

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 Seven

My head is killing me. It's not the first time this week, but I really hope it's the last. I must be coming down with something. I think about asking around to some of the girls, see if they're feeling under the weather too, but I don't want to cause a fuss. I don't want people knowing I'm getting sick because it will only get back to Tommy or Ralph and they'll flip their lids. Rescheduling acts during the holiday season is tough. One night with me out of commission will be a huge production for them, meaning it'd be a huge production for me and a whole lot of guilt, so I wince against the lights pouring down on me here on the stage, and I keep it to myself.

“Do you wanna switch the order of the songs around?” Smitty asks.

I take a long look at the drummer, trying to focus. “Yeah,” I tell him, “Let's bring the slow number to the close. Tone the place down a bit.”

“When are we starting with Christmas songs in the act?” Clara calls out loudly from the chorus lineup.

She's a young girl with wild red hair but shapely hips and ankles. The ankles are what got her hired. That and Hal's strange obsession with them. He begged and pleaded

with Ralph to give the girl a chance, and lucky for her he did. Lucky for me she has talent. Two days later she was in the show.

It only took Hal two more to get into *her*.

“Not until it’s actually Christmas time,” I mutter.

“Amen,” Smitty agrees quietly.

I look at him sideways, grinning.

“It’s practically Christmas now,” Clara whines. “Don’t ya see the snow outside? It’s the season. Yo ho ho.”

I grit my teeth. “It’s ‘ho, ho, ho.’”

“Huh?”

“What you said. It’s not ‘yo ho ho’. You sound like a pirate. Santa—“ I grit my teeth, closing my eyes for a second. “No. Never mind. It doesn’t matter. No Christmas music yet.”

She’s not listening, her meager attention span already spent. She’s looking past me and grinning like a viper out into the darkened seating area. Either she’s nuts or she’s smiling at someone, and I thought the place was empty except for us. I squint into the shadows so I can see what she’s looking at.

There’s a man sitting back perfectly shrouded in darkness as though he belongs there. Only the outline of his stocky frame is visible.

Drew.

My heart flies in my chest, but I fight to keep my excitement off my face. My sheer, unadulterated pleasure at him being here. Even with the way our last meeting ended, I’m aching to see him. To talk to him, laugh with him, dance with him, stand in a cold, filthy alley with him and feel the weight of his terrifying eyes boring down on me and challenging me. I can’t get the guy out of my head, out from under my skin, and it’s too bad because up until just now, I’d been fairly sure I would never see him again.

“She’s right, angel,” the shadow speaks up.

My stomach drops out in instant disappointment. It’s not him. It’s Hal watching his taste on the sly practicing her dance routine.

The fact that my practice is being used as foreplay on top of my crushed hope makes me shaking angry. “Get out, Hal,” I say severely.

“What?” he asks indignantly. “I sided with you!”

“I don’t care. Get out. No spouses, no girlfriends, no boyfriends, no paying customers allowed at rehearsals. You know the rules. Beat it.”

I hear him chuckle at my anger as he walks through the room toward the side door. He’s heading to the back where the guys are playing poker. That’s *their* rehearsal. Trading greasy, wrinkled, ripped pieces of green paper back and forth in exchange for lies and empty promises. The same money traded back and forth between the whores for their time and valiant efforts. The same money I get paid in.

“I’ll come find ya when I’m done here, Daddy,” Clara calls after Hal.

Her high pitched baby voice is grating on my nerves. She’s doing it on purpose, which only makes it worse. Some men like that childlike attitude, I guess. Personally, I want to slap her silly every time she talks, running around the club pouting at everybody and calling all the men ‘Daddy’.

“Shut up and get in line, Clara,” I tell her curtly.

She scowls at me. “You can’t talk to me like that.”

“Can’t I?”

“Hal!”

“Do whatever she says, Clara!” he shouts back, then disappears through the doorway.

I grin at Clara. “You heard your *daddy*,” I tell her, my voice saccharine sweet. “Get in line.”

She continues to scowl at me, but she goes without protest.

