

Three

The foyer of Jimmy Baker's apartment building smelled like a kennel. I was there because his was the first name on Hodges' list. Baker had been Jeff's drummer, and they were supposed to have been best friends. Hodges' secretary had called ahead to say I was coming. It was a good thing she had. Otherwise, I'd never have gotten in the building.

I rang the bell. "Yeah?" A deep male voice snarled out of the intercom.

"T. L. Gareth to see Jim Baker. I believe he's expecting me."

"Just a second." The box clicked into silence. I waited almost two minutes, then pressed the bell again.

"Yeah?" It sounded like the same voice. The snarl was the same at any rate. "I thought you'd died," I said.

"Who is this?"

"My name's Gareth. I got your name from J. C. Hodges."

"Oh, yeah. Come on up." The buzzer sounded. I pushed through the door. In the lobby the smell was even worse. It was an old building on East Fourth, certainly built before the turn of the century. But, that alone couldn't account for the stench. I held my breath, walked quickly to the stairs. Somewhere in the distance, dogs yapped.

"Gareth?" A voice called down the stairs

Yes?"

"At the top."

I groaned. From where I stood, all I could see was stairs. "All the way?" I shouted back.

“All the way!” I distinctly heard laughter.

There were a hundred and twelve steps. By the time I got to the top, whoever I’d been talking to had given up. The hall was empty. I looked around, saw one of the four doors on the top landing cracked open. I took a chance. “Hello,” I said tentatively.

“You made it.” A young man of about twenty-five peered at me through the crack. “You Gareth?”

“Mr. Baker?”

“Who’d you say sent you, again?”

“J. C. Hodges.”

“Come in.” He stepped back, opened the door. “The place is a mess. Hope you don’t mind.” I stepped inside.

He was right. The place *was* a mess. A threadbare oriental carpet lent faded technicolor to a small space crammed with too much life. Sound equipment sat on every available shelf. Wires webbed the walls and floor, cascaded in great loops from microphone stands. A silent, flat screen television set cast transparent color onto the ceiling while Roger Federer did awesome things to a tennis ball. Dust darkened everything.

“Mr. Baker?” There were three people in the room; two men and a woman in her early twenties. The smell of marijuana hung over everything.

“Have a seat,” Baker said. He sat cross-legged on the rug, naked from the waist down. I looked for a chair. There were none, so I dropped to the floor. I just missed sitting on a cat.

Baker laughed. “That’s Maude,” he said. “She lives here.”

I watched Maude make her way to a small bookcase where she turned tail and peed. It didn’t surprise me. I’m sure she thought she was living in a litter box.

“Thanks for seeing me, Mr. Baker. I hope this isn’t inconvenient.” He hadn’t introduced me to the other two, so I just smiled idiotically.

Baker shook his head. “Anything for Mr. Hodges. He always treated me right.”

“Amen to that,” the young woman said. She smiled beneath half-closed lids. She was very attractive.

“You mind if we smoke?” Baker asked.

“Whatever.” I shrugged.

“Care to join us?” Baker lit a thin, hand-rolled joint, held it toward me.

“No thanks.”

“How ’bout a drink? I think there’s a little Scotch.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t drink either.” Baker eyed me suspiciously.

“Jimmy, can we get on with the cut?” The second man spoke up. His voice had the quality of a large truck, slamming on its breaks. He seemed to squeeze the sound out of his nose.

“Shut up, Skid.” I guessed that was his name, Skid.

“Amen to that,” the girl added.

“Mr. Baker, I’m here to ask about Jeff Christopher.”

“Yeah, I know that,” he said. He passed the joint on, looked at me carefully. “You a cop?”

“Would you be smoking marijuana if you thought I was?”

“I know you’re not a cop.”

“If you know that ...” I was interrupted.

“Jimmy? I wanna get on with the cut. If he’s not a cop, why worry about it?”

“For Christ’s sake, Skid.” Baker turned. “Lemme find out what’s happening. All right?”

“I want to make the God damned cut and get out of here. I got things to do, asshole.”

“Skid, we got a guest, okay?”

“Amen to that.” The girl took a toke, handed the joint to Skid. That shut him up.

“Are you religious?” I asked the girl.

“God is the answer,” she said.

“To what?” I asked.

“Well, to everything. Isn’t She? I thought She was. Why did you ask that? Do you know something I don’t?”

