



Contracted (Gangsters at War #4)

Author: *Mel Teshco*

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: He's a merciless killer who gets what he wants. He can have me...for a price

Delilah

When my widowed stepmother kicked me out on the streets when I was sixteen, I was too proud to ask for help from any of my friends. Hunger left me with no choice but to accept money for sex so that I might survive. Four years later I'm not only surviving, I'm thriving. Asked to attend a private party at the Agostinos, a notorious mafia family who are as ruthless and cruel as they are filthy rich and generous, I can't say no. Then my gaze meets the cold eyes of Serafino, and I'm lost even before he decides he wants all of me...body, mind and soul.

Serafino

I'm known as a cold-hearted killer without a conscience, the bad boy of the Agostino mafia. That says a lot considering my brothers can be as ruthless as my father had once been, and he'd been a sick and twisted bastard of the highest order. Nonetheless, I have a reputation to uphold. People are afraid of me for good reason. What would they think though if they discovered the call girl who arrived to service the Agostino brothers is the one woman I want all to myself—a woman I would kill to protect—if she doesn't kill me first.

Total Pages (Source): 23

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:42 am

Serafino

I stood back in the shadows as I watched yet another party unfold on the ground floor of what had been my childhood home. The celebration was all thanks to my mafia family gaining the upper hand against one of our rivals, the O'Malley Irish mafia, after their don, Sean, had been executed.

The victory wasn't half as sweet knowing I hadn't contributed to Sean's death. Maybe then I would have been in a more festive mood. Instead, while our enforcer had exacted revenge by killing Sean in the name of love, I'd been busy drinking whiskey and snorting coke, and sharing whores with my brothers, Evander and Alessandro.

That there would be repercussions from the O'Malleys didn't concern me. I looked forward to their vengeance. I was running on dregs and not even sex and drugs could diminish the void gaining a foothold deep inside me. I needed adrenaline, something to refuel my existence and make me feel alive again.

My other brother, Ethan, the Agostino don and the man I now served, stalked past in his gray Armani suit. His wife, Sabrina, clung onto his arm, her long, silver-blonde hair swept up into an artfully messy bun. She was gorgeous in her dark blue gown that was modest at the front but dipped low at the back. Little wonder Ethan's dark eyes shone with devotion while she smiled up at him as though he was her whole world.

He probably was.

Something between envy and distaste curled deep in my belly. I'd never experienced love with a woman, nor did I expect to. Why would I hand my heart over to the hands of a female only for her to crush the life out of it? Better that I used and abused women who expected nothing less from me.

I loosened my ruby tie before glancing at my gold Patek Phillipe watch. It was almost 10 p.m. The latest high class whores should be here soon to entertain the single males and probably some of the married ones. Not that Ethan would partake, he was beyond happy with his wife, and their recently born son.

My nephew. I might kill without flinching, but the little cherub already had me wrapped around his little finger. Though my brothers had always been my family, along with the men who made up our mafia family, little Pietro had managed to soften the edges of my hardened heart like nobody else ever had.

I sniffed. Whatever. The kid might have gotten under my skin, but nothing could change my most fundamental side. Perhaps a sex show would bring me out of my moroseness and get my blood pumping hot through my veins.

I glanced around at the guests who were already drunk and high, with trays of champagne and coke floating around for whoever wished to partake. My nose twitched. As much as I'd love to lose myself in chemicals, I wanted to keep alert. Who knew when the Irish mafia would next attack to avenge their don?

We'd already lost two soldiers, we weren't about to lose any more.

Despite the men Ethan had stationed around the house—and the bedroom upstairs where he and Sabrina's tiny son was asleep in his cot—I was aware of the increased danger.

I wasn't sure whether to congratulate or bare my teeth like a rabid dog at Valentino

when he stepped through the crowd like a conqueror, his girlfriend at his side. I had to hand it to him though, she was a looker. With her inky black hair piled up on top of her head with long strands flowing around her face, and her sleeveless white dress hugging her slender curves, she looked like a princess, not the abused, former lover of the Irish mafia don.

That Valentino was now fully recovered shouldn't surprise me, not with his fortitude and strength. Except, I'd seen him lifeless like a vegetable, had seen his vitality slowly draining away—not from bullets, but from the deep, profound love he'd found with Chantilly and then imagined he'd lost.

Love really was a fucked up emotion.

I managed a tight smile as they looked my way. Chantilly's gold-brown eyes widened, as though recognizing my menace. But then, she'd be familiar with that vibe after being with Sean and now Valentino. Then he bent and murmured something in her ear and her gaze softened before she smiled back at me, unaffected now thanks to her lover's support.

Valentino nodded my way, his dark stare that locked with mine vastly different to the empty one I'd once known. My breath hissed. He really had changed.

If a woman could do that to someone like Val then maybe I wasn't a total lost cause. I deflated a little. I'd already acknowledged I'd never give a woman that kind of power over me. I was self-destructing fast enough without handing someone the ability to piss on my inner fire.

Valentino might be happy now, but he'd be destroyed when Chantilly turned on him.

When, not if?

I ignored the cynical voice inside my head and nodded at a waiter. He hurried to the bar to retrieve the aged whiskey he knew I enjoyed on the rocks. Champagne wasn't my drink of choice. Not ever.

A minute later I held a crystal tumbler in my hand, absently swishing the amber liquid inside before I took a deep swallow.

It wasn't until a lone woman stepped through the crowd that my entire body tensed and my breathing quickened, my attention centering exclusively on her. Holy fuck. She was drop-dead gorgeous, her long claret-red hair pulled back at the sides in a diamond clip while the rest cascaded down her bared back.

I knew a hooker when I saw one, but her profession was made even more obvious by her black, lace eye mask that enhanced her startling green eyes, her matching stockings and tiny silver-sequined dress that clung to her svelte body, and her little silver clutch that would hold all the tools of her trade.

Less was more worked like a charm on her.

I only hoped she'd left her condoms behind. Our physician would have stringently checked her for any diseases even before she'd stepped through the door. It was why we nearly always called in escorts from the high class agencies we owned, it was safer that way. It also guaranteed those women used birth control.

My cock hardened as she sashayed across the floor like a superstar, captivating everyone. Any other woman might have tottered awkwardly in such high, spiked heels.

I registered Alessandro and Evander's interest, their relaxed postures suddenly as taut as mine, their curiosity ignited. No one burned hotter and brighter than me, I was doused by her radiance, a proverbial moth drawn to her flame.

That I was ready to snap and snarl like a rabid dog at anyone showing any interest in her left me frowning. My ribs squeezed tight as I sucked in a breath through clenched teeth. What the fuck was wrong with me? I had no right to feel anything. She was a hooker; she fucked men for a living. She belonged to no one except the green bills men gave her.

I released a heavy breath. I was experiencing nothing more than lust at first sight. I had no reason to fear that any woman, including this one, would lead me around by the dick, one that was presently thick and hard with my interest piqued like never before.

So why did my legs seemingly move of their own volition when Evander, my half-brother and the underboss of our mafia empire, approached her? Sucking down the last of my drink, I deposited the glass onto a waiter's tray, then adjusting my tailored black jacket, I stepped faster toward her, cutting off Evander's advance and reaching for her hand.

She stilled, her lips parting as I raised her soft hand to my mouth and kissed her knuckles. "I'm Serafino," I announced huskily. I wasn't known for my small talk.

"Delilah," she said with a smile, her brilliant green eyes alight with interest. "You're one of the Agostino brothers I was sent here to pleasure," she added, her voice soft and musical.

She had a slight, lilting accent. French? All I knew for sure was that she was flawless. I managed to nod in response when my brother stopped beside me, his smile wicked as he focused on Delilah.

"I'm Evander, another Agostino brother." His dark, styled hair gleamed under the lights. "I'm looking forward to your...company."

I inhaled sharply, not bothering to return his quick, quizzical glance. Not even when I realized I was still holding her hand. I also wasn't known for my physical affection. I rubbed my thumb over her knuckles before I reluctantly released my hold.

Evander cocked a dark brow at my possessive touch. Clearing his throat, he scanned the crowd then asked her, "You're alone?"

She nodded, her heady scent that drifted my way reminding me of dark plums and rare orchids, of temptation and forbidden secrets. I drew in a deeper breath even as she conceded, "There were meant to be three of us, but my coworkers were a little...intimidated." She blinked, her long lashes concealing her emotions. "Word has it you brothers can get a little hot-blooded."

Roughly translated, a little violent. None of us had gentle natures. Even Evander, who still believed in love, wasn't tender when it came to sex.

My brother smirked. "And yet here you are."

Her returned smile was hollow. "All I care about is my bank account. As my two coworkers aren't here, I expect to be paid triple for my services."

I couldn't help but bark out a laugh. She was fearless, I'd give her that. That she didn't try to pretend money wasn't what lured her into the sex industry made me respect her even more.

My dick thickened and I almost groaned at the increased pressure. It'd be so easy to free my straining shaft and fuck her in the middle of the crowd. But first I'd push up her dress and go down on her, fucking her with my tongue and fingers until her knees buckled as she orgasmed hard.

It wouldn't be the first time I'd enjoyed public sex. My single brothers and I reveled

in a little exhibitionism. Perhaps that was why I couldn't have anticipated a prickling of resentment as Evander's gleaming stare looked her up and down.

"That can be arranged," he said with a half-smile.

Alessandro joined us then, his neat, designer stubble a sharp contrast to his twisted needs. "What can be arranged?"

Evander winked. "Alessandro, you took your sweet time." He nodded at the beautiful redhead. "This is Delilah, one of the women we've been waiting for." He smirked. "Since she was the only woman to show up, she wants a pay rise."

"Does she?" Alessandro asked. His hard stare glittered. "Likely worth it," he conceded.

I bristled as she smiled at him, my hand clenching as I shoved back some darkish strands of my shoulder-length hair. No doubt my irritation shone in my eyes as I caught her stare and asked coldly, "How much for a night alone with me?"

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:42 am

Delilah

I 'd been aware of the man standing in the shadows even before he stepped toward me and grasped my hand. My senses leapt to life, my flesh tingling and my skin prickling. His dangerous energy told me he was one of the mafia brothers even before he'd confirmed it, my inner thighs clenching knowing I'd be soon be his lover.

His brothers were almost as sinister and charismatic, but my focus kept returning to Serafino, our shared chemistry too powerful to resist.

I took a small step back. My reaction to him wasn't normal, not anymore.

I'd been in the sex industry long enough to become jaded. It was why I knew I had to get out. What had once been empowerment and a heady adrenaline rush along with financial freedom had all too quickly become a grinding chore.

I'd had enough. This was my last hurrah, my last night and my biggest pay yet. It meant I'd have enough in my bank account to start a new life, to perhaps even study and make something of myself while I was still young.

Then Serafino asked me how much for a night alone with him and I couldn't help but secretly rejoice. Not only might I finish my profession with my biggest income yet, it might also be with the one man who'd caught my attention from the start.

Alessandro gave his brother a close-lipped smile. "What the fuck, Serafino? Since when don't you share pussy?"

“Since now,” he growled. That he didn’t elaborate, didn’t justify his reasoning wasn’t a surprise. He was obviously a man of few words.

Thanks to my profession, I’d become good—better than good—at judging a man’s character.

Evander snorted, his dark eyes narrowed. “Of all the women you’d want to deny us, did it have to be this one?”

Serafino ignored them and I wondered which one of the brothers was the underboss. I vaguely recalled some gossip on the street about Evander stepping into the position, but perhaps I’d heard wrong? Or perhaps authority didn’t count when it came to their sex lives with the brothers respecting each other’s needs?

Serafino only had eyes for me when he prompted, “How much?”

My pulse stuttered. I already stood to earn thirty grand thanks to my friends being a no-show. Could I earn even more if I was willing to spend the night alone with Serafino while pissing off his brothers?

It’s not like you’ll ever see them again. This is your last opportunity to earn serious dollars before giving up your profession.

I shivered as I held Serafino’s cold stare before I glanced down at the impressive bulge inside his pants. He was the type of man who’d forget his manners and fuck me in this crowded room with everyone watching on.

“Fifty k and I’m all yours,” I said, my voice breathless.

While his brothers stiffened, he nodded without hesitation, his longish hair falling forward then back. “Done.”

“What the fuck,” Evander breathed.

“Well, shit,” Alessandro muttered. “There had better be some decent pussy here tonight.”

Serafino ignored them both as he reached for my hand and drew me away from his brothers and the crowd of partygoers, while four men with long hair and ripped jeans stalked toward a small stage where guitars, a drum set and a microphone waited. I smiled at the distraction. There would be very few now in the crowd who’d notice us leave.

It wasn’t until I stepped out under a large portico with Serafino, and we headed toward a slate pathway, where gravel separated it and a concrete driveway on one side from some pungent, lemon-pine scented hedges on the other, that I found myself relaxing just a little.

The outdoors always soothed me, made me less guarded. That these gardens were lit up by solar lights and were mostly formal, clipped shrubbery didn’t matter. Mother Nature might be cruel sometimes, but people were far more so behind closed doors.

I closed my eyes for a second as memories of my widowed stepmother battered me. Her shrill, accusing voice. Her excessive use of prescription drugs and alcohol. Her paranoia about her looks and aging. Her hate-filled eyes as she’d looked at me—the spitting image of my father—while telling me how repulsive I was before she’d locked me in the attic with no way out.

It hadn’t mattered that it’d had a long lightbulb, not when it had swung like it’d been pushed by an invisible hand. It hadn’t even mattered that I’d had a window to look through, not when it’d been barred to stop anyone pushing it open and not when it’d been so dusty there had been little to see and any sunlight had struggled to infiltrate the room.

She hadn't just imprisoned me; she'd chipped away at my self-esteem until one day I believed I'd deserved her abuse. At least it had made me realize I'd needed to leave the house before I lost my sanity. I'd never looked back. I'd escaped before I'd lost even more of myself to her.

"You're trembling," Serafino said, his voice low.

I sucked in a steadying breath, then flicked open my eyes. "Sorry," I said with a hoarse, half-laugh. "Sometimes I let my past catch up to me." I added hastily, "Rest assured, this is the first time I've allowed it to encroach on my job with a client."

He clasped my chin, his fingertips rough and rasping. I shivered. What bad deeds had he done with those hands? That I imagined they'd bring me to ecstasy as easily as they'd ended others' lives turned me on almost as much as it made me queasy.

To be so powerful and deadly that no one, least of all someone like my stepmother, would dare to treat him with anything but courtesy and respect must be remarkable. She'd probably piss herself facing someone of his reputation.

He looked down as he held my gaze, his shoulder-length hair sliding forward. "I don't want your professional persona. I want to know the real you."

I stared up at him, the shadows making him scarier somehow. But though I should have been intimidated, I was drawn to him, my anesthetized body responding to him in ways I'd never thought would be possible.

His dangerous, dark aura intoxicated me. Normal men didn't do it for me anymore; they hadn't in a long time. I needed someone who kept me walking on a tightrope. I needed excitement, I craved it.

Having sex and giving head to middle-aged, mostly married men, and to fresh-faced

graduates born with a silver spoon in their mouths had long ago lost its appeal.

It was no longer enough, not by a long shot.

I bit my bottom lip. “You’re paying a hell of a lot of money to get to know the real me. Most men— all men—want the fantasy, not reality.”

“I don’t want the fairytale,” he refuted, reaching behind my head to untie my eye mask and gently removing it before pushing it into his jacket pocket. I blinked up at him, feeling exposed somehow, as though he was now reading past my mind and into my soul. He smiled a little. “That’s for men who can’t handle real women or the real world.”

He was the first ever client to request normal from their dream woman. That I needed the opposite wasn’t lost on me. While he was looking for conventional, I was seeking unconventional. Tall, dark and deadly was clearly my type.

He clasped my chin and tilted my head higher as his mouth captured mine, revealing his dominance and skill as he kissed me. I quivered even as my lips automatically parted, his questing tongue that tasted and tangled with mine leaving me reeling.

Holy shit. I needed this stranger to make me want sex again. My passion o-meter was skyrocketing, my lacy thong wet as lust poured through me.

He was undeniably gifted, and I couldn’t help but wonder how glorious it’d feel if he used his mouth and tongue on other parts of my body. I didn’t doubt I’d find out soon enough and I moaned into his mouth, dropping my clutch bag before my arms draped over his broad shoulders while he cupped my ass with one hand and pushed my front against his arousal.

My pulse shuddered. He was freakishly big, but surely I was wet enough and

experienced enough to welcome his length? I writhed against him and it was his turn to groan, his blunt fingertips digging into my butt as he pressed me so close we were almost one.

That his firearm was yet another bulging distraction under his clothes didn't deter me. If anything it made me wetter, my needs greater.

He pulled back to look down at me, his dark eyes glittering. "I want you, Delilah."

He might be a man of few words, but when he spoke with such intensity he didn't need to elaborate.

"I want you too," I said softly. No subterfuge, no acting out yet another man's fantasy. This was my fantasy, my need.

Even if he had asked to fuck me in the room where partygoers were celebrating, I wouldn't have said no. Not because of the fifty K he'd agreed to pay me and not even because it'd change my life for the better, but because he turned me on so effortlessly.

I would have had sex with him for free.

The front door opened, rock music blasting through and obliterating the peace and quiet. A portly, suited man shut the door, quieting the racket. He withdrew something from his pocket. I realized it was a cutter and cigar after he snipped the tip and then lit it, the end glowing. Then he stepped out of the portico and onto the slate pathway toward us.

I knew right away he was someone important. Not because of his age or the world weariness that was apparent even with the shadows that encroached upon him between the solar lights. The way he held himself spoke of someone who didn't

intimidate easily. He was high up in the mafia hierarchy.

“Carlo,” Serafino acknowledged drily.

The older man slowed, the lights now picking out his hard, silvery eyes and thinning hair that in no way diminished his self-importance and ego. He was definitely someone of worth.

“Serafino,” he said, his demeanor reserved. “Need I remind you the Irish mafia is on the warpath? Bad enough we lost two good soldiers, we don’t want to lose you, too. I’d suggest you stay inside with your whore.”

Serafino stiffened, but I was used to the scathing term. Men like Carlo no doubt enjoyed hookers on a regular basis and yet they themselves were immune to derogatory labels.

“You will call this lady, Delilah,” Serafino said quietly, but with such an alarmingly dark undertone my pulse spiked harder again.

Carlo nodded tightly. “It’s nice to meet you, Delilah , if that is even your real name, of course.”

I nodded back just as tightly, peeved by his assumption. “It is. My father loved his biblical stories. I’m sure he would have named me Samson if I’d been a boy.”

Carlo had already lost interest, his dismissal of me all too obvious as he refocused on Serafino and reminded, “You know I err on the side of caution when it comes to our enemies, especially since one of our informants has suggested plans are in place to further avenge Sean’s death.”

“I’m aware of the situation.”

Carlo sucked on his cigar, the tip glowing red before the sickly scent of its smoke wafted our way. “I have no doubt of that,” he conceded. “Believe it or not, I do care about what happens to Lorenzo’s boys.”

“That was never in dispute. But I think we’ve proven we’re no longer boys and can look after ourselves—and others—as has Isabella.”

“You have all proven that time and again,” Carlo acknowledged. “But Sean’s brother, Connor, is—“

“A hothead who lacks self-control and discipline,” Serafino interjected. He sighed heavily, clearly sick of the conversation. Or perhaps he was sick of talking, period. I had a feeling he’d spoken more than usual. It seemed his respect for the older man ran deep. He crouched to pick up my clutch bag, then returned it to me as he straightened and asked, “Do you wish to go inside?”

That he asked instead of commanded made me a little giddy. Until Carlo’s shocked, smoky coughing fit quickly disintegrated my passion and left me feeling off-kilter. It looked like I’d be playing my role tonight, after all. I didn’t want to leave my profession on a sour note, with my last client regretting his fifty K bill.

Once Carlo regained his composure, he continued puffing his cigar as he led the way back under the portico and to the front door, making conversation as he went. “Without you brothers and Valentino on duty there is a much higher likelihood our enemies will infiltrate this place. And if our enemies can’t take one of us down, they’ll kill or take someone we care about instead.”

I didn’t miss his pointed look my way. And by the way Serafino moved between me and the older man, he hadn’t missed it either. It was...nice to feel shielded and secure, like nothing bad could touch me.

Until Serafino did. Because I had no doubt he was the baddest of them all.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:43 am

Delilah

I nodded demurely at Serafino as he held open the front door for me. I didn't have to worry about him caring about me. We might be attracted to one another on some insanely high level, but I wasn't stupid enough to imagine he wouldn't happily discard me come morning.

Whatever.

Despite my profession being a risky one, my wellbeing and safety had always been high on my list of priorities. Self-preservation had carried me this far, I wouldn't allow anything or anyone to set me down on a path that was sign-posted self-destruct.

He put his arm around my waist as he led me deeper into the noise, the long-haired band members playing covers of rock songs like they were their own. Despite being unbalanced by the confrontation with Carlo, the music and the heady atmosphere brought my excitement back up a couple of notches.

I smiled up at Serafino and his dark eyes shone. He was clearly just as glad to have left the conversation outside behind and enjoy the moment with me. He lifted curled fingers to his mouth, imitating having a drink, before he nodded toward the bar.

I nodded back and mouthed, "I'd love one."

