

Swan Song

By Tracey Ward

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Chapter Three

“Play that one again, will you, Eddie?” Rosaline asks, taking a sip of her soup. “I love that one.”

Eddie, the bassist in the house orchestra, nods before kicking off into the song again. I don’t know the name of it. It probably doesn’t have one. It’s most likely something he’s created on the fly because he’s that sort of talented. His song resonates cleanly through the quiet, closed club as we all sit around eating our dinner of soup and sandwiches, listening intently. We’ll have to start warming up soon to get ready for the club to open, but for now I’m loving this. Laughing, chatting, and relaxing with the only family I have left. The only one that matters anymore.

The club looks different in the daylight. It’s more damaged. The bar has less luster, the floors are scuffed, the tables are all missing their linen dressings leaving the entire room feeling darker. Heavier. There are no jewels here in the daylight. No diamonds or emeralds. There’s just us – the entertainers who can’t afford a drink when we’re open. The gangsters who don’t bother with jackets to conceal the shiny revolvers strapped to their sides.

“So,” Rosaline says slyly, leaning in close, “who was he?”

I take a bite of my sandwich, frowning. “He who?”

“You know who. The fella at your table the other night. The scary one.”

My eyes skate the room, making sure no one else is listening. “You saw him?”

“I was sneaking over a scotch when I saw him sitting with you. I figured he was important to be sitting alone with you, but then I saw Tommy come loose and I made myself scarce. So,” she repeats insistently, poking my arm, “who was he?”

“I don’t know,” I lie. “His name is Dan or Stan. I don’t remember.”

Rosaline knows it’s a lie, but she also knows not to push. The story will get larger and larger with every question, and he’ll be a man from Mars before I tell her he was there to see the brothers. Or that he’s probably a torpedo. A hired gun. A hitman on loan from New York. These are all things it’s dangerous to even think about, to be smart enough to figure, and they’re deadly to talk about. If I go flapping my gums about what I see to everyone who will listen, even Ralph can’t protect me from the end I’ll have coming.

I haven’t made it this far in this business with this crowd without knowing when to go deaf, dumb, and blind.

“Well, he was spooky,” Rosaline informs me, giving a theatrical shiver.

I laugh. “How was he spooky?”

“He had that feeling, ya know? Like one of the quiet ones.” She looks at me hard.

“You can’t trust the quiet ones.”

“He wasn’t so bad. He was funny.”

Rosaline snorts at me. “Your sense of humor is warped.”

“You didn’t even speak to him.”

“No, but I saw his eyes when he came in.”

“And what was wrong with his eyes? Were they red? Maybe he’s Dracula,” I tease.

Rosaline frowns, turning uncharacteristically serious despite my teasing. “I don’t know really. They were... empty.”

When the song comes to a close, Eddie asks what to play next. I want to tell him to put the bass down and eat something, anything, but I can’t. It’d humiliate him. Even if I gave him half my sandwich it’d be a huge thing. He was given dinner here at the club just like the rest of us, but instead of eating it, he’ll take it home to his wife and five kids. It’s noble but he’s starving and it’s killing me.

The door leading backstage bangs open loudly. It echoes through the space like a gunshot, startling everyone. Suddenly Tommy is standing there, his presence instantly commanding the entire room.

“Adrian, get in here now,” he commands severely. “We gotta talk, you and I.”

“Uh oh,” Rosaline breathes.

I slide calmly off the stage and saunter toward him, unrushed by his agitated attitude, but inside I’m ranting curses. Most of them are directed at Drew. That’s what this has to be about. It’s my payback for my flirtations that night. It’s a scolding for a child, and I’m in no rush to get to it.

“Take your sweet time, Aid,” Tommy growls. “I got nothin’ better to do than wait around on you.”

“My, aren’t you evil today?” I ask, slipping past him through the door.

He slams it shut behind me before ushering me down the hallway toward his office, his hand on the small of my back. His touch is firm, tense, but now that I’m close to him I don’t know that he feels angry. His eyes are intent on the path ahead, his mouth and jaw set tight, but there are none of the telltale quivers of rage in them.

