

FRANTIC FIRE

—— By ——

Eli Greenbaum

The four of them – Cruiser, McCoy, Gino and Bomba – were waiting in my outer office when I came back from court just before noon. They were a scary-looking crew, the kind that made you think about crossing to the other side of the street if you saw them walking toward you. But to Linda – my secretary – they were just four more of my odd clients. Rock musicians. In Linda’s mind—and mine—that explained their appearance . . . and behavior.

“Gentlemen,” I said, “please come in.”

They shuffled into my office. Bomba and Gino sat around a small table in the corner. Cruiser and McCoy parked in the leather chairs facing my desk. McCoy pulled out a cigarette. I shook my head. He lit up anyway.

“Man, you got us in here so early. It couldn’t keep a few hours?” he said.

I reached into my briefcase, pulled out a file labeled Frantic Fire vs. Beep’s Bar and slid out four checks.

“Case is settled with \$500 per. My fee’s been deducted. The accounting is at-

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tached along with a photocopy of the original check they wrote to me. Next time maybe they'll think twice before they cancel you," I said.

"Nah, we won't be talking to them again," said Cruiser. He was the band's leader, a wiry guy with a close resemblance to Mick Jagger in his prime.

"Doesn't seem like enough," said McCoy.

"It's close to what you would've been paid if they'd let you play," I said. "What about that recording contract?"

"Not happening," Cruiser replied. "Guy was all talk. A tourist. Real asshole. Wanted to hang with us. Looking for drugs and wimmen. Don't you know, all musicians do drugs and get wimmen? Who needs that? Man, what we need is a break. Jonesy, you gotta know someone could listen to us. You know people. You got connections."

"Not for music. I'm a lawyer. I know law. Music's like rocket science to me."

"I figured," McCoy said.

"Let's move, we got business. We be gone," said Cruiser.

And just like that, they were.

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Frantic Fire was a good garage band in a city filled with great garage bands. Detroit was filled with music; anyone who could do a few guitar licks was a rock-star wanna-be. Now these guys had gotten their money from me and were moving on, hopefully with decent bar owners that wouldn't cancel them at the last

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minute or stiff them on their fee. I didn't know if I'd ever see them again, but the next morning Cruiser was on the phone.

"You're up early. It's not even nine," I said.

"Ain't been to bed yet. Look, counselor, we need your services again," he said.

"What's up?"

"That concert, Saturday at the Palace, the Car Aid event," he said.

"I can't get you tickets, if that's what you're asking."

"No, it's not like that. The opening band is Frantic Fire."

"That's great. Looks like you got your break."

"No, man, it's the wrong Frantic Fire," he said. "Group from L.A. They got the same name we do. Can they do that?"

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We agreed to meet that night at Hamtramck's Onyx Club during Frantic Fire's regular Wednesday gig. I didn't like seeing clients after hours, but my case load was down and the bills were up. After 20 years in practice I was busting my butt picking up criminal appointments and passing out my card to anyone who would take it. I couldn't turn away prospects; hell, I couldn't turn away anything. Besides, I'd never heard Frantic Fire play. Now, newly single, I had nothing better to do.

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Frantic Fire had been referred to me by an ex-sister-in-law who had dated Cruiser. “Call Moody Jones,” she told them. “He’ll get Beep’s Bar to make good.”

Beep’s Bar had cancelled Frantic Fire’s at the last minute. Cruiser wasn’t having any of that. He said he’d firebomb the place before he’d let them get away with that. He showed me their contract and I told him to put the explosives away. Frantic Fire was in the right. Beep’s Bar owed them. When I called, Charlie “Beep” Belepski wasn’t happy to hear from me and said “No, no, no” all the way to the courthouse. But as expected, he settled for almost the full amount the morning of the trial. Frantic Fire was happy. Now I’d finally hear them play.

I walked into the Onyx Club after 11:00. It was a blue-collar bar in a shot-gun layout. Shot-and-a-beer specials were posted on a blackboard near the entrance. A small stage was set up toward the back. The place was sardine-can full. The crowd was young and loose. The bar maids agile and sharp. At a ripe 49, I felt like I was in a movie, a straight, unenlightened dad searching for his runaway kid. The band must’ve been on break because the juke box – named the best in town by the local daily – was pouring out Smokey Robinson’s “Tracks of My Tears.”

