

Chapter 1

Giles walked up to her where she sat at the table in the Magic Box with an uncharacteristic caution.

“Anya?”

“Yes?”

“Just... um, speaking... hypothetically... when you were a vengeance demon... did you ever, um, well... That is, did a woman ever wish...”

“Obviously this has something to do with sex, so just say it already, really, you’re not going to shock me.”

“It’s not about... well, I suppose it sort of is about...” He brought himself up short, girding his loins, and said, “Did you ever make a man, um, pregnant?”

“Oh sure. Heck, I thought you were actually going to say something weird. That was the number one wish among spurned pregnant women.”

Giles paled a few more degrees. Anya tossed her magazine aside and stood up, since this seemed to be one of those conversations better had standing.

“And given that you said hypothetically, that must mean that you think you are Pregnant.”

“Oh, good lord,” Giles said, swayed, and then plopped down into the chair Anya had just vacated. Ok, so maybe this was a sitting-down conversation after all. She sat, in one of the other chairs, and squirmed uncomfortably for a moment. No fair, why did he get her chair? This one was cold.

Oh, he was distressed, right, cleaning his glasses with vigor. Anya reluctantly shifted into comforting-friend mode, wanting to get back to her reading, and patted his knee awkwardly.

“There, there.”

Giles leveled a deep, glowery glare over the tops of his newly-reseated glasses.

“I hardly think ‘there, there’ covers it, Anya.”

Anya sighed. So, comforting wasn’t the correct option after all. She would just never understand all this nonsense. She grabbed her magazine and pointedly began reading again.

After a few minutes, Giles cleared his throat softly, and Anya looked up again. The thunder was completely gone from his face... in fact, he now looked... well, sort of... fluffy, in point of fact, holding his glasses in one curled hand that rested lightly against his lips and sort of peering up at her from behind his lashes.

“These, er, men... what... what exactly... well, became of them?”

Resigned, she set aside her magazine again.

“Well, mostly they died. You know, male bodies not really being designed to, you know, grow infants.”

His eyebrows crawled up a notch or two and he said, “Hmph,” softly.

“It really depends on the spell, of course,” she continued quickly, “I mean, if you are pregnant, well, something magical had to have caused it, so it really all depends on what it was and what the caster intended. I, of course, never really intended those back-stabbing liars to

survive. I mean, a painful death was pretty much the point, but, you know, if someone *did* want you to live, well, it's entirely possible, I suppose. Although, probably not at all comfortable... So, who do you think knocked you up?"

It just never ceased to amaze her how quickly that man could go from looking as shy and contrite as a lost puppy to murderous.

"Well," she commented mildly, "You're certainly getting the mood swings."

And just as he opened his mouth to protest, the bell over the Magic Shop door jingled and Buffy bounced in with a cheerful, "Hi guys!" and then saw them and immediately transitioned to cautious alarm, "Uh oh, badness, what's up?"

Before Giles could waste half their too-short mortal lives stammering, Anya said, "Giles thinks he's pregnant."

Beside her, Giles dropped his glasses on the table and buried his face in his hands. Buffy just stared, mouth open, for a long time, before she suddenly snapped it shut, then turned to Giles and yelled, "You WHAT?"

"Buffy..."

"Oh, nonono, Watcher-mine, don't 'Buffy' me. I *said,* 'you what?'"

"This is all purely... baseless... speculation at this point," Giles said, briefly going back to Ripper-mode to directing a poisonous glare Anya's way, "But... um... well... I've... been experiencing certain... symptoms..."

"Symptoms?"

Buffy tossed her bag under the table and sat down in the chair on the other side of Giles, leaning towards him intently.

"Uh... yes..."

"Such as?"

"Well, um... morning nausea, strange cravings... um, mood swings..." he glared at Anya again, clearly daring her to comment. So she did.

"Oh, yes, he's definitely having mood swings."

"But, Giles, that hardly qualifies as enough to jump straight to... um... you know... I mean, hey, I'm even a *girl* and that wouldn't--"

"I can feel it," he said, suddenly. "It's nothing... physical, exactly, I just... well, and there's..."

He paused for a long time, looking off in to the middle distance thoughtfully. Then, he drew something out of his pocket and laid it on the table.

"... this."

A home pregnancy test. It was positive.

After a protracted pause, during which Anya resumed reading her magazine, Buffy stared, and Giles pretended not to exist, Buffy finally spoke again.

"Oh. Um. Hey. Congratulations?"

* * *

"Ok. Ok, putting aside all the sense this *doesn't* make... would that test thingy even work on a- a- pregnant guy? And also... No, there's too much also. I can't even cover all the alsos. I'm lost. I give up. Willow's checking out for a little while."

And she did, thumping down into a chair at the table and getting a spaced-out look in her eyes. Tara patted her hand gently, and shot a sympathetic look over at Giles.

"I-I guess this must be, p-pretty shocking for you, too, huh, Mr. Giles?"

Giles's head lifted just a bit, but he didn't really look at her.

"Hmm?" he said, mildly.

Buffy rolled her eyes and threw up her hands.

"Hello? Is anyone at this table actually coherent?"

Anya gestured in the affirmative with a twitch of her magazine, and Tara shyly raised her hand. Xander stared at Giles. He looked vaguely like something in his brain might have broken.

Buffy rolled her eyes again, and tossed in a heavy sigh for good measure.

"I'm coherent!" Willow said, after an extended pause.

"Uh huh."

"No, no. I am," she said. "Really. Back with the program. Ok. Thinking now."

“Thank god,” Buffy said, and sat down at the table. Thinking was not her strong suit. At least, not this kind of non-tactical thinking, and she was beginning to fear she may have had to do some.

But it was ok now, because Willow was thinking. Leaning forward, with her elbows on the table and her chin resting on her hands.

“Oh. Oh, of course. Demon! It must be a demon, right?”

“Well,” Buffy said, “Yeah. I mean. Of course. Duh. Why didn’t anyone think of this before now? I mean, I just kind of assumed we’d already rejected that hypothesis. Giles?”

“Hmm?” Giles said.

Buffy looked at him.

“On second thought, I think maybe hypothesis has about three too many syllables for Giles right now. Geez, Giles, if you’re going to be like this for the next nine months, I’m gonna have to hire a new Watcher.”

“What?” he said.

“Never mind,” she said, and patted his shoulder sympathetically.

“So, ok,” Willow said, looking more non-shocky by the moment, “The demon idea. Not previously explored then?”

“I’d guess no.”

“Ok! I’m on it!” Willow said, and dragged over a book.

* * *

Five hours and a pizza (ordered by Buffy since Xander still hadn’t quite regained his wits) later, they had their suspects all line up. Willow looked with satisfaction over the list and nodded to herself. Ok. So, chances were good this was a demon thing. Now, if she could just get poor Giles coherent enough to see if any of these guy’s modus operandi’s checked out, they’d be in business. Most of these demons came with a relatively simple exorcism ritual. No fuss, no muss.

She knocked gently on the training room door and then slipped through it, shutting it behind her. It was dark. Giles was sitting on one of the mats in the far corner, leaning back against the wall, with one knee drawn up, and his arm resting on it, a glass of something dangling from his hand.

“Hey!” she said, brightly but cautiously, “Uh, so, we, uh, did the research thing. How... how are you doing?”

She dropped down to sit cross-legged facing him. He raised his head, looked at her for a moment, and then dropped it back down.

“Not good, huh?” she said. “Hey, it’s ok. Look, you think you’re up to looking over this list? Seeing if any of these sound like. Well. You know, your... guy? Or- or possibly girl! Several of them are actually-”

“Ethan,” he said.

“Uh. Ethan? What about-”

He set aside his drink, and rubbed both hands over his face, and then left them there, as though he couldn’t face her as he spoke.

“I- A few weeks ago, I- I...” he dropped his hands to his sides, and said, “slept with Ethan.”

Ho-kay. Apparently she was not the only one around here who was Gay Now. Or... Gay Already, as the case may be.

“Uh...” she said, “But, isn’t he in prison?”

Giles huffed a soft laugh.

“No prison in the world could hold Ethan. Chaos loves him far too much.”

“Um, but... well, it might not have been... him. I mean, a lot of these guys have, have the succubus thing going on. Shapeshifting-”

“It was Ethan. I’ve seen succubi. They aren’t that convincing. Not to anyone who knows anything.”

“Ok, why are you going and having, having... sex with... he’s a bad guy!” she said, with righteous indignation.

“The day there’s a label for Ethan, is the day labels really do lose all meaning.”

“But... But, he’s a guy!” she said, trying again, with not-so-righteous indignation.

“And? Do you think you hold the copyright?”

There was something not quite right about his eyes.

“Giles! Are you drunk?”

He blinked at her.

“Um. Perhaps a bit.”

She was shocked.

“Giles! Shame on you! Alcohol! Bad for the baby!”

He stared.

“Baby...” she continued, “which is... probably a demon, ok. But still!”

He sighed.

“Give me the list.”

She did, and he scanned it for awhile. Finally, he handed it back, shaking his head.

“Nothing.”

He leaned back against the wall and hugged himself, a perfect picture of traumatized dejection. She reached out and laid her hand on his knee in what she hoped was a comforting gesture.

“Ok, then. So, maybe it’s just a really, really good illusion. Or... even a demon we haven’t found yet. I mean, it’s... it’s probably not a real baby. That... that just seems... unlikely. And why on earth would Ethan want to... you know? I mean, generally, one tries to... avoid that kind of thing.”

“Well. Ethan always did have a... rather twisted sense of... whimsy.”

He fell silent, staring down at his feet and looking quietly desperate. For a long time, Willow didn’t really know what to say. But she really felt like she should say something. In fact, she knew what she needed to say. But she wasn’t quite sure how to phrase it. But then, she never really thought before speaking, anyway, and generally, she did manage to get her point across. So, what the heck.

“Giles... I... I’m sure this is something Hellmouthy. I mean, it *is* something Hellmouthy, obviously. But... I mean, *and*... and I’m sure we’ll fix this, ok?” She took a deep breath, “But if... if we can’t... or, or if this, like... IS a... a real baby... which, which it probably isn’t! But... if it is... you know we’re all here for you, right?”

Ok, and now came the breathless waiting, hoping against hope that whatever she’d said would make some form of sense. And then, Giles’s hand, the one that was braced on the mat beside her, slipped a fraction of an inch closer to her and turned over, held towards her, invitingly palm up.

Silently, she laid her own hand in his, and squeezed gently.

“Thank you,” he said, softly.

Chapter 2

A few fruitless days later, Willow was sitting in front of her laptop in Giles's apartment, surfing the web. It was still winter break, so she didn't really have anything else to do. And besides, to be honest, Giles had been a bit... needy the past few days. She'd cooked dinner for them tonight, and even managed to make something that tasted good and not at all burnt. And now, here they were, researching again. Researching Glory. Well. Actually, Giles was researching Glory. Willow was researching... babies.

"So... when you say weeks, like, how many weeks are we talking here?"

Giles twisted around on the couch and looked back at her.

"I'm sorry?" he said.

"How many weeks since you and Ethan... you know?"

"Oh. Um." He frowned a little. "Is it relevant?"

"Uh. Well, maybe."

The website had cute little pastel storks all over it. And smiling babies. Willow had to admit to herself that she was fairly enamored.

"Um. Not so much weeks, I suppose." He seemed to think for a moment, then said, "Actually, if I recall correctly it was sometime in early September."

"September?" she yelped.

"Er. Yes. Why? Is there a problem?"

"Well, no. I mean. I just mean... you've been, you know, pregnant for... for four months and you didn't even, like, realize it?"

"Well, honestly, it wasn't exactly the first thing that sprang to mind."

He glowered and turned pointedly back to his book. Willow sighed. *Bad, Willow,* she thought to herself, *he doesn't need you ragging on him. Bad enough what Xander and Buffy are putting him through. Thank god at least Spike doesn't know...* Willow shuddered at the very idea.

She gently closed her laptop, walked into the living room, and sat down on the couch beside him.

"Sorry," she said.

He set his book aside and turned towards her, pulling off his glasses and beginning to polish them as he spoke.

"Well, it wasn't that I... didn't notice, precisely. I just... believed it was middle age finally catching up to me, I suppose. You know, aching back, and... well. Other things. And, of course..."

He put his glasses back on and looked down at his stomach, rubbed a hand over it absently.

"Yeah," Willow said, "I mean, I didn't want to say anything, but... you have... put on a little weight."

He looked up at her ruefully.

"My girlish figure will never be the same."

Stuck by the unexpected humor, Willow broke down in giggles. To her surprise, Giles joined in.

They quieted after a moment or two, then looked at each other.

And cracked up.

For a good five minutes, they were both completely swept up in it, and by the time they finally got ahold of themselves, they were leaning on each other and gasping, with tears running down their cheeks.

“Ok, ok,” Willow gasped. “Not that funny.”

She giggled, then clamped her hand over her mouth.

Which made Giles giggle. Then, he cleared his throat and tried to look serious.

“God, I needed that.”

She felt a sudden surge of tenderness for him, and said, softly, “Good.” And then, a beat later, she said, “So, did you say backaches?”

“Oh. Um. Yes.”

“How about the barfiness? Is that a problem?”

“Uh. No, no, not now. Nausea was an issue for awhile there, but... I assumed it was the flu.”

“Well, the website I was looking at did say that would settle down in the second trimester.”

He shot her a hard look, and she “eeped” softly inside.

“Website?”

“Uh. Well. Yeah. You know. About... pregnancy.”

“Magically-induced pregnancy, I assume?” he said, and there was a dangerous edge to his voice and glint in his eye. Willow inched back a bit.

“Um. No. No, just the normal kind.”

Oh dear, the glasses were off again.

“There is nothing normal about this, Willow.”

“I- I know that. But... Giles... haven’t you even considered that maybe this is-”

“No.”

He wasn’t looking at her now. He was sitting with his back stiff and straight, and glaring across the room as though the fireplace had slighted him.

“Well... maybe... maybe you should. I mean, there’s a chance, small as it is, that this is... a baby, Giles. What are you going to do if it is?”

He stood up and walked over to one of the bookcases, fingering the worn leather spines.

“I can’t have a child, Willow. The thought alone is ludicrous. I- I’m a forty-six-year-old single man who fights demons for a living.”

“Well, yeah. But... you own a shop. You’re either there or at home a lot. You have time, Giles. And you have us. You know we’d help.”

“Thank you, Willow. But it’s not a point that is up for debate.”

She watched as his idle fingering of the books changed to active searching, and he picked one off the shelf and proceeded to sit down with it in the armchair. Ok, so, maybe she’d known it was dumb to think about it. Giles’s baby. Because, first of all, it probably wasn’t even real. And, also, it was silly, and girly, anyway, to wonder whether it would have his eyes. Or be all smart like him when it grew up.

Still, she was a little disappointed, if she were really being honest with herself.

* * *

Buffy pounced as soon as she saw him walk into the busy hospital hallway, all decked out as usual in his blue scrubs and stethoscope, holding a clipboard and clicking a retractable pen.

“Hi! Ben! I need to talk to you!”

He stopped, and smiled, sticking the pen behind the clip on the board.

“Hi, Buffy. How’s your mom doing?”

“Oh, she’s doing great. Look, is there, like, somewhere private we can talk?”

“Uh...” he looked around, “Well, the locker room’s usually pretty empty. Come on.”

She followed, growing more nervous with every step. Ok, so, it had taken a *lot* of

convincing to get Giles to go for this plan in the first place, but Willow had been insistent, and they all, even Giles, knew better than to argue with Willow. Right now, though, Buffy was beginning to wonder if maybe he'd been right all along about the badness of this idea.

Then, well before she was ready, she and Ben were both sitting at a small table in the doctor's locker room.

"So, here we are, in private. What can I do for you?"

Buffy took a deep breath, and folded her hands on the table in front of her.

"Um. This... is gonna sound a little crazy. A lot crazy, actually."

Ben smiled.

"No problem. I deal with a lot of crazy people in my line of work. Give me your best shot."

Oh, god, this was such a bad idea. She was gonna kill Willow.

"This guy, that I know... well. Is kinda."

Long pause. Ticking clock. Odd look from Ben.

"Kinda... pregnant."

Ok, really odd look from Ben.

"Um. When you say 'guy,' you're just meaning, like, person, here, right? As in a... female person."

"Um. See, that's the thing. No."

"No."

Think Buffy, think!

"It's a- government experiment! Gone... wrong. And... cruelly abandoned."

"Ah. Right... and I suppose your friend, the one with the really bad tachycardia, was part of a government experiment too, huh?"

"Uh. Well. Actually... yes. But don't tell anyone!"

"You guys seem to have a lot of run-ins with government experimenters, don't you?"

"Look, that's really not the point. The point is... He needs help. You know, like, medical help. But... we need to keep it quiet."

There was another one of those long pauses Buffy despised so much. Then, finally, Ben said, "Ok."

"What?"

"Ok."

"Wait, is that an ok as in 'I'll help you,' or an ok as in, 'you really are one of those ever-popular crazy people.'"

He smiled a little.

"It's an 'ok, I'll help you.'"

"Oh. Oh! That's great!"

But she was still going to kill Willow. Just on principle.

"Yeah. I mean, I don't want to get into too much detail, but I know a thing or two about secrets that need keeping. And being a little out of the ordinary. So, uh, how far along is... he?"

"I still don't like this," Giles was muttering, and yet, he continued to drive along the darkened Sunnydale streets towards the hospital, a week and a half after that day in the Magic Box. Xander watched the show from where he sat, crammed in the backseat with Willow and Anya. Not that that was a bad place to be crammed, of course.

"Well, I don't care, Giles," Buffy said, "Do you know how weird it was telling this guy I barely know that this other guy I know is *pregnant*? Come on, Giles. Make my trauma worthwhile, ok?"

"*Your* trauma?" Giles said, "Excuse me, but I think--"

"Oh, get over yourself. All you're going to have to do is show up and lie there."

Xander couldn't resist the urge to chip in: "Oh, no, you're forgetting, Buffy. He gets to lie there half-naked after drinking about a hundred glasses of water while some random guy probes his innards."

The car stopped rather unnecessarily abruptly for a red light. Willow was sighing deeply, in that disapproving way she had.

“Aw, come on Will,” he said, for the thousandth time that week, “We’re just joking around.”

“It’s not funny, Xander,” she muttered.

By the time they’d reached the hospital, and were walking into one of the side doors, Giles and Buffy had been reduced to simply glaring eloquently at one another, and Willow was shooting Xander looks of death if he so much as opened his mouth. She was very touchy lately.

“Hey, Willow, what’s with the attitude? Giles is the one who’s-”

“Shh!” Willow hissed, but as it turned out, the man who was walking down the hall towards them was actually Ben, anyway, so it was all right.

“Hey,” Ben said. “I see you brought the whole gang along. I hope you guys can be stealthy.”

“Oh, it’s all right,” Anya spoke up, “None of them are speaking to each other right now, anyway. We’ll be very quiet.”

“So, wait,” Ben said, peering at them through the dimness of the hall, which was lit only by a few fluorescent emergency lights. “Which one of you is-”

He was pointing between Xander and Giles. Xander wondered what he was talking about. Then, he realized.

“What? No! No! Him! Not me!”

Ok, now Giles *and* Willow were giving him death glares. Wonderful.

“Yes, it’s me,” Giles said, sounding tired.

“Right. Ok. Right this way.”

All the way down the hall, Xander kept thinking to himself, *no! not me! I could never be-!* And then it occurred to him, suddenly, briefly, in a way it never had before, that Giles must kind of be feeling exactly the same way. Only, in Giles’s case... he was. Xander felt his brow furrow as this thought churned around his brain.

Luckily, though, before it could really settle in, Ben brought the whole group to a halt by turning around to face them and raising his arms, like an elementary school crossing guard. They were right outside of the only open door on the whole darkened hallway, and yellow light was spilling out from the opening.

“Ok. Before we go in, I have to tell you. I brought someone else in on this.”

“What?” Giles, Buffy, and Willow all said at the same time.

Ben made the “don’t walk” sign again, and said, quickly, “I trust her, all right? I got her to go over the ultrasound technique with me, and it was just too complicated for me to learn this quickly. So. She doesn’t know who you are. You can walk out now, if you really want to. But... I think you really shouldn’t.”

Giles only considered a few minutes before giving in with a sighed, “What the hell. I’m already here. Let’s do this.”

And so they all trooped into the room, and Ben shut the door behind them. The nurse that Ben had enlisted was an oldish woman, with a seen-it-all expression on her face. And, being a nurse on a Hellmouth, she no doubt had. She just gave Giles a kind of tired, but mostly friendly smile, and launched into a rapid-fire recitation of instructions that Xander completely tuned out in favor of gazing at Anya for a little while. Because gazing at Anya never got old.

By the time he reeled himself back out of his happy place, Giles was lying on the table with his shirt pulled up. There was some kind of clear goo all over his stomach and the nurse was running a medical gadget over it. This was the moment of truth.

Xander followed everyone else’s gazes to the little screen next to the nurse and saw...

A pulsating mass of black and white.

“Eww,” he said, “What’s that?”

Ben chuckled.

“Nothing yet, really. She’s just getting oriented.”

“Oh.”

He found Willow, fully expecting to be on the receiving end of yet another glare, and prepared to take it like a man, but at the moment, Willow seemed completely enthralled by the nothing on the screen. And she was standing right next to Giles. And... holding his hand.

Weird.

“Oh!” she said, suddenly, and her eyes lit up.

The nurse smiled at her, a much more genuine smile, this time.

“Good eye, young lady,” she said, and Xander looked back at the screen. He still didn’t see anything. And then, the image shifted a bit, and he *did* see. A hand. A little hand... with fingers.

“Whoa,” he said. “That’s...”

“A hand, yes,” the nurse said, and froze the image. “And here’s an arm, and a little bit of leg,” she added, running her finger along the curve of human-shaped stuff on the screen.

A baby. It was a real baby. He stared, distantly aware that his mouth was probably hanging open, as the images flashed by on the screen... a spine, a ribcage, a head, two feet... a little heart that was pumping away wildly.

“Everything seems perfectly in order, Mr. Giles,” the nurse was saying, “In fact, if you weren’t here in front of me, and all I had was this ultrasound, I’m not sure if I would pick up on anything out of the ordinary at all. Were you born a hermaphrodite?”

“Most certainly not!” Giles said, half-sitting up in protest. The image vanished from the screen until the nurse got him settled back down.

“Sorry, but I had to ask. This is just simply remarkable. And you don’t even have any surgical scarring. How-”

“I don’t know,” Giles said, in his this-conversation-is-over voice.

The nurse was looking at the baby on the screen again.

“I’d say you’re about sixteen weeks along. I could tell you the gender, if you’d like?”

“Ooo! Really?” Willow said.

“No,” Giles said, at the same time.

The nurse smiled again, apparently quite warmed up to them by now.

“Want to be surprised, then, do you?”

Giles was looking at a painting that was hanging on the far wall, and Xander realized he had hardly even glanced at the screen the whole time.

“No. I want to terminate as soon as possible.”

“What!” Buffy yelped.

“Huh?” Xander said.

Willow just looked kind of sadly resigned.

“Why?” Anya said, “I mean, it’s small and ill-proportioned, but it is oddly attractive. I’d want one.”

Ok, that wasn’t good. Xander looked over at her and his heart clenched in pure terror at the way she was making doe-eyes at the monitor. Ben was saying something, probably something important, but fear had a very detrimental effect on his hearing. Anya gave him a strange look, and said, “What?”

“Nothing,” he said, and looked back over at Giles and the others quickly.

“It’s going to take major abdominal surgery to get it out, in any case,” Giles was saying, “What difference does it make when you do it?”

“All I’m saying,” Ben said, “Is that it would be hard to keep it quiet. I’d say odds are pretty good that somewhere along the line, something would get out about this. Give me some time, and maybe I can find a way around that.”

“How much time do I have?”

“At least a couple of weeks.”

“All right.”

Chapter 3

The fact that he agreed with hardly any protests to her suggestion that she stay with him that night only proved to Willow how off-balance he was. Even now, walking into his apartment, he looked tired and pale and older than his years. He was walking with a bit of a weave, and took two tries to get his coat properly hung on the rack. It wasn't late, by their standards, only just past ten-thirty, but even she was feeling like it was more like three-thirty in the morning. She could only imagine how Giles was feeling.

He'd stopped somewhere around his desk, and was looking around the apartment as though he wasn't quite sure what to do with himself. Willow hung up her jacket and set aside the overnight bag she'd packed and walked over to him.

No point in asking if he was ok, and she doubted he'd want to talk about it, so, instead, she said, "I was just planning on doing the newspaper crossword puzzle tonight. You wanna help, maybe?"

He looked down at the desk, furrowed his brow and picked up one of the books there, glanced at the spine and set it back down before he really acknowledged her.

"Uh. Thank you, Willow, but... I think I'd really rather just lie down, maybe do a little light reading before bed."

"Ok. I understand. Oh, but, hey! Could I at least give you that back rub I was thinking of offering a few days ago before we got sidetracked by arguing?"

He looked a bit doubtful.

"Aww, come on, it's just a back rub. You said your back was hurting. You know you want to."

She grinned at him and waggled her eyebrows, and he slowly smiled back. It was just a small smile, but it was a victory.

"Actually, that would be wonderful. Are you sure you don't mind?"

"Not a bit."

It wasn't until she had him upstairs, face down and shirtless on his bed that the first twinge of doubt really hit her. She hadn't anticipated doubt. Doubt had not even been on the radar. Or... on the gaydar, possibly. But then, as she'd scooted onto the bed and curled her legs up under herself to sit beside him, and really looked at him for the first time, that was when it all began to get a little complicated.

Because, ok, downstairs it had all been about helping a friend who was in a weird place and had a sore back. Up here, it was suddenly about... Giles. Half-naked. Lying on a bed. All relaxed with his head pillowed on his crossed arms and the lamp beside the bed casting this soft warm light over his really *nice* back and making him look like... Like something *way* too touchable. Because, hey, not that she was meaning to be repetitive, but she was totally gay now. In love with a girl. And very fond of breasts, which Giles, in spite of his current state, definitely did *not* have.

In spite of her new misgivings, she leaned forward and laid her hands on the back of his neck. His skin was warm. And soft. He grunted very softly as she began to rub his neck. She

bit her lip, and tried to concentrate on just working the knots out of his tense muscles.

Everything was quiet in the apartment, and even outside, like the whole world was holding its breath. Or maybe like she was too distracted to notice anything else. Because all she could hear were the sounds Giles was making: soft moans and sighs and grunts. It very much didn't slip her notice that those were the exact kind of sounds Giles might make if they were in a far more... intimate sort of situation. Ok, they were also kind of like the sounds he occasionally made while fencing. But now they were in a bed and she was touching his bare skin, and the context was way, way, way different.

And it was kinda turning her on.

She'd once heard someone say that 95 percent of all back rubs lead to sex. It didn't seem like a very logical statistic, probably one that would fall under that joking category of 57.8 percent of all statistics being made up on the spot, but still, when his hips shifted and bumped her knee after she'd dug into a particularly bad spot along his spine, she had some distinctly not-gay kinda feelings.

So she'd had a crush on him in high school. And he was really sexy when he sang. And he looked *good* in those nice Magic-Box-owner suits. And his eyes were such a pretty color. And he was smart. And he's always treated her like an equal, right from the start. She really loved that about him.

He was practically purring under her hands now, pressing up into her knuckles as she leaned forward to put her weight into kneading the small of her back.

"Oh, that's good," he said, his voice kind of shaky and dripping with pure, sensual pleasure, and ok, he *never* said *that* while he was fencing, at least not in anything *like* that tone of voice.

She pulled her hands away and sat back on her heels.

He hitched himself up on one elbow and looked back over his shoulder at her. His eyes were shuttered, half-closed, rings of jade around pools of darkness, and she knew that waxing poetical about eyes was one of the leading signs that she was really in a whole lotta trouble.

"Willow?" he said.

Apparently he had as much faith in her gayness as she'd had up until just a while ago. Except, here he was, living proof that maybe things weren't always so clear-cut, what with Ethan and Jenny and Olivia.

When she didn't answer, he sat up, facing her, with one knee drawn up and hugged in his bare arms. He somehow managed to look relaxed and content and ruffled and concerned all at the same time. It was endearing. And adorable. And sexy.

Damn it.

"Everything all right?"

And of course everything was not all right. Everything was very bad. And she was beginning to wonder if maybe this would always happen to her. Things would get good, and then she'd sabotage everything by falling for someone else. Because, things were good with Tara right now. Amazingly good. Better than anything.

But Giles had felt so good under her hands. And she'd just realized that the reason he was sitting in that awkward position was probably because he was hoping she wouldn't notice that he had an erection.

Ok, and now, in addition to coming up with some sort of coherent reply to his inquiry before he decided she'd lost her mind, she also had to find some way to pretend she wasn't staring at his bare chest.

"Uh," she said.

That really wouldn't do it. She mentally gave herself a good hard kick upside the head.

"Nothing," she said, looking up. "So... uh. Is that any better?"

He continued to look doubtful for a moment, and she cringed inside, waiting to be questioned again, but then, he just let it go, and his expression broke into a small smile.

"Yes, thank you. I feel like a new man."

"Well good. Not that I didn't like the old man. He was just a little, you know, cranky and pained-looking."

Giles laughed gently at that, and when he looked back up, their eyes met, and then, instead of flicking off somewhere else, it was like their gazes got tangled up somewhere between them, and they couldn't quite pull them away.

This was bad. This was dangerous. It had been bad enough when it had been just her, having naughty wrong thoughts. Now there was this intense, unbreakable gazing thing. The kind of thing that takes two people. Oh, this was very bad. She was having more flashbacks to senior year and Xander, but they weren't helping to clarify anything. They were just making her feel guilty and confused and kind of helpless.

Giles got himself untangled first, looking away sharply and reaching for his glasses.

"Ah, well, I- I believe I should, um, get some sleep."

"Oh. Yeah. Ok. I'll. I'll be down on the couch. You know. If you need anything. Not that you're, you know, incapable or anything, but--"

"Yes," he said, mercifully cutting her rambling short, "Thank you, Willow."

But he touched her hand as he said it, and it made her shiver.

She slunk back downstairs to the couch they'd made up with sheets and a pillow. She slept restlessly that night, and dreamed of green eyes and male hands.

Chapter 4

He was making no headway. Damn Glory, whatever she was. He turned the page of the book, but there was nothing but more frustration on the next page. He sighed and looked up.

It was dark in his apartment. Darker than usual. Darker than it should be. He stood up from his desk slowly, pushed the chair in and stepped away. The light from the desk lamp was a hazy golden halo in a dark mist, pushing weakly against the blackness. He looked around, and the angles were wrong, the stairway tilting off not-quite-right.

Something was there. Watching him. He could hear it. Feel it. It had a heartbeat, and it had magic, and it was out there, beyond the pitch black window panes. His own breath was loud in his ears as he backed slowly towards the kitchen, and then the wall was solid against his side, and he hung against it, feeling the slow, dumb terror of a hunted animal, feeling the pressure of the thing. Watching him. Waiting.

With a start, he pulled away from the wall, backing up again, down the hall, because to show his back to it would be the biggest mistake he could make.

