

Swan Song

By Tracey Ward

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Chapter One

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS
1926

This city is full of predators. There are more dirty cops than clean ones. More mobsters than grocers. For a girl living on her own trying to make it in the big city, life can be very dangerous. You have to be smart, you have to be hard, but most of all you have to be heartless.

I'm all of that and more. I'm also talented which makes everything both better and worse. Men want to *help* me. They want to give me my big break. Discover me. But at what cost?

Whatever it is, I promise you it's more than I'll ever pay.

My parents died when I was sixteen, leaving me alone in a tiny cow town in Iowa with barely a cent to my name and dreams bigger than my hands or heart could hold. Those dreams weren't going to come true in the middle of nowhere in the Midwest, so I sold it all. Every last item they ever owned. Then I took the money, took the bus, and landed here – Chicago. I'd rather it was New York, but beggars can't be choosers. Though I could have

afforded the bus ticket all the way east, I wouldn't have been able to afford anything else once I got there. I'm a dreamer, but I'm no idiot. Desperate women do desperate things, and before you know it you're a dead eyed whore wondering where it all went wrong.

That'll never be me.

I was smart, I took my time, and I did it right. Now here I am six years later, center stage in one of the hottest joints in town with my name on the marquee outside. Or at least the name I'm using now. No one knows my real name. They don't need to know. That girl got left behind in a drafty house back in Iowa with everything else of zero value that I couldn't sell. The name in lights outside reads Adrian Marccone. That's me, through and through. A raven-haired, stormy-eyed, statuesque siren. I'm lucky I'm determined, I'm lucky I'm talented, but most of all I'm lucky I'm beautiful.

I got my looks and the last name from my mother. She was half-Italian with olive skin, warm eyes, and an hourglass figure she graciously passed down to me. My father was a decent man but a terrible drunk, a vice that spelled doom for the two of them one night on a dark country road, but I'm grateful to him as well. Thanks to him I know how to handle a man. I know how to calm a raging temper, sooth an angry drunk. I can also see when it's a lost cause and time to head for the hills.

I spent a lot of years in a lot of small clubs when I first got here. I was building my name, gaining a reputation. Then a couple years ago I struck gold. A guy in the audience of a small time dive bar saw me perform and he liked what he heard. He liked it so much he came back night after night for over a week listening to me perform. He told me later he wanted to make sure I wasn't a fluke, that I hadn't had one good night that I couldn't repeat. He should have asked me. I would have told him I'm flawless every show. In the end it didn't matter. He was convinced I was a showstopper, a headliner waiting to happen, so one night he came in and told me he wasn't leaving without me. Once he told me where he worked, I went without a fight.

That man was Ralph Capone, Al Capone's big brother.

He manages the Chicago Cotton Club in Cicero, deep in mobster territory. It's the sister to the New York City Cotton Club, and that's where I want to be. That's the dream. Right now, Ralph and this joint are just a stepping stone to the big show. I'll get there one

day, I know it. I just have to keep my head above water swimming in this tank full of sharks.

As expected, a club run by a man high up in the Crime Syndicate is swarming with gangsters. Some are gentleman, some are charming, some are assholes, and some are downright scary.

Like Tommy, for instance.

Tommy is a demon. He's also one of the reasons I've been able to stay unmolested by most of these gangsters. He's Ralph's right hand man at the club, but he's also my unofficial handler and bodyguard, though his concerns with my body are entirely his own assigning.

"You had a good show tonight," he tells me, watching me in the vanity mirror of my dressing room.

He's standing in the doorway behind me leaning against the frame, one leg kicked over the other and crossed at the ankle. His hands are in his pockets, flaring out his tuxedo jacket, showing me the stark white of his shirt skimming close to his lean frame. Tommy, demon or no, is perfection. He's tall and thin, all wiry muscle that's deceptive in its tameness. Make no mistake, Tommy can be a monster of incredible strength. I've seen him do things to men. Things that would make me scream in my sleep if I let myself think about them.

He's a devil in the flesh with a face to match. It's all sharp angles with fierce eyes and hair that's golden in any light, like a halo on an unholy idol. He's handsome as any movie star or actor out there, but there's something feral about Tommy that's too real for the average person to digest.

You'd never believe him as Romeo. He'd do better playing the poison.

"Thank you," I tell his gleaming reflection.

He watches me through the mirror covered in clippings and pictures from both Cotton Clubs. A picture of me on stage taped up next to Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington on stage in New York. Me, Elle Fitzgerald, and Ruth Etting. Me and Billie Holiday. They overlap each other, the frayed edges of the clippings bleeding into each other, threatening to thread themselves together. There's nothing separating them at all really.

Nothing but everything.

I look at myself in the mirror, my face throw into the mix with my idols, and I tell myself every damn day that I'll be on stage with them soon, but it's been years here at the Cicero CC and I'm starting to wonder. I'm beginning to worry.

"Al was in the audience," Tommy drops as though it's nothing.

I stop fussing with my hair to stare at him in surprise, butterflies bursting to life in my stomach.