I ordered a draft and started to slink into a corner to wait for Frantic Fire to come on when I spotted Cruiser dragging gear to the stage. He caught my eye and nodded me over.

“We’re on in a couple of ticks. We do about 90 minutes. Meet us in the alley after,” he said.

Miraculously a seat opened up at the bar next to a just-old-enough-to-be-there blonde and I grabbed it. She looked at me as though I had just stepped out of a UFO. I smiled back. She predictably turned away. A shot of Canadian Club and one more draft and I settled in to listen. I hadn’t a clue what to expect. Suddenly

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the four of them were on stage. Cruiser on lead guitar, McCoy on drums. Bomba on keyboard and Gino on electric violin. This was going to be good.

They opened with a cover of Wilson Pickett's "Land of a 1000 Dances" and followed up with a stylized version of the Doors' "Light My Fire," with Cruiser channeling Jim Morrison. The crowd started chanting, "Your stuff. Your stuff." And then the real music poured. They broke into a number called "Dancing with Miss Lucy" then something named "Reggie's Blowing up the Senate Tonight." I can't describe the music because I don't have the adjectives for it. I'd never heard anything like it before – throbbing, rhythmic, bombastic lyrics, and yet, so personal and engaging; a seemingly incongruous combination that could be summed up as "Wow!" The whole place ignited. Everyone was dancing, singing, jumping. This went on and on and on and when it was over the room stunk of sweat and beer and the crowd shouted "More! More! More!"

"We'll be back!," screamed Cruiser. "We're just starting. This night is young!"

The crew slid off stage, broke through the groupies, and headed to the back door, lighting up joints as they went. I followed along, looking around for familiar faces or cops. In the alley Cruiser offered me a toke and I declined. Reading my mind, he said, "The cops around here are cool. This won't turn their heads."

"Easy for you. Cops would love to have something on me when I'm defending someone they're trying to put away."

He passed the joint to McCoy who passed it on to Bomba and Gino. There was little left when it got back to Cruiser.

"Listen, " I said. "That was great. I never knew how good you are. Now then, what's this about another Frantic Fire?" I asked.

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“We’ve been Frantic Fire for seven years,” said Cruiser. We’ve played Detroit, Ohio, Chicago, all of Michigan. Windsor, too. Ain’t no band coming in here taking our name and trading on it. Ain’t right. You gotta do something.”

“Like what?”

“You the lawyer,” said McCoy. “Make them change their name. They can’t be us. People see Frantic Fire opening Car Aid, they’ll think it’s us. But it ain’t. You gotta stop them.”

“Won’t be easy,” I replied. “They might’ve been around longer than you.”

“Not around here,” said Cruiser. “Find a way. We do the music. You do the legal hocus-pocus.”

Hocus-pocus? Did he really say that? In the background I could hear the bar crowd chanting “Frantic Fire! Frantic Fire!”

He took another hit off the roach and said, “We gotta go back. Our public’s calling.”

I watched them run off to the stage. Where did they get that energy? The next set was about to start, and I was beginning to get an idea.

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It was just past ten when I made it in the next morning. Linda handed me a mug of black coffee and gave me the “what-did-you-do-last-night-that-makes-you-look-so-bad-this-morning” look. She never asked questions, she just looked questions.

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“Steve Bloomer returned your call. Said to contact him ASAP on his private line,” she said. “Something about Frantic Fire.”

I nodded, went into my office and chugged half the mug’s contents. The bar night had gone on until closing, followed by bad pizza at a 24-hour slice stand on Woodward while going over the situation again with Cruiser. The others had gone their own ways. Although I was no music maven, I knew enough to recognize Frantic Fire as something remarkably different – something big enough to go beyond the Onyx Club, far beyond.