I get this a lot. Most of the girls working in the club are attached to a gangster in some way, shape, or form. It affords them certain rights. Certain status. As the main attraction of the Cotton Club here in Cicero, I have a certain status all my own. One I earned by myself that doesn’t depend on anyone else. Really what these girls are doing is riding the coattails of power trailing from these men.

Not me. I own my own status. I’m afforded my own set of rights. I’m a rare female power and sometimes people forget that. Sometimes they have to be reminded.

“Alright, let’s take it from the to—“

“Adrian!” Tommy shouts, bursting into the room and making my headache spike.

I groan inside. This rehearsal will never be allowed to start meaning it will never end and I'll eventually die on this stage of either agony or old age. "Yeah, Tommy, what?"

"I got a new girl for ya."

He holds open the door for a young woman behind him. She's looking around nervously like a kitten that wandered into a stranger's home and can't find a way out. Her eyes are wide with shock and curiosity, her hands pawing at the ends of her sleeves as she worries the fabric incessantly. She's young, probably fifteen or so, and absolutely gorgeous. Her skin is ebony in color and pure perfection, smooth as silk. Her hair is pinned expertly on top of her head with not a strand out of place, and her dress – though nothing but a cheap, thin cotton – is well maintained and perfectly pressed. I glance at Clara and a couple of the other girls where they stand slouching, snapping gum in their mouths like cows in the fields slathering over a chunk of cud, and I think in comparison this kid looks elegant as Cleopatra.

"What's your name?" I call to her, coming down off the stage.

She meets my eyes without an ounce of fear or hesitation, a level of self-assurance that startles me. I get down to floor level with her, and in better light I'm struck by how familiar she looks. Maybe she's a regular performer somewhere else that Tommy has sweet talked away.

"Elisha," she answers quietly, though not timidly.

"Can you dance?"

"Would I give you a chorus girl who couldn't dance?" Tommy demands.

"Yes, you would and you have."

"Who?"

"Bethany, for one."

"Hey!" Bethany shouts from the stage.

"She still works here?" Tommy mutters, looking her up and down with sudden interest.

"They don't stop working here just because you stop working them."

He returns his eyes to me, grinning. "This girl can dance, I promise. Train her up, get her in the show."

"As what and when?"

“I told you, as a chorus girl, and immediately.”

“The chorus line is full. You want me to use her as an understudy?”

“Only if you don’t want her to get paid, and then I’d wonder why we’re doin’ any of this.”

I frown. “What are you talking about?”

“She’s Eddie’s daughter.”

“She’s what?!” I take his arm and walk away from the girl with him, out of earshot. “You can’t put Eddie’s daughter in one of these outfits to dance in front of this crowd,” I hiss. “Are you crazy?”

“You asked me to take care of that family. That’s what I’m doin’.”

“I thought you’d give them some money. Help them get by until Eddie is better and able to work again.”

Tommy shakes his head, lighting a cigarette that he pulls from behind his ear. “This ain’t a charity, Adrian. I’m not givin’ away anything for free, you got that? This is the solution. Take it or leave it.”

I hate it, but I have to take it. Eddie can’t work right now, his wife has to take care of their kids, and when I consider her other options for working in the club, being in the chorus isn’t that bad. She’ll get pawed at less up on stage than she would working the floor as a waitress or cigarette girl. Or in the kitchen. God help us if a pretty girl like her was working in the kitchen or anywhere else in this building with dark corners and lockable doors. Backstage is always swarming with people. She’s safer out front in the spotlight.

I sigh heavily. “How long?”

“Doc says he’ll be right as rain in a few weeks.”

“Fine,” I mutter. I turn toward the stage. “Clara! Christmas just came early after all! Clear out. You’re on vacation for the next month.”

“What?!” she screeches.

“You heard her,” Tommy tells her firmly, standing directly behind me. The smoke from his cigarette is blowing over my head and cascading in front of me like a waterfall. “Scram!”

I step away from him when he shouts, the sound like an ice pick in my temple.

“Come on,” I tell Elisha warily. “Come over here and sit down.”

“Don’t thank me or nothin’,” Tommy scolds.

