

## Epilogue

A key turned in the lock and she looked up from the books she had strewn across the bar.

There was a gun hidden in a compartment under the counter by the cash register. She eased herself in that direction, just in case, though a quick glance at her watch gave her a pretty good idea of who it was.

Sure enough, long strands of Tessa's silvery-blond hair blew in as soon as the door was cracked. The tall girl hurried inside and slammed the door behind her. She shook the disheveled hair out of her face and pulled off her scarf before she realized she wasn't alone.

"Oh, hey, Ellis!"

"Afternoon, Tess."

Tessa shrugged out of her coat and folded it over her arm. "Crazy wind today."

"I guess spring changed its mind about coming early after all."

"I don't know, it's pretty mild aside from the wind. Don't jinx us."

While she spoke, Tessa pushed through the swinging doors into the kitchen to stow her stuff.

"Got a test?" Tessa called back over her shoulder.

"Monday."

Tessa pushed back through to the dining room, shaking her head as she pinned her hair into a messy bun. "Teachers, man. Killjoys. Always ruining the weekend."

Ellis nodded absently. This was all just review, actually. She would ace this test, like she had the others.

"Where's Nate? I thought he'd be setting up by now."

Tessa started dressing tables with the efficiency of long practice. She shook out clean linens, doubling them up on each table to make turnover faster. Ellis got up from the bar and went to help. She grabbed two of the smoky glass candleholders and placed them in the center of the tables Tessa had covered, then went back for another set.

"They had to move Wednesday afternoon's practice. Some school conflict."

"He's a saint, that husband of yours," Tessa commented. "Not even one of the dads, but he's single-handedly revitalized the town's after school sports programs."

"If it was a sacrifice, he'd be a saint. He enjoys it more than the kids do."

"He's good at that—enjoying things."

Ellis grinned. "Yeah, he should write a self-help book or something."

Tessa grabbed the big basket of place settings. With an expression that worked very hard to look nonchalant, she asked, "So, is that new guy, Garrett, working the bar tonight?"

"Yes." Ellis tried to keep a straight face. "He asked for Fridays."

"Everyone wants to be here Fridays," Tessa agreed, touching the hair at the nape of her neck. "And Marie's waiting tonight with me... Kenneth will bounce, right?"

Ellis nodded.

“Is Ken’s, uh, girlfriend visiting this weekend?” Tessa’s tone was casual, innocent of any agenda.

“I’m not sure. Val never gives us any warning, she just shows up.”

Tessa nodded to herself, chewing her lip.

*Ah, the drama of young love*, Ellis thought to herself.

Tessa had a major thing for the new bartender, but though Tessa was a darling girl and fairly obvious in her infatuation, Garrett was so besotted with Val he hadn’t even noticed. Of course Val was probably totally aware of the havoc she was wreaking, and loved it. *I really should say something to her. Then again, that would only egg her on.* Ellis sighed.

The door banged open with another gust of wind that smelled like fresh turned earth and evergreens and flower buds. Spring really was here at last, and Ellis would be happy to turn in her boots for sandals...in a few more weeks, hopefully.

The dog raced across the floor, ears flopping, her paws sliding on the worn wooden planks they way they always did, then buried her face in her water bowl behind the bar. She slobbered the water out onto the floor for a good three-foot radius. Ellis reached automatically for the mop.

“Hey, Lola! You look beat, girl. Did the kids wear you out?”

“Yes, they certainly did,” said the tall man who followed her through the door.

“Just watch—she’ll crash as soon as she’s fed. She’ll sleep right through all the fun tonight.”

“Not sure that’s physically possible for anyone with ears,” Ellis countered. “Let alone dog ears.”

He smiled at her, teeth flashing bright against his dark beard. He ran a hand through his sweaty curls. “Hi.”

“Hi. How did it go?”

“They’re really starting to get it. I think we’re going to surprise everyone at the tournament.”

He walked toward her as he spoke, then took the mop from her hand, leaned it against the bar, and gathered her up into a tight hug. She put her arms around his neck to pull her mouth up to his. Just the tips of her toes touched the floor.