I rarely, if ever, drank on the job, but tonight was...different. Not only was it my last night in my profession but I was reaching for the stars with this man and was happy to break my sobriety this once.

One of the bar staff was already pouring him a whiskey when we arrived, and Serafino turned to me and leaned close to my ear to ask, “What would you like to drink?”

I put up two fingers, then mouthed, “I’ll have what you’re having.”

He seemed delighted by my choice and I hid a smile. Did he think all women were champagne guzzlers? I might only imbibe occasionally, but when I did my bar at home attested to my expensive taste in both bourbon and scotch.

The band had broken into a slow rock ballad when Serafino nodded at the dancefloor. I giggled and nodded. If he wanted me to dance with him I was happy to oblige. As lovely as it was that he asked for my permission, he was paying me a hefty sum to obey his every whim.

He tipped his drink back and swallowed it down, and I followed suit, enjoying the burn as it went down my throat. The next minute he took my glass and set it down along with his own onto the bar top, then he plucked my clutch bag out of my hand. He handed it to the barman and said, “Look after this.”

The barman nodded, then indicated he’d leave it under the bar.

Serafino drew me out onto the dancefloor where probably a dozen couples were already dancing. I didn’t miss the raised eyebrows and shocked looks. Clearly he rarely danced, if at all.

I searched the fringes of the dancefloor and locked eyes with Evander. Going by his wide-eyed stare this was definitely new territory for Serafino.

Then Serafino took me in his arms and I closed my eyes as I pressed against his hard chest. Swaying across the dancefloor didn’t seem too overly complicated for him, not

when he probably hunted like a silent and deadly, apex predator.

Another little thrill shot through me. What was wrong with me? I should despise men like him, instead I basked in his power, in the fact he'd never answer to anyone except his don, and perhaps his consigliere and underboss.

I looked up at him. He blinked, his brilliant eyes gauging, assessing. Had he read my worshipful gaze? Thanks to my profession, he probably thought it was all an act. Perhaps not. A second later his gaze darkened and he bent his head and kissed me again.

Damn. His dominant mouth only heightened the intensity between us, the simmering passion. If our first kiss had been a Fourth of July explosion, this kiss was just as heady. He knew exactly what he was doing. I didn't even care about all the eyes on us. Though he'd done very little dancing in public, I'd bet he'd more than kissed other women in public.

A sharp, stabbing pain—jealousy?—had me jerk my head back, my eyes wide as I searched his.

He frowned, his hands tightening on my waist. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I lied, before adding truthfully, “I-I’m feeling things I probably shouldn’t.”

His hard face softened, his voice gentle when he leaned closer and said into my ear, “You’re not alone, my little firebird.”

Firebird? I shivered at the pet name that was clearly symbolic of my fiery red hair.

He pulled back and I blinked up at him, wanting to believe him, needing to believe

him. The people in my life hadn't left me brimming with belief in human nature; everyone close to me had either abandoned me or hated on me.

At least I could leave clients behind without any regrets. They were strangers, men I'd been physically intimate with while keeping my emotions safely locked away. That Serafino was becoming less safe every minute I spent with him was making me a little uneasy even as I reveled in the sensation.

I was finally letting down my walls and I wasn't exactly sure how I felt about it. Serafino wasn't the most prudent option. Was my subconscious attracted to him solely because no one would dare mess with him?

That he seemed as fixated with me as I was with him only made me more drawn to him.

You'll be with him for one night only, and who knows how violent he might become in the bedroom with no one else around.

My breath shuddered out. I'd heard the rumors. The Agostino mafia men weren't known for their gentlemanly acts with women. I'd heard their father, Lorenzo, had been the worst of them all. Though I had no idea how he'd died, I was only grateful he was no longer alive to terrorize any more women.

Sex was one thing I couldn't lose control of. It'd become something I could count on, the one thing I could command. Though it might have lost its charm, it'd never lost its power. My clients might think they were in charge, but I was the one they wanted, the woman they'd do anything to own, even just for a few hours.

I'd never felt that way more strongly than I did with this man. He wanted me on a level that was higher than the moon. It was oddly intoxicating and addicting, even as I wished not to experience such intensity and passion on the last day of my

profession. I didn't want to walk away second-guessing anything.

I wanted a clean slate, my past forgotten.

This man was blurring those lines and making me want the impossible.

I needed to steer clear of him and his family. After tonight I intended to do just that.

I managed a smile. "We make a good team," I conceded. I forced brightness into my voice. "I'm going to enjoy our time together."

I'd redrawn the line between us, reminding him that tonight was all we had, all we'd ever had.

He nodded, though I sensed my words had dimmed his fervor ever so slightly. I imagined, like me, he hadn't been thinking about our force of nature coming to an end anytime soon.

"I'll make sure of that," he finally vowed. He pulled me closer, so close our bodies almost merged. "Every time you fuck some other guy, it will be me you'll be thinking about. It will be us you'll be remembering together."

I trembled a little at the conviction and ferocity of his words. I wouldn't tell him that after tonight—after him—there wouldn't be any more clients. I dared not give him further ammunition to use in his fight to make me crave him alone.

Not that he gave me a chance to talk. He drew my head up and covered my mouth with his as he kissed me into an oblivion I never wanted to extract myself from. Pleasure fired up my synapses and burned through my body, my temperature rising fast.

He drew back only to lift me into his arms and carry me off the dancefloor. I clung onto his nape, a thrill shooting through me as my pulse thudded in my ears. His hair brushed my hands as he stalked toward a set of elevator doors. He punched a button to one side of a wall and the doors slid open, then as quickly closed behind us.

He looked down at me, his grip tightening. “If we didn’t have men watching every part of this house except the bedrooms and bathrooms, I’d gladly take you in the elevator.”

“A bunch of perverts would stop you?” I asked breathlessly.

His stare darkened. “Normally, no, it wouldn’t. But you’re worth more to me than that, and I don’t mean how much I paid to have you.”

My whole body tingled. I’d never been valued above the fee for my time, not ever. Yet here was this hard—literally—mobster man making me feel priceless in every way, shape and form.

“I want you more than I’ve ever wanted anyone,” he said roughly, but with so much sincerity, I almost melted in his arms.

“I feel the same way,” I admitted in a low voice. That I meant every word and it wasn’t part of my high price escort persona was everything to me. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d actually wanted a man so unreservedly.

The doors slid open with a hiss. As he carried me down a corridor he explained, “I have my own wing inside this house, though I rarely stay here anymore. I’m usually at my own premises in the city, unless I’m here for business purposes.”

“Or parties?” I added as I distantly noted the exquisite art on the walls, the abstract sculptures that would be worth a small fortune.

He nodded. “Yeah, or for that. As a mobster family we have to be seen as a united front.”

“From my perspective you and your brothers appear to genuinely care about one another.”

He nodded, then sighed heavily and admitted, “We do. It’s never far from our minds that we’ve already lost one brother, we can’t lose another.”

“I’m so sorry,” I said softly. “I can’t imagine what you’ve been through.”

He grimaced. “That our brother-in-law was the killer doesn’t help matters.”

I gaped, recalling the blond-haired Salvatore who’d worshipped his wife, Isabella. His adoration towards Serafino’s sister had clearly blocked me from sensing his cold-blooded nature. “You’re serious?”

“Unfortunately, I am.” He nodded at a pair of soldiers standing in front of a large, carved door. They immediately left their post guarding Serafino’s wing of the house. He pushed the door open and stepped inside with me still in his arms. “Not that any of us blame Salvatore for what he did after our father killed his mother. Blood for blood is the mafia motto we live and die by.”

My heart did a crazy little jig at his confession. I sensed few people knew what he’d told me. Not that it really mattered. The mafia was above the law, above everyone. It didn’t mean he and his family were immune to rival families, like the Irish mafia Carlo had warned him about.

I arched a brow. “Is dismissing those guards a good idea? If a war really is imminent—“

“I want you all to myself,” he interjected. “I don’t want those buffoons to overhear...anything.”

My skin tingled even as my soul shriveled a little. What kind of noises would his men have overheard? Screams of pain or ecstasy?

“And they’re still keeping guard, just not right at the front of my door.”

I relaxed a little. He wouldn’t have stayed alive for as long as he had without being careful.

He bent and placed me on my feet, his hair sliding forward. “I liked you in my arms.”

“I liked being in your arms,” I admitted huskily. Especially with my legs now so shaky and unbalanced. I clung onto his forearm, my laugh strained, nervous. “Perhaps I shouldn’t have had that drink.”

He cocked his head to the side, his eyes narrowed. “What’s really going on, Delilah?”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:43 am

Serafino

She shook her head, though I noted a glint of reservation in her eyes as she said, “It’s nothing, really. You’re paying too much for me to question...anything.”

I resisted jerking a fistful of my hair and showcasing my frustration. I’d cured myself of the habit I’d developed as a boy when I’d been unable—unwilling—to communicate my emotions. As an adult I was far more controlled, until this woman had swept the rug out from under my feet. “I’m not going to hurt you, that is the last thing I want.”

She blinked, her eyes going from guarded to soft and dewy. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to ruin our moment.” She sighed abstractedly. “I’m meant to be your biggest fantasy.”

“You are my biggest fantasy.” Words that wouldn’t normally make it out of my mouth were pouring out like notes from an instrument. “And I’ve already said I want the real you, which includes any fears or reservations you might have.”

I could only thank the stars I’d saved her from my brothers’ passion. They wouldn’t have held back, and normally, neither would I, but this woman brought out my protective instincts and something deeper I refused to contemplate.

I’d focus on taking care of her and pleasuring her by any method necessary, if that included pain to turn her on, then so be it. And didn’t that make me the biggest contradictory prick to walk on the planet.

I reached out and clasped her chin. “No more talking,” I rasped. “I want you in my bed.”

She stared up at me with her mysterious green eyes, her gorgeous hair reminding me of something between red wine and blood. A firebird. Her shimmering, silver dress that bared more than it covered was undoubtedly expensive, yet I yearned to swathe her in priceless gowns that were for my eyes only.

I hardly knew her and yet I was already obsessed. That I cared less should have troubled me more, but in that moment I would have sacrificed almost anything just to be with her.

Then I clasped her hand and drew her with me past my sitting room, my kitchen and dining room, then down a short hallway that led to my office on one side and my master bedroom on the other.

I pushed open my bedroom door. I only hoped she appreciated my masculine touch, where dark-stained cherry wood featured in the wall paneling behind my hand carved bedhead. Gray blinds and a matching comforter were the only color aside from some splashes of white thanks to my pillowcases and the huge black-and-white abstract artwork on my wall that was a swirl of the two contrary colors that ended in a scattering of spots that looked more like stars.

I pulled her to me and stripped off her dress. I lost my breath at seeing her in nothing more than a silver thong and a strapless bra that barely covered her plump tits. My mouth watered. I wanted to suck her nipples and her clit. I wanted to stick my tongue inside her mouth and her pussy, tasting every part of her until she was a part of me.

Instead I stepped toward a small round table where I kept my whiskey, a crystal tumbler and a remote. I chose the remote and pressed a button, soulful music springing into life from hidden, surround-sound speakers. I watched her with heavy-

lidded eyes. “Dance for me.”

She didn't hesitate. She was bold and brazen as she held my stare, and oh so fucking sexy as she lifted her arms and curled them over her head, her hips swaying from side-to-side as she moved to the sensual beat.

I groaned, my cock so hard it bordered on painful. I'd never seen anything so damn arousing in all my life. She intoxicated me and I couldn't get enough. She could have been made for me, everything about her utter perfection. Then she slowly turned around as she continued swaying, her butt all but bared with just her thong's narrow string covering her crack.

A burning wave of need hit me harder than ever. Had she ever been taken up the ass? Of course she had, her clients would have requested that all too often.

And that's all you are, a client. You're no more special to her than any other man, except you paid a hell of a lot more for the privilege to fuck her.

A growl tore from my throat as something too close to rage built inside me. I was a pressure cooker of withheld emotions and needs. I stalked back toward her, my conscience deserting me as I yanked her to me, then ripped off her bra. As her tits tumbled free and she gasped at my sudden ire, her green eyes wide and burning with fear and excitement, the beast inside me grew even more powerful.

“Don't. Move.” I kneeled at her feet and took off her shoes, tossing each one aside before I rolled down her stockings and discarded them. Her legs were slender and toned, her toenails shimmering with silver polish. I stuck my thumbs under the thong's string that sat on her hips, then pulled it down, my lust increasing tenfold as I bared her hairless pussy to my greedy eyes.

My mouth dried as I scented her slick wetness that enhanced her rare orchid and dark

plum scent. Fuck . I was going to take her again and again tonight. I was going to fuck her so long and so hard she really wouldn't remember the other men who'd paid for her services.

She stepped out of her thong, completely nude now. I looked up at her as I brought the scrap of material to my face and inhaled its scent. "I want to learn every part of you," I said hoarsely.

She gasped, her green eyes blazing. A feral roar rushed through me. I was her alpha male, and I was ready to claim her. I tossed her thong aside and leaned forward, my hands clasping her inner thighs as I used my thumbs to spread her pussy open.

Her pink flesh with its clit sitting inside like a hidden jewel sent my mouth from dry to saliva-filled. I leaned forward and licked her exposed flesh, making her quiver and moan. I licked harder, inhaling her heady scent before I pushed a finger deep inside her.

I smirked at her breathless little gasp. I'd always had big hands and long, thick fingers. I'd been told their size matched my anatomy. Only the most experienced women took me on without fear. Whores had always been my pick because their bodies were used to being exploited. Even better, they didn't expect anything in return, except remuneration.

My chest tightened, my burning need expanding inside at the realization she was the first woman I'd actually entertain the idea of being with long-term.

Fuck.

I pushed another finger inside her, doubling my penetration while I tongued her plump clit with little flicks that left her squirming.

Had seeing so many of my family being happily married actually gotten to me? Did I want what I didn't deserve? Because I was the last man on the planet who should be gifted with something as precious as love. I was sick and twisted, a reprobate with a soul darker than the devil's.

I deserved a death sentence or life behind bars.

The knowledge filled me with despair, and as I covered her nub with my mouth, I sucked relentlessly hard. She stiffened with a sharp gasp, a ragged scream piercing the air as she fell to pieces, causing the raging, lustful beast within to take over, eclipsing every other emotion except a gratification I had yet to sate.

I didn't doubt for one second Delilah would run for the hills once I'd finished with her.

The thought almost undone me.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:43 am

Delilah

I saw the change come over Serafino even before he lunged to his feet and crushed me to him, devouring my mouth with his own. My pulse beat wildly. He wasn't the man I'd gotten to know. He was completely untamed, his polite veneer stripped away to expose a primal lust that both terrified and turned me on.

He was pure alpha dominance and no longer showed restraint. I'd been with many clients over the years, but nothing compared to Serafino's confronting needs...just as nothing compared to the needs he induced inside of me.

I returned his kiss, my hunger matching his until it seemed as if we were both consumed by the same flame that had detonated into an inferno and melded us as one.

I pushed off his jacket as he unholstered his firearm and placed it on his nightstand. I tore my mouth from his as I undid the zipper on his trousers with jerky, uncoordinated hands before I shoved his pants down his strong legs. I didn't care that my high class persona had left the building and I'd become a needy, lust-ridden wench who cared about my own needs as much as his.

And neither did he.

His growl was more animal than human as he toed off his shoes and stepped out of his pants, his erection a big lump in his boxer briefs. He didn't need to command me to get on my knees, I was already there, swiping my tongue over the outline of his cock through the silky material of his briefs.

Liquid heat rushed to my core even as I noticed the wet, pre-cum patch on his briefs that barely contained his shaft. I licked him again and he pushed the fingers of one hand through my hair while he used his other hand to thrust down his briefs and bare his massive cock to my gaze.

He didn't need to ask me to take his length into my mouth, I did it without hesitation and any urging. I was burning for him and desperate to taste him.

I pushed my lips over the head of his cock, flicking my tongue across the tip to taste the salty-tang of his lingering pre-cum. My eyes fluttered closed and I hummed approval. I'd never really enjoyed blow jobs, but I wanted to please this man, I wanted to taste and suck him and feel every intimate part of him inside my mouth.

I enclosed my lips over him and sucked him harder into my mouth until his shaft rested at the back of my throat. That I hadn't managed to bring all his length into my mouth didn't deter me. I began sucking up and down, loving his groans and muttered growls as he surrendered to my technique.

Not that I was relying on past practice, sucking Serafino was like giving head again for the very first time, except I wanted to do it, enjoyed it. I was succumbing to the experience as much as he was.

"No more," he growled thickly.

I released him, then looked up at him as I licked my lips.

He exhaled shakily. "Get on my bed."

I nodded, aware I was no longer in charge. I lay down and reached for him. He shook his head. "On your belly."

My lashes fluttered, my womb pulling tight even as I did as he asked and rolled over. He knelt behind me and I felt his stare roaming over my naked ass and the length of my back. My muscles flexed tight as I waited for his oversized possession of my body.

He clamped one arm around my waist and lifted my ass high as he guided his cock to my entrance. That I was saturated thanks to his foreplay meant that I shouldn't have any trouble—

I sucked in a pained breath as he thrust forward and filled me to capacity. My inner muscles shrieked and cramped at the invasion, my channel burning. Fuck. I'd never been so utterly stuffed, like he'd just shoved a square peg into a round hole.

I'd been a fool to think I could take him on. I'd never be able to relax enough to enjoy our union.

Then he pushed my hair away from my nape and kissed me there. It was one of my few erogenous zones, and I cried out a little as electricity danced through my veins and pleasure quickly overtook pain. But it wasn't until he reached under my ass and parted my pussy to find my clit, then pinched the bundle of nerves that I exploded with a sharp scream.

I hadn't even finished orgasming when he held my hips and began hammering inside me with unrelenting strokes, harder and faster. Sweat formed between us at the friction that all but created a fire within. Pain no longer existed. I was on a whole other plane where I was aiming for the stars. I counterthrust, my ragged moans joining his grunts and groans as he plundered my body.

He didn't stop and I was once again on the precipice of orgasm when he simultaneously sucked my nape and pinched my clit. I fell into the abyss, rejoicing as I plummeted by shouting out his name.

His hands tightened, his fingers digging into my hips as his whole body shuddered and he followed me over. His seed pulsed deep inside of me while he bellowed with pleasure, my name then sounding like a whimper on his lips.

When it came to this man, all I thought about was how much he was thinking about me, wanting me, while he claimed my body. All I was thinking about was how much I now wanted him to think about me after I was discarded and another woman took my place.

I really did need to get away from him as soon as possible.

Then he bent close to my ear and said in a possessive whisper, “I’m not finished with you yet, my little firebird.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:43 am

Delilah

I woke to sunlight blazing through the slitted cracks in the blinds, and to Serafino sleeping soundly beside me. I wasn't surprised. He'd been insatiable. I'd never been so thoroughly fucked in my entire life.

I managed to extricate myself from his arms, though he muttered something in his sleep that sounded aggrieved.

I winced as I pushed to my bare feet. I ached everywhere. He'd brought me pleasure even while he'd at times pushed the limits to my pain, though the former had won out every single time.

I retrieved my thong and pulled it up my legs, then found my bra and clipped it on. I couldn't resist turning to stare at Serafino one last time as he peacefully slept. He looked so much younger, almost innocent, despite the fact he so easily killed. That he'd also brought me to ecstasy and made me yearn for more seemed wrong on so many levels.

I turned away, grabbing my skimpy dress off the floor and dragging it over my head. I found my diamond clip near the bed and I slid it through my tangled hair after creating a messy bun.

It was only then that I realized I'd left my clutch bag, the lifeblood of my profession, behind in the bar downstairs last night. I needed—or at least the cell phone inside of it—so that I could ring Sinead, the madam of the girls where I worked, to organize transport.

“Going somewhere?”

My pulse surged as I spun back around to face Serafino. Damn, he was a beautiful man, his sex-tousled hair and brilliantly dark, narrowed eyes making my insides clench. That he was also deadly made me swallow hard. I might have had sex with him, but it didn't mean I was now safe.

He threw the covers aside and swung out of bed, unashamedly naked, his morning erection proudly jutting out as if reminding me how much I enjoyed being the recipient of such a powerful tool.

I cleared my throat. “I am,” I said huskily. “Our business here is done.”

He stalked around the bed toward me. I stood my ground even though I felt like I was prey for him to capture and devour.

Need rippled through me, my body telling me I wouldn't mind a repeat performance.

He didn't say a word when he stopped in front of me. Not even when he clasped either side of my face and tipped my head up as he swooped low and he claimed my mouth in a kiss that immediately curled my toes.

Only once I'd melted against him, submissive to his demands, did he release me and ask hoarsely, “Is it?”

I nodded mutely, sweeping a hand toward the slats of the blind where sunlight poured through. “We agreed to one night together. Sinead will already be in a panic—“

“Sinead works for me,” he interjected. “Believe me, she won't interfere on your behalf. She knows better.”

I pressed my hand to my brow. I'd only been working at the exclusive escort agency for a couple of months, it seemed I still had a lot to learn—like who Sinead was actually working for. Who I was working for. It made sense now why two of my coworkers had refused to attend the mafia celebration. They'd probably been regulars of the mafia brothers and had known what to expect.

He arched a brow as he watched my expression, my thoughts no doubt showing through my eyes like words in an open book. “Your two friends who didn't show up last night are likely already fired. Sinead values loyalty and respect as much as I do.”

