

Swan Song

By Tracey Ward

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Chapter Six

An hour later and Eddie is finally in with the doctor, but still no sign of Tommy. I've stopped asking Mickey if he knows where we can find him. I even went as far as to ask if he can contact Birdy to find out when he left. Mickey laughed at that, but he never answered. Either it's hilarious to think Drew is easily reachable by phone or it's hilarious to ask a hitman when was the last time they saw somebody. I'm inclined to believe he was amused by both.

"You should go change your clothes," Alice tells me when she brings me a coffee. "You look a mess."

I ignore her. She's right, I look crazy with my hair down and wild and blood all over my dress, but I'm not going anywhere until I hear from the doctor himself that Eddie will be alright. I have so much guilt as I sit here thinking about him and his family. Of how they depend on him and how he's out of commission now for who knows how long. The injury is to his shoulder and as a bassist if he can't play right... I don't want to think about it. He'll be fine, I just have to keep telling myself that. I consider praying but I haven't done it since I was a kid and something tells me not a single member of the Holy Trinity can hear me in here.

The door bangs open, spilling daylight into the dark space. We all turn to look at who has come in but the second I catch a glimpse of that flaxen hair shining like a halo around his head, I know who it is.

“You’re back,” I say with infinite relief spilling out of me on a sigh. “I was so worried.”

“What happened?” he demands, striding toward me. “Where are you hit? Where’s the fuckin’ doctor?”

“I’m not hit.”

“Like hell. You’re bleeding all over your dress.”

“It’s not my blood,” I tell him as he takes hold of my shoulders to keep me still as his eyes examine me. “It’s Eddie’s.”

He scowls. “Eddie took a slug?”

“In the shoulder. The doctor is with him now.”

Tommy curses, looking away. He’s surveying the group and taking account of who’s here.

“Tommy, he took the bullet for me.”

His eyes snap back to mine. “Eddie did?”

I nod. “He saved my life. And he...” I step closer to whisper in his ear, “he has a big family. A family that depends on him. That barely gets by as it is.”

His hands tighten on my arms briefly, then he nods. “I hear ya. They’ll be taken care of. Alright?”

I feel a sense of relief again, of so much gratitude. I wrap my arms around his neck to hug him tightly.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

He hesitates only a heartbeat to put his arms around me. I feel weak then. Weak with relief, weak with fear, weak with so many other unnamable things that I know I need to get out of this embrace before I do something stupid.

I pull back, being sure to smile up at him so it doesn’t come off as a blow. He runs one calloused hand down the side of my face before stepping past me and heading to the back. He’ll need to meet with Ralph and the boys as they circle the wagons. They’ll be busy for the next couple of days with this. It’s shit circumstances, but I’m a little pleased

to have the heat of Tommy's attention off me for a while. Let the Irish take it if they think they're man enough to handle it.

The police came about half an hour after the shooting happened but the boys had already taken care of the mess. They met with the cops outside, never letting them enter the club to see what the rest of us were up to, and by the time they got there the blood was covered up or washed away. They couldn't get all of it cleaned fast enough so some pallets and crates had to be pulled out and set in odd places out back to cover it up. The cops knew, they aren't stupid, but they can know something all day long but it doesn't mean they can do a damn thing about it. If they don't see anything shady out in the open, they have to get a search warrant to go poking around. Can you imagine trying to get a search warrant in Cicero on a property run by a Capone? Heaven help the brave man who tries.

"Miss Marcone."

I spin around to face the doctor as he comes out into the dining area. He's covered in blood from working on all three men, each of them at least requiring stitches. One of the boys needed a bullet extracted and wasn't that the most horrible thing I've had to listen to in a long while. Almost as horrible as the night Tommy brought in a double crosser from the Southside and... Anyway, it was awful, but right now I'm told this man is sleeping soundly. He'll probably keep the bullet as a souvenir. Put it on a necklace or in a ring. If he gets shot again he can make cufflinks.

"Your friend, Edward. He is sleeping soundly now," the thin old doctor tells me in his thick German accent.

"He'll be alright?"

"He will be just fine. Ze bullet hit him just shy of ze lung. No permanent damage has been done."

"None at all? He's a musician, you see, so if he can't play..."

The doctor waves his hand in front of me, dismissing my concerns. "No, no, no. It is all tissue, all muscle. No bone appears to be cracked or damaged. He will be stiff for a few weeks but zen he is back to tickling ze ivories."

I grin. "That's for pianos. He's a bassist."

"Yes, yes. Tickling the strings, then."

"Thank you, doctor."

He bows slightly to me then turns sharply on his heels, leaving the room.

“I don’t like him,” Alice says sourly.

I frown at her. “What’s not to like? He came down here at the drop of a hat and single handedly stitched up three of our guys, no questions asked. The man’s a saint.”

Alice snorts. “Hardly. I don’t trust the Germans. Especially that one.”