“You’re seriously killing me,” Tessa groaned. “It’s hard enough being single without having to witness the super-happy lovefest everyday.”

Nathaniel broke away to laugh. “Sorry, Tessa. I’m keeping my eyes open for you, I promise.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ve heard that before. Just let me know when you or your brother is available.”

“Trust me,” Ellis told her, “You don’t want a guy like Ken. Nothing but aggravation.”

“You’re not supposed to say things like that to twenty-somethings,” Nathaniel stage-whispered. “They always want the bad boy.”

Tessa sighed. “That would probably be the case if I wasn’t holding an undying torch for you, Nate.”

Ellis felt the little shock run through his body as he reacted to the nickname. It still didn’t quite fit him.

“Ah, Tessa, I’m much too sedate for an exciting young girl like you.” He let go of Ellis and started mopping. “Tedious old guy who prefers the quiet married life. You’d be thoroughly bored with me in a week.”

Under her breath, Tessa muttered, “I’m willing to test that hypothesis.” Then she sighed again and spoke at normal volume. “I’d make a serious play for you if I thought it would do any good. Can’t you two just act like a normal married couple?”

“What do you mean?” Ellis tried to keep her voice casual, joking, but the hairs rose on the backs of her arms.

“Just...stop looking at each other like that.”

Ellis and Nathaniel exchanged a mystified glance.

“*You* know,” Tessa complained. “With all the stars in your eyes and, like, woodland creatures gathering around.”

Ellis was able to laugh naturally. “I can’t control the squirrels, Tess. If they want to gather, it’s out of my hands.”

“Forever alone,” Tessa grumbled. She shoved back into the kitchen.

“Maybe I should say something to Garrett...” Ellis mused.

“What?” Nathaniel half-shouted. Lola had just attacked her food, and it sounded like ten garbage disposals trying to pass silverware.

“Nothing,” Ellis shouted back. “Go get cleaned up. I can set up out here.”

Nathaniel crushed her in another hug. “I love you, Al..lis.”

“I love you, too, in spite of your tragic memory issues.”

Nathaniel laughed. “Like I said, I’m an old man.”

“None of that. You married an older woman.”

He leaned down to whisper loudly in her ear. “And I’m just supposed to take the date on that birth certificate at face value?”

She smacked his chest. “Shower.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

In the beginning, when Kev...Kenneth—it was important to use the right name even when just *thinking* it—had showed Ellis this place, she’d been skeptical. First of all, the rustic little restaurant-bar was called *The Hideaway*. She never really enjoyed Kenneth’s brand of heavy-handed humor. Then there was the upstairs apartment; Ellis didn’t know if she would be comfortable living on the premises. Would it feel like going home at the end of the day, or like staying at work? Wouldn’t it be safer to have some distance between the two?

But Nathaniel had loved it, and oddly enough, it *had* felt like home almost immediately. Ellis knew that was mostly Nathaniel’s doing. And partially Lola’s. Having a dog lolling across the end of the bed substantially changed the feel of a place.

Ellis lugged out the speakers, then wound the microphone cord into a neat coil. Tessa reappeared and brought the swivel stool with her. Not that many of the participants bothered sitting.

Kenneth had built a little raised platform in the northeast corner of the room. As he’d claimed, he was actually pretty handy. He’d done most of the renovations personally, and it all looked professional. The place had been a real dive when they’d bought it. Now it was a dive with character—the kind of dive local hipsters and seasonal tourists both loved to hang out at. It helped that the chef was gifted.

During the week, the platform held the biggest table—seating for six. On the weekends, it was the stage.

“Let me get the heavy stuff,” a baritone voice offered close beside her head.

Ellis jumped, then took a deep breath. “Do you always have to sneak up on me?”

Kenneth laughed. “It’s fun. Anyway, got to keep those senses sharp, Ellie.”

He hoisted the big karaoke machine up onto one shoulder—showing off—and carried it up to the place of honor.

“Oh, hi, Ken,” Tessa trilled as she came through the kitchen doors.