Cruiser had told me the Car Aid concert promoter was Hanley Horowitz. I knew Horowitz from a previous encounter. He was represented by Bloomer. I’d called Bloomer’s office and left a message on my way in. Bloomer had a reputation for being much too self-important to return phone calls. The mere fact he returned my call at all, let alone so quickly, was a clear message something was up. I punched in his private number.

“Bloomer,” he answered.

“Moody Jones here, Steve. How’s your morning?”

“What the hell is all this about stopping the concert? It’s just 48 hours away.” he screamed. “You can’t do that.”

“I can try. Got the papers ready to file. Still a few judges around here who like to promote and protect local product.”

“You’ll never win.” He was still screaming.

“Maybe, maybe not. Want to roll the dice on what happens to my pre-concert injunction request to bounce your Frantic Fire?”

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Silence. Then, "What do you want?" he sighed.

"Lunch. Pastrami at Moe's. We'll talk."

More silence. Another sigh. "Noon?"

"See you then."

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After lunch, I made a call. The cell phone voicemail picked up. I talked, "Cruiser, it's Moody Jones. My office, three o'clock, all of you"

Show up, guys. Show up.

They did. All four. Wary. Waiting to hear.

"I met with Bloomer, Hanley Horowitz's lawyer, at lunch. I gave him some options: take his Frantic Fire off the bill; put you on in place of them; change their name; hand you a suitcase full of money to go away. Or ..." I paused for effect, "give you guys an audition with Frantic Fire's recording company, Broken Records."

"Whoa," said McCoy.

"Broken Records wants the audition," I continued. "They've heard of you, even seen you at the Onyx Club. They're interested, think you could be something. They want you in Chicago next Tuesday morning. They'll pay expenses. I'd go with you to handle the contract. My opinion: Take the audition. It's the break you've been waiting for."

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They were quiet, then looked at each other, then McCoy nodded to Cruiser, a pre-arranged signal.

“Counselor, give us a moment to confer,” Cruiser said.

“Confer? By all means,” I said and stepped out of my office leaving them to . . . confer.

“And?” Linda asked as I stepped out.

“They’re talking about it.”

“What’s to talk about? It’s the best shot they’ll ever have.”

“We know that. I hope they know that.”

The door opened. It was Cruiser, with McCoy, Gino and Bomba behind him.

“Counselor, the audition, we’ll take it.”

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Bloomer and I worked together to draft a contract. Car Aid went off well. L.A.’s Frantic Fire turned out to be no threat to my Frantic Fire. I was excited about the audition because I knew it was as big an opportunity for me as it was for Cruiser and the boys. If they made it big, I’d make it big. A move up the legal food chain and a whole new legal realm.

Tuesday morning. Sunny, blue skies. MacNamara Terminal. Our flight to Chica-

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go goes at 9 am. It's 8:15. I'm waiting. Contracts in my shoulder bag. No sign of Frantic Fire. I call Cruiser. Voicemail kicks in. "Where are you, Cruiser?" He doesn't call back. Surely, they wouldn't miss this great chance. Surely they'd recognize how rare this opportunity is. Then I start to think about the things that might've happened to them. An accident on I-94. An alarm clock that didn't go off. An argument that cooks their chemistry.

At 8:30 I call again. Voicemail. I realize Cruiser's is the only number I have. 8:45. Once more I call. There's a 10:00, 11:00 and noon flight I tell the uncaring voicemail voice. At 9:00 our scheduled flight goes. I stay. My cell phone rings. Caller ID shows it's Cruiser.

"Counselor," he says. "We overslept. But we're okay with it. We got a deal for Beep's Bar last night. It was too good to pass up. We'll do the audition some other time. I guess we'll see you around. Oh, yeah, thanks for everything." And he disconnects.

Like that he's gone. I am stunned. There will be no "some other time." This was the only time. I see other flights taking off. My carry-on shoulder bag is suddenly very heavy. I crumple my boarding pass in my fist. I shake my head to clear it and walk toward the terminal exit to look for the parking lot shuttle bus. I put on my sunglasses. My eyes are red. It's still early. If I hurry I can get to circuit court and pick up an assignment or two. If I'm lucky.