know that."

"You think it's funny, what I said? You think I'm funny?"

"No. I'm just not used to hearing a third-rate strip club referred to as an 'establishment', that's all." He gave me the angry puppy dog look again.

"You ever *been* there?" he growled. "It's a high class place, my place. Real high class. Great broads, plenty of booze."

I'd been there, all right, from back before the war. The Pom Pom Club. Watered-down drinks, tone-deaf musicians, bargain basement décor, seedy patrons, and girls well past their prime, if they'd ever had one. There was an aging stripper there who'd coached me in the finer points of sex education when I was seventeen and pretending to be older. Two whole semesters' worth. Betty Barbera was her name. So, yes, to answer Jack J. Orlando's question, I'd been there.

"It's a classy joint," he continued. "Anyways, it's mine, and I don't like people putting it down."

"I'm sure it's swell," I said. "Better than swell. Now, about why you're here this morning. Honest to God, I'm all ears."

"You go looking for people?" he asked.

"Sometimes," I said. "Did you lose somebody?"

"One of my girls."

"I'm guessing we're not talking about a cherished daughter here."

"She left. And she took five hundred dollars of the club's money with her."

"When?"

"Yesterday afternoon, just before the first show."

"I see."

"Do you?"

"Sure. One of your strippers. She took your money, and she left. And you want her back. Right?"

"Not a stripper. A waitress."

"Okay, a waitress."

"Part-time."

"Okay. Part-time."

"You find her, you bring her back."

"With the money, of course."

"Yeah."

"Five hundred dollars."

"Yeah."

"Taken from the safe?"

"From the till."

"You keep that much money in the *till*?"

"That's what I said, didn't I?"

I leaned back in my swivel chair, if only to look more shamus-like. Forbearance, one of my lesser attributes, was already wearing thin. "Why come to me?" I asked. "Why not go to the cops?"

"Because I can't, that's why."

"Got a problem with the cops?" I figured he had more than his share, but again, I was cutting him some slack in the courtesy department.

"*Well*?" he said.

I squinted at him. "Well, what?"

"You gonna do the job or not?"

I leaned forward, eyeballing him. "Maybe," I said.

"What's that mean?"

I was ready to define the word for him, but I went with a more direct approach. "Before I agree, let's get a few things ironed out first. If we're talking about the Pom Pom Club, it's not your place, okay? You just run it. I happen to know the hood who owns it."

"So?"

"So, why isn't *he* hiring me? Why did he send you?"

"Because it's my problem."

"He say so?"

"Yeah."

"His money, but your problem."

"Yeah. So?"

I offered a look of jaded nonchalance, then grinned shamelessly. "I'm occupied with a few cases at the moment, but I guess I can set them aside if the price is right. I charge fifteen dollars a day plus expenses."

"You'll take six," he said, grinning back for the first time in our little joust. "And you'll pay your own expenses."

"Will I?"

"Why do you think I'm here?"

"Because you lost somebody. I thought we'd covered that."

His grin lingered, then widened. It wasn't anything I'd been expecting, so I paid some attention to it. "You wanna know *why* I came to see you?" he continued. "You in particular? Just you?"

"Sure," I said. "Why don't you just break down and tell me?"

The grin expanded. "Because you're the new guy on the block. You haven't had a single client yet, until me. I've been asking around. That's why you'll take six and like it. And pay for your own expenses."

"I see," I said.

"And I'll give you one week to find her, that's all. You don't find her in a week, we're done."

"Business not so good at the club?"

"Huh?"

"Can't afford a *real* shamus? Can't afford the new boy on the block for more than a week?"

"I got my reasons," he said, stiffly. "So, will you find her?"

"In a week?"

"Yeah."

"Is that a five day week or a seven day week?"

"Seven."

"Okay. That's eight dollars a day for seven days, comes out to fifty-six dollars. Payment in advance." I held out my palm. My gaze was pure deadpan.

"I said six," he grumbled.

"But I didn't. However, I might just let you off the hook at eight, on account of your situation with the cops." I waited for any reaction other than dull surprise. Finally I said, "Well?"

"Okay," he said. "Eight."

I wiggled five fingers at him. He hesitated.

"Will you take a check?"

I couldn't hold back the smirk. "You don't just want the new shamus on the block," I said. "You want the one who was born yesterday. No, no. It's cash up front, pal, eight bucks per day, or you can just go and look for the next shamus up the line, with my blessings."

The process of payment took a while. He seemed to have paper money stuffed into every pocket, mostly Washingtons and Lincolns folded into odd shapes. I knew a guy in the 101st who used to do that with his money, especially when he was on leave in Paris. Why make it easy for a mugger to clean you out? When my extended palm was full of crumpled greenbacks, I smiled officially for the first time at the Honorable James J. Orlando, Client.

"Okay," I said. "You now have my full attention for the next seven days." He didn't smile back. That didn't surprise me, given the circumstances. What did was when he turned sharply on his heel and made for the door.

"Wait a minute," I said. "Hold up there."

"You got your money," he snapped. "So, go find her."

"Find who?"

"I already told you."

"A certain part-time waitress from the Pom Pom Club, yes. She got a name?"

That stopped him. His scowl deepened for a moment, and his face flushed, but then he composed himself.

"Wanda. Wanda Delano."

“Does this Wanda Delano maybe live somewhere?”

That stopped him again. He re-composed himself. “Boarding house in Coney.”

“There’s plenty of those,” I said. “I could use up your entire seven day week just looking for the right one. But if that’s the way you want it...”

“West 15th Street. Where the Norton’s Point trolley passes. Brick building. She’s on the third floor, over a hardware store.”

My grin expanded. “So, you’ve been there?”

“Yeah, I’ve been there.”

“Personally?”

“Yeah. *Personally.*”

I upped the wattage on my grin. Now that I had his money, it was the purest fun toying with him. “Nice place?”

“It’s okay.”

“I like a place with a decent view myself.”

“You’ll start today? Right now?”

“Sure, sure. Wanda’s place, on West 15th Street. So, you got a picture of her?”

“Picture?”

“A photographic likeness. I’m told you can get them from things called cameras.”

“At the club, maybe.”

“Fine. I’ll stop by sometime when I’m not doing my nails.”

It was a good line, but he didn’t respond. “We finished now?” he asked.

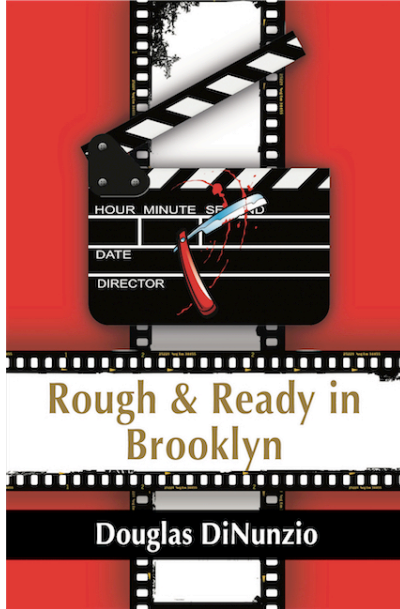
“Sure. Just one more thing, if you don’t mind. When you went to Wanda’s place, did you go on business for the club, or as an extra-curricular activity?”

“What does *that* mean?” he asked.

“Just being nosy,” I said.

He snarled, “I already got a wife.”

“That’s why they call it ‘extra’,” I said, and he walked out.



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