“Hey, kiddo.”

Tessa’s lower lip pouted out. “I should just start hoarding cats now,” she muttered as she passed.

Ellis leaned against the wall, watching Kenneth set up the system. It still took her a few seconds to process his face.

Kenneth had felt that *twins* were a little too attention-grabbing. He and Nathaniel would have to just be brothers. One of Val’s generous friends was a plastic surgeon, and the procedure had taken place off the books, with no before or after pictures. Naturally, Kenneth had healed quickly.

They still had the same color eyes and hair, but Kenneth’s nose was now a little thinner, his chin and cheekbones more pronounced. Ellis didn’t think it was an improvement, but then, she was biased in favor of Nathaniel’s face. The changes made Kenneth look older, which suited him fine. He added two years to the age on his driver’s license, and, if possible, became bossier than before.

The rest of the crew trickled in before Ellis was finished setting up. Kenneth helped Jordan carry in the crates of fresh produce, while Lou headed straight back to the kitchen to get started on the prep work. Ellis cleaned up her books and notes, then took Lola up to the apartment. Nathaniel was just finishing—tying shoelaces with one foot up on their single end table.

The front room was small, but there was room for a little desk for Ellis and an extra-long, mushy sofa for Nathaniel. One wall was entirely bookshelves, which he’d already completely filled; on one side, there was a growing vertical stack of the books that didn’t fit. When she walked in, he dropped his foot off the furniture, his face innocent. Lola threw herself onto the sofa with a deep sigh.

“Ellis,” he said. “Ellis, *Ellis*, Ellis. I don’t know why I have such a hard time with this. You never screw up.”

“You’ll get used to it after a while.”

He puffed out his cheeks then blew his breath loudly through his lips. “Or not. Maybe I just go with the story my dear brother *Kenneth* put out there.”

Ellis cocked her head to the side. “What’s that?”

“He told Lou and Marie I have a speech impediment.”

Ellis laughed out loud. “He did not.”

Nathaniel raised his arm, elbow bent at a right angle, his thumb holding his pinky down. “Scouts honor. Lou asked me how long I was in speech therapy in elementary school.”

Ellis rolled her eyes to the ceiling. She wasn’t necessarily unhappy that Kenneth had stuck around so long, but that wasn’t because he’d learned how to be less annoying.

“It’s just as well,” Nathaniel muttered. “I call him *Keveith* more often than not.”

Ellis set her books down on the edge of her desk.

“You don’t have a shift tonight?” Nathaniel asked, his voice abruptly concerned.

“No, I made a deal with Judd this week—traded Saturday and Sunday for tonight. Hopefully I don’t miss anything good. Not that this place ever sees a lot of excitement, even on a Friday night. We’ve got the best show in town going on right here.”

“We could move up to Denver if you want—try to catch some gun shot wounds, stabbings...”

“Tempting, but I’ll settle for the occasional resuscitation. I like it here.”

He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her on the top of her head. “Me, too. Ready for your midterms?”

“Yes. It’s not too challenging.”

“Are you saying the community college’s paramedic program doesn’t offer the same degree of difficulty as Columbia med? I’m shocked.”

“Well, at least I’m keeping my hand in. You never know when I might have to stitch somebody up.”

“Not to mention access to all those handy medical supplies.”

“I share a mantra with your Boy Scouts: Be prepared.”

He frowned, leaning down to touch the tip of his nose to hers. “I am worried about the upgrade, though.”

“What? Why?”

“I’ll miss your EMT uniform. It’s sexy.”

Ellis laughed. “Sure. Nothing hotter than a boxy white button-down.”

“Stop it. You’re getting me all worked up and it’s hours before we’ll be alone again.”

“Speaking of, you’d better get on it. Busy night.”

He sighed and set her free, running one hand through his damp curls. “We will return to this subject after closing.”

“I’m counting on it.”

“And I’m counting on you...”

She wrinkled her nose. “You’re really going to hold me to this?”

“I really am.” He examined her face for a moment, then smiled slowly.