Away from the desk lamp, in the shadows of the hall, the darkness was purer. Deeper. Like the gut of a dragon. The hall suddenly seemed miles long, and the only light was a faraway glimmer, hopelessly distant. He felt his heart beating harder, and it was cold, and he trembled.

It was closer now.

He fought monsters. He had fought them all his life.

But he had no weapons to fight this one. He reached out to touch the wall, and it seemed he was reaching through a deep cavern, feeling a cold cave-breeze on his arm. Then he felt it. The wall. But it was different. Cool and slick and smooth. He turned to it with a start, pulling his hand away.

Someone stared back at him.

He flailed away, panic crushing his chest.

And then realized he was seeing himself. A mirror.

Drawn, he stepped closer again. All was black now, everywhere around him, an infinity of dark space, except the mirror, glimmering faintly, and his own reflection, reaching up as he did to touch his fingers through the cold glass.

Then, behind him in the reflection, something moved in the darkness. It was like a deep-sea fish, moving sluggishly, blindly. It was pale, white on black, and fleshy, and it shifted and changed and pulsed softly, and he knew that was It. The Thing. He stared, in horror, and could not move, watching it. It was formless, and it was meant to be. But it didn't want to be. It wanted to be something. And so it changed, slowly, like clay molding itself. First an arm. Then a foot. Then a head. Each of these in turn, as though it wanted to be human, but since it couldn't see, it couldn't understand what that was. Couldn't grasp the totality.

He breathed out, slowly, and saw his breath as a white cloud in the cold.

It heard him.

There was no time to run. No way to stop it.

It started as warmth. Unthreatening, almost, if taken out of context. Just a solid curling

of heat in his gut. But it grew. Slowly, slowly, the temperature rising, a painful shock against the chill of the air. He gasped harshly, and his hand, slick with sweat, skidded along the mirror.

He whispered denial into the darkness, but nothing answered. Nothing changed. The heat curled tighter inside of him, and he could feel it, settling in there, making a nest from his innards. His hand slipped from the mirror and he dropped to his knees, as it tugged something inside him, and the heat flared unbearably. Cold sweat beaded on his brow.

“NO!” he shouted.

And then its claws ripped him open from the inside out.

* * *

Giles awoke already half-sitting up, with one hand clutched to his stomach. The dream was still wrapped around him like the tangled sheets.

Slowly, his heartbeat began to slow, and his panting calmed to slow breaths.

His hand was still pressed to his abdomen.

Just before he pulled it away, he felt it.

Something inside of him moved.

* * *

Willow looked up at a sound, and startled at the sight of Giles coming down the stairs.

“Oh. Giles. Hey. Did I wake you?” she said, looking guiltily at her midnight (or more like 4 AM) snack of crackers and peanut butter. She’d only turned on the light over the kitchen sink. She didn’t think that was enough light to-

“No, no, not at all. I just. Um. Bad dream.”

He was in a T-shirt and boxers, practically naked by his usual standards, and she felt an uncomfortable twinge of interest, which was quickly superseded by concern. He looked out of sorts, and was rubbing his stomach with one hand in a less-than-idle manner. Funny, now that she knew, how obvious it was. She wondered how she’d missed it. Must be that good old Sunnydale repression at work.

“Uh. Can I get you anything?”

He turned on the desk lamp. Then the lamp by the couch.

“No, that’s quite all-”

He stopped, mid-sentence, and held perfectly still, his head tilted slightly to one side, his hand motionless and pressed flat on his abdomen.

“Giles? You ok?” she asked.

He blinked, then moved his hand down to his side.

“Yes. I- I-” he paused, then said, “It’s... moving.”

“Oh wow! That’s so-” she stumbled to a quick halt, “So... strange?” she offered hopefully, and got a tiny smile in response.

“Very strange. One could even go so far as to say exceedingly strange.”

He sat down on the stool beside hers and cast a longing glance at the Scotch, but didn’t move to pour any.

“Peanut butter cracker?” she said, holding one in his direction.

He waved it off. For awhile, they sat beside each other quietly. He was staring at the countertop. She was staring at him.

She wanted to touch him so much. Even just his arm, or his shoulder. Her crackers sat there, forgotten. He was so unclothed at the moment. Bare, pale arms, one resting on the counter, the other on his knee. Which was also bare. And fuzzy. And even his feet were bare, down there in the shadows. He had long, guy-like toes.

Just a whole lotta Giles skin, really. Right next to her. So close she could almost feel his heat. Smell a trace of his sweat. Sense the aura of his magic. It tasted like ozone and summer rain.

His jaw was stubbly.

“You think I’m making a mistake,” he said, softly, and his voice was a bit rough from sleep.

“Huh?” she said, snapping out of her reverie.

“A mistake. The wrong choice.”

Oh. About the baby.

Then it was only natural to reach out and lay her hand over his.

“I think you don’t need me judging you right now. You know what’s best for you, Giles.”

“Perhaps,” he said, not looking at her. He turned his hand over under hers and curled his fingers loosely, and his blunt nails traced tingling trails up from her wrist to her palm. She could feel her pulse in her throat as she mirrored his gesture, wrapping her fingers around his own, nesting them together like yin and yang. The underside of his arm was white under the fluorescent kitchen light, and his Eyghon tattoo was like a dark insect just beneath his elbow.

They were holding hands. This... this was not of the good. Not at all. But then, it was. Because he was so warm, and he was Giles, and the fifteen-year-old with a crush that still lived inside her was bouncing with giddy joy. Her current self was just getting quietly turned on.

She uncurled her hand again, and her fingertips brushed against his wrist. It was warm, and very soft, and, intrigued, she investigated it more, tracing circles and lines. He accepted this without protest. When she looked at his face, she saw his eyes were following her invisible hieroglyphs. And when she stopped moving, he took her wrist in his hand. Gently turned her palm up.

Cradling her hand in his own, he reached up with the other, and touched just one finger to her life line. Slowly dragged it from one end to the other. And back. Lit fire to every single one of the thousands of nerve endings along the way.

“Oh,” she tried to say, but her voice had left the building, so all that came out was a small exhalation.

His voice was still working though, because he spoke, with the rough tenor of a rumbling fire.

“Have I ever told you how beautiful you are?”

Whoa. Whoa. That... she had not been expecting that.

“Uh... no... definitely no.”

“You are,” he breathed, and touched her heart line, followed its curve up to the sensitive skin between her index and middle fingers, then let his finger linger there, stroking between hers subtly, suggestively.

It sent a bolt of heat through her.

She jerked her hand away.

“Hey! This- this is all wrong! You’re not supposed to hit on me!”

“No?” he said. He was looking at her from under heavy lids, and that look alone was like a touch.

Her voice was shaking. She wanted it to be with indignation. But really, it was probably more like desire.

“No! You’re supposed to say, ‘we can’t do this, it would be wrong.’”

“I see,” he said.

Her body was heavy and time was slow. He touched her knee. Slid his hand up, just a little bit.

“I want you,” he said.

“I... I...”

It was bad. And wrong. But it was Giles. And she’d loved him for so long she couldn’t remember not loving him. And she’d never even hoped that she might actually have him someday. And she wanted him. So. Bad.

“Me too,” she said.

His eyes snapped up, and looked straight into her own.

“Ok,” she said.

And he leaned in, and then he was kissing her.

Eyes open, she thought. *I’m cheating on my girlfriend. There will be fallout.*

I’ll deal with it in the morning.

She was kissing him, too. This was...

“Whoa.”

“Mmm,” he said.

His eyes were closed, and his hand was splayed across her cheek, and his lips were still

close enough to hers they were nearly touching. And then they *were* touching, and she decided to stop thinking. She let him lead her up the stairs, let him take off her clothes and his own, let him drape them both naked across his bed. Kissing all the while, touching. Heated skin against heated skin. Friction and softness.

He braced himself on one hand over her, held himself in the other. She was stretched out under him, with her arms laced behind her head, relaxed and wanting. His eyes burned down into hers, and for a moment, she felt his magic again, cool and silver-green and electric.

Then, he touched himself to her, pressed just the tip of his cock against her slick heat, and dragged it down and then up, and then back down. Teasing them both, if the look on his face was any indication. She arched her back and groaned, and he pulled back as she moved, no penetration, just continuing the slow, sliding motion.

“Rupert,” she moaned, her voice thick with arousal and frustration.

He smiled down at her. And then pushed into her.

She gasped. He laughed, a strangled, short sound. Already his hips had found a rhythm, and he was fucking her, slowly, shallowly, giving her time to readjust to the sensation. She cupped the back of his head in her hand, feeling his hair coil around her fingers, and pulled him down for another kiss.

“More,” she murmured. He complied, going deeper, harder. She wrapped her arms around his back and hugged him close. Struggled just to breathe against the pleasure, felt his own breath, wet and hot, against her ear.

Gave herself over to it, and came, gripping his hips hard between her thighs and bucking up, pressing herself against his pelvis.

Watched his face as he followed her over.

They collapsed into a tangle of limbs and hot, damp bodies on the wrinkled sheets, and then wriggled around just enough to get under the covers.

They slept the rest of the night, soundly and dreamlessly.

Chapter 5

She moaned in protest at the annoying buzz of the alarm clock, her head aching a bit from a night of not-enough-sleep. To her surprise, for once, her groan produced real results. Someone else turned the damn thing off.

“Mmm,” she hummed approvingly, and cuddled closer to the warm chest she was draped over. Warm... manly... chest. And that thing against her thigh? Definitely not a girly thing.

But Giles **was** petting her hair a lot like Tara liked to do.

It was kinda nice. She kept her eyes closed, and held still, putting off the whole freaking-out phase that was probably going to come as soon as they both admitted to being awake. Actually, it was **really** nice. His arm was hooked around her back, holding her close, and his dick was hard, and they smelled good. Ok, not good, exactly. They needed a shower. But it was nice, in some sort of primal, sexy way.

It made her want to crawl on top of him, let him slide inside her, and ride him for as long as he could stand it, and just say to hell with the rest of the world, like shops that needed opening, and college courses that needed attending, and lovers that needed a big confession followed by a much bigger apology.

And his hand was so tender. So fascinated with her hair. Almost made her think...

Then she noticed that her left arm was completely numb, so she had to give up the illusion of sleeping so that she could pull it out from under him. He shifted obligingly, and she ended up propped on that elbow, looking down at him. He smiled up at her.

“Good morning,” he said.

Hmm. Not freaking out. Still petting her, even, although his hand had moved from her hair to her arm. Since she'd been expecting stammering and blushing and a speedy retreat, this all left her a bit confused.

“Hi,” she said.

Then they were both just silently looking at each other. Her heart was beating a little hard. None of this was going as she'd expected. Least of all when his hand moved again, from her arm to her face, touching her cheek, and then lightly brushing over her lips. She breathed out softly around his fingers, and his eyes drifted closed for a moment. Then he rolled them over, gently pressing her down on her back beneath him.

She didn't even try to not kiss him back. Didn't hide the way her body arched up against his weight.

“Oh, Willow,” he said, and then he was kissing a path under her jaw, his tongue soft and wet and maddeningly **good.**

She said his name, called him Rupert, because she'd only ever called him by it that one other time last night, and now it felt so good rolling off her tongue, like a sex word.

He nipped her earlobe, cupped her breast in his hand and rubbed her nipple roughly with his thumb. She gasped, and rocked her hips up. Oh, goddess, he felt wonderful. His thigh was between her legs, close enough for her to rub herself against, so she did, groaning at the

sweet relief of pressure against her hot, swollen center.

“God, yes, precious,” he breathed, raggedly, against the skin he’d dampened with his tongue. He hitched his knee a little higher, pressing more firmly against her sex, and slid his hand down to her hip to encourage her. Her gaze followed his hand down and something inside her flared up like a wildfire.

His hand was flexing and releasing, following the slow roll of her pelvis against his thigh, coaxing her, begging her to keep moving. Her leg was twined around his. His breath was harsh beside her ear. His cock was hard as steel, a hot brand brushing against her flank with each upstroke.

Precious

The endearment buzzed in her mind, flickering through the haze of sleepy, sensual pleasure.

She gripped his shoulder, could feel her own slick juices, cooling on the skin of his thigh. Could feel the hair there tickling her skin, sweet friction just where she wanted it.

He whispered to her as they moved together with their easy rhythm.

“Beautiful,” he said, and then kissed the folds of her ear. “Amazing.” Another kiss, and one to punctuate each word after: “Perfect. Wonderful. Willow.”

Then his hand slid off her hip, pushed between them, two fingers curling into her without preamble. She grunted and dropped her head back, twisted up to meet him, felt nothing, thought of nothing, but the pure pleasure of his hand on her, inside her, working her with practiced skill: his fingers moving inside her, his thumb pressed against her clit.

He shifted closer, bringing with him heat and the heady scent of male sweat and sex, and his mouth covered hers, his tongue pushed between her lips, taking her, claiming her, even as his fingers dug deep into her body.

She moaned helplessly, scraped her nails down his arm. It seemed to incite him. He pressed her down, kissed her fiercely.

He had four fingers in her now, his thumb still circling her. Her orgasm hit hard and fast, raking up her body, slamming her hips up against him, clamping her passage iron-hard around his hand.

She collapsed, boneless, but he didn’t let up. He broke the kiss to let her breathe, but kept up his rhythm inside her, his eyes on hers, blazing and intense.

“Goddess,” she gasped, “Fuck me, Rupert. Now, please. Please-”

He didn’t, though. Not until he’d wrung another orgasm from her. Then he left her, briefly, a melted puddle of happy goo, while he leaned over and pulled open the drawer of the bedside table. It was while he was rooting around in the drawer looking for another condom that she figured something out.

This was a seduction. Not a sexual seduction, obviously, since here they were, already well into the sex part. This was about a lot more than sex.

He crawled back over her, and kissed the tip of her nose teasingly. She was too distracted by her new revelation to smile. He cocked his head to the side.

“Something wrong?”

“No... I just... I’m having a paradigm shift here. Don’t mind me.”

He grinned at that, a broad, happy, uncomplicated grin, and kissed her again, lightly, on her temple, and then whispered, softly, “God, I love you.”

Then, while she was still reeling over that, he thrust inside of her.

“Just making sure you shift into the right one,” he said, still grinning, a cheerfully wicked sparkle in his eyes.

He was moving gently enough that she could keep her wits more or less about her.

“Love?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“But... but...”

He was looking down at her so tenderly, though. And he felt so good, moving inside her. Negative thoughts weren’t really coming to mind.

“Mmm, tha’s nice,” she slurred.

He pulled away and sat back on his heels. Wow, and she’d thought she was seeing a lot of Giles skin *last night*.

“Hey,” she protested, albeit somewhat weakly, because this was her best view yet of

Giles, full monty. “’scuse me, Mister, but what part of ‘mmm, that’s nice’ are you having trouble with here?”

“Roll over,” he said.

She arched her brow at him.

“Trust me,” he said, with another grin.

So, she did, because she was discovering that she really liked Giles when he was gleeful.

He leaned down over her, kissing her shoulderblade languidly for a little while, until she said, “So, what exactly are you planning on doing back there? Just so we’re all on the same page and all.”

She felt his chuckle on her skin, and shivered a little at the feeling.

“Not that, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

He nipped her, and she squirmed and giggled.

“Well, thank you, that was nice and indefinite.”

“Here, sit up. Slowly, let me-”

His hands were strong and steady on her sides, pulling her back towards him and then holding her still, up on her knees and braced against the wall with one hand.

“Big with the orders, today, aren’t we?” she said, as he moved up flush against her back, his knees between hers. “What are you-”

But then she didn’t need an answer, because he’d pulled her down into his lap, sliding back inside her.

“Ooooooh,” she sighed. “Ok.”

His stomach was a firm presence against the small of her back, and it occurred to her that if they’d tried this a few weeks later, it probably wouldn’t have worked out.

He’d wrapped one arm around her, and his other hand was on her, touching her as he began to move again. Their position kept things almost painfully slow, but that was more than compensated for by the way his cock was touching whole new places inside her, and his fingers on her clit were driving her right back out of her mind.

He kissed her neck, fucked her, held her tight, and she lost all track of time, everything just fading into a golden sort of haze. Nothing mattered except his hands on her, his cock inside her, his voice, murmuring to her. Calling her things like “darling,” and “love,” and “precious.”

Her climax, when it came, was powerful but slow, rolling over her like liquid heat. It was thorough, like being licked all over, and it left her every muscle quivering and weak in reaction.

She just hung in his arms, after that, her head draped back over his shoulder, exulting in the tingling aftershocks as he reached his own completion.

Afterwards, they were spooned together, unconcerned with their mutual lateness.

“But... what if this is just some kind of... weird reaction to, you know, this whole... weird situation. Like, maybe this is some manifestation of my nurturing instincts or something.”

His hand stopped petting her arm.

“Do you think it is?”

“I- I dunno. I mean, it’s not that I don’t... really really like you, Giles. I mean, I’ve had a crush on you for, like, ever. But... five years we’ve known each other, and we haven’t jumped in bed before.”

The petting resumed, but warily.

“Yes. But in that time... you were far too young at first. And then there was Oz. And then Tara.”

“Um, technically, there’s still Tara.”

He didn’t answer.

“I love Tara.”

His silence continued.

“I don’t know what I want, Giles... I didn’t think... this isn’t... I never planned on this.”

She started to roll over to face him, but he tightened his arms around her, and then kissed her shoulder.

“Take all the time you need, love. I’m not going anywhere.”

Chapter 6

Tara was already off to class by the time Willow got back to their dorm room. She'd left a message on the white board on their door: "Missed you last night. Hope things are good with Mr. Giles. - Tara. P.S. Will take good notes in class today" The message was followed by a quickly sketched heart.

Willow felt her lips tighten in a painful smile, and she reached out and touched it. Her fingers smudged away a section of the red line, and something in her ached horribly. She'd messed up Tara's little heart. It wasn't perfect anymore.

She sighed and pushed open the door, walked into their room, and started gathering together her shower stuff.

She spent a long time in the shower. It was midday, and no one was around. Most everyone was either in class or studying or sleeping. The water pressure, as always, left much to be desired, but at least it was hot. Hot enough to steam up the whole room, even, and to turn her skin all pink. She scrubbed herself determinedly with her little blue bath puff, and stared at the tired, yellow tiles.

Bad. That's what she was. Very, very bad.

She loved Tara. Tara was her girlfriend. Tara was *a* girl, and she was supposed to like girls now. Not boys. Her mother had been so proud of her when she came out. Excited, even. She'd joined PFLAG the very next day. She'd hung a rainbow flag next to their front door. But then, the next time Willow saw her, she'd called Tara "Tamara".

Which was totally beside the point.

The point being... she'd just cheated on Tara.

With Giles.

Who she really... Well, it was hard to define how she felt about Giles. She knew she loved Tara. Loved a lot of things about Tara. She loved her shy smile, and her gentle voice. She loved the soft curves of her body, and the way she smelled, and her kitten-soft hair. She loved, most of all, the way Tara looked at her... like she was perfect, like she was wonderful, like she could do no wrong.

Oh, but she *had* done wrong. Big wrong.

She should tell her. That was the right thing to do. Sure, she had done a bad thing. But it was Tara. And Tara loved her. She'd forgive her. She'd just tell Tara that... that things had gotten a little out of hand.

But then... that would work, maybe, to explain the first time. The second time? Not so much. And sure, she could say that Giles had started it, because he had. But that didn't really explain why she hadn't stopped it. She hadn't wanted to stop it. She'd just wanted to *do* it. And so she had. Even though she'd known that it was wrong.

No. No, she'd just been in the moment. That was all. It was a mistake. A big mistake. A fluke.

She swept a soapy hand between her legs, and her body twitched in response, still achy and tender. She lingered a little longer than strictly necessary. The hot water, slick foam, and her

own fingers combined with the echoing sensations of that morning's sex sent little electric tingles all through her.

Fluke, right. That's what it was.

Maybe it would be best to just not say anything. It wasn't going to happen again, after all. Ok, so, Giles maybe wanted it to happen again. Maybe. But... that didn't mean it would. She was strong. She could say no. And she loved Tara.

So, really, there was no reason to even mention it. It would just dredge up all sorts of issues and stuff. And really, that wasn't necessary. What Tara didn't know... wouldn't hurt them.

She made her decision as she shut off the water. She wouldn't mention it. She and Tara would continue on, undamaged. And the next time she saw Giles, she'd just gently break it to him that that whole sex thing was never ever happening again.

* * *

He could feel her approaching, as though his body were a taut guitar string that had just been plucked. Thrumming.

He'd gone still, for a moment, at the counter, a customer's purchase in his hand and halfway to the bag. Evening sunlight was slanting in and landing in crooked rectangles on the front floor of the shop, fluorescent orange. The Scoobie gang was grouped around the research table, clowning around as usual.

He had to shake himself to bring himself back to the present, finish up with the customer and send them on their way.

Then, he wandered towards the front of the shop, justifying the action to himself by straightening up a few shelves, brushing a bit of dust off a few of the statues. When the bell jingled over the door, he managed to keep himself fairly calm when he turned, and to keep his smile level and normal as he greeted her.

"Hello, Willow."

"Hey, Giles," she said, but when she looked at him, her eyes jittered a bit, like a flighty horse, and he felt a tightening in his chest. God, no.

She scurried to the back of the shop, and sat down quickly between Xander and Buffy, and the cheerful greetings from the rest of the group floated over to him. He found himself standing still again. Listening as the others' voices mingled with the dust that drifted in the sunlight.

He was a fool. An old fool, at that. Thinking that he could ever have her.

But, he was also, apparently, a glutton for punishment, because after a moment or two, he walked over and joined the group at the table.

"So," Buffy chirped, "What did you two *do* last night?"

"What?" Willow yelled, and Giles groaned inside. Yes, dear, and shall we sign a written affidavit confessing to our actions as well?

"Hey, chill Will," Xander said, "Sheesh, another reaction like that and we're gonna think you and Giles are having a torrid love affair or something. And can I just say: ew."

"No, no love affair. Not at all. We went to bed. Early. Separately!"

Anya spoke up, at that.

"I can't imagine why. Giles is quite physically pleasing. I would have sex with him. If I didn't already have Xander, who's much better, of course. But he's mine and you can't have him."

As usual, Giles was left wondering whether to be pleased or offended.

"So, really, you two just went to bed? That's boring," Buffy said.

"We were tired," Willow said, and Giles could still see the panic in her eyes. "Ooo, but hey, Giles felt the baby move."

Bloody hell. Yes, let's just bring that whole issue up again, shall we?

"Ooo!" Buffy said, "Really? Is it moving now? Can I feel?"

"No," he said, dourly, "But I do have a rather bad case of heartburn. Feel free to pop by the drug store and pick up a package of Roloids if you are indeed concerned about my physical well-being."

Buffy pouted.

“Fine, be that way. Geez, Giles. You need to lighten up a little.”

“Yeah, really,” Xander said, joining in, “I mean, think of it as a demonic possession. Only without the demon. Or the mind control.”

There was, he'd learned a long time ago and the hard way, such a thing as being too jaded. Things lost all meaning, then. Things lost all sense of balance, and proportion. The end of the world could feel as dreadful or as trivial as stubbing one's toe, if one had developed the right frame of mind. Sometimes, that was a good thing, a useful thing. Sometimes it meant that you could completely miss the things that were truly important, that were truly meaningful.

The things that were truly painful.

Except, at that moment, with the heat of rage rising through him to match the physical pain in his chest, he would never have been able to explain that to them. So instead, he excused himself and walked away, measuring his step until he was safely ensconced in the basement stock room.

He leaned back against the wall, shut his eyes, and slipped his hand between two buttons on his shirt and pressed it flat, his fingers touching the skin of his stomach. Truth be told, now that he knew what the sensation felt like, he'd been feeling it on and off all day. It was like ants marching in his intestines: a trembly little flutter.

A baby. Good God, it really was alive in there. Moving.

It was horrifying. He had always had the utmost respect for mothers, truly he had. He'd even assisted at a birth, once, part of the extensive first aid training he'd received in preparation for being a Watcher. The Council was nothing if not thorough.

But this? It was wrong on so many levels, he couldn't begin to count them. It was humiliating. Emasculating. It was like a cancer. Like a parasite. Like a horrible mutation. All he wanted was for it to be gone, for it to be over. The worst part of last night's nightmare had been waking up to the knowledge that it wasn't a dream. It was real.

This time, he didn't feel her until she was right beside him. He even flinched when she touched his arm.

“Oh... sorry, didn't mean to startle you,” she said.

He opened his eyes, looked at her.

Beautiful girl. Eyes so big you could get lost in them. Of course she would be the one to come down here. She would understand. She could never be jaded. She felt everything, all the time. He couldn't imagine it. But it amazed him.

She shouldn't be in the dark like this. She was meant for the light.

“You ok?” she asked.

He couldn't stop his ironic snort, and she smiled a little in answer. Because she understood him. She'd always understood him. God, from the moment they'd met in that library, she'd looked right into his soul.

He hurt inside, looking at her. And then decided, what the hell? He had faith in her. He knew she'd never let him harm her. She was stronger than that.

So he curled his hand around the curve of her skull pulled her closer and stepped towards her, and kissed her, because there were no words that he could say then. Words were far too dangerous, far too precise. Bodies only knew how to speak in broad terms. Bodies could say “I want” or “back off,” but not “I want to, but we shouldn't, I have a girlfriend.”

And for a moment, hers was tense, stiff. Her lips were locked tight as he kissed along them.

And then her hands were on his back, and her body melted like warm butter, and her lips parted beneath his, and he could breathe again. Thank god, thank *god*, was all he could think as he pulled her roughly against him, as her mouth opened wide, as she invited him inside her.

He knew that on some level, this was escapism. That he was burying himself in physical sensations to escape that freak show his life had suddenly become. But she wasn't just a convenient bystander. She was Willow. And he'd loved her for far longer than was socially acceptable. He wasn't passing this up, his one shot. He was tired of being lonely. Tired of stepping aside and letting people go, or losing them to death or fate or fear.

He pressed her back against the wall, and she squirmed against him. She wanted him.

For the moment, that was all that really mattered.

They kissed for a little while, their bodies undulating gently together. But even as they

did, Giles could feel the seconds bleeding away. Eventually, someone would come down here, try to figure out what had happened to them.

He kissed her hard, and then reached down, unbuttoned her jeans.

She groaned a “yes” against his cheek, so he unzipped her fly, pushed her pants and underwear down, hiked her up against the wall and held her up there.

“Whoa,” she said, but not at all in a restraining way. It was encouragement.

His hands gripped her thighs, holding her up, and she kicked her jeans off one foot, wrapped her legs around him, and hooked one arm around his shoulders. Had to hurry. God knew, Buffy was paranoid. She could be appearing down the stairs any minute now. His cock surged harder in his slacks and he almost laughed at himself. He’d lived long enough to accept the fact that public sex was one of his ironclad kinks.

“Unzip me,” he said, his lips near her ear, “Take me out, put me in you.”

“Oh goddess,” Willow gasped, and it thrilled him and aroused him to hear the wild abandon in her voice.

“Condom’s in my right jacket pocket,” he added, as her fingers touched his zipper. “Quickly.”

And then he lost himself to the feeling of her small, perfect hands on him. Loved the way she handled him, with sharp quick movements, fumbling a little from unfamiliarity and the constraints of their position.

And sliding inside of her was heaven, hot and slick and tight, moving around him. She grasped his shoulders hard and he bowed his head beside hers, panting against her shoulder as he fucked her. So good. So fucking good. That was all he could feel, or think, or comprehend. It was good. It washed up and down and all through his body, fiery waves of lust and satiation. He could taste her skin, smell her hair, hear her breath, and feel her. God, could he feel her. Clenching hard around him, drawing him deeper.

And he could feel her magics, too, reaching out from somewhere deep inside her and touching him, warming him in a way that wasn’t tangible, but was still so physical. She tasted like strawberries. He’d always assumed that was her shampoo, or her perfume, it was so strong around her. But it was magic. Oh god, she was powerful. He’d never even realized...

He stifled a groan against her neck, and she shuddered, wrapping her legs around him tighter, and pulling him up into her.

“Yes. Rupert, baby, yes, please,” she was saying, her voice still mercifully quiet, but taking on an edge of desperation, “Just a little more, please, more...”

More. A little more. Yes. He was gripping her thighs hard now, could feel his fingers digging into her skin. Prayed it wouldn’t leave bruises, and then forgot all about it as he hammered into her, deep, powerful thrusts that drove her inches up the wall, that made her squeak, and then bite her lip to keep quiet.

“Yes, darling, yes, come for me, come on,” he coaxed, watching her. Her eyes squeezed shut, her head thrown back against the wall, lost in the feeling, lost in *him*, dear god. He loved her. Loved her, loved her, loved her.

“Love you,” he gasped, hardly able to find the breath for the words.

And she came, her head thumping back against the wall, her whole body tightening around him: her arms and her legs and her hot, flinching channel. He buried himself in her as deep as he could, pressed his face into the hollow between her shoulder and neck, and his own orgasm took him, wracking his whole body, shoving him a few degrees over from reality, leaving him breathless and spent and sweaty.

And then, Xander’s voice came down the stairs: “Hey, you guys get et by vamps or something?”

She startled in his arms, and he let her down onto her own feet, and she called up, “Nope. We’re fine. Be up in a few.”

“Already was, actually,” Giles murmured into her ear and she giggled and poked his arm.

“Silly.”

“Ok,” Xander said, and the door whumped shut.

They went limp in relief against each other.

“Ok,” Willow said, “That was... really good timing.”

He grinned and kissed her.

“That it was.”

Then she reeled away from him, looking a bit drunk, and stopped a few feet away. Then she just stood there, naked from the waist down, with her jeans and panties caught around one foot and the other leg bare but for a sock. She glanced down at herself, and seemed momentarily taken aback, and she was just... simply the most adorable thing he'd ever seen. He marveled at his own capacity for sappiness as he dealt with the condom and then went over to help her get her jeans off so that she could get them back on again properly.

And then, when they were both properly clothed, he stepped back, and held out his arms for inspection. She looked him up and down, and nodded, then mirrored his posture.

“You look perfect,” he whispered, nothing but the truth, and kissed her one more time, letting the moment linger as long as he could.

They went back upstairs, studiously not touching, and he understood that this was the way it would be, for a time at least. A secret. He decided he could live with that.

Chapter 7

One week passed.

Giles's car was parked at the top of a rocky bluff, snugged up against the matte grey roadside barrier, a shock of red against the washed-out blue of the evening sky and the dense charcoal black of the rocks. The surf was wild, and wind-whipped, capped with foam and roaring against the small strip of sand. They were huddled together on a blanket, her back to his chest, his arms around her, and her arms crossed over her own chest against the chilly breeze. It was nice, though. The cold wind was something they could shelter each other from, made the warmth of their bodies that much more attractive.

His chin was resting on her shoulder, his face turned slightly into her neck, and his nose was brushing her jaw. It was cold, like a puppy's.

