

KARAOKE NIGHTS AT THE TWILIGHT LOUNGE

Jean Tennant

Chapter One

ONE

Thea

Hamilton Valley, Minnesota

Quiet during most of the week, come Friday night the Twilight Lounge was a gathering spot for the locals, a place to socialize, exchange stories or just unwind after the long workweek. Even so, the room was barely one-third full. Behind the bar, Thea Kelley took it all in as Lois, the bartender, explained things to her.

"Don't let Norma get under your skin," Lois advised as she mixed drinks with hands that flew like birds set free. "She's been bossing everyone around since Sophie first got sick, and she's not inclined to give up her position of authority now. She was really pissed when she found out Sophie hadn't left her anything in the will, but that doesn't mean she's given up on the idea of getting her hands on this place."

"She's already made me an offer," Thea told her.

Lois's eyebrows rose high on her forehead. "Has she now? And what did you tell her?"

"Just that I don't know yet what I'm going to do, but that I'll probably list the property with a realtor."

"Good idea."

"She didn't like that much."

"I don't doubt it."

They fell silent as Norma, tray in hand, approached the bar. "I need a bourbon press and JD water," she barked, taking the drinks Lois had mixed and placing them on her tray. She'd written down the two-drink order, and had referred to her notes before conveying the message to Lois. The other waitress, Ruby, an old hand in her sixties, let out a snort of derision as she passed by.

Since arriving in Hamilton Valley, Thea had attended the funeral of her favorite aunt, taken up temporary residence in the upstairs apartment of this building she'd inherited—the building that also contained the Twilight Lounge, the bar Sophie Everett had owned and run for the past two decades—and fielded numerous questions about her plans. Her mother, Sophie's younger sister, had advised her to sell—"What would you want with that rundown old place anyway?"—and Thea hadn't wanted to admit that she had a point.

The Twilight Lounge was a typical small-town bar with flat, industrial-strength carpeting and air hazy with smoke. The lights were dimmed; a dozen or so patrons sat perched on stools at the bar, which stretched twenty feet in length and boasted a scarred mahogany surface. Behind the bar crouched an old-fashioned cash register, a wall-mounted telephone and a long, cloudy mirror that gave the illusion of a larger space as it reflected back the images of those curved over their drinks. Liquor bottles of every size, shape and color stood three rows high directly in front of the mirror, within easy reach of the cocktail glasses and beer mugs.

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To one end of the big, open room was a kitchen, and next to that was a walk-in cooler where extra kegs and cases of beer were stored. Just inside the rear exit was a stairway that led to the apartment upstairs.

Lois, in her early fifties, with a tired expression and short streaked hair that she tucked behind her ears, had introduced herself at the funeral two days earlier. Since then she'd shown Thea around and filled her in on the workings of the business. She'd also proved to be a good-natured gossip, full of knowledge about the goings-on of most of the people who'd come through the door, and happy to share the information with Thea.

After Norma left with her drink order, Lois dried a beer mug and set it with the others in front of the mirror. She glanced down at Thea's feet. "Nice shoes. Are they comfortable?"

"Thanks. And, no," Thea said. Though she'd dressed in black jeans and a v-neck sweater that she thought would be appropriate for the setting, the only shoes she had with her were the black pumps with three-and-a-half-inch heels that she'd worn to the funeral. They made her feel tall and looked great with the jeans, but her feet were killing her. "I didn't come prepared. But I didn't think I'd be doing much more than taking care of some paperwork while I was here."

"You wouldn't last long trying to wait tables in them," Lois agreed. "But to tell you the truth, if I was twenty years younger and had your figure, I'd be tempted to wear 'em, too. But then when I was your age, I already had two kids in grade school."

A woman with dyed black hair and a face so wrinkled it appeared furrowed, sat at the bar. Beside her, two overall-clad men were nursing their beers. The woman finished her drink and pushed her glass forward.

Nodding, Lois mixed a Screwdriver, emptying a carton of orange juice she took from the glass-front cooler. She slid the drink to the woman. "Here you go, Myrtle," she said, and to Thea she added, "You could get me some orange juice from the refrigerator in the kitchen, if you want."

"Sure," Thea said, glad for a chance to be useful. She didn't feel confident enough to mix drinks, though Lois had shown her a few basics.

