

# Chapter 18

## BEYOND THE AESCULAPIAN

**D**ON'T IT ALWAYS seem to go that you don't know what you've got till it's gone?

Cowboy's absence brought about an unexpected change: Raymond took to playing Joni Mitchell for a while. He never gave a reason for deposing La Divina. Maybe Joni's girlish voice helped raise his flagging spirits. In the end the respite proved too good to last. Callas made a tragic comeback after Raymond took a trip to West Virginia.

The basement rooms just didn't feel the same. Cowboy's easy company along with Raymond's loony nosing at the edges of our lives had given me a home. Ill-defined and subject to lush's whims, but still a home. With Cowboy gone, all they were were sleeping quarters.

I missed him most of all when I was standing on the block. We'd always hung together. Even when he'd sauntered off to stretch his legs or rope a trick, his absence felt like company. I hadn't really shot the breeze with any of the other guys. They'd only ever spoken to him anyway.

*Hey man, how's it hangin'?*

*Slow tonight.*

*The Old Spice guy is out.*

*Maybe Stretch'll do him.*

A February cold snap killed the Grosvenor-Grenville traffic. Trade fled into crowded bars and seething clubs. So many men, so tightly packed, jumbled the impressions I got one-on-one outside. I couldn't even pick potential customers from guys too vain to pay. Brute salesmanship, not sensitivity, determined if I walked out with a paying john or went home empty-handed.

Clouds have silver linings, though, and mine was Dr. Ferenc. *Ferko*, he insisted. As Raymond had surmised, his interest in me went beyond the aesculapian—a word he taught me early on. He had a favourite club, Katrina's on St. Joseph, and any time I spotted him my night was guaranteed. Free drinks while he scoped the crowd. A proud ride in his purring Jag. The decency of snacks for me and any other boy he'd hired. Enthusiastic sex, a sumptuous bed, and hot food in the morning.

But unlike regulars whose patterns I could count on, Ferko at Katrina's—and later, when the weather started warming up, his Jaguar at the curb—was never a sure thing. Weeks would pass without my seeing him. Then, for days on end, I'd be eating Csabai sausages for breakfast with a side of Liptauer cheese.

He always paid, even when he only wanted company. It satisfied some urge bound up with courtesy and order. But it wasn't frosty commerce. He got a kick from having a relationship where he was using me as much as I was using him.

Indirectly, Ferko was responsible for Brian and me hooking up. Tuesday nights Katrina's held a stripping contest. The dance floor cleared, the patrons took to tables round the edge, and anyone who wanted to could strut their stuff. Mostly it was hustlers. Ferko liked to watch and sometimes purchase the contestants, so I nearly always made of point of dropping by.

He hadn't shown up yet the evening Brian took the floor. I'd been waiting for an hour and was getting set to leave when a slow piano intro clued me in the next dance would be special. "Slow" in male stripping means not only all the way but totally erect. Few contestants had the brass to try it.

I knew Brian from the block, though at most we'd only nodded

to each other. He had a round, cherubic face suggesting baby fat all over, but under lights with Bonnie Tyler torching out *Once upon a time I was falling in love, now I'm only falling apart* the fat looked more like muscle and by magic he became a godlet with a post-pubescent face and the bulges of a quarterback. His moves were slick, or as slick as can be managed when you're hampered by a hard-on.

Afterwards, with time a-ticking and my wallet thinning from the beers I'd had to buy, I left to try my luck outdoors.

The cold snap was abating. Stretch was out, wraithlike in the Caddy showroom light. Scott and Daryl cruised around, snug inside their Daddy's Lincoln, stopping for the guys they knew. Ensuing conversations, murmured through an open window, never carried far. Brokers, Cowboy'd said.

I staked a spot across the street from Women's College Hospital. Few cars passed. Last call was an hour away. The traffic would improve when losers at the bar game faced the fact they'd have to fork out for a blowjob or jerk off by themselves at home.

Brian showed up half an hour later, touring the block three times before approaching me and uttering the phatic greeting often made to Cowboy.

"Slow night."

"Bars are closing soon," I answered. "Business'll pick up."

A Grand Prix turned on Grenville, slowed in front of us and carried on.

"I saw you at Katrina's," Brian said.