They'd made love earlier, after feeding each other a picnic dinner of fruit, crackers and cheese, and a bottle of wine. She'd always figured that sex on a beach would turn out to be much more romantic in theory than in practice, but it had surprised her. With the cool sand shifting under the blanket under her back, the howl of the wind, and the pounding crash of the waves, it had all been so primal, so powerful. It was like they were connected to the earth, moving with some universal rhythm, and like the forces of the earth were moving in time with them, as well.

She shivered, remembering, and Giles pulled her a little closer, maybe mistaking it for a chill... or maybe knowing exactly what she was thinking. He nuzzled her with his cold nose and pursed his lips against her throat, a quick, glancing kiss. She rolled her head back onto his shoulder and looked up at the darkening sky.

"Are you sure you really have to go? Can't you just call them?"

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him smile.

"I wish I could. But I'm afraid this is my best hope for getting the Council to speak with me at all."

She sighed. She knew. And the whole Glory thing was more important than her sex life. But... but...

"This stinks. A lot," she said.

He licked her neck, and she squirmed and giggled.

"Giles!"

He just moved on to nibbling the shell of her ear. She sighed again, happily this time, and let the issue go. So, he'd be off to England tomorrow. Wasn't permanent. He'd be back. And then they could do this all they wanted, provided they could continue to find good excuses for slipping away from the rest of the group for a couple hours. His hand moved to her breast, squeezing gently. She turned her head towards him, and they kissed, deeply and slowly. The wind whipped her hair around their face and into their mouths, but they just laughed and kept kissing.

She felt the words inside her a moment before he spoke them aloud: "I love you."
Something twisted in her chest, and fluttered at the back of her throat. Maybe it was

habit, because whenever Tara said the words, she said them back, almost as a reflex.

In any case, thinking about it made her head hurt and her heart feel funny and panicky, so she generally tried to avoid it. Instead, she thought about how warm and solid and alive Giles's body was, like a living wall behind her, and how nice his arms were, wrapped around her, making her feel so loved, so cherished, so... "Precious," he whispered.

That thing inside her heart moved again, with an insistent lurch, and she had to say something, so she finally just said his name, because *that* at least, she was sure of.

"Rupert..."

Then she relaxed in his arms and just watched the stars come out over the ocean and let him hold her.

* * *

Mr. Giles had left for England that morning and Willow was spending the evening at home for what seemed like the first time in at least a week. Tara didn't begrudge her the time spent with him, of course. Far be it for her to try to get between any of the Scoobies. She knew that they cared about each other, and she knew that they leaned on each other. And she knew that Willow really cared about Giles, and things were weird and probably scary for him right now.

Still, if she were being completely honest with herself, she was kinda glad he was gone for the moment, and that Willow was actually here. Even if they were just studying.

Tara was at her desk making a spreadsheet on her laptop. Willow was on her stomach on the bed, tapping a highlighter against her lips and reading a textbook. Her knees were bent up, and her feet were hooked together at the ankles, swaying back and forth over her back, vaguely in time with the beat of the music on their stereo.

She smiled, warmed by the sight of her love, here with her and at ease.

And, ok, not all of that warmth was entirely platonic. After all, with all the distractions of the past week they hadn't really had any... alone time. Her smile widened a little, took on a wicked edge, and she decided that her spreadsheet could wait.

She shut her laptop and slunk over to join Willow on the bed, quiet as a cat, so that her hands on Willow's back came as a surprise to the other girl. Willow jumped a little, making a cute little squeak, and then looked over her shoulder at Tara.

"Hey!"

Tara just continued to smile, and started to rub her shoulders.

Willow arched into the massage and tossed her highlighter aside.

"Mmm," she said, and then, after a moment, "Hey, Tara, I heard once that 95% of all back rubs lead to sex. Do you think that's, like, really accurate? Cause it seems to me like that's- ooo, that was a good spot, right there... mmm..."

Tara leaned down over her and into the massage, like a jockey coaxing a thoroughbred to run just a little faster.

"This one might," she murmured.

And Willow rolled over under her then, and reached up to touch her face, her hair, grinning all the while.

"Yeah, kinda looks like," she said.

Tara let herself down over Willow, covering her like a blanket, and they were kissing, slowly, without urgency.

* * *

Willow couldn't help but compare them. Tara's kisses and Giles's. Neither of them came up lacking in her mind, but there were differences. Aggression, maybe, being the big one. Here was Tara, a warm weight over her, with her tongue slipping gently into her mouth as it did, soft and light. Giles could be gentle. Often was. But there was always something more there, something hard to define, something wild and maybe just barely leashed.

Willow slid her hands down Tara's back as they kissed, tracing her soft, feminine curves. Different, very different. But not in a bad way. She loved Tara's body. She loved the shape of it, the softness of it. It felt good under her hands, always had, even the first few times

they'd touched. She could remember the joy of it... the relief of it. The freedom of being able to admit how much she loved women's bodies.

But she loved Giles's body, too. And she'd loved Oz. And Xander. She liked male muscle, and broad shoulders, and... heck, Giles's chest hair.

Tara pulled them over onto their sides, and Willow's hand moved, almost automatically, to Tara's breast. There was nothing in the world like those. She was endlessly fascinated by them, the way they moved in her hand, a heavy, living weight, and the way Tara's nipples would peak into sharp points when she handled them.

Tara hummed softly into their kiss, moved her hand down to Willow's waist, and pulled them a little closer together, wrapping her leg around Willow's.

Maybe it wasn't fair to compare them. After all, she'd been with Tara for more than a year. Giles, she'd been with for a week. He still had the flush of new... whatever... working in his favor. Plus, the whole secret romance thing? Kinda sexy all by itself.

It wasn't until she was on her stomach between Tara's legs, with her tongue slipping into her folds, that the real epiphany hit her. What Giles had that Tara didn't. Hardness. And she wasn't talking about the physical sense.

Tara was kind, and gentle, and soft... malleable. And that gentleness defined her, filled her, through and through. It wasn't a bad thing. It was what made her so beautiful, so wonderful. Honest compassion, deep-seated agreeableness.

Giles, though... there was a darkness in him. A violence. Not something he was proud of, or something he showed very often. But it was there.

And the thing was... it was in her, too. She felt it sometimes. And when the two of them were together... it was like striking flint against steel. Sparks. Passion.

It wasn't a *guy* thing, it was a *Giles* thing.

Later, with Tara's tongue on her, and Tara's fingers inside her, she had to press her arm over her mouth, had to bite back the words that wanted to come. Silently moved her lips, shaped words against the skin of her arm, "Goddess, yes, please, harder... Rupert..."

Then she was arching her back up, biting her arm to stop any incriminating cries, and digging her heels into Tara's back, lost in the black-red haze of orgasm.

Chapter 8

Willow had driven him to the airport, partly to spare him the cab fare, but mostly so they could spend another few minutes together before he had to leave. She'd followed him to the gate, and when they'd called for pre-boarding, and he'd stood up and reached for his carryon bag, she'd jumped up as well, and hugged him. Not a quick, desperate hug. Just a slow, easy hug, the kind where you moved together as though drawn by gravity, and your arms wrapped tight around each other, and your bodies seemed to melt together into one being. And then she'd just held him, and he'd held her, there at gate A3, with the rest of the LA-bound crowd flowing around them, a distant, unnoticed blur.

And instead of letting go, they just seemed to bond a little tighter with each passing minute. He could feel her heartbeat, her breathing. Her head was tucked under his chin, and he could just barely feel her breath, warm and damp, through his sweater. He inhaled deeply the scent of her hair, knowing full well how much he resembled an addict who knew his next fix may be a long time off.

She seemed to be doing the same thing.

Inhaling him. Absorbing him.

They called his row, and he just pulled her closer, feeling the warmth, the mass, the shape of her body, and memorizing it. Loving it. Just trying to get his fill of touching her for long enough to let go and board the damn plane.

They'd finally pulled apart when the last call came, and they were both a little unsteady on their feet. His eyes were a bit unfocused, and her pupils were widely dilated. There were no words he could stand to say, so he simply touched her cheek, and then finally picked up his bag and walked to the gate. The attendant gave him an inscrutable look, checked his boarding pass, and waved him on. He didn't look back as he walked down the long, grey corridor to the plane. As he stepped onto the plane, he smiled and shook his head, amused at himself. It wasn't as if he were leaving forever. He'd be back in a few days. And yet, leaving her, even for that long, was sweet agony.

He'd miss her. Her soft touch, her smile, her voice. He'd always adored her, but over the past week, he'd become completely besotted with her. She delighted him, amazed him, set fire to his body and spirit.

He was in love, and it was utterly thrilling.

Five hours later, though, the elation had long faded. He hadn't even spared a thought to what it might be like to fly in his condition. All that had been on his mind was getting in touch with the blasted Council. Now though, after a rough takeoff and landing in a tiny puddle-jumper, and then another takeoff in a jet shortly thereafter, he was somewhere over Colorado, and all he was thinking about was...

Not. Throwing. Up.

The nausea had originally started a few months earlier. It was worst in the mornings, generally, and certain tastes and smells would set it off. It was bad, too. Not enough to be incapacitating, but more than enough to make him miserable. He'd assumed, though, that it was

simply a very bad case of flu, and therefore, nothing a doctor could do anything about. He'd bucked up and dealt with it, drank plenty of fluids, ate mild, inoffensive foods, and tried to avoid even thinking about coffee.

It had mostly settled down recently. But now... now it was back. Oh, yes. The little parasite did *not* like flying, and it was making its feelings on the matter abundantly clear. He'd been clutching the little white airsick bag ever since they'd crossed the Nevada border.

A flight attendant had been hovering around since then, as well, half-sympathetic, half-annoyed. Her early attempts at conversation had only made things worse, so she would just silently walk by every few minutes. His seatmate was shooting him constant nervous glances, and had turned her body until her little glowing laptop was as far away from him as possible.

Willow had mentioned that the nausea would settle down, he realized. And then he'd snapped at her. Because if a website could tell him what he would be feeling, it meant that this was... essentially normal. And that was a thought that was quite unacceptable.

But now he was wondering. It occurred to him that he hadn't felt any movement since takeoff in Sunnydale. This wasn't normal. The little thing was generally active. Hyperactive, even, bouncing around like a teeny-tiny billiard ball in there. Personally, Giles thought that its ultimate goal was to cause him as much discomfort as possible in however much time it had.

He shut his eyes and leaned his head back against the seat, praying sleep would find him before the plane hit another patch of turbulence.

He could barely even keep his eyes closed for a second. Sleep didn't appear to be an option.

He risked a glance over at his seatmate and noted her laptop was a PC running Windows. An instinctive little twist of distaste stirred in him, and even through the nausea, he had to smile a little. Between Willow and Jenny, he'd apparently inherited a distinct side in the Mac/PC debate. Jenny had once spent nearly an hour trying to explain all the ways that Macintosh computers were apparently superior to Windows machines. Almost everything she'd said had been utterly lost on him, but it had implanted some kind of seed, apparently. Then, of course, there was the conditioned association between the little glowing apple logo and Willow, and that alone was enough to make him partial to the brand.

She was *in* him, deeply and irrevocably. If he lost her, it would hurt. It was a danger. A liability. And yet... he believed she was worth the risk. He knew she was worth the risk. The elation, the joy that she stirred in him... that alone was worth it. That she'd given him herself, let him touch her... that was a gift he'd never expected to receive.

Now his eyes closed smoothly, his body relaxed, as much as it could, into the seat. Willow. Sweet Willow. Big green eyes and soft red hair. Small perfect breasts. She wasn't his type, really. He'd always gone for dark hair and eyes. But she defied type. He loved her small body, loved that he could pick her up, hold her down, loved that she let him.

Her kisses were so honest. Open. She never hid her desires. Her tongue against his said things she couldn't vocalize. They'd had whole conversation that way, wrapped around each other naked, or half-naked or fully clothed, just kissing each other, deep and slow or hard and fast.

Her hands... small hands... but amazing. She was surprisingly confident. She liked touching him. He knew, partly because she'd said it, but mostly because she did it, as much as she could. Little things sometimes, like brushing against him in the Magic Box, or touching his hand or his arm or his back or his shoulder to get his attention or emphasize a point. She'd sit near enough to him as they researched to let her knee brush against his whenever she moved, to turn the page, or lean in to see an illustration, or sometimes just so that their knees would touch.

When they made love, her hands were always on him. She would card them through his chest hair, or trace his jawbone. She'd touch his lips, let him suck on her fingers. She'd curl her hand around his cock, cup his balls. When he was inside her, she would have her hands on his shoulders, or a sweaty palm resting on his ribs, or both hands gripping his ass, and once, she'd reached down between them, touched his cock, slick with her own juices, felt the place where their bodies joined, and got such an amazed look on her face. It drove him out of his mind, sometimes, but only in the best ways.

He knew her fascination with his body stemmed at least partly from confusion. He understood her feelings, on a very personal level. He'd found men around the same age she had found women. He'd found that he still loved women as well a few years later. He knew that

feeling well, and knew that the best thing to do was let her figure things out for herself. And he was, of course, perfectly content to be her guinea pig.

A few days ago, they'd gone back to his place during lunch hour, and ended up in his bed. He was naked, but she was still dressed from the waist up. He couldn't quite remember exactly how that had happened, and it wasn't really important. She had pressed him onto his back, kicked away all of the covers, left him completely bare, spread out across the sheet. Then, apparently satisfied that she had him where she wanted him (and he certainly wasn't about to complain) she'd straddled his thighs.

Her expression had been a mask of studious concentration, and she'd leaned forward a little, and touched his face. She started with his eyebrows, then his nose, and his cheekbones, his jaw and his hairline, walking her fingers over him like she was blind and he was Braille. He'd shut his eyes, and her fingertips had grazed his eyelashes, touched his eyelids, and the corners of his eyes, where he knew his skin crinkled when he smiled. She ran her hands through his hair, and then fingered the whorls of his ears. One fingertip lingered for a moment at his piercing, and he'd shuddered at the sensitive, questing touch.

She'd continued her exploration, touching the cleft in his chin, the skin of his throat, pressing hard enough to feel his pulse, feel his windpipe, hell, even feel his lymph nodes. This was Willow. She was thorough.

He'd shivered when she reached his collarbone, and she'd noticed, and paused there, drawing her fingers back and forth along the circlet of bone there, just lightly enough to be felt, sending fiery tingles all over his body. And then she'd moved on, touching the muscles in his shoulder, maybe silently naming each one. He'd gasped in a deep, shuddering breath, clenched his hands into fists, and he'd wanted so badly to grab her, roll them over, slam himself balls-deep inside of her and fuck her until they were both raw. But he didn't. He resisted, lay still and let her look, let her touch. But he couldn't stop his breath from quickening, could stop the sheen of sweat that cropped up on his skin, or the goosebumps that followed.

She'd pushed his right arm up, about 20 degrees above his shoulder joint, and leaned in a little closer. Ruffled the hair in his armpit, and then dragged all her fingers up the underside of his upper arm, leaving sensitive skin burning in her wake. When she'd reached the inside of his elbow joint, she'd paused, lingered over the thin skin there. It would be warm in that spot, he knew, and a little bit tacky with sweat right now. The difference seemed to intrigue her. Her fingertips caught on the sticky skin, and staggered a little. Then she moved on, up his arm to his wrist, then to his hand.

His hand. Dear god. She'd started out simply touching it, as she had been, with her fingertips. Traced its outline, up and down his fingers, and then doodled across his palm, and then across his knuckles. Then she leaned forward, on her knees and one hand, and she'd pulled his hand to her lips, kissed his palm. First, just a dry, soft kiss. Then several. Then her mouth had opened and her tongue had poked out, a small, sharp point, tracing the shape of his hand, the lines on his palm. And then she kissed the center of his palm, deeply, mouth open wide, tongue pressed flat over his sweaty skin. She'd made a soft sound then, and licked up along his fingers. Then tickled his own fingertips with the tip of her tongue, feather-light, teasing. He'd groaned, deeply, desperately, and then she slid his middle finger into her mouth, as deep as it could go. Hot, slick, wet. Her tongue had curled around his finger like a cat, and he'd actually cried out, softly. She'd sucked, strong and hard, he could feel the ligaments pulling just a little, feel the pressure. Then she'd pulled back, and then gone back down again, three of his fingers in her mouth now, her hands gripping his wrist, holding him where she wanted him. Sucked on him again. Pressure, friction, her tongue flexing against the undersides of his finger joints, the ridges of her palate hard against his knuckles.

"Dear god, Willow," he'd gasped, and he'd wanted so much.

Wanted her to do to his cock what she was doing to his hand. She sucked his fingers a bit deeper and he felt her throat twitch, just for a moment, a mild hint of a gag reflex. It didn't seem to bother her. And god, how she looked at that moment, eyes shut, long dark lashes, her cheeks hollowed, her lips sealed around his fingers. His cock was hard as steel, flat on his belly, and wet, drooling on his skin.

"Please," he'd said.

She'd let his hand slide out of her mouth, looked at his face with drowsy eyes. A drop of her saliva had found its way down to his wrist. She smiled, a slow, sleepy smile, and then she

knee-walked backwards on the bed, and dropped her gaze downwards.

Her smile pulled a little wider, and she'd reached out and touched his cock, with the same light, maddening, fingertips-only touch.

He'd grasped crumpled fistfuls of the sheets, almost physically restraining himself. The light touch inflamed him, almost infuriated him, dragging the beast inside him far closer to the surface than he'd normally be comfortable with. He wanted to lunge at her, slam her down on her back. Wanted to, but didn't. Because right now, it felt so good to feel the beast rage inside of him.

He panted hard, clenched his fists white-knuckled tight.

She'd been investigating his foreskin, pulling and pushing it, experimenting with how it moved. Then she'd pulled it back with one hand, and touched the head of his cock with a few fingers on her other hand.

"This is killing you, isn't it?" she said, and he looked up at her. Her eyes were dark as night, dark as black magic. Her voice trembled, just a little. Not nerves, not at all. Power. She knew she had power. And she was loving it.

There was nothing he could say. Nothing he needed to say. He was hers.

She'd rolled a condom down over him and moved off of him, but her eyes had never left his. Slowly, deliberately, she'd laid back on the bed, spread her legs and drawn her knees up. He could see her then, perfectly, pink and open and wet, her dark curls clinging damply to her skin. His heart was leaping against his ribs, every breath felt like breathing rarified air.

"Com'on," she'd said, just softly, and it was like a sudden axe blow, severing his bonds, and he'd pounced on her, shoving her legs back, sinking into her with one thrust, no warning, no waiting. She'd shouted, an incoherent sound, and rolled her head back, her long, pale throat bared to him. He'd held himself over her with one hand planted in the bed on either side of her, her legs hooked over his shoulder, and he'd taken her, hard, fast, deep, his eyes on her, watching her, as her head rolled from side to side, as her own hands gripped the sheet, as she'd shuddered through three orgasms in quick, breathless succession. Her body was shining with sweat, her chest heaving, and she'd made more noise that one time than she'd made the rest of the week combined, sharp, garbled, strangled sounds.

His own orgasm had been a relief, almost painfully intense, like a rake dragged up his spine. His vision had even darkened for a moment. And after it was over, he couldn't bring himself to pull out of her, so he'd stayed inside, grinding against her, and she'd looked up at him with wide eyes, and then dropped her head back again, squeezed deliberately around him.

He'd wanted to try to go a second time, see if he even could, without pulling out... but it was too much, the sensation was too strong, pleasure segued to pain, and he'd pulled away, and fallen to his side on the bed, panting and halfway curled up. She'd sat up after a moment, and he'd raised his head a bit, smiled at her, and she'd smiled back, and gently stroked his hair.

Back in reality, the plane jolted suddenly, and all thoughts of Willow fled abruptly on a new wave of nausea.

He groaned and pressed a hand to his stomach. His layover in Washington DC loomed somewhere ahead of him, like one beacon of hope in a sea of dark despair.

Bloody Council bloody well better have some bloody information.

Because now he was not only on the verge of throwing up, he also had an erection he could drive nails with. Two things which, by all rights, truly should not exist simultaneously.

And he had to pee. Which was absolutely nothing new. He urinated about every ten minutes. Yet another of the parasite's exciting new contributions to his life.

The parasite which still, as far as he could tell, had not moved since leaving California. And, oddly enough... he was a little concerned. What was wrong with it? Was it possible it really *didn't* like flying? Was it at all advanced enough to even be affected by such things? Was it maybe that the vibrations of the plane were simply making it hard to feel the little flutters?

He stood up and made his way down the aisle, grateful for his long jacket, and stepped into the tiny airplane lavatory. The plane rocked as he shut the door, and his stomach clenched in protest.

He leaned back against the small sink and slipped his hand into his shirt, over his lower abdomen... over his newly acquired womb. And he pressed down there, gently. Held still in concentration.

“What are you up to?” he murmured. This simply wasn’t like the parasite. Honestly, the little thing would probably make one hell of a hyperactive child, were it ever to be born. He waited, holding as still as the plane allowed, his head bowed a bit, his brow furrowed. *Come on, then,* he thought. But there was nothing. Not a twitch. And then, just as he was about to draw his hand away... he felt it... a tiny shiver. He let out a breath he hadn’t known he was holding. “Right, then. Of course you’re still there.” He huffed a small, self-deprecating laugh. Well, at least the waiting had given his hard-on sufficient time to wane, and he was able to take a rather unsatisfyingly brief piss, wash his hands, and return to his seat. It was only when he’d refastened his seatbelt that something occurred to him. Hyperactive child. If it were born. Born. Good lord. His mind skittered nervously away from that train of thought... but there was a horrifying fascination to it that he could avoid. A child. Baby. Infant. His hand went back to his stomach again, rubbed back and forth. His child. Son or daughter. It could grow up. Be a person someday. He pulled his hand away. Placed it firmly on the armrest of his chair. Pipe dream. That’s all it was. Ridiculous. Out of the question. The nausea had subsided a bit, so he reached for the in-flight magazine, opened it to the crossword puzzle, and folded down the tray table. He concentrated on 1-Across and gave no more thought to the small corner of his mind that was murmuring, “Why not?”

Chapter 9

So, here he was. Inevitable, he knew. They always found each other. A whole wide world out there, and yet, they ended up in the same pub at the same time. Ethan smiled an ironic smile, realizing he was channeling Bogart, and then he picked up his drink and walked over. Because it was what was in the script. It was what he did. Would always do.

That night he'd gone back to Sunnydale. The blood still fresh on his hands, but only metaphorical. Only incorporeal. He had destroyed them. All of them. It was better than they deserved, they who had put a shovel in his hands and told him to dig. It took more than what they'd done to break Ethan Rayne. They would never break him. Could never break him. There was only one man who could break him. And that man was in Sunnydale. So, Ethan went. Back to Sunnydale. Felt the trembling tingle of the Hellmouth on his skin.

That man who was here now. Didn't matter why. Ethan knew why. Because it was meant to be. Because fate had a heavy hand, and pushed them all around like a young girl playing with rag dolls. Giles-Rupert-Ripper. Sitting at a table in a dark corner of a London pub, crouched over a clear glass that he held like a lifeline. Candle flame on his glasses.

If he hadn't looked so damn old, it would have been a flash straight out of their youths.

Except Ripper had never abided the glasses.

Ethan slammed his own drink down on the round table, and that was the first notice he got. Affronted green eyes jumping up to his face in the gloom. And then, recognition. And then, like clockwork, there was the anger.

He wouldn't say that what they'd done hadn't hurt. Because of course it hurt. It hurt to have needles jabbed into your skin day in and day out. It hurt when they shocked you with increasing voltages of electricity, from a small, almost pleasant tingle, up to triple digit screaming agony. But they couldn't touch him. Not really.

Ripper's fist in his gut hurt. It always did. But he barely tried to evade it. Let the blow come, let the force drive him back into the neighboring table, let Ripper catch him by the collar and haul him to his feet.

This was his greeting. This was the script. When he'd knocked on Ripper's door that summer, back from the desert and still soaked in all that metaphorical blood ol' Shakespeare was so very fond of, Ripper's fist had been the first thing he'd really felt. The first sensation that had registered. In hours. No. In months. So he'd let him. Let him hit him. It was his utter silence, in the end, that stopped the blows.

Here in the pub, held close enough to kiss him, he could feel Ripper's body. Feel the curve of his stomach, too pronounced for middle-age alone to account for. And he smiled, feeling the blood on his lip.

"Come to demand child support?" he said, knowing that all Ripper would hear was 'Hit me again.' Because that seemed to be all Ripper ever heard. Could say, 'Nice day we're having,' or 'Your mother wore army boots,' didn't make a bloody bit of difference. It went the same every time. Ethan knew why, Ethan was a man, himself, and knew that Ripper had his pride. But then, he also knew that what it truly was was cowardice. Deep, childlike terror. Ethan

was everything Giles denied in himself. His very existence was a threat.

Except, this time, Ripper shoved him backwards. And then walked away.

Six months, naked in a sterile white cell. Food came from the ceiling, every day, on schedule, the only way to keep time. Was drugged, of course, but then, Ethan had always been partial to a bit of controlled substance. Time passed easier while tranquilized. The humiliation was only distant and far away. Like it was someone else. He liked to pretend it was Ripper.

He followed him out into the street. Around the corner to an alley.

The blows had stopped after his silence. Ripper had looked down at him, and Ethan'd simply stood up, dusting himself off, feeling the pain. Beautiful pain, bright and sharp. Like freedom. Like hatred. Hatred. Oh yes. Rupert had looked so taken aback. So guilty. As though he'd done harm to an innocent. Wearing the same mask of regret. A lie. Such a lie.

But this was good. Guilt was the collar around Ripper's neck, and now Ethan had the leash.

"I suppose you want to know what-" he began, rounding the corner into the alley.

But couldn't finish speaking, because Ripper hit him. Hard, across the jaw, driving him back into a brick wall. And then grabbed him by his coat. *Slammed* him against the wall. Crack of skull against brick, world suddenly dark around the edges, stomach suddenly clenching. Another fist, hard right hook, cheekbone cracking like a twig. He would have fallen, but Ripper'd grabbed him again. Then thrown him to the ground. Hard. Hand catches on asphalt, trying to break his fall, skin shredded on the uneven surface. Blood in his eyes, everything's red, blood in his mouth, tastes like copper, blood on his hand, wet and cool. Too dizzy to get up. Not in the script. Not this.

They were trying to quantify magic. Trying to put it in their neat little boxes. Because they liked boxes. Soldier boys, oh so brave. But terrified. Terrified of anything that didn't fit in their boxes. They really liked boxes. Kept all of them in boxes. Literal boxes. Flat white, with one glass wall, so they could see them. Trying to put Chaos in a box.

Stupid. So, so, so stupid.

Chaos couldn't live in a box. Ethan couldn't live in a box. Ironic, really, that it was their boxes that kept them alive so long. Chaos couldn't live in a box. Ethan was powerless.

Guilty Ripper, looking at him, battered and bloodied. One tug on the leash, and they were upstairs. Ripper folded like a deck of cheap playing cards. Always did. Thought he was the one with the power. Always thought that. Believed it, even at that moment, flat on his back with his cock in Ethan's mouth. Giles liked boxes, too. But his boxes weren't going to save him. Ripper was in Ethan. Always, always, like the metal bits in the brain of a bird, he navigated by him. He'd give anything to get him out. Would never happen though. Ripper was a cancer that was deep inside him, tendrils reaching into all parts of him. Couldn't cut him out without destroying himself.

So... second best thing. Put a part of himself... in Ripper. Show him just how much power he didn't have. Leave a piece of himself inside him forever. Or at least a few months. Something Ripper would notice. And never forget.

Like he'd never forget. That he'd spent the whole evening. Warning him. About the sodding soldier boys. And yet...

Ripper had handed him over, with a smile on his face, and a song in his heart.

It was a game, he wanted to say. Are you mad? It was a game. It was always a game. He was supposed to know that. Had always known that, before.

The soldier boys, they didn't play games. Nothing was a game to them. Deadly serious, they were. So perfectly uptight. So perfectly convinced that they were doing the Right Thing. So utterly and completely sure that they were serving humanity. So equally sure that Ethan and the others did not and never had belonged to that particular camp. Because of their damn boxes. He, they all, could do things, things that weren't on the label of the box for "humans". So, he was cast aside, into the junk box, the one labeled "other." An animal? A demon? Didn't matter to them.

The kick came a heartbeat after he was expecting it, sinking into his stomach. Pain radiated, as it did, and he groaned, curled in on himself on the cold pavement. Another kick, hard against his ribs, hard enough to bruise, or maybe crack, definitely hard enough to roll him over on his back. Then Ripper was on him, his knee pressing into Ethan's windpipe.

"Undo it," he said.

Ethan knew he couldn't kill Giles, much as he wanted. Just couldn't do it. But he could hurt him. He could show him just how much of an illusion that power he thought he had was. A drop or two of blood and semen, an appeal to Diana, goddess of fertility, a sacrifice of an actual goat. Ethan always crafted his own spells. Like works of art, everything in its place. He had a binder of them, neatly typed pages with neatly drawn sigils. There was a place for order even when one was a chaos mage. Every spell he'd done, every chant he'd written, was in that book, from the time Ripper left. From the time Randall'd died.

But he couldn't remember how he'd killed the soldiers. He just remembered them dead, scattered about on the hard desert sand, still as the dusty rocks, rifles fallen from their hands. And all the other, witches and werewolves and sorcerers. He'd been standing alone, by his own half-dug grave.

Then he'd walked to the road and hitched a ride back to Sunnydale.

"Can't," he'd croaked, around Ripper's knee in his throat.

"Wrong answer," Ripper said. Knee dug deeper, vision narrowing, pain, pain, pain.

"Swear I can't." He'd mostly mouthed the words.

"Why the bloody hell not?"

All the spell had done was supply the necessary equipment, set things up. The conception itself, cellularly? Perfectly natural. It was ingenious, smoothly skirting around the difficult issue of using magic to create life from nothing.

"No reason not to kill you, then."

Yes, Ripper. Kill me. You owe me that much, you bastard. And it's the worst thing I can do to you. Make you live with it, all your life. You destroyed me, Ripper. I'll destroy you. I'm not playing anymore.

Everything dark, pain faded away, lungs burning for lack of air. And in all that, he's hard.

And then the pressure was gone. And the first thing he sees as his vision returns, slowly, like a photograph developing, is Ripper's back. And then Ripper is gone, and he's alone on the ground in an alley, nothing but pain and vertigo. And loss. How much more could he lose?

He dropped his head back on the asphalt and stared up at the night sky, tasting blood.

Chapter 10

His internal clock was staggering from the flight, but it was still fairly convinced that it was early evening, all evidence to the contrary. He was lying on his back on the bed in his sister's guest room, staring at the dark ceiling and wide-awake. The obnoxious ticking, glowing clock beside his head cheerfully informed him that it was, locally, 2:12 in the morning.

His little encounter with Ethan earlier was not helping him relax at all.

Finally, as the clock ticked another minute deeper into the night, he gave up.

If he recalled correctly, Tara had an evening lab course today.

He kicked the covers off and headed out to the living room, got the cordless phone and carried it back into his room. He was on the ground floor, so as long as he kept his voice down, he wouldn't wake anyone.