My pulse fluttered furiously. “Wasn't I enough for you?”

He chuckled darkly. “You were more than enough, sweetheart. You're all I want. But I can't say the same for my brothers. Since I made you unavailable, they would have had to find some female guests to enjoy in their beds...or wherever they happened to fuck them.”

I quietly exhaled before another thought brought back anxiety. I'd been ready to hand in my resignation, but if two girls were already gone, Sinead could ill-afford another girl to leave.

Shit.

He smirked, his eyes assessing me. “She also values the girls who look after their clients.”

I frowned. “I did that—very well—last night.”

“You did,” he murmured. “But I'm not finished with you yet. I want today and tonight again with you.”

Something dark and intoxicating stirred inside me, making me breathless...reckless. This was living! This was the challenge I needed. It didn't mean I'd be taken for granted. "I don't do anything for free. My time has a price."

He didn't appear shocked, if anything he seemed accepting, perhaps even a little amused. "You will be generously compensated."

"Generously?" I repeated.

His eyes hardened fractionally. But I wasn't about to defend myself. I wasn't about to ease his mind and tell him I never wanted to be poverty-stricken or homeless again. If I was a gold digger it was because I had no one to rely on except myself. My financial security and independence was imperative to me now.

I couldn't ever be helpless again.

"Very generously," he added.

I tingled all over, even as a part of me shriveled a little. Did he look at me differently now? Pfft. I might be a high-class escort, but most men, even those who had sex with me, considered me lower than low. The double-standards and hypocrisy had long ago stopped making my blood boil.

I'd accepted I couldn't control other peoples' mindset. That my fucked-up childhood had led me toward this path wouldn't matter to them, and I was sure it wouldn't matter to Serafino, either.

He turned from me and stalked around the bed to his nightstand, his back muscles flexing and his lighter-skinned buttocks apple-tight. I swallowed convulsively as he retrieved his cellphone. He glanced back at me. "Let me put that money into your account. This will be off the books, yours alone. I'm certain Sinead has made enough

off you and the rest of the girls.”

My throat tightened, my chest warming, though I hopefully managed not to look too desperate or grateful as I rattled off my bank details.

He nodded, then finished with his banking, he put down his cell and said, “Let’s get out of here.”

I looked down at my barely-there dress. “In this?” It wasn’t exactly appropriate for daytime wear.

He stepped back to his walk-in closet, forgoing underwear as he dressed into a charcoal gray suit with a cream shirt. After pushing on his footwear, he retrieved a white, button-up shirt and returned to hand it to me. “This should suffice for now.”

I pushed my arms into the shirt’s long sleeves, then buttoned it up before tying it to one side so that the hem of my dress was visible beneath.

His eyes darkened. “You’ve transformed that shirt. But then, you’d look gorgeous in a sack.”

After re-holstering his firearm, he reached for my hand, then led me back through the wing of his house and down the elevator. Collecting my clutch bag from under the bar, we walked together out through the portico.

I breathed in the fresh morning air that was tinged with pine and the vague scent of wood smoke. A bird twittered in the trees, a small lizard scuttling off the slate pathway and under the safety of the hedges.

My heels then crunched across gravel before click-clacking on the concrete driveway, where a suited man waited beside the opened, back passenger door of a black sedan.

I nodded at him, but he barely acknowledged me. I supposed I barely scraped anyone's interest being that I was nothing more than a prostitute, yet another transient lover in Serafino's life. I sighed heavily as I climbed into the leather seat and slid across, making room for him.

He looked at me. "Everything okay?"

I nodded. "Nothing I haven't gotten used to."

He cocked a brow. "Meaning?"

The driver shut the passenger door then walked around the car to take the driver's seat. I nodded at the man. "Meaning I'm looked at differently, with disdain or disinterest, thanks to being a sex worker."

"Emilio," he barked at the driver.

Emilio turned his head, his eyes sharp and bright with fear as he focused on Serafino. "Yes?"

"You will treat my lady friend here with the utmost respect and reverence."

Emilio turned his head to look at me. "My apologies, Ma'am."

"Apology accepted," I said in a small voice, though sparks of happiness filled me from within. Serafino had listened to me before acting on my behalf. I'd never had that from anyone before.

The driver smiled at me, then fired up the engine and drove down the long driveway before turning right onto an arterial road. That New York was a little over an hour in the other direction had me sitting up and asking Serafino, "Where are we going,

exactly?”

“You’ll see,” he said noncommittedly.

We didn’t travel far, maybe thirty minutes before the driver slowed then turned off the main road onto a narrower strip of asphalt that led to a small, tranquil village nestled amongst hills with leafy trees. It boasted an old-world charm, which I imagined drew in tourists as it was bustling for such a small community.

I had to admit, I was a little excited at the outing. I rarely ventured outside of New York, my apartment was ludicrously expensive and my work kept me city bound most of the time. Not to mention I was doing everything possible to fill my savings account.

The driver opened the back passenger door, and Serafino pushed on dark sunglasses before he slid out, then proffered me a hand. I accepted his steadying clasp as he drew me to my feet, my heels unwieldy on the cobblestone pathway that bordered the shopfronts along the street.

Two young women strutted past in jeans and cowgirl hats, and I touched my messy bun, then looked down at my borrowed white shirt and the dress that barely covered my ass. I stood out like a sore thumb. I hadn’t even had a shower this morning.

Did I smell like sex?

“You’re beautiful,” he murmured, as though reading my mind. Then he leaned closer and said, “I can smell myself on you.”

Another sedan pulled in behind us and he sent the driver a lazy wave before explaining, “Extra security, just to be safe.”

He scanned the area, then drew me across the street to a cozy café that was buzzing with patrons. “It’s still early enough for the breakfast menu.”

The café was charming, with rattan chairs and glass tabletops, a blackboard showcasing the day’s specials in looping, cursive writing. The scent of pastries and coffee beans was heavy in the air, the espresso machine kept busy as it gurgled and hissed.

A pretty young waitress approached, but Serafino had eyes only for me when she asked for our orders. I requested a chai latte while he decided on a strong black coffee. For breakfast we decided on sausages, eggs and hash-browns with a side of grilled tomato and avocado.

It wasn’t until our drinks arrived, steam floating gently from the top of the mugs, that I asked him, “So, who is Carlo to you?”

“He’s our consigliere, my oldest brother’s advisor. He was also our late father’s consigliere.”

At least now I understood why he respected the older man so much. I knew enough about the mob to comprehend Carlo was a big deal.

I’m sorry about your dad.”

My heart ached whenever I thought about my own father no longer being around.

“Don’t be.” He took a sip from his mug. “He wasn’t exactly a loveable father.”

“What did he do?”

“Other than being so ambitious he used his sons and daughter to be the most feared

mafia family in New York and the entire country? It didn't matter to him how he obtained that objective, just as long as he did." He grimaced. "I guess that was why Ethan eliminated our dad before he forced Ethan to eliminate Sabrina."

I gaped. "Your dad wanted Ethan to get rid of his own wife?" Serafino nodded and I added, "That is fucked up."

His grin was a little crooked. "Welcome to my family." He put his mug down. "What about your family?"

I grimaced. "I don't really remember my mother. I was five when she returned to France and remarried."

"That explains your accent."

"It might be the only thing I acquired from her." I took a sip of my drink, the spices soothing. "She started a new life with another man and left me with dad. I was happy enough, but he must have been lonely. He remarried when I was nine, then died when I was thirteen. Turned out his heart wasn't good. I sometimes wonder if my mom broke it."

"What happened to your stepmother?"

I almost choked on my next sip as I tried not to show my hurt, my desolation. "She was hateful," I said quietly. "I think every time she looked at me she saw my father. She couldn't cope. I ran away and never looked back. I didn't care that I was broke and homeless for weeks."

His nostrils flared ever so slightly. "You survived by selling your body?"

I nodded. "It didn't take long to discover it was my ticket to financial freedom."

His gaze held mine. “How old were you when you ran away?”

“Sixteen,” I admitted.

He reached for my hand, his expression solemn. “I’m sorry you went through that.”

I shrugged, suddenly self-conscious. I was a high class hooker, I wasn’t meant to burden my clients with negativity. Most of my clients were trying to escape their own family dramas. But Serafino had said he didn’t want the fantasy. I guess I’d given him anything but that.

At least the sex had been incredible.

I cleared my throat. “It all worked out in the end.”

He pushed his sunglasses on top of his head, his astute stare appearing to see right through me. “Did it?” He smiled, though his eyes glittered with knowledge. “If you’d been able to pick a career before you were forced into your present occupation, what would you have become?”

I shrugged. “Probably an interior designer and decorator. I have a good eye.”

“You’re still young enough to fulfill that dream.”

I nodded. “I am.” I’d just turned twenty-two, yet it seemed as though I’d lived three or four lifetimes already.

“Just not yet?” he prompted.

I took another sip of my chai latte. He didn’t need to know I wasn’t doing escort work after this last night with him. I just had to convince Sinead of that. Being that she’d

just lost two workers and I was one of her most sought after call girls, she wouldn't be happy I wanted to leave.

A waitress brought our breakfast then, and I was thankful for the interruption. No client had ever asked about me about my plans, my future, they'd only ever been keen to discuss their own interests.

Picking up my fork, I said wryly, “ Bon appetit .”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:43 am

Serafino

I knew evasiveness when I saw it and heard it, and Delilah was evading my questions like a pro. Literally. I almost smirked at the irony, except there was nothing funny about a woman whose traumatic past had paved her future.

We ate our breakfast in silence, and though it had been cooked to perfection, I barely tasted a thing. All my senses had honed in on Delilah, my body flooding with endorphins.

The universe had been listening when it had sent me the very thing I'd been looking for: something— someone —to refuel my existence and make me feel alive again. I'd never been more attuned to a woman before, had never been more invested or intrigued. I was beginning to understand why Ethan, Salvatore and Valentino had risked everything for their women.

Though I'd become comfortable using and abusing women, I wanted to cherish Delilah and make her happy. I wanted to see her smile and bask in her radiance. She was a special woman who deserved the world. That I didn't deserve her wasn't something I was ready to acknowledge just yet.

Paying for our meals, I pulled out her chair and led her outside, turning left and heading toward a small boutique that was becoming known for its quality fashion.

Delilah looked up at me as we entered the shop, the little bell on its front door trilling to announce our arrival. "I think I've heard of this place, it's very exclusive."

I nodded. “It is.” That it meant we’d likely have the place to ourselves made me happy.

A thin, bleached-blond saleslady approached, her bright red lips thinning as she looked Delilah up and down before she all but preened as she viewed me in my tailored suit. “May I help you?”

I was tempted to subtly slip open my jacket and bare my firearm, anything to wipe the superior look off her face. Instead I said, “I want you to find this lady everything she needs.”

The saleslady lifted her pointy chin, her eyes alight with dollar signs as she said, “Of course, come this way.”

A few minutes later another saleslady came out with tea in a delicate china cup. It definitely wasn’t my drink of choice, but I accepted it and settled into a squashy chair while Delilah was swept into a curtained area where she could change into everything presented to her.

The two ladies tottered back and forth in their heels, showing me whatever outfits they’d found which might suit Delilah. I shook my head at a frilly pink dress—were they serious?—then nodded at a white, backless dress with a scooped neckline, its hem shorter at the front than the back.

My pulse surged as Delilah opened up the curtain and stood in the white gown that was sexy and classy all at the same time and seemed to have been made especially for her. I selected three more gowns, one a peacock blue, the other two black in totally different styles. After selecting some casual wear, bikinis were brought out next.

Each new skimpy bikini got me more aroused, the lump in my pants making me wish I’d worn clothes that weren’t so form-fitting. Did Delilah even know how gorgeous

she was? She might work in a profession where looks were everything, but I couldn't help but sense she'd never truly gotten past her stepmother's cruel taunts.

It made my muscles quiver and my body tense. It would take very little to make me want to kill for this woman, to erase every bad memory she'd ever had. I had to take some deep, calming breaths, but it wasn't until one of the salesladies looked at me with yet another bikini in her hands, then visibly shrank from the vibes I exuded, that I managed to push back my ire and force a smile.

Ignoring an urge to shove my sunglasses back over my eyes, I tucked them into my pants pocket just as the curtains swished open once again and Delilah stood in front of me in nothing but a crimson thong bikini bottom and top that almost exactly matched her hair.

I groaned low in my throat, my lust so primitive and raw there was nothing I could do to withhold it. I turned to the salesladies, my voice low. "Leave us now. Close the shop for half-an-hour. Go have lunch, whatever."

The first lady, the one who'd treated Delilah with disdain, looked down at me, her pointed chin quivering. "That is unacceptable—"

"Of course, sir," the other lady simpered. She was the smart one. The one who knew I wasn't to be messed with. "We'll bag everything you've chosen when we get back."

The front door wasn't even shut and locked when I stalked toward Delilah. The look on my face made her take a step back until the wall behind stopped her. I was too far gone to reassure her, to lie and tell her I wouldn't hurt her. Instead I crushed her to me and slammed my lips on hers.

I was ready to spill my load inside my pants. Not even as a teenager had I lost so much control over a woman. It was both scary and exhilarating.

It wasn't until she kissed me back, her gasps and groans joining my own, that I wrenched down my zipper and allowed my dick to spring free. I'd never been so glad to be commando. Pushing aside her bikini bottom, I grasped her thigh and lifted it up before I one-handed my dick and aligned it to her core.

I plunged hard and deep, her breath cutting off. Though I relished being wrapped like a glove inside her, I simultaneously wished I wasn't quite so big. That I hadn't made her wet with foreplay was a momentary regret. All I cared about right then was fucking her hard and fast and getting quick release along with relief.

It was all about my own pleasure—I'd take care of hers later.

I lifted her higher, the heel of her shoe digging into my ass as I took her ruthlessly and without restraint. Her spine banged against the wall, her tits bouncing beneath the bikini top that barely contained them. Long strands of her hair fell from her fancy clip, highlighting her parted lips and flushed face.

Damn, she was exquisite.

My balls lifted. I held her stare and growled, "I'm going to come."

Her green eyes flashed. "Not without me."

It wasn't a high-class ploy. I slammed into her yet again and her inner muscles clenched, then locked around me as she cried out, her face contorting with bliss and more than a little shock.

My seed exploded out of me, gratification overwhelming me so thoroughly it was as if I was transported from one dimension into another, a place hazed with color so bright I was momentarily blinded.

I came back to reality aware Delilah was drooping around me, her leg slipping, her heeled shoe dragging along my flesh like a blade, and her arms that she'd wrapped around my nape losing grip.

I drew her tighter against me, glad of my strength that kept her there so effortlessly even as I bent and kissed her tenderly. She'd seen my savage side. I needed her to see my gentleness.

I drew back. "Did I hurt you?"

She shook her head. "Nothing I couldn't handle."

I sucked a breath through clenched teeth as I wondered if she'd had clients as rough as me. "Is brutal sex considered normal in your profession?" I growled.

She blinked up at me, the dewy softness in her eyes quickly dissipating. "Why does that matter?"

"I don't want you being hurt by other men."

"But it's okay for you to hurt me?"

Fuck's sake.

I exhaled slowly even as I carefully disengaged from her, though my dick was already thick and hard. I deserved to suffer after what I put her through. "You said I didn't hurt you?"

She staggered on her heels, and guilt immediately roared through me as I reached for her, steadying her. She glowered. "I'm fine. And I said sex with you was nothing I couldn't handle. I enjoyed your brutality as much as you did."

I tucked my hard length back into my pants, then zippered up. If only my emotions could be hidden away half as easily. It was as if my chest had been cut open to expose feelings that had long ago become anesthetized. I might have wanted to feel alive again, but I'd never allow her to crush my heart in her hands.

It's too late for that, a snide voice said inside my head.

The bell tinkled on the front door, jerking me out of my bleak thoughts. The half-hour was up already?

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:43 am

Delilah

I tried to decipher the fleeting expressions moving across Serafino's face, but it was like trying to pin down a tent in a hurricane. It made me want to stamp my foot while I shouted with outrage.

He'd been poker-faced until now, and yet I still couldn't quite read him.

He'd fucked with a ferocity that had been overwhelming even as it'd been oh so right. That he'd treated me with a tender restraint afterward had left me reeling. He was black and white with very little gray in-between.

Then the doorbell jingled and he leaned forward to tug my bikini bottom back into position, covering my bits from anyone else's view. I wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry. He really was a contrary man.

He stepped out of the dressing room as the salesladies cautiously approached, both of whom looked relieved to find me covered, if it could be called that, in my bikini.

Miss pointy chin forced a smile. "If you'd like to dress back into your, ah, outfit, we'll bag your purchases."

"Sure thing," I said airily, pulling off my bikini bottom and top, then handing them to her.

She held the bikini like she was holding kryptonite, though I didn't fail to notice her interest as she ran approving eyes up and down my nude body.

Serafino snorted amusement before he advised, “She’ll be wearing the white pants and leopard print top, and one of the new sets of underwear.”

“Of course,” the other saleslady said, averting her gaze. She took the requested clothes off a hanging rack just outside the dressing room, and after removing the price tags, she hung the pants, shirt and underwear on a hook inside. “I’ll go and ring those up along with the rest of your purchases.”

I smiled at her. “Thank you.”

Miss pointy chin glanced down at the bikini I’d handed her, then said weakly, “I’ll get her to ring these up too.”

She turned away and hurried to the register, leaving me naked with the curtain wide open. I couldn’t resist sniggering, Serafino joining in with a dark chuckle that exactly matched my mood.

It was only after we stepped back outside the shop, his arm around my leopard-encased shoulders and his other arm laden with my bags, that I realized I’d never felt happier. It was a good feeling to know that the man I was with wanted to spoil and look after me.

Emilio waited for us beside the car. As we crossed the road, I glanced at the other car parked behind ours, the extra security sending a little skitter of alarm down my spine. I couldn’t forget that Serafino was a dangerous man who attracted other threats like a magnet.

Our driver opened the trunk and helped deposit the bags inside before he pulled open the back passenger door and waited for us to climb in. After he slid into the driver’s seat, he looked at Serafino in the rearview mirror.

“My home in New York,” Serafino instructed.

My apprehension faded and it seemed natural, normal, to snuggle against Serafino’s side as he put his arm around me once again. I must have dozed at one point, not waking until the driver was alternately slowing and speeding thanks to New York’s thickening traffic.

I yawned and stretched as I opened gritty eyes to view the overcast sky outside the windows. “We’re nearly there?” I asked Serafino.

He nodded. “Ten minutes away at most.”

“Oh, good,” I said drowsily. “I could do with a long, hot shower.”

He nodded. “You and me both. Then a leisurely late lunch out on my balcony.”

“Sounds perfect.”

A short while later Emilio turned the car into an underground carpark situated beneath an Italian restaurant. A gate slid open silently as I asked, “You live here?”

“I live in the penthouse suite above the restaurant,” he said.

“I bet you rarely cook,” I said with a smile.

Emilio parked next to a private elevator as Serafino nodded and said, “I do love my Italian food.” He winked. “The restaurant might be my best investment to date, not financially, but personally.”

I giggled. “Well it would take a lot to fuel your big body.”

The driver opened the back door and I noticed Serafino touch the firearm under his jacket before he climbed out. I followed him and asked, “Is something wrong?”

His nostrils flared. “Two of my best soldiers were killed here by the Irish mafia. It’s made me cautious, perhaps even a little paranoid now, especially when I have others to safeguard.” He pulled me closer to his bulk. “Not even Salvatore was safe from our enemies after being shot in a gunfight. He was a heartbeat away from death thanks to our shared enemies.”

My knuckles cramped as my fingers locked around my clutch bag and I looked back at the closed gate, where the other car that had trailed behind us was now parked. Two men stood guard outside it, their presence reminding me once again of the powerful, intimidating man who’d paid to fuck me. I didn’t want to think about what he was capable of. I especially didn’t want to acknowledge that my hefty fee was likely blood money.

Then he silently clasped my elbow and drew me with him toward the elevator. The driver stayed behind, yet another soldier ready to destroy anyone who dared to cross his caporegime.

The elevator doors closed with a near silent hiss , then we ascended quickly before the doors reopened with a ping . I couldn’t help but be impressed by the spacious foyer with its dark marble flooring leading into a large gray kitchen with chrome fixtures including a double oven. A dining room boasted a huge table with gray velvet chairs, a crystal bowl filled with exotic fruits sitting in the middle.

A gorgeous, glittering chandelier broke what I considered an otherwise masculine setting, while huge windows showcased million-dollar city views outside. Heading toward a staircase, I noted the large black-and-white nude painting on the upstairs wall that was no doubt worth a small fortune. Grasping one of the black hand-railings, I climbed up to the split-level area, where I presumed his bedroom and

bathroom awaited.

I was right.

His bedroom was massive, with a sitting area at the far end of his king sized bed, a walk in robe with barn-style sliding doors that were presently shut, and an adjoining bathroom with gray-streaked-with cream tiles inside the shower, an old-fashioned claw-footed bathtub sitting under a large window at the other end.

I sighed, imagining having a deep bubble bath while drinking champagne and reading a novel. Real estate in New York was super expensive, which meant space was precious and apartments tended to be tiny.

Unlike Serafino's expansive living space.

He reached into the shower and hot water sprayed down. Though he had two shower heads, he selected just one. He clearly wanted to share. We stripped one another and stepped under the hot shower, my skin zinging as sweat and probably bodily fluids ran off me in the rivulets of water.