"I doubt it." I shook my head, turned back to Baker. He was fondling his genitals.

"The cut, the cut," Skid whined. I felt his voice in my teeth.

Suddenly, Baker was on his feet. His penis was semi-erect. It bobbed up and down as he moved. "God damn it, Skid. You are more trouble than a twelve-year-old at a *Kiss* concert. Fuckin' asshole." He opened a large trunk, hauled out the biggest baggie I'd ever seen. There was at least a pound and a half of marijuana inside. I knew now why I'd been kept waiting when I'd rung the bell.

Baker threw the baggie at Skid. "Now, take the fuckin' dope and cut the fuckin' dope and get out. Freda, make sure the cut's right. I gotta talk to Mr. Gareth, here."

Freda didn't seem to have heard. "I thought God was the answer," she mumbled, "but, you know, I've been thinkin' about becoming a vegetarian."

"Can the crap, Freda," Baker barked.

"Maybe something happened while I was asleep."

"Come on, cunt." Skid stood up, grabbed Freda's hand. "Help me with the dope."

"Go in the john," Baker said. He shook his head, then dropped to the floor in front of me as Freda and Skid vanished into the bathroom. "Sometimes I feel like I live in a zoo."

"Charming man, Skid," I observed.

"Yeah, he's a good friend," Baker said. "Terrific singer."

"Singer?" I asked, recalling the man's nail-curling tones.

"Yeah, he's a tenor."

"That explains it," I observed.

"Anyway, we can talk now. They'll probably be in there all day."

"It shouldn't take very long to cut the marijuana, should it?"

He laughed, slipped another slim joint out of a surprisingly elegant, alabaster cigarette case. "Freda likes to fuck in the bathtub," he said. "I doubt they'll be out before dinner. Now, you

want to talk about Jeff?" I nodded. Baker seemed more at ease. I assumed the joint they'd been passing had done its work. "You sure you don't want a toke?" He lit the new joint, offered it to me.

I shook my head again. "I don't use drugs at all, Mr. Baker. Not even aspirin."

"Don't approve, huh?"

"It has nothing to do with approval. What other people put in their bodies doesn't concern me. What I put in mine does."

"Admirable, Mr. Gareth." He smiled faintly. "Admirable."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, yours is a particularly enlightened attitude, don't you think?"

I shrugged. "Drugs are bad for you, Mr. Baker, which should be self evident to any intelligent person. Why do you smoke?"

Baker thought a moment, then shrugged. "Habit, mostly, I think. Everyone I know smokes, and every time I try to cut down somebody sticks a joint in my mouth. I'm so weak. But I don't do much of anything else. I never touch alcohol."

"Was Jeff Christopher into drugs?"

He shook his head. "Never. Jeff never touched the stuff. He took some kind of medication, I think. At least, that's the excuse he always used for not joining us ... said the mixture would fuck him up. But Hodges must have told you about that."

"Of course," I said noncommittally. I made a note. "Do you have any idea what he was taking?"

"No. Just that it was medicine. The prescribed kind, you know."

He paused, inhaled deeply, then smiled a dreamy smile. "This is good shit."

"I'm sure it is," I said. I was getting uncomfortable on the floor, so I shifted into a full-lotus.

"Hey, that's good," Baker said lightly. "Think I'll do that."

"How long have you known Jeff?"

“Long time. He was thirteen when I first met him, a little fucker. But, man, he could make that guitar wail.”

“Then you feel he’s genuinely talented?”

“The best. He didn’t really like it, though. That’s what was so ironic about it. So much talent, and all he really wanted to do was play with his recording equipment.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yeah. Jeff was really into sound.”

“His father thinks all he wanted was to make music.”

Baker shook his head. “Not true. All he really wanted was to be a recording engineer.”

“Didn’t his father know that?”

Baker giggled, took another hit off his joint. Groaning noises oozed under the bathroom door. “Come on, man. Whose father knows anything? Besides, Hodges was so intent on making Jeff a household word he couldn’t have stopped even if Jeff had said something. It was a fact before anyone knew it was happening.”

“I thought you liked Hodges.”

“I did. He treated me right. He treated everybody right, paid on time, paid good, too. I got no complaint against Hodges.”

“But, he didn’t know Jeff was unhappy.”

Baker shrugged. “Well, who’s to say? Hodges wanted to be famous himself, but he didn’t have any talent. It’s awfully hard for someone like that to understand why someone with talent wouldn’t want fame if he could get it.”