He dug out his international calling card, dialed, and lay back on the bed, the phone cradled against his ear. It rang three times, a distance purr, and he feared that she wasn't home. But then, there was a click, and her voice came on the line, slightly crackly over the long-distance: "Hello?"

He smiled, and finally felt himself relax a little.

"Hello, Willow."

"Giles! Hi, hon! How's England?"

The warm pleasure in her voice and the endearment made his smile widen a bit more. But then, it faded, and the first thing he thought of to say was: "I... found Ethan. Well, actually, he found me."

"Oh... Uh oh. He's not, like, dead or anything now, is he?"

Disturbingly close, actually.

"No... no, he's alive," was what he said. But then he felt compelled to add, "A bit battered and bruised, of course."

"Yeah..." Willow didn't sound too surprised. "Hey, um. There's something I should tell you."

That didn't sound good.

"Yes?"

"I... I slept with Tara." His heart clenched tight. "I mean," she continued, "you know, in the euphemism way, not the literal, cause, yeah, obviously I-"

God, stop. Please, stop.

"Yes. Thank you. I caught that."

"Oh. Ok."

A silence fell over the line, and he wondered why it bothered him so much. He knew perfectly well that Willow was still with Tara. He'd never really said anything about wanting them to be exclusive. In fact, he was fairly well aware that pressing the issue would no doubt only cause him to lose her. Eventually, he decided to ask the most pressing question.

"And? You're telling me this... why?"

"Cause... I mean, I haven't, since we... you know. And I felt guilty afterwards. It's

like... like I was cheating on *you.*”

Well. That was... interesting. Possibly... promising. In spite of himself, his heart was beating a little faster.

“I... see.”

“I don’t know what to do, Giles.”

Leave her he wanted to say, so badly he could feel the words sticking in his throat. Couldn’t say that, though.

“... I’m afraid I can’t console you on this, Willow,” he said, finally. “I’m sorry. I’d like very to tell you that I... just want you to be with whomever you choose, to be selfless. But... I can’t. I love Buffy dearly, but I’m afraid she’s about tapped me out in that regard.”

“... Oh. Wow. I... didn’t really... I didn’t know.”

“I love you, Willow,” he said, firmly, wanting to be absolutely sure that every word, every nuance, made it all the way across the ocean and continent between them.

“What do you want, then?” she asked, her voice a bit soft, almost hesitant.

“You have to ask?” he said, his voice gentler, now. “I want *you*. I want you with me. All of the time.”

“Wow.”

There was a long pause. He didn’t know what else to say, and apparently, neither did she. But really, even having the sound of her breathing in his ear, knowing that they were together, at least in some small way, still made things... better.

She was the one who eventually broke the silence.

“Uh. So. Ethan. Did he, you know, fix things?”

He shifted in the bed, restively. He wanted to discuss Ethan even less than he wanted to discuss Tara.

“I’m afraid not. Apparently the spell only... set things in motion. The, ah, conception itself was more or less natural. Reversing the spell now would... probably kill me.”

“Oh. That’s... not good. But also... so that means it really is just... human. Right?”

“Human.” *Human,* dear god. “Yes. An offspring of myself and Ethan Rayne. A truly frightening concept.”

It was easiest to be flippant, even as his free hand went almost unconsciously down to his stomach, rested over that spot.

“Huh,” Willow said, clearly contemplating said frightening concept.

“How is everything?” he said, desperate to change the subject, “Any difficulties with Glory?”

“Nope. Stuff’s pretty quiet. So, what else is going on there with you? Where are you staying?”

“Uh. My sister’s.”

“Wow. I didn’t even know you had a sister.”

“No?”

“Nope. Not a clue. You got any other siblings you haven’t been telling us about?”

“Um. Two others, in fact,” he said.

“Giles! What’s up with never telling us this?”

“It... never really came up.”

“Well, it’s coming up now. Spill, Buster. I want the whole story. Well, ok, I don’t need to hear about the, like, second cousins and stuff. Unless they’re particularly notable for some reason.”

“My life story, then?”

“Yup. Rupert Giles, unabridged. I’ve got time. Start with ‘I was born...’ and go straight on up to ‘And then this crazy witch person demanded I tell my life story.’”

He found himself laughing, softly. Then, obediently, he began, “I was born...”

He got up to his late twenties before the conversation wandered off to other things, like the weather in Sunnydale and England, and computers, and airplanes, and dog breeds, and various and sundry other topics of varying degrees of randomness. It was wonderful. Her voice, her laugh, her utterly unique outlook on life. He felt the tension of the past few days fade away completely.

Everything faded away, really. Everything but her voice, a soft vibration against his ear in the dark. He could almost feel her. See her, on her back in her own bed in the fading light of

evening.

“Man, hearing your voice,” she said, suddenly, “It’s like you’re here with me. Touching me.”

He chuckled.

“Shall I ask what you’re wearing?”

She giggled, a light and happy sound that made him feel a little bit thrilled for having provoked it.

“Silly. Although. I’ve never done the, you know. Phone sex thing. When are you coming home?” She added, quickly, and he knew she was blushing, which, given some of the things they’d done together over the past week both amused and touched him.

“I’m leaving the day after tomorrow, if all goes well with the council.”

He regretted the subject change even as he spoke. Would have been nice, whispering to her in the dark, telling her how to touch herself. Hearing her soft gasps, her bitten-back moans.

“Good. I miss you.”

“I miss you, too, darling.”

Silence again, but this time a comfortable one. He was at ease now, his body feeling warm and heavy, his eyelids drifting half-closed.

“Rupert?”

“Hmm?”

“I think I’m maybe in love with you.”

So much for being half-asleep.

“You still there?”

“Ah. Yes. I’m... I’m here.”

“I think maybe I’m gonna tell Tara. Today maybe. I think... I think she might already know. At least a little bit.”

Chapter 11

Reason number one was he would be sixty-five years old before the child could even vote.

Of course, it wasn't unheard of for grandparents to raise their grandchildren. He glanced up, saw a break in the stream of deplaning passengers, and started to stand. But he misjudged his altered weight and center of gravity and just ended up dropping back into his chair. He cursed, mostly silently, as the two children who had been kicking his seat on and off ever since they'd boarded the plane in Los Angeles jumped up and stood in the middle of the aisle, directly beside his seat, completely blocking his planned escape route as their mother struggled to get her luggage out of the overhead compartment.

Reason number two was he didn't have the time. He ran the shop, he helped Buffy train, he researched long into the night. Whatever free time he did have left over in all that he treasured far too much.

"Hi!" said one of the children, leaning on the arm of his seat. Lovely. The boy had big brown eyes, a gap-toothed smile, and straight dark hair in need of a trim.

"Hello," he said, reluctantly.

"I'm five!" the kid informed him, holding up five fingers, widely spread.

"Are you now?" Giles said.

"Mooooom," said the taller child, "Jake's talking to strangers."

There was a heavy sigh from above him, and the woman, who had finally wrestled her bag out, grabbed the little boy by the arm.

"Jake, what did I tell you?" She glanced at Giles for a moment, forced a strained smile, and said, "I'm sorry."

"No bother," he said, because it was expected, and then the woman and her two boys made their way down the aisle.

Reason number three, he didn't even particularly care for children. At least, not the younger ones.

Teenagers were, in spite of their reputation, not so bad.

Close on the heels of that came reason number four: He would, quite possibly, be a single parent. Granted, things were going well with Willow now, but... it seemed unwise to make such assumptions.

Although it wasn't as though he didn't have the resources. He had family money, and income from the shop, and savings left over from his career as Watcher. And as for the time issue, well, Willow had been correct in pointing out that a child could most likely stay with him in the shop. Magic shops were more or less expected to be family businesses anyway. An infant wouldn't be out of place.

The crowd that had been unleashed when the woman and her children had left finally passed by, and this time he successfully made it out of his seat, grabbed his bag from the overhead compartment, and fled towards the front of the plane.

His stomach rolled in protest at the movement, a recurrence of the airsickness, and that,

of course, reminded him of reason number five. He was a *man*, he couldn't carry a baby to term. It was *ludicrous*. Well, given the nature of Ethan's spell, he *could* carry a baby to term. Physically speaking. But. He couldn't. Could not. Would not. It was out of the question.

He stepped off the plane and into the passageway to the airport proper. His footsteps reverberated dully in the enclosed space.

Reason number six was this child would be half Ethan. God knew that was a set of genes that was never meant to be passed on.

Reason number seven was lost to the ages, however, because the moment he was about to define it was the same moment he stepped out into the gate, and the same moment he saw Willow, waiting by the check-in desk with a big grin on her face.

Fifteen hours on a plane or no, just seeing her put a smile on his face and a spring in his step. Not to mention certain effects on other aspects of his physiology.

He dropped his bag and caught her as she flung herself into his arms, and for a moment, he let himself get lost in the simple pleasure of holding her close again. Then he loosened his arms a bit and smiled down at her smiling up at him.

"Hi," she said. "How was your flight?"

"Um. Long. Fortunately, I was able to sleep for much of it."

She cuddled close to his chest again, tucking her head under his chin, and wrapping her arms around him a little tighter.

"That's good," she said, her voice muffled by his shirt.

He shut his eyes and dipped his head forward, breathing the scent of her hair. Feeling her magics. He ran his hand up her back to her shoulder, and his body thrilled at the feminine curve of her, the familiarity of her warm, slim body. He'd missed her. He loved her.

And she loved him, apparently.

Her hand was moving on his side, rubbing up and down just a little. He could feel her body moving as she breathed, and how she relaxed into him a little more with each breath.

She felt so good.

He kissed the top of her head, and pulled, reluctantly, away from her. Wouldn't do to get himself all worked up in the middle of Sunnysdale Regional Airport.

She looked at him with drowsy, bedroom eyes, a small crease of confusion in her brow.

"We should. Um." He gestured towards the exit with his head.

"Oh," she said, and seemed to snap awake. "Right."

So, he picked up his bag and they walked out to the parking lot, with her chattering away beside him about the events in Sunnysdale over the past few days.

Then, just as they reached his car in the bright morning sunlight, she said, "I, uh, told everyone your flight was coming in tonight. And that I would be out and around campus all day."

It actually took him a moment to grasp the significance of this statement. And then he did. Well, he thought, at least he wasn't actually in the airport anymore. All the blood in his body took a quick detour to his groin, and suddenly he wanted her. Badly. Far more than the low-level desire he'd been feeling for hours now, in anticipation of seeing her.

* * *

She saw the moment he caught the implications of what she'd said. Saw his body go still and his eyes go dark and intense. Something tightened low in her stomach, and suddenly his hand, that had been resting loosely on her shoulder, gripped her, pushed her back, her butt bumping back against the side of the convertible. And then his other hand was around the back of the neck, tilting her head back so he could... kiss her.

Oh yeah.

He was straddling her now, his pelvis pressed close to her stomach, his tongue in her mouth, his hand moved down from her shoulder to her *ass*, or at least what he could reach of it, what with her being pressed against the car, and all this right there in the middle of the *parking lot*. For a moment, she was shocked, then she remembered that this was the same guy who she'd had sex with in the basement of the Magic Box.

So instead of being shocked, she just ran her hands down his back to his own ass, and pulled him closer to her, opened her mouth wider and leaned her head back, letting him devour

her, trembling at the sensations. Goddess, it was powerful. A whole four days without him and she was suddenly *dying* to have him, never mind that before all this, she'd somehow managed to go for years without him.

She pushed her hips against his and she could feel his erection through his jeans and her skirt.

She wasn't wearing underwear. Figured it would make things easier. Plus, she wanted to see the look on his face when he realized.

He was kissing her deep and hard, tasting so good and Giles-y, one hand cradling her skull, holding her in place, while his other traced small circles and lines on the side of her hip, her thigh, her sensitive spots, making her body draw tight with want. She could feel herself getting wet and hot. Ready for him.

Wanted *something*, *anything* to just *touch* her, her vague attempts to rub herself against him coming to no good at all. She had to settle for squeezing her thighs together, squirming a little against the cool metal of the car.

Then he pulled away *again*, and he wouldn't let her follow him. She opened her eyes and saw his were darker, but fiery. He was looking down at her. Only touching her with one restraining hand on her shoulder. She squirmed again, not even intentionally for his benefit, but he smiled, a slow, dark smile, and his eyes lifted up to meet hers.

"Shall we go somewhere a little more private?"

She loved the way his voice got rough and deep when he was turned on. Loved that now she *knew* that his voice got rough and deep when he was turned on.

She grinned suddenly, ran one playful finger quickly over the bulge in his jeans and said, "Think you can drive?"

He grabbed her hand, even though she was no longer touching him, pulled it up and kissed her fingers, and then smiled behind them.

"I'll manage."

He tossed his bag in the back seat. Would have just vaulted into the car himself, but he seriously doubted he was still that maneuverable. Instead, he got in the normal way. He hit the gas the moment they hit the freeway, his dick hard agony, crammed against the seam of his jeans. He rather wanted to just unzip his fly, but he was already speeding, and he hardly wanted to be pulled over with his pants half-off. In a convertible with the top down. With his barely-legal lover beside him.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see her, leaning against the door. She was shifting on the seat every few moments, and it made him smile. There was no better cure for jetlag in the world than Willow, beautiful and aroused and *his* all day, no interruptions, no one expecting them anywhere.

Which lead his mind to the question: "You spoke to Tara?"

"Uh.... What?" she said, over the roar of the wind.

"Tara," he said, raising his voice. "Did you speak to her?"

"Uh... Well..."

He threw a glance in her direction, and saw her eyes were wide.

"No..." she said.

No?

"No?" he said.

"But I will! I really will, Giles, I swear!"

His heart tightened a little. He kept his expression neutral. Do not react. Do not. Push her and you lose her.

"It's just... I want to wait, you know, for the right moment. And, and figure out what to say, exactly. You know?"

"Of course," he said, and slipping into the mode of soft-spoken librarian was easy and comfortable. "I understand."

He was silent and hard-edged for the rest of the drive. She half-expected him to drop her off at her dorm, so even simply pulling up in front of his place was a huge relief. He was still wordless, though, as he put the car in park and got out, stopping only to pick up his bag before heading for his door. She wasn't even sure if he wanted her to follow him. But... well, it couldn't hurt. So, she got out and walked slowly through the courtyard to his front door, feeling a bit like a little kid expecting to be scolded, and really not liking the feeling.

What was his deal, anyway? She said she'd talk to her. And she *would*. Really. These things take time. And *tact*. She'd have thought he'd understand that.

By the time she reached his door, she'd worked herself into a pretty good state of righteous indignation. She slammed through it and banged it shut behind her, and just as she was drawing a breath to speak, something slammed her into the wall behind her.

It was Giles, which was mostly not a surprise, but given that this was the Hellmouth--

He pinned her there, one arm across her upper chest, pressing almost painfully against her collar bone, and he laid one hand over her lips, leaning in close enough that she could feel his breath as he whispered, "Don't say anything."

She drew in a hard breath, her heart hammering in her chest. She wanted to ask what he was doing, but somehow, she didn't want to disobey. So she was silent and still as his hand dropped off her lips and trailed down her side, found the hem of her shirt and then slid up under it, over the silky fabric of her bra, cupped around her breast. His other arm still holding her firm against the wall, his eyes on hers, as inescapable as his restraining arm.

Her breathing was still hard. She could feel the pressure of his arm with every breath. Feel his hand, moving just slightly on her breast. Feel her nipples growing hard. Feel the fear change to something else.

Relaxed against the wall, completely, and the moment he felt that, he smiled, mostly with his eyes, only a small twitch at the corner of his mouth.

"Good girl," he said, low and purring. She shuddered all over, shut her eyes, dropped her head back against the wall with a soft thunk.

His hand shifted on her breast, and he caught her nipple between his thumb and forefinger. He tugged on it a little, rolled it, gently, and little sparks of pleasure flitted through her. His lips touched her neck. Tongue traced her jugular. Then he pinched her. Hard.

She gasped, her whole body jolting, her sex clenching tight.

Her eyes snapped open, and he stared straight into them, his finger and thumb still painfully tight on her. Goddess, she was shivering. Hurt. But felt good.

He let go, abruptly, and the cessation of pain was almost as intense as the pain itself.

He stepped away, not suddenly, just easily, gently. She felt the loss of his nearness acutely, though, wanted him back against her. Holding her down. She didn't move away from the wall.

She could see approval in his eyes as he looked at her. She laid her palms flat on the wall behind her. Let him look. Loved him looking at her, with his eyes dark, trailing his hand lightly over himself through his jeans.

"Beautiful," he said, then suddenly pulled his shirts off, cast them behind himself on the floor. Left his jeans on and stepped up to her again. Unbuttoned her soft pink sweater, pushed it off. Then pulled her shirt over her head. She let him, moving only when necessary, letting him strip her, one article of clothing at a time. Her bra next, adeptly unclasped. She shivered a little as the cool air of the apartment hit her bare skin, and her nipples peaked sharper. He touched them, lightly, with the pads of his thumbs. She looked down, watched him touch her. His hands: male, strong hands. Callused from swords and other medieval weaponry. The index finger on his right hand that was bowed a bit, badly healed after Angelus. The ring on his left pinky that was cool against the side of her breast.

Then he unfastened her skirt and let it fall to the floor. For a moment, she saw him lose his momentum, startled, then he smiled slowly.

"Someone's being naughty," he said, very softly. Slipped his hands around her waist, his thumbs resting in the hollows of her hip bones, his fingers warm on the sides of her ass.

It was strange, being naked with him still half-dressed. Being naked right here, downstairs, by the door. But good. Made her warm in all the right places. Made her skin break out in goosebumps, and not from a chill.

He tugged her a step away from the wall, and then pulled away from her, keeping just

one hand on her side.

“Upstairs,” he said.

This, too, was weird: walking up the stairs, naked, feeling his fingers touching the small of her back, and knowing he was watching her. But still good. Trembly and interesting. And it made her wonder what it would be like to be on the other side of this. Her dressed, him naked. On his knees maybe. Doing whatever she told him to. She wondered if he would. She thought maybe.

Then they reached his bed and he was telling her to lie on her back, so she did, and he crawled on the bed over her, straddled her waist and took her wrists in his hands and pulled them over her head. Told her to keep them there, and got off the bed, pulled something out from under it.

She heard a clink, and when he stood up and then sat down on the side of the bed again, with a pair of padded handcuffs in his hand, she wasn't exactly surprised. But the reaction of her body shocked her, simultaneously relaxing and tensing. And wanting. She was wet, enough to feel herself: heat and liquid, a drop running down her perineum and into the crack of her ass.

He leaned over her again, his bare chest close to her face, and she could smell a trace of his sweat, his skin. Her seemed to be searching for something over her head. As she twisted her head back to look, he found it: a loop of rope, attached to the bed somewhere under the mattress. He looped the cuffs through the rope, and then reached for her wrist.

She almost pulled her hand away. For a split second, terrified. Not of him. Never him. Herself. Her reactions to this. This, that she'd never let herself think about. Ok, she had, but not in relation to her actually **doing** anything like this.

But she didn't pull away. She heard the cuff click as it locked. Unyielding loop, not tight, but enough that she couldn't slide her hand out. Enough that she could **feel** it there. Couldn't avoid the knowledge that she was naked in Giles's bed--a moment later, and the second cuff clicked around her other wrist--in handcuffs.

And then, at that moment, it was as though a string had been severed inside of her. As if some tension she'd never even known was there was suddenly **gone**, and she could truly relax. She actually sighed from it, the relief of it.

He moved back along the bed, sat down, his hip resting against hers, and he gently stroked her cheek.

“Feels good, doesn't it? Freeing.”

Her throat was too dry for words, all she could do was nod.

He reached up again, took her hand in his own and guided it to the cuff.

“There's a clasp here, if you need to get out of them.”

Mildly disappointing, that, knowing she could get out of them herself. But also comforting.

“Would you like to be gagged as well?”

She blinked at him.

“Uh.”

“I think you might appreciate it. Not feeling the pressure to speak. Not that I don't love the sound of your voice.”

“O-Ok?” she said, thinking that she could barely speak now, anyway.

He reached off the side of the bed again, came back up holding a rather disturbing-looking gadget.

“Uh. Does it hurt?”

He smiled.

“No. It is a little uncomfortable. But it doesn't hurt.”

She was still eyeing it suspiciously, but she nodded. His hands were tender as he lifted her head, and gently fastened the gag in place. She worked her tongue around it for a moment, realized she had to breathe through her nose. He was looking down at her.

“Ok?”

Her attempt to answer in the affirmative resulted in nothing but a muffled grunt. He smiled again: soft, nonjudgmental amusement. She waited a moment, rolling her eyes at herself, then nodded.

“If you ever want me to stop, for any reason, just cross your fingers. I'll be watching. All right?”

She nodded again.

He leaned forward, and placed a tiny, soft kiss in the center of her forehead, and then he backed down her body and knelt next to her hips again. Looked at her, and his lips parted, his breath moved faster.

“My God, Willow. Do you know how amazing you look right now?”

And he was right. It was a relief. Not to have to say anything. Not to have to move. Just to give herself over to him, let him lead.

Her whole body was loose, relaxed, trembling. When he touched her, running both of his hands up her sides and then down again, it was like her skin was one live, raw nerve, the sensations burning her like a brand.

She moaned, a high, silken sound behind the gag, and she loved the pressure of it on her tongue, loved the hard metal around her wrists, loved his hands, massaging her breasts now. Then, he reached down, between her legs, and she spread them quickly for him, and his fingertips brushed over her, barely enough for her to even feel.

She lifted her hips, tried to press herself against him, and he pulled his hand away, ignoring her groan of frustration. He laid his palm flat over her stomach, sticky warm skin.

“Shh. Let me, precious.”

The gentle motion of his hand on her stomach was anything but soothing. It aroused her, inflamed her, made her body break out in cold sweat. She found herself gripping the chain of the cuffs tight enough to feel the links digging into her palms.

This time, when he moved his hand between her legs, he didn't tease. All he did was slide that ever-so-slightly crooked index finger inside of her.

And to her intense shock, she came.

* * *

He smiled at the look of surprised pleasure on her face. Continued gently moving his finger within her as she drifted down a bit, panting. So beautiful. Flushed all over, writhing on the bed, clinging to the chain binding her to the bed.

His cock throbbed painfully in his jeans, again, wanting to be where his finger was, inside her, where she was slick and hot and still quivering from her orgasm. But this, this was about taking his time. About exploring every inch of her body, finding the spots that made her sigh and giggle and sob with pleasure. He didn't know when, or, god, even if, he would have a chance like this again, and he wasn't about to waste it.

He leaned down, brushing his nose up under her hair, breathing the damp scent of her there: her shampoo, her sweat, her arousal and her magic. He started there, then moved on, slowly, methodically, as she had with him before. Only he wouldn't let himself be sidetracked.

Touching her, with hands and lips and tongue. Starting from her neck and working his way down, noting every gasp, every sigh, every twitch. Like learning a new text, finding every nuance, committing it to memory. One never knows what might be needed someday, must remember it all.

Looked up now and then, checked her eyes, her hands. Her body was moving constantly now, as he reached her waist. Over-stimulated, every nerve burning, pleasure all she could feel. He knew the feeling. Had, in his younger years, all but *lived* for that feeling. Letting go of everything, and just *being*, not doing, just letting yourself be done to, and riding the sensation.

He was harder than he'd been in years, aching and desperate, and as he lay down on the bed between her legs and ducked his head down to her sex and she came, almost immediately, under his tongue, he began to move his hips against the bed, just a little, just enough to satisfy the desire, just a little.

His jeans were more torturous than any bondage device he could remember using, but taking them off would necessitate pulling away from her and that... was simply unacceptable.

Her scent here was like a physical presence, like a liquid he could drown in, and her taste was thick on his tongue. Licking, sucking, biting gently, then not so gently, until her orgasms were blending into each other, until her legs had gone limp and slipped from his shoulders to the sheets.

And god, it was pure hell to pull away from her long enough to take off his jeans, to find

a condom, but then he was above her, looking down into her eyes, so dark and so *drugged*. He pushed inside of her, finally, *finally*, and her body still rolled up to meet his, still wanted him, still shuddered through another small climax just from his entry. Bloody well nearly dragged him over the edge with her, and he had to hold perfectly still, not moving, not breathing, until the incipient orgasm backed away just a little, just enough for him to begin to move inside of her.

And then he reached behind her head gently, unfastened the gag and pulled it away. Knowing she was probably mostly beyond speech now, anyway. Just wanting to see her.

He lost all track of time, moving inside her languidly, looking into her eyes. When his climax came, it wrapped around him gently, rising through him like a slow tide, deep and strong and inevitable. Long, long pulses, dragging out of him, like he was leaving a piece of his soul inside her. Except, he knew, he'd already done that, long ago.

And when it was over, he let her out of the cuffs, and she curled against him immediately, a small creature, seeking warmth, and he pulled the comforter up and wrapped it around them both, and they slept.

Chapter 12

They slept, and she woke before him, got up, and read for awhile, then ordered them something to eat around two and woke him when it came. They ate dinner in his bed, with her wrapped in his too-large robe, and him sitting across from her, cross-legged, naked but for his glasses. They were close, her knee pressed against his. They couldn't seem to exist without touching each other in some way: a hand on an arm, fingers brushing lips... halfway through the meal, he untied the robe, let it fall open, and reached inside, laid his hand between her breasts, over her heart. She held still, on the outside, but inside her body was flying into motion. She'd read all the books recommended for outside reading in psychology, and she knew: love was real, was physical. Fast heartbeat, rising temperature, flushed skin, shaking. Estrogen, testosterone, endorphins, adrenaline. Fever, love bug. Not so far off, chemically speaking.

Which was utterly ridiculous, because nothing, just nothing, was anything like this.

She closed her eyes, and felt the tips of his fingers on her breast, circling her nipple. Felt it draw taut and hard. Felt heat, and love, and want.

His hand dropped away and they continued to eat, not speaking. What they had done, earlier, still lingered between them. She felt connected to him, like a cable hooked somewhere behind her heart, binding her to him. And him to her.

And gradually, their casual touches lingered a little longer, came a little more often, until the food was done and set aside, and there was nothing but each other. They were sitting directly across from each other, her on her knees, him still cross-legged, and looking into each other's eyes, and his hands were running over her slowly under the robe: up and down her sides, around her back, her shoulders; always moving, touching her, learning her. She curled her own hand around the nape of his neck, felt the fringes of his hair tickle her skin, and pulled him closer, and pressed her lips to his, and he wrapped his arms around her back, kissed her hard.

Then suddenly, she turned her head aside, tucked her forehead in his shoulder.

Her heart clenched with some feeling, so powerful, she couldn't tell if it was joy or grief, all she could feel was just a massive Something.

When she looked up again, she saw him through burning tears.

"Please don't be mad at me," she said, even though she hadn't really known she was going to speak at all.

"Oh, Willow," he said, gently, "I'm not-"

"You are," she said, because he was, she knew it, she'd seen the way he reacted in the car when she'd told him that she hadn't told Tara.

"It's just... I love you, and I love her, and I want to be with you, but I don't want to hurt her, and I don't know what to say-"

But then she had to laugh a little because he was literally kissing the tears off her cheeks, and she'd only ever read about anyone doing that. She felt his lips smile against her skin.

"Hush, precious," he murmured.

She sniffled, and then said, "I do, you know."

"Hmm?"

“Love you.”

And then, suddenly, she was alone.

But only because, as it turned out, he was going for a condom, and she thought to herself, even as she admired his sleek back and nice ass through the fading blur of tears, that she really should just get on the pill.

Then he was back with her, kissing her, pulling her into his lap, and soon, all she was thinking about was his cock, moving inside her as she slowly undulated against him. His stomach, rubbing against hers. His powerful shoulders, his hazy eyes, his gentle smile.

The robe curled around them both, soft and warm.

It was dark in the bedroom, and they were alone. She loved him, he loved her, and at that moment, that was all that mattered. Nothing bad could enter here: not confusion, not guilt, not doubts.

By the end of it, she was on her back and he was over her, driving into her, and they were both lost in it, in each other. She came, and he followed, and they held each other for a little while.

Afterwards, they got up, and they showered together, got dressed, and then settled down in the living room with sandwiches and tea and a game of Scrabble. At eight, he dropped her off in front of the student union on campus.

Kissing him goodbye felt deeply wrong.

She watched his taillights until he turned out of sight. Her arms were crossed against the light chill of the night as she started walking, slowly, back towards her dorm. As she walked, her mind toyed with conversation openers.

‘Hi Tara, we need to talk.’ ‘Sure, sweetie. About what?’ ‘I’ve been sleeping with Giles.’

No. Too abrupt, clearly.

‘Tara, you know I love you, right?’

No. Maybe... ‘Tara, you know I care about you...’

Willow sighed.

‘Tara, I have a confession to make. And it... it’s bad. Very bad.’ ‘O-ok...’ ‘See, lately I’ve... I’ve been... doing something bad. The kind of bad that’s... bad.’

Ok, that was leading nowhere fast.

‘Tara, I think maybe I need some... space.’

No. Way too generic. Plus, again with the way-too-abrupt.

Willow sighed again, more forcefully. How about just: ‘Hi, Tara, wouldja please hold still for a second so I can just rip your heart out and tear it into a million pieces and maybe stomp on it a few times, too? Thanks. Oh, and by the way, I’ve been shagging Giles for about two weeks now.’

Yeah, really, that was looking like the best of the bunch.

She remembered the betrayal in Oz’s eyes. And she remembered how her world had crumbled when she’d realized that the one person who made her feel special, made her feel *wanted*, had apparently traded her in for a better model.

What on earth could she say?

She still didn’t know by the time she reached her dorm. So she set it aside, wrapped up in a nice little coat of denial on a back shelf in her mind.

Tara was at her desk when she came in, and she looked up.

“Hey, Willow,” she said, softly.

“Hey,” Willow said, pushing a smile onto her face. “How was your day?”

She set her backpack over by her desk, and when she turned back around, Tara was standing up, with her hands clasped in front of her, looking down at the carpet.

“Hey, Willow?”

“Yeah?” Willow said, feeling a trickle of cold fear begin to run down her spine.

“I- Is everything all right? B- Because lately, you’ve... you’ve been a little... distracted. Like, like maybe you’re working a little too hard or... or something, you know?”

It was the perfect opening.

This was her chance.

But when she opened her mouth to speak, what she said was:

“What? No! No, everything’s fine!”

“You know, you can tell me anything, right? I mean... if something’s wrong... if... if *I’m* doing something... something that’s bothering you? Please, I want to know. I’d really rather you told me.”

She looked so sad, so.... afraid. Going to her, putting her arms around her, melting into her embrace was so easy, so natural. Hurting her... that was unnatural.

“Oh, Tara, baby, of course not. I’ve just been... you know, school and stuff, that’s all. I’m sorry.”

But even as she felt the relief in Tara’s body, a part of her mind was screaming at her. Because this... this was just going to make things worse. But that thought seemed far away as Tara kissed her throat, and hugged her a little tighter. Her body twitched in tired protest, but she still let Tara lead her over to the bed, helped her get them both out of their clothes.

Then she took over, pressing Tara down on her back, and kissing her, touching her, going over every sensitive spot she’d found on her lover’s body over the past year or so.