In the kitchen, she took a carton of generic-brand juice from the refrigerator. She'd just closed the refrigerator door when she noticed another door beyond the kitchen and, curious, went to it. There she found a storage room, with shelves that held pots and pans, dishes and paper supplies. The shelves were of sturdy wood that might have been painted once, and the shine had long ago been scrubbed from the metal surfaces.

She set the carton of juice down. The sound of chatter from the bar faded as Thea let her hand trail over textures of wood, metal and glass. She moved through the room, surprised at this heady sense of possessiveness she felt. From the tubes of aluminum foil and waxed paper on the shelves, to the dented pot on a rack by yet another sink, even the broom and dustpan propped against a wall, this all belonged to her. She'd never before given much thought to owning a business. She'd always been content to be the worker, to let others shoulder the burden of being in charge. It was easier that way.

In the space of a few days, things had changed. She'd get more details about it on Monday. That's when she would meet with the lawyer, Roman McKean, who'd called her with the details of Sophie's will and had papers for her to sign. For now, it was enough to know that she'd been given an unexpected opportunity to have something more. A couple of days ago she'd been sure she would immediately sell the building and the business

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with it. Today she wasn't as inclined to be hasty. She would sell, of course, but first she'd make sure that she had it appraised, and got some advice on a fair price. As little as she knew about the value of anything in this part of the country, she'd still recognized the offer Norma had made as being ridiculously low.

Her explorations took her to the far corner of the room, where she came upon a crate that rose almost to chest level. She brushed dust from it with her hand. The graphics on the box indicated it contained a complete karaoke system.

"What are you doing back here?"

Down on her haunches in front of the sealed box, Thea started, and looked up to see Norma standing in the doorway, hands on her hips, radiating righteous indignation.

"Lois asked me to get orange juice," she stammered. "I just—"

"Well, you won't find it back here, will you?" Norma's wire-rimmed glasses glinted as she jutted her chin at Thea. "You think you can walk in here and just start moving things around? I've put three years of my life into this place. I took care of everything around here in these last few months when Sophie was really bad. Everything! From stocking the liquor, to renewing the licenses, to ordering toilet paper." She took a step closer. "I'm the one who kicked out those kids with the fake IDs last week, and I called in the electrician when the ice machine quit working."

Having stood during Norma's tirade, Thea was frozen by the woman's attack, a small, guilty part of her feeling that Norma had a point, that she had no right to be here. "I know you've done a lot, and I appreciate it—"

"*You* appreciate it?" Older than Thea by a dozen years and inches shorter, Norma approached menacingly, and Thea, intimidated by this woman who looked like an enraged troll, actually took an involuntary step back until her butt bumped the crate. "I'm not going to be given the brush off after all this time," Norma continued. "You know nothing about this place, or how to run a business."

Thea's face was flushed; she could feel the heat rise under her skin, burning her with every angry word Norma threw at her.

Norma's lips curved into a tight, vicious smile. "I know what you do for a living. People around here have been talking about you. You work at a funeral home. You work with dead people. Well, most of the people who come in here happen to be alive, in case you hadn't noticed, and you have no right to be here."

"That's where you're wrong, Norma," a voice in the doorway said. "She has every right to be here, and I'm glad she is."

Norma flinched, and she and Thea both turned to the newcomer.

In the doorway stood a regally-postured woman—Rocky DeLuis, who had been Sophie's best friend since high school. Another woman, pretty, blonde, she stood off to one side. Rocky appeared composed. Only her eyes gave a hint at the wrath she directed at Norma.

Thea had never been so glad to see anyone in her life.

"This has nothing to do with you, Rocky," Norma said, but it was a weak attempt.

"Tough," Rocky shot back. "Why don't you take your tray and get back to business, Norma. I'm sure there are people who need their drinks refilled."

"Don't you tell me—"

"That is your job, isn't it?"

"I don't need you to tell me my job. I've been running this place—"

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Rocky put up a hand. "Yes, we all know what a saint you are. How self-sacrificing and noble you've been. You've reminded us of it often enough."

Norma's face was crimson, but when Rocky stepped away from the doorway, giving her the opening, she headed for it, pushing roughly past the other woman.

Thea ran a shaking hand over her face. "Guess I made her mad. I didn't mean to."

"Don't worry about it," Rocky said. "I'm not. Irene's headed for home. Do you have time to sit for a few minutes?"

Thea exhaled. "Absolutely."

