



**FREE
BOOZE
TONIGHT**

chuck freadhoff

Free Booze Tonight

Chapter 1

I was going to need help hiding the body so I called an old friend who owed me a favor. A big favor.

A lot of guys owed me favors, but I called Ralph. I called him because he could keep his mouth shut. That and he owned a van big enough for a rolled-up rug containing Mickey's remains.

Technically speaking, I hadn't killed Mickey. Not in the usual bodily harm sense anyway. But I was still responsible for him being dead. And once Vincent the Hammer heard that Mickey was dead, he probably wasn't going to discuss the finer points of how he'd actually negotiated the passage from this world to the next. Vincent had sent Mickey to kill me, and now Mickey was dead.

Vincent was a bottom line kind of guy and Mickey being dead and me not was certain to be his bottom line.

I needed to buy some time. I'd already moved Mickey's Olds Cutlass into a neighborhood a few blocks away. I'd left it locked up tight so it wouldn't look too easy and scare away any of the neighborhood car jackers. I wasn't really worried. By morning the Cutlass would be in a

thousand pieces or in Mexico. I didn't care which. It wouldn't be here. That's all that mattered.

And I'd left Mickey's gun under the seat as an added bonus for whoever decided to steal the car. Then I went back to the alley and waited with silent Mickey for Ralph to show up.

I could hear the van coming a block away, the coughing of the worn out engine echoing off the bricks and mortar and rolled down metal doors of the mom and pop shops that stretched in both directions down the block from the bar. A few minutes later the van, a dark green Ford Econoline, its high beams lighting up the alley like a movie set, wheezed to a stop a few feet down the alley.

I'd managed to move Mickey next to the Dumpster, but the guy had to weigh at least two fifty, maybe more, and that was as far as I could get him on my own. I'd thrown some cardboard over him just in case someone glanced up the alley as they cruised by. Now with the aid of Ralph's headlights, I could see Mickey's huge Birkenstocks and his red and green argyle socks, where they stuck out from the cardboard.

Ralph lowered himself from the driver's seat and walked to the cardboard, flipped it back, and looked up at me. He wasn't happy.

"Ah Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, it's Mickey. Damn it, Joey, you'd have been better off to just let him kill you. You know that, don't you?"

"Monday morning quarterbacking is easy, Ralph. Besides, I didn't kill him."

“Well, he looks pretty dead to me.”

“Look, you got the rug?”

“Yeah, it’s in the back. Where we taking him?”

“Angeles Crest. Where else?”

Chapter 2

I'd just started telling Ralph how Mickey met his maker when a cop pulled us over.

At the time, we were heading up Angeles Crest Highway to pick a final resting place for Mickey who was rolled in the rug in the back with two shovels and a pick ax next to him. Ditching a body permanently in L.A. isn't as easy as it might seem. There are twelve million people in the area and someone's always hanging around or showing up at the wrong time. And the way things had been going lately, I figured, why take a chance? So I had to choose, head to the mountains or the desert. It wasn't a tough choice. It was almost summer in Southern California and the thought of heading into the desert, even in the middle of the night, didn't hold much attraction for me. Besides, the Econoline didn't have AC. And the mountains were closer.

I was riding shotgun with the window down and my elbow catching the night air, listening to the Dodger's game drift in and out. The engine was knocking and the cab smelled like burnt Valvoline and scorched STP but I figured we didn't have much farther to go. The trick is you don't

have to be that far away from the city or even that far off the road, you've just got to make sure you dig a really deep hole. I couldn't take the chance that some coyote with an overly developed sense of smell would dig up Mickey. Word would get back to Vincent the Hammer. And the next time I came up here, I'd be the one in the rug.

I was thinking about the hole we'd dig, when Ralph said.
"Company."

I glanced in the mirror and saw the black and white. It was a Highway Patrol cruiser. Despite the heat, I felt a little chilly.