I turn to him and give a theatrical curtsy, intentionally bowing forward to give him a good look down my sweater. Breasts – they can pacify the tiniest of babies and the biggest of men. “Thank you so much, Mr. Giordano. You’ve been a peach.”

He grins at my sarcasm, scans the girls in the chorus line like a housewife shopping meat at the butcher’s, then heads toward the back. The women watch him leave with a mixture of lust, longing, and fear.

I motion for Elisha to follow me toward the stage. “You’ll watch this rehearsal and get a feel for how things work, get a chance to see the routine, then we’ll try and work you into it. You’ll be in the back or on the far side in the beginning since you won’t be very good, but maybe we’ll work you in farther later.”

“Yes, Miss Marcone,” she agrees hastily as she falls in step behind me.

“Call me Adrian.”

“Alright, Miss Adrian.”

“No,” I tell her with a smile. “Just Adrian.”

She looks up at me in surprise and shakes her head. “I coul—“

“Yes you can. I’ve been trying to get your dad to do it for years but he’s a stubborn one.” I stop to look at her appraisingly – taking in her curvaceous figure and fresh, young face – and my anxiety spikes again. “Are you stubborn, Elisha?”

She grins. “Wouldn’t be my daddy’s daughter otherwise.”

“Good,” I tell her, gesturing for her to sit as I turn back toward the stage. “Stubborn will keep you alive.”

“You can’t do this, Tommy,” Hal protests.

Tommy shoots him a hard look. “I what?”

Hal pauses, rethinking his phrasing. “Look, it’s not right. It’s not fair to Clara. She earned her spot on that stage. You can’t just take it from her and replace her with some charity case.”

“She only got a shot at that spot because you wanted to fuck her,” Tommy reminds him.

“Doesn’t change the fact that she’s got talent.” Hal turns to me, his eyes pleading for me to see his side. “She’s a good dancer, ain’t she, Aid?”

“Yeah,” I agree heartily. “She’s a great dancer.”

Hal turns to Tommy. “You see?”

“But she’s a shit person,” I add.

Tommy chuckles.

“That’s my girl you’re talkin’ about,” Hal warns me sharply.

“Yeah, and she’s *my* chorus girl, one I put up with out of necessity. She’s got a bad attitude. The last three days without her have been a dream.”

“But she can dance, that’s what matters,” Hal insists.

“It is, you’re right. And Elisha can dance too. And she does it without being a pain in my side, so I’m keeping her and that’s that.”

Hal turns to Tommy, changing his tactic. “What is she supposed to do for money, huh? Go get a job someplace else for a month? That’s crazy.”

“You mean to tell me you can’t afford your girl’s expenses for one measly month?” Tommy asks quietly. “That’s pathetic. If you can’t float her for that long, you shouldn’t have her. Let someone who can take care of her have a go at her.”

“I can take care of her,” Hal says angrily.

“Well then get out of my office and go do it. I don’t wanna hear any more about it, you read me?”

“Yeah,” Hal replies morosely. “I read ya. You’ll save a spot for her, right, Adrian? She can come back in a month?”

“Don’t hassle her with this,” Tommy warns him angrily. “Who knows what will happen in a month? Maybe we’ll all be dead.”

“That’s chipper,” I mutter.

“What I’m sayin’ is don’t worry about it right now.” He turns to Hal, looking at him seriously. “But speakin’ of worries, what’s the story with the Tremblays? What was our discount on the late shipment?”

Hal shifts in his seat. “We didn’t get one.”

Tommy sits back hard in his chair, leveling his gaze on Hal calmly. It's the calm you have to be careful of with Tommy. Even *my* hair stands on end when it comes around. "Why not?" he asks darkly.

"They gave us a few free cases of gin instead." Hal shrugs. "I took it. I figured we can make more money off selling free gin than they ever would have given us in discount for the late bourbon shipment."

"How much? How many cases?"

"Six with twelve bottles in every case."

Hal waits patiently while Tommy thinks it over. I know he's doing the math, figuring out what Ralph would have insisted on in discounts and what we can make off the free gin.

