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Tommy Swings

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No One Kills Tommy Swings

Tasha Peters-Vice

**Dedicated to Tommy Thompson, whose pseudonym and unmarked grave are as unusual as the rumored stories. Fiction seems only appropriate for the tales we will never know.*

After slipping the conductor some cash, Nara climbed into the rail car and hid behind the cargo. Within minutes of departing a sudden jolt propelled the railcar forward. The shifting cargo forced barrels full of sloshing liquid toward her. Nara found herself pinned to the wall of the freight car. Nara resisted the urge to scream from the blow her chest took when the barrels forced her into the corner of the 20 x 8 rail car even though the sound of clacking of cars grew louder, creating a rhythmic tempo. Straining her eyes, she made out the flicker from one row of shiny mechanical parts. To her left cotton sacks tied to pallets in a pathway were barely visible. Beyond them she tried to count. *Five barrels, possibly seven?* How could she move them?

Leaning into the barrels she pressed against them. Her lungs sucked in the cool air. Failing to free herself, she closed her eyes. Better to stay calm, she thought, despite the barrels pressing the air from her lungs. In her mind, she traced the silver Celtic knot her mother had worn when Nara was a child. With each slowing breath she imagined herself, a child, and traced over the lines. Again, and again. By the time the railcar door slid open Nara lost consciousness.

—24 hours Earlier

Paul leaned back against the red brick wall, puffing fat circles of cigar smoke while fixing his attention on the 1957 Packard parked at the corner of the industrial block.

“Nice car, but too nice for this part of town,” Paul said to one of the loaders. Paul pointed to the parked car before adding, “The FBI has been watching South Chicago for decades. But this isn’t some prohibition rum run here. We’ve gotta move these goods outta here before they pull a raid. Tell your guys to step it up.”

Inside, the crew busied themselves loading the moving van with unlabeled crates, maybe weapons, or cigarettes headed to Vegas. Or, liquor hijacked from the shipping yards. It wasn’t his job to know what was moving, only to get it there undetected.

After loading, a decoy truck was sent out first. The 57 Packard took the bait, following the first truck, full of empty promises for some eager undercover cops.

Three heavy bangs to the garage door gave Paul the signal he needed. He was clear to drive the goods in the opposite direction. Paul stomped on his cigar leaving behind a smolder of ash before pulling the truck around to the side of the warehouse. There he adjusted his black tie and grey felt derby while waiting for her.

Nara ran her fingers over neatly pressed waves of red hair before smoothing the large collar of her belted plaid dress. “Where to, today?” she asked. “State line” said Paul. “Right, let’s see to it then.” Nara leaned toward the passenger window admiring the contrast of grey buildings, tall and short, as they passed through the industrial center of the

Chicago. Silence filled the truck cab as they neared the state line. Nara shifted from the passenger side, to the middle of the truck's bench seat. "The usual role?" she asked.

Paul glanced in his rearview before responding, "Newly married, and moving?" Nara leaned-in hooking her left arm under Paul's, and stroked the shoulder of his crisp pinstriped shirt with her other hand. The morning sun filled the cabin when they approached the traffic stop. She gazed up at him as they approached state line. "What's your destination?" the guard asked. Nara belted out an enthusiastic response, "New house!" While looking over the side of the moving truck the guard asked, "Do you have anything to declare?" "No, Sir," Paul responded. "He's already declared his love. What more could a girl ask for?" Nara added. She flashed a smile at them both before planting a deep red kiss onto Paul's thick bare cheek. "Do you mind opening up?" the guard asked.

Paul stepped from the truck, unhinged the lock, and slid the truck's garage door upward. An oriental rug and gaudy golden lamps cluttered the view of cardboard boxes labeled dining, bedroom, and bath. After a moment's pause the guard gave the sign, and wave to Nara, "Carry on." Paul resumed his spot in the cab with Nara still snuggling beside him until they were well beyond the state line. "A little exaggerated, don't you think?" asked Paul. Nara responded while shifting out of the center seat and back to the passenger side. "Cool your jets. No one should question the business of a woman who's singing a romantic ballad."

"I can't imagine what you have in mind for next week's transport," said Paul. After pausing for a moment,

Nara replied, "I think you'd be surprised if you knew the full extent of my acting talents." "Will Jack be picking you up this afternoon?" asked Paul. Nara thought for a moment. *Does Paul know that Jack isn't coming back?*

It had been two weeks since the FBI questioned Jack about Tommy Swings. They picked Jack up mid-day in front of all the guys so they'd be assuming that Jack had flipped. Would the FBI keep pressuring him to give up Swings like this? Nara knew that's why Jack left, why he went underground to start a new secret life that same afternoon. Nara wondered, *How long can I keep all of this a secret?* "No, he's out of town on business. If you don't mind, I'll need a ride to my car after we've passed off the booze and due backs," said Nara. "Sure thing" said Paul as he pulled into the Kentucky warehouse.

