

**\*This is an excerpt story from the novel I'm working on about dancing at a hick, tiny, backwoods strip-club in the middle of nowhere**

### **The Italian Mafia**

I watched a suited man rip a \$100 dollar-bill down the middle right in front of me and he gave me one of the halves and he straight said point-blank “if you want the other half, you know where to find it” and by that, he didn't mean here, not at the strip-club. He meant I could get it if I came out later to the hotel or motel or wherever he was going back to, it'd be back with him and the rest of the Italian Mafia.

When he did that at me, I didn't at all feel “degraded.” I'd been asked countless times before if I could be bought outside the club, and I'd never once felt degraded. To clarify, nothing about making money after club hours is “degrading,” (as if sex work could be arranged in tiers of scandalousness or impropriety) so I had no reason to feel that way— it just didn't apply to me because I had my limits, I had a bed time. “I can't go home with you tonight,” dismissed, easy, and carry on, usually— but when I held the other half of that \$100 in my hand, it suddenly became very real, like I was already half-way there—and that's very well what I was being made to feel and he knew what he was doing. This—this is what the raw world looks like. This is what is going on behind everything you know. Half-truths, half a hundred-dollar-bill in my hand, every day people kill or are killed over money. It was degrading.

The Italian Mafia was seated in center-view of the stage. Our little old lady waitress pushed three tables together to make one big enough for the six or seven (large) men all together. It was clear you could tell who the boss was. He was at the end placement, doing all the talking with our waitress, the only waitress we had, Arlette at 78 years-old rushing around in her Velcro

snap Sketchers—and she's taking the table's orders from him, as if the others weren't allowed to speak. When addressing his men at the table, the boss communicated only with large hand gestures and small movements of the mouth. If one of his men started talking, he made a distraction out of himself. I could see how in private venues he might hit them over the head and smack them around a little, or maybe a lot.

How about this: take for instance the familiar image of the sharks you hear about who wait around with guns behind tinted windows in dark, fast cars at a stop in front of the family house of some poor sucker who never came through with the money— That was them.

Now, I'm not saying it was the Italian Mafia and I'm not saying it wasn't the Italian Mafia. But I am saying that it was different to see in the middle of hick bumfuck a group of olive-toned men in uniform black wool overcoats, filing in six or seven into the strip-club like a dark cloud moving in low with attaché briefcases; all rough, ashy faces, graying with age specked with fresh stubble down the neck; the eyes slopping, heavy with the weight of red swirling 'round bloodshot; business men, professionals. I remember they were so clean. It was that minty shower and aftershave in a moldy motel room kind of clean, criminally clean— Clean criminals.

Would it really be all that surprising if it truly was they were coming out to cut deals with our club? Maybe one look inside and they thought not.

We'd had our share of criminals come through the doors, but always the dirty kind, white and trashy. There'd been this guy— an idiot—a couple weeks before who'd come in alone, wearing a long black trench coat that hit the floor and dragged. This idiot sat up at the bar and ordered drink after drink for anybody who needed one. He'd just been awarded a bunch of money after he won an unwarranted search and seizure case against Isabella county in court

where on him then they'd found bad, mean drugs. This idiot had been going on boasting over his win, and later, only a few hours after he left the strip-club, his car was reported 3:30am engine running parked in the middle of an intersection blocking the traffic and him asleep over the steering wheel with an entire mobile meth lab in the backseat. I don't blame him. I blame the meth— That entire area was so sad for meth. But you'd think he would've learned something about carrying it around with him. The police came later to our club for the trench coat he'd forgotten at the bar with over \$700 in the pockets.