“Mr. Baker, why are you sitting here in this squalor when you are obviously such an intelligent man?”

For a moment, Baker just stared at me. Then, he began to laugh; not enormous belly laughs, but small, private laughs. For a moment, I was afraid he wouldn’t be able to stop. “Wow,” he said at last. “That was really off the wall.” He wiped his eyes.

“I’d like to know. That’s why I asked.” He saw I was serious.

“Well, I’ll tell you. Basically, I like to have a good time. I started doing it awhile back and got hooked. Now, I don’t seem

to have any choice. But, you know, my life is enviable in a lot of ways. I go to bed and get up when I want. I have time to read. I get stoned any time I want, and there's the music. Man, sometimes I'm surrounded with such beautiful sounds that Orpheus himself would have a shit fit."

"He tended toward that," I said.

"Huh?"

"Little joke." I smiled. "Go on."

"And, I like to get laid. I think that's the main thing. In fact, I know it. I can get laid any time I feel like it, any time at all ... and I do. How many corporate clones you know can say that?"

"Our tastes are similar in a lot of ways, Mr. Baker. Our styles are different, but the motivation is the same."

He looked at me quietly. "I'll take that as a compliment, Mr. Gareth. You seem like a man who'd be good to know."

"So do you," I said warmly. "Was Jeff a good man to know?"

"A fine, easy-going guy. Bright. Always willing to help out. I gotta tell you, I don't understand this Marnie Havek thing. It's completely out of character."

"To sum up, then, you think basically it's a problem of communication. Jeff didn't communicate his dissatisfaction to his father?"

"He wasn't exactly dissatisfied. That's not the right word. He just didn't take it seriously. He thought it would blow over. At first it was kind of a joke, you know. 'Jeff Christopher's Greatest Hits,' for Christ's sake. We all thought Hodges was just a guy with too much money. No one ever expected anything would actually happen. Then, he sold millions of records. Millions. Suddenly everything was rushing ahead, and Jeff was trapped."

"So, he went along?"

"He never took it seriously for a minute, not until Gregory came along, that is. I quit soon after that, so I couldn't say what happened later."

"Gregory?"

“AmenAmenAmen! Uh, uh, uh!” The bathroom spoke up. Baker smiled weakly. “Just a minute. Hey ...” he called out, “... shut the fuck up in there. Jesus!”

“Uh, uh, uh!”

“Sometimes I *know* I’m living in a zoo.”

I glanced around. “Uh, yes,” I observed, noncommittally. “You mentioned someone named Gregory?”

“He was Jeff’s arranger.”

“I thought Jeff was a composer. Wouldn’t he have done his own arranging?”

“At first he did. Then he got too busy shootin’ the shit with Ellen DeGeneres.”

“So they brought in Gregory?”

“Who?”

“Gregory. You just mentioned him.”

“Oh, yeah, Gregory. He’s why I quit. Did I say that already?” He laughed. “I’m kind of high, you know.”

“You quit because of this Gregory?”

“Couldn’t stand the bastard. He didn’t like me, either.”

“Didn’t Jeff object? You were with him a long time.”

Baker shrugged. “Don’t know. I haven’t seen Jeff since I quit. He was off doing a television special with One Direction when it happened.”

“Can you describe Gregory for me?”

“Sure.”

“Uh, uh, uh! Skiiiiiiiiid.”

“Just a minute.” Baker jumped up. I looked away, pretended to examine the many titles in the nearest bookcase. His penis was fully erect. “Be right back,” he said, as he followed it into the bathroom.

Baker was gone for more than ten minutes, which gave me a chance to catch up on my notes. Not that it helped. Nothing whatsoever seemed to be emerging. Hodges had said that Jeff was wildly enthusiastic over his career. Baker had said he hadn’t

taken it seriously. Clarence Thomas Chong had reported Jeff as a greedy little bastard and an ingrate, while Baker had indicated he was easy going and wanted nothing more than to be left alone with his recording equipment. Then, there was some kind of strange medication that kept him away from drugs, and someone named Gregory, neither of which Hodges had mentioned. All in all, nothing. Still, something was creeping and crawling in and out of my belly.

"Sorry 'bout that," Baker said, as he grinned his way back into the room. He still had the erection, but now it was wet. "I was wondering if this will take much longer?"

