

~ Gods Served and Abandoned ~

by Antigone Unbound

Hi Kittens! Here's my next foray into fan fiction. Thanks again to all of you who gave such great support and feedback to "On Second Thought." That piece is now in the completed fics archive and it includes my final responses to all of you who were kind enough to write in and share your reactions with me. I hope you enjoy this story.

Disclaimers: I wouldn't presume to imply that I own any of these characters. I take better care of what I love than that. Joss and ME will answer to their own gods in their own time.

Spoilers: Up to season 5.

Rating: R for now; if it changes, I'll give heads-up.

Distribution: Sure, with acknowledgement.

Feedback: Even more sure! Bring it on!

Part I

"Good birthday?"

"Best birthday."

"You know, I still can't believe you didn't tell me about your family..."

Had she been inclined to open her eyes, long moments later, Willow might have noticed that she and Tara were floating a good sixteen inches off of the ground. As it was, she only knew that Tara's fingers were arcing tiny spirals across her back and that Tara's hair was spilling lightly across her own cheek.

She also knew that sometime soon, after they left the Bronze but before this birthday celebration was over, she and Tara would make love. And for the first time, Willow now understood, Tara could offer herself up to Willow, and take Willow in return, safe in the knowledge that she need fear nothing from herself. There was no demon within her; and her family, far more realistic horrors, were now hours away.

Let me give you everything you deserve, Tara Maclay. Let me help you bury the demons of your last name.

The arbitrarily-patched potholes of Route 132 offered an arrhythmic tempo to the silent drive back home. Nathan Maclay clutched the steering wheel as if trying to throttle something that

offended him deeply, the whites of his knuckles visible even in the night. He had barely spoken since the three of them had left Sunnydale, even though Donnie had tried to incite his anger, baiting him almost, in an effort to get some kind of reaction from the man who had been so thoroughly emasculated earlier that evening. But his father had only grunted tersely a few times before finally snapping, "That's enough, Donald. Hold your tongue." Cousin Beth, of course, simpered her agreement with Donnie, reiterating her tight-lipped pronouncement that Tara was an ungrateful, unnatural girl. But she had shrewdly reckoned Nathan Maclay's admonishment to his son to include herself, and now sat primly with the air of reluctant smugness that characterizes the purest version of Christian piety.

"Hey Baby-you still have three gifts to unwrap. This birthday ain't over yet!" They were back in their room, and Willow was standing in front of Tara with a grin that encompassed roughly the same square footage as the Hollywood Bowl. She was bouncing slightly on the balls of her feet and somehow the word "pleased" seemed an insult to the degree of her satisfaction with the night thus far.

"Willow, honey, you've already done so much for me-the party, the tickets to Sarah MacLachlin, the truly remarkable cunnilingus...You didn't need to do anything else." Despite Tara's protestations, though, her eyes were shining.

"Tara, this is the first birthday I've shared with you. Do you know how wrong it is that you spent nineteen birthdays without me? Do you have any idea how much making up I have to do for all that lost time? I mean, even without the interest accrued on all those birthdays, I'm way behind." The remarkable thing, of course, was that this idea wasn't an abstract one to her. She wasn't just bantering.

"Case in point: 1993. You turn thirteen. You're a teenager now, an absolutely life-altering event. And where am I? Am I sitting beside you at the table, watching you blow out your candles? Am I going through all sorts of Byzantine maneuvers to arrange the perfect surprise for you? Am I asking my parents' permission to stay overnight with you in a thinly-veiled attempt to cop a feel even though we're both just starting to recognize our sexuality? No, I am not. I'm in Sunnydale, sitting up in my room studying."

"Willow, sweetie, how can you know exactly what you were doing on November 7th, 1993?"

"Trust me, it's the same thing I was doing every night except for the nights when I was vanquishing the forces of darkness, and that didn't start until '96."

"And your GPA didn't drop a single percentage point, did it?" Tara smiled at her proudly.

My girlfriend's biggest erogenous zone is the brain. It turns her on that I love to solve problems. She gets hot thinking about my mental prowess. God, how lucky am I?

"Well, my geek cachet isn't the topic at hand, although I wouldn't dream of violating your right to enjoy it. No, ma'am, we're talking about your birthday and all the ways I plan to celebrate you over the next sixty years or so. I mean, God, Tara-this is the day that you were born! You came into the world and I had no idea you'd come onto the scene...although I wasn't aware of much of anything at that time, I guess, besides eating and sleeping and pooping. But, back to the subject at hand, you were born and wrapped up in a little blanket and you had those adorable little ringlets and those incredible blue eyes and you spent your first night yawning and stretching and clenching your little fists..." Suddenly she felt the need to express herself in song. "On the day that you were born, the angels got together..."

"Oh God, Willow-you're giving me the gift of Karen Carpenter. Just when I think I grasp the full extent of your love."

"Why do birds suddenly appear? It's because, you are queer..."

"I don't think I got that particular 45."

"Well, it was a limited edition... Anyway, all those birthdays came without either of us knowing about the other, not knowing that there was this other person out there who would just completely change our lives. And I guess I'm just so smitten with you that a part of me is jealous that I didn't get to spend all the previous birthdays with you so I wanna carpe the birth diem like a woman possessed. If that's OK with you," she added unnecessarily.

Tara's smile turned a shade bittersweet. "You know, last year was the worst birthday I'd ever had. It was the first one without Mom, and the last one-or so I thought-before my demon side came out. I was here at college where I didn't know many people, nobody that I was close to, nobody that I could talk to about any of it. I spent my birthday night in my room listening to Allison Krause and crying."

"Oh, Baby...I'm so sorry." Willow felt as if her own heart was breaking, imagining her beloved so lonely and so bereft.

"And then, a few months later, I drag myself to another Wicca meeting and I hear this beautiful redhead pipe up with the earth-shattering idea that the witch group do something witchy, and I just start falling and pretty soon I'm too busy waiting for her knock on my door to be that sad anymore. Now here I am, twenty years old, in love and loved. Who says good things don't come to those who wait?"

"So you were waiting for me?" Willow couldn't resist pulling for a little heart stroking from Tara.

"Oh yes, even though I didn't know who you'd be. I just knew that I wouldn't do what Dad kept wanting me to do: date one of the nice boys from back home."

"Eew, Tara-your dad was trying to fix you up?" The thought of her own parents being actively involved in her life was a stretch for her, and now she was seeing some of the better aspects of that incongruity.

" I think he didn't really expect me to leave for school after Mom died. If I had decided to stick around Cold Springs and marry myself off to some local boy who could plug a deer at two hundred yards, I don't think he would have argued."

"And Donnie?" Tara's older brother was now a source of added disdain and anger for Willow. She knew what Tara's reflexive shrinking in the Magic Box had meant earlier tonight, when the surly figure had started toward her threatening to beat her down. Tara had never said explicitly that Donnie had beaten her, but Willow had suspected it. Now she knew. Now she hated him.

Tara's face grew somber. "I try not to think about what goes on in Donnie's mind, to be honest. All I know is that he's been mean and angry at life since I can remember."

Suddenly Willow wanted to change the subject. The image of any Maclay whose name wasn't Tara was an unsettling one to her. They were gone, driving back to their prison without their captive, who had gone and gotten all self-confident on them. The nerve.

It wasn't right; he was dead sure about that.

They'd driven all the way up to that fancy college she went to (she was too good for any of the local schools, where she could have stayed at home), intending to pack her up and bring her back-and then she'd said she wasn't coming back. Just like that. She didn't want to come home. And Daddy had just stood there like some castrated bull-calf, letting a bunch of girls tell him what he could and couldn't do with his own daughter.

It *was* a bunch of girls, too, even though some of them pretended to be guys...That English faggot, cleaning his glasses and standing behind those two girls; and that other pretty boy, the one who'd threatened him when he started toward Tara-when he'd had the balls to do what their daddy apparently wouldn't do, which was to remind Tara how things were in the Maclay family. But that guy had piped up all cocky-like and taken him by surprise. That's why he'd stopped so dead in his tracks; he'd been caught off-guard. It wouldn't have happened twice, though. He wished he'd had another chance before their daddy turned like a whipped dog, with his tail all tucked between his legs, and headed out of the shop. The only real man in that whole shop besides him was that other English guy with the greased-back hair and fancy leather jacket. He'd stepped up and smacked Tara, but all that had done was prove that Tara didn't have any demon in her.

He'd suspected as much for awhile now. It just didn't add up. But that didn't mean that Tara had any right to speak that way to her family, and just turn her back like she was too good for any of them. If Daddy said she should pack up and come home, she should have done it. Instead, what

happened? They were driving back to Cold Springs in the dead of night and Tara was still at her fancy-ass college. She was probably laughing at them right now, the little bitch.

It wasn't right.

"This first one is...I hope it's OK with you, sweetie." With a slight air of trepidation, Willow handed Tara an envelope. In it was a card which read, *In honor of the remarkable woman who raised the remarkable woman I love, a donation has been made to the National Breast Cancer Foundation in your name.* As Willow watched, tears slid past Tara's lids and trickled slowly down her face.

"Was that alright for me to do, Tara? I mean, I know I didn't know her, not directly-"

"Willow, it's the most wonderful thing you could have done, to honor my mother like that. I-I can't tell you what it means to me that you even thought of such a thing. And knowing you, it doesn't surprise me a bit." She said this last piece with a little smile.

"I'm so glad, Baby. I just wanted to do something to-to remember her; to thank her for you." Willow pulled Tara close to her and kissed her almost reverently.

"She would have loved you, you know."

He'd guessed his mother wasn't a demon, but that hadn't made him love her any more. Not that he figured she cared or even noticed, she was always smiling at her little "Bright Eyes" and sharing secret jokes with her. Oh, she hugged him and told him she loved him, but he knew she kept some special store of love just for Tara, like the good silver that you take out for the company that matters. Not for him. Those two shared the magic; he knew they did, even though Daddy had told his wife never to practice it again. He knew his Momma had shared secrets with Tara that she would never tell him. He wasn't special enough, or sweet enough, or whatever enough. He'd told himself he wouldn't cry when she died and he was surprised at how easy it was to keep that promise.

"OK, pick one: left or right?"

Tara was a little perplexed by the instructions, because Willow hadn't extended two closed hands. She was pushing her chest forward, wriggling her shoulders back and forth.

"You mean I should pick either your left breast or your right breast?" Tara's eyebrows were close to receding completely into her hairline with the extent of her bemusement.

"That's my brilliant birthday girl! Your final two gifts await you, deep within the confines of my bra." Willow had never really imagined herself as a saucy wench before, but she was warming to the idea immensely.

"Yes! It's Willow-breasts! I'll take Doors Number One *and* Two, please!" So saying, Tara scooped up Willow around the waist and wrestled her back onto the bed, where she reached around to the back of Willow's dress and began to unzip it. After considerable tumbling and wrestling and kiss-and-grin rolling about, the two had managed to get each other's dresses off and were laying on the bed in a tangle of arms and legs. Finally, Willow sat up and once more wriggled her breasts, hidden within her dark-green silk bra, in Tara's face.

"Left or right, sweetie-what'll it be?"

"Don't rush me, don't rush me...Lemme see if I can get any hints here." She reached out and slowly cupped Willow's right breast in one hand, and then did the same to her left, massaging her through the soft fabric. Willow's laughter stilled, and her gaze turned darker, but she still smiled with self-satisfaction. Tara could feel Willow's nipples hardening under her fingers. She felt something else, too-tiny slips of paper, each folded over once or perhaps twice, tucked into each cup of Willow's bra.

"I think I'll try...the left one." With that, she slid the strap of silk down over Willow's bare shoulder and then eased her fingers under the fabric, rolling the nipple quickly between her finger and thumb before sliding her fingers under the small, warm breast. She held Willow's gaze while she retrieved the folded piece of paper, looking away finally to read its contents.

I've been studying a little bit about deep muscle massage. I'd like to show you what I've learned.

"Oh, sweetie-you've been reading about massage? So you could give me one?" Tara's eyes lit up with child-like surprise. Willow looked at her with a fierce, almost aching protectiveness.

She's still surprised that I love her as much as she loves me. Goddess, please help me make her see how completely right that is. Aloud, she said, "I know how much your back and neck ache when you've been studying for a long time. I wanna help make it better."

"But to take the time to learn about it, Willow...You could've easily given me a certificate for a massage."

"Yeah, well, I also wasn't crazy about the idea of somebody else putting their hands all over you. I mean, at the risk of sounding all cave-dyke, I wanna be the only person making you sigh when they touch you." She grinned, but it was true. "Now, m'lady-your last gift of the evening." With that, she squeezed her right breast, massaging the nipple to hardness as Tara watched and parted her lips with anticipation.

"I think I'll try a different means of access this time," Tara murmured. She reached behind Willow and unsnapped her bra, holding the right strap loosely in her hand as she brought her mouth slowly down to Willow's breast. She gently nuzzled the fabric back with her lips, pausing

to take the nipple into her mouth and caress it fully between her tongue and teeth. Willow closed her eyes, pulling Tara's mouth tighter against her. Finally, Tara released her nipple and slid the strap lower down her shoulder until she could take the slip of paper between her lips.

"And what have we here?" she asked softly.

You have a gift certificate waiting for you at Sappho's Samplings. I'll be more than happy to help you with your selections.

"Sweetie, is this a lesbian bookstore? I've never heard of it, but it sounds wonderful!"

Willow paused briefly. "It's not exactly a bookstore, Baby. It specializes in more...*applied* aspects of lesbian life." She adopted what she hoped was a very salacious leer.

Tara stared at her in confusion for a moment, before her features cleared with the force of a sandblasting and her eyebrows shot skyward as if catapulted. "Oh my God, Willow...Are you saying-is this a sex shop?"

"I think they prefer the term 'Merchants of Pleasure,' but yeah, you have the right idea." Willow had never known that gift giving could have such wonderful payoffs-and this was before they had even gone to the shop.

"I thought we could just browse a little bit; you know, be informed consumers. And then when you knew what you most wanted, we could make our final selections." As Tara continued to gape at her, Willow grew slightly concerned. She knew that her lover was no prude, but maybe this had been a little *too* saucy. "Tara, is this OK? Have I offended you, or made you uncomfortable?"

Finally, Tara gave a shaky laugh. "Oh, no, sweetie...I'm just wondering if I'll come in my pants right now thinking about going into that shop with you."

Smiling with immense relief, Willow leaned forward and kissed Tara's hand. "No, sweet birthday girl, don't do that. Don't keep all those wonderful spasms and groans and tastes to yourself. Share them with me, OK? Share the wealth, oh Wondrous Hot Mama Most Divine."

And Tara, because she was by nature such an incredibly giving person, did just that. It was approximately three hours later that they finally used their bed for sleeping.

At about that same time, Donnie was settling into his bed with the same surly look slashed across his face.

Tara may have been the one going to college; she may have been the one with the grades and scholarships; but he wasn't stupid. He noticed things. And the thing he'd noticed most that night was the way the redhead protected Tara, and the way the two of them looked at each other.

He stared into the darkness and thought about this knowledge.

"Hey Baby, you almost ready? We're supposed to meet everybody at the Magic Shop to talk about the latest demon debacles and denouements. Giles sounded extra British when he called, so it must be exciting."

Tara emerged from the bathroom, smiling as she pulled a brush through her hair. "I'm good to go. Just gotta put on my shoes."

Watching Tara slide her boots up over her long legs, Willow murmured, "Yes, you certainly are good. To go, or eat in. Or eat out. And I cannot believe I'm saying such things. But I'm saying them, so I really should believe it. Otherwise I'm in a state of denial and that's no good for demon fighting or lezbo lovin'."

"Sweetie, I can't hear what you're saying. Do you need help with something?"

"Later on. I'll definitely need your help with something later on." As she pulled on her windbreaker, she added, "I wanna stop for mochas, OK?"

"OK, but let's hurry. I don't want to be late for the Scooby meeting."

Willow smiled at the words. After the scene in the Magic Box last night, Tara had finally realized just how much a part of the gang she truly was. *She's my family, and now she's family to the rest of my family. It seems like a different lifetime, that girl with no friends except Xander.*

She walked up to Tara and looked at her seriously, cupping Tara's face in her hands. "Do you know how much I love you? And how much I want you? Do you have any idea what you do to my body and soul?"

Tara's eyes softened, if that were possible, as she gently kissed each of Willow's palms. "I'm learning. And every thing I learn makes me realize how lucky I am." She leaned forward and kissed Willow softly, her lips full against Willow's. After a moment she leaned back, smiling slightly. "Now let's send your brain into an even faster whirl, shall we? Mochas for my mucho mentating mama."

Nathan Maclay sipped his black coffee in silence, his jaw seemingly as tight as it had been on the silent drive the night before. He disdained any kind of sweetening for his coffee: he drank it to absorb the caffeine, not to luxuriate in it as if it were some kind of confection.

Cousin Beth scooped sausage links out of a cast-iron skillet, the grease popping with each exit. She edged them onto a platter and carried it over to the table where her uncle and Donnie sat.

Donnie was guzzling his caffeine in the form of a Coke. He took in the scene around him and felt the sour, acrid taste of humiliation burn in his mouth. He and his daddy had kept up the house as best they could for the past year and a half, but they shouldn't have had to do it at all. Last night Beth had offered to move in and help out, and she would fill in as long as they needed her. At least one Maclay woman knew where she belonged. He chewed on his anger a moment longer, and then decided to test the waters.

"I don't know about you all, but that whole scene last night seemed mighty odd to me." His father's mouth twitched slightly, but he said nothing. Beth, though, jumped in as if on cue, although Donnie noticed that she kept an eye on his father, hoping to gauge and avoid any displeasure if possible.

"You're certainly not the only one, Donnie. I tried telling her how selfish she was being, but she didn't care a bit. All she cared about were those *friends* of hers." She said the word "friends" as if tasting something bitter and trying to spit it back out.

"Yeah, looks like Little Miss Wallflower went and got all social on us. Used to ride the bus with her head down, too scared to look at anybody. And now-"

"Now she's too good for us," Beth finished. "Now she's too concerned about what her friends will think to remember the man who raised her." She cast a doting look at her uncle, who still gazed straight ahead, seemingly oblivious to the conversation.

"You know, didn't it seem like she was...like she was 'specially close to that one girl? The red-head who sassed you when you told her to butt out, Daddy?" Nathan Maclay said nothing, but Beth's gimlet eyes narrowed at his words. Donnie waited, and then pressed on. "I mean, it just seems like those two was tighter'n the rest of 'em. Seemed to me that the red-head-what was her name? Willow?-seemed to me that she was all protective of Tara, more'n the others."

"And what kind of name is 'Willow,' anyway?" Beth snorted. "Her parents are probably New Age weirdos or something."

Donnie hesitated, not wanting to get slapped down like he had been on the ride last night. He knew that his daddy wouldn't stand for him talking about Tara as if *he* were her parent. He needed to move slowly here.

"Well, I think a *lot* of last night was weird. That whole gang, and Tara having that Willow girl actin' like her knight in shinin' armor. I bet Tara wouldn't done any of that if those people hadn't put those ideas in her head."

Nathan Maclay exhaled sharply, catching Donnie by surprise. He turned and looked at his son. "Donald, if you want to say something come out with it. Otherwise, just keep your opinions to yourself."

Donnie weighed his words carefully. He took a moment to assemble his face into his best imitation of brotherly concern.

"I'm sayin', Daddy, that I think Tara's gotten herself involved with the wrong crowd. And-and I think I owe it to her as her brother to try to talk some sense into her."

Nathan Maclay's eyes narrowed. "Just what are you suggesting?"

"I think I oughtta go back down there in a few days, just me, and see if I can help her see things straight."

"All I'm saying is that priapism, as a vengeance technique, isn't as rewarding as, say, making someone's tongue dissolve slowly into worms." Anya's pronouncement as Willow and Tara were entering the Magic Box evoked immediate grimaces of distaste from both of them.

Giles looked up with thinly-veiled irritation. "Anya, I don't really expect you to understand the...*nuances* of that punishment. After all, you are a woman; moreover, you have no grasp of anything even remotely akin to common decency or decorum. However, I maintain that it *was* a profoundly disturbing event to the man unto whom you visited said vengeance and that the scorned woman who invoked you did indeed put Hell's fury to shame in wishing what she did."

"So, is this the reason for the come-hither?" Willow asked Buffy. "To watch this week's edition of 'Face the Damn-nation'?"

"Got me, Will. Anya was talking about the good ol' millennia and this time when she granted someone's wish that her cheating fiancé would develop pipe vision, or whatever it is. What is it, anyway?" She looked at Willow expectantly.

Willow sighed reluctantly. "Priapism-it's a condition in which a man's penis stays erect no matter what he does; or who he does." Tara's look of distaste was directly proportionate to Xander's sudden expression of pleasure.

"And that's a problem? I mean, couldn't he just...you know, *please* his woman longer?" He leaned back with a barely-disguised smile of satisfaction.

"First of all, Xander, he might also be interested in pleasing his *man*, to use your lovely term of ownership. And second of all, we're not talking five minutes instead of four here, we're talking days, weeks...even years, if it's a curse."

"Which it most certainly was," Anya said proudly. "I mean, the clothing implications alone were excruciating. It just wasn't as satisfying to *me*. Not the sound and fury that I like."

"You mean *liked*, right?" Xander's tone had a worried edge to it. "As in, 'When I was much, much younger, I liked to wear my Bat-Man underwear on my head, but I don't anymore.'"

"Of course, silly," Anya said, leaning over to kiss him. Straightening, she winked at the three women across from her and smiled ...*disconcertingly*, was the adverb Willow finally settled on.

As she and Tara slid onto the short bench at the table, Tara asked quietly, "Xander wore his underwear on his head?"

"You don't want to know what he did with his hat," Willow murmured with a shake of her head.

"Now that we're all here, let us turn our attention, however reluctantly, away from genital vengeance and ill-advised headwear," Giles suggested. "In the name of the greater good, of course."

"You're a noble soul, thankless Watcher," Buffy said solemnly.

"So what's new in the world of unspeakable evil?" Willow leaned forward expectantly. So long as she focused primarily on the problems of thwarting Big Bads, she found the mental challenge to be exhilarating. It was like the most demanding, exacting homework she had ever faced, assigned on a near-weekly basis. It practically made her giddy.

The problem was when she let herself think about the full extent of that evil, and what would happen if they didn't thwart it. Because now, in addition to her own life (in which she had, she thought, a healthy self-interest) and the lives of her friends, she was also committed to making the world safe for the one person whose safety mattered above all else. The stakes had been raised so high as to make her dizzy when she took in their full scope. Now she knew the world had Tara in it and thus it was even more worth saving. Tara herself...well, it was simply the greatest truth in Willow's life that Tara be safe and happy.

She shook herself out of her reverie and focused on Giles, who was pacing the room with obvious agitation.

"It appears we have a particularly heinous form of evil on our hands," the anxious Watcher was saying.

"As opposed to what-a particularly *enjoyable* form of evil?" Xander countered, eyebrows arched skeptically.

"I'll grant that the adjective is always applicable, but I assure you that the adverb is most well-considered in this case," Giles replied with a slight air of exhaustion.

"And he just said...what?"

"Evil always bad. This evil *really* bad," Willow explained.

"Gotcha."

"As I was trying to say, with some modicum of clarity, we appear to be facing a creature who may well dwarf any demon we've previously encountered with regard to sheer power and malignancy."

Buffy crossed her arms. "And this evil answers to the name of...lemme see....Bill."

"Actually, her name appears to be Glory."

Part 2

"Donald, are you suggesting that you drive back to Tara's alone and try to change her mind?"

Donnie leaned forward, peering earnestly into his father's hard, skeptical eyes. *Listen to me, Daddy. Just let me take care of this the way it shoulda been.* "Daddy, you know it ain't right that Tara's up there by herself, away from her family. She needs us. Heck, forget the demon thing-"

Nathan Maclay looked up sharply, his mouth tightening dangerously. Donnie knew he'd made a mistake venturing into that territory. He backpedaled quickly, trying to find a new route,

"I mean, we all know that Tara's a quiet girl. We were worried about her when she set off to that big school, with all those uppity city kids and her not knowing the first thing about their world. And now look-she's fell in with God-knows-what kinda people..."

"Watch your language, Donald. I'll not have you taking the Lord's name in vain like that."

Yeah, that's right, Daddy. You make sure everybody talks nice and I'll go out and take care of business. "I'm sorry, Daddy. I just get so angry when I think about any of them folks taking advantage of Tara. I mean, she didn't have hardly any friends in school, you know that. The way I figure, she was easy picking for a bunch of slick, wealthy kids who wanted some nice country girl to play around with and lead into all the wrong kinds of places."

Cousin Beth was watching all of this unfold with a keen interest that she tried to disguise as family concern. She thought she knew where Donnie was going with this, and wondered whether he could sell that particular horse at this particular market. She watched, and maintained a tactical silence.

"What are you saying? You think Tara doesn't know what she's doing?" Nathan Maclay's voice was edged with disbelief.

"I ain't sayin' she's been brainwashed, not exactly." Donnie was gathering confidence in his plan, and he spoke with increasing surety and persuasiveness. "I'm just sayin' that the girl we just left doesn't seem much like the girl we all know. The one you raised, Daddy," he added significantly.

Nathan Maclay was silent for a moment. "I admit, Tara was a different person than the girl who left home two years ago..."

"A *very* different person," Donnie nodded emphatically. "Heck, we all know Tara a lot better than those folks do, and we know she just doesn't act like that."

Cousin Beth ventured into the arena cautiously. "I agree with Donnie," she offered tentatively. "The Tara we know isn't that selfish, rebellious girl we saw last night. She's always been so quiet and thoughtful."

"I don't know," Nathan Maclay muttered. "I don't like her behavior any more than either of you. I'm her father, after all-"

"And she acted like you were just some person she could say whatever she wanted to," Donnie interjected. "Does that seem like Tara?"

"No, it doesn't. She's never spoken to me like that."

"That's 'cause she's changed, Daddy. Those folks she calls her friends-especially that Willow girl-they've gotten her all turned around. They've made her forget who she is and where she belongs. She's lost, Daddy, and I think she needs us."

"Donald, you can't just go up there and drag her back with you. Much as I hate to admit this, she's an adult. We can't force her to come home."

Donnie's eyes widened with feigned horror. "You think I'd try to *force* her? Daddy, I'm talkin' about trying to get through to her, helpin' her see that we're worried about her. I'd never try to *force* her to do anything." He hoped his appalled expression hid his amusement at the hypocrisy of them both. If his daddy didn't know he'd beat up on Tara since she was old enough to walk, it was because he didn't want to know. And besides, Donnie was pretty sure the old man had roughed up Tara himself on at least one occasion. *He'd better have. He sure gave his belt a workout on me.*

He waited as patiently as he could for his daddy to make up his mind. Finally, he played his trump card.

"Can you imagine what it would do to Mama to know that Tara was being taken advantage of?"

It was a direct hit, and he knew it the second he shot. Nathan Maclay sat up even straighter in his chair, and his eyes took on a haunted look.

She had you whipped, didn't she Daddy? Even though you talked all big and laid down the law, you still wanted her to pat your head and tell you she loved you, didn't you? You think I didn't hear you cryin', Daddy, that night she died? Like a big baby you were.

Finally Nathan Maclay raised his eyes to meet his son's. "I think the sooner you can get to Tara, the better."

"Glory? What kind of name is that?" Buffy shook her head and frowned.

Willow thought that the same question could as easily be asked about Buffy's name. In fact, it had been. She also thought that this was probably not a good time to make that point.

"Yeah," she interjected aloud. "What's with all the religious nomenclature? We've battled Angel, Faith, Adam, and now there's this Glory beast. Who's next-the Virgin Mary?"

"Will, you're Jewish," Xander pointed out. "Do you really believe in the Virgin Mary?"

"Hello, making an amusing point here. Would like to be allowed to throw out ironic observations without somebody fussing over the picky details."

"Sorry."

"It does seem odd," Tara piped up. "You'd think at least one of these things would have a name like 'Agony' or 'Blinding Terror.'"

"Yeah, or 'Hatred,' or 'Envy,'" Buffy offered.

"Or even something like 'General Bad Hooey.'" Xander added.

"Do you mean 'General' as in a military designation? Or as a modifier for 'Bad Hooey'?" Willow asked. "'cause I think you mean it as a modifier, but it's also kinda funny to think of it the other way: 'General Bad Hooey, reporting for duty.'"

"Yes, well, if we survive this perhaps we can adopt a little orphan demon ourselves and name it as we see fit. Until such time, shall we focus on the matter at hand?" Giles never found these detours as entertaining as they all did, Willow thought sadly.

"It appears," the Watcher continued, "that this creature is immune to any of the means of slaying that we've come to know as universal."

"Which pretty much negates the 'universal' aspect of slaying," Buffy commented. "Anya, you ever hear of anything like this?"

Anya was visibly delighted to be consulted, and she assumed an even more authoritative air than usual.

"Well, let's look at this logically, shall we?" She looked at the perplexed faces gazing back at her, and sniffed with resentment. "Honestly, you people all think that just because I specialize in visceral things like vengeance and orgasms, I'm completely lacking in the cerebral proficiency department."

"OK, our mistake," Buffy offered placatingly. "You're a sexual dynamo *and* a veritable Rose Scholar."

"That's *Rhodes* Scholar," Willow murmured helpfully, noting as she did the pained expression on Giles' face.

"The point is," Anya continued, "we're talking about Glory as this very particular kind of demon with all kinds of extra-powerful demony qualities: stronger than any other demon; more cunning than any other demon. But she doesn't share the one thing that *all* demons share: very specific ways of being killed. So we have to ask ourselves-

"...will Anya come to the point of this discourse sometime before the country realizes that it has elected an idiot for President?" Giles looked at the former vengeance demon with exasperation.

"The point, Mr. 'I'm So Smart I Blew Up My Last Place of Employment,' is that maybe this Glory creature isn't a demon at all."

Stunned silence greeted this new consideration.

"So what would she be?" Tara finally ventured.

Anya looked at her. "That would seem to be the question, wouldn't it?"

Donnie allowed himself a grin of self-congratulation as he pulled out of the Maclay driveway and onto the first of several small roads that would eventually lead him back to Tara. Nathan Maclay had insisted he take the camper again, in what Donnie recognized as a vote of confidence. His daddy believed that Donnie would help Tara come to her senses; help her see that she belonged with the people who raised her, who knew her best and knew what was best *for* her.

His daddy believed that Donnie would talk to Tara.

Donnie, though, saw himself as more of an action kind of guy, and the way he saw it, he had lots of action to take with Tara.

He smiled to himself.

And as long as he was in the neighborhood, he might see what kind of action he could have with that Willow girl.

"Tara? Are you almost ready?"

"Just about. I'm almost all dressed."

"Good. We don't want to be late for such a big day, do we?" She heard the light, quick sound of footsteps on the stairs, and then the beloved face was smiling at her from the doorway of her room.

"Well hello there, Bright Eyes! Look at you, all dressed up!"

"And I p-picked out my favorite dress, M-Mommy. See? It's the one with the p-purple flowers on it."

"I see. You know, I finished that dress in a week, but I took three extra days just to sew all the love into it."

"You did?" Sometimes her Mommy joked and sometimes she was completely serious even if what she said sounded a lot *like* a joke.

"Oh yes...Look close. See this hem-line right here?" She pointed to the right sleeve. "This one I went over twice and the whole time, I was saying, 'Isn't Tara the cutest thing? Isn't Tara the cutest thing?' And then I went over the left arm twice, saying, 'Why, yes she is! Why, yes she is!'" Tara giggled at the image. "And this pocket I sewed over the heart? I sewed that extra strong because of all the good stuff you have inside *your* heart. I wanted to make sure it was always safe and warm."

Tara looked down at the gold thread laced through the rich blue fabric. Then she gazed back up at her mother, cocking her head slightly to one side. "You really d-did that?"

"Sweetie, if I could sew you happiness and a brand new car I'd thread up a needle right now."

"Mommy, you know I c-can't drive!"

"Then I guess it's just as well, huh? We don't want a seven-year-old out runnin' around in a blue suede car, knockin' over mailboxes and scarin' the neighbors, do we?" Her mother's laugh, swirling about her head and settling down around her heart, made Tara think of the foam at the very top of a fresh cup of cocoa, and socks just out of the dryer on a cold morning. She leaned in close, smelling her mother's Jergen's hand lotion and some other scent that she thought must be unique to her mommy alone.

"I can't believe you're already seven, pretty girl. And it's Saturday, so we get the whole day to celebrate. We're gonna go into town and look in all the windows and then we're gonna go out to eat. Somebody else is gonna cook *and* wash all those dishes!"

"What about Daddy and Donnie?" Tara didn't really want them to come. Her stutter always got worse and food never tasted as good when there were so many pitfalls awaiting her. Donnie was always laughing at her, and pinching her when their parents weren't looking; and Daddy always seemed like he was upset at her about something, even though she tried to keep from saying anything, so she couldn't figure out what she'd done. But if they *were* going to be there, she didn't want to get her hopes up.

Her mother seemed to fumble for words for just a moment. But her mommy was never confused about what to say, not like she always was. Maybe she was imagining it.

"Well, they have work to do here. They've got some fence to fix and some more feed to grind. This is going to be a special, all-girls day! Besides, we'll have cake and ice cream back here later on."

Tara didn't really care what the reason was. She could relax, at least for the day, because it was just her and her mother and nothing too bad could happen to her like that.

On her way out to the car, holding her mother's hand, Tara spied Donnie peering at her from the driveway of the barn. She started to hold up a hand to wave, feeling almost bad that she was getting to go on a special trip, but then she saw how he was looking at her. She let her hand drop, and stared down at her dress-up black patent shoes until she climbed into the safety of the Ford Fairlane.

"OK, maybe it's just me, but do you ever find yourself wondering if Anya makes up about half of the stuff that she claims to have done? You know, reliving and maybe embellishing the gory days?"

"Willow, Sweetie, what does it matter? I mean, my Grandpa Jack used to say that he'd killed a mountain lion with his Bowie knife when he was younger, but Mom told me that it was actually a coyote, with his rifle and a scope. But who wants to argue the point?"

Willow plopped the bag of groceries on the counter. "I know...It's just that sometimes I could swear she does it for shock value."

"Well of course she does. After everything the Scoobies have done and seen, do you really think she can make an impact on any of you by going all Understatement Girl?"

Willow tugged her scarf from around her neck and tossed it lightly over Tara's shoulders, letting it settle to her waist before using it to pull Tara close to her.

She heard Tara laugh softly. "No need to rope me, you butch rancher babe. You got me eating out of your hand." Tara's lips, warm and soft, nuzzled against her ear and Willow's smile caught on the edge of a sudden heat that seemed to make further conversation-at least here in the kitchen-an unwelcome delay.

"Can we leave dinner for right now? Actually, can we leave everything except each other for right now?" Willow felt herself blushing slightly. She still battled an occasional sense of vulnerability for how much she wanted Tara sexually. Last week, in the middle of the Magic Box, they had all been discussing Xander's recent identity crisis (Anya was still angry that she hadn't been granted her "Two for One" Orgasm Special) and Willow found herself completely unable to follow the conversation. Tara was wearing a new dress-dark blue with a deep gold

bodice-and Willow thought that it was utterly impossible that anyone could think about anything but Tara. In fact, she secretly expected that every one of them, including Anya and Buffy, would eventually call a halt to the meeting and ask Tara for permission to kiss her on the lips. Tara herself was warming her hands around a cup of Earl Gray, her long fingers interlacing. *Lucky porcelain*, Willow thought enviously. As she tilted her head slightly, looking up at Xander, Tara's blond hair spilled over her shoulder and slid down over one breast. *Tara's breasts. They're so round and perfect and smooth. I wish I could touch them right now. I wish I could just make everyone go away and stretch her out over the table and slide the hem of her dress really slowly up over her thighs, 'cause she loves it when I tease her, and-*

"...don't you think, Will?" Xander was looking at her expectantly. Willow thought quickly. If Xander was saying it, odds were it was wrong. But generalizations were always tricky...

"Xander, the most important thing is what *you* think," she'd finally replied, in a masterful display of saying nothing. That seemed to satisfy the easily-disgruntled carpenter, though. And then she'd caught Tara's eye. *Busted*, she realized, knowing that Tara would have sensed her mental absence and deciphered her slight flush. But oh, it had been worth it, because not long after that Tara had asked for her help on the upper level, and there, tucked behind the relative camouflage of a display stand, had invited Willow to kiss her and touch her as freely as she dared as a preview of coming attractions. And the coming, later that evening, had been so very attractive, indeed.

Looking into Tara's eyes now, feeling naked to her soul and dismissing the pride required in trying to hide, Willow saw the answering warmth spark and take form in that fathomless blue.

"Yeah, Sweetie; dinner can definitely wait. I, on the other hand, cannot." Thus was Willow led back to their bedroom and sustenance of a more sensual nature shared.

The young man's fingers flew over the keyboard with the surety of experience. Barely looking up, he asked politely, "And what brings you to Sunnydale, if I might ask?"

"Very important family business." Yeah, he could sound all formal if he needed to.

"Oh-I do hope that it's nothing too difficult." The eyes flickered up briefly before scanning the computer screen.

"Well, you know family...Can't live with 'em, can't shoot 'em." Donnie's chuckle was greeted with a surprised glance, and then an awkward smile. The clerk looked back at the screen.

"Yes, we do have rooms available tonight, sir. Smoking or non-smoking?"

"Don't make no never-mind to me," Donnie grinned obligingly. He could get used to being called "sir."

"And how many nights will you be staying with us?"

Donnie looked at the young man earnestly. "As long as it takes."

Much later, sitting on the couch with matching mugs of hot chocolate, their conversation turned back to the subject of Glory.

"Tara, do you think Anya's right? That this Glory wench isn't a demon?"

"I don't know." Graceful fingers ran lightly through Willow's hair as Willow snuggled down and rested her head on Tara's shoulder. "I mean, we don't even know what this whole 'Key' business is about. But Mr. Giles seemed more upset than I think I've ever seen him."

"Me either...well, except for the night Miss Calendar was killed." She felt her heart squeeze suddenly at the memory of that night, the ringing of the phone in Buffy's kitchen.

"Poor Mr. Giles," Tara murmured softly. After a few moments, she asked, "Do you think the Key is an actual, physical object?"

"Well, that would make the most sense, which probably guarantees that it isn't," Willow replied with a sigh. "We can narrow it down to a noun, which isn't terribly narrow."

"Well, you can key into something, but that just supports the idea of the noun."

"Can we safely leave out prepositions?" Willow wanted this particular universe bounded in some way, however ridiculously.

"Yes, we can. Prepositions, take heed: your services are not required."

Willow frowned. "I'll just feel better when I know what it is."

"Or where it is."

"Or who it is."

She was ten-done with single digits forever. She liked that idea. Now, every time she took one of those standardized tests that they gave out every year at school, she'd have to use two columns to indicate her age, and darken in two circles.

She ran downstairs, feet barely skimming the steps, and dashed into the kitchen. "Hey Mommy, c-can I help ice the cake?"

Her mother looked up, blue eyes sparking. Her daddy had blue eyes, too, but his always looked cold, like a winter sky just before it snowed. Everybody said she had her mommy's eyes, so she figured that must mean hers were warm, too.

"Now isn't that the funniest thing? I was just sittin' here thinking, 'You know, as soon as that cake cools a bit more, I'm gonna need some help icing it. But who can I get?' And no sooner do I think it than my beautiful ten-year-old shows up. Now that's what I call luck!"

Tara giggled. She was pretty sure her mommy hadn't been thinking anything like that, but it was fun to think of her sitting there, wishing for somebody just like Tara herself. Her smile dimmed slightly when she thought of her mommy calling her beautiful. She wanted to tell her that she didn't have to say it just to be nice; that she knew better than that. But that might hurt her feelings...She should just let it drop.

Edging over to the counter, she looked at her birthday cake and grinned hugely: chocolate, just like every year. And every year, her mommy made a special butter frosting that draped over the wonderful creation like a royal cape.

"Can I lick the bowl?"

"Unless there's some new birthday tradition I don't know about, you certainly can. Donnie did last month, remember?"

Tara remembered. She remembered how he'd told her, after supper, that he'd let her have a spatula's worth if she did his chores the next morning. But Tara had realized that as much as she loved her mother's special icing, she didn't want to share a bowl or a spatula or anything else that Donnie had already started on. And so she'd shaken her head no, eyes wide with misgiving. Donnie had glared at her, and then hissed, "Just as well. You're too big anyway. Everybody knows it." Tara didn't really think that was true. She was tall, and strong, that was true, but there wasn't anything wrong with that.

Was there?

Now, wondering yet again if being nice to her brother might make him be nice to her, she said quietly, "Maybe I should give Donnie half of it."

Her mother looked up with a strange expression on her face. When she spoke, she did so very slowly, as if being extra-careful with her words. *She only does that when she talks about Donnie or Daddy*, Tara realized.

"Bright Eyes, I think you're about the sweetest child Heaven ever saw fit to put on this earth. And if you wanna share something with another person, well, I won't ever tell you not to. But...Well, some people have a hard time sharing. It's like they never feel like they get what they deserve. And it kinda takes the fun out of sharin' with them, you know? Oh, honey, I'm probably not makin' any sense at all."

Tara felt her mind tilt slightly. *She doesn't want you to share the icing with Donnie. And she doesn't think she can tell you exactly why.*

She blinked rapidly, and tried to focus on her mommy's face. She'd had those little voices before: they were kind of her voice, but kind of different, too. The thing is, she didn't really recognize anybody else's voice in there.

"Will you help me with the icing then, Mommy? Just a couple of licks," she added quickly. After all, it was the best icing in the world, and there was only one bowl.

Her mother's laughter sprinkled down over her, and Tara was relieved to see that she didn't look worried anymore.

"Yeah, Bright Eyes, I think I can manage that."

Part 3

Tara's first class of the morning was an upper-level Art History course; it was probably the best course she'd ever taken. This would explain why she was so lost in her own thoughts as she descended the stairs outside the classroom building.

"Hello again, little sister. Miss me?"

He was standing so close behind her that her hair whipped his face as she spun around.

"Donnie! What are you doing back here?"

"I was just so lonesome at home without you." He grinned mockingly, enjoying the confusion and budding fear on her face.

"H-how did you know where I w-was?"

He looked at her for a long moment.

"Tara...Don't you know?" He smiled. "I'll always find you."

"Tara...Where you at? You know I'm gonna find you, Tara. Ain't no use tryin' to hide. Big brother always gets you sooner or later."

Don't breathe so hard. Quiet, just be quiet. He's bluffing.

"I think I'm gettin' closer, little sister."

Keep walking. Please keep walking.

"Let's see now...Maybe you're tucked in here behind these hay bales. Am I right, little sister?"

He thinks I told Mom. He's going to kill me.

"I thought so."

"You know, this is two days in a row you haven't given me a proper greeting. Didn't we raise you with any manners, Tara?" That grin-it seemed to paint everything around him in garish tones of ugliness and dread. She took an instinctual step back.

"It's enough to make a person think you don't care about your own brother."

Stand up straight. You're taller than him when you do, and you know he hates that. "Donnie, I think everything was pretty clear after my birthday. What are you doing back in Sunnydale?"

"Well, Tara, me and Dad and Cousin Beth got to talking, and we're just awful worried about you." His grin remain fixed, though his eyes narrowed slightly. "You know, the magic and...the other things you're into."

He knows. Damn him, he always knows. She summoned up the image of Willow's face, calming herself briefly. "Donnie, I don't know what you're talking about, but I'm almost certain it doesn't involve Edwardian England, and that's what I have to focus on right now."

"Off to another class so soon? Ain't you the little bookworm...Tell me, little sister, with all this studyin' you do, where did you find time to meet all those people? I mean, all of 'em just standin' up for you and tellin' you you don't have to go home. They sure do care about you, don't they?"

"Donnie, what's this all about? Where's Dad?"

"Oh, I made this little trip on my own. Daddy knows about it; I talked him into it."

Tara felt her stomach tighten. Somehow, Donnie on his own felt even worse. *Dad always looks like he's mad at me, but Donnie...Donnie just hates me.*

"I just told him how weird it was for you to be actin' all independent and rebellious. I told him I figured it was on account of your...*friends*." He tilted his head slightly.

Someday I will wipe that grin off of your face and Aradia herself won't be able to help you find it. "Donnie, I'm not sure what your grand scheme is, but I'm still not leaving, so why don't you get back in the camper and head home?"

He took a step forward. Tara willed herself to hold her ground.

"Maybe I'd just like to meet your friends; get to know them a little bit. After all, they do seem to carry a lot of weight with my little sister. Gotta make sure they're OK, don't I?"

Don't answer him. Don't light on that web. "Donnie, I don't have time for this. I'm going to class. I don't want to talk to you again, not for a long time." She turned to leave.

He continued as if she hadn't spoken. "Yeah, gotta make sure you're not hanging around with the wrong folks. It's my brotherly duty, you know." He paused for a moment. "And I have to say, I 'specially wanna spend some more time with that Willow girl."

She stopped, but didn't turn around. Willing all of the calmness and strength into her voice that she could muster, she finally said, "Go home, Donnie. You don't belong here." As she walked off, she felt a dizzying mixture of dread, anger, and a shaken relief that she couldn't see the look that she knew covered his face.

At the very least he would never hit her in broad daylight on a college campus.

Willow fumbled in her backpack for a moment before finally locating her wallet. "This mocha's on me, Buffy. Just my way of saying that I'm the happiest person in the world."

"Willow, if doing this makes you happy, it makes *me* happy. In fact, think of how happy you'd be if you bought me that red sweater we saw at that little boutique last week. I mean, could the universe contain the happiness that that would bring you?"

"You know, Buffy, I have to say-we'll never find out!"

"It was worth a shot." Buffy stirred some highly redundant Sweet & Low into her mocha and blew gently over the foam for a moment. "So life with Tara is good?"

Willow shook her head slightly. "I can't even describe it, Buffy. I mean, sometimes I look at her and I get all googly-eyed and I think, 'She's my girlfriend. She's with me.' It still just blows me away."

"Yeah, you two were definitely making with the Lezziepalooza at her birthday party." She looked up guiltily. "Is it OK for me to say that?"

"Well, we usually call it the 'Wine Me, Dine Me, Sixty-Nine Me' Festival of Homos, but Lezziepalooza has a nice ring, too."

"Thanks for the visual. It'll probably pop up on my mental screen the next time I see Tara and I'll just spit out whatever's in my mouth at the time."

"Which will probably be Riley's tongue," Willow said with a thoughtful nod.

Buffy spluttered around her drink. "Oh my God, Will, I can't believe you just said that."

"Neither can I, but I wish I had a remote control so I could play that moment back 'cuz I gotta say, it was really fun!"

The two enjoyed a companionable silence for a moment. When Buffy spoke, her voice was markedly more somber. "You know, Tara's family gave me the creeps. How did someone like her come from people like that?"

"I'm pretty sure it was her mother. She still has a hard time talking about her, but it seems pretty clear that she shielded Tara a little bit, or at least she tried to."

Buffy seemed to choose her next words carefully. "Will, when Donnie started down the steps toward Tara...I'm thinking that's not the first time he's acted like that, was it?"

Willow could feel the muscles along her jaw-line tighten. "I'm pretty sure it wasn't. Tara talks even less about him than she does her mother. But I know that her dad beat her-really bad-one time, and I'd be willing to bet that Donnie learned from the best." She remembered listening to Tara describe the scars along her thighs from her father's belt, after he'd found her looking at one of her mother's magic books. She was nine at the time. Willow felt the anger rising up in her as it did whenever she thought about the men in Tara's family.

Buffy shook her head slowly. "What makes anybody think he has the right to beat a little girl?"

Willow could only sigh. "Whatever it is, I wish you could stake it and send it back to hell."

Willow. She had to get to Willow. As soon as she could find her at the Espresso Pump, things would be OK. Edwardian England was forgotten as Tara walked without a second thought past the building where the class met. Willow was meeting Buffy for coffee; they should still be there.

What in the goddess's name was Donnie doing back here? The relief she'd felt when they finally slunk out the door at the Magic Box had been exhilarating-no more secrets between her and Willow, no more dire warnings held over her head. She'd walked out into the night and thought that the air had never smelled so sweet, not in all her life. She was finally free...free to be a witch; free to be a lesbian; free to think for herself; free to love Willow.

And now Donnie was back. And he knew, somehow he knew, that she and Willow were lovers. *Could it really be that hard to spot, Tara, to anyone with eyes?* Maybe she'd assumed that it would never occur to them. It wasn't like Cold Springs hosted a yearly Queer March...But Donnie, with his eyes ever peeled for things that he could use against her, had figured it out.

But what can he do? Really? You're already out, and if he tells Dad...Well, that'll just be one more stick he can light at my feet as he burns me at the stake in his head-witch, ungrateful

daughter, homosexual. Faggots for a faggot, as it were. If she could just keep the old fear in check; if she could just remember that she wasn't there anymore, in that house that grew so cold after her mother had died.

She rounded the corner and neared the coffee shop. Goddess, why did the darkness keep coming back? She didn't want to say Donnie's name; she didn't want to give voice to all those old fears and shames and scars. Saying them made them real again; gave them new life in this life, bled into the picture she was painting of her and Willow and what they were building. She wanted the canvas of that life burned, destroyed.

Even talking about her mother was hard, but in a different way. That hurt so bad because she had to use the past tense: "Mom was so good at sewing"; "Mom always made the most incredible soup."

Why had the only part of her past that she wanted with her now been taken away, while the part she would most gladly give up was so determined to track her down and insinuate his way into her present?

She spied Willow and Buffy, huddled conspiratorially over a rickety table. *Probably talking about Glory and her new brand of evil.* How ironic that she felt most fully in the light as a result of being loved by someone who fought the worst kind of darkness. But it was true. Colors took on such incredible richness when she was with Willow; things tasted sweeter and laughter was fuller.

"Sweetie-Goddess, am I glad to see you. Hey Buffy," she added as an afterthought.

"So I'm not 'Sweetie'? Fine, be that way."

"Buff, you're sweet," Willow reassured her. "You're just not the titular 'Sweetie' in this case."

Buffy's expression defied easy description. "Um, Will-all about being the 'Straight But Not Narrow' friend here, but what do my breasts have to do with this?"

Willow's suspected that her expression, too, flouted the boundaries of any single adjective. "Buffy, 'titular' refers to a title. Not, um, other things that begin with that particular combination of letters."

"I knew that." Buffy's mocha became a source of deep fascination.

"Hey Baby! Don't you have history class right now?"

"Yeah, but...oh, shit." She sighed as both Willow and Buffy looked at her closely. Tara didn't swear very often.

"It's Donnie. He's back."

Willow and Buffy gaped at her. "'Back' as in, 'Back here'? In Sunnydale?" Willow asked, stunned.

Tara nodded. "He caught me coming out of my art class."

Willow stood, and suddenly looked considerably taller than she actually was. "Did he hurt you?"

"No, he just played with my mind." Tara sat down and tried to collect her thoughts. She felt Willow's hand glide reassuringly up her back until her thumb was making small circles on Tara's neck. "He reeled off some story about the three of them deciding that I wasn't being 'me,' and him deciding to come back up here to check on me. But Willow, I know Donnie. He's going to try to take me back home."

Buffy and Willow both spoke at once, their voices a jumble of indignation and protest. "Tara, he can't, right? I mean, there's nothing he can actually do, is there?" Buffy seemed equal parts bewildered and outraged at the temerity of Maclay *films*.

"Buffy's right, Tara. He can't just drag you back to Cold Springs against your will, right?"

Tara took a deep breath. "No, he can't. I-I don't know what he thinks he *can* do." She made herself sit taller in her seat. "We're not back on the farm. Things are different here, different now."

"Not the least of which are several people who will kick his ass to a sidewalk in Senegal if he dares lay a hand on you," Buffy offered hotly.

They want to protect you.

But so did Mom.

Tara tried to stay in the present, tried to remember where she was, and who she was.

"Baby, what do you wanna do?" Willow's voice, clear and filled with concern, pulled her back into focus.

"Right now, I want to go home-*our* home-and snuggle up while we talk through this."

"So, I'm guessing that that plan doesn't include me?" Buffy's voice broke into their temporary oblivion to her presence. Not for the first time, Willow found herself wondering just how exclusively Buffy really batted for the other team.

Tara laughed, a sure sign that she was feeling more secure. "Uh, no, but you do get the *title* of 'Honorary Sweetie' for being so, um sweet."

"OK." Buffy stood and wrapped her arms around Tara, who sank her head gratefully onto her shoulder for a brief moment. "I've got my cell phone; call me if you need anything."

"Right. Thanks, Buff," Willow replied, giving the Slayer a hug of her own. As Buffy walked off, Willow turned back to Tara.

"Let's go home, Baby."

That had gone pretty well, all things considered. Just the look on her face was enough to make the trip worthwhile.

Not that he was done, of course; he still had work to do.

Who was he kidding...It wasn't all work; it was also a lot of fun, a lot of satisfaction. He could feel it spreading over him like a fever.

Daddy wasn't around to interfere; and Momma sure wasn't either. *The freedom of college life, isn't that what they call it?* He was liking it quite a bit.

He was about to pay off some old debts, and the feeling that rolled through him at the thought made him almost giddy.

"Baby, I'm so sorry you had to go through that alone. I just wish I'd been with you when you came out of class."

They were curled up in bed, Tara's head resting on Willow's shoulder. Willow was struggling to serve the presently-opposing gods of both comforting Tara and ripping Donnie's throat out.

"Willow, sweetie, you can't be with me all the time. And you shouldn't be," she added, interrupting Willow's protests. "In the first place, it's not healthy, and in the second place, we'd never get any work done because we'd be making love all the time."

"Leaving aside the first argument, explain to me the problem with the second." She felt Tara smile against her skin.

"I'm not afraid of Donnie physically attacking me in front of other people. He's a coward at heart, I know that. Remember how he reacted when Xander made fun of his beard at the Magic Shop? God, I wish I had his expression at that moment on film."

"Yeah, it was pretty classic. But Tara, are you sure? He seemed so...*ugly* when he was here. And from what you've told me," she added tentatively.

"He's definitely not here to enroll in a social work program, that's for sure. I just wish I knew what he *was* up to."

Willow paused, then decided to give voice to what she'd been thinking about for much of their time in bed.

"Baby, why don't you talk much about Donnie? I mean, I get that he's probably a really painful subject for you; that's pretty clear. It's just that...well, we tell each other everything about every other topic under the sun, and I don't want to seem pushy or be all Intrusive-Girl, but it seems like he was definitely a big part of your past and, well..." She trailed off, hoping that some combination of words in the preceding avalanche had made it to the bottom of the mountain relatively intact.

She felt Tara shift slightly. It would have been imperceptible to anyone who didn't know the movements of that wondrous form so thoroughly.

"Willow, I don't mean to be all avoidant about Donnie. I just...I hate talking about him." She sighed. "Remember how you told me about reading 'Bambi' and taping the pages shut where the fire starts and Bambi's mom dies? So that you could just kind of skip that part without even having to turn those pages? Well, that's how I feel about Donnie right now. I want him out of my life-not just the present; I want to pretend he never even existed. And I know I can't, but sweet goddess, it's so tempting to try."

Willow pulled Tara closer, knowing that Tara would tell her if she needed less body contact right now. "I get that, Baby. And I *don't* want to be Intrusive-Girl, even if it does come with a really cool cape." She heard Tara's smothered giggle against her chest. "I just wanna say that I know Donnie did some pretty awful stuff, and nothing you could tell me would make me flinch, or look away. OK?"

Tara was silent for so long that Willow began to wonder if she'd said something terribly wrong. But then her girl pulled back slightly, just enough to look Willow in the face.

"I love you, Willow Rosenberg, in case you aren't aware of that fact. I love you in languages that haven't been written yet."

And then they curled back around each other, each form finding the niches of the other in ways that made separation seem like the most ridiculous of notions.

A teenager...She'd crossed that threshold and there was no turning back. Not that she really wanted to, she realized. Each year brought her a little closer to leaving home and going to college. Donnie would probably never leave Cold Springs, or even their house, and that was fine with her. She'd be glad to do all the leaving herself.

She would leave her father, who was always angry but never really let her know why, so that she stumbled through the days trying to avoid one transgression only to commit another-all the while making guesses as to the code she was breaking. She would walk out the door knowing that if she tried to hug him, he'd stiffen up; and if she left without hugging him, he'd call her ungrateful.

She'd visit only when she had to, instead inviting her mother to visit her as often as she could come. Maybe, when Tara was away at college, her mother would decide to leave this man who seemed to grow colder by the year. When Tara had learned "the facts of life," she'd been unable to stop herself from thinking, just once, about her own parents. Those two had actually...done that? At least twice, apparently. They still shared a room, but Tara could barely imagine them having even the most utilitarian kind of sex, much less actually making love for the pleasure of being with each other. Then again, it was hard to imagine how any woman could enjoy...*that*.

And Donnie...getting away from him would be the best of all, she decided. She hated the way he looked at her, called her ugly and fat and said that her parents were always talking about what a disappointment she was. She knew that last part wasn't true, not all of it at least, because the one thing she did know was that her mother loved her. Sometimes she wasn't sure she really deserved it, but it was the truth beside which all other truths dimmed: her mother loved her fiercely.

Donnie, though-Donnie seemed to loathe her to his core. And as painful as his words were, they didn't terrify her as much as his fists, that always found an opening no matter how she curled in on herself; or his hands, that slapped her and yanked her hair and squeezed her arm so tight that it bruised. And then there were his eyes, that seemed to follow her everywhere so that she never really felt safe unless she was within arm's reach of her mother. She never knew what he was thinking, or what he was planning. And she never, ever knew why he hated her so much.

Only once, years ago, had she threatened to tell her mother about his beatings. His eyes had narrowed until only their inky darkness had been left. "You do, Tara, and I will kill you. I swear to God, I'll kill you." And then his fist had landed in her stomach and she had lain, doubled up and crying softly, on the hard ground behind the barn.

She wondered if her mother knew. Donnie always managed to place the bruises strategically, such that there was rarely any evidence to anyone else, even their mother. Even so, her mother had asked her about Donnie on several occasions.

"Sweetie, you know you can tell me if you ever get hurt, right? You know nobody's allowed to treat you bad, includin' your brother."

"I-I know, Mom. I'm OK."

Had her mother believed her? She suspected that she was a terrible liar, but she desperately needed that skill in those moments, because she didn't for a moment think that Donnie wouldn't do exactly as he had threatened to do. Her mother was strong, and loved her like a lioness with her cub, but Donnie had the force of hatred on his side, and Tara knew that he would find a way, some way, to get to her. Hatred always found a way. Love looked for the best in people, and wanted to believe they'd learned their lesson, but hatred waited until the guard left the door for the briefest of seconds and then it killed you in the room where you were supposed to be safe.

She turned toward the mirror, torn between wanting to see the dress clearly and wanting to avoid gazing upon herself. She did have pretty eyes, she could give herself that. But everything else,

including the new curves that were appearing on her body, seemed cause for disappointment and shame.

She squared her shoulder, preparing to join the others downstairs.

She wouldn't always be here.

Later that afternoon, Willow and Tara went over to Giles' house to get the latest on Glory's impending debutante ball.

"Do you want to tell the others what happened?" Willow asked softly as they approached the heavy wooden door.

"Want to? No. Think I probably should? Yes." Tara managed a small half-smile. "How 'bout a kiss?" she asked almost shyly, turning to face Willow.

"For moral support?"

"I was thinking more for yummy Willow-goodness, to be honest. But whatever gets the job done."

"How about we just assume you have a coupon with no expiration date on it, shall we? Good for one Willow-kiss, any time, any reason. No purchase necessary."

"Though we do have the...*shopping trip* ahead of us," Tara reminded her, arching her eyebrows in what could only be described as a leer.

"Anything to support the economy," Willow agreed, before leaning in to kiss her girl tenderly.

They were, at this moment, joined by Anya and Xander, approaching the door.

"See how Willow keeps her lips full when she kisses Tara? And looks as if she's using her tongue less intrusively? I'd like you to try that, Xander."

"And I'd like to try going one full day without peering at the ground, searching in vain for a huge, gaping hole to swallow me up. But that wacky sit-com 'Life with Anya' apparently couldn't spare the money for an editor." Xander sighed and smiled weakly.

As the four of them entered the warm house, Willow noticed Tara hang back slightly, just enough to whisper something in Anya's ear. Whatever the murmured confidence, it made Anya smile with delight. *Must be a spell for generating instant cash*, Willow mused.

Grabbing a scone from a platter on the table, Willow leaned over and asked softly, "What did you tell Anya just now?"

Tara grinned with only the slightest trace of self-consciousness. "I told her that you really *did* keep your lips soft and full, and that you used your tongue purposefully, not randomly." Willow felt the temperature in the room head toward the triple digits. *That's funny-I never knew Giles lived in Hell.* Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Anya looking at her encouragingly, and with a seeming new respect. She nodded weakly, as Anya gave her an enthusiastic thumbs-up.

Buffy was already there, as was Dawn. In response to Willow's questioning look, Buffy explained, "Mom has an opening tonight at the gallery. It was too late to get a sitter, so I brought Dawn with me."

"Hey Dawnie," Tara said warmly. Willow grinned to herself at the sight. It was obvious that Dawn adored Tara, and conversely. *The difference is that Tara doesn't have a huge crush on Dawn,* Willow thought, watching them hug. She'd teased Tara about it once, but Tara insisted that Dawn looked at both of them like older sisters.

"Yeah, most girls look at their older sisters and blush like crazy whenever they see them. At least, the girls who end up on Jerry Springer."

Now, she stepped forward and hugged Dawn herself, and then draped a proprietary arm over her girlfriend. *Why don't you just urinate around her to mark your territory?* She found her actions amusing, but nevertheless kept her arm where it was. No use giving the kid any false hope...

Buffy looked at both of them, a question within her glance. Tara squeezed Willow's hand, and then said, "Actually, before we get started, I should probably let you know something."

"You'd like to explore bisexuality?" Xander's expression-half joking, half hopeful-was quickly rendered fully immobile by Willow's hard smack on his arm.

"I'd rather plunge toothpicks into my eyeballs," Tara replied, smiling at him sweetly. Then she looked at Willow briefly, gathering her confidence and trying not to be rattled by the eyes that were locked on her. She rarely commandeered floor time at Scooby meetings; clearly, everyone knew that something was amiss.

"Um...My brother Donnie seems to have a hard time taking 'no' for an answer," she managed, her smile faltering. "He drove back to Sunnydale sometime yesterday and he caught me coming out of class this morning."

Four voices formed a jumbled chord.

"Whatever could he be planning to do?"

"Did he think we were joking at the Magic Box?"

"...not lay a hand on you, Tara!"

"...crawl under his eyelids and melt his brain from the inside out."

Tara held up a hand, and the others restrained themselves to a manageable array of threatening poses and glares.

"I'm not sure what he thinks he can do, but we're taking lots of precautions. I won't be alone with him; I already told him I won't talk to him. I can't imagine he'll try to grab me by my hair and drag me back to the family cave."

"Just the same, Tara, this must be disconcerting to you, to say the least." Giles looked at her with concern.

"And to say the most, it must be wiggling you out," Xander offered. Tara smiled at both of them.

Dawn stepped forward, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. "Tara, if you're ever at your place by yourself and you're scared, or even a little, you know, *disconcerted*" (here she rolled her eyes meaningfully), "I'd be glad to come over and stay with you. You know, until Willow gets back," she added, catching Willow's arched eyebrows.

"That's really sweet of you, Dawn, but I don't think it'll come to anything like that. But maybe I could call you tomorrow, just to check in and get some moral support." Dawn beamed as Willow ascended into yet another niche in the heavenly mansion that was her love and admiration for Tara. *She doubts her own voice so much, and yet she always knows just what to say to make other people feel good.*

"I just thought you should know, in case anything comes up. And thank you all, again, for standing up for me at the Magic Box."

"He'll still have to go through me," Dawn said threateningly, crossing her arms defiantly over her 'Hello Kitty' t-shirt.

"And me," Willow piped up-unnecessarily, she realized, as Tara looked at her with a faintly teasing grin.

"Now-let's get back to the more p-pleasant subject of Glory, shall we?" Tara had had her fifteen minutes of Scooby fame and didn't really care for more. She saw Buffy looking at Dawn, arms still crossed, with an affectionate smile. *So **that's** what an older sibling who loves their little sister looks like*, she thought with a sudden pang. *I always wondered.*

"Do we have any more information on this Key thingy?" Xander asked.

"The 'Key thingy,' to use Xander's technical language, appears to be utterly imperative to Glory's success," Giles replied.

Willow turned to the Watcher. "You still think Glory's trying to open some portal?"

"Yes, I do. That's what all of the available texts suggest...Balthazar's Oracle, The Scrolls of Timenthus-"

"Demon Portals for Dummies," Xander interjected.

Giles looked up in irritation. "Well, Xander, since you almost certainly have everything related to the intellectually challenged, I would expect *you* to have located that particular reference."

"Hey, that's sorta harsh," came the wounded response.

"As is Glory, which is why I would ask that we concentrate on discerning her true nature, as well as the nature of the Key." Giles looked only slightly penitent; then again, so did Xander.

"But we don't know what the Portal opens to, right?" Tara asked, a slight frown furrowing her brow. "I mean, it could be a demon dimension, or another Hell-Mouth...Anything, really."

"Tara's right, I'm afraid," Giles nodded slowly. "There's maddeningly little information about Glory, beyond the apocryphal and the wildly conjectural."

"And he just said...?" Xander whispered to Willow.

"Lots of wild rumors; few hard facts." She was accustomed to being Xander's personal thesaurus.

"We do, however, have one new piece of information regarding the Key," Giles was saying.

"Which is?" Buffy asked, leaning forward intently.

"It appears to be in human form."

There was a brief silence, while everyone tried to wrap their minds around this concept. Some, like Willow and Tara, had mind to spare while Xander, in particular, had trouble making his ends meet.

"So the Key is actually a human?" he asked, perplexed.

"It would appear so, though this represents a transformation of sorts. That is, the Key did not originate as a human being. It appears to have its genesis as a kind of energy, or mystical essence. The transformation into human form appears to have taken place relatively recently; probably within the last year."

"Why would it be turned into a human?" Tara asked.

"Probably to hide it. There's some indication that a group of monks actually possessed the Key and effected the change in order to keep Glory from finding it and opening this portal."

"God, what would the person look like...somebody who was created to hide something so important from such an evil creature?" Buffy wondered aloud.

"You gotta figure it's pretty skanky," Dawn replied, almost to herself.

"So our next job is to find the Key before Glory finds it. Because if she can't find it, she goes home with some nice consolation prizes and leaves us alone, right?" Xander looked around hopefully.

"We should be so lucky," Anya muttered. "Glory seems to have some major anger management issues and she doesn't seem like the gracious loser type."

"Anya's right; I suspect Glory will prove to be an indefatigable foe," Giles said slowly. "However, Xander's point is also well-taken." At this pronouncement, everyone at the table fought the urge to fall out of their seats in a dead faint. "Without the Key, Glory is, in effect, thwarted in her ultimate goal. So yes, we should make every effort to find the Key."

A short while later, as they were leaving, Xander grabbed Anya's arm excitedly. "Did you hear that? Giles said that my point was well-taken! I have a point, and people should take it well!" Willow suspected that this was the closest Xander had ever come to having a gold star on a school paper. Suddenly, she felt a hand grip her elbow. Turning, she saw Anya smiling at her.

"I've always thought that Tara had the loveliest smile, and now I know why. It's because of your talented mouth! Good for you!" She gave Willow a small but not-painless punch on the shoulder and winked again before heading out into the night.

"Uh, Tara-about your friendship with Anya..."

Part 4

On her way home later from her evening class, Willow stopped by the Espresso Pump to pick up decaf mochas for both Tara and herself. Tara was at Xander and Anya's, where Willow would pick her up on her way home. She felt better knowing that Tara wasn't alone, wasn't where her wretched brother could find her. *How in the goddess's name do those two share DNA? Maybe a mix-up in the nursery...I should check into that.*

Just outside the entrance, she practically dumped both drinks on the stocky figure standing in her path.

"Well look here! If it ain't Tara's friend-Willow? Is that it? Yeah, Willow!" Donnie's voice was loud, and bluff. "I was hopin' to run into you!"

Willow felt disgust roll up and over her as she took in Donnie's proximity and his overly-familiar smile. Narrowing her eyes slightly, she asked, "What do you want, Donnie? Tara isn't with me, and you're not going to get to her."

Donnie looked at her, his wounded surprise as fake as the plastic flowers in the vases on the tables. "That doesn't sound very friendly, I gotta say. Why, I just wanna get to know Tara's friends a little bit; you know, make sure she's in good hands." He winked at this last part, and Willow felt her stomach lurch.

There is no way this creature can be Tara's brother. Aloud, she said, "Donnie, I have nothing to say to you. I don't know why you came back, and don't give me some bullshit about looking after Tara's well-being."

"Now that's some awful rough language from such a pretty girl," he said with mock disapproval, grinning around his words. "I need to look out for Tara. I'm the only brother she's got."

"Good thing," Willow retorted, unable to stop herself. "Any more and she'd be dead."

The leering grin froze for a moment, and then crept back over the thin lips. "I don't know what kind of things Tara's been tellin' you all, but there's two sides to every story, at least where I come from."

"And what exactly is the other side to 'Big brother terrorized his little sister'? 'Cause I'm thinkin' that's something only cowards do—at least where I come from," she added sarcastically.

"Now don't go gettin' all witchy on me, OK? Don't cast some crazy spell on me." The grin was back in place, dismissal written in his eyes.

"I don't need to, Donnie. You're not worth the energy, and I have better things to do."

"Like my sister?"

Willow froze, choking around her fury. She realized, with utter clarity, that she had never hated another living creature as much as she hated this man-child in front of her. She felt magic roll unbidden to her mind, down her arms and into her fingers. With the flick of a wrist, she thought suddenly, heady with the realization, she could literally obliterate him. Forcing herself to breathe deeply, she steadied herself and then looked him in the eye.

"You are the most pathetic creature I've ever seen. How you came to share the same blood and lineage with someone like Tara, I will never, ever understand. Then again, I don't need to. I know enough to promise you that things will go very, very badly for you if you try to make trouble for her in any way. She has more people here that care for her than she ever had in her so-called home."

Donnie tilted his head, his gaze unreadable. "You threatenin' me?"

"You pick the verb. As if you'd know what that is," she added with a dismissive nod, and started to step around him.

"You know what I don't get?"

"Nearly enough sex, I imagine." She watched with pleasure as his face flushed white.

"I don't get what you see in her. Has she ever told you what she was like, before she came up here?"

"I know everything I need to know about Tara, and I'm sure as hell not looking to you for supporting documentation."

"She tell you about the clothes she wore to school? The ones that Momma made and other kids laughed at?"

My baby, young and perfect, wearing clothes made by someone who loved her.

"She tell you about sittin' alone on the bus, every damn day for twelve years almost, 'cause she was too timid to say 'boo' to anybody?"

I wonder what she thought of across all those miles? I bet she made up the most wonderful stories.

"She tell you about kids callin' her lezzy all through school 'cause they found that one love letter she wrote that other girl? Huh?"

Tara wrote a love letter to someone else? Whoever she is, I hope she kept it, because it must have been beautiful. My Tara, with her wonderful words.

"She tell you about never havin' a date-not to Prom, not to nothing, 'cause she was such a freak?

And now she's mine. I get to be the first person-and the last, if I have anything to say about it-to show her how beautiful she is.

Finally, she stared at Donnie, whose grin had been replaced by an angry, downward slash.

"Mostly she tells me how happy she is now, and how glad she is that she got away from the beer-bellied loser with whom she, through no fault of her own, shares a gene pool."

His eyes narrowed to slits, and he leaned closer toward her, raising his hand as he did. Then he seemed to remember his surroundings, and pulled back just slightly.

Following his gaze, Willow whispered venomously, "Do it. Forget about all of them. Pretend it's just you and some little girl. That's your style, isn't it?" Leaning forward herself now, she hissed, "Just do it. Make one move on me, or-Goddess help you-on Tara, and I will fuck with you in ways that defy mortal comprehension."

She pushed around him and left the coffee shop without looking back.

Fuck her.

Fuck. Her.

That bitch, talking to him like that, walking away from him like he didn't even count; like he wasn't worth the time of day. He didn't really think she'd just dump Tara on the spot, but he figured it would at least make her look at her different, maybe get an idea of just how pathetic Tara had been. But she didn't even bat an eye.

And the things she'd said to him, calling him a loser and letting on like he wouldn't understand half of what she said. He understood, all right. He understood that she was practically laughing at him. He understood that she didn't think he was much of a threat.

Turning over in bed, staring sleeplessly out the hotel window, he replayed the whole scene in his head, over and over, like a movie he couldn't stop watching even though he knew how it ended.

But this one *hadn't* ended, dammit. If they thought that was all he'd brought with him, they were dead wrong. That was just supposed to fuck with Tara's mind a little bit, and Willow's, too. And maybe it hadn't worked like he'd wanted it to, but he sure as hell wasn't heading back to Cold Springs just yet. He'd been waiting for a chance like this his whole life, it seemed, and one angry little dyke wasn't about to run him off. He wasn't like his daddy, whipped and dragging his ass back home. He had a lot more in his arsenal than one weapon, and he wouldn't really mind having to use all of them.

He allowed himself a small grin. At least he'd been right thinking Tara was a lezzy. Boy, the way that red-head had gone ballistic on him; the look she'd given him after his crack about her doing his sister-that was worth something...Looked like she wanted to scratch his eyes out, she did.

He turned onto his back and stared at the ceiling, watching snippets of another, older movie play out there. He'd always kind of wondered about Tara, even before those kids found that note. She never took notice of any boys, never talked about dating or anything like that...'Course, she hadn't said that much of anything when she was younger. Hell, the only time she didn't stutter too bad was when Mama was around, and even then sometimes she couldn't help it. But then those kids had found her pushing that note into Jo's locker, and pulled it away from her, and read it out loud...He smiled at that particular memory-the way Tara came home all puffy-eyed and went straight to her room; the way Jo stopped hanging around with her, wouldn't call her back; the way Tara just slumped over even more after that. The way he figured it, Jo had been a little bit queer, too. For all he knew, they'd had something going on, or maybe starting...But not after that.

He wondered if Tara had told their mom...They were always so close, those two. And Mama was just soft enough to put up with it. Had she known? Hell, Mama would probably have told Tara that it was all right, that she could be whoever she wanted to be. He couldn't believe his daddy had married such a woman, and stayed with her.

Was it worth it, Daddy? Was it worth everything you lost, everything you gave up to be with that witch who never loved you anyway?

He turned back onto his side, looking at the blank wall this time. No way was this over just yet. Lots of ways to skin a cat, and if he had to find new ways to do it, well, that was all right with him.

By the time she reached Xander's apartment, the mochas were cold. Willow herself, however, was steamed enough to power a small tug-boat. *That fucking malicious prick. How **dare** he talk about Tara that way?*

She practically pulled Tara bodily out of the apartment, offering the hastiest of good-byes to Xander and Anya.

"Don't you want to kiss Tara hello?" asked Anya hopefully, as Willow pointedly handed Tara her coat.

"Don't worry, I'll take notes," Tara assured her as they headed out the door. Once in the hallway, she turned to Willow.

"Honey, what's up? I know you can only take so much Anya in any one day, but-"

"I ran into Donnie at the Espresso Pump," Willow said simply, taking Tara's hands in her own.

"What? Did he-goddess, Willow, did he threaten you, or try to do anything?"

"The entire scene can be summed up like this: Your brother is an asshole beyond all known exemplars. But no, he didn't try anything physical."

Willow could feel the fear coming off of Tara like waves. She kissed her quickly, and looked into her eyes. "C'mon, Baby, let's get home. I'll explain on the way."

On the short trip back to their room, Willow could almost see Tara growing smaller and smaller. When she got to Donnie's malicious jibes against Tara, she thought about omitting them, knowing how much it would hurt her. *Does she really need to hear the whole ugly story? Would it really hurt to leave that part out?* She was silent for a moment, considering the possibility.

"Willow?"

"Yeah, Baby?" She fumbled for her door key.

"What else?"

Willow struggled to reply. "What do you mean?"

"What else happened? I can tell there's something you're leaving out."

Willow sighed. "Remind me not to play poker with you...OK, I'll finish the story, just as soon as we get inside."

Once in the warmth and safety of their home, Willow thought that Tara would relax, at least a little bit, but it was clear that her dread eclipsed any other reaction. She thought about making some tea, but realized that she would be doing it more to soothe herself, give herself something to do, than to actually serve a useful purpose.

She took Tara's hand and led her into the bedroom where they curled up on top of the covers. There, she told Tara what Donnie had said. As she spoke, she watched tears gather in Tara's eyes and then tumble unchecked over her cheeks. Willow reached out and softly stroked them away, wishing desperately for the words that would heal the jagged slice that she could see making its way through Tara's heart.

"Tara, Baby, you have to know that what he said didn't mean anything to me. You know that, right?" She couldn't keep the urgency out of her voice.

After a moment, Tara replied almost inaudibly, "Maybe. But they mean something to me."

"Tara, Sweetie, please look at me. Please don't turn those gorgeous eyes away from me. I can't stand it when you're sad."

Tara struggled to meet Willow's gaze. *Why? Why do all the good things have to get dirty and stained?* "Willow, I just want to forget all of that. Y-you know that growing up w-was a rough time for me. I told you I w-wasn't exactly popular."

Willow ached at the sound of Tara's small voice, at her stutter. "Tara, it's not like he told me you were an ax-murderer, or sold crack to kindergarten kids, or cheated on a math quiz...It was nothing horrible."

Tara shifted awkwardly, sitting up a little and looking at Willow as if she were missing the point. "What's not horrible about who I was? About how pathetic and lonely I was? What exactly was the Kodak moment in all of that?"

Willow sat up herself, squeezing Tara's shoulders. "You tell me what *is* horrible about who you were. Not how it made you feel, but who you were. Tara, Baby, have you forgotten who you're talking to here? The only real friend I had wore his underwear on his head, for God's sake. And as for being trendy, well, I wore clothes that would blind you if you looked at them without protective lenses."

She was rewarded by the slightest of smiles, and played her ace. "Tara, if you're saying that *your* past makes you too pathetic to be loved, then you're saying the same thing about me. And frankly, I resent it."

Tara's mouth twisted with anguish, her eyes darkening. "Willow, you know that's not true. You know how much I love you, and respect you-"

"And want me? Do you find me sexy, and desirable? Or am I some wounded creature you took pity on?"

"How can you even ask that? God, I want you so much it almost embarrasses me sometimes. I mean, I feel like a big pervert around you half the time."

"Well, the goal is to make that *all* of the time, with the understanding that pervert, as we define it, is a wonderful, wonderful thing. The point is, knowing my history doesn't make you want me any less, right?"

"Of course not." Tara was silent for a moment, and Willow fought the urge to send more words up to the front line to do battle with Tara's pain. Instead, she talked with her hands, stroking Tara's cheek and hair.

When Tara finally spoke, her voice was soft. "You're right. I mean, I'd smack anyone who tried to insult you, or make fun of you. It's just that..."She trailed off helplessly.

"Just what, Baby?"

"It's just that those demons die so hard, and so slowly. Why can't we just throw some holy water on them and watch them go 'poof'?" She leaned over and let herself sink into Willow's arms.

"I dunno, Tara. I think those demons call for some more sophisticated, subtle maneuvers...But I'll tell you one thing: There is no way that Donnie is going to steal any of my Baby's shine. Don't let him take your good stuff away, Tara. You've worked so hard for it; you've earned it. You walked this steep, rocky path and everything you went through was part of making you who you are-who, by the way, I love more than I thought was humanly possible."

She felt Tara smiling against her chest. "We both had tough rows to hoe."

Willow paused, wondering how prostitutes had entered the conversation.

"Who's a ho'? And where does the rose come into it?"

Tara sat up and smiled at her indulgently. "It's a farm term, Sweetie. Rows, as in field rows; and hoe, as in the implement."

Willow felt herself blush. "Oh, of course. Just makin' a funny, you know, in my own little suburban way..."

Tara sank back into Willow's arms, where they rested in silence for a few moments. Willow debated with herself for a moment, and then ventured a question.

"Tara...Why didn't you tell me about the note?" She felt Tara stiffen slightly, and wondered if she had blundered heedlessly into something too personal, too raw.

"Well, I told you that I had a huge crush on my best friend in high school. I guess I didn't go into details because it...the details didn't seem that important." She pressed her head more snugly into Willow's breasts.

"And because it hurts too much to talk about it?"

"Well, yes, Dr. Freud, there is that, I guess."

"Sweetie, it just sounds so painful. I mean, you couldn't *pay* me enough to go back to high school. Knowing you liked girls-that must have made it even harder." She thought about her own freshman year, and wasn't sure which was worse: being ignored, or being taunted.

Tara draped her arm more securely over Willow, as if trying to anchor herself in the present. "It was the third worst moment of my life."

"What was second?" Willow queried, knowing that the first had to have been the death of Tara's mother.

"The night you told me you were giving Oz another chance."

"Oh yeah...That pretty much redefined 'sucks' in my book," Willow said ruefully. "Tara, you don't have to tell me any more about it if you don't want to."

"Actually, there isn't that much more to tell...Jo and I were best friends; we did everything together. And after awhile, I found that I wanted us to *Do Everything* together: capital D, capital E. I dreamt about her, I couldn't concentrate in class. I was a total neurotic freak."

"And did she crush in return?"

"I think so; at least at first. We'd sit as close to each other as we could at lunch-time, and she was always inviting me to stay over at her house."

"Did she ever stay at yours?" Again, she felt Tara's body tighten, almost imperceptibly.

"I didn't really ask. Dad wasn't too keen on outsiders, and I wasn't too keen on having anybody-especially somebody I was crushing on-get to know my household up close and personal. Anyway," she continued, shifting the subject, "we spent every spare second together. We'd make up these wild stories about leaving Cold Springs and getting an apartment together-all sorts of crazy stuff that of course pales besides the crazy stuff that I actually live through now." She laughed, shaking her head slightly.

"And did any of these stories ever involve dating? Getting married, and not to each other?"

"Curiously enough, they didn't. No, boys never really made it onscreen in our little dramas. It was always just the two of us, braving the wild world beyond our one-horse town."

"I think it's safe to say Miss Jo had a little thing for Miss Tara," Willow pronounced with an emphatic nod. "Did anything ever happen?"

"No." Tara's voice grew quiet once more, and Willow strained to hear her clearly. "I got up the nerve to write her a note...That was nothing new, we were always writing notes back and forth; but this was a different kind of note. It was about as close to saying 'I love you' as you can get without actually saying it."

Willow wanted desperately to look Tara in the eyes as she recounted the tale, but was afraid of shifting at all, lest Tara stop talking. She settled for kissing her forehead and rubbing her cheek along her hairline.

"I basically told her that I liked her more than I had ever liked anybody, and that I wanted us to be together as much as we could, for as long as we could. God, I agonized over that note...It was only five sentences, but you'd have thought I was writing 'War and Peace,' the way I deliberated over every word. I went through at least ten sheets of paper before I got it the way I wanted it. And I knew it was a love letter, even if I didn't tell myself that. But I knew enough to burn the false-starts, and to try to sneak it into her locker when nobody was looking."

"Why didn't you just give it to her?"

"Oh, didn't I wish I'd done that later...But I was afraid, because I knew it was a different letter than I'd ever given her. I was afraid of seeing her face, afraid of her looking disgusted or freaked out."

"Even though you're pretty sure she had feelings for you, too?"

"Feelings are one thing, Will. Fessing up, when you're fourteen? And in a place like that? Trust me-Sunnydale may be the Hellmouth, but Cold Springs is Central Station on the homophobia subway system." She trailed off; Willow could feel her reliving that day. Again, she fought the urge to speak.

After a moment, Tara resumed the narrative. Willow listened with a growing ache, knowing how it ended.

"I thought I was in the clear, but there was a group of girls that had just left and one of them had forgotten her notebook. Jo's locker was near the end of the hall; when they turned the corner, they were practically standing on me. I must have looked like a deer in the headlights...Cathy grabbed the note right out of my hand-I mean, I was pretty much a social outcast, so they must have guessed it was a slaughter in the making. They read it out loud. And then they shared it with pretty much everybody." She sighed deeply.

"Oh God, Baby...I'm so sorry. Why are people so mean? How could anybody want to hurt you?"

"They didn't really have any idea who I was, Will. I was just some shy, dorky kid who read all the time and had all of one friend. And after that, I didn't even have her."

"She split, huh?"

"If you take the average time needed to split and cut that in half, you've got it. She wouldn't talk to me, wouldn't take my phone calls, wouldn't even look at me in school. Oh, and she started wearing enough make-up to make Tammy Faye Baker look like an Amish grandmother. She went from tomboy to ultra-femme in about one day."

"Did you two ever talk after that?"

"Nope. I tried, one last time, on graduation day. I think ours was a couple of weeks after yours; I remember hearing about the explosion down there in the big city...Anyway, I went up to her and I think all I managed to get out of my mouth was 'Jo, listen' and she just blinked, turned around, and walked off. I think it was the blink that got me, and don't even ask me to explain that."

"Actually, I sorta get it." Willow contented herself for the moment with stroking Tara's back and kissing her cheek and forehead.

Tara sighed. "And that, my love, is the story of my first crush, and the incredible crash and burn that became of it."

After a brief pause, Willow asked, "You know what I think?"

"That Jodi Foster needs to come out and be done with it?"

"Well, yes. And I also think that you were surrounded by far too many pooppy-heads in your childhood and adolescence."

"'Pooppy-heads'? Is that a clinical term, Dr. Freud?"

"Oh yes. I reserve it for the most challenging of cases. Anyway, I think that the number of pooppy-heads in your life to date has been disproportionately large, relative to the average American female of your age."

"So what do we do about this? Is there some kind of pooppy-head-quarters where I register a complaint?"

"No, we simply make sure that for the next twenty years you have disproportionately *fewer* pooppy-heads in your life."

Tara laughed, a slow, rolling laugh that seemed to come from deep inside of her. "And how exactly do we do *that*?"

Willow thought for a moment. "I hereby submit myself for consideration of Pooppy-head Detection Duty, or Ph.D...D." Tara sat up and looked at her, eyes arching. "That's right-I'll make sure that no pooppy-heads make it within a one-mile radius of your personal space. How about that?"

"Where do I sign?"

"It's actually not so much a signature thing as a kissing thing. You need to kiss me, big and hard, right on the lips. And use your tongue if you really mean it."

Tara laughed again, and leaned over Willow, her hair tumbling about both their faces like a curtain. She kissed Willow to convey her agreement, and apparently she meant it quite a lot.

Part 5

She answered the phone on the first ring, her voice as ingratiating as ever.

"Hey Beth, it's Donnie. How's life down there in the small town?"

"I was wondering when you'd call, Donnie. Are you having any luck with Tara?"

"Not just yet, but I'm a long way from done. How's the old man?"

"Donnie-how would Uncle Nathan feel if he could hear you? He's your father." Cousin Beth's tone was filled with moral displeasure, which he found very enjoyable.

"Aw, lighten up. I don't mean anything by it. How's he doing?"

"Well, to be honest, he still isn't saying very much. I think Tara's behavior hurt him awfully bad, Donnie." She exhaled sharply. "It just makes me so angry to think about it."

"Don't get your panties all bunched up, Beth," Donnie laughed. "It's not good for your circulation."

"You can just watch your mouth with *me*, too, Donnie. I don't need any lessons in self-control from *you*, of all people."

"Fine, whatever. I didn't call to get a Sunday School lesson. Listen, is Daddy around?"

"No, you know he's always milking at this time. Like you would be, if you were here to help," she added.

He ignored her implied reproach. "Good, I thought so. Listen, Beth, I need you to do me a favor."

He could almost see her ears pricking up, her nose quivering like a rat who had caught the scent of something foul nearby.

"Favor? What kind of favor?"

"I need you to get some stuff of Daddy's, without him knowing it."

He might as well have said that he needed her to steal the big cedar cross from off of the front lawn of the Cold Springs Baptist Church.

"Donnie, you have to be pulling my leg. You want me to steal something from Uncle Nathan? After all he's been through, you want me to go nosing around and just *take* something of his?" Her voice was climbing steadily with the force of her righteous indignation.

"In the first place, Beth, it's not stealing. We'll put everything back. And in the second place, don't get all high and mighty with me about nosin' around. If I know you like I think I do, you've already made yourself pretty comfortable with our house and everything in it." He smiled into the silence, enjoying the image of her choking on her own mortification.

Finally, she managed to splutter, "If you're trying to suggest that I'd steal anything from your father, all I can say is--"

"I ain't sayin' you'd *steal* anything. I'm just sayin' that you like to know what's goin' on, and I imagine you've strolled through the house more'n once, takin' a look at whatever you can see."

There was another brief silence, and then she sullenly replied, "Anything I do, it's because I feel so bad for your father. And for you, too," she added in a wheedling tone.

"I know, Beth. I'm sorry I teased you about it. I know Daddy's grateful for everything you're doing." A little soft-soaping couldn't hurt anything, he reckoned.

"Really?" The eagerness in her voice was as transparent as her dye job.

"Really. He told me so." He paused for just a moment to let her snatch that morsel off of the floor. "And I'm not tryin' to put you in a tough position, Beth. I just need some help from that end and I figure you're the one I can count on."

"Well you know I'd do anything to help, Donnie, but *taking* something private of Uncle Nathan's, without his permission...It just doesn't feel right."

"Beth, you and me both know that Daddy's never been exactly clear-headed where Tara's concerned." He could almost see her eyes narrowing with resentful agreement. "I'm just afraid if I ask him to give me the stuff directly, he'd get all uptight and torn-up about it. And hasn't he been through enough?"

"You don't need to tell *me* about how much your daddy's hurtin', Donnie. Tara's the one that needs to understand that."

"So you'll help me?" He tried to keep the impatience out of his voice. Beth was like a fish that bit quickly but didn't necessarily take the whole bait. She was wary, in her own way, and he needed to play the line carefully.

"I don't know, Donnie...I mean, do you think it's even a good idea for Tara to come back? Really? I can't imagine that she'd fit in anymore; not that she ever really did."

*I get it now. You **like** bein' the woman of the house.*

"You got a good point, Beth. Tara's never been a real Maclay, not like you. And I ain't just sayin' that," he interjected quickly. "I mean it. But it's just not right that she left like that, and then talkin' that way to Daddy the other night...She needs to face the music for what she did, whether she ends up stayin' or not. I just think it would mean a lot to Daddy if we could work together and at least get her to come home and apologize."

He held his tongue then, and waited for her to take the bait before he tried to reel her in at all.

"Well...I mean, if you really think it would help Uncle Nathan." He could hear the last lingering hesitation in her voice.

"I do, Beth. And I need your help. I can't do it without you.." He tugged the line, just slightly.

"OK. Tell me what you need."

"Thanks, Beth; I mean it. And I'm sorry about teasin' you earlier. I guess I'm just a little worked up, thinkin' about all of this."

"Well, I can certainly understand why." They were both playing the part of gracious allies now.

"You're good to help us out like this. Now-the stuff I'm talkin' about is in a lock box in Daddy's press."

"Lock box? But what good will it do you if you can't get into it?"

"Don't worry about it," he replied. "It's not a real tricky one." *Especially since he'd had a duplicate key made down at Winton's Hardware Store after he'd seen where his daddy stashed the original.*

There was a brief pause, and then Beth acquiesced to the version of reality that he encouraged her to hold. "So it's in his closet?"

"Yeah, up on the top shelf. It's all the way over to the right, tucked in behind some flannel shirts. You'll probably have to stand on a footstool to reach it," he added, thinking of Beth's stature.

"But how do I get it to you?"

"That's easy, at least for you. I'll drive down there this afternoon."

"But if you're coming all the way back home-"

"I'm not. I don't want Daddy knowin' about any of this, not just yet. I'll meet you at the IGA and you can give it to me. You still got your mom's car, right?"

"Yes. And I need to do some grocery shopping anyway, so that'll work out fine."

"Good. I really appreciate this, Beth."

"Donnie..." She hesitated, but he knew what was coming. "What's in the box?"

He could hear her curiosity slithering all over her. He smiled, and held out for the dramatic pause.

"Now if I told you that, it would ruin the ending, wouldn't it?"

That afternoon, Willow and Tara walked to the Magic Box to do some research and gather some spell necessities. Willow was paying for the ingredients, much to Anya's pecuniary delight.

"I know we live in a capitalist society, Baby; it just seems to me that things needed to fight the forces of evil should be free. God, I can't even declare them on my taxes!" Willow was waxing indignant.

"I can't really argue with you, Sweetie. Seems like adding insult to injury that we pay six cents on the dollar for aiding the cause of good."

"Exactly. Things like magickal ingredients-when those ingredients serve integral roles in averting the apocalypse-should be *gratis*. As should tampons," she added, in what, to the untrained ear, would almost certainly be a jarring non sequitur.

"Willow, did you call upon the forces of Tampax for some great conflict before I met you? And if you did, do I really want to hear about it?"

Willow nodded somberly. "It was the bloodiest of battles..."

"Oh goddess, please stop," Tara groaned.

"No, it's just a matter of principle. We have no choice but to use feminine protection products, and frankly, I think they should be subsidized by the government."

Yanking on the shop door, to the accompaniment of the increasingly-wearisome bell overhead, Tara could only shrug. "Gets my vote. You write the bill and we'll see about sponsorship."

"I think we can rule out Strom Thurmond," Willow grumbled.

They had only been working for a few minutes when the bell jangled again. They looked up to see Buffy and Giles enter. Any of their usual greetings were abandoned when they saw the look in the Slayer's eyes. Without speaking, Buffy headed back to the training room, slamming the door behind her.

Willow looked up questioningly at Giles. The Watcher sighed, then pushed a chair back from the table and sank into it heavily. "We've learned something...about the Key," he managed, his voice weary.

"Giles, what is it?" Willow was quickly becoming frantic. She hated to see Buffy hurting like this. She knew that her best friend could handle any physical challenge, but her heart was far more delicate than anyone else seemed to realize. And Mrs. Summers had been sick so much of the time lately, with those headaches that no one could figure out...Buffy was already coping with far more than she should have to, and now it looked as if something else had been dropped onto her shoulders-uncaringly, remorselessly.

"Actually, Willow, at the risk of sounding melodramatic or secretive, I really do think this should come from Buffy, whenever she's able to talk about it."

"Did something happen to Dawn?" Tara broke in, eyes clouding with dread.

To their immense surprise, Giles gave a dry, mirthless laugh. "How very odd you should mention that..." Then he shook his head, and looked at them squarely. "No, Dawn is quite safe, I can assure you of that."

The three of them looked up as Buffy walked back into the room. Willow caught the look that passed between Slayer and Watcher; it seemed to her that Giles was giving Buffy silent permission to handle this moment entirely as she saw fit.

"Buffy, are you OK? Do you want to sit down?" Willow was desperately trying to think of something that she could do, however minute, to help her best friend.

"No, Will-I think I need to be standing for this. In fact," she broke off, with a brittle laugh, "I may just need to interrupt this discussion to beat the hell out of something."

Willow started to speak again, but fell silent at the feel of Tara's hand falling gently on her thigh. She would follow Tara's lead here. Tara knew her way around the scary dungeons of psychological terrors far better than she did.

Buffy paced for a few seconds-short, staccato steps in which every footfall seemed to sound her outrage-and then turned abruptly and leaned over the table, planting her palms on the dark wooden surface.

"Giles and I have just learned that...We've just learned that the Key..." She took a deep, shuddering breath, closing her eyes briefly, and then gazed at them and spoke with the voice of someone much, much older. "We've just learned that Dawn is the Key."

Was she really sixteen? Was she really that close to getting away from Cold Springs, and her father? Was she really that close to leaving Donnie behind for good?

She looked at herself in the mirror, trying to stand up straight. "Honey, you're so beautiful...Why do you slouch over like that, and hide behind your hair? Let everybody get a look at you, Bright Eyes." Her mother was always encouraging her to show more of herself, but everything within her, it seemed, screamed at her to present as small a target as possible.

Time was rolling forward; there was no denying it. Even if the days sometimes seemed to last an eternity, like they had right after she'd been caught trying to press the note into Jo's locker. *She never even looks at me. She must think I'm disgusting.* She thought back over the past few months, and the spiraling isolation that had followed her ill-fated love letter. *Does Jo ever miss me? Does she ever miss the jokes we used to make, the ones that nobody else would ever think were funny? Does she miss sitting beside me on the bus, and leaning over so that we made our own private universe?* She tried not to think about Jo too much; when she did, her stomach hurt in a way she'd never felt before...like somebody had poked a white-hot fist right through her skin and grabbed her belly tight, squeezing it till she couldn't breathe. Mostly, she just tried to get through each day at school, focusing on her studies and reading by herself at lunch time. People still called her "lezzzy," but she'd gotten used to that and besides, they didn't do it all the time anymore.