"Yeah, I go there once in a while. I saw you dance. You win?"

"Nah. There's this guy likes to show up with all his buddies. They go apeshit when he's on so he always wins. He was there."

"Bummer."

Brian shrugged. "It's only fifty bucks."

He reached inside his pants and made adjustments to his crotch.

"Sorry. Had to tie off for the dance."

"Tie off?"

"Stripper's trick. Whack off till you've got a boner just before a

dance, then slip a rubber band around your dick. Hurts like hell but keeps you hard. You ever dance?”

“I don’t know how.”

“I could show you a few moves. You’ve got the look. Your eyes are something else.”

“Thanks.”

Up close, his baby-face revealed signs of wear. Tiny fissures spidered from the corners of his eyes. The pinkness in his cheeks looked raw instead of rosy.

He made another small adjustment. “Where’s Cowboy? Haven’t seen him in a while.”

“Extradited. Back to West Virginia.”

“No shit. Guess that means we won’t be seeing him again.”

“Guess not.”

“Were you guys lovers?”

“We sorta shared a place, that’s all.”

“The guys were curious. A loner like him, then all of a sudden he’s showing up with you in tow.”

“Did you know him long?”

“A coupla years, on and off. Enough to wonder when he partnered up with somebody like you.”

“What do you mean, like me?”

“Shit, man. Cowboy was—,” he looked away, trying to find the word, “—decent. Made it hard to, you know, *do* anything. Then you show up. Double-whammy. A walking conscience and a guy who’s pulling all our tricks.”

“I didn’t know.”

“Yeah, well, you wouldn’t. You were kinda off-limits. Because of Cowboy.”

“Cowboy scared you off?”

“Nah. Nothing like that. Cowboy just... *was*. Sorta like you. You’re different. The guys are kinda interested in how you do it.”

“Do what?”

“Fuck, man—every car that stops for you, you end up getting in. You’re hot, sure—half the guys would do you in a second—but

nobody's that lucky all the time. You got some kind of special kind of mojo or what?"

"I just say whatever I think a customer wants to hear."

"Right, like we don't?"

A gust of wind blew up the street. He turned his back, shuffling to stay warm.

"Fuck it. We're just jealous. You're okay. I shoulda talked to you before. Hey—you wanna go to Frans and get a coffee? My nuts are freezing off."



Cowboy's attitude had always been: Do no harm, and no harm done. Stealing, for example, was fine as long as no one felt the loss.

Not so Brian or the others who began to speak to me: Neil, the fresh-faced runaway who traded on his schoolboy looks to hook and blackmail pederasts; Magic, hyped on coke, whose quickie clients never felt his fingers in their wallets while his mouth was on their dicks; Shox, the smoldering hulk whose rough trade looks were anything but show.

The street began to feel different—charged somehow, alluring in a way that went beyond the high of selling sex. Who knew who'd be out on any given night, bullshitting or lounging with a ready *Hey, man, how's it hangin'?* Joints got passed around, my status changed to just-one-of-the-guys, and my luck with clients banded as the stuff of common legend.

Things petered out at Jarvis Street. Raymond's funk post-Cowboy seeped into the basement. I got antsy hearing him upstairs stumbling from room to room. Luckily, Brian had a bachelor on Sherbourne, several blocks away, where I could crash. Shox or Neil bunked there sometimes, too, but never Magic.

"Sorry, man. No way I'm sleeping with a cokehead," Brian said, refusing him one night. "Nothing personal."

We shared his ratty futon—two, or sometimes three exhausted hustlers sleeping naked with no sex. No sex that is except for Neil,

whose drowsy penis rubbing in my ass-crack occasionally woke me up.

Scott and Daryl weren't as quick to let me in the club. Whenever Cowboy'd been around, they'd always managed to be someplace else—down the street, around the corner, doing quiet deals. Cowboy said they knew the street like no one else. He could have claimed the same about himself, but he and they were oil and water, he with his agenda and they with theirs.

I felt them watching me for weeks before their Lincoln finally pulled over to the curb. The encounter had the feel of an audition. Both looked straight ahead. Eye contact was impossible. I couldn't read them as I did my clients. Had there been just one of them, a wealth of clues might have arranged itself inside my head until I saw the silver-grey geometry of who and what he was. But they were two, and good at letting nothing slip. Long pauses in their conversation made me feel their minds were elsewhere. Either that, or everything I said was being sifted, judged and filed.