The cops really did seem to come through. Every once in a while, we'd get an undercover cop. The ones we'd get would dress themselves up like cowboys and hippies, and they were obvious, asking up front where to find "the dust," "the good stuff, you know what I'm talking about?" Why would you think I know where to get "the good stuff?" Because I'm a stripper? (Yes.) These idiots were another brand of idiot—I'd lead them on by hinting that I indeed did know where to find the good stuff and I'd lure them into getting a dance, saying "let's talk about this in the corner," where they'd press me for answers, me still dragging them on and showing them my butt for a multi-dimensional distraction, them still trying to get information from me, encouraging to get me to turn around and face them instead of showing my butt, four songs later. That'll be \$80 dollars, thank you. I'd like to think of their corny disguises as their true, repressed selves. There was a stripper I knew who once sold crushed up white eyeshadow as cocaine to a guy at the club, because he was asking where to get some. This such idiot then went into the bathroom to do lines of it and came out with his nose and mouth and chin all sparkly. Then he went on to tell his friends how fucked up he was off that good stuff. She made a hundred bucks doing that.

As any other nightclub can be, the strip-club is an open forum for drug talk. I would even go as far to say that “the club” is a social institution. The club gives a safe places to practice deviancy— but in nightclubs, you don’t try deals with the employees. You don’t try drug deals with the employees of any other public establishment. Not in any other live theater.

Right after the Italian Mafia came into the club and sat down, I offhand announced to the changing room, “gee, looks like the Italian Mafia is in the building,” because I was bored and it was a boring night, whatever. My comment got an eye raise out of Charlie, who had just ripped her pantyhose and was over by her station rolling on a new pair. At our club, you wore four layers from the waist down: first you had a thong, then sheer pantyhose safety pinned over top, another thong over that, then your outfitted bottoms. God damn it got musty down there.

“The Italian Mafia?” said Charlie, buckling her heels back on.

“Yeah, don’t they look it?” I said.

Everyone else shrugged.

On that particular night, we had a case of the strip-club doldrums: a dead club, no one making money. The Italian Mafia wasn’t paying any attention to the strippers on the stage, wasn’t getting dances, and I initially dismissed any interest in trying with them. When I went out for my stage set, I saw Charlie was over there by the boss, chair pulled up so that she wasn’t sitting at their table, but off to the side like she wasn’t completely included but an extension of their moat, all awkward. The doldrums were at a peak, and even worse off we had it, only the Italian Mafia was hanging around, besides Murphy, that one guy always there who played pool silently in the corner, but he didn’t really count because he was always there. Like part of the ambiance.

I didn't make any money on stage then because, well, there wasn't fuckin' nobody in the club. The Italian Mafia ignored me, and Murphy always ignored everything; but our club was just about the only bar in bumfuck, so he didn't have anywhere else to go if he wanted to shoot pool, poor him.

Back to the changing room, "dude, you're really freaking out Charlie, about them guys being 'the Italian Mafia,'" said Olivia.

"What! It was totally a joke! Really? Could she not see I was joking?"

"I don't know, Charlie's fuckin' stupid."

Olivia had a lot of disdain for Charlie after some kind of ordeal I hadn't been around for. Apparently Charlie was a backstabbing bitch, but how could she have known any better? She was a secretary in a dental office by day, and also she had a biotin deficiency. That poor girl, give her a break!

Turns out the Italian Mafia was tipping her with \$1 dollar-bills packed folded over to contain the cocaine they were passing on.

Chloe did whisper something like "they're probably giving her drugs," which I initially dismissed as a ridiculous unfeasible development, and by no means did I take it seriously until later Charlie walked into the entryway of the changing room and seeing me there she stopped to pause and figure out if she should put the away the cocaine dollar secured in her fist or abandon mission and come back later. Decision: complete the objective, put cocaine dollar away in purse, look natural. Anyways, I, Rosemary, did not have any authority, but I might tell the other girls and they might tell on her, but it'd be easy to dismiss as a rumor since Olivia didn't like Charlie anyways and everyone knew it, and anyways, Olivia probably wouldn't give her shit about drugs

of all things if word came out her way, and anyways, this job is a joke, what does it matter? Who cares what these bitches think? Who cares if I get fired?

If Chloe hadn't suggested Charlie was getting drugs from the Italian Mafia, there'd be no reason to be curious about her haphazard presentation. She didn't act weird usually, but then again, maybe she had always acted kind of weird and actually I just hadn't noticed.

I investigated for fun. "Is the Italian Mafia giving you anything?"