For years, it seemed, she'd been trying to hurry time along, nudging it and pushing it and urging it to pick up its pace. Now, for the first time that she could remember, she wanted it to slow down.

Because her mother was sick.

Because her mother wasn't going to get better.

She knew it, even if her mother didn't come right out and say so. "You never know, Bright Eyes. The things they can do nowadays..." And then she'd leave the sentence unfinished, because her mother could do so many things, and do them so well, but she couldn't lie, at least not to her beloved daughter.

Why had it taken them so long to figure it out? Her mother always had energy to spare, but then she'd started getting tired almost as soon as she got out of bed. And her face, which had always

seemed to glow with some inner light, even in the dead of winter, became wan, and pallid, and dark circles appeared under her eyes seemingly overnight. When her mother had come into her room that night three weeks ago, closing the door softly behind her and coming over to sit on her bed, Tara had had to fight the urge to run out of the room before her mother had even started talking.

It's bad. She's sick, and it's really bad.

"Sweetie, you know I haven't been feelin' exactly myself for awhile, right?" Tara could only nod, the fingers of her right hand inching out to clutch more and more bedspread into her grasp while her left hand held onto her mother's and tried to memorize the feel of the worn, work-roughened skin.

"Well, I went to see Dr. Bradley last week, and he wanted to run a few tests..."

*Stop talking, Mom. Stop talking right now, and we can pretend we never even started this conversation. But you have to stop talking **now**.*

"The tests came back today, Honey , and... and it's not good." *Stop talking, Mom. Please Mama. Please stop talking.*

"It looks like I have cancer, Bright Eyes."

And then Tara knew that it was too late, that her mother had uttered the words and the words had made it all real. And she thought, dimly, that her eyes *were* bright, they had to be, because everything was shimmering, including her mother; she was twinkling and shining and glittering through the prism of tears that made everything so horribly bright.

"Donnie, you know I haven't been feelin' well, right?"

He paused, and then gave a small shrug of his shoulders. "I hadn't really noticed."

His mother sat silently for a moment. Had he hurt her feelings? Was she sad?

"Well, I know you've been busy helping out all over the farm. You know, your daddy tells me all the time how much h-help you are." This last part was said almost hopefully.

He gave her what he hoped was his most bored, annoyed look. He'd been working on it for nineteen years; he figured he was pretty good at it. "So what's up?"

He saw her take a deep breath that seemed to catch somewhere halfway up her throat. "Well, I w-went to the doctor, and he wanted to run some tests, so w-we did, and-"

"God, Mom, you sound just like Tara," he snorted. "Can't the two of you ever just spit stuff out?"

And he wished, immediately, that he hadn't said such a thing. Not because it was hurtful; he liked that part. But because of the look his mother was giving him now, the one that told him how she really felt, no matter how nice she tried to be. Her eyes were all narrow, like a cat catching sight of a very small mouse and trying to decide whether to bother with it or not. But she wasn't that detached, he knew, because she had those two stark brushes of red, one on each cheek; hot, red swaths that looked like the back of his legs right after Daddy hit him with the belt. Daddy scared him with his belts, but his Mama could scare him with those eyes, like she was doing right now. And the only person he hated for it more than her was himself. She never hit him, never even looked like she came close to raising her hand...but she scared him worse than his daddy did.

"I don't know what you got eatin' at you inside, Donald. I've done my best to figure it out and it looks like I never will. Because here's what's eatin' *me*, Donnie-I got cancer, and I got it bad, and odds are I won't make it to your next birthday. So if you get to thinkin' that maybe you'd like to let me in on something, I suggest you not wait until you're done with the corn plantin', Son, because it'll be just a little too late by then." She stood and walked over to his door. Looking back over her shoulder, holding his gaze so tight that it never crossed his mind to look away, she said, "I love you, Donnie. I always have, and I always will. And I'd just as soon not die with things like this between us. But it looks like that'll have to be your decision." And then she left, pulling the door shut softly behind her.

He sat unmoving in his dark, spare room for what seemed like another nineteen years. She was dying. His mama was dying. Just like he'd thought, when she kept getting sicker and sicker; the way her own mama had died ten years ago. She was going to go away and leave him alone.

And leave Tara alone.

He tried to figure out exactly what he felt, but he was very rusty at such things and none of the answers that came to his mind seemed to fit quite right.

Buzzing back to Sunnydale after his clandestine exchange with Cousin Beth in the IGA parking lot, Donnie mulled over his choices. He liked the element of surprise, but he also wanted to draw things out so he could enjoy them more. Such things had always been a struggle for him. Even when they were kids, Tara always rationed out her Halloween candy so that she'd have some the next week. Him? He just plowed through it, sometimes barely tasting one thing because he was already thinking about what to eat next. Then again, it hadn't really mattered because he knew that he'd just end up taking Tara's stash, no matter where she tried to hide it.

When would she realize that she could never hide from him? She couldn't hide herself, she couldn't hide what she was afraid of, she couldn't hide what she found precious. He always found everything. He always would.

"Buffy, what are you talking about? Dawn's the Key? That's impossible! The Key's older than the written word, and Dawnie's all of fifteen! There must be some mistake, something in the translation, or maybe this is a trick to mess with your mind; you know Glory specializes in that..." Willow trailed off hopefully. Even as she was speaking, though, she knew that there had been no mistake. Buffy would have looked from every angle, through every lens, twenty times over in hopes that it *was* a mistake. No one could want this to be wrong more than Buffy, and if she was telling them this in such despairingly declarative fashion, it must be true.

Tara, she noticed, hadn't voiced any such vehement denial. She was looking at Buffy with infinite compassion, and Willow knew then that Tara had already begun working out the implications of this news while her own brain was still trying frenetically to make it not so.

"How did you find out?" Tara was asking gently.

"A monk, at the factory where I met up with Glory. He told me..." She stopped, shuddering slightly. Willow could see that she was reliving the exchange. "He told me that his order had been in charge of protecting the Key, keeping it out of Glory's possession. They finally figured that the safest way to do that was to change her into human form and send her to me. They knew I'd protect her with my life."

Tara brought her hand up gently and rested it on Buffy's. Willow had noticed that Buffy seemed to accept gestures of kindness and compassion more readily from Tara than from those friends that she had known for years. Willow would have expected that she would feel some tweaking of jealousy about this, but oddly enough, she didn't. Tara could cut to the emotional chase, it seemed, in ways that never left Buffy feeling weak or pitied.

Willow struggled to make sense of the incomprehensible. "But what about all of our memories? I mean, I taught Dawn to play chess three years ago, Buffy-way before Glory ever came on the scene. We all went to the Ice Capades the first year you were in Sunnydale. And God, all of the times you complained about having a younger sister-" She stopped abruptly, catching the look on Buffy's face.

"Yeah. All of those times I complained about Dawn...Having to baby-sit her, having to drag her places, having to share my stuff with her...I've been resenting the hell out of her for stuff she never even did; stuff she couldn't have done because-because she wasn't around to do it." She gave a brittle laugh and dropped her head into her hands.

Giles had been watching all of this quietly from the shadows behind the table. Finally he spoke up.

"The monks took the energy of the Key and made it human, and then they delivered it to the one person they knew could and would protect it. In the process, they also gave all of us memories of Dawn. Each of us have believed, completely, that Dawn has been with Buffy's family since Buffy was four."

Willow looked up sharply. "Buffy's family? So Joyce believes it, too? Joyce thinks she gave birth to Dawn, the whole nine yards?"

Buffy looked at her steadily. "Everyone who would ever have had reason to come into contact with Dawn believes that they *have* come into contact with Dawn. They'd pass a polygraph test with flying colors."

"Oh God, Buffy-what are we going to do?" The first-person plural came out without a moment's conscious thought on Willow's part. Family was defined differently in the land of the Scoobies, and had now expanded to include mystical balls of energy.

"Dawn doesn't know, right?" Tara asked anxiously. "I mean, you're the only one who can really decide what to do, but..." Willow could see that she was torn between wanting to support Buffy in whatever decision she made and wanting to protect Dawn from unnecessary pain.

"No, you're right. She doesn't know, at least not yet. I figured it would help if *I* had some grip on the situation first, before we decide what, if anything, to tell her. I mean, it's her life, so part of me feels like she has more right than any of us to know about this; on the other hand, it's my job as the Slayer-" She broke off suddenly, and then her eyes narrowed slightly. "It's my job as her sister to protect her. So we gotta figure out how to do that." She looked up questioningly. "Does that make sense?"

"Yeah, Buffy, it does." Willow smiled, determined to marshal those thousand stray thoughts into some semblance of a working herd. The work here was to help figure out how to protect Dawn, not deal with her own blown fuses. "So...what about your mom?"

Buffy sighed heavily. "That's a tough one. I mean, Mom completely believes that Dawn's her daughter...God, Dawn *is* her daughter in every way that means anything. So it seems like I should definitely tell her. But then I think, what good would that do? Especially with Mom being sick so much of the time lately. I mean, that seems like the last thing she needs. And I don't want Dawn picking up on folks acting differently around her." She stopped, and looked up anxiously. "Do you guys think you can pull this off? Not let on to Dawn that anything's up until I'm ready to tell her?"

"Buffy, I managed to convince Dad that I was straight before I left home," Tara promptly replied. Then she frowned slightly. "At least I think I did. Anyway, we'll be the epitome of normal where Dawn's concerned."

"Well, at least *Willow* can be normal," Buffy said with a wry, tired smile.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Willow asked, feeling indignation wash up over her on behalf of Tara, who was looking at Buffy in hurt surprise.

"What Tara said-where Dawn's concerned. You're normal to her, Willow. *Tara*...Tara is currently the sun, moon, and two-thirds of the stars."

"So you've noticed it too, huh?" Willow asked triumphantly, looking at Tara with what she knew to be a look of supreme vindication.

"I suspect that anyone with even the slightest powers of perception would have noticed it," Giles confirmed dryly.

"Well excuse me for being in the blue reading group instead of the red group where this is concerned," Tara said in what, for her, approximated a huff.

"Or anyone not so preternaturally modest as to find it incomprehensible that anyone would have a crush on her," Giles added pointedly.

"So anyway, Willow and I will both act the way we always act around her," Tara said, blushing. "What about your mom?"

A sharp knock at the door interrupted them. Xander and Anya were peering in owlishly. Giles went to let them in.

A few minutes later, the carpenter and the ex-demon sat silently, trying to digest the new information.

"But Dawn...Well, she's had a crush on me for the longest time," Xander pointed out. "I remember how she always used to blush and stammer whenever I was around."

"That's how Willow knew I had it bad for her," Tara said wryly. Xander seemed to have no reply for this except to blush and stammer himself, trying to eject some kind of reasonable apology from the loud, twin-engine plane of his mouth. Willow spared him.

"That's old news that never was news, Xander. First of all, we *all* have lots of memories of Dawn, including Dawn herself, but apparently they were all planted by the monks. Secondly, in case you haven't noticed, Dawn has moved on to bigger fish. As it were," she added, catching sight of Tara's arched eyebrow.

"We were just trying to figure out what to tell Mrs. Summers, if anything," Tara said, in a not-terribly-subtle attempt to steer the conversation away from Dawn's crush on her.

"But if Joyce believes she's Dawn's birth mother, won't this just upset her?" Anya asked reasonably.

"That's what I keep thinking," Buffy replied. Willow noticed that no one mentioned the statistical improbability of Buffy agreeing with anything Anya said. "But then I think, doesn't she *deserve* to know? I mean, who am I to keep this kind of news away from her?" She was pacing again, arms crossed tightly over her chest.

"But what difference would it really make, Buff?" Xander was looking at her intently. "I mean, if you tell her, it'll get her upset but she won't be able to *do* anything about how she feels. She'll just

be, y'know, *stuck* with it. She's not the Slayer; she can't actually beat Glory. She'd just have to sit on the sidelines and pull like hell for the home-team. It's a tough spot to be in." Willow realized that he could speak from personal experience more than anyone else in the room.

"But is that the point?" Buffy countered. "There's the principle of the matter. A part of me feels like Mom just *should* know. Forget about all of this mystical energy hoo-ha-it involves her baby."

"The question before us really seems to be: do we opt for the functional thesis of morality or the idealized abstract?" Giles mused.

"And he just said...?" Xander whispered to Willow.

"Different kinds of good; what kind we choose?"

"Thanks."

Buffy had slumped back down in her chair. "I just don't know..." She looked up sadly. "You don't know how much I debated whether to even tell you guys or not." She held up a hand to forestall their protests. "Think about it. Now that you know this, you're all in danger."

Tara looked up, startled. "Are you saying that being involved with all of you could lead to some kind of violence or fighting?" She turned to Willow and glared. "You never told me this. You said you all got together and made flower arrangements, and sometimes exchanged ideas on classical literature." Looking back at Buffy, she smiled apologetically. "I'm sorry, but this wasn't at all what I signed up for. Do you know if there's a sewing club in these parts?"

Willow grinned hugely. She loved seeing Tara's Snidely Whiplash side come out. "Tara's right, Buffy, in a really sarcastic kinda way that none of you are used to seeing. If we wanted to be snug in our beds when the scary part starts, we'd have taken up bocce."

Anya shifted beside her. "You never saw the kind of bocce tournaments I saw back in 17th-century Italy," she muttered, nudging Xander. "They made modern soccer tournaments look like Bingo night at the rest home."

Xander looked at her unimpressed. "You've never seen the kind of Bingo nights at the rest home that I've seen. My grandmother's place, they make bocce look-"

"Yes, I'm sure someone here has a gripping tale of sharply-worded retorts at Quaker prayer meetings and the blood-lust that ensued," Giles sighed, "but let's get back to the issue of Dawn as the Key."

Tara looked back at Buffy and gave her a gentle smile. "What we're saying, Buffy, is that we all know the deal. You're the Slayer, but we're all part of something larger, and we all chose at some point to get involved with that."

Buffy returned her gaze. "When you fell in love with Willow and then found out about all of this, did you ever think about backing out? Or asking Willow to back out?"

Willow suddenly felt as if everyone else had disappeared, that only the three of them were left in the dimly-lit room, sitting around this old, round table.

Tara's response was immediate, and she linked her fingers more tightly with Willow's as she spoke. "Not for an instant. I would have opted for a life with Willow anywhere, under any circumstance. Everything that she is, I join myself to." Willow felt her throat tighten in a not-unpleasant way. "And no," Tara continued, "I never thought of asking Willow to stop fighting with you, or even cut back at all. It's part of who she is. And I see now that it's part of who I am. I was supposed to meet Willow, and be with her; and I was supposed to be a part of this fight. I wouldn't change a moment of it." Then, unexpectedly, she laughed--a low, delightful sound. "Well, I might trade in that moment when I was banging on that door in your building and one of the Gentlemen opened it holding a fresh heart. I'm not sure that that really contributed to my development in any singular fashion." Willow wasn't sure, but she thought she saw tears in Buffy's eyes.

"What she said," Xander piped up. At Anya's glare, he added, "Except the part about being with Willow. And personally, I'd like to swap that whole bug-eating incident with Dracula."

"And I'm supposed to be with Tara, and I'm supposed to be a part of this fight," Willow said proudly. "And for my trade-in, I'm offering up watching the Mayor's head split open and seeing a big lizard rip out of him."

"Well, I don't know that I'm *supposed* to be involved in some epic fight," Anya began, to no one's surprise. "But I do know that I could quit if I wanted to, and I don't, so that must mean something. Although I do wish I'd get paid," she added wistfully.

"Anything you'd like to offer up on the pile of denial?" Willow asked, feeling uncharacteristically warm toward the ex-demon.

"Oh, no-I've loved every minute of it," Anya enthused. "All the blood, all the entrails, all the indefinable fluids and smells...It's been a good life..." She looked off and nodded nostalgically, as if reliving one of the more cut-throat Bingo nights in her own personal rest home.

They all sat quietly for a moment, mulling over thoughts of battles fought and impending, and silently reaffirming the rightness of their decisions and destinies.

Finally, Buffy stirred. "Well, I still have to decide what to do about Mom. And Dawn," she added. "But her I feel more OK about, at least for right now." Looking up, she met each of their eyes in turn. "Thank you. All of you. I can't imagine what my life would be like without you." And then she smiled almost as if embarrassed, and pushed back her chair away from the table. As the others followed suit and moved toward the door, Buffy put her hand tentatively on Tara's arm. Willow heard her ask softly, "Can I talk to you?" Catching Willow's eye, she added, "Both of you. Can I walk you part of the way home?"

As they moved out into the chill night air, Buffy seemed to struggle for words. "Listen, Tara, I don't know quite how to ask you this, but...but I thought you'd have some pretty helpful thoughts on the subject."

Part of Willow wanted to tease Buffy about possibly switching teams, but suspected that this wasn't the night. She heard Tara ask softly, "What is it? You can ask me anything."

As if gathering her resolve, Buffy took a deep breath and stopped, turning to face Tara squarely. "Tara, I know that your mother died of cancer. I'm-God, I'm so sorry for bringing this up out of the blue-

"Buffy, please don't apologize. It's actually harder for me when it seems like everyone's so willing to pretend she never existed. I...I actually like any chance to talk about her."

How does she do that? How does she always know just what to say, even about things that hurt her?

"I get that; I mean, I can see where I'd feel the same way. It's just that...Well, what I want to ask about actually involves her being sick."

"So ask. It's OK, really." Tara was still looking at her patiently.

"It's just, trying to decide what to do about telling Mom, especially now that she's feeling so bad. I mean, I'm not trying to say that my mom is going through anything nearly as hard as your mother went through; God, I can't even imagine-

"You want to know what I would have done if I'd learned something really big after my mom got sick. You want to know if I would have told her." Tara's voice was soft in the darkness; Willow could barely see the profile of her face.

"Yes. And Tara, if it's too hard to think about, or if this seems like an unfair question, I'm so sorry. But...But I just wanted to hear your opinion," she trailed off weakly.

Tara reached out and took one of Buffy's hands. "I don't think it's an unfair question at all. God, Buffy, you've just heard the kind of news that no one should ever have to hear, and you're trying so hard to be good to everyone. You love your mother so much; how could I not want to help you?" Willow heard the slight catch in Tara's voice as she said this last part.

Tara continued. "Buffy, no one can tell you what to do, and anyone who thinks they *know* what you should do...well, that person is a Poopy-head." She favored Willow with a quick grin.

"Well, thanks, Tara; but I really need to ask that you try to watch your language, at least around Dawn. She's so impressionable where you're concerned."

Ignoring this, Tara continued. "And *I* can't pretend to know exactly what you're going through. But you asked what I'd do: I wouldn't tell her. Not yet. I think Xander made a really good point

earlier: your mom would want to do something to protect Dawn, and she can't. Of all the amazing things your mother can do, this isn't one of them. You can do it, with our help. But it would be so hard on your mom to feel helpless about one of her children. I think it's good that you're not being all presumption-girl, assuming you know what's best and that you have the right to play gate-keeper with all the important stuff. But you just learned this yourself; you're still dealing with the shock of it all. Maybe it will be right to tell her later, but for right now, give her this time. Give *yourself* this time, Buffy."

Willow watched as Buffy nodded slowly, and then suddenly pulled Tara into her arms, hugging her fiercely. Over Tara's shoulder, Buffy asked Willow, "Anybody ever tell you your girlfriend's pretty much the greatest thing since espresso?"

"Yeah-Dawn. Pretty much every day, in pretty much every way," Willow replied with a faux scowl. "Don't make me beat up your sister, OK?"

Buffy gave what appeared to be her truest smile of the night. "I dunno, Will...the girl's a ball of energy, in more ways than one, it appears. She might just take you." And then she gave Willow a quick hug before heading off to her own house and her own precious family.

Willow turned to face Tara and took her face gently into her hands. "You know that you're the wisest of any of us, right? I know everything about computers and science, and Buffy has all this slayer power, and Xander...Well, anyway-you're the one with actual wisdom, Tara Maclay."

The heat under her fingers told her that her girlfriend was blushing. Feeling a different kind of heat--delicious, twisting--within her own skin, she added, "And wise chicks turn me on like nothing else."

She felt Tara's mouth twist into a smile. "So why are we walking?" And so saying, she grabbed Willow's hand and pulled her into a swinging, giggling lope toward their room.

Continued...

**Antigone Unbound
Index Page**

~ Gods Served and Abandoned ~
by Antigone Unbound

Author Notes: See Part 1.

Feedback: Even more sure! Bring it on!

Part 6

"Donnie, w-would you take Mom's iced-tea up to her? I'm almost done with the soup and toast, and it w-would save me making two trips." From her position by the stove, Tara looked at her brother warily. She never asked Donnie for anything, but she was so tired from the countless trips up and down the stairs, not to mention the late-night studying to keep her grades up, that she decided to risk it.

He grunted dismissively. "D-d-d-don't you th-th-th-think you c-c-c-could use the exercise, Sis? You got breeder's hips if ever I seen 'em." He laughed at his own joke, and the harsh noise drowned out the sound of their father entering the kitchen. Tara saw the hard slash of his mouth tighten even more as he glared at his son.

"Watch your language, Donald. You'll not talk to your sister in that way." Nathan Maclay looked over at Tara, who, despite his words, felt no warmth or protectiveness emanating from him. What she did feel, what she had felt almost constantly for the last several years, was resentment and bitterness.

What did I do, Daddy? Just tell me, and I'll apologize. But you have to tell me what I did.

Their father turned back to Donnie. "Get your lazy body out of that chair and help your sister. And apologize while you're at it."

Donnie glowered at Tara with an expression that told her what she could expect later, even as he sullenly muttered, "Sorry, Tara." He pushed his chair back from the table with an angry shove and made his way over to the stove.

"H-here's the tea. You can just put it on the t-table by her bed."

In a low voice, Donnie replied, "Really? P-p-p-put it on the table? I was thinkin' of puttin' it in her dresser with her socks."

Tara said nothing until he reached the doorway, and then called out, "Thanks, D-Donnie."

She looked nervously at her father, who glanced downward as soon as she caught his eye. When he looked back up, he seemed angrier than before, and Tara had no earthly idea why.

She hated these moments alone with her father almost as much as she hated being caught alone by Donnie. Her father always seemed so resentful toward her, and it felt as if the more she tried to placate him, the angrier he became. When it was just the two of them, her anxiety raged almost out of control. Should she try to speak to him, engage him in conversation? What about? Was there a safe topic? Anything he might want to talk about? Or maybe he'd prefer to be left in

silence, without her bothering him. But what if he thought she was being rude, or stand-offish? Which was worse-to irritate him, or offend him?

Deciding that if he had wanted silence, he could have left the room, Tara ventured a question. "How's the p-planting going, Daddy?"

His frown told her she'd made a mistake. *What? What did I say? They're planting corn all this week, aren't they?*

"Have you looked outside, Tara? I know you don't dirty your hands much with the farm work, but even you should know that we don't plant corn when it's still so muddy from the rain."

The rain. Right, it rained hard these last two days. I knew that; I just forgot. But Daddy, don't you know that I'm taking care of Mom? Do you even notice?

Aloud, she said, "I'm s-sorry, Sir. I should have realized that." Now the soup was ready and the toast was lightly buttered, and Tara wanted to get it upstairs to her mother before it got cold. But if she left now, would he think she was being disrespectful? Walking out on him?

She looked at him uncertainly. "Would you like some soup, Daddy? It's tomato; home-made. And I could m-make you some toast?"

Did his expression soften, just slightly? "No, I'm heading back out to the barn. I'm fixing some machinery. Tell Donnie to come on out when he gets back downstairs."

"Yes, Sir. G-good luck with the machinery."

He turned to leave, and then paused in the doorway. Without looking back, he said, almost inaudibly, "Thank you." And then he was gone.

Sitting in his hotel room, Donnie pulled out the small, silver key that would open the lock box. Moments later, he gazed down into the box's contents and smiled.

"Daddy, you poor, dumb son of a bitch. What were you thinking?"

Tara and Willow huddled under the comforter, Willow resting her head on Tara's shoulder while Tara's arms lay protectively about her. The room was redolent with sandalwood, sage, and the very singular scent of really, *really* hot sex between two women. Willow's hand still nestled between Tara's legs-half relaxed, half proprietary.

When Willow opened her eyes, she was greeted with the very exquisite sight of Tara's breasts. *And they're mine, all mine!* Even in this sleepy state, she was consummately aware that if anyone tried to horn in on her babe, she'd reduce them to ash.

"Tasty Tara Tater-Tots," she mumbled. A low rumble of laughter answered this random observation.

"Tater-Tots? Are you hungry?" The arms tightened slightly; Willow felt a gentle kiss nuzzle the top of her head.

She pulled herself slowly to wakefulness. "You...Your body. All the sweet, savory parts...They're tasty Tara Tater-Tots. And they're all mine." She pulled back slightly to look up into Tara's eyes. "Nobody gets to eat you but me."

"Well look at you...Ma'am, yes Ma'am." Tara's eyes belied the gentleness behind the teasing. *I never dreamed that someone would ever want me all to herself. And never somebody like Willow.* "Rest assured that 'Tara's Terrace of Tender, Tantalizing Tater-Tots' only has one table, for one customer."

"Truly?"

"Trust me."

"Totally."

They lay in silence for a few minutes, each woman musing at first over other phrases they could use to prolong the consonance. Then their minds wandered back to the events of the day. In Sunnydale, it was hard to keep the Metro section of one's mental newspaper at too great a distance.

"I wonder how Buffy's doing tonight? I mean, God, how did she feel when she first saw Dawn, knowing she's the Key?" Willow frowned, and burrowed more deeply into Tara's warmth.

She heard Tara sigh. "I don't know, Will. I can't even imagine what it's like for her...not just with Dawn, but with her mom, too."

Wrapping her arms more tightly over Tara's belly, Willow murmured, "You were great tonight. Being there for Buffy..."

"Oh, Sweetie...Thank you. I think we all sort of make this...I don't know, *mosaic*, I guess, where we each try to add some piece that we believe we're good at. And the end product usually works pretty well, but it's because we've each given something unique."

Willow sighed. "God, metaphors make me hot."

"Well, you have your own endless supply of Tater-Tots right here," Tara laughed.

"Tara Tater-Tots," Willow admonished her. "Don't be fooled by cheap imitations." She nuzzled Tara's breasts and grinned like the supremely happy woman she was.

After a while, Willow broached another difficult subject-not because she wanted to, but because it was still hovering over them. "Baby, are you worried about Donnie? He didn't contact you today, did he?"

Tara's hands stilled just briefly on her back before resuming their gentle tracing. "No, he didn't try to find me after class or leave a message or anything." She sighed, a mixture of anxiety and sadness. "I'm hoping it means that he went back to Cold Springs, but I'm sort of afraid to believe it."

"But why, Tara? Why would he spend so much time and energy trying to get you to come back, if that's what he's doing? The two of you weren't exactly close." She shifted, moving to lay face to face with Tara.

"Since when do you go for understatement, Willow?" Tara's attempt at a smile left much to be desired.

"No, we're definitely not close. I can't bring myself to say I hate him, because I just don't want to invite that kind of energy into my life; but he's the only person I've ever wanted to hate, or thought I hated."

"So why's he doing this?" Willow was truly perplexed. She could feel Donnie's antipathy radiate off of him in the Magic Shop and outside of the Espresso Pump. True, he must have hated the idea of her being so independent and assertive, but it seemed that he would also want her as far away from him as possible. Wouldn't he?

Tara was silent, and remained silent, until Willow felt a cold horror start to spread over her. She felt almost paralyzed with the force of it.

Oh, goddess, no. Please, not that.

Should she ask? Would it be intrusive? Or would her silence, her decision not to ask directly, lead Tara to think that she couldn't handle such a revelation? She spoke softly, and tentatively.

"Baby, you don't have to say anything you don't want to, but I can hear whatever you need to say." She took a deep breath. "Baby...Did Donnie molest you?"

Tara's face seemed almost unbearably sad, and then she shook her head, very slightly.

"Actually, that's about the only thing he *didn't* do, Willow. I guess he gets points for that."

Willow propped herself up on one elbow, hot waves of anger washing through her. "No, he certainly gets no points for **not** molesting his sister. You don't commend a wife-beater for not breaking any bones."

She loves me. She loves me so fiercely.

"I know, Sweetie; I was just trying...No, Donnie doesn't get points for much of anything. But he didn't molest me," she added.

Willow touched Tara's face gently. "You know that even if he had, it wouldn't change my feelings for you; that you would still be my Tara, right?" She felt, intuitively, that this was very important, and she desperately wanted Tara to believe her.

"Yes, I know that, my love. And I know that you would change Donnie into a mongoose if I asked you to."

"I was thinking more along the lines of a hog, just before heading off to market." She pulled Tara next to her, cradling her in her arms.

"It's just...goddess, Willow, he was so cruel and I never, ever knew why. I tried to tell myself that it was just typical sibling teasing; big brother stuff. But I knew...I knew that he really wanted to hurt me; that he would have been more than happy if I-if I weren't around."

Willow felt her stomach lurch again. "Tara, Baby, did he try-try to hurt you really bad? Like...endanger you?" Without thinking, she tightened her arms around her beloved, as if the current protection could undo the past assaults.

Tara spoke so softly that Willow could barely hear her. "No...He didn't try to kill me. But I'm pretty sure he wanted me dead."

Willow felt a ripple of incredulous horror. What would it be like, knowing that someone who was supposed to love you wanted you dead? How could the world ever look normal to you?

She could only murmur, "My sweet Baby...I-I don't know what to say."

She felt Tara smile against her skin. "Neither did I, for eighteen years. I was always trying to find the right words, the words to make it stop, but I never could."

"Do you have any idea why? I mean, not that there's any justification for it; it's just...God, that kind of anger, and from someone who shares your genes. Tara, you're the gentlest person I've ever known. How could the two of you be siblings? How could he ever be mad at you?"

Tara edged back slightly, enough to look Willow in the face. "Maybe I was the only one he *could* get mad at; the only one who couldn't fight back." She tucked her head back snugly against Willow's chest. "But somehow that doesn't seem...*enough*, you know? I mean, it feels like there's more; like there's something so...*personal* about it."

Willow could think of nothing to say to this. The idea of anyone hating Tara, especially anyone who had spent more than five minutes with her, was simply incomprehensible to her.

"Was he this angry with your mom and dad?" She desperately wanted to understand what had happened to Donnie, why he was who he was. He was Tara's brother, and Willow would have been intrigued by him for that reason if no other. But he had hurt Tara; hurt the kindest, truest soul she had ever encountered. That made it almost imperative for her to understand it all, because if she understood, she could hopefully help protect Tara.

"Oh, he never raised his voice to Dad. He spent almost all his time with him, helping on the farm. You know, I'm almost sure Dad beat Donnie on a pretty regular basis. There were lots of times when I'd be outside for whatever reason and I'd see Donnie holding one arm funny, or looking like he was trying not to cry. Dad ruled that world with an iron fist."

"That world?" Willow echoed Tara's words.

"The world outside the house; the farm and the land. Dad gave the orders and Donnie followed them; I did, too. But inside, in the house...It was almost like there was another set of rules, at least for Donnie and for Dad. Nobody ever said it out loud, but Mom was the authority in the house, and she didn't get it through raising her voice or using a belt or anything like that."

Willow was fascinated. Tara had never spoken at such length about her family before, and Willow was almost afraid to breathe, lest she somehow interrupt Tara's narrative and silence her.

"Donnie knew that Dad would never tolerate him being disrespectful to Mom, so I never heard him say anything in anger. I'm-I'm not sure exactly what Donnie felt towards Mom, but he didn't say anything that would get him into trouble." Tara was silent for a moment, and Willow forced herself to remain quiet as well.

"And Daddy...I swear, Willow, I think he was almost afraid of her. I don't mean physically afraid of her, like she would just up and pull a gun on him some day. It was like she had some power over him and he didn't like it but he wouldn't, or couldn't, do anything about it."

Now Willow's mind was buzzing even as her heart held onto the ache she felt for her beloved. Power? But Tara's dad knew that his wife wasn't a demon, didn't he? Although Tara had said that she didn't think it was physical in nature. So what was it?

Now Tara fell silent again, until Willow began to wonder if she had fallen asleep. Just as she was about to try to shift slightly, to look at Tara's face, she heard her voice wafting up to her again.

"It's just so...so *sad*, Willow...We were supposed to be a family, and now look at us." She sighed heavily against Willow's chest.

After a moment, Willow let herself venture a question. "Baby, your mom sounds like such an incredible woman." She felt a tiny smile curving into her skin. "But-Tara, why didn't she protect you from Donnie?"

She felt Tara stiffen, and wished she hadn't broached something that clearly brought Tara pain. "Tara, Baby, you don't have to answer that; I mean, I'm sorry if it sounds like I was blaming your mom-"

"No, it's OK. I'd ask the same thing if our positions were reversed." Tara shifted and sat up slightly, looking evenly at Willow. "I truly don't think she knew, Willow. Goddess knows I never told-"

"But why?" Willow broke in, and instantly regretted doing so. Who was she to question Tara's decisions, the decisions of a frightened, abused child? "Tara, I'm sorry. I-I guess I keep wanting to...to read some version of this where it doesn't happen, and I keep trying to think of how it could have been avoided." She broke off, and stroked Tara's cheek softly. "But it couldn't have been avoided-not by anything you could have done. I know that."

Tara gave Willow a gentle kiss, and then pulled back, looking at her with eyes that suddenly seemed much older than they had an hour ago.

"I didn't tell Mom, because the only time I threatened to, Donnie flat-out swore he'd kill me if I did." Her voice was flat, matter-of-fact. Willow, by contrast, couldn't speak at all.

"And then he hit me once more, hard-right in the stomach. After that, I gave up the idea of telling Mom."

Willow finally found her voice. "Do you think she had any idea?"

"I'm not sure... I think so, because she talked about that kind of stuff, indirectly, a couple of times. But I always said no. I wanted to tell her, I wanted to so badly; but there was no way I was going to risk it. I knew he'd find me." Her voice softened again, became almost inaudible. "Just like he's found me now."

Willow felt her heart squeeze with a sense of rage and protectiveness so piercing so that it burned. When she trusted herself to speak, she said, "He won't hurt you, Tara. I will never let him hurt you." To herself, she added a silent vow: *I'll hurt him first if I have to.*

Cold Springs is a dull town, by anyone's standards. It's the kind of place where there's not much to distract you besides your own company after your work's done and the sun goes down. You have a lot of time to think in places like Cold Springs.

Beth Maclay was thinking now. She was nearly always thinking, always had been. Life had been harder to her, she knew, than to Tara or Donnie. Her own father-Uncle Nathan's brother-had run off and left her and her mother almost ten years ago, and for awhile her mother had let herself go. Barely kept a clean house; had any number of men coming around. Some had treated her mother with something approximating kindness; others had been unabashed in their singular

intentions. Still others-the worst ones-had seemed to enjoy being around Beth almost as much as her mother. She cringed at the thought.

And then her mother had found God, and God had surely never been the same. Her mother dragged her to a church just outside of Cold Springs for awhile, an evangelical place that held tent revivals and encouraged speaking in tongues. Beth could still feel the unforgiving wooden pews of the church; she could still feel the fear and eventually the embarrassment she'd felt when her mother joined in the more histrionic paroxysms of Christian piety.

Finally her mother had eased back to a place just this side of frenzied in her faith, and starting attending the Cold Springs First Baptist Church. (To Beth's knowledge, there wasn't a second and certainly not a third Baptist church in the little town; she wasn't quite sure what the competition was all about.) Gradually, her mother's beliefs became her own and Beth attended the church now with something akin to true devotion. It was the church that her Uncle Nathan attended, which made it good enough for her.

Uncle Nathan was the father she should have had, she knew. She suspected that her father had run off because her mother had gotten lazy and fat; maybe she hadn't been a wife to him in all the ways that she was supposed to. But she also remembered her father as an angry, red-faced man who was drunk much of the time. Uncle Nathan, by contrast, was never out of control. He didn't let his emotions get the best of him; he didn't run around making a scene at bars or revivals. He was a good man, and yet Tara apparently thought *she* was too good for *him*. This angered her greatly.

Now Donnie was down in Sunnydale, trying to convince Tara to come back. "But she doesn't belong here," Beth muttered to herself, rinsing out the frying pan she'd just washed. "She never did."

So why had she helped Donnie by giving him Uncle Nathan's lock box, something that Uncle Nathan would surely never forgive her for if he ever found out?

Because Donnie had said Uncle Nathan would be grateful to her. Donnie had as much as said that Tara didn't belong with their family; that *Beth* was the daughter Uncle Nathan deserved.

But what was in the box? She'd shaken it gently, without an ounce of self-consciousness, but she hadn't been able to discern anything. A mild rustling; something sliding back and forth across the bottom of the box. She'd been afraid to try anything more strenuous, for fear that she'd break something. She still had no clue of what Donnie had been so eager to get his hands on. She only knew that he was sure it would have a huge impact on Tara and her decision.

She should have held out for more information. She should have made him tell her what was in the box before she agreed to give it to him. But he'd been so persuasive, assuring her that Uncle Nathan would appreciate her part in all of this.

Beth loved her mother in a kind of distant, obligatory way that held more than a hint of distaste. Her mother was still so lost, so bereft, and always complaining to anyone who'd listen (and to

lots of folks who wouldn't) that her life had been so hard since her husband had left...raising her daughter all alone, trying to keep her fed and clothed, trying to give her good morals. Beth thought this was self-serving hogwash. Between her mother's whoring and her Holy-rolling, Beth figured she'd pretty much raised herself.

And now she was living in a warm, comfortable house with someone she could be proud to call a father. And Donnie...Well, she'd have to keep her eye on Donnie. She sensed that he saw more than she wanted him to see when he looked at her. She was used to being the one who could walk around unnoticed and see where the openings were. But Donnie had that skill in a different way.

Reaching for a drying towel, Beth decided that she would make Donnie her ally of sorts, at least for the time being. "Keep your friends close, and keep your enemies closer," her father used to say in his drunken voice, as if he were imparting words of great wisdom. Well, maybe he had been. As a Christian woman, Beth didn't like to think of herself as someone who would have enemies, or feel uncharitably toward someone. But there was Uncle Nathan to consider, and he'd been through enough already-first losing his wife, and then his daughter acting that way. Staying as close to the Maclay household as she could-it was the right thing to do.

That night, Beth dreamt of a family picture, and Uncle Nathan saying, "Come on in here, Beth. You belong in this picture."

Donnie dreamt of a blond woman who never looked at him, just kept walking away from him, even though he yelled at her and begged her to turn around. She finally stopped, and he thought for a moment she might come back to him, but then her hair turned red and in his mind he could hear her saying, "That's much better. That's the way it's supposed to be."

Buffy dreamt of bimbos in high heels pounding on her door, until Dawn told her, "It's OK, I'll get it. I know it's for me."

Willow dreamt of walking on stacks and stacks of magic books back through time until she stood in front of Tara's house and whispered, "Tara-come with me. I'm here to save you," and then a little blond girl appeared in the window, fighting back tears and mouthing words that Willow couldn't understand.

And Tara dreamt of walking into her room to find Donnie looking through her spell book. He turned and grinned at her and said, "Cat's out of the bag, Little Sister," and then he plunged their father's hunting knife into his own stomach and winked at her as he slid to the floor.

Part 7

Willow glanced around the Magic Box. All in all, she thought, they were doing a serviceable job of acting normal around Dawn; which is to say, Xander was trying to be funny, Willow was being bright and perky, Tara was asking Dawn about school and actually listening to the answers, and Anya was being nice.

Oh, shit!

This was no good at all. Dawn would surely realize that something catastrophic was afoot. Stealing a glance at Xander, Willow could see that he was too immersed in his attempts to catch Dawn's attention to notice Anya's behavior. (Dawn, Willow noticed, was too immersed in *Tara* to notice Xander's behavior.)

*So it's up to me to explain to Anya why sometimes she **shouldn't** be that nice. And then maybe I'll attempt to reverse the earth's rotation.*

Sighing, she walked over to the counter, just as Anya was asking Dawn if she'd care for a soda from the fridge-free of charge. Dawn looked up, eyebrows shooting north to disappear into her hairline.

"Um...sure, thanks," Dawn replied hesitantly, looking perplexed.

Perplexed. She's perplexed. Next comes nonplussed and then disconcerted and after that it's only a matter of time until-bam!-full-blown suspicion.

Willow waited until Anya returned with a Diet Coke and handed it to Dawn. "Could I talk to you for a minute? It's about the ledgers," she added, hoping that she sounded convincing. From under the counter, she grabbed a hefty book that looked as if it might pertain to money, and pulled Anya back toward the training room.

"What's up?" Anya demanded, the bright light of capitalism burning fiercely in her eyes.

"Um, OK-it's not really about the store's money," she began, trying to ignore the immediate halving of Anya's attention. "It's about Dawn; the way you're acting around her."

"What do you mean?" Anya's voice squealed off the track. "I'm being as nice to her as I can possibly be!"

"I know. And that's sort of the problem. See, we're all supposed to be acting normal around her, behaving like we always do. And you're not usually..." she trailed off, hoping Anya would help her out.

Anya didn't.

"Nice," she finished, flinching. She hastened on. "I mean, you're always funny and honest and you shoot straight from the hip, sometimes more literally than we might prefer, but you don't really specialize in the motherly nurturing behaviors."

To her relief, Anya didn't seem offended. "You're saying that she might think something's up if I act differently around her," she mused.

"Right! You got it."

"That makes sense. OK, it's back to business as usual." She turned and headed back toward the others.

"Thanks," Willow said to Anya's back, emerging into the front room just in time to watch Anya yank the Diet Coke out of Dawn's hand.

"Hey!"

"My mistake. I thought I was feeling generous, but it was just gas. That'll be a buck, missy."

"And people say teenagers are unpredictable," Dawn grumbled, digging into her jeans to find some cash.

Willow returned to her seat to find Tara looking at her with a wry smile. *She knows exactly what that was all about. Nothing gets by her.*

"So anyway," Dawn continued, tugging gently on Tara's arm, "Janice tries to say that magic isn't real and I tell her she doesn't know what she's talking about. I mean, *you* can do all *sorts* of neat things, Tara..."

Should be happening any minute now...

"...like, really special things that most people just can't understand..."

I'm guessing in...five, four, three...

"...and I'd love you to teach me..."

...two ...

"...one on one, maybe?" And here Dawn blushed a flaming, glorious scarlet.

Roger, Houston, we have facial blast-off.

Willow looked up as Buffy entered the store, eyes scanning the room until they rested on Dawn. They didn't linger there, but Willow could read the quick relief that flashed across Buffy's face.

"Any news on the Glory front?" Xander asked.

"It's more like a big Glory **hole**," Buffy muttered, then caught herself and looked around at the others, all of whom (except for Dawn) had caught her as well.

*They even blush the same color. How can they **not** be sisters?*

"I think glory holes are supposed to be a little more rewarding to plunge yourself into than this," Anya inserted, under her breath.

Dawn looked around suspiciously. "What? What sexual innuendo just happened that I don't know about?"

Buffy's hasty "It's nothing" competed with Anya's "I'll tell you later." Dawn sighed the grand, much put-upon sigh of a teenager and somehow managed to make slumping back in her chair very much resemble flouncing.

"So," Buffy said loudly. "Getting back to Glory...Will, remember the mental patient we ran into the other day at the hospital, when we were taking Mom for some tests?"

Willow grimaced. "How could I forget? He scared us all to death."

"Especially me," Dawn joined in. "Remember how he kept pointing at me and saying I didn't belong?"

There was a brief and uncomfortable silence while the experienced demon fighters struggled for something to say to the girl in front of them.

"That must have been so weird." Tara's voice was soft. "It totally would've scared me."

Dawn looked at Tara, opening her mouth to speak and then shutting it quickly.

She doesn't know whether to take the comfort or try to act brave.

Finally, Dawn shrugged her shoulders slightly and looked down at the floor. "Yeah-it pretty much freaked me out."

"Yeah, well, check this out." So saying, Tara leaned forward and whispered something in Dawn's ear. A huge grin broke out over the teenager's face a moment later.

"No way! Really? OK, now I don't feel so bad!"

"Care to share?" Xander asked, with no small measure of curiosity.

Tara just looked at Dawn and smiled. "Oh, I think we'll keep it between the two of us for right now." From that moment on, Willow realized, the conversation could concern anything in the world and Dawn would be fine with it because now she knew something private about Tara. Tara had entrusted her with a secret. What were mental patients and uncomfortable silences compared to that?

Willow caught Buffy's look of gratitude and then the Slayer continued. "Well, Ben told us that this guy had no history of mental problems; he also said that a *lot* of people had been checking into the Boo Radley Motor Lodge lately-none of whom had a mental illness history."

"Right. So?" Willow wasn't sure why the mental health climate in Sunnydale, long cloudy but never a subject of discussion before, should suddenly be an issue.

"Well, Giles found out that Glory is basically feeding off of people's minds. Somehow, she extracts their sanity. She needs it to keep from going completely bat-shit herself."

"I notice you say 'completely,'" Xander interjected. "Does this mean that Glory is never all that far from, shall we say, a liberal interpretation of reality?"

"Pretty much," Buffy nodded.

"So she takes people's minds," Tara said, so low that Willow barely heard her. Turning, she took Tara's hand in her own.

"Don't worry, Baby. We'll figure out a way to stop her." Willow tried to give her an encouraging smile, but the fear in Tara's eyes left her adrift in the effort.

"Nothing...nothing physical could match that," Tara murmured, more to herself than aloud.

"Hey, where *is* Giles?" Xander asked.

"He stopped back at his place to get some old manuscript that he thinks might have some useful info," Buffy replied. "Probably smells like the inside of a tomb," she added.

"Yeah, it was so rude of the ancient sages and scribes not to spritz a little rose water on the pages," Willow noted absently. She could still feel Tara's fear radiating through her touch.

We've faced scarier stuff than this before. Why does this have her so spooked?

Later that night, Willow sat curled up in the welcoming curve of Tara's arms, watching a History channel special on the evolution of Judeo-Christian religious traditions. "Now *there's* a nice, tidy little subject," Willow mused. "So easy to sum up in an hour."

Tara leaned forward and kissed her cheek. "That's why they're devoting an entire week to it, Sweetie."

"Oh, well, an entire week...That should make everything abundantly clear." She shifted slightly and looked up at Tara. "You grew up going to church, didn't you?" She saw the quick shadow that passed over Tara's eyes whenever her past came into the present.

"Oh, yes. We definitely went to church...every Sunday morning, and either Sunday evening Bible study or Wednesday night prayer meeting." Her mouth twisted with the memory.

"Wow-twice a week. That's, like, very pew-intensive. Were you really that religious?" Willow's own history with the synagogue was a far more casual affair.

"Don't confuse religion with spirituality, Will. My father was definitely the former, not so much the latter." Again Tara frowned slightly.

"What about your mom? Was she into it?" Willow's curiosity about Tara's family continued to poke at her, nudging her onward to put this picture together somehow.

"Mom was what I'd call spiritual, but she went to church to keep the peace."

"So what church did you go to?"

"In Cold Springs? Nothing but Baptist will do, thank you very much." Tara's laugh conveyed very little in the way of humor.

"So what was it like?" Willow knew that Tara didn't like talking about her past, and yet it felt so incongruous to her, knowing such limited glimpses of Tara's history. They were so synchronized, it seemed, in everything else; each knew the other to the bone. And then there were the first eighteen years of Tara's life, that Willow was left to fit together like a puzzle whose pieces came to light only fleetingly.

"What was it like..."Tara murmured. "Let's see-lots of hellfire and damnation; lots of very loud, spit-flecked denunciations of the human soul. Only one way to salvation; submit your will to the Lord's; take a pass on pretty much everything that brings you joy; and then finally one day you get the immense pleasure of looking down on all the pagans roasting in the eternal flames of hell. I think that pretty much sums it up." She looked down at Willow with a wry smile.

Willow's answering grin was a very feeble one. "That fun, huh?"

"Oh, yeah...And yet, can you believe it-I didn't find it spiritually nourishing? No, for that I looked to Wicca, to that frame of spirituality. I actually thought that Jesus was a remarkable person-very loving, very open. But the idea of one door into paradise? That only a few people had the inside track on? Definitely didn't fit for me."

Willow puzzled over this family religious structure for a moment. "But didn't your dad get kinda, you know-*testy* about the Wiccan part? I mean, he couldn't have been too thrilled with the whole non-patriarchy deal."

"That's putting it mildly," Tara replied with a grin. "He was always after Mom to give it up, denounce it, say that there was only one god. He wanted her to get baptized; like, head-under-the-water baptized." Her smile faded. "He said it would cleanse the demon from her soul."

Willow sat up and faced Tara, taking her hands in her own. "Baby, do you think your mother really believed that she had demon in her? That just seems so...so contrary to how you describe her."

Tara remained silent for several moments. When she spoke, her voice was low and filled with pain. "I don't know, Willow. I've asked myself that so many times since my birthday. I mean, if she knew that the demon tale was just a scare tactic, why wouldn't she tell me? And if she *did* think she was part demon, why did she keep practicing magic?" Tara shook her head, blond hair falling over her face.

Willow touched her cheek lightly. "But Baby, *you* were going to keep practicing magic. I mean, you *did* practice it..." She didn't finish the sentence, though both of them knew what she was referring to. But Willow didn't want this to turn into a discussion of Tara's decision that night. Tara had already apologized; that conversation was past. "I don't think it's that black and white, do you?"

"Even when I believed I had demon in me, I didn't think the magic was bad," Tara replied, biting on her lower lip. "I thought the magic might protect me from the demon,"

Willow nodded. "So maybe your mom thought along the same lines you did."

Silence fell over them as they considered all of this. Willow looked at Tara with concern. Tara had always described her mother as so loving, so protective-yet if she *did* know that there was no demon in either of them, how could she have kept this knowledge from her beloved daughter? Or had Tara's mother gone to her grave thinking that she was, in fact, part demon-prone to evil and corruption? Had she died thinking the same of Tara?

This painful conversation was interrupted by the harsh ring of the telephone.

"I wonder if that's Buffy," Tara mused, untangling herself reluctantly from Willow's arms and legs to retrieve the phone. Willow hid a tiny smile. She knew that Tara was a very private person and not all that fond of the telephone, with its potential intrusion by any number of unwelcome personages. Since signing up for the Scooby life, however, she had little choice but to answer the phone. She didn't have Caller ID, and she hated answering the phone ready to do battle with the forces of darkness only to be asked if she was happy with her long-distance calling plan.

"Hello?" she asked with measured politeness.

One look at Tara's face told Willow that this was neither stirring call to duty nor irritating phone sales.

"Cousin Beth?"

Willow felt her eyes bug out, and quickly regained her outward composure because she suspected that this was not such a good look for her. But she was still stunned. She found herself

wishing desperately that there was another phone in the room. When Tara motioned for her to come and listen in, she bounded over eagerly, putting her ear up to the shared receiver.

"Hi, Tara. I bet you're surprised to hear from me." Beth's tone was faintly wheedling.

"Um, actually, I'd be surprised to hear from Madonna. I'm *shocked* to hear from you, Beth." Tara looked at Willow, who silently mouthed, "*What the heck does Ellie Mae want?*" Though to be fair, Willow acknowledged, the girl on the Beverly Hillbillies had been considerably more buxom and a lot more fun.

"I know we didn't part under the best of circumstances, Tara," Beth was saying in her saccharine voice. "That's why I called."

"Beth, you called me a selfish bitch," Tara reminded her. Willow raised her eyebrows at this. *She called my girl a bitch? OK, she's toast.* "Was some there other insult you forgot?"

"Now, Tara, don't harden your heart against me, or any of us. You know that's not what Paul would want you to do."

"*Who's Paul?*" Willow mouthed. Placing her hand briefly over the speaker, Tara answered hastily, "Apostle Paul. Hated people like us."

So the girl's on a first-name basis with the original Christian Right? Figures.

Returning her attention to her cousin, Tara replied, "Frankly, Beth, I haven't spoken with Paul lately. I don't usually consult him about my decisions." Willow was amazed at Tara's bluntness, and the utter confidence with which she delivered it.

"Well, maybe you should," Beth said solemnly. As Tara began to argue, however, Beth changed her tone. "Oh, Tara-that's not why I called. I don't want us to fight."

"Beth, those last two sentences don't really go together. It seems to me that if you call, we're going to fight." Willow could see Tara struggling to keep her anger in check.

"But we shouldn't. Tara, we're family." Willow knew that that had made its way into Tara's heart, as much as her beloved didn't want it to. She remembered their conversation last night: "*It's just so sad... We were supposed to be a family.*"

Her heart ached for Tara as she watched her blink back tears. "No, Beth, we're blood kin, just like Daddy said. That doesn't make us a family, not the way I define the word."

There was a brief pause, and then Beth spoke again, her voice full of conciliation. "Tara, I didn't call to give you a hard time. I just want you to know that I'll back you up whatever you decide to do."

Willow felt the earth tilt on its axis, and glanced at Tara to make sure she didn't fall over. Tara was looking at the phone as if it had suddenly grown flippers and snatched a fish out of her hand. "What did you say?" she finally managed.

"Tara, you're a grown woman and I may not approve of your...*choices*, but they're yours to make."

Tara drew in a deep breath, and then said, "Beth, I'm...I don't know what to say. I mean, I'm glad to hear it, but I never would have expected it."

Beth jumped into the half-opening that Tara had given her. "I know you're surprised, Tara. I've just done a lot of thinking since we left, and it seems to me that if you really feel like you belong there at school, then that's where you should be. Especially now that you don't have to worry about the demon," she added.

"Beth, did you know? That the demon story was a lie?" Tara asked, a sense of urgency in her voice.

"No," came the quick reply. "I was as shocked as you were." After a moment, she went on. "That was sort of what sealed it for me. Once I realized that there was no danger in you staying at college, well, it just seemed wrong to say you couldn't live your own life."

A frown stealing over her face, Tara asked suddenly, "Beth, what about Donnie? He's down here, I know you know that. He said that you all decided he should come."

Beth laughed, a not-altogether authentic sound. "Tara, you know Donnie. Once he decides how things should be, there's no changing his mind." Willow watched the pain roll over Tara's face, and felt her own darken in response. *I'll change his mind, the little prick.*

"He just got it in his head that he should give it one last try," Beth was continuing. "And Uncle Nathan..." Here her voice faltered.

"What? What about Daddy? Is he OK?" Willow could hear the fear in Tara's voice. He may not have been much of a father, but Willow knew that Tara still loved him; she always would.

"Oh, no-he's fine, Tara," Beth hastened to assure her. "He's just-he just hasn't completely accepted that you're an adult now. He still thinks he knows what's best for you."

"Beth, is Daddy thinking that Donnie can really bring me back?" Willow noticed Tara's fingers clenching reflexively over the receiver.

There was a brief pause, and then Beth replied slowly. "I don't know, Tara. I think Donnie sort of played on Uncle Nathan's fears; you know, about you being away at school. But I know that in time Uncle Nathan will realize that you can decide where you belong and what you want to do."

"I hope so," Tara said sadly, her voice almost inaudible.

"Well, that's really all I wanted, Tara. Just to tell you that I know you're happy at school and I think you can decide where you want to be."

Tara drew a shaky breath. "Well, Beth, if anybody would have told me ten minutes ago that I'd be saying this, I'd have passed dead away, but-thank you. Thanks for thinking about this, and for having the courage to call me and tell me."

"You're welcome, Tara. We all have to figure out where we belong, don't we?"

Tara laughed quietly. "Yeah, I guess that's half the battle...Thanks, Beth. Really."

"You're welcome. Take care, Tara."

As she hung up the phone, Tara turned to Willow. "OK, who was that and what did she do with my cousin?"

"I don't know, Baby, but it looks like you have one less Maclay trying to lasso you and drag you back home." Willow nuzzled happily into Tara's neck, kissing the smooth flesh.

"Well, it sounds like she doesn't agree with Donnie coming down here, at least not anymore. And Donnie...maybe he'll give up and head home. He hasn't tried to contact me again; maybe he's just using this as an excuse to get away from the farm himself."

Burrowing deeper into Tara's arms, Willow only nodded. *Please let her be right. We have enough battles to fight right now.*

Returning the phone to its cradle, Beth checked once more that her uncle still hadn't come in from the barn. "Now, as long as Donnie doesn't find out. There's no need for him to know," she reassured herself as she made her way up the stairs. "If I don't look out for myself, who will? And Uncle Nathan will come around after awhile." Walking down the long hallway, she caught sight of Tara's high school graduation picture hanging on the wall. Her long blond hair flowed smoothly over her shoulders; Tara's blue eyes seemed shy, and her smile was tentative. Beth looked at the picture for a long time, taking in all of Tara's features. "You don't know how lucky you had it," she finally muttered, pulling away at last and heading into her room.

The heavy, crimson drapes were closed, leaving the room unnaturally dark. She sat beside the bed, cradling the bony hand with infinite tenderness while her mother lay sleeping. She gazed for long moments at the slender fingers, bringing them unconsciously up to her face as she remembered...

...hands bundling her into her winter jacket, long fingers sliding the zipper expertly into its clasp and up over her chest;

...hands brushing her hair, never rushed or impatient, easing the brush gently through the tangles and smoothing the golden strands in its wake;

...hands tossing lumps of dough down onto the ancient wooden counter, then punching the dough with a strength and sureness of purpose that characterized all of her work;

...hands gliding back and forth over a sewing machine, fingers nimbly edging the fabric into colorful, intricate patterns;

...hands rubbing lotion onto her chapped skin in the winter, blue eyes sparking as they looked down at her;

...hands checking her forehead for a fever, resting cool against flushed skin...

They were the most beautiful, capable hands in the world, Tara knew suddenly; no one had such wonderful hands as her mother. They had done everything; smoothed her own life as best as they could, and taught her how to grow herbs and weave fibers and play the piano. They were strong, with long, tapering fingers, faintly marked by tiny scars picked up in the business of living.

And they were warm. As long as they were warm, Tara knew, the sun hadn't deserted her. And somewhere, in a quiet room in her mind, Tara let herself believe that so long as she held her mother's hand, it would never grow cold. She would keep her warm with her own warmth, just as her mother had done for her. Tara would keep the cold away from her mother's body and her own soul. All she had to do was hold on.

She was surprised to feel her mother stir suddenly. After a moment, she opened her eyes. Morphine and her ebbing life force gave them an unfocused cast. Tara could tell that she was struggling to awaken, and to stay awake.

"Mama?" she whispered quietly, reverting back to the first name by which she had called this woman, the name she had used when she had so many years with her still ahead.

She watched her mother struggle to moisten her lips. "Mama, do you want some ice chips?" Her mother gave an almost imperceptible nod. Tara brought the cup close to the bed, grasping one chip in her own long fingers and holding it to her mother's lips. She watched as her mother took it gratefully and let the liquid dissolve slowly in her mouth.

After a moment, she managed to speak. "Hey, Bright Eyes. What day is it?"

Tara had to think for a moment before she could answer. "It's Tuesday, Mama. Tuesday afternoon," she added.

"I feel like I been in this bed forever," her mother whispered. In fact, it had been a little less than a week since they had brought her home from the hospital, back to her own room where she could see the trees starting to bud outside her window, knowing that she would not live to see them open.

"You wouldn't think it would be this tough," she continued. "All I got to do is lay here. But dying is hard work." She grinned at her words, too weak to summon a laugh.

Tara fought the urge to argue with her, to tell her that she shouldn't talk that way. *She is dying. She knows that better than any of us. Nobody gets to tell her how to talk.* Instead, she kissed her mother's hand and whispered, "I wish I could do something, Mama. I-I wish I could make it hurt less." She tried to get the words out without choking.

"This part here...this is just the mop-up, you know? Don't really mean that much. Life-that's the party, and Honey, you brought so much joy to my life." She closed her eyes with the effort of speech.

No, Mama-don't speak in the past tense! Please, stay with me!

Tara looked at her mother, absently feeling wetness splash over her cheeks. She wouldn't have thought that she had any more tears in her.

Looking at the frail, wasted figure before her, Tara realized that all of the Hollywood tear-jerkers and TV Movies of the Week and tragic novels were bullshit. Death didn't descend in one gentle, peaceful moment, with the dying person's eyes fluttering softly closed accompanied by one last, defiant breath.

Death was the thoughtless intruder who showed up whenever he felt like it; came in and ambled around your house, breaking everything you held precious and left abruptly, only to return just as capriciously. Death took his time and made himself at home and stole the person you loved bit by bit. Death didn't care about your feelings and he didn't care about your beloved's dignity and he didn't care about poignant moments of farewell. Death didn't answer to you; Death was oblivious to you.

Tara had watched her mother waste away, the palliation of the morphine demanding the sacrifice of precious final hours of lucidity. When she had finally accepted that her mother was dying, she had thought that perhaps there would be some final, infinitely touching exchange between the two of them. Now she realized that the goodbye would be patch-work in nature; moments when the pain unclenched its fist and let her mother think, speak, be. This was one of those moments.

Forcing some measure of steadiness into her voice, Tara replied, "Mama, you *gave* me life. Gave me so many incredible gifts...courage, strength, magic." She drew a shuddering breath and forged on. "Every good thing I have, Mama, I owe to you."

She watched, heart twisting, as her mother pulled Tara's hands to her lips and kissed them softly. "Bright Eyes...I hate that I'm gonna miss so much of your life...You're gonna have the most beautiful children, Tara; I know it." Her mother blinked against her own tears.

Funny how she's never mentioned my wedding day. You know, don't you, Mama?

Aloud, she whispered, "I hope I do half the job with them that you've done with me, Mama."

"You will, Honey. Just love 'em like there's no tomorrow." Her eyes grew unfocused, and Tara knew that her mother needed to sleep again.

"You rest, Mama. I'm right here." She felt exhaustion creep over her, needles of pain pricking into her back and neck from the hours spent in the chair, day after day. And still she held her vigil.

After perhaps an hour, she heard footsteps coming through the door behind her. Turning, she saw Donnie staring at their mother, his hands jammed deep into his pockets. He was chewing on the inside of his lip-one of the few habits they shared. She couldn't read the expression in his eyes.

"She wake up at all?" He didn't look at Tara as he asked.

"Just for a few minutes. The pain didn't seem as bad as it did earlier." Tara watched him, hesitant to speak or move.

Looking at him more closely, she could see that he was clenching and unclenching his fists within his pocket. Eyes still locked on their mother, he asked, "Did she say anything?"

Like what, Donnie? You want to hear that she asked about you? Why should she? You only visit her once a day, and you never stay more than ten minutes. So what do you think she might have said?

But she only replied, "Nothing much. She was thirsty; wanted to know what day it was." She was unnerved by his quiet; by his unwavering gaze at the figure in the bed.

So low that she could barely hear him, he suddenly muttered, "She's really gonna die, isn't she?"

A wave of grief and rage crashed over her heart, finding new crevices to wash into and leave her raw. *What tipped you off, Donnie? The portable IV with the morphine drip? The thirty-five pound weight loss in the last three months? Reverend Timson, coming around every other day and mumbling over her bed?* She came as close as she ever had to telling him what she really thought of him.

And then she saw-or later, she would remember being sure she had seen-his eyes glistening. In the dimly lit room, his brown eyes seemed to glitter slightly, like rain on a dark stone.

She sat as if paralyzed, unable to take her eyes off of that which she had never seen before. "Donnie?" she practically whispered. And still he looked only at their mother.

"Do you want to s-sit with her for a bit?" she finally asked, even as she unconsciously braced herself against his taunts about her speech.

But he said nothing; it was as if he hadn't heard her. After a moment, he turned and walked out of the room.

He looked at his mother, lying asleep in the old bed, and fought the urge to run out of the room. She was so bony and weak, and when she was awake-which wasn't that often-half the time she talked nonsense because of the drugs. He could practically see her life ebbing away, and he was terrified that she would die right before his eyes. He hated being alone with her, not wanting to look at her too closely and yet unable to look away, afraid she might stop breathing and he wouldn't notice. He knew there were only a few more times that he would look at his mother, and then he would look one last time before they closed her casket.

The only thing that scared him even half that much was his father-walking around like he was in a trance, barely speaking except to bark out orders. He didn't even criticize Donnie these days. He just charged him with some job and then went back to his own work and whatever horror film was playing in his mind. His mouth was carved into a permanent slash, it seemed. On three different occasions, Donnie came upon his daddy unexpectedly and found his eyes red and swollen. The first time, he had made the mistake of staring openly, a mistake which led to a back-hand across the jaw. "What are you lookin' at?" his daddy whispered hoarsely. Donnie just mumbled and looked down, knowing that there was no right answer for that question. He waited just the briefest of moments, and then turned and walked off in the opposite direction, not even knowing where he was going. After that, when he saw his father in such a state, he quickly looked away and went on about his business.

Did he love his mother? He wasn't even sure what the word meant. His parents were supposed to love each other, but he knew something was wrong there. She told Donnie she loved *him*; why couldn't he feel it? He knew her eyes didn't light up when they saw him. He wouldn't even know what the phrase really meant if he hadn't seen her looking at Tara that way a thousand times in the last seventeen years. She would have loved Tara even if they weren't related. His mother loved him, he suspected, because she was his mother.

Had it always been that way? He tried his best to remember, but everything seemed all jumbled up. He knew that he couldn't ever remember not being angry most of the time; and he knew that his anger had frightened her. After awhile, that was rewarding in itself, because at least it was something, some kind of gut reaction.

He knew that his mama had taught Tara all kinds of magic, even though she wasn't supposed to. He wondered if it had ever crossed her mind to teach him. Not that he wanted to learn that weird stuff...So Tara had learned how to float all kinds of things with barely a whisper of her breath. Meanwhile, he fought and kicked and cursed and it seemed like nothing moved for him, ever.

Except for Tara. She was *always* afraid of him. And that felt good, too...But even as he drank up the pleasure of terrifying her like a dog drinking from a puddle, he knew-somewhere, deep in his gut-that she wouldn't always be afraid of him. Little sister would grow up and leave him behind.

Part 8

"I wonder if I could get some kind of course credit for demon fighting? Maybe something like criminal justice or modern culture." Willow was all about applying school to everything, and conversely.

"Modern culture?" Tara asked, digging into her coat pocket to find her dorm key.

"Oh yeah. Vampires are very hot nowadays. Dark, brooding creatures of the night are practically sex symbols, without the requisite tans."

Turning, Tara murmured, "I think I like my sex symbols light and quirky and given to boundless optimism."

Willow beamed. "How 'bout we make that singular? Your sex *symbol*. And I'd like to apply for the job, please."

Tara grinned at her and arched her eyebrows suggestively. "Care to come upstairs for an in-depth interview?" She was about to lean forward for a kiss when a grating voice called out.

"Hey Tara-bet you thought I'd headed back home." Tara wheeled about and saw Donnie smirking at her. She also caught his leering gaze at Willow, and this second fact fueled her response.

"Donnie, what the hell are you doing here?" Beside her, she felt Willow move into a familiar defensive posture. *Donnie counts as a demon*, Tara realized.

"I was lookin' for you; then again, you probably figured that out." He was rocking slightly back and forth on his heels, that same fake smile plastered onto his face. Tucked under one arm was a small lock box.

"I don't think there's anything left for you and Tara to talk about," Willow replied, her eyes narrowing practically to slits.

She felt her stomach clench as Donnie slowly and deliberately ran his gaze up and down her body. "Actually, Willow, this doesn't really involve you. This is family business."

Tara had followed his gaze as well, and now an incipient rage slid along her veins. "Willow *is* my family, Donnie. I'm not ashamed of that; in fact, I'm downright proud of it."

Donnie just laughed. "Oh yeah-what's that saying you all have? 'We're here; we're queer'?"

"We're fabulous, get used to it," Willow finished for him. "You know, you're pretty familiar with our lingo, Donnie. Wanna sign up?"

He flushed, deep crimson splashes washing over his face. "Shut up," he hissed. "I know what my parts are for, even if you don't."

Crossing her arms, Tara said contemptuously, "I think you're jealous, Donnie, because I have a better-looking girlfriend than you'll ever have."

"Listen, bitch," he muttered, taking a half-step closer to them. "I don't know why you turned out the way you did, but it's just one more sign that you're nothin' but a fucking *freak*." He practically spat the words out.

Feeling Willow's anger spiral close to explosion, Tara drew a deep breath and tried to center herself. "Donnie, as much as I enjoy these special moments, we really do have nothing to say to each other. Go home. Alone."

Now the oily smile was back in place. "Actually, Tara we got something pretty important to talk about. Since you won't come home, I guess I gotta bring it to you." He patted the box slowly, a gesture that seemed almost obscene.

Tara felt a shallow ripple of dread pass over her. But what was there to fear? Pulling herself up to her full height, she looked at her brother dismissively. "What's in the box, Donnie? A gun? Are you planning to shoot me, the evil lesbian witch? How cliched is that?" Beside her, she felt Willow's hand tighten in her own.

But Donnie only laughed. "Now Tara-do you really think I'd try to hurt you?"

This was too much for Willow. "Yeah, asshole, I think you'd *love* to hurt her. And I almost want to see you try, because then I'll have a good excuse when the cop asked me why I burned your eyeballs out of their sockets."

Tara knew that Donnie thought Willow was speaking metaphorically. *You think I got power, Donnie? You should see her.*

Donnie had turned away from Willow, after one more salacious leer, and addressed Tara. "I'm telling you one more time, Sis-you need to come home."

You look at my girl like that one more time, and I'll be the one ripping you apart.

"Or what, Donnie? My 'demon side' will come out? Everyone will see how Mom's 'evil' got passed on to me? Mom was so strong, Donnie, and it scared the hell out of Dad. And you," she added, glaring at him.

His mouth twisted with anger. "You think she was the only one with power, Tara? Huh? You think she was so damn special? She was *nothing*."

Tara recoiled as if slapped. She could feel the rage cresting again, and this time wasted no energy fighting it. "She **was** special, Donnie. I'm sorry you were too busy being pissed off at the world to recognize it, but that's your loss, not mine."

She took a step toward him, and spoke very quietly. "There's no demon in me, Donnie. Go home."

Donnie held his ground and spoke just as quietly. "That's what you think, Tara. But I got some bad, bad news for you."

Tara shook her head in exasperation. "What kind of game is this, Donnie? It's out in the open now-Mom didn't have any demon in her!"

Donnie laughed, a low, very unpleasant sound. "No, Mama wasn't a demon, Tara." He smiled, and patted the box once more. "But let's not forget about Daddy."

Later, Willow would look back on the conversation and wonder if she could have done anything to change how it all turned out. As it was, she felt as if she were watching everything unfold in slow motion, her growing dread at the idea of what awaited them at the bottom of this spiral only heightened by the time it took them to reach it.

As Tara stared at her brother with a mixture of scorn and distrust, Donnie rocked back on his heels and smiled his oily smile. "Care to take this inside where we can have some privacy?" he asked with exaggerated politeness, emphasizing the last word with a suggestive leer.

After a moment's hesitation, Tara squared her shoulders. "Let's get this over with," she muttered, keying into the building. The three of them walked in silence along the hallway and up the stairs, Tara's hand never releasing its hold on Willow's. When she unlocked the door to her room, Donnie brushed past them and walked in, turning around slowly as he took everything in.

"Nice little set-up you got here, Sis," he said admiringly. "Look at all these candles and magic books and crystals all over the place." He looked up from his perusal and gave them a wide grin. "It's a lot fancier'n your room back home, ain't it?"

"This isn't a social call, Donnie." Willow had never heard Tara's voice sound so cold. "What's in the box? What does Daddy have to do with this?"

"Oh, so now you're all ears, huh? Now you *wanna* hear what I got to say. Aren't you even gonna offer me something to drink? Maybe a little hug from the both of you to make me feel welcome?" He looked at Willow as he said this, and took a tiny step toward her as he began to extend his arms.

"Touch her and I set you on fire," Tara said, raising her left hand slightly. Gone was any trace of her stutter, and only someone who knew Tara as well as Willow could have recognized that she was trembling inside.

Donnie stopped, cocking his head to one side like a homeless dog sniffing for carrion. After a moment, he dropped his arms and shrugged with mock remorse. "OK, I guess this won't be like

one of those talk shows, where everybody kisses and makes up. Fine with me." He plopped down on the edge of Tara's bed, and Willow made a mental note to wash the comforter after he left.

Tara took a seat in the small study chair, Willow perched beside her on the edge of the desk. Willow watched with a mixture of dread and overpowering curiosity as Donnie unhurriedly took out a small key and unlocked the box. Willow could feel Tara stiffen as Donnie's fingers rested lightly on the gray metal lid. Part of her actually feared that Donnie was going to pull out a gun, or do something else violent and abrupt. Instead, he looked up and grinned at them.

"You know what they say, Tara-old sins cast long shadows." He eased the lid up and back, edging the box toward them slowly until they could see what rested within.

Cold Springs, normally so sunny and pleasant at this time of year, had been hit with a freak heavy rainfall on the morning of Julia Maclay's funeral. By noon it was gone, but it made for quiet conversation among the mourners that gathered at the cemetery after the church service. It was as if the heavens recognized one girl's loss in the midst of their own gain, and they wept rare tears at the injustice.

She had died without sound or fury, late one evening when her husband was out milking and her son was helping him and her daughter had drifted off into a brief, halting sleep filled with fragments of dreams and the smells of sickness and herbs. As befit her character, she died when it was least inconvenient or painful to those around her.

At first, Tara reproached herself bitterly for falling asleep. *I was supposed to hold on, Mama. I let go, and you left. I'm so sorry, Mama. I told myself I wouldn't let go but I did.*

But then she realized that perhaps it hadn't been such a cruel coincidence after all. Perhaps her mother had died exactly when she planned to, sparing Tara the necessity of watching her draw her last breath. As it was, Tara snapped back to wakefulness to find her mother looking more peaceful than she had in months. Tara was seventeen and had never seen a living thing die before-surprising, really, for someone who lived on a farm-but she knew instantly that her mother was dead. She went through the motions of checking for a pulse and listening for some lingering, obstinate breath, but she knew before any tangible corroboration that the fight was over. And she knew she was alone.

Donnie stood beside her at the gravesite, looking equal parts lost and defiant. Her father watched with blank eyes as the minister concluded his words of would-be comfort.

"For verily I say, that whosoever believeth in me shall not die, but have everlasting life," Reverend Timson informed them in his sorrowful voice.

Did you know Mama thought you were a droning, narrow-minded hypocrite? Probably not. She was too gracious to let it show.

She found herself staring at the clenching along her father's jaw line. He seemed so angry; so incredibly angry at everyone, including his late wife. Did he think she had done this on purpose? His eyes were bloodshot and vacant, and he had barely spoken to either of his children that day or at the viewing the night before. Tara had helped him pick out her mother's clothes and casket. She had ironed his one good suit, and Donnie's as well. She had answered the phone and received the visitors bearing casseroles and sandwiches and throughout it all, she wished that her father would speak.

Donnie was silent too, and for this Tara didn't know whether to be grateful or afraid. All she really knew for certain was that her mother had run into a force stronger than her own considerable will, and now everything was different.

"Go ahead, take a look. It won't bite." Tara heard Donnie's voice as if from some great distance.

Inside the box lay nothing so dramatic as a gun, or a human heart, or any other shocking sight. The contents were unremarkable indeed: a small reddish stone, no bigger than an infant's fist; and a plain white business envelope.

Tara suspected that her own face held the kind of confusion that she now saw on Willow's.

"Is this some kind of joke?" she asked harshly.

"Fraid not, Sis. Read the letter." Donnie's voice held gloating, and anticipation.

Tara stared at her brother for a long moment, and then pulled the envelope out of the box. She saw on the outside the following written in her father's dark, spare handwriting:

To be opened by my wife, Julia Maclay, in the event that I precede her in death.

Nathan Maclay

Tara pulled a single sheet of yellow legal paper out of the already-unsealed envelope. The letter was dated the 28th of February, 1978.

I don't want to read this. I don't want to be related to either of these men. Mama? What's happening?

Drawing a deep breath, she looked at Willow once for comfort, and then lowered her eyes to the page.

Dear Julia,

If you're reading this, it means that I've died before you. You have to believe me that I want it this way, because it means that I don't have to keep going in this life without you beside me.

Tara found suddenly that she couldn't read anymore at the moment because the words were dancing crazily on the paper. *Oh, Daddy...you really loved her, didn't you? Why did you try so hard to act like you didn't?* She shook her head quickly, and felt Willow squeeze her shoulder reassuringly.

I need to tell you something that I should have told you many years ago. There is no demon in you. There never has been.

*The demon is in **me**. It comes from my father. He could hide his demon aspect when he wanted to. My mother had no idea who she had married until twelve years after the wedding. She saw him one day, by accident, when he thought that she had gone into town for the day. I remember it like it happened yesterday: she came to get me at school, and we drove off with two suitcases and the little bit of money that she had in the bank. He didn't even know that she had seen him.*

I was 10 years old at the time, and Mother didn't tell me why we had left until I was 18. At first, she said he was cheating on her but that never rang true to me. I'll always believe that he loved her. I never saw my father again. I don't know if he's alive or dead. Mother never really recovered.

When I was 18, she told me the truth. I had always felt different, like there was some strange part down inside me that was pushing to get out. I'm not very good at describing how I feel, so I don't know if this makes any sense to you or not. It never came out or hurt anyone, but I always remembered what it cost my father when his wife found out who he really was.

When I met you in the drug store that day, I knew I had to find a way to meet you. I never told you that I dropped my umbrella on purpose, just to catch your attention. After you agreed to meet me that weekend for a movie, I spent the next three days wondering what to wear, which was funny because I only had three decent shirts. I fell for you so hard, Julia, and in the back of my mind all I could think about was what Mother did after she found out about my father. I was so scared to lose you.

*So I didn't tell you I was part demon, which is bad enough, I know. But I was also so scared that I lied to you and told you that **you** had demon in you. I thought it would keep you bound to me, if you thought that you had some sickness only I could help you with. I'm not even sure how I did it. I just found myself saying the words and then I felt this kind of dizziness rising up in me, until it felt like I was only half there. And I could tell you believed me. You had this strange, faraway look in your eyes. Maybe that was the demon part of me. I don't know. But it scared me to feel that way, like I'd been drinking cheap whisky, one shot after another. I never tried to do it again, I swear. But I made you believe that you had demon in you, and that any girls we would have would also be part demon. Our children **will** have demon blood in them, but I swear I'll watch for it. If I see anything, I'll tell you everything, I promise.*

I don't know if you can forgive me for this, but I just couldn't stand the thought of losing you. Now that I'm gone, I want you to know the truth. You're a free woman now, Julia. You don't have to be afraid anymore.

I know I've made a lot of mistakes in my life, but the best thing I ever did was marrying you.

Your loving husband,

Nathan

Tara sat back, scarcely feeling the paper between her fingers. Willow was looking at her questioningly, and without speaking Tara handed the letter to her beloved. In a matter of seconds, she heard Willow's whispered "Oh my God." For her part, Tara was beyond speaking.

It's not over. It'll never be over.

Willow's mind scrambled like a child on a jungle gym, trying to find some reassuring angle from which to consider all of this.

"How do we even know your father wrote this?" she asked Tara, gripping her shoulder. "It could be something Donnie just made up--"

"It's Daddy's hand-writing," Tara replied dully. "I recognize it." She looked up to see Donnie grinning with malicious glee. *You found me, didn't you, Donnie? You'll never let me go.* Eyes narrowing suddenly, she asked, "How did you know about this? And when did you find out?"

Donnie leaned back casually, apparently more than willing to supply any information they asked of him since all the information he had would, he knew, be painful to them.

"It was right after Mom died. I woke up in the middle of the night; heard something moving around down stairs. I grabbed a ball bat and went down to check it out. And what do I see? Daddy, standin' there in front of the fireplace, readin' this letter and just cryin' like a baby. Big ol' tears just runnin' down his face. He gets done readin', and makes as if he's gonna chuck the letter in the fire, but then he changes his mind and folds it back up, puts it back in the envelope. He locks the box back up and then hides the key between two loose stones in the hearth. I guess Mom must have known where he kept the key, since the letter was to her," Donnie added almost as an afterthought.

Tara stared at him. "So you just decided to help yourself to his private things? Things that could make him cry at night after his wife had just died? God, Donnie, is there anybody you *don't* hate?"

His mouth twisted suddenly, and then his trademark plastic smile was back in place. "If I think of anybody, I'll let you know." He chuckled at his own words. "Yeah, I watched him pick up the box and head back toward the stairs. I high-tailed it back to my room, and listened from the doorway. He just went straight back to his room, so I knew it had to be in there somewhere. First chance I got, I took a look around."

He looked off, reliving the experience. "When I read that letter, you could have knocked me over with the tail-feather of a sparrow. So it wasn't Mom who was demon; it was Daddy. And that meant *I* was part demon, too." He smiled as he spoke.

"And you liked it," Willow muttered with shock. "You liked knowing you had something scary and evil inside you." She felt Tara wrench suddenly under her hand, and realized with sick regret what she had just said. "I mean, you liked knowing that maybe you had..." She trailed off, uncertain where to go.

"Oh yeah, I loved it," Donnie replied easily, and then caught her look at Tara. "Complicates stuff, doesn't it? First Tara lies about having any demon in her, then everybody thinks she *doesn't* have demon in her; and now...Sorta throws a wrench into the child-bearing plans, although who knows what you two were gonna try with that anyway." He laughed at the image in his mind.

Willow practically jumped to her feet, unconsciously placing herself between Donnie and Tara. "How do you explain what happened at the Magic Shop?" she demanded angrily. "Huh? How come Spike couldn't hit Tara without his chip setting off fireworks?"

"Hell if I know," Donnie shrugged nonchalantly. "Maybe it only kicks in at a certain age. We don't even know what kind of demon it is." He seemed happy to consider the myriad possibilities.

Tara, meanwhile, was struggling to find her voice. *I can't go back. I can't go through this again. Not now; not when I'm finally living the life I want to lead. I can't lose Willow. Whatever I have to do, I can't lose her.*

Looking at her brother, Tara finally asked, "Why didn't Daddy say anything about this before? At the Magic Box? Why did he just turn around and leave?"

Again, Donnie only shrugged. "Got me. I kept waitin' for him to speak up, tell you the truth. Whether you got it from Mom or Daddy, doesn't really matter, does it? But he just turned around and practically crawled out to the camper. I finally decided that one of us had to act like a man."

Willow snorted. "No, you decided to act like a child throwing a temper tantrum because you didn't get your wish."

Donnie glared at her. "What do you know about it? Don't matter what you do or who you do it with, you still ain't got the equipment you need to take care of a woman."

Willow again had to fight the urge to fling magic at him with just the barest flick of her wrist and two, maybe three quickly chanted words. *I can't do it. It's not what Tara wants...I think.* Instead, she replied, "I know what *you* need. You need a good roll in the hay with a big, husky construction worker you call 'Daddy.' All this macho shit is just repressed-"

But Tara silenced them both using neither magic nor force. Holding a hand out to Willow, she turned to Donnie. "What about the stone? What does it have to do with anything?"

Donnie looked confused at her question. "Hell, I don't know," he muttered. "It's a damn rock. As whipped as Daddy was, he probably saw it on the ground on his first date with Mom and kept it for sentimental reasons." He scowled. "I never dreamed Daddy was such a pussy. Can you believe all that shit about droppin' his umbrella just to meet some bitch-"

It happened so fast that Willow wondered if she had imagined it, but the angry, red flares along Donnie's right cheek told her otherwise. Tara had slapped him, hard; and she looked ready to do it again.

"If you ever talk about her that way again, I'll do more than that. She gave birth to you, Donnie. Doesn't that mean anything to you? And aren't you glad to know that your parents loved each other?"

"Not if it made Daddy so miserable," Donnie shot back, rubbing his cheek. "Christ, Tara, did it look like they loved each other when we were growin' up? Did you ever see 'em hug or kiss or anything like that?"

Tara had no real answer for this. For a moment, the room was silent. Finally, Willow spoke, trying to keep her voice somewhere close to civil.

"Donnie, why are you doing this? Do you really want Tara to come back home? Is that what you want?" Even as she asked it, she felt her voice hardening.

Donnie had dropped even the pretense of brotherly love. "You bet I do," he muttered.

Tears finally made their way to Tara's eyes and began to spill down her cheeks. "Why? Why don't you want me gone? You hate me, Donnie. Why have me anywhere around you?"

Donnie was staring at Tara now with a quiet bitterness that frightened her more than his rages. "Because you ain't goin' off and leavin' me there alone. You don't get to leave, Tara, and just act like you don't even belong to this family. You don't get to head off to college and leave your white-trash family behind like you're too good for us."

For one, excruciating moment, Tara dropped her head, gazing at the floor with a resignation that Willow hadn't seen in months. But then she straightened, pulling herself to her full height, and gazed at Donnie until he was forced to lower his own gaze under the weight of hers.

"I'm not going back, Donnie. No matter what, I'm not going back. If you have any sense, you'll leave, too. But I'm gone; I always have been."

It was well past lunch-time, but neither Willow nor Tara could imagine eating anything. Donnie had finally left, taking the box with him, but not before Willow snatched the small stone from its confines, ignoring his protests.

"This was in there for a reason. I'm going to find out what it is," she told him defiantly.

"Fine, whatever," he had muttered. "You know I'll be back, Tara. Why not make things simple and just pack your stuff?" And then he had slouched out the door, slamming it shut behind him.

Willow was completely at a loss. She wanted to comfort Tara, but had no idea how to do so. What could she say- "Don't worry, Baby. I still love you, even if you *are* a demon"?

And that, she realized, was the problem. *Would* she still love Tara if Tara was a demon? Love her in the active sense of the word, not the abstract, from-a-safe-distance version? Could she go through that again, what she had suffered through with Oz? What if the demon aspect *was* hidden, or latent, until a certain age? Tara's father had certainly seemed to grow colder, more angry over time. What if that happened to Tara? Nathan Maclay's letter to his wife had been so full of love, even if his actions were profoundly misguided. What if Tara became bitter and resentful over time? Could she even imagine it?

And what if Tara one day felt the pull to one of her own, someone more like her-as Oz had done? Willow feared she might vomit at the thought. She couldn't have imagined being closer to someone, more kindred in spirit, than she was with Tara. But couldn't that change? If Tara *did* have demon in her, who could say that it wouldn't grow stronger and wilder until one day she, too, could no longer resist its pull and left Willow alone once more, just when she had grown to believe that she might never be left alone again?

Could she risk it? If this all proved to be true, could she stay with Tara?

And then, so abruptly that she almost gasped at the impact, she realized that the question was moot beyond words. Even if she did have to consider all of these questions, was there really any chance that she would choose to walk away from Tara? Was there really any chance that she would look into those eyes, into that soul that she loved beyond her capacity to describe it, and leave her?

Of course not.

It really was a matter of how, not if. And though this realization didn't exactly comfort her, it did somehow manage to lower the raging confusion within her mind and her heart.

She drew a deep breath, and pulled Tara gently into her arms. "Baby, we'll figure this out. You know Donnie would do anything to hurt you. We just have to-" She was stunned to feel Tara wrench violently out of her grasp.

"Yes, he *would* do anything to hurt me, because apparently he's part-demon. He has 'something evil and scary' inside him-remember?"

Willow took an involuntary step back under the force of Tara's hurt and anger. "Baby, I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking, or at least I wasn't thinking about you. Tara, you're the *least* scary, evil person I've ever met."

"Well, maybe not for long. Maybe Donnie's right; maybe it's dormant until a certain age. Who knows when it might kick in? When I might just turn evil and hurtful and destructive?" She began to shake as she talked.

Willow reached out one tentative hand and, meeting no resistance, gently stroked Tara's arm. "What-you're saying you'll go all 'Black Magic Tara' on me? That one day you'll go evil and try to destroy the world? And-what else?-oh, maybe your hair and your eyes will turn black and you'll hurt the people you love? Tara, that's ridiculous. That's the kind of stuff asinine TV plot twists are made of." She felt Tara calming, just slightly, under her touch.

Finally, Tara allowed herself to be enfolded in Willow's arms. "Oh God, Willow...I'm sorry. I just-I can't go through this again; I can't. I finally let myself believe it's over, that I've gotten away from my family, and now this. It's like they show up every time I start to believe I can be happy, and they try to take it away from me." Willow felt hot tears trickle down her neck as Tara wept softly against her.

"Baby, I don't know what the truth is, but I do know that they can't take *you* away from *me*. No matter what we find out, we're in this together, OK? You don't do any blind Cadria spells, and I don't turn Donnie into a sentient toilet plunger. At least until you give me the go-ahead," she added meaningfully.

Tara pulled back slightly and gazed at her, tears hanging unshed from her thick lashes. Willow thought that she had never looked more beautiful. *How could she be a demon? How could I not love her, even if she is?*

"I think we should tell Giles and the others about this," Tara was saying. "We need to know if it's possible that the demon aspect hasn't been...activated yet."

"Or if there's some other explanation for this," Willow reminded her. "Just remember-I'm with you, no matter what we find out. What the goddess has joined together, let no disturbed brother put asunder."

Tara managed a weak grin. "Ain't nobody puttin' us under, Sweetie. C'mon, let's go see that tea-drinking bastion of wisdom."

Part 9

"You say you're sure the letter was written by your father?" Giles' tone was a mixture of confusion and curiosity. They were talking in the back room of the Magic Box while Anya took money up front and commended herself on contributing to the betterment of the nation's economy.

"Positive," Tara replied promptly. "I know his writing, and I know Donnie's, and this was his. Besides, Donnie would have misspelled half the words in there, including 'the.'"

"Fascinating," Giles murmured. "And more than a little upsetting to you," he added quickly, seeing Tara's expression.

"You could say that," she replied heavily.

"And it was dated in February of 1978? What was going on at that time? In your family?"

Willow watched Tara bite her lower lip, an unconscious habit when she was concentrating.

"'78...Let's see...Donnie was born that October; I'm guessing Mom had just found out she was pregnant."

"So maybe your dad wrote the letter to her because he realized the stakes had gone up: he was going to be a father; the demon blood had passed into the next generation." Willow said this last part reluctantly, knowing how the implications would hit Tara.

"The next generation..." Tara echoed. "Nice legacy, Daddy."

"Yes, well, Willow may have a point," Giles said quickly. "If your father realized that he now needed to be watchful about someone besides himself, he might feel a particular urgency in writing the letter."

"But then he didn't give it to her," Willow argued, shaking her head. "He didn't intend for her to see it unless he died first, because then he wouldn't have to deal with her reaction. He wanted her to be set free of thinking she was demon, but only if it didn't cost him his marriage." She suddenly felt even more deeply for Tara's mother, who had gone to her grave thinking that she was demon, that she had passed that demon on to her beloved daughter.

"You're right, Willow. He tried to hide the truth from her so that he wouldn't ever have to risk losing her. It was a selfish thing to do." Tara's eyes were sad as she spoke, and Willow realized that she was remembering the spell she had cast only recently. She took Tara's hand urgently into hers, trying to tell her through touch and gaze that she was not her father.

"Tara, when were your parents married?" Giles asked suddenly, and again, she chewed on her lower lip for a moment before replying.

"1972. They met in 1971, Mama told me, and got married the next year."

"And Donnie was their first child?" Giles asked, almost as an afterthought. But Tara shook her head.

"No; Mama had a miscarriage in 1975. It hit her really hard, she said. She was sure that it was a boy; she already had a name picked out for him, even though she lost him in the second month."

Giles tilted his head at this information, as if trying to reassemble a picture within his mind.

"So Nathan meets Julia in 1971, and apparently falls quite hard for her. They get married in 1972, conceive but lose a child in 1975, and then your mother gives birth to Donnie in October of 1978. And you were born in November of 1980," he finished.

"Right," Tara concurred.

Willow picked up the narrative. "And in February of 1978, Nathan writes a letter to Julia telling her the truth, but clearly doesn't expect to give it to her himself. Julia dies before he does, and she never learns the truth." Willow looked sadly at Tara as she said this, knowing that she only had a dim sense of how much this must hurt her girl. *Right now, probably everything hurts her.*

"If Daddy did write the letter because he had just found out Mom was pregnant, why didn't he do it the first time she was pregnant?"

"I can't imagine," Giles murmured. "In fact, all of this seems incredibly mysterious." He sipped his tea absently.

"The biggest mystery to *me* is why Spike went into a limbic system melt-down when he hit Tara," Willow pointed out.

"I agree," Giles replied. "What we know is that Spike cannot hurt any living human without intense neuralgia in the cerebrum."

"You mean brain pain," Willow clarified.

"Well, yes. I just hated the way it rhymed," he admitted stiffly.

"That's my Giles," Willow said affectionately. "Ever the crusader against malice, mayhem, and monosyllabism."

"Giles, is it possible that I have demon in me that hasn't been...*activated* yet? Like some kind of latent or dormant strain?" Though she asked the question openly, Willow knew that inside, Tara was screaming for the answer to be no.

At Giles' sigh, Willow knew that the wish would go unanswered. "As much as it pains me to say this, Tara, I'm afraid there are instances of hidden demon aspects that do not emerge until the creature-er, the person is of a certain age, or under a particular set of circumstances. This is particularly true when the person isn't a full-blooded demon. Sometimes," he added, in a more hopeful tone, "the demon doesn't emerge at all."

"So I just have to walk around being very, very careful not to-well, we don't know what I need to avoid, do we? We don't even know what kind of demon we're talking about. Once we find that out, I just live my life in a plastic bubble, avoiding all known activating agents." Tara's voice was more bitter than Willow had ever heard. Suddenly she remembered sitting with Oz in his van, protesting that the wolf had emerged because she had upset him. "Well, so we're safe then," he had replied, in his ironic style, "cause you'll never do that again."

How do I go through this again? Goddess, why is everything so hard?

She realized that Tara was looking at her intently, her blue eyes cloudy with sadness and fear. Willow smiled at her gently, forcing her own fears to the back of her mind.

"There's something else I don't understand," Giles said, as if unaware of the painful dance that the two women before him were trying to navigate. "Why didn't your father say anything about this in the Magic Box when he came to take you home? After he admitted that your mother had no demon in her, why not tell you then?"

"Well, for one thing, he didn't know Donnie knew. He still doesn't. Maybe he was planning to regroup. I don't think he seriously considered that I wouldn't go back with him. That you all would stand up for me," she added softly, squeezing Willow's hand gently.

"Always," Willow murmured in response, and knew that it was true.

"Yes, it was clear he was a man not used to being questioned, much less defied," Giles nodded.

"And yet, that letter...I've never, ever heard my father talk like that. I certainly never saw him show anything like that kind of devotion when Mom was alive. But-I mean, what he did was so wrong, to deceive her like that, make her question her own soul; but in its own way, that was a love letter. He was crazy about Mom when he wrote that." Tara's voice sounded almost desperate with the need to understand all of this.

"Yes, well, I'm afraid that right now, we have far more questions than answers," Giles sighed.

"Ooh-the rock!" Willow dug into her pocket and pulled out the small, red-tinged stone.

"Mmm...It appears to be, um, well..." Giles trailed off.

"A rock," Willow finished for him. "And you don't have to worry about rhyming it with anything, like 'dock' or 'frock' or 'cock' and how about we just forget that last one, OK?"

"Gladly," the librarian and the lesbian sang out in unison.

"It doesn't appear terribly unique; then again, appearances can be deceiving," Giles mused, turning the stone over in his palm.

"True," Willow nodded. "I looked straight there for a while."

"Let's hear it for deceiving appearances," Tara replied, with a reasonable facsimile of her usual smile.

"Well, I'd like to study it more," Giles said, moving over to his desk and pulling out two musty texts. "We can discuss everything further tonight, since we already have a meeting scheduled. In

the meantime, I suggest that the two of you try to get some food in you and maybe even some rest if you can. This has already been a traumatic day and it's not even mid-afternoon."

"Yeah, but in New Zealand, it's way past sundown," Willow said philosophically, though it was hard to know which philosophy she was drawing on.

"Yes, well...Imagine me making a suitable reply, if you would. I'm unable to do so myself right now." Reaching out, he folded Tara into a surprising but very welcome hug. "We'll resolve this, Tara; you'll not be taken away from us," he murmured softly.

Moments later, they emerged into the sunlight and turned down the sidewalk to head back to campus. Both of them were preoccupied with unsettling thoughts, and the walk home was an unusually quiet one.