I'd long ago decided they were frauds, wannabes who couldn't cut it hustling. Both wore nerdy glasses and had pimply skin.

Turned out I was wrong.

Hard drugs weren't a big part of the Grosvenor-Grenville block. Except for Magic, no one hustled to support a habit. Those who tried soon disappeared. The money wasn't good enough. Recreationals, however, had a place—a big one, I found out with Cowboy gone—and Scott and Daryl were the major source. Of an evening, they might sidle by and murmur *E?* or *Hash?* to every hustler on the street. Deals struck and money fronted, they'd set up a meeting. Sometime later and deserted blocks away, one or other of them would appear—who knew which was which?—with baggies of whatever had been purchased.

Articles that fell off trucks got handled the same way.

They also played the go-between for men with special hankering: piss scenes, dungeon play, cutting. I never figured out how they connected with the buyers. Perhaps they dredged the Personals. But wherever they came from, Scott and Daryl's gentlemen paid well.

Very well. I got to hoping more and more I'd see their Lincoln pulling up and hear the quiet: *Wanna make some money?*



The police cracked down on hustling in the summer of that year. Plainclothes trawled in unmarked cars while uniforms in cruisers hassled any guy who didn't scam the moment they showed up. They got me twice—for vagrancy (standing in a doorway to escape the rain), and trespassing (walking off the sidewalk on the grass).

Brian hatched a plan to make up the financial loss. He laid it out one evening over day-old muffins in a booth at Frans. The muffins were half price.

“His name is Merrick. He's fat and gross and wears a ton of jewelry. Gold jewelry. He doesn't actually do anything, just takes pictures. It's kinda creepy. He pays good, though. A hundred bucks, upfront. You can keep that if you want. We don't have to split it. You'll be doing all the work.”

“I don't mind.”

“Nah, it's okay. Scott and Daryl figure we'll clear around eight hundred after their cut. The guy has a *lot* of jewelry.”

“He's not a customer they set you up with, is he?”

“You think they'd fence shit lifted from a guy they set up with a hustler? Get real.”

“He lives over near the Valley, on Ontario Street. The area's pretty rough so he's got security, bars and everything, and an alarm he keeps set all the time. But here's the thing. There are two ways to disarm it. One's the keypad. The other's by unlocking the front door from the inside. I guess it saves a step if someone knocks or something.”

“He's got this studio on the second floor with a bed and cameras and shit. He keeps his rings and chains and stuff downstairs in the bedroom. Takes off whatever he was wearing when he's taking pictures, too.”

“Mostly, all you gotta do is keep him occupied while I'm

downstairs. That shouldn't be too difficult. You're good. The hard part's the alarm, but I got an idea. He hates being touched. Must be why he takes pictures. Anyway, the way I figure it is, if you put the moves on him inside the door, right after he sets the alarm, he'll freak and get distracted. The entrance is small and the lock's a Medeco—you know, one of those ones with a key on the inside?—but he never takes it out so all you gotta do is reach behind your back. He'll never notice."

"Won't it seem weird if I put the moves on him when he doesn't like being touched?"

"He doesn't know you know, now, does he? You're just a horny hustler raring to get going."

"He's got to hire me first."

Brian made a sound like *ffff*.

"Right, like that's a problem."



Brian stuck around at Woody's—Cowboy's happy-hour hunting ground—till Merrick had shown up then took a streetcar to Ontario to wait.

Merrick loved his jewelry all right. But even in a crowded bar that made it hard to size him up, instinct warned me not to praise the rings on sausage fingers or the gold chains in the rolls around his neck. Some men's peacock urge becomes a nightmare when their efforts at attention-getting work.

He kept his distance in the taxi, pressed against the door and toying with a pinkie ring. The diamond in it twinkled like a captive star.

*Last of thirteen kids...parents Seventh Day Adventists... peculiar childhood illnesses that seemed to have no cause... blamed himself somehow...*

The entrance was as Brian had described: the tiny vestibule, the keypad, the key left in the lock. I let him punch the passcode in, then pressed my crotch against his ass and ran my fingers down his



watermelon gut. He froze. Waves of fright came off him like the fear that horses are supposed to smell. I hung on till he squirmed away and stumbled to the safety of the hall.