"Just a couple more things," I said. "I'd like you to describe this Gregory for me, and I'd like to ask you about the Willie Wicked thing."

"Willie Wicked?" Baker sounded surprised. "Why would you ask about him?" He reached for a jockstrap, pulled it on. I must confess, I was relieved.

"Can you think of any reason?" I asked.

"Willie Wicked's into dirty punk," Baker explained, "or smut punk as I've heard his stuff called. It's sort of a post punk new wave, to use an outdated term. Whatever, It bores me."

I sighed. The first new wave I could remember had been in the Ninth Century. Some monks of the Burgundian school ran amok and blatantly began singing two notes at once. They were burned for heresy. "Was Jeff into this smut punk at all?" I couldn't believe Baker didn't know Jeff was Willie Wicked.

Baker snorted. "You gotta be kidding." Obviously, he didn't.

"Jimmy?" Freda shrieked from the bathroom. "I got something for you."

Baker's snorting degenerated into a sheepish grin. "I gotta go. You got something else?"

I stood. "So, you can't think of any relation that might exist between Willie Wicked and Jeff Christopher?"

Baker shrugged. "Should there be one?"

“Jimmy?” Freda sounded like she was in pain.

“Hold on to it for a minute, Freda, for Christ’s sake,” Baker yelled.

“Just one more thing,” I said hastily. “This Gregory. I’d like a description.”

Baker glanced toward the bathroom, wet his lips. I could tell he was losing interest. “Sure,” he said. “He’s medium height, just under six feet I’d guess. He always has a good tan, which is surprising since he’s a speed freak.”

“Speed?”

“Amphetamines.”

“Right,” I said. “How old is he?”

“Around my age ... twenty-six, twenty-seven, maybe. His hair’s red, did I say that? He keeps it short, like a Marine. He’s got bright eyes, too, but that’s because of the speed.”

“Jiiiiiiiiimmmmy? You’ll miiiiiiiiissss it.”

“Coming, God damn it!” He turned to me. “That it?”

“I gotta make a phone call. Then, I’m outta here.”

“Whatever, man. Make yourself at home. I gotta go. Close the door when you leave, huh?”

“Right,” I said, “and thanks a ...” But, by that time, he was back in the bathroom. Can’t say I blamed him. I pulled out my cellphone, moved a pile of old beaver magazines and sat. They looked like they had leprosy.

Ms. Chong answered immediately. “Gareth Associates. One moment ...”

“*Stop.*” I screamed.

“Beg pardon?”

“It’s me. Don’t put me on hold.”

“Uh, uh, uh!” More rhythmic moans from the bathroom. In spite of myself, my body reacted.

“Hiya, kiddo. Find Jeff yet?”

“When I find Jeff you’ll be the first to know, Ms. Chong. What did you find out about Willie Wicked?”

I could hear her sigh. "Business, business, business. No time for funs."

"Uh, uh, uh." I didn't think she needed to know what was happening in the bathroom.

"What about Willie Wicked?"

"Clarence Thomas Chong not know anything about Willie Wicked."

"Oh?"

"No stuff on Facebook, either. But, I make few calls. Willie Wicked very big. He really dirty punk rocker. Maybe that why he not on Facebook. You know 'bout punk rockers?"

"Don't they call his music smut punk?" I chanced it.

"Oh, boy. Maybe not live in cave. Anyway, Willie Wicked very loud. I borrow record from kid down the road. Wouldn't believe such fantastical awful sounds."

"Keep it. I'll listen to it when I get back."

"You hate it. Good reason, too."

"Ooooooh! Jimmmmmmmmy."

"Wat that?"

"Ms. Chong, I have to go. Call Steven and tell him ..."

"I know wat that is."

"... tell him to catch a plane to New York. I'm staying at the Waldorf. Have him ..."

"You think I don't know wat that is?"

"Ahhh! Skiiiiid."

"Where you at?"

"Ms. Chong, there's a perfectly plausible explanation, but right now, I want you to call Steven. Tell him to fly down here, and be sure and let me know ..."

"You in big trouble!" She said evenly.

"Ms. Chong ..."

"Uh, uh, uh. Aaaahhhhh!" Ecstasy in three parts pulsed through the room. The cat howled.

"I'm going now, Ms. Chong."

“You in big trouble!” She yelled into the phone. I didn’t hear any more. I hung up. I had to get out of that apartment. Two more minutes and I’d have been in the tub. ■