"Be cool," I said. Ralph just smiled. He waved to the cop in the mirror and pointed ahead, letting him know he'd pull the van off at the next wide spot in the road. A couple of minutes later we were at the side of the highway and the Chippie was approaching the van.

"Evening gentlemen. Can I see your license and registration?"

I pegged the cop at about twelve years old, but all cops look young to me these days. I nodded to him and tried to look bored as I reached into the glove box and handed Ralph the registration. Ralph had already pulled his bulging wallet from his hip pocket and handed the officer his license.

"Where you headed?"

"Wrightwood."

"Really? This time of the night?"

Ralph shrugged. "We got a job up there first thing in the morning."

“Job?”

“We’re carpet installers. We’re doing a motel. Whole damned place in one day. Working dark to dark. Money’s good.”

The cop handed Ralph the license and registration back. “Well the reason I stopped you, is your tail light is out.”

“Again? Oh hell, come on give me a hand and I’ll fix it. You got a flashlight, right?”

Ralph pushed open the door and the cop stepped back and his hand went to his hip but Ralph was already half way to the back of the van. A second later, he was on his back in the gravel.

“Come on, over here. That’s it just put the light over here. Okay, I got the wires. Bingo. That ought to do it. Thanks.”

Ralph scrambled in his feet and stared at the back of the van with pride. In the mirror, I could see the red glow of the tail light reflecting off his shirt.

“Thanks again,” Ralph said and started back to the driver’s door.

“You get that fixed permanently, okay?” the cop said.

“You bet.”

Ralph waited for the cop to pull ahead of us on the highway. Once the cruiser was around the next bend, Ralph dropped the transmission into drive. The van shuddered and began crawling up the highway again. Ralph looked at me.

“You were telling me how Mickey happened to end up dead.”

Chapter 3

Mickey hadn't lost any weight in the few hours he'd been dead. The rug added a few pounds, too, so once we got him on our shoulders and got some momentum going, we didn't want to stop.

We'd gone up a fire road a ways then turned onto a hiking path that quickly became too narrow and rutted to drive. So Ralph took Mickey by the ankles where his feet stuck out of the rug, and I took the other end and was happy to do it. The rug, some huge oval-shaped thing that made me think of my maiden aunt, covered all of Mickey's head and I could almost pretend that it was just a rug I was carting into the San Gabriel Mountain wilderness to bury at four in the morning.

We made it about a quarter mile up the hiking path before we veered off the trail and found a relatively flat spot. Ralph went back to the van for the shovels and pick ax while I stood doubled over, hands on my knees, catching my breath trying not to look at Mickey.

We got lucky and the dirt was relatively soft, at least by mountain standards. Still it took us almost two hours to dig the hole, dispose of

Mickey and fill it in again. The sun was already up when we got back to the van and headed back toward the basin.

“You hungry? I’m starved,” Ralph said.

I was leaning my head on my hand, my elbow on the edge of the window. “I could use some coffee, I guess.”

“Great, there’s a Denny’s in North Hollywood. They got this Lumberjack Slam Breakfast. It’s pancakes, ham, bacon, sausage and hash browns. You’re buying, right?”

I looked at Ralph. He was smiling, happy. I nodded. “Why not?”

Ralph ordered his eggs over easy and mixed them with his hash browns. I still didn’t have any appetite. And watching Ralph eat didn’t help. I was on my third cup of coffee by the time he finished. He leaned back in the booth and shoved the empty plate away.

The waitress stepped to the table. She was about sixty and wore a brown polyester uniform with a floppy bowtie. She smiled like her feet or her hemorrhoids hurt. Her name tag said ‘Britney’.

“Warm that up, hon?” she said and held up a pot with coffee that looked like liquid shoe polish. I held up my cup. She filled it. “Cream?”

“Why ruin it?” I said.

Ralph watched her move on then leaned forward, his forearms resting on the table. “Okay, so how’d you not kill Mickey and still have him end up dead?”

