

Swan Song

By Tracey Ward

Text Copyright © 2014 Tracey Ward
All Rights Reserved

All Rights Reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the author, except as used in book review.
This book is a work of fiction.

Chapter Four

Three weeks later and no one else has died. Considering the death toll since this gang war started, going this long without a hit feels like a record.

It also feels like I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop.

The death of Hymie Weiss cannot go unanswered. They know it, the Outfit knows it. Hell, half of Chicago and all of Cicero knows it. The only question is when.

Halloween comes around and for once I'm not working. I'll be at the club anyway, dressed to the nines in an all-black get up complete with black diamonds on loan to Ralph from some jeweler in town. My costume was chosen by Tommy, of course. I'm a witch, but a witch with a plunging neckline and a slit cut so high in her dress it's nearly indecent just to walk down the street.

Other bigger acts are booked for the night. A couple of up and coming jazz artists I am not familiar with and a young vaudeville actor and comedian. He's only about eighteen or so, just a few years younger than me, but already a huge name making the circuit across the country. To say I'm a little green with envy is the understatement of the year.

The girls all show up as well, including Lucy, which is simply crazy. She hates the club and everything to do with it. Hates the gangsters, hates the gambling, hates the

prostitutes. The only part she does like is the free hooch we slip her and the chance to see a good show without paying the cover she can't afford. Most of us who work here in the Cotton Club can't afford the cover and every member of the band has to enter through the back door by the alley simply because of the color of their skin. The world is full of injustices, so much so that I almost can't be bothered worrying about them anymore.

Rosaline and Alice are working tonight so Lucy and I arrive alone together in a cab Ralph sent for us. There are people everywhere outside, shouting and laughing. It makes me a little bit nervous because there's so much motion and noise, it's hard to filter out what's friendly from what could get me killed, but I keep my chin up and my shoulders squared as I pass through the chaos.

Costumes range from elaborate to nearly nothing. Maybe a stick on moustache or a funny hat. When Lucy – dressed as a clown of all things – and I arrive, Rick is quick to open the door and usher us in out of the cold. There are groans from the line outside, people angry that they've been made to wait, but Rick silences them with a quick, stern look.

Rick is a massive man standing easily six foot, five inches. He's built like a train, hits like a wrecking ball but is sweet as a kitten to me. He works as the bouncer at the door but also watches out for us girls as we come and go from the club. He's got a soft spot for each and every one of us. I imagine it has something to do with the six daughters he's got at home.

Lucy and I quickly check our coats and head inside. The place is packed to the gills and hotter than hell itself but it's jumpin' something fierce. I'm a little glad I'm not performing tonight so I can enjoy it with the masses. At least that's what I tell myself. Just like I pretended the sign outside hadn't been changed from my name to the toddler standing on stage.

He's a tall wisp of a guy with rouged cheeks and that perfect vaudeville smile. He's killing, that's for sure. I can hear laughter roaring from around the room and the spattering of appreciative applause.

“Let's get a drink,” Lucy says loudly in my ear, making sure I can hear her.

“You read my mind.”

“No,” she says, pulling me forward. “I read your eyes. Tone down the heat or he'll catch on fire.”

“It would serve him right,” I grumble, still watching the kid.

“Hey!” Lucy snaps, tugging at my arm. “Are you going to be evil all night?”

I sigh, turning my back on the stage. I mean to look at Lucy to answer her, but when I sweep the bar, I’m stopped by ice blue eyes locked on my face.

“Who are you staring at now?” Lucy asks, coming to stand beside me and follow my gaze.

Drew is sitting at the bar in a corner, his back against a wall and most of his face hidden in shadows. He’s wearing a plain dark suit expertly cut to his full frame. There’s a matching fedora on the bar beside him along with a lowball glass of amber liquid, and his dark hair has a pomade sheen to it that makes it glisten like glass.

“I know him,” I mutter.

“Who? The creepy guy in the corner?”

I nod, not answering and not looking away from Drew’s eyes. When I smile he does as well.

“You know the worst kind of people,” Lucy grumbles. “Who is he?”

“Just a guy. A guy from New York.”

“Ah, so that’s the attraction.”

“Sure,” I agree vaguely. “Rosaline is over there by the cigarette girl, do you see her?”

“Yeah.”

“She’ll fix you up with a drink.”

“Wait a minute,” she says hotly, grabbing my hand as I move to walk away. “You’re not leaving me alone in this joint with all these mobsters.”

“You wanted to come!” I cry, feeling exasperated.

“Yeah, *with you.*”

“I have to make the rounds, I told you that. Do you want to come with me? Do you want to meet Ralph? Maybe some of his boys? I think there’s a senator here tonight.”

“No,” she answers glumly, releasing my hand. “I want nothing to do with it. I’ll go find Rosaline.”

As Lucy trudges off in her puffy white clown get up, I move deeper into the club, ignoring the pull of the stare coming from the corner of the bar. I quickly find Tommy

sitting at a large, round table in the VIP section. He's seated with both of The Brothers, quite a few old, white haired men in tuxes, and a few of the whores from the club's stables. One of the whores, a redhead named Mary Ellen, sits in his lap giggling. Her eyes have the glassy look of a dooper and I know just looking at her that she'll wake up tomorrow and never remember tonight.