And when Tara looked over at her, later, her eyelids heavy with satiation, and said, “You never-” Willow just smiled and said, “I’m fine, go to sleep, hon,” and held her until she did.

As she was lying there, with Tara beside her, she happened to look over at the bookcase, and something caught her eye.

It was an old book, bound in cracked, dry leather. She slipped out of bed quietly and pulled it off the shelf, let it fall open in her lap. It had once belonged to Jenny Calendar. Willow had sorted all of her things after she’d died, and no one had ever asked for them back. So, now they were hers.

This one was a book on magic and midwifery, passed down through many years and generations, handwritten in many different hands and languages. Willow flipped past the Rumanian and German sections, but stopped when she got to a part written in French.

Mostly, it was simple things, like charms to ensure the unborn child’s health and long life. A couple of spells to determine paternity and legitimacy. Many, many potions to help ease the more unpleasant side effects of pregnancy.

And then, she found it.

It was a dark spell, the kind that called for blood and ash and some minor dealings with some minor demons.

But it would do what Giles wanted. It would end it. Give him back his life, some trace of normalcy. No surgery, no risk of unwanted publicity.

She slipped a piece of paper between the pages. She’d show him the spell at the Magic Box tomorrow after class.

Chapter 13

It was a quiet morning in the Magic Box. There'd only been two people in all morning, and neither had bought anything. In fact, they had come in together, looked around, laughed at the merchandise, and then left, joking audibly about the freaks who actually believed that stuff was real.

Their naivety provoked, as it always did, conflicting feelings of annoyance and a kind of longing in Giles.

Ignorance seemed so blissful at times. In their world, no ten-year-old boys were told that their whole lives boiled down to a handful of years in the service of a single, too-fragile teenaged girl. In their world, no one had to behead a friend to stop a homicidal demon.

As he watched them go, as though to punctuate his thoughts, he felt a small shifting inside of him.

Somewhere, in some other world, Anya was ranting about the dying consumer spirit, and how it heralded the end of life as all good Americans knew it. Distractedly, he suggested that she take an early lunch, in case things got busier in the afternoon.

The prospect of future customers seemed to cheer her, and she buzzed out the door a few minutes later, leaving Giles alone.

Well. Not alone.

He sat down heavily in one of the chairs beside the Scoobies' table. He realized a moment after he'd done it that he'd placed his hand over his stomach again.

He suddenly regretted sending Anya away.

It was in these moments, these quiet moments, that it all seemed so hard to ignore.

He looked down at himself, at the slightly-too-pronounced curve of his abdomen. He ran his hand back and forth over it. Really, it still just felt like his stomach always had.

Except... it didn't, exactly. He did feel different. Most likely it was hormones. God knew, he must have some uncharacteristic ones floating around in his bloodstream at the moment.

But he did feel different. Aware of it. That same awareness that had prompted him to buy the damn pregnancy test in the first place.

He shut his eyes, and felt a cold wash of fear roll up and over him, icy cold and paralyzing. His heart was hammering in his chest, frighteningly hard, and his chest felt tight, felt like he couldn't quite breathe in deep enough. Couldn't move.

Odd to know that to anyone looking at him, he'd probably appear perfectly calm.

Under his hand, he felt it shift again, as though it sensed his anxiety.

It was so easy, when he was with Willow, to forget it for a little while. Block it all out.

Too easy. And, much as he loved her, he knew he was using her.

He tugged his glasses off. Heard the clatter as they fell onto the table, and realized only then that his hand was shaking too hard to hold them. He watched it, for a moment, with a distant sort of fascination. Felt his heart, still doing a four-minute-mile in his chest.

The light was too bright, like a drugged hallucination, filled with creatures made of fire.

He understood that what this was was a panic attack, and a part of him wondered at that. He hadn't even been entirely aware that... that it was really that bad.

He knew that he could get out of the chair he was in. But it seemed like an extremely bad idea. Like after waking from a nightmare, lying in the dark, trying not to even breathe for fear of summoning demons from the darkness.

The bell over the door jingled, and he wished he'd thought to turn over the closed sign. But then, he really hadn't exactly been planning on... panicking.

"Giles?"

Willow's voice. He'd like to have been able to say that just hearing her voice made things better. But, really, it was more making things worse.

"Giles?"

She stopped in front of him, and set the book she was carrying on the table.

"Are you ok?"

"Um. No," he said, eventually. "Not... not really."

Her brow creased with concern as he tried to concentrate on just breathing. She folded gracefully down onto her knees in front of him. Lovely, that was really helping his heart rate. She laid her hand over his on his knee.

"Whoa, your hands are cold. What... what's wrong? Is it... is it demonic?"

He managed a small laugh.

"No. Er. No."

Then, he saw understanding in her eyes, and she touched the hand that he was still holding on his stomach.

"Oh."

She paused a moment, her fingertips light on the back of his hand, and then she pulled away and stood up.

"I- I think I can... help."

She picked up the book and held it out to him. He saw her watching his hand shake as he took it.

"God, Giles... I.. I didn't know it was that bad..."

He laughed again, softly, feeling a self-deprecating blush rise to his cheeks. *Good lord, man,* he thought, *pull yourself together.*

"I actually just had that precise thought myself."

He looked down at the book.

At first, he didn't realize what he was looking at. Then, gradually, in fuzzy bits and French-accented pieces, it began to sink in.

"My god," he whispered.

"So?"

She had sat down in the chair beside his, and was turned towards him, her knees near his own.

So? *So?* This was hardly the sort of thing to be summed up in one-word questions. His stomach rolled in the kind of threatening-with-intent way it had developed over the past few months. He managed to get a breath deep into his lungs, and used the calming rush of oxygen to set the book aside and stand.

"Giles?"

"I'll... I'll be..."

He gestured towards the training room, and then went, grateful that Willow actually did somehow catch his meaning and stay put.

Everything still had a haze of dizzy unreality to it as he walked through the training room and into the small employee washroom in the back. Hitting his knees in front of the toilet on the neat blue and yellow tile Xander had laid felt far too familiar. Flu. He'd thought it was the flu. Why couldn't it have been the flu?

The porcelain was cold and smooth under his hands, and he waited, silently conversing with his body. The nausea flickered low in his gut, flaring and then fading, and then flaring again. A little lower in his gut, something else stirred again.

For a moment, he was positive that, yes, he was going to vomit.

But then the feeling faded again, and was gone. He rocked back onto his heels, and sat, silently, there on the floor. Everything looked strange from this angle: the shining white curve of

the bottom of the sink, the walls too tall and seeming to tilt inwards. The sense of strangeness was almost comforting. It felt right, like it matched the strange whirl in his mind.

He'd wanted to end this, from the moment that he knew about it. It still terrified him, on a level that was deep and primal. And it had never been his choice. It had been thrust upon him, an act of hateful vengeance.

And yet...

Yet...

It was alive. It moved inside of him. It had hands and arms and a head and legs. It had a gender, albeit one unknown to him.

And it was his. Much as it was half Ethan, it was also half him.

His child.

* * *

Willow was about to go in after him, when he finally emerged from the training room. He still looked pale and shaken, like he had when she'd come in, and she worried about him.

He stopped beside the table and stood there for a few moments, looking at the book.

She fought the urge to say anything, wanting him to speak in his own time.

He didn't, for quite awhile. Just continued to look down at the page, with his neck twisted at an uncomfortable-looking angle, so he could scan the text.

And then, finally, he reached out, and gently folded the book closed.

"I can't," he said, just a breath of a whisper.

And then Anya swept in through the door, a one-woman hurricane of excessive enthusiasm, and she dragged a bemused and helpless Giles away on a mission to do some sort of inventory, and Willow was left, by herself, at the table with the book.

And a staggering revelation to contemplate.

"Whoa," Willow said, finally, to the empty room.

Chapter 14

Three days after he'd made his decision, and things were the same, and were different, than they'd always been. The world went on around him, unchanging, in that way life always had of not marking major events. Rain on a wedding day, sunshine at a funeral. The damn bell still jingled merrily over the door to the shop, Anya still chattered brightly about money.

But things were different. Every time he sat down to a meal, there was suddenly a nagging presence in his mind asking if it was good for the baby. Every time he reached for a drink and stopped himself, it was suddenly because it would harm the baby, not because it would unsettle his stomach. Every time he laid down to sleep at night, he suddenly wondered if sleeping in certain positions was better than others.

It was driving him around the bend.

And he'd hardly seen Willow since.

Which, of course, only made things that much worse. And the fact that most of the time he did see her, she was with Tara... well, none of this boded well.

Like now, he was organizing a new shipment of charms, and they were over at the table, chattering and giggling... sitting close together, touching hands, ducking their heads together conspiratorially. Some men, he supposed, or even most, perhaps, would not see this as a hindrance. A woman, bisexual, with a female lover. The thought would be arousing, the sight of them, more so.

But Willow and Tara... the only heat they raised in him was anger. Futile, unjustified, impotent wrath. Because what the hell could he do? What ground did he have to stand on?

Nothing.

Tara couldn't steal something that had never been his to begin with.

Couldn't turn the anger on them. Could easily turn it on himself, though. Idiotic old fool that he was, thinking she'd ever... his fault. All his fault. He'd started it, he'd kept it going, always made the first move. Swept her along in something... something she'd maybe never even really wanted. Buried himself in her, mind and heart and soul. Used her.

He couldn't stop a soft sound of disgust as he turned back to the shelf after glancing over his shoulder at them yet again.

He was-

"We both know what they've been up to, eh, Rupes?"

Startled at Spike's voice, as he appeared out of nowhere beside him. Hated himself for the show of weakness, for the moment off-guard as Spike chuckled at his expense.

"Surprised *you* can't smell it on them," Spike continued, leaning against the shelf, boxing Giles in, deep inside his personal space.

"Do shut up, Spike," he said, in a tone pleasant enough to reek of threat.

"Heh. You wish, Rupert. Gonna take more than that to keep me quiet."

A small alarm bell tinkled in the back of Giles's mind.

"And what, precisely, is that supposed to mean?" he said, gently setting down an amulet, and then leaving his hand there, on the shelf, not moving a muscle of his body.

“Come on, now. You’re a Watcher. You know all about us vampires and our... gifts.”
Spike leaned in even closer, undead breath cool on Giles’s ear.

“I know Glinda’s not the only one been dipping into that particular honeypot.”

Giles’s breath caught in his throat, even as Spike pulled infinitesimally away.

“Also know you’re preppers. Can’t quite figure that one, but I’ll say this: no such thing as safe sex with a Wicca, mate.”

“That wasn’t Willow,” Giles said, before he could stop himself.

Spike tossed his head unconcernedly.

“Yeah, well, here’s the thing--”

Giles glared.

“Go away, Spike.”

“The thing is,” Spike continued, blithely unconcerned, “Way I see it, I have some information here. Information that certain other parties--say, a certain girly witch type--don’t have. Information you don’t want certain other parties to have.”

And suddenly, he was fighting off a laugh. He forced a (mostly) straight face, held up a hand, and said, “Hold off, just a moment, are you *blackmailing* me?”

Spike looked a bit derailed.

“Uh. Well, yeah.”

“By threatening to tell Tara that Willow and I are involved.”

”Um. Yeah. That’s the plan.”

Giles just turned towards him, crossed his arms and looked at him. Watched as understanding slowly began to dawn in Spike’s eyes.

“Oh. Oh! Oh... How ‘bout this then? You do what I want... I tell the witch for you... everybody wins.” He paused, frowned, then said, “Well, ‘cept the witch. Guess she kinda loses.”

“No, thank you,” Giles said, drily, turning back to continue organizing the shelf, feeling the threat passing.

“Hey, hold up, then. That won’t work, then how ‘bout this. You do what I want, or I tell the Slayer ‘bout your little indiscretions. How about that?”

In an instant, his blood ran cold. Dear god. Buffy. In all honesty, he had truly not spared a thought to her reaction. True, they’d been as discreet as they could, mostly, in his mind, for Tara’s sake. But Buffy? Knowing?

That was terrifying.

He knew he should have said, “be my guest,” should have blown it off. But he also knew that now was far too late, and knew that Spike had seen the way his body had drawn tight.

“What do you want?” he finally said, softly, admitting defeat and hating it.

“Ah, that’s more like it then,” Spike said, and his cheery tone grated hard on Giles’s nerves, and he felt his fist curl.

“Just tell me, Spike.”

“All right, then. Very simple really. Just a small thing.”

Giles waited, agitation growing.

“Put in a good word for me.”

“What?”

“With the Slayer.”

Giles blinked.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Put in a good word for me with the Slayer. Tell her what an all right kinda guy I am. Give her that speech, you know? The one you gave me a while back about how maybe I’m destined for great things and all.”

“You blew me off after I made ‘that speech,’ Spike.”

”Yeah, well, don’t tell her that part. Besides. I’ve changed.”

This was all far too bizarre for Giles’s taste, but it seemed harmless enough. Buffy would simply not listen to him, as she always did, and everyone could move on with their lives unmolested.

“All right,” he said, finally.

Spike smiled.

“Right then. Great.”

Then, he didn't leave. After a moment, Giles had to ask, "Why are you still here?" Spike looked wounded.

"I'm making conversation. Hey, by the way. You and the witch. What exactly do you think is going on there? I mean, do you really think you're gonna win her back to our side of the fence with, what, the magical powers of your prick?" Spike paused, looked thoughtful, and then poked Giles's stomach, "Or maybe she's just attracted to the whole androgynous deal." Ok. One step too far.

Well, actually, as usual, Spike had gone many steps too far, but that was the proverbial straw.

"Out of my shop," he said, pouring every bit of malice he possessed into the words. And Spike went.

And sadly, the main thing he felt was a burst of relief that at least some level of his masculinity was still intact.

He looked over to the table, and was suddenly sure that Willow and Tara had heard every word, but the two girls were still conversing quietly.

He watched them for a moment, as Willow was speaking and gesturing at something in the book they were looking at. She was so beautiful. Always. Her eyes glowing with enthusiasm, her whole body infused with it, every movement so joyful and alive. As always, she called to him, drew him.

He stopped resisting, and went to her, and when she and Tara both looked up, eyes still bright with laughter from some private joke, he found himself spinning some fantasy to them about needing Willow's help setting up the old laptop she'd left at his apartment.

Bold move, snatching her right out from under her girlfriend's nose. Stupid move. Desperate move.

But Willow was agreeing, was telling Tara that it would be dull, best that she just head back to the dorm, reminding her of her evening lab, asking him if it was all right if she stayed and studied a bit at his place afterwards, where it was quieter than the dorm.

All he had to do was call down to Anya that he was leaving, that she could count out the cash register. His hands trembled a little as he turned the sign to closed. His palms slipped a little on the steering wheel, warm and soft with a hint of sweat. He dropped off Tara, pretended he didn't see their goodbye kiss, and drove himself and Willow back to his place, amazing himself by managing not to run any red lights or stop signs or speed.

He had her in his arms, had his lips on hers, the moment they were in the door. Finally. God, too long. Her arms were under his jacket, holding him. Her hands on his back. Her tongue, pressing his.

Hitched her up the door, held her there, kissing desperately, like drowning. Her small whimper was like a spark of bright sunlight, shining on water. Her voice, gasping his name as he kissed down her neck, smelled her hair, tasted her skin. God, he was so hard. Wanted her so bad.

Wondered, suddenly, if sex would hurt the baby.

"Bloody hell," he spat, suddenly shoving away from the door, from her, from everything. Buried his face in his hands and silently screamed, "SHUT UP!"

"Giles?" Willow's voice said, breaking through the haze. "Giles? What? Did- did I-"

He dropped his hands away, and his shoulders slumped.

"No, no. Not you," he said, then pulled out the desk chair and sank down into it.

"Uh... what then?"

She was approaching him cautiously.

"Giles?"

She touched his shoulder, shyly, and he reached up and laid his hand over hers, felt her relax a little.

"I just- it seems ever since I decided to... er, to carry this... um... to term... all I've bloody been able to think about is, uh, what's good for it. And, what's not. And, uh. I'm not entirely sure which is which."

"Huh?"

"Everything I eat, everything I do, I keep thinking, 'is this good for... for...' well, you know."

"The baby?"

“Right. Yes.”

“Uh. Well, I can hook you up with some websites, if you want? And, and we can call Ben back and ask him, too.”

Two excellent suggestions. Also, frightening. Facing up to this as a reality. As something that there were websites on, and that doctors had pamphlets about. It was somehow easier to face it as a great unknown, as something no one had dealt with before. Because that was how it felt. In a way, that was truly what it was.

But, his reason was stronger than his subconscious in this case. Better to light a candle than curse the darkness.

“Yes, of course. That would be wonderful.”

She reached up with her free hand and touched his cheek.

“We could, you know, actually set up that laptop, if you want.”

He shut his eyes and turned into her hand, kissed her palm, smelling the faint scent of sweat there. With a solution in sight, his panic was easing away, leaving behind only want.

“Later...” he said, softly.

“Yeah...” she said.

So they went upstairs, stripping each other gently along the way--with maybe a little help from Willow’s magic, he wasn’t sure-- and then they stood, naked and kissing, at the top of the stairs.

She always felt so good. Always sent warm shivers through him. Always pushed away the darkness, left behind only light, only pleasure. His cock brushed against her stomach... skin there so soft... he pushed closer, felt heat trickle up his body as his shaft slid against her.

“Oh, darling,” he whispered.

She pulled away from him, then, and backed up to the bed, sat down on the edge. Looked at him, and her gaze came to rest on his stomach. He shifted, self-consciously.

“Don’t,” she said, softly. “Don’t try to...”

He forced himself to hold still, although her gaze felt like an unscratched itch.

“You’re... beautiful,” she said, finally, and he had an uncomfortable moment wondering if maybe Spike hadn’t been so far off after all, but then she amended quickly, “But... but not in a girly way! Not at all. It’s... I dunno, maybe it’s the whole guy-with-a-baby thing, only more so. It’s like you... you’re so brave, Giles. And... and you’re... I dunno. I can’t... think of the words, really.”

He walked to her, and she put her hands on him, over the spot. First person to touch him there, like that, besides himself. He had to shut his eyes under the onslaught of emotion: passion, from the intimacy; fear, as the whole thing became ever that much more real; love, for Willow and her gentle hands; tenderness, and something like pride, for the child that was within him.

And then Willow’s hands slid down lower, both curling around his cock. He sighed, and opened his eyes as things got simpler, as the lust and the love took over.

“Sex is ok,” she said, as she let go of him and moved backwards to the middle of the bed.

“What?” he said, as his mind was still working on dealing with the sudden lack of her hands on him.

“For the baby,” she said.

He crawled on the bed over her.

“I checked,” she added.

“Ah,” he said, and he did feel relieved.

He kissed her as she continued speaking, sneaking words in as their lips parted briefly.

“I did hear that... high levels... of... ooo... testosterone... in the womb... might be... related to... homosexuality.”

He paused.

“Hmm. Really? That’s fascinating.”

She was flushed, and breathless, grinning up at him.

“Yeah. But... well, we’re probably not the best control group, y’know?”

He laughed softly, and kissed her some more, until they were both breathing heavy and moving against each other. A moment apart, and then he was on his back, and she was over him, sinking down on him, her eyes fluttering shut, her head rolling back. Beautiful, god, so

beautiful. His breath rushed out in a shuddering gust, and he pressed up into her, feeling her, tight hot slick, around him, and so soft.

“Rupert,” she near-whispered, looking down at him as she rocked on him. He loved the way she said his name, how intimate it felt, spoken by her only in these moments, when they were together, alone, touching.

“Oh, my love,” he whispered back, mourning, for a moment, in the back of his mind, how hopelessly lost he was, and then found her hand and clasped it in his own.

Then they were quiet but for gasps and soft groans, moving together towards the fall, and then over it, with two soft cries in the darkened room.

They held each other afterwards, murmuring meaningless pillow talk to each other, until one of their stomachs rumbled, and they laughed and got up.

He put on his robe and she put on his T-shirt and they went downstairs and ordered Chinese, and then they settled down in the living room so Willow could work her mojo (of the non-magic variety) on the old laptop.

He couldn’t even express what a simple joy it was, sitting there together, cuddled close, just holding each other, talking and laughing softly as she attempted, patiently, to guide him through the intentionally unfamiliar world of computers and internet.

“... But what if it freezes up? It’s always freezing up for some reason or another.”

“Well, if it freezes, and you haven’t saved your work...”

“Yes?”

“You cry,” she said, with cheerful finality.

“Oh, wonderful. Thank you, Willow.”

“No, see, the moral of this story is save early and often.”

He smiled and kissed her hair.

“Ah, I see. A cautionary tale, then.”

“Yup. Heed well, my friend.”

There was a knock at the door.

“Ooo, food!” Willow said, bouncing up and down a little in a supremely distracting sort of way.

“Ah, yes. Keep doing that and we’re not going to be eating anytime soon.”

“Oh! Oops,” she said, grinning back at him unapologetically as she leaned forward and put the laptop on the coffee table. He quickly hopped up and skirted around the table before she could actually get him into a state unfit to answer the front door in. The fact that he was wearing nothing but a robe was quite bad enough.

She was a few steps behind him as he opened the door, carefully back out of the line-of-sight, given her state of dress, and he was half-turned towards her, about to comment on her lack of decorum.

But his comments died on his lips when he glanced briefly towards the delivery man.

Or, rather, the person at his door.

Who was not actually a delivery man.

“Oh god,” Willow gasped, after they’d all stared at each other for a bit, “Tara!”

Chapter 15

She could hardly remember the scramble to get her clothes together, could hardly remember running out the door. She wasn't aware of much at all, really, until she'd caught up with Tara, grabbed her arm, pulled them both to a halt.

Oh, goddess, tears--

And: "Don't touch me!"

And Tara was pulling away, stumbling backwards, crying and shouting, "How could you? How could you?"

"Tara! God, Tara, I'm so--I--"

Her world was spinning, everything off kilter, only a few words really cutting through it, like "trusted" and "loved" and... and all the accusations, all true... "With Giles? God, Willow--"

"Tara, please!"

"I thought-- I asked you if anything was wrong-- I don't... I don't understand."

Tried to touch her, her hand, her arm. Had to... but Tara was still pulling away, like she was made of fire.

"Tara... I'm so sorry!"

Anger now, flashing in those teary eyes, "Sorry for what, Willow? Sorry you did it? Or sorry I found out?"

"I-- I--"

Too many feelings, too much everything. Too many lies and half-truths and hopes and wants...

Tara was backing away again, a few slow steps, shaking her head.

"Too long, Willow. Wrong answer. I-- I'm not... I can't-- I thought... I thought we had something. Something special."

"We did! We do! Tara... baby, I... I love you."

Tara's arms wrapped around herself, like a shield, blocking her out. Like a cross warding off a vampire. It burned.

"Then why? Why?"

What answer was there? What to say to erase that pain, bring down those barriers?

And in all this, her body was still trembling, still flushed with the reaction from him. Still remembering his lips, his warmth, his arms... the tinge of desperation in his voice, always there when he said he loved her.

"I don't know!" she cried, suddenly, because it was the only truth she could find. "I don't... I'm so... I don't know anything. I don't know... I don't know what I am, who I am... I don't know what I want."

Saying it aloud was like opening the floodgates, feeling it all rush in, and she could suddenly barely breathe through the sobs, was suddenly holding herself tight, arms wrapped around her middle like if she held on hard enough maybe she wouldn't come apart at the seams.

"I'm so scared, Tara. I'm so confused. I just-- I just wish... I don't even know! I love

you and... and I love him... and it's all so--"

"You love him?"

Tara was quieter now, calmer, as though Willow's own breakdown had eased her own.

"I--" Willow sniffled, breathed deep, tears still flowing, but slower, "I think so... I... I know I do. But... Tara, I love you, too."

But now she wasn't looking at her. She was looking away, at the sidewalk, at the cars, at the trees, but not at Willow. Willow's tears dried slowly, she couldn't move, couldn't cry anymore. Something was happening, something dreadful.

When Tara did look at her, finally, her eyes were dry.

"I told you a long time ago, Willow. You should be with the one you love."

And then she was walking away, leaving Willow frozen. Horrified.

The sight of her retreating back burned across her retinas. Something deep inside was being pulled along with her, stretching to the breaking point as she walked away.

Then Willow knew what she had to do. It was so simple.

Chapter 16

He was waiting. He hated waiting. It was, he was sure, one of the worst feelings in the world. Waiting, and not knowing.

And then there was guilt, yet another shining example of hell on earth.

And humiliation. That one was good, too.

He'd watched her, how she was, after Tara had fled. How panicked, how desperate. How she hadn't even looked at him on her way out the door.

And, yes, he realized, as he trudged up the stairs, found his slacks, his shirt, that she hadn't had much time. That she had to go to her, had to say something... but at the same time... he almost wished she hadn't. Had a fantasy, somewhere in her mind, that she'd let her go. Sort things out later, maybe, but that she'd be...

Relieved, on some level.

Like he had been.

Horrid as it was, taking comfort in another's agony... when he'd seen her there in his doorway, when he'd realized there was no way around this one, he'd felt... something almost like joy. Like a heavy burden had been lifted.

He'd had no idea how heavy it had been, until it was gone.

Now Tara knew.

But...

Where would that lead?

He sat down on the couch, dressed now, and waiting.

The silence was thick around him, and seemed like a blanket, cutting him off from the rest of the world. There, on his couch, in the comfort of his home, he felt more completely alone than he'd ever felt before. It brought back, suddenly, the dream he'd had a few weeks earlier, of embracing darkness, and cold, and distances far too long, separations far too great.

He thought of scotch, of the warmth of it, artificial though it was, and for a moment, he ached for it, like it was the embrace of a lost lover. Shut his eyes, bowed his head. Remembered the life inside of him, and resisted, though one drink probably wouldn't hurt it. One thing lead to another. Always did. Remained on the couch, instead, in the silence.

Until the door opened softly behind him, and he could breathe again. Twisted around and saw her there. And she was smiling.

The twist of hope in his heart was by far more painful than anything else, and even as he stood crossed the room to her, saw the tear tracks dried on her cheeks...

He was still alone.

She was still smiling. Reached for him and touched his cheek. Smiling, with salt crystals in her eyelashes.

"That's settled," she said.

Crushing pressure of not-enough-air in his lungs, world still slightly off-base. Half-convinced that maybe this truly was just a dream, or a fantasy, come a little too close to life. His heart hammered, ready for when the other shoe would drop.

“Oh?” he said, because it was all he could manage.
Touching her, so lightly, like she was fine china, his fingertips just skating over her arms.

“Yup. All better now,” she said.

She tugged on his hair, pulled him down and kissed him, and he felt it to his toes, even that phantom brush of pink lips. He pushed in closer, kissed her back, harder, deeper, feeling the pressure of teeth, tasting her breath. Tasting the salt of tears.

He pulled back, just enough. Saw her, her heart shining in her eyes.

And knew. Knew something wasn't right.

“Giles?” she said, and her brow drew in just a bit, a flicker of doubt moved behind her eyes.

“You told her?” he said. But even as he spoke, each word grew harder to force out, like watching a horror movie, every instinct screaming not to open that door. “About us?”

Then he didn't need to hear her words. Didn't want to. Couldn't stand to. Reeling was the only term to describe what he felt. Falling, freefall, no bottom in sight. Staggering back away, suddenly needing space, suddenly, again, still, unable to breathe.

Words--excuses, ridiculous excuses--echoing in his mind. And with them, rage. And this time he couldn't hold that rage on himself. Never again wanted to hear her say:

“Well, not exactly. I mean... not at all... Giles, what--”

And then, then...

“But it's better. I mean, I fixed things! I just, I just did this little, teeny-weeny memory charm--”

Time didn't stop. The clock on the desk was ticking. Steady. Slow.

But they didn't move. She didn't speak, didn't finish the sentence.

He couldn't speak either. Could hardly think, anything beyond: memory charm.

Then, she did speak. Foolish child.

Foolish child speaking to a far more foolish man.

“I'm still gonna tell her...”

And he had to laugh. Because that was so utterly incidental to the true issue as to be meaningless. So he laughed. Half-hysterical, he knew, could see the fear and confusion written across her face, and wasn't that priceless? Didn't even know what she'd done.

Where the hell had he been? What the hell had he been thinking? How had he never bothered to teach her the slightest thing about magic? About *ethics*? Maybe he'd truly been fool enough to think she'd understood them already.

He stumbled onto control of himself unexpectedly, and was suddenly straight-faced, dead serious.

“Undo it.”

“What?” she said, and looked honestly surprised.

He repeated his statement, slowly, for her benefit, feeling the rage swell again, and just barely battling it back, even as he found, preemptively, the closest inanimate object for if the need to hit something became a little too powerful.

“Why? Come on, Giles, it's better this way.”

Impressed himself with his control when he said: “You can't just erase someone's memory because it's convenient, Willow.”

“Well, I didn't, like, completely erase--”

“That isn't the point! Willow, you altered her *mind.* Without her knowledge or consent--”

And suddenly, like a spark, his anger seemed to jump to her, and she shoved close to him, shouting, “It's not hurting her! Seeing us like *that* was hurting her!”

Trembling now, fists clenched, just a moment away from an act he'd regret, hating the feeling but hating this whole damned situation more. Felt his control slipping even as he ground out the words:

“Undo it. Now.”

She pulled back sharply, and glared up at him, a petulant, child's glare. Spoke with the quick, sharp tones of annoyance. Mere annoyance, so entirely missing the point, as she said:

“Ok. We've been sleeping together for, like, two weeks now, Giles. Doncha think it's about time you stopped actin' like my father?”

One breath, and then, he lost it.

“*Damn it,* Willow, do you not understand? What you did--what you did to *Tara,* whom you claim to love--it’s like rape, Willow.”

She recoiled, sharply enough that she bumped back against the door, eyes wider than he’d seen them in a long time. And he pulled away, horrified. Turned away, had to reach out to touch the desk, something solid, anything solid.

“Wha- *What?*

 Giles-- it-- I-- It’s *nothing* like... like... *that.* What the heck are you--”

He could speak calmly now, like the calm in the eye of a hurricane, staring down at the floor, feeling the words pour out like a recitation of memorized texts, “It is an assault on one’s body and mind against their will. It’s very much like--”

“Oh, fer crying out loud!” were the last words he heard before the door slammed shut behind her.

* * *

She came back, hours later. It was late, and the night was well and truly dead, but he was still awake, still sitting, quietly, in his living room, letting music wash over him in lieu of the alcohol he was craving. He heard the door open. Stood up and turned around in place, let her come to him. Shifted restlessly when she got closer, silently warned her to keep her distance. Then waited.

“I’m sorry,” she said, and he knew she meant it.

She really was beautiful. He hadn’t cried since Jenny died. But he could feel tears now, hot and roiling just below the surface.

“You undid the spell,” he said, but couldn’t find the energy in him at all to give the words intonation or feeling, not even enough to put a questioning rise at the end of the sentence. The words fell flat from his lips, only given texture by the roughness of his voice.

He saw her answer on her face a moment before she spoke, saying, “Um. No, not yet, but--”

Something stirred tiredly inside of him, that may have once been an emotion, and he said, drily, “You know, those are rapidly becoming my least favorite words.”