He reached for the liquid soap and rubbed it between his hands, making it lather. I sighed blissfully when he caressed my shoulders, my back, my breasts and my belly, massaging away my aches along with my anxiety.

Then he bent and washed each of my legs, starting with my thighs and then down to my calves. When he reached for one foot and pushed his thumbs into my soles, I was as boneless as jelly, my entire body relaxed even as heat built deep within me.

He straightened then and I thought he was done. He wasn't. He emptied a blob of shampoo in his hand, then drew my front against his back as he massaged the foamy apple-scented shampoo through my wet hair.

How could hands that killed so easily also be so tender and restrained? He was a maestro with his soft touch, a magician with his deeper, massaging strokes. He moved fully back under the spray and ensured every bit of shampoo was rinsed out before he proceeded conditioning my hair.

I loved being looked after like this, except, he was paying me for the privilege of my company and my expertise. I should be looking after him, not the other way around.

It wasn't until he'd rinsed my conditioner from out of my hair, that I ran a long-nailed hand along his shoulder and down his arm and said, "Let me look after you now."

His eyes darkened, his voice smoky. "What do you—"

His voice ended on a strangled note as I dropped to my knees, then took his cock in my hand and did a long, leisurely lick along the head. His flesh was warm and silken, his cock long and thick and rippling with veins.

He was perfect.

I sucked the tip of his shaft into my mouth, tonguing his slit then sucking him deeper. He jerked even further into my mouth, groaning as I cupped his heavy balls and skillfully stroked, before I pushed his length to the back of my throat.

My eyes watering, I retreated then advanced, my head bobbing faster and faster, a primal rhythm that brought a man to his knees as easily as I'd dropped onto mine.

Serafino was no different.

He was a man in his prime, someone who'd probably never been deprived of sex. That I wanted to wipe his memory of every other woman he'd been with made me pause for just one second. Hadn't he wanted to do the same with all the men in my

past?

He used my stillness to withdraw from my mouth. “Stand up,” he said thickly. When I did what he asked, he said, “Now turn around bend over, and touch the floor with your hands.”

I tensed. Was he about to claim me where few men had been allowed? He was way too big. The very idea both electrified and petrified me.

My palms had barely touched the floor when he plunged into my pussy from behind, filling me to the hilt. His grunt echoed with my pained gasp. Was I ever going to get used to his size? Then his hands were on my hips, using them as leverage as he pushed in and out, his deep, hard strokes increasing in pace and intensity.

I had no idea how he withheld from spilling his load. He clearly had a will of iron. Then he reached between my legs and squeezed my clit. A jolt of electricity burned through my nerve endings and shot me straight into climax, satisfaction blasting through me until it was as if I was nothing but overcharged atoms.

Serafino froze, then roared as he ejaculated, filling me with his seed. Then all that could be heard was the spray hitting our bodies and the tiles. Warm steam lazily swirled around us, fogging the mirrors and shower screen.

He ran his hands up and down my hips. “That was incredible.”

I couldn’t have agreed more. Sex had never been like this with anyone else. We were little more than strangers and yet it was as if I’d known him all my life. I straightened and he kissed my nape before he carefully disconnected. I held back a sigh. It really wasn’t going to be easy walking away from him.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:43 am

Serafino

My emotions were in tatters, my mind whirling as I entered my walk-in closet with Delilah. Be careful what you wish for, a voice taunted inside my head.

My stare returned to the woman who'd turned my life upside down. Not that I was complaining. If my life had become jaded, it was now bright and full of color and life.

I blew out a breath as I dressed into casual gray pants and a cream polo shirt. After buckling on my chest holster, I pushed in my gun before shoving my arms into the sleeves of an informal gray jacket that helped to conceal my weapon.

She arched a brow as she pulled on the same white pants and leopard print top she'd worn earlier from our visit to the little boutique. "Did you realize you were staring at me the whole time you were getting dressed?"

I shrugged. "It's hard not to."

Her green eyes warmed. "You know how to make a woman feel good."

I smirked. "I certainly hope so."

She shook her head. "You don't have to hope. When you're not tearing me in half every time we have sex, you're given me glorious orgasms."

It was my turn to arch an eyebrow. "Tearing you in half? Is that what is called a

backhanded compliment?

She giggled. “Maybe? But glorious orgasms are high praise.”

I was smiling when I clasped her hand and walked with her out of the bedroom and down the stairs. That she’d discarded her heels and chose to stay barefooted made me realize just how much I towered next to her. Did she feel intimidated? I imagined women in her profession needed to grasp every advantage they could get, including height.

I picked up my cell from the kitchen bench and said, “Give me one minute to order a light lunch. How does an antipasto sound?”

“Wonderful,” she conceded.

After making the call, I brought her out onto the balcony. Though I’d never feared death, having men shot dead in my own home was a memory I preferred not to dwell on. I’d always kept my work and private life separate, but their coldblooded deaths had encroached on that and impacted the tranquility of my home.

I was only glad I was in the position to compensate the deceased soldiers’ families. Not that any amount of money could replace a loved one, I’d learned that when my oldest brother, Nico had been executed.

Locking that memory away once again, I pressed a button on the wall next to the bifold doors, bullet proof glass then rising from behind the railings. At her puzzled look, I explained, “We’re protected out here now.”

“Is that a new addition?” she asked, nodding at the glass.

“It is,” I acknowledged. “I’ve added a few extra precautions.”

She sat on the chair I drew out for her. I chose the one opposite, wanting to drink in her gorgeous green eyes, her full lower lip and the sweet bowed top, her wide brow and flawless cheekbones that were highlighted by her blazing red hair she'd pulled back into a messy bun.

I could so easily fall for her.

My breath caught in my throat, my heart rate surging into a gallop as I examined the idea and allowed it to expand inside my head. Was love truly a possibility for someone like me?

No. Have you forgotten? You're a killer, a madman. You're not deserving of any woman's heart. Nor do you want her to crush yours.

If she was aware of my heightened emotions she didn't show it. She began talking, her soothing voice soon settling my equilibrium and bringing forth words that I rarely voiced. She was an enigma; she made me want to contribute to the conversation, made me want to articulate the thoughts in my head.

My family would have been fascinated to see me like this. I'd always been the spectator, the silent but focused one. I rarely discussed my thoughts or feelings, rarely showed anything at all beyond my ability to kill or my primitive need for sex.

"So what about your mother?" she asked. "I mean, I've heard a little about your father but nothing about the woman who raised you."

I flinched, the feelings flooding through me still too raw to confront. I cleared my throat as I gathered myself and said softly, "She was wonderful. I don't doubt for a minute she regretted marrying a man who showed her such little love or affection. Though she was surrounded by materialistic things, I think her children were all she cared about. We were everything to her."

“Were?” she repeated. “So you’ve lost both your parents?”

I nodded, my voice growing tight. “She developed young onset dementia and lost her memory very quickly. Dad didn’t tolerate weakness. He locked her away.” I’d never forget the men who’d come and forced her out of her own home. My hands curled into fists. “We never even got to visit her before she died.”

“I’m so sorry,” she whispered, obviously appalled as she stared wide-eyed at me, then reached across to clasp my hand and give it a squeeze. “That must have been terrible for everyone, including your mother.”

I nodded, the memories I’d stuffed into a padlocked part of my brain resurfaced with scratching, maddening precision. “She must have wondered, in her times of lucidity, why we’d abandoned her.”

Delilah’s hand tightened on mine, her eyes big shimmering pools of green. “Your father really was a monster.”

I nodded. “Many say Nico—the brother who is no longer with us—took after him.” I held her stare. “Others say I’m the most like him.”

“I never met your father, and though I don’t doubt for a minute you have a darker side I’ve yet to really see, I think it is your mother you take after.”

She meant it. I could see it in the gentle way she spoke, in the grip she still had on my hand, and in the way she leaned closer, like she wanted to share my suffering, dilute it.

“Thank you,” I managed.

Did she have any idea how good she made me feel?

My mother had been a wonderful woman, too caring and gentle for the lifestyle my father—her husband—had expected her to tolerate, but even she'd looked at me sometimes with concern, like she feared for what I was becoming.

The elevator suddenly pinged, its doors opening to reveal one of the white-coated chefs I employed. He pushed out a cart that held a large platter, along with a bottle of whiskey I'd ordered and two crystal glasses. Once he was out on the balcony, he transferred everything down in front of us.

"Thank you, Romeo."

The chef nodded respectfully before glancing at Delilah opposite me. His eyes widening, I cleared my throat and said, "That will be all."

"Naturalmente ," Romeo said apologetically, before he backed away and hurried to the waiting elevator.

I smirked, amusement winning out over the spark of ire Romeo's interest had induced. "I think he likes you."

She cocked her head to the side. "Does it bother you that he could have me for a price?"

My lips thinned as the spark of ire burst into a bonfire. It took everything I had not to allow it to become a wildfire. I poured the whiskey into two glasses, then took a deep gulp of my own. "You probably already know the answer to that."

She winced. "You're probably right." She nodded at the antipasto. "This looks delicious."

I focused on our lunch. She was right, it did. I scanned the cheeses, the cured meats,

the olives and grapes, the cherry tomatoes and pickled onions, the blistered capsicum and dry crackers. My inner fire finally cooling off somewhat, I cleared my throat and said, “Let’s not waste it.”

“Let’s not.” She plucked a cracker off the platter, then added some cured meat, cheese and an olive on top before she popped it into her mouth.

I grabbed a bit of everything and chewed, suddenly ravenous once I started.

She giggled as she reached for her whiskey and took an appreciative sip. “Great sex really does create a great appetite.”

“Then I’d better order ten more antipastos.”

Her expression heated. “Perhaps I was your entrée?”

“You were my Almas caviar and my white truffles, my finest cuisine and delicacy all rolled into one.”

Her lips pulled into a smile as she extended her leg and lifted her foot beneath the table, reaching between my thighs to rub my arousal. “And you were my beast in the bedroom.”

My dick jerked and thickened, my voice a growl as I said, “You’ll see the real beast if you keep playing with me like that.”

“Oh?” she breathed, her eyes wide and innocent. “What might you do?”

“Other than fuck you against the bulletproof glass where anyone could see us?”

“There’s more?” she asked breathlessly.

“How about the entire block hearing your screams of ecstasy as I make you come?”

She stilled her foot’s circular motion. “Is it bad that you’re making me drenching wet?”

“Is it good that I’m big enough to take advantage of your lubrication?” I countered.

Her smile widened. “I like this game.”

“Who said it was a game?”

“So you’d actually consider fucking me in public?”

“If there were no children around—yes.”

She sighed fitfully. “Let’s not give them an X-rated show.”

I cocked a brow. “Then we’ll come back out here tonight, when no one can see us.”

“It doesn’t matter who hears us?”

“That depends on how loud you scream.”

“Maybe you’ll be the one making all the noise,” she pointed out.

I grinned, even as my dick hardened to concrete. “Maybe.”

I couldn’t wait to find out.

Delilah

I stood in front of the walk-in closet's dressing room mirror with a wide smile. Though I owned many gowns thanks to my profession, most of them were sexy verging on slutty, baring more than flaunting my body beneath. The white gown Serafino had bought me was beyond classy. It made me feel like a princess.

I caught most of my hair back into a knot, leaving the rest to trail down my back. Pushing my feet into a pair of white heels Serafino had purchased earlier and had delivered here, I stepped back and looked at myself more critically.

You'll do.

Serafino was buttoning up the jacket of his black tuxedo when he moved behind me, and I couldn't help but compare his intoxicating darkness to my refined radiance, just as I couldn't help but wonder if he'd gone commando again.

His eyes caught mine in the reflection. "Exquisite."

"You're not half-bad yourself."

One side of his lips quirked. "I'll take that as a compliment, half-a-one, anyway."

I turned around and looked up at him. "I don't think I need to fill your head with more praise. I'm sure you have plenty of other women for that."

His eyes darkened. "I don't want to hear it from other women. I want to hear it from

you.”

I glowed from within. A man like Serafino didn’t get through life by smooth talking, he barely spoke at all. But when he did, he meant every word. I wrapped my arms around his nape. “In that case, you’re the most handsome, charismatic man I’ve ever had the pleasure of being with.”

He bent and claimed my lips in a kiss that left me breathless long before he released me again, my body quivering and my senses so far gone they were irretrievable.

He smiled down at me. “I’m going to hold you to that.”

I didn’t have time to query him, not when he grabbed my hand and drew me with him toward the elevator. “Let’s not be late,” he added.

I pulled free of his grip and hurried to the kitchen counter to retrieve my clutch bag, which matched my shoes perfectly, before I stepped into the elevator with him.

It wasn’t until I was sitting in the back of the sedan driven by Emilio that I asked, “Are you going to tell me where we’re going?”

“Don’t you like surprises?”

I shook my head. “I like to be in control of my destiny.”

“Of course you do,” he murmured, almost to himself. He reached for my hand and kissed the back of my knuckles. “We’re going to watch a Broadway theater performance starring my sister, Isabelle.”

I gaped. “Are you telling me I met someone famous and I didn’t even know it?”

He grinned. “She recently exploded onto the theater scene, thanks to not only her talent, but her husband’s investment into her career. She and Salvatore are a formidable team.”

“They looked very much in love,” I confessed. “As did Ethan and Sabrina.”

Salvatore nodded. “Valentino was equally as lucky with Chantilly. Though whether any of us deserve to be loved is another matter entirely.”

I blinked at him, neon lights flashing across his face as Emilio drove down yet another street as he headed toward the theater district. “Everyone deserves love.”

“Everyone?” he repeated huskily.

“Yes, everyone .” I lifted my hand and ran my fingertips down the side of his bristled face. “You might have done a lot of things I don’t condone, but I don’t doubt for a second you’ve done a lot of good things too.”

He pushed his head further into my hand, like a cat seeking comfort. “You say all the right things.”

We sat in companionable silence for the rest of the short ride, getting out in front of a theater where a huge billboard flashed Isabella , and the name of the show. “Florence,” I said, more than a little awed. I’d heard of the critically acclaimed show. “I’m impressed.”

Serafino’s smile glinted, his hair sliding forward as he nodded. “Me too.”

He clasped my hand before we stepped into the foyer where a well-dressed crowd mingled. Many of them stopped and stared, and I wasn’t sure if it was because Serafino’s reputation preceded him or if it was because we made such a striking

couple. Or perhaps it was simply because he'd brought a date to the theater with him.

I decided it was all three.

Then I noticed Salvatore on the other side of the room, his platinum-blond hair eye-catching even from a distance, as was his height that had him towering over everyone except Serafino. Though the Costa boss was surrounded by suited men vying for his attention, he lifted his hand, acknowledging us with a smile.

I smiled back, even as I wondered if the suits were mafia or theater men. People tended to gravitate or be repelled by men like Serafino and Salvatore.

Serafino nodded at him before guiding me through the crowd towards the bar. "Whiskey?"

"I'd love one, thank you."

It was oddly comforting when he handed me a drink, then drew me closer with one arm encircling my waist as we sipped our drinks on the rocks. Acquaintances soon approached him and made small talk. He mostly nodded and stayed silent, his interest blatantly focused on me.

It wasn't until we'd nearly finished our drinks that I noticed a middle-aged man staring our way. My stomach dropped. Charlie. He'd been a client from when I was with a different agency.

He bent and said something to the brunette woman he was with. She frowned, clearly irritated, but followed him as he strode toward me.

"Delilah," he greeted enthusiastically, his stare drinking me in like he was a man parched. "How wonderful to see you again." He dragged his gaze from me to

Serafino, whose arm was locked around me. “And who is the lucky man?”

The woman with Charlie narrowed her burning eyes, and I cleared my throat and said, “This is my friend, Serafino.”

“Friend?” Serafino’s arm tightened fractionally before he inclined his head and said, “And you are?”

“I’m Charlie.” He stuck his arm out. When Serafino pointedly ignored it, he dropped it back to his side and cleared his throat. “This is my date, Greta.”

Greta’s eyes burned for a whole different reason as she took in Serafino. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

He nodded but didn’t bother with the formality of replying.

Charlie turned to me, his interest obvious. “So what have you been up to, other than, you know...”

“Other than fucking men like you for a living?” I said, filling in his unspoken words.

He spluttered. “I wasn’t going to put it that way.”

“Then how were you going to put it?” I asked mock-sweetly. It was pointless withholding the truth and I refused to be made to feel worthless for it.

Greta gaped, her eyes flashing. “You paid to fuck her?” she hissed.

Serafino cocked a brow. “You give it to him for free?” He clucked his tongue. “No wonder you’re furious.” He smirked. “If you’ll excuse us...”

He guided me away from them, his stare as he looked down at me seeming to see right through me. “Are you all right?”

“Nothing I can’t handle,” I said softly, though I was shaking inside.

Confrontations weren’t uncommon. But I hadn’t made excuses for my profession in a long time, and I didn’t intend to start now. I provided a service, men could make use of it...or not.

I only wished I had someone like Serafino by my side more often. I looked up at him as we climbed a round of steps to the boxed seats above the main auditorium. “Thank you.”

“For what? Telling the truth?”

I shook my head. “For defending me.”

His mouth twisted, then he paused, showcasing an unnatural, predatory stillness. “I would do a whole lot more than shield you with a few simple words.”

I inhaled quickly, my senses attuned to his. Right now he was a tightly leashed tiger. I could only imagine the carnage if he was set free. He’d leave dead bodies in his wake to defend my honor.

A delicious little thrill shot through me. I shouldn’t enjoy that thought, yet a part of me—a big part—truly did.

He smiled, muscles untensing. “Let’s not miss the opening of the show.”

I nodded and allowed him to usher me to a private seat that took in the stage below. When the lights dimmed I leaned forward, enthralled within seconds by Isabella’s

magical performance, the other actors adding to her brilliance.

It didn't matter that it wasn't a musical, if anything it highlighted her performance, made her standout even more for her brilliant acting ability. I was only glad it was a ninety minute show without intermission; I was too absorbed in the story to want it to stop.

It wasn't until the end of the performance, where Isabella held her dying boyfriend in her arms, and the stage curtains swished closed, that I realized my cheeks were wet. I realized just as quickly Serafino was watching me, and had probably done so for a good duration of the show.

Then the audience pushed to their feet and roared approval, their applause deafening. I pushed to my feet and hollered and clapped right along with them, all too aware of Serafino doing the same beside me as he grinned with pride.

"That was incredible," I shouted to him above the noise.

Then the curtains swished open and revealed the actors with Isabella in the center. As they linked hands and bowed, the audience cheered even harder.

Serafino leaned close, his big hands cupping the sides of my face before he kissed me, then swiped my cheeks dry with his thumbs. "Let's go home," he said into my ear. "I want you all to myself."

My nipples hardened to sharp points, my stomach clenching along with my pussy. I nodded, then allowed him to draw me with him out of the boxed seat and toward the stairs. I wanted him all to myself, too.

But I was certain his sister would want us to at least make an appearance backstage. "Shouldn't we congratulate Isabella first?"

He grimaced, then nodded. “You’re right, it’d be selfish not to.”

Security nodded assent at our VIP access backstage. The moment I saw Isabella, I squealed like the biggest fangirl, before I threw my arms around her neck in a warm hug. “You were wonderful,” I enthused.

She drew back, her eyes shining and her long dark hair a little mussed. “Thank you. And thanks for coming!”

“Congrats sis, you’re a star.”

She blinked, her eyes tellingly wet. “That means a lot coming from you.”

Salvatore strode over, wrapping his arms around her from behind and kissing the top of her head. “Even better, you’re my shining star.”

She giggled, her eyes turning dewy. “You’ve always believed in me.”

“Always and forever,” he murmured throatily.

A lump formed in my throat at their obvious love and devotion. It seemed when the mafia men fell for a woman, they fell hard.

More fans approached and we said goodbye before walking back toward the foyer. Though most of the crowd had dispersed, there were some diehard fans hanging around, hoping for a glimpse of the actors.

I didn’t take notice of any of them. I took even less when Serafino leaned close and said, “I believe we have some unfinished business to complete on my balcony.”

My vision narrowed to just him while everything within me clenched. With just a few

words he'd put me back into an immediate state of need. But then, even when my attention had been on the stage I'd been conscious of him.

"I believe so," I said huskily, my skin prickling and my nipples little hard points. I could only imagine how hard his dick must be.

I'd find out soon enough.

We were halfway through the foyer when my former client hurried over. His face was flushed, his eyes glittering. "I'm so glad I caught you before you left!"

I glanced past him, but his 'date' was nowhere to be seen. I didn't doubt for a second she'd left him after what she'd learned. It'd been more than obvious he was interested in being my client again. "Charlie, what is it?"

He glanced a little nervously at Serafino before Charlie refocused on me and blurted, "Who do I call now to make a booking with you?"

I wilted, my breath hissing from my lungs like deflating balloons as Serafino stiffened beside me. Didn't Charlie realize who I was with? Or was he just plain stupid and thinking with his little head instead of his big one?

Neither of the men knew I was retiring, and I wanted to keep it that way. I reached into my clutch bag and withdrew a business card. I'd borrow some of Isabella's acting skills and pretend I'd still be a call girl in the weeks to come. "Call Sinead."

Serafino growled low in his throat. "You're not fucking serious?"

I looked up at him with a frown. "Last I checked you didn't have exclusive rights."