Behind my back, I turned the key.

“P-p-please,” he stuttered. “D-don’t do that. Just... just go upstairs. I’ll b-b-be up in a minute.”

Upstairs was a single room—open, like an attic. A workbench held a row of lenses organized by size along with scissors, pliers, duct tape and some squares of coloured cellophane. Opposite, against the wall, an unmade bed and stands with silvery umbrellas.

A Polaroid was aimed toward the bed, and some other kind of camera I’d never seen before: a metal box with smoked glass on the top. The glass was etched with grid marks and the view was upside down.

“D-don’t touch that,” Merrick said behind me as I bent down for a look. “P-please. It’s very expensive.”

I straightened up and turned around. He’d removed his jewelry and taken off his clothes except his underwear. A smudge of pubes showed through the threadbare cotton.

“Over there,” he said, pointing to the bed. “And w-w-would you strip. Please?”

*Don’t sit... hunker like a runner to unlace my shoes... flash a lot of armpit when my T-shirt’s coming off... don’t primp... he doesn’t like that... act a little shy...*

Merrick’s hand was plunged inside his briefs. The cameras clicked and whirred. Was Brian in the house yet? How long would he need?

“Lie down. P-p-lease. On your back.”

*Stretch out like a cat... head up on the pillow... touch myself... massage my nipples... trail my fingers down toward my crotch...*

The man behind the cameras got everything he bargained for. I didn’t need to see the movement in his briefs. Even with no contact, his needs and wishes flooded me. It was as if his lenses worked both ways, capturing my image, feeding me his hunger.

*“D-d-damn.”*

He straightened up. His boner bulged across his thigh.

“I n-need more film. It’s d-downstairs. In the kitchen. Stay here. P-please.”

*Shit.*

He lumbered to the stairs. My hard-on started drooping like a time-lapse wilting flower and my heart began to race.

“While you’re in the kitchen,” I called loudly, “could you get a glass of water?”

His footsteps carried on.

I lay there listening. Where was Brian? Had he heard me? My jeans were on the floor beside the bed. I sat up and grabbed them, but scarcely had them to my knees when Merrick’s footfalls sounded in the stairwell. I slid them off and lay back down.

Something glittered at his throat as his head rose into view. Then I heard Brian’s voice behind him, growling: “Keep moving, asshole.”

The glitter was a carving knife.

I scrambled up and struggled to get dressed while Brian frog marched Merrick to the bed.

“Sorry,” he grunted. “Didn’t know what else to do. Thanks for the warning.”

He hardly sounded pumped at all.

“No problem,” I said shakily.

Merrick’s eyes were slewed toward the steel at his throat. Beads of sweat were trickling down his temples. Brian dropped the knife and shoved him roughly on the mattress, where he curled up foetally and started making mewling sounds.

Brian jerked his head toward the workbench. “Grab that roll of duct tape.”

Merrick kept on whimpering while Brian forced him on his back. I slapped a piece of duct tape on his mouth then wrapped some more around his ankles. Brian heaved him on his stomach, yanking back his arms so I could tape his wrists.

We rolled him on his back again.

“What do we do now?” I panted.

Brian looked around.

“Grab that camera, for starters.” He went over to the tripod with the square black box. “It’s a Hasselblad. Worth a fucking fortune. The lenses, too.”

*Breathing calm... his movements sure... no panic in his voice*

...

The penny dropped.

“You meant to do this all along.”

He unscrewed the camera.

“Yeah, well, I figured you’d be more convincing if you didn’t have to think about me charging up the stairs.”

“What are you planning to do about him? He wasn’t supposed to see you, remember? And I was going to be the guy upstairs—you know, the one with no connection to the break-in?”

“Don’t sweat it. I kept a little something back. Rumour on the grapevine.”

He came over to the bed and sat, balancing the camera in his hands.

“So you like taking pictures, eh?” he asked Merrick conversationally.

Merrick looked too terrified to answer even if he could have.

Brian set the camera down.

“I asked you a question, asshole. Do-you-like-taking-pictures?”

