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Everything at the offices of a company that had the audacity to call itself *PURE GOLD* was oversized: the garish signage, the overwrought doors, the pretentious light fixtures, and most of all the overwhelming array of gold and platinum records intermixed with photos of the CEO with everyone from Springsteen, Jagger, and Lady Gaga to the Obamas, LeBron James, and Clayton Kershaw.

The obvious goal was not merely to impress, but also to intimidate. I, however, was of no mind to be either impressed or intimidated.

Glancing around at the eager staffers scurrying this way and that, I couldn't help but remember when piercings were shocking, and tattoos iconoclastic rather than *de rigueur*. Those thoughts reconfirmed my belief that people trying hard to be hip never are.

Making little effort to restrain a growing sense of crankiness, I approached the receptionist, who, consciously or otherwise, was affecting a look from a vintage Cyndi Lauper video.

"Bobby 'Blue' Bland for Chuckie Goldsmith."

"I-I beg your pardon?"

"Private joke," I explained. "Tal Foster to see Mr. Gold."

"Is he expecting you?"

"More than that, he's clamoring, beseeching, and even begging."

The receptionist, who had a name plate on the desk reading *ARIEL*, eyed me strangely, then reached for her phone.

"I've got a gentleman named Foster here," she stated.

"Gentleman?" I quipped, getting no response other than a strange look.

Moments later a patrician blonde in impossibly tight faded jeans and a tattered Bob Marley t-shirt strode toward me with her right hand extended. "I'm Philomena," she announced in an accent that sounded more Oxford than Liverpool.

"And I'm not."

"I think I could like you," she said as a bit of a smile appeared on her face.

"Won't be easy," I warned.

"Nothing good ever is. Shall we?"

Down a hall lined with even more platinum records, celebrity photos, and memorabilia we went until she pointed toward what was clearly the *sanctum sanctorum*.

"His Majesty awaits," my British escort said with a wink

I stepped into a room that was more showcase than office, a cavernous space more suited for the real Napoleon, should he somehow find his way to contemporary LA, than for the short, stubby guy with a Napoleon complex who stood to greet me.

"The most famous guy most people have never heard of!" Charles Gold exclaimed, waving me in with a cigar that I assumed was a Monte Cristo smuggled in from Havana. "How the hell are you?"

"Peachy."

Wearing a three-day power beard, and dressed in a blue v-neck sweater over a gray t-shirt, Gold, since the last time I saw him, had clearly worked long and hard with an expensive trainer to transform his endomorphic body into a state somewhat approximating fitness. "Shall we talk about the good old days?" he asked.

"If we can think of any."

"Then let's talk business. Seen your old friend Gib lately?"

"Nope."

"Neither has anyone else."

"Meaning?"

"Gib Gibson is MIA."

"Give me that in English."

"Vanished. Disappeared. Gone."

"So where do I fit in?"

"I'd like you to find him."

"Are we talking about hide-and-seek?"

"Only as in seriously missing person."

"Shouldn't you be talking to the cops?"

"And bring in tons of unwanted publicity?"

"Wait a second," I said. "Aren't you the genius who said the three rules of the music biz are *Promotion! Promotion! Promotion!?*"

"Only when it's time to promote."

"Then why not call a private eye?"

"And expect him to know his way around the worlds Gib inhabits?"

"This is not exactly what I do."

"Then who was it who tracked down Kazmerski's daughter?"

"I got lucky."

"And helped Bob Benton find his low-life brother?"

"I caught a couple of breaks."

"And got Callahan back the missing Ray Charles tapes?"

"How do you know all this?"

"Information is the key to everything I do," Gold stated proudly before looking up as his office door swung open.

"Got a minute?" asked someone decidedly not of the tattoos and piercing generation, who then spotted me and barely suppressed a glare.

"I'm assuming you two know each other," said Gold.

"All too well," I responded. "Or should I say *unfortunately?* Miss me, Roy?"

A vestige of the days when virtually every record label had a fixer on staff – someone who could settle union troubles, deal with artists whining about royalty payments or the lack thereof,

and handle simple matters such as payola – Roy Perrone was an ex-con with roots initially in Brooklyn, then in Las Vegas. "Sure, I miss you," he said. "The same way I miss bronchitis and fucking pneumonia." Punctuating his crack with a sneer that would have given children a week's worth of nightmares, he then turned toward Gold. "Shout when you're finished."