“Somewhere out there in the world, there’s probably a man named something like...I don’t know...maybe Daniel, who has a birthday today. We should celebrate for him.”

She gave him a dark look, but she wasn’t going to hassle him about breaking the rules—just a little bit—today.

“You’ll be sorry,” she threatened.

“Never.” He leaned back into her and pressed his mouth to hers for one long second. “I’m never sorry for anything we get to do together.”

“Well, right now we need to open a restaurant together.”

“Indeed.” He kissed her one more time and headed for the door.

“Break a leg tonight, *Nate*.”

He laughed once, but she could hear him muttering, “Nate, Nate, Nate,” to himself as he headed down the stairs.

Ellis brushed her hands absently down her black T-shirt, wondering if she should change her clothes. What was the point though? A nicer outfit than her usual jeans-and-a-tee wouldn't make tonight less embarrassing. It wouldn't make her less likely to fail in all the most awkward and humiliating ways possible. Why had she ever agreed to this?

She shook her head, then tucked her chin-length hair back into place behind her ears. She knew why she'd agreed—because Nathaniel had asked her to. She'd never been any good at telling him no.

Of course, tonight had seemed far away when she'd promised. Now that it was staring her in the face, she was suddenly terrified.

*No one is going to shoot you, she reminded herself. Or stab you or beat you or poison you, so it's really not that bad.*

She tried to believe herself, but her stomach wouldn't relax. She took a deep breath, then another, looking for something to focus on. A small silver frame on the bookshelf caught her eye, and she walked over to examine it more closely.

*Who would have ever thought?*

It was a kind of cheesy shot, posed in front of a small, steepled white chapel—*Little Chapel of the Flowers* read the large letters over the door—but you expected cheese in Vegas.

It was a sensible move—another way to make the Ellis Grant identity more fleshed out, less vulnerable to scrutiny. Legally tack a different name onto the end in the most common way possible, and then someone who stumbled across Ellis Grant's trail might lose it, might never get to Ellis Weeks.

But of course she hadn't felt sensible at all that day. She didn't look sensible in the photograph and neither did he, both of them smiling hugely, wide-eyed and exhilarated, like two kids on a roller coaster.

The white eyelet dress with the Peter Pan collar didn't help her look like a careful adult making rational decisions, either—next to the giant towering over her, she looked like a very happy child. The dress still hung in a bag in the back of their little closet, taking up space that they desperately needed, but she couldn't bring herself to get rid of it.

The scar across her jaw was invisible in the photo. Val had taught her a few things. Even when she didn't bother to cover it, the scar had healed up better than she'd hoped. She blamed it on the most banal cause—minor car accident—and no one ever showed too much interest. Sure, if someone came around, asking specifically about a woman with a scar across her jaw, people would think of Ellis. But who would know to ask the question?

Luckily, Nathaniel's more remarkable scar was easy to hide.

Looking at the wedding photo helped a little bit. She'd discovered a long time ago what she needed to survive—him alive, herself alive, preferably together. As long as she had that, what was a little public abasement?

Of all the nights to have a full house... Ellis found herself cringing every time another group walked in the door, and sighing in relief when one would leave. But very few left. Unfortunately, Friday nights at The Hideaway were becoming a little too popular. Last week had been standing room only, and tonight looked on track to match or surpass those numbers. Fantastic.

The singing started at nine, but the place was entirely filled by a quarter to. No one wanted to miss the opening act. Including Val, who blew in with a dramatic gust of wind and a tantalizing swirl of her short red skirt. An audible, and very masculine, wave of sighs followed her entrance. Val smiled so smugly Ellis imagined yellow feathers sticking to her crimson lips.

Val sauntered through the tight quarters to give Ellis a hug first. Val always pretended that she didn't notice whether Kenneth was there or not.

"Hey, Ollie-Ellie-Ollie," she said in a sing-song voice. "*So* glad I didn't miss anything."

"Just in time. You singing tonight?"

She winked. "I couldn't disappoint my fans."

It probably *was* Val's fault that so many people were regulars. "Well, I'll leave you to them."