"And if I wanted to arrange that?"

I handed him another of my business cards—not that he needed one when he owned the damn agency—ignoring the yearning piercing through me from the inside out. I couldn't want him to arrange that, not ever. Because wanting him to want me would only lead to a broken heart.

His nostrils flared, his hard stare moving to Charlie. "Don't bother booking. She's mine."

I narrowed my eyes. Serafino would not control me. I'd fought hard for my freedom, my independence. "That's for Sinead to decide."

He turned to me. "The same madam who is on my payroll?"

I sucked a breath in through my teeth. "You can't buy everything and everyone."

"But I can buy you."

It shouldn't hurt to hear him say that, but it did. And didn't that make me all kinds of a fool. He might want to own me, but he didn't want me as his equal. He'd conquer me, then he'd move on.

I arched a brow, hiding my hurt by turning his opinion of me back on him. "I'm always available. For a price."

Charlie sniggered. "Then I'll be seeing you soon, sweetheart."

Serafino seemed to grow bigger, more menacing. "She is not, nor will she ever be your sweetheart."

Charlie flushed, clearly intimidated but standing his ground. "I'm a client, you can't—"

Serafino flipped open his jacket, revealing his firearm. “I can do what I want, when I want. So unless you have a death wish...?”

Charlie took a jerky step back, his hands up. “Whoa. Whatever man. I didn’t realize you felt that deeply about her.”

“Now you do.” His eyes hardened to granite. “Never go near her again.”

Charlie nodded, then turned and stumbled away.

I gaped at Serafino. “What are you doing?”

“What does it look like I’m doing?” he growled.

“You mean other than threatening my clients?”

“He isn’t your client. Not anymore.”

My stomach roiled. “What are you going to do—chase away every single one?”

He strode forward, taking me with him. “If that’s what it takes, then, yes.”

Though a miniscule part of me stupidly reveled in his possessiveness, a much bigger part burned with fury and resentment. I’d worked too hard to have this man dictate who I could see, or what I could do. That I’d be leaving the profession after tonight was neither here nor there. He didn’t know I was leaving, and that was all that mattered to me.

I lifted my chin as we stepped outside. He mightn’t realize it yet, but he couldn’t have me, either. He’d paid for my time, but after tonight he’d never see me again.

That the thought left me hollow inside wasn't something I wanted to examine too closely. I was in a contrary crisis that left me swinging between wanting him and hating him.

As we approached the car, he shook his head at Emilio and the driver left his position by the back door for Serafino to open it. I gritted my teeth in a parody of a smile and slid into the backseat. Clicking on my seatbelt, I looked out the side window—away from him—as he climbed in beside me.

The tension could have been cut with a knife, and the driver knew better than to make conversation as he pulled out into the stream of traffic.

The push and pull inside of me was so perverse I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Serafino was a dominant asshole but he'd made me feel things no other man had managed to ever. That he was a client and I'd soon be a free woman meant that tonight really was the last time I'd see him.

I was glad, of course I was. So what was with this yawning abyss inside of me?

He put his big hand on my thigh, tingles immediately flaring to life. "Perhaps I was bit controlling," he admitted in a voice that throbbed with intensity.

I refused to cede to what I supposed was a half-assed apology. I turned to him with narrowed eyes. "A bit?"

"What do you want me to say?" he asked, his stare burning with needs that were too hot even for me. "I'm not good with words. I've never been good at talking."

"Yet you were so quick to voice your demands."

His nostrils flared, his eyes hardening. "I'm a caporegime, it's what I do."

“It’s what you do with your soldiers. Not. With. Me.”

His hand clamped under my jaw, his tight face close to mine. “We shall see.”

Serafino

I 'd never been so furious , so close to losing my mind. Didn't Delilah understand my emotional state? Of course she didn't. She used men like me for our money, then she moved on, forgetting we even existed.

I was like a rabid wolf by the time the car pulled under the carpark. I only just managed to keep myself together as I climbed out and stabbed the elevator's button, then stepped inside it with Delilah reluctantly trailing behind.

Not that I blamed her. I mightn't be snapping and snarling, but I was close to it. I wanted to assert my dominance and force her to forget all the other men she'd had in her life as my alpha side brought her to heel.

At the back of my mind I knew I was losing it, a green eyed monster sending out its tendrils and crippling my iron will.

Whatever . I was burning with lust and fury by the time we stepped out of the elevator and into my penthouse, my dick throbbing just like my voice when I said, "You know where the balcony is."

She narrowed her eyes, her rebellion just barely tempered by a lust that was as unruly as my own. "We're doing this now, while you're...angry?"

"The balcony," I repeated starkly.

She nodded mutely, submitting to my demand as she strode toward the balcony,

tossing her white clutch bag onto the kitchen counter on the way past. Not that she had a choice but to obey. I'd paid through the nose to fuck her when and where I wanted for the night.

There was still intense chemistry between us, even as there was also something not quite right, something a little off-kilter. But I was too far gone to stop and think too deeply about it. Rage, lust and jealousy were a toxic combination, and I trod a fine line that took me ever closer to the point of no return.

She's going to hate you forever, a little voice taunted.

She doesn't hate me already? I taunted back.

Chemistry was one thing, values and beliefs were another thing entirely. She might be attracted—for now—to my darker way of life, but soon enough she'd hate me for my mafia role, despise me for my bloodied hands and my even bloodier soul.

I pushed the button near the bifold doors. As the bullet proof glass rolled up, she turned to face me, her eyes glinting in the blackness broken by a backdrop of flashing neon lights. "Is this really what you want?" she asked, her breath shuddering.

"You wouldn't be here with me now if it wasn't," I said, my voice as hard as my dick. "Turn around," I instructed. She did as I asked, and I added, "Take off your clothes and lean against the glass."

She only paused for a second at most before she did what I asked. I gained a certain, sick satisfaction from that even knowing I would have enjoyed tearing her dress and underwear off. Then my heart thudded like a drum in my ears as I stared at her pert ass and the long, toned length of her back, her rigid shoulders and small waist.

No one could see her, but I imagined the visual if they could with her tits mashed up

against the glass, her pussy flattened against it and her breaths puffing little clouds.

I ran a hand down her spine, her shiver leaving goose bumps in its wake. It was my one moment of softness before lust took over. I reached between her legs and pinched her clit. She jerked and gasped, and I rubbed away the sting, not relenting until she cried out and succumbed to orgasm, her liquid heat scenting the air like ambrosia.

My nostrils flared as I inhaled, my dick thickening like a steel pike.

I was going through the motions, my actions reflexive and more than a little mechanical. Nothing like the emotional connection we'd previously shared. Good . I couldn't afford to let my guard down. She'd gotten under my skin enough already.

I unzipped my fly and released my dick—I must have known to go commando—then one-handing it, I directed it from behind to the entrance of her sweet pussy. With a massive thrust, I surged inside her, ruthlessly filling her.

Her breath hissed, her inner muscles locking around me, an oversized invader. But I couldn't stop now. I wanted to claim her, possess her. My fingers dug into her hips. I wanted to brand her, to mark her.

I began to thrust, going deeper and harder within seconds. But if I hurt her she wasn't complaining. I grimaced, even as pleasure pierced through me. She was paid to be the consummate actress when it came to sex. Even if she didn't enjoy it she'd pretend she did.

My strokes grew harder, more vicious, my need to hurt her before she hurt me a knee-jerk reaction I could no longer control. I was an animal, a monster who—

She screamed out something garbled and foreign, her orgasm that clenched and released her inner muscles taking me by complete surprise. I didn't have the strength

to resist my own release. My balls lifted and my seed shot out of me in streaks of fire that took away my breath, my sanity.

I shuddered against her, my breathing ragged and my skin soaked with sweat, despite the tepid nighttime temperature. That she was breathing just as heavily, her skin warm and damp as I slumped against her, made me realize she'd been as physically affected as I'd been.

I had no way of knowing if she'd been as mentally and emotionally affected as I had. It hadn't just been my seed that had drained out of me. I was depleted and exhausted, a primal and instinctive need to keep Delilah as my own threatening to upend me.

I didn't do relationships. I didn't even like the idea of a woman having a speck of control over me. But the intimacy we shared was only making my needs and wants more powerful. She'd soon have me wrapped around her little finger.

I jerked away from her, disconnecting almost painfully. That I only wanted to become as one with her again was a weakness I intended to rectify. I needed to strengthen my resolve, make her believe she meant nothing to me.

Coward, a snide voice mocked.

"I needed that," I said in a neutral voice. She stiffened, but didn't look back at me. I reached out a reassuring hand, then dropped my arm to my side and said, "Let's take a shower."

Delilah

Serafino was already in bed—it was after midnight—when I climbed in beside him. My entire body twinged with aches and pain, though nothing could be half as bad as the hurt deep inside my chest. He'd taken me again in the shower, and though my body had responded with yet another orgasm, a piece of me had fractured at his aloofness.

He'd been a machine, without feeling or care, as he'd hammered inside me. I'd never felt more vulnerable, mostly because I'd yearned for the man I'd glimpsed earlier whose emotions had been accessible, a man who had shamelessly wanted all of me, not just my body.

Now he was just another mafia man, a cruel, closed man who shared nothing but his physical needs with me.

You should be glad. It will make it that much easier to walk away in the morning.

Except I was so far away from glad I was close to crying.

A frown creased his brow. "Hey, what's wrong? If I hurt you—"

"No," I interjected hoarsely. "I'm fine."

But I wasn't fine. He knew it. I knew it. I just hoped he wouldn't push the issue because I just might break after all.

I couldn't have been more grateful when he snaked an arm around me and drew me close, his warmth seeping into my pores and calming me, my tense muscles slowly unknotting and my breathing steadying.

"Good," he purred next to my ear, "because my body can't get enough of yours."

His body, not him.

I knew the meaning behind his words. He'd use me again tonight, sate his physical needs, then he'd discard me come morning. That he'd scared off another client no longer really made any sense. He clearly had no real feelings for me.

It was odd how much that hurt. I didn't develop feelings for any of the men I slept with, it was unprofessional and...dumb. I was usually more than willing to leave a client behind without looking back.

But I knew, deep in my heart, that Serafino would leave mental scars that mightn't ever fully heal.

He reached between my legs and cupped my sex, using his thumb to part the petals of my sex to find the plump jewel within. I couldn't help but groan as he pressed on it then massaged with circular little strokes that left me mewling like an alley cat.

When he tossed me onto my stomach and pushed into me from behind, I didn't protest, not even with the burning jolt of his oversized entry. I deserved to be punished for my growing feelings toward him. I deserved to be reminded exactly what I was here for.

Then I lost all capacity for thought as he lifted my hips and slammed deeper inside me, his savagery...breathhtaking.

*

I woke with the first rays of dawn light filtering through the curtains in a weak orange glow, the relentless noise of New York traffic the faintest hum thanks to what I imagined must be quality soundproofing. Serafino's steady, even breathing tickled my nape

Not that I was dwelling on my visual or auditory senses.

With his arms wrapped tightly around me, imprisoning me, his touch was as comforting as much as it was suffocating. His sandalwood and citrus scent, which I usually craved, made my stomach twist in rejection.

I knew better now than to want him, even if I had to trick myself into believing it. Even so, I knew deep down I wanted to stay like this with him, that I really didn't want to leave at all.

I savored being close to him for a few more minutes, then carefully slipped out of his hold before I pulled the bedcover over his bared, broad chest. Though I was tempted to push his mussed hair behind his ear, I resisted.

It was better that he didn't wake. Better that I didn't have to say goodbye. Better that I didn't have to pretend he hadn't affected me deeper than anyone had ever before.

Ignoring a wave of sadness, I slinked over to the walk-in-robe. Scanning the clothes he'd bought me, I selected a long peasant skirt in gray and peacock blue and an off the shoulder, short white blouse with blue trim on its hem that encircled my waist.

Once I was dressed, I picked up the high-heels he'd bought me so that I could slip out quietly.

I'd enjoy putting my overworked feet into the sheepskin slippers I had at home. I might even go back to bed and sleep the rest of the day and night away. I grimaced. It was the only positive I could muster knowing I was leaving my client for good. I hid a heavy sigh. I didn't dare linger any longer, as it was I had little enough strength to leave.

I didn't look back as I left the bedroom then grabbed my clutch bag from the kitchen. The moment I stepped into the elevator, I dug out my cellphone and rang Sinead for the agency car and driver.

"Are you okay?" Sinead asked, her voice a little scratchy and sharp.

"I'll live," I said shakily.

Silence throbbed between the airwaves, then she said, "Get some rest, yeah? I'll see you as soon as you wake up."

I frowned as she disconnected. I hadn't had a chance to tell her anything, not least that I needed to talk to her. The elevator doors opened and I stepped outside and waited on a bench seat outside. I guess I'd tell her I was leaving the agency tomorrow when I saw her.

I only had to wait ten minutes before the agency's white sedan glided to a stop at the side of the road. The driver stepped out to open my door, and I smiled at him and said, "Thanks Mickey."

"Any time, Delilah." He cocked his gray-haired head to the side as I slid into the backseat. "Are you okay?"

I giggled tiredly at the Déjà vu, then lied and said, "I'm fine, thanks for asking."

He nodded, though a deep crease marked his already craggy face. “You could do with some rest.”

Had he and Sinead been drinking from the same fountain or something?

I leaned back in my seat. “I intend to.”

He shut my door and walked around the car before he claimed the driver’s seat. Seconds later he moved the sedan back into the stream of traffic.

I was about as numb as I’d ever been as I closed my eyes. I didn’t reopen them again until forty minutes or so later when the car slowed, then stopped in front of my apartment building.

The driver opened my door and I climbed out with a grateful smile. “Thanks Mickey.” I opened my clutch bag and gave him a handful of big bills. He’d been raising his two young grandsons alone after his single-mother daughter had tragically drowned in a boating accident. “Make sure you treat yourself.”

His eyes widened, then glimmered wetly. “That isn’t necessary—”

“But it is,” I interjected. “This is my last chance to show you how much I appreciate what you’ve done for me and the other agency girls, and for those boys you took on.”

“My grandsons are my pride and joy.”

I smiled, though sadness tempered my happiness. If only I’d experienced that same love and devotion from my stepmother. I leaned close and admitted, “It’s not official yet, but I’m retiring from the business.”

“You are?” At my nod he said thickly, “I’m going to miss you, Delilah. Out of all the

girls, you've always been my favorite."

"And you've always been my favorite driver. "

His chuckle pierced the noise of the traffic. "That's because I'm the only driver."

I winked. "Look after yourself, Mickey."

"You too, Delilah."

I gave him a quick hug, then stepped toward my building without looking back. I was getting good at that.

I rode the elevator up to the tenth floor, then stepped out into the faded-carpeted corridor, where I turned left and unlocked my door. I stepped inside, my appreciative gaze drifting around the small space that I'd made my own.

The white kitchen was counterbalanced by a teal backsplash, the white walls offset by the walnut-stained floorboards. There were also pops of color here and there, with teal cushions and throws on my big, white sofa and armchairs, and in the teal, navy-blue and white zigzag mat on the floor. Green lacy ferns in big copper pots gave the space some life.

A pity I didn't get to see it often enough.

That was about to change, though.

Dropping my clutch bag onto one of the three rattan bar stools, I headed straight to the shower. Standing under the hot spray, I scrubbed my body of any lingering scent that reminded me of Serafino. I needed to wipe him from my mind and move onto my next plan.

I was looking forward to making a new career that didn't involve sex...or a mobster who could so easily rip my heart out of my chest.

After drying myself and dragging on a flannelette nightie, I pushed my feet into sheepskin slippers— ah...bliss —then headed back through my bedroom and into the lounge room, straight to my corner bar.

Despite the early hour I badly needed a whiskey. It would be 9.00 PM somewhere in the world. Selecting an aged bottle from the top glass shelf, I poured a decent splash into a crystal tumbler, then swallowed the alcohol down with a sigh.

It was the little luxuries that reminded me how very lucky I was.

I didn't need Serafino in my life.

That my good mood instantly dimmed wasn't something I was ready to face. Not yet. Sleep was beckoning, and I couldn't wait to lose myself to unconsciousness.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:43 am

Serafino

I touched the bed next to me. Empty. I frowned, a strange emptiness filling me from the inside out. What the hell was wrong with me, of course I was alone. I might come from a big family but I'd never fitted in. Loner should have been my middle name.

“Stop! No . Don't do this Lorenzo. Please...think of our children.”

My breath shortened as my lungs squeezed tight, my legs swinging off the bed and my bare feet hitting the floor before I was even fully cognizant. I hurried out of my bedroom, my tread soundless as I left the bedroom door open behind me and hid next to the banister of the marble staircase.

My eyes widened at seeing two of my dad's soldiers dragging my mother to the front door, my dad following them with a vacant face even as she begged him to listen to reason.

“I'm not sick anymore, I feel fine. Please Lorenzo, I just need some rest, that's all. I'm—”

“You'll get all the rest you need where you're going,” he interjected dispassionately.

She shook her head. “Our children need me!”

“You spoil them and make them weak. They're better off without you. I need them to grow up, to immerse themselves in the mafia empire.”

“But their j-just children! I-I’m their mother.”

“You were their incubator, your job is done.”

My knuckles gripped the banister so tight I wondered how it didn’t crumble under my hands. And though my mind screamed for them to stop, my throat had closed up. I couldn’t even whisper for them to leave my mom alone. I couldn’t utter a single word.

The men dragged her out the front door and into a waiting car before I released my grip and fell onto my knees. Then grabbing a handful of my hair, I tugged and tugged until my scalp was on fire.

I was vaguely aware of my father’s heavy tread coming up the stairs, but I was too stricken to care. I was already battling the screams inside my head when he paused and asked, “What the fuck are you doing out of bed, boy?”

I didn’t look up. I burned with hate for him.

“Answer me!” he grated, his voice cold. When I pulled even harder at my hair, a hunk tearing free, he grabbed me by the arm and dragged me into the bedroom. “Looks like I’ll have to teach you a lesson you won’t soon forget.”

My bedroom door clicked shut and my dad pulled free his belt. When his first strike cut through the air and slammed against my back, I didn’t cry out. My sobs joined my mental screams.

Didn’t he realize? Nothing could ever hurt more than seeing my mother dragged from me...away from her children and her home.

The second strike hit harder than the first.

I didn't even flinch.

He wanted me to beg for mercy, to apologize for catching him red-handed. He wanted to assault me into submission.

All he did was make me retreat further into myself.

All he did was feed the monster inside that promised retribution.

All he did was make me more alone than I'd ever been before.

I woke with a start, my screams still echoing inside my skull. My breathing was heavy and harsh, my skin damp.

My eyelashes fluttered and it took me a good minute to realize my dream had just been that...a dream that had forced me to relive my past.

It was only when I rolled over and reached for Delilah that I comprehended she wasn't there. "No!"

But this time my voice broke free from my throat.

This time I wouldn't stand back and watch somebody I adored leave me.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:43 am

Delilah

I 'd woken from a deep sleep after slumbering most of the day and all night away, just as I'd predicted. My lips quirked. I must have really needed my beauty sleep.

After dressing quickly and leaving my apartment behind, I stepped out of the elevator onto the fifth floor of the bricks and mortar part of the escort business, determined to get what I wanted.

My freedom.

The interior was discreet yet somehow intimidating with its gold leaf lettering on its interior glass doors, which subtly proclaimed New York Exclusive Inc , along with its pristine white walls and large tinted windows with gold-colored shutters.

My high-heels clicked across the mosaic floor, their height gaining me some much needed power leverage. Other than my footwear, I looked the opposite of what I did for my profession, my knee-length navy skirt, white blouse and navy jacket super conservative and my hair pulled back into bun. I could have been a lawyer or a young business executive.

Whatever . I needed my armor for the coming confrontation, and clothes had always defined the role I played.

I slowed though when Sinead came out of her office space that was set in the back behind the receptionist's desk. She looked preoccupied until her gaze settled on me, her eyes widening as she took in my outfit. "Delilah," she said faintly, as though

recovering from the vision I presented. “I wasn’t expecting you so early.”

I shrugged, my hands tightening on my black clutch bag. “I managed to catch up on my sleep.”

“Good. I’m guessing you took the sleeping tablets I gave you? We need you to stay looking your best.”

I blinked. Had she already booked me in with another client? It wasn’t uncommon to have reservations in advance but usually I knew beforehand. “I didn’t need the tablets, I slept like the dead.” I cleared my throat. “I came in early so I could speak to you.”

“Oh?” Her lips tightened. She knew as well as anyone that no news was good news. “Whatever for?”

“I’m leaving.” No point in beating around the bush. I needed to get it out.

Her dull brown eyes flashed, her straight blonde hair that fell to her shoulders suddenly taking on a disheveled look. “You can’t,” she said flatly, without even a whiff of compromise. “I only just got rid of two of my girls who refused to attend the Agostino party.”

“How is that my problem?”

Her eyes narrowed and turned flinty. “Without you, I barely have a business.”

I narrowed my eyes right back. “You have ten other girls.” I exhaled slowly. “I appreciate you giving me this job, but you knew from day one it was only temporary until I had the funds to get out of the industry and into a new career.”

She softened her voice. “There was never any denying that,” she conceded, even as she nodded her head at the door she’d just walked out of. “Let’s talk privately.”