Chuck Gold watched Perrone leave, then faced me with something approximating a smile. "Will you do it? Will you find Gib for me?"

"I don't know."

"Just tell me how much you want."

"It's not about money."

"Everything's about money."

"In your world, maybe," I said. "Not in mine."

"Mr. Foster!" shouted a proper British voice as I ambled toward my car a few minutes later. "Or may I call you Tal?"

"Call me anything you want, but not late for dinner," I replied, slowing down to allow Philomena to catch up to me, and not only because she was young, blond, and pretty.

"It would be great if you helped with the search."

"Is that on behalf of Gold, or you?"

"In truth, both. I quite like him, you know."

"I'm assuming you mean Gibby."

"Gold's not so bad."

"Right, and I'm the Dalai Lama."

"Am I correct that you once played in Gib's band?"

"In point of fact," I said as I reached the still not completely restored Edsel I'd been working on for years, "he's the one who played in mine."

Despite her well-cultivated aplomb, Philomena had a perplexed expression on her adorable face when I climbed behind the wheel, then pulled out into Los Angeles traffic.

The version of the Gib Gibson story that Philomena referred to was conceived and perpetrated by none other than Charles Gold. Accepted as rock & roll lore, it had the future star arriving in Hollywood as a fully-formed force of nature, one who was destined for success. The truth, however, was that like most aspiring musicians who manage to find their way to LA, the Gibster initially logged considerable time as what I call a *hyphenate*. Whereas some guys work as pianist-waiters, or singer-messengers, or perhaps drummer-bellhops, Gibby did a stint first as a guitarist-cab driver, then as a guitarist-moving man, then later as a guitarist-night watchman.

Pulling the Edsel up toward a place occasionally referred to as "my office," a decidedly untrendy spot that was a true dive bar long before that term came to describe hangouts that weren't in any serious way either true or dives, I stepped inside. I allowed a moment and a half for my eyes to adjust to the almost total

darkness, then nodded to a couple of nearly comatose regulars before ordering a beer then sitting down at a corner table.

While a part of me considered any involvement with Charles Gold to be no more appealing than elective root canal work, I nonetheless found myself thinking about my earliest encounter with the guy now thought to be missing, who once upon a time was like a brother to me.

Back then, while cobbling together some semblance of a living by toiling two or three days a week as a substitute teacher in places like Compton, plus working a couple of shifts at a long-gone Hollywood restaurant called The Elegant Chicken, I was in the process of putting together a band when a bass player I knew mentioned a guitarist who, like me, was a fan of people such as Slim Harpo, Wynonie Harris, and Solomon Burke.

Though we hailed from different parts of the world – me from an industrial armpit in New Jersey; Gib from a poverty-stricken parish in New Orleans – we discovered, over gumbo, fried chicken, and more alcohol than our meager bank accounts could then afford, while infiltrating an otherwise all-black Creole place in the 'Hood, that it was as though we had gone to different high schools together. Each of us had been somewhat of a jock – me a basketball player who occasionally dabbled in boxing; Gib a baseball prospect who also logged ring time thanks to the his area's Police Athletic League – as well as a part of the local music

scene. Yet neither of us, we realized, had ever managed, or if the truth be known *wanted*, to fit in.

In both our cases, salvation in the days before each of us hit the road Jack came through music not played on white radio stations – and often enough not on black stations either. That led to each of us independently venturing into soul food restaurants with great jukeboxes. In my case, that introduced me to the likes of Joe Turner, Big Maybelle, and Wynonie Harris. For Gib, it opened the door to the sounds of Ernie K-Doe, Irma Thomas, and Benny Spellman.

Then, while still underage, each of us independently sat in as often as possible with R&B, Blues, and Soul bands playing in black bars and clubs.

Further, both of us, we discovered that evening, had chosen Los Angeles as a destination not merely for the weather and the musical opportunities it might offer, but also because each of us independently had come to the realization that it was the largely uncredited birthplace of the music that came to be known as Rhythm & Blues. Hungry for entertainment in the aftermath of World War II, crowds – first black, then also white – had flocked to LA's Central Avenue, where Roy Milton, Joe and Jimmy Liggins, Johnny Otis, and others had moved on from pre-War big bands to create a new and more modern sound, which in turn attracted the likes of Amos Milburn, Percy Mayfield, and Floyd Dixon, then later the genius himself, Ray Charles, who bought a

house in town, then a building on Washington Boulevard that came to serve as both his office and his studio.