"How does it taste?" he finally asks. "Is it rotgut?"

"It's legitimate gin, bottled at a distillery in Canada. No bathtub shit. I tasted it when they offered it." Hal shrugs again. "It was fine. Decent."

"I've drank it," I pipe up. "It's swell. Better than the whiskey."

"It's gin, though," Tommy mutters to himself. "Not a lot of people drink gin."

"We could put gin and tonics on special for the holidays," Hal suggests.

"Yeah, maybe. It'll make it go farther." Tommy glances at me. "Is that how you're drinking it or are you taking it straight up?"

"With tonic water," I tell him.

"Alright. Tonic water is cheaper than gin. We'll still come out on top with this deal. Good work, Hal."

Hal smiles proudly. "Thanks, Tommy."

"Now get the hell out. Check the bar. Make sure they're ready for the night."

"You got it."

Hal disappears from the room, the door closing behind him with a decided click. I stand up and start to pace, feeling caged all of the sudden. I want to talk to Tommy about Elisha, but I don't know how to say it or what it is I really want to say. All I know is that I'm worried about her being here. I'm worried about Eddie and his injured arm. I'm worried about my girls in the line and my guys in the band and the holidays coming up, and more than anything I'm worried about these headaches that will not let me go.

“You’re scowling,” Tommy scolds quietly.

“Am I?”

“This thing with Elisha, this is what you asked me for,” he says, nailing my anxiety on the head. “Be happy.”

“Oh, I’m thrilled.” I mutter, collapsing down on the side of his desk. I’m facing the wall behind him, looking at an ugly painting of an ugly woman and wishing for the fiftieth time tonight that I could go home and nurse the headache growing behind my eyes.

“What’s with you lately?” he asks, pouring himself a drink. It looks like bourbon. “You’ve been evil the last few days.”

I shake my head. The movement makes me feel a little dizzy. “I haven’t been feeling well.”

“You gettin’ sick?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“You better not be,” he grumbles, taking a sip of his drink. “You want one? Might set you straight.”

I frown, fighting the rise of my stomach at the thought. “No. It’ll only make it worse.”

“Hmm.”

My eyes are drawn to the massive painting behind him again. The woman captured in it has a frown frozen on her face and it strikes me that this is how she’ll be seen for all of eternity. People who have never met her will look at her here in Tommy’s office and think to themselves that she looks like one mean, ugly witch of a woman. But is she? What if this was just a bad rendering and she’s actually sweet as pie, making cookies with her grandkids, attending church every Sunday where she tithes double to help out the single mother sitting beside her who lost her husband in the war?

Suddenly I feel the compulsion to know.

“Who is this?”

“Who is who? What are you askin’?” Tommy asks. He doesn’t look behind him, though. Instead he’s watching me. Examining me where I sit on his desk.

“The woman in this painting. Who is she?”

“How should I know?”

“It’s on your wall. How can you *not* know?”

He shrugs. “I didn’t pick it. It was there when I took over the office.”

“Who was the last guy? Who’d you take over for?”

“None of your business.”

I groan, sick of his games and too tired to play. “Forget it,” I snap, moving to go.

Tommy stands quickly, grabbing my wrist. He pulls me back to the desk until I’m sitting in the center, directly in front of him. He looks down at me with his dark eyes and I know immediately what he’s thinking. What he’s feeling.

He presses his body between my knees, spreading them as far as my skirt will let them go. His hands smooth out over the fabric on my thighs, running up and down slowly. I stare up at him, sure where this is going but unsure how I want to react.

“You want to know why I keep that ugly woman on my wall?” he asks softly, his voice deep and vibrating.

His fingers begin to gather the skirt. To pull it up with each movement.

“Why?” I ask breathily.

My knees are bare.

“I keep it there,” an inch of my thighs is exposed, “so when I’m having an off night,” another inch, “and I’ve got some ugly dame bent over this desk,” he runs his fingers lightly under my garter, “I can remind myself it could always be worse.”

His hot hands make their way to my inner thighs, pushing against them to spread me wider. His body immediately fills the space, his warmth and strength pressing against me. The feeling leaves me breathless.