On the nights that Ellis wasn't racking up EMT hours, she usually worked as a floater, delivering food when the wait staff got behind, acting as hostess, and generally averting difficulties wherever she could. The one place she was not allowed to help was the kitchen, but she was fine with that. Every person was born with certain gifts, and accepting the truth of where one was not gifted only made life simpler.

She liked the routine of it, the feeling of safety that came with familiarity. Waitressing definitely wasn't the worst job she'd ever had.

The crowd was getting louder now in anticipation. Ellis bussed a few tables that had finished with the eating part of the evening.

Nathaniel was giving interim instructions to Lou, who always did just fine for the five minutes she was head chef Friday nights, when Ellis took the dirty dishes through the swinging doors. Nathaniel was a bit of a control freak regarding his kitchen, but he was so nice about it that nobody minded. Satisfied that the place would not become engulfed in flames during his absence, Nathaniel headed out to the floor.

All of the regulars cheered when they saw him, and then the newcomers joined in. That was a fresh development. Ellis hurried back to the watch from the doorway.

Nathaniel always kicked things off on karaoke night. In the beginning, it was encouragement. The idea didn't immediately take off, but Nathaniel's gusto and total lack of embarrassment made everyone comfortable with giving it a go. Now it was just tradition; there was already a line for the next spot. His performance was usually one of the best of the night—if not musically, at least on the enthusiasm and dance fronts—which accounted for the punctuality of the regulars. He set the tone, and the other performers had long since learned to hold nothing back.

Nathaniel's song choice was always a huge secret from everyone but Ellis—he liked to practice in the shower, so it was hard to keep it from her. Tonight it was Huey Lewis and the News, "The Power of Love." It was a good fit for Nathaniel's vocal range, plus it was danceable. If Nathaniel's voice was pleasant but unremarkable, his dance moves made up for it. He credited his shady past clubbing in college, but it was obviously something he was born with.

Usually Ellis loved watching Nathaniel perform—he had so much fun, it was impossible not to enjoy it with him. However, tonight it just made her more nervous. Did he have to set the bar so high?

When he sang the line about how the power of love *just might save your life*, he winked at her.

Then it was over—it had gone so quickly—and Nathaniel headed back to the kitchen to the sound of a standing ovation. The first in line was a regular, and the night proceeded down its usual path, only somehow moving much faster than usual.

Tessa took the long way to the kitchen to pass by Ellis.

“Table five came down from Denver,” she announced excitedly. “Just for karaoke night.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, and that’s not even the best one—the couple at number fourteen is driving from Albuquerque to Billings and they stayed an extra night in Colorado Springs because they heard about us. Crazy, right?”

“Um, yeah. Amazing.”

Tessa was underwhelmed by Ellis’s hesitant response. She ran over to Kenneth, seated at his usual barstool, to try for a better reaction to her news. Ellis watched Kenneth’s face closely. He smiled and nodded, looking appropriately pleased. Tessa moved on to share the news with the kitchen while picking up her orders. Ellis met Kenneth’s eyes, brows raised. He shrugged, held his hands palms up and then shook his head. Not something to panic about then.

Ellis knew Kenneth was confident that they’d dealt definitively with their past, and that they’d also buried their tracks well before they settled in Colorado, just in case. Still, none of them had counted on Nathaniel’s place becoming a local hot spot. Plans were never a simple matter with Nathaniel in the mix. She did a bussing run around the room, taking a surreptitious closer look at the out-of-towners, but didn’t see any obvious red flags.

It would be unwise to forget that these were adopted names and borrowed lives. They always had to be ready to give both up if the situation demanded. Ellis kept two caches of run-bags—bags that held everything they needed to disappear again, everything from the most vital chemical compounds to her prized new passport to the dog-sized gas masks she’d finally procured. One set was in a locked cabinet, high and out of the way, in the kitchen; it was Nathaniel’s job to retrieve those. The other was about a half-mile up the little canyon behind The Hideaway. Kenneth had his own situation, probably much more elaborate, a few miles away on the ranch he owned. He hadn’t started up a dog breeding program or any other hobbies yet, but he had disappeared for a few days—during their second month in Colorado—and returned with Kahn, no doubt stolen from his new owner. There was a sweet little family reunion when Einstein, Lola, and Kahn were back together.