"OK, Giles, you know I love you, right? Before I met you, I was just a high school loser. And now...Well, now I'm a more mature loser. But in the interest of self-improvement-"

"Yes, Xander? What singular wisdom are you poised to impart that will catapult me into the very stratosphere of self-actualization?" Giles' head was tipped to one side, eyebrows slightly arched. The group, including Dawn, was noshing on scones, awaiting their liquid refreshments.

"Well, you always serve tea at these shin-digs. And that's great, but I was thinking maybe we could expand our repertoire to include coffee and soda." Xander looked as hopeful as a child awakening on his birthday. His hair added to the effect.

"Oh yes, that's exactly what we need-the lot of you thrown into an even greater level of agitation due to all the caffeine in your systems. I can just see it now: stakes and arrows flying hither and yon; faulty decisions based on jittery nerves. I hardly think it's prudent."

Xander frowned. "Giles, we're not talking about starting a heroin ring or turning Buffy into a crack whore. I just think a little joe would be...apropos." He smile in self-delight.

"Xander's right," Buffy chimed in. "We're out there facing the legions of hell night after night. I don't think coffee is gonna shorten our life span to any appreciable degree. Besides, it's very adult, and it has a certain ambience. Like those old Taster's Choice commercials, remember? Where the man and woman keep meeting at these dinner parties and such and he's always bringing the coffee and you can tell she's getting hot for him just watching him flash those grounds."

"I remember those commercials," Giles muttered. "Pure rubbish, and the acting was nothing short of abysmal." He poured himself another cup of tea. "Be that as it may," he continued, "I certainly acquiesce to the voice of the people. Henceforth, I shall be only too happy to contribute to your collective premature aging and artificial excitement."

"That's my boy," Buffy smiled. She turned to Willow and Tara, who had watched this exchange with muted expressions, and her own features grew serious. "Will? Tara? How you guys doing?"

"Been better," Tara replied softly.

Willow thought that her beloved seemed tired despite the two-hour nap they'd taken this afternoon. Willow had tried to get Tara to talk about what she was feeling, but her efforts had met with limited success. For the most part, Tara simply reiterated her bewilderment and her adamant refusal to return to that life.

"Well of course you won't return," Willow had said, shocked that Tara had even felt the need to state it. "We'll figure this out and we'll take care of it. I'm with you, Baby; I'd never let you go through this alone."

Tara had looked at her with a haunted, fragile smile and said, "And if you have to kill me, I know you'll do it gently."

Willow recoiled, feeling sick to her stomach. "Tara, don't you ever, *ever* say something like that again. Do you hear me? In the first place, we don't even know if your father was telling the truth, or knew the truth himself; in the second place, we don't know if it was passed on to you; and in the third, and most important place, I love you, regardless of your particular genetic make-up, and I will *never* let anything happen to you."

But Tara had just apologized softly, saying that she was tired and needed to sleep. Now, in the soft lighting of Giles' living room, she thought that Tara looked even more exhausted.

Giles had given the rest of the group an update before they had arrived, and to Willow's intense relief, everyone was as warm and easy around her as they had been. Anya, who had always been partial to Tara, was especially solicitous toward her. Willow reasoned that this had at least something to do with Anya's own history. She, more than anyone else, knew what it was like to have something inhuman within her.

*But she **chose** to be a vengeance demon. The only reason she's not one now is that Giles destroyed her amulet. My baby didn't have any choice at all in this.*

*If she even **is** part demon.*

Dawn, as Willow would have predicted, was being fiercely protective of Tara, sitting as close to her as possible short of elbowing Willow out of the way. *It's so ironic...all those years when Tara only had one person trying to protect her, and now all of us are lining up to defend her. I wonder if she gets it; if she really believes it.*

She realized abruptly that there was another irony at play: Dawn, who currently felt so average and unimportant compared to the rest of them, was the one person here who could actually relate to Tara...*if* she knew the truth about her own origin. Willow allowed herself a private smile as

she thought about Dawn's reaction to this. *She'd probably consider it a small price to pay to be that close to Tara...*

She turned her attention back to the conversation at hand. "Yeah," she said belatedly. "I think we're still trying to wrap our minds around all of it." She caught Tara's glance, and squeezed her hand gently. *Don't doubt me, Baby. Doubt your dad; doubt that prick of a brother of yours. But don't doubt me.* Could she possibly convince Tara that she wasn't going anywhere?

"So do we know if Nathan was telling the truth?" Xander asked. "I mean, we only have Donnie's word that he found the letter the way he described."

"It's definitely Daddy's writing," Tara answered slowly. "I don't think Donnie could possibly have forged it."

Anya spoke up. "So you think Nathan really does believe he has demon in him? Couldn't he have written that letter, planning for it to be found, to mess with Tara's mind? He could have collaborated with Donnie on this whole thing."

"It's possible," Giles nodded. "They both want Tara to return home; it's conceivable that they came up with this after their initial trip proved unsuccessful."

"OK, so we can't really know for sure when Nathan wrote the letter and whether or not it's true," Buffy piped up. "What about the miscarriage? That seems suspicious to me."

"I think so, too," Willow replied quickly. "I mean, it seems odd that Mr. Maclay didn't write the letter the first time his wife was pregnant, even though she carried the child for two months before she lost it." Turning, she asked Tara, "Did you mom say anything else about that time that you can remember?"

Tara shook her head slowly. "She only talked about it once. I was about 14. We were looking through my baby album, and I said something about her having two children. That's when she told me that she'd been pregnant three times, but miscarried the first time." Her voice grew distant as she remembered. "She was so sad, even after all that time, talking about it."

"Well, I suspect it's something that would never lose its pain for her," Giles mused. "Did she say anything about the circumstances? Had there been any indication of a complicated pregnancy?"

Tara looked at him almost apologetically. "Not really. She did say that it was a surprise; that she'd been doing fine. And then, she lost him. I remember her saying that she knew in her heart that it was a boy. Then she started crying, and I just wanted to make it stop." Willow could see the tears in Tara's own eyes, and she ached anew for all of the pain that her beloved had borne and witnessed. She rested her cheek against Tara's shoulder, wanting to ease that pain somehow. Was it even possible?

"And there's no sign that Tara's father wrote any letter the first time they were expecting?" Anya asked.

"None that we've found," Giles replied, sipping his tea. "But I agree-the miscarriage does raise suspicions."

"And what about this rock?" Xander frowned, interrupting his pacing of Giles' floor. "Isn't there anything, you know...*supernatural* about it?"

In reply, Giles withdrew the rock from under a small pile of papers and handed it to Xander, who looked at it curiously.

"So far as I can discern," Giles was saying, "the rock appears to have no unusual qualities about it. It's a typical sedimentary stone, no different from a million others lying about."

"What about the red?" Xander persisted. "Maybe it's-"

"It's not blood," Giles finished for him. "I considered that, but the reddish tinge is part of the stone itself. I've looked through several texts, and I can't find anything that mentions such a stone or refers to any usage that it might have."

"But it's got to mean something," Anya muttered, crossing her arms. "It was the only other thing found in this box besides the letter."

"I agree," Giles nodded. "At present, however, we have no way of knowing what that might be."

Dawn spoke up suddenly. "But it doesn't matter, right? None of this matters, because we already know that Tara's not a demon. Spike hit her in the Magic Box, and then did his whole girly scream thing, and the chip only activates when he tries to harm a human being. So we can play Nancy Drew and figure out the 'Mystery of the Mean Maclay Men,' but it doesn't really change anything for Tara," she finished, her last words uttered hopefully.

"If we're playing Nancy Drew, I get to be George, the athletic one," Willow said quickly, drawing a tiny smile from Tara.

"I dunno, Will. The athletic one? Seems like that should be me," Buffy said decisively.

"The athletic one who was always so very, *very* protective of Nancy," Willow added significantly. "And who never seemed to show any interest in boys."

"OK, so maybe you're George," Buffy capitulated. "Anyway, Dawn's right. Spike's chip has never failed before, so far as we know. We have to believe that means Tara's not a demon."

"Too bad he didn't slug Donnie while he was at it," Xander mused regretfully. "Not only would it have given us useful information, it just would have been a gas to watch. If Donnie has demon in him, Spike kicks his ass. If he doesn't, Spike goes down for Round 2. Either way, it's good clean fun for the whole family."

"Maybe we could just take Spike to the next Maclay family reunion and have him walk around hitting people," Willow suggested, only half in jest.

"Tell him to give Cousin Beth a good smack in the mouth," Tara added, allowing herself a small grin. "Maybe it would stop her simpering for a little bit." Her expression turning serious again, she continued. "But it's not that simple. There's the chance that the demon could be dormant inside of me; that I have to be a certain age or exposed to a certain stimulus for it to become active."

There was silence at this. No one wanted it to be true, yet no one, including Giles, could offer proof that it wasn't. After a moment, Buffy spoke.

"What about Donnie? Did he ever change suddenly at a particular age, or in a particular circumstance?"

Tara's laugh was short and bitter. "No, it seems like Donnie's pretty much always been a sadistic bastard. I can't remember any specific time when he turned into more of one." There was an uncomfortable silence at her harshness. "Sorry, guys," she said simply. "This hasn't been the best day of my life. For the better part of twenty years, I believed I was a demon. And then, one night, all of that changed. I was free of it, and I had a real family." She struggled to regain her composure. "And then it turns out that I may have demon in me after all, just passed through a different parent. And I just want this all to be over. I want to know the truth."

The room was quiet as Willow rubbed Tara's back. Suddenly, though, Tara squared her shoulders and drew a deep breath.

"And if I want to know the truth, there's only one place to find it." She turned away from the others, gazing intently into Willow's eyes. "I have to go home."

Willow started to protest, and then realized the truth of Tara's words. She nodded slowly, and then said, "And I'm going with you."

The table had been cleared; the dishes were washed and put away; one last load of laundry had been put in the dryer. Now Beth and her uncle were watching television. It seemed to be one of those earnest drama shows on Pax, which was one of the few channels her uncle ever watched. Beth herself paid only scant attention to the fictitious proceedings before her. Her mind kept whip-lashing between this domestic scene and countless other evenings in that other house, the one she'd grown up in. Uncle Nathan didn't talk much, but that was OK. He didn't shout or walk around half-drunk. She liked the quiet.

She tried to remember if her father had always been that way-brash and outspoken and so very fond of his whiskey. She could dimly remember him as a happier man, one who gave her horse-back rides through the house and whose laughter wasn't so harsh, so bitter. But in the ten years since he'd left, her memories of him had grown blurry and she wasn't sure she trusted them

anyway. It was hard to have any real sense of him, especially with her mother damning him to the fieriest torment Hell had to offer. Her tone ranged from full-throated condemnation to mewling, sanctimonious "forgiveness," but no matter the key, the score could best be titled, "Quinn Maclay is Going to Hell."

"Your father is nothing but a drunken, whoring sinner who abandoned his wife and child to fend for themselves."

"We're better off without him. He brought nothing but shame to this family."

"I hope he's seen the error of his ways. He's a lost sheep; that's what he is. And on Judgment Day, if he doesn't come to the Cross on bended knee, he'll have to answer for his sins. 'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord,' and I believe it. It's not for me to judge; God will do that."

Uncle Nathan, by contrast, was polite, if terse; and he never raised his voice. He had been the sole parent for two children, neither of whom could be described as easy.

Donnie was so angry all the time; Beth had no idea why. Even his grin made her uneasy. It reminded her of some of the booths at the Fair, the ones that were all bright and lit-up, but when you actually stepped up to the counter to play the game, everything was dirty and the prizes were cheap and tacky.

And Tara...Beth unconsciously frowned as she considered her cousin. If ever a girl had it made...Uncle Nathan didn't make Tara do the hardest, dirtiest chores on the farm and as a result her hands were never all stained and roughened, unlike Beth's, who had already performed more physical labor than most women twice her age. Tara had two parents, and it was plain her mother adored her. If Uncle Nathan was a little less affectionate, it was just because he wasn't a showy person. Tara had that long blond hair and those blue eyes and apparently she had all sorts of book-smarts; at least she should-she was always reading.

Beth had bounced to a couple of different schools over the course of her mother's spiritual journey, and so she had only heard bits and pieces of what people said about Tara. She knew her cousin wasn't popular; Beth figured it was because she was too stuck-up to be friends with regular people who didn't happen to keep their noses in a book all day long.

As a commercial came on, beseeching viewers to make the phone call that would change their lives, Beth turned to her uncle, sitting in his easy chair on the other side of the living room.

"Uncle Nathan, would you like something from the kitchen? A glass of iced tea?"

Nathan Maclay seemed momentarily surprised to find another person in the room with him. He looked at her blankly for a moment, and then said, "No thank you, Beth. Actually, I think I'm going to call it a day." So saying, he rose and headed out of the room. "Good night," he said, almost as an afterthought.

"Good night, Uncle Nathan," Beth called after him. She had considered asking him earlier how he thought Donnie was progressing in Sunnydale, but quickly discarded the idea. He had been virtually mute on the subject since Donnie had left, even though there were huge gaps of silence between them in which Beth suspected they were both thinking about that very thing. But she learned quickly how to anticipate his moods and most of all how to avoid broaching subjects-like Tara-that clearly made him upset. She didn't need to add any fuel to the fire; she certainly didn't need Uncle Nathan getting angry at her. She had taken over Tara's room, and she was in no hurry to relinquish it.

As the sincere, white, church-going family took shape once more on the television, she remembered evenings, many years ago, sitting in front of a much smaller set trying to ignore the arguments around her.

"Where have you been all night? We waited supper for you for over an hour!"

"I was out, OK? I just felt like seein' some of the guys down at the Fire Hall. It's no big deal."

"No big deal? You don't call to say where you are; you could be layin' dead in a ditch somewhere for all I knew. And you stink of booze."

"Jesus Christ, woman, would you back off? I'm not dead, and I didn't drink that much. Besides, half the time I drink just to get away from you."

"Were you out with some trash? Did you pick up some whore down at Benny's?"

"I told you-I was at the Fire Hall. You wanna call down there and check out my alibi?"

"Did you see her? Was that where you were?"

"I don't need this shit. I'm going to bed."

"Don't you walk away from me when I'm talking to you!"

So many nights like that-the screaming and cursing and threats, and through it all, she acted as if she weren't even there because for all they cared, she wasn't. It was a handy skill to have, she gradually came to realize-the ability to fade into the woodwork and see everything that went on. People forgot that there was a witness to their crimes.

Part 10

"So, um, what should I pack? What's appropriate attire on a farm?" Willow was bustling nervously around her room, pulling out a small suitcase. After returning from Giles' the previous night, they had decided to leave at noon that day.

"Sweetie, we're not setting out for the New World. And we won't be staying overnight. I want to hear what he has to say and then leave." Tara sat down heavily on the bed. "Willow, are you sure you want to come with me?"

Willow called a halt to her stress-induced planning, and walked over to sit beside Tara. Taking one slender hand in her own, she replied, "Baby, there is no way on this earth or in any other dimension that I would let you go back to that place by yourself. You left there alone; you're going back there with a partner." Kissing Tara's cheek, she added, "Who will kick every ass on the homestead if need be."

Tara gave a small laugh. "Oh, honey...So tiny, yet so butch." She pulled Willow onto her lap and rested her cheek against her breast.

Willow held her tightly, relieved to see Tara expressing something besides exhaustion and fatalism. She had realized last night that while Tara wasn't afraid of having to return home, she *was* afraid of having demon blood in her. *Well who wouldn't be?* She herself was worried about that possibility; she could only imagine what it was like for Tara.

"Baby, can we talk about this a little bit? I mean, I know you're reeling from everything, but it's hard to sit by and wonder what you're thinking." She spoke tentatively, torn between wanting to respect Tara's need to mull things over in her own head for awhile, and needing to be *inside* of this somehow, with her.

"Yeah," came the mumbled reply, Tara's breath warm against her neck. "I mean, we're lesbians, so we have to process this, I know." Her attempt at laughter was valiant but unsuccessful. Willow cupped her chin and tilted her head until she could look into Tara's eyes. When she could, she held her gaze for a long moment, and then kissed her gently and fully. As they parted, she heard a slight hitch in Tara's breath, and then saw tears splash down over her cheek.

"Oh, Tara, I'm so sorry you have to go through all of this. I wish I could just make it all go away." She felt tears threatening in her own eyes.

"Willow, what if it's true? What if I do have demon in me? How can I live like that? How can..." She trailed off, lowering her eyes.

"What, Baby? How can what?"

Tara was silent for a moment, and when she looked back up, her eyes were filled with a pain that Willow hadn't seen (and had hoped never to see again) since the night she had told Tara that she was giving Oz another chance.

"How can *you* live like that? How can you be with someone who's...tainted like that? Again?" she added softly.

Willow felt her heart and mind aching simultaneously. Tara was in such pain, and her primary thought was of their relationship. And she wanted to comfort Tara-she *would* comfort Tara-but

she couldn't lie to her and say that the thought had never crossed her own mind. She slid off of Tara's lap, but only to be able to look her more easily in the eye.

"Baby, I won't try to tell you that I'm not scared, too. I am. More than anything, I'm scared of how this is affecting you inside, how you're feeling. I hate seeing you in pain; it makes me want to move heaven and earth to put that smile back on your face. And yeah, I'm scared of how we'll handle this, because it would be something we couldn't just ignore. But Tara, there's nothing we could find out that will make me leave you, or *want* to leave you. It's just not an option."

"But Willow, what if I'm dangerous?" Tears were falling faster now from the fathomless blue eyes.

"Then we'll figure out how to deal with it. Don't you see, Tara-no matter what's inside of you, you're inside of *me*. Life has never been sweeter than it is with you; why would I ever chose to leave it? Besides, I've lived through three alleged ends of the world, not to mention kissing Xander. Do you really think this can shake my resolve?"

This last bit earned her a small grin from the lovely woman before her. "That's true. Kissing Xander is not for the faint of heart, I suspect."

"Nor the gay of spirit," Willow confirmed. She brushed some of the tears from Tara's face, her fingers lingering over full lips.

"I just know what you went through with Oz," Tara said softly, pain creasing her features again.

Willow fell silent, considering her own experiences with the werewolf. After a moment, she answered truthfully, "Tara, the worst part of that was how it ended-the first time, I mean. The werewolf part wasn't exactly a day at the Science Fair, but we handled it alright; or so I thought. What hurt me was finding out that he was drawn to another werewolf instead of me; that he wanted her in some kind of primitive, animalistic way. And he didn't tell me; he didn't let me in on what he was feeling. He just shut me out and tried to take care of it himself, coming to the wonderful solution that he should lock the object of his desire inside his cage with him. Can't imagine why *that* plan didn't work..." She gave Tara a wry smile.

Tara's eyes narrowed as she considered this. "That's why it's so important to you that we talk about this, isn't it? I mean, I know you want to help me with this, but you also don't want to be on the outside, do you?" She stroked Willow's cheek with soft fingers.

Willow sighed. "I guess you're right. It just hurt so much to find out that he was feeling all of these things and didn't tell me about it. So yeah, I want to be on the inside of this, with you, figuring it out together. I can handle anything that the two of us go through, so long as we go through it together. I'll fight anything by your side, Baby, but don't ask me to go get some coffee while you figure out what to do."

Tara grinned, and now it was her turn to kiss her girlfriend gently in silent reassurance. "No coffee-check."

They sat in comfortable silence for a few moments, and then Willow pulled back slightly. "So it's agreed? We face everything together, and we tell each other when we're scared, and when we get coffee, we do it as a team."

"It's agreed." Tara looked at her watch. "I guess we should get going soon. We need to go to Xander's and pick up his car. God love him for loaning it to us."

"You sure I shouldn't pack extra clothes? Just in case we decide to stay overnight at some little bed and breakfast, or maybe some tawdry no-tell motel where we can play all sorts of naughty games?"

Tara laughed, and Willow basked in the full, rich sound that filled the room. "Oh right, because we never play naughty games in our rooms." She shook her head. "Well, you may be right. Better to be prepared."

"That's my motto," Willow replied enthusiastically, pulling extra clothes out of her drawer. "Say, Tara, I was thinking about something. Your dad's letter made it sound like he was an only child, but what about your cousin Beth? Is that on your mom's side?"

Tara pulled on her jacket as she answered, "No, actually Dad has two half-siblings. His mom remarried when she settled in Cold Springs. Beth's dad is his half-brother, my Uncle Quinn."

"What's his story?"

"Well, apparently he was as loose as Dad is uptight-in more ways than one. I know he drank a lot, and I think he cheated on Aunt Margaret pretty regularly. He left-I guess it's been about a decade ago. Nobody's talked to him since, as far as I know."

"So he wouldn't have any demon blood, if your dad's telling the truth." Willow emphasized this last part.

"No, and neither would Aunt Beverly. That's Dad's half-sister," she added, anticipating Willow's question. "She never got married. Maybe that's where I get it from...I think she was on the bus, too, although she certainly never came out to me. She left Cold Springs when I was about four, I think. Also without much fan-fare; pretty much as soon as she graduated. Really kept to herself. We get Christmas and birthday cards from her, but that's about it. She's in Dallas now, teaching high school."

"So simpering Cousin Beth has no excuse for her behavior?"

"No, she's just a natural-born holier-than-thou sneak."

"Very attractive," Willow noted, tucking socks into a corner of her bag and zipping it.

"Not so much, actually," Tara relied. They headed toward the door and opened it to reveal two Scoobies, a Slayer, one Watcher, and a Key.

Xander's hand was in knock position; he quickly lowered it and stepped inside, followed by the others. A jumble of voices filled the room, each contributing a separate account for their presence.

"Whoa, hold on, kids." Willow gestured for quiet. "What's with the send-off party? You guys planning on busting a bottle of champagne over Xander's car?"

A brief silence greeted this question, and then Giles-apparently the tacit choice for spokesperson-ventured forth.

"Actually, it's not a send-off party. We discussed it last night, after the two of you left, and we all felt that, well, perhaps you would do well with some moral and tactical support."

"We're coming with you," Anya announced, reducing Giles' explanation to a pronouncement.

"To lift spirits, watch your backs-" Buffy began.

"And kick some ass," Dawn finished, willfully oblivious to Buffy's consternation. "If necessary," she modified slightly, blushing as Tara smiled at her.

"You guys, I don't know what to say," Tara replied, looking at each person in turn. "I mean, this is so incredibly kind of you, all of you. To take time off from work, and school, and-" She looked at Dawn again, frowning. "And school, as in, high school. Dawn, Sweetie, you can't just miss all your classes."

"Can. Will. Am." The teenager crossed her arms over her chest.

"Trust me," Buffy said with a sigh, "we've been all through this. Short of tying her up or threatening to publish her journals-which I can't do, since it would incriminate me on some things I'd just as soon not come to light-there was no way to keep her from coming."

"Besides, I want to see where you grew up," Dawn added. "Maybe not the people so much, because they're kinda poopy, but your house, where you used to play, all that stuff."

Willow refrained from rolling her eyes, but caught Buffy's grin in her direction and had to smile in return.

"Are there pictures of you from when you were younger?" Dawn was asking, moving to Tara's side as they walked out of the room.

"Or drawings on refrigerators, held up with magnets? I understand that's a very common custom in families." Anya's curiosity was a thing to behold.

"It's a veritable field trip," Giles remarked, smiling affectionately at Willow as she followed him out of the room. "Perhaps we'll stop for ice cream."

The trip to Cold Springs took place in Joyce's 4-Runner. Buffy insisted that her mother was feeling better today and that a friend was spending the day with her. Joyce had actually suggested the use of her vehicle when Buffy explained the situation to her. It was certainly far more comfortable, even with its full passenger load, than Xander's beat-up Tercel would have been.

And there was indeed a stop at an ice-cream parlor, where Xander grilled Tara on farm life.

"So did you have indoor plumbing?" he asked, brows furrowed as he slurped on his bittersweet mint milkshake. Willow was about to smack his arm in exasperation when she caught Tara's slight shake of her head. *So my baby wants to have some fun, huh?*

"Actually, we didn't," Tara replied sincerely, avoiding meeting Willow's eyes. "We had an out-house by the barn."

Xander stopped in mid-slurp. "Wow...That must have gotten so cold," he said, eyes wide.

"Oh yeah, especially in the middle of the night. Worse than that, though, was hauling the water up from the creek for dishes and baths."

Willow kicked Buffy under the table, who looked at her and stifled her own laugh.

"You had to haul water inside? From a creek? Man, you guys must have been working all the time." Xander was growing more impressed by the minute.

"Pretty much," Tara nodded in stoic remembrance. "And when we weren't working, of course, we were busy in-breeding."

Xander spat out a mouthful of half-melted ice cream.

"Honestly, Xander, you've watched 'Deliverance' one too many times," Willow said, shaking her head at his misinformation.

Tara nodded earnestly and spoke in an exaggerated drawl. "Oh yeah, we done got one o' them talkin' picture boxes what you can watch 'Hee Haw' on. Talk about yer good times!"

Willow watched her girlfriend lay waste to her oldest friend and smiled in momentary contentment. *I don't care what we find out today. I'm going to spend the rest of my life with this girl.*

The remainder of the trip was spent in more serious discussion: how to approach Nathan Maclay about the truth.

"He'll probably be out at the barn," Tara said. "When we get there, I think I should go get him and ask him to come back to the house. I'll tell him I've brought friends, but if you guys wouldn't mind, I'd appreciate you waiting in the kitchen while we talk. I hope it doesn't seem like I'm being rude, after you came all this way to support me," she added anxiously.

"No, nothing of the sort," Giles quickly responded. "I suspect that he would either explode or shut down completely if we were all in the room talking to him. We'll be out of sight, but near enough to be there in an instant should you need us. And he'll know you're not alone."

Willow kept silent, but wondered if she were to be relegated to the kitchen as well. It was Tara's father, after all, and she should do what she thought was best...

And then, in one of those moments of synchronicity that shouldn't surprise her anymore but still did, she felt Tara take her hand.

"Will, Sweetie, I want to tell Dad about us when I get him at the barn. I want to do that with him one-to-one. But when I come back to the house, I'd like you to stay with me. Is that OK?"

Willow tried to speak, but found that the constriction in her throat was making it difficult, so she only nodded and squeezed Tara's hand.

"What about Donnie?" Buffy asked. "Do you know where he is right now?"

"Well, he said he was coming back," Tara replied. "If he did, I don't know about it. I spent the night at Willow's. For all I know, he's pacing around in front of the dorm, waiting for me to get there."

"I supposed it would be too much to hope that he doesn't show up today," Giles remarked.

"He doesn't know we're on our way to Cold Springs. There'd be no reason for him to suspect it," Willow reasoned.

"Ah, but the fireworks wouldn't be nearly so dramatic without him," Xander pointed out, "and fusty old Professor Experience says that the Scoobies never do anything without maximum pyrotechnic impact."

"Well, if some bizarre plot twist puts him on stage, so be it," Buffy said philosophically. "The more, the...louder."

The trip continued in this manner, with Tara pointing out various land-marks from her youth as they drew closer to the small town in she was raised.

She should have been back by now. She hadn't come back last night, but by the time he decided she wasn't coming back at all, he had missed seeing whether or not she was at the redhead's

dorm. Of course that was where she was. They'd probably been up half the night talking about the letter and...doing those things they did together. It filled with him a strange, hot anger, thinking about it as he lay in his bed back at his hotel room.

When he got tired of waiting at Tara's the next morning, he decided to go to the magic shop where that whole scene had taken place only a few nights ago. But it was locked up and dark, and the sign said "Closed." Then he went over to Willow's room just after lunch, but no one answered his insistent knocking.

"Where the hell is everybody?" he muttered, feeling distinctly ill-at-ease with the sudden black-out.

Tara could feel her heart begin to pound more emphatically the closer they got to Cold Springs. By the time they pulled off of Rte. 132 onto the gravel road that led to her house, she was surprised that no one in the 4-Runner had mentioned it. Maybe they were all just being polite. Well, no, that wouldn't explain Anya's silence.

And then she heard herself saying, "It's the next driveway on your right. Actually, it's the only drive-way on this side of the road for quite a while." In a matter of seconds, the battered mailbox came into view. It was bare now, after all those years when first her mother and then Tara herself had planted morning glories around its base.

As they pulled up to the house, she took a deep breath. *Who ever said that taking a deep breath helps steady your nerves? It just makes my heart-beat sound louder.*

Everyone piled out of the vehicle and walked slowly up to the front steps, taking in the sight of Tara's home. Tara raised her hand as if to knock, and then changed her mind and walked in. *I'm not knocking on my own front door, even if I **don't** plan on living here ever again.* A creeping sense of surrealism was beginning to take over her mind.

I've just learned that I may have demon in me, right after learning that I didn't. I read this totally confusing letter from Daddy, sounding like I've never heard him sound. And now I'm back here, on the farm, surrounded by Willow and my new family, and I'm about to ask my father if he really is a demon. Oh, and I'm coming out to him, too. With my girlfriend here with me. Just another day...

The group was gathered in the living room, looking at various pictures.

"That's your mom?" Willow asked softly, pointing to a framed photograph of a woman with laugh lines around her eyes, graying blond hair, and sapphire blue eyes.

"Yeah," Tara replied simply, smiling automatically at the image of her mother kneeling in the garden mulching the tomato plants. Tara had taken that picture herself.

"Well there's no questioning where you get your beauty," Giles remarked, looking closely at the photograph. Tara blushed, feeling Willow's hand on her shoulder.

"Um, would you guys like something to drink? Before I go to the barn?" She headed into the kitchen, pulling up short when she saw the note on the table:

Uncle Nathan-I went to the store. Be back soon. Beth.

"Looks like Cousin Beth is playing live-in maid," Buffy mused, peering over Tara's shoulder.

"Live-in substitute daughter, more like it. I suspect Beth would just as soon I never came home," Tara replied softly. "I think she always wanted to be a part of our family, instead of her own.

"How's that for irony?" Xander asked, smiling gently at Tara. She knew that his own family was hardly the stuff of touching TV movies. She nodded, returning the affectionate grin.

After pulling out a pitcher of iced tea and some sodas, Tara faced the group and sighed. "I think it's time for Act I, Scene II of 'Show Down on the Back 40.'" Kissing Willow unabashedly in front of everyone except Dawn (who was still looking for pictures of Tara in the living room), she headed out the door and down the dirt path to the main barn. *Get ready, Daddy...Your little girl's come home, and she brought back-up.*

Scientists say that smell is the sense most closely linked to memory. So it wasn't particularly surprising that Tara watched herself grow up as she drew closer to the old wooden barn, red paint peeling along the boards that rose from ground to sky. The barn had been a hiding place from Donnie; a hiding place from the world. A warm, soft bed of straw had been her favorite reading spot, light pouring in through the east window in the loft. Tears stung her eyes as she smelled the familiar mustiness emanating from within-cattle, and hay, and machinery oil.

And then she saw her father, rounding a corner in the back section of the barn.

"Hello, Daddy," she said simply, giving silent thanks that she hadn't stuttered.

Nathan Maclay halted abruptly, the five-gallon bucket in his hand suspended over a feed trough. He stared at her dumbly for several seconds, and then set the bucket down soundlessly.

"Tara." He made no move to come toward her; to hug her, or raise his hand to her. He kept his distance. After another pause, he asked, "So you've decided to come home after all?"

"Only for today, Daddy. And only to ask you some questions."

His mouth drew down into its familiar slash. "You send me away on your birthday; you speak to me with more insolence than I've ever tolerated...And then you show up to ask me questions and then leave?"

"That's right." She couldn't believe her boldness. *I must be channeling Willow. Or maybe Anya.* "I've learned some things and I want to know if they're true. And then I'm going back to school. With my friends, who came with me." *Definitely Anya.*

Her father walked toward her now, incredulity covering his face. "You've grown very willful, Tara."

"Yes, I suppose I have. I'm not trying to be disrespectful, Daddy, but I have to know the truth and you're the only one who can tell me." She stretched to her full height. *You're so beautiful, Bright Eyes. Don't slouch over like you're ashamed to be tall!*

Her father regarded her silently for a moment, and then said, "What is it you want to know?"

She swallowed, and then replied, "Before I ask any questions, Daddy, there's something I want you to know." *Oh my God, I'm about to say the g-word, I'm really going to say it, oh goddess, here it goes, I can't believe I'm going to say this-* "I'm gay, Daddy. I've known for awhile. Willow, the girl in the store who asked me if I wanted to go home-she's my partner."

She waited expectantly for the earth to tilt on its axis. When it didn't, she began to breathe again.

Her father frowned even more deeply. "I can't say I'm surprised by this. I always wondered about your...unnatural tendencies. All of them," he added significantly.

"I'm sorry you think it's unnatural, Daddy, because I don't. It's the only thing that's ever felt natural to me, besides magic."

"You would say that. Just to hurt me; to throw it in my face." Nathan Maclay suddenly looked older than Tara had ever seen him.

"No, Daddy. It's got nothing to do with hurting you. I just won't lie anymore, to anyone. I'm not ashamed of it, and I'm not ashamed of Willow."

There was another long pause, and then her father asked, "Did Willow come with you?"

"Yes. So did everyone else who was at the Magic Box that night, except for Spike. The one who hit me." She unconsciously lifted her hand to her face as she remembered the pain of his fist.

"You brought that woman into my house?" His voice rose, and Tara took an automatic step back.

"I brought her into *our* house; it's mine and Mama's, too. They all came here with me, to support me. I know you probably can't believe that, but it's true." She could see the anger flaring in his eyes. She summoned up Willow's image in her mind, steadying herself.

"There are questions I need to ask you, Daddy. And I think we should talk at the house." Hardly daring to believe her temerity, she turned and headed back into the sunlight.

"You think I can just leave off my chores like this? In the middle of the day?" His voice called after her.

She turned only slightly, and answered over her shoulder, "I think you have to, Daddy. Isn't it about time to face what *really* matters?" And then she continued her march back to the house.

Moments later, she was standing in the living room. Beth still hadn't returned. Willow ran forward to meet her, and Tara gave her a shaky smile. "Well, one big secret is out in the open," she said, scarcely believing she'd done it.

She turned at the sound of boots on the front porch, and then gave the group a small nod to say that she would be OK. *And I will be. I can do this. I'm not alone.* They murmured their support and good wishes, and then retreated to the kitchen. Willow stepped back from Tara, wanting to be nearby for her beloved but also recognizing that this drama began long before she had ever entered Tara's life. She would be within arm's reach at all times.

When Nathan Maclay saw Willow-again-his jaw clenched, and a flush crept over his cheeks. He stared at her for a moment, and then turned his attention to Tara. Apparently, Tara realized, he was going to act as if Willow simply didn't exist.

"You don't want to talk about this in private?" he asked sharply, his only acknowledgement of Willow's presence.

"Whatever I find out, Willow shares it with me," Tara replied evenly. *When did I get so bold? I love it, but when did it happen?*

Nathan Maclay made no reply to this. Instead, looked grimly at Tara. "So-what is it you need to ask me?"

Tara took what felt like her five hundredth deep breath of the day, and plunged in. "Donnie came to Sunnydale; you know that."

"Yes. He was going to try to talk some sense into you." Still the eyes were cold and hard.

"Well, it didn't work. And when it didn't work, he decided to pull out some bigger guns. He showed up at my dorm room with a gray lock box, and-" She didn't get to finish the sentence.

"What?" Nathan Maclay's face had turned ashen, and his breathing grew labored. For one awful moment Tara thought he might have a stroke. "What did you just say?"

"Daddy, are you alright?" Her father only nodded, sinking into a chair. Finally, she resumed her narrative. "He brought along this lock box, and he had a key to it. He opened it, Daddy; he showed me what was inside."

At this, Nathan Maclay lowered his head and groaned softly. "You were never meant to see that. Neither of you. I can't believe he knew about it...he took it."

Tara felt her heart soften just a bit at the sight of her father, sitting broken before her. "He said-he said he heard you one night, after Mom died. He saw you looking through the box, and he saw where you hid the key."

"I'll kill him," her father said suddenly, and Tara had a cold, terrifying suspicion that he wasn't just using a figure of speech. "I will kill him with my own hands..."

"Daddy, no; please. No more. No more hitting, and no more secrets. Please, Daddy-I have to know: is it true?"

Time passed very slowly, it seemed. Tara and Willow would later both recall hearing the steady ticking of the old clock on the mantel. There was no sound from the kitchen; there was no sound from any of them.

Finally, Nathan Maclay lifted his head and looked at Tara with eyes that had aged, it seemed, twenty years in those few minutes.

"It's true."

Tara felt herself grow dizzy, and wondered dimly if she would faint. Fainting would mean a few more minutes where she didn't have to face the truth. But then her vision cleared, and she could feel Willow's hand on her arm, guiding her to the sofa. She sank slowly into the old cushions, Willow joining her.

"Why, Daddy? Why didn't you ever tell us? How could you-how could you let Mama think it was her?"

Her father laughed, a dry, brittle sound. "You wouldn't think a man in love would do something like that, would you?"

"I know you were scared of losing her, Daddy. But even at the end? You let her die thinking she had demon in her." Tara's voice sounded very far away to her own ears.

"Things change over time. Lots of things changed between when I wrote that letter and when your mother died." His eyes told them that he was watching some movie in his mind to which they weren't privy.

Finally, a sob broke from Tara's throat. "And your children, Daddy? Did things change with us, too? How could you not tell us?"

"I wanted to protect you," he said dully. "Although that doesn't really matter, I guess."

"Protect us? By keeping the truth from us?" Tara suspected that her laugh bordered on hysterical.

"You didn't need to know, Tara." His voice grew firm again.

"Yes we did, Daddy. Maybe you were trying to protect me, but I deserved to know." Her voice trembled with the force of both anger and pain. "I'm not your little girl anymore."

Nathan Maclay looked at her, his gaze almost unspeakably sad.

"You never were."

Continued...

Antigone Unbound Index Page

~ Gods Served and Abandoned ~ by Antigone Unbound

Author Notes: See Part 1.

Feedback: Even more sure! Bring it on!

Part 11

Though Hollywood and television would have us believe otherwise, there aren't really that many distinct, life-altering moments for most people. Changes, losses, realizations... They usually take shape gradually. Paintings don't leap onto the canvas as finished products, and our truths usually don't present themselves as such in discrete, self-contained moments in time.

Usually.

For Tara, this was an exception. Before that moment, she was Tara Maclay, daughter of Nathan and Julia Maclay. And then, in an instant, she became someone else.

And yet, when she would look back later, she would swear that there had been some tiny part of her that said: *I knew it*. She would have no idea where or when she had first thought it, but the fact that she had room for some emotion besides shock meant something, she suspected.

As Nathan Maclay's four syllables sounded in her mind, all of the air seemed to leave the room and Tara struggled to draw a breath. She felt Willow's hand come to rest on her back, and she

suddenly believed utterly that without that hand, she would fall backwards and keep falling-to the floor, and then below it, never able to stop herself or the spiral.

Silence ruled unchallenged for several moments while Tara haltingly began to build a new life story. Finally, she spoke, and her voice seemed not her own.

"What...what are you s-saying? Daddy, what are you t-telling me?" She heard the term of paternal address slip out before she could catch herself, and she wondered if she would ever say it again.

Nathan Maclay looked up at her, his face still ashen; his eyes hollow. "I said, you never were...my little girl." His voice was barely a whisper. Even as he gazed at her, Tara suspected that he was seeing her mother.

"I don't understand, Daddy." Apparently she was still speaking with yesterday's tongue. "I don't know what y-you're talking about."

Nathan Maclay sighed heavily, and turned to look out the window. Without looking back at her, he replied, "I'm not your father. I raised you, but I'm not your father."

This isn't happening. This cannot be happening. I can't lose both my parents.

More to himself than to Tara, it seemed, he muttered, "Doesn't make any sense to keep the secret anymore. Everything's already broken..." He finally turned and met Tara's eyes again. "Your mother? The one you thought was so perfect? She cheated on me, Tara. Had an affair while I was out working my fingers to the bone trying to keep our heads above water. He's your father."

Tara felt as if she were watching a glass filled with water slam against a sidewalk. The rivulets ran everywhere, each one a repercussion or implication or question from this revelation.

"Then who?" she finally managed to whisper.

But her father just smiled an ancient, bitter smile and turned back to the window, shaking his head as he watched the old movie playing in his mind.

Don't you turn your back on me, damn you!

"I said, who is my father?" she demanded, more forcefully this time.

After a moment, her father began to speak, though he still didn't look at her. "You couldn't believe it was me, could you? In that letter, the way I sounded? I was so in love with her..." His voice trailed off, and Tara knew that he was seeing her mother again.

"Julia Benedict...She was the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen...From the moment I saw her, I knew that I would marry her. I've never given another woman a passing thought from the

moment I laid eyes on her." For an instant, his eyes seemed to shine; or perhaps it was just the sun, catching his face just so.

"I courted her every way I knew how, which probably wasn't much. I wasn't as handsome as a lot of the boys who tried to catch her eye, and I wasn't any genius or smooth talker. I didn't have that much going for me, except for being hard-working, and sincere...and persistent. Oh, I was certainly persistent." He gave a short, dry laugh.

For her part, Tara couldn't speak and wasn't sure how she managed to breathe. She wondered absently if the group in the kitchen could hear any of this, and this made her remember Beth. She offered up a quick prayer that her cousin wouldn't return home soon.

"She agreed to go to the movies with me, and after that I just kept showing up at her house, with flowers for her, flowers for her mother...I had said I was going to marry that girl, and finally I did. That day was the happiest day of my life." And this time Tara knew that his eyes were glistening. "I would swear on everything holy that there has never been a more beautiful woman than your mother that day."

Tara's mind darted back to pictures she had seen of their wedding day. Her mother, it was true, had been so beautiful that Tara had found it difficult to believe that she herself came from such a woman.

She wanted desperately to know who her father was, and yet she suspected that this legacy and that of her father's demon aspect were closely intertwined. "And the demon?" she managed to ask. "You didn't tell her about it?"

Still he refused to look at her. "No. I wasn't going to do anything to risk losing her. I thought about it-every day, I thought about it. But...but I never did."

"So you wouldn't risk her leaving you, but you *would* risk her life, if the demon ever over-came you," Tara said flatly.

Now he swung around sharply, his face white with anger. "You judge me? Without knowing what happened? And if I recall correctly, you hadn't told *her*," he nodded harshly toward Willow, "about your little secret either."

Tara sank back into the sofa. *He's right. I did exactly what he did, for the same reason. I called it love.* She felt Willow's hand stroking her arm, and then heard her speak softly, as if Nathan weren't even in the room.

"Baby, don't do this to yourself. You were scared, but you did the right thing. You kept it a secret for a few hours; he kept it for decades."

Tara tried to let the warmth of Willow's presence sink into her, but the entire scene was so surreal as to preclude such things as comfort. Finally, she lifted her eyes to his again. "You didn't

just keep the truth from her, you actually told her the demon was in *her*. How could you? How could you hurt someone you loved so much?"

His anger had seemingly disappeared, replaced now by a dull, haunted gaze. "Because I knew I was losing her. Part of me had never really believed she was mine in the first place, and it wasn't long after we got married that I could feel her slipping away from me." He ran a weather-beaten hand through his thick, dark hair.

I wonder if my father's hair is blond, like Mom's?

His voice was weary, and soaked with anguish. "Do you know what it's like to have the person you love more than anything in the world just get farther and farther away from you? It wasn't sudden; she wasn't mean or cruel. She just seemed a little less...*there*, with me. When I woke up in the morning, it was like she had crept just a little bit farther away while I slept; and in the evening, when we went to bed, there was just a little bit less of her there beside me. I tried everything I could think of to keep her with me...I thought that having children would help."

Tara remembered a conversation with her mother years ago. "What about the miscarriage? What happened?"

Nathan nodded. "So she told you about that? I might have guessed. She was a lot closer to you after you came along than she was to me..." His voice trailed off bitterly. After a moment, he sighed deeply, and his breath seemed to catch in his throat.

"I was so excited when Julia told me she was expecting. The idea of raising a child, with her...I thought I was going to bust a seam, just thinking about it. And she did seem closer to me; she talked to me more, we made plans for the baby...She was absolutely certain it was a boy. Said she just knew, and I didn't doubt it." A glimmer of a smile passed over his face, and then faded.

"Didn't you think you should tell her the truth then? If you were going to be a father, weren't you worried about the demon aspect coming out?" Tara was incredulous at his deceit, even as she had some understanding of what prompted it.

Nathan was silent for a moment. When he spoke, his voice held no trace of defensiveness, no effort to persuade her of his innocence. "I knew we would have to keep a close eye on the boy, to see if there were any sign of demon coming out. At the same time, I was afraid that if I told her the truth then, she would definitely leave me, to keep the baby safe. I knew I couldn't convince her that I wouldn't hurt the child, or her. I just knew it. So I told her the demon was in *her*. I figured that way she wouldn't leave me because she would want me to keep them both safe."

"But how? How did you do it?" Tara had so many questions, and she couldn't imagine ever having them all answered.

Nathan gave a brittle laugh. "You know, I'm not even sure. It wasn't like I set up some fancy spell or anything. I didn't even know any magic...That was your mother's specialty, as I found out shortly before we married. All I can remember is thinking that I had to do this, that there was

no choice, and that I'd better get it right the first time...except I didn't even know exactly what 'it' was. I just started talking, and the more I talked, the more I believed it myself. I felt this-*heat*, or burning, in my heart, and it kept getting worse. But when I finished talking, and I saw your mother crying...I knew it had worked, and the pain stopped. From that moment on, she believed that she carried demon in her, and that it would be passed on to her daughters. I wanted her to believe that it was just through the female line, so she wouldn't even think of a male possessing any demon. I figured the boy would be with me more and more as he got older, and I could watch him as I needed to." He passed a hand over his eyes, exhaustion seeming to roll off of him in waves.

"What happened? To the baby?" Tara was afraid to hear the answer.

"You think I did something, don't you? You think I hurt him?" Nathan's voice quavered for the only time that Tara could remember. "I loved that little boy more than I have words to tell you. He was my greatest hope. Yes, I was worried about watching out for the demon; but I knew he'd be at least half your mother, hopefully more. And that would make him almost perfect, I figured."

Tara felt tears stinging her own eyes at his words. *Goddess, he had so much love in him, and so much fear. I'm surprised he didn't just break apart with it all.*

"It was late August...We'd been in a near drought for the better part of the summer; we needed rain bad, and one night we got it. A storm blew up; probably the worst this area had seen in a long time. The wind was awful, and the rain started coming down in sheets. Once you stepped outside, you were soaked to the bone in a few seconds. I had just finished the milking and come back to the house. Your mother had made beef stew; I could smell it as soon as I walked in the house." Again, the sad smile slid across his face, only to disappear as he spoke.

"I was just about to take off my boots when I heard a banging coming from the direction of the barn. When I stepped out onto the porch to see what it was, I saw the big barn door on the south end slamming back against the barn. Somehow it had blown open, and I knew I had to go down and shut it back up. The storm would frighten the horses and the calves, and I couldn't risk them hurting themselves trying to get out of their stalls. So I pulled my jacket back on and told your mother where I was going. I hoped it would only take a few minutes, but the door was so heavy, and the wind made it damn near impossible to shut it. I almost had it a couple of times, but then the wind would rip it right out of my hands and I'd have to start all over again. The next thing I knew, your mother was standing beside me, tugging on the door. I-I told her to go back to the house; I told her I could get it. But she said-" Nathan stopped, and swallowed heavily. "She said she didn't want our son thinking she was some kind of princess that wouldn't get her hands dirty to help his father. She wouldn't leave, no matter what I said. She just kept tugging, right there beside me. Finally I gave up trying to convince her and between the two of us we managed to get the barn door shut and bolted. She was breathing heavy, but I could see her grinning at me in the rain and for the first time in a long time, I could feel her love for me. We got back to the house and changed out of our wet clothes and ate the best supper I've ever had. We went to bed laughing about how Vaughn Nathan Maclay had just done his first piece of farm work, and how

we'd have to include that in his first allowance." Nathan fell silent, and looked back out the window.

"The next day your mother started spotting. She tried to say it was nothing, but I got her into the truck and went to the doctor that afternoon. We lost him the day after that." His voice was flat now.

Tara didn't bother to fight the tears that were washing over her cheeks in streams. *They both lost so much-the baby, each other...*

Nathan resumed his narrative, still in the same dead voice. "After that, things changed. Your mother started getting more distant with me; nothing I did could keep her close. I don't know if she blamed me-I tried to get her to go back to the house, I did; but maybe I should have just left the door and hoped for the best. Maybe I should have physically made her go back to the house, but that never even crossed my mind. I don't know...Maybe she thought I blamed her, although I tried to be as kind and gentle as I knew how. I told her we'd have other children; told her I loved her whether we did or not. And she tried to be normal with me, but I knew her heart was slipping away again. You don't know what it's like to love someone so much and know that she's leaving you even while she's standing right in front of you."

He stared off into the distance. Tara struggled to find her voice. "I'm so sorry," she finally whispered. Her father looked at her in mild surprise; he didn't seem to know how to respond to her kindness.

After a moment, Tara asked softly, "What about Donnie?" At the name, Nathan's baleful countenance returned.

"I said your mother grew more distant; she didn't actually leave me, not physically. She still believed she had demon in her, and I-I think she really didn't want to hurt me." This last part was said so quietly that Tara had to strain to hear him.

"Your mother found out she was pregnant with Donnie in February of 1978," Nathan continued, confirming the timeline that she, Willow, and Giles had deduced yesterday. "I decided to write her the letter in case anything happened to me, or if I died before her. I loved her so much...If I died before she did, I wanted her to know the truth. I just-I didn't want her to know when I was still alive, because then..."

"She might leave you," Tara finished.

"No; I'm sure she *would* have left me. Finding out that I had lied to her-there's no way she would have stayed with me." He looked at her, his gaze at once helpless and defiant. "So I didn't tell her. Donnie was born that October. I had hoped it would bring us closer again, but this time was different...Throughout the pregnancy, even at the birth-she never seemed nearly as excited. She was sick a lot, and she had never had morning sickness the first time. She was tired, too, and we didn't really discuss names until a month before he was born. When Donnie came, she got all

depressed for the first couple of months; I didn't think she was ever coming out of it. She just kept slipping further and further away from me; Donnie didn't change that at all."

Tara felt a wave of nausea wash over her, thinking about her brother. *Half-brother*, she corrected herself. "Does Donnie have demon in him?" she asked, knowing that either answer would hurt.

Nathan's laugh was harsh. "I suspect you'd be in a better position to know that than I am," he said simply.

Tara stared at him. "You know what he did? You know how he hurt me?" Any vestige of sympathy she felt for her father was quickly being eclipsed by rage at this new insinuation.

"I didn't know for sure," Nathan replied, and his tone suggested that he wasn't just hedging. "I certainly came down hard on him, a great deal. I was worried sick that he might have demon in him. He always seemed so angry and bitter, even when he was young. I had hoped that by instilling...*discipline* in him, I might keep it from emerging."

"Spare the rod, spoil the demon," Willow murmured softly.

Nathan glared at her. "What do you know about any of this? About my family? How dare you judge me. You're lucky I haven't thrown you out of this house."

"You won't do that," Tara interjected flatly. "I won't let you." Nathan and Willow both stared at her incredulously. "No more threats; no more violence. She stays." So saying, she entwined Willow's fingers in her own. In her own mind, Tara was beyond being shocked at anything that might transpire this afternoon. She had come out to her father, who-as it turned out-wasn't. Defending Willow, always a natural reaction for her, came so easily as to be unnoticeable to her own observation.

Nathan gave her his coldest stare, but Tara was unmoved. Finally, he relented, slightly. "I truly believed it would keep the demon in check," he muttered. "Donnie was always so ready to blow up; he had so much violence in him. I thought it was the demon."

"Or it could have been the result of being beaten and suspected from an early age." Tara's voice held curiously little judgment; she was simply stating a possibility.

"Do you think I wanted to do that? Be so hard on my own son? I wanted to play with him, teach him things, just like the father I had planned to be with Vaughn. But Donnie's temper showed up early..."

"His *temper*-not his complete soul, and not necessarily a demon aspect. You couldn't know that, any more than you could know that Vaughn would have been different." Tara found herself feeling oddly protective of Donnie, at least as she watched his history unfold. Nathan sat without speaking.

"And then you suspected him of beating on me, and you didn't step in," Tara continued, her voice shaking.

"I said I wasn't sure. I never saw anything."

"You didn't *want* to see anything," Tara cut him off. "I didn't have anything to do with whatever happened between you and Mom, but you were willing to stand aside and let him do whatever he might be doing."

"Didn't have anything to do with it?" Nathan echoed. "You *were* it! You represented it all!"

"Through no fault of her own!" Willow broke in. "She was an innocent!"

"There's no such thing," Nathan declared flatly.

As Tara looked helplessly at Willow, who gazed at her with a fierce protectiveness that finally penetrated some of the surrealism of the moment, she heard the kitchen door slam. Nathan's head snapped up, his mouth tightening.

"If that's Donald-" he began in an ominous voice.

"What are you doing here?" It was Beth's voice, indignant and shrill. She had obviously discovered unwanted city folks in her kitchen.

Not quite feeling her legs, Tara rose and walked unsteadily into the kitchen, Willow immediately behind her. Nathan remained seated. "They're here with me, Beth." Tara's voice sounded strange to her own ears.

Now it was Beth's turn to look surprised, and more than a little nonplussed. "What do you mean?" Her eyes narrowed. "Are you coming back?" The resentment in her voice was obvious, and profound.

From the corner of the kitchen, Dawn spoke up. "Actually, we're all coming to live here. We hear you make a mean apple strudel." Buffy's elbow to her ribs seemed to lack its usual vigor, as confusion washed over Beth's face.

Do they know? What did they hear? She had to find out before anything went any further. "Um, guys-could you hear anything that we were talking about?" The group was silent, and then Giles spoke, his voice soft and apologetic. "Yes, Tara. We could hear. We probably should have left the house completely, for your privacy, but we also didn't want to risk being too far from you if you needed us." His eyes held a very old kindness, it seemed to Tara.

She shook her head without really thinking. "No, it's OK. I would have told you anyway." She looked back over her shoulder. Nathan apparently had still not left his chair.

"What are all of these people doing here, Tara? What's this all about?" Beth's indignant tone brought her back to the scene in front of her.

"Don't you know?" Willow asked, anger rippling through her own voice. "You seem to have installed yourself pretty conveniently into the household. I'm surprised you don't have all the inside scoop."

Beth turned to Willow, fixing her with a malevolent glare. "Who do you think you are, coming in here and talking to me like that? You think I don't know what kind of person you are?" She sniffed as if detecting sour milk.

Willow tilted her head in mock consideration. "Jewish? Red-headed? Stunningly intelligent yet modest? Oh, wait-big ol' honking lesbian?"

Beth took an automatic step backwards, as if the orientation might be contagious. "I-I was talking about you being a witch." Willow gave Tara a weak, apologetic grin.

OK, I guess I'm out to Cousin Beth now, too. But Tara couldn't really summon the energy to be upset with Willow. That little revelation was hardly going to be the lead story of this whole newscast.

Beth had pulled herself up with righteous disdain. "Although things certainly make more sense now," she continued, looking at Tara with new and greater condemnation.

"Beth, you know that Donnie was trying to get me to come back home. You called me to say you understood that I wanted to stay at school. There's no need for us to be enemies," Tara said placatingly. Then she noticed Beth's anxious glance into the living room.

"Tara, let's not talk about what's gone on between us, alright? I just want to know what's happening right now."

"Donnie showed me a lock box, and it had some information in it that I needed to...confirm," Tara replied. "My friends came with me-Willow came with me-to support me. They knew it wouldn't be the easiest time in the world." *And I'd give a big cheer for understatement except that that would be an oxymoron, I think.*

Beth looked around at all of them, confusion settling across her features. Finally, she seemed to reach some decision. Pushing past them, she made her way into the living room, where Nathan still sat, seemingly oblivious to the upheaval twenty feet away.

"Uncle Nathan, are you alright? Are these people upsetting you?" Her voice was solicitous, and Tara, following closely behind her, realized that it wasn't an act.

"Yes, Beth. Thank you. I-I think it would be best if you gave us a little time to talk privately." Nathan Maclay's voice sounded distant and rote.

Tara actually felt feeling sorry for Beth when she saw the hurt flash across her cousin's face.

"Are you sure? With-with all these strangers in the house?" she faltered.

"Yes, of course. Why don't you just go on up to Tara's room for now? I'll call you in a little bit." His tone suggested that he had already forgotten her presence.

Tara had also seen Beth's reaction when her father-when Nathan-had referred to "Tara's room." *You want this to be your home so bad, don't you Beth? The grass is always greener...* She turned to see Willow standing beside her. The others had remained in the kitchen. *Hope they're making themselves at home. This could be a while.*

She returned to the couch, Willow by her side. It was time, she knew.

"I need to know who my father is," she said simply.

Nathan turned to look at her, his gaze unreadable. "You really don't know, do you?"

Tara decided that such a question deserved no answer. She just waited.

He stared at her for a long moment, before finally speaking. "Your mother-she seemed to have so much...*life* in her, so much energy. She was always wanting to go out, see people, go into the city. I didn't have the time for such things; there was always so much work to be done. And besides, it wasn't really my idea of a good time. I liked the evenings when it was just the two of us, in our home. But Julia-she wanted to go out to eat, go dancing, go to the movies. It was just one of the things that seemed to come between us." His distant expression brought a small tightening to Tara's throat; she wasn't sure why.

"I noticed that she would spend more and more time away from the house-going to the store two and three times a week; going into town for any reason she could think of. And she always took Donnie. I didn't want to say anything about it; I thought maybe it would make her happy, getting out more. But she kept pulling away from me...She never said anything to me directly; it was just her manner, and the look in her eyes." Again he turned to stare out the window; Tara wondered what he saw there.

"Then I started noticing how she was acting different. It wasn't just what she was doing...She was starting to dress a little differently, even around the house. She seemed nervous, too, and I don't think she'd been anxious a day in her life. It was like she'd started drinking or something, the way she changed. It was even harder to reach her than before. I asked her if I could do something; I even suggested we go away on a trip, even though it was fall and there was so much to do on the farm. I was getting desperate. I didn't think she'd leave me, not with Donnie, and...and thinking she had demon in her. But it was getting to be like living with a stranger-this beautiful stranger that I was in love with but who barely even noticed me. But she said no, that she didn't want to go on a trip. And that should have told me, I guess. She finally had something here that she didn't want to leave." Nathan's smile was twisted and bitter.

"I can't remember the first time the thought actually crossed my mind that she was seeing someone. But once the idea came, it never left. I wanted to follow her, when she went into town, but we only had the one vehicle. Besides, Cold Springs is so small that I couldn't imagine her meeting someone without everybody in the town knowing it inside of five minutes. Still, though, I thought something was up. I decided to call Joe Buckner, up the road, and asked if I could borrow his second car for a few days. I had loaned him a tractor and wagon more than once, and he was glad to help out. I told him the truck was acting up. When he dropped it off the next day, I told Julia that he'd asked me to look at it. I was always good with machinery. She didn't bat an eye; seems like she was barely noticing me those days anyway. The next morning, she mentioned she was going into town. I waited about five minutes and then headed out after her. She had Donnie with her." He paused, tilting his head slightly to one side as he remembered.

"I was afraid that I might not be able to find her once I reached town. Cold Springs is little, but there was no guarantee I'd see her. Turns out I didn't even need to go into town."

Tara could hear her heart pounding loudly in her chest, its tempo increasing, it seemed, with every passing sentence. She wondered absently if there were some upper threshold that she was in danger of crossing. All she knew for sure was that she couldn't imagine what her life would look like in a matter of moments.

"I had driven about five miles when I saw the truck parked a ways back on a little side road that led back to the old Huntley place. If I hadn't glanced over to that side of the road, I'd never have seen it. Nobody had lived there for about ten years; it was all grown over with weeds and the same old 'For Sale' sign. I guess I knew then that I was right. Why else would she be there? All I needed to know now was who the son of a bitch was." He fell silent, and kept his silence for so long that Tara thought she might scream. Finally he nodded, as if confirming some inner truth, and spoke once more.

"I turned around and drove back; I parked the car on the other side of the road and killed the engine. I headed up the lane, all the time hoping I was wrong and knowing I was right. The lane was about fifty yards long...I didn't think I'd ever reach the house. I can still remember every bush and plant and tree I saw on that walk. I finally got to the porch, trying to be quiet. I didn't really need to be, though. They were making enough noise that they sure weren't going to hear *me*. I could hear her voice, clear as a bell. And then I heard his voice." Nathan looked over at Tara, as if registering her presence anew.

"You're wondering if I recognized it, aren't you?" he asked quietly.

Unable to speak, Tara only nodded.

Nathan stared at her.

"Of course I did. I should have-I'd known him since the day he was born."

Oh, no...Oh, sweet goddess, no-not this...

Nathan met her desperate gaze with his own dead eyes. "Turns out my brother had more to offer my wife than I did."

Part 12

"Mama, are Aunt Margaret and Uncle Quinn coming over for Christmas? I want to see what Beth gets from Santa. Are they, Mama? Mama, are you listening?"

"No, Bright Eyes; they're not coming over this year. We're going to celebrate with just the four of us."

"We hardly ever see them, Mama, and they don't live far away, like some people's families."

"Well, sometimes it's nice to have just us, don't you think?"

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*"Beth was crying at school today, Mama. I heard her tell Jenny Baxter at recess that her mom and dad are fighting all the time. I never hear you and Daddy fight."*

*"Well...Your daddy and I try to be nice to each other, Bright Eyes. I wouldn't want **you** crying at recess."*

*"But you and Daddy love each other, right? Right, Mama?"*

*"Of course we do, Honey."*

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She was supposed to be asleep, but she was thirsty. So she slipped out of bed and padded along the hallway until she reached the top of the stairs. She hoped her daddy wasn't alone in the kitchen. He'd either scold her for being up or just look at her funny, the way he did sometimes when her mama wasn't around.

Three hesitant steps down the stairs, she heard both of her parents in the kitchen. She fidgeted indecisively for a moment, and then sat down on the steps, her blue flannel nightshirt edging up over her knees. She frowned, absently rubbing a bruise on her arm as she heard her parents talk quietly.

"Does anybody know where he went?" Her mama's voice.

"No," her daddy answered. "I just heard from Jack McAllister down at the Feed and Grain that he's been gone for a couple of days. Apparently he never said a word to anybody."

Who were they talking about?

After a minute, her mama spoke up again. Why did her voice sound so little, and cold?

"Well, maybe that's for the best."

"You really think so?" Her daddy sounded funny, too-like he was keeping his mouth even tighter than usual.

"Yes. Maybe he'll go away and-and pull himself together. Stop drinking. Maybe then he can come back and Margaret and him can work things out."

Her daddy didn't say anything for a minute, and then he finally answered, "Maybe you're right. That would be nice, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, it would. Heaven knows Beth could use two solid parents."

Uncle Quinn? He had left home? Left Aunt Margaret and Cousin Beth by themselves?

"Do you want any dessert while you watch the news, Nathan?"

"No thank you. Are you going to watch?"

"No, I think I'm going to head on up to bed."

She didn't really feel that thirsty anymore. Usually she would have waited for her mama to start up the stairs and asked her for another goodnight kiss, but for some reason she thought maybe she should just head back to bed.

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Wrapping her arms around her in a deliberate attempt to stop trembling, Tara looked at the man she had called "father" for twenty years. He seemed to shimmer; and then she realized that her vision was tilting. She thought for a moment that she might faint, and then she rested her head in her hands, briefly, as Willow rubbed her back in small circles. After a moment, she trusted herself to look at Nathan once more.

"You're saying-you're saying that Uncle Quinn is my father? My biological father?" Her voice seemed to come from someplace far away.

Nathan stared at her, his expression unreadable. "Yes. My wife had an affair with my brother. Sounds like something from an afternoon talk show, doesn't it?" His laugh was humorless.

"I-I can't believe this is happening. I feel like I'm watching somebody else, in a movie." *Mama? How could you do this? And how could you keep this a secret from me-my own father?*

"Well, it's real, and it's true. I know you always thought your mother was perfect, but she wasn't. I certainly found that out the hard way."

"Mama had an affair..."

"And she took her infant son along with her. Doesn't exactly qualify her as 'Mother of the Year,' does it?"

Tara's head sank once more. She tried to focus on Willow, near and strong and loving. *How could I bear this without you?*

"Oh goddess, Mama..."

Beth wasn't going to sit passively in Tara's room, and even if she *had* been inclined to wait, she wouldn't have called it "Tara's room." She paced quietly along the upstairs hallway for a few minutes, before letting herself into her Uncle Nathan's room, where she made a quick phone call. Then she grew impatient once more.

She was good at hiding; good at keeping herself invisible even to folks who could have seen her if they'd looked at all closely. It was easy, really, to edge herself noiselessly down a few steps until she could just make out the voices in the living room-one low and flat; the other soft and incredulous.

"Daddy-I mean..." Tara paused, trying to find words that wouldn't sound ludicrous within her own mind. "I-I don't know what to say."

"Neither did I." Nathan Maclay was now gazing at her almost relentlessly, as if he were searching for something that only she could reveal, and he no longer had to conceal his search.

"What...what did Mama say when you confronted her about it?" She swallowed, a bitter, metallic taste in her mouth as she imagined harsh words; bitter recriminations; threats, and pleas for forgiveness.

"I never did."

Tara looked up sharply. Surely she had heard him wrong...

"I stepped back off of the porch, and I walked back to the car. I drove home and sprayed the corn, and then I started the milking. I saw your mother driving up to the house about an hour after I got back." His eyes, in the fading afternoon sunlight, looked almost black.

"You mean-you never told her you knew?"

"No. She may have suspected, or wondered, because I'm sure I seemed quite strange to her for the first two or three weeks after that. But I never said anything. I never let on that I had heard her rutting in an abandoned house with my brother while our son slept nearby."

Tara felt her stomach surge dangerously for a moment. Fighting past the bile, she managed, "Why? Why in God's name wouldn't you tell her?"

"Don't use that phrase," Nathan countered promptly. "You don't know the first thing about God's name." But his voice held no fire.

"I'm sorry, sir," Tara found herself replying automatically. And then she stopped herself. What did she owe this man? Whether he was her father or not? Shaking her head quickly, she continued, "Why didn't you tell her?"

Nathan's expression suggested that he didn't understand her question. "Because she hadn't said she was going to leave me. I didn't think she would. I thought that if I told her I knew, she might feel like she *had* to leave."

"And you still wanted to be with her? You didn't think at all about leaving yourself?" Tara was incredulous.

Nathan looked at her quizzically. "We don't get a choice in who we love, Tara. Your mother tore me apart like a tornado blowing through a haystack, but I still loved her. I still wanted to fall asleep next to her, and wake up next to her." He spoke slowly, as if uncertain of her ability to comprehend his words.

Beth heard the clock on the mantle downstairs chime five o'clock. *Probably about half an hour now*, though she couldn't for the life of her imagine why she would think of such a thing. About half an hour since she learned who her father had really loved; and why he had left. About half an hour since she learned that Tara hadn't been satisfied with her own family; she had taken Beth's, too.

"But what about Uncle-about Uncle Quinn?" *I barely remember you; I'm not about to call you "Dad."*

Nathan caught her hesitation, and smiled bitterly.

"Well, I wasn't about to let her sleep with him again. That night, I sat her down and told her how much I loved her, but how afraid I was for her. About the demon, I mean. I told her I'd noticed some changes in her, and that it scared me. I said I'd stand by her through anything; no matter what evil things she might want to do, or who she might hurt with that sinfulness. I told her it wasn't her fault that she had evil thoughts. 'God looks into our hearts, and knows what's there,' I

said. 'What's important is that we ask for forgiveness, particularly if we know that we're especially likely to fall victim to temptation and sin.' I did a pretty fair impersonation of Reverend Timson, if I do say so myself." He nodded proudly as if to himself. "And I would bet this farm that they never did that again."

"But when you found out Mama was pregnant..." Tara could barely bring herself to ask further about this time that she knew she needed to understand. *Willow, my love... Could you have imagined this when we left this morning? Was it just this morning? **You're** my family now, Beloved.*

"Oh, I knew it was his. Your mother and I hadn't been together as husband and wife for probably a month and a half before I found them. And it was another month after that before we were again. But she had already stopped making her little afternoon trips, and she at least acted like she wanted to spend time with me. And so, a few weeks after that day, we resumed our marital relations." His tone, as if discussing a business contract that had been briefly interrupted by a strike, conveyed none of the agony that Tara knew he had felt.

Tara fought to keep the dizziness, creeping back along her vision, at bay. Finally, she managed to ask, "Wasn't Mama afraid that you would know? About me?" *No, not about **me**. I didn't do anything. I didn't wreck your marriage.*

Nathan's laugh chilled Tara's blood, pounding throughout the heart that he had not helped to create.

"Oh, she told me you were premature. She told me when she must really have been almost two months along-but she said she was about three weeks pregnant. I knew, though... She hadn't known with Vaughn or Donnie until she was almost two months along. Now she was trying to say she 'just knew' she was pregnant. I offered to go along with her to the doctor's, get everything checked out-but she said I didn't need to worry myself with it, that she was doing fine. And she was... She was never sick with you. They talk about pregnant women glowing-well, she did. And when you were born-a month early, she told me, trying so hard to act natural-the doctor said it was one of the easiest births he'd ever seen. And the whole time I played right along, even when you came out weighing over eight pounds-as if a baby who's a month premature is likely to weigh that much."

"And you never told her-ever," Tara repeated, feeling like a slow-witted child.

"No. She was my wife, and I wanted her to stay my wife. Quinn tried to see her, I'm sure of it. We had some calls that were hang-ups, and a couple of times that bastard even came to the house. I could see him drive up, when I was out in the fields closest to the place. And I headed back in, thinking I might just kill him if I found him going after my wife in my own home. But he left almost as soon as he arrived. I think he fell for her as hard as I did... Quinn always loved his whiskey; now he started drinking seriously-missing work, passing out at the bar and having to have somebody drive him home. Until he finally just left town."

Tara closed her eyes, and forced herself to ask the next question. "Do you know where he is?" Willow's hand stilled on her back, as if any sound might drown out the answer she awaited.

Nathan's smile was empty. "Quinn? My dear brother-your father-is dearly departed, Tara. He died a little over a year ago."

I have no parents. My parents are dead. My mother is dead, and the man who was really my biological father is dead. I can never talk to him. And I can never talk to her about what happened.

Variations of these thoughts echoed in Tara's head for several seconds, and she watched them ripple out from her brain to begin stitching a new fabric for her life's story.

The past twenty-four hours had been a succession of blows to what she had always accepted as reality. After learning that her mother had no demon in her, she had found that her father did. Only he wasn't her father; her uncle was. The man she had called "Uncle Quinn" had had an affair with her mother, in which she herself had been conceived, and eventually he had left his wife as well as the woman he loved and two daughters. Now he was dead.

The only constant was the invisible cord that held her close to Willow, anchoring her to a family that didn't build hollow existences on the ruins of lies.

My parents are dead but my mate lives. So I can live, too.

Finally, she drew a shuddering breath and looked at Nathan shakily. "You're saying Quinn is dead? That there's no way for me to talk to him?"

Nathan's gaze was unreadable. Did he regret her pain? Did he relish it?

"That's right. I heard from Beverly last September. She said he called her from Tulsa; that's where he ended up. She's the one who told him that Julia had died. They spoke a couple of times, but he never wanted to get together. She got the impression that he was drinking even more. Apparently, his stomach started to bleed one night and two days later, he was dead. He had told the hospital that Beverly was his next of kin." Nathan smiled thinly. "Not his wife, who he never divorced, and neither of his two daughters."

Tara looked down again, feeling bludgeoned by the concussive force of the revelations. She had always been thoughtful, contemplative; she preferred the chance to reflect on things within her own mind before giving voice to those thoughts. Now, though, she felt as if she were on stage beneath an unyielding spotlight. As she tried to quiet the pounding in her head, she felt Willow lean closer, enclosing Tara's hand in both of her own.

"Baby, are you OK?" she whispered. "Do you need some fresh air; maybe take a break?"

Tara looked up to see Willow's worried gaze, the latter's brow arching in question. Suddenly, the need to be outside felt so overwhelming as to leave her almost dizzy. She tried to speak, but the words seemed to collide and tumble within her head. She closed her eyes for a moment, and then nodded.

"Yeah, that actually sounds like a good idea." She drew herself up straight, and looked at Nathan. *What do I call him?* As the two gazed at each other, the incredible irony sank into Tara's awareness: in the process of learning that this man was not her father, she had come to know and understand him more than she had ever imagined possible.

Maybe we're beyond titles now. "I need a little time to think," she said, half-amazed that she hadn't stuttered. She turned to Willow. "Maybe we could just go into town for a bit; get something to drink or whatever." It was close to six o'clock, but she could no more imagine eating than indulging in sex games with Xander, and both were approximately equal in their appeal. All she knew was that she needed to be away from the man in front of her, and the house, with all of its pictures that lied. And away from Beth, who sat upstairs unaware that they were sisters.

"You're just going to head back to college now? After everything you just learned?" Nathan sounded incredulous, snapping out of his seeming blankness.

"No," Tara replied evenly. "I just need to get my bearings and think about this a little bit. You've known all of this for two decades. I think it's pretty reasonable that I'd need to catch my breath after everything you've told me." Again, she felt a ripple of surprise at her bluntness with her father-with Nathan, she corrected herself. Standing, she was glad to feel Willow's hand on the small of her back, an unspoken assurance that she would steady her, hold her up.

"So you'll come back?" Nathan's voice sounded almost hopeful. *Hopeful of what?*

"Yes, but I won't be staying. We all need to get back...home." She saw his jaw tighten at the word, and wasn't sure whether she felt sorry for him or outraged. *Both*, she realized, *and probably a whole slew of other feelings that I can't even imagine right now.*

Turning to leave the room, she suddenly thought of another house that had been shaken to the ground. "Does Beth know? About any of this?"

Nathan shrugged. "I'm almost certain she doesn't. I'm sure Margaret told her Quinn was dead, but nothing more than that."

Tara shook her head. Had any of these alleged adults, years ago, thought of the price their children would have to pay for their own fears? She fought the urge to run out of the house. Instead, she walked deliberately toward the kitchen. Reaching the threshold, she saw that the group had pulled on their jackets and windbreakers and were already coming to meet her. *So they heard all of that, too.* Her vision grew blurry for a moment as she took in the love and gentleness of the faces before her. Afraid that her voice would fail her, she squeezed Willow's hand in a silent plea.

"Hey guys," her mate said quietly. "Let's get out of here for awhile." So saying, she turned, and the group filed out of the kitchen door that opened onto the side porch. No one said anything until they reached the car, and then, with no warning, Dawn turned and buried her face against Tara's shoulder, wrapping her slender arms around her with a strength that Tara couldn't have guessed she had. Tara was stunned, but only for a moment, and then she enfolded the younger girl tightly into her arms, resting her cheek against the brown hair. She felt Dawn's shoulders trembling slightly, and murmured, "It's OK, Dawnie. I'm alright." The others watched with a mixture of discomfort and sadness, but Tara was content to focus on Dawn for this time.

After a couple of minutes, Dawn reluctantly pulled back a few inches from Tara's embrace, and looked up at her with glistening eyes. She seemed unable to speak, and instead reached up to Tara's face with shaking fingers, where she hesitantly wiped away the tears that Tara hadn't even realized she'd shed. Tara managed a tiny smile, and pulled Dawn close to her again, whispering as if sharing a secret with the younger girl alone, "I love you, Dawnie. *You're* my family now."

They piled into the car in silence.

Beth must have walked back upstairs. She couldn't remember doing so, but now she was standing in front of what used to be Tara's room, so she must have done it.

She watched her hand extend to the doorknob and twist it slowly. Giving a slight push, she saw the objects in the room grow closer with the steps that she must be taking. Finally she reached the bed, and watched as her hands sank to the blue and white quilt and she lowered herself onto the mattress. She didn't lie down. She just sat, very quietly, and thought about things.

Part 13

Fifteen minutes after Buffy had slid the car into gear, they were pulling up beside a small diner. The faded red lettering on the window proclaimed this to be "Jack's Place." Jack, like most Cold Springs proprietors, had apparently seen better days.

The conversation on the way had been slight, after Tara had quietly told them that she needed some time to digest it all. Now, as they took their seats around a large table toward the back of the diner, everyone exchanged uncertain glances, or devoted profound consideration to the knives and forks resting on the chipped gray Formica.

"So-your father isn't really your father," Anya finally said brightly, apparently unable to tolerate the silent tension anymore. Far better for her, it seemed, was the loudly proclaimed tension.

Xander looked at his girlfriend with a mixture of disbelief and consternation, while Willow's mouth formed a thin slash and she glared at the ex-demon without remorse. Tara, however, found the observation almost unspeakably amusing-to the point of near-hysteria. Her laughter,

quiet at first, quickly gained volume and vigor until tears were streaming down her face. *Well, this should just confirm their original suspicions that I'm a freak.* But she couldn't help it, and she realized with surprise that she didn't really *want* to help it.

"Apparently not," she finally managed to reply through her laughter. She knew that everyone but Willow was staring at her as if she'd just told them that she had converted to Satanism and intended to round up a few animals back at the farm for ritual sacrifices.

"I'm sorry," she continued, her laughter finally abating. "It's just-I can't believe this. This morning my main concern was whether I had any demon in me. And apparently I don't, but it's sort of hard to focus on that part, considering everything I've learned in the past two hours." Willow's hand rested lightly on her leg, giving a gentle squeeze of reassurance.

"Tara," Giles began, clearing his throat. "One can only begin to imagine what you're going through right now. I suspect there aren't really words for it."

"Except for 'hellish,' 'unreal,' and possibly 'mind-bending,'" Xander added with a sardonic grin. Tara met his eyes, and they shared a brief smile-the kinship of estrangement from one's kin.

A tall, reed-thin server whose name tag suggested she might respond to "Angie" appeared at their table, plunking down menus and promising to return with water. The conversation halted briefly while they considered their gustatory options. Tara barely glanced at her menu; it was hard to imagine ever being hungry again.

"So, uh, Tara-you've eaten here before. Any suggestions?" Buffy asked.

"Stay away from the seafood buffet," Tara replied absently. "It's basically Mrs. Pauls, deep-fat-fried."

The server returned, depositing glasses of water from her tray. "You folks aren't from around here, are you?" she inquired. "Pretty sure I've never served you before-except for you," she added abruptly, suddenly noticing Tara at the far end of the table.

Tara nodded, not terribly happy to have been recognized.

"What's your name, Honey?" Both Willow and Dawn glanced up sharply at this, and Tara made a mental note to explain the custom of greeting everyone with terms that implied you were about to sleep with them.

"Tara," she answered simply.

"Who's your family, Sweetie?" Tara could see Willow and Dawn frowning. *Remind me to write a short story about this sometime.*

Aloud, she replied, "Maclay."

"Maclay..." Angie frowned, considering the name. Then she brightened. "Oh, you're Nathan and Julia's girl." She grinned as she placed Tara in her personal Cold Springs reference guide.

Tara felt her heart constrict to the point of bursting, but managed to nod and give what she hoped was a reasonable facsimile of a smile.

Angie's own smile dimmed. "Julia was such a nice lady. I've only seen your daddy a few times, but your mom came in here a lot. She was one of the classiest people I've ever met."

Tara couldn't imagine speaking, but knew she had to. Swallowing heavily, she said simply, "Thank you. You're very kind."

Angie gave her a sympathetic smile and turned back to the others. "You all know what you want, or do you need a few more minutes?"

Soon, Angie had taken their orders back to the kitchen, the scribbling of her pencil pausing only briefly when she heard Giles' English accent. She winked at him and said, "Hope you enjoy our little slice of American cuisine, Honey," which seemed to appease Willow and Dawn considerably.

As she walked away, Tara felt tears pricking her eyes. "Except I'm not, am I? Nathan's girl, at least." She fell silent, uncomfortably aware of the others' eyes upon her. She hated being the center of attention, and there was no way that she couldn't be right now. She was the very reason these people were sitting here in an old diner, preparing to dig into roast beef with mashed potatoes and gravy and other home-style eats.

As the silence lingered, she fought the urge to drop her head. Clearing her throat, she said, "I feel like I should apologize for what this day turned into."

A chorus of protests greeted this. "Tara, this is what friends do," Buffy said vehemently. "Besides vanquishing the undead and averting world cataclysm, of course."

"Buffy's right," Xander nodded. "If you gotta go through this, I'm glad we're here."

"And I've hardly thought about the money we're losing at the Magic Box," Anya offered earnestly. "I mean, here it is, a beautiful day when people might well be out doing their holiday shopping-I can only guess how much we'd have cleared-but it's barely crossed my mind."

Willow just shook her head, but Tara reached across the table and squeezed Anya's hand. "You really do care, don't you?" she asked, with just a trace of a grin.

"More than most people around here seem to realize," Anya replied pointedly, as Angie returned with their drinks.

When she had left again, Giles leaned forward, speaking softly. "Tara, do you believe your father? All of what he told you?"

Tara had pondered this question on the way into town. Looking at the kind face before her, she shook her head in tired bewilderment. "I think so. I just don't see what reason he'd have to lie. I think he wrote the letter when and why he said he did; and I..." She was having trouble putting the rest into words. Finally, she bit her lip and said, "I think he was telling the truth about Mom, too...As much as I don't want to believe she could do such a thing, I think it's true."

Dawn's voice rose in protest. "But couldn't he just be telling you that to hurt you, Tara? I mean, it's an awful thing to imagine, but he just seems so...so hurt and bitter about their marriage falling apart. Maybe he just wants to taint your image of your mother."

Tara gave a bitter laugh. "Well, he did a good job with that one...I mean, she took Donnie with her. What in the goddess' name was she thinking about?" She felt her throat tighten as she remembered Nathan's graphic depiction.

She couldn't face that yet, she realized. She needed to be alone with Willow for that conversation. Returning to the issue of Nathan's veracity, she continued, "The thing is, by telling me what he did, he also knew that he would set me free." Her words stunned her even as she spoke them, but she realized it was true. If she wasn't Nathan's biological daughter, there was no chance of her having any demon heritage. And such a heritage was the only factor that had even a remote chance of dragging her back to Cold Springs.

The others fell silent as they considered this fact. Finally, Giles murmured, "Nathan seems to be a very...*complex* man, Tara. It's hard to know exactly what his motivation is."

"I agree," Buffy nodded. "On the one hand, he has to know how much it would hurt you to hear about your mother and his brother." She halted, looking at Tara as if apologizing for the words. "But on the other hand, he just assured you that you don't have to worry about any kind of demonic legacy, which means he really does have no scare tactics left to try to force you back home."

Tara felt an unexpected twinge as she replied, "Maybe he's decided he really doesn't want me at home." *Why should that thought make me sad? It's not like I want to be there...*

"I don't know," Giles said slowly. "From what I could, um, overhear, he didn't want you to leave just now. I have the impression that he does want you back home. The question is, for what reason?"

Tara looked up to see Angie returning with their food. At Willow's urging, she had ordered a small cup of baked potato soup and was surprised to find herself savoring its aroma. As everyone focused on their meals, Tara took the opportunity to look more closely at Willow. Her beloved had been unusually quiet since they arrived at the diner. Leaning in toward her, Tara whispered, "Are you OK, Sweetie?"

As Willow looked up at her, Tara realized that her eyes were filled with tears, rendering the usually-clear emerald gaze a glassy opaque. Willow shook her head helplessly.

"I just-I can't stand watching you go through this, Baby," Willow replied softly, her voice obscured from the others by the clinking of cheap cutlery on cheap plates. "You've been through so much-*too* much-and I just want to do something to make it all end." She drew in a small, hitched breath and added, "It kills me to see you hurt, Tara." At this, a tear finally edged over her lid and trickled down her cheek.

Unable to speak, Tara simply took Willow's hand and kissed it with infinite gentleness. "As long as you're my future, I can handle anything about my past," she managed to whisper, and realized that it was true. They held each other's eyes for a long moment, and then Willow gave her a tiny smile.

Taking a spoonful of the surprisingly good soup, she heard Dawn say, "Well, there's one good thing: Donnie isn't your full brother. I mean, you're nothing like him anyway, but... Well, I don't know. That just seems good somehow."

"It is," Tara confirmed. "We could argue nature versus nurture until the cows come home-which is about sevenish, around here-and never know for sure why Donnie turned out the way he did, but it does feel good to know we only have one parent in common." Frowning, she added, "Although I have to admit, I felt kinda sorry for him, when Dad-when he talked about beating Donnie the way he did." *Not to mention the fact that Donnie was dragged along whenever Mom had a rendezvous with her husband's brother-my father.*

"I know," Xander replied. "I was all set to hate my dad, and then I found out that *his* father was an alcoholic who used to drag him into bars and basically forget about him until closing time, and then drive him home three sheets to the wind." His voice grew quiet as he remembered. "The gray zone sucks... I like my women adventurous, my tools sharp, and my evil unambiguous." He shook his head.

Willow spoke up now, angrily. "I don't care what he went through when he was little... I mean, OK, I do, because no kid should be beaten, ever; but that's no excuse for the way he treated you. He beat on you-he *terrorized* you-because you were smaller than him. He took out all of his anger on you, and hit you where your parents wouldn't see it, and there's no excuse for that." She stopped, and drew in a gulping breath.

The table fell silent, and Tara realized that not everyone knew just how abusive Donnie had been. She could see Willow come to the same realization. Green eyes looked helplessly at her, filled with apology for the spill. Tara could only smile sadly, and took hold of Willow's hand.

"So Donnie beat you up?" Dawn asked, eyes narrowing. "Like, all the time?"

Tara gave what she suspected was a sorry excuse for a grin. "Well, not all the time... Tuesdays were usually pretty calm." *Bad joke, but I just can't go into the full horror story right here in the middle of Jack's Diner.*

"Can I stake him?" Buffy asked Giles flatly. "If he's half demon, does that make him fair game?"

"Guys, please-I know you're just being protective, and I...God, I love it; it's a totally new experience for me. But..." She sighed, trying to find words. "I'm so tired of all the anger and the hurting and the violence. I have to make my own peace with all this, and inflicting pain to *heal* from pain seems like a dubious enterprise." She smiled again, this time with more actual humor. "Although if anyone feels the need to knee him in the groin if you ever see him again, I wouldn't exactly file charges."

"What about Beth?" Anya piped up. "If Nathan's telling the truth, she's your half-sister."

"I know," Tara said, shaking her head as another relationship in her life tilted and reshaped itself before her.

"Maybe...maybe the two of you could end up being friends," Dawn offered hesitantly. "You know-you've both had such a rough time with your parents; maybe you could sort of help each other out." She stopped, and then shrugged with exaggerated nonchalance. "I mean, Buffy may be a little rough around the edges, but I don't know how I would have gotten through Mom and Dad's divorce without her." She glanced at Tara with an embarrassed smile. "But if you ever tell her that, I'll never drink milkshakes with you again."

Once again, the table fell silent; this time, though, for a different reason. Dawn, however, didn't realize that, and continued looking at Tara with barely-disguised adoration.

Her mind seemed to be slogging through some nearly-impenetrable mire. From one corner of her mind, she watched herself thinking, and wondered why it was so difficult to put thoughts together. She knew she wasn't stupid. Why was her brain moving so slowly?

Her father had had an affair with Tara's mother. Apparently, he had loved her, enough to leave town-leave his *daughter*-rather than be near her and unable to touch her.

Except he had left *two* daughters. Tara was also his little girl.

And he was dead.

Her mother hadn't told her about that.

The ride back to Tara's house was less constrained than the trip into town. Tara could still feel herself tumbling from anger to grief to disbelief, but she had been shored up by the brief respite. She could face this house, this man, again, knowing that she would soon leave and go back to the place most truly called "home."

"I think I'm ready to leave, at least for now," she said as Buffy toiled down the winding lane. "I need to go back to Sunnydale, think about all of this-and talk everything over with Willow," she

added, hoping Willow had forgiven herself for her earlier disclosure. *After everything this day has held, Love, do you really think I would be angry about one slip, made in the heat of protecting me?*

"Well, whatever you need to do, Tara," Buffy replied, catching Tara's eye in the rearview mirror. Tara smiled back at her gratefully.

*One of my friends is a vampire slayer...**The** Vampire Slayer. And she wants to kick my tormentor's ass for me, at the very place where I was most vulnerable. Things really do change...*

As they rounded the bend, Tara heard Dawn say from the front seat, "Tara, it looks like there's company. Do you know who it is?"

Leaning forward to peer between the two sisters, Tara felt her heart begin to pound until it was ringing in her ears. Sinking back against Willow, she said quietly, "It's Donnie."

One small part of Tara's mind took in the sight of the camper and wanted to laugh: *Of course he's here... We're gathering at the mansion for the big denouement scene.*

Another, much larger part wanted to shut down, drive away, do anything to avoid what could only lead to chaos and anger.

Pulling rather abruptly to a halt, Buffy turned to look at Tara. "Do you want to just leave now? I can throw this thing in reverse and we can be back on the main road in less than ten minutes."

"Or you could just run over him," Dawn suggested hopefully.

Tara gave serious thought to Buffy's suggestion, and let herself reflect briefly on Dawn's. *No...Let's get this over with. If all the players are on the stage, let's finish this scene.* She looked at Willow, who reached out to brush her hair back from her face.

"I think I should do this, Will. It's time."

Willow gave her a gentle smile. "It's your call, Baby. I'm right here with you... We all are."

Tara leaned over for a much-needed kiss, and then nodded to her beloved, who popped open the door. As they all tumbled out of the SUV, Donnie emerged from the house, followed closely by his father. He looked at Tara, and then at Nathan, and finally back at Tara again. Even from several yards away, Tara could see his jaw clenching; and then she saw his fists do likewise. After a moment, he started toward her.

I don't have to be afraid. I can stand tall, and I have people who love me here beside me. I don't have to run from him anymore.

As he neared her, she pulled herself to her full height and felt an unexpected but profound calm settle over her. She was powerful. She was strong. She loved, and was loved.

What is there to fear? I know what I need to say to him.

And she would have said it, too, except that he was no longer in front of her. He was, in fact, now flying several yards away, his face contorted with rage and budding fear. Turning, Tara saw Willow, one hand extended and trembling. Her breathing seemed almost ragged.

"Never. Again. You will never touch her again." The words were expelled with a venom that Tara hadn't imagined her sweet Willow possessed.

She reached out and put her hand on Willow's raised arm. The flesh pulsed with heat and power, and Willow's eyes shimmered with fury. Looking into those eyes, Tara felt her throat tighten. "Willow, Sweetie-it's OK. Thank you, for protecting me. But..." She stumbled, trying to find words. "But with you here, for the first time I feel like I can protect myself."

Willow hesitated, and then nodded reluctantly. She lowered her hand, extending it to clasp Tara's. "I just-Baby, it's so hard not to hurt him." Her eyes had become gentler, it seemed, and now brimmed with tears.

"I know...I'd feel the same way if someone wanted to hurt you." She squeezed Willow's hand, feeling her mate's energy return to normal.

Behind them, Donnie rose unsteadily to his feet. "Fucking dyke witch!" he swore hoarsely. As if unable to believe he might be subdued a second time, he took a threatening step toward her.

"Oh no, Dickless Wonder-I'm next," Buffy interjected darkly, edging in front of Willow. "I'm not a dyke. I'm not a witch. I'm not even fucking at this particular moment. I'm just a little slip of a girl-who will rip your arms out of their sockets and beat you with them if you so much as think about it."

Donnie stared at her in disbelief. "What is this? Why are you even here?" he demanded, gesturing to the entire group.

Meanwhile, Dawn had managed to sidle up next to Buffy and was now trying to wrest free of her sister's restraining grip. "C'mon-I wanna piece of that beer-bellied slime-ball!" she hissed menacingly. Tara stared at the slight teenager with a mixture of shock and love.

"I mean it," Dawn was saying. "I may not be a witch and I may not be fucking either, but I can take your scruffy ass." Buffy looked at her sharply, whether because of her language or because of her conspicuous absence of clarification regarding her own sexual orientation, Tara wasn't sure.

"Dawn, you can't go after him," Buffy whispered tersely.

"Why not?" came the defiant reply.

"Because," Xander piped up, stepping forward himself, "if we're gonna go Mike Tyson on this Aryan Nation reject, we're doing it in order of age, which means you go last."

And Tara, who was peaceful and loving and gentle and gracious, felt her heart grow warm and happy at the sight of so many people lining up to beat her brother into a soggy mass of quivering flesh.

Donnie seemed unable to comprehend the scene before him...all these people so willing-so *eager*, it would appear-to pound him into the ground. He looked from one ominous face to another, his stupefaction rendering him uncharacteristically mute-for a moment.

"What the hell are you all thinking? Do you have any idea what a freak she is? This is-" He stopped, fumbling in his agitation. "She's a fucking weirdo lezzy who's only here in the first place because our mom was whoring around with her brother-in-law."

He knows. He knows everything, she thought, even as she gripped Willow's hand tightly and whispered, "As you have done, receive." She watched as Donnie sank to his knees, clutching his chest in agony. He looked up at her, his face filled with anguish and confusion.

"Does it hurt, Donnie?" she asked shakily. "Does your heart feel like it's going to rip out of your chest?" She held his gaze for a moment more, before muttering, "Release." At the word, Donnie slumped forward, ashen and struggling for breath.

Donnie stared at her, tears spilling over his cheeks and splashing onto the cracked gray sidewalk. He shook his head dumbly, and when he finally spoke, his voice was broken and raw.

"She took me with her, Tara. She threw me in a car seat and dragged me to some abandoned house so she could screw Dad's brother." He rose slowly to his feet, anger spilling back into his eyes. "It's not fair, damn it! It's not fair..." His voice choked on his grief and rage.

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Upstairs, forgotten by her uncle and pondering the death of her father, she heard the crunch of tires on the gravel and at first assumed that Tara and her friends had returned. The familiar spluttering cough of the engine as it cut off, however, told her that Donnie was back.

Donnie...None of this would have happened if she hadn't agreed to help Donnie. Did she wish she could go back and do it differently? Go back to when she thought her father was at least still alive somewhere and that none of his affairs had involved Tara's mother? When she didn't know that Tara was her sister?

She heard Donnie's harsh voice carrying over the yard and into the house, and decided not to go downstairs just yet.

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"No, it's not fair," Tara replied, her voice breaking. "It was wrong and she was wrong and I'm sorry, Donnie, I'm so sorry that you went through that. And I'm sorry that you were beaten because of his twisted reasoning and I'm sorry that when you were upset they didn't hold you and try to figure out what you needed. I'm sorry, Donnie, I am, but it wasn't my fault! I didn't do any of it! I was the one person who couldn't hurt you, and you decided to hurt *me*. And that was wrong too, Donnie." She was sobbing now, Donnie a dim blur through her tears.

"Fuck her," Donnie's voice sounded raspily in her ears. "Fuck that lying, cheating slut-"

"Donald, stop it!" Nathan's voice called out sharply. "Don't...don't talk about her that way." He walked toward them slowly, and some distant part of Tara's mind realized that he was getting older.

Donnie wheeled about, gaping with disbelief. "What the...Daddy, are you defending her? After everything you just told me? After everything she did to you? Did to *me*?"

"She's still your mother, Donald. And she was my wife." Exhaustion radiated from Nathan's eyes.

"A wife who cheated on you, Daddy! How can you stand up for her?" Donnie's face was pale and drawn as he looked at his father in shock.

"Because I love her. I always did; I always will." The tone of his voice suggested that this answer sufficed entirely.

Donnie stared at him a moment longer, and then laughed weakly, the sound tinged with despair. "And her?" he asked, gesturing to Tara. "Do you love her, too?"

Tara realized with a swift shock that she desperately wanted to know the answer.

It shouldn't matter. You don't belong here. He's not even your father...

*Of course it matters. He's the only father you've known; the only father you'll **ever** know.*

She found herself looking reluctantly at Nathan, dreading his answer. He gazed at her for several moments, his eyes filled with messages Tara couldn't decipher.

Finally, he replied quietly, "Every time I look at you, Tara, I see your father."

Oh goddess...

"And then I look at you again and I see your mother."

His face was suddenly filled with a grief that left Tara almost breathless. "You're so much like her, Tara-the way you look, the way you think...the way you tilt your head when you're lost in thought...You have her smile, and her gentleness."

Tara could barely see him through her tears.

"It breaks my heart to have you here, and it breaks my heart to watch you leave." He fell silent, his head dropping slightly.

Beside her, Tara could hear Willow's own muted crying. The hand in hers squeezed tightly, as if trying to convey immeasurable love and strength through the rhythmic flexing of her fingers.