By the time I was ordering my third beer, I knew full well that it would be hard for me to ignore the fact that the Gibster had gone missing. But instead of phoning or texting Charles Gold, I followed a piece of advice given to me by the King of Rock & Soul, the late Solomon Burke, who in turn had been mentored by none other than one of the great comedians, a woman who went by the name Moms Mabley. "Never say *Yes* quickly," King Solomon counseled me one night when the two of us were reflecting on and about the music business. "Making 'em wait gives you a chance to see how just much they want you. Or better yet, just how badly they need you. And that, you see, puts you, rather than the other folks, in charge."

So after watching a couple of innings of a Dodgers game on the bar's TV, I drove over to my favorite Ethiopian joint, a place on Pico Boulevard that from the outside looked like a crack house. There, I elicited the customary laugh from my favorite waitress by ordering "Fried Missionary," which yielded as always an over-sized platter of red and yellow lentils, carrots, string beans, buckwheat, and other assorted goodies on a bed of a spongy crepe-like bread called *injera*.

Thinking about how I could easily wind up a vegetarian if it weren't for my addiction to Langer's pastrami and other heart-

clogging substances, I wondered when I would again hear from my least favorite manager in the entire music biz.

The wait for a call did not take very long, though the voice at the other end was decidedly English and female.

"Can I buy you lunch?" Philomena asked bright and early the next morning.

"Not a dirty weekend in Paris?"

"What if I said yes?"

"I'd probably have a panic attack."

"Am I that threatening?"

"Do I have to answer?"

"How about we discuss it over Persian food?"

"And here I was afraid you'd say kale and quinoa."

"I'd rather eat styrofoam," Philomena said, further endearing herself to me.

"Better than bangers and mash?" I asked a few hours later as I watched Philomena devour a dish called *fesenjan*, which translated into chicken with a sauce of pomegranates and walnuts, at an Iranian place in West Los Angeles.

"And kippers. And kidneys. And above all what my dear, dear countrymen call black and white puddings. So tell me why you're not exactly keen on dear, dear Mr. Gold."

"Let me count the ways."

"A musician who quotes Elizabeth Barrett Browning?"

"Ex-musician," I countered. "And as for quotes, mainly it's from singers."

"I'm not sure I follow."

"It's a little inside thing Gibby and I used to do. If I say Howard Tate —"

"Yes?"

"That's a case of *Get It While You Can*. And James Brown?"

"I give up."

"*I Feel Good*. Then there's Percy Mayfield."

"Tell me."

"*Please Send Me Someone To Love*. And Dusty Springfield —"

"*Wishin' And Hoping*?"

"There you go!" I said.

"But as for Charles Gold?"

"Once upon a time there was this band that was making a name for itself around town, playing music that ran counter what was generally being heard."

"Gib Gibson & Fever."

"Actually, in those days it was just Fever. The band —"

"Meaning Gib and you."

"Plus a drummer, a bass player, and a guy on sax. Anyway, thanks to open mic nights, as well as little gigs here and there, we were very much on the radar."

"But, as I understand it, without a recording contract."

"And not exactly pining over it."

"Because?" Philomena asked, taking a hearty sip of the strong Persian tea that I insisted she try.

"Believe it or not, *making it* wasn't all that important to us."

"Are you're telling me that it was actually a case of making music for music's sake?"

"Seem silly to you?"

"Rare, but eminently commendable. And then?"

"Into our lives came a fast-talking ball of fire who promised us the moon, the stars –"

"And, if I'm not mistaken, more pussy than you ever dreamed possible?"

"Well –" I mustered.

"And of course you couldn't possibly mean the one and only Charles Gold."

"Who in those days was still known as Chuckie Goldsmith."

"Interesting," Philomena said, taking another sip of tea. "So, in contrast to the *Official Version* –"

"Stick with me, kid, and you'll learn the difference between the truth and the legend."

"I may just take you up on that."

"Despite my not exactly being the flavor of the month?"

"In point of fact, because of that. I hope you know dear Mr. Gold is prepared to offer you a significant chunk of change."

"5 G's?"

"He proposed 10."

"If I wind up doing it, it won't be for the money."

"Which is why I can probably get him up to \$15,000. Can I tell him we have a deal?"

"And here I thought you and I were simply bonding. Or should I say courting?"

"What if I can get you \$20,000 plus expenses?" Philomena replied.