“You don’t trust Santa Clause,” I tease her sharply, snapping a napkin at her ass.

She squeals and jumps away, laughing. “You shouldn’t either. Breaking into houses, stealing pastries, leaving bribes. Hush money is what it is.”

“Hush money for what?”

“We’ll never know will we? The kids aren’t saying ‘cause if they do, Santa is taking back that toy train. Lickety split!”

I laugh, feeling giddy with relief. “We were kids once and I don’t remember what the hush money was for. Do you?”

“Course not. He brainwashes you.” She leans in and whispers loudly, “Like the Germans.”

I throw the napkin at her face, laughing. “You’re full of hot air. Leave the Germans alone.”

“They’re trouble, I’m telling you. Someday you’ll see.”

“Yeah, alright. If you see Tommy or Ralph, tell them I went home to change, will ya?”

“You got it.”

I gather my things together and leave the club, smiling at Rick as I go. I feel light, airy. Unattached to the world around me, like I’m riding too high for it to really touch me. I think that’s a good thing. I think it’s right that I should feel happy because Eddie is going to be fine, Tommy is alive, and no one died in that attack. Not even little old me. It’s right to feel good. Great even.

Then why do I also feel so sick inside?

One of the few things I like about the holidays is the food. I'm crazy for sweets and there's no time like Halloween or Christmas for candied everything. Save your Valentine's Day chocolates in a heart shaped box, I'd rather have a pillow case full of candy I gathered after a long night of Trick or Treating. At least then I know I earned it.

It's been a long stressful week at the club thanks to the shootings, and also at home with simply because if you pack four girls into one tiny apartment, there's bound to be fighting. Living with the girls is great, right up until it's not. Right up until someone insists that dress is theirs or those shoes are mine and who ripped a hole in the last good pair of stockings? The one bedroom apartment full of bodies and shouting was getting to be too much for me, so now I'm cruising the streets of Cicero, bundled up for window shopping and munching happily on some candied popcorn I splurged on from a street vendor. Not many people are out this evening. The temperature is dropping fast making it feel more like winter than the end of fall. Once the streets are covered in snow and ice, walks like this will become rare for me. I'll be surrounded by people in the club and at home all the time. No escape.

The thought makes me want to tear my hair out.

"You owe me a name," a deep voice rumbles in my ear from behind me.

I nearly jump out of my skin, popcorn flying out of the bag as I jolt with surprise.

"You rotten son of a—," I breathe, pressing my hand to my chest as my heart beats wildly, like a bird trapped indoors.

Drew eyes me carefully, noting my reaction. "I wondered if you were there."

"Where?"

"The shooting behind the Cotton Club. You're jumpy like a kid back from a war zone."

"What shooting?" I ask innocently, sounding confused.

Drew smiles. "Nicely done."

"What are you doing here?" I ask, annoyed that he can see through me.

"Were you hurt?"

"Hurt when? Now? When you scared me nearly to death?"

"I think it would take more than that."

“Not much more, and no, I’m fine. Thanks,” I mutter. “What are you still doing here? I thought you were long gone back to New York.”

“Now who’s the detective?”

“What do you mean?”

“I never told you I was from New York.” He’s watching me closely, his face serious. Intense. “You asking around about me, Adrian?”

I shake my head. “I know better than to ask questions. I hear things, though. A lot of things.”

“Did you hear what brought me to Chicago?”

I look at him sideways, glaring at him sharply. His eyes are steady on my face as we walk and I understand for a moment why Rosaline didn’t like them.

“No,” I say firmly, “and I don’t want to know.”

We continue together in silence for nearly a block. He’s looking at me the entire time and I wonder how he doesn’t trip or run straight into someone. Just when I’m feeling like I’ll squirm or scream from the attention, he releases me from his stare. The air around him shifts, lightening instantly as he reaches over to steal popcorn from my forgotten bag.

“Do you ever ask permission?” I demand, pulling the bag out of his reach when he goes in for more.

“Not when I see something I want. I don’t like being told no.”

“Something tells me being told no doesn’t exactly stop you.”

He chuckles as he tosses a few kernels in his mouth, then he frowns in surprise. “It’s sweet.”

“I like it sweet.”

“Really?” he asks dubiously.

I grin at him. “My popcorn at least. Everything else I like a little...”

“Sour?”

I feel a pull low in my stomach. I’m flirting with him, there’s no getting away from that, and if I’m reading him right, he’s flirting back. Why I’m doing it, I’m not entirely sure. He’s a stranger, he’s clearly dangerous, Tommy would pitch a fit if he knew, and he’s just really not that handsome. There are a lot of better looking fellas at the club who probably have a lot more money and influence that would be more than happy to take me

on. But I've always said no. I've always walked away and kept that distance because I don't want it that way. I won't sleep my way to the top because it never gets you all the way there. All it gets you is pregnant and forgotten, relegated to an apartment kept by some mobster who swings by to screw you every now and then when his wife gets boring. Now here I am on a cold street in Cicero looking into the scariest eyes I've ever seen, and all I want to do is find out what his lips taste like.

