

Feminine Touch

By Michael Danese

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The sun is streaming through the window onto a small collection of plants on a windowsill. A violet, two bonsai and a miniature rose. It's a large, bright, cheery kitchen, with stainless steel appliances and an island in the middle. The intoxicating smell of just-baked chocolate chip cookies makes this warm setting even more delightful. A woman is making sandwiches on the counter when the phone rings.

"Hello, Feminine Touch..." she says. After listening for a bit she looks at the clock on the wall which reads 12:05. "Yes, I can do two-thirty. Ok, text me the address. Bye!"

She's about 30, with shoulder-length red hair and a few freckles framing brilliant blue eyes. She's tall and quite fit, probably because she spends her time working out at the makeshift gym in the basement and running through the streets of her town on the Main Line, outside of Philadelphia. She is wearing a white tee-shirt, shorts, and is barefoot. She was what you would call "the popular girl" in high school. You know, prom queen, homecoming queen, cheerleader, hell, she even married the quarterback. That didn't end so well, at least for him. His cheating cost him the house and kids. Her mother keeps asking if she's dating. She tells her, "not yet!" to appease her. She seems quite content going it alone at the moment.

She punches a few numbers into the phone. "Hi mom, I have a job this afternoon. Can you...great, about 1:45. Thanks...love you too!"

She continues making the sandwiches while calling out for the kids, "Brett! Crissy! Time for lunch!"

In a moment the kids tumble into the room. Brett is 10, but looks older. He is tall with wide shoulders, blonde hair and dimples, just like his dad. He's wearing white shorts and a red Phillies tee-shirt. He was named after Brett Favre, his dad's idea. Christina is eight and a mini-me of Eileen – long red hair in a ponytail, freckles, blue eyes and a wide smile. She's wearing princess "dress-up" clothes. She was named for Christina Hendricks, also dad's idea. Eileen pours some drinks over ice and serves the sandwiches and some fruit as the kids dive in. She pulls the top off of a Greek yogurt and joins them.

A while later Eileen's mom shows up to cheers of "Mom-Mom!" and a flurry of kisses ensue. The kids love when Mom-Mom is there, because they get spoiled and pretty much always get their way.

Eileen has changed into a black leotard top and long yoga pants. She grabs a black bag, her purse and her folded massage table. "I'm leaving (not that anyone cares...) I should be home by 4:30 or so."

"Ok dear," said her mom. "Where is the job?"

“Its downtown. I want to get outta the city before rush hour,” she says as she walks through the door. “Thanks, mom!”

She waves to her neighbor, Mrs. Kravitz, who constantly watches out her window as she glances back to her soaps on TV, making believe she wasn’t watching. She enters the garage and puts the table in the trunk of a black Mercedes sedan. Before she gets into the car, she removes the yoga pants and slips into a short black skirt. She kicks off her flip flops and puts on a pair of black high heels. She makes the drive into the city and aims to be right on time.

She parks the car, and before getting out, she quickly puts on make-up to hide her freckles, some bright red lipstick, then adds a Marilyn Monroe-like beauty mark just under her right dimple. She then pulls on a long blonde wig, black leather gloves and large, dark sunglasses. She grabs her black leather purse and walks across the park, past some construction workers fixing a pothole. One of them whistles at her and she smiles back.

She enters the Claremont Hotel and walks through the marble lobby, heels click-clicking as she goes. The place even smells like money. She finds the elevator. The doors open and a young couple spill out. The man smiles at her. She enters the elevator. All four walls are mirrors. In the reflection in front of her she sees the young guy turning back to check out her rear view. As the doors close, she pushes the button for the penthouse. As the elevator makes the long climb, she touches up her lipstick while a dreadful disco version of *Copa Cabana* plays. She thinks to herself, “For the money people pay to stay here, they should at *least* get better music!”

She walks along the hall to the door and pushed the bell. She takes off the sunglasses and puts her big smile to the peephole. The door opens and a chuffy guy in his sixties says, “Well, what have we here?”

“Hi, I’m Chelsea, are you gonna invite me in?” she says with a giggle.

“You know I am!” he says wickedly. (and yes, she *knew* he would...)

“Are you Joey DiMarino? She asks.

“Yes I am, and I’m...”

Before he could get a word out she shot him through her specially-designed purse. Once in the heart and once in the head. As he crumbled to the floor gasping, she put the glasses back on and left the way she came.