Ellis heard the murmur race through the room as Val made the decision that it was time. She never stood in line; she just smiled at the man closest to the front of the line and he always let her cut in. Men simultaneously leaned closer to the stage, mouths falling open as Val picked the microphone up off the stool and leaned into her start pose. The women were nearly as enthralled, though with less enjoyment and more wariness. Val began something sultry and soulful. She had a beautiful, throaty voice, naturally. She wasn’t the dancer Nathaniel was, but with her body, she really didn’t have to be.



Kenneth was the only one who seemed unaffected, but he always played it cool with Val. Probably the reason she came around with such regularity.

The new bartender, Garrett, was leaning across the bar, unaware of anything but Val; lucky for him, the patrons were equally mesmerized. Then there was Tessa, unaware of anything but Garrett's preoccupation, her big brown eyes radiating hopelessness. Ellis brushed by Tessa, directing her toward some empty glasses, then joined Garrett behind the bar.

"You can't afford her," Ellis said in a loud voice to be heard over the volume of Val's solo.

He blinked, almost like coming out of a trance. "Huh? What do you mean?"

"That she's not some unattainable goddess. She's just very expensive."

Garrett's expression was a mix of shock and outrage. "Are you saying...?"

"Exactly what you think. But add three zeros to the end of whatever number you're imagining would suffice."

"I wasn't...I... But..."

"Though he doesn't look it, Kenneth is loaded. I mean, not for long at *this* rate." Ellis glanced back to Val, who was leaning down now to caress the face of a stranger crowding close to the side of the stage. "When he runs dry, we'll never see her again. Back to Paris, or Moscow, or wherever the next millionaire is located." Ellis shrugged, then patted Garrett's shoulder. "Some things, you shouldn't buy. If you're looking for romance, there are easier ways. Well, not *easier*. You know what I mean."

Garrett looked stunned; he looked back to Val and his mouth made a funny little *O*. Ellis considered pointing out Tessa's wholesome charms right then, but decided that might be too obvious. She'd let him stew on it, then bring up Tessa next week.

Val got the fourth standing ovation of the night. Ellis joined in, then suddenly froze, palms still pressed together, when she saw that Nathaniel was back on the floor and heading for the stage. She glanced frantically at the clock. That couldn't be the time!

"Thank you all, so much!" Nathaniel said. "This has been a fantastic show tonight. We love all the new talent—seriously, come back soon." He paused, then smiled at Ellis's bloodless face before looking back to the crowd. "Now, I'm going to break with tradition tonight. Usually, we have an informal little vote on the best act, and that person gets an encore. But tonight is special. Tonight, after much begging and threatening, I have coerced my lovely wife to grace this stage for the first time ever."

Ellis could hear Kenneth's braying laugh over the sound of good-natured applause. A few of the regulars cheered loudly. Some of them had tried to cajole her up there in the past.

"Come on up, darling!"

It didn't feel like she was entirely in control of her body as it dragged her across the room. The sensation reminded Ellis of the kinds of nightmares she'd had back before her life had gotten dangerous—normal nightmares about walking naked through a crowd or standing at a lectern with no idea what to say. Nightmares that were silly in some ways, but no less terrifying for their absurdity. She tried to remind herself that this was not the same as getting shot at, but in this moment, it actually felt worse. At least if she were shot, people would feel bad for her rather than mocking her.

“You’ll be wonderful,” Nathaniel murmured as he put the microphone in her hand and forced her fingers to curl around it. Then he left her there, alone in the spotlight.

She should have insisted on a duet.

Though everyone else had ignored the stool, Ellis was glad to sink onto it.

“I have a horrible voice,” she warned them as she scrolled through the song options on the machine. Though Nathaniel kept adding more, it didn’t take long; they were in alphabetical order.

“I’m really, *really* sorry about this,” she continued. “Nathaniel made me. Blame him.”

