

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. To Linda, my secretary, they were just four more odd clients. They were rock musicians. In Linda's mind, and mine, that explained and excused their appearance and behavior.

"Gentlemen," I said, "let's go into my office."

The crew shuffled into my office. Bomba and Gino took seats around a small table in the corner. Cruiser and McCoy parked in the two leather chairs facing my desk. So far, none of them had said a word. McCoy pulled out a cigarette. I shook my head "no." He ignored me and lit up.

"Man, you got us in here so early. Couldn't it keep a few hours?" he said.

"Not if you want your money today. I'm booked through day and evening," I replied.

"We ain't morning people."

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

"It's \$500 for each of you. My fee's been deducted. The accounting is attached, along with a photocopy of the original check they wrote to me. Next time maybe they'll think twice before they cancel your appearance without notice," 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.

“Still doesn’t seem like it’s enough for what we do.”

“What about that recording contract?” I asked.

“Not happening,” Cruiser replied. “The guy was all talk. A tourist. 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 don’t. I’m a lawyer. I know law. Music’s like rocket science to me.”

“Yeah, I figured,” McCoy said.

“Let’s move, guys, we got business. We be gone,” said Cruiser.

And just like that, they cut out.

I didn’t think I’d hear from them again. They were a good garage band in a city filled with great garage bands. They’d gotten their money and were moving on, maybe scoring some gigs now and then, hopefully with decent bar owners. But I was wrong. The next morning Cruiser was on the phone.

“You’re up early. It’s not even nine,” I said.

“Haven’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. Want me to look over the contract?”

“No, it’s the wrong Frantic Fire,” he said. “It’s some group from L.A. They got the same name we do. Can they do that?”

We agreed to meet that night at Hamtramck’s Onyx Club, where Frantic Fire had a regular Wednesday gig. I knew my way around town from my law school days at Wayne State when we’d skip out of Professor Miller’s torts lecture and drive the 10 minutes to take a few beers at Dom Polski.

I didn’t like meeting clients after hours, but my caseload 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 prospective fees. Besides, I’d never heard Cruiser and his boys play. Newly single, I had nothing better to do. Frantic Fire had been referred to me a few months back 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 dates at the last minute. I found out it had a habit of stiffing bands. 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 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 shortly after 11 p.m. It was a blue-collar bar with a shotgun 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. Didn't anybody have to work the next morning? The mixed crowd was young and loose, the barmaids 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 jukebox—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 near the stage to wait for Frantic Fire to come on when I spotted Cruiser dragging some gear to the stage. I caught his eye and he nodded me over.

"We're on in a couple of ticks. We do about 40 minutes. Meet us at the back door 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 the four of them were on stage—Cruiser on lead guitar, McCoy on drums, Bomba on keyboard, and Gino on electric violin. Yeah, electric violin. This was going to be good.

They opened on a cover of "Land of 1,000 Dances" by Wilson Pickett 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!" I got the idea the covers were just warm-ups and that Frantic Fire definitely had a following.

And then the real music started raining down. McCoy and Cruiser broke into a number called “Dancing with Miss Lucy” and 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!” It was something to behold because the whole place ignited. Everyone was dancing, singing, jumping—bottle the energy in that room and OPEC could drink their oil. This went on for almost an hour, and when it was over, the room stunk of sweat and beer and no one was thinking of leaving. The crowd shouted “More! More! More!”

“We’ll be back! We’ll be back!” screamed Cruiser. “We’re just starting! This night is young!”

The crew slid off stage and headed to the back door, lighting up joints as they went. I followed along, looking around for familiar faces or any sign of cops. When I met Cruiser at the back door, he offered me a toke; I declined. Reading my mind, he said, “The cops around here are cool. A little grass won’t turn their heads.”

“Easy for you to say. Cops would love to have something on me when I’m defending someone they’re trying to put away.”

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

“Listen,” I said. “That was great. I never realized how good you are.”

“Just a little garage band in need of a break.”

“Okay, but what’s this about another Frantic Fire?” I asked.

“This is the deal,” said Cruiser. “We’ve been Frantic Fire for seven years. We’ve played metro 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.”

“But 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!”

Cruiser took another hit off the roach and said, “We gotta go back. Our public is 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.

It was just past 10 a.m. 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.

“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 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 request to bounce *your* Frantic Fire?"

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

"Lunch. A pastrami at Moe's. We'll talk."

More silence. Another sigh. "Noon?"

"See you then."

After lunch, I made a call. The cell phone voice mail picked up.

“Cruiser, it’s Moody Jones. My office, 3 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 big. 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.”

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.”

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 completely new legal realm.

MacNamara Terminal. Tuesday morning. Sunny, blue skies. Our flight to Chicago goes at 9 a.m. It's 8:15. I'm waiting. Contracts in my shoulder bag. No sign of Frantic Fire. I call Cruiser. Voice mail 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. Voice mail. I realize Cruiser's is the only number I have. 8:45. Once more I call. There's a 10 a.m., 11 a.m., and noon flight, I tell the uncaring voice mail voice. At 9 a.m., our flight leaves as scheduled. 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.

Just 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 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 pick up an assignment or two.