She sashayed back across the park, then to her car. She reached for her phone and texted, “done.” Then she removed the glasses, wig and heels and stashed them back in their bag. She drew down the vanity mirror and wiped off the make-up and lipstick. She smiled at herself in the mirror, then slipped back into her flip-flops. She started the car and the radio was blasting a country song about love gone badly. She pulled out into the traffic as she sang along, and she was home well ahead of the rush hour.

At this point dear reader, I know what you're probably thinking. How did a nice girl like Eileen end up in a racket like this? Fair question.

A few years ago she was just getting off the ground with the massage business. She'd been a single mom for a while, and now it was time to "get back to having a life" as one of her girlfriends put it. Her business grew, mainly by word of mouth as she handled mostly wealthy clients. Who else can pay for a massage in their homes? She cultivated a list of regular clients, and things were going quite well.

One of those clients was Rocco "Stumpy" Foglia, who lived in a row house in South Philly. Stumpy was in his early forties and was always impeccably dressed in a custom tailored suit and a large Windsor knot in his tie. It was no secret that he was in line to become the head of one of the major Philly families.

When she arrived at her appointed time, one of his "boys" would let her in and Stumpy always greeted her with a hug. He would then climb the stairs to change as she set up her table in the living room. It isn't a large room, but it had a lot of marble and the wall across from the stairs was all mirror, which gave the room a much larger appearance. At the same time, the boys, sometimes one or two, sometimes five or six, would move towards the back of the house into the dining room and kitchen. This was to provide a bit of privacy for the massage.

Eileen enjoyed the danger aspect of having Stumpy as a client. It was certainly exciting to hear the boys discuss their "business" in muffled tones while she set up. They talked in a kind of code, but she was usually able to figure it out.

When Stumpy descends the steps in his large, white terry cloth robe and slippers, the boys would close the door to the kitchen. Stumpy almost always made some kind of a play for her – dinner, a weekend in Atlantic City in his suite at the Borgata, a quick getaway to Florida, and she always gently turned him down. "I have my son's baseball game!" or "My daughter's recital!" or any other excuse she could come up with. He knew it would never happen, and she would be disappointed if he didn't at least give it a shot. The truth is, many of her clients have the same ideas, men *and* women.

After their sessions Stumpy occasionally would give her some type of gift, "Here is a great bottle of wine that I think you will enjoy with your mother." or "Hey, your kids like iPods?" And she would always take the gifts, she would not want to appear rude or ungrateful after all! And, you guessed it, many of her other clients did the same thing.

So, yes, she enjoyed being her own boss, making her own schedule, and enjoying the perks that come along with the job. She also enjoyed her family and leisure time. And that included owning, handling, and especially shooting guns.

Eileen's father and grandfather were both tough Irish Philly cops. There was a lot of pride and tradition in their family. Her uncles and cousins were all mostly cops too. Their social life and family functions were all based on The Force. Her father saw the seedy underside of the city

first hand, on a daily basis. So he instilled in her the knowledge, skill and courage to protect herself in many situations.

She grew up the typical tomboy, and was always “daddy’s little girl” Boxing, karate and judo were all part of her lessons. Dancing, ballet, and piano were all for sissies. She also grew up around guns. From the time she was old enough, they were at the range. First with her dad, who beamed as she improved, then with an uncle or friend, then finally alone.

One day Eileen was at the range with her Glock 38. She just finished emptying the eight rounds into a target, with a large grouping in the bulls-eye. She changed cartridges and repeated the feat. When she was finished she cleaned up her area and went through the doors to the ready area where she removed her eye and ear protection and packed up her weapon. A man in a dark coat and hat walked towards her. She recognized him as one of Stumpy’s boys.

“Good afternoon, Eileen. Nice shooting!” he said as he passed her and headed towards the exit.

“Thanks, Sal...” she replied.

Later that week she was back at Stumpy’s for their regular appointment. Before he removed his robe, he glanced towards the kitchen to make sure they were not being heard. “Sal says you’re a dead-eye with the pistol!” he remarks. “says he saw you shoot better than anyone he ever saw, and he ain’t that easily impressed!”

“I’m ok, I guess.” She nervously responded. “I grew up with a gun in my hand. My dad was a Philly cop in the Frank Rizzo days. He wanted to make sure that I could protect myself from...”

“Guys like me?” he added.

“I... I didn’t say that!” she blushed.

“I know, lighten up, I’m just havin’ some fun. Relax!” he said. “I wanna run something by you...”