It was easy to pick Kenneth’s laughter out of the rest, though it sounded like most of the patrons were laughing with him; they probably thought she was joking. Surely she could have banned Kenneth for tonight—so what if he owned a third of the place? Why was she only thinking of these things now?

As the intro began, she realized that she really should have practiced. Her logic had been that practice wouldn’t make her voice any better. She was going to embarrass herself regardless. But still, maybe she would have felt less... nauseated if she’d gone through it a few times. As she opened her lips for the first word, she made a vow that no matter what, this was the last time she would ever hold a microphone in her hand for the rest of her life. This karaoke career was over.

“*You fill up my senses,*” she sang quietly, badly, with her eyes on the floor. “*Like a night in the forest.*”

Her mother had loved John Denver. Ellis couldn’t remember a time she didn’t know all the words to “Annie’s Song.” When she’d agreed to humor Nathaniel for the sake of his old life’s birthday, it had seemed the obvious choice. Plus, it was short.

And then, the song had made more sense to her since she’d known Nathaniel. The whole world had been a frightening gray blur before they’d met. After his entrance, she’d started to see the colors.

She looked up to find him, but that was a mistake. He was easy to locate, right in the front row, probably waiting to catch her if she tried to run. His eyes were wide and surprised, soft and innocent as ever. She couldn’t help internalizing the words as her voice wobbled over the high notes of *let me die in your arms*. It wasn’t a hyperbole for her. He almost had.

She was horrified when she realized that she was about to cry. There was no holding it back. Already her weak voice was turning froggy, her throat tight. She blinked hard against the tears, but they came anyway. She felt one spill down each cheek, then drip off her chin.

It was dead silent in the room. This was worse than the nightmare. Ellis couldn’t remember ever feeling so totally humiliated. She kept her eyes on Nathaniel, who would at least be kind, even if no one else was, as the interminable three-minute song finally ground to an end.

“*You fill up my senses, come fill me again.*”

She dropped her head as soon as the last word was out, and set the microphone carefully on top of the karaoke machine while the music tapered off. The crowd was still apparently on mute.

She hadn't expected real applause. Just some polite, scattered claps. She'd hoped they'd be too nice to laugh. This vacuum she didn't know how to interpret.

In the silence, someone sniffed. Ellis glanced over before she could stop herself, and saw that a woman at table two, a total stranger, held a tissue to her left eye. Movement behind the woman caught Ellis's attention next, and she saw one of her regulars wiping the back of his hand under his eyes.

*I was so bad they're crying*, Ellis realized in horror.

Then, from the bar, a loud supportive hooting that she would have known anywhere. Kenneth was on his feet, applauding.

The rest of the room followed suit, first slowly and then with more gusto. Ellis looked down again, not sure how to respond to their compassion. Before she could decide, she was almost knocked over as Nathaniel rushed the stage.

He yanked her against his chest and held her there so that her feet dangled while he kissed her in an almost desperate way. The crowd cheered louder, and Ellis thought she could hear Kenneth laughing again.

She expected Nathaniel would let her down quickly. He would need to say goodnight to their guests. Then there were piles of chores left to do in the kitchen after they closed. She waited for him to stop, and then when he didn't, she sort of forgot what she was waiting for. The approving ovation continued.

Nathaniel leaned down, his mouth still on hers, till her feet hit the floor. Then they were moving. Without a word of excuse, lips still locked to hers, Nathaniel dragged her through the close-packed tables to the back exit. She felt hands patting her as they passed, and heard several wolf-whistles. Nathaniel shoved the door open with his hip, and then they were on the dark, empty stairs and the sound of laughter rippled through the room behind them.

Nathaniel hauled her up the stairs.

"Closing?" she managed to gasp out.

"Someone'll get it."

He fumbled for the key to their apartment.

"What did I do?" she asked.

In answer, he put his hand under her jaw and kissed her again.

Eventually, he got the door open.

*Who knew?* she thought to herself as they kissed and tripped their way past the snoring dog to their bed. *Romantic songs sung very badly*. Maybe her karaoke career wasn't over after all.