

Chapter 20

LOVELY NIGHT FOR A BEATING

SOMETHING NASTY HAPPENED to Toronto.

Three years earlier I'd woken in an alley with a feeling for the city that was more than *déjà-vu* but less than memory. Woven into practicalities like streets and landmarks was Toronto's image of itself—its aspirations, expectations, etiquette. Even after real knowledge overwrote the almost-recollections, nothing contradicted what I'd sensed from the beginning.

Overnight, that changed.

The abruptness had to be deceptive. Perhaps I carried from that inexplicable first morning a tenacious but outmoded notion of Toronto's personality, and simply didn't register the transformations. When did a venerable dive for ageing queens become a fast food joint? What season was it when the city's favourite cinema mutated into boutiques for the rich? What fertilizer, dumped on little shops and businesses, germinated Second Cups and Starbucks in their place? Had teams of yuppie goblins worked by moonlight to erect the wall of condos sundering the city from its waterfront? What sorcery cloaked office towers during their construction so they magically appeared in all their glass and marble finery, glittering like greedy children's dreams?

The Toronto that I thought I knew was cold but never brittle, cheap but never mean. Suddenly, or so it seemed, the city lost its

soul. Sidewalks grew a film of grit they never had before. Bay Street turned a blind eye to the homeless at its feet. Parks I'd once felt safe in got unnecessary facelifts: bushes hacked to unconcealing regularity, paths filled in with Unilock, lights and more lights everywhere, turning the nocturnal commons into sterile no-man's lands.

The numbers of the privileged declined while the space they stole expanded. The have-nots, an embarrassment, got shunted into ever-shrinking cracks and margins.

And on the Grosvenor-Grenville block, a new spirit of self-interest began to take up residence.



Stretch had always been a problem.

Hustling's by nature solitary work. When customers are driving by you have to stand alone. It just makes sense; you're more accessible that way. But when traffic's slow you stroll around, make contact with the guys you know and size up those you don't. It's how you stay informed, protect yourself, establish new connections.

It's also just good manners.

Stretch didn't stroll. He hugged his well-lit turf as if the dimmer corridors of Grenville Street and Surrey Place held lurking bedroom monsters. If he saw you coming down the street, he scurried to the other side. If you surprised him coming round the corner, he tracked you with the cold gaze of a lizard.

His clothing never varied: acid-wash—both jeans and jacket—and a pair of oversized white Nikes. The look had made a fashion blip some time before then vanished into never-even-to-be-retro land. In combination with his weedy frame and pitted face, Stretch fit nowhere on the quirky, sometimes suspect gamut of what turns a gay man's crank. No one fathomed how he ever got picked up. Rumour was, as Cowboy'd said, he undercut.

Selling sex below the market value broke unspoken rules and hurt us all, but certain johns were better left undone, and *Stretch can have 'em* kept the rest of us from turning into bottom feeders.

Still, the undercutting niggled, and the new, uncaring spirit of Toronto had no sympathy for outcasts.



Someone started calling Brian, Neil, Shox and me The X-Men. *Hey, mutant, where's your buddies?* soon replaced the standard *How's it hanging?* if I happened to be solo. Had we been one less, no doubt we would have been the Three Musketeers. Fours are harder to find names for. The Fantastic Four? It sounded dorky. Besides, we were more like four and a half. Magic horned in sometimes, sniffing hard and dancing at the edges of the group.

We smoked a lot of dope, though I held off till I'd pulled at least a trick or two. Pot dried out my mouth—never good for business—and stole the focus that I needed to get into clients' heads. But the high was always welcome, forging warm connections to each other and the night. It let us be ourselves. Underneath his baby face, Brian was a mastermind, conceiving plans and setting them in motion. Neil displayed a gift for comic accents. Shox would take a toke or two and stand there slack-jawed like a satiated caveman. Our wired little pixie, Magic, hopped from foot to foot and jabbed the air, vanishing as often and as randomly as he appeared.

I smelled the pot a half a block away one slow October night as I was coming back from turning what was probably my only trick. Earlier the weather had been clear and cool, but somewhere around suppertime a warm front had blown in. Soft rain fell and fog descended, bringing on an early dusk. The glow of streetlamps charged the air with orange-coloured plasma.

The X-Men were across from Women's College Hospital. The tail end of a sentence floated up the street.

"... undercutting, man. I say we beat the shit out of him."

Neil spotted me and flashed a loopy smile. Putting Brian in between us when we bunked together hadn't quelled the crush he'd had on me for months.

"Hey, David. That was fast."

“Couldn’t wait to join you guys.”

“Ah, dat’s so sweet,” he mugged, imitating Tweety Bird. “How much did you make?”

“Thirty.”

More like fifty, but I didn’t want to say. Traffic had been spare the night before as well.

“Fuck,” Shox grouched, “how come you’re so lucky?”

“Because, dear boy,” Neil quipped, sounding like a ’30s film, “he puts out for his customers instead of scaring them. They come back that way, you see.”

Shox had to think it over.

Brian handed me the joint. I took two puffs and looked around for who was next. Shox put out a nailbitten mitt.

“We were just discussing Stretch,” Brian filled me in.

“Figures. I heard something about undercutting.”

“It’s not just him,” Neil put in. “It’s all the little kiddies selling now. They’ll do a guy for fifteen if that’s what he’ll pay.”

The changes in Toronto had brought more—and younger—hus-tlers to the block.

“Yeah,” said Shox, passing Neil the joint, “but he’s the one who started it. We shoulda taken care of him.”