So that’s how it all began. Stumpy explained how things work, how jobs get done how she’s paid and how much. She took some convincing, but one line did it for her. Stumpy said, “Listen, from the minute you get the call, the guy’s already dead. Done deal. If it ain’t you, it’s somebody else, but their life is *over*. And this ain’t done lightly. No sir! Ain’t no one getting hit that doesn’t deserve it a few times over!”

Stumpy then set her up with Lou, a kinda go-between agent. Lou handled everything for her. He got her a new clean gun and an endless supply of burner phones. She uses a new phone for every appointment that Lou makes for her, then she disposes of that phone. He cases the target to assess the best time for her to work, then he assures that the target is alone. Lou also arranges for travel as needed. He even set up an offshore account for her payment, and he makes sure that she gets paid. *Very well!*

She requested the custom handbag that just fits her hand, the Glock and silencer, with the opening for the barrel to slightly poke through. If she was going to do this, it was going to be her way. She also asked Lou to always call her Chelsea. That way her name is never mentioned, and it was little easier to keep her alter-ego separate from her family life.

Granted, Lou is getting his cut for sure, but he plays an important role in this business. After their initial meeting they were never again seen together. Nothing could ever be tracked back to her, because their only communication is ever on phones that no longer exist.

Now, fast forward a few years, and Chelsea is a seasoned pro. She “works” a job every month or so. As her reputation grows, Lou begins to share her with the other Philly crime families, and also two in New York, and one in Boston.

She occasionally feels guilty. But, she remembers Stumpy’s words. She reminds herself that this isn’t happening to anyone that doesn’t deserve it. It isn’t personal. Strictly business. If she didn’t do it, there were plenty of others that would, even cheaper. Once the call is made the target is essentially dead already. Sometimes it helps, sometimes not. But she carries on.

Eileen is able to use the massage business as a cover. She hasn’t actually given a massage in years. Not for money at least. She maintains the website and the advertising, and when calls come in, she sends one of three young women on to the appointment. Everything is working like a well-oiled machine. When the calls come in on the burner phone, she always answers, “Feminine Touch,” because someone may be in the room, it could be a wrong number, or worse yet, it could be someone besides Lou. She is lucky that when she has an appointment, if the kids aren’t in school, or timing isn’t right, her mom is usually available to watch the kids.

One day, early in the morning, she gets a call that she *never* expected.

“Really?... There must be some mistake...are you positive it is... *Stumpy*? ...I can’t...I won’t...Okay...okay...” She hangs up the phone and slumps in her chair. She knew that she did her best to get out of it, but Lou was right, they will never suspect her.

Eileen spent several minutes just staring into space. Her thoughts raced as she fought a battle against herself in her mind. She never had to *visit* someone that she actually knew. Oh, sure, there were a few names that she had heard on the news or read about in the paper, but this is someone that she really *knew*...someone that was *kind* to her. She eventually rationalized with herself that the job would be done either way, and if someone was going to do it, it should be her. She would assure that he doesn’t suffer.

She dressed in her normal workout clothes and headed for the car. It was a warm, brilliant spring day. She thought it would be a fitting last day for him. As she drove through the city, the battle continued in her head. “What if this? How about that? Or that? But the conclusion was always the same.

She decided to leave “Chelsea” at home for this one. As she parked the car, she pulled a large floppy hat over her head and wrapped herself in a long black raincoat. She did, however, bring Chelsea’s big sunglasses and purse.

She climbed the few stairs to his front door and rang the bell. Right before he answered she removed the glasses and plastered a fake smile on her face. As the door cracked open, Stumpy saw it was Eileen and welcomed her in.

“Hi, we need to talk,” she said coyly.

“Of course, what can I do for you?” he answered.

She looked up at him with tears in her eyes as she said, “Sorry” and shot him in the chest, then the head. He never saw it coming and the hurt was evident in his eyes, even more so than the bullet wounds.

Eileen leaned back against the wall to steady herself. She pulled the hat down and put the sunglasses back on. She left him bleeding on the marble floor in his hallway. She quickly made her way back to her car. She sobbed a bit to herself as she drove home. When she got there, she immediately took a long, hot shower. Soon, life returned to normal as the kids came home from school and they both got a huge hug from their mom. Eileen cooked a big spaghetti dinner, Brett’s favorite, and she also invited her mom over. Her mom was good at talking about things that distracted Eileen, and she needed just that on this night!