I glanced at the receptionist who was unabashedly eavesdropping, her tight brunette chignon doing little to smooth out the wrinkles around her eyes and mouth. She might have once worked in the sex industry as an escort, but she’d yet to learn how to keep things personal and private. She’d talk a person’s ear off about her past and the girls who worked here.

“Fine,” I said, following Sinead into her office, which was a spacious room with the usual overlarge desk and chair, along with a corner lounge next to a gas fireplace and a huge window with views of the Hudson River.

The usual honeysuckle incense scent was diminished somewhat by the distinct Colombian cigar smoke that filled the room, a scent that made me stop in my tracks.

Sinead smiled. “I think this man here might make you change your mind.”

My eyes clashed with the man sprawled out on the lounge, his gaze smoldering. I swallowed tightly, then managed weakly, “Serafino.”

He cocked a dark brow, his long hair that was caught back in a cord making his face look harder, fiercer. Less forgiving. “You left without even a kiss goodbye.”

“You were asleep after a rather vigorous night. I didn’t want to disturb you.”

He gripped the back of his hair and tugged, random strands then cascading forward from their confinement. “I thought you knew me better than that,” he said hoarsely, his voice an accusation.

I shrugged, though my pulse galloped. “Our time was up.”

“Actually, that is why he’s here,” Sinead interjected with a forced smile. “He wants more time with you.”

The room did a slow spin around me as my blood drained away from my face. “I-I can’t,” I said. “I’m leaving this profession.”

The tip of his cigar burned bright. “You are?” His eyes burned almost as brightly. “You never mentioned wanting to leave?”

I lifted my chin. “You were a client. It wasn’t necessary to tell you.”

“You’re also his employee,” Sinead said archly. “He has every right to know.”

I glared at her before narrowing my eyes at him. “You’re not really going to use our working relationship against me, are you?”

He nodded at Sinead, his eyes hardening. “Get me her file.”

She hurried to do his bidding, unlocking the bottom drawer of her desk and shuffling through some hanging folders before selecting one. She withdrew it and handed it to him.

“Thank you.” He opened it and scanned one of the documents inside, then looked at me and said, “You signed a three month contract. You’re contractually obligated to stay with this agency for another month.”

“What?” I looked at Sinead then back to Serafino. Neither looked guilty about my situation. They looked pleased. “I never signed up for three months.”

“You did,” Sinead declared. “You just didn’t read the fine print after your one week trial.”

“You said I was signing a waiver!”

“It was that too,” she conceded. “One never knows when a client might hurt one of my girls.”

I stepped back, my vision misting with red. “I’ll be seeing you in court.”

Sinead laughed. “With the judge and jurors in Serafino’s back pocket? Have fun wasting all that money you’ve been saving.”

My bottom lip trembled and Serafino stiffened ever so slightly before I said, “That’s not fair.”

“You, of all people, should know life’s not fair,” Sinead responded.

Serafino stood. “I believe I have a solution for you.”

I looked at him, my chest as tight as my breathing. “I just bet you do.”

“Stay with me for the month you have left, all expenses paid along with a bonus.”

I inhaled sharply. “There must be hundreds of women who’d love to fill that position.”

“Maybe. But I don’t want them. I want you.” His eyes glittered possessively even as he added quietly, “Once the month is over, you’re free to go.”

I held his dark stare. “No other clients for that entire month?”

“Just me,” he said in a low voice that throbbed with an intensity I couldn’t read.

Sinead cleared her throat. “Serafino doesn’t want to share you.”

I didn’t look at her. My gaze was caught and held by Serafino’s as he added softly, “I want exclusive rights.”

I should have been thoroughly pissed off and infuriated, but something inside my chest warmed, a part of me thrilled that I’d have a whole month with the one man I should be running from. That was despite the fact heartbreak had never been on my agenda, I didn’t want to experience it—not ever—and yet something told me I was putting myself in the firing line for that exact scenario.

He sat straighter, his attention still all on me. “Deal?”

I nodded, my throat drier than dust. “Deal.”

Serafino

I allowed my cigar to cool down before I disposed of it into an ashtray. My lungs were tight enough after seeing the woman who had taken up my every thought.

That she was dressed in clothes befitting a lawyer or businesswoman only made my dick harder. Perhaps some role play was in order in our future.

I pushed to my feet, satisfied with the outcome. I'd gotten the woman I craved. I just had to ensure she was completely mine by the month's end.

I held Delilah's gaze. "Let me drive you home. I'm sure you'd like to pick up a few things before coming with me for the month."

She shook her head. "No. Absolutely not. No client ever goes to where I live."

Sinead sent me a simpering smile. "It's true, our girls never entertain men in their own home, for obvious safety issues."

I concealed a flash of irritation. "You and I both know I have all the workers details at hand whenever I need them."

"You do," Sinead conceded, immediately contrite.

Delilah glowered at me. "You might own the agency, but you don't own me."

What she didn't know was that I intended to change that very soon. I wanted to own

her, body, mind and soul. Then she'd never want to leave me again.

She was mine. She just didn't know it yet.

I clucked my tongue. "Everyone has a price."

She crossed her arms, her bottom lip trembling. She looked damn well stricken. "And too many know how to make others feel cheap."

That the ice around my cold heart was beginning to crack meant nothing—did it? Even worse, guilt left a sour taste in my mouth when I said, "That was never my intention."

"Wasn't it?" she questioned. Rubbing the back of her neck, she sighed and said, "Whatever. We'll go to my place. There are some things I'd like if I'm going to be living with you for the entire month."

I was intrigued, but managed to keep an impassive face. She didn't need to know just yet how deeply she'd hooked her claws into me—however unwittingly—in just four days. I was desperate to see inside her home to glean some clues about her.

I had a month to make her feel the same about me as I did about her, and I intended to use everything in my arsenal to make that happen.

I stepped toward Delilah, then wrapped my arms around her and drew her against me. My whole body unwound. She belonged with me. I glanced at Sinead. "See that you find three more girls within the week."

She nodded tightly. "It will be done."

Without looking back, I drew Delilah out of the office, then the reception and waiting

area. Once we'd stepped out into the corridor, we took the elevator down to where my car waited along with my driver, Emilio.

He nodded and smiled at Delilah, showing his respect as he opened the back passenger door. He knew better now than to incite my anger, especially when it came to my woman.

I settled into the back leather seat beside her, waiting for the car to pull back out into the traffic before I cupped her chin and drew her face up to mine. My mouth settled over her soft lips and I groaned at the rightness of our kiss. It was drugging, intoxicating and addicting.

It wasn't until she kissed me back, her mouth softening even more and her lips parting, that I drove my tongue deep inside, savoring her.

She drew back first, panting as she looked up at me with her plump, wet lips and her dewy eyes. "Why me?" she asked, voice breathless. "What exactly do you want from me?"

"Why not you?" I countered. Didn't she realize she was my perfect match in every way? "And I want all of you," I said with such intensity she shrank back from me.

I smiled. She'd soon change her mindset. That she didn't speak to me for the entire journey to her home meant nothing to me. What did fifteen minutes of silence matter when I had a whole month to convey our solidarity?

Emilio found a park next to an aged apartment building. I hid my surprise. I'd expected her to live in some fancy condo, not a shabby apartment complex with a whole lot of shady neighbors.

I walked with her into the lobby where moldy carpet and faded paint, along with a

general feeling of neglect greeted us. Stepping into the elevator and then back out again on the tenth floor, the stale smell was even more pronounced.

Perhaps that was why I was so surprised when I followed her into her apartment, with its clean white lines and splashes of teal and navy colors, the feel of luxury in the white furnishings and the dark floorboards beneath, the faint scent of lavender in the air.

It was all so understated and elegant, just like the woman I admired.

But where were the photos, the memorabilia? Didn't women showoff that kind of stuff like prized medals? There was nothing to hint of her family, nothing to showcase what she'd done in her life.

That she hid that part of herself, even from her own eyes, squeezed at my innards. She was doing her best to forget her past and obviously her present. Little wonder she wanted to leave it all behind.

And yet you've forced her to stay another month in a profession she doesn't want to be in .

I shoved away yet another bout of guilt. One more month wouldn't hurt her, not when she was only seeing me. That I'd ensured no other client would be a part of her future should make her happy...I hoped it did.

"Would you like a drink?" she asked, heading toward a corner bar that reflected the same walnut-stain as her floorboards. Though it featured a built-in wine rack between the doors and the bar-top, it was the whiskey bottles on the glass shelves above that caught my eye.

"A woman after my own heart," I mused aloud.

She snorted. “Not all women drink wine and bubbly.”

I accepted my glass with its splash of amber with a nod of thanks. She tipped her glass back and swallowed its contents in one gulp, then placed it back on the bar with a sigh. “I’ll go and get my things.”

I nodded, taking a small sip of my drink before following her into the bedroom. She dragged a suitcase down from an overhead cupboard and proceeded to stuff it with clothes.

“You still have some things left in my closet at home,” I reminded silkily. I didn’t know what had been worse, finding her eye mask in my jacket pocket after I’d gotten dressed or seeing her clothes abandoned in my closet.

Definitely the former. When I’d pulled out her eye mask, I’d felt emotions I’d never experienced before. Yearning and need had overwhelmed me all over again, my fluttering stomach and racing pulse reminding me what I must do—everything possible—to reclaim the woman I wanted.

Now I just had to win her over in the coming weeks.

I tossed back the last of my whiskey as she continued packing, my voice a growl thanks to my dark emotions. “I’ll supply anything you need, just take essential items.”

She looked up, her face flushed. “My clothes are an essential part of me.” She frowned. “We are going to your place?”

I shook my head. “No. My don—my brother—has a casino in Vegas. He wants me to oversee things there for a few weeks.” I wouldn’t tell her it was mostly until things calmed down a bit.

She blinked. “Really? How lovely of him.”

Lovely wasn't a word too often associated with Ethan, but I couldn't help but smile at her excitement even as my dick strained. “Really.” I stepped toward her and drew her close, clasping her ass and pressing her against my arousal, “But first, I want to make our month together official.”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:43 am

Delilah

I couldn't help but be excited about my first trip to Vegas. Energy thrummed through me, but knowing I'd be there with Serafino made it even more special.

His dominance enthralled me, his skill in making me succumb to him beyond compare. He might know how to kill, but he most certainly knew how to fuck. Despite my best intentions, I was opening to him like a bud to first dawn light.

We boarded his private jet, the ultimate in luxury with its leather seating surrounding a polished table, more seats behind with a big screen television. A cream carpet with dark swirling patterns was soft and luxurious underfoot, and I couldn't wait to take off my heeled boots.

Our luggage had already been put away, and I only had my clutch bag on me, my overnight bag stashed in the bedroom of the jet. I shivered delicately. I didn't doubt for a second I'd become a member of the mile high club. Though where he'd find the energy after he'd screwed me senseless in my own home, I had no idea.

He directed me to a comfy two-seater lounge that seemed designed for intimacy. Not that I was complaining, I enjoyed his big, hard body next to mine, even if I wished that I abhorred him.

An air hostess approached, her simpering smile making my stomach twist. "Would you like a drink, perhaps a snack?" She didn't look my way as she asked Serafino, "Something else?"

He was immune to her bold innuendo when he replied, “Two whiskeys on the rocks.”

The air hostess frowned a little, then nodded and sashayed off to prepare the drinks.

I dragged a hand through my high ponytail as I glanced at him, my voice tight. “Another one of your conquests?”

He arched a brow. “Possibly. I stopped counting a long time ago. Why? Does it bother you who I’ve fucked in my past?”

I lifted my chin. “I’m an escort. Fidelity isn’t in my repertoire.” Though jealousy seemed to be now.

He inhaled sharply, his nostrils flaring. He reached out and gripped my chin, holding my stare. “You’ll be all mine for this coming month.”

I wrenched free from his near painful grip. “Don’t fret. I won’t cheat while you’re paying for the privilege of exclusivity.”

His eyes darkened, anger swirling in their depths. “Guess I can count that as yet another perk of being rich,” he said bitterly. He laughed, the sound brittle. “Not that I should complain, I’ve gotten what I wanted thanks to my money.”

I wanted to reassure him and take back my words, but it was too late now, the damage had been done. I was supposed to be his fantasy lover, not some toxic shrew making his life hell. I might make money from sex but it didn’t mean I was a nymphomaniac who couldn’t keep her legs shut.

It didn’t stop me from adding, “Once a whore always a whore. You’d do well to remember that.”

He sighed indulgently, his mood shifting fast. “If you think I’d judge you for that, you don’t know me very well at all,” he mused.

Our drinks came then, the air hostess delivering the whiskeys with yet another annoying come hither smile at Serafino while she batted her long lashes. “Anything else you need?”

“That is all, thank you.”

Why was I all but chasing Serafino away with my snarly comments then waiting with baited breath for him to find interest in someone else? Was I trying to keep him at arm’s length because he was the only client who interested me?

I chugged down the quality drink, the air hostess returning a few minutes later to take away our glasses even as the jet’s engine whined as the pilot prepared for takeoff.

We put on our seatbelts, Serafino reaching out to hold my hand, his fingers intertwining with mine. His touch burned through my nerve endings and made my stomach flutter. I might have been with a lot of men, but they all faded into oblivion when I was with him.

I looked down at my tiny leather skirt and yellow blouse that deliberately clashed with my fiery red hair. I’d wanted to stand out, and I certainly did. Even my knee-high dark leather boots with their spiked heels drew the eye.

Perhaps I should have stuck with my lawyer look, at least then the air hostess might have viewed me with a little more respect, instead she’d practically ignored me and focused on Serafino. I was nothing more than competition to someone like her.

Stop playing yourself down. You’re beautiful and smart, men want you and women wish they were you.

Minutes later the jet took off and we were high in the air, the gentle hum of the jet's engine diluted by a soundtrack of popular songs played through surround sound speakers. I must have dozed at some point, waking only as the jet touched down on the runway.

How much sleep did I need? At this rate I wouldn't sleep for the next week. My stomach fluttered. Perhaps I was mentally preparing for Serafino's ravenous needs.

That I had my head tucked under his arm made me realize how comfortable I'd made myself. I blinked up at him. "We didn't use the bedroom."

He smirked, his eyes glittering. "As much as I'd planned, in stunning detail, to take you there, you looked way too comfortable to disturb. You clearly needed your sleep."

Something shifted in my chest. I'd assumed sexual gratification was all he cared about, but he must care for me too.

Or maybe he really does want to keep you fit and healthy for the next month while he pushes your body to the limit.

I ignored the snide little voice in my head. It was time to earn my position as his lover and so far today I hadn't been doing a very good job at it. A smile curled my lips. I had more than made up for it in the bedroom earlier.

The jet taxied to a stop and Serafino looked down at me and murmured, "Let's go paint Vegas red."

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:43 am

Serafino

There was something exhilarating in watching the beautiful woman next to me eagerly taking everything in. It seemed almost impossible to believe that such a worldly woman had such a sheltered life when it came to traveling.

That she was seriously impressed at seeing the Costa dark-stone and glass circular tower with its laser lights that streaked up and down the building before encircling it in constant, ever changing colors and patterns left me smiling.

I was a cynical bastard at the best of times but she'd changed all that, had opened me up to a life I couldn't imagine without her in it. Love might be a fucked-up emotion, but I was ready to dip my toes into its murky waters.

She didn't need to know I'd taken her out of New York and to Las Vegas to get her away from the potential threat of the Irish mafia. Rumors had increased to fever pitch about their new don's desire to prove himself and his position via an act of vengeance against the Costa mafia. It meant Delilah—any of my family's partners—were in the firing line as much as the rest of us Costas were.

I shook off my thoughts and concerns. I really was ready to enjoy this week and soak everything in right alongside Delilah. She made everything feel like it was a first time for me too, my jaded outlook falling off me like a cloak.

Only time would tell if my past fears and traumas would fall away as easily.

The driver took us to the carpark beneath the Costa Tower, and she giggled at the

dazzling laser lights that streaked beside us and then ahead, lighting the way.

Our driver, who was one of my many soldiers I had here in Vegas, parked the car into a bay next to a private elevator. I climbed out and proffered Delilah a hand, she accepted it and the elevator doors swished apart before we stepped inside and ascended to one of the top floor penthouse suites.

“No flashing lights,” she said, her lips quirking with amusement as she glanced around at the smoky-tinted glass elevator that gave a birds-eye view of each level of the casino. The first floor was slot machines, the next two catered for every gaming imaginable, including blackjack, roulette, craps, baccarat and poker.

She stared out at each floor, like a kid in a candy shop and I resisted telling her there was no need for lights inside the elevator when there were so many to see in the casino levels that flashed past.

Instead I murmured, “I’m sure a laser show could be arranged in here if that is what you wanted.”

She snorted. “That’s a nice thought, but I’m not that self-centered”

“I can make it reality for you,” I interjected, every cell in my body wanting only to please her.

The glass doors slid open then, revealing the huge penthouse suite with its floor-to-ceiling surround windows that captured the endless glittering lights outside. Overlong white sheer curtains had been pushed to one side, along with block-out gold drapes. The bared windows gave the effect of being inside a spaceship.

“This is incredible,” she breathed, stepping onto the thick cream carpet in her heeled, knee-high boots. She dropped her clutch bag onto one of the thick red leather

armchairs as she stalked toward the windows to look out at the illuminated vista spread out around us. “Just beautiful!”

I moved behind her, wrapping my around her waist. “I agree,” I said huskily, not taking my eyes off her. “The views are beyond beautiful.”

She giggled, her body simultaneously relaxing and tensing all at once. “For a man of few words I’m actually impressed.”

“Oh?”

She turned in my arms, the backdrop of neon lights making her face radiant, her teeth glinting white against her ruby lipstick. “I never thought I’d hear corny words coming from a man I’m supposed to fear.”

My breath caught, my heart expanding as I drank in her splendor. “Supposed to fear?” I growled. “You should fear me.” Not because I was a mafia madman, not even close. She should fear me because I was obsessed with her and wasn’t about to let her go anytime soon, if ever.

Before she could react I bent and sucked the side of her throat. She gasped and wilted in my arms, yielding to me. A roar echoed inside my head like a lion claiming its mate. But if I was king, she was my queen. I released her momentarily, spinning her around so that her back was to my front.

It took less than a minute to strip off her clothes until she wore nothing but her boots. Her added height was an advantage, her nudity along with her spiked boots sexy as fuck.

“Are you ready for me?” I asked harshly.

She nodded silent assent, her panting breaths only provoking my feral lust.

I pushed her against the window, her breasts mashing against the thick pane. My blood heated, thickened, my breathing choppy and my needs raw.

I could so easily fall for this woman.

I'd gone beyond ready to dip my toe into the murky waters of love. I'd stuck my leg deep into its depths.

A surge of adrenaline and fear gripped me tight. Was I mad? I couldn't love anyone. Even if she became a permanent part of my life I wouldn't— couldn't —fall for her.

My dick spasmed. I'd fuck her again and again, fuck her until no more fucks could be given and every orgasm had been wrung out of her. Then I'd buy her everything money could get and then some. But she would not get my heart.

My hands trembled as I widened my stance and unzipped my pants. I didn't bother undressing, my compulsion to take what I wanted was too great. I one-handed my inflated dick, directing it between her thighs. In one brutal surge I claimed her, filling her pussy and snarling, "You're mine."

I was balls-deep inside her when I commanded hoarsely, "Say it."

She nodded and panted, her every muscle drawn tighter than a bowstring. "I'm yours."

Her compliance made my whole body jolt, my dick expanding to the point of pain. I grunted as I withdrew partway then thrust deep, a momentum that quickly gathered speed.

The carnal scent of our lust, the slapping of skin-on-skin, the darkness outside that was just millimeters away with the beckoning lights, along with her cries of pained delight...it all set me off like a firecracker.

I grasped her hips and slammed into her one last time before I emptied my seed deep inside her, hollering out my triumph. Even so, a part of me was furious that I hadn't given her exactly what she needed.

Reaching between her thighs, I parted her folds and rubbed her nub with practiced strokes, not relenting until she collapsed against me with mini-convulsions.

I held her upright even as I whispered a promise into her ear. "We're not finished yet. I'm going to suck your clit until you coat my tongue with your cum. Then I'm going to fuck you all over again."

Delilah

I ached from head to toe, but they were delicious aches, ones that left me beaming. I couldn't help but smile even wider as I stepped out of the elevator with Serafino and onto one of the gaming floors where people milled about.

The whole place buzzed, the atmosphere electric. A shout filled the air after a gambler won the roll of the dice on the roulette wheel.

Serafino glanced at me. "Let's start there."

I nodded, his hand squeezing mine as we approached the gaming table, the crowd parting to let us through. Though I doubted anyone knew who he was, his dangerous aura was enough for them to get out of his way.

If their stares weren't already drawn toward us, with him in a dark tailored suit and me in a sparkling silver sheaf dress with an irregular hem, then they certainly were when he put down five thousand for the croupier to exchange for chips.

"They're yours," he said, pushing the chips in front of me. "You just have to decide where to place them."

"They are?" I breathed. I glanced at the board and bit my bottom lip. "I want to put a grand on black."

He grinned. "Let's do it then."

I slid some of my stack of orange chips inside the black rectangle on the table even as the croupier threw the ball into the spinning wheel. When the ball popped into number thirty-three black, for a moment I stood there with my mouth open.

“You won,” Serafino said with a chuckle.