Magic, who’d been bobbing up and down, hopped off the curb and started kicking at it. “Fucker’s always down there at the corner by himself. Never bothers to say hi. Looks scared if you go near him. I say we should get him.”

“Teach the boy a lesson?” Neil growled with boot-camp nasti-ness.

“Fuckin’ right.”

Neil offered him the joint. He refused it with a quick flick of his head. Brian’s turn was next.

He took his two puffs slowly.

“I think,” he mused, “we should at least go talk to him.”

“Make him an offer he can’t refuse?” Neil rasped.

“Huh?” said Shox. “What offer?”

Neil rolled his eyes.

The night wore on, the dope wore off. Three cars swished around the corner. None of them slowed down. Magic disappeared. Half an hour later he came back. His nose was running and he couldn't seem to keep his eyes on anything.

Brian turned reflective in a way he got sometimes when he was hatching plans.

"Know what, guys?" he said. "I say let's do it. Let's go talk to Stretch."



He and Neil took the lead. Shox and Magic followed. I pulled up the rear. All of us wore runners so our footfalls made no sound.

Stretch observed the phalanx coming down the sidewalk and crossed quickly to the other side.

"Make like you're going to Frans or something," Brian ordered quietly. "I'll split off and talk to him. Come back by way of Bay. Around the dealership. He won't see you coming."

He peeled off diagonally.

Shox and Magic stayed in front. Neil slowed and fell beside me.

"Lovely night for a beating," he fluted in a British accent.

"You think it'll go that far?"

He gestured at the two ahead.

"Elementary."

A streetcar clattered by. The passengers inside looked lost in misty autumn thoughts.

We passed in front of Frans and turned up Yonge.

"It's five against one," I said.

"Does zat trouble you?" Neil responded in mock German. "Ve all must do vot iss good for ze fazzerland." He giggled. "Or the hustlers' block."

We hung a left at Grosvenor, our circle now three-quarters done. Neil jammed his hands inside his pockets and began to whistle softly.

"You don't plan to get involved," I said.

“Honey—,” Deep South this time, “—ah assure you, ah don’ even know *how* to throw a punch. Ah’m here to lend mah moral support.”

He nudged me on the shoulder.

Shox and Magic slowed at Bay. We crossed together and walked four abreast to Grenville. I hoped things wouldn’t go too far, but neither did I want to see them stop. Shox’ and Magic’s pseudo-righteous anger was infectious. I felt the pull, the same as Neil. Inside my head it was as if the four of us were one.

A ruby neon sputtered in the Caddy showroom window. The heavy air outside appeared to throb in sync.

Stretch’s back was turned when we came around the corner.

“Fuck you, man,” we heard him say. “You don’t own this street.”

Brian answered calmly. “True. But we do all have to share it.”

He threw a glance past Stretch.

“Hey, Stretch,” Neil called. “You got a problem?”

Stretch wheeled. His face was mottled and the skin around his eyes was like a piece of hide drawn tight against his skull.

“What the fuck *is* this?” he drawled, aiming for pissed off, sounding scared instead.

A tingle brushed my groin. The *us* inside my head was growing, taking on a colour like vermilion. The showroom neon turned the air the same peculiar hue. The rainy street reflected it. My body drank it in. The tingle spread toward my abdomen.

Stretch stood rooted to the spot—in my mind, a smear of pale yellow on a field of orange-red. His eyes went left toward the street. Sensing what he planned to do, I made to warn the others. I wasn’t fast enough. Stretch spun and darted left. Magic was on him in a second. I saw a blur, and Stretch was face down on the pavement. The pale yellow flared and filled my inner vision.

Brian ordered Shox to pick him up. Shox rolled him over, grabbed him by the armpits and hefted him upright. His nose was at a funny angle, leaking blood.

“Don’t hurt me, man,” he mumbled. “Please, don’t hurt me

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“Why not?” Brian sneered. “You’re hurting us.”

Magic cocked a fist and planted it in Stretch’s stomach. The yellow flared again. Shox was holding on too tight for Stretch to double over. He started making retching sounds.

“Take him down the street,” directed Brian.

Shox marched him past the dealership. Brian stayed in front with Magic, edging backwards warily.

Stretch abruptly tried to wriggle free of Shox. Shox tripped and both of them went down. Shox let out a roar, and rising to his knees, laced his hands together in a massive fist and swung at Stretch’s head. Stretch’s whole frame shuddered with the blow.

The yellow turned the crimson of a setting sun. The street began to dim behind a haze of swirling reds. The tingling in my cock and belly deepened to a frank erotic charge.

Shox lumbered up. Towering over Stretch he started aiming runners at his ribs. Magic danced around and kicked with lightning feet. Neil stood by and watched. Brian wore a look of satisfaction.

The thrumming in my belly and the colours in my mind were like a thread connecting us. I needed to join in, though—to kick along with Shox and Magic—for the joining to be perfect. The moment my foot landed we’d erupt into completeness.

Blood rushed through my ears and I felt myself move forward.

Headlights swept around the corner. The bewitchment vanished. White light fixed the real scene: a gang of street kids kicking a defenceless victim.

Shox and Magic froze.

“Clear out!” Brian yelled and started running.

Shox and Magic tore off after him.

Neil grabbed my arm.

“Come on, David! We gotta get out of here!”

My legs had turned to jelly, but I shook him off and lurched into a headlong sprint. We hightailed it to Grosvenor and kept on going till we reached the safety of Queen’s Park.

Neil panted to a stop beside a drinking fountain.

“Well, now, that was fun,” he gasped. “Maybe next time we should hire him and rough him up in private. If he’s undercutting, how much can it cost?”