Would they be sweet? Or would they be sour?

"Sour is good," I answer, feeling a little breathless.

He abruptly steps in front of me, stopping me in my tracks. He looks at my mouth for a moment, the way he did in the club when I drank the whiskey, and I wonder what he's thinking. With him, I'll probably never know.

"Name," he says simply, his voice hushed and deep. Demanding.

He's standing so close. I can smell him. Soap and that mysterious something else.

I take a half step closer, wanting more of it. Of him. "Addy."

"It's not short for Adrian, is it?"

"No."

He takes a step toward me until he's towering over me. Until our bodies are nearly touching and my popcorn bag crunches loudly between us. Until his scent is in my nose, in my lungs, in my mind, and I'll remember it forever and always wonder what it is. Why I crave it. Why I want it so badly.

"Who calls you by that name?" his voice vibrates roughly.

"No one living."

It's a macabre answer to an innocent question, but I know he'll understand. In his line of work, people are categorized in two ways; living and dead. That's all that really matters.

"Good," he replies. "We're even."

He takes a step back and the cold air feels frigid in his wake.

"You're leaving now, aren't you? Going back to New York?"

He nods, watching me. "All my debts here are squared."

"When will I hear the rest?"

"The rest of what?"

“Your names.”

He scans the sidewalk behind me for a long moment before answering. “Ask around some more,” he replies coolly. “You know enough to get the rest.”

“What if I don’t want it from anyone else? What if I only want it from you?”

I know how it sounds, that’s why I said it that way. What exactly it is I’m doing I have no idea, but I do know I have to see him again. I have to know why his laugh makes me light up inside like a spotlight on stage, why his stare scares me nearly until my knees are knocking, and why all of that makes me feel so sinuous inside.

“You’re a kid,” he says tightly. “You don’t know what you want.”

“You’re not that much older than I am.”

“Aren’t I? I grew up in this life. How long have you been in it, country girl? Two years?”

“What? You think you’re smarter than I am?”

“Yeah, I do,” he replies calmly. “You’re playing out of your league.”

“What are you talking about?”

“First Two Thumbs, now you’re tryin’ for me?”

“I told you already, Tommy and I have ne—“

“Who are you gonna shack up with next? One of the Capones?”

My mouth drops open in shock and anger. “Fuck you!”

“That’s the idea, isn’t it?”

I throw the popcorn bag against his chest, the kernels exploding against his gray coat in a shower of yellow and white that tumbles to his feet. I step quickly past him, taking off down the street. Anything to get away from him.

I make it half a block before I feel a steel grip on my arm spinning me around, pulling me back, and slamming me against the hard planes of a broad chest. He holds me against him as though I weigh nothing and drags me quickly into an alley. We’re instantly hidden in the shadows, surrounded by empty crates and darkness. When I look up at him, his face is hard and at home. This is where he works. This is where he lives - half seen in the cold empty.

“Look at me,” he demands.

I already am. He's all I can see. His electric blue eyes and the deep lines of his face forming a frown of anger or frustration or confusion. He presses his body against mine, pinning me against the wall until it hurts. I'm trapped between two hard surfaces forcing the life out of me until suddenly Adrian dies on a gasp and Addy bursts to life in his arms. I stare up at him and I'm not the singer in the club. Not a canary in a cage. Not a bundle of flesh and bone and blood under Tommy's watchful stare and insistent fingers.

I'm a woman – breathing deep and burning fast.

“What is it about you and gangsters, huh?” he rasps, his hands pinning my arms to my sides. “Is this what you like? The violence? The danger?”

“You,” I confess in a strained whisper. “I like you.”

He stares at me as though he didn't hear me. As though he can barely even see me. My words don't register with him, or if they do, they mean nothing. “This is how it is with me. Nothing nice. Nothing sweet. Nothing real or meaningful to tell your girlfriends about.”

“I don't care about all of that,” I breathe, my chest painfully being crushed by his.

“You will. Eventually you will, and I won't give you any of it. I'm all whiskey, all sour, and you think you want it now, but in the long run you'll want something else. Something I don't have. So why don't you save us both the trouble, sweetheart, and go sing this song to Tommy or one of the other guys drooling over you every night in that joint.”

He shoves away from me, leaving me limp against the cold, brick wall. He backs away a few steps, but his eyes never leave mine. He's waiting for something. Maybe for me to cry or for me to run to him, cling to him. Beg him to see that he's wrong and that I want him any way I can have him. But as much as my body misses the weight of him against it, that's one thing I'll never do. I'll never beg any man for anything.

So I walk away and I don't look back.