I turned to him. “I did,” I said with a breathless rush before I threw my arms around him and clung on.

His laugh vibrated straight through me, his strong arms encircling me before he said into my ear, “Keep clinging to me like this and I might have to take you someplace private and have my wicked way with you.”

If his words weren’t warning enough then the bulge against my stomach most certainly was. I pulled back, my face flushing. “You’re insatiable,” I managed, before I turned away from his smug gaze and watched my chips grow in size.

We tried baccarat next, and though I lost more than I won there was something invigorating having Serafino standing behind me like an impenetrable wall. That he had my back was irrefutable.

A bald man in a pale gray suit approached from out of the crowd, and Serafino smiled before he shook hands with him. Then drawing me close, he said to the man, “Jarrod, I’d like you to meet my girlfriend, Delilah.”

My heart pounded at his words. Girlfriend? Why did I wish for that with every cell in my body?

“Delilah,” Serafino continued, “Jarrod is the director of this casino.”

I turned to meet the man’s pale blue stare, my breath shuddering and the hairs on my

arms standing up with a sudden sense of foreboding.

“I didn’t know you were with someone,” Jarrod said to Serafino before he slid me a sideward glance that seemed full of insinuation.

Serafino’s voice sharpened. “Now you do.”

“No offense intended,” Jarrod said in placating tone, jerking his gaze away from me. “I can see she is special to you.”

“She is,” Serafino agreed. With a dismissive tone he added, “I’ll catch up with you later in the week.”

“Of course, you know where to find me.”

He didn’t look my way again when he pivoted and walked away.

It was only after the director was out of sight that Serafino murmured, “You looked like you saw a ghost.” His voice tightened. “Have you and Jarrod already met?”

My laugh was dry. “If you’re asking if he’s ever been a client of mine, then no, he hasn’t.” I shook my head and admitted, “There was just something off about him.”

He brushed a hand up and down my back. “I’ll have someone look into him.”

I nodded, the bad vibe soon dissipating as I tried my hand at craps. I won more than I lost, my adrenaline surging as the croupier slid my pile of chips toward me.

“It’s getting late,” Serafino said next to my ear.

I turned to him with a pout as I looked up into his stare. “But I’m having so much

fun.”

“I was going to suggest a visit to the nightclub next,” he murmured. “You can really let your hair down there.”

I giggled, more than a little drunk on winning...on life. “I’d love that.”

We collected my winnings, which I happily squirrelled away into my silver clutch bag. I had a spring in my step as Serafino held my hand and led me through automated glass doors and across a carpeted lobby toward the nightclub.

The hefty bouncers who stood guard at the doors immediately recognized Serafino. Ignoring the people lined up at the door, they unlatched the red barrier ropes and let us through with a deferential nod.

Serafino took my clutch bag and handed it to the nearest bouncer. “Watch this for a few hours.”

It wasn’t a question and the bouncer didn’t take it as one. He immediately nodded and put it inside his jacket.

I laughed. It was getting to be a bit of a habit for him to palm off my clutch bag to the nearest trusted person. That my clutch just happened to hold a small fortune inside it didn’t seem to faze him. But then, why would it? Anyone who knew him also know no amount of money was worth risking their life.

A bearded DJ in a fluorescent pink shirt kept the place hopping with a seamless mix of electronic dance music, hip-hop and pop, strobe lights flashing to the beat. I shivered with excitement. The atmosphere was electric.

“Let’s dance,” Serafino said close to my ear before he drew me onto the floor where

other clubbers were moving to the frenetic beat.

I laughed as I lifted my arms above my head and rolled my hips, the music pulsing through me. All my problems and cares slipped away as I became as one with the beat, as I danced for the man who was so invested in me.

He stepped closer to me and I spun around and encircled his nape with my arms as my spine pressed close to his front. At his arousal so blatantly pressing against me, I writhed against him, pushing his willpower to the limits.

I didn't hear his growl but I felt it shuddering through his body, his big hands encircling my waist and bringing me even closer so that we were almost melded together.

Then his breath brushed my ear and he said thickly, "You're going to be the death of me."

I looked up at him as I tilted my head back against his chest, my eyes then clashing with his as the strobe lights flashed through the crowd of dancers. "We bring each other to life."

It would have been next to impossible for him to hear me above the music, but his eyes darkened as though in understanding, his hands gripping me tightly. Then he spun me around so that I faced him, his head swooping low and his mouth devouring mine in a kiss that was as frenzied as the beat swirling around us.

I might as well have been in my own world, the dancers jostling around us becoming non-existent while my heart throbbed for the man who'd captured my attention and had yet to let it go.

No one could compare to him, no one would come close to having his charisma, his

dangerous aura, his skill in the bedroom—or anywhere else.

It was as if he'd been crafted especially for me. Or perhaps the reverse was true. It didn't matter. All that mattered was how much I wanted him and he wanted me.

He peeled his mouth away from mine, his dark eyes glittering before he said close to my ear, "Let's take this to the bedroom."

I jerked out a nod. I wanted, desperately, to submit to him. I wanted him to fill me completely, where the pain of his entry was overcome by a pleasure that was so damn incredible I all but blacked out from this world and stepped into another.

He kept his arm around my waist as we headed toward the exit. The bouncer looked surprised by our early departure before a knowing look settled over his face. Then his expression became carefully neutral—no one disrespected Serafino's woman—as he handed my clutch bag back.

We made it to the elevator. Once the doors slid closed, he pressed me against the wall with his fingers digging into my upswept hair as he claimed my mouth once again. I was so invested in his kiss I didn't notice him unclipping my hair until it tumbled down my back.

He drew his head back, his eyes dark. "My gorgeous firebird," he said reverently.

My shiver came from somewhere deep inside. My feelings were too powerful, too intense. I was walking a tightrope with this man and doing everything I could not to fall for him.

Then the doors pinged and opened, and he picked me up and carried me into his suite of rooms, kissing me again.

My temperature rose as we shared breaths. Then he put me back onto my feet before we undressed each other, my hands fumbling with a desperate need to touch his naked skin.

Briing. Briing.

He jerked his head back. “What the fuck?” he growled.

“Don’t answer it,” I breathed.

He shook his head. “I have to. It’s my brother’s ringtone. My don.”

My whole body trembled with unfulfilled needs, but I stepped back from him as he withdrew his cell and answered the call. “Ethan. What is it?”

I couldn’t hear the conversation but I sensed Serafino’s shock at whatever his brother aka boss said to him. His whole body had tensed, his eyebrows drawing low and his mouth thinning.

Serafino nodded. “The pilot is waiting? Good. I’ll board in five minutes.”

He disconnected the call, his face hard and his voice flat as he looked my way. “I have to go. My family is in danger, my nephew apparently targeted in a planned revenge attack.”

I gaped. His enemy using a child as payback was chilling, sickening. “I’ll pack my things.”

“No.” His voice could have been a crack of a whip, decisive and unyielding. “I want you to stay here where you’ll be safe.”

I nodded mutely, then followed him into the bedroom where he tucked some firearms into an overnight bag along with some random clothes. I cleared my throat, my stomach tight. "Tell me you'll be safe," I said softly.

"Tell me you care," he volleyed back at me.

How did I tell him I cared too much, and that I didn't want to lose him? Despite what Serafino had told Jarrod, I wasn't his girlfriend, I was nothing more than his whore.

He snorted at my silence. "I'll be back before you know it, sweetheart."

My heart lurched. I much preferred him calling me firebird . It made me feel special, deserving of him.

He zipped up his bag, then grabbed a cellphone from out of a drawer and closed the short distance between us. He handed the cell to me. "This has my number in it. We can text or call each other whenever we need to."

I blinked, accepting it from him with something between relief and trepidation. I never gave clients my work phone number, it was almost exclusively reserved for Sinead. That he felt it was necessary to contact me and vice versa set off little alarms inside me.

His stare darkened as his face turned serious, his tone somber. "Stay in this suite of rooms. Do not go outside. Not for anything or anyone."

I felt the blood drain from my face, my entire body shutting down. I didn't stay indoors, especially alone. My mind always ran rampant, my twisted memories sneaking up on me as panic set in.

He stared down at me, a frown furrowing his brow as he added, "If you need

anything, ring me, or use the in-room phone and call reception for Jarrod.”

“Jarrod?” I repeated faintly.

Serafino nodded. “He’s one of the few I trust.”

“I don’t,” I reminded, my voice scratchy.

“Then stay here. I won’t be gone long.”

My pulse surged. How long was not long?

He bent and kissed me, his mouth hard and his emotions tinged with angst. Then he pulled away and strode past me without looking back.

I pressed a hand to my mouth, then dropped it to my stomach as foreboding swept over me once again. Nothing about this whole scenario felt right.

Nothing at all.

Delilah

I t'd been two days since Serafino had left me alone in his suite of rooms with nothing but room service to look forward to. But today I'd skipped breakfast and had yet to order lunch. I wasn't hungry, not with my anxiety rising every hour that I was alone and locked away.

He couldn't have known this was my worst nightmare. He'd paid for me to make him feel good, not for me to breakdown and bemoan my horrible childhood.

But I felt suffocated, hemmed in and all too alone.

I swallowed past my dry throat as the walls closed in around me. Not even the balcony fended off my phobia, where tall buildings invaded the skyline, invaded my space.

I rubbed my sweaty palms together, my whole body beginning to perspire. I released a jagged breath. I had to get out of here.

But I wouldn't ring Serafino, he had enough to deal with.

I picked up the in-room phone and rang straight through to reception. After a woman with a friendly voice answered, I said in a high-pitched voice, "This is Delilah. Could you please put me through to Jarrod?"

"Of course. One moment, please."

The three or four seconds it took for him to answer felt like a lifetime.

“Delilah,” Jarrod said in a smooth, congenial voice. “What can I do for you?”

“I-I need to get out of here,” I choked out.

“Out?” he repeated. His voice dropped with concern. “Is everything okay? I’m happy to take you anywhere you need to go.”

“The nearest garden,” I blabbered, my brain shutting down as panic clawed through me.

“I hear the Botanical Gardens are beautiful.”

“Please,” I said, voice cracking.

“Wait there. I’ll come and get you.”

I disconnected without answering. Every bit of my strength went into pushing back my panic attack. I did some deep breathing as I threw a cream cardigan over top of my black pantsuit, and pushed my feet into comfortable black ankle boots. Then grabbing the cell Serafino had given me, I sent him a text.

Feeling imprisoned. Have to get out of here. Jarrod taking me to Botanic Gardens.

I slipped the cell into my clutch bag just as the elevator dinged and Jarrod stepped into Serafino’s abode.

I managed a tight smile and ignored the pitching of my stomach. Getting out into Mother Nature would be worth any silly dislike of this man.

Jarrood waited near the elevator, and for that at least, I was grateful. I didn't want his presence to sully the memories I had here with Serafino.

Like a panic attack isn't doing that already?

I hurried toward him and he cocked his head to the side before he said solicitously, "You don't look great, Del."

I frowned at the shortened name he'd given me. He was a stranger. He didn't get to call me by any other name. "I've been better. And please, call me Delilah."

He inclined his head and said, "Of course. Delilah." He stepped aside and allowed me to access the waiting elevator first. It wasn't until he followed me in that he reached out and clasped my shoulder. "You're going to be okay. Just take some deep breaths."

I hid a shudder but managed to nod before he released his clasp. I vaguely heard the beep of a returned text, but I ignored it. I was slowly suffocating inside the elevator and it took everything I had just to keep another round of panic at bay.

But Serafino clearly didn't like it when I disregarded his text.

Ring. Ring.

"Ignore it," Jarrood said, voice soothing. "Concentrate on staying calm and centering yourself."

"Easy for you to say," I said tightly.

"True," he conceded. "But I witnessed my mother suffer from panic attacks for many years. I know the signs."

It should have made me feel more comfortable, but there was nothing calming about being close to him. And there was definitely nothing centered about my cell going quiet. It wasn't until we stepped out into the casino's foyer that my panic marginally subsided.

"I have a car waiting for us outside," Jarrod said.

I nodded stiffly, my heels clicking across the mosaic floor as I hurried toward the huge sliding doors. An indoor fountain tinkled into a pool filled with koi, but I barely noticed. I was on a mission to get out of the casino as fast as possible.

"Jarrod? Miss? Is everything okay?"

"We're fine," Jarrod grunted. "Get back to your desk, Sally."

"Of course, sir," she said in a cool voice.

I wasn't focused on the woman or her and Jarrod's strained work dynamic, I was focused only on getting out of the casino. I stepped outside, but had to suck in a strangled breath at the tall buildings looming over me like scary sentinels.

"Let's get you out of here," Jarrod said as he opened the passenger door and gestured for me to get in.

I climbed into the back seat as he slid in beside me and reached out to pat my knee as I clipped on my seatbelt. "You'll be fine."

Nausea swirled in my stomach. I hadn't had an anxiety attack this bad in years. Perhaps that was why I didn't register for a minute that the driver had stayed behind the wheel, the same driver who pulled away without asking where we wanted to go.

“How far away are we from the Botanic Gardens?” I croaked.

Jarrold smiled amiably. “Thirty minutes at most.”

I fished my cell out of my clutch bag with shaky hands.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“I’ve got a text.” Not that it was any of his business.

I opened the message and read it with a shaky inhalation.

Don’t go anywhere with Jarrod. Your instincts were right.

My cell rang and I answered the call with a shaky voice. “Serafino, I’m sorry. It’s too late, I—“

A sharp prick in my neck cut off anymore words, my voice failing and my strength non-existent as my cell fell to the car’s floor as if in slow motion. Darkness pressed down on me and I slumped forward. Then...nothing.

*

I woke with a sharp inhalation, instantly aware I was in the same car I’d been in earlier even before I cracked open my eyes. Except the ride was no longer smooth, I was getting jostled, the now one-lane road ahead rougher, the neighborhood seedier with rundown buildings and warehouses either side,

My pulse drummed louder in my ears. I remembered answering my phone after I’d read Serafino’s text, then—

Fuck.

Understanding was an arrow straight through my consciousness even before I focused my gritty stare on the man sitting loose-limbed next to me, a gun sitting on his thigh, its muzzle pointed my way.

“I was beginning to think you were never going to wake.” Jarrod smirked. “I didn’t want you to miss seeing your own demise.”

“Why would you want that?” I gritted. “What have I ever done to you?”

He chuckled, clearly pleased with himself. “You’ve done nothing, and that’s the crux of the problem. You fuck men like Serafino to get ahead, while hardworking soldiers like myself get overlooked. Every. Single. Time.”

I blinked. “You’re the director of the Agostino casino.”

His lips flattened. “I want more.” He patted his jacket pocket. “I want money. Prestige. Notoriety. To get that, I’m doing what I should have done a long time ago. I’m taking charge of my destiny and grabbing any opportunity with both hands.”

“Do you really think you’ll get away with kidnapping me? If Serafino doesn’t kill you, the Irish mafia will dispose of you quicker than you can put your hand out for your blood money.”

I noted the driver’s cynical smirk. He clearly agreed with my theory. A pity Jarrod hadn’t noticed. He had his eyes firmly on the prize, his tunnel vision making him blind to anything else.

“Serafino won’t go near the Irish territory, not even for his favorite whore. As for the O’Malleys, I’ve delivered what— who —they wanted, and they’ll generously reward

me for it.”

“They’ll kill you for your trouble,” I gritted. “Then they’ll kill me.”

If they didn’t rape and torture me first. I shuddered, fear knotting my stomach as gorge rose in my throat.

Jarrold chuckled. “I’ve given them my loyalty and they’ll honor that. As for you, I’m sorry to say you’re just another innocent victim. If it makes you feel any better, I’m sure you won’t be the last.”

He wasn’t going to listen to reason. Fine. I’d at least try to get some answers from him. “Why do the Irish mafia want me? I’m nothing to them. Nobody.”

“That’s true. You’re nothing more than Serafino’s whore. But even a blind man could see he cares about you. It’s what makes this so...delightful. He’s never cared about a woman until now. Soon enough he’ll know what it feels like to lose someone special in his life.”

It was my turn to laugh. “Serafino doesn’t care about me. If I died it’d be no skin off his nose, he’d replace me with someone else.”

I didn’t believe that, not deep in my bones, he did care about me to a certain extent. But he didn’t love me, he was incapable of that. The only people he truly loved were his family.

Would he miss me when I was dead and buried? Or would I be nothing more than a vague glimmer in his dark past? The idea made my breath catch, pain ripping through me like hot shards.

Jarrold shrugged. “Either way, I’ll get what I want.”

The driver slowed the car, then turned into a narrow laneway.

My hands fisted. “I don’t suppose it matters to you that I’ll die a horrific death.”

“We all die one day,” he said without a trace of remorse. “Some of us just die sooner rather than later.”

If I’d ever wondered if Serafino had a conscience, I knew now that he did. He had it in spades compared to the monster beside me.

A few rays of afternoon sunlight managed to splash between two buildings and glint on the mesh gate ahead. It was slid open by an armed man in a dark suit, his hat shadowing his face.

The driver then edged the car forward through a makeshift lane, where shipping containers and machinery sat either side in macabre display, dirt and garbage built-up against metal and tires.

“Where are we?” I asked, my stomach crawling as though I had bugs digging and scratching inside it.

The driver looked into the rearview mirror. “Most of our hostages call this place hell, you can call it whatever you wish.”

“Hell it is,” I whispered.

Serafino

“Delilah!” I barked into the phone, but all I heard was what sounded like the dull throb of an engine and a low chuckle.

“Fuck!”

“What is it?”

“I looked up at Ethan’s shocked query, my eyes clashing with his before I glanced around the sitting room where my other brothers stood watching me with their drinks in hand, their brows furrowed and their stares narrowed and assessing. Valentino and Carlo were the only ones who looked calm and composed.

I squeezed my eyes shut. I’d forgotten I wasn’t alone. I’d always been the I couldn’t give a fuck guy, not this rollercoaster of emotions man who couldn’t contain his grief.

I was only glad Isabella and Salvatore were absent and in their own wing of the house—the one they claimed when they weren’t at the Costa house—along with Sabrina who was in the nursery with her son. I presumed Chantilly was in the nursery too, she’d become good friends with Sabrina and loved helping out with Pietro. I didn’t want to frighten them more than they already were with the supposed attack waiting to happen.

I grabbed a fistful of my hair, growling low in my throat as I explained hoarsely, “Delilah has been taken.”

Ethan sucked a breath through his teeth. “You’re sure?”

“Never surer. Our fucking casino director is a traitor.”

Ethan’s voice turned sharp. “Jarrod?”

“The one and only.”

“We gave him everything,” Ethan growled.

“It clearly wasn’t enough.”

Valentino stepped closer. “You have a tracker on her phone?”

“I do.” I refocused on Ethan, though rage was misting my vision red. “I need to get her back.”

Ethan nodded. “Of course you do. But you’re not going alone.”

I shook my head. “I don’t want anyone helping me, not if it will expose Pietro and your wife to the Irish dogs.”

“Serafino is right,” Carlo said in a low voice. “No one should go running headfirst into a battle for some worthless whore—“

I was in his face before I’d even realized I’d taken the steps to get to him. I thrust out a hand and curled it around his bull neck. “She isn’t worthless,” I snarled. “She’s everything to me. Say one more bad word about her and I’ll kill you with my bare hands.”

“Serafino, step away,” Ethan commanded softly. “You’re my brother but even I can’t

protect you when you go and make threats to my consigliere.”

I glowered at the man who’d dared to demean my woman. It was almost impossible now to believe I’d been terrified to hand my heart over to a woman only for her to crush the life out of it, when losing her permanently would accomplish that task far more effortlessly.

I released my grip from Carlo’s throat, ignoring him then as I looked around the room at my brothers and Valentino. “I’m leaving now. Come with me if you want, but I don’t expect anyone to put their life—“

“Just try and stop me,” Alessandro interjected with a glint in his eyes. “You’d do the same for any of us.”

Evander unholstered his gun and checked it. “Count me in.”

“Let’s put some holes in those Irish bastards,” Valentino growled.

Carlo crossed his arms and gritted, “This isn’t a good idea.”

He didn’t need to tell us that. As I headed to the elevator that would take me to the rooftop helipad, I couldn’t help but be grateful for the dangerous and deadly men backing me up.

I only hoped I wasn’t leading them to their graves.

Delilah

The driver braked the car to a stop in front of a nondescript warehouse. Cutting the engine, he climbed out of the car and opened up the back passenger door, gesturing for me to get out.

I nodded and unclipped my seatbelt with unsteady hands. It was pointless to argue. The more I complied, the less chance I had of getting hurt.

At least for now.

Jarrold holstered his gun, then stayed close behind me as I followed the driver toward a single door guarded by a soldier, though I noted more soldiers doing their rounds outside the warehouse. We stepped inside onto a concrete floor, the dimly-lit, cavernous space crowded with long tables where haggard-looking women weighed and bagged coke. They didn't look up as we took the metal stairs to the next level, not even when my heels rang out sharply.

I didn't doubt if they paused for even a second they'd be assaulted by the two guards wandering around the room with their firearms. Though my heart ached for the women, I had enough of my own problems to deal with, namely staying alive. Still, it was tempting to act on a sudden impulse to turn around and shove Jarrold down the stairs.

My legs were starting to turn to jelly, my heart in my throat as the driver in front of me stepped up onto the overhead level. It took everything I had to ignore the next image in my head where I instead threw myself down the stairs and ended my life. At

least then I wouldn't be raped and tortured before I was killed.

