

Swan Song

By Tracey Ward

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Chapter Five

“Did we get the cases of bourbon in yet?” Ralph asks the room.

Tommy, Mickey, and Hal all nod their heads.

“It came in last night,” Mickey tells him.

“It was late,” Ralph replies biting. “Tell them we ain’t paying full price for product that shows up late. We needed it for Halloween and it’s come and gone now.”

“Seems like we did alright without it,” Hal says, leaning back and puffing lazily on a cig.

“Tell that to Al. Senator asked twice for bourbon. Imagine how fuckin’ happy he *wasn’t* when we couldn’t produce.”

“Besides,” Tommy adds darkly, “doin’ alright ain’t the same as doin’ great and we coulda done great that night. Holidays are a time to make a killing and we won’t have another shot at one until New Year’s.”

“Which reminds me,” Ralph says, looking up and pointing at Mickey, “make sure we got champagne on hand for New Years and lots of it. Start ordering more and hiding what we got.”

“You got it, boss.”

“Tommy, who you got lined up for New Year’s entertainment?”

I feel my pulse quicken at the question, but I don’t move. I stay stock still in my place tucked in an arm chair in the corner of the big office. I wasn’t sure why Tommy wanted me here in the room while they talked business, not until right now. It’s like Halloween all over again – I know I won’t be the star, and that’s fine. That’s swell. I can live with that. What I’m concerned about is who will be taking my place on the stage. More specifically, I’m interested in where they’re from.

And when he tells us who’s headlining for New Years, I just about up and die right there on the spot.

“We got the Duke,” Tommy says seriously.

Ralph puts down his pen and stares at him. “Are you fuckin’ kiddin’ me?”

“No laughs. We got him on loan from the Harlem Cotton Club.”

“No shit,” Hal mutters.

“What witchcraft did you have to pull to manage that?” Mickey asks, amazed.

Tommy smiles darkly. “I have people skills.”

I’m flying. I’m giddy and squirming in my seat like a kid stuck in church on a sunny summer afternoon.

Anytime there’s a guest in the club, there’s always a chance I’ll get to do a number with them. I just have to be there and you better believe that if Duke Ellington and his boys are coming to *my* club, I will be there that night. A chance to sing with him is the closest I’ve ever come to my dream of hitting it big in New York and taking the stage of the Harlem CC.

Tommy glances back at me and I smile at him, ear to ear.

He doesn’t smile back.

“Adrian!” Ralph says loudly and I don’t think it’s the first time he called my name.

I snap to attention. “Yes, Ralph?”

“You and the girls ready for tonight’s show? Is everything set?”

“Everything is perfect.”

He grins at me. “I can always count on you, sweetheart. You never miss a beat.”

“Thank you.”

“Why don’t you head out onto the floor, grab a drink or a bite or somethin’? We got some other stuff to discuss.”

Meaning the other side of the club. The part even I’m not supposed to see.

I stand with a gracious smile, perfectly fine with being left out of the dirty details. “Of course.”

He waves a dismissive goodbye before turning his attention to the boys. “Get me the envelopes, would ya, Mick?”

“Yeah, boss.”

“Did you deliver to Birdy yet?” Ralph asks Tommy absently.

“Not yet,” Tommy replies with disinterest.

“Why the hell not? It needs to be dealt with.”

“He’ll get it when he gets it.”

I slow my walk, my hand almost on the doorknob.

“He’ll get it now because I told you to take care of it! What’s the matter with you, huh? Services have been rendered, Tommy, to a T. Deliver the fuckin’ envelope.”

“I’ll take care of it tonight.”

“You’ll take care of it now,” Ralph tells him hotly. “This is not a guy you want to anger, do you understand? We may need him in the future. Don’t burn this bridge for us.”

I can’t stall any longer. I leave the room entirely, pulling the door closed silently behind me. I hear more shouting, the screech of a chair sliding roughly across the floor, then the pounding of angry footsteps. I know it’s Tommy coming out to deal with business and he’s in a real mood because of it.

I dart quickly into the lady’s room just as Ralph’s office door opens and bangs shut. I wait with my ear pressed to the bathroom door, listening to Tommy’s shoes snap sharply across the hard wood floor in a quick clip. I know he’s angry. I know who he’s going to see. Thing is, I can’t decide who I feel more sorry for. Drew for having to face Tommy when he’s feeling evil? Or Tommy for taking his bad mood out on the very wrong man.

