

# *Swan Song*

By Tracey Ward

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## Chapter Two

Music explodes from the stage, filling the room instantly with deep drum beats, sharp trumpet tones, and the slightly off key crooning of a short, blond woman who will never be me. The music snakes through the air, slinking through the clouds of smoke, over the water-stained bar, under the crisp linen-coated tables. Feet tap around it, moving with it. Tripping over it. Busy fingers dusted with the powdered sugar coating of cocaine thread through it. Drinks are spilled, splashing onto patent leather shoes and worn out pumps that brush against each other in a disjointed dance that leaves you dizzy.

The music slithers its way toward us, barely reaching us. It grapples and strains to enter the darkness of the farthest table, but it's kept at bay. Blocked by the shadows. Cut down by the steel blue-gray of the stranger's eyes.

"You're the headliner, aren't you?" he asks quietly.

Lord, that voice. Its deep tenor sinks lower than the bass until it vibrates in my bones, where I feel it more than hear it.

I take a slow drag of my cigarette, pacing myself and him. "You're quite the detective."

He grins at my sarcastic tone. "What's your name?"

“Are you illiterate?”

“Are you always this hostile, Adrian?”

“So you do know my name. Swell.”

He sits back, taking me in as he knocks out a cigarette. “I know your stage name. I asked what your name is.”

“What’s your name?”

“You want my stage name?” he asks, popping the cigarette in the side of his mouth where it dangles carelessly. “Or my real name?”

“You’re a performer?” I ask suspiciously. This man does not stand in front of a spotlight. As it is, he’s dodging the dim candlelight from the table.

“Of sorts.”

“What sorts?”

He looks around, surveying the entire room before finally bringing his eyes back to mine. He takes his time and I fight a knowing grin. I’m not the only one who likes to be in control. “The unsavory sorts,” he mutters. Suddenly he takes up my whiskey glass, gives it a quick sniff, then takes a large swallow. “The sorts you don’t discuss with a lady.”

“Very chivalrous of you.”

“Thank you.”

“Of course drinking from a lady’s glass without asking – that’s rude.”

He sets the glass down in front of himself, showing no signs of returning it. “You weren’t drinking it.”

“I was going to.”

“No, you weren’t. You let it sit for over ten minutes without touching it. The ice has melted.”

“I like it with a little water.”

“You don’t like it at all.”

I raise my eyebrows. “My, aren’t you an Abercrombie? Care to enlighten me on any more of my likes or dislikes?”

He abruptly pushes the glass in front of me. “Take a drink.”

I don't like being told what to do. I don't like being called out on being a liar either, even when I am. Especially when I am. I pride myself on being an excellent liar and to have this total stranger catching me at it peeves me.

I keep my eyes on his as I take up the glass, put it to my lips, and take a long sip.

I want to gag. I want to spit it back in the glass. I want to throw it in his smug, watchful face. Instead I drink it down. I keep my face blank and easy. I even lick my lips as I set the now nearly empty glass back down with a muffled *thud* onto the thick table cloth, retrieving every last drop of the vile stuff from my mouth as though it were a honey I don't want to lose an ounce of.

"Not only are you quite the canary," he tells me slowly, his mouth twitching into a half smile. "But you are one hell of an actress. I almost believe you enjoyed that drink."

"I loved it."

His smile grows as he runs his thumb along his lower lip. The smoke from his cigarette propped between his fingers dances with the movement, back and forth. Back and forth. It creates an undulating curtain of white in front of his eyes, making them look opaque. Dead. "A girl in your profession, I imagine you pretend to enjoy a lot of things you don't particularly like."

"Like this conversation?"

"Are you not enjoying my company?"

"You wouldn't know it if I wasn't."

He chuckles. "I'm getting a fair idea that you're not."

"Yet you're still here," I say, feigning amazement.

"That's because I *am* enjoying this conversation."

"Bully for you."

He examines me for a long time, his face completely blank. Part of me starts to sweat inside, wondering if I'm pushing him too far. These guys, they love a girl with a pretty face and a smart mouth, but it's a tightrope walk. It's easy to go too far. Teasing can turn to insult, which they are quick to turn to injury, which means you have to watch yourself. You have to be cunning and very, very careful.

"What's your name, Adrian?" he finally asks quietly.

I shake my head, snubbing my cigarette. “No dice. You already have two of my names and now you want another? I don’t even have my first from you.”

“Drew.”

“It’s not your only one, is it?”

“No.”

I lean forward on the table, dropping my voice conspiratorially. “Why do you think it is that we have so many names?”

He leans forward as well, coming farther into the light where I can see him better. He’s rougher than I thought. There’s stubble on his face, a small scar on his cheek to match the one on his neck, and fine lines around his eyes that age him beyond his years.

“Because we’re playing the game,” he tells me softly, “and you should never play the game with anything that’s real.”

“That’s very deep,” I whisper, lowering my voice to pull him in closer. “Where’d you get that? Shakespeare? Mark Twain?”

“Felix the Cat.”

I laugh before I can stop myself. It’s full bodied, loud, and too honest for this time of night.

“Be careful,” he warns with a smile that’s surprisingly warm in contrast with his eyes. “That right there, that was real.”

“How do you know? Maybe it was whiskey.”

“Maybe. But I doubt it.”

“And I’ll never tell.”

“I doubt that too.”

I sigh theatrically, sitting back in my seat. “It must be incredibly convenient to know everything.”

He lifts my whiskey to his lips, grinning at me over the rim. “It’s the better of my many burdens.”

“What the fuck is this?”

*Damn.*

Tommy’s back and what he sees there at the table between Drew and I obviously does not make him happy.