I waited. I took another sip of coffee. I owed him an explanation. It was the least I could do. An explanation and a Denny's breakfast. I was getting off cheap and I knew it. So did Ralph.

"I figured Vincent the Hammer would be sending someone around pretty soon, and I was keeping a pistol under the counter at the bar. Just in case, you know. Last night, the place was empty so I locked up a little early. Went out back to throw some stuff in the Dumpster and Mickey's Cutlass comes up the alley. I hid behind the Dumpster and about the time he got to the back door, I took off running. So he yells at me 'Shit, Joey, don't make he shoot you in the back.'

"I stopped and turned around, thinking maybe I could talk him out of it. Maybe buy a day or two. But before I could say anything, he pointed that damned Glock of his right at me. Then he got this really funny look on his face and just keeled over. I figure he had a heart attack or stroke or something. He was dead before he hit the bricks."

"Guy like that, he should have worked out more, watched his diet," Ralph said.

"Yeah," I said, not quite sure what else to say.

"So why's Vincent the Hammer want you dead?"

"I tried to steal from him."

"Tried to?"

"If I'd gotten away with it, he'd never have known."

“You tried to run a con on Vincent the Hammer? Man, you really are stupid.”

“Yeah, well I’m getting smarter by the minute.”

“You better. You might not have that many minutes left.”

Chapter 4

When Jimmy and James Roo waddled into the bar during Happy Hour, I reached for the piece I kept under the counter for these types of emergencies.

But Jimmy shook his head. “Just here to talk,” he said and advanced toward the bar. Jimmy came around one end while James came around the other. They both stopped about two feet away, making me feel like the cream in a Twinkie. I looked from one to the other and tried to smile.

The first time I saw the Roo boys, I’d pegged them as fraternal twins the same way you’d peg two Russet potatoes as twins. They bore a striking resemblance to one another but weren’t quite identical. But they wore the same cologne, something in the formaldehyde family. Between them they overpowered the smell of stale beer that saturated the place. It wasn’t an improvement.

“Seen Mickey?” Jimmy asked. He was the taller one. Maybe six feet, two fifty.

“Nope.”

“He’s missing,” said James the littler one at five ten and two thirty.

“If I find him, I’ll send him home. Promise.”

“Vincent wants to see you,” Jimmy said. “You can ride with us.”

“Look, I’m a little busy. It’s almost Happy Hour.”

“Not any more,” James said.

“I can’t just walk out and leave my customers. I’ve got to run a business here.”

“There’s only one customer,” James said. He nodded toward Davy, the semi-illiterate music critic in the far corner, his pork pie hat riding low on his forehead. Davy hid out here most days escaping the bands he’d reviewed. Most of the bands didn’t really want to kill him. They’d have settled for a few broken fingers and a couple of thumbs.

Davy had been married to an oboe player once. It hadn’t turned out well. Found her in bed with a third-chair French horn player. He’d been a critic ever since.

Davy couldn’t write. Couldn’t spell either. His uncle owned the newspaper.

“How long’s he been nursing that beer?” Jimmy asked.

“Couple of hours. But the place is going to get busy soon. I promise.”

“Let’s go,” James said.

“Okay, look, I’ll admit there was a mix up between me and Vincent and I want to make it right with him. I really do. But it’s going to take me

a day, maybe two, three, tops to straighten this whole thing out. In the meantime, if I see Mickey, I'll tell him to phone home. Okay?"

"He said Vincent wants to see you," Jimmy said. He turned to go. I followed him outside with James on my heels. *Renegade* by Styx was playing on the speakers as we crossed to the front door. I always hated Styx.

Renegade for a funeral march and Davy, the music critic, for the eulogy. He'd probably quote John Denver. It was enough to make breakfast at Denny's look good.

Outside, Jimmy pointed to the back seat of a Lincoln Town Car at the curb. The Town Car didn't surprise me. The color did. White. The leather interior was blood red and it smelled like cheap car wash deodorizer. Al Capone meets the Mustang Ranch.