An hour later and Tommy still hasn't come back. I'm getting worried, but about what I'm not sure. I'm just antsy is all. I've got a bad feeling in my stomach that won't leave me alone. I wish he'd call or come bursting through the door, throwing off his coat to the check girl and yelling at all of us to shake a leg, but another half hour passes and still he doesn't show.

"I need some air," I finally declare to the band, calling a halt to the warm ups.

"You goin' out back, Miss Adrian?" Eddie asks me.

I grin at him thinly, trying to hide my unease. "Yeah, Eddie. You coming with me?"

"I wouldn't mind some air."

He helps me into my coat before we walk out of the room, heading into the back halls behind the stage and toward the back door by the loading docks. The second we step outside into the brisk air I regret coming out here. He's wearing a threadbare brown coat that makes me shiver as I watch the wind cut through it, but if he's cold, he never lets it show.

"How are your kids?" I ask, pulling out a cigarette. I hand it to him without asking and I don't give him a chance to say no as I take out another for myself.

"Good. Real good. Growin' like weeds."

He pulls out a book of matches and lights my cigarette for me before doing his own.

I chuckle. "I bet they make beautiful weeds."

"That they do," he says with a grin. "Oldest one is sixteen now. She all kinds of a trouble."

"I believe it," I say wistfully. "It's just how girls are."

"You a handful at that age?"

I try to grin but fail. I bring my cigarette to my lips to cover my shortcoming. To hide my sorrow. I don't talk about Iowa. Not if I can help it. Not even to a friend like Eddie.

"Of course I was," I tell him finally. "It was in my blood."

"Well, hopefully she'll grow out of it someday. Become a lady like you."

I laugh. "Don't ever wish for your girls to be like me, Eddie. They deserve more than that."

“I don’t know ‘bout that,” he says softly. “You’re doin’ it all by yourself. You’re walkin’ tall every day. You speak your mind. You’re smart. And you’re kind. Don’t know what else I could want for ‘em.”

I’m glad we’re alone in this alley because what I do then could spark the kind of crazy that neither of us could ever walk away from.

I lean over and plant a quick kiss on Eddie’s cheek.

He looks at me, stunned, and not a little afraid. It was selfish of me. If anyone saw it, Eddie would have hell to pay. But I couldn’t help it. I don’t get a lot of kindness with nothing expected in return and his sweet words moved me beyond my control. And, yes, the approval of a father, even one that’s not my own, was more than my cold little heart could bear.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, “but thank you.”

He nods, still stunned silent.

The rumble of a truck coming down the alley stirs us both. I watch with curiosity as the large brown truck comes into view, pulls past the loading docks, then reverses toward them.

“It’s a little late in the day for a delivery, isn’t it?” I ask Eddie.

“A regular one, yeah,” he mutters, “but maybe this one ain’t so regular.”

“We should go inside.”

He nods in agreement, tossing aside his cigarette and taking mine to do the same. “Whatever it is, it ain’t none of our business.”

We’re walking toward the door when I hear the bay doors of the loading dock slide open nearby. Two men step out, guns in hand.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” one calls, waving for the truck to stop. “What is this?! What are you unloading?”

The back door of the truck bursts open and five guys pile out, rifles in hand. They open fire immediately, taking down the two guys from the loading bay before they can fire a single shot. More gunfire erupts from inside the building where more of Ralph’s men must have been waiting. One of the guys from the truck goes down, blood exploding behind him all over the outside of the brown vehicle. I don’t realize I’ve screamed until one of the men looks over and turns to fire on Eddie and I.

Eddie immediately grabs onto me and pulls me into the recessed doorframe. I'm hidden between the door and his body but I still shriek as gunshots ring out in our direction. More come from the garage, men shout, bricks burst and explode in dust clouds around us as bullets fill the walls of the club. I stop shrieking but I'm clinging to Eddie, panting short, frightened breaths into his shoulder.

After what feels like ages but is probably less than a minute, the truck pulls out with squealing tires. Men in the garage come pouring out and I hear more gunshots, then returning fire.

Eddie grunts roughly and sags against me. Then he falls. He slips slowly down my front and I look down in horror to find my coat and dress covered in blood. Eddie's blood.

I scream again. I drop to my knees and cry for help, calling out with indistinct words that mean nothing other than despair.