I gesture casually across the table, pretending I don't notice his tone. "Tommy, this is Drew. Drew, Tommy. He was keeping me company."

"You know this guy?" Tommy demands.

He's not looking at me. He's staring daggers at Drew who sits back in his seat, appraising Tommy.

"We just met," Drew tells him evenly.

"And what? She invited you to make yourself at home?"

"No, but we've become fast friends, haven't we, Adrian?"

"I don't know," I reply flippantly. "I think you're something of a pill."

He grins at me, the amusement back in his eyes.

Tommy, however, does not find us funny. He straightens his dark suit jacket over his shoulders before telling Drew, "I think it's time you hit the bricks."

"You might want to ask Bottles about that first," Drew suggests, his voice dipping. Becoming dangerous. His entire demeanor changes from grins and banter to bullets and business the second he turns his attention to Tommy. It's the gangster in him. In both of them.

"You got business with Ralph?"

"And Al."

Tommy's jaw clenches briefly. "Your name is Drew?"

"Andrew."

"You're Birdy."

"That's right."

"Birdy?" I scoff, surprised.

He grins, raising an eyebrow. "You don't approve?"

"No, I do. It's... sweet."

"Let me tell you something," he says, snuffing his cigarette. "Never trust a man with a 'sweet' name. The story behind it is almost always ugly."

"So you're telling me not to trust you?"

"No farther than you could throw me."

“We’ve been waitin’ on you,” Tommy interrupts, but his tone has changed. It’s not friendly, but the hostility is gone. He’s respectful. Cordial at the very least, and it dawns on me. ‘Birdy’ here is the butcher.

Birdy shakes his head at Tommy. “I told them that I wouldn’t meet in an office. I don’t do private engagements.”

“What? You want me to drag ‘em out here to meet with you?”

“Either that or I can finish this drink and go home.” He makes a show of looking at me out of the corner of his eye. “The trip won’t have been a complete waste.”

“Scram, Adrian,” Tommy snarls abruptly.

I don’t complain as I stand to leave. I’m used to being sent away when business is being handled, and besides, I saw it coming the second Tommy laid eyes on me at a table with a strange man, and I know it’s not Drew that’s the problem. He’s not handsome, he’s not competition for Tommy as far as he’s concerned. The problem is the way I reacted to him. Smiled at him, laughed with him, leaned into him and lured him closer to me.

Drew stands as I do, but I nod to him only briefly, avoiding his eyes and pushing past Tommy.

“Go straight home,” he commands curtly. “Alone.”

“I always do.”

“Adrian,” Drew calls after me.

I sigh internally, but I turn to look at him one last time, noting the way the shadows hold him. Hugging him like he was born of them.

“What was it?” he challenges. “Was it real or was it whiskey?”

I want to lie to him. I want to tell him that my laugh was whiskey all the way. That it was a lie, a fake, an act. But for reasons I don’t quite understand, I don’t.

“I can’t stand whiskey,” I tell him honestly.

When I finally walk away, my hips swinging to the rhythm of my heels snapping on the hard floor, I feel two heavy sets of eyes watching my every move.

I hoof it home after that. Just like I’m told. I should take a cab or have one of the boys call around a car, but I need air. It’s dangerous for me to walk around unguarded like this with the war going on, but I live here in Cicero not far from the club and right now if there’s a dangerous spot to be, it’s back at the club with Tommy.

Near Drew.

This is why I need air. Why I need a breather from that joint. From all the men and their guns and their egos. Luckily I live with three other girls. Two from the club who waitress and work in the chorus and another who works in a department store in downtown Chicago. Aside from us, she has no connections to the mafia. Some days I envy her.

When I unlock the door to our tiny apartment she's there sleeping on the stiff couch. It's one in the morning and she has to be at the store early so I try to come in quietly, cursing the creaking door as it closes.

"Hey, Adrian," Lucy mumbles sleepily, her eyes still closed. Her blond curls are a crazy matted mess around her head.

"I'm sorry," I whisper. "I didn't mean to wake you up."

"It's okay. How was your night?"

I silently slide my heels off, parking them by the door. "It was good."

"Anything exciting happen?"

"Ralph and Al were there. I didn't see them but Tommy was completely goofy over it."

Lucy yawns. "Tommy is always goofy."

"Yeah."

"Alice and Josephine are still working?"

"Probably late, yeah. I'll try to keep them quiet when they come in."

"Thanks," she mutters, already rolling over to go back to sleep. "I made muffins. They're on the table."

I can smell them. Pumpkin, spice, and everything nice.

"Thanks, Luce. You're the bee's."

"I know."

I head into our tiny kitchen where I find a China plate sitting in the center of our dull, beaten dining table. Piled high on top of the plate's chipped alabaster surface is a glorious mound of muffins that make my mouth water and my stomach ache. After I silently devour two, I move to the bedroom I share with the other two girls. I strip down to nothing and throw on a man's nightshirt that's loose, comfortable, and the opposite of

everything I wear at the club. I spend a good ten minutes pulling out hairpins to let my long, thick tresses fall heavy and loose.

It feels divine.

This is my favorite part of my night, the part when the club comes off and all that's left is me. I love being on stage. I love singing in front of a crowd. I love playing the part in front of all of those people. I even love my song and dance with Tommy, no matter how confusing or irritating it can get. But every now and then it feels good to just be me for a minute. To be the girl with no makeup stealing a third muffin in her bare feet in a dark kitchen. It's moments like these when I feel almost sixteen again. Almost like the kid with simple cotton dresses and ribbons in her hair. As much I hated her, there are days when I almost miss her.

Almost.