Her protests drifted past him unnoticed, and he responded, automatically, “When will you?”

Couldn’t look at her, could barely stand to hear her, saying she’d undo the spell once she figured out what to say. He ached, all over, and deep inside.

So beautiful, but not his. Never truly his.

He sat down again.

“I can’t do this anymore,” he said, because it was only the truth.

She questioned him, he knew she would.

“I just can’t, Willow. This-- this was never meant to be to begin with.”

“But... but it is, it was...”

She sat down beside him, and he felt the couch dip beneath her weight, felt himself shift towards her an infinitesimal inch. And so he edged a little farther away. Kept looking down at his hands and feeling vertigo.

“Go back to Tara, Willow.”

“But, Giles... Giles, I... I know I haven’t-- I’ll do better, I swear, I just... I love you, I want to be with you--”

He shut his eyes.

“Willow, I’m not offering. I’m telling. This is over.”

“Giles-- Rupert...”

He listened to the sound of his own breath, one in, one out, steady, slow.

“Go.”

Ten more breaths. And then.

She went.

Chapter 17

It was when she got home... got back to the dorm... that she first began to really understand. When she pushed the door open and walked in, shaky and sick inside, and there was Tara, sitting at her computer, waiting up for her to get back from her alleged trip to the chem lab, and smiling, and so completely unaware.

So different from the girl that had been sobbing only a few hours before.

The feeling was so strong, Willow couldn't move away from the door, couldn't even pull her key out of the lock. The *wrongness* of it. Of Tara being so oblivious.

All the feelings she'd been having that night, all directed at Giles: the anger, the fear... suddenly turned around, surged inside herself, about herself. She'd done this. And he was right. Of course he was.

"Willow? What's wrong?"

Strange, because she knew she could leave it this way, no one but him the wiser. She could stay with Tara and Tara would never know.

But she could hear his voice, still, and see the... the betrayal on his face. And she knew, that really... she couldn't.

Tara was reaching for her, so she caught her hand, held it in her own. Felt, for what she knew was the last time, the slender bones, soft skin.

Tears welled in her eyes as she said, "Tara... I did something really bad tonight."

"Oh?" Tara's voice was small, but gentle, "Ok. Here, let's... let's sit down, ok?"

Willow let herself be led over to the bed, and sat down on it, beside Tara, her hand still wrapped around hers.

She looked down, and confessed.

"You know, how you asked me, the other day, if something was wrong?"

Tara nodded.

"Well... something... something kinda is. Kinda... was. Is. Whatever." She paused, reached for breath, and continued. "I-- I've been... having an... I've... been with... someone else."

She could *feel* Tara's reaction. Could feel her stiffening, feel her freezing over.

"What?"

"It's... it's Giles," she said, staring down at her hands, feeling a teardrop well and fall over her eyelashes.

Now Tara was standing, was pulling away.

"Oh god... I-- You-- I thought you were spending... just too much time with him... but... oh god."

Tears falling freely now, but her voice was steady.

"I'm so sorry, Tara. So sorry. I should have told you, right away. But I... I didn't know. Anything."

"How... how could... I thought..."

"I did, Tara. I love you. I loved you. But... he's... I've loved him for a long time. And..."

and I wish there was an easy way to say this, but... there's not. There's just not."

"Oh god," Tara said again, and she could hear her sitting down suddenly, in the chair at Willow's desk.

"There's... more..."

"More? How could there be more? What, are you married? Pregnant?"

"No... no... it's... Tara, earlier tonight, you... you caught us."

"What?"

"You came to Giles's apartment. He opened the door 'cause he thought it was the Chinese delivery guy. But it wasn't. It was you. And we were all... not entirely dressed."

"Willow, what are you talking about? I never--"

"You did. You did."

"No, I didn't, I'd remember-- oh. Oh no."

Willow stood up. She felt empty inside as she murmured the words to end the spell. Then she said, "I'll get my stuff. I can move back home for awhile."

* * *

And so he was alone. Again.

Day three without Willow, and here he was, in his empty apartment. The first few days without Willow had been made--almost--easier by the arrival of Quentin Travers and the Watcher's Council. Seeing Buffy put them firmly in their place had even drawn an actual smile from him... and having an official job as Watcher again truly warmed him more than he'd expected it would.

Not to mention that with the... with his current condition, an extra source of income was nothing to be scoffed at.

He had to laugh, though, at the thought of what the Council would make of all of that. And especially of his decision to actually--

To actually have this baby.

Baby.

He furrowed his brow and concentrated, rolling the word over in his mind. Imagining the babies he'd known. His first nephew, just born, tiny and red and scrunched and just about the ugliest thing he'd ever seen. And yet, strangely alluring.

He remembered the first time they'd placed the baby in his arms, how he'd grinned down at it and bestowed the benediction, "may you grow up to be nothing like your father," and how his brother had glared and his sister and sister-in-law had laughed.

Babies.

Such tiny little things. So fragile.

He moved, suddenly, leaning forward and grabbing the edge of the laptop that had been lying dormant on his coffee table ever since that night. He opened it, and touched the power button with a cautious finger.

The machine obediently purred to life. He watched with a kind of nervous fascination as it ran through its start-up routines.

He managed to get online on his first try, and typing in "pregnancy.com" got him immediately to a bright, text-heavy website.

It was an utterly and completely overwhelming excess of information.

He closed the window, and stared for a few minutes at the plain blue wallpaper of the computer's desktop.

Then he took a deep breath and tried again.

This time, he read a bit of the text. The first link that drew his eye was one titled "is it safe?" Since that was the big question in his mind, he clicked it.

Only to find that this page, too, was a sea of too-much-information. Questions that had never occurred to him at all were present here, such as "Is it safe to get a manicure while pregnant?" and "Is it safe to eat soft cheese while pregnant?"

His mind was spinning, and he found himself hoping, desperately, that the answers to these bizarre questions were yeses. Otherwise, this whole pregnancy thing truly was far too dangerous. It would be a miracle that anyone was born normal.

He retreated from that section and tried the pregnancy calendar, instead.

After he'd entered the date of conception and assumed that, were he a woman, he'd have a normal cycle of 28 days, the website cheerfully informed him that he was on week 19 of his adventure. One week shy of halfway.

The baby, the site said, was six inches long now, and 8 and a half ounces. It was working on developing sensory areas in the brain.

He was captivated.

Especially by the next line: "If your baby is a girl..."

He reached out and actually touched the screen, trailing his fingers over those words. A girl. It could be a girl, he didn't know.

He let himself think about it. A baby. His baby. His child.

He touched his stomach, and for the first time, it was with a sense of wonder rather than terror. True, the fear was still there, lurking just below the surface, surging now and then. But for the moment, it was different. For the moment, he could close his eyes, and think what it might feel like to hold this child in his arms.

For a moment, he actually felt excited.

He hadn't thought he'd ever have children. He wasn't adverse to the idea, if the right woman had come along, but he'd just never thought it very probable.

He smiled, rubbed his hand back and forth, and then held still, waiting, until he felt one of the telltale shifts inside of him.

Even as he felt a certain warmth in his heart, and as he forced himself to think about it, to make it true in his mind... it wasn't entirely real. It still seemed rather like an exceedingly odd dream, or like a misread passage of a text. Like when you hear a song, and are half-convinced the lyric was "pickles in my head," although you know, deep down, that of course that wasn't truly what it was.

So he thought: it needs a name.

Or possibly *she* needs a name.

His only niece was named Brianna, although she preferred to go by "Bri" like the cheese, a preference which he'd never entirely understood. His sister's name was Maureen and his mother's was Margaret. Much as he loved the people, neither name really appealed to him.

Oddly, or possibly not so oddly, the first name to follow on the heels of those was Buffy. And honestly, that was not a name he'd inflict on a child, either. Elizabeth, though, had its charm. But then, he also wasn't quite sure how Buffy would react to having a child of his named after her. She'd probably find it odd. Or possibly even morbid.

He set aside that line of reasoning.

Willow's mother's name was Sheila.

That really didn't have any bearing on anything.

And then, he thought:

Jennifer.

His breath caught for a moment, and he found himself shutting his eyes. No. Could no more name a child Jenny than he could name a child Randall. An innocent baby didn't need such dark connotations.

So he changed tactics, moved away from names he knew.

Catherine, perhaps. A good name, with inoffensive nicknames: Kate or Katie or Cathy.

Or Linda.

Or Ellen.

Amanda, maybe, which, for some reason he couldn't begin to comprehend, he could imagine quite clearly stitched in script on a pastel baby blanket.

Hmm. A blanket. He supposed she, it, would need one of those. And clothing. And a crib. And... a rocking chair?

And...

Then it stuck him.

Where on earth was he going to put all of that?

He suddenly had that feeling, that kind that feels like ice water sinking through your insides, that kind the dims the lights in the room, and suddenly focuses your mind on one thought and one thought alone, like a single spotlight on a dark stage.

This apartment was not big enough for a baby.

Then his door burst open and Xander and Buffy blasted in.

In a panic, he lunged for the button to close the browser window, but at the last minute, he stopped himself. No reason to hide it, he supposed.

Xander apparently hadn't missed his startled jolt, though, and made a point of leaning in towards the computer.

"Surfing the web for internet porn again, Giles? For shame."

And then:

"Wait a minute. That's not demons. That's babies."

Buffy, who had already made herself at home on the other couch, now sat up to look at them.

"Baby demons?"

"Baby humans," Xander said.

"What?" Buffy said.

This time, Giles really did close the window, and turned towards Buffy, and shooed Xander back a bit.

"Yes. Um. There's... something I should tell you both."

They both just looked at him, with almost matching expressions of "I'm all ears" on their faces.

"I've... er... I've decided to. Um."

He found the words were harder to say than he'd anticipated, especially with Buffy's attention so riveted upon him. After a scant moment of silence, Xander began tossing out suggestions.

"What? Move to Tahiti? Sell the Magic Box and run away with a tramp half your age?"

Giles's brow furrowed, but no more, he hoped, than it ordinarily would in response to Xander's idiocy. However, in Xander's favor, the annoyance did make it easier to get the words out.

"Keep the baby."

Silence fell over the room.

Then, Buffy squealed.

"Giles! That's awesome! What are you gonna name it? When's it gonna be born?"

Huh? Details!"

He couldn't even explain, though, that he had no real details, as she'd bounded over to him and was currently squeezing the breath out of him, and possibly breaking his ribs.

"Buffy," he gasped, and she let go, looking contrite.

"Oh. Sorry. It's just... this is so cool! A baby! A little baby Giles! It's gonna be so cute!"

He looked over to Xander and found the boy simply staring at him, mouth slightly open, and an obvious vacancy behind his eyes.

"Xander?"

"Wait. You. Uh. But."

"Yes. I... realize it's a bit much to, um, wrap one's head around. I myself haven't entirely, well, managed it yet..."

"But you're a guy!" Xander yelled, coming back online with a snap. "Guys don't... Guys can't... It's just... It's against all known laws of nature! It shouldn't be allowed!"

"Actually, yeah, Xander kinda has a point."

"What?" he looked back to Buffy, who was now looking concerned.

"I mean, can you? Won't it, like, screw you up or something?"

"Oh. Well, no. Not physically, in any case. The spell is designed to... completely provide all of the necessary... organs and, um. Hormones. For a normal pregnancy."

"Uh. All?" Buffy looked suddenly extremely grossed out.

"Well," he amended quickly, "All, um. Internal. Organs."

"Oh."

She still looked... unsettled. But then she brightened.

"So! You know what this means?"

He dreaded her next statement, but it came, nonetheless.

"This means shopping!"

Chapter 18

So, the next day, Buffy dragged Giles out to Sunnydale's major hub of suburbia, a shopping center across the street from the mall, home of the only Starbucks and McDonald's in the town, as well as several chain stores, including one of those massive baby superstores.

Ok, not the most creative place to go, but definitely large.

Dawn hopped out of the car first, practically vibrating with energy at the prospect of "cute baby stuff!!!" Giles was the last out, and he was regarding the store with undisguised horror already. She'd seen him look at mucus-y demons with more affection.

So she just grabbed his arm and tugged, dragging the poor guy along in pursuit of her sister.

"Come on, Giles, it's not that bad."

"I... don't think I can do this," he said, weakly.

She rolled her eyes.

"See, this is why men don't have the babies. You know, I think I explained my policy on this subject a few years ago."

Then they were walking in the door, feeling the rush of the building's climate control wash over them. Giles froze on the spot.

"Dear. Lord."

"Breathe, Giles. This is supposed to be fun."

His look ranked an 6.5 on the skepticism scale.

"Fun?"

"Yeah. I mean, it's exciting! You're shopping for stuff for your baby! Your offspring! You should be experiencing awe and joy, and going completely unnecessarily gooey over stuff like--"

At that moment, Dawn ran up to them, clutching a teeny-tiny yellow jumpsuit with rabbits all over it.

"--that," Buffy finished.

"Isn't it the cutest thing ever?" Dawn was gushing. "It's so little! And it has bunnies on it! We could totally traumatize Anya. It'd be funny!"

Giles's gaping lack of response apparently didn't slip Dawn's notice, because she flipped the jumpsuit around and frowned at it.

"What? You don't like the color?"

Years of training with him had Buffy fairly attuned to how Giles telegraphed his movements, and right now, his body language was screaming that he was plotting to bolt off in the direction of the exit any second now. Concern broke through her amusement.

"It's great, Dawn. Why don't you go see what else you can find for a minute."

Dawn gave Buffy a look, and Buffy looked back more firmly, and then Dawn frowned again, but obediently, for once, headed back to the clothing racks.

Buffy turned her attention back to Giles, who was eyeing the high rafters of the store as though in awe of its size.

“Hey... this is really bothering you, isn't it?”

“Hmm?” he said, then looked at her. “Oh. Well. No more than any, um. Expectant parent, I suppose. Well, possibly a little more... It's all just... a bit overwhelming. More than a bit, actually.”

And then she realized something. She'd been so caught up in the rather amusing novelty of a man, pregnant, that she'd never even really thought about it in terms of just a person, pregnant.

“Yeah,” she said, sobered now, “I guess it would be.”

They stood together for a few minutes, then Buffy said, “Well, here's what we could do. We can look around a little, no actual purchases. Focus on the fun stuff. Not think about the whole issue of, like, cribs and diapers and stuff. You know, we look at, like, cute yellow suits with bunnies on them. And... baby booties! And, you know, stuff like that. Baby blankets.”

And for some reason, though he'd been looking doubtful up to that point, something seemed to shift in his expression at that last bit. He relaxed a bit, enough for her to see, at least, and said, “Well. I suppose... I could handle that.”

So they started towards the clothing department, with Giles looking only slightly panicky.

“So... do you know if it's a girl or boy?”

“Uh, no. Not yet. I was thinking of calling Ben today or tomorrow, actually.”

“Cool. Which do you want? I know you've gotta have a preference.”

He smiled, then, a real smile, and stopped in front of the first rack of baby stuff, little sleepers in pastel pinks and yellows and greens.

“A girl, I think.”

“Hey, all right. You could name her after me.”

He'd picked one of the sleepers off the rack, a pink fuzzy number, and had cocked his head to the side to eye it uncertainly. At her words, though, he grinned.

“Believe or not, the thought crossed my mind.”

“Really? Wow. I'm touched.”

He put the fuzzy thing back, and said, straight-faced, “Well, of course, I then came to my senses and realized Buffy was no name fit for a human child.”

She punched him, and he said “ow” between chuckles.

“Loser,” she said, then noticed a little purple shirt with pictures of various sweets under the title ‘Sugar and Spice and Everything Nice.’ She snagged it off the rack.

“Ooo, look, Giles, I think that's a jelly donut. How appropriate.”

“Oh, so you two dorks did decide to join the party after all, huh?” Dawn said, walking up with her arms crossed. “Hey, Buffy, did you give him the thing?”

“Thing?”

“Yeah, you know. Willow's thing.”

Giles did an odd twitchy thing at the mention of... one of those words. Willow, or thing, or possibly the combination of the two. Whatever it was, Buffy quickly dug into her purse and found said thing.

“Oh, yeah. Willow asked me to give you this. Told me to tell you that she did this... ‘before.’ Something. She didn't say what. Said you'd know. Anyway. It's a charm.”

He took it from her and looked at it uneasily. It was a small stone, polished and green and veined, woven into a hemp bracelet.

“See, apparently you told her about the whole baby thing before us. We're hurt, by the way. But, anyway. This is supposed to make it so anyone who doesn't know you are... you know... can't tell.”

He pulled his head back in mild surprise, and then looked more closely at the stone.

“Oh, and, since you two are apparently so buddy-buddy now... did she tell you why she broke up with Tara? 'Cause she just won't tell us at all.”

“She *what*?”

“No way you didn't know,” Dawn broke in, “It was like, days ago. She didn't tell you?”

He looked way more shocked than the situation warranted, Buffy thought, although it was kinda weird.

“No... No, she... why?”

“Uh, Giles. That’s what I just asked you.”

“Yeah, it’s totally weird how much she’s not talking about it. I mean, like, remember Oz? And how she made you blind, and made Buffy marry Spike, and made me into a five-year-old? That was so annoying.”

Giles had folded the bracelet into his hand.

“Is she all right?”

“Yeah, actually. I mean, not great, but... she’s coping a lot better than that other time.”

She paused, then added, “And how about we don’t talk about depressing breakups. And ugh, marrying Spike. We’re supposed to be shopping.”

But he still seemed off. He even spent a little while talking about, of all things, Spike’s redeeming features. Finally, in desperation, Buffy did the only thing she could think of to cheer him up.

She found the book department.

And then stood back and nodded with satisfaction as he dove in like a fish out of water suddenly finding the sea.

“Good call,” Dawn said. “Shall we go and squeal over the cute little booties now?”

“He’ll be here a while, so... let’s shall.”

* * *

She’d just moved back to the dorms today, after all the administrative stuff had been sorted out. Her roommate seemed like a nice girl, but resentful, because for the first few weeks of the semester she’d had the room to herself.

Also, her major decorating motif seemed to be... crosses. And it didn’t seem like she was going for the vampire-repelling aspect. So, yeah, that might be a bit awkward. On the other hand, though, it might make going easy on the magic and the Wicca stuff a bit less of a challenge.

Right now, said roomie was away, at her bible study group, and Willow had the place to herself.

It was quiet. And empty. And she was... lonely. Just lonely.

She sighed and looked back down at the big book she’d bought at the Magic Box yesterday, when Giles was out on his lunch break.

“Magical Atrocities: A History of Magic From An Ethicist’s Standpoint”

Tiny text, pretentious tone, dense language. She groaned, and her eyes hurt. But she forged onwards. She had to.

Because she had to get him back.

Chapter 19

A few days later, he had an appointment with Ben.

They'd agreed to meet in the waiting room of the ER, because he figured that a single man in the waiting room of the OB/GYN ward might be a little odder than he would like to appear. He was early. He'd spent the better part of the morning wandering aimlessly about his apartment, and finally decided he might as well just come in. He'd been here for about a half-hour now, perusing the local real estate listings.

He noted that, in spite of all their efforts over the years, houses in Sunnydale were still disturbingly affordable.

Well, at least that worked out in his favor.

He'd just circled another possibility when Ben appeared through the typical Sunnydale ER crowd.

"Ah, Mr. Giles. Hi. Come on back."

So they made their way back through the ER into the hospital proper and on into the OB/GYN ward, exchanging the usual pleasantries, comments about the weather, about the health of Buffy's mother.

The closer they got, the more agitated the flock of butterflies in his stomach became. He felt like he was going to meet his child for the first time, and he wasn't quite sure if he was ready, if he could face up to that level of reality, yet. Actually "seeing" the baby, actually receiving the pamphlets and the lectures and the... gender.

"You doing all right there?" Ben asked.

Giles sighed inwardly. Honestly, he was a trained Watcher. This propensity for panic he'd picked up lately was highly uncharacteristic and rather humiliating.

"Fine," he said, shortly, then immediately regretted his harsh tone. "Sorry. This is all still... rather odd."

"Yeah, I can imagine. Having someone else in your body. It's... I mean, I'm sure it must be a little unsettling."

He managed a tight smile as they walked into the exam room, and he changed into a gown and sat down on the table while Ben left for a few moments to go and get some files. When Ben came back, they went through a quick physical which involved bloodletting and uncomfortable abdominal palpation.

When that was over, Ben gave Giles a moment to change back into his own clothes, and then started in on the lecture portion of the event. Sure enough, there were handouts and charts and a list of suggested reading (most of which were books Giles had already purchased).

Giles had spent most of his life learning how to best find and internalize information, so listening and absorbing everything was actually easy, and even comforting in its familiarity. Having the knowledge was also a vast improvement over facing the unknown.

And then, Ben picked up the last manilla envelope.

"So, basically, everything looks good. You seem to be in remarkably good shape, and the symptoms you're telling me about sound perfectly normal. If we could meet about every

two weeks or so, that would be great, just to keep tabs on everything. The baby looked healthy when we did the ultrasound. So... you wanna see the pictures?"

The nervous butterflies were back, battering their little bodies against his insides.

"Yes-- er. Yes. Please."

Ben tugged the film out of the envelope and leaned in, so they could both see. Giles had to look at the first picture for a moment, not seeing anything, but then Ben pulled out a pen and waved it over a part of the image.

"Here, we've got a hand. You see it? The bone structure?"

Oh. My.

He did. A hand. How incredible.

The next image showed a curl of backbone, and the next, two feet. He'd seen this before, of course, but he'd been trying hard not to at the time. Trying not to acknowledge any of it, just desperately wanting it all to go away.

But now, he couldn't look away.

A profile shot showed a clear outline of a face, with a nose and lips and a chin and a forehead. He traced the line lightly with his index finger.

"Amazing," he said.

Ben smiled.

"Yeah. It always is. Even when it's not quite as... extraordinary."

Giles smiled back. Ben flipped to the next slide, and then swiftly pulled them out of Giles's line of sight.

"Now you gotta make a choice," he said, "You want to know the gender?"

He didn't even hesitate.

"Yes."

Ben laid the slides down again, and pointed to a seemingly random area of gray and white and black.

"This one may be a little hard for you to see, but... if you look right around here you can see."

Giles looked, but couldn't make heads or tails of it.

"Congratulations," Ben said, "You've got yourself a little boy."

It had been two and a half weeks since she'd lost Giles. And Tara. She hadn't spoken to either of them beyond a few short words in passing since, but she had been watching him. The Wicca stuff had, as she'd expected, seriously freaked out her roomie, so she'd finally just given in and gone back to studying at the Magic Box. It was a comfort, being near him, even if they didn't speak.

He wore her charm, she saw, and a good thing, too, probably, because it seemed like his stomach grew a little more everyday. You could still look at him now, maybe, and not guess, but in a little while, she was thinking it was gonna be pretty obvious.

She ached inside, though, watching him. He talked to Buffy, with a certain spark in his eyes that just hadn't been there before. He spent every spare moment reading books ranging from What to Expect When You're Expecting to Grey's Anatomy (which even Willow thought was a bit towards the overkill side). A small ultrasound photo appeared, subtly tacked up on the corkboard over the coffee maker. She had to make excuses to Buffy about why she couldn't go with them as he house-hunted.

She got her Giles news from Buffy, in conversations where she pretended to know more than she did, where she let her believe they still spoke to each other. From Buffy, she learned that the baby was a boy, learned that Giles still didn't have a name for him. She learned that there was a house in Buffy's neighborhood Giles was eyeing, and that he was trying to figure out exactly how to explain this all to his family.

She watched as Xander reeled in denial for about a week, and then suddenly, as he was wont to do, got over it and started discussing plans for a baby shower.

Which would be in one week.

So, here she was, at the mall, clutching the list that Giles had made of stuff he needed to buy. Buffy had absconded with the list, made copies, and handed them out to Xander, Willow,

Anya, Joyce, and even Spike, oddly enough, saying something about how Giles seemed to like the guy or something. Xander had already claimed responsibility for his gift, as had Buffy.

The mall boasted a small rare books store, which catered mostly to the occult crowd. She'd seen Giles here often, and came by a lot herself. It was run by a little demon named Nej'k who looked human most of the time, except when he was revved up about something, and then he tended to revert to his true form, which looked something like a cross between a fetal pig and a fledgling eaglet. He deeply resented all jokes revolving around when pigs flew.

She stopped there first. Not for baby stuff, though. Nej'k had called her earlier, saying he'd gotten in a couple of volumes of the diaries of Jacob Hills, who had been referenced in one of the ethics texts as a classic example of a sorcerer falling from grace. She'd read an excerpt of his writings in that book, and the words had oozed regret like blood, talking of the loss of family, friends. The needless death and suffering of those he loved.

Reading these things, she'd found, was like watching the videos in driver's ed. Blood and pain and shattered glass and twisted metal. All of it horrifying, heart-wrenching, and yet, so necessary.

Driving was power, magic was power. Both could be misused, both could backfire.

She was beginning to understand Giles's reactions to her magic use. What she'd thought of as condescension or jealousy, she now was beginning to suspect was more like fear.

The more she read, the more she wanted to ask him about Eyghon.

She chatted with Nej'k for a little while, then paid and left the shop.

And then, the whole mall sprawled before her, and she knew that somewhere in here, or possibly across the street at that baby place, was the perfect thing for Giles and the baby. She looked around at all the stores and despaired of ever finding it.

Chapter 20

"I'm worried," Buffy said.

"Hmm?" Giles was distracted. Was that a water spot up there in the corner, or just a trick of the light? He tilted his head and squinted.

"Giles? Attention for a moment, maybe?"

The light, he decided. Or perhaps not. It took him a few moments to pull his attention away and turn it onto his Slayer.

"I'm sorry, what were you saying? And does that look like--"

"Giles, forget the funky ceiling. This place still has disturbing vampire tingles, anyway."

"Does it really?"

She threw up her hands.

"So not the point I'm trying to raise here!"

"Sorry. I rather like it, is all."

It had personality. And a sense of history... something sadly lacking in most dwellings in these parts.

"I'm worried about Willow. And ew, Giles, three people just died here, like, a week ago. It's morbid."

A nice den downstairs, with bookshelves already built in, and an actual, if small, dining area.

"Well, the same can be said for most--" Then he really heard what she'd said, and forgot all about the house. "Worried about Willow?"

"And finally, his train arrives at the station."

"What about her?"

"Well, it's just, she's been really... withdrawn lately. I'm wondering if she's taking the whole Tara thing harder than she's letting on. And she's been reading some really odd and disturbing books. You should, like... talk to her or something."

"Me? Why me?"

"Geeze, Giles. What are you, two? Anyway, because the rest of us, Anya included, already tried to talk to her, and she won't say anything."

"Odd and disturbing?"

"Yeah. Like, I took a peek in one of 'em, and it was like, a whole thing about this nutty guy, like, sacrificing his firstborn child or something. Which would make me more concerned if Willow had a firstborn child, but she doesn't, so I figure we're ok for a little while at least."

"Dear lord," he said, his head spinning. What was Willow getting herself into? "I should--"

He headed for the door, a surprised Buffy trailing after him, protesting his haste.

By the time he reached the Magic Box, his heart was hammering in his chest. He nearly knocked the bell off its hinges on his way in the door, startling Anya and a few customers, but paying them no mind, just hurrying to the back of the shop and the table where Willow sat. And

finding her not there.

“Oh, hey,” Buffy said, “that’s the book.”

It was lying open, in front of the chair Willow normally occupied. He reached for it, turned it towards himself.

And then went limp with relief, after reading only a few words.

“What? So?”

“Jacob Hills’s diaries,” he said.

There was a pause, and then Buffy said, “And... that’s supposed to mean?”

“They’re... more or less an ethics text.”

“Ethics? So, what? The message is ‘I sacrificed my son for fun and profit, but it didn’t work out, so I don’t recommend it?’”

He was staggered for a moment, then pulled himself together and said, “Well. Um. More or less. Although, he never actually--”

And then, a soft voice came from the direction of the training room.

“Giles?”

Willow, standing just beneath the loft, hanging back like a shy child. He pulled away from diary and table. Formed his lips into a smile for the benefit of Buffy and Anya.

“Just, um, looking for a book. Which, ah, isn’t here. At home, I believe.”

He left the shop then, and drove home, his head still spinning slightly as he began to understand.

He’d been watching her, the past few weeks. She had stayed away from him, she’d left Tara. She’d been reading, more than usual, and now... now he knew what it was she was reading. Jacob Hills. And probably others. Maybe Milo Jennings, Annette DeCanto. The histories, the accounts, that she’d avoided or maybe ignored. The books he’d never given her when he should have, perhaps, about powerful magics, gone horribly wrong. People dead, lives destroyed, realities thrown out of balance. He’d feared exposing her to even the idea of such dark magics... but how could one know the risks if they had never been shown them? If they’d only seen the light, how could they truly know of the darkness?

He should have shown her, when she’d been so young and earnest, and only wanted to learn.

Now, he knew, the books would bite like whip lashes. Knew every word would tingle with the power of potential autobiography, the guilt within them internalizing and turning on her own self.

Even for him, they had been like a gauntlet of fire, and his heart had never been as open as hers.

He pulled up to the curb in front of his apartment and dropped his forehead on his hands on the steering wheel, eyes shut, heart aching.

Willow. Oh, poor, dear Willow.

The next day, she left her books on the table when she went to class. When she came back, lying atop the rest of her stuff was a book she hadn’t seen before. Volume twelve of Hills’s diaries, which Nej’k had been unable to find.

She slipped it into her bag, but she didn’t read it. Not right away. Couldn’t stand to. Couldn’t stand any more of it: the horror and then the anguish. Plus, the next day, Dawn found out about being the Key, and everything went a little nuts for awhile. She finally picked it up again the night before the baby shower. She figured she should read it, and then give it back to him.

She noticed the difference immediately.

Hills had turned himself over to the Watcher’s Council and his spirit had been imprisoned in a mystical dungeon in a neighboring dimension for one hundred years, where time passed differently. He’d written the diaries there, when he’d had nothing to do but regret. Five years had passed in the “real” world when he was returned to his own dimension and body.

This diary was written fifteen years after that.

In it, he spoke of the son he had nearly destroyed growing to strong adulthood. He

spoke of forgiveness from his former wife, of being accepted back into his father's house. He spoke of the joy of watching his sister's children playing, and feeling the summer breeze, and listening to the waves at the ocean.

The last entry was a few pages from the end of the book. He said he prayed others would learn from his mistakes, never see their loved ones in pain because of their actions.

But what was most remarkable about the last entry was an old, folded sheet of paper, tucked in between the pages.

She laid it flat gently and saw writing in a hand very different from Hills's. The text made her heart stagger.

"Rupert-

"Redemption is the most vital part of punishment. There is a word for punishment without redemption.

"Torture.

"Such a thing is not of any use to anyone.

"- E. R. G."

She traced her finger over the letters in his name, up there at the top of this note, and felt a small shimmer of hope.

Chapter 21

“I still don’t see what’s wrong with Alexander,” Xander said. “It’s a good name!”

“Aw, come off it already, you little ponce. Don’t see me going around telling him to call it William, huh?”

“Actually, you know, unsavory associations aside, I kinda like William,” Buffy put in.