Merrick’s head bobbed up and down.

“And those would be... *hmm*, let’s see—,” he put a finger to his chin, “—pictures of boys?”

Merrick nodded, very quickly.

“Maybe even pictures of *little* boys?”

No nod this time. Brian raised his hand and brought it down on Merrick’s cheek. Merrick’s head snapped sideways.

“I said, maybe even *little* boys?”

Merrick signalled yes.

“Want to tell me where you keep them?”

Merrick squirmed. Brian’s hand went up again. Muffled squeals

issued from the duct tape.

“Um, Brian?” I broke in. “I don’t think he can tell you with his lips taped shut.”

Brian winked. “I know.”

He grabbed the knife and laid it flat on Merrick’s cheek then tore off the adhesive gag. Merrick bellowed like a wounded bull. Brian clamped a fast hand on his mouth.

“Another sound and I start slicing, pervert,” he hissed. “The only thing I want from you’s an answer. Yell like that again...”

He drew the knife down Merrick’s cheek. A thin red line appeared. Merrick bucked and tried to twist away.

Brian’s wink suggested he was acting out a script, but with Merrick’s terror clouding my internal sight, I couldn’t sense how far he’d go. What I could see, though—a single, sharp-edged detail in a blurry double image—was that Merrick would start hollering despite the threat when Brian took his hand away.

“Brian, wait.”

He turned around. His face said, *Who are you to call the shots?*

“He’s only going to shout again.”

I nipped a length of tape off with my teeth.

“What the fuck you doing, man?”

“What’s it look like?” I shot back.

He glared but snatched his hand away. I thumbed the strip in place.

“Right,” he said disgustedly. “Like now he’s going to tell us anything. I hope you got some better idea.”

“I do. But you’re going to have to leave us alone.”

“Huh?”

“Go downstairs. Wait. I won’t be long.”

He didn’t budge at first, then shrugged and stood up with the Hasselblad.

“We gotta find those pictures,” he said darkly. “You gotta make him tell us where they are.”

“Don’t worry. I know what I’m doing. Trust me.”

He went over to the workbench.

“You going to tell me what the fuck you plan to do?” he asked, gathering the biggest lenses.

“Like I said, just trust me, okay?”

He frowned but finished loading up and went downstairs.

I sat next to Merrick. He’d wet himself. His briefs were clinging to the shrunken nub inside. I stroked his cheek where blood had started clotting.

“I’m not going to hurt you, Merrick. Really. Just lie still. Everything’ll be all right.”

He flinched but I kept stroking till he settled down. Then I took a breath and let him fill me just like any other guy I wanted to know everything about. His shame, his fear, his shyness and compulsions—all of it flowed into me. The puzzle-pieces slipped in place like tumblers in a lock.

“You never touch them, do you?” I said gently. “The little ones. The ones you really love.”

His head rolled side to side.

“You have a darkroom in the basement.”

His chin went up and down.

“You keep the pictures of the bigger boys down there.”

Another nod.

“But your little ones, the special ones, they’re hidden, aren’t they? In a safe behind a bookcase in your bedroom. It’s not a combination safe. It takes a key. The key is on a chain you like to wear beneath your shirt. You had it on tonight. It’s in the special box with all your other pretty things now, isn’t it?”

He made a tiny sound, as if he might be crying. I stroked his cheek again.

“You’d like to keep those pictures, wouldn’t you?”

His eyes screwed shut and tears oozed out the sides.

I stood and got a pair of scissors from the workbench.

“If you don’t make any noise and stay here till we’re gone, we’ll only take a few, okay?”

The eyes screwed tighter and he made a little movement with his

chin.

I cut the bindings on his legs and wrists but left the gag in place. He rolled over, shuddering, and curled against the wall.

Brian nearly shit a brick when I went through his loot bag, found the key, unlocked the safe and handed him the pictures. They were innocent enough, except the models—none with pubic hair—were awkward, thin, and very naked. Every photograph was stamped with Merrick's name.

"Fucking awesome!" Brian slapped me on the back. "What the hell'd you do?"

"Just sat there till he told me." How else could I explain it?

Minus Scott and Daryl's cut, we walked away with seven-fifty.

Seven-fifty *each*.