Tommy nudges me into his office before closing us in together. He doesn’t tell me to sit and he doesn’t go behind his desk. Instead, he pulls me to the farthest corner of the room and backs me into it where it’s dark. Shadowed and cramped with his body bearing down on mine and blocking out the light from the lamp on his desk.

“I’m gonna be straight with you because I don’t have the time to beat around the bush,” he tells me quietly, his eyes hard on mine. “Can you handle that?”

I nod my head, thrown by the question. Maybe this isn’t about Drew after all. My mind flashes to the terrifying night of the Hawthorne and I worry that one of the Capones is dead. What will that mean for The Outfit, this club, and everyone inside? Unseating the king means a scramble for power. The savage dogs that lap at his scraps will tear each other apart, and those of us living on the fringe will be casualties of a potential civil war or forced to try to make a life elsewhere.

As Tommy stares down at me, I wonder how he’d fair. How high he’d climb.

I worry he’d try to drag me with him.

He frowns down at me. “Say it out loud.”

“Yes,” I comply. “I can handle it.”

“Good, because I need you on top of things out there. I can’t be bothered with it tonight. I got other things, bigger things that I gotta attend to. I need you to keep the girls in line. You gotta keep ‘em calm, you hear me?”

“Yeah, I hear you, but what’s happened?”

“You know who Hymie Weiss is?”

“Of course I do. He’s been the leader of the Northside Gang ever since O’Banion died.”

“Not anymore. He’s dead.”

I gasp, shocked. “No.”

“It happened just an hour ago. Gunned down in the street.”

I’m dying to ask who did it. Who ordered the hit, but I keep my cool. This isn’t a part of the club I get involved in. This is Outfit business, something I’d be wise to stay out of. I tell myself it was a terrible accident. An unfortunate coincidence that the biggest thorn in Al’s side took his last breath today.

“His poor family,” I lament carefully.

“Yeah, it’s a real tragedy.”

“They’re going to think The Outfit was behind it, aren’t they?”

“Of course. That’s why we’re circlin’ the wagons. Security is gonna be tight tonight. Only trusted regulars will be allowed in, but we can’t close. It’d be an admission of fear and guilt, so business as usual, you got me?”

“I got you,” I reply, feeling my stomach knitting with fear. Fear that I refuse to let show on my face.

“Keep your eyes and ears sharp. Tell the girls to stay alert, but don’t scare ‘em. Last thing I need is a henhouse full of hysterical dames.”

“They’ll be solid. I’ll make sure of it.” I hesitate before asking, “The Irish, they’re quick to react, aren’t they?”

“Yeah,” Tommy nods. “With them revenge is swift. It’ll be the first order of business to find out who did it. If they get a whiff on the wind that anyone in this joint was behind it, they’ll strike. Tonight.”

My heart nearly beats out of my chest, but I will it to slow. To maintain. “Will you be here with us?”

“All night,” he promises me.

That’s comforting. It’s calming. This beautiful monster in my corner puts my heart at ease.

And that scares me more than anything.

“Good. I’ll go gather the girls. Do you want to tell them or should I?”

“You do it. Most of them are afraid of me. Bad news from my mouth will only make trouble. Trouble I don’t need tonight.”

I nod in agreement, going to step past him.

He puts his hands on my arms to stop me. “You alright?”

“I’m always alright.”

His eyes scan my face critically, checking for signs of a lie. For cracks or faults where weakness could spill out. I give him none to find. “You gonna be okay to perform?”

“You gonna keep me safe up there?” I ask plainly.

“Always. From anything.” He looks at me pointedly. “From anyone.”

Ah, here it is. My scolding.

I smile lightly. “From bullets will be plenty, thanks.”

He doesn’t reply. He holds me pinned down by his stare, trying to make me sweat or confess some sin I haven’t committed.

I wait him out impassively.

Finally he takes a step back, giving me an escape. “You better get out there. Break the news.” He rubs his thumb under my left eye lightly. “Shed a tear if you can. They’ll follow your lead, and sad is better than afraid.”

“I’ll give the performance of a lifetime,” I promise.

Then I hightail it out of that office.

My fingers are shaking when I reach for the doorknob.