"Know what? I think I'm about to do a Clarence Carter."

"Which means?"

"Slip Away."

I can't deny the pleasure I received from knowing that Gold, to whom Philomena would certainly report immediately, despised waiting.

With no desire to face the daytime denizens downing their third or fourth boilermaker of the afternoon at my so-called office, I drove instead to a decidedly non-Starbucks coffee house known for playing an eclectic mix of oldies from the worlds of Blues, Country, and early R&B.

There, while listening to cuts by talents as diverse as Lightnin' Hopkins, Lefty Frizzell, and Bobby Marchan, I, like many of the other patrons, went to work on my laptop. But in contrast to those spending day after day trying to write a classic

screenplay like "The Godfather" or "Chinatown," or alternatively a commercial franchise such as "The Fast And The Furious" or "Twilight," I spent my time Googling so as to catch up on the last several years in the life of a certain rock star I once knew.

Though there was little I was not aware of during the time Gib and I were band mates, all that changed the moment the two of us went our separate ways. From that point on, it was only by happenstance that we ever saw each other. Though we never had anything even faintly resembling a confrontation, or anything akin to a falling out, our encounters became increasingly awkward, and therefore willfully brief or nonexistent.

During what had been the good times, however, the two of us were largely inseparable. From the days when we billed our band as the Rogues, then subsequently the Rhythm Kings, we were united in our commitment to our music and our desire to be true to what we innocently considered to be our integrity.

Initially our band featured cover versions of the kind of songs the people who came to see us had either forgotten about or, more often than not, had never before even heard. The Simms Twins' sweet "Soothe Me" was a fixture in our sets, as was Solomon Burke's gut-wrenching "The Price," O.V. Wright's powerful "A Nickel And A Nail," and Irma Thomas' plaintive "I Wish Someone Would Care." Being obsessive about roots, the more obscure or arcane the gems we played, the more tickled we were.

By the time we adopted the name Fever, which was inspired by the song far too many people attribute to Peggy Lee, but which we embraced in the original version done by the late, great Little Willie John, we had found a collective voice that was ours and ours alone. That became even more true once we introduced the material Gib and I had started composing. I was lead on most of the vocals, with Gib and our bass player, Hank Cartwright, singing back-up, though Gib took over on a ballad or two, and our saxophonist, Boo-Boo Baker, did the honors on a novelty song called "Upside Down" that we later added.

But everything changed when into our lives came the guy that our drummer, Sticks Hodges, dubbed "The Silver-Tongued Devil." Bringing promises of fame, fortune, and fellatio, Chuckie Goldsmith promptly moved Gib to center stage, which meant his taking over most of the vocals. Next, also based on what our new manager called his *vision* came endless guitar solos, with Gib stirring up the audience by playing the same chords behind his back, over his head, and even with his teeth.

The key to success, our new manager claimed, was star-making. As he explained to us, it was Gib, rather than the other members of the band, who with the right kind of promotion had the look, the moves, and the requisite charisma to become a star.

The irony was that like me, Gib had long expressed serious misgivings about both stardom and stars. Our models were never Elvis, Chuck Berry, Jagger, or Hendrix. The people we talked

about were the progenitors of the music, the people who continued to inspire us: Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf, Slim Harpo and Mose Allison, Arthur Alexander and Irma Thomas.

Yet Gib did not balk or utter the slightest bit of protest when Gold made him the focal point of the band.

Nor did the Gibster balk when instead of the band continuing to be billed as Fever, it became clear that our first album was to be released as *Gib Gibson & Fever*.

I suppose, therefore, that we shouldn't have been surprised when an announcement inevitably came, not from Gibby, but from the guy who was suddenly *his* manager rather than *ours*, that a certain guitar player/vocalist/friend was leaving the band in order to embark on a solo career.

Partially out of pique, but also because I had nothing but disdain for the direction in which he was headed, musically or otherwise, I quickly stopped following Gib's mounting headline-producing adventures. That meant that I was largely oblivious to the starlets with whom he was rumored to be keeping company. Or the hotel rooms he was destroying. Or his ever-more-frequent stints in rehab facilities throughout Southern California. Above all else, I chose to remain willfully and blissfully unaware of the so-called music that supplanted what he supposedly had long appreciated and cherished.