I've only met Ralph's younger, more notorious brother once. It was about a year ago. I was ushered up to his table after my performance where I immediately recognized him, half his goons, and Big Bill Thompson, a former Chicago Mayor. According to Tommy he'll be Mayor again soon if the Capones have anything to say about it. I met Al only for a second, just long enough for him to tell me I had quite a set of pipes before Tommy quickly ushered me away.

I turn on my stool to face him. "He was here?"

"Still is. He's got a meeting with Ralph and a fella from out of town."

"He must be a big deal if both brothers are meeting with him."

Tommy shrugs, looking away.

"Where's he coming from?" I push.

"Are you writin' a novel?" Tommy snaps, scowling at me. "What's with the third degree?"

"Why bring it up if you don't want to talk about it?"

"I didn't think you'd care so damn much."

"I care more because you won't talk about it. Don't be so secretive and it won't be so interesting."

"Don't be so nosy and I won't have to shut you up."

I snort. "Quit being nasty, you'll get frown lines on that pretty face of yours," I tease, turning my back on him.

None of that is a smart thing to do. Not to any gangster and certainly not to Tommy "Two Thumbs" Giordano. What's lucky for me is that Tommy and I have a history. We know each other's limits and we push them on the regular. Will I get away with the

disrespectful behavior tonight? Yeah, I think so. Would I if he was in a mood? Or if I pulled that act in public?

Not a chance.

Know your limits, but more importantly, know a mobster's.

"You done asking questions?" he demands.

I reapply my lipstick, a shocking shade of red to match the evening gown Tommy's picked out for me tonight. "Are you gonna keep evading them?"

"New York."

I pause, thrown. "What?"

"The guy. He's from New York," Tommy repeats, watching me closely.

My heart skips a beat at the mere mention of it. I can feel the reaction on my face before I can contain it.

"Careful, pretty bird," he whispers with a dark grin, "your skirt is up."

"What does he do there?"

"Nothing you need to know about."

I resist the urge to sigh, roll my eyes, or toss my heavy purple perfume bottle at his face. This right here – this is Tommy pushing my buttons to the limit.

Instead of acting crazy, I put on the mask that hides the fire-filled Iowa orphan threatening to rise to the surface and set flames to everything I've built. "So he's not a baker, I take it?" I ask with feigned disinterest.

"Or a candlestick maker."

"Butcher," I groan as I curl my lip in disgust. "Just what we need around here."

"We need all the hands we can get, or have you forgotten the Hawthorne?"

I absolutely have not forgotten. No one in Chicago and certainly no in Cicero will soon forget the Hawthorne.

Two weeks ago, eight carloads of men emptied machine gun fire into the restaurant at the base of the Hawthorne Hotel. Al wasn't hit despite the rain of over one thousand bullets with his name lovingly etched on each one, but it was a clear message. The Irish aren't happy with him, and we all know why. He had their Boss, Dean O'Banion, killed in '24 for a double cross. Ever since then it's been all out war around here. Security at all of the Chicago Outfit's holdings and family have been tighter than a drum. There's no clear

end in sight and the tension it causes is wearing on everyone. Eventually, something has got to give.

I stand, straightening my dress, smoothing it over my body with the flat surface of my palms. “That’s why he’s here? Because of the Hawthorne?”

“Did I say that?”

“You’ve barely said anything.”

“You should follow my example.”

“You shouldn’t bring up topics I’m not supposed to know about.”

“Maybe I’m trying to teach you to quit with the questions that will get you in trouble.”

“Oh, this was all for my benefit? None of it was to infuriate me? Maybe you thought it’d be fun to dangle New York in front of me just to watch me sit up and beg?”

Tommy smiles crookedly. “If I could teach you to beg, I’d be a *deeply* satisfied man.”

I snort. “I’ll roll over and play dead first.”

“We’ll see about that. Are you ready or what?”

“You tell me,” I say, spreading my arms to present myself for final inspection.

Tommy steps into the room, kicking the door closed behind him.

My body jerks with the *bang*.

He circles me slowly, looking at every angle in every light, and suddenly the small, hot room is losing oxygen. It’s burning out as the heat of his body closes in on mine and breathes against my exposed skin. As he passes behind me his body blocks the light from the lamp on the far table, plunging me in shadow. His shadow. I can see it in front of me on the wall where it eclipses my own, entrapping me inside it.

I go still when I feel his fingers, warm and rough, running along my spine down the exposed back of the dress. They trace it from my bare neck left open to his touch by the high pile of curls he insists on, down to my waist, then back up again. I shiver, my breath catching in my throat, then I settle into a statue stance of perfect stillness. I let the predator sniff and examine my body. I let it decide if I’m worth the kill or if I’ll be allowed to run free, and in the back of my mind I wonder what I want because at moments like this, I’m never really sure.