I stare behind his head at the painting, thinking what a horrible thing that is to do. Those poor women who look at this beautiful man and think his interest makes them beautiful too, but it doesn’t. It doesn’t because Tommy is rotten on the inside.

And what about me? What am I? I’m gorgeous in the mirror, but what about what lies beyond that? Below the surface where all the cracks are. Where the secrets eat at me like mice on Swiss cheese until maybe someday I’m just a hollow shell like Tommy. Maybe someday I’ll look in the mirror and I won’t see me anymore. I’ll see into me, the way Drew did the night I met him, and I’ll glare at myself and whisper—

“You’re disgusting.”

“Am I?” Tommy asks innocently. He leans down, rubbing his face against mine softly. Almost tenderly.

Suddenly he takes hold of my ass and yanks me forward on the desk until I’m flush with him. I gasp, instinctively wrapping my arms around his shoulders and clinging to him for support.

“I can’t be too disgusting,” he breathes against my neck. “Otherwise you wouldn’t be here. Or do you like disgusting, Adrian? Do you like ugly?”

“I don’t think I like you at all.”

He smirks. “You know what? I think I believe that.”

His lips crash down on mine as his hands move from my ass to my hips. They ride up my sides as his tongue takes immediate possession of my mouth, wasting no time. I’m breathless and dizzy as his hands rise higher and his tongue delves deeper. I’m lost and confused and so, so, so excited.

I’ve never let it go this far with him. I shouldn’t be doing it now, but I haven’t been touched like this in years. Not since I first arrived here and learned early on that I needed to be an ice sculpture if I wanted to make it big. If I wasn’t looking to be used and abused. That’s a lot of years with a lot of pent up energy. I’m dying to be kissed this way, caressed the way I know Tommy is capable of, and even though it’s the wrong way with the wrong man, I consider taking that risk.

As he kisses me, his hands split up to cover more territory. One goes north, taking my breast in his palm and squeezing it hard, while the other goes south. His fingers skim over my skirt, run the inside of my thigh, and brush gently across the fabric of my underwear.

I jerk back in surprise and his mouth leaves mine, his eyes staring down into me with determination and desire. I try to breathe steadily as I look back, but I’m a jumbled mess that’s coming apart at the seams as his hands continue to move over my body, never letting up.

“You may not like me, but you like how I make you feel, don’t you?” he asks darkly.

I refuse to answer. To give him that thrill, but he’s right. He’s so right. Even my endless headache has receded to the back of my mind as his fingers toy with the hem of

my underwear, threatening to breach that barrier. All I can think is that I want this release so badly. It's different when it's someone else doing it. It's better, more exciting.

Scarier.

"Adrian," he growls, warning me not to ignore him.

"What?" I breathe, trying to focus.

"Answer me. Do you like how I make you feel?"

I watch him in amazement, noticing for the first time how his demeanor changes in moments like this. How different he is when he's alone with me compared to how he is with his boys. The way his speech shifts, becoming more eloquent.

Some part of Tommy is an act. I just don't know which one.

"Yes."

He nods. "Do you want to feel even better?"

"Yes," I whisper.

"Ask me."

"More."

"No," he scolds. He withdraws his hand, leaving me feeling cold. Unfulfilled. "I didn't say tell me, I said ask me."

I glare at him, and I hate the look I see on his face.

Power. Control. Dominance. This is what it's always like with him, with all the mobsters. They want control over everything they see and I refuse to play that game. I don't care how unsatisfied I am. I'd rather have my pride than a moment of bliss that will leave me with nothing.

I shove his hand aside and slip off the desk, smoothing my skirt and erasing the feel of his fingers from my skin.

"No, thanks," I tell him.

"Really?" he asks, obviously amused by my act. "You sure you feel alright?"

I turn to smile at him with my brighter-than-the-city-lights stage smile that's so much whiskey I feel drunk off it. "I'm swell."

I slam the door behind me as I leave, staggering slightly down the hall and cursing myself with every step.

Whatever has gotten into me, it needs to get out. Otherwise, I'm a goner.