Nara didn't worry about any attention the shiny hopped up 1957 Chevy Bellaire might bring to the two of them. "Thank you for the Ride, Paul," said Nara as Paul offered her a hand out of the car. "My pleasure, see you for next week's gig" said Paul as Nara stepped out of the black two-door sedan. While walking away, Nara thought about Paul and Jack as kids. The two boys were known as the inseparable North-Side Irish Duo. She wondered: *Should she tell him?* Instead, Nara swallowed the guilt of her secret finding resolve in one thought. *Paul is only safe if he knows very little about Jack and even less about Swings.*

In the normally bustling afternoon market area the yellow hardware sign took on an eerie green hue. Heavy cloud cover arched above the barbershop. Overcast stretched into

the department-store windows casting a dreary grey light on the dressing displays. One paperboy, unaffected by the looming threat of soggy weather, waved and chattered up sales in front of the floral shop. Nara picked up two papers, one for quick impending rain cover, and another for good measure. When shuffling the papers into a makeshift umbrella, the headline came into Nara's sight. "Impossible!" Nara gasped. "Mam?" asked the boy whose confused expression seemed to match his oversized trousers and blazer. "Tommy Swings is dead? It's not possible!" said Nara-more to herself than to the paperboy. "I don't report the news. I just sell the papers, mam," the paperboy explained.

Nara rolled up both copies of the paper in disbelief before tucking them under her arm and trotting through the now steady rain to her car. "It's not possible," she mumbled to herself, "No one knows Tommy Swings. No one kills Tommy Swings."

At home in the quaint red-checked kitchen, Nara slammed the papers down on the small round breakfast table. She glanced around the room to her husband's brown leather jacket still hanging on the wall. If the FBI tried to get to Tommy through Jack, then they must be close to Tommy. It wouldn't be long before they'd come for her, then they'd come for Paul. Suddenly, a thick hand clamped across Nara's mouth, while an elbow wrapped around her neck. Her heart pounded in her ears while electrical currents of fear shot through her arms and legs. Her thoughts screamed. Move! Fight!

With a sweeping blow, Nara struck out wind milling her right arm over her head and following with a swing of her left fist. Nara's violent response forced the vice of hands squeezing her neck away. Gasping for breath, she fell to the floor. As she tried to rise, the weight of a boot slammed her body down, shoving her face to the ground where the smell of leather and linoleum compounded. "Where is Jack?" a voice demanded. "You tell me. Haven't seen him in three days," Nara choked. "Tell him Southside Mack Vicente was here. Rumor has it that Jack's boss Tommy Swings is dead. Jack needs a new alliance. It's in his best interest to talk to me," said the voice. "Twenty-four hours, or I'll see your pretty face again." "This is for the left hook," Mack gave Nara an extra kick in the ribs before finding his way out. Nara's long slim arms found their way up the side of a nearby chair, and with them she pulled herself up. She dialed the only person she could trust.

When Paul answered, she told him everything he needed to know. 1. Jack wasn't coming back 2. Tommy Swings was dead 3. Southside Mack was moving in. 4. Nara needed an exit—fast!

Within the hour, Paul sent over the maid. Adeline McGitty pulled into Nara's driveway without taking notice of the cars parked on either corner. She rang the doorbell with a thick feather of plumes in one hand and a bucket of lye soap in the other. Adeline's crisp white apron was a stark contrast to the deep dark creases of labor that marked her hands. Her long black dress hung loosely on her narrow frame. Nara took one look at her and thought, *This is the perfect clean up*. One hour later, Mack watched from a parked car at the curb as a maid exited Nara's house and made her way to the train station.

The dull aching in Nara's lungs lingered as she came back to consciousness. The barrels that had taken her breath away were no longer around her. She lay in the center of the floor looking up. Above her, a simple light bulb hung in the center of a small concrete room. While trying to regain control of her body she wondered, *Who pulled me from the freight car that I snuck into?* Two shadows, long figures, emerged from the corner. "Well, well, well! If it isn't Tommy Swings, our North-Side leader!" Paul said. "Where's Jack?" Nara squeaked out. "All this time, and I never knew," Paul added. "Now then, don't strain yourself. Your train hopping excursion in that freight cart of barrels from Chicago to Wyoming has already done a number on you," Paul said. "That's one hell of an exit plan," he added.

Nara stood up, the maid's crisp white apron that had disguised her exit from the house, was tarnished with freight-car dust and barrel grit. She made the drive in the maid's car from her home to the train depot without being detected by Mack. The escape plan had worked- for all of them. "She's alright, as salty as they come," Jack said as he stepped out from the shadows. Jack lent Nara a hand as she struggled to stay on her feet. "Don't listen to Paul. He's just mad because he spent six hours hiding in the back of a truck and then I told him that he's working for a girl!" Jack laughed. Then, while leaning in to kiss Nara on the forehead he pressed her lucky silver Celtic Knot into her hand. "This kept us together while we were apart," Jack said. This time Nara didn't need to close her eyes to feel the cool silver as she traced her fingers over the knot. "I wouldn't even know if the police hadn't tried to wash you out in the open with the fake headlines!" Paul

said to Nara. “No one kills Tommy Swings.”

“You understand, don’t you Paul? You are my closest friend. But, knowing that Nara is Tommy Swings, the boss of bosses, would have put you at risk.” Jack gave his old friend a pat on the back. “We have enough put back to start new, the three of us,” added Nara. “Sure, I get it. There’s just one thing that doesn’t jive,” Paul added. “Nara, why do they call you Tommy Swings?” he asked.

Nara, who was still recovering from another day in the business, smiled at Jack. They were all together and now they had no more secrets. “Jack gave me the name. He said that I reminded him of a promising baseball player,” said Nara before adding, “I can take a hit. And, if I go down—I go down swinging.”