"Don't call them 'the Italian Mafia,'" she said, putting her cocaine dollar in her backpack, taking so much care to be discreet so that she was anything but discreet.

"Are those guys out there giving you anything?"

You wouldn't expect Charlie to be interested in getting cocaine from the Italian Mafia, her being more put together than most of us, and by that I mean the most normal: she had a day job, a lawyer boyfriend, was putting down a payment on a new car, had a five-year-old son at home, no tattoos or associations with counterculture, and she never hinted at drugs or deviancy, but because she was a stripper, she was inherently deviant, I should have remembered.

All she did was give me a face that said yes.

"Do you think I could get any?"

"I don't know. Go ask?"

Two minutes later about, I'd gotten myself a cocaine dollar from the Italian Mafia. I ran back into the changing room and tucked the cocaine dollar into a safe spot somewhere in my purse. By then, the strip-club doldrums were lifting and more customers were coming in. I passed by the Italian Mafia on my way out to make money, and I thought it would be appropriate to go up and give a follow up remark, considering I'd scurried away. I went close up into the boss's ear and bent down, "thank you for, you know. I hope you guys are having fun."

“No problem, dear.”

“Have a good night / Let me know if you need anything else / See you next time,” etc.

Then I felt the press of a hand on my shoulder as I was going, the boss, “hold on, hold on. Take a seat,” he pointed to where Charlie’s chair was, empty until I took it. He put his hand inside his coat and pulled out saying “see this?” before I could see what it was, then I see it’s a \$100 bill. He folded it down perfect on the middle. Then he ripped it down perfect on the line. And it crushed me. That violence, who else is subjected to such a unique form of violence as that? It’s something you watch tear you apart from the outside. He extended one of the halves, “go on, take it,” and with a loose grip, I did. From his fingers to mine it passed on so gently like winter to spring; so welcoming, so ready, so green as the first velvet moss grows to the north as if the north had answers for what’s to come. There’s an empty space in the air during every start of spring. I was speechless.

“Do you want the other half?”

What was the proper answer? Yes, who wouldn’t? Any other answer would be a lie. “I don’t know,” was what I said.

I’ll never forget it when he when it said, “I think you do know.” And I just looked at him. “If you want the other half, you know where to find it.”

Then I said “I don’t understand” because I didn’t. Then he put his half back inside his inner coat pocket or wherever he picked it from.

“You can find it later. Do you want me to write an address down for you?”

“An address, to where?”

“An address to where you can find the other half.”

I understood then. And all I could do was look at him, that was all I had left. Structure, I had my structure, I had a form, I had an outline holding my body together, a shape, I had measurable dimensions, density, tangibility, geographical coordinates, a name. Antarctica, too, has all that. I've heard it's melting, anyways.

In that moment, I was half human. I was thinking of all the others like me who too had held half a hundred-dollar bill in their hand in the way I was, having something taken away from you before it's yours, like a future. That makes something desperate out of you, it pools it all up to the surface. I wasn't questioning if I should go. I was questioning who the hell are you to come in *my* club and treat my desperation like it could be bought out of me? I was not desperate for that money, unfavorably for him. I was desperate to understand how ever in my life I ended up in that moment, faced with the kind of decision people die every day over. Right now, someone out is out there lying dead over a pile of cash and you're here making bets on my desperation. Money kills people. Money is dirty, all of it, and I made my money the dirty way and so did he—but we were clean about how we did it. Difference was he was an idiot. And never was I any kind of criminal, just inherently deviant, as all strippers are.

A clean criminal counts loss in what he could not buy. A stripper counts loss in what's left to lose, what's next? What else can be taken?

The bank wouldn't help me out with completing the \$100 bill. You need more than half, they told me. I never went after the other half. Instead, I went to Chloe's house after work a few houses down from the club in the gutter streets of the backwoods and asked if she wanted to do these lines with me. It was the good stuff. We went into her little bathroom damp with back country grit, chalked out the lines on the countertop, rolled a bill up and did them fast— we have to do this quickly, she said. "My son is asleep in the room next to us."