I lifted my chin. No. I'd do everything in my power to survive. Time was my friend. If I couldn't escape I only hoped and prayed Serafino would do everything in his power to save me.

You're his whore, why would he bother?

The thought was like a sucker punch to my gut, the desolation then coming over me almost bringing me to my knees.

"Move it," Jarrod hissed, shoving me from behind as I slowed at the last step.

I stumbled, but I didn't have time to react, not when the driver stepped aside to reveal a short, stocky man who'd been clasping the safety railing and peering down at the workers below. He pushed off the railing to turn and face me, his beady eyes raking over me as though I was a piece of succulent meat at market.

The driver nodded respectfully at him before he gestured toward me. "This is the woman you wanted, Boss."

My stomach cramped at the vile man who was apparently the Irish don. He was so different to the tall, dangerous and sinfully handsome Agostino and Costa men. This don looked more bullfrog than man, with a personality to match.

His yellowed teeth flashed behind his thick, bulbous lips. "So this is the whore who'll have the Agostino Muppet crying in his milk."

I didn't say a word. Though I was shaking inside, I managed to stay calm on the outside as he walked slowly around me, tearing away my clothes with his eyes and making me feel cheap and sullied.

My thoughts scattered, then replayed indiscriminately through my head.

I couldn't forget that Serafino was a dangerous man who attracted other threats like a magnet.

I needed to steer clear of Serafino and his family.

Normal men didn't do it for me anymore; they hadn't in a long time. I needed someone who kept me walking on a tightrope. I needed excitement, I craved it.

I was about to pay a serious price for ignoring my better judgement.

I could have left my profession, left Serafino, without looking back, then worked my ass off to graduate from an interior designer and decorator degree. I could have started a whole new life.

Despite that, I knew deep down I still would have chosen Serafino for our short time together. Better to have loved and lost...

My breath suspended as my heart lurched, my skin tingling. I did love him. I'd been in love with him from the very start.

The Irish don clasped my jaw with his stubby fingers, making my eyes water. "You're nothing special. Shite, I've fucked better looking monkeys from the ghetto. Except they didn't pretend to be high class, they were cheap and nasty, expendable just like you."

His taunts triggered something deep inside of me. My stepmother's vile words flooded my memory, bringing with it past trauma, despair and pain. Not to mention my wrath. My laugh was caustic. "You fucked monkeys? That's disgusting." I hawked a globule of spittle squarely onto his face. "You're disgusting."

Cold fury contorted his face as he released his grip on me and used the sleeve of his jacket to wipe his face dry. Then lifting his arm, he backhanded me so hard I buckled to the floor, my ears ringing and blood pouring from my nose.

I had no doubt it'd soon be the least of my worries.

He stood over me. "I'm going to fulfill your death wish. After I've fucked you, my men will take turns invading your body until you're so used and abused you'll be begging me to end your suffering."

Whomp. Whomp. Whomp.

The faint noise quickly escalated, and even with my ringing ears I realized it was an approaching helicopter. My insides vibrated as I swallowed down a laugh. Then spitting out some blood, I looked up at him and said with a feral smile, "Not if Serafino kills you first."

The Irish don didn't move for a moment, his disbelief costing him precious seconds. Jarrod had also frozen in place, his face draining of all color.

The driver was the first to move. Running to a grimy window at the end of the building, he peered through the filthy pane. "Boss, incoming."

The window suddenly shattered as a bullet ripped through, slamming into the driver's head. He was little more than a ragdoll as he flopped to the floor in a shower of glass and brains, his eyes staring blankly our way.

All my focus turned to Serafino as he hung from the open door of the helicopter hovering at the exposed window. He lowered his gun, his eyes locking on mine. My breath squeezed out, a rush of energy fizzing through me.

He'd come for me.

He stared for no more than a couple of seconds, but it seemed infinite, time suspended with our connection irrefutable. His eyes turned hard as he took in my bloodied nose, my bruised face and swollen eye. Raising his gun, he looked through its sight, targeting the Irish don.

Too late.

Rat-a-tat-tat.

The soldiers outside the warehouse let loose with a spray of bullets that pinged against the metal body of the bird, forcing the pilot to pull sharply away.

Leaving me behind.

Oh, crap.

With the rotors fading, silence grew. Until one of the women on the ground floor screamed.

A soldier barked at her. "Don't fucking move!"

Bang.

I sucked in a strained breath. Had he killed her?

The Irish don didn't appear to give a shit. Menace poured from every cell in his squat body as his muscles unlocked and he stalked toward the dead driver and snarled, "How the feck did the Agostinos find us so quickly?"

Was the don expecting a reply? Was he that deranged?

He shook his head and added, “We only just got Serafino’s whore.” His lips flattened as he turned an accusing stare Jarrod’s way. “Did you double-cross me?”

Jarrold gaped, his face now bone-white. “M-me? No! Of course not. I’ve proven my loyalty by bringing you the Agostino whore. I’m here to serve you.”

“Don’t effin’ lie to me!” the don bit out, his face red and his body bristling. He unholstered his gun. “Tell me now why I shouldn’t kill you.”

Jarrold sputtered. “I have intel on the Agostinos! How else could I have known how smitten Serafino was with his whore? Even your driver knew how desperate I was to join your family.”

The Irish don snorted. “A pity your only witness is now dead.”

Jarrold shook his head. “I still have one witness alive.” He turned to me, his eyes wide and beseeching. “Tell the boss how much I wanted to impress him by bringing you here.”

I glared even though one eye was so puffed up I could only see out of my good one. Did he seriously imagine I’d do him any favors after he’d brought me here? “My memory must be failing me,” I said sweetly. “All I seem to recall is you telling me we all die one day. And that some of us die sooner rather than later?”

“I can’t dispute that,” the Irish don said, depressing the gun’s safety before he lifted the muzzle and pointed it at Jarrod.

He gaped at me, his face going from white to gray. “Don’t do this,” he whispered. “You’re no killer.”

“Do I look like I have the gun?” I asked.

He’d brought this on himself.

Bang.

I looked away from his body as it slumped to the floor. I was already in survival mode and stayed motionless as the don stepped toward me. It was only when he reached for me that I put every ounce of my energy into punching him between his legs.

“Oomph.” He doubled over with a strangled breath and I pushed to my feet and pivoted away, leaping over Jarrod’s lifeless form before sprinting down the stairs in a noisy clattering of my heels.

This was my one real chance to evade the don. He’d be in too much pain to issue commands. I doubted he’d even walk for a few minutes let alone have the capability to run.

I absently touched my swollen jaw as I hit the ground floor.

Karma really was a bitch.

My head swiveled between the door I’d been brought through and the room where the women had been working. I chose the room. No doubt the entry would soon be swarming with the don’s soldiers.

I had no idea what I’d face out the back, or if there was even a door that way, but the two soldiers were gone. I assumed they’d taken the women somewhere safe.

I grimaced. One woman had been left behind. She wouldn’t be going anywhere. Her

limp body was sprawled face-down on the filthy concrete in a pool of her own blood, one hand clutching a bag of coke that had spilled free, creating macabre-looking slurry on the floor.

No doubt the Irish don would be more furious about his wasted coke than he would the death of one of his workers.

I ran in the direction the woman had been heading, detouring around her body and its spreading blood. I couldn't think about her family, especially the children she might have. It was better not to think at all.

I raced around the tables, avoiding big trolleys, crates and other paraphernalia as my heart pumped furiously, the adrenaline pouring through me ensuring I no longer felt the pain of where I'd been hit.

I thrust open the back door, then slammed it shut behind me even as I stood for a second or two to get my bearings. An empty, overgrown yard riddled with weeds and patches of shale stood between me and a sagging ten foot chain-link fence.

Outside of the fence was yet another overgrown yard cut in half by a drainage ditch, which appeared to gouge the ground for miles either side. Behind it an aged redbrick warehouse with patches of moss growing up its walls looked as though it had been a part of the landscape since time began.

Pushing away from the warehouse door, I sprinted in the direction I thought the helicopter had gone...until one of my heels dug into some soft shale, twisting my ankle sharply. I cursed under my breath, slowing to a hobbling trot at the explosion of pain.

I was almost to the fence when the warehouse door slammed open. I looked behind me, close to sobbing at seeing the two soldiers who'd already killed one of the

women who worked for their don.

The nearest one raised his gun just as the Irish don stumbled outside with more soldiers behind him. “Don’t shoot you fecking imbecile,” he shouted. “I need her alive.”

I could see in his eyes he was going to make me pay for what I’d done. He’d keep me alive while killing me slowly.

I set off again, ignoring the stabbing pain in my ankle when I put weight on it. If I could just get over the fence before the soldiers caught up to me I might have a chance.

I’d reached the fence when movement outside of it caught my eyes. A sob finally broke free at the vision of Serafino, his brothers and Valentino as they climbed out of the ditch, staying on their bellies with their guns raised.

I clasped the chain links, just as Serafino fired off some shots. A soldier grunted behind me and dropped to the ground, followed by another.

A handful of seconds passed in ear-splitting silence, then...chaos.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:43 am

Serafino

I 'd never been so bloody terrified in all my life. The woman I adored was struggling to climb the chain-link fence in her heeled ankle boots, her injury making it ten times more difficult. That her face was bruised and swollen made my blood boil all over again.

But I had to stay cool, calm and collected as I picked off enemy soldiers one-by-one, my brothers and Valentino shooting beside me while bullets whizzed past our heads and kicked up clods of dirt and grass around us.

The ditch kept our bodies protected; it was quite literally a lifesaver.

That the Irish don, Connor, didn't give a fuck about his soldiers was obvious. He'd surrounded himself with them, their taller mass protecting him as they fired random shots our way while they chased down Delilah. My hands shook. If I wasn't careful I'd shoot her instead. But if the don got to her there would be no going back.

I'd lose her for good.

I couldn't think about what might have happened if Delilah hadn't voiced her fears about Jarrod and I hadn't acted on them. Not only had I had him investigated, I'd had Sally keep an eye on both Jarrod and Delilah at the casino. She'd informed me the moment Delilah had stepped out of the elevator and into a waiting car with Jarrod.

I'd immediately rung Delilah again. She'd finally answered before her cell had dropped from her hands and silence had met my ear. I'd known then how much I

truly cared about her.

A clump of grass splattered into pieces not even three inches from my face. I fired off three more shots before a soldier grabbed Delilah's feet and dragged her off the fence.

"Don't shoot!" I bellowed at my brothers and Valentino, though I continued to watch through my firearm's sight as the Irish don jerked her to his front, his gun pointed at her head.

"If even one more shot gets fired, she's dead," he called out.

My fingers turned cold and numb, my stomach rolling as I shouted, "Let her go and there will be no more shooting."

The Irish don laughed. "What a load of bollocks. Do I look stupid to you?"

My eyes narrowed. Did he really want me to answer that?

He dug the muzzle of his gun harder into the side of her temple, and my finger automatically tightened on the trigger. His laugh turned into a sneer. "Your enforcer killed my brother."

"You hated Sean," I called out. "Seems like Valentino did you a favor."

"Sean was still my don."

I held my aim steady, though my arm was beginning to burn. "And now you're the don. Congratulations."

"Yeah, well, I'd say thank you, but it looks as though we're at a bit of a standstill," he

said with a crooked smirk.

My arm twitched ever so slightly. “Let Delilah go and we’ll forget this...incident ever happened.”

Connor looked around him. “I might have considered that option if there weren’t a whole lot more dead people on my side of the fence than yours.” He stared at Delilah with a twisted grin before looking my way once again. “It seems you owe me at least one life.”

Sweat beaded my brow even as chills slid down my spine. “We don’t owe you anything. You took my girl; we shot some of your men. We’re even now.”

Connor spat on the ground. “Your whore isn’t worth one of my men let alone a dozen.”

I sensed my brothers’ gazes on me. But then, they knew me better than anyone. Knew I was a coldblooded killer at the best of times. It probably scared them to see me care so much for anyone besides my family. They didn’t know what to expect from this side of my character.

Not even I knew how far I’d go to save her life.

I was only thankful Evander wasn’t using his underboss title to take away my decision making. He’d experienced love and knew this fucked-up scenario was personal for me. I had nothing but instinct to act on now.

“That’s where you’re wrong,” I said, my voice ringing out loud and clear. “She’s worth more than any of you.” I stood and dropped my gun, my hands raised. “She’s definitely worth more than me.” I’d acknowledged long ago I deserved a death sentence. It was finally time to pay my penance. “Let her go. Take me instead.”

Alessandro's breath hissed. "What the fuck, Serafino?"

I was distantly aware of Evander and Valentino echoing his words before all my focus centered on Delilah.

She gaped. "Serafino, no! Don't you dare give yourself up, not for me, not for anyone."

"Shut the fuck up," Connor growled, "or I'll put a bullet in your head right now."

"Then do it," she said.

I slowed and sucked in a breath. Was she crazy? I was trying to save her ass and she was ready to die.

"Tempting," Connor mused. "But your lover is worth more to me."

I stopped at the fence, though all I wanted was to vault over it and drag her away from the sick fuck holding her. "I'll climb over once you've let her go." I narrowed my eyes. "If even one shot goes off, you'll be the first one my brothers will shoot."

"Not before you and your whore are shot dead."

He shoved Delilah away and she cried out as she stumbled, limping heavily. I held her gaze. "Take off your shoes, then climb the fence."

She shook her head. "No, I-I can't do that. I can't let you die."

"And I can't let you die." I held her stricken gaze. "I've done a lot of bad things, if anyone deserves this, it's me."

A tear trickled down her cheek. “Don’t talk like that.”

My heart broke at what I understood was her emotional farewell. But I had to stay strong and distance myself. “I need you to climb the fence, little firebird.”

She lifted her chin, her eyes suddenly glinting and her shoulders back as she refuted, “And I need you alive and well.”

My eyes widened as she whirled around then stamped her uninjured foot hard onto Connor’s nearest foot. Her boot heel went straight through his shoe and into his flesh and he shrieked bloody murder before he swung his fist at her.

She ducked, grasped his wildly waving gun then snatched it free. Yanking her heel out of his foot, she stepped behind him and held the muzzle of the gun to his head. “Surprise, mother fucker.”

His shrieks quickly died off, his face red and blotchy as he snarled, “You’re going to pay for that bitch.”

She pressed the muzzle harder against his brow. “Tell your men to drop their guns or watch their don’s brains get blown all over the yard.”

He scoffed. “You wouldn’t—“

“Try me,” she said quietly, but with such conviction in her voice he became subdued, compliant.

He looked at his suited soldiers, all of whom looked twitchy and uncertain. “Do what she says.”

I waited for them to toss their guns before I clambered up the chain-wire fence and

dropped to the other side. I wasted no time in gathering up the firearms. Valentino and my brothers took perhaps a minute to scramble over the fence before joining me and relieving me of all the weapons.

I nodded at them before I stalked toward the woman who really had crushed my heart in her hands. Did she realize I wouldn't have had it any other way? She meant everything to me. She was the breath in my lungs, the blood in my veins.

Without her I was a shell. Empty. Meaningless. Irrelevant.

Connor had good reason to cower as I approached. Sending my fist flying into his meaty face, I knocked him out cold. As he crumpled to the ground, Delilah dropped the gun before I dragged her into my arms.

My pulse thundered in my ears, my chest warm and my emotions high. Only when I pulled back a little and gently cupped her bruised and bloody face did I tell her, "I love you, little firebird."

Her eyes teared up, her voice shaky. "I thought you were incapable of loving me...of loving anyone."

"You're right on the latter, but definitely not the former," I said huskily. "I think I fell for you the moment I set eyes on you...the only call girl brave enough to set foot in the Agostino home."

She managed a smile and my heart contracted. She still looked beautiful even with her bruised face and her swollen, half-closed eye as she whispered, "I've thanked God every day since that you wanted me all to yourself."

"Hey, steady on," Evander said, his gaze swinging between us and the enemy soldiers he had his gun pointed at. Valentino had gone into the warehouse and retrieved some

rope and was busy tying the soldiers' hands behind their backs. "We have feelings too, you know."

Alessandro laughed. "You might, sempliciotto. It doesn't mean the rest of us do."

Delilah giggled, but she had eyes only for me when she looked up at me and finally admitted, "I love you, too."

I knew right then and there...nothing would ever keep us apart again.

Delilah

Two months later.. .

I stood in front of the aged care home with Serafino, my mouth dry and my palms wet. So much had happened to get to this point. I glanced down at my solitaire diamond ring. Not least Serafino going down on bended knee and proposing to me.

Of course I'd said yes. My life wasn't complete without him in it. But before I could plan my future, I needed to let go of my past.

He looked at me, his face grave. "Are you sure this is what you want to do?"

I nodded. "Yes. Seeing my stepmother, no matter the state she's in, will give me the closure I need."

That Serafino was by my side gave me the strength to go ahead with it.

We stepped inside, the smell of disinfectant and a musty scent I associated with old people filling my nose.

"Can I help you?" a nurse asked with a friendly smile.

I nodded. "We're looking for my stepmother, Mabel."

"Oh, Mabel will love that." Her voice cooled a little, her smile dropping a few degrees. "She never gets visitors."

My smile was strained after she directed us to where Mabel spent much of her time, which was apparently alone in her room. I sucked in a steadying breath and knocked on the door, Serafino then reaching for my hand and squeezing reassurance before we let ourselves in.

The woman watching television as she lay on a bed with her head propped on a pillow was my stepmother, but she wasn't. She was someone else, a woman with kind eyes and a warm smile. She blinked as she tilted her head to the side, her brow wrinkling as though she was trying to find a memory, and failing.

She put a fluttery, frail hand to her chest. "Aren't you a beautiful girl?" Her frown deepened. "You remind me of someone. I just can't place who, exactly, but I'm certain it was a man I used to know." She blinked again before she stared at Serafino. "And who is this handsome man?"

I stared, not quite believing this woman was one and the same who'd made my life hell. I ignored her question and asked, "Do you remember me?"

She shook her head, the light in her eyes fading. "No, dear. Should I?"

I swallowed hard, Serafino's hand warm on my back. A lump clogged my throat, tears pricking my eyes. "No. I don't think you should," I said huskily.

Some things really were best left in the past.

She swept a blue-veined hand toward her bed table. "Would you like a cup of tea? A biscuit?"

"No, thank you," I managed. I backed away a step. I'd seen enough.

"We brought you these," Serafino said, placing the bunch of lilies and red roses onto her bed. "I'll have a nurse put these in a vase for you."

“You’re too kind to me,” she said.

I wanted to agree with her, but I couldn’t. She was no longer the same horrid woman I remembered. It was as if she’d reverted to some child-like version of herself. I looked around the room. Either way, it looked like she was getting what she deserved without any input from me.

I repressed a sudden giggle. Did this woman realize Serafino could break her neck as easily as he’d given her flowers? I knew he’d do exactly that if it meant protecting me.

I sighed heavily, then stepped closer and bent to kiss her dry, sunken cheek. I shuddered just a little. It was so hard now to believe this woman had once terrorized me and made me run away from the only home I knew.

The same home I now owned and which I’d eventually test my skills on once I’d graduated from my interior design and decorating degree.

“Thank you for visiting,” my stepmother said. Her watery gaze flitted left then right. “You do make a beautiful couple. I bet you’ll make beautiful children.”

I sniffed back sudden tears, reflexively twirling the gold band on my finger. “I only wish my dad was still around so that he could see his future grandchildren.”

Not that we were planning on having a family anytime soon. We had plenty of time to become parents.

She stiffened. “Your dad?” Her eyes suddenly sharpened, a whole lot of knowledge filling them. “I knew him didn’t I? And I knew you. I-I missed him and you were a constant reminder.” Tears filled her eyes. “I’m sorry for how I treated you.”

Her mind appeared to be shutting down fast. Her eyes were dulling and becoming

unfocused, but a weight was lifting off my shoulders when I said softly, “I forgive you.”

When we walked out of her room, out of the nursing home and toward the driver waiting for us beside our car, I glanced up at Serafino and said softly, “I’m beyond ready now to move on with my life.”

He drew in a sharp breath, his nostrils flaring. “That is music to my ears, little firebird.” He reached out and caught my hand. “I can’t wait to spend the rest of my life loving you.”

I glowed, warming from the inside out. If I was his world then he was most certainly mine. We belonged together.

Soul mates.

Want more Gangsters at War stories by Mel Teshco ...

Reformed

One mafia madman. One plain-Jane Introvert.

Alessandro

I’m not known for my long-term relationships, in fact, some might say I have commitment issues. Not that I care. I do what I want, when I want. I live my life by my own rules. Then I see sweet, homey little Jane. She reminds me of a buttercup, so fresh and innocent. So different from the women I normally go for.

Perhaps that is why I have to have her. Not that she’ll ever reform my bad boy ways.

Jane

That's my real name. I'm a true wallflower, invisible to people. Then my biggest male fantasy-come-to-life steps into my vintage shop and I wish more than ever I was sexy and confident. When he asks me out on a date, I'm so dumfounded I can't say no. Not that I ever expected one date to lead to another. What I should have expected is my growing feelings for him...until I find out he's a mobster. I have to leave, but he's not about to let me go.

He wants the plain Jane, but I don't belong in his world. Fine. He can have me, once I've transformed myself.

Watch out world...watch out Alessandro.