

Last Dance Before Dawn Excerpt
Partners in Crime Tour
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Manhattan, 1925

Everyone came to the Nightingale looking for something.

They didn't have much else in common, the folks who snuck down the alley toward a single electric light that flickered like it had been forgotten for years and could burn out at any moment. You never knew who would whisper the password at the door under the light, who would make their way through the midnight velvet curtains that muffled loud laughter and louder jazz.

Maybe your family could have bought half of Fifth Avenue, or maybe you couldn't even buy new shoes. More likely, you lived somewhere in between, with work that paid your bills and the hope, one day, of something a little more. At the Nightingale, it didn't matter who you were in the daytime. If you could hold your booze and let loose on the dance floor and keep a secret for a stranger, you were in.

They came looking for excitement, for the thrill of breaking a law that no one liked anyway. They came to dance and drink and maybe find a new friend, the sort of friend who— after a glass or three of champagne— would meet them in a quiet corner to get a little bit friendlier.

They came because they loved the music, the way it curled through the air and carried them across the floor, the way the singer's voice filled the room and made their hearts ache.

They came for the party. They came to escape.

If they were lucky, they could pretend that whatever waited for them back at home didn't exist. They could lose themselves in the music and the arms of someone new. They could feel free, even if it would never last, because in that moment nothing mattered but the next dance, the next drink, the next hour.

If they were lucky, they found what they were looking for, and they left before trouble could find them.

But not everyone was lucky.

Vivian recognized the sound of danger before she even realized what she was hearing.

Twilight had settled on the city, humid and heavy and speckled with the glow of streetlamps. She and Beatrice Henry— Beatrice Bluebird, as she was known at the Nightingale, where she sang six nights a week— moved through it with the practiced carefulness of two women who were used to navigating New York’s streets alone. Their steps were quick, but their eyes were quicker, always on the lookout for a man who might be trouble or a cop who might be trailing them.

The Nightingale paid off the police weekly, like any other dance hall or juice joint. But everyone who worked there knew to be wary just the same.

It was that wariness that sent a prickle of warning down Vivian’s back when they were two blocks from the Nightingale’s back entrance.

“Bea— ” Vivian tossed out a hand to stop her friend in the middle of the sidewalk. A few steps ahead of them, a cat yowled as it ran out of a narrow alley. “You hear that?”

For a moment, the only sound out of the ordinary was the distant grumble of thunder. Then Vivian heard it again.

“Look a little closer, pal.” The voice was low and menacing, snaking out of the shadows and clearly not meant to be overheard. “I want to make sure you and me is on the same page.”

“Viv— ” Bea hissed, but Vivian couldn’t help herself; she took a step forward, just enough to peek down the alley.

Halfway down the narrow stretch of filthy brick walls, two men were just visible in the fast-fading light. One had his back against a wall. He was the taller of the two, but he still shrank back from the menacing bulk of the second figure. That one loomed toward him, his wide shoulders cutting off any escape as he shoved some kind of paper toward the nervous man’s face.

“—told you, when I have something, I’ll let you—”

The menacing man shoved him against the wall, the gesture nearly careless enough to hide the violence of it. The voice broke off with a grunt of pain, but it had been enough. Usually, Vivian would have stayed far away from anything that sounded like a beating and wasn’t her business. But she recognized that voice.

“Don’t interrupt,” the menacing man snarled. “My boss don’t take kindly to rude fu—”

“It’s Spence,” Vivian hissed.

Bea tried to pull her away. “It’s not our business. We can tell Silence or Benny,” she whispered, naming two of the bruisers who worked at the Nightingale keeping customers— and anyone else who needed it— in line. “They’ll come handle it.”

“That’ll take too long.” Vivian shook her head, pulling away from Bea’s cautious hand and running down the alley toward trouble. “Hey! Leave him alone!”

The bruiser barely glanced over his shoulder at her, just cocked his fist back and drove it, almost casually, into the nervous man’s stomach. He doubled over, heaving and gasping for air, as his assailant tipped his hat mockingly. “We’ll be seeing you soon, boyo. You can count on it.”

He was gone before Vivian could reach them. She stood, panting and staring at the gap between buildings where he had disappeared. A drizzling rain began to fall, plastering her hair against her cheeks. She wasn’t dumb enough to go after him.

“You okay, Spence?” she asked instead, turning toward the remaining man as he braced his hands on his knees.

“Swell,” croaked the Nightingale’s second bartender, a lanky, mouthy, handsome grump. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Apparently chasing off the fella who was about to beat you to a pulp,” she said, stung. Spence had been working at the Nightingale all summer and still hadn’t managed to endear himself to any of the other staff. But Vivian had expected at least some gratitude. Instead, he scowled at her like she was the one who had just punched him in the stomach, not the one who had run the attacker off. “But no need to say thanks or anything.”

He hauled himself upright, wincing. “I had it handled, you know,” he said, still sounding resentful. “I didn’t need a rescue.”

“Sure you did, pal,” Bea said, joining them at last. “That was a stupid thing to do, by the way,” she added, glancing at Vivian as she opened her umbrella and held it over both their heads. “Be glad he didn’t have a friend waiting to beat the stuffing out of you too.”

“My stuffing’s doing just fine,” Spence grouched, pushing his wet hair off his forehead and straightening his jacket and tie.

“What was that about?” Vivian asked, laying a hand on his arm. “Spence? Are you in trouble?”