"But you have her restlessness, too, at least where home is concerned," Nathan continued after a moment. "I couldn't keep her, and I knew when you were just a little girl that I wouldn't be able to keep you either. I knew you'd get away, just like she did."

Tara found her voice, and prayed for steadiness. "But you talk about her as if she were some kind of animal that you wanted to keep penned up. I-I don't think it works like that."

Nathan looked at her with a kind of puzzled resignation. "But she would have left, Tara. She would have taken all that light and spirit and gone away. I wasn't enough to keep her here. And I couldn't lose her," he trailed off helplessly.

"But you did," Tara replied simply. "You lost her heart, and her spirit and her light and everything that you loved about her because you tried so hard to make her believe she was evil." Her voice shook as she thought about her mother dying with that belief. "She deserved better. And Donnie deserved better than being beaten because you wanted to keep him in line, too."

Turning to her half-brother, she added, "I can't believe I'm sticking up for you, Donnie, but if he hadn't beaten you, I don't think you would have beaten me."

"You don't know that," Nathan said quickly. "He *does* have demon in him-just like me."

"He was also brutalized by the man who should have protected him," Tara snapped back. "You don't know if he's so mean and angry because of the demon or because of what you did."

Halting abruptly with the force of her sudden uncertainty, she stared at Nathan. "Are you even sure you're a demon?"

Nathan seemed taken aback by the question. "What do you mean, am I sure? I was telling you the truth about my mother and what happened."

"You told me what your mother told you. But did you ever see anything? Did you ever witness your father being evil or destructive or cruel?"

Nathan's eyes grew cloudy as he struggled to remember. "No-but then, who's to say he didn't deceive me in some way, or take away my memory of it?"

"And who's to say he did?" Tara replied.

Nathan shook his head as if trying to force his thoughts into something cohesive and trustworthy. "But why would my mother lie?" he finally asked.

"Who knows?" Tara shrugged helplessly. "And I'm not saying she did. But look around you-has anything good at all come out of believing it without question? You didn't trust yourself, you didn't trust your son..."

"I trusted my wife," Nathan said simply. "And she betrayed that trust."

"Yes, she did," Tara replied, feeling her heart ache with the concession. "And she's the one person you knew *wasn't* a demon. So tell me how it all adds up to make any sense?"

In the silence that followed, Tara could hear Donnie's ragged breath. Turning, she saw that he was struggling to keep from crying. Biting his lip so hard that she thought he might draw blood, he said quietly, "You shouldn't have hit me, Daddy. You never had the right to hit me."

Nathan looked at him, his expression a mixture of remorse and obstinance. "I thought I was doing what was best, Donnie. I-I didn't know."

Donnie continued speaking as if he hadn't heard his father's voice. "It wouldn't have been that hard, Daddy, just to talk to me like I wasn't some dog." He seemed to be looking at something beyond his father.

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When she heard the rumble of a second vehicle, she knew that Tara was back. Standing, she moved slowly about the room and peered at the various pictures and certificates and awards yet again. She knew them all, could practically recite the various inscriptions from memory.

She looked closely at a framed picture of Tara and her mother at Tara's eighth-grade graduation. Did Tara look like her father? She had a hard time remembering him clearly. She didn't think he had blond hair, but she was fairly sure that he had been taller than his brother and that he'd had long, graceful fingers.

As she heard the voices rising and falling below her, she walked slowly back to the bed and sat down. Maybe she would wait up here just a little bit longer.

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As Tara felt the reassuring pressure of Willow's fingers interlocked with her own, she let herself feel the first wave of exhaustion from the day's chaos and upheaval. She wanted desperately to

be alone with Willow, who she knew would help her begin to make sense of it all, wrapped within the comfort of her arms. Willow, who celebrated her strength and spirit-helped her find it and trust it, even-instead of trying to cage her or break her like a wild horse that she wanted to bend to her will.

Do I really need to say anything else? Is there anything else that I need to hear from them?

Looking at the faces of those who had come to protect her, she realized that it was time to be with her family.

Taking a slight step forward, she said, "I have to go. It's time for me to leave."

Grief flashed across Nathan's face before he could hide it.

Donnie turned to her as if just remembering that she was there.

Steadying herself with Willow's presence, she continued, "There are probably other things we need to talk about at some point, but I can't do it now. And heaven knows you two need to talk," she added, glancing between the two men who stood angry and defeated before her.

"Are-are you sure you have to go?" Nathan's voice sounded smaller than Tara had ever heard it.

She couldn't bring herself to comfort him, and she couldn't bring herself to strike him down. She could only meet his eyes and reply, "Yes. I do...Daddy." The appellation was out of her mouth before she could stop herself, and she wasn't sure she would have stopped it anyway. Was he her father? Did she even have one? She only knew that this was what she had always called him, and though she wasn't sure she would call him that in the future, it was what she would call him now.

She saw him start at the word, and watched as his jaw worked furiously. Another man might well have cried, just a little.

Turning to Donnie, she said quietly, "I meant what I said earlier-I am sorry about everything you went through. But I don't want you to call me or come see me or interfere in my life in any way. I mean that just as much." Looking back at the others, she felt a tiny smile ripple over her face. "And in case you couldn't tell, they meant what they said, too."

She felt the warmth of Willow's fingers, of her spirit, sliding along her veins, warming her and giving her the strength to walk away. The others followed quietly behind her. Nathan and Donnie stood mutely, their eyes alternately trailing her and stealing back to the other, as if unsure of the threat they faced from one another.

When she reached the SUV, she remembered something. She turned and looked at Nathan. "The rock--what does that mean?"

He started at the sound of her voice, and then a ghost of a smile twisted across his mouth. "My father gave that to me. It was the week before we left. He said if you held it up to the light, you

could see a bear in its markings. I could never see it...But I kept it. I thought maybe one day I'd be able to."

Not trusting herself to speak, Tara just nodded. She held his gaze for what felt like a very long time, before turning and climbing into the car.

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Listening to Tara drive away, she glanced at the clock above the desk. Donnie had arrived just after the group had left the first time. So she knew her uncle hadn't eaten any supper.

She moved slowly to the door and walked out into the hallway, wondering whether he would prefer chicken or pot roast tonight.

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## **Part 14**

It was a quiet, contemplative group that climbed into the SUV and headed down the old country road. Willow, whose years on the Hellmouth hadn't prepared her for such non-demonic carnage, found herself fighting back tears as she looked at Tara. Her beloved, so strong-so *powerful*-throughout the entire day, now looked exhausted and vulnerable.

*Her whole world has just been ripped apart, and the two people she most needs to talk to are dead. How can she bear it?*

She had watched Tara stand up to her father, and stand up to her brother. She had watched her learn horrific things about the woman she had idolized, the only person who had nurtured and protected her before she left home. She had watched her learn that the man she had called "Daddy" for so many years wasn't, and then learn that her actual biological father was dead. And through it all, Tara had held on tight to Willow's hand as she stepped unflinchingly into the innermost chamber of family secrets and betrayals.

*It's not fair. She's already been through so much...too much...*

As they pulled onto the highway that would lead them back to Sunnydale, Giles half-turned in his seat and asked, "Tara, do you want to talk about any of this? Or would you prefer some time to yourself?"

Willow felt a sudden squeeze on her fingers as Tara replied, "Actually, what I *most* want to do is to thank you all. I can't even begin..." She shook her head slightly and continued. "I can't even begin to tell you what it means to me-you coming with me like this, all of you. Taking time away from work, away from school..."

She gave Anya a little grin. "Away from the joys of capitalism."



Nodding, Anya said decisively, "Profit without principle is an insatiable temptress who corrupts the only possession that truly endures-the soul."

"Whoa," Xander broke in, staring at his girlfriend. "Who said that-Eleanor Roosevelt?"

"I did," Anya replied, tossing her head. "Just one of the many things you'd know about me if you asked me something besides, 'Will you wear this and pretend to be a virgin?'"

After a moment of collective silence that was, Willow suspected, accompanied by some truly mind-bending visuals, Tara said diffidently, "So, uh, anyway-thanks, everybody."

"Yes," Giles exclaimed quickly. "Staggering though it is to imagine that this is the more comfortable conversation, I would like to echo Anya's sentiments...er, the first sentiment, that is, not the second."

"I should hope so," Buffy commented dryly. "If Xander's asking *you* to wear some flimsy little outfit, not to mention the whole 'virgin' thing-"

"If you finish that sentence, I will hurtle myself from the car in hopes that the resulting brain injury precludes my ever having to remember this moment."

"Guys," Dawn interjected, "we were asking about Tara, remember? The one who's been through, like, five life-times of shock in one afternoon?"

Smiling gently at the girl beside her, Tara replied, "Actually, it feels sorta good to laugh again. The last few hours have felt like something out of a soap opera, without the requisite skimpy clothing and snifters of brandy."

"Really?" Willow asked gently. "I mean, I totally get it if you do; I just don't want you to feel like you've used up your daily ration of kindness from others."

"She's right," Xander said, nodding. "I know you're not much for the spotlight, Tara, but you've got a long way to go before you have to turn in your room key at the Open Arms."

"Thanks, Xander," Tara answered softly. "It's just-there's just so much to take in, and think about...I think I sorta need to watch the high-light reel in my head again before I can really talk about it and try to make some peace with it all." Turning to Willow in the darkness, she gazed at her intently and pressed two fingers against Willow's heart. Silently, she mouthed, "Later" to her partner.

Willow took Tara's fingers into her grasp and lifted them to her lips, nodding a silent understanding. *At the end of the day, any day, it's always the two of us. As it should be.*

"I hope that's OK with everybody," Tara added a moment later. "I mean, you came all this way with me, and stood up for me-I hope it doesn't feel like I'm tuning you out or anything. I'll definitely be bending some ears in the near future."

"I can only speak for myself," Buffy replied, "but I'm definitely pissed. I mean, jeez, Tara-after the day you've had, you certainly owe it to us to share every single thought and feeling you have." Catching Tara's eye in the rear-view mirror, she grinned. "No, I understand," she continued. "Sometimes the mental cacophony gets a little overwhelming."

"And sometimes I wonder how you can use 'cacophony' in one sentence and then infer when you should imply in the next," Dawn added, winking at Tara.

As Buffy pulled to a stop at a red light, Xander glanced out the window at the brightly-lit neon of the "Coastal Cowboy Bar 'n' Grill," announcing happy hours every night from 5 till 7 and karaoke every Friday and Saturday starting at 9. "Hey Tara," he asked, "y'ever been in that fine-looking establishment?"

Grinning with something akin to genuine amusement, Tara replied, "As a matter of fact, I have. I used to hang out there sometimes, the summer after I graduated."

"You're kidding!" Dawn exclaimed, leaning over Tara (and taking her time doing so, Willow noted) to get a better look at the place. "You hung out at a bar and grill?"

"Yeah," Tara nodded, as the light turned and Buffy pulled away.

"By yourself? Did you pick up women?" Dawn's curiosity was growing.

"Actually, um, my friend Kerri and I went there a lot."

*This oughtta take the attention off of her family...*

"Kerri? Who is this Kerri person? And why haven't we ever heard of her?" Xander inquired with feigned paternal disapproval.

"Kerri was this skanky ho-dyke that Tara cut her lesbian teeth on. So to speak," Willow added, frowning.

"Kerri was a very nice girl who was one of the few bearable people in this entire area," Tara corrected her gently.

"And just how exactly did you bear her?" Xander's curiosity was running neck-and-neck with Dawn's.

Willow fixed him with a warning glare as Tara replied, "I met her at the county library, in the Women's History section. She had gone to a different high school. Anyway, she started talking to me and we became friends."

"Orgasm friends?" Anya asked quickly.

"No!" came the duet from Tara and Willow. "Like I said," Tara continued, "we hung out a few times over the summer, and yes, she plays for our team, but we were never a couple."

"But you fooled around some, right?" Xander asked, pulling ahead slightly in the Vicarious Titillation race that was picking up speed on California Route 132.

"There were some smoochies and, um, you know...mostly smoochies," she finished lamely. "Hardly on a level with costumes and counterfeit virginity," she added pointedly. "She went East for college; we e-mail every now and then." Willow knew all of this but was nonetheless intrigued to see where it had all taken place.

"And I'm guessing you did karaoke too, huh?" Buffy piped up from the front seat.

"Oh, right," Willow scoffed. "Tara used to get all gussied up and grab that microphone like-"

"Yeah, once or twice."

Willow felt her jaw bang off of the floorboard and hastily scooped it back up to her face. "You did? You never told me!" As Tara shrugged, she continued, "What did you sing?"

"Well, the first time, I did 'Come to My Window,' by Melissa Etheridge."

*I would dial the numbers just to listen to your breath...*

The image sucked all of the air from Willow's lungs.

"You're serious, aren't you?" Dawn asked incredulously. "How in the world did you end up doing *that*?"

"Well, I lost a bet the first time, and the second time, Kerri said she'd give me her entire collection of Out magazines if I did." Willow realized that Tara, though usually averse to being the center of attention, was relieved by the temporary suspension of high angst.

"So what did you sing the second time?" she asked.

"Um... You know, I'm not sure I remember," she hedged.

"Bullshit on a Kaiser bun," Willow rejoined promptly. "You never forget anything, so give."

"Oh, it was one of those '80's hits," Tara replied faintly. "You know, all overwrought and melodramatic..."

"And which was referred to on the radio as...?" Buffy persisted.

"Dyuthnkimseksy," Tara finally mumbled, after a long pause.

"What?" Anya prodded her. "You sang some Russian tune?"

Tara sighed. "I sang 'Do You Think I'm Sexy?'"

The din in the car was terrific and sustained.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Xander whooped, practically leaping out of his seat onto Tara's lap.

"We're talking 'If you want my body, and you think I'm sexy' here? Followed immediately by 'If you really want me, just reach out and touch me'?"

"No," Tara retorted, "I sang the Mormon Tabernacle Choir version: 'Do you think I'm sexy? No, because that would be wrong.'"

All further consideration of this revelation was interrupted as Buffy hit the brakes with her usual lack of subtlety and careened into a convenience store parking lot with a squeal of tires. Weaving through parked cars and around gas pumps, she barely paused at the edge of the parking lot before pulling back onto the road-heading north.

"Good Lord, Buffy," came Giles' exasperated shout as he clutched the grip above his window.

"What in God's name are you doing?"

"Some things in life should never be passed up," the Slayer replied calmly. "Such things include free mochas, hot sex-you're excused from that one, Dawn-and hearing one's friends sing karaoke at out-of-the-way dives hours from home."

"You're going back?" Willow asked, agape, as Dawn squealed with delight.

"That's the plan," Buffy nodded with a grin. "Unless Tara doesn't want to. She gets right of first-and only-refusal."

Willow watched in amazement as her beloved first stared at Buffy in disbelief, and then slowly broke into a wide grin.

"As long as I'm not the only one singing," she stipulated, laughing.

"Are you kidding? This group, pass up a chance to make a scene? No way!" Buffy was grinning wickedly.

"But Buffy, it's already after nine," Giles pointed out with a sigh. "If we do this, we won't get back home until the middle of the night."

"Good point," Buffy mused. As Giles began to settle back into his seat, she added, "Looks like we'll have to stay. Tara-anything in the way of motels around here? Not too Norman Bates-ish?"

"Just a few miles up the road from the bar," came the quick reply. "We were almost there before you went slave to the rhythm and turned around."

"Great. It's a Friday, so no school missed, and we'll be back in the Dale of the Sun before noon."

Willow could scarcely believe what was unfolding before her, but as Tara turned to smile at her, she could see the first traces of relief and relaxation edging into her expression.

*After the day she's had, I'm not surprised she just wants to laugh for a little bit. And if this helps her do that, then I support its nomination and election.*

Buffy tooled the car into the bumpy, pot-holed lot of the Coastal Cowboy and cut the engine. Soon, the group had settled around a long table toward the back and ordered drinks and munchies.

"What's with the celery that comes with Buffalo wings?" Xander mused a few minutes later, biting into the latter and ignoring the former. "Does that make them healthy? 'Here-these vegetable slices will negate the arteriosclerosis'?"

Steering a French fry through an immense pile of ketchup, Dawn said, "So let's get with the singing, gang. I wanna hear this group rock the house!"

Willow turned to the Watcher, who was taking a long slug of draft beer. "G-Man, we've heard you sing. I think you're the one to start this tune-fest."

Giles choked slightly on his beer and looked at her as if she had suggested he trade in his tweed for bib overalls and take up professional wrestling. "I most certainly shall not," he managed to reply haughtily. "Someone has to retain some sense of dignity."

"Oh come on, Giles," Anya complained. "You've got dignity out the ass. You could stand to eliminate some of it, if you get my drift."

"I'll leave that to you," he maintained. "I shall enjoy my drink and pretend that I'm here as your guardian on a supervised trip from the group home."

"You could sing something British," Buffy cajoled. "You'd be quite the exotic attraction, right here in River City." She thought for a moment, brow furrowed. "I've got it!" she exclaimed. "How about 'I'm Henry the 8th, I Am'?" Turning, she slammed her palms onto the table and exclaimed, "Second verse-"

"Same as the first!" Willow and Xander sang out in unison.

"Bloody idiot-savants," Giles mumbled into his frosted mug. "Save the world once a year like clock-work, but damned if I can take them out in public."

Sensing that this particular dog wouldn't hunt, Willow turned her attention to the others. "OK, who's gonna bite the big one? Ain't gonna be me, for lots of reasons," she added.

"I'll go," Anya said excitedly, clearly getting into the spirit of things. She tossed back the rest of her vodka tonic like so much 7-Up and started to push back her seat.

"Ahn, honey, you sure you're up for this?" Xander asked with a worried expression.

"Of course, Xander," she smiled, looking at him quizzically. "Don't you want to hear me sing?"

*Ah, Xander, my friend-you know the question's rhetorical, right?*

"Of course," he said weakly, after a moment's hesitation. Grabbing her arm as she headed toward the stage, he added pleadingly, "Sing something nice, OK Ahn? Something-something sweet, to show your love?"

Anya's eyes grew moist. "Oh, Xander-you want me to serenade you! That's the most romantic thing you've ever said. Of course I'll sing something just for you."

"Something *sweet*," he attempted to clarify as she made her way toward the stage.

Moments later, following a hurried consultation of various options, she took the microphone and turned toward the group, her eyes seeking out her lover. Showing a surprisingly melodic voice, she began:

*"I love myself, I want you to love me..."*

Stealing a glance at Xander, Willow saw a tiny smile of relief and affection nudging his lips.

He had, she realized, no idea what was coming.

*When I'm feeling down, I want you above me...*

She saw the smile waver just for a moment.

*I search myself, I want you to find me;*

*I forget myself, I want you to remind me...*

He was frowning slightly, as if trying to place the lyrics. Looking at the others, she saw that Tara and Buffy had already done so and were gaping first at the stage and then at each other, unable to believe their wondrous good fortune at hitting the mortification mother lode on the very first strike.

*I don't want anybody else,*

*When I think about you I touch myself.*

The bar erupted into wild applause and whistles as Giles spat out a mouthful of beer. Xander just stared at his girlfriend. "Words all gone. Xander no have words."

He simply shook his head as a greatly enthusiastic Anya sang, "I get down on my knees, I'd do anything for you." Moments later, she left the stage to great applause and skipped back over to the table.

"Did I surprise you, Xander?" she asked, breathless with excitement.

Xander managed an affectionate smile and took her hand. "Though it should be a complete impossibility by now, yes, Ahn, you did." He kissed her, to the appreciative cheers of their fellow patrons.

"Hey Tara," Dawn exclaimed, "you're the pro at this scene. Isn't it about time for you to head up there and work a little down-home magic? No pun intended," she added.

*Oh yes... Yes, it's definitely time for her to work her magic.*

Tara looked around uncertainly. "What should I sing? And no, Xander, I'm not taking a stroll down musical memory lane, so just put that idea out of your head." Turning to Willow, she explained, "I'd really like to sing you a love song, Sweetie; on the other hand, it's been a long day and I don't know that I'm up for an old-fashioned gay-bashing."

Buffy looked up from her potato skin. "Tara, are you really worried about that?"

"Well, it's crossed my mind," she answered reluctantly.

"And you think that I'd-what-just sit back and watch? If you wanna sing something to your girl, this is the place to do it. I got your back."

"And I got your front," Dawn piped up eagerly, only to look down quickly when she caught Willow's raised eyebrows.

"How about something stylish and classy?" she asked Willow, running her fingers lightly over Willow's cheek.

"You could sing the alphabet song to me and I'd throw my room key and underwear up on the stage," Willow replied helplessly, feeling her heart do that funny flipping thing it so often did when Tara looked at her like *that*.

Nodding, Tara looked back at the stage and took a final gulp of soda. "Wish me luck," she murmured, standing to make her way toward the stage. Without hesitation, she chose her song and then turned to take the microphone. As the last bars of the opening died away, she looked over at Willow and winked.

*Chances are, 'cause I wear a silly grin,*

*The moment you come into view,*

*Chances are you think that I'm in love with you...*

Willow felt her heart begin to squeeze almost painfully as Tara's sweet voice floated over the noisy crowd and lazily brushed against her cheek. It seemed almost impossible that this beautiful woman was singing to her.

*In the magic of moonlight, when I sigh, "Hold me close, dear,"*

*Chances are you believe the stars that fill the skies are in my eyes...*

She caught the surprised expressions on her friends' faces and realized that they had never heard Tara sing before. *Listen to her...Isn't she beautiful?*

*Guess you feel you'll always be,*

*The one and only one for me,*

*And if you think you could...*

*Well, chances are your chances are awfully good...*

Willow knew she was crying and didn't care.

*Well, chances are your chances are awfully good.*

Somewhere during the song, the bar patrons had recognized that Tara's voice had more going for it than just enthusiasm, and the more sentimental of them found themselves nodding at the time-burnished lyrics. A few people shook her hand and smiled at her as she returned to the table. Taking her seat, she entwined her fingers with Willow's and leaned forward to kiss her.

*If we get killed, we go out in style-serenaded and stuffed with chicken wings and cheese fries.*

As it turned out, however, the audience had focused its attention back onto the stage as a slightly bow-legged man with dark blond hair and a loud shirt took the microphone and proceeded to do irreparable damage to Frank Sinatra's "My Way."

"Wow," Buffy marveled. "His way really sucks." Turning back to Tara, she said, "You have a great set of pipes there, girl! Why didn't you tell us you could sing?"

Tara blushed and looked down, as Dawn gazed at her in almost slack-jawed adoration. *It's official: Key or no Key, I have to take that girl out of commission.*

As Tara continued to reap more praise, the man on stage finally stopped doing it his way and reluctantly left the stage. Dawn abruptly stood up and announced, "OK, I think the time has



come." So saying, and much to Buffy's profound chagrin, she pushed away from the table and made her way quickly to the stage. Like Tara, she seemed to know exactly what she was looking for.

As she clutched the mike nervously, she looked back at the table and grinned-a huge, goofy, "Can you believe I'm doing this?" kind of adolescent grin. Suddenly, the unmistakable notes bounced forth from the amps and heads started bobbing of their own accord.

*We are family,*

*I got all my sisters with me...*

Looking quickly at Buffy, Willow saw her best friend's eyes widen in surprise. A not-quite-sad smile slowly made its way across her face.

*Everyone can see we're together,*

*As we walk on by...*

Feeling the tell-tale pricking at her own eyes, Willow saw Giles rest his hand gently on Buffy's back for the briefest of seconds. Everyone at the table exchanged quick glances, before Tara suddenly joined her voice to Dawn's as she came to the chorus.

*We are family,*

*I got all my sisters with me.*

*We are family,*

*Get up everybody and sing...*

Willow knew that Dawn had heard Tara's voice above the noise of the bar. She looked back and beamed at the blond woman who was smiling at her encouragingly.

*Livin' life is fun and we've just begun*

*To get our share of this world's delights...*

Willow wanted a "Pause" button just for this moment, because she knew that before long, Dawn wouldn't be able to sing this song with such unthinking enthusiasm. Before long, the real world would call each of them and demand their undivided attention.

*No, we don't get depressed,*

*Here's what we call our Golden Rule...*

She tried desperately to take a snapshot of the moment.

*Have faith in you and the things you do,*

*You won't go wrong-oh no-this is our family jewel...*

And then they were all singing, joining Dawn for the chorus...

*We are family,*

*I got all my sisters with me...*

And because it just seemed ridiculous not to, Willow stood and grabbed Tara's hand, pulling her to her feet; and Willow had awful rhythm, she knew-

*Come on everybody and sing...*

-but it didn't really matter, she realized; what mattered was that they were all there, on this wild night after this wild day, and they could sing a song like "We Are Family" and mean it, in the very best sense of the word-

*I got all my sisters with me...*

-and Buffy was dancing and beaming at Dawn, and Xander and Anya were twitching and writhing in their own inimitable way, and now even Giles was grinning like a fool and if she didn't know better she'd swear she saw him mouthing the words-

*We are family...*

-and she knew that it couldn't last forever but that only made it that much sweeter.

Beside her, hands clasped tightly in her own, Tara smiled at her through glistening eyes and Willow knew she was thinking the same thing.

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## **Part 15**

They left the bar shortly after Dawn raised the roof and brought down the house with "We Are Family." There was a collective sense that nothing could top this, and so they settled the bill and headed out to the SUV, arms flung companionably about each other with no particular regard to coupling or gender.

As they approached the car, a woman's voice-not quite soft, not quite menacing-called out, "Hey, Tara-saw you in there, kissing your girlfriend."

Willow wheeled about, wondering just who was trying to spoil their fun *this* time. *Maybe it's Jo, coming back to claim her woman and drag her off to the hills.*

As the woman stepped out into the lamplight of the parking lot, Willow heard Tara's quick intake of breath.

"Cathy?" Tara asked hesitantly.

*Cathy...Cathy...Who's Cathy?*

*Oh-that Cathy.*

The Cathy who had humiliated Tara in front of the entire school; made her life even more miserable. This wench had taken something so exquisitely personal from her shy beloved and used it to drive a wedge between her and the only real friend she had.

*Guess the ass-kicking isn't done for the day.*

Looking at her closely, Willow could see a tall, impossibly thin woman (*Doesn't anybody eat in this state?*) with short black hair. Her hands were stuffed deep into the pockets of her very trendy leather jacket as she came slowly toward them.

"Long time no see, Tara," Cathy offered.

"A fact which I'm handling remarkably well," Tara replied evenly, to Willow's delight.

"OK..." The other woman nodded slowly. "What you did, inside-singing a love song to a woman and then kissing her like nobody else was even there..."

"Yes?" Tara's voice held an edge to it which Willow had heard all too frequently in the last week.

"I hope I have the guts to do it someday." The voice was suddenly very quiet.

"What?" Tara sounded incredulous.

*Of course. Of course her high school nemesis comes out to her, tonight, in Cold Springs. Saw it coming a mile away.*

"I said, I hope I'm brave enough to be myself one day, no matter where I am."

"Cathy, if you're trying to make up for lost time since I've skipped our class reunions, you've picked a really bad-"

"No," the other woman replied, holding up a conciliatory hand. "Just wanted to say I'm sorry for being such an ass, and tell you how great it is that you're so open."

Tara shook her head as if to clear her vision, and finally replied, "Cathy Morrissey...Of all the shockers..." She looked up, a smile finally creasing her face. "Dare I ask who? If there is anyone, that is."

Cathy laughed. "Tina."

"Tina *Corcoran*? The class Holy Roller?"

"*Retired* Holy Roller. Hung up her wings right after we got roaring drunk on Prom Night, flirting all the while, and finally ditched our dates to make out in the library."

"And it all gets curiouiser and curiouiser..."

"Anyway, I just wanted to tell you, and apologize. You look really happy." Cathy seemed almost shy now.

"I am. Immensely so." Tara smiled at Willow, who felt her heart break out into a tiny little tap dance of joy.

"Take care," Cathy nodded, then turned and walked back into the bar.

"You too," Tara called, just before the others broke out into a frenzied babble of questions, opinions, and wild conjecture.

"All will be revealed," Tara laughed, with a dazed shake of her head. "Let's just get to the hotel."

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O'Leary's Motor Lodge (*Free Cable and Pool!*) was never full; hence the startled look on the desk clerk's face when seven individuals tumbled in and asked for accommodations.

"Uh, how many rooms will you be needing?"

There was a moment's uncertainty as everyone looked at each other.

"Well, we could put all the girls in one room, and Giles and Xander could room together," Dawn suggested.

"I don't think so," Anya replied promptly, and with more than a little vehemence. "I just sang 'I Touch Myself' to the man I love, and if you insist on some archaic gender segregation, you'll *listen* to me touch myself all night long."

"Etch-a-Sketch Moment! Etch-a-Sketch Moment!" Willow cried out, shaking her head frantically from side to side in an attempt to clear the image from her mind.

"Tara, I'm guessing you and Willow would like some time alone, right?" Buffy asked, hands on her hips.

"Actually, yeah. That would be just about perfect right now," Tara nodded gratefully.

"OK, so how about this: you two in one room; Anya and Xander in another room, preferably in another wing of the hotel or maybe another hotel altogether; me and Dawn in a third room; and Giles, that leaves you bunking single, if you're OK with that."

"I should be immensely relieved, to be honest," the Watcher replied. "I always stash some Earl Grey in my jacket. I think I'll just sink into bed and enjoy a quiet cup."

With a decisive nod, Buffy turned back to the clerk and within a matter of minutes, the seven of them were making their way down a long hallway to their respective rooms. Pausing outside #214, Tara looked at the others, gratitude battling exhaustion in her eyes.

"You guys-what you did today; what you did tonight...I don't know how I can ever repay you. It-it means more to me than you'll ever know."

Giles enfolded Tara in a tweedish and very warm embrace. "My only request of you, Tara, is that one day you realize that no repayment is ever necessary for caring about you."

After that, there was a dim blur-at least to Willow's emotional gaze-as each person came up in turn to hug Tara, offering words of either sincere comfort or gentle banter. Even Anya flung her arms around Tara, whispering, "You really do deserve the good stuff, you know."

Willow saw Dawn hanging back, hands jammed into her back pockets as she stared at the ground. *She really is overwhelmed by all of this; by what she's feeling.*

"Dawnie?" Tara's voice was soft. And then Dawn edged around Buffy and wrapped her arms fiercely around the taller girl's waist. Through her own misty vision, Willow saw a tear slip past Dawn's closed lashes and trickle down her cheek. She didn't say anything, just squeezed Tara as if her life depended on it and finally stepped back away, looking down at the ground once more.

Finally, the group dispersed into their own rooms, Anya humming the chorus of her chosen serenade from earlier.

*Alone at last.*

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Willow looked at Tara for what seemed like an eternity, before stepping forward and pulling her gently into her arms.

"Oh, my sweet Baby," she murmured, wondering what she could possibly say to ease the pain and confusion of this incredible day. Pulling back softly, she stroked Tara's soft cheek and opted for tangibility. "Is there anything you want? Anything to drink?"

To her surprise, Tara nodded slowly. "Now that you mention it, I'm parched. I think I saw vending and ice machines at the other end of the hall. Would you mind...?"

"Of course not." Willow practically jumped at the chance to do something for her beloved. She grabbed the ice bucket and pulled a handful of coins from her purse, and then kissed Tara softly. "I'll be right back, Baby."

Heading down the hall, she glanced at the short corridor leading to the balcony on the second floor. She pulled up abruptly when she discerned Dawn's slight figure leaning over the railing.

*Three guesses what's on her mind...* She wondered if there weren't some karmic reason for her to have been walking down the hallway and to have glanced over just when she did. She made a 90-degree turn and within a few strides was standing next to the teenager under a bright moon.

"Hey Dawnie," Willow said softly, running her hand briefly over the girl's arm.

"Hey Willow," Dawn replied, giving her a quick smile before turning back to gaze at something far away.

"Long day, huh?" Willow offered. "I mean, who coulda guessed this morning how everything would turn out."

"Not me," Dawn muttered, "and I thought I had a pretty good imagination."

"You know," Willow continued, proceeding by intuition as much as rationality, "I don't think Tara realizes how much good stuff she pulls from people just because of who she is. Does that make sense?"

Dawn nodded. "It's like she doesn't get it-how special she is. And now, seeing where she came from and what she went through, I think, well how *could* she have gotten it, before now? No wonder she has such a hard time knowing how great she is."

Willow answered slowly, "Well, sometimes other people see us more clearly than we see ourselves, especially when our feelings are involved."

Dawn stole a quick glance her way, before staring back out at the night. Willow continued, "And Tara... Well, she just doesn't get how easy it is to love her." She saw Dawn shift uncomfortably. "I think she's still surprised that I love her. She can't imagine someone just falling for her, head over heels."

Even in the dark, she could see Dawn's knuckles whiten as she gripped the railing. "Willow?" Her voice was tiny.

"Yeah, sweetie?"

Dawn swallowed twice, and then squared her slender shoulders. "I think I'm in love with Tara."

*And in other news, scientists have determined that fire is hot.*

Listening to her now, Willow couldn't feel any resentment or possessiveness. She looked at Dawn and saw a teenager who was swamped with feelings she could hardly understand or explain. She saw a girl who worshipped someone well worth worshipping and who had absolutely no idea of how to deal with it. And she saw someone who was the Key, created to open the portals between dimensions, who had no idea how her life was about to change.

So she turned and took Dawn into her arms and said, "Who can blame you, Dawnie?"

"You're not mad?" came the muffled query.

"No, I'm not mad. I mean, she's Tara. I commend you on your good taste." She felt Dawn grin against her shoulder before the girl pulled back and look down at her shoes.

"Does Tara know?" She folded her arms as if anticipating abject scorn.

*How do I answer that one? Tell her that everybody **else** knows but Tara is the one person who doesn't really believe it?* "Well, it's like we were saying: it's hard for Tara to imagine being such a hot commodity, so I don't think she does."

"OK, that's a huge relief," Dawn sighed. She turned, and leaned back against the railing. "I didn't really figure it out until today. I just thought that Tara was-extra neat, you know? Like, she's all gentle and magical and really smart...I just thought that I wanted to be like her. And then today, seeing how people treated her, and hearing what she went through...At first I just wanted to slug her dad-or whoever he is-and then after awhile all I wanted to do was sit and hug Tara. And the more I thought about hugging her, the more I felt all..." Here she stopped, and looked away in keen embarrassment.

"Kinda warm and squiggly inside?" Willow offered helpfully.

"Very warm, and all kinds of squiggly," Dawn confirmed decisively. "I mean, I know she's your girlfriend, and everybody would say that I'm too young for her-even though I'm *way* more mature than Janice, and she's dating an eighteen-year-old-and basically, I haven't got a chance in hell and I really am happy for you two, and oh God, I'm starting to sound like a graduate from the Willow Rosenberg School of Elocution and Conciseness."

Willow frowned slightly. "Well, thanks-I think. You're right, she is my girlfriend and everybody-including Tara and me-would say you're too young, and no, you wouldn't stand a chance anyway. But that's not the point," she added quickly. "The point is, you have really intense feelings for someone and it's complicated. It's like the greatest and the worst emotions in the

world all wrapped up in a Total Confusion Tortilla. It's tough; God knows I know it's tough. But you're not bad for feeling that way and I still love you. It'll ease up after a while."

Dawn looked at her skeptically. "What if it doesn't?"

"Then you and I take it outside and mud wrestle." Seeing Dawn's eyes widen, she hastily went on, "OK, very much not really. If it gets worse, or months go by and it's not getting better, we'll talk it over some more. And we can talk about it whenever you want you. But please don't freak about it, Dawnie," she finished, realizing the breath-taking irony of *her* telling someone to relax.

Dawn was quiet for a moment, and then looked up suddenly. "Willow, does this mean I'm gay?"

Willow laughed, albeit somewhat nervously. "You know, I left my Lesbian Detection Kit at home." When the younger girl simply looked at her, slight hurt stealing into her eyes, Willow sighed. "I don't know, Dawnie. I mean, I don't know if there's a definite yes or no to that question, at least not now." She suddenly felt woefully inadequate. *Me and my stupid ideas-come out here and talk to Dawn about her feelings. I do technology; Tara does emotion. Shit.*

She saw that Dawn was still looking at her, though, and she realized that the girl needed her; needed some kind of anchor and confidant. She didn't have to be perfect or omniscient. The realization prompted her to ask, "Do you need to know, right now? I mean, know for sure? Would the label really make a difference in how you act or how you think?"

Dawn considered this for a moment. "I don't know...It just seems like if I *am* gay, I should know about it."

"Well, yeah, I'm not saying repress it and get married tomorrow because, hello, very much illegal and also yucky. I'm just saying that maybe you don't need to take an oath-any oath-right now. Don't push me over the rail for saying this, Dawn, but you really do have time, you know?"

Dawn sighed the universal sigh of teenage angst. "I know, I know-I have my whole life ahead of me."

Willow cringed at the unintended irony of the phrase. "Well isn't that a heck of a lot better than saying that your life ends tomorrow? That your time's up and you'd better have everything figured out right now because Uncle Death is coming for an extended visit?"

Dawn stared at her, slightly aghast, it seemed. "Jeez, Willow-and have a nice day to you, too. Morbid much?"

"I'm just saying that being a teenager isn't the worst thing in the world, even if it isn't the best. And one of the good things about it is that you *don't* have to sign up for one life right now if you don't want to."

After a moment, Dawn nodded. "OK, I get that. I'll take my time, even though we both know patience isn't my strong suit."



Willow grinned. "No; that would be your keen mind, or maybe your singing ability."

Dawn shrugged, but Willow could see her smiling slightly. She linked her fingers through Willow's. "Can I ask you for a favor?" she began, tugging Willow back toward the corridor.

"Cast a spell on Anya and make her celibate? Because that would be fun but unethical."

"Don't tell Tara."

Willow hesitated. She didn't like the idea of keeping anything other than a birthday present a secret from her girl, especially something that involved her. On the other hand, she was on a first-name basis with embarrassment and didn't want to make things more difficult for Dawn than they already were.

"Tell you what. I won't bring this up. If she asks about it, though, I won't lie, but I'll tell her to come to you first. How does that sound?"

Dawn nodded. "I can live with that." As they reached the hallway and she turned away from Willow to head back to her room, she asked quietly, "Sure you're not mad?"

Willow grinned, feeling warm and affectionate toward this girl who, like Tara, had such precious little idea just how much was within her. "I'm not mad, Dawn." She hugged her tightly. "But if you look down her blouse I'll gouge your eyes out."

Dawn nodded feebly. "No chest shots. Got it." She lowered her voice suddenly and added, "You're the greatest, Willow. Tara's lucky to have you." And then she darted back down the hallway to her room.

Willow glanced at her watch as she turned toward the vending room. Almost one o'clock. *Even a trip to the juice machine gets dramatic on this trip.*

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"Where'd you get the juice, Sweetie-Tulsa?" Tara's voice was edged with fatigue. She was stretched out on the bed; two candles were lit, one on either stand beside the bed.

"Sorry, Baby-I ran into Dawn and she was pretty upset about today." Willow hoped Tara didn't ask too many questions because she didn't want to lie, especially since she was awful at it.

Tara sat up quickly. "Dawn's upset? Maybe I should talk to her."

"No!" Willow realized that she had practically shouted her directive. "I mean, she was really wiped out by the end of the conversation. She was going to head to bed. Besides," she added, pouring some juice into an ice-filled cup, "you're the one who needs the TLC right now." She carried over the drink and sat down on Tara's side of the bed, running her fingers gently through soft tendrils of gold.

"Totally Licentious Cunnilingus?" Tara smiled, batting her eyelashes with exaggerated coyness.

"Whenever possible," Willow breathed, amazed that even after a day like this, Tara could simply banter with her about sex and Willow was primed and ready to go. *I'm like the old Timex commercials used to say-I take a licking and keep on...well, licking.*

"How are you, Baby? Really?" She felt her heart squeeze suddenly as she caught full sight of the exhaustion in Tara's eyes.

"How about you take those clothes off and get ready for bed and then come in and ask me that question?" Before Tara had even finished the question, Willow had bounced off of the bed and headed into the bathroom to wash her face and brush her teeth. A bare five minutes later, she hastened back to bed, half fearing that Tara would already be asleep and half hoping that she was, if that's what she needed.

But Tara obviously wasn't going gently into any dark night without Willow beside her. Willow slid in under the covers and stretched out her full length against Tara's warm body.

"So let me ask that again-how are you?"

Tara's eyes suddenly glistened in the dark as she pondered the question. "God, Willow-how do I even start to answer that? I feel like my whole world exploded on me in one afternoon." She drew a shuddering breath. "I mean, I thought everything had been resolved on my birthday. And then Donnie shows up and tells me Daddy has demon blood in him. So we head off to Cold Springs where Daddy tells me that he really *is* a demon, but I don't have to worry because he really *isn't* my father. Who, by the way, was my uncle; who, by the way, is dead. And the coup de grace: my mother wasn't a saint." Laughter and weeping seemed to dance fitfully together in her voice.

Not for the first time that day, Willow raged against her helplessness to ease Tara's pain. "I can't even imagine it, Baby. It's just too much for you; it's too much for anyone."

Tara looked up at the ceiling, as if discerning some truth among the aging tiles. "Have you ever noticed that that phrase makes no sense? That something is 'too much'?"

As Willow fumbled to apologize, Tara interrupted her. "No, Sweetie; you didn't say anything wrong. I'm just saying that it doesn't really matter if something *should* be too much. Things still happen however they happen. I mean, life doesn't tap you on the shoulder mid-way through some trauma and ask, 'Is this too much? Because if it is, I'll back off right now.'"

"You're right," Willow murmured. "I just hate watching you go through all of this-not just today, but knowing what you've gone through your entire life. It's so unfair, and I know life isn't fair but that doesn't stop me from wanting it to be, especially where you're concerned." She felt Tara pulling her more tightly into her arms. They held each other in silence for a moment.

When Tara spoke again, her voice was quiet and almost contemplative. "You know, a part of me wasn't surprised. About Daddy, or-goddess, I don't know what to call him right now." She took a deep breath. "Somehow, it just didn't shock me the way I would have expected. It's like it explains some things."

"Such as...?" Willow asked gently.

"Such as him always being so distant from me. Never having anything to say to me, it seemed. There were times when he almost seemed afraid of me, Will, and I know that makes no sense, because there were lots of times when he flat-out terrified *me*. But-it's like he never knew how to act around me, or what to say to me. And now I find out that he raised me, knowing I wasn't his, but he never told Mama the truth..." She trailed off, tears sliding rapidly down her cheeks now.

"And Mama...oh goddess, Willow; I can't believe she did what she did. I mean, she not only cheated on Daddy, she took Donny with her. He was there, every time they-" Willow watched her gulp back a sob, unable to finish. "Willow, she was my heroine. I knew she wasn't perfect, but I didn't know she was *that* imperfect. I feel like I don't even know her anymore."

"Tara, that's not true!" Willow was stunned by the force in her voice, but continued. Something told her that of all the revelations that Tara had withstood today, the news of her mother's infidelity was the hardest to bear. "She's still your mother. She's still the woman who told you how wonderful you were, who sewed such wonderful dresses for you and braided your hair and taught you magic. She doesn't have to be perfect for those things to be true." She stopped, out of breath.

Tara looked at her, eyes shining. "But she didn't do those things for Donnie. Nobody did those things for Donnie." Guilt flashed through her eyes, now dark with pain.

Willow fought her own resentment at Donnie, a resentment that made it difficult to feel any compassion for him. "Tara, you don't know that. You don't know which came first, Donnie's surliness-which would make it harder for anyone to bond with him-or your mother's infidelity. You can't know that; no one can. And remember, your mom had post-partum depression after he was born. That wasn't her fault; it wasn't his fault. It was just a bad break, and I know that doesn't make it better, but neither does trying to reach a verdict when you can't get all the evidence."

Heart wrenching at the sight of tears cascading over Tara's face, the drops illuminated by candlelight until they seemed like so many tiny jewels, Willow propped herself up on one elbow and kissed her beloved's soft flesh, drying the wetness with her own fingers and cheeks. *I can handle anything except seeing her in pain. Except that that's what she needs from me right now-to be with her and not try to make it all go away. This isn't magic.*

Turning slightly, Tara offered herself up fully to Willow's embrace. Crying now herself, Willow held her fiercely. "You're home now, Baby. I'll be your home from now on." She felt Tara nod against her neck.

"Willow, Sweetie-I don't think I've ever been this exhausted." The crying seemed to have stopped for the moment, as Willow gently stroked her hair.

"It's OK, Baby. I mean, of course you're wiped out." She eased down onto her pillow, careful to keep Tara cradled gently within her arms. "Just close your eyes and drift off. I'll keep you safe and warm."

She was surprised and a little disconcerted to see Tara pull back slightly, until she was looking down at Willow with a desperate, aching gaze.

"Willow...I need you to touch me, all over." Her eyes were luminous in the dark.

Willow was taken aback by the words. "You-you want to make love? You feel like that now? Because I'd be more than happy-" She fell silent at the feeling of Tara's fingers on her lips.

"No, not make love; at least, not in the usual sense of the phrase." Her brow furrowed as she fought to make herself understood. "I need you to touch me, bring me back to here, to you. I feel like I've been thrown around, pushed around all day by one person or another. Just going back there, seeing everything as if I were seeing it for the first time. I feel...not me, Willow. I don't know how to explain it, but I feel like a stranger in my own skin." Her gaze became needful, and urgent. "I need you to put your hands on me, all over me. Not sexually, but..." She shook her head, frustration working her lips into a frown. "I don't need you to try to satisfy me. Just...Just touch me, Willow. Please." The last word was whispered, almost pleading.

And Willow finally understood. Nodding, she leaned forward and kissed Tara gently on the full lips, and then began to trace her fingers over the indescribably warm, soft flesh of her beloved's face. She brushed the last vestiges of tears from her cheeks, and leaned over once more to kiss the line that her fingers had drawn.

Moving slowly down over the graceful arc of Tara's neck, Willow's fingers pressed gently into the hollow at the base, feeling the deep thrum of Tara's pulse. She let her fingers wander lower still, stopping to cup the full, heavy breasts into her palms.

"You're mine," she murmured through the choking in her own voice. "Just like I'm yours. Just like I'll always be." She squeezed Tara's breasts once more before trailing her hands gently but firmly over Tara's belly, knowing just how to touch her to avoid tickling her. Then she edged her body slightly lower in the bed, pressing her palms into the firm thighs and down the long legs before sliding back up along the backs of those legs to curve her fingers over Tara's soft, rounded hips.

"No matter where you go, or what you learn, the one constant is me. I will always be here, Tara. Because I'm yours. No one else can ever have me; no one else will ever know what my hands feel like on their flesh. Because I will always belong to you. Just like you belong to me." She saw Tara's eyes glittering in the flicker of candlelight, and wondered how she could breathe in the presence of such beauty.

She ran her fingers over the small of Tara's back, and then up toward the surprising muscles of her shoulders and upper back, squeezing her fingers into the strength that always delighted and satisfied her.

"Do you feel it, Tara? Do you feel yourself coming back to yourself? Coming back to me? Stay with me, Tara. Don't ever leave me. This, right now-this is reality, the only reality that matters. Stay with me always, Tara. We'll make a home and raise children and grow old together and we'll say the hard things that we need to say and we'll laugh more than any two people have any right to and we'll putter around in a garden that grows every herb we need and our grandchildren will always be coming over to our house because we'll spoil them so rotten and they'll climb onto your lap and you'll sing to them in that incredible voice of yours and I'll sit and watch and think once again how lucky I am."

She slid her fingers into the thick silk of Tara's hair. "Stay with me, Tara. Because I'll always stay with you. Because *this* is home, wherever we are."

And with those words, she pulled her beloved close to her, and the last thing she heard before both of them drifted off onto some other realm was Tara's voice, infinitely soft, saying, "I'm back. And I'm yours."

They arrived back in Sunnydale just before noon the next day. Everyone was tired, but in Willow's assessment, they were also more than a little proud of each other. They could fight among themselves, true; but like any real family, they didn't permit outsiders to mess with one of their own.

As for Willow, she was immeasurably glad that it was Saturday, and she and Tara could relax and do whatever they needed to do-at least until that evening. Buffy had dropped her and Tara off last, and it was soon clear that this wasn't a function of chance.

"You guys," she'd begun nervously, "I know you must be wiped out, but is there any way we could get together tonight? I need your advice on something."

"I'd go with the print dress instead of the pastel," Willow yawned.

"And the Stove Top Stuffing over potatoes," Tara added helpfully.

"OK-thanks, and thanks again. And then, after you've both returned to the Land of Shared Reality, maybe you could help me with something else."

"Sure," Tara smiled. "How about seven? We could order take-out."

"Sounds great." And with that, the two had practically fallen out of the SUV and made their way into Tara's dorm room, where they collapsed into bed and each other's arms and sleep.

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Continued...

**Antigone Unbound  
Index Page**

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**~ Gods Served and Abandoned ~**  
by Antigone Unbound

**Author Notes: See Part 1.**

**Feedback: Even more sure! Bring it on!**

**Part 16**

"I wonder what Buffy wants," Tara mused, taking a sip of her mocha. It was almost four o'clock. They had slept until three. Willow had roused herself first, taking a quick shower and then heading out for coffee and bagels while Tara finally dragged herself out of bed and prepared to face the day. Now they were sitting on Tara's bed, legs entangled while hands busied themselves with the matter of nourishment.

"Maybe she's thinking of switching teams," Willow suggested. "Maybe she's seen our True Love and Grand Passion and Epic Connection and she wants a little piece of the action. Er, not *our* action, that is," she hastily amended. "The girl-on-girl action."

"Yeah, that's probably it," Tara nodded. "And then maybe Anya will be next to fall victim to the Lesbian Vortex-that inescapable force that we create by virtue of our combined estrogen."

"And then Anya and Buffy can get together!" Willow finished excitedly. "And I think I need to stop this pretty much right now, or my head will blow clean off my shoulders and you'll be left dating the Headless Homo!"

"Ah, but if you were headless, you wouldn't have that mouth," Tara reminded her in a low voice, reaching out with one long, tapered finger to trace the outline of Willow's lips. "And without that mouth, there are so many things you wouldn't be able to do..." She trailed off, her eyes darkening in the late afternoon light.

"Such as...?" Willow managed to squeak.

"I think you know," came the soft reply, and suddenly bagels became superfluous, as did clothing.

They hadn't made love for a few days, in the confusion and distress of all that had happened with Tara's family. *Family of origin*, Willow reminded herself. Tara had been disoriented and agitated, and the touch that she had needed most had been of the comforting variety. Today, however, appeared to be a different story.

"You know we'll have to take another shower later," Willow murmured against the full lips.

"Mark it down in your Daily Planner," Tara replied, a smile quirking across her mouth. "Use a blue pen." So saying, she pulled Willow tight against her. Upon feeling Tara's breasts pressed into her own, Willow swallowed heavily.

"I've missed you," she admitted. "Missed this."

"I know," came the whispered voice, breath soft against Willow's face. "I have, too."

At the words, Willow felt the familiar twisting, low in her belly, that left her so gladly helpless. She was torn between a feeling that she should go slowly, and a desire to have her hands hot upon Tara's flesh without hesitation, without pause. Her dilemma was solved when, seconds later, she felt Tara's fingers sink into her hair and pull her back from their kiss. She gazed at Willow, heavy-lidded, for a long moment before softly uttering one word: "Please."

Then she lightly pressed Willow's head lower, arching her back at the same time, until Willow's lips hovered just above one taut nipple. With a groan, Willow sucked the tiny nub into her mouth, closing her eyes in abandon to the hunger that poured through her body. She reveled in Tara's response, moaned with the excitement of hearing Tara's breath catch in a series of small gasps.

*The rest of my life. I get to touch her, kiss her for rest of my life.* Unexpectedly, she felt tears prick her eyes, threatening to overflow the dam of her closed lids.

As if Tara were speaking within her own mind, she heard the low voice whisper urgently, "Touch me, Willow."

Barely trusting herself to speak, Willow pulled her lips from Tara's breast and murmured, "Like last night?"

"No," Tara replied, wrapping one long leg over Willow's. "No, touch me like you do. The way you know how." Lightly circling her fingers around Willow's wrist, she added, "I need you to touch me...*here*." And with the word, she pushed Willow's hand lower, from her breast down over belly and then lower still, until Willow's fingers brushed over soft curls.

Willow's head sank briefly, swimming with the sensation beneath her palm. Finally, she propped herself up on her other elbow to look Tara directly in the eyes. "Are-are you ready?"

She watched as Tara bit her lip, eyes narrowing, and then whispered, "Always."

Groaning, Willow sank her fingers into the wetness, pushing through the swollen flesh until she was buried deep within her lover.

*She gives herself to me so easily. Does she know what that does to me? How she makes me **more**, somehow, every time I touch her?*

Such coherent thoughts became difficult and then irrelevant as Willow watched Tara's legs fall open helplessly, her cry choked and needful. Tara held Willow's face in her hands as Willow slid easily into her, then curved her fingers and withdrew slowly, stroking the ridged flesh deeply.

"Do you know?" she breathed, watching Tara's eyes darken even more. "Do you know how I feel about you? How you can excite me just by looking at me in a roomful of people?"

"Willow..."

"I've never felt anything like this, Tara-how I feel when I touch you, when you touch me."

"Oh, goddess..."

"It's like my blood gets hot and my skin tingles and all you have to do is touch my face and I feel like I might explode."

"Willow-I'm so close...So-so good..."

"Show me, Tara. Show me how it feels to you."

"I can't hold back; can't stop. Willow, I'm-"

"Yeah, Baby. That's it. That's it. Show me, Tara. Give it to me."

"Willow-"

"Tara, come to me."

And then she watched, tears falling freely now, as Tara's back arched and her hands clutched at Willow's shoulders and she cried out the name of her beloved. Willow held her possessively as Tara's body shuddered and ripple after ripple rolled through her, each wave's origin and ending emanating from the spasming that clenched Willow's fingers hungrily within her.

*Her...Always, only her.*

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They did indeed eventually shower-again-in anticipation of Buffy's visit. Willow made sure, though, to leave a little Tara Essence on her fingers. One of her favorite naughty activities was



catching Tara's eyes, after they had made love and then joined the others, as she raised her fingers casually to her face and inhaled deeply. It never failed to earn a blush.

"Thanks for seeing me, guys," Buffy said, shucking off her jacket as she sank into the papasan chair. Willow thought that she seemed uncharacteristically nervous.

"No thanks necessary," she reassured her best friend, wondering what had precipitated this seemingly-clandestine meeting. "Do you wanna order some Chinese?"

"Food," the Slayer nodded, as if hearing of the concept for the first time. "Yeah-food is good. Pepper steak with steamed rice is especially good. Yes-let us have food." She attempted a grin that wasn't terribly successful.

Forty minutes later, Chen's had delivered a buffet to their very door. The conversation in the interim had been pleasant, if somewhat awkward. Buffy had asked Tara how she was doing, and Tara had given her the Cliff Notes version of her emotional work-in-progress, but Willow suspected that each of them were thinking about the conversation to come. As they finally settled onto the floor, chopsticks in hand, Willow let her raging curiosity out to roam.

"What's up, Buffy? Why the urgent summit meeting with the conjuring queers?"

Buffy looked at her with a curious smile. "Is that the name of your new Wicca group? Kinda like gay AA meetings? Not to imply that being gay is some kind of problem or addiction or anything like that," she added quickly. "A-and not to imply that being alcoholic is some kind of moral lapse or anything to joke about-I'm not saying anything like that at all, I hope you know that. I mean, we know now that alcoholism is a disease, and not some sign of weakness, so if you thought that I was mocking that disease, well, I'd really hate that." She eventually stopped talking, but only, it appeared, to draw a breath.

Willow stared at her in amazement. "My God, Buffy-do I sound like that when *I* babble? 'Cuz it's a truly incredible spectacle."

Tara leaned forward and rested her hand on Buffy's knee. "Sweetie, whatever it is, it's pretty obviously making you crazy. I think maybe if you just...let it out, you know, get it out there, you'll feel better."

Buffy nodded. "You're right. I mean, it's not really some earth-shattering revelation or anything like that, because let's face it, Tara, you've had enough of those lately, right? I just need your advice about something; well, your advice, and a favor, too. Except the favor is more like a promise, and I don't want to put your two under any more pressure than you've already been under, so-

"Praise be to Venus and spare me the penis, Buffy-what in Sappho's name *is* it?" Willow made a mental note to work on her own babbling, because at this moment, when faced with such a stunning display thereof, she had to fight the urge to bounce a wonton off of Buffy's head.

"OK," Buffy sighed, drawing a deep breath. "It's about Dawn. I need your advice about Dawn." She looked at them with troubled eyes. "Do I tell her about being the Key?"

Willow pulled back slightly in surprise. "Oh, God, Buffy-that's so hard to answer. I mean, there are so many things to consider. Can-can you keep her safe if she knows? Or would it be easier to protect her if she *did* know? And do you think she can handle it?" Questions tumbled out of her like the tiny squares of gum in a store vending machine.

Feeling strong fingers squeeze briefly over her own, she turned and saw Tara gazing at Buffy intently. "Buffy-why are you asking us this?"

Buffy shrugged, looking embarrassed. "I wanted your opinion. I don't expect you to *tell* me what to do, but-"

"No," Tara interrupted. "I mean, why are you asking *us*? As opposed to Giles? Don't get me wrong, Buffy-this doesn't feel like a burden, and I'm not saying that I wish you would ask him instead. It's just-isn't he who you usually seek out for advice?"

Buffy shifted slightly; it seemed to Willow that she felt distinctly uncomfortable. "I didn't go to him because...because I knew that as much as he tried, he wouldn't be able to take off his Watcher's hat when he was talking about it. And I get it; that's his job. But for this...for this I didn't want a Watcher. I wanted two people who would talk about it from a family standpoint." She looked from one of them to the other, anxiety creasing her brow. "Does that make any sense?"

Willow nodded slowly. "Yeah-I think it does." She looked over to see Tara smiling sadly at Buffy.

"You want so much to protect her, don't you?" Tara's voice was soft. "To keep her from having to see all of the worst parts of life, much less be involved in it."

When Buffy looked up, her eyes were filled with anguish. "Is that so bad? To want to protect my little sister? And she *is* my little sister, no matter where she came from." A single tear wended its way down her cheek.

"Buffy, it's not bad at all," Willow replied, her heart aching for her best friend.

"You don't want to tell her, do you?" came Tara's query.

After a long moment, Buffy shook her head fiercely. "No, I don't. I want her to wake up and go to sleep thinking that her worst problems involve her curfew and her crush on you, Tara. I don't want her to have to deal with this."

"Then...Then Buffy, why are you asking for our opinion?" Willow asked hesitantly, afraid that she would sound accusatory or judgmental.

Buffy uncrossed her legs, and stared at the floor for several moments before responding. "Because I don't know if I'm right. Just as I convince myself that I should listen to my instincts and not tell her, another voice pops into my head and says that maybe it isn't instinct at all-maybe it's fear, or selfishness, or cowardice." Raising a hand to forestall Willow's protests, she continued. "And so I decided that I needed to talk to people I trust; people who would be honest with me." She stated the last part almost as a plea.

The room was silent for several minutes. When Tara finally spoke, her voice was filled with compassion. "Buffy, I can't even imagine having to make a decision like that; I really can't. But you asked what we thought, and this is what I think: I think you should tell her." She reached out and took Buffy's hand, looking into the downcast eyes. "Buffy, I'm not saying that you'd be wrong to keep it from her, because I don't think there *is* a clear-cut right or wrong here. But...But I can't help thinking about how else she might find out, and what it would do to her to find out from someone else." Her voice grew thick. "Buffy, I just learned that my dad isn't my dad, and I just learned that my real dad-or my biological one-is dead. And the only reason I found out is because my brother was wanting to hurt me. Trust me, Sweetie, it wasn't the best way to learn the truth. And...And I may be way off here, but I think maybe you knew I would say something like that, which sorta takes the credibility out of your whole 'coward' assessment."

*Is anybody in this room **not** crying?* Willow doubted it.

"You're right," Buffy replied shakily. "I didn't know it until right now, but it's true. I knew somehow that you two would-keep me honest, I guess, or make me look at it from an angle I was trying to avoid on my own." Her laugh was brittle. "Is it just me, or do the choices we face keep getting harder and harder?"

"It's not you," Willow concurred, shaking her head sadly. "Apparently, it has something to do with growing up."

"Well, at the risk of sounding unbecomingly harsh, growing up sucks ass." Buffy sighed heavily.

Willow wanted to agree with her best friend, but realized that she couldn't. Her own life, and Tara's, too, had actually gotten immeasurably better with time. "You know that we'll back you, whatever you do, right?"

"I know," Buffy answered heavily. "But I also think I know what I *have* to do."

"What about your mom?" Willow asked, desperate for Buffy to have someone to share this struggle with.

"I need to tell her; I'm just not sure when. She's supposed to go in for more tests on Monday and I don't want her dealing with any more stress than she has to; and let's face it-finding out that your daughter is a ball of mystical energy, created by monks to prevent the flooding of dimensional portals by an amazingly powerful and slutty-dressed demon...that'll take it out of you." She dropped her head into her hands for a few moments, and then looked up with an expression of determination.

"I want to tell Dawn tomorrow night, before I come up with more reasons not to. Will you guys be around if she needs to talk? Or I do?" she added quickly.

"Of course, Sweetie," Tara replied, squeezing Buffy's hand once more. "You know that we'll always be there for both of you."

Buffy gave a wry smile. "Funny you should mention that..."

Willow looked at her quizzically. "What do you mean?"

"Well, we've arrived at the 'Promise' portion of tonight's program..." She trailed off, seemingly to gather her courage before pressing on. "It's just... See, here's the thing: if anything happens to me-fighting this Glory wench-I'd like you two to look after Dawn."

Willow was stunned; turning, she could see that Tara shared her reaction. "Buffy, what are you talking about? Nothing's going to happen to you!" *Maybe if I say it loudly enough, it'll be true...*

"I dunno, Will." The Slayer shook her head thoughtfully. "Everything we find out about this one says that she's strong, really strong."

"They're *all* really strong, Buffy," Tara argued. "Adam-he was unlike any demon you'd fought before, and you took him."

"*We* took him," Buffy amended quickly. "The four of us. But Glory feels different to me somehow. I haven't even met the fashion plate yet, and I have an incredibly bad feeling about her."

"OK, acknowledging that slaying is dangerous work now," Willow capitulated. "Admitting that this Big Bad may be more of both. But Buffy, we'll get through it. We'll get each *other* through it." Willow found herself reaching for her best friend's hand without conscious intention, and held onto it fiercely.

"That sounds great to me, Will," Buffy replied. "I'm just asking... If anything *does* happen, will you look out for her?"

Tara's gaze held confusion. "Sweetie, you *know* that we'll always be here for Dawn-and for you, too. But what about your mom? Are you worried that she can't handle it? Are you..." Tara's voice grew quiet. "Are you worried that there's something seriously wrong with her?"

Buffy shook her head decisively. "No. This stuff with Mom-it's confusing and scary, but I know she'll be OK. I may be the Slayer, but my mom is the strongest person I know. No, she'll be fine, I believe that." She hesitated, seeming to fumble for words. "The thing is, Dawn feels close to you guys. She can talk to you about anything; stuff that she might be afraid to tell Mom about it. And if something happens that I can't be there for her, it would help me to know that you guys were."

Willow fought to impose some kind of order on her thoughts and feelings. *Nothing's going to happen to Buffy...even if she is the Slayer and faces the worst danger in the world on a near-nightly basis; even if she **has** cheated Death more times in five years than most people do in a lifetime. Nothing's going to happen to her.*

But Buffy wasn't asking them to reassure her that she would be fine. She was asking them to keep her beloved sister close to them if she died; to take care of her and talk to her and enfold her into the family that the two of them had created.

She knew she couldn't speak yet, and so she only nodded. As if from a distance, she heard Tara finally say, "Of course. Of course we'll look after her, Buffy, if the need ever arises. Goddess willing, though, it never will."

When she trusted herself to speak without crying, Willow said simply, "Your sister is our sister, Buffy. She'll never be alone."

For the first time that night, Buffy seemed to relax. The shadows passed from her eyes, and she straightened her shoulders, drawing a deep breath. "I don't know how to thank you guys-for all of this." She looked helplessly from Tara to Willow.

"It's what we do," Willow replied, brushing away her tears. "It's what we *all* do."

Later, as Tara fell asleep in her arms, Willow let herself go back in her mind to her first understanding of family. *There was a mommy, and a daddy, and a little girl.*

And now?

*There are two lesbian witches, and one straight girl who fights vampires and demons, and a British man who trains her, and an ex-demon who's over a thousand years old, and a mystical ball of energy parading around as a teenaged girl with a crush on my girlfriend, and a loyal if somewhat goofy straight boy.*

She felt Tara move restlessly in her sleep, wrapping her arm more tightly around Willow's waist. She looked down at the soft features, barely illuminated by moonlight, and pressed a gentle kiss on her forehead. Knowing that for tonight, at least, all was well within her family, she finally succumbed to her own exhaustion, and slipped off to dream of a girl who looked up at her and Tara and called them both "Mommy."

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"So how should we spend this lovely Sunday evening?" Willow asked, looking up from her organic chemistry text. She wasn't sure whether she was irritated or secretly reassured that academic obligations rolled on heedless of the epic battle against evil. She took at least some dim measure of comfort from the fact that algorithms would be waiting for her whether she acquitted herself against a T'Darek demon the night before or not.

Tara gave a long, slow stretch, yawning as she relieved the kinks in her muscles. "Maybe I'm getting old in my young age, but I sorta feel like staying in and watching a movie; something low-risk like that."

"Me too," Willow concurred, leaving her chair to sit behind Tara on the bed. Rubbing her hands together briskly to make sure they were warm, she began to massage Tara's neck gently. "We've had enough adventure lately."

"Oh, goddess, that feels good," Tara groaned, as small goose-bumps rose on her skin. "Have you noticed, though, that adventure never comes in measured doses? I mean, it's not like passing on seconds of mashed potatoes: 'That's enough for me, thanks.'" Willow just smiled and leaned forward to press her lips against Tara's soft shoulder.

"We could see what's on TV," she suggested, nuzzling the warm flesh.

"Sunday...Sunday..." Tara mused. "Well, I like 'Alias.' Jennifer Garner's a hottie, although I wish she'd eat a sandwich or five."

"Isn't there some fantasy-type show about a demon-hunter or a vampire or something like that? You know, all dark atmosphere and angst and total neurotic projection?" Willow furrowed her brow, trying to place the show.

"Oh yeah," Tara nodded. "I saw it once or twice. From what I could tell, it's by some melodramatic bone-head who apparently went to the 'Kill Anyone Who Seems Good or Happy' school of writing."

"Forget that," Willow grumbled. "What bullshit." Resting her cheek against Tara's back, she asked softly, "How you doing, Baby? Things settling down at all?" She had hesitated to broach the subject; on the other hand, she didn't want Tara to think that Willow herself was trying to avoid it. If Tara didn't want to talk about it, Willow trusted that she would let her know that.

Tara shifted until she was sitting sideways in Willow's arms, and leaned into the warmth of those arms. "Oh, Sweetie..." She sighed, and frowned as she seemed to gather her thoughts. "There's a part of me that still can't believe everything that happened. I mean, my mother and my uncle? Or the man that I always *called* my uncle? And they're both dead, Willow. I can't talk to either of them." Willow's throat tightened as she watched a tear spill silently down Tara's cheek. "Even after Mom died, I still felt her near me. It still felt as if she were close to me, somehow. But since Friday-I don't feel her, Willow. And it's like she died all over again."

Willow pulled her close, wishing yet again that she could say something that would make everything right. *I can't use magic. I can't solve it like some complex scientific equation. I can't do anything.* The impotence was excruciating.

"And I can't help wondering how everybody's doing back in Cold Springs; even Donnie," Tara continued. Willow bit her tongue to keep from protesting that Donnie could just damn well take

care of himself. "I know he's a malicious prick," Tara added, as if reading Willow's mind, "but there's a part of me that feels like he was hurt just as badly as I was in some ways."

Willow made herself speak calmly. "But Tara, you never turned your hurt against someone else. You never tried to make yourself feel powerful by abusing another person."

"Maybe that's just because there wasn't anybody younger or less powerful than me," Tara mused sadly, playing with the buttons on Willow's shirt. "Maybe if there had been someone around who I *could* have picked on, I *would* have."

"I don't believe that for one damn second. Baby, I don't know why you went down one path and Donnie went down another, but I don't think it's about birth order or a shortage of targets. God, Tara, I can *feel* the kindness in you; sometimes it's so strong that it almost aches. It doesn't mean you're perfect or you never feel like being angry or selfish or just plain grouchy. It *does* mean you're likely to choose kindness over cruelty. I know it, Tara; I know it down to my bones."

She felt Tara smiling against her chest. "And such fine bones they are," she murmured, drying her eyes. Pulling back slightly, she shook her head wonderingly. "And Beth is my half-sister. Oh my goddess..."

"Gotta say, I don't see the resemblance," Willow muttered, picturing the pious sycophant who had apparently tried to take Tara's place in the Maclay household.

"That may be the nicest thing you've ever said to me, Sweetie," Tara replied with a small grin. "It's just one more thing that makes me shake my head and wonder if this all really happened."

Willow ran her fingertips over Tara's cheeks and down to her jaw-line. "Baby, do you believe it? All of it?"

Tara looked out the window as if watching the events of the past few days unfold against the backdrop of the trees. Finally, she turned back to Willow. "Yeah... Yeah, Sweetie, I think I do."

Willow gathered Tara back to her fiercely. Kissing her soft hair, she murmured, "I just wish you could talk to your mom, or Quinn, or even your grandmother-ask her if the demon part is even true."

"I know," Tara replied, her voice muffled against Willow. "I keep thinking, 'What if the demon legacy is just a family myth? What if the whole reason behind Dad's behavior was never even true?' God, Willow-so much of what he did was a reaction to thinking he had demon in him, and that he was passing it along to his kids."

Willow tilted her head slightly. "What about your Aunt Beverly? She'd have to know something, wouldn't she?"

Tara edged back just a bit, enough to look Willow in the eye. "I hadn't even thought about her," she replied slowly, a dawning curiosity in her voice. "She and Dad had different fathers, but she'd still know at least *something* about him, not to mention her own mother."

"So maybe we give her a call," Willow suggested, energized by the thought of being able to take some kind of action.

"Let me think about it," Tara hedged, her voice cautious but intrigued.

"OK; that's a good idea. No need for speed," Willow demurred, as much to slow herself down as to agree with Tara. They sat in silence for a few minutes, each lost in her own world of possibilities and implications. Finally, Tara stretched back out on the bed, holding out a hand in invitation. Willow happily snuggled down into warmth and the scent of lavender.

"Speaking of family dramas, I wonder if Buffy's talked to Dawn yet," Tara murmured, tracing her fingertips over Willow's back.

"Oh God, poor Dawnie. I can't even imagine how she'll feel when she finds out. As if she doesn't have enough angst in her life right now," Willow added, remembering their conversation at the hotel.

"What angst? What are you talking about?" Tara leaned back and looked quizzically at Willow.

"Oh, you know," Willow back-pedaled quickly. "Just the usual teenage *sturm und drang*. I wouldn't go back to that age for all the cunnilingus on Lesbos." Catching Tara's skeptical gaze, she added, "Because if I were a teenager, the cunnilingus might be illegal and I'm so rarely naughty anyway that I wouldn't be able to enjoy it, what with the threat of legal action hovering over my head and all."

"Sweetie, listening to you talk is like taking the longest, most scenic route through the amusement park." Tara laughed softly, a rippling sound that always delighted Willow. She often found herself wanting to make Tara laugh, to make up for all those years when laughter had been such a rare commodity in her beloved's life.

Easing back into Tara's warmth, one arm flung possessively over the curve of her hips, Willow felt fatigue begin to wash over her mind like unhurried waves. Feeling safe and eminently content, she gave herself over completely to the lassitude of the moment and dropped off to sleep.

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Their very enjoyable nap was cut short by a sharp banging on the door. Willow started, ripped unceremoniously out of a dream in which Tara fed her plump strawberries dipped in chocolate while gesturing carelessly at the ponies that grazed nearby. "All they want to do is watch," Tara assured her.



While Willow tended to snap more or less quickly to wakefulness, Tara was of the "I'll get there when I'm there" variety, which meant that she was now blinking slowly as if unwilling to accept this new state of consciousness. Her mumbled "Who's there?" came out as "Whuzr?"

"It's me," came the impatient reply. Willow and Tara looked at each other, realization edging into their eyes. "Dawn," Willow whispered unnecessarily.

"Coming, Sweetie," Tara answered quickly, moving to the door while smoothing her hair. She opened the door to a red-faced teenager who now knew that she was ancient.

Dawn moved into the room, standing between them with her arms crossed. Her expression, Willow thought, was both pleading and hostile. *And welcome to the reality that is Dawn.*

"Did you know?" she asked without preamble. "That I'm the Key?"

"Dawnie, please-can we get you something to drink? Do you want to sit down? We can-"

"Yes, Sweetie. We knew it." Tara's voice was soft but unapologetic. "Buffy told us last week, right after she found out. She's been trying to decide how to tell you since then."

"And you didn't say anything? You knew and you didn't tell me?" Dawn asked accusingly.

"Dawn, it wasn't our place," Willow argued, even as she realized that if the situation were reversed, she too would probably feel betrayed to discover that everyone had known and kept the secret from her.

"Oh, right," came the bitter retort. "It wasn't your place, *and* you didn't want to get involved."

"That's not true," Tara replied quickly. "We *are* involved, Dawn; we'll always be involved in your life. But Buffy's your sister; she had to be the one to decide-"

"Buffy's not my sister," Dawn hissed, biting out each word. "Buffy's *nothing*. She's just some security guard who has to watch out for me."

Willow felt anger surge through her. She loved Dawn, certainly, but she also had a fierce protectiveness toward her best friend. "You don't know how much she's agonized over this, Dawnie. She loves you. You *are* her sister, whether you believe it or not."

"Don't call me Dawnie." The voice was barely a whisper. "That person doesn't even exist. I don't have a name. I'm just a thing."

Willow saw that both she and Tara had tears shimmering in their eyes, while Dawn seemed beyond crying.

"Sweetie, we're so sorry. I know we can't understand what you're feeling; nobody can." Tara's voice was almost pleading. "But we do love you. We worry about you when you're upset, and

we're proud of your intelligence and your kindness and we hope and pray that you'll be happy in life-all the things that a family feels for each other."

Dawn turned to Tara, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "Family? I'm your little sister? Sure-I guess it's easier to talk about me that way than as some freak who fell in love with you."

Willow watched helplessly as a rather large cat emerged from its bag and batted her lover upside her head.

Tara struggled for words, a deep blush racing across her face. "Dawn, what do you m-mean? You have a c-crush on me?"

"I hate that word," Dawn spat. "It's so...*juvenile*. 'Oh, look-little Dawnie's got a crush. Isn't that just the cutest thing?'" She trembled for a moment, and then sank abruptly into the papasan chair, seemingly deflated. "It doesn't matter anyway. You're with Willow, I'm just a kid, and now it turns out that I'm not even a kid." She clutched a small pillow to her chest. "That time you took me to see 'Antonia's Line'? Never happened. Going to the library and then the Espresso Pump during the summer? We never did that. All those times when I just sat there being happy that you picked me to spend time with...you hadn't picked me at all." The tears were flowing once more.

Willow was struck with a sudden sense of voyeurism, a feeling that she was watching something intensely personal that didn't really involve her. Should she leave? Give them some time?

Her questioning was cut short as Tara reached out to squeeze her hand before moving over to sit on the floor beside Dawn, who refused to look at her. Willow followed, taking a seat on the bed to Dawn's left.

"Dawn, I don't know what to say," Tara began slowly. "And it's not because I think you're not human, and it's not because I'm freaked out about your feelings. I don't think it's juvenile, or cute, or anything like that. It hurts like hell to love someone who-who isn't available." She stole a quick glance at Willow, who could see that she was remembering the early days of their friendship. Looking back at Dawn, she continued, "I'm just a little awkward with this particular bit because I'm not used to the idea of someone falling for me. But that's my deal, not yours, OK?" Tara reached out and placed a tentative hand over Dawn's. This time, she didn't withdraw. When she spoke, though, her voice was almost unbearably sad.

"It still doesn't matter," she replied softly. "None of it's real. I'm not real."

Willow broke in, unable to keep silent. "You *are*, Dawn. I know what I feel; I know that I love you. When you hurt, I hurt. When you won that poetry contest two months ago, I was so proud of you. And you *did* do that; there's no question about that memory." She felt as if she were desperately trying to persuade a skeptic that the earth was round. It seemed so patently obvious and yet the skeptic had some very good reasons for her disbelief.

Tara leaned forward suddenly, her eyes intense. "Dawn, just what do you think *makes* somebody human? What's the litmus test?"

Dawn looked at her in irritation. "Is this going to turn into some philosophical discussion on the nature of existence? 'Cause that's just lame."

"Like hell it is," Tara retorted, much to Willow's amazement. She watched Dawn's eyes widen with surprise. "This entire *thing* is about the nature of existence." She sat back and shrugged. "But if you're not up to it, that's OK."

Willow could see Dawn's eyes practically blaze with indignation. "What do you mean, if I'm not up to it? Like, if I'm not smart enough?"

"I didn't say that," Tara replied placatingly. "I just meant that if you couldn't talk about such a complex thing, you could tell me and I'd understand."

"That's just five name-brands of bullshit," Dawn said angrily. "I may be fifteen, but I've read more than lots of people twice my age, and everybody I hang out with is all with the existential questioning. Except Xander and Anya," she added, seemingly as an afterthought. "They just fuck."

Willow was starting to find all the profanity a little heady. She fought the urge to call out "Damn straight!" just to be a part of the moment.

"So if you have the smarts for it, then, answer the question. What makes somebody human?" Tara cocked her head and waited.

Dawn fidgeted in the chair. Willow suddenly realized that Tara might be the only person with enough leverage to make Dawn think about such things. With Buffy or her mother or anyone else, Dawn would probably hurl some accusation and flounce off. Tara, though, she was most definitely afraid of pushing too far.

"OK, if you wanna get all abstract reasoning, I think that being human means that you feel the typical human feelings and...and that your body goes through lots of changes." She paused. "It means you're born and then you die. Hopefully, with some time in between." She stopped, and looked at Tara defiantly. "I wasn't born. I was...*made*, by a bunch of monks somewhere."

"I'll give you that," Tara replied evenly. "But everything else? If you're cut, you bleed. You're finite; you know that, right?" Dawn nodded slowly. "And let's face it, Sweetie, you definitely feel 'the typical human feelings.' We've all seen that." Dawn blushed furiously. "The one thing you *don't* fit on is the birth experience. Are you going to let a womb dictate your feelings? And remember, that feeling bit is a fundamental part of humanity-you said so yourself."

"It's not that simple," Dawn said with frustration. "You can't just take this whole news flash and reduce it to a math equation."

Tara rubbed her hand gently. "I know, Dawn. God, I know. If it *were* mathematical in nature, you can bet I wouldn't be contributing to this conversation at all." She sighed heavily. "But right now you're so ready to throw out everything we *all* feel, and I know this must be crazy-making

for you, Sweetie, but..." She trailed off, and drew a deep breath. "But I just don't want to lose you. It's rare, and precious, to have people in your life who you just know *belong* in your life. I'll be here for you, Dawnie, we both will. We'll help you any way we can and you can call us day or night to talk. Just please don't take yourself away from us. Please don't act like you're not human just because of how you came into this world."

Dawn was sobbing now. Tara half-pulled her out of the chair and down to the floor, where she gathered her into her arms and rocked her slowly. After a moment's hesitation, Willow slid off of the bed and joined them, partially enfolding Dawn in her own arms such that she and Tara created a kind of cocoon for the girl who huddled crying between them.

They sat that way for a long time, it seemed, the three of them entwined on the dorm floor—two powerful witches and an ancient mystical entity, all very real and all very human. Finally Dawn sniffled and tried, mostly unsuccessfully, to wipe her nose discreetly on her shirt sleeve. Willow and Tara pretended not to notice.

Sitting up slightly, Dawn muttered, "This is going to take a long time to get used to."

"I know, Sweetie," Tara nodded, brushing Dawn's hair back from her face. "But you know that we love you, right? That we'll do anything we can?"

"Yeah," came the soft reply.

"Listen, Dawn," Willow interjected suddenly. "Every teenager thinks she's special, right? That she's going through something so incredibly unique that no one else can relate; something that only she understands?"

"Right," Dawn answered slowly, a dim flicker of a smile crossing her lips.

"Well in your case, you're right!" Willow announced with gleeful certainty. "I mean, every girl in your class *thinks* she's something special. Every one of them *thinks* that no one can begin to grasp her complexity."

"Especially that bitch Christy," Dawn nodded grimly.

"Especially that skanked-up, cheap-ass, two-bit ho' Christy!" Willow exhorted, glad to be a part of the naughty talk, before catching Tara's alarmed look over Dawn's head. "Um, right, yes—especially that infinitely annoying person known as Christy. But Dawn," she continued, stroking the younger girl's hair and gazing steadfastly into her eyes, "Dawn, you *are* special. You *are* going through something that none of them can understand or compare to. You're millions of years old and six months old and even with all of that, you've managed to get yourself loved something silly by some of the more interesting people in this town. If I do say so myself," she added with a grin.

Looking once more at Tara, she saw the cobalt eyes shining with joy and...*Pride. She's proud of me.* No academic accomplishment had ever made Willow feel as proud as she did whenever she saw Tara looking at her with that expression.

"I guess that's true," Dawn said, a full-fledged grin now in place.

Willow could feel a twinge shooting down her back and knew that she should probably move to a more comfortable position, but years of experience on the Hell Mouth had taught her that truly sacred moments are incredibly rare, and not to be ended lightly. So she sat there, arms and legs entangled with two such beloved souls, and let herself concentrate on the late-day sun that warmed her back.

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## Part 17

"Do we have time to get coffee?"

"We'll *make* time to get coffee." Tara's answer came swiftly and decisively. "That part's non-negotiable."

"Duly noted, Most Beautifully Caffeine-Addicted One. It just means we have to leave within ten minutes if we want to get there on time."

Tara's hands stopped on their ascent to clasp her necklace, as she looked at Willow with amusement. "Will, Sweetie, have you ever been late for anything, ever?"

"Have I ever been late?" Willow snorted. "Pshaw...I'm late all the time. I've gotten so laid back I'm practically horizontal."

"Name one time," Tara challenged, fastening the leather cord.

Willow furrowed her brow, searching her memory banks for the surprisingly elusive funds.

"Well, um, I was late last month," she finally asserted defiantly.

"Late for what?" Tara asked in bewilderment.

"You know...*late*." When Tara only continued to stare at her, Willow added, her voice heavy with significance, "I was *late*-for my cycle. I was supposed to get my period on the 17th, and it didn't show up until the 20th. See? Late."

Tara fixed her with her most withering gaze. "Oh, yeah-we were so worried you might be pregnant. Each of us thought the other had taken care of the birth control." Seeing Willow's injured look, she smiled and pulled her girlfriend into her arms. "How do you manage to make neurotic idiosyncrasies so endearing?" she asked, rubbing her nose against Willow's, "when

somebody like Martha Stewart just makes me want to push her in front of a snow blower?" At Willow's horrified expression, she added, "Metaphorically, that is."

Slightly mollified, Willow replied with a shrug, "I just wrap all the neurotic parts up in the most appealing package I can muster, and then I throw in really, really good sex, just to be sure."

"Works like a charm," Tara laughed, pulling her jacket off of the stand. "And now, fair maiden, let us away to Sir Giles' humble dwelling."

Pulling the door closed behind her, Willow added, "Whence we can learn of ever-more perplexing goings-on involving mystical balls of energy made flesh."

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Half an hour later, they met up with Xander and Anya, settling down onto Giles' over-stuffed couch with small plates of scones. In response to their unspoken question, Giles noted, "Buffy and Dawn will be here in just a few minutes. Buffy called earlier to say that she needed to go to the drug store first and pick up some new medication for her mother."

"Is Mrs. Summers still feeling bad?" Tara asked, concern evident in her voice.

"I'm afraid so," Giles replied slowly. Willow thought she saw his hand tremble just slightly as he poured himself more tea. "Her head-aches have gotten worse; they're talking about giving her another MRI, as well as two or three more intrusive procedures." He sighed. "I'm frankly surprised Buffy's holding up as well as she is, considering all the added responsibilities she now has at home."

"Including Dawn," Xander commented. "She sorta combines work and family, in that 'Damn it, doesn't this ever get easier?' kinda way. Now, with her mom sick, Buffy feels like she has to handle that on her own."

"I agree," Giles nodded. "And Buffy's mother has always been a source of great comfort and strength to her."

"Especially since she came out," Willow added. Giles plunked the lovely porcelain tea pot down with rather less grace than he might have wished.

"Excuse me-did I miss something?" His eyebrows had lodged near his hairline.

"I mean since she told her mom about being the Slayer," Willow explained, remembering Joyce's initial disbelief and attempts to persuade Buffy that she could change.

"Ah, yes-I can see the parallel," Giles concurred. "But instead of discovering whom her daughter loved, Joyce learned that Buffy would face unspeakable dangers almost every night." He paused, his eyes filling with admiration and sadness and something else that Willow suspected he didn't

realize himself. "She handled such momentous news with more grace and courage than even *I* had believed possible."

*He worships her. He totally adores her, and he doesn't even know it.*

Willow suddenly felt desperately sad for all of the love that would never see the light of day under the constant threat of the Hell Mouth. Without conscious intention, she snuggled more closely to Tara, wanting to wrap herself around her beloved and keep her within her sight at all times, lest the heedless machinations of evil try to take her away.

Tara looked at her, a question in her eyes. Willow just gave her a tiny smile and rested her head on Tara's shoulder.

Silence held sway for a few moments, everyone lost in their own inner worlds of questions and fears and hopes. When Buffy's knock sounded on the door, there was a collective start within the room.

Dawn hadn't seen Giles, Xander or Anya since Buffy's disclosure. Now, she stood hesitantly just inside the door, looking from one person to another. Finally, she decided to focus on Willow and Tara, fixing them with a slight smile. Tara held out her hand, inviting Dawn to join them on the couch. Before she could reach them, however, Giles stepped forward tentatively.

"Dawn," he began, as she looked at him almost warily. "I just to say...I want you to know..." He shook his head as if angry at his fumbling. Willow noticed that Dawn's eyes were beginning to fill with tears. Finally, the Watcher reached out and rested one hand gently on her shoulder, looking at her steadily. "Dawn, I'm glad you're here."

He was offering her two gifts with his words, Willow realized, and she prayed that Dawn would let herself accept both of them. After a moment, she nodded briefly, and Giles took one step closer to the slender girl before him and wrapped her gently into his arms. Dawn froze for an instant, and then she was hugging him fiercely, tears sliding down her cheeks. "Thank you," she mumbled against his sweater vest.

Xander, as if reassured by this scene, came up to the two of them. As soon as they separated, he pulled Dawn close and said quietly, "Love you, Dawnster." They stood rocking for several moments. Anya seemed uncertain as to what she should do; probably, Willow surmised, because Anya really wanted to do this right. Finally, the ex-demon moved hesitantly to Xander's side. As Dawn pulled back from Xander, wiping her eyes, Anya began tentatively, "Um, Dawn..." Willow realized that everyone was watching this particular exchange with bated breath. "I just want to say that it totally weirded me out to go from being human to demon and then back to human again, and I've had over a millennium of practice. So if you ever want to talk about it or just bitch a little, I'm here. I'm especially good at bitching," she added, with greater confidence. Her eyes widened with surprise as Dawn first took her hand and then hugged her. A relieved smile worked its way across her face.

*She's so glad she didn't mess it up. Stuff like this, she **does** worry about saying the wrong thing.* Willow felt one of her increasingly frequent flashes of warmth for the person who had made her acquaintance by trying to cast Sunnydale back into a world of evil and darkness.

Buffy had watched all of this from several feet away. She seemed to be looking at Dawn with a mixture of protectiveness and fear. Willow caught her eye, and mouthed the words "It's OK." Buffy just smiled uncertainly and shrugged.

Dawn sank onto the end of the sofa, where she squeezed Willow's hand and murmured, "If I'm a key, maybe I *really* unlock people's inner warm fuzzies."

Willow grinned. "We're kinda sappy that way."

"So I noticed," Dawn replied, rolling her eyes, but her voice belied her relief and happiness at the outpouring of affection.

"So-as much as we would prefer not to, we should discuss Glory's plans for Dawn," Giles said reluctantly.

"Plans which will see the light of day over my dead body." Buffy spoke for the first time since her arrival, and her words evoked an anxiety so strong that none of them could speak of it. Dawn, Willow noticed, simply looked down at the rug as if wishing she could blend into the intricate fibers and emerge when the world made sense again.

Seeing the tension, Buffy added, "Glory doesn't get within a country mile of my sister; that's all there is to it."

Willow was startled to see the sullen expression that darted across Dawn's face. *If she says Buffy's not her sister, I'll scream.* But the diminutive brunette said nothing. Willow couldn't believe that Dawn would resent the very person who was sworn to protect her with her life.

"That would certainly be the best plan," Giles was saying, resuming his position at his desk. "Glory needs Dawn's energy for some reason. However, we don't know what that reason is just yet. Glory will try to learn the form and location of the Key; of that we can be most certain."

"OK, so this is all very confusing," Willow frowned. "The Key is essentially energy, right?"

"That basically captures it, yes," Giles nodded.

"And the monks, in order to hide it, made it human, right?"

"That's correct."

"And just to be doubly safe, they made the Key into the Slayer's sister, knowing she'd protect her with her life. Still right?"



"As always, Willow, you understand it as well as I do." Giles smiled at her affectionately.

"Well, I have to say-those were some stupid-ass monks," Willow huffed.

"Excuse me?" Giles started, as everyone stared.

"Oh come on-these guys have been protecting the Key for how many millennia now? Don't you think they could have come up with something a little more sophisticated?" Catching herself, she looked guiltily at Dawn. "I mean, most of all, I can't imagine Dawn not being with us. So in that sense, I don't want to seem all snotty or disapproving about their game plan. But from a logical perspective, why would they make it mortal in the first place? In the second place-and this is the part that really gets me-why would they send it here? Why would they plunk her right down on the Hell Mouth, where she'd be in the most danger? *And* they make her Buffy's sister...Buffy, who doesn't exactly lead a quiet life." She shook her head at the improbability of it all. "Why not make the Key a ball of lint in a dryer in Finland somewhere?" she asked in bewilderment.

"Finnish dryer lint?" Giles scoffed. "That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard."

"Well, I'm not saying it *should* have been lint; I'm just saying that it *could* have been lint. And what do you have against Finland, anyway?" she demanded, even as a small voice in her head suggested that perhaps they were getting off the subject.

"Will, the monks said they knew Buffy would protect it with her life," Xander reminded her. "That's why they sent Dawn here."

"But if they'd sent her somewhere else, she wouldn't *need* to be protected by the Slayer. They could have sent her somewhere else, in some form that Glory would never discover." She looked once again at Dawn, knowing that her words were painful for the girl beside her. But she needed to know; she needed to understand. She had never been comfortable with the kind of "Hell if I know, let's just fight it" approach taken by Xander and even Buffy, to some degree. "Dawn, you know that I wouldn't trade you for anything, don't you?" she asked urgently. "I just wanna understand this as much as I can, in order to fight it." Dawn gave her a sad shrug by way of response. Aching, Willow gripped her hand.

"I agree there are parts of this that don't make a great deal of sense," Giles acknowledged, sipping his tea with his customary thoughtfulness. "On the other hand, your questions may be moot. The facts remain: the monks transformed the Key into human form, namely Dawn; they sent Dawn to Buffy-to all of us-in order that she might be most fiercely protected." He looked at Dawn and added quietly, "And so she shall be."

But Dawn merely gave an almost imperceptible nod, and continued staring at the rug. Willow started at the sound of Tara's voice next to her. "Dawn, you know we'll protect you, don't you?" From her proximity, Willow could see Dawn's jaw working furiously as she fought to choke back her emotions. After a moment, she turned to face Tara.

"I know you'll protect me, Tara-all of you, especially you, Buffy," she said, despair in her eyes as she looked at them all in turn. Finally her gaze rested on her sister. "But-it's so hard...Not just being the Key, although that pretty much out-sucks anything else I've been through." She paused, trying to collect her emotions. "It's like I go from being a burden because I'm the tag-along younger sister to being a really huge, scary, awful burden because if anything happens to me, for all we know the world ends." She swiped at her eyes with the hem of her sleeves. "Just once, I wish I'd walk into a room and know that everyone there was glad to see me." She fell utterly silent.

Willow drew a shaky breath and rested her hand tentatively on the younger girl's back. When Dawn didn't shrink from the touch, she rubbed gentle circles across the light blue fabric.

*How can I get her to see that we've **all** felt that way, at least all of us besides Buffy? I'll bet even Giles was an outsider when he was younger, all tweedy and obsessed with vampires and demons.* How many times had she walked into the cafeteria as a girl and sat down alone because it was too humiliating to stand there and hope somebody would wave to her? How many birthday parties had she attended where she could tell that the only reason she'd been invited was because the kid's mother had insisted on it?

But Dawn was beyond easy consolation right now; beyond any assurances that she wasn't as alone as she believed. She gazed helplessly at Tara, hoping that she would have some idea of what to do. Tara was looking at Dawn with sad, gentle eyes.

"Sweetie, even if I tell you that I *am* glad to see you, whenever I see you, you won't believe me. Right now it would just feel like empty words. But I am-even if you don't believe it, I know it's true." She faltered briefly. "I just hope-I hope you try to hang onto that, at least a little bit, until you start to feel it inside."

Dawn seemed to be spiraling into anger now, though; Willow could feel the bitterness start to roll off of her. "Maybe you feel that way, Tara, but that's only because you don't live with me." She threw a venomous look at Buffy. "My sister, though-it's pretty clear she wishes I weren't in the picture."

Buffy recoiled as if slapped. "How can you say that?" she asked, her voice equal parts shock and frustration.

"It's not hard to tell," Dawn retorted. "You walk around all upset and stressed out; you're always trying to figure out what to do about me. You never tell me what's going on. You get angry at me if I do the littlest thing." She crossed her arms and dropped sullenly back into the couch.

For a moment Willow thought that Buffy might actually hyperventilate. She'd never seen her best friend look so agitated. Finally, she crossed the room and came to stand in front of her younger sister.

"In the first place, I'm stressed out because I have this little gig where I fight vampires all the time. It gets me a little tense, I guess; maybe I should switch to decaf. In the second place, yes,

I'm upset about you and I'm trying to figure out what to do about you because you're my sister and I love you and the thought of anything happening to you makes me so crazy I think I'll just explode. You want to know what's going on? Hell, *I* don't know what's going on half the time, Dawn. I'm making this up as I go along and I'm ashamed to admit it because I'm *supposed* to know. I'm supposed to have everything figured out when it comes to the scary stuff. But OK, I'd want in on the intell more myself if I were you, so I'll try to do a better job at it." She stopped, and closed her eyes for a moment before leaning forward to peer at the girl on the sofa in front of her. "And as far as getting mad at you for every little thing? *That* is because you're a fourteen-year-old girl who gets into my stuff and spills soda on my leather pants-which you are *so* not allowed to borrow-and you don't tell me about it so the pants get ruined. And I think, in the middle of all this chaos and mayhem and danger, is it really expecting too much that my favorite pants not get carbonated gunk all over them? Is it?" And with that final question, so obviously rhetorical in her mind, Buffy sat down on the coffee table in front of them, narrowly missing the dish of jam for the scones.

A heavy silence hung over them all, each wondering what words might come flying next. Willow tightened her grip on Tara's hand; turning, she saw that Tara was crying openly. *My baby has seen too much family drama in the past few days.*

Looking back at Buffy and Dawn, barely two feet apart and staring each other down like miniature bulls, Willow realized that she was holding her breath, not wanting any sound to disrupt the quiet before one of the sisters did.

After an interval that was far too long for Willow's comfort, Dawn tilted her head just slightly. Almost inaudibly, she muttered, "I tried to get the soda off your pants. I just didn't know how. I panicked."

Stealing a quick glance at her best friend, Willow saw a faint ripple of relief wash over her face, before she replied, "Well, one crazy idea might have been to ask Mom about it; or hey-you could have done something *really* extreme and taken them to a dry-cleaner."

"Spent all my allowance on clothes," Dawn shrugged, finally meeting Buffy's eyes.

"Of course you did," Buffy replied, rolling her eyes. "*There's* something totally unpredictable...to anyone who's had their brainstem filled with Slurpee mix."