Jimmy drove. James rode shotgun. Neither one spoke. I didn't try to make conversation. I was too busy praying for red lights and heavy traffic. When you think it's your last few minutes on earth, it's amazing what you'll pray for.

But if there is a God, she was apparently pissed off at me too. We hit nothing but green all the way. Forty-five minutes later we were in the San Fernando Valley and I was walking up the sidewalk to Vincent the Hammer's house. It was a two-story job with a driveway that curved past the front door. A small, Juliet-calling-Romeo balcony jutted from one

corner of the house and a Neuschwanstein spire rose from the other. The place looked like a cross between Disneyland and a funeral home.

You figure your luck can't get any worse when you can't even hit a red light in L.A. But I was about to rethink that.

Chapter 5

Vincent the Hammer was short and thin and reminded me of a weasel or ferret. He smiled when he saw me. The smile wasn't reassuring. It's how an Anaconda would smile at a sluggish chicken.

He was wearing a gold, silk shirt under some kind of shaggy white jacket that reminded me of an albino Irish setter I'd seen in a magazine one time. He was sitting behind a desk, an eight by ten piece of polished plywood resting on two sawhorses. A metal folding job like you'd find in a church rec hall of was in front of it.

The desk was a surprise. The rest of the house was all polished marble, glass and gold, except the carpet. That was white, shag, and thick. James and Jimmy made me take off my shoes at the front door.

"Sit," Vincent the Hammer said. I took the chair, the Roo boys lurked behind me.

"You like the desk?" Vincent the Hammer said.

"Looks like it gets the job done."

"Who needs fancy?" he said and smiled. I glanced at a miniature replica of David on the shelf on the wall behind him.

“Right. Who needs fancy,” I said.

Vincent had little speakers on the corners of his desk attached to an iPod. Liza Minnelli was singing Cabaret. “What good is sitting alone in your room?” I could answer the question but decided not to. Why aggravate the man?

“So, Joey, you tried to steal from me,” Vincent said.

“Nah, Vincent, it wasn’t like that. It was a mix up, that’s all. I’d never try to steal from you. That’d be stupid.”

“I didn’t say you were smart, Joey. I said you were a thief. A bad one at that. You’re a bad liar too.”

“It was a mix-up. I can explain.”

“Save it. I sent Mickey to kill you last night.”

Now what do you say to that? “Thank you?” Or maybe, “Sorry it didn’t work out?” I figured Vincent the Hammer probably wasn’t looking for a response. So I just looked at him. He was smiling again. I felt like a sluggish chicken.

“Now Mickey’s missing. You know anything about that?”

“Not a thing. But like I told the boys here, if I see him, I’ll send him home.”

“Forget it. I’ve changed my mind. I’ve decided not to kill you.”

“Good.”

“I have a daughter,” Vincent the Hammer said. I didn’t like where this was going. I glanced over my shoulder. The Russet brothers were still there. Making a run for it wasn’t going to work.

“A daughter?” I said. Sweat was starting to trickle from my arm pits down my side.

“She’s a musician. She’s got talent. Real talent. But these assholes in the record business, they don’t appreciate her. You know what I mean?”

“Of course,” I said. Hell, I was still breathing. I wasn’t going to disagree with the guy even though I had absolutely no idea what he was getting at.

“I’m going to make you a deal,” Vincent said.

“An offer I can’t refuse.”

“Maybe you’re not so dumb after all. Let me tell you how it’s going to be.”

Anyone else sitting there listening to the proud mobster dad spin a tale of my role in his only daughter’s glorious future might have thought of the old poem, *The Lady or The Tiger*, or maybe just the saying, *the devil or the deep blue sea*. Me? I thought of *Thelma and Louise*. The last scene where that car goes airborne. No matter how hard I tried, I just couldn’t see any upside in this.

Maybe Ralph was right. Maybe I should have just let Mickey kill me.