Tommy and I – we aren't built for love. We aren't made for intimacy. We're both too driven, too crazy for anything normal and nice, but that doesn't mean we're dead. We're both beautiful people with beautiful bodies and I cannot lie; Tommy knows how to touch me. He's made it no secret that for years he's wanted between my legs and there are nights when I lie alone in bed with my fingers between my thighs imagining that I let him.

"Tommy, I—" I cut off my question as his fingers dip into the fabric of the dress. They run along the swell of my ass, skimming across my flesh. I try to shut it out, to keep my breath even, but inside I clench hard.

"What was that, Adrian?" His voice is low and rough, tickling against my ear where I can feel his hot breath. "What were you going to say?"

His fingers trace the outline of the dress, following the fabric up the right side of my back, tickling over my ribs. He halts his hand just below my arm. Barely an inch from the side of my breast.

I swallow hard, steeling myself. Distancing myself with anything I can. "What part of New York is this fella from?"

Tommy chuckles softly as his fingers recede from the dress, from my body, and I'm so relieved that I nearly collapse on the dirty, scuffed floor. Just because I'm not sure I don't want Tommy, it doesn't mean that I *do* want him. Confused is not where I ever want to be. I can't make mistakes here and when Tommy touches me... I get cloudy. Fuzzy. Drunk on a strange desire that is so deadly and dangerous it makes it more appealing somehow. It's been years and I need to stay strong, maybe stronger than ever before, but I'm worried I'm weakening.

I'm scared there will come a night when he touches me and I won't walk away. When we'll go too far and my delicate house of cards I've propped my dreams up on will come crashing down around me.

Tommy lays a quick, hot kiss on my shoulder before heading out of the room. "Shake a leg, would ya?" He opens the door for me. "I got shit to do."

I follow him out into the hall feeling uneven, like I just dodged a bullet.

"You'll sit at a table in the back tonight," he explains brusquely, turning all business in an instant. "I'll have Joe send one of the girls over with a whiskey."

"I hate whiskey."

“Too bad. We’re flush with it so that’s what we’re all drinking. You can have your scotch when the next boat comes in.” He pulls out a cigarette, lighting it quickly and taking a hard drag. “I’ll join you after I make my pass through downstairs, see how the tables are faring.”

“Rosaline says there’s a new Black Jack dealer.”

“Sam, yeah.”

“Do I want to know what happened to the old dealer?”

“Not if you know what’s good for you.”

I’m paraded through the club to smile and greet anyone of note inside. Were Al and Ralph still holding court out there, I’d be brought to them immediately, but they’ve since disappeared. I notice quite a few of their guys in the area, though. The Outfit’s presence is heavy tonight, as is the scent of reefer in the air. It’s probably a fifty-fifty split between cigarettes and joints peppered throughout the room and the earthy scent makes me a little sick inside.

Tommy hurries me through the routine of meet and greets to deposit me in the promised dark corner.

“You good?” he asks as he sits me down.

“Aces.”

As he walks away, women’s eyes all around the club watch him go. They lock on with longing and lust and I almost wish I could warn them. I would tell them they don’t want to walk that path. That too many have gone before them, many will follow, and few will be remembered, but no one who looks at Tommy like that can be warned away. Maybe not even me.

When my whiskey arrives I thank the girl but I ignore it completely. I choose to smoke instead of drink and as time and cigs tick by I worry my boredom is building on my face and in the clipped movements of my hands. I need to mask it, but as I struggle to maintain that flawless façade, I worry for the second time tonight that I’m getting weak.

Or maybe I’m just tired of the act.

“Is this seat taken?” a deep voice rumbles behind me.

I nearly jump out of my skin with fright.

There's a man standing in the shadows behind me, his face dipped low and close to mine. Too close. I just about scream bloody murder when I meet his eyes, but something stops me. Something chokes the cry in my throat and rolls it through my chest like a wave of hot smoke.

Set in a rugged, tanned face beneath a shock of jet black hair are the most startling eyes I've ever seen. They're ice blue and sharp as daggers. As he looks down at me, his face hovering only inches from mine, I feel like they're piercing me, puncturing me, and seeing clean through me. Into me. All of me. Past the dress and the whiskey and the diamonds down to the dirty feet of a teenager running nearly naked through the summer hot fields of an Iowa farm. He's trouble, no doubt about that, and I know in my gut that I should tell him to get lost.

Instead I shake my head.

He steps around me, taking the seat just to my right. He remains in the shadows making it difficult to get a good look at him but I can tell he's not terribly handsome. Not the movie star perfection of Tommy or the boyish good looks of some of the Outfit's men. His nose looks to have been broken a time or two, and even in the shadows I can see the thin line of scarring along his neck, the white standing out harshly against his tanned skin.

He looks hard. Worn for his age which can't be much more than mine. I'd peg his body at twenty seven but his soul at sixty two. It's in the way he's looking at me. The way he carries himself, as though nothing in the world matters to him at all. This building could tumble down around his ears right here, right now and he wouldn't be concerned in the slightest.

All of this tells me one thing beyond a shadow of a doubt – he's a mobster. A seasoned one. Powerful. Dangerous.

I should have told him to piss off.