Yet in contrast to the other members of Fever, I could never bring myself to hate the Gibster. Nor, even when the band broke

up, could I ever entirely blame him. For one thing, we were far from the only artist or group never to reach its full potential, or to get its due. That list included all sorts of people I revered, from James Carr, Howard Tate and James Booker on through the Chambers Brothers, Southside Johnny, Mink DeVille, and even a band called Moby Grape. Plus, I could not believe that success, which meant becoming a generic rock star, was making Gib the least bit happy, proud, or fulfilled.

If at the end of the day Fever was nothing but a recording industry footnote, with one moderately successful album, plus an obscure follow-up that was released with scant publicity after the band's demise, in my estimation we were at least a pretty important footnote. Whereas in the eyes of people who cared more about music than about grosses, Gib Gibson, for all his commercial success, was little more than a well paid sell-out, which to me could be defined by two very sad words: a casualty.

Despite the multiple calls, texts, and emails I received from an ever more impatient, Charles Gold, it was not until late the next morning that I at last responded, agreeing to pop by his offices some time after lunch.

Not surprisingly, it was Philomena who initially came out to meet me when I arrived.

"I'm glad you agreed to do it," she said.

"Except that I haven't. All I agreed to do was come in."

"So what will it take?"

"What are you offering?"

"I told you what you're likely to get."

"That's from him. I mean from you."

Unless I was mistaken, Philomena seemed to blush. "You're terrible."

"And I'm only getting started."

"Are you like this with all women?"

"Only when they first approach me."

"And otherwise?"

"I live in constant fear of rejection."

"You're teasing."

"Not one bit."

Philomena studied me for what was only a moment, yet seemed longer due to the intensity of her gaze. Then she smiled.

"Mustn't keep *El Commandante* waiting."

"He coulda been a contender!" Gold exclaimed as I stepped into his office. "So I hear you've finally succumbed to the fine art of negotiation."

"Without yet saying yes."

"You're enjoying this, aren't you? A chance to get back at the sonofabitch who shattered your dream."

"Don't flatter yourself."

"Want to talk turkey? So what if you had more talent than Gib? He had the *it* that makes all the difference. Know what that is?"

"I suspect you're dying to tell me."

"Every guy wanted to *be* him. And more importantly, every girl wanted to *fuck* him. Guys like you who think it's the music that counts? You're the also-rans, the holier-than-thou crew who matter to nobody except a handful of pointed-head critics and a crew of pathetic geeks."

"So how does it feel to need me?"

Despite his attempt at self-control, Gold winced. "Shitty. But remember, you also need me."

"And why is that?"

"Because I know how much – or should I say how little – you've been making."

"Which hasn't stopped me yet."

"So tell me this: would you be here if you weren't interested?"

I started to leave, then reconsidered.

"Let's get down to business," I said as I turned and faced him.

"Who would want to see Gib disappear?"

"You thinking foul play?"

"Me? For all I know he boarded a space ship, or journeyed to the center of the earth. Any enemies?"

"I'm the one who makes enemies."

"Sure as hell fooled me. No ransom notes? No one gloating?
No one making demands?"

Gold shook his head.

"I'll need information," I said. "A timeline of the last few years, professionally and otherwise. A list of anybody and everybody in his life – musically, non-musically, whatever. Venues he's played, places he's lived. Spots he's visited or vacationed."

"Consider it done."

"And not just the good or obvious stuff. I want to know most of all about the problems.

"Problems?"

"The busts, the rehabs, the dealers, the creeps, the hangers-on."

Gold nodded with no great glee.

"And above all the women," I added.

"You mean his sweet wife?"

"Plus the bimbos, groupies, hookers, and one-night-stands."

"Does it make you cringe when I mention Iona?" Gold asked.

"Not as much as being here with you. Now about the info –
"

Again he nodded unhappily.

"And if I find you're withholding anything, or telling less than the truth –"

"You'll tell my mommy?"

"Let's just say that if I were you, I wouldn't even ask."

"Positive?" Philomena asked as I started to leave Pure Gold.

"Is anything with your honcho entirely positive?"

"C'mon, he's not that bad."

"And now I'll tell one. And his main man Perrone?"

That brought a frown to Philomena's lovely face.

I watched her for a moment, then stepped outside, only to have Philomena follow.

"How about the fact that he wants you to find Gib?" she inquired.

"Is that altruism? Compassion? His overwhelming humanity?"

"Well –"

"Seems to me it comes down to business, pure and simple."

Philomena shrugged, making no effort to disagree.