“So we have an understanding?” Vincent the Hammer said.

“You bet.”

“You’ll start tomorrow.”

“You bet,” I said again.

“Jimmy, James, take him back to that shit hole bar where he works,” Vincent the Hammer said. He was done with me and started fiddling with his iPod.

I stood up and stated back toward the front door. The Roo boys fell in behind me. A second later, music was filling the room again. The Bee Gees, “Staying Alive.”

I looked back at Vincent the Hammer. He was smiling.

Chapter 6

This wasn't going to be easy. I had to make Delilah, Vincent the Hammer's only daughter, into a rock star. And I had to do it fast.

To make sure I didn't slack off, Vincent put me on the advance installment plan. Every advance in his daughter's career bought me another installment of living. If I got behind on my payments, Jimmy and James would repossess my lungs. It was a highly motivational arrangement and I was eager to succeed.

Then I met Delilah.

My friend Irving the PR guy would have said Delilah had a certain unappreciated inner beauty. She couldn't sing either.

She wasn't Creature from the Black Lagoon ugly. In fact, she wasn't really ugly at all. She was just sort of plain. But she seemed to have a Janice Joplin thing going and apparently didn't think just being plain was good enough. So what she lacked in outright bad looks, she tried hard to make up for with attitude.

The first time we met didn't go well. She was sitting on the edge of her couch, strumming her guitar, mumbling a song. A Marlboro was

between the fingers of her right hand, an open bottle of Southern Comfort at her feet. It was ten in the morning.

She screamed “come in” at the door when I knocked. I stepped inside and closed the door behind me.

“Who the hell are you?” she said.

“I’m Joey. I’ll be your manager today.” I figured I’d try humor first. I didn’t have a lot of cards to play.

She put the guitar down on the couch next to her. Took a long drag, a even longer swig, burped and said, “You’re the piece of shit tried to sell my old man the fake John Lennon autographed guitar.”

“It was a mix up.”

“Yeah, right. You either have cajones of stainless steel or you’re really stupid. You don’t look like you’re much in the balls department, though. So let’s see, what’s that leave?”

She picked up her guitar and started strumming again. She had a point. It really had been a stupid idea. At the time, though, it had looked so easy.

Mickey, the recently deceased hit man, came in the bar one night and started talking about how Vincent needed a really great gift for his daughter. They were fighting and he needed something to make up. That got me thinking about my friend Pablo the Forger. So I bought an electric guitar, had Pablo forge John Lennon’s name and slap a date on it.

I convinced Mickey that I was so down on my luck (I didn't have to make that part up) that I'd consider parting with my one prize possession - my autographed John Lennon guitar which I had from my days as an advance road manager for Frank Zappa and the Mothers. Vincent the Hammer paid top dollar.

"Hey, I just grabbed the wrong guitar, that's all," I said to Delilah.

"Oh please." She said please like it had six syllables.

What the hell, I thought I'd try honesty. Nothing else seemed to be working. "How'd you know?"

"Jesus. The date, man. It was signed 1997. Whoever signed it switched the last two numbers. It should have been 1979."

"It's Pablo. He's dyslexic."

"You used a dyslexic forger? You really are dumber than dirt."

Things weren't going well. I had to try again.

"I've had some experience in managing bands. Advance work mostly. But I understand what it takes to make it to the top."

"Vincent threatened to kill you didn't he?"

"I thought maybe I could lend you a hand. Offer a few pointers."

She slowly lowered the guitar to the floor and laced the fingers of her hands together across the fretted neck and leaned forward. The smoke from her cigarette drifted up, almost obscuring her face.

"You know, Joey, you've got a real problem. I don't want anything from my father. The guy's a mobster, for God's sake. You think I want to

owe my career to him? You're dumb, but you're probably smart enough to answer that without notes. In other words, you're fired."

I couldn't leave. I needed the job to keep breathing. James and Jimmy were waiting in the car downstairs to dole out my next installment.