"Adrian!" Ralph cries when he sees me. His voice is loud and his face is ruddy. He's been here awhile.

"Mr. Capone," I say with a small nod. I turn to Al and repeat, "Mr. Capone."

"Adrian," he replies, lifting his glass to me. "I'm sorry we won't hear you sing tonight."

"I'm sure if we asked her nicely..." Ralph says.

I give them my stage smile. "Anything for you, gentleman."

"Good. Good. You enjoy yourself tonight, sweetheart."

Recognizing my dismissal, I give a smile to every man at the table, including Tommy and his whore who ignore me, and make my retreat. I walk lazily around the club, saying hello to regulars and shaking hands, meeting wives and mistresses. I make my presence known but more often than not I'm interrupted by the bellows of laughter from people watching the stage. I try to tune it out, all of it, but it grates on my nerves. Eventually I decide I need a drink, or at least something soothing.

It should be no surprise where I end up. It's certainly no surprise to him. He watches my approach with an amused expression as though he knows I took my time on purpose. As though he knew I'd wind up here eventually.

I take a seat beside Drew at the bar, which is mysteriously the only vacant seat in the club.

"You didn't wear a costume," I accuse, crossing my legs and getting settled.

"Sure I did."

"Really? What are you then?"

"A regular Joe."

"Ah. And normally you're what? Irregular?"

He chuckles. "Something like that. What about you? What is this?"

I square my pointed, black hat on my head. "I'm a witch."

“And that’s different from everyday how?”

“Har har,” I tell him dryly. “Most people find me very charming.”

“Most people must not know you very well.”

“And you think you do?”

He examines my face intently. “I think I’m getting an idea.”

“Really?” I turn to face him and my dress falls open at the slit over halfway up my thigh, a fact that does not escape his notice. “What’s the diagnosis, doc? Who am I?”

He grins into his glass. “Why don’t you tell me, Iowa?” he asks before taking a drink.

I raise my eyebrows. “Now how did you know I’m from Iowa?”

“I ask the right people the right questions.”

“There you go being a detective again.”

“Why’d you leave?”

I chuckle. “No one had an answer to that?”

“I didn’t ask.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m asking you. I told you, I ask the right people the right questions. Why’d you leave?”

I reach over to steal his glass, buying time by taking a drink. I almost gag. Whiskey. Of course. When I set the glass down, he’s smiling.

“I’m scared of cows,” I tell him.

“Try again.”

“I hate corn.”

“Not even close.”

“That town was too small for me.”

“Now we’re getting warmer,” he says, pulling out a cigarette. He offers me one which I gladly take, anything to wipe the taste of the whiskey off my tongue. I let him light it for me. His hands are close to my face in the flickering orange glow of the match and I see scars across his knuckles. Fine white lines like cracks in thin porcelain.

I take a small puff, blowing it out slowly. “Why don’t you tell me why I left and I’ll tell you if you’re right?”

He ponders his answer briefly. “There was nothing for you there.”

“All sixes. You should be a fortune teller. Shouldn’t you have read my palm to get that answer?”

“There’s nothing for you here either,” he says, ignoring my flippant attitude.

“There’s where you’re wrong. I have everything here.”

“Really? This is where you want to be forever?”

“No one is where they want to be forever. We’re all shooting for something else. Something bigger.”

He nods in understanding, blowing a cloud of white smoke over my head. “What are you shooting for?”

“The Cotton Club in New York,” I answer without hesitation.

“Then what? After that, where do you go from there?”

I shake my head with a frown, looking away from him into the ashtray between us as I flick the end of my cig. “Then nothing. That’s the dream. That’s it.”

“So that’s where your life will play out? You’ll live and die on a stage in Harlem?”

“Better that than settling down and popping out a bunch of brats, if that’s what you’re getting at.”

“It’s not.”

“What about you? Where are you going?”

He takes a sip of his drink slowly. “Can’t tell you that.”

“Why not?”

“Cause to tell you where I’m going, I’d have to tell you where I’ve been, and that’s not a story I’m looking to share.”

“That’s not fair.”

“Did you tell me the story of why you left Iowa?”

“No. And I’m not going to.”

“Then it’s exactly fair.”

The club bursts into deafening applause. The band kicks in playing a rollicking song, and we both turn to watch as the kid takes his bows and exits the stage to a standing ovation. As the crowd dies down and the band shifts gears, diving into a slow number to

give people a chance to mingle and grab drinks, I feel a light tap on my bare knee. I look at Drew, surprised to find him leaning toward me. Watching me.

“Maybe you should be a comedian,” he says softly.

I laugh, shaking my head. “You already are one.”

“You’re prettier than he is.”

“What is this? What are you doing?”

He shrugs. “Trying to make you feel better.”

“Well you’re awful at it.”

“I don’t usually do it.”

“I can see why. Anyway, who says I feel bad?”

He sits back and snubs out his cigarette. “You sighed.”

“I sighed?” I ask incredulously. “And you heard it over this crowd?”

He nods.