I've seen men shot before. I've seen people roughed up and beaten down and I've held it together like a seasoned champ. I know how to shut this shit off, but I can't with him. Not with Eddie. He can't be dead. He simply can't.

I put my hands on him, searching for the wound. It doesn't take long to find it. It's in his shoulder, dangerously near his chest, the bullet having passed clean through. I rip off my coat and lay it partially beneath him to keep it between his wound and the ground. Then I pull the rest of it up and over his shoulder near his neck to use it to apply pressure to the front of the wound. I push down hard and I'm relieved beyond measure when he groans and coughs in pain.

"You're gonna be okay, Eddie," I tell him urgently. My hands are shaking and my voice is frantic. I need to calm down for his sake. I have to pull it together. "They're already calling for help. You're gonna be fine. You just hang on, alright? Do you hear me?"

"Yeah," he replies weakly. His eyes are closed but at least he's breathing and answering me. I watch his chest as I press on it, making sure it keeps rising and falling.

"Adrian, are you hit?!" Mickey calls from the dock.

"No, but Eddie is! Get an ambulance now, please!"

"Shit! You got it!" Mickey shouts back. "Ben, call for a doctor. A private one. We got three men down."

"Call a bus!" I cry.

“Cool it, Adrian. We can’t.” He’s coming closer, his eyes darting around the alley behind the club. He’s watching for a repeat performance.

“Why the hell not?”

“We can’t have the cops sniffing around back here. We gotta deal with this ourselves.”

I shake my head in frustration. “People will have heard the gunshots. They’ll call the police.”

“And we’ll have this cleaned up and won’t know nothin’ about it by the time they get here.”

“What about Eddie?” I ask desperately.

Mickey kneels down beside Eddie and I. He watches as Eddie breathes. It’s labored but it’s clear. There’s no rasping to his breath, no blood coming from his lips. Odds are he wasn’t hit in a lung which means he’s got a good chance.

“He’ll be seen by the doc when he shows.”

I scowl at him. “Yeah, after the two other guys. How badly are they hurt?”

“It don’t matter, Adrian,” Mickey tells me firmly. “They’re part of the Outfit. They get seen first.”

“Yeah, and they’re white,” I say bitterly. “Tell me that doesn’t make a difference.”

He looks at me hard. “Rank based on service, Aid. That’s what it is. You got a problem with the pecking order, you can take it up with Ralph.”

I could, but it wouldn’t change a damn thing and Mickey knows it. The Capones pride themselves on being progressive. They fill the clubs and casinos with black entertainers, wait staff, cleaning and maintenance crews, but they still make them enter from the rear of every establishment. There’s a divide in the club. A divide between the blacks and the whites. The men and the women. The gangsters and the working men. The whores and the chorus girls. We’re one big family living under one roof, but we’re definitely not a happy one. More like a school of piranha taking bites out of each other whenever we can get our teeth close enough.

“We gotta get a move on, kid,” Mickey tells me gently, touching my shoulder. “We need to get him inside and clean up the mess out here.”

I nod in silent reply. I don't realize I'm shivering against the cold, dressed only in a thin cotton dress now that my coat is wrapped around Eddie, not until Mickey removes his and drapes it heavily over my shoulders. It's long and made of thick dark wool that smells surprisingly like lilacs. I sniff it, glancing up at him in confusion.

He smiles. "My wife loves the stuff. Practically soaks our clothes in lilac water."

"I didn't know you were married," I mumble, pushing down hard on Eddie's wounds. He grunts, satisfying me that he's alive.

"Eight years now. Since we were just kids."

"She must really love you."

Mickey chuckles. "Why do you say that?"

"You don't go home a lot of nights," I say, thinking of the times I've seen him stay late at the club, taking liberties with some of the paid girls.

"She doesn't mind," he tells me, signaling for two more guys to come help move Eddie. "She knew what she was marryin'."

The extra hands arrive and they lift Eddie carefully into an upright position, a man on each side holding him up. I hurry to the door and cringe as I watch his feet drag lifelessly behind him as they tow him inside. His shoes will be scuffed to smithereens. Tommy will probably yell at him for it.

"Mickey," I call, stopping him from disappearing into the garage by the docks, "where's Tommy?"

"Don't know. He hasn't come back from his delivery."

I shiver, pulling his coat closer around me. "Should we be worried?"

Mickey chuckles darkly. "About him vanishin' after meetin' with Birdy? Common as that is, yeah. We should be pretty fuckin' worried."