*So **one** apocalypse, of the emotional variety, has been averted. Let's see if we can go 2-for-2.*

Dawn gave Buffy a small conciliatory grin. Buffy, in turn, proceeded to swing around and wiggle her way onto the couch, creating a space between Willow and Dawn. "Make room, ladies. We got one more on board."

The force of said wiggling left Willow, not reluctantly, half-sprawled over Tara's chest. "Hey, Buff," she said, in feigned chagrin, "watch the hips."

"Sorry," the Slayer said, cheerfully, draping one arm over Dawn's shoulder. "Slayer strength and all."

"More like Slayer *ass*," Willow grumbled, but was hardly in a mood to begrudge her friend's forcefulness, especially since it paid off so handsomely for her in the form of being practically pasted onto Tara's very receptive body. She looked up to see Tara smiling at her, the darkening of her eyes telling Willow that her girlfriend was thinking *very* naughty thoughts. Suddenly it seemed to her that they had been at Giles for quite long enough, even though they had generated no game plan.

*Plan, shman-I wanna go home and heat up some Tara-Tots. This breast woman is hungry.*

As Giles cleared his throat in a peremptory fashion, however, she realized that the meeting was far from adjourned. "Again, as much as I hate to say this, we really should talk more about Glory...what we know, what we suspect, and especially how we fight her."

Buffy looked up, tightening her grip on Dawn's shoulder. "Well, I can tell you that she's stronger than anybody I've ever fought, with the possible exception of Adam. When I went up against him at the end, I had three other people lending me their particular ass-kicking strengths. But at the warehouse, when I found the monk...nothing seemed to faze her, not even a little bit. The worst part is, I almost had the sense she was playing with me. I mean, I have this very unpleasant feeling that I was lucky to get out." Looking at Dawn, she added, "All of which just means that we have to look extra hard to find Waldo. She has a weakness; we just have to find it."

"Could there be more than one Key?" Anya spoke for the first time since greeting Dawn.

"I don't think so," Buffy replied slowly. "From what the monk said, the Key's pretty much a one-shot deal." Giving Dawn a sardonic smile, she added, "I've always said there could be only one Dawn Summers." Dawn smirked in return and kicked her.

"So, then, we know that Glory-" Giles was interrupted by the ringing of the telephone. "Oh-excuse me just a moment." He answered softly, "Hello?"

He frowned suddenly in confusion. "Buffy Summers? May I ask who's calling?"

Willow watched, her blood growing colder with each second, as Giles' face grew pale. "Yes, yes-of course. Just a moment." Placing the receiver against his chest, he spoke with difficulty. "Buffy, it's the hospital. It's your mother."

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*Not again. I can't do this again.*

The smells were unmistakable, inexorable. When you left, they clung to you, reminders of your own vulnerability. How many hours had she spent in a place like this? How many hours had she lost track of, one following the other with growing sameness until 3pm was indistinguishable

from 8am? She could have easily told them where the vending machines were; where the bathrooms were; where to find the shaded little area outside where people went to pretend that they were just enjoying a breath of fresh air, like all the anonymous other people that they now envied.

She didn't say all of this, though. Instead, she sat quietly across from Joyce's daughters, holding Willow's hand. She could feel her girlfriend's agitation and fear; it radiated from her in periodic bursts of helpless energy.

When they had first left for the hospital, tumbling into two cars, they knew only that Joyce had collapsed and been taken to the hospital. She carried several different contact numbers for Buffy, Giles included. That was all they knew.

But now, watching the physician walking toward them, her white jacket almost glaring under the fluorescent lights, Tara knew more than the others. She knew more than she wanted to. She had seen that face before, on a different doctor, and though she didn't know the details, she did know that in a matter of seconds Buffy and Dawn would be thrust into a new reality.

"You're Mrs. Summers' daughters?" the doctor asked, her tone suggesting that she already knew the answer based on the two young women who had disentangled themselves from the others and now stood before her.

"Yeah-yes. I'm Buffy, and this is my sister Dawn."

*She lives by protecting others, killing the things that go bump in the night. How will she endure this?*

"I'm Dr. Santiago. I'm a neurosurgeon here. A neighbor who was supposed to have coffee with your mother got worried when she didn't answer the door. She looked in through the window and saw your mother laying on the floor. She called the ambulance."

*Don't draw this out. Please. Let them know.*

"It appears that your mother suffered a massive stroke. I suspect she had no warning, because there's no evidence that she was trying to reach the phone."

She could see from their expressions that they were still untold leagues away from grasping what they were being told. "Stroke" was bad, it was scary, but people survived. They hadn't let the "massive" make it through their filters, though. More than anything, this was their mother, which meant that she would be with them for many, many years. This was their reality, and she knew that children don't easily accept new truths about their parents.

"But she's going to be OK, right?" Dawn had crossed her arms, her tone practically daring the woman in front of her to contradict her.

"I'm so sorry, but your mother experienced extensive damage to her brain and her heart. She must have gone several minutes without breathing. We worked on her for a long time, trying to save her."

She saw that Buffy had gone stark white; even her lips looked pale. "What-what are you saying?"

The doctor's eyes, she could see now, were kind, and exhausted. *She's had to do this so many times before, and she keeps thinking she should find a better way to do it.*

"We did manage to establish a pulse, and we now have her on total life support, but I'm afraid that there's no way she could breathe on her own. Your mother is clinically brain dead."

And there was the D word; only this time it hid behind a qualifier, unwilling to collect its ransom openly. It lurked behind another word, and that partial obscuring would let hope linger for at least a few minutes more.

Giles, she noticed, had reached out to brace himself against a wall. *He never told her. Did he know himself? Before this moment?*

Tears were streaming down Willow's face, and she didn't bother to wipe them. She reached out one hand as if to touch Buffy's back, but then paused, hovering indecisively. Turning, she burrowed into Tara's arms and wept soundlessly.

Xander just stood mutely, shaking his head. Anya stared first at him, and then at the doctor, her gaze becoming sad and frightened.

And Buffy and Dawn just gripped each other's hands as if they could fuse their pulses into one and give it to their mother.

"But she *is* breathing?" Dawn asked, her voice almost insistent. "She's still alive?"

"Only in the most minimal, technical sense. Machines are breathing for her. They're pumping her blood. She has no brain activity of any kind."

"Are you-are you saying that our mother has no chance at recovery?" Buffy's voice, though it seemed to come from far away, was remarkably steady.

"I'm taught never to make absolute predictions about life and death," Dr. Santiago replied slowly, "but the chances of your mother awakening are virtually negligible. It would constitute a miracle, in my opinion."

"Then let's get another opinion," Dawn blurted desperately.

"You can certainly do that. I encourage it, in fact. Believe me, if another physician says that there's a better outlook for your mother, I would be so happy to be wrong."

*But you're not wrong. You know you're not wrong.*

"Doctor, if you're right...if our mother has no realistic chance of recovery, what-" Buffy stopped, closing her eyes. "What should we do?"

Dr. Santiago replied evenly, "The machines are keeping her alive at this point. It will be your decision whether to maintain that or to have us take her off of those machines."

"And if we do? Take her off the machines?" The words were practically a whisper.

"The overwhelming likelihood is that she would die within a short time; probably a matter of hours."

"No!" Dawn shouted. Several people turned to stare at her in voyeuristic curiosity. "No, we won't do it! We can't!" She grabbed her sister by the wrists. "We can't do that, Buffy!"

"Dawn, we'll get a second opinion. We'll-we'll talk about it and figure out what to do." She looked back at the doctor. "We...we have time, right?" Tara saw the compassion behind the doctor's quick nod; she suspected Buffy did as well. Time, they most certainly did have.

"Would you like me to suggest another physician you could talk to about this? I really do encourage you to seek another opinion."

"Yes...thank you," Buffy replied. The doctor quickly scribbled the information on a notepad that she produced from her jacket.

"Dr. Brunard has been in practice for over twenty years. He works at St. John's. He's a highly respected neurosurgeon, and he'll be honest and direct with you."

"Thank you," Buffy repeated automatically.

"And this is how you can reach me," Dr. Santiago continued, adding her own name and pager number to the sheet.

*Thank you for not saying "Here's my card." Mom's oncologist did that and I wanted to choke the breath right out of him.*

Buffy looked up suddenly. "Where is she? Can we see her?"

"Of course. I'll show you the way." She nodded toward the hallway from which she had first emerged.

Buffy turned to face them. "Dawn and I are going to see Mom," she said simply, and then turned back to follow the doctor.

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The rest of the day was a hazy, surreal combination of frenetic activity and waiting. The group left the hospital, minus Buffy and Dawn, a little over an hour after the doctor had delivered the news. Tara and Willow went to the store and bought lunch-meats and other sources of quick meals, using the key that Willow had been given years ago to enter the house and put the perishables in the refrigerator. They also made a lasagna that Buffy and Dawn could heat up for that evening. And they tried to call Hank Summers. After two failed attempts from the hospital pay phone, Buffy had asked them to continue trying to contact her father.

"What do you want us to tell him, exactly?" Willow asked anxiously.

"Tell him he's exactly the prick I've been thinking he is," Buffy muttered, looking over her shoulder to ensure that Dawn hadn't overheard them. But her sister was still gazing at their mother, silent and unmoving among the artificial creatures that did the work of living for her.

Then she shook her head. "Just tell him what happened. If he asks what he should do-and **that** would be a first-tell him to let me know when I can reach him and I'll go over everything with him." She looked back toward their mother's room. "I-I wanna get back in there with Mom and Dawn."

"Of course," they'd answered in unison. "Do you think you'll be home later?" Willow added.

"What? Oh, yeah. Hospital visiting hours are over at 8. We should be home a little after that." And then she had left to sit with her mother.

At a little past 8:30, Tara heard them come through the door. If they were talking to each other, it was inaudible to her. She listened to the staccato-burst of Dawn's footsteps as she pounded up the stairs to her room.

"Buffy? Dawn?" Willow called out, looking up from the homework that Tara knew she really wasn't seeing.

Buffy walked slowly into the kitchen, dropping her bag onto the floor as if it had become the final piece of a burden she could no longer carry. She sank onto a stool near the counter. Her eyes weren't red; they were vacant, and exhausted.

"How are you? How's your mom?" Willow's anxiety tumbled out of her in the form of her questions. Tara said nothing.

"Mom is... Mom is in a coma and I don't think she's going to wake up." And in saying the words, Tara saw, Buffy came to believe them and she watched the proud Slayer crumple before her, wrapping her arms around herself as if afraid to trust anyone else's grasp and weeping noiselessly into the abyss of her self-embrace.

Willow started forward as if to take Buffy into her arms, but then she hesitated, perhaps sensing, as Tara did, that Buffy needed them near her, but not touching her.



*Some part of her is always alone. Is it right to try to break through that? Does it help her do what she has to do?*

So they watched, pain etched across their own faces, as Buffy convulsed with sobs; throughout, she made no sound. When she stopped, she did so abruptly, as if deciding that it served no purpose to continue. She stood and walked mutely to the sink, lowering her face to splash cold water over it with methodical sweeps.

"What-what about the second opinion?" Willow asked hesitantly.

*She wants to make it better. With everything she's seen, she doesn't really understand that people can die of ordinary things like strokes and cancer. She hasn't seen that kind of death yet.*

Buffy just shook her head. "I reached Dr. Brunard. He's going to come by in the morning and check on her, and talk to Dr. Santiago. But when I explained what she'd said, he pretty much confirmed the outlook. He said that when the brain is deprived of oxygen for the amount of time that Mom probably was, there's rarely anything to be done. The body can be kept alive, but the person's mind is just...gone." The last word was uttered as if a pronouncement.

"Buffy, I'm so sorry," Willow whispered. "I wish...Oh God, I wish I could do something."

"You're a witch," Buffy replied, her voice expressionless. "Can you undo this?"

*Oh sweet goddess, no...Don't-please don't ask those things of us. Don't ask them of anyone.*

But then the Slayer gave a mirthless smile. "Aside from that, you're doing everything you can."

*Thank you. Because if I wouldn't do it for my own mother, I wouldn't do it for yours.*

"And Dawn?" Tara managed to say. "She must be a wreck."

"Right now she's angry. I think that's probably easier for her to handle than being sad."

"Angry?" Willow echoed, mystified. "About this happening?"

"Oh, I'm sure that's in there somewhere," Buffy replied, shaking her head. "Dawn's never too far from being pissed about something. Mostly, though, she's angry with me."

"For what?" From the tone in Willow's voice, Tara knew that her beloved was feeling protective of her best friend.

Buffy was silent for several moments. "She's angry because she knows that if there really *isn't* any chance for Mom to recover, I'll want to take her off the machines." She turned and looked at them evenly. "Does that make me a heartless, ungrateful daughter?"

"Oh God, no, Buffy!" Willow's reply was immediate, and forceful. "You're an incredible person; an incredible daughter. How can you think such a thing?"

Buffy didn't answer; instead, she gazed at Tara, her expression unreadable. "Tara, I notice you haven't voted on the subject."

Tara held her gaze. "Did your mother ever say what she wanted? Did she ever talk about something like this?"

Buffy nodded. "As a matter of fact, she did. Her cousin was in a car accident, about three years ago. I only met him twice, but they were pretty close growing up. He was on life-support for over a year. Mom visited him three or four times-if you can call them visits," she added bitterly. "She said he just wasted away. He had to be turned in bed to keep from getting bedsores...He just lay there, hour after hour. She said-she said that if anything like that ever happened to her, she didn't want to be kept alive like that. She said she didn't want to run up a gigantic hospital bill if she couldn't enjoy the fine cuisine." Buffy smiled sadly, even as a shudder rippled through her.

"Then I think you're being the daughter she needs you to be," Tara replied, feeling that she could now give an answer she believed in. "Does Dawn know about this?" she continued.

"I tried to explain on the way home, but she wouldn't listen. She refuses to even think about Mom not waking up. When I tried to talk about it, she just said I was giving up on Mom." She swallowed heavily. "I think that if I hadn't been driving, I would have slapped her. Which makes me glad I was driving," she added.

"Did your mom leave any kind of living will? Anything that would make her wishes clear?" Willow asked reluctantly.

"I don't think so," Buffy replied heavily. "I know she made her will, but I'm pretty sure she didn't include anything to cover something like this." She dropped her head again. "I can't even believe I'm having this conversation," she whispered.

After a moment, Tara ventured quietly, "Buffy, do you mind if I go up and talk to Dawn? Or just see if she wants to talk?"

Buffy didn't look up as she answered, "No, that's good. You're probably one of the few people she'd actually want to see at this moment. God knows *I'm* not."

Tara allowed her hand to slide quickly over Buffy's shoulder as she walked past her. As she made her way up the stairs, she could hear her beloved and the Slayer talking in low, disjointed tones.

She paused briefly in front of Dawn's door, considering the huge "Keep Out!" sign. It was just like Dawn, she realized-hoping to convey an air of guardedness even as its very presence practically begged you to take a closer look. She knocked lightly once, and then again.

"Go away," came the sullen reply.

"Dawn, it's me-Tara." She heard Dawn blow her nose, and then the door swung open. Dawn's face, she thought, was a whirling mosaic of anger, grief, shock, and fear.

"Can I come in?" she asked quietly, not wanting to take the door-opening as a tacit invitation.

"Yeah." Dawn stepped aside to let Tara in. Looking around quickly, Tara noticed a large Justin Timberlake poster tacked up inches away from an even larger "Xena" one.

"Dawnie, I'm so sorry about your mom; about her stroke," Tara began.

"She's going to get better," Dawn cut in, her tone suggesting that anyone who disagreed was simply mistaken.

"I hope so," Tara replied carefully. "But what if she doesn't?"

"She's going to!" Anger washed over the teenager like handfuls of hot water. "That other doctor is coming tomorrow and he'll be able to tell us stuff this one couldn't. He'll spot something she missed."

"I really hope so, Sweetie," Tara repeated. "That would be wonderful. But Dawn-what if he doesn't?"

Dawn glared at her, tears forming at the perceived betrayal. "I thought that you of all people would be on my side, Tara. You know what Buffy wants to do? If this doctor says the same thing, Buffy wants to let Mom die!"

Tara struggled to keep her voice even. "Dawn, do you really think that's what Buffy *wants* to do? Or is that what she knows she *should* do, based on what your mother told her?"

"I never heard that conversation," Dawn retorted.

*Because you didn't exist at the time.* But she only replied, "Do you think she's lying?"

Dawn just turned away, shrugging her shoulders.

"Do you think for one instant that Buffy wouldn't move heaven and earth to make your mom better?" she continued. "Because if you don't, you don't know your sister very well. And I think you actually know her better than pretty much anybody."

After a long silence, Dawn muttered through clenched teeth, "Maybe she just doesn't want the inconvenience of having to care for an invalid mother. It would get in the way of her slaying duties."

With that, patience give way to anger.

*Enough, dammit! I've had enough!*

She reached out and spun Dawn around to face her. "Listen, Dawn-you're not the only one hurting in this household. Your older sister is downstairs trying to hold it together because something awful has happened to your mother and your father is AWOL and she's *terrified*, Dawn-absolutely terrified. So if you're so hell-bent on everyone giving you a little more credit for your maturity, this would be a damn fine time to show it."

Dawn looked at her, eyes wide and disbelieving. "Are you telling me you would've let *your* mom die? That you would have pulled the plugs and just let her die?"

Pain ripped through her. *Ah, goddess-will it always hurt like this?*

She gripped Dawn's shoulders. "I *did* let my mother die! She went through so much chemotherapy, so much radiation that by the end there was practically nothing left of the woman I knew...nothing except her eyes and her smile and her mind, and she used that mind to decide she wanted to come home and die there. Do you think that's what I wanted? You think I wouldn't have walked to hell and back just to see her smile at me one more time? But she knew what she wanted, and she could decide for herself. Your mom doesn't *have* her mind, Dawn. Her mind is already gone. Except she told Buffy what she wanted, and now you have to grow up even more and face that fact."

She could feel Dawn trembling under her hands. Or was it her hands that were shaking, rippling through to the slender frame before her? It was a moot point, though, because Dawn had thrown her arms around Tara's back and buried her face in her shoulder. Sobs wracked her young frame; unlike her sister, though, Dawn's cries were fierce and unmistakable.

"I can't lose her," she finally managed. "I just can't."

*But you will*, Tara thought sadly, even as she murmured, "I know, Sweetie...I know..."

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## **Part 18**

*"I've made up my mind. I want to go home."*

*"But what about your treatment? What about seeing the doctors?"*

*"That time is over, Honey. It's been over for awhile now."*

*"Don't say that, Mom. Maybe you just need more chemo."*

*"What I need is to be in my own home, in my own bed. The doctors have already said that any more treatment would only add two or three weeks, if that."*

*"But that's better than nothing, Mom. That's better than..." She wouldn't say its name. She wouldn't acknowledge its victory.*

*But now her mother had tears in her own eyes. "No, Tara, it's not. I'm so tired, Honey, and I just can't go through the hell of chemo again, not just for an extra few days of being sick. I can't stand the smell of this place and I can't see the trees or the flowers and I just want to go home. Please, Tara-I need to go home."*

*And then she understood, or rather, she let herself understand, and in her mind, she took yet another step on her own journey of realizing that she would lose her mother. Not next year, or even next month, but very soon. As she took that step, she gathered strength to her heart and then gave it to her mother.*

*"OK, Mom. I understand. We'll take you home."*

*Her mother's smile defied its own exhaustion and reached out to drape itself around her beloved daughter, who was now saying that the honeysuckle was just about to bloom and she would make sure that there were always fresh cuttings in her room.*

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When Buffy walked into the kitchen after her meeting with Dr. Brunard, Willow knew the outcome of the meeting by virtue of having known Buffy for five years. Tara knew the outcome by virtue of her ability to read other people's sadness, those emotions they tried so hard to keep tucked behind the more acceptable and convenient displays of lightness and optimism.

"What did he say?" Willow asked, even as she fought to keep her voice steady.

"What I thought he'd say," Buffy replied flatly. Her eyes told them that she had believed him, known what it meant.

"Does Dawn know?" Tara asked softly.

"Yeah. She came with me. I didn't want her to, but I couldn't see telling her she couldn't. She's her daughter too. I mean..." She trailed off, shaking her head.

"No, you're right," Willow said with surety. "Dawn *is* your mom's daughter. That's what you all feel. That's what's real."

"Reality-now *there's* a concept that's lost most of its meaning for me lately," Buffy laughed hollowly.

Tara and Willow just looked at each other. There really wasn't much that they could say to that.

After a moment, Buffy continued, "She had a melt-down in the car...Actually, I'm glad she's letting it out. It's scarier when she just locks her feelings away and closes herself off."

*She has no idea how ironic those words are, coming from her.* Tara just nodded.

"Buffy, I'm sorry, but we still haven't been able to reach your dad," Willow broke in, her voice filled with regret and barely-disguised anger. "We've left a ton of messages, and each time we make it more explicit, but we can't seem to find an actual person to talk to. It's always his voice mail."

"Why should *you* be sorry?" Buffy replied, her own anger not disguised in the least. "And you know, I think I'm just about through using the term 'Dad' to refer to that bastard. He doesn't deserve it." She grimaced bitterly, pushing her scarcely-touched glass of juice away from her. "I can't remember the last thing he did right."

"It was probably a little over twenty years ago," Willow commented softly, drawing a small, grateful smile from her best friend.

"Sweetie, is there anything we can do?" Tara asked gently. "Is there anything you need? Errands, or details?"

Buffy just shook her head, finally looking up at them with eyes that seemed to have grown older in the space of a day. "Can you tell me this isn't happening and not lie?"

Tara's heart squeezed until she almost winced. *"Maybe just a little more chemo, Mom...Maybe one more round would do it."*

Finally Buffy stood up, squaring her shoulders in what Tara realized was becoming a habit with the Slayer. "I'm going to go talk to Dawn. I have to-we have to make a decision." As she reached the kitchen doorway, she turned, not quite facing them directly. "What you're doing, for us..." Tara saw her fingers grip reflexively against the door post. "Mom would appreciate it more than she could say. *I appreciate it more than I can say.*" And then she was striding down the hallway toward the stairs.

Tara realized that she was squeezing Willow's hand so tightly that her partner's fingers were reddening. "Sorry," she whispered, as Willow turned and enfolded her in an embrace of surpassing gentleness and sorrow.

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Over an hour later, Buffy emerged from Dawn's bedroom and found Willow and Tara reading-or pretending to read-on the couch, propped up against opposite ends with their feet rubbing against one another in an unconscious habit. They looked up as she entered the room.

"Buffy?" Willow said softly. "Are you OK? Oh God, I'm sorry-what a stupid question...I mean, are you as OK as you can be?" Tara watched her lover's face crease with sadness and anxiety,

and her heart ached for the sincerity with which Willow so wanted to do the right thing for those she loved.

For a moment, Tara thought that Buffy hadn't heard her. But then she shook her head, as if forcing her thoughts into some kind of order, and looked at them. "You know, I don't think I could answer that question if you held a gun to my head-which I almost wish someone would, just to make this all go away." She walked slowly to the couch and stood above them, looking at Tara.

"She wants to talk to you," she said simply. Tara gave a small start of surprise, and she felt a momentary ripple of guilt as she saw the quick look of hurt that crossed Willow's face before she could stop herself. *Oh, Sweetie-this isn't the kind of credibility you want to have.*

She disentangled herself from Willow's legs and rose from the couch. Within seconds, she was knocking on Dawn's door. "Dawnie? It's me."

Her first thought, upon entering the room, was that Dawn had shrunk somehow; that grief and rage had conspired to bend her little body further in on itself. Stepping closer, though, she could see that Dawn had huddled into a tiny ball, knees drawn tightly up to her chest, arms wrapped fiercely about her legs. *As if she can make herself so small that reality doesn't notice her.*

She sat down gently on the bed, reaching out one hand tentatively to rest on Dawn's arm. When the younger girl looked up, Tara was surprised to see that her eyes, though red, were now dry.

"You heard?" she asked quietly, gazing at Tara.

"Yeah, Sweetie. Buffy told us. I'm so sorry." How many times had she said that lately? To Dawn; to Buffy; to Donnie. The phrase seemed a fixture now, a staple of the language she used to make contact with others. Before her, Dawn stared almost vacantly.

"I don't know what to do," she finally whispered. "I heard what that doctor said, and what the other one said, and I know they wouldn't lie to us. But I still can't believe it."

*Precious one, if disbelief made any difference, my mother would visit Willow and me all the time, and she would teach our children how to make bread and grow herbs.* But these were words that you simply didn't say.

Instead, she asked, "You can't believe it? Or you're trying *not* to?"

But Dawn didn't answer. "We went back to the hospital to see Mom after we talked to the second doctor. I kept thinking I was seeing her eyelids opening. I kept staring and staring, thinking, 'Any minute now. She'll wake up and she'll be sorta groggy at first but then things will clear up and she'll have to stay in the hospital for another day, just for some tests, but they'll all come back OK and on the way home we'll talk about Thanksgiving dinner. Any minute now.' But she didn't, and finally I had to stop looking because my eyes hurt. Then I felt guilty because I looked away and maybe that was the one moment when she could have opened her eyes, if I'd just been

looking at her." Dawn was rocking slightly now, an almost imperceptible to-and-fro to some inner rhythm.

Tara just listened, and remembered standing at her mother's casket at the visitation, watching her chest for any sign of movement. Several times, she was certain that she had detected a slight rising, but a prolonged gaze proved her false. She knew, though, that it was imperative that she keep looking because if her mother did gain breath once again, she would need Tara to see it and save her; prove all of this to be blasphemy. But the breathing never came, and Tara finally had to leave the funeral parlor with her father and brother. The next day, at the funeral, she did the same thing until they finally wheeled her mother's casket to the back of the tiny church and sealed the coffin. The funeral director gave one of the keys to Donnie, and the other to her. She kept it in a velvet-lined box that was opened with a tiny hidden spring-latch.

Tara gently rubbed Dawn's arm. "It's so wrong, isn't it? You know this shouldn't be happening, but it is. Feeling helpless when someone you love is hurting-it has to be one of the worst things in the world."

When Dawn looked back at her this time, Tara could see that the tears were edging closer. "When your mom decided not to keep doing the chemo...Did you try to talk her out of it?"

The wrenching grief surged through her once more. When she trusted herself to speak, she answered slowly, "Yeah, Dawnie-I did. At first, anyway. I thought that if more treatment could give her more time, then of course she should do it." She drew a deep, shuddering breath and took both of Dawn's hands in her own. "I've never told anyone this, Sweetie-I don't like to think about it. But part of me was angry with her. Like, she had the chance to live longer and she decided not to. It felt like...like she had the chance to stay with *me* longer, and she decided not to. And I know that's not how it was; I knew it intellectually even then. But I just wanted my mother to stay with me as long as she could and it was so hard not to feel like that wasn't as important to her. Oh goddess," she whispered, sobs choking her voice, "it still hurts to remember that." She tried to gather herself together, remembering the aching girl who sat before her. She became dimly aware that Dawn was now rubbing *her* arms.

*I'm supposed to be comforting her*, she told herself desperately, fighting to still her own sobs.

But Dawn, she would later realize, was making one of those quiet leaps into her own looming adulthood. Maturity didn't proceed in an orderly, uniform fashion. It crept and raced in turns. Dawn was older now than when she had first folded into herself on her bed two hours ago.

"I have to let her go, don't I?" The words were so quiet that Tara first wondered if she had imagined them. Looking through her own blurred vision, she saw Dawn gazing at her with tears sliding heedlessly down her cheeks.

"If Mom can't ever get better, I have to let her go. Don't I?" She was looking at Tara so intently that the very air seemed to hang suspended, waiting.



*Oh dear goddess...Does it fall to me to answer that; to confirm what she already knows? Do I have to be the verdict's voice?*

"Dawn, Sweetie..." She struggled to find words, to find her voice. "Dawn, you don't *have* to do anything. That's what makes this so hard, I think-when we have a choice, instead of having the hardest choices made for us." She bit her lip, and then took Dawn's face in her hands. *She's so tiny...* "But I think you know what your mother would ask you to do. And...and I think you have the courage to do it."

With the words, Dawn's sobs wrenched out of her from some deep place that Tara recognized; and because she recognized it, she knew that the time of words was now over and so she pulled Dawn closer as love and grief washed through her and spilled out onto and all around the slight form within her arms.

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The next twenty-four hours passed with the blithe indifference of Death moving freely among them all.

Buffy and Dawn had talked until early evening. At their request, Giles, Xander, and Anya came over to the house a little after 8. Tara and Willow had already agreed to stay for at least two or three more days. Willow had tried Hank Summers once more, this time leaving the message that the mother of his children was dying and that she hoped his secretary was doing well.

"Very bitter," Tara commented, her tone holding no reproach at all.

"Very satisfying," Willow replied simply.

Anya sat in Xander's lap, but there was nothing sexual in the act. To Tara, it appeared that she was clinging to her boyfriend as if needing constant proof that the anchor of her *own* life still breathed. Giles, she realized, had probably not slept at all the night before. He had also cut himself, more than once, while shaving. She had never seen him look so nakedly vulnerable before, and her heart ached for him.

*Every day. I will tell Willow how much I love her every single day that I get to walk through life with her.*

The two sisters sat together on the couch, holding hands. Though Buffy did most of the speaking, Tara noticed gratefully that she looked frequently to Dawn for support and verification.

"Dawn and I have been talking pretty much all day," she began. "From everything the doctors have said, there's really no chance that Mom will come out of her coma. Right now, the machines are breathing for her and keeping her heart beating." She paused; Tara could see her hand shaking within Dawn's grip. "Dawn and I both agree that Mom wouldn't want to be kept alive like that."

Tara saw Giles start at the words. "What-what are you saying?" he asked hoarsely.

Buffy opened her mouth to speak, and couldn't. Finally, she squeezed her eyes shut and whispered, "We've decided to take Mom off of the machines." Over the quick ripple of gasps and sighs, she continued, "The doctors say that she'll probably die fairly soon after that." Tara saw her wince at the word, swallowing heavily. "But...but Dawn and I feel that her soul, her spirit are already gone. We believe this is what she would want." Then she sank back into the couch as if she had exhausted her last reserve of strength.

"But-are you sure?" Giles demanded, his eyes belying his desperation. "I mean, it's been hardly a day. Perhaps you should give it more time."

*"But maybe the chemo will work if you try it again, Mom. You should give it more time."*

Buffy looked at her Watcher, sorrow dancing haltingly with anger in her expression. "Giles, do you think we haven't thought this through completely? You think we didn't talk that over with the doctors, down to every last possible scenario?" Dawn, Tara noticed, had lowered her head as if trying to drown out a Siren's song, pleading with her to do what she most wanted to.

*You forfeited the right to have a role in this decision by not saying anything. You know that now, and it's killing you.*

After a moment, he sagged against the back of his chair. "Yes-yes, of course. I'm sorry for questioning your decision." An uneasy silence sank over the group.

Finally, Xander asked, "What do you need from us, Buffy?" Seeing her quick glance at Dawn, he added, "And you, Dawn? Anything, either of you..." He trailed off, looking helplessly from one sister to another.

When Buffy spoke again, her voice was stronger. *Because now it's about doing something. Right now, it's not about feelings.*

"We're going to do it tomorrow. She loved early evening; it was her favorite time of day. Years ago she used to say that that was when the flowers smelled sweetest. Over the last few years, she said it was the last time of the day that she could be outside and not look over her shoulder and wonder if she'd brought enough holy water." Buffy smiled, just for a moment, and then rocked forward slightly as if in pain. The motion, Tara knew, would become a habit before it finally waned and left. She watched as Dawn squeezed her sister's hand, and then spoke up herself.

"So...we're going to spend tomorrow with her, and then take the machines away as sunset begins." She said the words quickly, as if afraid that she wouldn't be able to finish the sentence if she let herself hear what she was saying.

The silence returned, until Anya blurted, "I'm sorry Joyce can't wake up." Buffy looked up at her as if registering her presence for the first time. Tara could see that Anya was terrified of having said the wrong thing.

Finally, Buffy gave her a gentle smile. "Me too, Anya. Thank you." Tara thought she could see tears forming in the ex-demon's eyes.

The evening ended shortly after that. Hugs, more tears, condolences, promises... Words and gestures were offered, taken, acknowledged. And everyone was exquisitely aware that all of these words and gestures, while true and sacred in their own right, would not change reality. They would not make Joyce wake up.

A short time later, Tara offered herself up to Willow's arms and loosed the sobs that had been pounding within her since she had talked to Dawn. She told Willow of her anger at her mother, and her rage at Death for taking so many of the very best, and her fear that she would never find peace with her mother's life now, much less her death. Tears coursed down her cheeks, splashing onto Willow's breasts as her beloved held her and without speaking, reminded her of the beauty that still graced her life.

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At 7:38 the next evening, when the sun offered its last shimmering reminder, Buffy nodded to Dr. Santiago, who quietly stilled the machines that had frustrated both Death and Life.

In the waiting room, Willow and Tara waited with the others, watching the final piercing splash of red and orange as the sun took its leave of them.

She could only guess what the others were feeling, but as she rested her head on Willow's shoulder, Tara remembered great bunches of honeysuckle, gathered every day and placed in vases and glasses and Mason jars throughout her mother's room.

And though they had all been prepared to stand vigil for hours and perhaps days, Joyce Summers, beloved daughter of Jack and Sharon McNamara, beloved mother of Buffy and Dawn Summers, seemed to know that she was being called elsewhere, and so she did not breathe and did not linger, but rather left as she had lived-quietly, with dignity and immense grace.

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Less than a week after Joyce had kissed her daughters for the last time, they laid her to rest in a mahogany casket draped with yellow roses. Willow wept in the sheltering crook of Tara's arm, and wondered how Buffy and Dawn could survive this.

*How are they even standing? How in the goddess' name do they not just collapse with how completely wrong this is?*

But they didn't collapse, because they just didn't do things like that; even Dawn. Instead, they leaned slightly on each other, never taking their eyes off of the dark enclosure that sealed their mother away from them. And at the very end, after all the mourners had expressed their final condolences and trickled off in groups of two and three, they turned away in unison, as if heeding some silent message that only they could hear, and left the gravesite.

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Riding in the back of Xander's car on the way to Buffy's, Willow looked over at Tara and wondered anew at her partner's strength. She tried to envision Tara, standing alone at her mother's grave and trying to accept the finality of her death; dreading the return home because it could only mean more neglect from her father, more terrorizing from her brother. Fresh tears splashed onto her silk blouse; without thinking, she huddled closer to Tara, who looked at her with her gentle blue gaze.

"C'mere, Sweetie," Tara whispered, not realizing the actual cause of the tears that were now spilling from Willow's cheeks onto her own shoulder. Willow didn't explain, not then. Instead, she accepted the invitation and burrowed tightly into Tara's warmth.

"What happens now?" Anya asked, her voice hesitant in the front seat.

"Buffy said there would probably be some more people stopping by with food. I guess they have enough cold cuts and lasagnas to last until the Hell Mouth freezes over."

"People want to feel like they're doing something to help," Tara commented softly. "They can't do what the person wants most, but they need to do *something*."

Tentatively, unsure if Tara would want to talk of it, Willow asked, "Did people bring lots of food when-when your mom died?"

A surprisingly bitter smile twisted quickly across Tara's mouth. Looking out the window, she replied, "No. Daddy wasn't much for socializing, so there weren't that many people at the funeral. We ate meat-loaf that Aunt Margaret made for the next couple of days, and then I was cooking again."

*She has two decades of good stuff coming to her. At least two decades.*

"Will we be expected to entertain them?" Anya asked in the same anxious tone.

"Ahn, they're bringing over food to grieving daughters," Xander replied, his voice laced with impatience. "They won't really be expecting a Broadway revival." Anya huddled back in her seat, eyes hidden behind her sunglasses.

"It's a reasonable question," Tara said unexpectedly. "We didn't have many visitors, Anya, but I wondered the same thing. Here were these people in my house, just milling around, and I kept thinking I should, I don't know, take care of them in some way; make them comfortable."

"Really?" Anya turned as far as her seat-belt would allow, edging off her glasses to look at Tara through red-rimmed eyes.

"Definitely," Tara nodded. "But I think these people will probably just drop off their food and tell Buffy and Dawn they're sorry. They'll tell them to call if they need anything. Some of them

will even mean it." Again, the bitter smile. "But all we have to do is take the food, help find a place for it, and thank them. I doubt they'll stay long."

Anya looked at her gratefully, and then turned back in her seat. Willow realized that Tara had just chastised Xander in her own quiet way.

Thinking about it, it *hadn't* been a stupid question. Death had so many rituals, many specific to one culture or another. Some of those rituals seemed to contradict each other. The Irish threw the equivalent of a big party, which might seem like blasphemy to other cultures. Some cultures buried the deceased as soon as possible; others waited over a week. Mourning traditions weren't a function of deductive logic. You only knew them because you had learned them, like the Periodic Table or the state capitals. Tara, she realized, had particular compassion for someone who struggled to understand how to act, how to figure out what everyone around her seemed to take for granted.

She huddled in closer once again, realizing anew just how capable were the arms to which she entrusted her heart and her life.

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## **Part 19**

At the neat two-story house on Revello Drive, they took turns answering the door and escorting the visitors into the house. Anya greeted one heavy-set man who was holding a cooled casserole dish.

"Thank you so much for coming," she announced, in a pleasant, even voice. "Please come in. Let me just find a place for this." Willow saw Tara squeeze Anya's shoulder briefly as she walked by.

In the living room Buffy and Dawn were trying to make intelligible conversation.

"Yes, it was very sudden."

"No, there was nothing they could do."

"Yes, she was an incredible woman. Thank you."

Listening to Buffy's automatic agreement with one visitor's assertion that God has a plan, Willow found herself wondering exactly what that plan was.

*Let's see...I think God wanted Joyce to die so that Buffy would feel even **more** completely responsible for Dawn. Yeah-I think God's plan was for Buffy to have just one more totally overwhelming loss and struggle in her life. Sure. Sounds good to me.*

When another person commented a few minutes later that Joyce was now at peace, Willow had to fight the urge to ask, "How do you know? Did she send you a post-card saying, 'Sure is peaceful here!'" But she didn't. She thought about Tara's earlier statement, that people just wanted to do *something*. Standing silently in the face of grief was harder than it sounded. So she just greeted people and wedged plates of food into the crowded refrigerator and tried not to think about losing her own mother. While they had never been close. Willow now found herself preoccupied with the notion that her mother was one of the very few people who had been in her life from the moment she'd *had* a life. It was a group with limited membership, and something about that fact made her hold it in more particular esteem.

By early evening, practically all the guests had left and all available refrigerator and counter space had been claimed by one dish or another. Willow felt more exhausted than she could remember; she was at a complete loss as to how Buffy and Dawn were still functioning at all. Giles had left shortly after arriving, complaining apologetically of a migraine. At the ringing of the doorbell, Willow sighed. *Please, God-not another tray of lunch meats.*

Fixing her smile in place, she opened the door to greet the next visitor-who was nowhere to be seen. She looked around in confusion, wondering if she could possibly have imagined the noise. But then she glanced down and saw the neatly wrapped plate of brownies, artistically arranged on what appeared to Willow's untrained eye to be good china. A small envelope sat just to the side of the plate, with the words "Buffy and Dawn Summers" written in perfect script across its front.

"What the..." she muttered in total bewilderment. She stepped out onto the porch and then down the sidewalk, casting about in all directions for any sign of the mysterious caller. Finally she shrugged and walked back to the house, stooping to retrieve the brownies. She set them on the counter and made a mental note to tell Buffy about this later.

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Finally the last caller left. Reaching out to rub Buffy's shoulder, Willow commented, "It was nice of everybody to come, but I'm glad they're gone. You're totally wiped out. It's time for you and Dawn to have the house to yourself so you can get some rest."

But Buffy just shook her head. "No-now the hard part begins."

Willow looked at her quizzically. "I'm not sure what you mean."

Buffy turned slowly and met Willow's eyes with her own dull gaze. "As long as people were here, everything was still about Mom. They came to pay their respects to Mom. We talked about Mom. Now...now the world comes back. Now we start dealing with things that don't have anything to do with Mom." She wrapped her arms tightly about herself and looked vacantly back toward the living room. "Now I really start my life as someone without a mother."

Willow had watched Buffy endure more pain and hardship than most people twice her age, but she had never seen the Slayer look more utterly heartbroken.

*When does it end? When does she get her reward for saving all of us so many times?*

Willow felt as much as saw Tara approaching them. Long tapered fingers rubbed the back of her neck with great gentleness, as her partner reached out with her other hand and rested it lightly on the Slayer's back.

"It may sound funny, but I r-really found that reading people's cards and notes helped me. It was like seeing l-little snippets of her through other people's lenses." She looked uncertainly from one woman to the other. "Does that make any sense?"

Buffy just nodded wordlessly. Then she turned and hesitantly replied, "It might-it might be good for us. To-to read what people had to say." Looking down, she added softly, "It might keep the other world away for a little bit longer."

"Why don't I go get them?" Tara offered, moving off to do so. It took some time, because there were several sympathy cards that had arrived in the mail and still others attached to the various dishes that people had brought. Watching Tara head off to gather them up, Willow remembered the mysterious delivery from earlier.

"That reminds me, Buffy. Someone dropped off a plate of brownies on what looks like pretty expensive china. There was a card attached, too-to both of you."

"So who brought it?" Buffy asked, confusion in her voice.

"I don't know," Willow shrugged. "When I opened the door, no one was there. I looked up and down the street, but I didn't see anybody and I didn't hear a car drive away."

"That's weird," Buffy commented absently before returning to the couch to sit beside Dawn. The younger girl hadn't said much that day; mostly she had stuck by Buffy as if she might drown if she lost contact. As soon as Buffy had dropped back onto the couch, Dawn leaned over slowly and rested her head on her sister's shoulder.

Watching them read slowly through the cards and letters, Willow realized that Tara had been right.

"Read this one from Stephanie."

"Wait, who's Stephanie?"

"She lived down the street in LA. She moved two years before we did."

"Oh, yeah-she was funny...God, I'd totally forgotten about her. Remember how she used to make banana bread? She'd bring over a loaf and she and Mom would sit there and dish about their husbands all morning!"

"And here's one from Reverend Thompson. Mom always loved him."

"Yeah, he was cool. Hey-remember that one Sunday when you were about five and you kept asking Mom if he was naked under his robe? The more she tried to quiet you down, the louder you asked. I remember Mrs. Penfield in the pew behind us glared at you like you were the anti-Christ!"

"Well, I wanted to know! I mean, you couldn't see any pants legs or anything."

"So you thought what-he was wearing culottes under his robe?"

*It's amazing...Right now, neither of them believe for a single second that Dawn wasn't really around for all of that.*

When they reached the cream-colored envelope with the perfect writing that had accompanied the brownies, Buffy frowned slightly. "That's so weird, the person not even waiting to hand it to you, Will."

Xander had smuggled one of the treats into his own mouth and was chewing appreciatively. "Whoever made these, they know their way around chocolate."

Dawn shrugged and looked expectantly at her sister. Buffy ran her finger quickly under the flap and pulled out the delicate stationery. She froze, and then re-read the contents as if hoping that her eyes had betrayed her on the first reading.

"Buffy? What is it?" Dawn's voice sounded small and scared.

Shock was quickly eclipsed by anger, which flared almost immediately into rage. Buffy dropped the card to the table and grabbed Dawn's hand as if by instinct.

Willow, her heart pounding fiercely, reached down and retrieved the letter. Aloud, she read:

*Dearest Slayer and Little Miss Dawn,*

*Please accept my deepest sympathies on the loss of your mother. You may hurt now, but I know you'll survive this. Remember-perseverance is the Key to everything. If you really want something, never stop looking. I haven't, and now I'm close to finding what I want. Enjoy the brownies-they may not be heavenly, but they're certainly to die for.*

*With you in spirit,*

*Glory*

Dawn's face had drained of all color, while Buffy's burned hot with fury. "That **bitch!** She came here, today, to our house-to Mom's house-and left this. She walked up to the door and..." She trailed off, her voice shaking with rage.



Xander had already swallowed one mouthful, but now threw the remainder on the floor and looked for a moment as if he might try to purge what he'd just eaten. No one could bring themselves to speak. Willow felt somehow that it was her fault; that if she'd been quicker she could have spotted the demon and...and what? Stopped her? Created a scene on the day of Joyce's funeral?

"She knows," Dawn whispered. "She knows I'm the Key."

Buffy wheeled back to face her sister and took both of her hands in her own. "Dawn, no. That's not true. If she knew, she'd have tried to take you. And I'll never let her take you," she added quietly. After a moment, Dawn nodded and Buffy pulled her near. Watching Buffy's face, though, Willow could see the fear. She wasn't sure she'd ever seen Buffy looking truly frightened.

"How could she just ring the door bell one second and be gone the next?" Willow wondered aloud. "I mean, it really was about a second, Buffy. I had just walked past the door into the dining room when I heard the bell. And I checked the street. She wasn't anywhere around unless she was hiding somewhere."

"That must be it," Xander replied, nodding emphatically. "She didn't want to get into it with you right now, Buff, so she drops off a little 'gift' just to play with you and then ducks around a corner somewhere like a big honking sissy."

Buffy only nodded slowly. Willow wondered if Buffy, like herself, had difficulty imagining this particular creature hiding from anyone, for any reason.

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Xander and Anya left soon after the discovery of Glory's "gift." Good-byes had been an uneasy mixture of sadness and dread.

Later, as they lay under the thick comforter on the pull-out couch, Willow and Tara spoke in hushed tones about the day that had thankfully come to a close.

"Do you think there's any chance Glory really *does* know that Dawn's the Key?" Willow asked, pulling Tara's arm more tightly about her.

"If she knew, I think she'd have tried something already. I think Xander's right-she's just trying to mess with Buffy's mind."

"I'm guessing she did a pretty good job," Willow muttered, remembering the shock on her best friend's face. After a moment, she asked, "How are you doing, Baby? Today must have been so hard on you, too."

For a few seconds, Tara's only response was to nuzzle her head against Willow's chest. When she finally spoke, her voice was small.

"Yeah, it was. Harder than I actually thought it would be, you know?"

"I know," Willow replied, though she really didn't.

"I'd expected it to bring up memories of Mom's death, and it did. But it also brought up everything I just learned. Not that those things have been exactly absent since we got back from Cold Springs," she added. She pulled back and looked at Willow. "There are so many things I need to ask her, Will, and now I'll never get the chance. And Mrs. Summers will never get to see Buffy graduate and Dawn will never get to show Mrs. Summers her SAT scores and they'll never get to sit down together for another meal, ever. I hate it, Willow. I hate how Death just takes whomever it wants, whenever it wants them, whether we're ready to let them go or not."

"I know, Baby-but we'd never be ready to let them go, would we? Maybe, if we *have* to lose people at some point, it's better that Death does it for us so that we don't have to decide when it will happen." Worried that her words had sounded callous or indifferent, she kissed Tara's forehead and looked at her uncertainly. "Baby, I didn't mean to sound all 'Hey, it's for the best' just now." When Tara didn't answer immediately, she added, "So, um, did I sound all 'Hey, it's for the best' just now?"

Tara rested her head against Willow's breasts once more and sighed. "No, Sweetie. It's just..."

"Just what?" Willow prompted, when Tara had trailed off into silence.

Tara sighed again, deeper this time. "It's just that we do all this fighting, and we spend so much energy trying to fight the most terrifying creatures imaginable, but we can't save the people we love from things like cancer or strokes. It makes me feel like we're giving away the very best gifts to people we barely know, while we give the people closest to us scraps, hand-me-downs. It makes me-it makes me angry at myself."

Willow frowned in confusion. "But Tara, Baby, it's not one or the other. It's not like fighting demons takes away our ability to heal our family."

"I know," Tara replied, a faint trace of irritation in her voice. "I didn't say it was rational, or right. I'm just saying I hate the fact that we can save so many people we barely know but we can't save our own families."

Willow had heard the frustration in Tara's voice, and realized that now was not a moment for analytical discourse. "Yeah," she finally answered. "I get that. I guess I always sort of have in the back of my mind that when I help kill some demon, I'm making the world a little safer for *you*. So it's not some abstract cause that I'm fighting for-it's to make the world a better place for you. And for our children," she added quietly.

She felt Tara's small grin against her chest before her beloved pulled back once more and looked at Willow with soft blue eyes. "Honestly, Ms. Rosenberg-for someone who claims to be a babbler, you sure know what to say to make a girl feel special."

"Not just any girl," Willow murmured around the lump that had suddenly appeared in her throat. "Takes someone special to bring out the Cicero in me."

They lay entwined like that for a long time afterwards...not really speaking, just unconsciously rendering their breathing synchronous until they fell into a sad but much-needed sleep.

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"Do you think they've learned anything new?" Willow asked, tugging a light sweater over her head.

"I don't know," Tara replied, glancing at Willow in the mirror. "Xander just said we were supposed to be over at Giles' at eight. I wonder how he's doing."

"Xander? Why, did he sound weird on the phone?" Willow paused in the middle of tying her shoes.

"Actually, I meant Giles. He's taking Mrs. Summers' death pretty hard."

"You noticed that too, huh? Yeah, it pretty much broke my heart to watch him. I think he's probably been in love with her for a long time."

Tara's eyes clouded with sadness. "At the funeral, he looked as if he hadn't slept at all. And then later, he left the house almost as soon as he got there. I don't think he said ten words the whole day." She moved over beside the bed and sat down behind Willow, wrapping her arms around her and resting her head against her back. "Do you think Mrs. Summers felt the same way?"

Willow leaned back against Tara's warmth. "I don't know... You know, in a lot of ways, they were really Buffy's parents, when you get right down to it. Good ol' Hank's been pretty much MIA, with the aforementioned 'Action' primarily involving his secretary. Joyce and Giles have been the two adult constants in Buffy's life. I think they were unofficially a twosome, at least in that regard. Plus, there was that whole Band candy episode, in which Giles got in touch with both his inner adolescent and Joyce's outer breasts. Right there on a police car," she added.

"Wasn't that during the time when you and Xander...?"

"If you love me, you won't finish that sentence, OK? The point is, those two definitely had sparkage, not to mention a strong parental connection about Buffy. But apparently he never talked about it, and neither did she."

Tara pulled Willow more tightly against her. "I think that's what makes me sadder than anything. To have so much to say to someone, and never say a word."

They sat there in silence for a few minutes, each thanking the goddess for the words they themselves had found the courage to say, all those months ago.

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The only sound was the sound of water splashing out of the hose and into the heavy trough. He and his daddy didn't talk much these days, though they certainly had a lot they could say to each other. He figured it was his daddy's place to start that conversation; after all, he was the one who'd dropped the bombshells on everybody last week. About his mom's cheating; about Uncle Quinn being Tara's father. If anyone should start talking about what everyone was thinking, it should be his dad.

But Nathan wasn't saying much of anything. Nathan pretty much did his work and then looked for more work to do, which was always within eyesight when you lived on a farm. He and Donnie talked about the winter wheat and fixing machinery and the latest milk prices. They didn't talk about Donnie's mother taking him along for her meetings with her husband's brother, or Nathan beating him throughout his entire childhood, or Tara being a half-sister to both him and Beth.

And poor Beth...She just kind of flitted around the house like a bird that kept banging up against the walls and didn't know it could just fly out the open window if it wanted to. She never talked about going home. The only thing she talked about was the weather, and how the crops were coming along, and whether they might prefer peach cobbler or cream pie for dessert.

They watched each other, that much was clear. Him and his daddy circling each other, always knowing where the other was but pretending not to notice; and then the three of them in the evenings, wobbling like a chair with one leg missing-unsteady, but trying to hold up.

And they never said a word about any of it.

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Willow and Tara arrived at Giles' house to find it cluttered with old newspapers and unwashed glasses. A container of take-out Chinese had been hastily tossed in the garbage. One of the chopsticks had fallen to the floor; it had never been picked up.

Giles muttered his apologies as he cleared off chairs for them to sit. They had been the last to arrive. Buffy and Dawn were on the couch, while Xander and Anya occupied the bar stools against the counter. As they settled into their chairs, they automatically brought them closer together. Glancing around, Willow noticed that everyone seemed to be touching someone else. Xander had his arm over Anya's shoulders, while Buffy kept running her hand over Dawn's hair and down her back. Willow found herself wishing that she'd passed up the chair and just nestled on Tara's lap; she settled for clasping Tara's hand tightly in her own.

*We all need to comfort, and be comforted. We need to feel the person we're closest to in order to believe we're still here. And Giles has no one.* She lowered her head and brushed away the tears that had gathered so quickly in her eyes.

"Thank you for coming," the Watcher began, rubbing his forehead as he spoke. "Buffy, Dawn-I know how hard things are right now. I...I wish I could spare you all of this; somehow make all of this just go away." He sighed, and Willow saw now that his eyes were red-rimmed with exhaustion, or perhaps something else.

"I know," Buffy answered quietly. "But there's no bereavement leave for Slayers, is there? We don't get time off to mourn."

*But you wouldn't take it even if there were, Willow found herself thinking. You need to be doing something. You couldn't handle sitting quietly in the house right now.*

"It's OK," Dawn added in a small voice. "We have to know what's going on."

Willow remembered her conversation with the Key at the hotel that night, before Dawn had known who she really was; when the biggest difficulty in her life was a crush on someone older than her who was totally unavailable. Hadn't that been another lifetime ago? Surely it had been, for the slight teenager in front of her.

"It's just-well, I've received news that I thought you should all know about." Giles took his glasses off slowly, looking at the floor. "I only wish it were good news."

"And so much for the ambiguous foreshadowing," Xander commented, shaking his head. "Can anyone remember the last time we *did* hear good news?"

"It was ten days ago," Anya promptly answered. "I took that EPT thing and urinated on the little stick, remember? And then we waited for what seemed like an *eternity*, and you kept pacing back and forth-"

"Right. Of course. How could I forget?" Xander grinned weakly.

"And now, none of us will ever forget it, either," Tara smiled, looking at Willow and arching her eyebrows just the tiniest bit.

*If those two ever reproduce, we might all rethink our positions on genetic engineering.* But she said nothing.

"Giles, you were saying...?" Xander prompted, clearly preferring the impending bad news to a detailed account of his recent reprieve.

"A few days ago, I contacted the Watcher's Council, to see if they had any information on Glory." As he might well have expected, a chorus of alarm welled up around him. Buffy's voice emerged as the strongest.

"Giles, if those sanctimonious bastards know that Dawn's the Key, they'll be over here before you can say 'Tower of London.' What were you thinking?"

"Buffy, you can't possibly think I told them anything about Dawn," Giles protested. "I would never entrust them with such information. You have to know that I would never put Dawn in jeopardy like that."

Buffy held his gaze for a moment, and then dropped her eyes to her sister. "I'm sorry...It's just that I've just had nothing but bad experiences with Quentin Travers and that five-alarm freak show he heads up. First they put me through that insane 'test' and then they go all wet-works on me when they thought I was Faith. It doesn't exactly build up your trust and good-will."

"I'm with Buffy," Willow chimed in. "That much tweed in one place must surely tempt the forces of darkness."

Giles shook his head patiently. "Yes, well, I understand; at its worst, the Council is an archaic lynch mob, using the most reprehensible of tactics under the guise of working to eradicate evil."

"And at its best?" Tara asked doubtfully.

"Officious pricks with deplorable fashion sense," the Watcher replied evenly.

"So we're all in agreement," Xander said emphatically. "The Council of Watchers is hereby on the 'Do Not Invite' list for all major celebrations and any gatherings where you don't want skullduggery to abound. Just say no to COW."

"And to MOO-Mothers Opposed to the Occult," Willow added, recalling her own experience as witch hunt prey. She shook her head wonderingly. "Who'd ever have thought that dairy could be so ominous?"

"Certainly, having been unceremoniously fired two years ago, I hardly consider them close, personal friends," Giles asserted, rubbing the back of his neck. "I would have been guilty of putting vanity before duty, however, had I not considered the possibility that they might have useful information on our current antagonist. So yes, I called them, and I appealed to their sense of self-importance in asking for their assistance. I spoke in the most abject of ways about my own limitations, in both resource and perspicacity, and asked for their learned input."

"And he just said what?" Xander asked, looking at Willow in confusion.

"Giles kissed some COW ass," she answered, nodding approvingly at the Watcher.

"And the tweedy little milquetoasts spilled the beans," Giles finished, giving her a slight smile.

"And just what did said milquetoasts have to contribute to the knowledge fund?" Willow asked.

The smile faded quickly from Giles' face. "As I said, the news is hardly good."

"So enough with the foreplay," Buffy said in exasperation. At the uncomfortable glances and raised eyebrows that greeted her, she added, "Or foreshadowing. Or forehead. Or for which we

stand." Turning back to Giles, she fixed him with a hard stare. "What is it, Giles? What kind of demon are we looking at?"

Her Watcher sighed. "Glory's not a demon." He reached out to rest his hand on her shoulder. "She's a god."

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## **Part 20**

A few hours later, Tara unlocked her door and they more or less stumbled across the floor and into bed, collapsing in an exhausted heap.

"Do things ever calm down?" Tara asked, her tone suggesting that the question was largely rhetorical. Willow, though, answered her.

"About once a year; for about seven or eight hours. We usually use that time to catch up on our correspondence, maybe take in a movie."

"How do you fight a god?" This time, the question wasn't rhetorical; Willow, though, had no idea how to answer her.

Finally Tara spoke again. "I guess...I guess we find out everything we can about her and we try to find her weak spots."

"Yeah, that seemed to be the general game plan that emerged tonight," Willow concurred. "The only thing is, in SAT terms, 'god' is to 'weak spot' as 'Michael Jackson' is to 'mental health.' I mean, isn't the whole idea of a god that she's pretty much invincible? Not to mention that whole brain-sucking thing, a fact without which I could so easily have lived." She shuddered briefly. "Let's face it, Tara-the hell-god got game."

Tara shook her head. "I can't let myself get too stunned and amazed about her, Will. I have to believe that there's some way we can take her down. Otherwise... Otherwise, we just give up and hope that somebody else will take care of her." She turned on her side to look at Willow. "And that's not really how the Scooby gang works, is it?"

Reaching out to tuck a lock of hair behind Tara's ear, Willow replied softly, "No ma'am, it isn't. The Scooby motto is, and I quote, 'The few; the proud; the profoundly outnumbered.'"

"I'll take quality over quantity any day," Tara assured her, nuzzling into the warmth of the arms that reached out for her.

They lay quietly for several minutes. Willow was so exhausted that she could have fallen asleep right there on top of the covers, sneakers and all, and she suspected Tara felt the same. Bedtime

without brushing, though, had serious implications for morning breath, and so she forced herself to sit upright.

"C'mon, Baby-let's get out of these clothes and get ready for bed."

Tara grumbled but complied. "Doesn't it seem just a bit surreal? Coming back home, washing our faces, brushing our teeth...right after learning that this year's Big Bad is an honest-to-God, well, *god*?"

"Gotta admit, it's hard to find the bright side with this one," Willow acknowledged, walking toward the door. Passing Tara's desk, she noticed the small packet of mail that Tara had retrieved but not opened earlier that day. "You might wanna check your mail, Baby. You may have already won ten million dollars!"

"Thank you, Ed McMagic. I'll just make sure there's nothing too pressing, like a chance to receive TV Guide at a fraction of the news stand price, and then I'm right behind you." Willow nodded and headed down the hall toward the bathroom.

Several minutes later, as Willow peered at her soapy reflection in the mirror, she wondered where Tara was. *Maybe she really **did** win ten million dollars...And maybe she's spending it all on TV Guide subscriptions.* She realized that exhaustion was starting to make her incoherent.

She also realized, immediately after that epiphany, that life on the Hell Mouth should have taught her by now that innocuous things often weren't, which was why she now quickly splashed water over her face and ran back to Tara's room. Throwing the door open, she felt relief wash over her as she saw Tara sitting quietly on the bed, peering at something she held in her hand.

"Tara? Baby? What is it?" Relief gave way to uneasiness as Tara looked up at her. Her blue eyes were filled with pain. In reply, she simply held out the single sheet of paper.

Willow searched her lover's face questioningly, and then looked down at the words before her.

*Dear Tara,*

*I don't know whether you really want to hear from me or not, but I decided to go ahead and write and just hope that you'll listen to what I have to say. I know that the trip must have hard for you, finding out what you did. I'm sorry that you went through so much growing up. I should have been a better father. You weren't responsible for your mother's behavior, but I know that part of me blamed you even though another part of me said I shouldn't.*

*Your visit wasn't easy for me, either. It was hard to relive everything and talk about it after keeping my silence for so many years. In the middle of all of our family secrets, the news that you think you're a homosexual almost got lost. Tara, I know that the men in your life so far haven't been very good examples of manhood. Your real father drank himself to death, I was angry most of the time, and your brother beat you up. I'm sure that women must seem must safer and easier to trust right now. But please, Tara, don't give up on men just because of how you grew up.*



*You're a fine young woman, and I'm sure there's a good man out there who could make you very happy.*

*Your brother hasn't said anything about all of this. I'm not sure what he thinks. Beth is still here, though I've told her that if her mother needs her, we'll find a way to make do.*

*I just wanted to you to know that I'm sorry for the way I acted when you were younger. I know that the news about your mother upset you, but she did love you, Tara, very much. I wish you could talk to her, and to your real father, but that's not possible. However, I thought you might want to talk to your Aunt Beverly. She and Quinn were full brother-and-sister, and she also knew your mother fairly well. In fact, the two of them were pretty close. She and I don't talk very often, but I'm sure she'd be glad to hear from you. I think she probably liked you more than Beth, quite frankly. Anyway, if you want to get hold of her, her number in Dallas is (214) 555-0124.*

*Take care,*

*Nathan, Your father*

Willow re-read the entire letter, trying to assimilate both its contents and its tone into her already-overloaded brain circuitry. What must be going on in Tara's mind?

"Baby? Are you OK?" She rubbed Tara's back gently, feeling her heart break once again at the pain in those cobalt eyes.

"Willow...Goddess, where do I even start? I mean, I can hardly believe he wrote in the first place. And then he apologizes, which he has never, *ever* done. And he tells me how to contact my aunt, because he thinks it might help to talk to her. But he also doesn't believe I'm really gay, because the men around me when I was growing up were such losers. Oh, and my 'real father drank himself to death,' let's not forget that." Her laugh was dry and brittle.

Willow looked at her helplessly. Finally, she turned and slid her right leg behind Tara and then gathered her beloved close, feeling the soft hair tickle her cheek. She felt Tara's quick, convulsive sob, and then tears were trickling down her neck.

"Tara, Baby, I'm so sorry...I'm so sorry you've had all of this dumped in your lap, and you can't even talk to your mother, because I know that's what you want, more than anything else." She felt tears stinging her eyes, and dimly wondered if she would ever simply cry herself out; if she would just reach the end of her lifetime supply of tears because she lived where she lived and did what she did.

When Tara had finally stopped sobbing, Willow extricated herself from Tara's limbs and then gently pushed Tara back until she was prone on the bed. She slowly untied Tara's shoes and then slid her socks off. Tara struggled to sit up.

"I need to wash my face and brush my teeth," she protested. "After everything we've been through, I don't want you to wake up and have to deal with my morning breath."

Willow took the opportunity to pull Tara's shirt up over her head. "I brushed my teeth twice, so we're covered."

"What kind of logic is that?" Tara asked, but let herself be relieved of her bra and then lowered once more to the bed.

"It's *my* logic, and I'm extraordinarily smart, so you probably don't want to question it," Willow replied, tugging Tara's jeans and then her panties down over her hips and discarding them on the floor beside the bed. "Besides, you never have bad breath-even when you're sick, even when you first wake up."

"There's always a first time for everything," Tara argued, but Willow could see that fatigue of both the emotional and physical varieties was winning out.

"Baby, if the hardest thing I have to face tomorrow is that I wake up next to you and your breath isn't minty fresh, I gotta think I've come out ahead."

Quickly shucking her own clothes, Willow crawled under the blankets and pressed herself close to Tara, who was almost asleep. Before she went under, though, Tara mumbled something in Willow's ear.

"What, Baby? I couldn't hear you."

"I said, did I tell you today how much I love you?"

Willow draped her arm over Tara's chest and tried to pull her even nearer. "Yeah, you did. First, this morning; and then late this afternoon when we were on our way over to Giles'."

This confirmation was apparently the last thing that stood between Tara and a profoundly deep sleep, and watching her in the moonlight gave Willow the comfort she needed to do likewise.

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How long did it take for someone to answer their phone?

Really?

Tara had lifted the phone from its cradle three times, only to replace it again. Four times, she had dialed all of the numbers and then hung up. Now, having actually punched in the numbers **and** hung around to see what happened, she was wildly impatient, as if the person at the other end should have known to show some mercy on her after all of the stress of simply making the call.

As she deliberated whether she would have the courage to call back if she didn't get an answer this time, she heard a click and then a familiar voice said, "Hello?" She sat there mutely.

*This would be a good time to speak, Tara.*

"Um, h-hi-Aunt Beverly?"

"Tara, is that you?" Her aunt sounded genuinely pleased to hear from her. "Oh my God, it's so good to hear your voice!"

"Thanks, Aunt Bev. It's r-really good to hear yours, too. It's been t-too long."

"It really has been, Tara. We haven't talked in over a year, I'll bet. And I haven't seen you since..."

"Since Mom's funeral. I know." *You can do this, Tara. You can.*

"So how are you, Sweetie? How's college? Are you still majoring in English?"

The dichotomy-the absolute *chasm*-between something as prosaic as her college major and the total upheaval of her life over these past few weeks struck Tara as so surreal to be almost ludicrous. Yes, she actually *did* major in English, didn't she?

"Yeah.. although if I'm studying it, I should probably pronounce it correctly, so-yes. I'm still majoring in English."

"That's great, Tara. Are you thinking about teaching? Not that I'm biased or anything..."

*Actually, I'm thinking about my mother and her infidelity and my dead biological father and my abusive brother and my lesbian lover and...what else...oh, yeah-the arrival of a Hell God who wants to open the portals between dimensions using a Key who happens to be in the human form of my lover's best friend's sister-a young girl I love dearly, who has a huge crush on me.*

"Well, teaching is a definite possibility," she replied.

Her aunt laughed deeply; Tara liked the sound. "Isn't that phrase almost an oxymoron? 'A definite possibility'? I mean, isn't the nature of a possibility that it isn't definite?"

*So that's where I get my verbal obsessiveness. Cool...* "You're right-it seems sort of like saying that someone's decidedly ambivalent."

"Exactly. You and I always thought alike, you know."

*And what else do we do alike?* But this wasn't the time for that conversation. Her mental digression, though, was interrupted by her aunt's gentle voice.

"What's going on, Tara? I mean, I'm thrilled to hear from you, but I know you're not crazy about talking over the phone just to be doing something, so I'm guessing something's on your mind."

Her aunt had remembered Tara telling her that? Maybe someone had been paying more attention to her than she realized, and suddenly she felt a pang for the chance to have been closer to her father's half-sister.

"Good call, Aunt Bev-no pun intended," she added, enjoying her aunt's quick laugh. Maybe that was where she'd gotten her odd sense of humor, too.

"So what's up, Sweetie? Heartache? Family problems? Existential angst?"

"Um...that would be 'No,' 'Yes,' and 'Often, but not right now,' in order of appearance."

"Ah, family," Beverly replied knowingly. "Can't live with 'em, can't institutionalize 'em against their will unless you have really powerful lawyers....So who's doing what?"

Now that the moment had arrived, and it was abundantly clear that her aunt was genuinely interested in helping her, Tara felt her head start to ring. She wondered if she would be able to speak.

"OK, so it must be something pretty major," her aunt noted after several seconds had passed. "I can hear you breathing, so I know we're still connected."

"Pretty major," Tara echoed, with a dry laugh. "Yeah, you could say that."

"Well, I could, but I suspect that it would be more helpful for *you* to say that. Are you afraid of something, Tara? Is that what's making it hard to talk about it?"

*Afraid? Yes...afraid of learning nothing; afraid of learning something I won't be able to live with; afraid of losing the one parent I trusted all over again.* Aloud, though, she simply replied, "Sort of...It's just-it's hard to get into over the phone, but I have to because you're in Dallas and I'm in California and thank heavens telephones even exist and so I'm trying to figure out where to start."

*I have become my lover.*

"It's about your mother, isn't it?" Beverly's voice was so gentle that Tara felt her eyes welling with tears, in spite of her determination not to cry.

"How'd you know?" Tara asked softly.

"I didn't; I just guessed. But I know what your mother meant to you, and what you meant to her, so it seemed a pretty good bet."

"You should come to Vegas," Tara commented, knowing that her aunt could hear the tremble in her voice.

"Tara, sweetie, is there any way *you* could come *here*? I know money's tight when you're in school, but I'd be glad to get you a ticket. Besides, I'd love to see you again."

At the offer, Tara was gripped with a longing that threatened to paralyze her. The warmth in her aunt's voice made her ache for a home that now existed almost entirely in her mind, one in which she was close to the people she was related to. The fact that her aunt had known her mother, had been friends with her, only heightened her loneliness.

She struggled to find her voice again. "Aunt Beverly, you don't know how much that means to me. I'm serious-thank you." She paused, thinking of Willow and her family here. "But I can't. Part of it's school, and part of it's about other stuff going on here."

"You can't tear yourself away, even for a long weekend?"

*"No, Aunt Beverly, because I'm needed to help save the world."*

"I really wish I could, but I can't. But thank you for caring so much. It really does mean a lot to me; more than I can really say."

"OK," her aunt replied with obvious disappointment. "But promise me you'll think about it, for the future-even if things aren't so urgent. I'd love the chance to just sit down and catch up with you. You know I've always had a soft spot in my heart for you."

*Recognition, perhaps?*

"Me too you, Aunt Bev." She took a deep breath to steady herself. "See, a lot of stuff has happened lately at home."

"Is everyone OK?" came her aunt's worried question.

Tara laughed; the noise sounded brittle to her own ears. "Well, that depends on how you define 'OK,'" she replied. "No one's been hurt or anything like that."

"So we're talking 'stuff' of the psychological variety, huh?"

"Pretty much...I guess-I guess what I need, Aunt Beverly, is to know more about my mother-what she was like; what you thought of her; things like that."

"OK, that's a pretty broad subject, but let me see what I can do...Are you thinking of anything in particular?"

*Oh, just whether you ever noticed her and your brother making eyes at each other over the punch bowl at Christmas.*

"No, not really...I guess I just want to talk to the people who knew her; who knew her long before I did."

"I can understand that," Beverly replied slowly. "Well, I don't know how much new material I can provide, but I'll do my best. Let's see... Well, Nathan was pretty much gaga about her from the minute he saw her, I know that. She was all he talked about after that. He said he was going to marry her, and I'd never seen him so definite about anything before in my whole life. Sure enough, he wooed her like crazy and the next thing you know, we're all gathered at the Cold Springs Baptist Church watching them say 'I do.' I don't think I've ever seen your father look happier."

*You mean my father Nathan, right? Not my biological father; he hadn't really entered the drama yet, had he?* Aloud, she could only manage, "Yeah-I know he loved Mom."

"That's an understatement, Sweetie," her aunt chuckled. "I think he must have gotten to the church before your mother even did, and all he had to do was put on his tuxedo and make sure his pants were zipped. No way was he going to be late."

"Who was his best man?" Tara asked, realizing she had never seen a picture of her parents' wedding, even as she knew at that same moment why.

"Oh, that was your Uncle Quinn," Beverly replied, confirming what Tara had already surmised.

Tara fought past a sudden wave of nausea. After a moment, she asked, "What was Mom like? When she was younger?"

Now Beverly paused, and when she spoke, Tara knew that her aunt had been as captivated by her mother as everyone else had been.

"Julia was one of the finest people I've ever known, Tara," she said simply, when she finally replied. "I'm not saying that because she's dead, or to make you feel better. She was just a truly warm, loving woman who could charm the fuzz off a peach-not because she was trying to put one over on you, but because that's just how she was. She looked like an angel, with that blond hair and those blue eyes and that innocent face, but she also knew some jokes that would make a sailor blush. She used to put me in stitches, just listening to one of her stories. She was a born story-teller, Tara."

*"Then what happened to Goldilocks, Mama?"*

*"Well, Bright Eyes, the Three Bears came home and of course the soup was all gone, and she had rearranged the living room furniture, and just made herself at home in Baby Bear's bed, so they really didn't have much choice but to have her arrested for unlawful entry."*

*"She got arrested?"*

*"Oh yeah-but she came from a lot of money so her daddy hired her one of the lawyers that works for the Ewing family over on 'Dallas,' and he argued diminished capacity because most folks around those parts knew that Goldilocks wasn't exactly the sharpest plow in the barn, so she got*

*off with making the Bears another pot of soup, only they didn't like it because she put too much paprika in it."*

*"You're teasing me, Mama!"*

*"Maybe just a little bit."*

"Yeah, I remember," she said, and her voice seemed to come from far away.

"Tara, Sweetie, are you OK? I don't want to pry, but it seems like this is pretty painful."

"Yeah...I mean, yes, it's painful, but it's also good to hear about. It really does help."

"OK...Well, your mother loved you like crazy. When you were born, all people could talk about was how much you looked like her, and you did, Tara. You were the spitting image of Julia, except for your hands. Julia and Nathan both had short, square hands, and you had these long, tapered fingers that looked like they were just made to play piano. No one knew where you got those hands."

*Oh yes they did; **some** people knew...*

"What about Donnie? Did Mom love him, too?"

For the first time, her aunt's voice became cautious. "Well of course she did, Tara. I didn't mean to imply that she didn't. It's just-well, you and your mom seemed like two peas in a pod, and Donnie was often out with Nathan, so I think the four of you sort of formed two teams, if that makes any sense."

"Yeah, I know what you mean," Tara replied, feeling her throat tighten.

"But I know she loved him." She hesitated for a moment, and then continued, "See, the other thing was that you and Donnie had such different temperaments. You were so sweet and easy to take care of, Tara. You didn't really fuss much unless you were hungry or tired or needed your diaper changed. But as soon as you were fed or rested or dry, you were back in good spirits. Donnie, though-he was colicky a lot as a baby, and his temper showed up pretty early on. He wasn't the easiest baby in the world. But Julia certainly loved him," she added for a final time.

Tara felt a sudden ache in her fingers, and realized that she had been squeezing the phone so tightly that her knuckles were white. There was so much more to ask, and she wasn't even sure how she could bring up the subject of Quinn without arousing her aunt's suspicions. For right now, she wasn't ready to go into all of that. Suddenly she felt almost unimaginably exhausted.

*I need some time to digest this.* Aloud, she said, "Aunt Beverly, this is helpful; it really is. I'm just-I'm trying to learn more about my mom, from the folks who knew her, and I really appreciate you talking to me about her."

"Why do I have the feeling you're about to get off the phone?" her aunt asked, but her tone was gentle.

"Because you're a smart woman," Tara replied, feeling something akin to genuine amusement. "But I'd like to call back again-soon-if you wouldn't mind."

"Of course I wouldn't mind, Tara. It's good to talk to you, whatever the reason. I don't want to lose contact with you."

"Me either with you, Aunt Bev. I'll talk to you soon, OK?"

"OK, Sweetie. And remember-if you want to visit, any time, I'd love to see you."

Moments later, Tara had set the phone back in its cradle. She was in her bed and asleep within ten minutes.

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Continued...

## **Antigone Unbound Index Page**

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# **~ Gods Served and Abandoned ~**

## **by Antigone Unbound**

**Author Notes: See Part 1.**

**Feedback: Even more sure! Bring it on!**

### **Part 21**

"I talked to my Aunt Beverly this afternoon," she informed Willow as soon as her beloved had entered her room.

"Without me?" Tara could see the mild hurt that crossed Willow's face, and tried to keep her guilt at bay. She beckoned Willow over to the bed to join her.

"I didn't mean to go all Lone Wolf or anything, Sweetie," she replied, stroking Willow's face gently. "It was more like getting a sudden burst of courage and worrying that if I didn't seize the



moment, it wouldn't come again." She watched Willow nod reluctantly, and knew that her partner still felt somewhat left out.

"Willow, I really wasn't trying to exclude you, or do this when I knew you weren't around," she insisted. "I just had this need to do this all of a sudden and I didn't want to wait. I felt like I *couldn't* wait." She scanned Willow's face anxiously. "Do you understand?"

Finally, Willow relented. "Yeah, I get it." Then she kissed Tara softly, and her expression became one of concern. "Baby, are you OK? What did you ask her? What did you find out? Can I fire some more questions at you until you're completely overwhelmed?"

Tara laughed, and realized how good it felt to draw breath so deeply. "Yeah, Sweetie, I'm OK; or at least, more OK than not. I just asked her about Mom today. She told me what Mom was like, and how much she liked her, and especially how much Dad-I mean, Nathan-absolutely adored her."

"God, that must have been so intense," Willow murmured. "So she has no idea? About Quinn?"

"I don't think so," Tara replied slowly, rolling over onto her back and staring at the ceiling. "If she did, she was hiding it pretty well...Of course, I get why she'd hide it, if she assumes I don't know." She shook her head. "What a soap opera-does she know, and if she does, does she know I know?"

Willow nodded. "Yeah, you never really saw this kind of stuff on 'The Waltons.'"

"Did you know that Grandpa was gay?" Tara asked abruptly, turning back toward Willow. "I mean, Will Geer, the actor-he was gay."

"Seriously? Wow...I guess they weren't really gonna do much with that, though," she mused. "I mean, can you see Grandpa Walton putting the moves on Ike Godsey?"

"No, I really can't, and to be honest, I'd prefer not to. How'd we end up here, anyway?" Tara asked, confusion in her eyes.

"Uh...oh, the Waltons, and their relative stability."

"Right-not to be confused with the Maclays, and their relative Gothic drama."

"You said 'today,'" Willow noted suddenly. "A few minutes ago, before our little detour, you said that you asked her 'today' about your mother. You're going to talk to her again?"

"Yeah-I sort of hit 'Overload' during this conversation, so I asked if I could call her again soon. She was great about it."

"Did you like what you heard?" Willow asked gently, tucking an errant lock of hair behind Tara's ear.

Tara thought back over everything her aunt had told her-the warmth, the kindness, the natural entertainer who apparently had a sizable repertoire of dirty jokes...And the love...the obvious love that Julia Maclay had for her daughter; that Nathan Maclay had for his wife...The love that Donnie received primarily as a function of parental duty, perhaps...

"Some parts yes, some parts no," she answered simply. "There's just so much involved; so many relationships."

"I wish we could go see her," Willow mused, taking Tara's hand and kissing it softly.

"Funny you should mention that," Tara replied, and told Willow of her aunt's offer.

"Tara, you should go! And I could buy my own ticket." Willow back-pedaled quickly. "I mean, if you want me to go-I'd understand if you wanted to go alone. Well, I wouldn't totally understand, 'cuz I'd definitely want *you* there with *me* if the situation were reversed, but that probably sounds all love-one-upmanship or something, like there's something wrong if you don't feel what I'd feel. I mean, I wanna go with you, Tara, but I'll support whatever you want to do; I just-"

"Will, Sweetie-breathe, before your face matches your hair. In the first place, I'd definitely want you to come with me. In the second place, it's a moot point, because neither of us can go anywhere with Glory on the loose." She smiled affectionately at the relief that flashed across Willow's face with her confirmation.

"Are you sure, Baby? Like your aunt said-even for a long weekend?"

"I'm sure. Willow, there's just too much for us to do right now. Goddess willing, my aunt will be in Dallas for a long time, provided we manage to stop the merging of universes."

"You know, there's a sentence I bet you wouldn't have imagined saying a year ago," Willow mused. They lay in silence for a few moments, and then Willow asked, "So do you think she's gay?"

Tara shrugged. "I'm not sure. We didn't really get into her life. I think I'm going to come out to her the next time we talk; this time, I was pretty much zeroed in on family of the biological variety."

"Makes sense," Willow replied, her earlier insecurity seemingly appeased.

"Anyway, she didn't say anything to suggest one thing or the other," Tara said.

"Did she sound gay?" Willow asked after a moment.

"What do you mean, *sound* gay?" Tara replied, perplexed. "What exactly does a gay person sound like?"

"I don't know," Willow replied, her face suggesting that she was beginning to see the rather odd nature of her question. "Just-you know...gay-ish." She trailed off helplessly.

Tara just peered at her. "Well, her voice sounded clear, so I'm pretty sure she wasn't going down on anybody at the time," she finally replied, keeping her face neutral.

"Tara Maclay!" Willow yelped. "Such spicy talk, from such an angelic creature!"

*"She looked like an angel, with that blond hair and those blue eyes and that innocent face, but she also knew some jokes that would make a sailor blush..."*

"I come by it naturally," was all that Tara gave as a response.

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*How many times have we sat here, like this? How many more times will we be here in the future, all of us, safe for at least the time being?* Willow had such thoughts occasionally, though she tried mightily to keep such mental sojourns brief.

They were gathered at Giles' for another update, though it wasn't clear how much new information there was to be shared. In Willow's opinion, Giles looked only marginally better than he had four days ago, when she had last seen him. He had managed to provide cookies and various representatives of the cola world, however, and his apartment had been given at least a cursory cleaning. Tara and Willow sat on the couch with Buffy, while Dawn was perched on its arm. Xander and Anya sat across from them in chairs while Giles, as was his wont, paced the floor.

Leaning over, Xander caught Willow's eye and nodded toward Tara. "You gonna eat that?" he asked.

Choking on her Diet Coke, she stared at him dumbly for a brief moment until she realized that he was actually indicating the sole remaining Oreo on the plate she shared with Tara-which now sat in front of her partner.

"Not at this precise moment," she managed, earning a bewildered look from her friend.

"And you've received no further message from Glory?" Giles was asking Buffy. "No warning of any kind?"

"Nope. She made her one special delivery and then went back into hiding-whenever it is exactly that a god hides," Buffy added, her brow furrowed. "I mean, that's the thing-she knows where I am, but I have no idea where she hangs her horns or her pitchfork or whatever accoutrements she's partial to."

"It's certainly frustrating," Giles acknowledged, "but at least she doesn't know that Dawn's the Key."

"She doesn't know it *yet*," Anya corrected him, "but she certainly will by the time we're through."

The group turned to her as a single body. Buffy's voice won out over the others.

"What are you talking about?" she demanded, her face flushing. "Have you lost whatever trace of humanity you've picked up in the last two years?"

Anya recoiled from the force of the Slayer's outrage, her face etched with shock. "Of course not," she protested angrily. "I'm saying that if we're not careful with what we say and where we say it, Glory's going to find out from *us*. Even though it's the last thing *any* of us want," she added, her gaze lingering significantly on Buffy.

"But we're hardly carrying on these conversations at the Espresso Pump," Giles replied slowly. "I certainly appreciate your discretion, Anya, and let me just pause for a moment to grasp the sheer improbability of ever saying such a thing to *you*." He shook his head quickly. "I'm sure, however, that we're perfectly safe here."

"How do you know?" she persisted. "I was just reading this great mystery from Debra J. Skippet-you'd enjoy her; she likes women as well," the ex-demon commented, in an aside to Willow and Tara. "Anyway, her latest book is called 'The Lady Drove a Pick-Up,' and in it, the main character realizes that her house is being bugged by this guy who's trying to frame her for murder. And if a mortal can do it, heaven knows-no pun intended-that a *god* can do it."

"She's got a point," Willow said, less reluctantly than she might have a few months ago. "Glory *does* know that Buffy's involved somehow-wouldn't she want to keep a close eye on her, and probably a close ear as well?"

The Watcher nodded slowly. After a moment, Buffy did likewise, looking at Anya apologetically. "Sorry about the detonation," she said quietly.

Anya seemed taken aback at the words. "No problem," she finally replied, an awkward smile emerging on her face.

Buffy spoke more decisively. "Well, she hasn't figured it out yet, but let's not take the chance." She turned to her sister. "What we need is an alias for you. Any ideas?" she asked, looking around the group.

"Well, we could go with-whaddyacallem-anti-hyms," Xander suggested. "Something like 'Sunset.'"

"In the first place, Xander, they're *antonyms*," Giles sighed. "And in the second, it would hardly require the mind of a god to solve that riddle."

"Hey, how about your favorite character from your favorite Christmas special?" Buffy asked suddenly. "Cindy Lou Who?"

"But I'm *way* more than two," Dawn protested. "I'm like, a million and fifteen."

"Yeah, she's way too cute for you anyway," Buffy grumbled.

"How about 'Sela'?" Willow asked, tactfully ignoring Dawn as she glared at her sister. "I read that name recently. It's really classy and kinda serene."

"We should probably avoid gender-specific names," Tara countered reluctantly. "I was gonna suggest 'Antigone,' because I love that play, but--"

"'Antigone'?" Dawn scoffed. "Pretentious much?"

"Picky much?" Buffy countered. "It's an alias, not a life partner."

"Well *you* may be happy to go through life with a name like 'Buffy,' but I'm going to pick something appropriate... Stylish, yet tasteful."

"And after we select your name, we'll hit the boutiques to find just the right pair of shoes to accessorize it," Giles sighed. "Might we focus on the task at hand? Tara is right-we should choose a name which conveys as little information as possible."

"And what kind of name is 'Buffy,' anyway?" Dawn continued to grumble. "I mean, what names did Mom and Dad *reject* before they settled on that winner? Muffy? Blossom? Besides I still don't see why I can't just choose my own name. I mean, it's not like I'd pick something obvious or stupid. I think I wanna be--"

"Pita," Buffy said abruptly, staring at her sister.

"You want to name me after a pocket bread?" Dawn looked incredulous. "Why not just call me 'Kaiser,' or 'Multi-Grain'?"

"Not the bread; the acronym," Buffy corrected her. "PITA: Pain In The Ass."

"You are *so* not going to call me "Pain in the Ass," Dawn practically howled.

"We won't," Buffy replied. "We'll call you 'PITA.'" She looked around. "What do you guys think?"

"But there's Peta Wilson, the total babe who starred in 'La Femme Nikita,'" Tara noted, registering one second too late Willow's expression. "Who has completely let herself go and now looks just awful," she hastened to amend. "I think she has leprosy, in fact."

"Uh-huh," Willow muttered, not remotely appeased.

"Anyway, we can't use a name that would get someone else killed," Tara continued, obviously eager to move away from this particular appellation.

"Do we have to use a name at all?" Xander asked. "Why not just say 'the Key'?"

"That may well be the safest option," Giles concurred. Silence ensued, as everyone grappled with the fact that Giles had, in the space of a few minutes, commended Anya on her discretion and Xander on his prudence.

"Yeah, I guess you're right," Buffy commented after everyone had regained their equilibrium. "Less chance of a slip-up that way, or accidentally putting someone else in danger."

"I'm on board with that," Willow weighed in, after her Full Pout Moment had passed. "Seems like the main thing isn't just keeping Dawn's name out of the conversation, it's also talking about the entire subject as if it involved someone or something outside of our immediate circle."

"We'll have to be circumspect," Giles warned them.

Willow saw Xander's horrified expression. "Not *circumcised*, Xander-*circumspect*. It won't be painful." Though he clearly didn't understand the word, he sat back in obvious relief.

"Are we agreed then?" Giles inquired, glancing around the room.

"Can I still get the neat shoes?" Dawn asked. At her sister's expression, she sat back and crossed her arms over her chest. "Fine. No shoes."

"Sorry...PITA," Buffy offered after a moment.

"No problem...Muffy."

"And so now, albeit sadly, we return to the subject of Glory," Giles said with a small sigh of exasperation. "Though she hasn't made contact with any of us, she's still very much a part of Sunnydale. The incidence of psychotic episodes among individuals with no psychiatric history has actually increased, which suggests that it does in fact weaken her to be on this plane in her current form."

Willow noticed Tara practically shrink back into the couch. Looking at her with concern, she mouthed the words, "Baby? You OK?"

Speaking to the entire group, Tara blurted, "If she comes close to me, she'll have to kill me. I won't let her take my mind."

A stunned silence fell over her friends. Her lover, though, asked incredulously, "Tara, are you serious? You'd rather be dead than psychotic?"

"I've had my mind used and abused enough in my life," Tara replied simply, barely meeting Willow's gaze. Then she grew visibly uncomfortable with the attention directed at her. "Anyway, it's not like we have to sign up for one or the other," she added, trying unsuccessfully to smile.

Willow, though, was agitated at what she had just heard. *We'll definitely talk about this later...*

"Is there any kind of pattern to her victims?" Buffy asked, looking back at Giles.

"None that we can discern," he noted reluctantly. "It seems to be a matter of...well, convenience. Thus far, no one appears to have been selected for any reason other than his or her availability."

"So if she's taking more people's minds than she did when she first arrived," Willow mused, turning her attention back to the subject at hand, "maybe that means there's a limited window of opportunity. I mean, maybe she needs to get-to get the Key within a certain time frame, or she goes too wonky or whatever to actually *use* it."

"That would be about the first piece of good news we've heard in awhile," Buffy commented, shaking her head.

"If that's true, though," Giles countered, "we can expect her to step up her efforts to find-the Key."

"Which means we basically play keep-away," Xander pointed out, "instead of having to go on the offense."

Buffy seemed to ponder this with considerable ambivalence, Willow noticed. "What's the matter, Buffy? Wouldn't that be easier?"

"Probably," Buffy acknowledged slowly. "But nerve-wracking, in a whole different way. I mean, I'm used to meeting the bad guys head-on, not holing up and just hoping the monster goes away." She looked at Dawn helplessly. "It's hard to do nothing."

Dawn considered this for a moment, and then slowly replied, "But we know that the Key is ancient and probably incredibly wise, too." At her sister's bemused expression, she continued, "I'm just saying that I suspect the Key would recommend the option that seems least likely to get people hurt-including you, Oh Mighty, Ass-Kicking Slayer." Willow thought she could hear a slight tremble in Dawn's voice. "I mean, the Key has probably seen far too much death and destruction in its existence. It wouldn't want us to go out and deliberately seek more of it."

The room fell very quiet again, until Buffy finally replied, "You're probably right, Dawn. I guess I can learn to cool my jets in the interest of prudence and deliberation." She managed a wry grin for her sister. "We shouldn't underestimate the wisdom of the Key, I suppose."

"That path leads only to ruin," Dawn solemnly intoned.

"I'll keep that in mind...PITA."

"Good idea, Muffy."

Turning back to the group, Buffy said, "So we keep a low profile and wait for Our Lady of Clairol to make a move. Sound like a plan?" An echo of confirmations greeted this question.

"I'd also suggest we all make every effort to avoid being alone if at all possible, certainly in any location that carries heightened vulnerability," Giles added, his voice heavy with warning.

"I'm thinkin' a hell god can make just about any location pretty vulnerable," Xander commented. "But color me on board, Watcher Man: Anya and I will make sure that we're always together."

"That'll be new and different," Willow heard Dawn mutter.

"Ooh-I definitely like this plan better than some of the other ones you guys have dreamed up," Anya enthused. "Breaking into the Initiative? Taunting the Mayor with the same knife you stabbed Faith with? This is much wiser."

"Except that both of those examples ended with us winning," Willow pointed out, suspecting that Buffy had thought the same thing. "Giles, is there any way to get some more intell on Glory? Anything about her past, how the other two hell gods teamed up to kick her skanky ass onto our plane?"

Giles shrugged apologetically. "I'm certainly poring over every tome and reference we have on both Glory and hell gods in general. At present, though, I've exhausted every resource I can think of."

*You're so tired,* Willow thought suddenly, looking at Giles with fresh compassion. *The only reason you can focus on any of this is because it involves saving Joyce's daughter.*

The meeting broke up shortly after this exchange. As they headed back to Tara's dorm, Willow asked, "Baby? You OK? That whole brain-drain discussion left you pretty freaked, it seemed."

At the words, Tara wrapped her arms tightly about herself, squeezing as close to Willow as walking permitted. She was quiet for several seconds before responding. When she did, her voice was barely audible.

"I meant it, Willow. I'd rather have that bitch kill me than rip my mind out of my body, leave me a hollow shell like those people at the hospital."

Willow stared at her, unable to believe that she was hearing such a flat avowal of death before disability from her beloved. "But Tara, you don't know that those people won't recover. This all started so recently; for all we know, it's a temporary condition."

Tara stopped and wheeled to face her. "They won't recover, Will. She takes their minds and feeds on them. There won't be any 'spontaneous recovery' for this. They'll lay there, empty and alone and babbling incoherently and people will have to feed them and change their clothes and bathe them. Nobody knows what horror show is running in their brains, Willow-nobody knows what they hallucinate about or who chases them in their nightmares." She shuddered, a quick, spasmodic twitch, and then stared at Willow intently. "I mean it, Willow-if she comes for me, I'll fight until she has to kill me and she won't be *able* to take my mind. And please don't try to 'reason' with me about this, OK?"



Willow could find no words, and Tara clearly didn't want to hear the ones she would have hoped to find. She only nodded slowly, and then finally managed to breathe, "We won't let it happen, Baby...not to any of us. She won't get any of us, OK?" She eased her arm back around Tara's shoulders and they resumed their trip home, each deep within her own thoughts.

When they reached Tara's dorm, it was only 7:30, yet Willow realized that she was exhausted. *Me and my damn need to fight for humanity's survival...* With a groan, she remembered the chemistry exam she had yet to study for. All of her books were at Tara's anyway, but the last thing she felt like doing was cramming for a test.

*Maybe if Glory figures out Dawn's the Key and corners us all, I can stall by firing questions about the chemical composition of the Hell Mouth...*

*Or maybe I can't.*

As they trudged up the stairs to Tara's second-floor room, the exhaustion seeming to hit both of them simultaneously, Willow saw a tall figure pacing slowly in front of the door, its back to them. Glancing quickly at Tara, Willow saw that her partner was as taken aback by the idea of a visitor as Willow herself was.

As the figure reached the end of its self-imposed circuit and turned back, Willow could see that it was a woman.

*Glory? Here?* Her fingers tightened reflexively around Tara's. They stopped, unsure of what they should do.

The woman stepped toward them hesitantly, giving no indication of any intent to harm them.

"Tara?" The voice was tentative.

*If this is Glory, she's gotta go through me.*

Tara, though, had taken a small step forward. Willow looked first at her and then back to the figure just a few feet away.

"Tara, is that you?" Willow struggled to place the accent.

Tara's voice was low and incredulous. "I don't believe this..."

The older woman laughed, and her voice sounded warm in Willow's ears. "Well, sweetie, to coin a phrase-if the niece can't come to Dallas, take Dallas to the niece."

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## **Part 22**

Taking in the tall, angular features of the woman standing before her, Tara suddenly felt a wave of homesickness sweep over her, so forceful that it left her momentarily dizzy.

*But what home am I missing? The one I wish I'd had? The one populated with people who really belonged there?* Because now, looking at her aunt, Tara felt sure somehow that this woman was one of those people.

"Tara, Sweetie-it's so good to see you," Beverly was saying as she walked toward her, and then Tara was wrapped up in strong arms, hardly bothering to blink back the tears as she returned the embrace with a fierceness that almost surprised her.

They stood there like that for several seconds, Tara lost in a surreal world in which the present gave reluctant shape to whispers and glances and half-told stories from decades past.

*You knew my mother. You met her when she was a teenager. You watched her walk down the aisle in her wedding dress. You listened to her tell stories. You knew her.* And again, nearly as sharp as when it had first punched its fist into her heart, grief ripped through her and threatened to swallow her where she stood.

Finally, as if by mutual accord, they pulled apart, but held on to each other's hands. Beverly was crying, too, and Tara wondered about the secret compartments of her aunt's own grief. Then she remembered Willow, and turned to find her beloved standing awkwardly off to the side, smiling politely.

*She thinks she's intruding. Doesn't she know that any home I have begins with her?*

"Willow, Sweetie, c'mere," she managed, holding out her hand. *So I guess I just came out to Aunt Beverly.*

Willow hesitated, as if giving Tara a chance to reconsider, and then stepped forward and linked her fingers with Tara's.

"Aunt Bev, this is my partner, Willow Rosenberg. Willow, this is my aunt, Beverly Maclay."

When Beverly smiled, Tara noticed that she had the same crooked grin that she herself had. It surprised her-she had always believed that she took exclusively after her mother's side of the family. But the Maclays made up half of her heritage as well, even if that heritage was of a different source than she had believed two weeks ago.

"It's very nice to meet you, Willow," Beverly said warmly, shaking Willow's hand. "Sorry about the hall-way crying jag."

"Oh, no problem," Willow quickly reassured her. "I do some of my best emoting in public places." Then she grinned hopefully, if with a little discomfiture, as if realizing that not everyone spoke like that.