"Perception's reality," I said.

"What the hell's that mean?" she said.

I had no idea, but at least I had her attention. I've been getting by on my slick tongue and half-baked ideas for a few decades now. I'd make it up as I went.

"Being a rock star. It isn't how good you can sing, how well you can play the guitar. It's how good people *think* you can sing and play."

"Huh?"

"Look you gotta be original. You think drinking Southern Comfort will give you an edge? But Janice already did that. Hell, you need to drink peppermint schnapps or something."

"Drinking peppermint schnapps is going to make me a rock star?"

I probably should have said Wild Turkey, but I was on a roll. Besides, I had to look like I knew what I was talking about.

"All I'm saying is that it's all spin, all marketing. You gotta be new, different, edgy."

"Different, edgy?"

"You got a band?"

“No.”

“No problem. Listen, I’ve already booked a gig for you Saturday night. I’ll get a band.”

“Where the hell’s this gig?”

“No, no. You let me worry about that. You keep practicing. I’ll be back tomorrow about this time.”

I left before she could say anything. I’ve heard that humans are capable of tremendous feats when they’re under pressure. I read one time about a mom who dead lifted a Chrysler off her baby. Saved the kid’s life. Hey, all I had to do was pluck a rock band out of thin air.

I walked toward the Roo boys’ Continental waiting for me at the curb. I stopped and filled my lungs with L.A. smog. Life is short, enjoy every minute, I figured.

Chapter 7

Ralph came by the bar that night to see if I was still alive. He sat on a stool nursing a Coors, a ten spot on the bar next to his elbow.

He turned and looked around the bar and back at me.

“How come this place is always empty?”

“Because no one comes in.”

“How the hell you stay open, make any money?”

“We don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“Make money.”

“How can you stay open if you don’t make any money?”

“It’s a front.”

“What?”

“You ever hear of Grassman Guzman?”

“Of course. Everyone knows the Grassman. His slogan’s great. ‘I got the biggest baggies in town.’ ”

“That’s him.”

“So what’s the Grassman got to do with this?”

“He *owns* the bar, Einstein. You look at the books, the place is packed every night. I just keep it open for appearances. He sends someone by every now and then. Does the paperwork. Figures out how many margaritas and beers I sold the week before. It’s a living.”

Ralph stuck the ten back in his pocket.

“So what you going to do with Delilah?”

“I’m going to make her a star.” I gestured past him to the empty room. Guzman didn’t care what I did with the place so I’d decorated it the way I wanted.

The walls were covered with murals of Jagger, Dylan, Hendrix, and others. All of ‘em playing left handed. Except Hendrix. He was playing right handed exactly the opposite of the way they should have been. Pablo did the murals. I’d guess I should have known.

“Did I ever tell you about when I was the advance road manager for Frank Zappa and the Mothers? Did it for about five years. I quit after we toured Europe. I woke up in the middle of the night in another anonymous hotel room and realized that not only did I not know what hotel I was in or what city I was in, I didn’t even know what country I was in. I decided I’d had enough. But along the way I learned a lot about managing a music career.”

Ralph sipped his beer and nodded. “Zappa died a long time ago. That’d mean you were, oh, about fifteen when you were waking up in that hotel room.”

I wiped down the bar. I leaned forward. "Vincent the Hammer bought it."

"Vincent tried to have you killed."

"Good point."

"So what you going to do about Delilah?"

"Get her a gig and hope for the best."

"You better do more than hope. Vincent isn't a patient man."

"I know. The Roo brothers are my new best friends. We go everywhere together."

"She have any talent?"

"How the hell would I know? I'm a worse judge of talent than Davey." I nodded to the far corner where Davey the critic had passed out facedown on the table.

"Davey's tone deaf."

"Yeah, that's my point."

"You're in trouble."

"I prefer to think of it as an opportunity to succeed."

"You've been listening to those Tony Robbins tapes again haven't you?"