She picked up the orange juice and the three women left the storage room, closing the door behind them. Thea left the orange juice with Lois, who said, "Norma's got her panties in a wad about something," then went to the booth on the far wall that Rocky and Irene had taken. The two women were sitting across from each other, so Thea slid in next to Rocky.

Thea had met Rocky a few times over the years, when she'd come to Minnesota, and also once when Sophie had brought Rocky with her to California. Irene she'd met only a couple of times before, one of those being at the funeral.

At sixty, Rocky was statuesque and elegant, with chin-length hair that she'd stopped dying years earlier but still held only a few streaks of gray mixed in with the brown. Her gray eyes, even with little makeup, were thick-lashed and striking. Years of modeling had disciplined her to keep her spine straight and chin up. The habit made her look younger than her years, as did the black turtleneck that accentuated the slender length of her neck. Her age showed only in her hands.

Pale and lovely, Irene's soft blonde hair was feathered in an attractive style. There was a natural sweetness to Irene that drew people to her, though her usual bubblyness was now subdued. Her husband, an ophthalmologist in Minneapolis, had recently retired due to health problems, and she was anxious to get back to him.

Both had been friends with Sophie for as long as Thea could remember. She'd visited with them only briefly at the gathering after the funeral, and this was the first time she'd seen them since then.

"How are you getting along?" Irene asked.

"I still feel blindsided," Thea admitted. She leaned forward in the booth. "Why didn't anyone let me know what was going on with Sophie? I thought the cancer was in remission. That's what she told me last time I talked to her. Why did I have to find out otherwise when it was too late, through a phone call in the middle of the night?"

"Oh, sweetie, she wanted to spare you," Irene said.

"Spare me from what? I should have been here for her."

"That's just what she didn't want," Rocky said. "That disease took a terrible toll on Sophie. The chemo made her hair fall out, then didn't do her any good in the end anyway. She lost so much weight she was barely a shadow of her old self. I used to bring her chocolate milkshakes, but she had no appetite. I think she got tired of fighting it, and in the end she just gave up."

Irene sniffled and reached in her purse for a tissue.

"She had no right to hide it from me," Thea told Rocky. "Why didn't *you* let me know?"

"She had every right to see who she wanted in the end, and it was a very short list." Rocky's mouth curved into a careful smile that didn't deepen any lines on her face.

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"She was vain about her looks. Not as much as me—who is?—but enough, and she wanted you to remember her in a better way than that."

Thea shook her head, unable to hide her feelings of loss, betrayal, grief. Though Rocky had surely been honoring her friend's wishes, that didn't make Thea feel any better about it. She blinked rapidly, surprised that she had any tears left.

Irene handed her a tissue, then patted her hand. "How's Julia doing? I hardly got the chance to talk to her, she was so busy every time I tried to get close. But she looked wonderful."

"Mom's furious with me for staying in Sophie's apartment upstairs. She says it's gruesome. She wanted me to stay in the hotel with her and Belinda." Belinda, younger than Thea by four years, was less at odds with their mother than Thea always seemed to be. She'd tried to mediate, with little success. It had been a relief when they'd finally left.

Rocky pulled a pack of cigarettes from her purse and tapped one out. "For God's sake, it's not like Sophie was interred in the front room. She was in hospice care at the hospital for the last month, but she had a detailed list of what needed to be done to the apartment to get it ready for you." She lit the cigarette and took a drag, blowing the smoke to the side, away from Thea. "Are you comfortable there?"

"Very. But it's more like a hotel suite than an apartment. There are no pictures on the walls or any personal touches. I found some things in a big old trunk in front of the sofa, but that's about it."

"That was her doing. She thought you'd feel more at ease that way. I had a truckload of stuff hauled off to Goodwill last month."

"Have you decided what you're going to do?" Irene asked.

"Sell the place," Thea said. "But I'll stick around for a week or two, list it with a realtor before I go back. I can't stay longer than that. I have a boss who's pretty unhappy with me as it is."

"Well, if you get a decent price for it, you can always tell him to go fuck himself," Rocky said.

Thea laughed, and Irene, though she looked pained and said, "Oh, you," managed a smile.

"I probably won't do that," Thea said. "But it's given me some options I didn't have a couple of weeks ago. I guess I can thank Sophie for that."

The three sat in silence for a moment, each lost in her own thoughts.

Finally, Rocky ground out her cigarette and said, "Oh, hell. It just doesn't seem right, the way things turned out."