Giles was feeling mellow from the slight overindulgence on cake and ice cream, so he was simply watching all of this with a slight smile. Buffy, Dawn, Xander and Anya were squeezed onto the couch, he was sitting in the armchair by the door, Joyce across the room from him in the other. Spike sat on the hearth of the fireplace.

He wasn’t quite sure why the vampire was here, but, to his surprise, Spike was being, relatively speaking, perfectly cordial. Almost likable.

And then there was Willow, of course, sitting at the desk. Her earlier tension had faded as the sugar kicked in, and for the first time in a month, she really seemed herself again, smiling and watching the conversation bounce around the group.

“If you’d been a boy, you would have been named William,” Joyce said, and Buffy stared.

Then said, “How’d you get from William to Buffy, anyway?”

Joyce shrugged.

“You were born and... it was just you.”

“What were you gonna--” Dawn began, then stopped suddenly, her face clouding. “Never mind.”

Joyce answered anyway.

“You were always Dawn. From the moment I... realized I was... I knew.”

Dawn’s brow furrowed ever so slightly, but before the silence could grow too deep, Willow said, “I was gonna be Jethro.”

The room universally “ewwed.”

“Where’d they come up with that?” Buffy asked.

“I didn’t want to know...”

Giles was still hearing Joyce’s words about knowing. He’d thought he’d known. To be honest, he’d mourned a little. The little girl who’d been living in his head for a few days was not the child that grew inside him, and it did hurt to let go of her. He didn’t know why he’d been so convinced that his child was a daughter. In the end, he knew that all it really had been was hope.

Not that he was devastated. A son was as much a miracle, but it had simply been harder at first, to connect with the idea.

“So, come on, Giles,” Buffy’s voice shook him from his reverie. “You must have, like, some ideas.”

Name ideas... After he’d learned it was a boy he had gone through the same ritual as before, naming relatives and friends, and discarding each name one by one, but deciding to use his father’s name as a middle name. Then he’d started going by ear, names that he simply liked the sound of. None seemed right.

"I really don't know."

He really didn't.

"Ok, then. We agreed to forgo the humiliating and occasionally downright disturbing baby shower party games, so the least we can do is get this baby a name," Xander said. He snagged the little baby name book off the table, and opened to a random page, and, before anyone could begin to protest, began reading off names.

"Ok, Enrique, please god no. Ephraim, what? Epifanio? Ok... Eric. There, that's a normal one. And then, Ermin, back into the land of names to give a child you hate..."

But Giles wasn't really listening anymore. Xander's voice had fallen to a distant mocking cadence.

It meant powerful ruler. And if there was anything that this child was, powerful was it. And it was simple and smooth, and it just...

It just clicked.

"Uh, hey, Earth to Giles? I mean, I know 'Erv' is pretty awful, but is it really checking-out-of-reality material?"

Oh. Right. Xander.

"Hmm? Oh. Sorry. I-- Eric."

"Huh? No... Xander," Xander said, carefully.

"No, I mean. Eric. I... I like it."

"You do?" Buffy said, instantly abandoning the war of sarcasm she'd been having with Spike instead of listening to names.

"You do?" Willow echoed.

"Like, you like it in that 'now the baby's got a name' sort of way?" Dawn said.

Every moment it seemed a little more right.

"I... I believe so."

An awed silence fell over the room.

Until Dawn said, "Woohoo! This calls for presents."

Giles was still quietly marveling when a wrapped box landed in his lap.

"Open mine first!"

Eric. Eric Edwin Giles.

And so long as he never spoke his middle name aloud, well, it wasn't even the sort of name that would get one's lunch money stolen. He tore away the wrapping paper distractedly, and opened the box within.

The contents only grabbed a little more of his attention, but he did manage an appropriate response apparently, because Dawn immediately began babbling on about the cuteness of the little baby shirts and little baby shoes. In all honesty, he was still rather baffled by the entire notion of going "gooey" over baby clothing, as Buffy put it. But he did have to admit that the tiny little things did have a certain charm.

The next gift plopped down as soon as the first was off his lap. Buffy's this time, and she was smiling as he opened it.

His fingers met soft fabric as he reached in. Warm sea green, like Caribbean waters. He pulled the blanket out and it fell around his arm and brushed his skin, like feathers.

"I looked, like, everywhere for that. It's pretty much exactly like the one I had. Only, mine was pink. And is now not in nearly such good shape. I dragged that thing around until I was five."

He was smiling and rubbing his thumb over it.

"It's wonderful."

"Thanks."

He would have said more, but suddenly, Anya appeared between him and Buffy.

"Ok. Gratitude has been given and acknowledged. Time for my gift."

He had to get up to get to her present, which was bulkier than Buffy's or Dawn's. Getting out of the chair was, as it had been lately, rather distressingly more difficult than it should have been.

Once unwrapped, the gift revealed itself to be a car seat.

"I researched thoroughly and found this is the seat rated most safe by several surveys. Which is good, as it would be quite distressing to go through all of this emotional turmoil and physical discomfort only to have your offspring flung through the windshield in a minor fender

bender.”

“Good lord,” he said, as the rest of the room was silent in horror. But. Well, she did have an excellent point, if he thought about it. “That is, er, thank you. I truly appreciate the effort.”

And he did. Researching car seats had been one of the larger baby-related headaches he’d been trying to avoid. Although, seeing the thing in front of him now did bring up a small twinge of oh-god-my-poor-leather-seats. Ah, well. Parenthood was about sacrifice.

“Me next,” said a surprising voice.

“Spike? You brought a gift?”

Spike tried to look wounded.

“Course I did. Kind of the point of this whole deal, innit?”

There was a pause, and the Giles said, “Well?”

“Oh. Yeah.” Spike reached into his jacket and pulled out... a bottle of Scotch. He plunked it down on the table.

“Scotch?” Giles said.

“Well, yeah. Supposed to buy you stuff you’ll need when the baby comes. Don’t kid yourself, mate. That there’s what you’re gonna need.”

It was even his favored brand.

“Thank me later, Rupes. When you really mean it.”

Spike sat back down and Joyce was up next. Her gift was an assortment of baby stuff: powder, formula, infant tylenol, a small package of diapers.

“It’s all the brands I used with Buffy and Dawn.”

His thanks to her was easy and heartfelt, and with it came a rush of relief that at least someone he knew here had actually been through all of this before.

“It’s an adventure,” she said, “but it more than pays off.”

And then everyone, lead by Xander, was getting up.

“Gotta take a little field trip for mine,” Xander said.

“Well,” he added as they trailed the group up the stairs, “Not just mine. Everyone kinda chipped in on this one. But I... well, you’ll see.”

Everyone was gathered around Buffy’s bedroom, and he felt a rush of nerves. What could they have gotten him that was--

He nearly gasped when he stepped through the door.

“Xander...”

It was a crib, made of dark wood, polished to a shine. When he touched it, it was solid under his hand.

“It’s beautiful. You--”

“Yup. One hundred percent Xander-made.”

He slid his hand back and forth over the rail. No rough spots, no splinters.

“Thank you.”

Xander could only hold his gaze for a fraction of a second, before ducking his head and saying, “Well, you know, nothing but the best for our favorite man who is with child.”

As was the intent, the mood was broken and they all headed back downstairs.

A little while later, the party wound down. Spike left, and Anya dragged Xander out the door, and Buffy and Dawn made Giles stay in the living room as they went to clean the kitchen.

And he was left alone. With Willow.

She got up suddenly, silently, and came over to half-perch on the end of the couch beside him, not quite meeting his eyes.

“I-- I couldn’t think of what to get you.”

As it did, his body tingled to life at her nearness. He could feel her heat, her aura across the intervening space. She was so far away, though, even as she was near him, drawn so deep inside herself.

“It’s all right,” he said.

“No... I should have... but...”

His hand literally itched with the urge to touch her, soothe her.

“Willow, this... this charm... it’s invaluable. If you owed me anything, which you don’t, this would more than compensate.”

She looked at him, a little, from behind her hair.

“Hey, Giles?”

“Hmm?”

“Who’s E. R. G.?”

So she had gotten the note.

“My father,” he said, and saw a small smile.

“I thought so, maybe.”

Then things were quiet between them. Uncomfortably so. He didn’t know quite what to say to her. What she wanted. What he could have.

She spoke, suddenly, with a tinge of desperation in her voice that was intimately familiar to him.

“Giles, I... I know that I messed up. Really bad. But... I’ve... I’ve been trying. I understand now, what I did wrong, and, and I’m so sorry. For all of it.”

“Willow--”

“I know. I know it was wrong to do that spell, I do. And I know that you can’t just forgive me for the way I acted with Tara. But... but... couldn’t we at least... maybe... someday, be friends again?”

“I--” But still, he wasn’t quite sure what to say.

All he knew was his heart was breaking all over again.

“Willow, I-- I don’t know... if I can trust you. I want to. I do. And you have been making a great deal of effort, I can see that--”

He heard himself talking down to her, saw her turning her head away to hide tears and stopped himself.

“There’s a lot that I... need to think about. My child... *Eric.* He’s my priority. I need to be sure I’m... doing what’s best for him.”

“Yeah. Yeah, ok. I get that.”

She stood up, started to walk away. That wouldn’t do. Not like that. He grabbed her hand.

It was like being kicked in the gut.

Her skin against his, after so long apart. She felt it too, her spine suddenly pulling straighter. They let go of each other, but he could still feel her.

He opened his mouth to say “I miss you,” but at that moment, Dawn burst into the living room, armed with a garbage bag, and began to gather up cups. Willow slipped out of the room and out of the house.

Chapter 22

Three days later, three days of not speaking to each other again, of everything staying exactly as it had been for the past month, he stopped her as she was about to leave the shop.

“Oh, um, Willow. I need to talk with you.”

For a second, she half-expected it was a mistake, that he'd slipped up and would remember that they weren't speaking. She gave him an out as best she could, saying, “Me? Oh. Ok. Sure. Now?”

She took a few steps towards him, and hugged her books to her chest, and he didn't quite look at her, kept half his attention on the money he was... well, supposedly counting, although he didn't seem to be paying quite *that* much attention to it.

“Um, no actually. Could you stop by my place, a little later? Say sevenish?”

Her heart leapt. His place? He was letting her come to his house? This... this was big. She forced herself to play it cool.

“Uh. Sure. I mean, not like I have *plans* or anything.” Seeing as it was *Valentine's Day* and she was well and truly dumped. She thought for a moment, her mind buzzing from Giles to Valentine's Day and back again, then she added, oh so calmly, oh so subtly, “So... what's this about?”

He was frowning at the money now, and reshuffling it, obviously realizing that he hadn't actually counted any of it.

“Oh. Glory,” he said, distractedly, “A spell I found. It may be able to hurt her. I'd like to go over the details with you. See how plausible it sounds?”

She was disappointed. For a moment. Then realized what this meant.

“A spell? I mean, you'd want me to... do a spell?”

He looked up, really saw her this time.

“Of course. There's nothing wrong with magic, Willow. So long as you control it and understand it. And... I believe you have been making sincere efforts in those regards.”

“Yeah! I mean, I have. I really have.”

“Wonderful. Seven o' clock, then? Oh, and, um, don't bother eating. I'm sure I can find something.”

Dinner. At Giles's. Talking about magic.

It wasn't everything, but it was a start, and that... that was all she could really hope for; all she even needed, for now at least.

“Yeah, I'll-- I'll be there.”

But then there was nothing to do but go back to the dorm and wait.

She agonized for an hour over what to wear, finally settling on khakis and a tank top with a cardigan over it. Something soft. Touchable. Even though she knew that chances of *that* were... pretty much nonexistent.

Then, she had another hour to kill. It loomed before her like the vast Sahara desert.

She sighed. She was too wound up to do homework or read or even sit still. So she wandered around her dorm room until her roommate glared at her once too often, and then she

left the dorm and drifted around campus until finally, her watch said it was fifteen 'til. She might be a little early, but she couldn't wait any longer.

Chapter 23

He'd bought her daisies. When he'd gone into the shop, he'd fully intended to buy her red roses. The past was the past, after all, and it was silly to let it continue to affect him so deeply. But the moment he'd stepped in the door and the scent of them hit him, it was like he was living it again. The horror was fresh as yesterday.

The air outside had been a sweet blessing, clear and cool and three years removed from the day he'd found his lover murdered. He'd gone home, and called in an order.

The daisies were on the table now, the one he'd wrestled out of storage and shoved the desk aside to make room for. They were lying between the good china plates and the wine glasses, petals brilliantly white in the half-light of candles.

Their message of absolution was too strong and he half-regretted them, but he had them now, and he would give them to her. Partly because at least some of their symbolic purity was telling the truth, and partly because this time, he was--*they* were--doing this right. No more hiding in the dark. Doing it right, or not at all.

Because they couldn't be friends now. Not when every time he touched her, he could *feel* her.

He knew he was too solemn as he pulled the chicken out of the oven, but the weight of thoughts on his mind was too heavy, and the burden was spilling over into his heart. So much could go wrong.

He shut his eyes, and breathed in deeply, pushing aside the doubt, and the tears that were too close to the surface. Told himself not to count the battle lost until it had actually been fought. Then he carried the chicken and the vegetables out to the table.

Checked the clock and saw it was still early. But if he knew Willow...

Sure enough, before the minute hand had even moved to the next tic mark, the door rattled and swung open. Something inside him leapt like a startled rabbit, and a distant part of himself was still calm enough to be embarrassed that he was more nervous now than he had been before a few apocalypses he could recall.

She stepped inside. Stopped. And gaped.

And he smiled and, just like that, was perfectly relaxed. Because this was Willow, and she was here, and they could make this work. He *knew* it, deep inside, even as he was still perfectly aware of the obstacles.

She finally managed to speak, then, saying his name, so choked full of emotions none of them came through quite clearly.

He fell apart again, suddenly not knowing what he was doing, what he was thinking. Throwing together this Hallmark card romance. Being fool enough to think that flowers and candles and all of this meant anything. This... this was not the sort of thing he should have sprung on her. It was unfair. Manipulative, really. Forcing her, perhaps, into something she maybe didn't even want...

Or worse, something he might not even be able to offer her, because what had happened a month ago was not so easy to forget. Was not something that should be forgotten.

But then he saw tears in her eyes, and the panic eased like a shadow before dawn, and he reached for the flowers and walked to her. Pressed them into her hands, white blossoms saying everything that needed to be said. She fell against him, the flowers just out of the way enough to avoid being crushed, her face against his chest. When he hugged her, tightly, he could feel her tears in the shaky breaths expanding her chest and pushing out against his arms. He ducked his head down and inhaled the scent of her again.

They held each other.

Then she looked up at him, with red eyes and tears in her lashes, and laughed a very small laugh, and he smiled down at her and pushed her hair back behind her ear. So soft. Thin strands tingling against his knuckles.

“Have I ever told you how beautiful you are?” he said, and her shaky smile grew a little stronger and a light danced behind the sheen of tears.

“Maybe a few times,” she said.

They were kissing, again, finally. She was really here. In his home, in his arms. The kiss tasted like tears and relief.

Then she giggled, interrupting them. When he opened his eyes he found her looking down at his stomach between them, where it bumped up against hers.

“Wow, he’s getting big, huh?” Willow said, still looking. He didn’t let go of her, even as she wriggled her hand between them to lay flat over his stomach.

“He should be weighing about a pound this week,” he said.

Having another person’s hand there didn’t feel so strange now, since Buffy and Dawn had hardly let him alone at all the past couple of weeks, but it was still strange having *her* hand there. This girl, this woman, who might, maybe, someday, if things went exactly right, which they seldom to never did... be this child’s mother one day.

Even having that thought now, though, was enough to kick up another flurry of doubt, and he gently pulled away from her, said that the food might be getting cold, suggested they eat.

It wasn’t right, and it wasn’t fair to her, or himself, to be thinking that far ahead. Especially not right now.

So instead of thinking, he served the food, and blushed appropriately at Willow’s jokes about his ability to cook and how this somehow made him the perfect man, which set the tone for the rest of the meal. They shared lighthearted banter, not touching on any of the heavier issues between them. Simply talking and even laughing, and... god, she was perfect by candlelight.

When they’d both finished, though, the mood shifted as she slipped her fingers between his on the table. Their skin was pale against the dark grain, and in the flickering half-light, it was hard to see where she left off and he began. Just two hands, interlaced, flowing together.

“Willow, I can’t just forget what’s happened.”

“I know,” she said.

Although here and now, it felt like he could. Felt like he nearly *had*, already. He stared as she traced their woven fingers with her other hand, and felt the need to ask what they were talking about.

Then shook himself, lifted her teasing hand away, and said, “No more lying. Hiding what we had... it was killing me...”

“I know,” she said, again, and was pulling her hand away, folding it away in her lap and drawing inside herself again. “I mean, I knew. And... I’m so--”

He touched her lips to quiet her, said, “Don’t. Don’t. Not tonight. That’s over.”

And then, oh, his fingers were still on her lower lip, touching lightly, warm damp skin, and she was looking up at him through her lashes with wide tragic eyes, and all he could do was lean in and kiss her. He just touched his lips to hers, and pulled away, just slightly, still close enough to taste the champagne on her breath.

Felt her hand curl around his shoulder. Saw her close her eyes, and closed his own. Felt her cheek brush up next to his, felt her turn her face into his neck, her breath tickling him.

A cold teardrop rolled from her to him, curled down around his jaw.

Her scent was working its way through him, making him feel more alive, more aware, than he had in a month. Sweet perfume, shampoo. And her magic, still so much a part of her. Technically, not a scent, but somehow that was the easiest way to define it.

Strawberries.

Which reminded him...

He sat back in his chair and said, "Dessert?" as she blinked at him.

He smiled when she smiled.

"Whatcha got?"

"Go sit down," he said, inclining his head towards the living room. Already his body was warming in anticipation, his blood gathering in his groin. He took the plates into the kitchen and left them to soak in the sink, and then picked up the wine glasses and the half-empty champagne bottle in one hand, and the pièce de résistance, a tray of chocolate-covered strawberries, in the other.

In the living room, Willow had caught onto the plan already, sitting with her legs tucked up under her on the nest of bedding he'd arranged in front of the hearth and leaning in to light the logs in the fireplace. He paused for a moment there, beside the couch, with his breath caught in his throat. Struck again by how gorgeous she was as she sat back, tucking her hair behind her ear and watching the fire catch.

His Willow. His. No more lying awake at night, knowing she was in someone else's arms. No more fretting that they'd be found out, no more waiting, wondering, who would win her.

She looked up and saw him, and warm affection changed her face and her posture.

"Y'know, technically, you giving me alcohol is illegal. Which is fairly ironic when you think about it, what with all we've done that's not actually illegal."

He laughed softly and set everything down on the coffee table, and then carefully eased himself down onto the floor. He wasn't quite to the point where things were physically difficult, but the added weight and changing center of gravity did make things different enough as to be noticeable. The moment he'd gotten himself seated, cross-legged on the blankets, she flowed up to him, curling her arms around him and settling herself against his side. Her nearness sent a thrill through him. Then she peered back over his shoulder.

"So what is-- Oh. Wow. Chocolate-covered strawberries. Giles, if I wasn't in love before--"

She jostled around and a moment later she was back beside him and the tray was on the blankets in front of his knee. He stopped her hand before she could reach for one, then picked one up himself. Cool, damp, fuzzy stem an interesting sensation between his fingers. His arm was around her back, and she was a warm solid presence against his side as he lifted it up to her. Could not tear his gaze away as her eyes drifted closed, her lips folded around the fruit. A drop of juice caught on her lipgloss in a perfect hemisphere and glistened in the firelight.

He tasted that drop and chocolate as he kissed her deep and slow. She moaned and moved against him, her hand on his leg shifting, sending small sparks up his thigh. Her breast brushed against his ribs, and he groaned softly. Aching, but in the best ways.

"Oh," she said, as their lips slipped apart. Her eyes were so dark. He felt a rush of heat, hard want.

Her hand moved from his thigh to his chest, rubbed him there as she kissed his cheek, his jaw. Then she reached down, and a moment later, cool chocolate was pressed to his lips. He reached for it, but she pulled it back at the last moment, teasing him with just a hint of sweetness on the tip of his tongue. Caught up in the moment, a sound of frustration escaped him and she laughed softly and relented, letting him catch it with his teeth. Sweet dark chocolate and cool juice on his tongue.

And then her hot mouth was on his, just as sweet, twice as powerful, especially as she got up over him on her knees, as much in his lap as she could get now. He held her, supporting her, his hands on her small waist, her sweater soft under his palms. Loved her. Wanted her. Couldn't move in this position and already was nearly desperate from it.

He gasped her name, and she sat back on her heels, started unbuttoning his shirt. He let her unbutton it, push it off, peel off his undershirt next. The heat from the fire, burning well now, played across his bare skin but her eyes taking him in made him hotter. So amazing to have her looking at him like this. Never thought he'd really have her. Never thought he'd have her again. But he did.

He reached for her, pulling off sweater and tank top, feeling skin against his forearms as he unclasped her bra. She shook it off and climbed over him again, kissing him. Her hair fell around them both, brushed his throat, and even that small thing was enough to tighten the grip

of lust on him. Was enough to make him realize, all over again, that she was *here*, she was with him, and he wondered how he'd lived without her.

His hands went back to her waist at first, just wanting to touch her, be connected to her. Her skin was far softer than the fabric, and warm. After a moment, he slid one hand up her back, pressed between her shoulder blades, moved the other between their bodies, found the peak of one nipple, the soft weight of her breast. She made a small sound against his lips that went straight down his spine, straight to his cock.

Now he was fully hard, and when her hand dropped down into his lap and gripped him through his pants his whole body jolted with want and need.

"Oh, wow, baby," she whispered, obviously feeling it, understanding it. How much he wanted her. She seemed about to move away, and that wouldn't do, so he grabbed her arms, firmly and quickly, just above her elbows, held her close.

Saw her small gasp, saw her eyes change a little more. Saw in her face a dark appreciation that he never would have guessed existed in that shy high school girl. Never, at least, until he'd seen her turned; her raw essence, stripped of soul and humanity. Horrifying. Fascinating.

"Tell me you want me," he said, feeling how rough his voice was, like waking up after a night of not enough sleep.

"I want you," she said, softly, but with feeling, the words echoing in her eyes, in the way she was squirming just slightly in his tight grip. "I want you a *whole* *lot*."

And what should have sounded childish just sounded unbearably good, and he let go of her, just for a moment, to move the strawberries up onto the coffee table and out of the way, then pushed her down on her back, into the piles of blankets and pillows. He lay half beside her and half on top of her, her right side pinned by his body, her left arm still held tight. She relaxed completely, and her willing submission made him that much harder. He pressed himself against her thigh as he whispered against her temple, "Say you love me."

"I love you," she said. Her arm flinched as she spoke, as though she wanted to reach for him.

But he didn't let her.

Her body was too tempting in the firelight, all curves and shadows. Nipples dark and hard with desire. He kept holding her as he slid lower, leaned over her and found one nipple with his mouth, circling his tongue on her, tasting her skin. Feeling her tug against his hand, her leg brushing against his cock, teasingly light and unintentional as she arched her back, pressed up towards him.

Sighed his name.

* * *

"Rupert..." Felt so good, saying that name again, saying it like *this*, with his mouth on her, and his hand painfully, wonderfully tight on her arm. Torn between the pleasure of being restrained and the desire to touch him. She was dizzy, a little high on the feeling, his solid weight beside her all that grounded her, that reminded her that this was real.

His tongue flicked lightly against the side of her breast and she gasped and surged against him. His arm held her down. The feelings made her tremble, everything so mixed up and crazy inside of her. Love and loneliness and joy and sadness and oh, he felt so good, touching her like he'd found some kind of roadmap to her body, knew every place to stop, every place to touch, to kiss. Spent what had to be hours on her nipples and breasts, tongue and teeth on her skin, driving her out of her mind.

Her hips were rocking now, and she was wishing for his hand on her, between her legs. Couldn't find the breath or redirect her concentration enough to ask, though.

He was hard, she could feel him through his pants as he subtly humped her leg. Ready for her, like she was ready for him. He nipped her, then, a little sharper than he had been, and the breath it forced out of her carried a word.

"Please."

He looked up, the firelight playing over his face, highlighting cheekbones, jaw, catching on his eyes and making them glow. He was beautiful in that moment. Ethereal, and it stopped her breath, made her heart stumble as she was overwhelmed by the emotions of the night. She'd

thought that, maybe, this would be her chance to make things up to him, to start to rebuild things. Instead, she'd found this waiting for her: flowers and candles and near-redemption. It was all so sudden. She was still half-expecting to wake up.

Still felt alone.

The tears came back suddenly, flooding her eyes before she could think to hold them back, and exasperation added itself to her mix of conflicting emotions. Tears, tears, so annoying, just getting in the way, she shouldn't be *crying* now.

But it didn't seem to phase him. He came up beside her again, and kissed her softly, and his hand moved down, unbuttoned, unzipped her pants. She kissed him back, even as the tears fell down her cheeks, got in her hair and her ears. Her arms were free now, so she wrapped them around him as he tried unsuccessfully to push her pants down one-handed. She just wanted to hold him.

After a futile moment, he abandoned his efforts and put his arm around her, hugged her close. They were on their sides, and she tucked her face down between them, where it was warm from their bodies, damp from her breath. His scent was a powerful presence, tied to so much in her mind; everything from moments when he'd snatched her back from danger and she'd found herself briefly but tightly clasped against him, to that night when they'd first touched each other, when he'd first been inside her. The scent, his arms, his body, their bare flesh pressed together. She could feel him breathing, his chest slowly rising and falling, his breath moving her hair. Slowly, the reality of it began to seep in, as her tears ebbed and she relaxed by degrees against him, until she felt like she was a part of him, drifting on the rhythm of his breath and the warmth of their bodies and the fire. He was stroking her back, slow and even.

She flinched awake, and pulled back a little.

"Hush, love," he murmured, "Sleep if you want to. We have time."

But she didn't want to. Not now. She rolled onto her back, and pushed off her pants and underwear. Turned her head to the side and saw him propped on his elbow, looking at her. Still so amazing in the firelight: shirtless, all skin and rumpled sexiness.

He reached across the space between them and touched her, palm flat and fingers spread. Ran his hand down her chest, over her belly, then edged a little closer so he could reach further. Slid his hand over her pubic hair and down, his fingers brushing along her labia. She laid her hand on his arm and watched his muscles shift as his fingers pressed into her. Yellow firelight on his smooth skin, where it was soft on the inside of his forearm. And, there, on his wrist, was the bracelet she'd made for him.

Woven by hand, as she'd chanted and watched American Idol. It wasn't his style, this handmade earthy jewelry thing, but it seemed so... comfortable there on his wrist, moving with the slow rhythm of his hand inside her. She touched it, where it lay on his arm, feeling his skin and soft, broken-in hemp. She'd given it to him, and he was wearing it.

Somehow, that touched her even deeper than his hand. Did something funny to her insides. She watched his face as she said, "Hey. If I bought you an earring, would you wear it?"

Trembling in anticipation of his answer, in pleasure as his thumb caressed her clit.

"Why?" he asked, but not in a way that said 'no.' He seemed intrigued.

She rolled up on her side, wrapped her leg over his. Her hand still on the bracelet.

"Cause it would be sexy," she said. Dead serious, so much so it made it kind of hard to breathe. "Really sexy."

He smiled.

"I have earrings," he said.

That wasn't the same.

"I want you to wear mine," she said. She knew, in the way his eyes flashed, in the way that he pressed deeper inside of her, rubbed her hard with his thumb, made her buck at the sudden pleasure, that his answer was yes.

"Giles," she said, as he eased off again, just teasing her again, light quick strokes inside her, "Take off your pants already."

He grinned, and did, and while he was still on his back she straddled him, dropped down on him. Quick enough to send a bolt through them both, heard his cry match her own. So good, so hard, so full. She panted, felt him touching her deep inside.

"Willow," he gasped, a warning in his tone.

All she had to say was, "It's ok. Got on the pill, finally, last month." Even as she hated having to say that, to say anything, when all she wanted was to just feel him.

"Oh, god," he said, relaxing, and then she began to move, and there was nothing else they had to say.

* * *

When it was over, they'd straightened up the place, just enough to feel they'd done something. Folded the covers, did a few dishes, made sure the fire was out, working together in quiet synchronicity. Then they'd gone up to his bedroom, settled down in his bed.

His body was still loose and content and his mind at ease. Perhaps that was why he was able to work up the nerve to say, "There's a house I've been looking at. It's near campus. Good neighborhood. I was thinking, perhaps, if you wanted--I know this is rather sudden, and, feel free to say no, it's really just an offer--you and I could possibly--"

She sat partway up.

"Giles!"

Shit. And things had been going so well.

"Sorry, I--"

"Are you asking me to live with you?"

"You don't... we don't have to..."

But he let his voice trail into silence, because she was bouncing a little on the bed, kind of quivering, and her eyes were bright, and she was talking fast, saying, "Wow. I mean, I'd love to. That would be just... the most amazing thing *ever*. I mean, if you want me to. Wow."

His heart surged with joy as she dropped back down on the bed and hugged him.

"I want you to. Very, very much."

Then, he had to add, "We have to tell Buffy, and the others. As soon as possible. Tomorrow."

"Ok," Willow said, quickly, still maybe distracted, because she kept talking, saying, "Wow. A house. That's... that's so cool, Giles."

He kissed her.

"I missed you. I love you."

"Me too," she murmured against his chest. He let himself think that everything would be all right, and slept better that night than he had in years.

But the best thing of all was waking up the next morning with her beside him.

Chapter 24

Of course Mr. Allergic-To-Late Giles would choose today to discover the power of antihistamines. Today, when here she was first thing in the morning, bright and early, definitely needing some Watcher-ly advice, and needing it **now**. She would have gone by his place, but she'd figured he'd already be here.

But he wasn't, and so she was standing around in the front of the shop, and waiting. And Anya kept shooting her pointed annoyed looks because apparently, she was frightening the customers.

Whatever.

When he finally **did** show, forty-five minutes late and looking way too chipper, she grabbed him immediately and dragged him back to the training room.

"We need to talk," she said, once she'd firmly shut the door.

When she turned back around, she found that his chipper-ness had completely abandoned him. In fact, if anything, he looked... panicked. Odd.

"We... we do? A-about what?"

"Spike," she said.

He seemed quite taken aback by this.

"Er. Spike? What about--"

"He hit on me last night."

All of Giles's contriteness vanished in a moment, replaced by a where's-my-stake gleam in his eyes.

"He **what**? How? Why? What happened?"

"Hey, whoa," she said, "Like, a few weeks ago, you were all like, 'Spike could be a useful ally, maybe he has a higher purpose.'"

"What?" He blinked, and seemed to scan back in his mind. Then he whipped off his glasses and all but slapped his forehead. "Oh, for god's sake. That was what that was all about. Please tell me you didn't--"

Ok, confession time.

"I kinda kissed him."

Ok, she'd seen that look on Giles's face before. But usually it was directed at Xander. When he'd said something particularly... dumb.

"You... kissed him."

"Um. Yeah. Kinda."

"Kind of?"