But Beverly only laughed, absently brushing away her tears. "That's good to know. Next time I'm in the mall and have a sudden urge to weep, I'll give you a call."

*Yes-these two women are part of my family.*

"Aunt Bev, come on in," Tara finally said, wiping her own face with her sleeve. She keyed into her room and was relieved to remember that she had at least picked up some of the random mess of papers and books that usually littered her living space.

"God-you definitely keep a cleaner house than I did when I was in college," Beverly commented. "Cleaner than I *still* do, to be honest." She gave Tara a wry grin.

Tara saw that Willow was standing uncertainly a few feet within the room, as if unsure whether to proceed further. She looked at Tara, a question in her eyes. Tara answered the question with a slight nod of her head, and Willow now moved decisively to her side.

"Please, have a seat," Tara beckoned her aunt, who seemed grateful to sink into the papasan chair. "How long have you been waiting, anyway?" she asked, as she and Willow plunked themselves on the bed.

Beverly gave a quick glance at her watch. "About two hours, give or take," she replied, quickly forestalling Tara's apology. "You had no idea I would be here, Tara. I didn't even know if you were coming home tonight." She said this last piece with no apparent self-consciousness or judgment. "I'm just glad you did. It's been a long time since I slept in a hallway, and that was only because I passed out." She grinned easily.

"Can I get you anything?" Tara asked, hoping her aunt would decline because she had virtually nothing in the tiny dorm fridge. Demon fighting tended to make such matters as grocery shopping a catch-as-catch-can affair.

"No thanks," her aunt duly replied. "I had a Coke from the machine earlier." Sitting up a little bit, she continued, "Tara, I know you must be shocked to find me here. I'm really sorry if I'm guilty of presumption or assumption or any other conduct unbecoming. But when we talked on the phone, I could just tell that something was up. And I've been wanting to talk to you anyway, so when you called, I guess part of me just thought that it was a sign." She shrugged. "If I'm wrong, God knows it won't be the first time, and I can just head back home." She smiled, somewhat uncertainly.

*Where in the goddess's name do I begin? "So, Aunt Bev-did you know Mom slept with Quinn? Did you know I'm his daughter? Did Dad-and by 'Dad' I mean Nathan-ever talk about having demon in him? Oh-and you are a big dyke too? 'Cause I am."* Quickly scanning the mental menu, she decided to stall just a bit.

"But how did you manage it so quickly? I mean, the ticket price alone must have been incredible."

"Well, teachers don't have the greatest salary in the world, true, but I also sell heroin." She smiled benignly at their stricken faces. "OK, so that last part is something of a stretch in the sense of being completely untrue. The fact is, I have *beaucoup de* Frequent Flyer miles racked up and more sick days than you can shake a stick at." She paused, giving them both a quizzical look. "Where in the world did that saying come from, anyway? Who shakes sticks for *any* reason? Did early Cro Magnon people say, 'Hey-let's shake these sticks for good luck on the hunt'?"

*Oh my God-she's not just related to me, she's related to Willow, too. And that makes Willow and me related. And I need to stop thinking about this.*

She met Beverly's amused glance, and realized that her aunt was trying to set her at ease. "I guess what I'm saying, Tara, is that this seemed important enough to make things like money and work take a back seat, you know?"

"Yeah, I know. I definitely know." Tara gave her a philosophical smile.

"I also realize that this little visit is completely out of the blue, and that you may have about fifty thousand other things that you want or need to do," her aunt continued. "Believe me, I won't be wounded if you decide this isn't a good time. But if you *do* need me, I'm here." She looked at Tara gently. "You just seemed so...*confused*, or lost, when we spoke."

Tara sat quietly for a few seconds, gradually becoming aware of something missing; an absence that she didn't like. Frowning, she realized that she wasn't touching Willow.

She needed to be touching Willow.

She reached out and slid her fingers through Willow's, giving her partner a reassuring squeeze and receiving much-needed grounding in return. Glancing up, she saw Beverly looking at her intently, patiently.

When Willow spoke, the sudden breaking of the silence caught them all a little off-guard. "Listen, Tara, if you want to speak with your aunt by yourself..."

"No." The word was out of Tara's mouth before Willow could even finish her sentence. She looked at her aunt, gradually reorienting herself as she held tight to Willow's hand. "Aunt Bev, Willow's been through everything with me, all the upheavals in the family." She paused, drawing a deep breath. "She's my partner, and I don't know what I'd do without her. I...I want her to stay." She looked at Willow, who was gazing at her with that look of utter adoration, the one that said, *"I would walk through Hell for you."* Turning back to her aunt, she added simply, "Without her, nothing makes much sense."

Beverly just smiled in return. "I get that. If our situations were reversed, I'd definitely want Tanya with me."

Tara stole a quick glance at Willow. *"That sounded pretty gay, didn't it?"* she wanted to ask her partner. Instead, she turned to Beverly. "So you're on the bus, too, huh?"

"Yep. Bisexual, to be exact. But pretty much bat-shit crazy for Tanya...Have been for over five years now.

"Bat-shit crazy," Tara echoed, shaking her head. "Now *there's* an endearment you don't see on a lot of Hallmark cards."

"Well, it's not the sort of declaration that a girl just tosses around lightly," her aunt concurred, laughing. "Although you appear to be of comparable bat-shit psychosis," she added, arching one eyebrow significantly.

"Oh, we're definitely with the bat-shit," Willow replied enthusiastically. "If it's the fecal output of a nocturnal flying mammal, we're all about it."

*I live in a universe most people only dream of.*

"Does Nathan know?" Beverly asked, bringing the lightness of the moment to an abrupt halt.

*She didn't say "your dad." Does she know?*

"Funny you should mention that," she replied, glancing at Willow, who gave her a sad smile. "We took an impromptu road trip to Cold Springs a couple of weeks ago, to clear up a few things." *Nice understatement, Tara...* "I came out to him then."

"Wow," Beverly replied, shaking her head. "How'd he take it?"

"Let's just say he won't be Grand Marshall at the LA Pride March any time soon," Tara said. "But to tell you the truth, that was sort of the *least* dramatic revelation of the trip."

"My God, Tara-what happened? What has you so thrown?" Beverly's face was creased with anxiety.

Tara took another deep breath, wondering where and how she could begin this conversation.

"Aunt Bev, there's just been a lot of stuff in the family for a few years, and it's kind of reaching a crescendo right about now." She paused, unsure how to continue.

"Well, that's the kind of specificity you normally find only on 'The X-Files,'" her aunt commented dryly after a moment. "Stuff's happening, and it just peaked. OK, that clears everything up."

Tara looked at her aunt, feeling equal parts desperate to confide and afraid of divulging material that wasn't hers to share.

"I just need to know a little more about my mother," she finally managed. "And about-about my dad, too." *How's that for double meanings?* She felt Willow's gentle squeeze of her fingers.

Her aunt looked at her intently for several seconds, and then nodded. "OK-how can I help? What can I tell you about? I mean, is there anything specific you're wondering about?"

*Well, for starters, when do you think Mom and your **other** brother started noticing each other?* But that question would require a slightly more sophisticated means of inquiry.

"Did Mom...did she seem happy?" Tara finally asked.

Beverly cocked her head inquisitively. "And you know, of course, that I'm dying to know why you're asking this. Notice, of course, that I'm refraining from pushing that issue."

"Duly noted," Tara acknowledged, giving her aunt a small grin.

"Did Julia seem happy... You know, it seemed to come and go. I mean, everybody has ups and downs; I'm trying to remember stretches of time when her mood seemed one way or another." She bit her lower lip-another shared habit, Tara noted. "I guess she seemed happy at first; I mean, after she and Nathan first got married."

"Were you surprised that she married him?" Tara asked suddenly.

"Again, please note my admirable restraint as to learning your motivation... Well, I guess I was, at least a little bit."

"Why?" Tara could almost feel her mind working backward through the years, casting its eye on impressions and reactions first formulated long before her own conception.

"Because Nathan was so reserved, and Julia seemed so full of life," Beverly answered readily. "Don't get me wrong-it's not like Nathan was a robot or autistic or anything. He was just always shy; he had an easier time doing things than talking about them. But once he met Julia-he was like a different man. He came home after meeting her for the first time-I was about seven at the time-and he'd brought all of us milkshakes from the local dairy. He even got my favorite flavor-bittersweet mint."

Tara felt her heart constrict at the image of her father-of Nathan-being so taken with her mother from their first meeting that he had wanted to share his good fortune with his little sister.

"Keep in mind, Tara, I was just a kid," Beverly was saying. "I mean, I was only fourteen when you were born, and I left Cold Springs right after graduation. So it's not like I have perfect recall *or* that I was a mature, fully-developed reporter of family affairs."

*What incredibly unfortunate phrasing...* But it wasn't Beverly's fault. Tara suspected that her aunt had no idea of that liaison, and its outcome; that is, her.

"No, no-I get it," Tara said, realizing that Beverly was staring at her curiously. "I-I was just thinking; trying to see it through your eyes."

"Well, in my eyes, Julia McKinnon was about the greatest thing to hit my little world since I first saw Buddy on 'Family.' I mean, she was funny; she actually took an interest in me; and she made my brother happier than I'd ever seen him. To me, she was the County Fair, Dairy Queen, and softball all rolled into one."

Hazarding a guess, Tara ventured, "Crush much?"

"Crush *intensely*, before I even realized what a crush was. I guess, to be honest, it turned into a crush when I hit adolescence, but from the moment I met her, I thought she was special. And she was," she added simply, shrugging.

*OK, so it appears that **all** of the Maclay brood fell for my mother. She must have had such a shine to her...*

"So, back to the happiness question," Beverly continued. "I guess they had their rough spots, like all couples do. But I know that when Julia got pregnant-" Here she stopped abruptly, looking at Tara uncertainly. "Tara, Sweetie, I'm a little unsure where to go here...I mean, I don't know how much you know about the early days of your parents' marriage." Her eyes narrowed in hesitation.

"I know that Mom and Dad lost a baby to miscarriage," Tara said. "And I know they both believed it was a little boy."

Beverly nodded sadly. "And that seemed to change things. I don't know that they ever got back on track, not completely. Even after you and Donnie were born." She leaned forward suddenly, her eyes intense. "But Tara, I meant what I said on the phone-your mother loved you like crazy. No matter how things were going between her and Nathan, she adored you."

Tara could feel the tears welling up. *Will I ever watch this movie and not cry?*

"I know she did, Aunt Bev," she said simply. "I never had a moment's doubt about that."

The room was silent for several moments, each woman lost in her own inner reflections. Finally, Tara squared her shoulders.

"OK, new topic," she announced decisively. "Let's go with 'Nathan's Family History' for 200, Alex." She saw her aunt grinning at her accommodatingly. "What can you tell me about your mom's first marriage?"

Beverly blinked, and for one awful moment Tara feared that her aunt hadn't known about this little tidbit. But then Beverly shook her head and grinned once more. "You're not much for transition sentences, are you?" she asked, shaking her head slightly. "Well, let's see...Mom didn't talk much about him. I know that Nathan was ten when she left his dad and moved to Cold Springs. She married my dad-your Grandpa Frank-less than a year after that." She rolled her eyes slightly. "Mom was not of the self-reliant variety. Anyway, the only thing she ever said about her first husband was that he hadn't turned out to be the man she thought he was. I asked her about him a few times, but she so clearly didn't want to talk about it that I didn't push the issue."

"Do you know if he ever tried to contact her, or...or Dad?" Tara asked quietly.

"Not that I know of," Beverly replied. "But considering how close-mouthed she was about him, she never would have talked about it even if he had."

Tara sat quietly for a moment, and then a somewhat surprising question came to her. "How did your dad and my dad get along? I mean, were they close, or did it seem like there was tension?"

Beverly laughed, but Tara could see her aunt's own grief rushing into her eyes. "You know, I don't think it was *possible* to have tension with Dad. He was just about the most laid-back, easy-going person I've ever known. And yes, I'm probably guilty of deifying him a little bit, but *only* a little bit. I used to wonder how he and Mom ever got together. God knows she was just one big bundle of nerves."

Tara tried to remember her grandfather, who had died when she seven. Pictures of warm brown eyes, a shock of white hair, and a near-perpetual smile flitted through her mind. *He was kind*, she realized suddenly. Her grand-father-and he *had* been her grand-father, both biologically and emotionally-had been a kind man.

"I remember being sad when he died," Tara offered her aunt, who was rubbing her hand across her forehead as if trying to dam up her tears.

"I remember being *devastated* when he died," her aunt replied. "And angry...Both at God, or whoever was in charge of this 3-Ring circus, and at him."

"Why him?" Tara asked, dimly recalling her grandfather's sudden fall in the house, the broken hip, the quick decline.

"Because if he hadn't been drinking, he probably wouldn't have taken that header down the basement stairs and busted himself up," Beverly replied, sighing. Peering closely at Tara, she added, "You know he was an alcoholic, right? No, apparently you didn't..." Her grin was mirthless. "Oh, yeah...Dad was just about the most wonderful father you could ask for, *and* he had a disease that took him away from us way before his time." She turned to look out the window, as if watching a home-movie playing upon its panes. "He fought it, so hard, so many times. On the wagon, then off again. Mom just called it the 'demon rum,' as if he were possessed or something." She apparently missed the combined quick intake of breath from both Tara and Willow. "I don't think she was much help; mostly, I think she made him feel guilty. But he joined AA, and he tried so hard. After Mom died, I thought it would either send him back to the bottle or clean him up once and for all. He fought it for a long time, but at the end he started drinking again. He swore it was just a little bit, that he could handle it, but everybody knew that was bullshit. And one night he was apparently having 'just a little bit,' and decided that he just had to have something from the basement-who knows what he was going down there for-and he fell. And then he died," she finished, looking back at them with tired eyes. "Any chance we can move to a different category, Tara?"



Glancing at Willow, Tara could see tears in her partner's eyes. She realized that her own family, with all its twists and turns and tragedies, held a different kind of horror than Willow's demon-fighting had prepared her for.

"Sure, Aunt Bev...God, I'm just so sorry," she added in a rush. "I had no idea."

"That's OK, Sweetie. Alcoholism runs in our family. It took Dad, and it took Quinn."

Heart pounding, Tara felt Willow's fingers stroke gently over her own. Struggling to find her voice, she asked, "And what was he like? Quinn?" As she registered her galloping pulse, she found it difficult to believe that Beverly couldn't see her shirt rise and fall with the force.

"Quinn? Oh, God, lemme see..." In the brief silence that followed, Tara felt as if she were being stretched into two lives. The first was the life she had always known, in which Quinn was simply her uncle who had gone away under unfortunate circumstances when she was younger. The second was the life of the man who was actually her biological father; the man who had apparently fallen in love with his brother's wife and fathered a child with her.

*She's about to talk about my father.*

"Well, Quinn was a lot like his father. Both of them were jokers; both of them loved a good laugh more than anything besides a good drink. And Quinn could charm your socks off, too. He had more women chasing him than he knew what to do with."

*Don't fall apart, Tara. No matter what comes out of her mouth, don't fall apart.* As she fought to steady herself, she heard Willow asking, "So how did he settle on Margaret?"

And now Beverly's eye roll was nothing short of profound. "Oh, dear Lord, Margaret...Talk about someone with a complicated relationship with God." Beverly sat back in her chair, shaking her head. "Well, he and Margaret had apparently consummated their relationship *before* the good Reverend Timmons had given them full Baptist blessing."

"From whence sprang Beth," Willow ventured.

"From whence sprang Beth," Beverly concurred. "I would bet my eye teeth that Quinn had enjoyed many a woman's favors before, but he'd been smart enough to use protection. But suddenly, Margaret had a bun in the oven and Quinn had played the part of the baker. So they were married without much in the way of glad tidings. Still, though, they made it work, at least for a few years," she mused.

Finally trusting herself to speak, Tara asked, "Do you know why he left them? Why he ran off and left his wife and daughter?" *Two daughters?*

Beverly looked at her sadly. "No I don't, Tara. I wish I did. I was gone by that time, although we did keep in touch, at least a little bit."

"He had named you as his next of kin," Tara said dully.

"Nathan told you that, did he? Yeah-I got a call one night from a hospital ER in Tulsa, saying that he had been admitted with bleeding in his stomach. He died before I could get there, but he'd left a note saying he wanted to be cremated and have his ashes spread over any patch of honeysuckle I could find."

*"The honeysuckle's blooming, Mama. I'll make sure there's always a bunch in your room."*

Tara thought she might pass out.

"Tara, Baby, are you OK?" Willow's voice seemed to come from a great distance. Tara reached out to that voice with her mind, pulling herself back to the reality that held the owner of that voice. Because any reality with Willow in it was a reality she could survive.

"Tara, what's wrong?" Beverly's own voice was filled with confusion. Tara realized that Beverly would have no idea why she was so devastated by news of her uncle's death.

"It's just-it's just a lot to take in," she managed, gratefully accepting the glass of water that Willow had secured for her.

"We don't have to talk about all of this at once," Beverly offered. "I can tell that something's got you completely shaken, Tara, and you don't have to tell me what it is. But I don't want to overload the system completely."

*Too late*, Tara thought dimly, and found the response mildly amusing.

"Yeah, that-that might be a good idea," she muttered, trying to summon a reasonable facsimile of a smile with which to reassure her aunt.

"Of course. It seems like it might be a good idea to have some time with Willow, let her help you sift through all of this. I'm staying at the Sunnysdale Ramada." She held out a hand-written scrap of paper with the hotel's phone number and her own room number.

Tara and Willow walked her the short distance to the door. Catching Tara's eye, Willow observed, "Um, not to seem like a great big sissy trapped in a little dyke's body, but it *is* dark out, Beverly. Will you be OK?"

Beverly smiled at the concern. "I'm parked in a well-lit spot, Willow, but thanks for the cautionary note. I'll be careful. Anything jumps out at me, I'll just emote until it goes away." She turned and pulled Tara into a tight embrace. "Good night, Sweetie. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

Holding onto her father's sister an extra moment, Tara whispered, "Thank you, Aunt Bev. More than I can say."

As she closed the door behind her aunt, Tara felt Willow's soft arms encircling her from behind. They stood there in silence for what felt like hours. Finally, she heard Willow's voice soft in her ear, asking, "Would the question 'Are you OK?' qualify as completely ridiculous?"

"Nothing you say to me could qualify as ridiculous," Tara managed, before the sobs overtook her and she could speak no more.

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"Baby, do you want to talk?" Forgotten was the chemistry exam. All that mattered, the only reality of import, was the gentle, bereft woman leaning against her.

"I don't think I have the energy to speak any more. I mean it, Willow-I feel like my mind and heart are just too exhausted to formulate a coherent thought, much less summon up the energy to *communicate* it." Tara looked up anxiously. "Is that OK? Does it feel like I'm avoiding it all?"

"God, no. I can feel your exhaustion just rolling off of you. C'mon-let's go to bed. None of this is going anywhere, much as we might want it to."

A few minutes later, as they stretched out beneath the covers and entwined themselves into one another like the petals of an intricate flower, Tara mumbled, "God, she came all the way from Texas...Just because she was worried about me."

"Well, Tara Maclay, you're an easy person to love," Willow whispered against her partner's soft hair, as much to herself as to her beloved.

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When Tara met Willow for mochas the next day during their one shared break, she was considerably more energized than she had been at the close of the previous evening.

"Think about it, Will...She knew my dad-both of them-when they were young. I mean, Nathan was a teenager when she was born, but she still knew him then. And she was only two years younger than Quinn, so she knew him virtually all of his life." She fell quiet for a moment, and then added softly, "All of his life, which is now over."

Willow ached for her partner. To some degree (albeit a far lesser one), she ached for everyone in the Maclay family-the boy whose mother left his father because that father was a demon, or so she said; the young man who had fallen so hard for his brother's wife, eventually abandoning his own family to drink himself to death alone in a strange city; the wife and daughter he had left behind...Some very small part of her even felt a sliver of compassion for Donnie-less loved, it would seem, by his mother and beaten by his father. What a sad, twisted legacy her beloved had been given...And how bravely she fought it.

"Are you gonna tell Beverly about your mom and Quinn?" she finally asked.

"I don't know," Tara replied slowly. "Part of me feels like it's not my information to share, you know? I mean, it doesn't just involve me."

"Seems to me it involves you as much as it does anybody else," Willow countered. More hesitantly, she added, "And Tara-two of the other people that it *does* involve are...they're dead."

But Tara just shook her head. "This may sound crazy, but I still feel some sense of responsibility to them, Will; especially to Mom. I know they're beyond any kind of judgment or recrimination, but...but it still doesn't feel entirely mine. At the same, I *want* to tell her. I think that might help it make more sense."

Willow couldn't honestly say that she completely understood. Her own experiences with death had been of the profoundly unnatural variety, little complicated with the intricacies of family secrets. Her father's parents had died before she was born; her mother's parents lived in Phoenix. She saw them perhaps once every three years. Tara's family was so tightly interwoven, so incredibly entangled in each other's lives...and yet, for all of that, so alienated and split off. The ones who did love, it appeared, either died or suffered irreparable heart-ache. Willow intended to see that Tara would be the one to break that legacy.

After a moment, she offered, "Beverly seems nice-really funny, too."

"And a card-carrying Friend of Dorothy, it would appear," Tara added with a small laugh. "How cool is that?"

"Yeah, apparently she had a crush on your mom as well. What's it like, thinking of your mom as some total hottie?"

Tara looked at her somewhat askance. "Actually, Will, I *don't* really think of my mom as a total hottie, you know? I mean, it's hard to put those two nouns in the same sentence."

"Still, Julia McKinnon Maclay had some major love mojo workin' for her...just like her daughter," Willow added, raising Tara's hand to her lips.

"Well, I don't think I have the numbers working for me that she did," Tara replied, shaking her head. "I mean, it's not like the masses have lined up to savor the experience that is me."

"They should," Willow countered promptly. "There should be a web site, or a board somewhere, where people could use all sorts of different colored pens-of the electronic variety, of course-devoted to the loveliness of Tara Maclay."

"Yeah, well, I'm sure somebody will get right on that," Tara replied, giving a wide and utterly artificial smile. "Meanwhile, I got my hands full with one very fascinating witch. That's all I want."

"Honestly-you do say the most *charming* things, Miss Maclay," Willow said demurely, giving her best imitation of a southern belle. Her best wasn't terribly good, but Willow could see that Tara found it terribly endearing.

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Between her Art History and Women's Studies courses, Tara phoned her aunt to see if she would like to join them for dinner. Beverly was apparently out enjoying the infinite delights of Sunnydale, so Tara simply left a message. When she got back to her dorm room later that afternoon, Beverly had left her own message, suggesting that Tara and Willow pick out a restaurant and she would pick them up at seven unless she heard differently.

"How about *La Belle Maison*?" Willow asked after Tara updated her on the plans.

"Sure. Just give me time to knock off the local convenience store and we should have just enough cash for appetizers." She shook her head in exasperation. "Honestly, Willow, have you ever noticed that no one in our social circle holds down a job except Xander, yet we all act as if we have money wafting into our wallets while we sleep?"

"I know, I know," Willow admitted. "OK, so how about Red Lobster? I'm sure we all love seafood."

Tara looked up at her quickly in the mirror, but Willow's expression was pure innocence. "Yeah-that sounds good...more affordable than *Maison*, but a step up from 'Earl's Taco Tavern.'"

True to her message, Beverly showed up promptly at seven. "Oh, God, I love seafood," she exclaimed when Tara presented their dining suggestion. Studiously avoiding Tara's eyes, Willow shrugged into her windbreaker and followed them both out the door.

Dinner was somewhat less emotional than the previous night had been-partly because they were in public, and partly because Tara had spent a considerable part of the day trying to center herself. She refused to let any news from her family of origin dislodge the sun from her own system. She had a truth now-that Life was meaningful, that she herself had worth-and she wouldn't go back to that place where everything revolved around her father's angry stillness and her brother's angry abuse.

Beverly had insisted on picking up the tab. "I remember how broke I was in college," she maintained over their arguments. "I really want to do this. And if you two insist on sharing an appetizer and calling it dinner, I'll dump shrimp shells over both your heads."

Later, as they nibbled at the cheddar biscuits and their salads, Beverly asked, "So-how you doin' today, Tara? I know last night was pretty intense."

"Better, thanks," Tara replied around a mouthful of biscuit. "I still can't believe you flew all the way here just to talk to me, Aunt Bev, but I hope you have some idea of just how much it means to me."

"Ah, well, that's the kind of debt best repaid by a return visit," her aunt nodded, giving Tara a wry grin.

"Aunt Beverly, I know I didn't give you much to go on last night; I mean, I was pretty vague with the details," Tara acknowledged.

"Are you kidding? You made Clinton sound downright explicit about Lewinsky," Beverly replied dryly. "But I figured you had your reasons."

"Yeah, well, I feel like you deserve a little more info than what I gave you," Tara said. Looking at Willow sitting beside her, Tara linked their fingers and sighed. "OK...See, the thing is-

"Two crab-leg dinners and an Admiral's Feast."

Aunt Beverly caught her eye over the server's arm. "Yeah, crab legs always **are** the thing, aren't they?"

When their dinners were duly arranged before them, Tara continued. "Aunt Bev, I just found out some pretty mind-bending news." She felt Willow's fingers press reassuringly into her own. "Dad told me..." Here she drew a deep breath. "Dad told me that Mom had an affair when they were married."

Beverly's eyebrows shot upward. "Whoa...I have to say, that really surprises me. I mean, I knew they were having a rough time after the miscarriage, but still..."

"Yeah, well, it gets better," Tara attempted a weak laugh. "I was conceived in that affair."

Now Beverly put aside all pretense of eating. "Jesus H. Tap-Dancing Christ, Tara," she breathed. "You are *kidding* me!"

"Oh, and don't I wish I were," Tara replied. "No, this is pretty much the Gospel According to All Indications."

"God, Sweetie...I don't know what to say." Her aunt looked at her with a mixture of disbelief and compassion.

"OK, so remember how I said it got better? Well, get ready for the Grand Finale." Tara could feel herself trembling. For a moment, it seemed that Willow's hand on her back was the only thing that kept her from flying out of her chair with the force of her agitation.

"This is really gonna fuck with me, isn't it?" Beverly asked, her eyes narrowing.

"Yeah, probably," Tara acknowledged simply. "It turns out that Mom was having an affair with-she was having an affair with Quinn." There-she'd said it. Did she regret it?

"*Quinn*?" Beverly gaped incredulously. "You cannot be serious!"

Tara didn't bother to respond to the statement. She knew that Beverly's mind would wend its way, however reluctantly, to the reality of the situation on its own. After a few minutes of profoundly uncomfortable silence, Beverly let out a breath that she seemed to have been holding since Tara first spoke.

"Quinn...and Julia." Her eyes glittered suddenly under the harsh fluorescent lights. "Why am I surprised..."

"Wait, are you saying you should have guessed?" Willow asked, leaning forward.

"God, no- at least not suspected, or predicted," Beverly replied, shaking her head. "But it was obvious that Quinn and Margaret weren't happy, and God knows everybody was just drawn to Julia's spirit, and brightness. I mean, when I think about it, Quinn and Julia made a more natural couple than either of them did with the people they actually married." She shrugged helplessly. "Quinn and Julia were both basically happy people, *light* people, if that makes sense. Nathan and Margaret-they've always been more serious, even solemn. Neither of them were what you'd call sociable, or easy-going." She stopped, apparently still trying to rearrange the pieces in this altered puzzle she'd suddenly been handed.

Finally, she looked up, curiosity in her gaze. "Tara, how in heaven's name did all of this come out? Is there something going on? Something medical, that you needed to be told about this?"

Even in the pain of this moment, Tara was moved by her aunt's concern. "No, Aunt Bev, it's nothing like that." She hesitated, looking to Willow in silent questioning.

*Do I go ahead and give the uncensored version?* Willow simply shrugged, as if assuring Tara that this was her story, and Willow would support whatever Tara wanted to do with it.

"OK, let's move on to Act II of 'The Dinner of Infinite Surprises,'" Tara finally said, squaring her shoulders.

"Fine, but I want Ashley Judd playing my part in the Hollywood film version," Beverly replied promptly. At the sight of four raised eyebrows, she defended herself. "What? We could work closely together; I could help her get into my psyche."

"Not to mention your pants," Tara added, grinning in spite of herself.

"Well, there is that," her aunt grudgingly concurred. "OK, so I just thought we all needed a breather there for minute. At least, I know I did." She nodded gently to Tara. "OK, Sweetie-on to Act II."

As succinctly as possible, Tara told her aunt the story: Nathan's original lie that the women in the family carried demon in them; Tara's own belief growing up that she would manifest that demon on her twentieth birthday; the subsequent discovery that Tara carried no demon within her (she omitted many of those details, including Spike's role in debunking that myth); and the eventual revelations about Nathan's father and his own demon heritage.

Through it all, Beverly sat quietly, looking at Willow occasionally as if to ensure that they were both listening to the same narrative. When Tara finally finished, her aunt gazed at her intently. After a few moments, she asked, "So Nathan says that his biological father was-what did you call it?-a Ghirardelli demon?"

"Zhordellian," Tara corrected her.

"Uh-huh," Beverly responded slowly. "Right. And this revelation did *not* prompt you to have him evaluated for a possible involuntary psychiatric commitment?"

Willow and Tara exchanged quick glances. Apparently, Beverly wasn't so much for the demons; for their actual existence, to be exact.

"Well," Willow hedged, "*he* seemed to believe it, and that seemed to be the main thing."

"So? I believed that Virgil Wakefield down at the Baptist church was Santa Claus's younger brother because they looked so much alike, but to my knowledge, they don't exchange birthday cards." She shook her head as if unable to accept that her brother believed such a thing so deeply.

"And you, Tara," Beverly continued, "you grew up thinking you had demon in you; that your *mom* had demon in her. My God, that's just insane." At Tara's expression, she quickly amended, "No insane on *your* part, Sweetie-on his; on Nathan's. I can't believe he'd put you all through that."

"He was afraid of losing her," Tara said quietly.

"And lo and behold, lose her he did," Beverly quickly replied. "God, I feel like I wouldn't recognize Nathan right now if he were walk through those doors and show me his driver's license."

"I'm sorry, Aunt Bev," Tara offered after a moment. "I know we're talking about your brothers, and your mother here."

"Yeah, well, I can't imagine my shock comes anywhere close to what you've been going through," Beverly commented, placing her hand over Tara's. "This must be hell for you, especially the part about your mom."

Tara felt tears stinging her eyes. *Dammit, I'm not going to cry in the Sunnydale Red Lobster.* It felt important somehow, though she couldn't have begun to explain why.

"You're right, Aunt Bev...It's pretty much rocked my world. I mean, I always thought of my mom as this-I don't know...*angel*. Then I find out that she had an affair on my father, *and* that she took Donnie with her. Now it feels like maybe I never really knew her."

"Whoa, there." Beverly held up her hand. "I'm not saying I agree with what Julia did; not for a second. But there's about three continents and a country mile between making a mistake-even a



huge mistake-and being evil." She tightened her hold on Tara's hand. "Even if there *were* such things as demons, Tara, your mother certainly wasn't one."

Tara was quiet, not sure how to answer either her aunt's defense of her mother or her flat denial that demons existed. Finally, she replied slowly, "But she had a choice, Aunt Beverly. Maybe...maybe a demon, or anyone who's just completely malevolent, doesn't really have a choice. Maybe it's so much a part of their nature that they're just acting on instinct. But a human-a decent, average human-who *chooses* to do something wrong-maybe that's worse."

"I don't know, Tara," Beverly sighed. "I certainly can't claim to be the world's leading ethicist. But before you convict your mother, keep in mind that she can't testify in her own defense."

"I know that," Tara replied, somewhat more hotly than she intended. "Nobody needs to tell me that she's gone and I can't talk to her." She felt Willow's hand raising to her cheek; dimly, she noticed that tears were splashing down over the soft fingers.

"Oh God, Tara, I'm sorry," Beverly said her voice filled with remorse. "I didn't mean to imply that you were being harsh, or that you had forgotten she's gone. You feel that more acutely than anyone else, I suspect."

"It's OK," Tara finally replied, after she had taken a sip of water, lifting the glass with a shaking hand. "I just keep thinking that if this were some story, I'd find a letter she wrote me, explaining everything and saying she's sorry."

"Yeah, it'd be nice to log onto 'www.deusexmachina.com' and order yourself a nice plot device," Beverly concurred.

"So you're saying that site isn't up and running?" Tara asked dryly.

"Server went down shortly after Tom Clancy's last novel. May never be up again."

They ate in silence for a few minutes, though no one, Tara thought, seemed especially hungry. Mindful of her aunt's generosity, however-in both spirit and money-Tara tried to make herself crack open several of the crab legs in front of her. She mulled over what had just emerged: her aunt had definitely not known about Quinn and her mother, though she had hardly been surprised that there was an attraction; and she appeared to have absolutely no belief whatsoever in demons.

*Well that kind of puts a cap on how much detail I share about my life here in Sunnydale.*

She decided she needed a change of subject, at least for awhile. "So, not to break the awkward silence or anything, but can you tell me about my grandmother?"

Beverly looked up, seemingly surprised by the question. Then she nodded. "Sure; that's pretty easy. Well, Adele was about as different from her husband-her second husband, at least-as you can imagine. She was wound up tighter than an 8-day clock. Always nervous; always fretting and worrying about *something*, whether it was the furnace or your eternal soul."

"Pretty religious, huh?" Willow queried.

"That's putting it mildly. You remember the Stephen King story, 'Carrie'?" At the combined nods of her listeners, she continued, "Well, my mom would make *her* mom look like someone who got kicked out of Woodstock for misbehavior."

"You're kidding," Tara protested.

"Only a little bit," her aunt relented slightly. "She really was into her church, and Bible verses, and Scriptural dictates on right and wrong. I don't know that she ever got near as much fulfillment out of the love and compassion parts as she did the hell-fire and damnation portion of the program." She looked closely at Tara. "How much do you remember of her, Sweetie?"

Tara frowned, trying to pull fragmented images into some meaningful picture. "Well, I know she died when I was five. The biggest thing I remember is that I totally had her name wrong until I was maybe ten." At Willow's questioning glance, she explained. "She was always referred to as 'Grandma Adele' to me. I guess people said her name quickly; I don't know. Anyway, in my mind, she was 'Grandma Dell' for the longest time. I think it wasn't until I saw her name written down that I realized what it actually was." She smiled at the memory.

"You know she suffered from dementia in her final years, right?" Beverly asked. "She finally went into a nursing home only a few months before she died. God knows Dad tried to take care of her himself. I'd be surprised if you had any memories of her before she lost her faculties, Tara. It was all so sad...She got really paranoid at the end, and a lot of her delusions involved-here's a big surprise-religious ideation."

Tara felt her mind falling away from the table, as if being pulled down into a tiny, empty theater, until she was watching a series of blurry pictures play out before her.

*It was summer. She knew it was summer because she was wearing her blue shorts and a sleeveless red cotton top. They were eating supper, all of them...cold roast beef, and potato salad, and iced tea. The screen door banged open and then an old woman was standing in front of them, yelling and waving her arms. She was wearing a shirt-pink, with white flowers on it-but then she could see that the woman wasn't wearing any pants. She was naked from the waist down, and she knew that you weren't supposed to let strangers see you naked. The woman was yelling at her daddy-what was she saying? She was calling him 'the Devil,' and 'Satan's bastard child,' and saying she knew he wanted to kill her. Her daddy's cheeks got all red and splotchy, but her mama's hand had reached under the table to hold hers so she knew then that it would be alright eventually. And then someone else came through the door-her Grandpa Frank-and he was holding a blanket out towards the strange lady. He was crying, too, and that was almost as scary as the strange lady, because Daddy said boys didn't cry, so surely old men didn't either. Finally, her daddy and her grandpa got the woman to sit down, and they wrapped the blanket around her, and then the two grown men just looked at each other.*

"Tara? Baby?" Willow's voice drew her back into her present reality. "Baby, are you OK?"

"Yeah," she finally managed weakly. "I just had this-this sudden memory of Grandma walking into our house...I must have been about four, and she just marched into our house while we were eating, and started calling my dad evil and saying he had Satan in him. She-she was only half-dressed, too," she added reluctantly, as if fearing that news of this incident would hurt her aunt.

"Yeah, I heard about that," Beverly replied. "Dad told me about it. I think that was what finally convinced him to put her in the nursing home, when he realized he couldn't keep an eye on her every second." She sighed. "Nice parting gift to her eldest, too-calling him evil."

Tara tried to envision her father sitting helpless before his delusional mother who had just walked half-naked down the country road to his house, listening to her call him the worst names he could imagine. She bit her lip against the tears. Finally, she looked at her aunt.

"You think the demon story is a crock, right?" Her aunt nodded as if this were a foregone conclusion. "So, do you think she really believed that her husband was a demon? Or that she made that story up, for God-knows-what reason?"

Beverly tilted her head to one side, frowning thoughtfully. "Well, I guess we'll never know for sure what happened that afternoon that she left him. But here's where I put my money: I think she saw him with another woman, and the only way she could let herself leave him was to say that he was a demon; that he was possessed."

"I don't follow you," Willow interjected, capturing Tara's bewilderment as well.

"Mom was nothing if not a good Christian lady," Beverly said patiently. "She was always talking about what a good Christian lady should do, and how she should behave, and one of the primary rules of conduct was that she stick by her husband. She also considered infidelity just about the worst sin you could commit. To hear her talk, it was practically worse than murder. I think that she caught him with someone else-hell, maybe it was a man, and not a woman. That would've freaked her out even more. She can't stay, but as a proper Christian wife, how can she just run off and leave her husband, and take a boy's father away from him in the process? The only possible excuse would be if he represented a greater evil than leaving your husband: being *possessed* by something evil; being a danger to her mortal soul. I'd guess she really believed that his behavior *did* reflect some kind of moral corruption of the worst kind; in other words, something demonic. Heck, she'd probably have passed a lie-detector test about it."

"And she just made up the details? Like, the name-brand of the particular demon?" Willow asked skeptically.

"That's my guess," Beverly shrugged. "But like I said, it's a guess. None of us were there that day; none of us saw what actually happened. I'm just hypothesizing, based on what I know about my mom and what seemed to make her tick. But is that the truth? I wish I knew." She looked apologetically from Tara to Willow.

It was clear that her aunt didn't believe in demons, and it was just as clear that they really did exist. Those facts didn't necessarily mean that her aunt was wrong about this particular scenario,

however. What if there *were* no demon, anywhere, in her family? What if her grandmother had been a scared, rigid woman who had stumbled upon her husband committing some horrific sin and contrived the only reality that permitted her to leave him?

And if so...how much had all of them lost?

The remainder of dinner was fairly quiet, each woman mulling over what she had heard and how it fit into her picture of her family. As they walked out to Beverly's rental car, she took Tara's hand.

"Sweetie, I have open passage on my flight back to Dallas. I don't want to overstay my welcome, but I think we probably have a couple more conversations between us before I leave."

"I think that's a safe bet," Tara replied quietly, squeezing her aunt's hand gratefully.

*She has long fingers just like I do. Maybe like Quinn did.*

*"Did." Past tense. He's gone.*

Back at Tara's dorm, Beverly insisted on parking the car and walking them both to Tara's room in order to hug them good night.

"Willow, I hope I see you again before I leave. I can tell what you mean to Tara, and anyone who's that good to my niece is great in my book."

Tara's heart swelled, watching her beloved shrug awkwardly with the praise. "Well, usually I talk a lot more, and only about two-thirds of what I say actually contributes to what I mean, but I'm glad I've been able to spend some time with you. And yeah, I wanna see you again before you leave," she added.

Beverly gave Tara one final hug and then began to make her way back down the hallway.

"Remember," Tara called out after her. "Be careful on your way back to your hotel." Keying into her room, she commented to Willow, "She's gonna think we're paranoid, talking about demons and constantly warning her about walking to her car."

"Better safe than sorry," Willow replied philosophically. "Dallas may be a hell of a lot bigger than Sunnydale, but we've got the market on things that go bump, drool, and bite in the night."

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## **Part 23**

Tara's room actually looked out over the parking lot. Had she and Willow been gazing out the window during this exchange, they would have observed a very curious thing.

Aunt Beverly was tall, and she certainly carried herself with no small measure of confidence and self-assurance. She wasn't especially muscular, however, nor did she carry any observable means of self-defense, such as mace or pepper spray. In sum, to the casual observer she appeared to be neither especially vulnerable nor especially imposing. One would expect that she would reach her car quickly, keys at the ready, and not, perhaps, *hurry* into its safety, but certainly not dawdle, or stroll. One would surely be surprised to see her reach her car in easy, measured strides, only to perch on the hood and lean back on her elbows, as if taking in a particularly beautiful night. Behaving thus, a vampire might easily think her a potential victim, particularly in a parking lot that, while well-lit, was also virtually empty.

A trio of vampires would certainly think her vulnerable.

In such a case, the dominant vampire would lead the stealthy approach, her lesser companions following a respectful step behind. They would think themselves quite lucky to have such a beautiful young mortal practically presenting herself to them on the silver platter of a Toyota Corolla hood, now stretching herself back to rest against the windshield, hands linked behind her head, gazing up at the stars.

Which was why it was so surprising that the lead vampire, having neared to perhaps twenty feet of her, stopped suddenly, and tilted her head as if in question. Her eyes narrowed, and they held confusion, and something else besides. Her companions halted just as abruptly, looking first at their leader and then each other with troubled eyes. They sniffed the air, and finally, a very low, very soft whine escaped their throats. They didn't speak in any fashion at all. They simply turned, first the leader and then the two within her pack, and melted back into the shadows.

Several feet away, on the hood of the Corolla, the woman was humming an old Sarah Vaughan tune, remarking to herself on the stillness of the night.

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*Can I really do this? If I take this one step, will I be able to stop myself from taking the next? Am I in danger of becoming who I most despise?*

She squared her shoulders and forced herself to walk on, drawing ever closer to the creature she both feared and exalted. Finally, there were no more steps to take; she was standing before it.

"Dr. Lowery, I need to ask for a one-day extension on my paper."

Said Dr. Lowery merely blinked twice, and then nodded. "Given your performance to date, Willow, I'm willing to assume that you have a good reason for your request. Extension granted; just have the paper in my office by five o'clock tomorrow."

On the walk back to her dorm, Willow felt as if she had lost a virginity of sorts. Everyone did what she had just done, but *she* had never done it before. Now she had. Was there any going back? Would she regret it later?

As she reached the steps in front of Stevens Hall, she was surprised to find Tara's aunt sitting on a bench by the sidewalk--waiting, it would appear, for Willow herself.

"Hey, Beverly," she called out, not knowing the circumstances of the visit but glad of it anyway.

"Hi Willow," the taller woman replied, smiling broadly as she shielded her eyes against the sun. "Hope I'm not catching you at a bad time. I just had some free time and figured I'd take a chance you might as well. I thought coffee could be involved. Tara said she'd be in class until five-thirty," she added.

"Right," Willow confirmed. "Introductory Geography, a.k.a. 'Rocks for Jocks.' She hates it."

"More of an arts and literature kinda gal?" Beverly asked. At Willow's affirmative nod, she added, "Comes by it naturally, if aunts can be considered a source of genetic endowment."

"Well, you do seem to have some very...*compelling* features in common," Willow said thoughtfully, then grinned. "Now--about that cup of coffee. How do you feel about late-afternoon shots of espresso?"

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Beverly, it turned out, felt just fine about espresso--in the late-afternoon or, judging from her intake, the middle of the night. The girl drank it like ice-water, Willow marveled.

"So at the risk of being nosy, how long have you and Tara been together?" Beverly asked after draining her first demi-tasse.

"Not quite a year--although in lots of ways it's hard to imagine ever having *not* been Tara's partner," Willow added thoughtfully.

"Your first serious relationship?" Beverly queried.

"No--that would be Oz," Willow grimaced.

"As in the Wizard of?"

"As in Osborne...Daniel Osborne." Willow wondered what Beverly's reaction to this news would be. She identified as bisexual; maybe she would assume Willow did as well.

But Beverly didn't seem inclined to speculate about Willow's sexual orientation, at least not verbally. "So what happened with him?" She seemed genuinely interested, and Willow found it easier to speak openly with Beverly about her experiences than with Xander, whom she had known for years.

"Well, things get complicated, especially in your first relationship. Oz was a great person, and he really did love me. I think in the final analysis, there was more that pulled us away from each other than brought us together. It really wasn't about him being a were-" She stopped abruptly.

Beverly just tilted her head questioningly, waiting.

"Being aware of other people," she finished lamely. *To use the noun loosely.*

"And then you met Tara," Beverly said softly.

"And then I met Tara...and suddenly it was like I had met the one other person in the world who shared my decoder ring. We understood each other, way beyond the spoken word. Before I really knew what had happened, she was standing in the middle of this room in my soul that I'd never even realized I had. And once she was there, I didn't know how I'd managed to live *without* her there."

She paused suddenly, feeling vaguely self-conscious. *I sound like a Hallmark card for homos.* Looking at Beverly, though, she felt herself relax, because the older woman was smiling at her gently.

"I met Tanya at a Sarah MacLachlin concert. She was right in front of me, and I kept trying to figure out how to strike up a conversation. I didn't think she'd seen me, much less noticed me. All of a sudden she turns around and says, 'Somebody told me she was going to do a duet with Marilyn Manson tonight.' I knew right then I was going home with her. What I *didn't* know was that I'd want to keep waking up next to her, every morning for as long as God gave us."

They grinned at each other in silent affinity for a few moments. Then Beverly's expression became serious.

"Willow, you know better than anyone-how's Tara handling all of this? There's been so much chaos back at the ranch lately. The news blew me out of the water, and I'm not nearly as close to it all as she is."

Willow frowned, considering her answer carefully. "You know, I'm always afraid I'll underestimate how tough things are for her, how much they're affecting her, because she always keeps it together. I mean, she tells me how she's feeling, and she lets me comfort her, help her however I can, but I just get the sense that...that it's never really been an option for her *not* to keep it together, get through things. Does that make any sense?"

Beverly nodded slowly. "Yeah, it does. I feel it too, even with seeing her so rarely. She's quiet and gentle and you think she may well have never said 'fuck' in her entire life-but she's so much stronger than you realize at first glance."

Willow was quiet for a moment, thinking of some specific and very enjoyable times that Tara had indeed said 'fuck' and many of its synonyms, but figured that sharing this information with Tara's aunt would be possessed of considerable weirdness. So she simply replied, "I know what

you mean. And it's so natural for her, I think, to be attuned to other people that she doesn't automatically think to be attuned to *herself*, to her own feelings."

"But she seems really happy with you, Willow," Beverly smiled. "She seems...*bigger* somehow, like she's not ashamed to take up her fair share of the oxygen. It's good to see."

"Well, if anybody deserves to breathe, it's Tara, and that may well be the most ridiculous thing I've ever said-which is saying *way* more than you could possibly imagine." Willow could feel herself blushing. *My God, she must think I eat non-sequiteurs for breakfast.*

Beverly, though, was laughing boisterously, her eyes shining with delight. "I couldn't have said it better myself, Willow." She paused to wipe her eyes and then added, "Seriously-she does deserve the good stuff, and clearly she's found it with you."

"Trust me, the locating has been mutual," Willow replied quickly, wondering how it was that she found it so easy to talk to someone she had met less than 48 hours ago.

"So what do you two crazy kids do for fun?" Beverly asked after she had returned with her third espresso.

*Kill demons. Practice witchcraft. Each other.*

"Well, we're both movie buffs, so we do that a lot; and we love to eat out." *Don't grin. For the love of God, don't grin.* Then she hesitated. "And we both like history, especially the history of various myths and legends." At Beverly's curious gaze, she added, "We like the imagination involved; all the great stories."

Beverly sat her cup down with an audible rattle. "Willow, you don't mean to tell me that you actually believe that whole demon hoo-ha that Nathan came up with, do you?"

"Hoo-ha?" Willow asked, stalling for time.

"It's a technical term," Beverly replied. "It means 'stuff and commotion.' And you're avoiding the question."

*Note to self: Don't try to put one past Aunt Beverly.*

"I wasn't really thinking about Nathan," she hedged, speaking half-truthfully. Knowing that Beverly wouldn't let it rest there, she added, "We enjoy the literary aspect of myths and legends; how they shaped their particular cultures, and conversely." *Did I read that on a syllabus somewhere?*

Beverly seemed satisfied by this answer. "OK...Listen, I'm sorry if I seemed all 'Thought Police' there. It's just that I see what Mom's lie did to Nathan, and what Nathan's lie did to Tara, and it just feels like a whole truck-load of trauma has been passed along, to absolutely no one's benefit. I mean, Nathan told Julia she had demon in her because he didn't want to lose her, and yet he did,



in the ways that matter most. I guess I just hate to think about any generation paying the debt their parents incurred; paying it with interest, in some cases." She looked at Willow with a self-conscious smile. "Plus, I guess you can tell I have a soft spot in my heart for Tara."

"Line forms to the right on that one," Willow replied with a grin of her own.

Beverly looked down into her nearly-empty cup and sighed. "Well, I guess we should leave before I fly out of here on the force of my own buzz." She glanced at Willow, and then added, "I hope it's OK with you that I just sorta zipped my ass to Sunnydale and made myself right at home, at least for the time being." She seemed to fumble for words. "I mean, I hope I'm not overstaying my welcome."

Willow looked at her in surprise. "Beverly, you're the first truly loving family member that Tara has seen since her mom died. I *know* that she's glad you're here. And I love seeing *anybody* who's known Tara from the day she was born. I know you left for college when she was young, but you still knew her when she was a baby." As they slid out of the booth, she sidled up next to Beverly and spoke in a conspiratorial tone. "Now, on the way back, I want full details of Baby Tara, and don't leave out one tiny, adorable detail, OK?"

The walk to Tara's dorm was probably the most enjoyable that Willow had ever taken in the presence of anyone besides Tara herself. Among the nuggets she gleaned were the fact that Tara's first treasured possession had been a stuffed pony ("As in a toy, not Roy Rogers' horse," Beverly had emphasized); that Tara's first word, not surprisingly, had been "Mama" but that her second, less predictably, had been "potato" ("tato," to be exact); and that her hair had been a mass of curls before her first real hair-cut.

*I can't get enough of who she is,* Willow thought, and was perfectly content with that fact.

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*I could get used to having her here. She's funny; she's bi; she supports me...*

*She's family.*

The idea of having a living relative who was loving and emotionally accessible was so appealing that it almost hurt. Because if she let herself get used to it, she could lose it.

*Or I could end up with someone in the Venn diagram of families who actually falls into my "Family of Origin" **and** "Family of Choice" circles. It's a crazy thought, but it just might work...*

They were having dinner again, the three of them. It amazed her, really, how easily her aunt fit into their world...Except for that little part about living on a Hellmouth and fighting the evil undead with a regularity that rivaled her menstrual cycle.

She had gotten so accustomed to censoring herself in front of her family that she didn't doubt her ability to hide this from Beverly; what disconcerted her was how much she didn't *want* to hide this from her.

Tara had insisted on pizza tonight, because she knew that Beverly would pay for dinner again and though she didn't doubt her aunt's sincere wish to do so, years of self-sufficiency had made her loathe to accept too much from other people-even those people who loved her.

She edged slowly out of the conversation between her aunt and Willow-not because she wasn't interested in it, but because she simply wanted to watch them, and delight in them. They were talking about computers, and to Tara, it sounded something like this:

Beverly: "Well, my Mac has a megasaurus, enough hurts to zip a ram, and I can drive down the load with a pentagon processor."

Willow: "Yeah, but PC's give a bite and let you grade up and besides, my Internet axis is just *unbelievable*."

Beverly turned to her. "What do you think, Tara?"

"I think that computers are over-rated," she shrugged. "I mean really-what's so special about them?" Taking in their simultaneous gasps, she smiled. "I was hoping to make your heads spin all the way around on your necks, but abject horror will suffice."

"OK, so enough with the geek brigade," Willow grudgingly acknowledged. "We can discuss politics and movies and literature."

"Did you ever think about what else Shakespeare might have been able to accomplish if the Web had been available then?" Beverly asked, shaking her head.

Tara was spared a lengthy discussion on this very speculation by the unexpected appearance of Buffy and Dawn. She felt a rush of what she belatedly recognized as pride: pride at the thought of introducing a family member to her friends. It wasn't a feeling with which she had a great deal of familiarity.

Willow hadn't seen them yet, but as Tara put her hand on Beverly's arm to get her attention, she realized that her aunt was already looking at the two sisters.

Later that night she would wonder if she had really seen anything or not. In that moment, though, she could have sworn that she saw her aunt flinch.

Not dramatically, and not for long.

But in that ephemeral half-moment between reflex and social propriety, Beverly flinched. And Tara, for the life of her, had no idea why.

And then her aunt was looking at her with her usual expression of warmth and affection. "What is it, Sweetie?"

"I-I just saw two friends come in. Buffy and Dawn," she added, looking at Willow. "I'd like you to meet them."

"Cool," Willow said as Tara raised her arm to catch the sisters' attention.

"Hey kids-and young-ish adult," Buffy quickly amended as she caught sight of Beverly.

"Buffy, Dawn-this is my Aunt Beverly. Beverly, I'd like you to meet Buffy and Dawn Summers."

"Hey, Willow told me you had come to visit-all the way from Dallas, no less," Buffy smiled warmly, shaking the hand offered her. The handshake was cut short by Dawn elbowing in front of her sister.

"You're Tara's aunt? You knew her when she was little? That is so cool," Dawn said excitedly. Tara studiously avoided Willow's eyes, knowing that a smirk was glinting there and choosing to forego the visual verification.

"Oh, I know many secrets of the great, the inimitable Tara Maclay," Beverly intoned. "But I am sworn to secrecy, and would certainly never *dream* of sharing baby pictures unless Tara were adequately incapacitated by spirits."

"If we get her drunk, you'll open the scrap-book?" Buffy echoed. "OK, let's go. Dawn, you'll stick with root beer."

"Who needs booze?" Dawn retorted. Nodding conspiratorially to Beverly, she added, "I'm more of a free-baser gal."

"There will be no drunkenness, no illicit drug use, and no sharing of ill-advised infant photos, is that clear?" Tara asked, trying to sound authoritative.

"Oh, look at you. So...*dominant*," Willow grinned. "Hubba, and, may I just add, hubba."

The five talked casually for a few minutes, and then Buffy and Dawn moved off to their own table, the former far more readily than the latter. Tara noticed that Beverly's eyes never left them.

"Hey-we meant to ask you," Willow said abruptly. "There's a big multicultural fair tomorrow on campus. It should be really cool. We're definitely going, and we wanted to see if you'd like to join us."

Beverly pulled her gaze away from the retreating pair, and smiled at Willow. "That sounds great."

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*I could get used to having her here. She's funny; she's bi; she supports Tara.*

Willow smiled as she thought of the singular illumination that a relative provides on someone you love. She was greatly enjoying Beverly in and of herself; what sent Willow to the very last stop on the Gleeful Express, though, was hearing about Tara from her aunt. Beverly had helped Willow see Tara as a baby, as a child-and Willow, for her part, simply fell more deeply in love with Tara with every story she heard.

Besides, it was obvious that Tara felt a connection with her aunt that she hadn't felt with any relative since her mother had died...not her half-sister, not her half-brother, not the man who raised her. Willow found herself wondering how much two tickets to Dallas would cost them. She would love to meet the woman whom Beverly clearly adored.

She looked at her watch: 2:13. Tara and Beverly were supposed to meet her at this booth at 2:00. What was keeping them? She scanned over the crowd once more and sighed. *Patience is a virtue, right?*

Well, she might as well be comfortably virtuous. She dropped onto a bench a few feet away from the booth.

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"This is such a great idea, Sweetie," Beverly smiled. "And thanks for the baklava, by the way."

"That's the way of the bi," Tara replied, grinning at her own joke over Beverly's groans. "I'm glad you wanted to check this out," she added. "Sometimes Sunnydale looks like one giant slice o' white, upper-middle-class pie, but we really do have a *little* diversity here."

"That surprises me," Beverly mused. "I should think southern California would have a *lot* of diversity."

"I know. It's totally whacked." Tara sipped contentedly on her lemonade. Contentment, though, turned abruptly to consternation as she realized that she had left her billfold at the booth they'd departed several minutes ago. Glancing at her watch, she saw that they were already ten minutes late.

"Aunt Bev, I have to go back to that last food place. I left my wallet there. Willow's such a paragon of punctuality-I hate to keep her waiting even more. Can you go on ahead and meet her? Just follow this sidewalk. It winds around a little bit, but it's only about two hundred or so yards up ahead."

"If I can navigate Dallas rush hour traffic, I can handle this," Beverly assured her. "I'll see you in a few minutes."

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*Where are they? I'm tired of being virtuous.*

Then she felt long, graceful fingers twining gently through her own. She grinned, marveling at the way her heart invariably picked up its pace whenever she saw Tara after an absence.

"Hey Baby," she said, turning, but it wasn't Tara who sat smiling back at her. And her heart pounded more fiercely now.

"This seat taken?"

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*I'm coming, Sweetie. Remember-patience is a virtue.*

She hoped that her aunt had made it to the meeting place without incident. Then she smiled. If the worst thing that happened to her today was that she and her beloved wandered through a cultural fair looking for her aunt, who loved and supported her, then she was in pretty good shape.

Every now and then, life really did ante up and give you a taste of the good stuff.

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"Now, don't take this the wrong way, but you're not my type." The smile was almost sincere.

*Oh goddess. Please-not this. God, anything but this.*

"See, I'm actually partial to blondes-myself, most of all. I mean, look at me." Glory shrugged as if her radiance spoke for itself. "But there's another blonde that I'm just ever so captivated by right now." She leaned closer to Willow and winked. "You know who I'm talking about, right? You have...*special* feelings for her too, don't you?"

*What does she want? What's she talking about? Goddess, help me.*

"I would offer to share-I know that open relationships aren't for everyone, but if all parties are mature, I believe they can work. The thing is, I'm not sure what will be left when I'm done." Glory shook her head thoughtfully. "Anyway, you can help me find her, can't you? I went to her room, but she wasn't there. I thought I'd find her with you; instead, you're sitting here all alone." She peered closely at Willow, who wondered dimly if this was how rabbits felt, staring frozenly into the fathomless dark eyes of the hawk.

"Did you two Sapphic sweethearts have a fight? Is that why she's not here?" Glory's face softened incongruously as she reached out and caressed Willow's cheek with the back of her hand. "Are you sitting all alone because your Tara is angry with you?"

Fighting past the terror that threatened to paralyze her, Willow stared back at Glory-and then slowly nodded her head.

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*OK, I love all the costumes and the musicians and the general merriment, but do there have to be so many people right in front of me?*

Tara found it almost impossible to move beyond a glacial pace, edging to the left and then the right as one throng after another seemed to walk almost intentionally into her path.

*So now, maybe, a little lesson in patience for me.*

Besides, the delay only heightened the payoff-that rush that she always felt when she was about to see Willow.

*Good things come to those who are forced to wait.*

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## **Part 24**

Glory gazed at her with something that looked freakishly like sympathy. "Oh, my poor weeping Willow...Sitting on a bench, waiting for her wench." She sighed. "These lovers' quarrels can be so difficult." Then her gaze hardened as she abruptly gripped Willow's lower jaw. "So maybe you should give her a little payback. Maybe you should settle the score for whatever she did to upset you."

She released Willow suddenly, and leaned back against the bench, smoothing her silky red dress over her legs. She looked at Willow once again, and this time Willow saw that her eyes were glittering. They were like cats' eyes, simultaneously mesmerizing and predatory. "Do you want to tell Auntie Glory all about it? Do you want to tell her where she could find that mean girlfriend who hurt you so much?"

Willow finally forced herself to speak. "Why do you want Tara?" It came out as a whisper.

Glory looked at her indulgently, as if she were a child asking a painfully self-evident question. "Sweet, slow Willow...Tara's my Key, of course."

Her own quick intake of breath sounded to her ears like wind roaring through trees, and she blurted as if stung, "Tara's not the Key."

Glory frowned at her in rebuke. "I should have expected that you'd try to mislead me, even if you two have had a little *malentendu*. Really, though-lying is just so...*common*." She seized Willow's hand once more. "Now, the unfortunate thing is that I'm starting to lose my patience, because I

really didn't put on enough sunscreen for this kind of weather. I went with 4, and I need at least 15. So tell me, little witch, before I get ungracious-where's your girlfriend?"

"I'm serious," Willow breathed through her panic. "It's not Tara."

Glory looked at her skeptically for a moment. "You do seem awfully convincing. In my experience-and I have a lot of it, mind you-undiluted terror has a negative effect on a person's ability to lie with any degree of verisimilitude." She leaned over suddenly and threw her arm around Willow's shoulder, squeezing quickly. "Isn't that a great word? I learned it in hell."

"I'll be sure to use it in my next paper," Willow managed. *Tara, Baby-can you hear me? Oh God, Sweetheart-run! Get as far away from here as you can.*

"So now Willow-you've practically convinced me that Tara isn't my Key." Glory smiled at her with what must have been her version of affection. "And I think we're closer for having shared this honest exchange."

"We-we should have coffee sometime." *Tara? Run, Baby. If you can hear me-run.*

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*If you can hear me-run.*

The voice crashed forcefully into Tara's head. Willow-Willow was in danger, and she was trying to warn her.

For the first time in her life, Tara pushed her way through other people, heedless of their feelings or common courtesy.

*As if I would ever leave you, Willow...*

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Glory threw her head back and laughed. "Coffee-oh yes! It's just about the only thing this wretched little dimension has going for it. So many options, so much ambience." She squeezed Willow's shoulders once more. "So-if it's not Tara, who is it?"

*Goddess, what do I do? Help me.*

"See, if you do *me* a favor," Glory was saying, "I'll do *you* a favor. Tell me who the Key is, and I'll let you go and I won't even bother talking to Tara."

*Could I do it? Could I betray two people I love to save the one I love most of all?*

Glory's face turned suddenly dark with fury. "I thought we were friends, little Willow. I thought we understood each other. What's with the delay tactics? If I had a mother, I'm sure she'd have

always told me I was too impatient for my own good. But that's just who I am, and now you're sitting there with the very thing I need most of all and you won't share. You're supposed to share, little Willow, and instead you're being completely selfish." She withdrew her arm from Willow's shoulder and picked up her hand, gripping it with steadily increasing pressure. "Who. Is. The. Key?" She punctuated each word with a squeeze, until Willow was fighting back tears of pain.

If she told Glory that Dawn was the Key, Glory *might* leave Tara alone; might really even let Willow live. If she didn't, Glory would go after Tara and kill Willow herself-or worse. And Tara-her absolute terror of that fate; her insistence that she would die before she would surrender her mind.

She looked at Glory, tears sliding unchecked over her face and splashing onto her lap.

*Forgive me...*

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*Willow, I'm coming. I'm almost with you, my love.*

And then she could see them, Willow and Glory sitting on the bench, people passing by as if oblivious to the drama before them; and even from this distance Tara could see that Willow was trembling, and the knowledge of what her beloved was feeling filled her with a rage she hadn't thought herself capable of. She would channel every strand, every fiber of magic that flowed within her; she would do that, and more:

*Mother-Help me!*

She was so close now, close enough to hear Glory's hiss of rage as she raised her hands to Willow's temples-

*By all I know and all I trust;*

*By force of life, and force of dust;*

*Grant me power, with this last breath,*

*To come forth now in guise of-*

"Please stop fondling my niece's girlfriend."

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That voice. That sounded like Beverly's voice. Willow's mind tilted dangerously, trying to assimilate this fact while Glory's fingers stilled briefly against her skin. Beverly, who didn't believe in demons, was about to fall victim to a god. Did she believe in gods? Willow wondered.



"You seem to be touching my niece's partner against her will, and that's not only wrong, it's just tacky."

Willow wanted to scream out for Beverly to run, but her voice seemed frozen deep in her throat.

"OK, and just who the heck are *you*?" Glory pulled her hands away from Willow's temples just long enough to focus completely on Beverly-and was, apparently, deeply disconcerted by what she saw.

"You know what I am," Beverly replied evenly. "And you know why I'm here."

This was what Tara heard as she reached the bench. Without breaking stride, she reached out and took Willow's hand and pulled her off of the bench and into her arms. "Willow, Sweetie, it's OK. You're safe." Though she wasn't sure how accurate that was. At the very least, Willow would have Tara with her throughout whatever happened.

"What *is* this?" Glory demanded, "a freakin' *convention*?" She turned back to Beverly. "You don't exist. You were destroyed."

The words registered dimly in Tara's ears as she embraced Willow fiercely and then released her slightly in order to slide between her lover and the hell god. What was Glory saying-that Beverly had been destroyed? And why wasn't she annihilating all of them? Why was she edging back away from Beverly as if...*afraid* of her?

"Tara, get Willow out of here." Beverly's voice was harsh.

"Beverly, you don't understand-she's a...she's a god."

"A hell god, to be exact," Beverly replied as she extended her arms, palms outward, toward Glory, who shook with fury.

"I thought you didn't believe in demons," Tara said incredulously.

"I thought you two spent your free time at the movies," Beverly retorted. "Just go. I'll catch up with you-trust me."

"I'm not going to leave you," Tara insisted. Beside her, Willow was regaining her voice, and her volition.

"It's two against one," Willow rasped out. "I don't know where exactly she fits in," she added, nodding at Glory.

"Tara, I'm telling you to leave." Beverly's eyes never left Glory; her arms never wavered. "I'm-I'm older than you. Respect your elders."

"Nice try," Tara scoffed. "Maybe when I was seven..."

"Oh, for a hell god's sake," Glory interjected, her voice a mixture of rage and exasperation, "*I'll* leave. You three have some power and control issues to work through." Her eyes narrowed as she turned her gaze to Beverly. "This is quite a surprise. Don't think I won't be prepared for it next time." And then she quite literally disappeared.

Tara pulled Willow against her, a tiny sob escaping her as she thought about how close she had come to losing her life's greatest truth; how close she had come to sacrificing a different but still precious truth by her own hand. She felt Willow's hands clutching at her back, then running through her hair, as if she couldn't press herself closely enough against Tara's body.

Finally Willow pulled back just enough to kiss Tara, stroking her face as if reassuring herself that both of them were still alive.

"I thought I told you to run," she whispered against Tara's cheek.

"You didn't say 'please,'" Tara answered softly, placing fierce kisses against Willow's brow as she spoke.

After a few minutes, both of them turned slightly in their embrace to see Beverly gazing at them, a wry grin making its way across her face.

"We should probably have a little chat," she finally said.

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"A chat...OK, chatting is nice." So managed Willow after narrowly averting death and dementia.

"You know what's even better?" Tara amended. "A lengthy narrative in which you explain what in the goddess's name just happened."

"Actually, I sort of envisioned a cathartic, bonding discussion," Beverly suggested. "A little 'Steel Magnolias,' a little 'Ya-Ya Sisterhood...'"

"Feel free to use the term of your choice," Tara replied through clenched teeth. She felt as if she were riding some surreal emotional Tilt-a-Whirl. She knew that something supernatural had just taken place between her aunt-who had so vehemently denied the existence of demons-and a hell god. She knew that her aunt had somehow managed to frighten or at least deter that hell god, though she had no idea how. Eclipsing everything, though, was the knowledge of just how close she had come to losing Willow. Would she have been able to save her, if Beverly hadn't arrived? Because Beverly *had* saved Willow-saved them both-and Tara knew that that fact would carry greater weight than any other information she might learn.

In short, she was grateful, relieved, anxious, and very, very curious.

"OK, Sweetie," Beverly capitulated, reaching out to squeeze Tara's shoulder. She seemed to think better of the move, however, and withdrew her hand. "But not here. People don't stay clueless forever, even in Sunnydale."

"You've noticed that, huh?" Tara asked, catching her aunt's bemused gaze.

In less than half an hour, they were sitting in Tara's dorm room.

"So...you two are involved with Glory, eh?" Beverly began without preamble.

"Not romantically," Tara replied, feeling an inexplicable urge to stall. Was she afraid of her aunt?

"Right, because threesomes...not so much our scene," Willow added.

"But you know she's a god, of the hellish variety. And did you learn this by watching the Discovery Channel?"

"No, we read about it in the National Enquirer," Tara countered. "How did *you* make the nice lady's acquaintance?"

Beverly looked at her through narrowed eyes. "You don't trust me, do you? You want to, but you're not sure what just happened. You want me to go first."

Tara met her gaze evenly. "Can you blame us?"

They exchanged a long look. Finally, Beverly sighed. "No...I don't blame you at all. And I will tell you. It's just that-what happened this afternoon, finding out you two have even *heard* of Glory, much less have cause to interact with her...Believe me when I say I'm as shocked about you two as you are about me." She fell silent again.

Willow blurted out abruptly, "We fight the forces of darkness-typically vampires, but also demons of all other varieties." She had apparently decided to offer up some information as a show of good faith.

Beverly looked at her, a delighted grin slicing across her face. "So you're the good guys."

"Two of them," Tara granted.

"And I'm one of them," Beverly promptly replied. "Please believe that. And please understand when I ask you to explain this to me-how you're involved; what you do. I swear to you, Tara-I *will* tell you what you want to know. But I need some context here; I need to know the cast of characters."

*Could she possibly be working against us? Am I so glad to have a real family member close to me that I give her what she wants, even if it's a huge mistake?* Without realizing it, Tara closed her eyes; tried to anchor herself and gain even a whisper of intuition.

From the swirling eddy of fears and uncertainties, she became aware of one thing above all others: Willow was holding her hand. Willow, her rock and her one abiding truth, held Tara's hand tightly in her own. Looking into Willow's eyes, Tara saw that her beloved was ready to take the chance, to share their secret with Beverly. And Tara knew that had it not been for Beverly, she wouldn't be holding Willow's hand right now.

*That has to count for something.*

"OK. Honesty in exchange for honesty." She drew a deep breath. "Willow and I are witches. Good ones," she added.

"'Good' as in 'Glenda the Good Witch,' or 'good' as in 'we're good at what we do'?" Beverly asked, one eyebrow raised.

"Both," Willow replied. "We work for good, and as far as workin' the mojo-we pretty much kick ass."

Beverly smiled at Tara. "You get that from Julia, don't you?"

Tara fought against the tears gathering suddenly behind her eyes. "You knew Mom practiced?"

"I knew Julia had something extra going for her. Her essence was just radiant. Like yours," she added, this time letting herself squeeze Tara's hand briefly.

Tara only nodded, willing herself to speak with a steady voice. "Willow and I met at college. She's been involved with Buffy for almost five years now."

"Not romantically," Willow clarified helpfully.

"Right," Beverly nodded, grinning once again at Willow. "Let's just assume that 'involved' doesn't carry any erotic implications in this conversation." Looking back at Tara, her voice grew serious. "What does Dawn's sister have to do with any of this?"

*Dawn's sister?*

"She's the Vampire Slayer," Tara replied.

Beverly's eyebrows shot upward. "The Slayer? Oh my God...of course." She nodded in admiration. "That was brilliant-absolutely brilliant..." She looked past Tara, seemingly lost in her own tangled reality.

After a few moments, she met Tara's gaze again, a troubled expression in her eyes. She seemed to fumble for her words, as if afraid that any miscue might have dire consequences.

"And how-how does Dawn fit into all of this?" she finally asked.

Tara looked quickly to Willow, whose eyes confirmed what Tara already believed: that this information wasn't theirs to share. But how to avoid that topic without arousing Beverly's suspicions?

"Dawn? She's just the Slayer's younger sister," Willow supplied. "Precocious; occasionally obnoxious. Prone to mood swings. Has a huge crush on Tara."

"Thanks for sharing," Tara managed through her flaming blush.

Beverly only looked from one of them to the other, her eyes telling them both that she was waiting for Act II in this story.

But Tara gazed back in turn, determined not to be intimidated.

*Who's going to blink?*

"So... When Dawn's not being a typical teenager, falling hard for my ever-so-humble niece, what does she do?"

Tara glanced at Willow, then replied, "Actually, I don't know. I mean, she's younger than us, so it's not like we all hang out together on a regular basis."

Beverly shook her head, but her sigh of exasperation was mingled with admiration and affection. "Tara Maclay, you are an abysmal liar, but I sincerely respect your integrity."

"What are you talking about?" Willow demanded.

Beverly looked at her for several seconds, as if deliberating some decision. And then she reached it. "OK-my turn. You two have been honest with me, and I appreciate it." She rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "So... when Dawn's not buying Clearasil or sneaking a look at your lesbian literature, does she ever-oh, I don't know... open the portals between dimensions?" She leaned back, smiling in frank amusement at their stunned expressions.

"You know?" Willow finally spluttered. "You know Dawn's the Key?"

Beverly nodded.

Tara looked at her closely. "You knew last night-at the pizza place. You spotted them before I had pointed them out, and I saw you react."

Beverly grimaced with self-recrimination. "God, I was hoping you hadn't noticed that."

"You were staring at them, and you watched them walk away...but I thought you were looking at Buffy."

"And what-scoping her out?" Beverly asked, bemused. "No, it was Dawn. I felt her before I saw her. As soon as she entered the restaurant, I could feel her. I looked up, and I knew as soon as I laid eyes on her who she was."

"But how?" Tara demanded.

Beverly, though, either hadn't heard her question or was pretending that she hadn't. "Does she know? Dawn?"

Her aunt's evasive maneuver hadn't escaped Tara's notice, but she let it go for now. "Yeah. She just found out a couple of weeks ago."

"Poor kid," Beverly sighed. "God, that must have whacked her world right out of its orbit."

"Yeah, she had some issues," Tara commented dryly. "None of which were helped by her mother's sudden death right after that."

Beverly looked up sharply. "Her mother's dead? How?"

"Some kind of brain hemorrhage," Willow replied. "She fell into a coma, and Buffy and Dawn had to decide what to do." She drew a quick, shuddering breath. "It was so awful."

Beverly sat quietly for what seemed to Tara like a long time. Finally, she ran her fingers through her short blond hair and shook her head.

"So the monks sent her to the Slayer for safe-keeping. I gotta hand it to 'em... Those boys had shit for fashion sense, but they knew their way around mystical protection."

"OK, so the monk part isn't news to you, either," Tara interjected. "Aunt Bev, are you planning on telling us where *you* fit into all of this?"

To her surprise, Beverly reached out and gripped her hands tightly. "Tara, Sweetie, first of all, I want you to understand something. I want you to know, beyond a shadow of a glimmer of a fleeting glance of a doubt that I love you. You're my niece, and I would walk through hell to protect you."

Stunned, Tara only nodded.

Beverly released her hands, and sat back with an almost embarrassed laugh. "OK, that takes care of tonight's Hallmark Moment."

"Aunt Bev, what is it? You can tell us."

Beverly smiled, seemingly more composed, and answered softly. "I know I can. You're good, Tara...better than you know. You too, Willow," she added, looking gently at the other witch. She gazed at them for a moment. When she spoke again, her voice was low and soft.

"As you know, Dawn is the Key that opens the door between dimensions. Glory wants her-needs her-to get back into her particular hell dimension. For Glory, this is about going home, although we're not talking Waltons Mountain here. Glory's little corner of the universe makes just about every other demon dimension look like Pee-Wee's Fun House-minus the porn, of course. Glory isn't really interested in dragging this world down into hell. But that's exactly what will happen. The torment faced by every person-every living creature-on this earth will be unimaginable. Take your worst nightmare, and multiply it ten-fold. If you *can't* imagine such a hell, count yourself fortunate."

She paused. Tara realized that she could hear her heart sledge-hammering its beat throughout her body.

"The monks knew that Dawn-the Key-had to be protected from Glory's acquisition. And so they built in certain...safe-guards."

"Buffy," Willow said quietly.

Beverly's laugh held little trace of actual humor. "Tara, you're the English diva. Perhaps you noted the second plural in that sentence."

"Safe-guards," Tara echoed her aunt. "You're saying the monks didn't depend exclusively on Buffy to protect Dawn."

Beverly nodded. "Think about it. Here's the one person-the one entity-who can unleash a literal hell on earth. I know Buffy's good, and I'll bet she's downright amazing when it's her sister she's protecting...But if you were the monks, would you really want to put your hopes entirely and exclusively on one person, no matter how remarkable she is? For God's sake-what if she got hit by a bus?"

"Finnish dryer lint," Willow commented randomly.

"Huh?"

"Don't ask," Tara shook her head. "So you're saying that the monks considered it too risky to pin all their hopes on one person-even the Slayer, protecting her sister-so they built in more than one means of hiding the Key."

"Right." Beverly stared hard at Tara, and Tara found that it was impossible to look anywhere else. She suddenly remembered her aunt's words two nights ago, just before Tara had told her about Julia and Quinn's affair.

*This is really gonna fuck with me, isn't it?*

"And that's where you come in, isn't it?" Tara asked, finding it hard to speak around the thickening in her throat.

"Yeah." Beverly smiled sadly. "Tara, Sweetie-I'm one of the forces responsible for keeping Dawn safe."

Tara felt Willow's fingers tighten on her own, and she held on desperately, afraid of drowning in terror if she were to loosen her grip at all.

"You? Aunt Bev, you're supposed to watch over Dawn?" She shook her head. None of this made sense. It was impossible. "I don't understand. How did you even get mixed up in all of this? How did you go from being a school-teacher in Dallas to being one of the people in charge of keeping a mystical key away from a hell god?"

Her aunt's voice, to Tara's ears, suddenly sounded so old as to be ancient. "I didn't, Tara; not really." She drew a deep breath. "God, how do I even say this?"

She reached out and took Tara's hand once more into her own, such that Tara was holding onto both her beloved and her aunt with a fierceness that would have surprised her before she met Willow.

"Tara, Sweetie-Dawn was created from energy; made flesh, made human, made *real*...to herself, to her family, to everyone who met her." She paused, then gave a sad attempt at a smile.

"We're a lot alike that way."

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*She isn't real. She says she loves me; she says she loved my mother. But she isn't real.*

It felt as if she had been given the chance to wander about a beautiful, inviting house and then abruptly told that it was actually crumbling, would tumble and collapse around her.

"Tara, do you understand what I'm saying?" Beverly's voice seemed to come from a great distance.

Numbly, she replied, "You were created. Like Dawn. You're energy made flesh."

Beverly's laughter was brittle. "Yes, well, I guess that's pretty much it, at least the Cliff Notes version. Basically, I'm an inter-dimensional security guard."

"So you didn't really exist until recently? I mean, exist in human form?" Willow asked incredulously.



"Nope. I only picked up this mortal coil a few months ago. Apparently I'm pretty old, too-although not as old as the Key. But the word 'I' is kind of misleading, because the energy had no consciousness, no mind. I can pretty much guarantee that the energy didn't like Buffalo wings."

Tara knew that her aunt-that this person in front of her-was trying to make this easy for her, but she also knew that the effort was in vain.

*So I've lost her, too. Let me know when the leaving's finally over, God, OK? I'm just gonna keep my eyes closed until then.*

Her own voice was leaden as she met Beverly's gaze and said, "Tell me. Tell us. What's your story?" She could see Beverly wince slightly at the words, but she didn't have the energy to be more gracious.

"My story...OK, let's see...Basically, I was molded into human form by the same monks who transformed Dawn. I was given memories the same way she was; everyone who would have reason to believe I exist, from the time of my putative birth until this moment, absolutely believes it. Nathan believes he has a half-sister; if my parents were alive, they would be utterly convinced that they had a daughter named Beverly."

"But when they died," Willow argued, "they believed they had two sons."

"Right," Beverly acknowledged. "But Nathan can recall conversations he had with our mother about me. And Quinn," she continued, glancing at Tara, "he really did call me when he was in the hospital."

"So you're supposed to protect the Key," Willow continued thoughtfully. "Even though you were...*placed* in Dallas, hundreds of miles away from Dawn."

"The monks knew the danger of having all of the Protectors in one place, just like they knew that having only one Protector at all would be lunacy."

"So how many are there? Protectors?" Willow asked.

"I don't know," Beverly shrugged. "I think it's one of those deals where they figured it was safer if we didn't know about each other. That way we couldn't risk each other's safety if we were captured."

Tara looked up sharply. "What did Glory mean when she said she thought you'd been destroyed?"

Beverly's face paled suddenly, and she looked at her hands for several seconds. When she spoke, pain radiated through her voice. "Somehow, Glory got wind of the fact that there were Protectors sent to guard the Key. She managed to track some of us. The ones she found...Their deaths were not pleasant ones." She closed her eyes as if trying to ignore some horrific movie.

"But you-today..." Willow fumbled for words. "I mean, what kept her from destroying you today?"

Beverly looked up and for a moment, there was a flicker of the familiar light in her eyes. "Miss Glory has some *issues* with the Protectors themselves. We repel her in some pretty profound ways." Her voice grew somber again. "The others... She sent her fucking little sycophant minions to kill them, with instructions to torture them into giving away information about other Protectors." She looked at Tara, and there was pride in her voice when she said, "She didn't believe them when they said they didn't know. I heard that one of them said that the only other Protector she knew of was Barbra Streisand. If it ever comes to it, I just pray that I have the same defiance."

"Who will you pray to?" Tara asked, her voice empty.

"Whoever listens and cares enough to come through for me," Beverly replied without hesitation or self-consciousness.

There was an uncomfortable silence, until Willow asked, "So how exactly do you protect the Key?"

Beverly grinned. "You mean, what's my superpower? Well, from what I can tell, we basically weaken Glory with our presence. We disorient her; she feels the urge to get away from us as quickly as possible. Sorta like listening to Howard Stern," she nodded thoughtfully. "Frankly, I would've liked something a little more, you know... *impressive*. A little superhuman strength; maybe the ability to transport her to another dimension. Instead, I'm basically high-powered body odor."

"How did you find out?" Tara asked. She knew that the being in front of her, who had said she loved her, desperately wanted some sign of affection or compassion from her, but she simply didn't have it right now, and she wasn't sure it would be pulling into the station any time soon.

"Well, I was just minding my own business... preparing lesson plans the way I'd been doing-or so I thought-for the last few years. Tanya and I had taken a two-week vacation in Colorado... we're both ski nuts. We get back home and I'm finally making myself sit down to prepare for the new school year, when I find this book in one of my desk drawers-it was wedged all the way in the back, and I wouldn't have even found it if I hadn't had this weird sense that I *had* to look back there. And when I say 'book,' I don't mean a concise, nicely-bound treatise on Keys and dimensional portals. This was one seriously old text, and the language was basically a series of symbols, unlike anything I'd ever encountered before."

"So how did you decipher it?" Willow asked, clearly fascinated. "How did you find someone to even recognize it, much less someone you could trust enough to translate it all?"

Beverly gave her a droll smile. "That's when I *really* knew something was up, because one minute I was staring at this ancient volume, thinking, 'What the hell is this?' And the next minute, I was reading it. Just zipping right along like I was reading my daily horoscope."

"God, you must have freaked," Willow breathed.

"And that is what we English teachers like to call 'understatement,'" Beverly grinned.

"Did you believe it? I mean, right away?"

"You know, it may sound weird, but I *totally* believed it. I was reading it, and it was like I just recognized it. My life up until then had been one truth, and now there was this other truth; and it didn't negate the first one, but it also resonated so deep inside of me that I knew it was all true."

"What about Tanya?" The question was out before Tara had even considered it. She watched as Beverly's grin faded.

"Tanya...Oh goddess...I had absolutely no idea what to do. I loved her so much-I *love* her so much-and I had just discovered that prior to a few months ago, I hadn't existed in this form. And here she thought-we both thought-that we'd been together for years. And that's the thing..." Beverly's voice became urgent. "For all intents and purposes, we *had* been together. We had built a life together; we were planning a commitment ceremony. All of it was real." She leaned back, staring out the window once more, and Tara knew that she was reliving that time. "Finally, I realized that I couldn't keep this from her. She had a right to know, and if she left me...God, I could barely form the thought in my head, much less imagine how I'd actually survive if she *did* leave me. Forget annihilation by a hell god; I'd just crumple up and die."

"What did she say?" Willow asked, her eyes wide. Once again, a wry smile creased its way across Beverly's face.

"OK, so I tell her I have to talk to her; there's something I have to tell her. This is three days after my epiphany in cuneiform. And I've been noticing that there's this awkwardness between us that's *never* been there, ever, in our relationship, and I figure it's because she's picking up on my little pile o' angst, right? So I start in with the whole thing, just figuring I'll start at the beginning and keep it simple-you know, 'Honey, apparently I'm a transformed ball of energy. I have to protect *another* transformed ball of energy from being used by a hell god to open the doors between dimensions. Hope you're OK with that.' And I get about one full sentence out of my mouth and then Tanya asks, 'Babe, does this have anything to do with gods and other dimensions?' Turns out she'd been dreaming of exactly the scenario that I'd *gone* through, every night for three nights running." Beverly shook her head, laughing at the memory. "At that point, we did what all women in same-sex relationships do: we processed it all. And to condense an incredibly complex story into pamphlet form, she decided that she wanted to be with me no matter what. She said she had scheduled some one-on-one time with her heart, which told her that leaving me would be giving in to fear. The way she put it, there wasn't any erasing what she flat-out *knew* about us, which was that we belonged together." Beverly hastily swiped her hand across her eyes, and then shook her head. "As you can probably tell, I have a pretty incredible partner."

"I know the feeling," Willow murmured, and Tara held on to her hand more tightly.

*Willow's real. I know she's real. And as long as she's real, I can handle anything.*

"So why did you come to Sunnydale?" she asked abruptly. "It wasn't really to see me, was it?"

Beverly looked taken aback for a moment, and then said simply, "Actually, Tara, it *was* to see you. I didn't know Dawn was here. After we spoke on the phone, I just knew that I needed to talk to you, see you in person. Believe me, I nearly fell out of my chair when Dawn walked into that pizza parlor last night."

Tara battled between wanting to believe her and fearing that she had been just a convenient excuse for Beverly to be closer to the Key.

Eyes narrowing, Beverly asked, "You think I don't really care about you, is that it? That I found out Dawn was here and used seeing you as a way to keep an eye on her."

Tara didn't trust herself to speak.

"Oh, Sweetie-what can I tell you? Maybe the monks, or fate, or whatever, made it so imperative to me that I come see you. All I can say is that when I talked to you on the phone, I wasn't thinking about the Key or Glory or anything even remotely mystical-I was thinking about my niece, whom I love very much." She fell quiet, looking at her hands. "I was also afraid that I wouldn't...I didn't know when any of this cosmic upheaval was going to happen, you know? And I was afraid I wouldn't get to see you again if I didn't go now." Her voice, as she finished, was barely audible.

"But why didn't you tell us?" Tara asked, the anguish finally creeping into her voice.

"Tara, I had no idea you were mixed up in anything supernatural, much less Our Lady of Skankiness herself. I figured you were two college women, going to classes and attending protests and living off of macaroni and cheese. What was I supposed to do? Lean forward in the middle of Red Lobster and say, 'Hey, I've been meaning to tell you: I'm a transformed ball of energy, created by monks to prevent the doors of hell from opening.' Yeah, right..."

"But...still..." Tara argued persuasively.

"Besides," Beverly broke in, leaning forward, "I'm not the only one who kept a little secret. You two didn't say anything about being witches, did you?"

"But you were so dead-set against it," Willow countered. "You made it sound like only the marginally-lucid believed in such things."

"OK, good point," Beverly acknowledged grudgingly. "I was hoping you two were way far away from anything that could be magical or dangerous."

"Way far away?" Willow echoed. "We practically pay room and board at magical and dangerous." Looking closely at Beverly, she added, "Why couldn't you tell when you met us? I mean, one look at Dawn and you knew; but you didn't recognize Tara and I?"

"Tara and *me*," Beverly corrected her absently. Catching Willow's bemused gaze, she shrugged. "Hey, as far as I'm concerned, I've been an English teacher a lot longer than I've been a mystical guardian. Anyway," she continued, "I guess my receivers are set to pick up Key waves. Nothing went off with you two or with Buffy."

"I get that," Willow mused. Shaking her head, she continued, "This is just too bizarre. I mean, what are the odds that all of us would be involved with the Key?"

But Beverly disagreed. "Actually, it's probably not that bizarre at all. I mean, yeah-from a statistical perspective, you wouldn't predict it. But doesn't it seem, when you think about it, that none of this is random at all?"

"What do you mean?" Tara asked, frowning.

"I mean that we all ended up here-right here, in this room, connected in the ways that we are-because we were supposed to. Tara, why did you decide to attend UC-Sunnydale?"

"Because they have a great literature department, and they offered me a good scholarship package."

"But didn't you get offers from other places? Places with great lit departments, that offered you good financial aid?" Beverly persisted.

"Well, yes..." Tara conceded.

"But you chose this school-where you met Willow, and fell in love, and also honed your magical ability and joined the Vampire Slayer in her crusade against evil. Why?"

"I guess...I guess because it just *felt* like the place to be; like I should be here, even though I had no earthly idea what adventures awaited me." She glanced at Willow, who was smiling that *one* smile, the one that said she just adored Tara; and for the first time in hours, she felt a tiny glimmer of lightness.

"That's what I mean," Beverly nodded. "It seems so random, so statistically unlikely, and yet we all end up where we're supposed to be, or at least that's what I believe. I think I'm supposed to be here, and you two are supposed to be here, and be together, and Tara, I think I'm supposed to be your aunt. As far as I'm concerned, I *am* your aunt."

But grief, hot and searing, wrenched through Tara so sharply that she fought to catch her breath. "But everything you told me-all those stories about knowing my mom and idolizing her and being at her wedding...None of it's true. That never happened. You didn't know my mother at all."

Beverly recoiled as if slapped, and then she rocked forward and almost shouted, "Don't you *dare* say that! I *did* know her, and I loved her. I met her when Nathan brought her to the house the first time, and I drew pictures for her that she always made a fuss over and said how pretty they were. I was the flower girl at their wedding, and I was so nervous about messing up that I almost made myself sick, and Julia sat down and pulled me onto her lap, even though she was already in her wedding gown, and she told me that it was OK to be scared because she was scared, too; she was scared she would trip and fall in her big fancy dress but she said we could both get through it." The words were pouring out of her now, punctuated with half-sobs.

"I remember all of that, Tara, and don't you dare try to take it away from me. Because I don't know how much of a future I have, but no one gets to take away my past. I remember all of that; I *remember* it, and it keeps me sane to know that people like Julia and Tanya can love me."

And then she stopped fighting the sobs and wrapped her arms around her waist as if trying to hug herself.

*Willow says I do that, when I'm too sad to talk. And then she takes me in her arms and rocks me a little bit and after a while I know I won't drown in the sadness.*

Willow, she knew, was wiser about things of the heart than she gave herself credit for. So Tara trusted that wisdom now, pushing aside her own grief and anger, and moving over onto the bed to take her aunt into her arms. She didn't really even know what she said, only that she said the words with kindness.

Within seconds, Willow had joined her, and Tara recognized, in some deep, ancient way, that she was part of something special-here, in this moment, these women who had ended up where they were needed and who tried so very valiantly to do the right thing.

*This is my family. Am I really anything but blessed?*

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## **Part 25**

"OK, let me get this straight-there's a whole gang of you, and you call yourselves the Scoobies?"

"Right," Tara confirmed.

"And in addition to you two, this little power circle is comprised of the Slayer; the Slayer's Watcher, who blew up his former place of employment; the Key, who was delivered in the form of the Slayer's sister; an ex-vengeance demon who's been around since Charlemagne; and the ex-demon's boyfriend, whose primary claim to fame would seem to be his show-stopping rendition of the Snoopy dance."

"That pretty much covers it," Willow nodded.

"God, and I thought *my* life was unique." Beverly paused, shaking her head. "Somebody really oughta make a movie out of this, or at the very least, a mini-series starring Patty Duke."

"No way," Tara objected. "Once Hollywood gets its grubby hands on it, all semblance of integrity goes out the window."

The three of them were on their way to Giles' place, for what Willow anticipated would be a truly memorable encounter. She was exhausted, having been up with Tara for hours after Beverly had left to go back to her hotel room. Her beloved had finally eased into a kind of philosophical acceptance of Beverly's origins.

"In all the ways that matter, Sweetie, she *is* my aunt. She didn't have any choice in this; the monks didn't exactly invite her to a working lunch and get her input on the subject."

"I know, Baby, but you've been through so much." Willow's heart had done that tight, squeezing thing it always did when she thought about everything that Tara had faced and survived.

"So? I'm starting to think life isn't fair. And I don't mean that in the cynical, 'I was *robbed!*' way," she added. "I mean...maybe 'fair' isn't really part of the deal. Life isn't out to get you; it isn't out to save you. Life just *is*, and all the adverbs get tacked on in retrospect, after the show's over."

"Wow. OK, well, that's...uplifting." Willow was thrown by Tara's thesis.

"I'm not trying to be a downer, Will-I just don't want to get all wrapped up in keeping a running tally of my hardships." She was quiet for a moment, and then Willow felt Tara's soft fingers tracing over her face. "But if anything happened to you...If I ever l-lost you..." This last was said in almost a whisper. Tara let her fingertips rest against Willow's lips. "Maybe I *am* keeping score, Willow, it's just that every painful piece feels balanced out by you. As long as I get to fall asleep next to you; wake up next to you; touch you and kiss you and make love to you-as long as I have you, everything else is bearable."

Willow had difficulty answering around the tightness in her throat. "I know what you mean," she managed hoarsely. They lay quietly for several minutes, the only sound their own breathing and the faint footsteps of other students in the hallway.

*Bet none of them had the kind of night we did.*

She looked at Tara, so close to her...her blond hair seemed to shimmer in the moonlight that fell hauntingly across the room. Tara's lips were slightly parted; Willow could just barely see her dark blue eyes as they caught tiny flecks of the moon's grace.

"Baby?" she asked tentatively.

"Yeah?" came the soft answer.

"Are you tired?"

Tara was quiet for a few moments, but Willow could see her lips curving into a smile. "Why Ms. Rosenberg-are you suggesting that we indulge in certain delights of the flesh? That we embrace each other and exchange the sweetest of kisses, the most exquisite of caresses?"

"God yes," Willow breathed. "And if you're not in the mood or just completely wiped out, I totally-"

*"Understand."* That's the word she would have said, and she would have meant it. As it turns out, though, she didn't need to.

So yes, she was very, very tired today; so tired that she had almost dozed off in her chemistry class.

*Funny how my idea of living on the edge has changed...*

They had decided to hold a summit meeting of sorts with the rest of the gang; Willow had arranged it by phone that morning.

Giles had been conspicuously unenthusiastic at first. "You should meet Tara's aunt," was all Willow had initially said, not wanting to broadcast such a singular revelation via Ma Bell.

"Willow, I'm sure she's a lovely woman, and while I would ordinarily be delighted to meet a *pleasant* member of the Maclay family, this really isn't a good time." Willow could hear him shuffling papers in the background.

"But Giles, I really think you need to meet this woman," Willow persisted. "She definitely has some fascinating stories to tell. I think you two would really hit it off."

She could hear his impatient sigh across the line. "Willow, I don't wish to be rude, but I'm really not in the mood to spend an awkward evening trying to make conversation with a total stranger, no matter how charming she is."

In Willow's brain, untold synapses fired simultaneously, fixing upon a single target. "Oh my God, Giles," she practically squealed. "You think we're trying to fix you up? OK, having issues now."

"Well, I-I mean, you seemed so...*determined* for me to meet her," the former librarian spluttered. "I thought that perhaps-well, perhaps that you envisioned a certain compatibility arising between the two of us..." Here he trailed off somewhat incoherently.

"OK, first of all, this isn't a Disney plot to get our lonely mother and father together; second of all, I'm talking about having the whole gang meet her; and finally, Tanya, her partner of five years, would have some serious reservations about the whole thing."

"Ah, well...So then, I'll see you at eight?" Willow had hung up the phone with amusement; Giles, she suspected, with relief.



"Well, Buffy should be relieved," Beverly was now saying.

Willow and Tara looked quickly at each other, and then away. Beverly, in turn, looked at *them*, her eyes narrowing in suspicion.

"OK, I've been a teacher for way too many years-or so I've believed-not to recognize a meaningful glance. What's up?"

"Um, well, that's sort of hard to put into words. I mean, it's kind of complex, you know..." Tara seemed to be weighing all explanations carefully; probably, Willow realized, because she didn't want to offend Buffy's best friend.

"What's Tara tactfully not saying is that Buffy has a few...*issues* around her role as the Slayer, especially when it comes to Dawn." She paused, trying to articulate her thoughts.

"OK, so..." Beverly interjected with an air of perplexity. "It's good to be in touch with your feelings; hopefully she's making progress on those issues; Dr. Phil will be so pleased." She shook her head impatiently. "What exactly are you saying, Willow?"