I narrow my eyes at him. “You’re very astute, aren’t you?”

“So they say.”

“Is that why they call you Birdy?”

“Uh oh. Be careful, kid,” he cautions as he rubs a hand over his mouth. The gesture almost looks nervous. “I warned you about that. Cute name equals—“

“Ugly story, I remember. So you’re not gonna tell me?”

“No.”

“I can take it.”

“I’m sure you can.”

“Then why not?”

Drew meets my eyes with his strange ones, and it might be a trick of the light or the hooch I’ve been drinking since lunchtime, but they look almost sad. “Because I don’t want you to know it.”

I nod thoughtfully. “You know what I want?”

“What’s that?”

Tossing my hat on the bar, I stand up in front of him, offering my hand. “I want to dance.”

I expect him to tell me to sit down. I expect him to laugh and shake his head, telling me he doesn't dance. What I don't expect is what I get.

Drew takes my hand gently in his, wraps it around his forearm, and leads me to the center of the club like a Southern gentleman at a debutant ball. He silently turns me toward him, his eyes tight on mine as his hands touch my sides. His palms run lightly up and down just once across the fabric as though settling in, then they sit low and heavy on my hips. When I put my hands on his shoulders I notice that he's really not that much taller than I am. Maybe five foot nine compared to my five feet seven, but he's broad and stocky. Strong. The heat and weight of his hands feels secure where they touch me. They feel capable and gentle. Everything about him says he could take care of a girl when the chips are down. That wherever you are, you're safe with him. Everything except his eyes. His eyes say to run. His eyes shout predator. They're screaming at me now, telling me to high tail it out of here away from him as fast as I can.

So why do I step closer? Why do I wrap my hands loosely around his neck and try to press against him, to feel him from head to toe?

I honestly do not know, but what I do know is that I can't stop myself.

His hands take firmer hold of my hips, gently keeping me from coming any closer.

The rejection stings but I smile through it. "You're quite the gentleman, aren't you?"

He smirks. "I'm a preservationist."

"What are you preserving now? My reputation? My chastity?"

"My face. I'm not looking to get in a fight tonight. Certainly not over one dance with a dame."

I smile at the slight. "Are you saying I'm not worth it?"

He looks me over from my long cascading hair to the pointed tips of my black shoes. "Not for just a dance."

"What then?"

"What then what?" he asks, his eyes falling back on mine.

"A dance with me isn't worth a fight. What is?"

Drew considers my question, his lips tightening in thought. "Well that's the problem, isn't it? It's an escalating scale. A dance with you isn't worth a fight, not even a

fair one, but a kiss might be. But then a kiss probably won't earn a man a fair fight. So for an unfair fight I suppose it'd be worth a little necking. But now necking will get a fella jumped and beat for sure, no pretense of fairness. So where do you go from there? Spending a night with you would be worth a beating for sure, but knowing Two Thumbs, a man would get far worse than just a beating for that."

"You're worried about Tommy," I say disdainfully, pulling back.

Drew pulls me in close again, closer than I was before. So close that I can feel his heat and smell his scent. It's strange, almost like tobacco but not quite. It's not a cologne or a soap. Maybe it's in his hair? Whatever it is, I like it. I breathe in deeply trying to get more of it.

"I'm worried about you," he tells me deeply, earnestly.

I shake my head. "You're worried about your face."

"That too. I don't want it rearranged just for looking at another guy's girl."

"I'm no one's girl," I tell him firmly.

"You might not think so."

"You've been asking the wrong people the wrong questions," I reply hotly. "You wanna know something about me, ask me."

"Alright. How is Two Thumbs going to react to you dancing with me?"

Damn him for being clever. And right. I can't answer that honestly without sounding like a girl with a jealous boyfriend. It never mattered to me before and I'm thoroughly annoyed that it matters to me so very much now.

"As I said," Drew tells me in response to my silence. "One dance we can get away with but—"

"All I asked for was a dance," I cut him off.

He pauses, watching me with that deadly blank stare of his. Then he says softly, "Well then, we're in the clear."

We dance in silence after that. I try to avoid his eyes but there's no hiding from them. Eventually I look at him again and I'm not surprised to find him watching me. His face is still carefully blank, his eyes their usual unnerving intensity but there's something else. It's not soft, not exactly. More like...calm.

He doesn't say a word as he pulls me in closer. His face doesn't change in the slightest when my body is pressed against his and he wraps his arms around my waist. His eyes give nothing away when I wind my arms around his neck, pulling my chest up against his. But that's how we stay for the remainder of the song. And it's nice. It's not the groping I get from some of the boys. It's not the electric shivers I get from Tommy's advances. It's more like a gentle glow in my blood that runs through me, warming me like hooch going down your throat and heating your belly. I'm getting drunk off it. I'm staring into his eyes, barely blinking, and it should be terrifying but it's not. I can see him for what he is because he doesn't bother trying to hide it. He puts it on display, showing it to me so I'll know the score.

He's a monster. He's a killer. A demon worse than Tommy, but when you're already in the Devil's arms, what evil is there left to fear? There comes a point when the danger becomes comforting. When you feel safe with it. When you're so deep inside the fire you can't feel the flames.