The next day as she returned from the gym, she saw a black Escalade parked across the street.

She entered her house and was grabbed by Sal. He throws her onto a chair while another guy holds a gun to her head. “What do you know about Stumpy?”

“Only what I read in the papers and saw on the news.” She whimpered.

“We know it was you. How could you do this? He loved you!” said Sal.

“And I loved him, I would never...”

As she spoke several police burst in, from the front and the back. For a second, the guy with the gun considers shooting then drops his gun.

The police round up Sal and the other guy and take them out of the house. Sal gets one last glare in, aimed at Eileen.

Eileen tells a detective, “They were looking for information, they thought I might know something about that gangster’s murder, you know, Stumpy Foglia.”

“Well do you?” the detective fired back.

“Of course not! I gave him a massage a few times, it’s my business,” she said as she handed him a business card. He was a big tipper. But murder! Oh, heaven’s no!” she said as she welled with tears.

“Thank God you came in, thank you! How did you know to come here?” she quizzed.

“Your neighbor called, she said she saw two shady guys and it looked like they were breaking in. She also said that she thought she saw a gun, so we got here as quick as we could.” He replied.

“Thank God for Mrs. Kravitz!” Eileen exclaimed.

The police eventually cleared out and the detective gave the obligatory, “We’ll be in touch.”

At this point, Eileen began to see the writing on the wall as her whole world was melting away. From the beginning she knew things would not last forever. She hoped that she would never have to use it, but she did devise an end game. Years earlier she arranged, through Lou, to get fake passports for her and the kids and her mom. She had millions of dollars in her account in the Cayman Islands, and she knew that she could get money any time through wire transfers. She was thankful for Lou and all that he had done for her. She knew that he loved her, and she made him a very rich man. She knew he would never give her up.

Eileen quickly packed for her and the kids, and as soon as they got home from school, she told them that they are going on a surprise vacation. They then headed for Philadelphia International Airport and picked up Mom-Mom along the way.

Mom-Mom’s cousin runs a luxury resort in Cabo san Lucas, so that is where they went. Since the passports were fake, there were no records of their escape. She even had a fake license plate for the Mercedes, which she assumed would gather dust forever in the airport’s long-term parking lot. So they all essentially disappeared. New identities.

Eileen explained to her mother that she got caught up with the mob guys and deeply regretted it. She conveniently left out the killer-for-hire story though. She told the kids that the gangster episode scared her, and she should have never taken that bad man as a client. She said they threatened her, and that they would never give up hounding her, so they just need to escape. The kids and her mom supported her decision. They were also thrilled to live in luxury in Mexico, especially after the last few winters.

They settled into a beautiful estate high in the hills above the harbor, with a spectacular view. Especially from the infinity pool. Off of the pool was an elevated hot tub and a few feet away there was a bar and sitting area. The bedrooms were spacious, and everyone had their own bathroom, which the kids loved! There was a satellite dish and a big home theater, and even a separate game room. There were several well-to-do families in their “neighborhood” which was mainly walled estates with long driveways. The kids quickly made friends and enrolled in private school.

From the time they arrived, she vowed to keep up her shooting skills. From the start she frequented a high-end range near the town. She went almost every Tuesday morning at nine am, like clockwork.

Eileen's mom also settled in quite nicely. She was happy to reconnect with her cousin. She always wanted to work with jewelry, so they bought a small shop in the tourist district. She enjoyed working there very much, especially since Krissy also like to help out in the store. It brought her much closer to her granddaughter. And, it was also profitable, as tourists love to buy jewelry while on vacation!

The next year, Eileen bought a boat. Well, more than a boat. It was a 55 foot yacht, with three bedrooms, a dining room and a bar. It was outfitted for deep-sea fishing and the hired crew were out several times a week during the high season. She hired a captain, Frank, who was from San Diego. He was tall, with sandy hair and blue eyes. Brett idolized him and he became a fixture on the boat as he grew to be quite the sailor. Eileen also grew close to Frank, and eventually began to trust him. They all became almost like a normal family, if that was even possible...

Eventually Eileen even stopped looking over her shoulder.

One day, as she was finished shooting, a pale, tall guy came up to her. He had dark hair and a bit of a stubble. He was wearing a coat and seemed a bit out of place. She didn't recognize him as a patron of the shooting range. He smiled at her and said, "I've seen you here a few times. American?"

She nodded.

"You're quite a good shot!" he added.

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