"See, the thing is, Buffy's sort of a Lone Ranger type; or at least, she can be," Willow began.

"Girlfriend has a lot of place settings for a Lone Ranger type," Beverly commented dryly. "Five confidantes who know all about her gig, plus the sister."

"Well, yeah," Willow acknowledged, "but when she feels threatened-or when somebody she loves is threatened-she sort of takes the world onto her shoulders. Which makes sense, given how many times she's *saved* the world. I think she just feels really alone much of the time, even though she knows we'd all do anything for her."

"Because she feels different-like she has this job to do that sets her apart," Beverly said quietly.

Willow just nodded, watching as Tara slid an arm around her aunt.

"But at least I know that there are others out there like me; I mean, people who have the same purpose," Beverly continued. "Buffy...She really *is* the only Slayer."

"And she's *known* that for over four years," Tara added. "I think she's always afraid that if she lets herself believe she doesn't *have* to feel so alone, it'll come back to hurt her."

"I get that," Beverly nodded. "Although I have to say, I tell Tanya every last thing that I'm scared about, and half the time she knows what it is before *I* do."

"Buffy's just not that open," Willow shrugged. "At least not instinctually. I think her first impulse is always to keep stuff to herself and try to deal with it alone. And now that Dawn's at stake, and her mom's dead, Buffy feels even more responsible...because she *is*."

"OK," Beverly replied slowly. "So I make sure that Buffy doesn't feel like I'm trying to trump the sister act, or eclipse her in some way. Won't she ultimately be glad to know that she has some help?"

"Yeah, I think she will," Tara concurred. "I just... Well, I'm glad you understand why she might be a little guarded at first."

"Oh please," Beverly said, rolling her eyes. "Tanya's mom always has to feel that *her* Christmas gifts are the very best ones-not just for Tanya; for all of us. If I can be sensitive to a hyper-touchy, always-this-close-to-full-blown-petulance mother from Tempe, I can be understanding to someone who battles evil every day."

"Sensitive?" Tara asked with a wry grin.

"At least to the old girl's face," her aunt replied, squeezing Tara's arm.

They had arrived at Giles' door.

"Ready for one of the more surreal evenings in your ancient young life?" Willow asked. At that moment, the door swung open and a pair of bright, inquisitive eyes peered out at them.

"So you're Tara's Aunt Beverly. Giles said you have sex with women, too."

Beverly pulled back just a fraction, and then grinned. "You must be Anya."

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Twenty minutes after their arrival, Willow, Tara, and Beverly were still exchanging pleasantries with the assorted Scoobies. Tara felt that same tug of pride that she had at the pizza parlor two nights and a life-time ago. Beverly had an ease about her that the others seemed to respond to instantly. Even Buffy and Dawn, tormented as they were by their mother's death and Glory's constant threat, were clearly drawn to Beverly and seemed to relax just a little bit.

*Don't get too comfortable, kids...*

Beverly had introduced herself to Anya by clarifying the fact that while she *had* slept with women, she was currently sleeping with only *one* woman.

"Good heavens," Anya replied. "Don't any of the Maclay women like men?"

"I like men just fine," Beverly replied without a hint of consternation at the ex-demon's social oblivion. "I'm actually bisexual. But I'm in love with Tanya, and falling in love with a woman has nothing to do with men." She grinned. "I mean, you didn't fall in love with Xander because all of the women here were dogs, did you?"

"Oh God, no," Anya hastily answered. "In fact, let's face it-the women here are gorgeous; I mean, completely *hot*. Believe you me, I know how attractive women can be." She nodded and looked off for a moment, as if remembering a very pleasant moment from a very different time.

Everyone gazed at her reluctantly, as if torn between their curiosity and a simultaneous dread that Anya would provide, unbidden, the answers to that curiosity. The ex-demon just continued to smile enigmatically.

"So Beverly," Xander was saying, his attempt to sound sophisticated compromised somewhat by the trace of donut glaze on his right cheek, "you're bisexual?"

*Yes, Xander, and she's not attracted to **you**,* Tara thought with some annoyance.

"Yes I am-and absolutely devoted to and satisfied with Tanya," Beverly replied. "You know, it's so funny how some people just assume that being bisexual means you'll sleep with anyone...I mean, really-can you think of anything more juvenile and sophomoric?" She fixed Xander with an easy smile.

Xander's own smile was anything but easy. He shook his head, seemingly unable to look at Beverly. "How cliched," he finally managed weakly.

"So what was Tara like as a kid?" Dawn interjected, asking what even Tara knew was a major source of interest to the teenager.

Beverly shot a quick glance at Tara, and then smiled gently at Dawn. "Tara was just about the cutest baby you could ever hope to see. All these ringlets, just a tangle of blonde curls; and those great big blue eyes. God, and was she curious-always reading, anything she could get her hands on, as soon as she learned how. And she learned pretty quickly, from what I remember. Tara was a *very* smart girl."

Beverly looked back at Tara again, and Tara caught the quick hitch in her voice. "Anybody who knew Tara when she was little was a lucky, lucky person."

Tara held her aunt's gaze, and then reached out to take her hand. From the corner of her eye she saw Giles looking at them both with a slightly puzzled air.

*He knows something just happened.*

Tara struggled against an growing sense of disorientation. Everything was going so normally, so very pleasantly. Everyone except the three of them thought that this was a little social call, a chance to meet one of her more agreeable relatives.

*They're so glad I have her. That's part of why they wanted to meet her.* Tara's mind slid suddenly back to that incredible day at Cold Springs, when they had all been so ready to protect her; and then that night, as they sat around a battered table eating the most God-awful and delicious food;

she and Anya and Dawn taking the microphone and each of them reaching out to each of the others in some way or another, affirming the bonds that made them a family.

*And now they're going to get the 150th shock of their lives...Does that come with a certificate or anything?* She found herself wondering briefly what the folks at Dawson's Creek were doing that night.

"You know, I really appreciate all of you coming over on such short notice, just so we could get together," Beverly was saying.

"Well, hey-anybody who loves Tara is in like Finn with us," Buffy assured her. Brows furrowing suddenly, she glanced around the room. "Speaking of whom, has anybody seen him lately?"

The others gave a collective start, and then they, too, peered about, as if Riley might emerge from behind the asparagus fern.

"Do you remember when you saw him last?" Beverly asked helpfully.

"Oh God...Maybe a few weeks ago?" Buffy hazarded a guess.

"Well he can't just have disappeared," Giles argued. "That's ludicrous."

"Hey, don't blame me!" Buffy protested. "Been a little busy here."

"I'm sure he'll show up," Willow said soothingly. "Sometimes people can get distracted and just forget things."

"Well *somebody* sure fell asleep at the wheel," the Chosen One grumbled. After a moment, though, she shook her head and smiled once more at Beverly. "As I was saying, I'm just glad we got the chance to meet you." Giving Dawn a quick grin, she added, "We don't get that much excitement around here."

Beverly paused for a moment, her own brow arching in a distinctly wry manner. "You know, somehow I find that hard to believe." And with that as her sole preamble, she launched into the tale of her own genesis.

Tara wished she could have taped the entire exchange, because she would have dearly loved to play it back later and take in the assorted gaping, protesting, denying, and slack-jawed bewilderment that ensued at her own leisure.

"I confess, I'm completely at a loss for words," was Giles' initial comment.

"Don't worry," Anya interjected. "He'll have tons of 'em in a minute; more than you'll really want to hear."

Pretending to ignore this color-commentary, Giles asked, "So you came to Sunnydale having no idea that Tara was in any way involved with Wicca or magic or fighting demons?"

"Giles, my good man, I had no idea that the Key was in Sunnydale, or that Tara had any kind of contact with anything mystical." Beverly shrugged. "The first I realized that my worlds had collided was in the restaurant a couple of nights ago," she added, nodding at Buffy and Dawn.

Tara and Willow had discussed with Beverly the group's decision to refer to the Key with only that term, keeping Dawn's name out of it all as much as possible.

"And then Glory showed up at the Multicultural Fair and tried to feed off of Willow's mind? Take her sanity?" Even Anya seemed to realize that this fact called for some modicum of restraint in her depiction.

"Yep," Willow confirmed. "Plopped her slatternly little ass right down there beside me and proceeded to chat with me like we had gone to high school together."

"Because she thought that Tara was the Key," Giles said slowly.

"Right again," Willow replied, though her voice held less bravado than it had just a moment before. "She was looking for Tara. She...she was going to take her." And with those words, her voice finally faltered.

"It's OK, Sweetie," Tara murmured softly, pulling Willow close to her and stroking her hair. "It's over."

"Does she still think Tara's the Key?" Anya asked.

Willow shook her head. "I'm pretty sure she doesn't. I think I was pretty convincing, what with the mortal terror flooding through every cell in my body."

"And she tried to force you to divulge the Key's true identity?" Giles inquired.

Willow hesitated so briefly that Tara suspected she was the only one who could see it. And then her beloved replied, "She tried to. I did my feeble imitation of flippant defiance, and then, thank every god and goddess in every belief system known to humanity, Beverly showed up." She looked up gratefully at the Protector. "At which point, Glory got a little queasy and had to be excused."

"And that was when it hit all of us that we had more in common than family history and a love of seafood." Even in the middle of the tension, Tara could see the grin that quirked briefly across her aunt's face.

*Vixens. I'm surrounded by vixens.*

"I can't believe this," Xander muttered. "The odds...they're just beyond astronomical. That you would be Tara's aunt *and* a Protector of the Key?"

Resting her hand on her aunt's shoulder, Tara replied, "I think this is about what's *supposed* to happen, not what's statistically likely. I mean, when you think about it, what were the odds of all of us ending up in this room even before Beverly appeared? But we *are* here because we're supposed to be." She brought Willow's hand up to her cheek. "I came to UC-SD, even though I could have ended up at any number of other universities. Because I needed to meet Willow. It simply wasn't a possibility that I *not* meet her." She gazed at her mate, whose green eyes glittered with a fierce and absolute love. "And for some reason, Beverly was placed in my life, and made contact with the Key through *my* contact with the Key." She paused, and then looked intently at Dawn.

"And I was most definitely supposed to come into contact with the Key. It's an essential, sacred part of my life." She saw Dawn swallow quickly; saw the kaleidoscope of unshed tears in the teenager's eyes.

The group was silent for a moment. And then Giles asked, "And you have no idea where the other Protectors are? Or who?"

"None," Beverly answered. "Which I think is for the best."

"I agree," Giles said, nodding slowly.

Tara had watched Buffy carefully from the moment of Beverly's revelation. The Slayer had yet to speak, though her own eyes had never left Beverly. *What in the goddess's name is she thinking right now?*

Finally, Dawn's sister asked Beverly quietly, "So you're supposed to protect the Key, right?"

As if measuring her words carefully, Beverly replied, "I'm supposed to *help* protect the Key." She hesitated, then added, "The Key is more powerful than anything we could imagine, and yet incredibly vulnerable, too. Its safe-keeping is an awesome responsibility, and an honor as well."

Buffy only nodded curtly, then continued, "How? How exactly are you going to protect something so precious?" Her hand reached out as if of its own volition and stroked Dawn's hair.

*Oh God, Aunt Bev-don't use the body odor metaphor, OK?*

But Beverly clearly recognized the tension that virtually radiated from the Slayer, and she spoke in the same careful tone as before. "I weaken Glory. I don't know why; I don't know how. There's something about my very energy that enervates her, drains her a little bit. I can't kill her-though I swear to you that if I could, I would," she added. When Buffy didn't respond, she continued. "I don't have any special weapons or powers. I can only...*neutralize* her, by my proximity. And only her-if any of her unctuous little minions capture me, they can kill me in any number of profoundly disconcerting ways."

Tara felt her heart catch briefly. *No. Please. Because she is family.*

Silence hung thick and uncomfortable in the room. Tara felt herself growing first annoyed and then angry with Buffy. Didn't she realize that this meant she had help? Why wouldn't she be grateful that there were others trying to protect Dawn?

Surprised at the edge to her own voice, Tara said, "Maybe a little more appreciation and a little less 'I ride alone' territoriality, Buffy?"

She fought the urge to duck her head and stammer out an apology as seven sets of eyes fell on her, each possessed of at least some measure of shock.

"Excuse me?" Buffy asked, cocking her head and crossing her arms across her chest.

"I'm sorry, Buffy-I know this hits you pretty personally," Tara acknowledged. "But do you honestly think my aunt is just thrilled at the chance to go up against a Hell god? To find out she's had an entire lifetime's worth of memories implanted into her? To risk losing everything?" She swiped an impatient hand across her eyes, feeling Willow's hand resting on the small of her back as if anchoring her there. "Beverly didn't ask for any of this but she didn't turn away from it, either. She didn't run away or try to deny it. She's trying to do the right thing, Buffy...like you are. Like we all are." She could feel the tears edging down her face as she struggled to speak. "No one's saying they can do this better than you can, Buffy. But I don't take kindly to watching my aunt bring her best gift to your house only to have you look at her like she's trying to steal the silver."

*And that's the longest speech I've ever delivered to this group. But she needed to hear it.*

*I think.*

She glanced at Willow, who was looking at her questioningly. *She's wondering if she should jump in, back me up.* Tara gave the barest shake of her head, hoping that only Willow saw it. She knew beyond question that Willow supported her, but she didn't want Buffy to feel as if the two of them were ganging up on her. Upon a second's extra reflection, she realized that she also wanted Buffy to weigh her, Tara's, own words, without those words having had reinforcements sent in.

Finally, Buffy sighed heavily. Her eyes, exhausted yet determined, rested on Beverly. "I'm sorry, Beverly. This particular battle is more important than anything else I've ever done. God, yes-I'm glad to have help." Tara saw Buffy's hand, so immeasurably strong, tuck Dawn's hair behind her ear with equally immeasurable gentleness. "And I'm also so damned scared that if I let myself breathe just a little bit easier, knowing I have help, Glory will get past me while I'm inhaling." She closed her eyes for just a moment, as if the horror were unfolding in front of her and she couldn't bear to look upon it.

Tara saw that Beverly's own eyes were filled with tears, as her aunt nodded her understanding. Then Dawn took Buffy's hand and squeezed it gently, willing her sister to look at her.

"Buffy...I don't know anyone who could bear the responsibility you have and not just explode with it all. The Key...the Key must know that you're its greatest champion. But I don't believe that it would want you to be completely on your own. It would want you to have others to help you..." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "It wouldn't want you to be so alone."

For a moment, Buffy looked at her sister through her tears; and then she reached out and took Beverly's hand in her own. Her eyes, Tara thought, looked almost pleading.

"I-I need your help," she said simply to Beverly. "Please help me protect the Key."

Beverly just nodded slowly, and held onto Buffy's hand with her sure, gentle grip.

"You have my word."

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Continued...

## **Antigone Unbound Index Page**

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# **~ Gods Served and Abandoned ~**

## **by Antigone Unbound**

**Author Notes: See Part 1.**

**Feedback: Even more sure! Bring it on!**

### **Part 26**

"OK, so what's the game plan?" Xander, Willow knew, was big on game plans. They made him feel less paralyzed in the face of all-consuming terror.

After Buffy had worked through her issues with Beverly (with no small measure of assistance from Tara), the meeting had settled into a reasonable facsimile of its earlier congeniality...albeit with a heightened sense of urgency.

"Do we wait for the interdimensional skank to make the next move?" Beverly asked. Willow noticed that she was looking at Buffy as she did so.



*She's letting Buffy know that she sees her as the alpha chick in this particular pack. Very smooth.*

"I don't know that we have any choice," the Slayer answered reluctantly, pacing the length of the room. "We don't know where she lives, or if she even 'lives' in any traditional sense of the word. For all we know, she only takes human form when she drops in on us for one of her surprise visits. Maybe she's just some nebulous entity the rest of the time." She stopped for a moment, then muttered, "God, I *hate* just waiting; wondering when she'll show up."

Dawn looked at Giles. "Do we know when the ritual's supposed to happen? I mean, the coupon has an expiration date, right? She has to use the Key to get back to her home within a certain time frame, doesn't she?"

Giles nodded. "Yes-and that's probably the greatest advantage we have going for us. That, and having the Slayer and apparently any number of other good souls entrusted with the Key's protection," he added, smiling gently at the two women who now stood side by side. "But to answer your original question, Dawn-we know that Glory does indeed have a limited time frame with which to work. Even draining so many people as she has, she can only stay in this world for so long. She wasn't meant to spend so much time here."

"Which means that she should be coming for it sometime soon," Dawn said quietly.

There was an intensely uncomfortable silence, until Tara said, "And whenever she does, we'll be ready." She walked over to where Dawn stood, hands shoved deep inside her pockets, her eyes studiously avoiding all of them. Willow thought that she had never seen the girl look so tiny.

"Dawn, Sweetie," Tara said gently, reaching out to take her hand, "I know you're scared. We're all scared. But we'll get through it-*all* of us will get through this, and life can get back to the way it's supposed to be."

"Right," Willow chimed in. "Soon everything will be back to normal...long nights stalking through graveyards, vanquishing demons of all sorts, and narrowly averting an apocalypse." At Dawn's bemused gaze, she acknowledged, "Although the word 'normal' is, of course, a subjective term."

Giles looked back at Beverly. "And you don't know the identity of any other Protector? Or how many there are?"

Beverly shook her head apologetically. "I wish I did, even though it's safer that I don't. It would give us an idea of just how much back-up Buffy has."

*And again with the recognition that Buffy's in charge.* Willow knew it shouldn't be possible, but she couldn't help feeling that Tara had picked up some of her emotional nuance skills from her aunt.

"And they can recognize the Key, just like you, right?" Buffy asked anxiously.

"Right," Beverly reassured her. "But the Key won't recognize them. It might be too hard for the Key to act normal if he or she were just to run into one at the mall."

"I dunno," Buffy mused, a trace of a grin flashing across her face. "I have it on good authority that the Key has a hard time acting normal under the most normal of circumstances."

"Probably has something to do with being around a control-freak vampire slayer all the time," Dawn replied sweetly, grinding her tennis shoe down onto Buffy's open-toed sandal.

"OK, so what exactly does Glory know about the Key?" Xander was asking.

"Well clearly she knows that the Slayer is entrusted with protecting it," Giles murmured, lightly blowing across his fresh cup of tea.

"But she doesn't know exactly who the Key is," Anya added. "Because she was looking for Tara at the multicultural fair."

"That's right," Giles said slowly, leaning forward in his curiosity. "But why? Why Tara and not Willow, whom she had in her very hands?"

"Maybe she likes blondes," Xander offered.

"Wait a minute-Glory's on the bus?" Beverly's tone was incredulous. "God, there's not a straight girl in this whole town!"

"Excuse me-breeder standing right in front of you," Buffy said indignantly.

"I dunno, Buff-you lost Riley, for heaven's sake," Willow pointed out. "Unconscious wish fulfillment? Better blatant than latent, I always say."

"Actually, Sweetie, I've never heard you say that," Tara countered gently. "But I like it. You can say it all the time from now on."

Giles interrupted this debate on the myriad Sunnydale sexual orientations with a brusque snort of impatience. "Actually, the available texts suggest that she has a blow-up doll." As all eyes turned to him filled with something akin to horror, he added, "What? I get to be saucy sometimes, too." He took a mildly flustered sip of his tea and continued. "To return, albeit reluctantly, to the matter at hand: Glory literally had her hands on the Slayer's best friend; someone who has known her and worked closely with her for years. Yet she believed Tara was the Key. Why?"

"Maybe *because* Willow's a Scooby vet and I'm not," Tara suggested. "I mean, that's just one difference between us, and it may not have anything to do with why she believed it was me, but it's worth keeping in mind."

"I agree," Giles nodded. "We should also be mindful of any other differences between the two of you, for possible clues as to her reasoning."

Willow leaned over to Tara and whispered, "You think Glory knows I wear bikini underwear and you wear thongs?"

"Probably not," Tara muttered through clenched teeth.

"If she *does* think the Key is one of the newer members of the club, then I'm in danger," Anya commented. Willow couldn't tell if Anya was worried, flattered, or a little of both.

"As is Dawn," Giles added pointedly.

"Well, if she grabs either of you, she'll just find out she was wrong-just like she was with Tara," Xander offered soothingly.

*Nice thinkin', X-Man. A little misdirection can't hurt, just in case somebody is listening...*

"Let's face it," Willow said, a trifle dejectedly. "We really don't know jack about Glory; least of all what *she* knows about the Key."

The room was silent for a moment, then Giles turned back to Beverly. "Do you have any idea how the others will end up here? How they'll come to be in a position to protect the Key?"

"Good question," Buffy nodded. "It won't help us to have three hundred Protectors if two hundred and ninety-nine of them live east of the Mississippi."

Again, Beverly could only shake her head. "I certainly didn't head to Sunnydale with the idea that I might meet the Key. I just wanted to see Tara; I felt like I *had* to see her." She smiled ruefully at her niece.

"Maybe that's how it'll happen," Xander mused. "It'll be like a homing device, or an instinct. Like salmon migrating to lay their eggs."

"Thanks for the analogy," Beverly said skeptically. "Don't let me forget to drop off my eggs at 'Spawn 'r' Us' later tonight." Looking back at Tara, she said softly, "It really was to see you, Tara. Maybe the monks did install some kind of timer or signal, but as far as my heart and mind were concerned, I was coming to see my neice."

Tara just nodded, a kind of sad smile dimly illuminating her features.

The meeting ended not long after that, with the understanding that Beverly would be sticking around. In the interim, everyone was to stay as close to each other as possible. As they left, Tara turned quickly to Buffy. "Um, listen...about my little righteous indignation earlier..."

Buffy just smiled. "Actually, I was thinkin' it was impressively butch. And now I should probably just be quiet."

As Willow, Tara, and Beverly turned off from the rest of the group at the end of Giles' walkway, Beverly said abruptly, "I'm calling Tanya when I get back to the hotel. I'm going to ask her to come out here."

Willow, walking on Tara's right, felt her lover reach out to Beverly, on Tara's left. "Want a little moral support?" she asked gently.

"I want Tanya," Beverly replied simply. "I miss her like crazy, and it looks like this is turning out to be far more eventful than I anticipated. She said last night she doesn't like missing all the excitement."

"What does she know?" Willow asked reluctantly, hoping that Beverly wouldn't take the question as a sign of disinterest in Beverly's own unique situation. *If I were Tanya, and Tara were the one with such a burden, no way would I stand for being hundreds of miles away.*

"Don't worry; I've never mentioned any specifics. To be honest, we sort of have our own little language anyway; anybody listening in would be lost most of the time."

Willow glanced quickly at Tara, who was smiling back at her. The two of them had established their own unique lexicon themselves.

"Besides," Beverly added, her voice growing very quiet, "if she had to wait until I got back to see me, she might not see me."

"Don't say that," Tara practically shouted. As if embarrassed by her outburst, she spoke more evenly. "Aunt Beverly, we've all faced some of the most horrific situations you can imagine, and we always pull through." Tara attempted a smile. "It's in the Scooby Handbook: 'All Scoobies and Scooby guests are required to survive all supernatural battles and other exploits.'"

"Oh, well, if the Handbook says so..." Beverly stopped and turned to Tara, giving her a wry smile. "Sweetie, I know that this trip hasn't been what you expected. For what it's worth, *I* wasn't expecting this either."

The air about them seemed heavy with a kind of sad, wistful lassitude, as if reluctant to let time nudge them toward such horrors as they would most certainly see. Tara stood facing Beverly, holding onto both of her hands. Willow took a half-step closer to her lover and laid her cheek gently against her back, her hands resting lightly on Tara's waist.

Tara seemed to have a hard time speaking. "Aunt Beverly, I think I gave up on normal a long time ago; or maybe normal gave up on me. Either way, you are who you are, and I'm proud of you. For everything," she added, and now Willow could hear the tears in her beloved's voice. "As far as I'm concerned, you knew my mother; more importantly, you loved her."

"Yes I did," Beverly replied simply. "And she was so easy to love, Tara." She paused, and looked at Willow over Tara's shoulder. "Willow-finish that sentence for me, if you would."

"She was so easy to love...just like her daughter," Willow instantly obliged. And then the three of them melted into a kind of living sculpture of arms and hand and cheeks and backs as they pulled into one very impressive group hug.

Finally, Beverly pulled away just a bit. "I hate to go all mundane concerns on you two, but is it OK to be walking around here at night?"

"Oh, we always pack protection," Willow boasted, "and I ain't talkin' dental dams, either." Catching herself, she added with mortification, "And now I just ain't talkin' at all."

"What Willow's trying to say in her own very singular fashion is that we always carry holy water and crosses," Tara said in reply to both Beverly's question and her bemused look at Willow's announcement.

"OK; cool. Just checking," Beverly nodded as she linked her arm through Tara's and they began walking once more.

"Um, so Beverly...trying the speech thing again," Willow fumbled. "I was wondering-you said that you repel Glory. Do you know if you have the same impact on demons and other less respectable creatures?"

"That's a good question," Beverly mused. "You know, I've definitely had the feeling that I was being watched a couple of times...actually, *followed* would be a better word."

"Were you scared?" Tara asked, her voice edged with concern.

"Well, I was definitely *aware* of them. And it's not like I have any great strength or fighting skill, so I guess I should have been more afraid than I was. But I have to admit, I felt pretty secure; like I knew somehow that they wouldn't get too close."

"And it was always the same feeling?" Willow asked, her inveterate curiosity eager to understand this new phenomenon.

"*Similar* feelings, yeah...but not exactly identical-if you'll pardon the redundancy." Beverly's expression suggested that she was busy analyzing the limited data herself. "You know...this is just a hunch, but I wonder if there's a connection between whatever I'm facing at the moment and how powerful my impact is."

"What do you mean?" Tara asked, frowning.

"I wonder if my effect is directly or maybe inversely proportional to the evil of what I'm facing. Maybe that's why I've felt more or less confident in each experience. If something's *really* evil, I repel them either more or less."

"Wonder what effect you'd have on Pat Robertson?" Willow asked thoughtfully.

"I suspect we'd each repel the other so strongly that we'd just shoot to opposite sides of the globe," Beverly said dryly.

They were walking past the hospital now. Willow felt her mind wandering back to that awful night when they had first learned of Joyce's collapse. She could feel Beverly's eyes resting on her with curiosity.

"This is the hospital where Buffy and Dawn's mother died," she explained, feeling Tara's own sadness roll off of her in waves.

"God-what else do those two have to face?" Beverly asked, more to herself than Willow or Tara, it seemed.

Looking at the imposing structure, Willow saw someone walking toward them, illuminated by the lights of the parking lot. She stiffened and reached into her pocket; but then she felt herself relax as recognition sank in.

"Everything OK?" Beverly asked quietly.

"Yeah-it's one of the good guys," Tara replied in an equally soft voice. She smiled at the friendly face arriving before them.

"Hello, Ben."

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"Ben, this is my aunt, Beverly Maclay. Aunt Bev, this is Ben..." Here Tara trailed off, looking questioningly at the intern.

"Dover," he supplied with a self-effacing smile.

Just as Willow was thinking how thoroughly he must hate his parents, she noticed that Beverly was rubbing her temples.

"Hi Beverly," Ben said easily. Beverly managed a smile, and shook his hand.

"Nice to meet you, Ben." She rubbed her temples again, grinning ruefully. "Sorry; I seem to be having a wee bit of a headache here; completely out of the blue."

Ben's gaze was sympathetic. "Sometimes I get those, too. Weird, isn't it?"

"You said it," Beverly nodded. "I was fine just a minute ago, and then it hit like a ton of bricks." She gave him a wan grin. "Anyway, don't worry-I'm not one of those people who meet doctors and immediately ask for free advice."

But Ben just laughed. "Hey, for all we know, *I* could be giving you a headache. I hear that from plenty of women." Then he blushed, as if realizing the various ways that his comment could be construed. "Are you sure you're OK?" he asked, his voice now the essence of professional objectivity.

"Yeah-I think it's passing," Beverly assured him. Willow, though, suspected she wasn't being entirely truthful. "So how do you know these two fine women?"

Ben's eyes took on a regretful cast. "I was involved with Mrs. Summers' case when she first noticed she wasn't feeling well. I met Buffy and then Willow and Tara and the rest of their friends over the next few weeks at one time or another." He turned to Willow. "How's Buffy doing?" His voice, Willow thought, was studiously neutral.

Willow shrugged. "It's been tough. I can't imagine how hard it must be to lose a parent, much less when you then have to turn around and raise your younger sister by yourself."

"Riley's probably a big help though," Ben commented. Now he was clearly putting effort into his nonchalance.

"Whenever we can find him," she replied cryptically. Glancing at Beverly, she could see in the stark glare of the light that the woman was growing pale. Tara had noticed it too.

"C'mon Aunt Bev. Whatever it is, it isn't going away. Let's get you home and see what we have in the way of headache medicines."

"Yeah, I think that's probably a good idea," Beverly managed, pressing the heels of her hands against her eyes.

Ben was scribbling something on a piece of paper he'd pulled out of his windbreaker pocket. "Here's my number," he said, handing Willow the information. "Call me if you don't feel better. I mean it," he declared over Beverly's protests. "I keep pretty weird hours and I really do love what I do, so call me any time tonight or tomorrow if it doesn't go away and you're worried."

"Thanks Ben," Tara replied. "That really is sweet of you."

"No problem. It was great to see you again. And it was nice to meet you, Beverly," he added, smiling at Tara's aunt. "I hope you feel better." Then he moved off into the dark.

"Do you want to sit down?" Willow asked. She was worried at the intensity and sudden onset of Beverly's pain.

"No, I'm good. Really," she stressed, seeing their faces. "I'm probably just having a sugar high from all those cookies at Giles'." She smiled. "Actually, it really is starting to ease up now." She gave her temples a much lighter rubbing. "Yeah, it's definitely going away. Isn't that weird? Two minutes ago, it feels like somebody's shoving their fingernails into my brain, and the next..." She

looked up suddenly, glancing first at Willow and Tara and then off into the darkness that Ben had just entered. "Whoa..."

"You don't think Ben has anything to do with Glory, do you?" Tara asked, visibly shocked.

"Ben?" Willow protested. "Every time I saw him at the hospital, I wanted to ask if he had a note from his mother to be out that late."

"Yeah, right-because evil always comes clearly adorned with horns and sinister countenances and preferably a few sixes etched into the forehead in plain view," Tara replied, arching one eyebrow.

"Well, did you pick up anything from him, Beverly?" Willow asked, turning to Tara's aunt, who was now stretching her neck as if trying to relieve a crick.

"Like what? Herpes?"

"No, like an aura, or a feeling, or maybe mild intestinal cramping. I don't know...*anything*." Willow could hear the frustration in her voice.

"No-he seemed like a friendly, genuinely kind person. All I know is that the second I met him, my head started to hurt and it just got worse until he left; and now the pain is almost totally gone." Beverly looked from one woman to the other. "What about you two? Don't you pick up on things like that; people not being who they say they are? What about that trip to the Nether Realms you told me about, Willow?"

Seeing Tara's horrified expression, Willow hastily explained, "I was telling Beverly about some of our various exploits, and I gave her the abridged version of what happened when Faith took over Buffy's body. Nothing too specific."

*Like how we were both dripping with sweat and other body fluids and I pretty much came from the intensity of it all.*

"Oh," Tara mumbled. "Yeah, well, that worked with Faith's little identity joy ride, but I never really noticed Ben."

"Neither did I," Willow chimed in.

"There's a shocker," Beverly commented dryly. "Just out of curiosity, was this Faith a little on the hot side?"

Tara's eyes said, *You go first*, and Willow suspected hers were playing the same feature. After a moment, she said, "Well, she's hot in a skanky kind of way...Not that I find that sort of look attractive."

"Right," Tara quickly chimed in.



"So all we have for evidence is my headache-notable for the intensity of both its onset and its remission." She shook her head. "Ally MacBeal would have a field day with it, provided she didn't pass out in court from hunger."

They were all quiet for a moment, pondering the implications of what had just happened...or seemed to happen, or hadn't happened, Willow realized-depending on how you looked at it.

Finally, Beverly sighed. "Let's get our women-lovin' selves home, women. I wanna call my sweetie and tell her to get *her* woman-lovin' self out *here*." She paused, then added quietly, "I need her."

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## **Part 27**

"What time does her plane get in?" Willow asked, reaching out to hug Beverly as she walked into the hotel room. Tara, close behind her, did likewise.

"Just before three," Beverly replied, draining the last of her third coffee that day. "I was thinking of leaving in about half an hour."

Tara looked at her watch. "Are you going by way of Wisconsin? It's just past one, Bev, and the airport is all of twenty miles away."

"I just don't want to be late," her aunt huffed. "Besides, if it were Willow, you would have slept overnight in the terminal last night just in case the roads were closed today."

"She's got a point," Willow murmured.

"OK-how about we leave at a quarter till two and stop for coffee on the way?" Tara suggested.

"Are you sure that gives us enough time?" Beverly said skeptically. "I've heard about the California traffic."

"Beverly, unless the entire state of Nevada decides to stop by to see the Sunnydale Museum of String Art, we're in good shape."

"OK, OK...I know I'm being neurotic." She smiled slightly; a crooked grin that Willow recognized.

*Did Quinn smile like that, too? Except that Beverly isn't related to them...Except that she is.*

Forty-five minutes later, much of which was spent reassuring Beverly that she looked fine, looked great, looked absolutely wonderful and yes, she was a freak but no, not a bad one, they took off in the elder Maclay's rental car.

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They did indeed have plenty of time to spare. "I guess you two should have brought some school stuff to work on," Beverly said apologetically.

"Yeah, I've been meaning to read 'War and Peace,'" Tara replied dryly.

Finally, the irredeemably cheerful voice of the airport's announcer burst over the line to inform them that Southwest Flight 228 from Dallas was now arriving. Beverly jumped to her feet and took up a position perhaps twenty feet from the arrival door.

"Five bucks says I know what they'll be doing tonight," Willow nudged Tara as they followed her.

"Ten bucks says we'll *hear* what they do tonight," Tara muttered in reply. "So sometime between now and then we're picking up some ear plugs because I just don't need that."

Tanya St. Clair was a tall, athletic-looking woman with dark brown eyes and a wry grin. When she and Beverly had finally extracted themselves from each other-earning considerable gawk points from their fellow airport patrons in the process-she greeted Willow and Tara with quick hugs.

"I hear you two have been taking great care of Beverly," she said warmly.

"Yeah, well, we've been adequate tour guides, I think," Tara replied. "But she's been missing you like crazy."

"I hear you," Tanya murmured, pulling Beverly close. Looking quickly around the terminal, where a few travelers were still casting what they thought were subtle glances in their direction, she added, "Don't get many Black people in Sunnydale, do you?"

"Not as many as we should," Willow acknowledged ruefully. Thinking of Kendra, she added, "And the ones we *do* get tend to die."

"Well *that* sucks," Tanya commented dryly.

"But I'm sure they'll make a special effort for you, Honey," Beverly said reassuringly.

Tanya shook her head. "You know, if you're White and gay, you get looks. If you're Black and straight, you get looks. But girlfriends, if you're Black and gay-just step right up and prepare to be an object of enduring fascination."

"I've always said you're timeless," Beverly said proudly, as the four of them headed out through the sliding glass doors.

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Dinner that night looked like any other gathering of four people who are getting to know each other better...Selective reminiscences, political discussions regarding matters of common concern, and ongoing analysis of the impending apocalypse.

Willow and Tara gave Tanya a brief history of their nocturnal activities, and Tanya shared her thoughts on Beverly's unsolicited call to arms.

"It blows," she weighed in.

"Tanya, Sweetie, I love it when you talk dirty." Beverly grinned and twirled some more angel hair pasta onto her fork.

"And now, of course, my inimitable partner here will make a joke, hoping to thereby deflect the solemnity of the moment." And though she rolled her eyes as she said it, Willow knew that this was a conversation they had had many times over the past five years of their five-month relationship.

"Guilty as charged, and yet so unbelievably cute that you can't help but love me." Willow noticed that while Beverly's right hand was wielding her fork, her left was nowhere to be seen. She had a pretty good idea where it was.

"My love for you has never been the issue, Baby." Tanya turned back to Willow and Tara. "Let me ask y'all something."

Willow looked up sharply "*Y'all.*" *Someone has called me that before, but not here. Not in Sunnydale. Maybe an alternate reality?* But this wasn't the time to figure it out.

"You two signed on for this, right? Of your own free will? You go out at least two, three times a week-more in May, it seems-and you stake and you behead and you ax and you curse and probably a slew of other things that you won't be putting on your curriculum vita when you go out on the job market. And you don't even get hazard pay?"

"Well, it's not like we're in it for the money," Tara argued.

"I'm not saying that. Of course you're not in it for the money. What I'm saying is that you give and give and give and if you get hurt, that's it. Your tough luck. And if the very worst happens, like with Kendra and Miss Calendar, does the Society for the Preservation of the Species pick up the funeral expenses? No, they don't. Am I right?"

Willow shifted uncomfortably. What could she say?

"Yeah, I know," Tanya grinned. "I'm just a Summer's Eve douche commercial of soft focus and sunshine, aren't I? I'm not trying to be a downer; I just don't like how everyone's life gets tossed around croutons on some giant, inter-dimensional salad and we don't even know who's holding the tongs."

Beverly placed her glass carefully back onto its cardboard coaster. "You know what I think?" she asked quietly.

Tanya gazed at her. "What?"

"I think maybe it's easier to be angry with whatever forces put this stuff in front of us than it is to be angry with me for choosing to go along. Because it *is* a choice, Babe, when you get right down to it. Nobody held a gun to my head." She held Tanya's gaze evenly.

Willow became intensely preoccupied with the parmesan cheese shaker. She felt Tara grip her hand tightly on the seat between them.

"Maybe I am," Tanya finally conceded. "The thing is, there's no way you *wouldn't* do your part. I know you, Girl. And I chose to stick with you, even though nobody held a gun to *my* head." She sighed. "So maybe I'm just railing against everything that makes it seem damn near impossible to get a good night's sleep in this life."

Beverly leaned forward and kissed her gently, then whispered something in her ear. Tanya just arched her brows and pushed her away with absolutely no real indignation or force.

*Probably something about the likelihood of getting any sleep tonight,* Willow thought.

As they walked out to the car afterwards, Tanya lit up a cigarette. Nodding to Willow, who had fallen in step with her behind Tara and Beverly, she said, "Bev's been after me to give these up since the day we met. I told her that if she does her stint in the Key Protection Service and makes it through, I'll quit." Exhaling, she added softly, "She's risking her life to save the world. I figured I should put something up on the table, too."

As they lay in bed later, Willow curved back against the warmth of Tara's body, she asked quietly, "What's trump?"

She could almost feel Tara's bemused gaze at the back of her head. "Are we talking Donald or cards?"

Willow turned, sliding her leg between Tara's. "Cards. What's trump in this hand? Or, to be more specific, *who*?"

"Will, Sweetie, walk toward the sound of my voice and then give me the decoder ring to what you're talking about."

"OK, see, the monks decide that in order to best protect all of humanity, they'd alter the reality of Goddess-only-knows how many people. Basically, they over-ruled *somebody*, or something-whatever or whoever had set the previous reality in motion. But are they the final word? Could somebody come along and trump their ace?"

Tara's palm against her cheek was warm. Had she ever not known the feeling? Was there a reality out there in which that hand never touched her? And if so, could she please, goddess, make sure that it never threatened this one?

"I don't know, Sweetheart. I wish I could offer you proof that there's some kind of method to all this madness, but I can't. The only thing I know for sure is that you're lying here next to me, and you love me like I love you. I can handle the existential uncertainty of the species so long as that truth holds."

Willow pressed herself as tightly as she could against Tara's warmth. "I know," she sighed. "The whole thing just offends my sense of order and stability." Kissing Tara's shoulder, she added, "It's either arbitrary or it's cruel. Either way, I'm not a satisfied customer."

She felt Tara laugh softly against her hair. "Well, we can look into legal action after it's all over."

She finally fell asleep, well after Tara had done so; and her dreams were filled with crazy bottle-blondes and books that were suddenly re-written half-way through their plot and finally Tara, feeding her lobster with her fingers. She was grateful, the next morning, that she had spent the longest time in the last scene.

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The four of them met for lunch the next day at the same pizza parlor where Beverly had had her "Holy shit, it's the Key!" epiphany.

"You want to meet the rest of the Scoobies?" Beverly asked Tanya with a grin.

"Only if the ex-demon asks me about our sex life," Tanya replied easily. "I brought along some videos."

Beverly's expression of horror, nano-second in duration though it was, told Willow that just such tapes existed.

*I bet Tara would look totally hot in a sexy vid...Wonder if I could get her to go for it?*

"When I cringe and run from the restaurant, I'm sure you know it's not homophobia," Tara commented. "Just good old-fashioned family boundaries."

"Yeah-let's see if the monks can alter reality to erase the last ten seconds," Beverly muttered. She glanced at her watch and pushed back her chair. "Time to feed the implacable demons of parking. Spare change, if you please."

Moments later, she was shoving a random assortment of quarters and dimes into the gaping maw of the meter. As she turned to leave, she heard a sudden scuffling in the alley to her left. She took a half-step toward the sound.

"Hey-anybody there? Everything OK?" In lieu of a verbal response came a louder clanging, like metal tumbling about itself. And then she heard-or she could have sworn she heard-a faint gasping, as if someone were fighting to draw breath.

And because she was the kind of person who did things like help strangers and talk to people in elevators and sign on to protect mystical balls of energy, she dashed into the alley to see if someone needed assistance. As the darkness of the space closed in around her, she looked up to see a very short creature with serious skin problems standing on top of a trash dumpster. He was hoisting a club, and seemed intent on bringing it down with no small measure of antipathy upon her head.

"Oh, *fu-*"

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Which was how Beverly came to find herself in Glory's penthouse. She awoke to hear that Hell God's shrill voice reaming new and varied orifices into her minions.

"You're lucky she's still alive," she hissed. "If her skull's cracked or she has some kind of weird brain damage, she's not going to be of any help to me; and if that happens, *you* won't be of any help to me, ever again, because I'll pull your spleens out through your nose."

"We're so blindingly sorry, Most Abundantly Divine One," came a quivering reply. "We thought that she might prove difficult to subdue, given her special status."

"As what? A big dyke? She's a Protector, you worthless lump of idiocy, not a Slayer. You know what her power is? She gets near me, and I get all woozy. To anybody else, she's just another woman in comfortable shoes."

"We pathetically beg your most undeserved forgiveness, Oh Stunningly Rapturous Yet Tasteful One. We only wished to be certain of delivering the foul one to you."

"Hey," Beverly managed in a hoarse whisperer. "I'm fine with 'dyke,' but 'foul' just won't do. Besides," she added, glancing from one toady to the next, "when was the last time *your* face saw the business end of an exfoliant?"

Speaking left her nauseous. She dropped her head for a moment, hoping desperately that she didn't toss her cookies in front of this crew. She could feel ropes cutting into her wrists and ankles, binding her to the hard wooden chair in which she sat. She heard rather than saw Glory take another step away from her, although she was already skulking close to the back of the room.

"Ooh, look-it's a Protector...left so very unprotected. You know why you're here, of course."

"You wanted to ask me to the Prom and didn't want to do it in front of my friends?"

*Oh God, if she's gonna kill me, please let it be quick. Please.*

"No, silly; I don't play for your team. I don't really play for *any* team, to be honest. I'm more of a free agent kinda girl."

"More like a free agent kinda whack job," Beverly corrected her, knowing as she did so that Glory probably wasn't terribly receptive to constructive feedback.

"You say potato, I say tuberous food source first cultivated by the Mayans," Glory blithely replied. "But let's cut to the main feature, shall we? You know the identity of the Key, and I need that information. Let's work together on this one, shall we?"

"Let's see about getting you eaten by a giant slug, shall we?"

"Oh, honestly... You're all about empowering women, aren't you? And what could be more empowering than helping a woman-a *God*-regain her rightful throne? Let's face it, Sweetie-it's right out of Marion Zimmer Bradley."

"What, they have Barnes and Noble where you're from?" *Keeping her talking, Bev.*

*Why?* she suddenly asked herself. *Nobody can beat a Hell God; you're not going to give her the information she wants. So, what-keep her talking, so you can be good and conscious when she starts to torture you?*

*I gotta try, she finally knew. Tanya will kick my ass if I get killed.*

Glory, meanwhile, was giving a detailed description of the horrors that would ensue if Beverly didn't divulge the Key's identity, and showed an impressive knowledge of human anatomy in so doing.

"Listen, Glo-do you mind if I call you 'Glo'?-let's just face the fact that we are separated by profound ideological differences. Is there somehow we can set aside those differences and just be real with each other? Just be ourselves? Me, a dedicated if somewhat irreverent woman who teaches inner-city school children; you, a profoundly disturbed deity in exile from hell." Squinting, she could dimly make out Glory huddled at the back of the room. "Ebony, and ivory, live together in perfect harmony..." she sang in a remarkably off-key voice. Beverly knew she had no ear for music.

"What in the name all things unholy is she doing?" Glory demanded, her voice hitting a new octave.

"I believe it's a popular song from the 1980's, Thou Most Lusciously Amoral One," came a helpful voice from behind her. "I believe Paul McCartney and Michael Jackson sang it."

"Michael gets out, and I can't get back," Glory muttered.

"Side by side on my piano keyboard, oh Lord..."

"Shut *up*," Glory screeched, flinging a vase which shattered inches to her left. "I'm sick of this...Sick of everyone trying to keep me away from what I need. If you were stranded in the desert, don't you think I'd give you a drink of water?"

"I'm guessing no," Beverly replied, trying to keep her nausea gauge at half-tank.

"Well, no-I'd probably taunt you and hold the glass just beyond your reach," Glory admitted. "But that's because I'm a Hell God. I'm not wired to be beneficent. You-you help the Key; you help strangers in an alley; you help snot-fricken'-nosed kids...but you won't help me."

"At the risk of arguing the subjective nature of good and evil, those snot-nosed kids aren't planning to annihilate the human race. At least not the ones in PS-367."

"Fine," Glory hissed. "You think I'm not getting closer? I know the Key's here. I know it's in human form. I know it's one of the newer members of the Slayer's circle. I can just take them one at a time-the new ones, the old ones...Sooner or later, somebody's either gonna spill the beans."

"You don't know this crowd," Beverly said evenly.

"I could just keep you here, and kill them one by one until you gave in."

"Oh, yeah-that would really put me in a helpful mood. Save your breath for your blow-up doll, OK?"

"Or maybe I wouldn't have to kill them all." Glory's voice was suddenly, sickeningly smooth. "I could just take the one. The one who came because she just couldn't stand to be away from you. You think you might be able to come up with a name if her life depended on it?"

Beverly wondered if they could hear her heart pounding in her chest. Of course they could-it was deafening; cacophonous.

"What's the matter, Bev? Suddenly you're very, very quiet, and you were so *spirited* just a moment ago."

Beverly felt the nausea cresting again, and this time it had nothing to do with her injuries. This was the worst, and she had done it. How could she have been so stupid? So *selfish*? To have Tanya come here in the middle of all of this? When Beverly was certain to be a target in one way or another?

*"Baby, if you stay, I can't even pretend that you won't be at risk. The safest thing would be for you to take off now and find some nice woman who isn't mixed up in something so crazy...And who manages to balance her check-book," she added. Maybe if she could laugh about this, her heart wouldn't rip completely out of her chest with the pain.*



*And Tanya had stared at her, that searching, fathomless gaze that Beverly now knew was an invitation-an invitation to walk into something real and honest, and not back down, not take refuge in half-truths and irony and easy outs. She stared at Beverly, and asked simply, "Do you love me?"*

*And Beverly, because she knew that Tanya knew the answer but needed to hear it, had gazed back her and replied, "Yes. With everything I am, I love you."*

*"Then I stay," Tanya had answered in return. "And we don't ever, ever have this conversation again."*

That had been months ago, right after she had learned she was a Protector. But this-how could she possibly refuse? Could she really stand by and watch Glory kill her partner?

Finally, she looked up, and stared hard at the dim shape of Glory at the far wall. "If you make one move toward her, I'll terminate my existence," she said slowly. "I'll be dead before you can say 'Questionable Hair Rinse.'"

*"Daddy, how come you beat Uncle Quinn and Uncle Nathan so much when you guys play poker? Are you just luckier?"*

*The eyes were mischievous; the smile, a welcome into a secret. "I'm no luckier than they are, Baby Girl. I just bluff better."*

"You're lying," Glory retorted. "Your hands are tied; your feet are tied. You can't raise a finger to hurt yourself."

"I don't have to," she replied evenly. "It's mental, and it's all mine."

"This is nothing but a pathetic bluff," Glory shouted.

"Then your decision should be an easy one, shouldn't it? Just go ahead with your threat, secure in the knowledge that I won't die right in front of you without ever saying a word."

When Glory didn't answer, Beverly could feel confidence edging back into her heart. "But if that *isn't* your final answer, then just drop the idea of touching her, even coming near her. Because at that point, my life doesn't matter and I'll kill myself just to piss you off. Got that, Oh Skanky Ditzzy Compulsively Masturbating One?"

*Hey-that was a good one, Maclay.*

Then she looked up and even through the darkness and distance she could feel Glory's fury radiating off her.

*Of course, now she's **really** angry...*

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"So at the risk of getting personal, do you two have an 'Understandable Indiscretion' clause?" Tanya asked, wiping pizza sauce from her chin.

"Um...having a hard time matching the noun with the adjective," Willow replied hesitantly.

"Oh, we're not talking random flings," Tanya hastily assured her. "I mean, specific-albeit completely unattainable-women. If by some miracle you ended up with the chance to sleep with them, you'd be forgiven for doing so."

As Willow and Tara looked at each other with uncertainty, Tanya continued, "For me, it's Halle Barry. If she shows up and says, 'Hey Tanya-wanna make with the hot sex?' I get to go for it. Oh, and Charlize Theron. Bev...let's see, I think she went with Sandra Bullock and maybe Ashley Judd."

"Sounds like a fun game," Tara acknowledged, until she felt Willow's eyes fall upon her with the force of a bludgeon. "At least, fun for other people who aren't me. It's not so much my thing."

Tanya laughed; it was a deep, rich sound that Tara liked immensely. She drew some comfort from the fact that her aunt's partner hadn't lost her sense of humor. She watched Tanya glance first at her watch, and then out the wide restaurant window.

"How long does it take a person to put money in a meter? We only parked a block away." She looked at Tara, who saw nascent fear emerge in the dark eyes across from her, felt it slide across the table into her own heart. There was a brief silence, and then all three women had pushed back their chairs and were heading for the door, oblivious to the manager's angry shouts.

Moments later, it was clear that Beverly wasn't on her way back to the restaurant; wasn't at the car; wasn't anywhere that they could find her. Tara felt dread slinking along her veins until it threatened to drown her from within. As Tanya spun to look at her, she saw terror and rage and something else-a fierce and furious determination. She held Tara's gaze for several seconds, her breathing shallow. When she spoke, her voice was barely a whisper.

"How do we find this bitch?" she muttered.

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## **Part 28**

*Girlfriend needs a mood stabilizer, Beverly thought dimly. Where does a god go for psychiatric services?*

Aloud, she replied, "It's nice, Glo. Plush, yet just this side of garish."

Glory laughed, delighted. "I'm so glad you like it! Especially since this suite will be your last stop on the subway o' Life."

"No time for that pony ride?" Beverly asked.

"Fraid not," Glory answered, and her voice sounded almost regretful. "But we can move the torture from room to room, so you can sample all the amenities."

"How about the bathroom?" Beverly suggested.

"How about the name of the Key?" Glory countered.

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"Tanya, wait-we don't know *where* Glory is," Tara said reluctantly.

"Then let's find her." Tanya's voice was calm and collected and absolutely chilling.

Tara looked at Willow in anguish. Was this really happening? Had her aunt really been snatched away from them in broad daylight?

She knew the answer to both of those questions, even before she registered Willow's gaze, a look filled with both fear and compassion.

"We'll find her, Baby," Willow assured her, in that voice that told her that no matter how Big the Bad, Willow would never let her face it alone.

Tara held onto her hands and drew a deep breath, then turned back to Tanya. "I think we should find the others," she said simply.

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"You know, Glo, we could have some difficulty with the torture bit." *That's it, Maclay...Keep it light. This chica doesn't want to fuck you up beyond recognition; at least not yet, not before she gets her info.*

*Wonder how she'll take the news that she's not getting her info?*

"And what might the problem be?" Glory asked, in the same solicitous tone.

"Well, I don't exactly advertise this fact-I mean, in the world of education, a certain discretion is called for-but I'm really into the 'S' part of 'S&M.' I mean it-the more it hurts, the giddier I get. Could make for a long and ultimately frustrating experience for you."

"Is that right?" Glory asked, her crossed arms barely visible in the dark recess.

"Oh yeah," Beverly enthused. "If you *really* wanna inflict some damage, I'd suggest a glass of Merlot and a warm bath with sandalwood foaming gel."

"Really?"

"Definitely. It's hurting me to even say the words."

Tentatively, like a squirrel considering a run across an interstate highway, a voice piped up from Beverly's right.

"Please forgive my most presumptuous and mind-numbingly stupid interruption, Thou Eternally Scrumptious One, but I believe the Protector lies."

"You think so, Einstein?" Beverly flinched as a vase shattered next to the toady who had just spoken. "Boy, nothing gets by you, does it?" Glory took a quick step toward her, and then halted, teetering slightly. "What the hell is it about you?" she muttered weakly, stepping back as far from Beverly as she could.

"I dunno," Beverly shrugged. "A lot of women fall all over themselves to get close to me."

"Damn it," came the low hiss. "Why is this so hard? All I wanna do is get back home, prop myself up on a few eternally suffering souls in front of a nice roaring fire, and spend some quality time with my peeps; my two buds; the ones who spit me out into this little slice of suburban hell. I'm so close to the Key I can practically *feel* it; *you* know who it is and you won't tell me; and before long, that humanity-infested twin of mine is gonna show up and want the remote."

*OK, didn't know that...*

*Wonder what else Her Royal Insanity would like to share with the group?*

"Glo, you oughtta give this realm a chance. What's so bad about it?"

She heard Glory slam a fist into the étagère beside her, sending expensive curios flying against the wall.

"What's so bad? What *isn't*? The noise; the mortality; the smells; the *humans*." Beverly could feel two baleful eyes glaring at her. "And look at you-you're *not* human, and you're going to die for them?"

*For Tanya? About a thousand times, if needed.*

"But what about your sister? If she's human, doesn't she at least bring a wee smile to that sad face of yours?"

"Sister? What the...?" Then a harsh, grating laugh barked out of the shadows. "Oh, you're talking about my mortal coil!" Glory's voice was heavy with disdain. "Lemme tell you something, Bev...Opposites do *not* attract, ever. My *brother*, for want of a better word, is as dedicated to *saving* humans as I am to eating them for breakfast."

*Brother?*

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Within 45 minutes, Tara, Willow, and Tanya had been joined at Dominic's Pizza Den by Giles, Buffy, and Dawn. Willow had conveyed the urgency of the situation as explicitly as possible without naming Glory or the Key by name. Introductions had been hasty and strained, particularly where Dawn and Tanya were involved.

"You say that Beverly left to put more time on the meter, and after a few minutes you became worried?" Giles' expression conveyed his own concern.

"Right," Willow nodded.

"But if it was only a few minutes, they couldn't have gone too far, right?" Buffy asked, looking at Giles.

"I don't know that that really applies here, Buffy," the Watcher countered regretfully. "We don't know that Glory is constrained by typical parameters such as speed."

"Except that I bet Glory wasn't there; not in the alley, anyway," Tara put in suddenly.

"Why is that?" Giles looked puzzled.

"Because Glory can't be around Bev without getting a little woozy, remember?" Tara replied.

"That's right," Willow joined in quickly. "She'd have to send her scabby little sycophants to-to do it." She stopped abruptly, watching Tanya's face at this last part.

"And we have no evidence that Glory's minions have any particular powers," Giles said thoughtfully. "So perhaps she *was* taken somewhere close."

"I can't really see any of those crusty little half-pints pulling away in a '95 Civic," Buffy mused. "And you say the rental car wasn't touched?"

"Nothing," Tara concurred, looking at Tanya. The other woman's silence was beginning to worry her.

"Tanya, is Beverly strong? Could she have put up a struggle; made it difficult for them to...well, to take her?" Tara could see that Giles hated asking the question.

But Tanya's jaw only tightened for a moment before she replied, "She's tough, I know that. But I guess it depends on whether they took her by surprise, and whether they-whether they used any weapons." As she said this last part, Tara could see her swallow hard, trying to keep her voice steady.

Dawn, she realized, hadn't spoken at all. She suspected that Buffy and Giles had tried to discourage the teenager from accompanying them, to no avail. She knew that Dawn had taken an instant liking to her aunt; more to the point, she was fairly certain that Dawn was already carrying a heavy burden of guilt. Beverly's kidnapping would surely worsen that.

"So do we fan out?" Willow was asking. "Start from here and work outwards, looking for possible living quarters? There's a cyber-café on the next block; I could pull up the street plans and rule out some places, save us some time." Tara could practically see her girlfriend shifting into problem-solving mode. Tanya, by contrast, appeared to be shifting into vengeance mode, judging from the fury that practically radiated from her.

"That might well be our best option, Willow," Giles assented.

"Tanya, I know you must be crazy right now, but remember, Glory's not gonna want to hurt her. Bev has something she needs."

Tara halted abruptly as she was reaching out to Tanya. *Hurt...Bev, hurting...Her head hurting so bad, so suddenly...*

"Ben," she practically shouted.

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"OK, so I may be way outta line with the personal questions here, but you have a brother?"

"You're not going to try some family therapy thing are you? Tell me that communication is the key to any good relationship?" Glory's voice was bored, and Beverly knew that that was a bad sign.

"So Glo and the bro aren't close?"

Glory's laugh sounded anything but humorous. "Beverly, Beverly...Methinks you're stalling." Turning to one of her toadies, she said conversationally, "I think we should start the persuasion techniques now, Jinx."

"Gladly, Most Curiously Strong One," came the eager reply. "What would you have us do?"

"Hmm...I think to start, we'll go with something distinctive but not too extreme," Glory mused.

"Oh God, not the Merlot!" Beverly screamed.

Glory chuckled. "You got some brass ovaries, girl." She paused, and then added, "I'll have to soak them a few hours before I eat them."

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"Ben? What's he got to do with this?" Giles asked, perplexed.

Tara hastily recounted the chance meeting two nights ago, and Beverly's inexplicable reaction.

"So you think Ben's involved with Glory somehow?" Buffy's voice was skeptical.

"I don't know," Tara shrugged. "But there's no denying the fact that her headache was severe *and* the fact that it was perfectly synchronized to his coming and going."

"He gave me his number, too-remember?" Willow said excitedly.

Tanya looked hard at Willow; Tara could see the effort it was taking for her aunt's partner to keep it together. "Get him on the phone," she said simply.

As Willow began to rummage through her bag for Ben's information, Giles glanced at the front section of a *Sunnydale Prism* that had been left on the table to their right.

"Hullo, what's this?" he murmured, retrieving the paper. "'Gathering of Robed Horsemen Draws Citation,'" he read. Scanning the article, he explained, "It appears that a patrol car happened upon a large group of men dressed in black robes, loitering in the woods outside of town. Apparently, they travel by horse," he concluded.

"Think they have anything to do with this?" Buffy asked.

"I don't know. According to the story, they were all served with citations for creating a disturbance and failure to pick up their animals' droppings. They're being held for further questioning."

"Wow...Stealth, not so much an option when horses get involved," Buffy murmured.

Tara had been watching Dawn during this exchange. She sensed that the girl was close to tears. Finally, she reached across the table and took Dawn's hand in her own.

"Dawn, Sweetie, it'll be OK. We'll find her," she said softly.

"Yeah, Dawnie-you know our motto: A day without mortal peril is like a day we never experience."

But Dawn wasn't looking at either of them. Instead, she was staring at Tanya.

"I'm sorry," she finally whispered, her voice tight with misery.

Tanya didn't insult Dawn by asking "What for?" She only sighed, and shook her head.

"I know that if it weren't for me, Beverly wouldn't be in danger," the teenager continued, ignoring Buffy's warning glance.

Tanya looked at her for a long moment, then dropped her head into her hands. Tara wondered if she were crying, but when the older woman looked up again, her eyes were dry as she gazed intently at the Key.

"Dawn, I'll be honest with you-when I first heard about all of this, I hated you." Dawn flinched at the words. "I didn't even know you," Tanya continued, "but I hated what you meant to our lives; I hated the thought that Beverly could die because of you."

"Hey-enough with the 'H' word, OK?" Buffy interjected, her voice laced with hostility.

"Let her talk," Dawn muttered. "I'd rather hear the truth than a bunch of reassurances I don't believe."

"Tough girl," Tanya murmured. "Good for you." She rubbed her hands across her eyes as if trying to erase an image from her mind. Then she looked back at Dawn. "Thing is, Girlfriend, I suddenly realized that if it weren't for you, Beverly wouldn't even *be* here; at least, I don't think she would. So it's kind of a Catch-22, you know? Beverly could die to protect the reason she was created." She turned, staring out the window for a moment, then turned back to Dawn. A rueful half-smile crossed her lips. "And then I get here and I meet you and you're all of what-fifteen?-and you're worried sick about my baby, and Tara and Willow obviously think you're the bee's knees, and I don't hate you...I just want Beverly back. So I'm sorry if my social skills aren't on their A-Game, Dawn, but don't blame yourself, OK? Because I don't."

Dawn swallowed heavily, and then nodded. She chewed her lower lip for a moment, and then said so softly that Tara had to strain to hear her, "I'll do anything it takes to get her back, Tanya. I promise you."

Suddenly, Willow gave a muted shout of triumph. "Got it! 'Ben Dover-234-0126,'" she read.

"His name is Ben Dover? That's gotta have some issues attached to it," Buffy muttered.

"Let's see what he knows," Tanya said decisively.

"What do we say?" Willow asked, her fingers poised over the keypad of her cell phone. "'Hi, Ben. Say, are you involved with a Hell God? Just wondering.' Not much nuance."

"Buffy, you talk," Tara instructed. "Tell him you need to see him."

"Why me?" Buffy asked, but her question was too purposefully innocent for Tara to grant it any credence.



"Because he'll be more responsive to you, and you know it," she replied. "Ask him if you can come over to his place."

"What if he's at the hospital?" Giles interjected.

"Then try to talk to him in person; tell him you'll come over later, when he's done, and see if he'll give you the address. That may even work better-we can check the place out while he's gone."

"Damn, Tara-there's more spy girl to you than I knew," Buffy replied admiringly. Tara watched with faint amusement as Buffy unconsciously settled her face into Subtle Flirtation Mode. "OK, here goes."

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*My left hip...That doesn't hurt. Just concentrate on your trusty left glute, Maclay, and you won't be so upset about that blood pouring out of your face...*

Such positive self-talk was interrupted by the harsh ring of a phone. She tried to lift her head, but her view of the Hell God was obscured even more by the blood that ran down over and into her eyes. Her hearing, though, was still good.

"Damn it, Benjamin, not now!" The voice was as harsh as it had been for the past hour, but now it was also tinged with frustration. Beverly could hear a struggle emanating from the shadows at the back of the room.

*Who the hell's she fighting? I never passed out; I know nobody came in.*

After several seconds, the scuffle seemed to subdue, and then she heard nothing. Even the minions had been silenced, it seemed. Finally, a slender figure emerged from the shadows.

*Who's the guy in drag?*

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"Hi-is this Ben?" Buffy's voice bordered on breathless.

Tara caught Willow's eyes across the table. They had compared notes before with regard to Buffy's somewhat split personality where men were concerned. Demon-slaying warrior by night; occasionally dippy Valley Girl by day.

"Oh, good-I'm so glad I caught you. Are you at work right now?"

Buffy gave a quick shake of her head to the others. "Well, I hope it's OK that I called you...What? Oh, Willow gave me your number...Yeah, I kinda asked her for it."

Now Tanya had joined in with the raised eyebrows. Glancing over at Dawn, she muttered, "If you're into guys, Dawn, take notes." She gave the Key a small grin.

"I was wondering if I could stop over...Yeah...Well, I need to talk to you. About what? Oh-uh, about...about my spleen."

*Her spleen? Better than STD's, I guess...*

"Yeah...Oh, I just have a couple of questions...Plus, I'd like to see you. Yeah...Is this a good time? Oh? Why not?" Her glance to the rest of them conveyed her suspicion at his response.

"OK...What about later? Oh-you have a double shift? Well, I guess we won't be getting together, will we? Tomorrow night? Well, that might work...What if I come over to your place?"

*My God, if this guy **isn't** involved with any of this, he's gotta think Buffy's the easiest thing since falling off a log.*

"Dinner at Antonio's? I dunno...I may need to take action on my spleen before then. I'll get back to you." So saying, she hung up abruptly.

"OK, guys, Ben definitely does *not* want me to see his place. Either he's got a crazy wife locked in the attic, or something else is going on. Will, can you hack into the hospital files and find his home address?"

"Consider it done," Willow replied, speaking literally-she had started the task when Buffy was still on the phone. "Dover, Benjamin K. Lives at 228 Delgado." She looked up hopefully. "That's only a couple of blocks from here."

"Let's go," Tanya said, in a voice that left little room for debate.

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*Don't pass out, Maclay. Whatever just happened, Glory's not happy about it, and this may be your only chance to get out of here.*

She could barely make out the shape of the person approaching her.

*Where's Glory? And why is this guy wearing her dress?*

She tried to focus on him; tried to form words. The closer he came, however, the more she hurt. Blood was streaming down over her face, blurring her vision; she was already in worse pain than she had ever imagined; and now it felt as if her very brain were about to explode. She dimly recognized it as a different kind of pain...She had felt *that* before-when? Recently, wasn't it? Nausea rose up in her at the force of it; she fought to hold onto consciousness.

Two nights ago-that was it. When she met that guy...Ben, wasn't it?

She heard him take another step toward her and knew that she would pass out with the pain. Through the roaring in her ears, she dimly heard a voice from her left beseeching, "You must leave, Most Rippled Muscular One. You must allow Glory to return."

"No...No, I have to help her. Help me untie her, you scabby little wretch." Beverly recognized the voice, though now it held none of its previous friendliness. She heard an agonized sob wrench from someone nearby; with an almost-detached surprise, she realized that it had come from her.

"Please, Your Illustrious Symbiotic Handsomeness...The great Glorificus will be *most* displeased if-" The pathetic voice fell silent abruptly, only to resume with greater urgency. "Someone approaches, Sir. If you will not allow Glory to return, you *must* leave at once."

"No-no, I should stay and just get this over with, right now...one way or another. Maybe it's not too late." Through her agony, Beverly could hear the desperation in his voice.

"Do you really think that, Most Ambivalent One? That you can explain all of this to anyone-even the lovely mortal who just called-and they would understand? Of course not. Go, Sir, if you still refuse Glory her home. *We* will take care of this one."

*Oh, well shit.*

But the sabers piercing her brain had stilled, just a little bit, as Ben stepped uncertainly away from her.

"I'm-God, I'm so sorry," he finally whispered, anguish thick in his retreating voice.

Seconds later, she heard the door burst open. By now, her eyes were completely useless, coated with her own blood. But she knew it was Tanya; knew it even before she heard the choked sound of her own name called out in the voice that had first serenaded her years ago.

"Bev-oh God, Baby."

She tried to warn her; tried to tell her that there were still enemies in the room-albeit extremely short and poorly dressed ones. But she couldn't speak. Her tongue was too thick within her mouth and she wasn't totally sure how she was even breathing at the moment.

"Buffy!" She recognized Willow's voice. "Scabby minion, two o'clock!"

Bev could hear the sounds of a quick and decisive struggle. From her left, she thought she heard several creatures scurrying off, hoping to avoid their cohort's fate.

At that point, she stopped worrying much about what else was going on because Tanya had reached her and was pulling frenetically on the ropes that held her.

"Baby-just hold on, OK? We'll get you out of here. You're safe now, Sweetie." The words tumbled out in an anguished sob.

"Here-hold this li'l fella, Giles. I think he's gonna be a big help to us in the near future." Beverly could hear Buffy shove the vanquished and now-groveling Assistant to the Hell God aside and dart over to her. Within seconds, the ropes were untied. Beverly felt herself floating off, almost as if she now knew that she could afford to; that she was finally safe. She watched herself fall into Tanya's arms; watched the strong arms encircle her and pull her into a gentle but fiercely protective embrace.

The last thing she remembered was the sound of her own voice saying, "I'm in big trouble for this one, aren't I?" and Tanya's soft, sweet laughter, threaded with her tears, spilling down over her soul as she finally let go.

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## **Part 29**

Tara was only now beginning to trust that her aunt had survived Glory's "hospitality." She, Willow, and Tanya had taken Beverly to Sunnydale General's ER unit, where Willow had assumed responsibility for watching out for Ben.

"We don't know exactly what he has to do with all of this, but I don't want him anywhere near her," Tara had whispered to Willow as they approached the admission desk.

Beverly had regained consciousness on the ride to the hospital. "I'm alive," she marveled. "Son of a bitch, I'm really alive."

"Yeah, Baby, you are," Tanya had murmured, doing her best to staunch the flow of blood from Beverly's wounds. "At least until they get you all cleaned up and back on your feet. And then I am going to kick your ass from downtown to Denver and back. What the hell were you thinking about?"

Beverly had managed to give a synopsis of her kidnapping, and Tanya had been distinctly nonplused at the narrative.

"Wait a minute-you *chose* to run into that alley?"

"Well, it sounded like someone was in trouble. You know me...I act first; think later."

"OK, so I know you didn't ask for my opinion on the subject, but you may wanna rethink that approach to life," Willow had offered tentatively.

"Oh, it's fine, Willow," Tanya had assured her. "If Beverly wants to run off into dark alleys, knowing she's a major player in the foiling of a Hell God, who are we to cramp her style?"

At the hospital-where Ben had refrained from making an appearance-Beverly had received 38 stitches in various cuts on her forehead and face. There were no broken bones, although she had an angry bruise across her temple. The ER physician had recommended she stay overnight for observation, but the four women, after a hurried summit, decided that Beverly would be safer under their own care. After receiving various medications for pain and infection, as well as explicit instructions for after-care and warning signs to be aware of, they had wheeled Beverly back out the to the car and headed home.

She and Tanya had decided to switch hotels; she waited with Tara and Willow while her partner checked them out of the Ramada.

"Sorry about the scare, Sweetie; but I gotta say, that was one helluva rescue mission."

"Well, you know-just another day in the life of those crazy Maclays, right?" Tara had tried to keep her tone light, suspecting that her aunt wasn't in any condition to have an extended conversation on the complete horror of the day.

Two hours later, Tanya had deposited them back at Tara's dorm; Beverly had nodded off to sleep again in the front seat. "We'll call you later, just to check in and let you know how we're doing." As Tara pulled on the door handle, she felt Tanya's hand resting on her arm.

"We wouldn't have found her without you, Tara. And I will never, ever forget that."

Tara only nodded, looking first at Tanya's fierce, exhausted face and then her aunt's sleeping form. *I don't want to lose these people. I just found them.*

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As Willow clicked the deadbolt into place, Tara collapsed into bed. "You know, I will be really quite OK if I'm never, ever that scared again in my entire life."

"Good luck on that one," Willow said, but her tone was gentle. She pulled the drapes shut and joined Tara on the bed. "How you doin', Baby? This day took it out of *me*, and I'm not her niece."

Tara's laugh sounded brittle to her own ears. "Hey-can't get all upset about every little mortal danger that presents itself to someone I love, can I? Oh wait-I can. I do." Turning to face Willow, she whispered, "I'm tired of this, Sweetie. I haven't been fighting the bad guys even half as long as you have, and I'm already tired of it. Every time I think my life can't get crazier, it does. I mean, I don't need it to be nice and calm; I think I ended up here, doing this, for a reason. But today..." She rolled back and gazed up at the ceiling. "Today, charging into that room and seeing Beverly tied up and bleeding...And then seeing Tanya's face, throughout the whole ordeal...Willow, I don't know how she would have survived if Glory had killed Bev; I really don't. And that's-that's what I can't shake." She trailed off, crossing her arms over her face as if to shield herself from her own thoughts.

"What, Baby? What can't you shake?" Willow's voice was soft as she brushed the back of her hand over Tara's arm.

After several moments, Tara rolled over to face her. "I watched Tanya nearly lose her partner today, Willow. I saw her face when she realized Bev was missing; I saw her trying so hard to keep it together with Buffy and Giles and Dawn; and I saw her when we got to Glory's, that one God-awful moment when we didn't know if Bev was alive or dead. I saw her, Willow, and even while I was focusing on finding my aunt, another part of me kept thinking: That could be me. I could be in her place, wondering where you were and if you were hurt and oh, God, if you were even alive...And I couldn't survive it, Willow; I couldn't. I don't care about fighting the good fight or going on because it's the right thing to do-I care about you. You're the reason I'm in this fight, Willow, and I'm sorry if that sounds selfish or short-sighted but it's true." She paused, drawing a shuddering breath, and then cupped her hands around Willow's face, now wet with tears. "If anything ever happens to you, Willow, I'm gone. I mean it-I have absolutely no interest in seeing what happens in the next episode, because for me the show ends at that moment."

Willow was a dim blur through her tears, but she felt warm, strong hands stroking her face. She let the tears fall, trying desperately to repel the image of Willow, tied and bleeding and suffering.

"Tara-Baby, look at me." Willow's voice was practically a whisper, yet its strength compelled Tara to do as she asked. Willow brushed away her tears with her fingers, and then her lips. She brushed kisses over Tara's cheeks and eyes and when she finally rested upon her mouth, Tara could taste the salt of her own tears.

Finally her terror ebbed slightly. She willed herself to focus on her partner, her mate, who was lying here next to her, warm and alive and constant.

"Tara, the last two months have been one long emotional earthquake for you. I know you said you were handling it," she stressed, over Tara's objections, "and you are. But Baby, there's no way this isn't taking a toll on you; there can't be. All I can promise you is that you won't face any of this alone, Baby. I'll be here, and I'll be safe and we'll come back from one wild night or another for many, many years to come and we'll tumble into bed together. Always together, Tara, because we're a package deal."

"Willow, Sweetie, you can't guarantee that. Look at what we do-"

"I have, Tara. You're right, I've been doing this longer than you have. But it didn't make sense until you came to me. Before, I was Buffy's sidekick, her aide-de-camp. When I found you, though, I started to see the real picture, at least where I fit in."

"And where is that?" Tara asked quietly.

"With you. I wasn't one of the supporting cast of Buffy's movie anymore; I was sharing the title role with you. And somehow I know that our film has a long, long playing time."

"We can't know that, Will. We tell ourselves that to keep from going crazy with the danger of it all, but God-look at what we've already faced."

"And survived," Willow added, her voice heavy with emphasis.

"Exactly. Doesn't that make you wonder just how much luck any two people can have?"

"No it doesn't," Willow replied, and her voice held nothing but conviction. "Just the opposite. The more we survive, the more I know we're *supposed* to."

Tara gazed at her, one eyebrow arched slightly. "You realize, of course, that a psychologist would consider that distinctly irrational thinking; a belief you've developed to keep you from living in a constant state of terror."

"Psychologists...what do they know?" Willow sniffed disdainfully. "Besides, if it *is* an irrational belief, seems to me it's a pretty good one."

"Can't argue with that," Tara admitted.

"Tara, do you want to stop? Do you want out of all of this? Because if you do, I'll leave with you. I mean it-we can tell Buffy and Xander and Giles that we're taking our toys and going home."

Tara sighed. "Oh God, Will-it's tempting. But we can't leave. I mean, we *can*," she added, as Willow started to break in. "But I can't imagine it. I'm in it, in this, for the long haul-so long as you're in it, too." She traced a shaking finger over Willow's lips. "But I'm serious, Willow-if anything happened to you, I don't think I could survive it."

"Tara, Baby-I'm right here; right beside you. And I'm alive and safe and so in love with you that I think I'll break wide open with it sometimes." She leaned over, kissing Tara softly, then pulled back to gaze into her eyes. "Touch me...Feel how warm I am; how *alive* I am."

Taking Tara's hand in her own, she curved the warm fingers over her face and down her neck, where she pressed two fingers against her pulse.

"See? My heart's beating, strong and steady." She paused, and then her voice dropped, growing husky. "Touch me-remind yourself that I'm here, because God knows I know *you* are. I can feel your energy humming off of you, and it makes me dizzy."

Tara recognized the tone in Willow's voice, and the darkening of her eyes. As Willow dragged her fingers away from her throat and down to the swell of her breast, she could feel herself answering the unspoken beckoning. Her own pulse quickened, and she could feel the warmth and the fullness that was settling into her lips, and her breasts, and her belly. She leaned in, so close to Willow's lips that she was drinking her shallow breath, not quite letting herself kiss them.

"You're here?" she whispered, never taking her eyes from Willow's lips.

"Yes."

"And you can feel the life in me?"

"Yes-like you can feel it in me."

"And you want me?"

The answer was a groan, but she didn't need one, not really. She finally let herself take Willow's mouth under her own. As she did, she felt an echoing thrum of need threading through her. Clothes seemed more than an impediment; they were symbols of the restraints and formalities and daily distractions from what was real and true and enduring within her life: Willow, and the bond that held them always together.

Willow slowly unbuttoned her shirt, pushing it down over her shoulders, and Tara shifted slightly, shrugging her way out of the confinement. For so long, she had been self-conscious of her figure, fearing that it was too full, too round. Gradually, though, Willow had helped tear down that barrier...not through her words, but through the desire that Tara, even through her fear, could see shimmering in the green eyes, the eyes that always turned a shade darker when Willow was aroused. Finally, she had come to trust in that desire, until she now let herself lay naked and vulnerable before her beloved's eyes.

Willow's hands slowly encircled her, pulling her closer; after a moment, Tara could feel the hook of her bra being easily unfastened. Willow kissed her shoulder before sliding the straps down over Tara's shoulders, her thumbs barely grazing over Tara's breasts. Willow held her gaze for several seconds, finally whispering, "You are so beautiful. It almost hurts sometimes, how beautiful you are to me."

Tara's fingers were buried in Willow's hair, slowly but steadily pulling the half-parted mouth toward her breast.

*Feel this...Feel every moment of this.*

She knew Willow would kiss her breast lightly first, before taking her nipple into her mouth; it was almost a signature.

*See it; watch it as if it were the first time. Never, ever take this for granted.*

Willow's profile in the dying light was a fine tracing of lines and curves. Her eyes were almost shut...almost. Her mouth was slightly parted; her tongue slid out quickly to wet her lips before they descended.

*There was a time when you hardly dared to dream of this sight; when you were certain it would never be anything **but** a dream. Now it's real and it's yours to savor and you are blessed to be right here, in this moment.*



"Tara, I love you..." And then the sweet, knowing lips had closed over one swollen nipple and Tara heard her own choked response-

*feel every moment of this*

-and then she pressed her lips to Willow's soft hair, breathing in the essence of her beloved, who would not leave her.

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"So we're going to an honest-to-God Scooby meeting? Words fail me, and I'm an English teacher." Beverly was gingerly applying another ice-pack to the purplish bruise that presently occupied approximately 60% of the left side of her face.

"And I don't have a thing to wear," added Tanya. "Left my chiffon in Dallas."

Beverly, despite the strenuous objections of three very forceful women, had insisted on being up and about the next day.

"Can't sleep my life away," she said matter-of-factly. "Especially when there's ever so much going on in the world today." So Tanya had loaded Bev, her ice packs, and several bottles of pain killers into the rental car and driven to campus.

Shortly after their arrival, Giles had phoned to update them about the pint-sized apostle they had captured while in Glory's penthouse.

"The little wretch keeps insisting 'the great Glorificus' is on her way to save him and if we know what's good for us, we'll release him immediately."

"And since when have we known what's good for us, much less done it?" Willow mused.

"Yes, well, everyone was quite shaken after yesterday's adventure, so we made an early evening of it. We plan to resume questioning today."

"Where did he sleep?" Willow asked, thinking Giles had perhaps kept the creature tied to a chair all night.

"Oh, I bundled him up nice and snug and plopped him in the tub," Giles replied.

"Isn't that where Spike slept last year?" she queried.

"Yes, I'm thinking of opening up a little bed and breakfast in my bathroom. Anya seems to like the tile."

"Well, I'd like to be in on the interrogation, and I suspect Tara would as well. She was pretty upset by what happened to Beverly."

"I should imagine," Giles murmured. "Yes, by all means come over. I've already spoken to the others, including Xander and Anya, and they'll be here shortly after five. Until then, I'm gagging Mister 'Glory will avenge my mistreatment' so that I can continue my research in relative quiet."

As soon as Willow hung up the phone and summarized the conversation, Beverly invited herself to the gathering. Tanya's reaction to this, while lacking subtlety, was certainly compelling.

"Like hell you will," she exploded. "Honey, less than twenty-four hours ago, you were being held hostage by a Hell God. Couldn't we just take one day and go to the zoo; maybe check out the boutiques?"

"As if you need more shoes," Beverly retorted. "Tanya, c'mon-this is big stuff. I wanna hear what the little shit has to say." Tanya had finally relented, but only after Beverly had agreed to take a brief nap before they left. The four had fallen into an easy conversation, tacitly agreeing to a respite from the horrors at hand. After about half an hour, Beverly had curled up on Tara's bed and fallen promptly asleep.

"So bring me up to speed on this cast of characters," Tanya sighed, resting her hand protectively on Beverly's leg. "I don't want to be remiss in my historical context."

"Um, OK," Willow began uncertainly. "Well, Buffy's the Slayer; Dawn's her sister; Giles is Buffy's Watcher. Giles hasn't dated anybody seriously since Miss Calendar was killed by Buffy's boyfriend Angel, who's usually a good vampire but turned bad after deflowering Buffy. Giles *did* have sex with Buffy's mom on the top of a police cruiser, but that was because they'd eaten this band candy that turned all the adults into adolescents. Even though that was supernatural, we're pretty sure he loved Mrs. Summers for real; he hasn't totally been himself since she died. Let's see...Anya is an ex-vengeance demon who lost her powers after inadvertently summoning my doppelganger from an alternate universe, who was actually a vampire-all evil and skanky."

"And kinda gay," Tara added.

"And kinda gay-right. Anyway, she and Xander have been together for a couple of years. I've known Xander since we started kindergarten together."

"She had a raging crush on him for about ten years," Tara added, with a not-so-slight roll of her eyes.

"Well, yeah," Willow admitted reluctantly. "But once we actually did something about it, it sorta killed the magic of the fantasy; and besides, I really did love Oz and I wanted to be with him. So Oz forgave me, although Cordelia--she was this five-alarm diva who somehow ended up in our little cadre--never forgave Xander. Of course, Oz pretty much forfeited all claims to righteous indignation when I caught him with Veruca, who was another werewolf, not to mention a total ho-puppy. Anyway, getting back to Xander...he doesn't have any particular powers, but he tends to forget that. He's loyal, though, and he's brave, especially considering he's about the most limited of all of us in pretty much every way." With that pronouncement, Willow finally came up for air.

Tanya was looking at her, Willow suspected, much as she might a particularly interesting but as yet unclassified life form.

"You realize," she finally smiled, "that all of you will need major psychiatric intervention by the time you're thirty."

"Oh, of course," Willow nodded. Turning to Tara, she said, "Remind me to make sure that my first job has good mental health benefits. Yours too," she added, "although I think I'm wound up a little tighter than you."

Beverly awoke at four-thirty, splashed some water on her face, and led the contingent out to the car.

"Scooby-Dooby-Do, where are you? We got some work to do now," she crooned.

"Baby, I love you," Tanya said warmly, walking out into the late afternoon sun. "But you need to end that travesty right now before mothers start pulling children back into the safety of their houses."

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### **Part 30**

As they neared Giles' door, Beverly nudged Willow. "Twenty bucks says Anya can't shock my girl speechless."

"You're on," Willow whispered.

Buffy and Dawn were already there; barely five minutes later, Xander and Anya ambled through the door, not bothering to knock.

"Oh my God, Xander, it's a Black person," Anya cried, clearly delighted with this new element. Beside her, Xander turned not black but rather a vibrant shade of crimson.

"Yes, but I'm not out to my family, so I'd appreciate you keeping quiet about it," came the easy reply. "I'm Tanya, Beverly's partner." Across the room, Willow discreetly slid a bill into Beverly's outstretched hand.

"Humor-a staple of human social interaction," Anya nodded. "Xander keeps trying to teach me about it, but he's not nearly as funny as he thinks he is."

Tanya grinned. "Well, don't be too hard on him. I think it was Mark Twain-or maybe e. e. cummings-who said that analyzing humor was like dissecting a frog: you can do it, but the frog tends to die in the process."

Watching all of this, Willow suspected that Tanya had taken an immense liking to the ex-demon. She was also friendly with Xander, and the exchanges between Tanya, Dawn, and Buffy were far less strained than they had been the day before.

*Nothin' like surviving mortal danger to bring people closer,* Willow mused.

Dawn edged slowly up to Beverly, who winked at her and draped an arm over her shoulders.

"How are you?" Dawn asked, her voice small.

"I look worse than I feel," Beverly replied easily, but Willow was certain this wasn't true. "I figure that as long as I don't run into any more alleys on ill-advised good Samaritan urges, I'll be fine."

"Wait a minute," Buffy broke in. "You're saying you *meant* to be there? You ran in of your own free will? God, if you were watching that in a movie, you'd be screaming at the hero, 'Don't go in there!'"

"Yeah," Beverly said sheepishly. "I've been getting a lot of that."

"I think it took courage," Dawn said, and Willow wondered if perhaps the Key had a thing for both of the Maclay women.

"Oh God, don't encourage her," Tanya protested, but she was grinning at Dawn as she said this.

"So can we see the little sack-cloth suck-up?" Beverly finally asked. Her voice was casual...studiously so, Willow thought.

"Yes, of course," Giles replied. He stepped out of the room, returning moments later with a very short man-to use the term loosely-garbed in a long, tattered robe. His nose was hooked to the point of deformity; one could easily lose sight of that, however, in view of his truly horrific skin condition. His hands were tied behind him, and a gag rendered his stream of invectives unintelligible. Giles plunked him unceremoniously into a desk chair, then loosened the gag.

"-and so I warn you: release me or suffer devastation beyond your worst nightmares."

"Listen, Little Lord Clearasil," Buffy interjected, her tone unimpressed, "I've battled a vampire Master, a Mayor who turned into a giant lizard, and truly agonizing menstrual cramps. You're gonna have to do better than that." She walked slowly over to the chair and towered over him. "Now let's start with the basics: what's your name?"

The little minion squared his jaw and intoned, "I come from a long and venerable line of servants to the great Glorificus. My father served her, as did his father before him. My lineage boasts no peer."

"Yeah, yeah," Xander nodded impatiently. "And at socials in Hell, your name tag says, 'Hello, my name is...'"

"Binky."

Profound silence fell over the group as they considered this. After a moment, Buffy asked incredulously, "Your name is *Binky*? What did dear old Dad answer to-'Poppy'?"

Their captive looked up at her defiantly. "And you're going to avert an apocalypse with a name like 'Buffy'? Glass houses, Slayer; glass houses."

"Wonderful," Giles sighed. "We have with us tonight Buffy, Binky, Anya, and Tanya. Filming for 'The Tele-Tubbies Battle a Hell-God' will commence post-haste."

"You cannot make me speak, misguided as you are. Your reputation precedes you, Slayer-you do not inflict pain on those who cannot fight back." The smirk on his face made Willow want to skip negotiation and go straight to whup-ass.

"And do you know *my* reputation, little man?" Tanya's voice was far too calm to bode well.

"You were with the others yesterday. We haven't been properly introduced." Still the infuriating sneer.

"Oh-well, my name would be Tanya, and I would be someone who hasn't yet settled on a moral code. I'm considering all my options, of course, but presently I'm leaning toward vigilantism. I tend to favor sharp objects, and I will slice you once for every time you stall." The smile never left her face.

"Tanya, Sweetie-we still haven't settled that assault charge back in Dallas," Beverly cautioned. "Of course, what with that guy not having a tongue *or* fingers anymore, testimony might be a problem."

"You wouldn't dare." The smirk was gone, replaced by faltering bravado. "Slayer, this isn't how you do things. You wouldn't let her."

"You're right," Buffy sighed. "I gotta intervene....Tanya, you shouldn't."

"But I want to."

"OK." Turning back to the trembling creature before her, Buffy shrugged. "Can't say I didn't try."

"What's wrong with you people? What about taking the higher ground?"

"We realized we're all afraid of heights," Xander replied, as the others nodded. Tanya took another step toward the shirking figure in the chair.

"Stop! I'll-I'll tell you whatever you want. Just don't let her near me." The voice held none of its earlier defiance.

As Tanya stepped back and slid her arm over Bev's shoulders, Willow heard the Protector murmur, "Nice Foxy Brown impersonation, Babe. Very large with the butch."

"So...*Binky*," Giles began. "Why don't you tell us a little bit about Glory."

"Starting with the ritual." Dawn's voice was flat.

Binky looked side-long at her. "The Slayer's sister...Aren't you a little young to be witnessing such evil goings-on?"

"Aren't you a little tied up and scabby to be taunting other people?" came the quick retort.

*Well, go Dawnie!*

"I wanna know about the ritual, and how the Key figures into things," Dawn said. "She only has this one chance, right? One chance to use the Key."

"That is correct," Binky replied sullenly.

"And if she doesn't find the Key before the clock strikes midnight, Cinderella gets kicked out of the ball, never to return," Dawn continued. "Is that correct too?"

"Yes," the minion said through gritted teeth, or whatever filled his mouth. "But this is all heresy, and you will pay for your sacrilege." At Tanya's first step toward him, he shrank back in his bonds.

"See how intimidating I am?" she murmured to her partner.

"Yes, dear, you're frightening the wretched little inter-dimensional toady just right to bits," Beverly replied dutifully.

"OK, so if the window of opportunity passes, what exactly happens to Glory?" Giles asked.

"In that case, the great Glorificus would lose all power. She might still have consciousness, but she could not take form, and she would have no hope of regaining her rightful throne." Willow could see that Binky was practically choking on the words.

"And what happens to the Key and the Protectors if Glory's stopped?" Dawn's voice held no trace of fear, but Willow knew that they had all asked themselves that very question at one time or another.

Binky only stared at the ground. Tanya took another step toward him, and this time Willow knew that there was no bluff involved.

"Answer that question right now, little man," she said, her voice practically a hiss.

Finally, Glory's sycophant met her gaze. "In the astoundingly unlikely event that Glory does not find the Key, and the moment of her triumph passes...the Key and any *surviving* Protectors will go on with whatever pitiful lives they have created."

Beverly, clearly not one for restraint, whooped her joy, enduring the resulting pain with a grin. Tanya just sank back against her, resting her head lightly against Bev's shoulder.

Willow looked at Tara, trying to imagine themselves in such a scenario: knowing that Tara could very likely be killed by the force she was created to stop, yet uncertain that she would live on if the threat were extinguished. The very thought was painful.

Dawn, of course, didn't have the luxury of showing her relief. Instead, she simply crossed her arms and nodded. Buffy, currently standing behind the minion's chair, allowed herself a huge grin as she looked at Dawn and quickly wiped her eyes.

"OK, Binky, let's move on to Round Two," Willow said, feeling an uncharacteristic swagger in her soul at the recent news. "What was Glory doing in Ben's apartment?"

"More to the point, what was she doing in his *body*?" Beverly amended. A chorus of voices greeted this question, all of which were delivered in the key of disbelief.

"Wait a minute," Tara said, holding up both hands in an attempt to quiet the group. "Aunt Bev, we called Ben when we remembered your reaction to him. He stalled Buffy about getting together, at least at his place, so Willow hacked into the hospital files and got his address. When we went there, we heard yelling and crashing inside so we basically busted down the door. We saw you and a bunch of these guys; no sign of Glory *or* Ben."

"That's because Glory morphed into Ben, who then basically wrung his hands a lot and finally apologized before leaving the scene." Bev explained this patiently, as if unsure of her audience's mental capacity.

"You actually saw him take over her body?" Xander's voice held more than a touch of doubt.

"I didn't really see Glory that much because she hovered at the back of the room the whole time she was there. Remember, I have this weird repulsion thing where she's concerned. Anyway, she'd been slapping me around in various ways for a little bit, but I never lost consciousness. All of a sudden, I hear a phone ring and then her voice gets all wonky-"

"Could you perhaps clarify your adjectives?" Giles asked tactfully.

"Wonky-as in, possessed of a distinct element of the unusual or the bizarre," she replied, casting a bemused glance at the Watcher.

"Ah, yes...wonky."

"Anyway, after a few seconds I don't hear her voice anymore; I just hear this scuffle at the back of the room and the next thing I know, I hear *Ben's* voice. It took me a minute to place it, but it was him. He starts walking toward me and at first I thought he'd come in through some other door and I hadn't heard him but then I get a look at him and I see he's wearing Glory's dress."

"Ben was wearing Glory's clothes? OK, so maybe he's a transvestite, but what does that have to do with Glory?" Buffy's brow was furrowed in confusion.

"I didn't say he was wearing *a* dress," Beverly explained, frowning. "I said he was wearing *her* dress; as in, the one she had been wearing not five minutes before. If I remember correctly, it was a lovely little Vera Wang number."

"So Glory steps out of the room and Ben takes that opportunity to borrow her clothes? How fortunate for him that they fit so well," Giles nodded slowly.

Beverly finally gave vent to her exasperation. "No, my beloved vegetables...He didn't borrow her clothes; he didn't sneak in while she was gone; he *is* Glory, or at least they share a body. I know it's an elusive concept, but I thought you could all stretch that far."

Behind her, Binky was chuckling.

"What's with the inappropriate laughter, Spanky?" Xander demanded.

"Binky."

"Whatever. What's so funny?"

"You. You can't see the truth because the great Glorificus has ensured that you can't. Just one of the many glimpses of her most blinding omnipotence."

"Except that Our Lady of Skank's little illusion doesn't work on me," Beverly interjected. "Why?"

The minion turned sullen. "I do not know. You have some heretical ability to withstand at least some measure of Glory's power."

"Fine; OK," Beverly sighed. Turning to Giles, she asked, "Hey Watcher Man-you keep any note cards around here?" As he nodded toward the desk, she said, "This should just take a minute." The group watched as she pulled out several index cards and scribbled hastily across them. Then she stood, pulled an equal number of paperclips from a holder on the desk, and walked up to each of them, fastening a card to their shirt sleeves. "Honestly," she muttered, "do I have to do everything around here?"

Willow, who had watched all of this unfold with an unfamiliar-and quite terrifying-sense that she was just a bit slow on the uptake, looked down at the card affixed to her sleeve: **GLORY IS BEN AND CONVERSELY. BELIEVE NOW, GRASP LATER.**



*Huh. Never saw that one coming.*

"OK," she said aloud. "So Ben and Glory share the same body. Does that mean Ben's a god as well?" She desperately hoped not.

"Well, to hear that tramp Janza talk, you'd think so," Binky sniffed. "Jinx, too, come to think of it...But no, he's not a god. Ben is the mortal that Glory was damned to be confined to. She must share his physical being."

"So then," Giles murmured, peering at his index card like a child who had just been placed in one of the slower reading groups, "Glory is basically a captive to Ben."

"Glory is captive to no one," the outraged minion spluttered, "and certainly not a *mortal*. Ben should be grateful for his wondrous fortune...to be so close to Glorificus; to share so intimately her body and soul."

Willow arched one eyebrow. "Seems like *somebody's* got a crush on a Hell God," she commented. Beside her, Tara stirred uncomfortably.

"If he starts getting...*excited*, will you poke my eyes out? You know I can't handle that stuff."

"Don't worry, Baby-he's got a robe on; I don't think we'd know."

"So who's the majority stock-holder?" Anya asked. "Who makes the decisions about the long distance company?"

Binky's uncomfortable silence gave them their answer.

"And do each of them know about the other?" Tara asked.

"Yes, and far from being proud of his role, Ben wishes to separate himself from Glory; 'free' himself, to use his words, and live out his life as one mortal helping others."

"Through his medical career," Buffy mused.

"What happens if Ben dies?"

Silence fell over the group. No one seemed able to look at Giles, who had put forth the query in an even, controlled voice.

"The man asked you a question," Tanya said, glaring at the creature in the chair who was struggling to avoid meeting her gaze. "If Ben dies, does Glory die, too?"

The quavering little minion looked aghast. "You...you cannot mean to say that you would kill a *mortal*, an innocent."

