

## KARAOKE NIGHTS AT THE TWILIGHT LOUNGE

Jean Tennant

### PROLOGUE

"You're not going anywhere, bitch."

He grabbed her arm to keep her from opening the back door, and in the process knocked the small suitcase from her hands. It skated over the dull linoleum as though on an escape path of its own, stopping only when it hit the refrigerator with a hard *clunk*.

They each lunged for the suitcase at the same time. He thought she couldn't leave without it; she, though she wanted it, knew she would abandon it if necessary. Hands outstretched, she reached it first and scooped it up, holding it close to her chest. It was just a small bag. It contained underwear, a few toiletries, nothing that couldn't be replaced, but it was a symbol of their many differences, and what each wanted.

He tried to pull it from her but she held on tight, so he grabbed a handful of her jacket sleeve and twisted the fabric with one powerful fist, lifting her to her toes. The air in the kitchen was charged, crackling, giving the plain room an intensity it rarely possessed, as though the molecules had been snapped by lightning.

"Please, just let me go," she said, her voice surprisingly level, even as he pushed his face close to hers. She stared up at him, frightened, as she always was these days, yet still somehow defiant. "You know I have to do this."

He wanted to slap her insolent face, but this new determination on her part made him cautious despite his fury. They stood delicately balanced in a place where, if he didn't handle it

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carefully, she might tip over to the side of never forgiving.

"Don't do this to me, baby," he said, his voice low. His free hand caressed her face. "We can work it out. Please, sweetie... I'm sorry I got mad. Things will be better, I promise."

Still clutching the suitcase, she shut her eyes.

Sweetie, baby, honey. They were words that she'd once liked to hear, but now were brought out and dusted off only when he wanted something from her.

The hand on her sleeve loosened, then released the fabric, and she dropped down on her heels. He stroked her arm as though to erase the lingering memory of earlier violence. It almost worked. She felt herself weakening, and hated herself for it. Then she opened her eyes and saw his expression, saw his eyes that were twin views into a burning furnace, revealing the true glowing depth of his rage. With surprising agility she ducked under his arm and sprinted for the door. She actually had it open and was almost out when he caught a handful of her hair, halting her flight and yanking her back.

"Fucking worthless whore!" he screamed.

There. That was more like it.

He jerked her around to face him again. "You're nothing. You're not going anywhere, not until I say you can." His poisonous words flew in the air like droplets of acid, to sizzle and burn where they landed. He raised his hand, the fingers curling in to make a familiar fist.

And for the first time she struck back, using the only weapon she had—the suitcase. She swung it as hard as she could at his chest, where it connected solidly and sent him staggering back in surprised loss of balance, and she took the opportunity to turn and fling herself through the open doorway, leaving behind a hunk of her hair still tangled in his fingers, a small price to pay for escape.

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She reached the car, thankful she'd left the keys in the ignition, and was in it before he'd fully recovered.