Giles answered steadily, "We like to know all potential courses of action. Killing Ben would not be our first choice, but weighed against the lives of untold billions of other beings, in other dimensions...We would be remiss *not* to think of it."

"I gotta say, Binky, I'm not crazy about the idea, but Giles is right." Beverly's voice was matter-of-fact. "Besides, that whole 'innocent' thing is a little suspect: Ben had a chance to help me, to talk to us about all of this, and he chose Door Number Two, which for purposes of edification I'm labeling 'Chicken-Shit.'"

"Wait-Ben's involved with Glory?" Xander's voice was incredulous.

Without a glance in his direction, Giles grabbed Xander's arm and hoisted it in front of his eyes. "So while we'd prefer to spare Ben, we are prepared to sacrifice him to save everyone else from Glory's destruction," the Watcher concluded evenly.

"And screw his medical career," Tanya interjected suddenly. "If the man really wanted to *be* a man, he'd sacrifice *himself*." As the others turned to look at her in surprise, she continued insistently, "I mean it. If you knew that inside of you there was someone else who had the power *and* the distinct inclination to bring suffering and death to every living creature, and that the only sure way to stop her was to end your own life, wouldn't you do it? You've all risked your lives goddess only knows how many times; I don't believe for a minute that you'd risk everyone else's."

An oppressive silence, thick and heavy, fell over the room.

*Would I? Would I have the courage to end my own life if I knew it was the only sure way to avoid a literal hell on earth for everyone else?* Her heart squeezed with pain.

*Could I willingly leave Tara?*

She looked at her beloved, who was gazing back at her. Willow suspected she was pondering the same question.

*You would if you knew it was the best way to save her,* came the sudden, sure answer.

After a long silence, Binky apparently decided that he was feeling brave again. "You sit here, making your doomed plans. But when Glory comes for me, you will know the full scope of her wrath."

Giles gazed at him, a faint half-smile creasing his face. "An interesting point, that. Let's review the night's events, shall we? You put up a bit of token resistance, only to crack like the frailest of eggs at the mere suggestion of pain. You then proceed to divulge all sorts of fascinating information regarding Glory, her connection to Ben, her very existence...information which we will most assuredly use in planning our attack. All of which begs the question, then: Do you really *want* Glory to find you?"

It seemed to Willow that Binky had grown distinctly less homesick as he listened. Giles reached for the phone. "Let's just call her up right now and ask her to come and get you, shall we?"

Binky, hardly tan under the most generous of lighting, paled visibly. "Well, of course, Glory could never doubt the sincerity, the unwavering strength of my loyalty. It might, though, be best if I were to submit to captivity for just a bit longer...to gather useful intelligence that I could present to the great god."

"Wait a minute," Tara interrupted, looking askance at the creature before her. "Now you're saying you *want* to hang out with us? Limited mortals such as ourselves?"

"Well," Binky fumbled, his voice quivering, "I have heard Glory speak highly of your culture's Buffalo wings."

"We'll be sure to order some without delay," Giles replied dryly.

"Let's reinstate the gag order, drag this guy back to the bathroom, and map out some strategy," Xander suggested.

"I agree," Buffy nodded. As Giles moved toward him, Binky piped up, "Might I request a new gag? The old one is rather...distasteful."

"Oh, but that would diminish the suffering you're enduring for the great Glorificus," Giles said cheerfully. "Can't compromise the martyrdom."

As the minion was taken from the chair and hauled back to the bathroom, his garbled protests echoing down the hall, Willow looked back at Tara. This time, though, her partner was looking at someone else. Following her worried gaze, Willow saw it fall on Dawn, who no longer seemed even slightly relieved. If anything, she appeared more troubled.

*What's going on in that head?*

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Continued...

# ~ Gods Served and Abandoned ~

## by Antigone Unbound

**Author Notes: See Part 1.**

**Feedback: Even more sure! Bring it on!**

### Part 31

"Let's order Chinese--I'm in the mood for pepper steak." Xander's voice was never so decisive as when he was selecting his food.

"Sounds good to me," Buffy replied easily. Tara thought that it had probably been several weeks since the Slayer had sounded so upbeat.

*She actually thinks we can win. This is the first time she's truly believed we could all make it through this.* Tara was stunned to register the full extent of Buffy's previous despair.

"Hey, Dawn--whatcha want?" Xander asked cheerfully.

"Oh...Um, how about some beef lo mein?" Her voice, to Tara's ears, seemed to be straining for nonchalance. Dawn had sat down as they dragged Binky back to his temporary lodging, but now she stood abruptly.

"I think I need a bathroom break," she announced, heading toward the stairs.

Tara caught Willow's eyes; by unspoken accord, they rose and followed Dawn out of the room. "Great minds think alike," Willow said by way of explanation, after giving Xander their order.

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Upstairs, they watched Dawn walk past the bathroom and step out onto a small balcony that overlooked the street below.

"Do you think Tanya's 'Anything Short of Self-Immolation is Selfish' speech got to her?" Willow asked reluctantly.

"How could it not?" Tara replied, grimacing. "I mean, I totally get where she was coming from--I do. But if I were Dawn, and I heard that argument, stated that flatly, I know I'd be struggling."

"Yeah...me too." Willow nodded. She sighed heavily. "Remind me again why we're pursuing such a fun hobby?"

Tara managed a grin. "Because the post-disaster-aversion sex is so incredible."

"Well, there is that..." Willow leaned forward and kissed her quickly. "OK, let's see if we can calm her down a little."

Dawn, though, wasn't crying; and she wasn't kicking things or complaining about her lot. She only glanced at them wordlessly as they joined her.

"Dawnie--are you OK?" Tara asked gently.

The teenager just gazed back at her, her eyes dark with sadness. Finally, she said, "She's right."

"Who?" Willow asked.

*Sweetie--we know who...*

"Tanya--what she said, about Ben. She's right. He *should* take himself out of the equation. Anybody in that position should, if they're really serious about wanting to do the right thing."

"And you think you're in that position," Tara replied simply.

"I *am* in that position," Dawn said flatly. "If Glory doesn't get the Key, she can't start the ritual. If she *does* get the Key, everyone either dies or wishes they would. I have the power to make sure she never gets it. How can I not?"

Tara wanted to argue with her, refute her logic--but she couldn't. Dawn was right: it *was* within her capacity to make sure that Glory never opened the gates of her Hell and every other dimension. Wouldn't she be thinking the same thing if she were the Key?

"Dawn, you can't really think that you should..." Tara couldn't even say the words.

"Kill myself?" Dawn finished hollowly. "Yeah--I think I should. But I don't want to and I'm afraid I won't have the guts to."

"Of course you don't want to," Willow said urgently. "You heard what the little scab said: if Glory doesn't succeed, you get to live your life. There's so much ahead of you, Dawnie, and I think we can beat her."

"But that's not the point," Dawn broke in, her voice cracking. "If I really want to be the person I *say* I want to be, I won't take that chance; I won't let it get that far. There won't be an epic battle because I'll take away what Glory's fighting for." She broke off, struggling to regain some composure. "I wanna be brave--but if I were *really* brave, I wouldn't be standing here talking about it; I'd be *doing* it." She shook her head, and when she looked back at them, pain was etched across her features.

"I've always felt so boring--the Slayer's younger sister; always tagging along even though I knew Buffy didn't want me there, just because I was so desperate to be a part of something big, something special. And then I learn that I am, and all I want is to be that annoying kid again. But

I'm not. I'm the key to something awful." A small, miserable grin edged across her face. "It's one thing to spill Diet Coke on your sister's keyboard; it's another to know that you could bring misery to every living creature in every dimension."

Dawn seemed beyond their reach. It was as if she had reached a decision that seemed patently horrific, and yet her logic was damnably sound.

Tara exchanged a despairing glance with Willow. What could they say that wouldn't sound trite or worse?

"The monks should have destroyed me when they had the chance," Dawn muttered dully.

Tara looked up sharply at the words, gazing at the teen for a moment. "But they didn't."

"No, they didn't," Dawn replied with a sigh. "They put me in human form and sent me to somebody who *had* to look out for me. They put everybody I care about in danger."

"So why would they do that?" Tara continued. "If the Key is nothing but a danger, nothing but bad, why wouldn't they destroy it? Dawn, I have a *lot* of problems with the monks' playing God and Goddess, but I don't think they're *stupid*. There's some reason that you were made human, and I don't think it was just to jerk everybody around."

"I'm with Tara," Willow said, nodding. "The monks went to so much trouble to transform the Key into human form, even though they knew the potential danger. Why?" She leaned forward suddenly, her voice urgent. "Maybe the Key has potential for incredible *good*, Dawnie."

The teenager looked at her skeptically. "Like what?"

Willow shrugged. "A cure for cancer; the end to world hunger...Maybe the Key unlocks the secret to thinner thighs. I don't know, but I *do* know that the monks chose to *alter* the Key, not destroy it; and I don't think that was by accident."

Dawn, though, seemed unwilling to let herself feel even a glimmer of hope; as if doing so would destroy any measure of resolve that she had forced herself to summon.

"You're just saying that," she whispered, shaking her head. "You're just trying to make me feel better."

"No, Sweetie, that's not it," Tara argued. "I mean, yeah--at first I guess I was trying to say *anything* to help, but then you mentioned the monks and it really made me think. Dawn, they're guilty of a lot of things, but I really don't think idiocy is one of them."

Dawn's expression was equal parts despair and nascent hope. She closed her eyes and clenched the railing of the balcony. "I wanna believe you," she whispered. "And that's what scares me--I'm afraid I'll believe you because I *want* to so bad, and then I won't do what I should."

"Dawn, please--look at me," Tara beseeched her. "Sweetie, if there *is* a chance we're right, don't you also owe it to us--to everyone--to try to survive? Try to have the life that's waiting for you after we defeat Glory?"

Dawn was silent for so long that Tara began to wonder if she wanted to be left alone. Finally, though, she squared her shoulders and gazed at them, her expression unreadable.

"OK--for now, I don't do anything. But I need you guys to promise me something."

"Anything, Dawnie," Willow replied quickly. Tara, though, felt a curious dread stealing over her.

"If it comes to it...If Glory captures me, and starts the ritual..." She paused, and Tara could see that she was biting her lip so hard that she was afraid she might break the skin. "If that happens, and I have the chance to--to do it...Promise me you won't try to stop me."

Tara felt her stomach lurch. "Dawn, Sweetie--you can't ask us to sit back and watch you take your own life," she whispered.

"Please," Dawn begged, her voice cracking. "If it comes to that, I need to know you guys will help me do the right thing; and it *is* the right thing. Both of you would do it, I know it. If I could stop her--keep the people I love from going through whatever she'd do...then at least it would mean something."

Willow was leaning forward as if to interrupt, but Tara squeezed her hand tightly. Whatever Dawn needed to tell them, it was costing her dearly to say it. She deserved to be heard out.

"You guys have been more important to me than anybody besides Buffy and Mom," she continued. She shrugged and gave a tiny smile. "You're my heroes. Willow, I've watched you risk your life for over five years; and Tara, I saw you go home and stand up to your family and deal with news that would drop anybody else. And now maybe it's my turn to do the right thing, and I wanna have the courage to do it."

She had finally let the tears come, a fact which Tara registered through her own blurred vision.

"I need to know that if it comes to that, you guys will help me be strong; be the kind of person you could be proud of..." She drew a long, shuddering breath. "The kind of person *I* could be proud of."

Tara had suspected the nature of Dawn's request the moment she started speaking. She had wanted to argue with her, reassure her that the whole scenario would never come to pass. Now, though, she realized that they owed Dawn more than false promises that the teenager would never believe anyway. She looked at Willow; the sadness on her beloved's face, she suspected, mirrored her own.

Tara hadn't known she would be able to speak until she heard her own voice saying, "We promise."

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They waited a long time before going downstairs, washing their faces in an attempt to mask the evidence of their shared anguish. Dawn had extracted one last promise from them both: they wouldn't tell Buffy of the conversation.

When they reached the living room, the others were just starting to sort through a large delivery from Tommy Wong's. By way of explanation, Willow said simply, "Girl talk."

The quick narrowing of Buffy's eyes told Tara that the Slayer didn't entirely believe them; but she apparently wasn't going to challenge them at this exact moment.

After a period of relative silence in which everyone settled into his or her particular meal, Giles rested his chopsticks against the carton.

"So...We have established some of the parameters of Glory's plans, as well as the constraints thereon. We also understand, albeit through the aid of visual reminders, the nature of Glory's connection to Ben. How do we proceed from this point?"

"Well, I say Plan A is that we keep Glory from getting the Key until her opportunity passes. Plan B, a distant second, is that if she *does* find the Key, we keep her occupied through the miracle of modern combat so that she can't start the ritual."

An uncomfortable silence ensued at this thought. Tara was unable to look at anyone but Willow. After a moment, Buffy added, "Plan B is rhetorical, though, because Glory won't get the Key." Tara leaned into the warmth of Willow's hand resting on her back.

"OK, so I know this is a delicate subject, but do we really consider killing Ben?" Xander asked reluctantly.

Giles sighed. "While it's certainly difficult to imagine, it might come to that. As loathe as I am to say this, if we have no other choice, I am willing to sacrifice Ben for the good of so many others."

Buffy sighed. "I just wish he would come to us, work with us. He has to know we're involved, especially after yesterday's recon and rescue mission."

"He's probably scared out of his pants...and I mean that quite literally," Bev commented. "Can you imagine having a Hell God really pissed at you?"

"But apparently she's in his body, at least some of the time," Anya protested, looking at her index card. "What's she gonna do--bitch-slap herself into keeping quiet?"

"I could help," Tanya muttered. Tara realized that she was least likely of any of them to cut Ben any slack. He'd had the chance to help Beverly, and he'd bailed. The odds of her forgiving him for that were roughly equivalent to those of Anya becoming a nun.



*Anya in a wimple...I'd pay full admission for that.*

"So killing Ben comes in at third," Xander said decisively. "We definitely don't want to, but we will if it's the only way."

"You know, it's great that we found out what we did," Willow commented suddenly. "But we need to know *when* the ritual's scheduled to happen. We can't just hang around wondering if we're five minutes away from an apocalypse."

"Yeah, because we've *never* been in that position before," Anya interjected dryly.

"Well of *course* we need to know when the ritual will occur," Buffy said indignantly. "Only an idiot would have one of Glory's minions and not ask that question."

"Think he'll tell?" Xander asked.

"He will if my little shrinking violet over here so much as sneezes in his direction," Bev opined.

"I was just doing my Mother Teresa impersonation," Tanya said blithely. At the perplexed expressions around her, she added, "I didn't say it was a *good* impersonation."

"OK--let's drag the little wretch back out here," Buffy requested, and Giles rose to do so. Sighing, she added, "God, I hate toadies."

"When exactly have you dealt with toadies?" Xander asked, puzzled.

"It's a matter of principle," she replied, shrugging. "Like hating the kid who always got to clean the erasers after class."

"I was that kid," Willow muttered, to Buffy's profound chagrin.

"Will, Sweetie, you're not in the least toad-like," Tara reassured her. "From pictures I've seen, I'd put you in the 'adorable puppy' family when you were a kid."

Giles returned, Binky in tow, and plunked the minion back into the desk chair, securing him tightly. Tara noticed that his earlier bravado seemed to have been replaced by a quiet sniveling.

"We need to know when the ritual's going to take place," Buffy demanded without preamble.

"I do not know," came the immediate response.

Buffy peered at him like a jack-o'-lantern-in-waiting. "Tanya--whaddya think? A finger or an ear?"

Binky practically squealed. "No, please! I am telling you the truth! Only Glorificus and the high priests know...It is a most jealously guarded secret, in order that none may imperil it."

"You mean she doesn't trust you," Giles amended dryly. "Imagine that."

Though it was difficult to be sure given Binky's dermal issues, Tara could have sworn that he was blushing.

"The ritual is of the most sacred, delicate nature," Binky spluttered. "I think--I think Glory is wise to preserve its secrecy."

"You mean she doesn't trust you," Giles repeated. Sighing, he turned to Buffy. His expression said, "Now what?"

"You don't know *anything*?" Willow asked incredulously. "You spend 24/7 around the girl, doing her bidding and licking her boots, and you don't know the first thing about the ritual? God--what kind of minion *are* you? Glory must have some pretty low hiring standards."

Binky was deeply offended. "I know all that any of my kind know, and often more," he huffed. "Does Jinx know even the riddle? No, he does not?"

"Riddle? There's a riddle?" Now it was Willow's turn to squeal. "I love riddles!"

Tara could see that Binky regretted his vanity-based disclosure. "And just how does this riddle go?" she asked sweetly.

"I...I cannot tell you. Glorificus will inflict far greater pain on me than even you would," he cried.

"Yes, but if you *don't* tell us, we'll call Glory on Ben's cell phone and inform her of what you've already divulged," Giles answered easily, as if he were explaining to Binky exactly why he couldn't hold his breath until he died. "If you *do* help us, we can offer you protection."

"But I don't *want* to leave the service of the great Glorificus," Binky practically wept. "It is all that I have ever known; all that I could hope to know." He shook his head in despair. "Better that I should die now, and preserve some small shred of honor, than betray Her Most Intriguingly Unbalanced One."

"We'll give you some sweet and sour pork," Xander offered.

Binky's head popped up, his eyes wide. "Might there be an egg-roll with that?" he asked after the briefest of hesitations.

"We could probably make that happen," Buffy nodded slowly.

"I have seen the great Glorificus dining on such wondrous things many, many times," Binky murmured, almost to himself. "Always, I have yearned to know their taste..." He shook his head. "But Glory left for us only the dross of human consumption...Such things as would repel most sane mortals."

"You don't mean..." Beverly said, edging back with horror.

"Chicken McNuggets," he whispered.

The group, save Xander, recoiled as one. "What?" he demanded. "They're chock-full of crunchy goodness!"

Tara heard Anya mutter, "You're not kissing me on the lips for the next three months."

"So...the minion wants some Chinese take-out," Buffy murmured enticingly. "Spill, Binkster, and the pork's yours. We decide you're not lying, the egg roll comes after that."

Binky wavered for only a moment, then nodded almost eagerly. "I will give you the prophecy's words. Though I doubt very much they will mean more to you than to me," he added with a trace of his earlier insouciance.

"My dear chap, it's just a tad late for defiance," Giles sighed. "Especially since you're practically drooling at the thought of an egg roll."

"Fine," Binky muttered sullenly.

"So...what's this big prophecy riddle?" Buffy demanded.

Binky shifted in his seat, then intoned: "*That day shall commence with weeping; and it will end with weeping. Tears without sorrow will fall as alpha and omega. And when the weeping is no more, then shall the Unholy One open the portal to Hell. So may she until love's eye falls upon her and will not be hidden.*"

The deflated sycophant finished his recitation and sagged back against the chair. A long silence fell over the group, broken finally by Bev's succinct, "Well, *that's* a pisser."

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## **Part 32**

Giles led a defeated but well-fed minion back to his temporary abode. When he returned, the group was sitting in frustration, mulling over the prophecy.

"What kind of riddle was *that*?" Willow scowled. "No numbers; no algorithms that I could find...It was all just--just *words*."

"Imagine that," Beverly commented dryly. "Do such things even exist anymore?"

"All I'm saying is that I do better with graphs than grammar," Willow said, chastened. "I didn't say it was normal." Turning to Giles, she asked, "Does this sound like anything you've heard of before?"

The Watcher sighed. "Unfortunately, no. We'll look through all of our resources, of course, but I've not encountered this prophecy before, nor any like it."

"So the day of the ritual will start with weeping, and end with weeping," Beverly mused. "Sounds like an episode of 'Dawson's Creek.'"

"Yeah, but it's not sad weeping," Buffy pointed out. "Remember: 'Tears without sorrow.'"

"So maybe they're tears of joy," Tara suggested.

"Given the way things have been going lately, we should be pretty safe," Xander observed with a sigh. "When was the last time any of us wept with happiness?"

"Actually, I kinda thought you were going to the other night, when I finally agreed to dress up as \_."

Anya's reminiscence was cut short by a chorus of not-quite-desperate voices. Giles stood decisively, reaching into his pocket. He walked over to Anya and held out a twenty dollar bill.

"What's this for?" she asked, delighted.

"Consider this a safety deposit against your ever finishing that sentence," the Watcher replied coolly. "There's another twenty in it for you if you make it through the ritual's date without doing so." Turning back to the grateful group, he continued, "Tara's hypothesis seems reasonable: if the tears aren't caused by sorrow, it would be only logical to assume that they're caused by joy. At the same time, Xander's point is also well-taken: there have hardly been many causes for celebration of late."

A pained silence fell over the group, the memory of Joyce's death filling the room with a sudden pall. Willow looked over at Dawn, but the teenager was staring at the floor.

"But it doesn't necessarily refer to *our* tears," Willow pointed out after a moment. "I mean, there's all sorts of goings-on, right here in River City-people getting married, having children...Just because *we're* always picking up the more sinister cable channels, that doesn't mean everybody else is."

"But all day?" Tanya asked, skepticism evident in her voice and her expression. "I mean, I've had some pretty happy days, but I've never come close to crying with joy from sun-up to sundown."

"Even when I sang 'You Light Up My Life' on karaoke that night at Viva Tequila's?" Beverly asked, clearly wounded.

"Oh, I felt like crying, Baby-tears *with* sorrow were running down *my* face and every other face in the bar," Tanya replied, squinting at the memory. Beverly gave a sniff of faux-indignation and turned back to the others.

"Girlfriend's got a point," she shrugged. "Even if somebody reaches a state of pure, unadulterated *uber-happiness*, they're probably not gonna cry all day."

"What about mental patients?" Willow asked suddenly. "Glory literally feeds on people's minds- could she leave them in a state of delirium? I mean, joyful delirium?"

"That's an intriguing thought," Giles mused. "We've had only limited information on what Glory's victims actually feel. We've assumed it to be a state of mental torture, but we have no irrefutable proof of that."

"Yeah, because brain-sucking...who *wouldn't* get all misty eyed and nostalgic about *that*?" Xander asked sardonically, arching one eyebrow.

"But we don't know for sure," Willow persisted. She felt desperate for some kind of clue, a decoder ring with which to approach this question.

"OK, so let's leave that as a definite possibility," Buffy interjected. "What about this 'love's eye' thing?"

"Maybe it means that when someone looks on her with love, the opportunity passes," Tara suggested.

"I dunno," Buffy replied slowly, shaking her head. "I mean, that would be all very eleventh-hour redemption, tearful resolution-y, but it's hard to see it working here."

"And anyway, who's gonna volunteer for *that* duty?" Xander asked. "Plus, it would have to be real to work, right? So double my previous estimation of unlikelihood."

"Do you think Glory can even *recognize* love?" Beverly asked. "I sorta got the opinion she considered love a weakness--so very mortal and all that."

"Binky said that Glory could open the portal to Hell until love's eye looked upon her *and* won't be hidden," Willow mused. "Not that it can't be hidden; it *won't*."

"So we're talking about something both very powerful, *and* willingly accepted," Buffy nodded.

"Which the best love is," Tara pointed out, stealing a quick glance at Willow.

*And we should know, Baby.*

"Yes, but that brings us back to the issue of someone looking upon Glory with genuine love, *and* her accepting that love," Giles reminded her. "Two facts which seems patently unlikely."

"What about God?" Xander interjected abruptly. "Or *a* god...you know, a *good* one?"

"Good God?" Buffy asked, brow furrowed with confusion.

"A good god," Xander clarified. "Or God-the one that most of us in this room grew up hearing about and possibly believing in."

"The Judeo-Christian deity," Giles murmured reflectively.

"Right," Xander nodded. "That God, or any god who's more likely to be nice than nasty. I mean, if there are Hell Gods, shouldn't there also be Heaven Gods?"

"That would be a welcome piece of interdimensional news," Tanya interjected decisively. "I wouldn't mind a little other-worldly assistance with this one."

"OK, if that's true, it would mean that Glory could complete the ritual *until* this god of love looks on her and neither she nor the god will look away or be hidden," Buffy mused. "I like the emotional backdrop-very "Love Conquers All"-but from a tactical stand-point, it feels pretty risky. I mean, what would we do? Sit there and hope God glances our way and notices what's going down?"

"But God-any god-is assumed to be omniscient," Giles pointed out. "In which case, He or She would already know of Glory's actions."

"Which begs the question: what would make the god intervene *then*, if It hasn't done so before?" Beverly asked.

"Checking our mettle?" Willow asked tentatively.

"If God-*any* god-needs more evidence of our mettle, I give up," Buffy exclaimed, throwing up her hands. "We've offered a veritable kettle of mettle over the last five years. I for one believe that our mettle represents the Gold Standard in both quality and durability."

"Hear, hear," Xander agreed, nodding.

"The frustrating thing is that this is all speculation," Tara commented. "I mean, we can come up with all sorts of theories but unless we have something to go on, that's all they are."

"I agree," Giles murmured, taking a small sip of tea. "The only thing we're even remotely confident about is the matter of the tears being tears of joy, not sadness-but we don't even know *that* for certain."

After two hours of random conjecturing and futile poring over the texts Giles had on hand, Willow glanced at her watch. "Guys, it's almost midnight. I love a good brainstorming session as much as anyone-"

"*More* than anyone, actually, Sweetie," Tara murmured.

"Well, that's certainly one perspective...OK, so, be that as it may, and it may be completely true, I was going to say that I don't know if we're going to come up with anything more definite

tonight. I say we all get some sleep, and meet up tomorrow at the Magic Box and look over those books. Plus, maybe we'll see something we don't right now-you know, a different perspective."

"Besides, it *is* a school night," Beverly added.

"Exactly," Willow said, nodded emphatically.

"Willow-I was being ironic."

"Oh...right. Of course. Irony. How very ironic of you."

*Nobody appreciates the great academic truths anymore...*

"I suspect that Willow's right," Giles said, stifling a yawn as he did so. "Why don't you all come over to the shop tomorrow whenever you can and we'll take another crack at this."

"Are you going to be alright with him here?" Buffy asked, jerking her head toward the bathroom.

"I may not have Riley's rippling musculature, but I'm confident I can handle a vertically-challenged toady," the Watcher assured her. "Especially one who's in a food-induced stupor."

"If I ever see Riley, I'll tell him you've noticed his rippling musculature," Buffy commented, slipping into her lightweight coat. "I'm sure it'll mean a lot to him."

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A short while later, nestled against each other in Tara's bed, the two of them found it difficult to leave the prophecy behind.

"Do you think it *could* be love that redeems Glory?" Willow asked, stroking Tara's back.

"I don't know, Sweetie," Tara sighed. "I'd *like* to believe it, but maybe that's just wishful thinking; wanting to believe that love is greater than any other force in this dimension or any other."

"I wonder if there are dimensions that don't even *have* love, or what we call love," Willow murmured. She tried to imagine such a place; a world where she would look on her friends and feel nothing; a world where she would look at Tara and feel nothing. Would she have any sense at all of how empty that world was?

"Maybe there are dimensions that have an *exalted* kind of love; where what we feel would be magnified by ten."

Willow tightened her arms around Tara's warm back. "I think I'd burst, loving you that much more."

"Oh, but we'd all be equipped with skin or casings or shells capable of expanding to accommodate the love," Tara replied easily, planting a soft kiss on the top of Willow's head.

"Very convenient," Willow commented. After a brief silence, she asked quietly, "Can we really do it?"

Tara, as Willow had trusted, knew what she was thinking of. "Watch Dawn kill herself? I don't want to; it's almost too horrible to think about; and yes-if it comes to that, we do. We have to."

"Because we promised her," Willow said, feeling tears pricking at her eyes.

"Because we promised her, yes; and because it's the right thing to do."

"Then why does it feel so awful?"

"Will, Sweetie, I don't think it's necessarily a good idea to judge something's moral value by how good it feels. I mean, that would be nice, but it just doesn't work that way. When Buffy killed Angel, right after you had restored his soul-I can't imagine that *that* felt good. It probably felt excruciating *and* wrong, at least partly wrong. But she knew that in the larger picture, it was the right thing to do. Dawn knows that now." She paused, cupping Willow's chin in her hand and tilting her head so that they gazed at one another. "Just like you would know, if you were in her situation. Just like I would know."

Willow fought the trembling in her voice. "I tried to imagine it, when we were talking to Dawn. Baby, it hurt too much to even think about. Leaving you; ending my own life. The only way I could do it would be to focus on saving your life. Otherwise, I don't know...I don't know if the abstract knowledge of doing something right would be strong enough to make me leave you."

Tara's fingers brushed over her cheek-warm, knowing. "I don't think that's true, Willow. I think you're a lot stronger than you give yourself credit for."

Willow nuzzled back into Tara's chest. After a moment, she whispered, "It would kill Buffy. And she'd never forgive us."

"I know," Tara replied evenly. "But Sweetie, this isn't really about Buffy, is it? It's about Dawn, wanting to be brave and strong. She has the highest card in this hand, Will, if Glory realizes who she is and starts the ritual."

Willow knew she was right. The last five years had been about Buffy, first and last: her duties as a Slayer, the singular responsibilities that she faced. And Willow and Xander had signed on because it was important--a decision that Willow had occasionally questioned but never truly regretted. But this moment, this show-down...Buffy would grieve and rage and they would all pull together to help her survive it as best they could. In the final analysis, though, it really was Dawn's moment. They didn't have the right to eclipse that, disregard the most painful decision imaginable, in order to spare Buffy's feelings or even their own.



"You know, I've had a few moments where I resented being a peripheral character in the grand drama of vampire slaying," she finally sighed. "It's been easier, since you came into my life-I've realized that we have our own story, you know? But before-I definitely wanted to be center stage, at least a few times. Now, though...It just reminds me all over again how glad I am that I'm in *our* story, not that one."

Tara pulled her close, caressing her back with warm, strong hands. "I know, Sweetie...I know."

They fell asleep like that, finally, each of them tumbling down into a dreamscape of how this story might possibly end.

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### **Part 33**

The next day, Willow struggled mightily to pay attention in her three classes. Even her 400-level physics class seemed tedious. Though they were in something of a holding pattern, at least with regard to offensive maneuvers, she couldn't shake the feeling that she and Tara should be at the Magic Box, trying to decipher the message with the others.

She pondered what they might learn. Part of her hoped that the ritual's time wouldn't come in the near future, so that they could better prepare for it. Another part wanted it to be as soon as possible, while Glory didn't know that Dawn was the Key. If it came and went, they won-didn't they?

Tara met her outside of her final class at 3:30. Beverly and Tanya were waiting for them on the street in the Protector's rental car; they would all travel to the Magic Box together. Willow was especially glad of this fact when they stepped outside into a downpour. As she slid into the back seat, wiping the rain off of her face, Tanya turned to them both with a wry grin.

"I thought it never rained in California," she said.

"Seems I've often heard that kind of talk before," Willow admitted. "Thanks for picking us up, especially considering the lovely external ambience."

"Yeah-it's been coming down all day," Beverly said, shaking her head. "And they say it won't let up until tonight. From what I remember of California meteorology-an admittedly tricky concept, I know-on the few occasions it *did* rain, there would be a quick storm and then-presto, chango-sunshine again. What's up with this?"

Willow turned to Tara, about to include her in the exchange. Her beloved, though, was sitting as if paralyzed, her face stricken.

"Baby? What is it?" she asked, reaching over to take Tara's hand.

Tara looked at her, a dawning fear edging over her features. "Tears without sorrow..." Her voice shook slightly. "The day will day start with weeping and end with weeping -"

"But the weeping holds no sorrow," Willow finished, her eyes widening in comprehension. They stared at each other in silence for a long moment.

In the front seat, Beverly had pulled off to the side of the road. Now she and Tanya were looking at them, stunned.

"It's *rain*," Tanya breathed.

Willow's eyes never left Tara. "Which means that today's the day."

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In Tara's opinion, the 15-minute drive to the Magic Box was fourteen and a half minutes too long.

"Do you think the others have figured it out?" Willow asked, her brow furrowed anxiously.

"From what I've seen, I'd vote 'yes' on Giles, 'maybe' on Buffy, and 'no' for the others," Tanya replied, gripping Beverly's hand on the gear shift. "And if Giles *did* figure it out, he couldn't tell you because none of you hip southern California kids have cell phones. Blows my mind."

Tara didn't reply; she had thought it somewhat odd herself, on more than one occasion, but had been reluctant to make an issue of it.

"Are we completely sure this is it?" Beverly asked, catching Tara's eye in the rearview mirror.

"I think so," she answered, silently willing her aunt to disregard all but the most important traffic laws. "I don't see how it *can't* be. The day opened with rain--tears without sorrow--and it's supposed to rain all day. That *alone* is so unusual in this region that it's suspicious."

"I should have figured it out sooner," Willow said angrily. "I mean, I wake up, it's raining, I *comment* on the rain...and then I skip off to class like Cousin Marti, cheerfully working at the Kwik-Serve after barely graduating high school."

"You have a Cousin Marti?" Tara asked softly.

"We don't talk about her much," Willow muttered out of the side of her mouth.

Moments later, the four of them tumbled out of the rental sedan and pounded on the door of the Magic Box. A large "Closed" sign was hanging crookedly in the window.

"What if he's not here?" Willow asked, looking worriedly at Tara. Within seconds, though, they heard footsteps from within and then Giles had opened the door and stood aside to let them in. A quick glance at his face told Tara that the Watcher had also solved the first part of the prophecy.

"I can't believe we didn't think of this sooner," he muttered, ushering them back to the library section of the store.

"Yeah, let's all spend lots of time beating ourselves up about that," Tanya interjected. "That always leads to good things."

"Point taken," he nodded, giving her a reluctant smile.

"When did you figure it out?" Tara asked, shrugging out of her jacket.

"Early this morning, after the second customer had remarked on the weather, right on the heels of the *first* customer having done so." He shook his head. "I suppose I'm still in something of an English mentality where weather is concerned--rain hardly shocks me. But then I realized that it *should* do so, especially rain of this kind and of this duration."

"Have you talked to Buffy?" Willow asked, taking a seat beside Tara and reaching for her hand.

"The man doesn't have me on speed dial for nothing," came the reply from behind them. Buffy was standing in the doorway to the training room; her right hand clutching a sword, her left resting on Dawn's shoulder.

*She doesn't know whether to attack or defend.*

"Hey Dawnie," Tara called softly. "How you doing?"

Dawn's smile carried not a speck of humor. "You know that feeling you get before the biggest, scariest things you have to do? Where you're terrified of what could happen, but you also know that it's almost over and you won't have to worry about it anymore? Multiply that times about ten."

Tara thought that the teenager looked almost nauseous. Instinctively, she held out her hand. Dawn stepped forward and took it quickly, looking at Tara with a fierce, quiet desperation.

"We'll keep you safe," Tara said simply.

Whereas Dawn looked terrified, Buffy looked as though she wanted to rip the store apart just to keep from exploding.

"So what happened?" Willow asked her best friend.

"Giles called me at about 9:15. As soon as we hung up, I went to school and picked up Dawn."

"Uh, Buffy," Willow interrupted with obvious hesitation. "Do you think that was the best thing to do? I mean, I totally get wanting to have her near you; I just wonder if it's good to--you know...have her near you."

Tara almost expected Buffy to lash out at Willow for asking; thankfully, though, the Slayer had apparently struggled with the question as well.

"I know," she replied slowly, moving into the room to take a seat next to Dawn. "Part of thought I should keep her at school, as if nothing's out of the ordinary, although the day would've passed even *slower* than it already has. But then I was afraid that Glory would be desperate and might kidnap her or something to try to force us to tell her who the Key is."

"Irony of ironies," Beverly commented, grinning at Dawn, who managed a slightly more credible smile in return.

"In the end, I decided to pick her up and come here. We've been hiding out ever since, basically trying to convince Time to pick up the pace a little." Buffy reached out and smoothed Dawn's long brown hair over her shoulder.

"Do Xander and Anya know?" Willow asked.

"No, not yet," Giles replied, taking a slow sip of his tea. "We actually decided to use the phone as little as possible, although I honestly don't see Glory being patient enough to master the intricacies of phone tapping."

"What about Binky?" Tara asked suddenly. "Does he know anything?"

"No, he isn't aware of this," Giles quickly assured her. "He's still in my bathroom, securely tied with only enough flexibility to graze on a waffle, smothered with syrup and eaten with his fingers. Honestly, the little wretch made the most appalling noises..."

"And there's been no sign of Glory?" Beverly asked.

"Nothing," Giles shook his head. "I closed the store, because I thought it might throw her off if she thought we weren't around. So far, it's been just the three of us and now you."

"I'm glad you're here," Dawn murmured, looking at Tara. "Makes me feel safer."

"Even though I'm not much in the fight department?" Tara asked with a small grin.

"We'll let Buffy take care of the butch stuff," Dawn replied, nodding at her sister. "You're in charge of the more subtle things."

"As frightening as all of this is," Giles was saying, "I really do think we're in a very good position. It's almost four o'clock, and Glory is no closer to the Key's identity than she was two weeks ago."

"OK, so do we have any ideas about when the window of opportunity closes?" Beverly asked, glancing around the room.

"We now know that the day of the ritual will start with rain and end with rain. From what I surmised, Glory can conduct the ritual during any part of this day, until love's eye looks upon her."

"We still don't know what 'love's eye' refers to, though," Willow said in frustration.

"But all we have to do is keep her away from the Key for the rest of the day, right?" Tanya asked.

"I dunno...That's way too vague for me," Buffy replied, shaking her head. "I wanna know what the second part means, so when I finally exhale, I'm not looking over my shoulder."

"I agree," Giles murmured. "The more precisely we can ascertain the ritual's closing, the more confident we can be in our plans." He waved loosely at the pile of old books scattered about the room. "I've been researching all day, but to no avail."

"Well, we were all thinking in terms of emotional metaphors before," Tara pointed out, "and it turns out we were way off base there. I think we need to be very careful about our assumptions this time."

"Indeed," Giles nodded. "Love, and love's eye, may have nothing at all to do with the emotion of love."

"Above all," Buffy interjected, "we keep the Key as far away from Glory as possible. That's our main objective, right?"

The nods of assent that greeted this assertion were cut short by a harsh clanging as the shop door was slammed back against the wall.

"OK, I am *sick* of this!" Glory's voice was equal parts fury and petulance.

For Tara, the next ten minutes passed in a second, even as a part of her watched events unfold in slow motion from a great distance.

"I've tried bargaining; I've tried cajoling; I've tried everything except a wrist corsage and candy," the hell god continued. "But patience has never been one of my virtues--heck, I don't even know *what* my virtues are--and we need to get this show on the road."

"You mean, your time's running out, don't you?" Beverly asked, stepping forward.

Glory recoiled almost instinctively. "You...God, I've had enough of you to last a lifetime, which, considering I'm a god, is really saying something." Her voice was thick with loathing.

"Now that hurts, Glo," Beverly said, shaking her head. "I thought we were really connecting, there at the end. I mean, the brutalization definitely brought up some trust issues, but I think we could've worked through those."

"Get out of my way," Glory practically hissed, although Tara noticed that she maintained a healthy distance from the Protector.

"What are you even doing here, Glo?" Beverly asked. "Shouldn't you be out canvassing the city? If I'm not mistaken, there *is* something of a time crunch here." And then, with seemingly utter nonchalance, she began to whistle the theme song from 'Jeopardy.'

Glory's eyes narrowed to slits. "How do you know about that?"

Giles stepped forward, though he remained behind Beverly. "We mortals aren't quite as provincial as you think we are," he murmured. "We've been tying our own shoelaces for centuries now."

Glory clenched her fists in impotent rage. She glanced around desperately, as if trying to figure out a way to get past Beverly. She was accompanied by six of her minions, but it was clear that she had little faith in their fighting ability.

"Give me my Key," she shouted, grabbing a flask from one of the shelves and hurling it against the far wall. The smell of lavender filled the room.

"That's a really nice scent, Giles," Beverly commented, turning to the Watcher with a nod. "Remind me to buy some of that before we head home."

"Consider it my treat," he replied, giving a courtly half-bow.

"Give me my Key or I bring this whole place down on top of you." Another bottle crashed onto the floor.

"First of all, I really must insist on some recompense for this mess," Giles said evenly. "In the words of American consumerism, 'You break it, you bought it.' And with regard to your threat, my dear woman, that's simply not a compelling argument. If you *do* locate and use the Key, we all die anyway. It's very much six of one, a half-dozen of another, don't you think?"

Glory pulled herself up short from her ranting, and turned to look at them. Her gaze lingered on each person in turn, and when she spoke, her voice was practically a purr. "But it doesn't have to be like that," she murmured. "If you help me get home, I could make sure that all of you live happily ever after. I refer you to my earlier comment regarding eternal life," she added.

"Is that true?" Tara started at the sound of Dawn's voice beside her. "If we give you the Key, you'll keep--you'll keep us safe?"

"Dawn, no!" Buffy almost shouted. "Don't believe it, not for an instant."

"But of course I'll keep my promise," Glory insisted, looking wounded at the slight. "It's such a small price to pay for such a huge favor."

Tara watched in desperation. Her heart was pounding so loudly in her ears that she suspected she wouldn't be able to hear Dawn say, "It's me." She fully expected Buffy to clap her hand over Dawn's mouth.

The Slayer obliged her by doing so. "Dawn, I can't let you sacrifice an innocent," Buffy hissed. "Especially not for a promise that this bimbo will never keep." Dawn struggled against Buffy's restraint, but clearly had no chance of succeeding.

"Oh, well...guess we'll just have to do this the hard way," Glory said airily, and Tara thought she saw the Hell god glance toward the back of the room.

Following her gaze, Tara turned to see a short, robed figure standing in the doorway of the training room. He had gained entrance through the back door, and now looked at his master adoringly.

"For you, Glorificus," he said softly, and then raised his cross-bow and fired.

Tara had instinctively leaned forward to shield Willow, but her beloved was not the target. She heard the bolt whiz past her, and looked up to see her aunt staring wide-eyed at Tanya.

"I'm sorry, Baby," she whispered.

Tara knew that Tanya had screamed; she had seen her open her mouth as she dropped to her knees to pull Beverly close to her. But Tara hadn't heard a sound; all noise had ceased, just for a moment, as she took in the sight of her aunt lying crumpled and bleeding on the Magic Box floor.

And then chaos erupted, as Glory threw back her head and laughed with delight.

"Oh my *Hell God*, I feel like a brand new woman!" she cried, clapping her hands. She strode toward the group, gathered around the table in a tight knot except for Tanya, who was desperately trying to stem the flow of blood pouring from Beverly's wound.

Fury...it was *fury* that she was feeling, and she had never felt the likes of it before.

"*Incendiere*," she cried, only dimly aware that she was saying the word.

But Glory wasn't even singed by the orb of flame that Tara had hurled at her. Smiling, she deflected it with a flick of her wrist. "Ooh--look who's gone all vigilante!" she laughed.

When Beverly had been shot, Buffy had released Dawn and now stood in front of her. Tara watched as Dawn tore her eyes from Beverly's inert figure, looking back at Glory with hatred in her eyes.

"You bitch," she cried, taking a step toward Glory. "You want your Key, come and get it!"

"Dawn, no!" Willow shouted in desperation.

"Out of my way, little girl," Glory said dismissively. With the barest nod of her head, she sent Dawn flying up against a counter. Tara heard the glass crack under her weight.

"OK, Slayer--let's cut to the chase. One more time: where's my Key?"

Tara's mouth had gone dry; even if she had known what to say, she couldn't have said it. Buffy stood dumbly in front of Glory, then glanced toward the door leading into the training room.

"Think you can outrun me, Blondie? I'll be standing in front of you before you're half-way there."

"Oh most magnificent One," cried the minion who had shot Beverly.

"You'll get your reward later," she cut him off, barely sparing him a glance.

"But you must look--"

"Not now, you greedy little skank!"

"Glorificus, the sister!" he finally shouted. "Look upon her!"

Glory paused, just the barest moment, and then turned slowly to see what everyone else had already seen: Dawn was cut, badly, and her blood was spilling out onto the counter. As it pooled, a bright crimson, a faint glow began to emanate from it, hovering slightly above the counter. As they watched, it shimmered and turned from red to a deep, cobalt blue; and then it changed, once more, into a glittering, emerald green.

Dawn's eyes were wide with terror. Tara thought that her own heart would surely crack open with her dread.

"My, oh my, oh my," Glory whispered. "Little sister's not as old as she looks, is she?"

With a harsh cry, Buffy launched herself at Glory, who threw her off with seeming ease. "Protect her!" the Slayer called out, but the others had already rushed toward Dawn.

"No!" Glory shouted. "It ends here!" With the barest wave of her hand, they all went flying away from Dawn, crashing into the walls.

Tara's head was ringing; she could barely make out Glory seizing Dawn by the wrist and pulling her toward the door. She watched as Buffy hurled herself once more at the Hell god, who if anything seemed amused by her efforts.



"Nice try, Slayer," she laughed, gripping Buffy by the throat and lifting her off of the ground. She smiled sweetly.

"Dawnie won't be home for dinner." And then she threw the Slayer against the wall and was gone.

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## Part 34

Glory was gone, the door banging closed behind her as she triumphantly dragged Dawn out of the Magic Box. But it wasn't Buffy that Willow was looking at; it was Tara, half-dragging herself over to her aunt. Willow was at her side in an instant.

"It's bad," Tara whispered, and Willow wasn't sure if she was talking to herself, to Willow, or to all the gods and goddesses in a desperate entreaty.

Looking at the pale form protectively enfolded in Tanya's arms, Willow saw that Tara was right. Beverly had turned at the sound of the shooter's voice, and the bolt had entered her left shoulder; the tip and the very upper part of the shaft was protruding grotesquely through the back of her now-crimson shirt.

"Baby, please...C'mon, Sweetie..." Tanya's voice turned angry. "Dammit, Bev, *wake up!* Don't you even *think* about leaving me!"

Willow could see that Beverly's breathing was irregular, her shirt moving in arrhythmic hitches as she struggled to draw breath.

"We have to get her to a hospital," Tara said, her eyes never leaving her aunt's face. Willow looked up to see Buffy and Giles standing over them, dread etched across their faces.

"We--we should try to get the arrow out of her," Tanya said, her voice laced with desperation.

"No," Giles practically shouted, stepping forward. "If we do so, it could worsen the bleeding immeasurably. Tara's right--we need to get her to a hospital."

"Right--right, a hospital." Tanya was nodding frantically, as if this one word now held the fate of every dream she'd ever had.

"The bleeding seems to have slowed a little bit," Willow said hopefully, knowing as she did so that there could be two very different reasons for this.

"I'll call for an ambulance," Giles offered, hurrying over toward the shattered counter.

"Willow..." Buffy's tone held both urgency and reluctance. "Willow, Glory's got Dawn."

"Buffy, we have to take care of Beverly," Willow replied, trying to keep the anger out of her own voice.

"Will, the ambulance will be on its way," Buffy pleaded. "If we don't want *everyone* to die--"

"What do you mean, 'everyone'?" Tanya interrupted, her eyes blazing. "You're assuming Beverly's already gone? Toss her in a body bag and move on?" She was shouting now, her voice hoarse with rage for what was happening before her; terror for what might yet come. "Let me tell you something, Slayer, I don't give a damn about this whole prophecy/Key/Chosen One bullshit. Everything I care about is right here in my arms, and she's hurt and we're taking care of *her*. So you just run along and do whatever heroic things you need to do, but--"

"Tanya!" Tara's voice was sharp, uncharacteristically so. Willow realized that her lover's eyes had never left Beverly, and now she, too, looked down at the dark-haired woman, and saw that her lips were moving.

Following their gaze, Tanya's eyes widened. "Beverly--Baby, can you hear me? You're gonna be OK, Baby...Just hang on, please."

Willow realized that Beverly was trying to speak. "What is it, Baby?" Tanya asked, her voice breaking. "I'm here; help's on the way."

Willow strained to hear the words echoing dimly from Beverly's lips...

"A little less shouting, please."

Beverly swallowed heavily. "Got a bit of a headache." Finally, her eyes opened, briefly, and Willow could see life flickering stubbornly in the brown eyes.

She could also see Tanya wavering between hope and fear. "Baby, the ambulance is on its way. Just hang on, Sweetie. They'll be here any minute." She looked up, and Giles nodded his confirmation.

Beverly forced herself to open her eyes with obvious effort, and swallowed once more. "No," she whispered.

"What do you mean, 'no'?" Tanya asked, brow furrowed.

"No hospital," Beverly managed. "No time."

Tanya set her mouth in a grim slash. "I don't know what you're talking about, Sweetie, but you need to be in a hospital, as of right now, and that's where you're going."

"No." The voice was stronger this time, and laced with a resolve that made Willow think that this easy-going woman was not one to be dictated to. "The wound's not fatal, and I can't be in a hospital; not now." She licked her lips, and gazed up at Buffy. "She got Dawn, didn't she?"

Buffy only nodded wordlessly.

"I'm sorry," Beverly whispered. "I was supposed to protect her."

"I was supposed to protect her," the Slayer choked out. "I'm her sister."

Looking back at Tanya, who had observed this exchange in disbelief, Beverly drew another deep breath. "Tanya, my work isn't done. I can't go anywhere until Dawn's safe."

"I am not hearing this," Tanya muttered, her voice breaking. "You *have* to go to the hospital, Baby. You--God, you almost died, and you're still in danger. The arrow's so close to your heart..."

"Close only counts in horse-shoes and hand grenades," Beverly replied, her mouth crooking upward in a half-grin. Willow heard the wails of an ambulance in the distance.

"Get rid of them," Beverly said abruptly, her voice all business now.

"No," Tanya hissed. "Dammit, Beverly, I am not losing you!"

"You won't," Beverly said evenly. "But if you love me--if you really know me the way I think you do--you know why I'm doing this. And you'll help me." They stared at each other, until Willow felt almost an intruder.

Outside, the sirens were drawing nearer. Looking up, Willow thought she could see reflections of their lights flashing against the rain-streaked windows.

Dragging her gaze back to the silent struggle that was playing out before her, Willow watched as tears cascaded down Tanya's smooth skin, dropping silently onto Beverly's shirt.

"I am in love with a total fool," Tanya finally said, shaking her head. "You break my heart on this, Beverly Maclay, and I follow you in to the next life and dog you till you wish you'd never met me."

"Won't ever happen," Beverly whispered with a small grin, and Willow didn't know if she was talking about her death or the possibility of ever regretting Tanya's place in her life. Looking up at Giles, Beverly said resolutely, "Get rid of 'em, Watcher Man."

"Are you sure?" Giles asked, though Willow thought that his expression said he already knew the answer to the question.

Beverly nodded. "Got work to do; Keys to save." She grinned. "Tea to drink."

"Oh well, in that case..." Giles strode to the door just in time to greet the EMT's.

"I'm afraid it's been something of a false alarm," he said smoothly. "A minor mishap, but not so serious as we originally feared."

The first EMT, a wiry white man with dark hair, just nodded. The second, though, a tall Hispanic woman, had stepped further into the room and was now staring at the scene before her: a woman with an ugly projectile embedded in her shoulder.

"Holy shit," she murmured.

"Looks worse than it is," Beverly said cheerfully.

"Ma'am, you have--" She trailed off, uncertainly.

"Oh, this--yeah, it sorta stings, but nothing to worry about," Beverly replied, her voice the very essence of reassurance.

"You take bolts from cross-bows every day, do you?" the woman asked, eying Beverly steadily.

"Not as often as I used to, since I quit playing full-contact Dungeons and Dragons," Beverly nodded agreeably.

Behind the second EMT, the first had taken in the scene. "Ma'am, we really should get you to the hospital."

Beverly's voice grew firmer--still very friendly, but also quite resolute. "I appreciate your concern, but I really am OK. Here--I'll make it official: I do not require hospital services, and I politely decline your kind offer to assist me."

The two medics looked at each other. Finally, the man shook his head. "We can't drag her there," he said, shrugging.

Looking back at Beverly, the second EMT said slowly, "No...no, we can't. But if you need anything, *please* call me--immediately. My name's Angelina Ramirez; I work for Alpha Ambulance Service." Willow wondered absently why the woman hadn't used the first-person plural to indicate their services. She also noted that Tanya hadn't spoken during the entire exchange.

After another long look at Beverly, both medics turned reluctantly and left, the bell on the door jangling noisily.

"OK," Beverly said, nodding decisively. "First things first: let's get this thing out of my shoulder."

"What about the bleeding?" Tara asked anxiously.

"It'll be worse for a few minutes, but it'll stop," Beverly replied confidently.

"Baby, did you go to med school when I was at that conference last year?" Tanya interjected shakily. "Because I'm not quite sure how you can know that."

"I just do," Beverly said, shrugging. "Maybe the monks gave me a little extra healing power; maybe I have access to certain knowledge by way of the transformation process."

"Maybe you have no blood circulating through your brain," Tanya muttered. "What if you're wrong?"

"I won't be," Beverly replied stubbornly. "Besides, I can't walk around with this thing sticking out of my shoulder. What else can I do?"

"There's always the crazy notion of the hospital," Willow suggested tentatively, but Beverly's arched brows told her that that suggestion had been vetoed.

"We can cut off the shaft end of the bolt," Giles asserted, then paused, looking uncomfortable.

"And pull the rest out through the back of my shoulder," Beverly finished for him.

"It will be quite painful," the Watcher said quietly.

"Then the sooner we start, the sooner it's over," Beverly answered flatly. "Help me stand up." Willow reached out, along with Tara and Tanya, and together they pulled her gently to her feet. She swayed once, but seemed to steady herself. As a group, they walked slowly to the big table in the library section and sat Beverly down gingerly.

Giles disappeared into the back room, reappearing moments later with a recently sharpened sword in one hand and their extensive first-aid kit in the other.

Buffy had watched all of this unfold without speaking. Now, she stood and held out her hand for the sword. Pausing only for a moment, Giles handed it to her. She turned to the wounded Protector.

"Bev, there's no way this won't hurt," she said evenly. "But I can cut the bolt and remove it more quickly than anyone else." She stopped, looking intently at the bleeding woman before her.

Without hesitation, Beverly replied, "I trust you." Turning to Willow, she said, "Bring a few books over here." In response to her questioning gaze, she added, "We'll stack them on the table, until the bolt's resting on top. That'll make the cutting easier." Willow nodded, and did as she was asked. As she did so, Tara grabbed a pair of scissors and gently cut away Beverly's shirt from the wounds.

When she returned, they piled the books one on top of the other until the shaft of the bolt was laying evenly on the top-most book. Then Beverly reached out for Tanya with her left hand and Tara with her right.

Willow watched her squeeze both sets of hands with her own strong fingers, and then nod at Buffy.

"Let's do this," she said quietly.

To her credit, Willow thought, Buffy didn't prolong the moment or try to say anything. She simply nodded, and then raised the sword and brought it down swiftly and surely on the bolt, as close to Beverly's flesh as she could without breaking the skin.

Willow had expected a cry of some sort, but Beverly was just humming. Leaning closer, she discerned the chorus to "I Will Survive."

"God, I *hate* that song," Tanya muttered, swiping quickly at her tears.

Buffy had moved behind Beverly, peering at the head of the arrow protruding through her shirt. "Giles, be ready with the antiseptic," she said curtly. "Bev, are you ready for this?"

"I don't think a person really gets ready to have a cross-bow bolt pulled out of her shoulder," Beverly replied. "I think she just says, 'Pull that fucker out.'"

With the words, Buffy propped one foot against the curved bench, gripped the arrowhead tightly, and gave a savage, wrenching pull.

This time, Beverly did cry out, and she was joined by Tanya's own anguished sob. Tara, Willow saw, was crying silently, never looking away from her aunt's face.

Giles moved quickly, pouring antiseptic fluid over first the entrance wound and then its counterpart, in the back of her shoulder. Beverly had turned dangerously white, and Willow thought that she would surely pass out from the pain. Instead, she drew long, shuddering breaths, trying to steady herself. Willow helped Giles bandage both wounds, watching anxiously for signs of heavy bleeding. Beverly continued trying to breathe through her distress, focus herself to keep from passing out.

They sat like that for several moments, until Willow began to believe that the bleeding had indeed subsided. After ten minutes, the bandages showed only faint traces of pink.

"I think the monks *did* give you some sort of resistance, or resilience," Giles commented finally, shaking his head. "It's miraculous the bolt didn't puncture any major arteries, or worse."

"Yeah, well, the scabby little would-be assassin choked," Beverly replied grimly, biting her lip against the pain. She looked up at Buffy. "This isn't over yet, you have to believe that. We'll get Dawn back."

Willow thought that she had never seen Buffy look so demoralized. "How? We don't even know where Glory's taken her." She shook her head, seemingly dazed. "I never should have taken her out of school. I should have left her there; Glory had no idea who she was..."

"If you'd done that, there's no guarantee Glory wouldn't have kidnapped her and used her as a bargaining chip, like you worried," Willow pointed out. "Buffy, you did what you thought was best and you had good reasons for it. Now we have to get her back."

She started as the annoying bell jangled once again; looking over, she saw Xander and Anya hurrying toward them.

"What happened?" Xander asked, his eyes taking in the damage. Catching sight of Beverly, he recoiled. "Glory." He said it flatly, as if he already knew the answer.

Giles gave a commendably brief summation of what had happened.

"So the weeping referred to rain," Xander said angrily. "Of course, *I* didn't get it, not even when it was pouring." He shook his head, sighing.

"Xander, Sweetie, we're trying to keep a limit on the self-flagellation," Tara said softly, resting her hand on his arm and giving him a tiny smile. He raised his head slightly, his eyes grateful.

"Giles, you keep any liquor around here?" Beverly asked abruptly. "I could use a shot or five." Giles nodded, and walked quickly around the counter, pulling out a bottle of Dewars.

"Thanks, that helps," Bev said gratefully after two impressive pulls on the bottle. "OK, we have to figure out where Glory's taking Dawn."

"She can't have too much time left to complete the ritual," Anya pointed out. "The rain's supposed to stop early this evening."

"Yeah, but then she can open the portal *until* love's eye looks upon her," Willow countered. "So *that's* the time limit."

"OK, if Glory's going to open portals between dimensions, she's going to need some room, right?" Buffy asked, looking around the room.

"I should think so," Giles mused.

"So it's probably outdoors," Buffy continued. "Someplace spacious."

"And tall?" Xander asked suddenly, looking at Giles and then the Slayer.

"That would probably serve her purposes as well," Giles concurred. "What makes you ask?"

"Because there's a big and very poorly-built tower going up over on the east side of town," he answered excitedly. "Where that puke-ugly Super Wal-Mart used to be, pardon the redundancy."

"The one that closed down when folks found out that the owner was a Corruptus demon?" Willow asked, peering at him.

"That's the one," Xander said, nodding. "The building was razed, but nothing's gone up since then, until now. My company didn't get the contract, and from the looks of it, no reputable company did. I wouldn't even know about it if I hadn't been over to that part of town a couple of days ago."

"And it's tall, you say?" Giles asked, leaning forward anxiously.

"Tall, and *very* shaky," Xander said decisively. "Looks like it's being built by a group of fifth-graders."

"Or by some very unstable people working under an urgent deadline," Tara suggested, looking at Willow.

"The mentally ill," Giles said softly. "Let me check on something." He rose abruptly, and made his way back to the telephone. He grabbed the phone book, and within a matter of seconds, he was punching numbers hastily.

From what she could hear, Willow discerned that he had called Sunnydale General Hospital to ask about its mental health ward.

"Several people left, against medical advice?" the Watcher was murmuring. "Yes, very interesting indeed."

Returning to his seat, he sighed. "Tara was right--all of the patients who had been admitted with no prior history signed themselves out four days ago. The hospital couldn't keep them there against their will; they posed no threat to themselves or others."

"So that's Glory's construction crew," Xander muttered. "Bet the pay sucks and the hours are worse."

"Xander, that's great," Buffy said, seeming to regain some of her morale. "It's a pretty good bet Glory's over there, and she has Dawn with her." She glanced around the table, taking in each of them with her gaze. "I say we gather up the weapons and head over there. Anybody who wants out, I understand."

Willow, Tara, Giles, and Xander just shook their heads. Anya, it seemed, hesitated just a moment and then sighed and said, "Well of *course* I want to be there. Wouldn't miss it for the world."

"OK, then," Buffy nodded, setting her jaw. As she prepared to push back away from the table, Tanya looked up. Willow saw that her eyes were red-rimmed.

"A quick question," she said quietly. Buffy just looked at her, waiting expectantly.

"What time does night fall around here?"

Willow stared at her in confusion. "Night fall?" she echoed.



"Right." Still the eyes held little expression.

"Um...I believe it's usually around 7:30 at this time of the year," Giles said, his face suggesting that he was equally confused.

"And the rain's supposed to end before then?" Tanya continued.

"Well, Accu-Weather didn't say for sure," Tara answered slowly. "They just said early evening."

Beverly spoke up, her brow furrowed. "Tanya, what are you thinking?"

Tanya looked back at her partner, nodding slowly. "I'm thinking that 'love's eye' has nothing to do with love and everything to do with the planet Venus."

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### **Part 35**

"Venus?" The word was uttered almost as a chorus as everyone looked at Tanya.

"The *planet* Venus," she repeated deliberately. "Not the goddess of love, but the planet *named* after the goddess of love."

"The light from which appears early and very brightly in the evening sky," Giles muttered, nodding excitedly.

"Tanya, if you're right, that means Glory can start the ritual *after* the rain stops and *before* the light from Venus becomes visible," Buffy said, her eyes narrowing she took in the implications of this.

Willow glanced at her watch. "It's just after five o'clock," she announced. "The rain's supposed to end late this afternoon, maybe early this evening. It seems like a safe bet that the rain stops *before* Venus appears; otherwise, the prophecy makes no sense."

"Or I'm wrong," Tanya supplied evenly. "But somehow I don't think I am."

"Either way, it's the best lead we have," Buffy said, her expression grim. "OK, who here can recognize Venus?"

Willow, Tara, Giles, and--surprisingly--Anya all nodded. The ex-demon murmured under her breath, "You all still think I'm just a newly-mortal pervert."

"My bad," Willow said contritely.

"Great. You guys keep the rest of us--especially me--updated, OK?"

*She's banking on at least one of us being alive at that point,* Willow thought, unable to stop herself.

"We keep the Goddess of Ridiculous Shoes on the ropes until Venus shows up," Buffy was saying, "and then we're in the clear."

"I'm not so sure about that," Giles countered reluctantly. "Buffy, have you thought about Glory's reaction should she be thwarted in this?"

"I'm guessing 'disconcerted' may be an understatement," Buffy replied evenly. "But that's Act Two, none of which will see the stage if we don't stop her now. If we can take her out tonight, so much the better."

"Does that mean we kill Ben if we get the chance?" Willow asked, giving voice to what she suspected had crossed all their minds.

Buffy gazed at her for a long moment, and then said, "Yes."

No one spoke, and then Buffy nodded as if to herself. "OK. I think we should head over to the tower; find out for sure that that's where Glory is."

"Uh, should we maybe formulate a game plan?" Xander interjected, looking around the room.

"Go to the tower. Get Dawn. Kick Glory's ass." Buffy's voice was flat and decisive.

"OK. Sounds like a plan," Beverly said, nodding as if Buffy had just laid out the blue-print for the Normandy invasion. Buffy gave her a quick grin, then beckoned Giles and Xander to help her grab the weapons from the back. Clenching her jaw, Beverly stood up, leaning slightly against the table for support.

"Beverly, are you sure you're up for this?" Tara asked worriedly.

"What, and miss the grand finale?" Beverly's grin faded as she turned to look at her partner. "Tanya, Sweetie, maybe you should--"

"If you say 'stay here,' I will dump you and take up with Gwen Paige."

"That skank from the gym? You wouldn't!" Beverly's voice was horrified.

"Watch me, Girlfriend," Tanya retorted, crossing her arms.

"Christ, you fight dirty," Beverly muttered, shaking her head.

"We'll take two cars," Buffy announced, as she, Xander, and Giles returned from the training room weighed down with weapons of all kinds. "Half of us will go with Xander; the rest will follow in Beverly's car."

"I think I'll let my better half do the driving honors for now," Beverly interjected.

"Xander, take us someplace about a block from there; we'll walk the rest of the way to avoid being seen." The Slayer turned to face them. "Guys..." She faltered suddenly, fumbling for words. "I know we're trying to save the world, but..." She stopped, clenching her fists, and then drew a deep breath. "But please help me save my sister." With that, she turned and headed for the door.

*Armageddon Number 5*, Willow thought, squaring her shoulders as she followed Tara out the door of the Magic Box.

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Moments later, they were parked behind a convenience store. Willow took in their surroundings: this was the older section of Sunnydale, with several abandoned lots and none of the chic little boutiques that dotted the tree-lined streets of downtown. Rain was still falling, but it was far lighter than the downpour of earlier. She watched as everyone chose a weapon of some sort, grabbing a long knife for herself. Tara, she noticed, was looking at the arsenal with a decidedly bemused expression.

"Still not much for the swimming?" she murmured into her girlfriend's ear.

"Or the climactic battle with the Hell God," Tara acknowledged ruefully.

"Tara, you should at least take a dagger or something small," Xander said, glancing at her. "Here--this one has a belt and sheath; you can just strap it to your leg."

Willow looked at her, her eyes a study in innocence. "Yeah, Baby--just strap it on. I bet you'd be really good with it."

"Remind me to put frogs in your back pack," Tara muttered through clenched teeth as she took the proffered weapon from a clueless Xander.

As they fell in step behind the others, though, Willow reached out for her beloved's hand. "Baby--promise me you'll be careful; promise me you'll keep safe."

But Tara's expression told her that she knew such promises were impossible to keep. She'd seen too many of their battles; fought in too many herself...and she'd witnessed, more than any of them, how tenuous human existence truly was.

Tara replied simply, "I'll promise if you will."

Willow gazed into the fathomless blue eyes looking at her with love and wisdom, and suddenly the desire to stop, to turn back and return to whatever safety they could find, was so sharp that it hurt. She granted herself the luxury of stroking Tara's cheek, leaning forward for one moment to

feel the soft lips against her own. And then it was time to walk again, because really, she knew, they couldn't do otherwise.

The group walked in silence for the remainder of the trek to the construction site. In moments they were staring up at an immense tower that loomed at least seventy feet high. In the quiet of the night, they could hear the rickety structure creaking in the light wind.

"Spedoinkles," Beverly finally breathed.

"I thought you were an English teacher," Xander said, peering back at her over his shoulder. "I was expecting something a little more poetic."

"You got a better ejaculation?" Tanya asked, fixing him with a wry gaze.

"Probably not," Anya murmured as Xander shrugged uncomfortably.

Moving closer, they could see several figures--some in robes; others in regular attire--moving about the base of the tower.

"Good call, Xander," Buffy said quietly. She took in the scene for a moment, and when she spoke, Willow knew she had moved into combat mode.

"OK, guys, this is it. It's still raining, but it's definitely easing up. I wanna be in position *before* it stops completely, so let's move in. Glory's either got Dawn up on the scaffold already, or she'll be moving her soon. If I see them on the tower, I'm heading up. You guys do whatever you can to keep the rest of them from stopping me, because I'm guessing she'll make that a priority as soon as she sees me. Willow, Tara--anything you've been saving for a rainy day, bring it out now, OK?"

Willow felt the reassuring warmth of Tara's hand in her own as they nodded in unison.

"Buffy?" Giles' voice was hesitant. "What if we're wrong about the window of opportunity?"

Willow knew that the Slayer could barely consider the possibility. Suddenly, Tara's voice broke into the silence.

"Glory's not exactly stoic," she pointed out. "If we see her starting to panic as time passes, I think we'll know we're on the right track."

"Good point," Giles said, nodding.

"And if we *are* wrong," Buffy finally spoke up, "I think it's safe to say we're all fucked." She turned to start toward the tower.

"Wait." Beverly stepped toward the Slayer. "Buffy, I think I should be with you. You're going up against a Hell God, and I'm the only thing that's slowed her down so far." Willow could see Tanya's fingers clenching and unclenching around her ax handle.

Buffy looked from the Protector to her girlfriend and then back. "Bev, are you sure?" she asked quietly.

"It's why I'm here," Beverly answered simply. With a slight grin, she added, "Hell, that's probably about the safest place I could be. Glory's the one soldier in this battle who can't lay a hand on me. Besides, I wanna see the look on that wench's face when she finds out I'm not dead."

Buffy gave a small grin in response. "I get that." Then she turned back toward the construction site, which was lit by a bizarre mixture of lights and candles. "Let's do this."

As they approached the tower, Willow could see two robed figures leading a struggling captive up the final flight of stairs.

"Buffy," she whispered.

"I see it," came the terse reply. Buffy stopped abruptly in mid-stride; slowly, she held out her hand, palm up.

"It's stopped raining."

Buffy withdrew her hand, curling it into a fist. "Now," she hissed, and they tore forward, stealth abandoned. They were spotted by one of Glory's minions when they were within twenty yards of the tower.

"The Slayer! Glorificus, the Slayer arrives, accompanied by her insignificant, mortal companions in a vain--" He halted suddenly, crumpling slowly to the ground.

Willow looked over at Giles, who had just sent an arrow thudding into the warty little sycophant's chest.

"Nobody calls me insignificant *and* vain in the same sentence," he huffed.

"I'll make a note of it," she nodded, eyes widening. Turning back to the tower, they saw that Glory was on the landing between the second and third flights of steps. Far above, Dawn was being led to the end of a long platform that extended out over seven floors of empty space.

"Guys, keep 'em busy," Buffy shouted. "Bev--stick close to me." Together, they headed toward the stairs.

Glory's voice screeched out, furious and shrill. "Nobody gets up the stairs, especially not the Slayer and the lesbo."

"Which lesbo?" came the bewildered query, as the minions gazed out at the Sapphic-intensive onslaught.

"The Protector, you wretched refuse! The one that's supposed to be dead!" Glory slammed her fists against the railing of the stairs, then resumed climbing.

Willow could see that even with Buffy's strength, it was proving impossible to fight through the thick crowd that had gathered at the base of the steps to block her. Beverly was limited to warding off blows with her staff. Despite the dose of mystical healing, Willow could see that the Protector was in pain.

Giles, Xander, and Tanya were now wielding swords. Some combination of athleticism, adrenalin, and love was making Tanya a fiercer warrior than Willow had imagined. Anya was swinging a mace wildly above her head, and Willow made a mental note to give her wide berth. For their part, she and Tara were chanting litanies of spells as quickly as they could think of them--spells to separate; spells to repel; anything that might help them break through the throng. And still, none of them were within fifteen feet of the stairs.

Suddenly her attention was drawn to a slight figure perhaps twenty yards away who was sprinting toward the fray. As the person drew closer, Willow recognized her as the EMT who had lingered behind at the Magic Box, giving Beverly her name and workplace.

*What the hell...?*

From above them, Glory screamed out in frustration. "Not *another* one--I thought the Lone Star lezzy was the only one left!"

"She's a Protector!" Tara shouted. "She must have recognized Beverly and followed us."

"So *that's* why she was talking to Bev that way." Tanya's voice was harsh above the clanging of metal.

"What did you *think* she was doing?" Willow demanded, dispatching a wild-eyed teenager with a quick incantation.

"Hitting on her!" Tanya bellowed, bringing a minion to his knees with a heavy swing of her sword.

"While she had an arrow sticking out of her shoulder?" Tara called out incredulously, sending a mumbling homemaker flying with a hurried "*Exodus Expedite*."

"Hey, your aunt's a total babe!" Tanya protested defensively, neatly beheading a short, warty figure in a burlap robe.

Sparing a glance above, Willow could see Glory turn and resume her climb.

*Why doesn't she just fly up to the top? She's a god.* Then she saw Glory falter slightly, pressing her palm into her forehead.

"Tara, Glory's getting weaker!" she shouted. "Bev and the other woman are close enough to slow her down."

"Is Venus out yet?" Xander called. But the planet had yet to make its appearance, and Willow estimated that there was at least half an hour before it did so.

"No," she replied hoarsely, repelling a dazed man of perhaps fifty with a quick chant. Looking up once more, she saw that Glory was slowly making her way upward, and the more distance she put between herself and the two Protectors, the more she regained her strength. Several feet away Buffy was swearing, and Willow knew that the Slayer had also realized this. Her friend's voice held a desperation Willow had never heard before.

*Oh God, she's not gonna make it. She can't even reach the tower; Glory's already--*

*Willow.*

She heard her beloved's voice, but knew her name hadn't been spoken aloud.

*Willow, together. We have to be together.*

The din and chaos surrounding them faded and blurred as Willow suddenly stilled herself. Of course. How silly they had been, not realizing it from the beginning. They would do this together; they could *only* do this together.

She felt herself step back from her own desires and her own fears; felt her mind slide into the groove that she and Tara had etched together. She saw herself reach back and take Tara's hand without needing to look for it. The warm flesh molded into her own and anyone watching would have known that the two women's fingers were entwined but could not have told you where one outstretched hand ended and the other began. They were seamless, and Willow felt Tara's energy slide through her with a force and a surety that made her gasp. Their eyes met, quickly, and then both of them turned toward the throng blocking the steps.

*"That which would divide us is now divided."*

Willow didn't know where the words came from; she had never encountered them in any text. Nor did she know who had spoken the words. They had been uttered aloud, she was sure of it: the voice that spoke them was neither of theirs; and both of theirs. This was the sound, she realized, of two voices merged into one. It wasn't alone and it wasn't harmony. It was one voice-- their voice.

It worked as she had known it would work. Bodies began flying away from the base of the staircase, landing harmlessly ten and fifteen feet away.

"What the--?" Tanya's voice was awestruck. But Willow saw Buffy look back at them, and she only nodded as her best friend mouthed the words, "*Thank you.*" And then the Slayer was sprinting up the stairs, Beverly and Angelica close behind her.

The throng, once dispersed, seemed totally lost. The humans were walking aimlessly, peering with blank eyes at the chaos around them. The minions, it appeared, were torn between resuming the battle and hovering at its edges, waiting to see how this new turn of events played out. Willow took advantage of the moment to catch her breath and watch the emerging drama on the tower.

Far above them, Dawn was struggling against the two minions who had led her to the end of the platform. She was fighting like a woman possessed, and Willow suspected that the two servants had anticipated all of the glory of the moment but none of its difficulty. They hadn't counted on the slender teenager putting up such a good fight. As Willow watched, Dawn managed to free one hand, and with surprising force, landed a harsh blow to one minion's stomach. As he doubled over, Dawn gave him a fierce kick to his face. He lurched forward and with a final kick, Dawn sent him screaming off of the platform, arms flailing uselessly.

The remaining servant was still desperately trying to secure the Key, who was clearly energized by her recent victory. The struggle was terrific, and Willow could see the platform pitching slightly with the intensity of the fight.

Suddenly, both figures froze, peering at the landing several yards away. Following their gaze, Willow saw Glory emerge from the stair case.

Dawn stared at the Hell God for several seconds. It seemed to Willow as if they were talking. Then Dawn glanced back over her shoulder, into the abyss that opened only inches away.

"She's going to jump," Tara whispered, still holding onto Willow's hand.

Her partner was right. Dawn had realized that Glory would reach her, would bleed her to open the portals, and she was about to do the only thing that could stop her.

"Tara, we can't let her! Somehow--a spell, something to freeze her, hold her there--"

"Willow, we can't." Tara's voice was equal parts determination and despair. "We promised her; we can't break that promise."

"But Buffy's on her way up the stairs! Glory's still walking toward her; Dawn doesn't have to jump, not yet."

"Willow, Glory's a *god*. This could be over in a split second and it'll be too late for Dawn to prevent it. We *promised* her, Will!" Tara was almost sobbing now.



*Goddess, don't make me watch this girl I love kill herself. Please don't let it end like this, with us standing here watching it happen. Please--not this.* Tara's hand was clenched around her own, squeezing almost to the point of pain.

And then there was a scream, and Willow thought for one instant that Dawn had jumped; that her own eyes were unwilling to see what had happened. But it was Buffy, shouting out her sister's name in terror and desperation.

"Dawn! Dawn, I'm coming; I'm almost there! Hang on!"

At the words, Glory shrieked with frustration and tried to run toward Dawn. But Buffy wasn't alone--she had two Protectors with her, and they were getting closer. Willow watched as Glory stumbled slightly, raising one hand shakily to her head.

Willow looked back at the landing where Glory had arrived seconds before. Buffy emerged slowly into view, followed closely by Beverly and Angelica. All three moved tentatively out onto the platform.

*Oh God, it can't hold them all. It's too shaky, it's too weak...*

And then another figure had arrived on the landing, a minion who paused only long enough to cry out, "For you, Glorificus!" and then raced forward, tackling one of the Protectors and sending both of them off the platform and into the void.

"Oh God." Xander's voice was choked with horror. But a panicked glance at Tanya told Willow which Protector had been lost, and her own beloved's face was filled with sadness but not agony. Willow looked back at the tower, and in a split second the long hair streaming in the wind identified Angelica as the sacrifice. Willow looked away one moment before the bodies slammed into the ground.

Willow swallowed hard, gripping Tara's hand with trembling fingers, and then craned her neck to see what was happening seven floors above them. Glory was shaking with fury, looking first at Dawn and then at the Slayer and the Protector. Willow scanned the darkening sky, praying for some tiny glimmer from the second planet from the sun. It couldn't be long now; any minute now.

As if reading her mind, Giles cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted hoarsely, "It's almost over, Buffy! Venus will appear very soon!"

Glory bellowed with rage, turning back to Dawn. As she did so, however, Beverly darted forward and brushed past her, giving her a small push as she did so. The Hell God swayed slightly, and Willow prayed that she would fall. But Glory quickly righted herself, looking over to see that Beverly had positioned herself between herself and Dawn.

The glance was no longer than a half-breath, but such moments had been the provenance of Buffy's legacy for almost five years. She reached Glory in two strides, pivoted, and delivered a knee-shattering kick that pushed Glory to the edge of the platform.

Willow watched, unable to breathe, as Glory teetered for perhaps two seconds, the crazy weaving of a high-wire walker gusting in a sudden breeze. She was fighting gravity with the force of her godhood; but that godhood was wounded, made low by the force of the Protector that was looming so close to her. She gave one final, strangled scream, and then pitched forward off of the platform.

Willow vowed that this time, she wouldn't turn away, and she didn't--which was how she knew the exact moment that Glory became Ben.

The obscene transformation was made even more grotesque by the fact that it was complete in time for Ben to realize what was happening. Willow stared in horror as he took in this knowledge, his mouth opening in a scream that was smothered back into his throat by the force of his falling. Then he hit, slamming onto a pile of bricks. Willow could hear the snapping of bones being crushed and severed.

Only then did she look away, folding into the embrace that Tara offered, which she offered Tara in return.

No one spoke for perhaps ten seconds, and then Tanya was crying out Beverly's name. Willow looked back at the tower, where three figures were making their way as quickly as possible down from the tower. On the ground, both humans and minions seemed to disappear into the night.

When the three had reached the bottom, Beverly gave as credible a version of a sprint as she could manage, falling into Tanya's arms and kissing her so fiercely Willow thought their lips would bruise. Right behind them, Buffy was leading a shaking Dawn off the final flight of steps. When they were standing on solid ground once more, Buffy pulled Dawn into a tight hug; they said nothing, just rocking slightly. Finally, she opened her eyes, catching Giles' gaze.

"Glory?" she whispered.

"Is dead," Giles answered steadily. "She transformed into Ben during the fall; it was he who landed."

Buffy stared at him. "But why would Glory change into Ben? That's the only way the fall could kill her."

Giles only shrugged helplessly. Tara, though, stepped forward slightly, her arm still wrapped protectively around Willow's waist. "I'm not sure that's how it happened," she said slowly.

"What do you mean?" Buffy asked, perplexed.

"I think maybe Ben was the one who forced the change."

Silence greeted this idea, until Xander protested, "But he'd have to know it would kill him."

"And--and I saw his face," Willow added, her voice trembling at the memory. "He was...terrified."

"Who wouldn't be?" Tara replied. "I don't think he wanted to die. I think he craved life with everything in him. But I also think there was some part of him that knew this was the only way. Maybe--maybe the best part of his humanity convinced him that sacrificing his life was truly the best thing he could do with it."

Willow knew without looking that Tara was speaking to Dawn now. "I think he found the courage to do the most selfless thing imaginable," Tara continued. "And it takes more courage than we probably know to even think about doing such a thing."

Willow had a hard time seeing things after that, because she was crying and because she had pulled first Dawn and then Buffy into a hug. Within seconds, everyone was embracing someone and at some point Giles and Xander were hugging and that was how Willow really knew that the miraculous had occurred.

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After several minutes of random, chaotic hugging, the group managed to disentangle itself and take in their surroundings. The tower still creaked ominously in the night wind; Willow couldn't imagine that it would hold much longer. On the ground, the last of Glory's minions had scurried off into the dark like so many rats, while the humans seemed to be milling around close to the gated entrance to the construction site. Bereft of purpose, they seemed like remote-control toys being operated by heedless owners, their movements dazed and uncertain.

Several feet away lay four mangled bodies. Buffy tried to prevent Dawn from looking at them, but the teenager refused to be shielded. Pulling away slightly, she stepped hesitantly toward the nearest body--the minion she had propelled to his death in her fight to save her own life. Willow saw her face harden for a moment, and then the teenager turned to gaze at the battered figure of Angelica.

"Who was she?" she asked, in almost a whisper.

"She was another Protector." This simple statement was uttered with surpassing respect. "She was with the ambulance that came to the Magic Box after Glory took you. She must have figured out what was going on...I guess the cross-bow injury must have tipped her off." Her laugh was dry and brittle.

"So she came here to help? To--to protect me?"

"Yeah...That's what Protectors do," Beverly replied softly. She knelt beside the broken figure. "I want to make sure she has family; that she won't just lay here."

Tanya had stepped forward, and was now looking at her partner with love and relief etched across her tired features. "We'll take care of her, Baby."

Dawn, meanwhile, was now staring at Ben. "He never wanted Glory to win, not if it meant so much suffering." She turned to her sister. "He doesn't have anyone, Buffy. I think he deserves a decent burial."

"You're right, Dawn," Buffy assured her, her voice thick. "He deserves that."

Dawn looked back at the body lying twisted before her. "He didn't want anybody to get hurt," she murmured. "He only wanted to live..."

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## **Part 36**

It was several hours later when they finally walked through the door of the Magic Box.

"What's going to happen to Glory's little cheering section?" Xander asked, flopping into a chair with a loud groan.

"I really don't know," Giles sighed, rubbing his shoulder. "Perhaps they'll return to some other dimension."

Beverly looked up, bemused. "I should hope so," she said. "Can you really see them integrating into *this* plane?"

"They could team up with Michael Jackson," Willow offered. "Nobody would think twice about *him* being surrounded by freaks."

"What about the poor people that Glory fed off of?" Beverly asked, her eyes clouding.

"And again with the grammar faux pas," Xander piped up. "I thought you weren't supposed to end your sentences with a preposition."

Bev fixed him with a withering gaze. "OK, how about this: What about the poor people that Glory fed off of, *Jackass*?"

"Uh, I think I'll let Giles take this one," Xander replied with a weak grin.

"I'm forced to admit once more that I simply don't know," Giles said slowly. "We've called the authorities to tell them where they are; what happens next is anyone's guess."

"Mr. Giles, what are you going to do about Binky?" Tara asked almost reluctantly. Giles looked up with a start.

"Oh dear Lord--I'd forgotten all about him!"

"Well you may want to remember him fairly quickly. He's in your bathtub," Buffy pointed out. "Maybe there's some kind of one-dimensional catch-and-release program."

"From the apocalyptic to the asinine in the blink of an eye," Giles muttered.

"So this is really over, right?" Tanya asked warily. "No small print loopholes, no do-overs, no 'Ah, upon a closer reading we see that Venus actually refers to the elder Williams sister of tennis fame.'" She said this last part with a faux-British accent.

"I resent that insinuation," Giles sniffed. "We have no reason to believe anything except that Glory has been thwarted in her attempt; furthermore, since her human host was killed, she was also extinguished."

"And Dawn and Bev both get to live happily ever after?" Buffy asked.

"I also believe that to be true," the Watcher confirmed.

"You are just morally opposed to one-word answers, aren't you?" Bev asked.

"Yes," he replied, negating his reply.

"So does this mean we can get some sleep?" Anya demanded. "I'm not used to expending so much physical exertion without having an orgasm to show for it." She met each exasperated stare with her own indignant huff. "What? It's true."

"Do you think their sex life is really that good?" Tara whispered to Willow.

"Maybe...Or maybe she means she does all the work," Willow replied with a shrug.

"I'm with Anya," Buffy was saying. "Um, about the sleep part; not the exertion/orgasm trade-off. If I had an orgasm for every fight I'm in, my circuits would blow."

Looking around the room, Willow wondered how any of them were managing to keep their eyes open. Exhaustion was pouring through her in waves. She leaned in close against Tara, remembering the joining of their hands, the incantation that they had both just *known*, and suddenly she knew that as much as she loved each of these people--even Anya, if she were being honest--she needed to be home now; in bed with Tara where things always made the most sense.

Glancing up, she saw that Tara was gazing at her, the blue of her eyes deepening almost imperceptibly. "Time to go," she whispered. Willow just nodded, unable to pull her eyes away from that gaze.

"Uh, guys--Willow and I are gonna call it a night." Looking over at her aunt, she added, "Can you do lunch tomorrow? Like, a late lunch?" she hastily qualified.

"Sure, Sweetie," Beverly replied with a grin. "We'll probably stay a couple more days; spend some time with you when we're not all in the throes of abject terror and impending doom."

"That sounds nice," Willow said cheerily, as she and Tara rose to leave.

"Willow." Buffy's voice was quiet, and suddenly serious. Willow turned, looking quizzically at her friend. Buffy walked slowly over to stand beside her.

"Willow, what you did tonight--clearing a path to the tower...If you hadn't, I could never have made it up. None of us would be here right now." Willow saw that she was having trouble speaking around her tears. She reached out and took the Slayer's hands in hers.

"It was Tara as much as me," she managed, her own voice unsteady. "It was something we did together." Looking back at her beloved, she added in a near-whisper, "The magic's always

strongest when we make it together."

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Thirty minutes and what felt like three hundred embraces later, they were curled up in Tara's bed. Willow wanted desperately to talk about the evening, and with roughly equal fervor she wanted to fall asleep.

"Can you believe we beat a *god*?" she murmured, snuggled firmly into Tara's chest. "An actual god...I mean, well...*god*."

"Pretty amazing," Tara concurred sleepily against her hair. "I can still feel the hum in my fingers, from where we joined hands and dispersed that mob."

"Yeah," Willow nodded, planting a kiss on Tara's breast. "Where in the world did that spell come from?"

"I don't think it was *from* this world," Tara mused. "I think it came from a different place, a different reality from this one."

"Like Pittsburgh," Willow mumbled, before jerking back to wakefulness.

"Yeah, that must have been it." Tara's laugh rumbled through her, a delightful sound against Willow's ear.

Willow pulled back slightly to look at her beloved. "Baby, do you realize everything that's happened in the past few weeks? I mean, really--can you grasp it all?"

"You mean like my family showing up here for my birthday and me finding out that I didn't have any demon in me and Donnie coming back with news that our *father* had demon in him and me going home to find out that Dad wasn't really my father and that my mother had had an affair with his brother and that my uncle was my father and losing Mrs. Summers and learning that Dawn was a ball of mystical energy and finding out my aunt was *also* a mystical ball of energy as well as bisexual and deciphering a prophecy that helped us defeat a Hell God who wanted to use Dawn to get back home and wreak devastation on this and every other dimension?"

Willow blinked, twice, and then mumbled, "Uh, yeah...I think that about covers it."

Tara yawned. "Nope. Still trying to take it all in." She looked at Willow, and her half-smile was laced with sadness. "I think I'll be able to deal with the Hell God part before I make sense of everything I've learned about my family."

"About your family of *origin*," Willow clarified gently, slowly tracing her fingertips over Tara's lips and cheek.

"As long as I get to wake up next to you every day, I can handle it," Tara said softly.

"It's a deal," Willow replied, pulling Tara down for a kiss before nestling back into her arms.

"I can't believe how crazy it's been," Tara murmured. "And how *quickly* everything happened. I mean, it seems like every week there was some new drama."

"Yeah...Well, except for--" She hesitated. "Well, except for the last part. I mean, when we were in the Magic Box, right after Tanya figured out what the Venus reference meant...I know this sounds crazy, but it felt like we just *stood* there, in suspended animation, like, *forever*."

"No, you're not crazy. I noticed it too," Tara said, looking down at her with puzzled eyes. "I thought maybe it was just me. It felt like we were stuck to that spot for almost a *month*."

"Weird," Willow muttered, shaking her head. And then she was just too tired to move her head, and she dimly realized that she didn't have to; that she could rest, they could all rest, because the next day would come, and she was curled up next to Tara which meant that nothing too bad could happen.

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Time is a funny thing. It writes so forcefully upon our minds and souls, only to erase itself in a perpetual revision. And so the book is never finished, it seems.

When Willow had stood in front of the creaking tower, wrapped up in Tara's arms and finally letting herself believe they had all made it, she couldn't imagine that their life would ever return



to anything approximating normal. After everything that had happened, culminating in that apocalyptic show-down, surely everything within the foreseeable future would be viewed through the lens of that upheaval.

And yet, as certainly as night follows day, she and Tara were moving forward and treating each new day, each new experience, as singular in its own right. Classes were meaningful; exams were cause for anxiety; new demons were slain with old methods; old demons were slain with new love.

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They drove Beverly and Tanya to the airport, tearful with both sadness at the parting and relief that they were all alive, all still with the ones they loved.

"Do you have to go?" asked Tara, in a small voice, and Willow ached for her girl. *Family is so precious to her, and she's lost so much...*

"Yeah, unless we want to lose our calling as shapers of young minds," Tanya replied. "Our jobs have this funny thing about actually being around to *do* your job. Still not sure what that's about."

Tara managed a tiny smile, but Beverly turned to her, her own eyes shining, and took her hands.

"You've had more than your fair share of good-byes, Tara," she said gently. "This one's only temporary, I promise you." Then she pulled Tara into a fierce embrace, rocking slightly as tears rolled down both their faces.

Tanya had extracted a promise that they would come visit them. "We have a couple of good friends, Debra and Rachel; they're expecting a baby. You'd love them, and maybe they could give you some good information about becoming parents."

Beverly rolled her eyes. "She's always trying to swell the ranks." She grinned, and Willow knew beyond any doubt that she and Tara had the same smile.

On the way home from the airport, they stopped for mochas. "Two shots of espresso, please," Tara instructed the gangly youth who waited on them. Turning to Willow, she smiled and added, "In honor of my aunt, the caffeine addict."

Later that week, they were over at Giles for a Scooby meeting. "It's important we not become lax in the aftermath of Glory's defeat," the Watcher reminded them, seemingly unable to simply enjoy their success. "While we can all certainly take pride in a job most remarkably well done, we have to be cognizant of --" He paused as the phone rang.

"Yes? Oh, hello--yes, it *has* been a long time. What's that? Oh--yes, I see. Yes, of course I'll tell her. Right. So long, then." Hanging up, he turned to Buffy.

"That was Riley, spouting some rubbish about being left behind on one of your outings and then getting lost in some kind of inter-dimensional blank space where he was unable to move until this moment. Honestly, Buffy, I realize you're smitten with him but he doesn't always seem quite...*stable*."

Buffy only shrugged.

Binky had responded to the news of Glory's defeat with surprising restraint and good grace. Of course, that was largely due to the fact that he was utterly homeless and knew that any attempt to rejoin his clan would be greeted with disdain if not physical violence. In any event, he set about trying to convince Giles that he would make a wonderful butler.

"Surely, most illustriously British One, you know that my scraping and groveling are beyond compare. When it comes to obsequious sycophancy, you'd be hard-pressed to find anyone with my complete and utter lack of pride."

"Indeed," the Watcher muttered, "I'm hard-pressed even now not to be ill in the presence of your skills."

In the end, though, Giles decided that Binky would be better off elsewhere; certainly he himself would be. Over the minion's desperate pleas, Giles arranged for Binky to be given lodging in a very specialized establishment; a kind of demon halfway house, if you will.

"There now--buck up. You'll be just fine," Giles assured him as he pulled his arm out of Binky's grasp and backed out of the boarding house.

Dawn rebounded nicely from narrowly escaping both her own suicide and a god's attempt to cut her open and use her blood as a Greyhound bus back to Hell. Now she was trying to cope with something far more common, and far more profound--the loss of her mother. She and Buffy were relying heavily on each other, and Willow was heartened to see that the Slayer was letting her younger sister give support as well as receive it.

Dawn was still infatuated with Tara. She was trying mightily to act normal around her, but Willow knew that the teenager was struggling with her feelings. She also knew that she was mortified at having blurted out her affection, in the heat of that conversation in Tara's room, what felt like lifetimes ago.

"Maybe she'll just forget I said anything," Dawn said hopefully to Willow one evening while Tara was out picking up a movie.

"Sure...That might happen," Willow replied dutifully, knowing Tara was more likely to become a crack whore than forget something like that. But that information wouldn't help Dawn in her quest to stop blushing whenever Tara was around.

A month after their victory over Glory, Tara received another letter from Nathan. Cousin Beth was still living with them, cooking and cleaning. She was staying in Tara's old room; would Tara mind if Beth moved in a few of her things? Donnie was pretty quiet these days. Time was, Nathan would have worried he was up to something. Now, though, he just seemed to be tired a lot. Of course, there was always so much work to be done on the farm; it could wear out even a strapping boy like Donnie. Oh--and if Tara ever felt like writing, Nathan wouldn't mind hearing from her.

And Willow and Tara had made a quiet trip back to Cold Springs, where they had visited Tara's mother's grave.

She gazed at the marble tombstone, taking in the inscription: *Julia Anne Temple Maclay, Born Aug. 12, 1951, Died Sep. 2, 1997. Beloved Wife and Mother. "Be Ye Kind."*

"Is that a Bible verse?" she asked Tara, pointing to the phrase at the bottom.

"Yeah--it's from the gospel of Luke. Mom knew Dad wanted some kind of Scripture reference on both their tombstones; she made sure this was the one on hers. She said it was one part of the Bible that she had no argument with."

They stood in silence after that for what felt like a very long time. Willow simply held Tara's hand, knowing that her beloved knew she could talk when and if she needed to.

Finally, Tara turned to her, sadness rippling through the incredible blue eyes. "I just wish I could talk to her, Willow. There are so many things I need to ask her."

Willow wanted to jump in and reassure her, but she realized that that would serve her need, not Tara's. Instead, she said simply, "What would you ask her?"

Tara sighed, shaking her head. "Oh goddess...I'd ask her--I'd ask her *why*. Why she had the affair with Quinn, and why in God's name she dragged her son with her when she did. And I'd ask her if she still thought she had demon in her when she died, and if she truly loved Donnie." Tears slipped down her cheeks, clung to her lashes.

After a moment, Willow said tentatively, "I wish you could, Baby; I wish you could ask her all those questions and everything else you thought of. And I wish you could tell her everything you'd like to tell her." She hesitated, then went on. "But Tara, no matter what you found out--would it change the mother she was to you? Really? I'm not saying that what she did was OK; it's just that...Tara, she loved you so much. I can hear it in how you talk about her. Even your dad--Nathan...When we were there, and he was talking about her, he said so. And yeah, I wish Donnie had had that kind of love, but that wasn't your fault. Your mom wasn't perfect, Baby; but it seems like she did a whole lot of stuff *right*, too." Then she fell silent, fearing that she had perhaps said too much.

Tara, though, simply leaned against her shoulder. "Whatever else she did, she was a wonderful mother to me," she whispered. "And as much as it hurts, knowing what she did, I can't bring myself to judge her; I don't *want* to." Gazing at her mother's headstone, she whispered, "Maybe the goddess made sure I didn't find out about this until I could handle it...Until you were here, to help me make sense of it." When she turned to look at Willow, there was a tiny, sad smile hovering about her lips.

"I can go with that interpretation," Willow said softly, feeling her heart slide and tumble and stretch itself yet again to make more room for this woman who was her mate and her best purpose.

"Let's make a promise, though, OK?"

"Anything," Willow replied, and meant it.

"Our children will never, ever wonder if their parents love them; and they will never, ever doubt that their parents love each *other*, and belong together, completely and eternally."

Willow tried to speak, but found that the lump in her throat wouldn't let her. So she settled for nodding, not trying to stop the tears that were edging down her face and tickling the corners of her mouth. She leaned forward, resting her forehead against Tara's, and they stood like that for several minutes.

And then Tara pulled back, just slightly, and took Willow's hand, and together they turned away from the grave and walked back toward their future.

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**THE END**

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