"Well, it was just sort of a brief kiss, and he was actually a... gentleman about it."

Damn it. She was fond of him. When the hell did that happen? It was just, he'd been so charming over the past few weeks, and... and...

"He nearly staked Drusilla!" she said, because Giles was still just sort of speechless. He continued to be speechless, so she continued to be... speeched. "Oh, yeah, she was the vamp who was on that train by the way. Anyway, she showed up, attacked us, and Spike was fighting

against her right alongside me, and it wasn't just for show Giles, I mean, I'm a Slayer, I know slaying, he was really trying."

"What on Earth does Drusilla have to do with anything?" Giles said, finally managing to speak again.

"Well, it shows that... that he's on our side now, Giles. He could have gone back to her, but he didn't."

Giles's mouth opened and closed a couple of times, and then, he said, firmly, as he gathered his wits back about him, "Let's sit down, shall we? I--" he lost his momentum for a moment, then regained it. "There's something I should... tell you... before this conversation goes any further."

And that really didn't sound good. So, they sat and then she waited, as he looked at the floor, and the walls, and his hands, and pretty much anywhere except actually at her. Her heart sank. When Giles got like this, good things rarely resulted.

"It's not... something about the baby is it?" she asked, finally, though she didn't even like saying that out loud. But the suspense was worse.

"What? Oh, no. No, he's fine. It's... it's about me, actually. It's--" He closed his eyes for a moment then, and then forged ahead, "I know... why Willow left Tara. Um. In fact I... I'm... I'm rather the reason that... Willow left Tara."

Yeah, well, Buffy thought, you're pretty much the reason I kissed Spike last night, too. But she didn't say that.

"Oh? Really? That's weird. What did you do?"

He was looking away again.

"I... she and I... Buffy, we... I know it may seem odd to you at first, but..."

No. Way. He was not saying that--

"We're... in love. At least, I believe that we are. I-- I love her. Very much, and--"

She fully expected the grossed-out feeling to hit at any moment. But... it didn't. And watching him stammer out this confession, tensed up as though half-expecting her to order him out of Sunnydale...

She didn't feel angry. Or repulsed. Because he was just Giles and Willow was Willow and after everything they'd all been through... she couldn't even contemplate begrudging someone the right to be with the one they loved. To be happy.

In fact, it really wasn't a bad match.

"Giles," she said, gently, reaching out to touch his arm. He looked up, finally meeting her eyes. "It's ok. I'm... I mean, that's great. If you're both happy. I mean, yeah, if you hurt her, I'll have to kill you, but, other than that..." She smiled to make sure he knew she was kidding.

"Well," he said, "That, um... that went better than I expected."

She grimaced a little, regretting her younger, stupider self.

"I know, I know, I used to be pretty... tactless. Sorry. I'd like to think that maybe I have managed to grow up at least a little."

He was smiling at her now, a soft smile.

"You have. Very much. You never cease amazing me, Buffy."

He squeezed her shoulder, gently, and she had to admit that the thought did cross her mind that perhaps his touches weren't quite as chaste as she'd always assumed, but it was only a superficial thought, not one that came close to touching her true beliefs. He'd always looked at Willow differently than the rest of them.

And then he was sitting up straighter, looking stern.

"Now, about this situation with Spike..."

Crap.

Chapter 25

Willow had asked Xander to meet with her at the Bronze that night, and he was late showing up. She sighed and stirred her coffee. She could be with Giles right now, but no... Xander was wasting her precious cuddle time, here.

Her gaze swept over the room. All these people. High schoolers and college kids. Out on the dance floors with their sweeties, dancing to the steady pulse of the band onstage. Kissing and hugging and... undulating. Her eyes were drawn to one couple, off to the edge of the dance floor, near the stage. They were lost in each other, dancing as close as a single body, fused into oneness by the dance and the darkness. They were unconsciously drawing in magic, focusing it and flaring it back out in a wave of sensual heat that she could feel across the room.

The heat flushed through her and she squirmed in her chair. Looked to the door again to see if Xander might by some coincidence be walking in at that moment.

No such luck.

She wondered if she could talk Giles into dancing with her here.

Ok, so, he was a bit older than most of the crowd, and she was a lot younger than him, and they'd probably get *looks*, but then, she'd danced with Tara here often enough, so a few looks weren't going to scare her.

And it would totally be worth it to be able to wrap herself around Giles like that couple was. Be one with the beat and the crowd and each other and just move.

She was breathing a little harder suddenly, imagining it. His body in her arms, all against hers, and holding her. Desire made tangible.

Someone touched her arm and she nearly jumped out of her skin. And did spill a bit of her coffee.

"Whoa, hey, Willow. Big with the jumpy tonight. That's not that double shot stuff is it?"

"Oh. Xander."

He was mopping up the spill with a napkin and then sitting down.

"So, what's the big news? I got the feeling you were asking me here for A Reason, y'know, the kind with capital letters? Is this about Tara? 'Cause if so, Comfort Guy is in the building and totally ready to be a sympathetic listener."

He was putting on his bartender face. Willow sighed. Ok, she appreciated the effort, but, also, it was kind of annoying.

"It's not... well, it's kind of about Tara. But not exactly."

Xander patted her hand.

"Very specific."

She took a deep breath. Xander waggled his eyebrows and then waited, wide-eyed and expectant.

"It's about Giles," she said, in one quick rush of breath.

"Giles? He's not thinking about jetting off to England again, is he? 'Cause if so--"

She didn't wait for him to finish.

“We’re together.”
Xander blinked. Then looked blank.
“Huh?”
“Giles and I? We’re... we’re a couple.”
“A couple of whats?”
And, sadly enough, the question seemed in earnest.
“He’s, like, my... boyfriend.”
“Who is? Boyfriend? Willow, you’re--”
“Bi. I’m bi. And Giles. Is my boyfriend.”
Xander’s brow was furrowed.
“Giles can’t be a boyfriend. He’s, like, forty.”
“Forty-eight. And, ok, pick your favorite term then. He’s my SO. My lover. My
cuddle-bunny.”
“Oh.”
Willow waited. That couldn’t possibly be it. Xander was still frowning, and he had a
distant look in his eyes, like he used to get when he was trying to figure out French vocabulary.
Finally, he said, “Ok, ok, wait. I get it. This is a joke, right? Ok, funny. Yeah, ok,
Xander’s an idiot, everyone laugh now, he fell for it for a minute there.”
She sighed as he searched for the hidden camera.
“Not a joke, Xander. I know it’s kinda strange, but... I really love him. And he loves
me.”
There was, for a moment, a disbelieving stare. Then Xander was on his feet.
“Ok, that’s it. Where is he? I need to kill him.”
“Xander! Not funny.”
“So not joking.”
“Xander!” she said again, and grabbed his arm as he seemed about to head for the exit.
“God, Will, he’s like a million years old. This is... is... illegal or something!”
“No, it’s really not.”
“Well, it *should* be. What the hell is he... what are you... No. Forget it. Just-- I’m
leaving. I need to... Bye.”
And then he was gone, disappeared by the crowd. Willow stared after him, numb inside.

Chapter 26

“But it’s been two weeks, Giles! And he won’t even talk to me.”

“He’s... working things out, Willow.”

He gently caught her arm and steered her **around** the hood of the car, diverting her from her apparent planned course, which seemed to involve plowing straight through it. She bumped up against his side and distractedly slipped her arm around his waist and he smiled and hugged her shoulders, keeping her close as they made their way up to the dorm and she continued to angst.

“But, but! He needs to, like, get over it already! I mean, it’s not like you’re some skanky old man I met in a bar or, or, online or something! You’re you!”

He kissed the top of her head and didn’t comment. It was a beautiful day, and almost all was right with his world, aside from one Hellgod and one obstinate young man, and he wasn’t letting any of that drag him down at them moment. Her hair smelled wonderful, her arm was holding him tight. And today, they were moving her things from her dorm to their new home.

“Stop patronizing me,” Willow muttered, but without much heat.

“I wouldn’t dream of patronizing you, dear,” he said, cheerfully.

They reached the door to her dorm and she slipped out from under his arm long enough to unlock it with her student ID card and open the door.

Walking into these buildings was always a strange experience for him. So much youth. This was their world, and these were their peers, and they all looked so **young**. Oddly, the high school hadn’t provoked nearly the same feelings. On the other hand, back then, he hadn’t been **sleeping** with any of them, he supposed.

Willow bumped back up against his side and hugged him close as they walked.

Giles didn’t miss the disgusted look they got from a boy they passed in the stairwell. He pretended it didn’t bother him.

“Whatcha thinking about?” Willow asked as they reached her floor. “Deep thoughts?”

“You,” he says, because it was as close to the truth as he felt like getting, and because he knew it would make her happy.

“Aww!” she said. “That almost makes up for the patronizing thing earlier.”

“I wasn’t--”

She unlocked her door and tilted a skeptical brow at him.

“All right, perhaps a bit.”

“See?” she said, as they walked into her dorm room, “I told you things would be easier once you just started admitting I’m always right.”

He kicked the door shut gently and then grabbed her arm, pulled her to him. Held her a bit tightly and mock-growled, “Always?”

She just grinned up at him.

“Ok, maybe eighty-five percent of the time?” she offered.

Her body was close and warm and he felt himself beginning to react. Let go of one of

her arms with one hand so he could slide it down to the small of her back, press her against him.

“Make it seventy-five and we’ll have a deal,” he said.

Her arms curled around his back.

“Eighty.”

He let her go abruptly, stepped away.

“No. No, that will never do.”

He took the moment of mock-rejection to look around the room. Good lord, but she wasn’t kidding about her roommate. Crosses and angel figurines and bible quotations. Amusing to think of a Wiccan sharing a room with her. Although he could see why Willow might be uncomfortable.

Willow’s half of the room, in fact, barely looked lived in. Which made sense, since she’d been spending most of her time at his place.

Then she was back against him, cuddled close.

“I guess I can settle for seventy-five,” she said, as his own arms went around her again, almost automatically.

For a while, he just held her. Thrilled, all over again, that this amazing woman was his. God, he loved her so much. He held her tighter, tucked his head down to kiss her hair. Whispered his love to her. Felt her happy sigh move them both.

“You too, baby,” she said, into his chest, like she was speaking directly to his heart.

The emotion, the closeness, stirred his cock, and for a moment, in a way he hadn’t in a while, he hated the entire pregnancy thing. Damned the way his swelled stomach held her away from where he really wanted her.

But then, as though she’d read his mind, she slipped one of her hands between them, curled it around him.

“Mmmm,” she said, and he dropped his hands down to her ass, her thighs, rubbing her where he knew she was sensitive.

“You know my roommate could come back at any time,” she said, still stroking him.

He grunted softly as his cock got a little harder.

“Somehow, I knew that wasn’t going to deter you,” Willow said, sounding amused.

“Well, from what you’ve said,” he said, as he ducked forward, held her by the shoulders and kissed her ear, her jaw, and she giggled, “Might do her some good.”

“Giles!” she said, still grinning.

“Get on the bed, pull down your jeans,” he said, right beside her ear, then he considered what he’d said and added, “But not in that order.”

She was still laughing breathlessly as she unbuttoned and unzipped, and pushed her pants down to her ankles. And, god, no matter how many times he saw her like that, no matter how many times she proved she wanted him... it would never, never get old.

She draped herself over the bed, knees bent over the side, and looked at him. One of her hands was rubbing circles on her stomach and he could see the peaks of her nipples, poking out against her shirt.

The surge of desire shoved him a few steps across the room, close to her, standing between her legs. Her gaze was steady on him as he went down to his knees. He watched her eyes until he closed his own, leaned in and nuzzled her heat through the thin cotton of her panties.

She made a complex, wordless sound, and her hips tilted up a little.

He licked her, tasting salt, smelling musk. God, he loved her. Loved this.

He pressed in hard, teeth and lips and tongue, until the fabric was soaked and she was moaning, rolling with a hard, desperate rhythm against him. Until she groaned, “Rupert, please, please...”

And he yanked her underwear down, gasped, “Hands and knees,” and then staggered to his own feet, cock aching with every movement. He watched her scramble into position as he yanked his own clothing just out of the way enough.

The mattress squealed and shifted alarmingly as he crawled on, but then it steadied and he was on his knees behind her, her hips in his hands, and nothing else mattered because he was burying himself inside her and her back was arching and she was crying out in pleasure. Pressing back against him.

“Yes, god, yes,” he gasped.

When he glanced to the side he saw her bookshelf, with texts for classes like Psychology 101, Introduction to Drama, C++. And the thought hit him, then, that he was fucking her in her bed in her college dormitory, and bloody hell, there had to be something extremely kinky about that.

But apparently, it was a kink that worked for him, because he bowed over her back as much as he could, and pressed in deeper, speeding up his thrusts.

She'd always come easily in this position, and he didn't even have to touch her before he felt her shudder, tighten, gasp.

"Love you," he said, "I love you."

She felt so damn good.

For a while, he slowed his pace, just felt her around him. Looked at her, slatted sunlight falling through venetian blinds across her pale back.

He had to close his eyes as he came, too afraid that if he didn't, it would kill him.

Then they eased down onto their sides, facing each other, her body folded around his, their legs tangled together, just to be touching. Her eyes were bright, looking straight into his own, and she was gently stroking his hair with her fingertips.

Then, even as she looked so sweet and so harmless, she dropped the bombshell.

"Hey, Rupert?"

"Hmm?" he said, still running his hand happily along her side, counting all the colors in her eyes.

"You wanna marry me, right?"

Shock did not even begin to cover it. He stared, and went numb.

"I- I mean, do you? Want to marry me? You do, right?"

Her eyes were wide and hurt, and he dug deep into his strength reserves and found the ability to speak. Or at least, to stammer.

"What- what brought this on?"

She propped her self up on her elbow, and rubbed his chest as she spoke, but didn't quite meet his eyes.

"Well, nothing, really. I mean... I mean, I just thought... I love you, and... you love me, and we're moving in together, and there's the baby, and stuff. I thought... why wouldn't we? I mean, you do love me, right? You keep saying you-"

God, he never wanted her to doubt that.

"Of course I do. With all my heart, Willow. But-"

"But what?"

"Willow, are you sure?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"I simply mean- have you even given this any thought? Before this precise moment?"

He would love to know where this came from. And if it was a who, who it came from, so he could kill them.

"Well, yeah. I mean, a little. I- I used to write 'Willow Rosenberg-Giles' all over my notebooks in high school. Well, that and 'Willow Rosenberg-Harris.' And sometimes 'Willow Rosenberg-Cusack.' But that's all over now, I swear!"

"That- wasn't precisely what I meant."

That **really** wasn't what he meant. And was, in fact, slightly disturbing.

"What's there to think about?"

"Good heavens, Willow. There's scads to think about."

Now she was simply beginning to look annoyed.

"Such as? And don't even start with the age thing, ok? I'm sick of hearing about it, already."

He struggled to find a place to start, to organize his spinning thoughts.

"Willow, we've only been... involved so to speak for about two months. And even in that time... things haven't exactly gone perfectly smoothly."

"Well, yeah, but... we've known each other for five years. And all that not-smoothness is in the past. It's done. Not going to be an issue anymore. It's over between Tara and me, you know that."

"That's not all that I'm... referring to. I simply mean... marriage is a very intense, long-term commitment. It's about spending the rest of our lives together. That's decades, with any

luck, of just the two of us. Are you positive that's what you want? Are you sure we're even prepared for that?

"Not to mention how your parents might react. Aside from the obvious fact that they'll probably not be overly enthusiastic about your choice of partners, there are also very real social and legal factors involved in marriage. You'd no longer be their dependant, and you'd be an independent adult, which means they'd be perfectly justified in no longer paying your college tuition, for one thing.

"And the fact that I'm so much older than you *is* a factor, Willow, much as you may be 'sick of hearing about it.' There's a very good chance I will leave you a widow at a relatively young age. Or, worse, that you'll be forced to spend some of the best years of your life caring for a senile old man."

Her face had fallen during this speech, but she managed a comeback, albeit a weak one.

"Oh... oh really? Well, if this is all such a bad idea, why are we even together now, then, huh?"

"Because, god help me, I can't resist you. But, please, *please*, Willow, give this some serious thought."

"Well, couldn't we at least, you know, be engaged? While I think? I don't even need a ring or anything."

"Willow--"

She sat up, suddenly, kneeling beside him, looking somewhere between adorable and obscene half-naked the way she was. There was an edge of desperation in her voice as she said, "Come on. Look, see, I'm on my knees and everything. Rupert Giles, will you marry me?"

"I don't know. I don't- Willow... Willow, don't. I just--"

"Fine!" she shouted.

She was stumbling out of the bed, nearly falling on her face. She jerked her pants up, and zipped them, and began to shove stuff into a box. Then she stalked out the door.

He flopped over onto his back.

"Bloody hell."

She managed to keep up the hurt and angry routine for almost three days before she finally gave in and things went back to normal. He felt terrible about it, of course. A part of him that sounded very much like his father was berating him. After all, the woman he'd been shagging for weeks, whom he loved and whom he shared a home with, had asked that he marry her, and it seemed, if nothing else, incredibly rude to turn her down.

But at the same time, their relationship *was* new, and was still shaky, and rushing into a lifetime commitment just seemed terribly unwise.

He was convinced he'd made the right choice.

And then, two weeks later, Joyce Summers died.

She was tucked under his arm on the couch, and they were both staring into the empty fireplace. These past few days had been a nightmare, and being near him sometimes seemed like the only way to find an oasis of sanity in the chaos.

"Yes," he said, suddenly, apropos of nothing.

"Huh?" she said.

"Yes, I'll marry you. If you'll have me."

This was the kind of statement that should have knocked her clean off the couch. She supposed it was the cushioning of days of numbing shock that made her hardly react at all. She pulled back, enough to look at him, but he was still just staring.

"Really? Wait. No. This is one of those... grief-does-weird-things-to-people moments, isn't it?"

He finally looked at her, and reached up and touched her face, very softly.

"No, actually, I think it's more of a suddenly-realizing-life-is-short moment."

"Oh. Ok," she said, softly, watching him watch her, "So... like... like, when?"

Because weddings took time, and there was the whole thing with Buffy and Dawn and how it would seem disrespectful to their grief to announce it too soon, and then there was the whole birth-of-the-baby thing, and the whole Glory thing, not to mention figuring out how the heck she was gonna tell her parents-

“Tomorrow?” he said. “I’d say today, but I doubt there’s anywhere short of Las Vegas we could get a license at this hour.”

The clock ticked loudly in the silence, and neither of them moved.

Finally, she spoke.

“Ok.”

Chapter 27

He woke early the next morning.

He still hadn't quite adjusted to the new house. Its rhythms were different, the ambient sounds were off. Even the way the air flowed through this enclosed bedroom was noticeably different from his loft.

He lay awake, quietly. He was on his side, and Willow was back to back with him, leaning against him. He could feel her warmth through her soft nightshirt, and her weight was comfortable. Outside, birds were twittering at each other, and the traffic passed steadily on the nearby road.

He was getting married today.

His first reaction, lying there in a golden haze of near-sleep, was simple joy. He smiled, and reached back, touching Willow's arm. She'd be his wife.

His smile widened to a grin. Then Eric shifted inside of him. Felt like a stretch, maybe. Whatever it was, it reminded him quite firmly that he had to pee. Right now.

He eased out of bed. Willow murmured something sleepily, but knowing her, she could well be speaking to a character in a dream. He checked to see that she was still sleeping, pulled the sheet gently over her shoulder. Eric shifted again.

He padded quietly down the carpeted hall to the bathroom, idly rubbing a hand over his stomach.

"Feeling active this morning, are we?" he said to his stomach once he was the door was shut and he was sure he wouldn't be bothering Willow.

Apparently, Eric was feeling active, because he continued shuffling around all through Giles' morning routine.

Giles slipped back into their bedroom, and stopped just inside the doorway. Beautiful Willow, still asleep, her hair tousled on the pillow, yellow morning sunlight kissing her shoulder. For a moment, he couldn't breathe. Love squeezed his heart until it hurt. These past four weeks, with her, were wonderful.

He'd never realized how alone he was, until now, when he wasn't anymore. When he knew that every day, he would come home to someone, to her.

Her bright chatter in the afternoons, her sleepy murmurs in the mornings, her grumbles when she was tired or bored, all of it was precious to him. He hadn't loved anyone this much since...

In a very, very long time.

And, god, yes, it was too fast. But he wanted this forever, so much it brought tears to his eyes.

He walked to the bed, leaned down and kissed her cheek, and then climbed in next to her, lying beside her to watch her wake.

Her eyelids fluttered, and she made a soft sound, almost a word. He gently brushed her hair back behind her ear, and her face turned into his touch, just slightly. He let his fingers drift down to her lips. Then her eyes opened, and she said, "Hey."

He felt her word, felt her smile. Smiled back, and then kissed her softly, his finger making way for their lips.

“Morning,” she said, then she blinked, and suddenly her eyes were wide. “Oh. Oh, hey. Are we... are we still gonna...”

“As long as you still want to,” he said, and tried not to feel panicked.

“Of course,” she said. “Silly.”

Then she kissed his nose.

“Guess we should get dressed, huh?”

* * *

She could barely calm down enough to eat two slices of toast and an egg for breakfast. She was all jittery inside, now, in his car, like she'd drunk way too many mochas. She looked over just to see him beside her. And because he looked really sharp in his suit. He, at least, looked calm, watching the road impassively.

She reached over and put her hand on his knee, just to see him react.

He smiled, and she smiled, and then he turned off the road into the parking lot at the mall.

Rings. They were going to buy wedding rings. She was so excited, she could hardly breathe.

“So, so, what kinda rings do you think we should get?”

The question burst out before she could do anything about it as she walked around the car and met Giles on the other side.

“Like, gold? ‘Cause it’s all traditional. But, but platinum’s pretty, too. And are we gonna get something with diamonds? We really don’t have to, of course, ‘cause jewelry’s not even really my thing, and I don’t think we should buy anything that we have to, you know, have a financing plan for, cause-- I’m babbling again, aren’t I?”

“Just a bit,” Giles said, but his eyes were kind and loving, just the way she loved to see them. “I think you’re entitled.”

His arm was around her shoulder, and she loved that, too. She just loved him, up and down and backwards and forwards, and all over, and yeah, she was feeling **really** sappy today, but then, she was kind of entitled to that, too. Plus, it was really so nice to be thinking of something other than death right now. Although, even thinking **that** made her feel guilty.

Because what right did she have to be all happy when Dawn and Buffy would never get to see their mom again?

“I wish we could do a spell, and fix things,” she said, and then realized that she hadn’t really given Giles any actual segue to work with. “I mean, for--”

“I know,” Giles said, quickly, “And you know we can’t. It isn’t--”

“Right. I know. It’s not right. But, still. This stinks.”

He hugged her tighter for a moment, and rubbed her arm.

“I know.”

They were silent the rest of the way to the jewelry shop, and she felt bad for even bringing it up. When they stepped inside, now surrounded by all these glass cases full of shiny stuff, he kissed her, just beside her ear, and whispered, “Anything you like.”

And ok, she was pretty sure he hadn’t meant it that way, but those words sent a dark and sexual shudder through her.

He let go of her, but she didn’t want to move away. She felt kind of like a shy child, hovering back away from the other kids. Wanting to go, wanting their company, knowing that good things lay ahead, and yet, afraid of stepping away from familiar comfort.

Rings would make it real. Physical.

She was still beside him, close enough to feel his body against her, her shoulder bumped against his side, the swell of his stomach against her flank. She turned towards him and looked up at him, and he looked down at her, calm and cool.

She touched his face.

Freshly shaven, smooth, except his upper lip, where her fingertips caught on short stubble, and another rough patch on that spot just beneath his chin. Hands moved down, across broad shoulders, powerful biceps.

She knew this was a public place and a private moment, knew it must be making him uncomfortable, reserved as he was, but he bore it quietly, without complaint, without even shifting away from her.

He even carried this child like a male, sometimes rolling his body back a bit as though trying to take the weight on his shoulders. The extra bulk sat uneasily on his unsuited frame. He'd hardly breathed a word of complaint until one day his back hurt so much he could hardly get out of bed. Ever since then, backrubs had become a part of their routine, but she could still read silent pain in his stance more often than not.

He attacked the situation like a battle plan, making strategies and executing strikes. He had lists and tables and even diagrams and watched his diet and exercise with the same scrupulous intensity he devoted to Buffy's training.

He was a man, no question, and she asked herself one more time, there in that jewelry store, if it bothered her. She knew she wanted him, but she couldn't lie. Couldn't pretend it wasn't true that, more often than not, it was women who caught her eye. Even today in the mall, just walking in the door, she'd noticed someone.

As she stretched her hands around the firm muscle of his arms, she thought about soft curves and long hair and hot, slick heat clenched around her fingers.

But as she took a deep breath, she could smell his cologne, and all it ended up coming down to was him. Giles. Rupert. The one she loved.

She smiled.

"All I want is you," she said.

He smiled, too.

"Well, you already have me. Surely there's something else in here you'd also find attractive."

So they looked around, and ended up settling on a pair of simple gold bands.

But there was something else that did catch her eye, and before they left the mall, she said, "You know, we're getting married. I think we should buy gifts. For each other. Don't you?"

And as soon as he'd agreed and they'd gone their separate ways, she'd slipped back to the shop and made another purchase. Then, she'd settled down on the bench they'd chosen to meet back at and pulled out the other small box, flipped it open and stared down at the glint of light on gold rings until he showed back up, and they were ready to go.

Get married.

"You know," she said, "the last time I was here, I was being held hostage."

He peered up at the imposing City Hall.

"Well. Hopefully, this experience will be... a bit more pleasant."

She snuggled against him.

"You know it will, silly," she said. He pulled her closer. They were just standing next to his car. Technically, they should be walking across the street. Into the building. Down to the county clerk's office.

Neither of them were actually moving however.

His voice of reason cheerfully informed him that he was completely off his rocker insane.

"I mean," she said, "It would kinda have to be, right? Pretty much anything better than being threatened by Faith at knifepoint."

He loved her. He truly, truly did. But god, his relationships... they really never worked out as he planned them. This whole idea suddenly seemed dangerously optimistic. Naive, even.

"Although, um, don't tell anyone, but... that whole Faith thing? Kinda sexy, actually."

He chuckled, startled, and hugged her tighter. Kissed her hair. Took a deep breath, both to fortify his courage and simply to breathe in her scent, and then said, "All right, then. Shall we do this?"

He felt her grip a handful of his shirt and was actually relieved at the sign that she was as nervous as he.

"Yup. Yup, let's do this."

When they reached the steps, she said, "Giles? Are you scared, too?"

They stopped again.

"We... we don't have to do this, Willow. If you're--"

She gave him a Look.

"Wuss," she said.

But they stayed there, at the foot of the steps, facing each other, holding hands between them. The wind teased her bangs loose and a lock fell over her eye. He reached up to push it back in place. She tilted her face into his touch.

"I love you," she said, "And... I want this. Even if... it's big and it's scary."

And all there was to say to that was, "So do I."

Waking every morning as he had this morning, with her beside him.

So they climbed the stairs.

And they bloody well did it.

* * *

Giles and Willow had been late. They'd said they'd be here by three. Probably they'd been off somewhere having sex.

Disgust twisted his gut, and he shoved aside that particular mental image. Wonderfully nice of them. Abandoning Buffy and Dawn in their time of need for their own icky pleasures.

Xander scrubbed the dish he was holding with a bit more vitriol than strictly necessary.

Out in the living room, Dawn and Anya were arguing over the validity of a Scrabble word, and Giles' deeper tones were cutting in now and then, and mostly, it seemed from the escalating volume, being ignored. Or making things worse.

Scrabble was a dumb game anyway, in Xander's opinion. Totally skewed towards losers who spend their way too long lives reading way too many big books.

And stupid vampires who knew words like "effulgent."

And what the hell was up with Willow and Buffy and their whole thing with dating completely inappropriate guys? Why hadn't she *learned* by now not to date the evil undead? And Willow was supposed to be all gay now. So why was Giles so special, anyway?

In the other room, the game apparently broke up. Dawn stalked though the kitchen near tears.

Xander was about to go after her when Spike followed, pushing him aside and saying, "I got it, stay here."

Anya's voice came through clearly over the running water for a moment. "It is *so* a proper noun!"

He finished up the last dish and walked into the living room, to find that everything had gone disturbingly quiet. That is, except for Buffy. Who was crying. Clutching Giles like a lifeline and sobbing.

Anya was staring, taken completely aback, and Willow was sitting on the other side of Buffy on the couch with her hand on her back, leaning in and adding her own murmurs to Giles' litany of comfort.

Xander froze and swallowed hard. What the hell happened?

Giles looked up for a moment, and his eyes silently flicked from Xander to Anya to the kitchen.

Hurting and a little scared, seeing Buffy like this, he took the silent cue and said, "Hey, Ahn, wanna help put the dishes away, maybe?"

"What happened?" he asked, once they were back in the kitchen.

"I don't know. One moment we were arguing about whether Kleenex was a proper noun, which it is, of course, because it's a brand name, and the next thing I know, Dawn was running away and then Buffy was crying..."

She stopped and looked at the plate in her hands.

"This is all very confusing and distressing."

"Yeah," Xander said, "You can say that again."

After a while, Giles and Willow came into the kitchen.

"Buffy's resting until dinner's ready," Giles said.

Willow had her hand on his shoulder, where his shirt was wet. God, did they have to be

all over each other like that all the time? Xander looked away pointedly.

“You can go if you’d like,” Giles added.

“Yes, let’s,” Anya said, quickly.

He had to agree with her.

“Yeah. I’m gone. Better than watching the two of you hang all over each other.”

Chapter 28

The next five weeks, Willow was convinced, were some of the worst of her life. Which, given some of the months she'd had, she felt was really saying something.

Buffy didn't seem to be getting any happier. Xander was snippy and obnoxious. And Giles was growing increasingly crabby and short-tempered.

Not that she blamed him. Ok, not that she felt like she *should* blame him. He was in pain and hormonal and Ben hadn't shown up for his last appointment and... when Buffy hurt, he hurt. Especially when it was like this and there was nothing he could do.

But still, if she were honest with herself, she was getting tired of it. All of it.

Spike and Anya were just about the only people she could stand to be around at the moment, and how weird was that?

She mused on that as she sat at the table in the Magic Box with her homework and watched Giles and Xander bicker over something. She didn't know what they were talking about. She didn't want to know. She wished she were somewhere else.

She sighed, and suddenly Anya plopped down in a chair beside her.

"Obnoxious, isn't it?" Anya said.

"Mmm-hmm," Willow said, finding no energy to form real words.

"I mean, Giles is always on Xander's case these days. Whatever did Xander do to him? It's just wrong!"

Willow blinked at the injustice of this, and turned a tired glare on Anya. Who was oblivious.

"You know, this wouldn't even be a problem if you'd just stuck with women."

Willow shook her head in complete defeat and buried her face in her hands. So much for Anya. Guess she was left with Spike.

Giles and Xander's shouts rang through the enclosed space, and she was really about ready to just slap her hands over her ears and start singing. But before she could, the shouts ended abruptly with a sharp crack.

And then a clatter.

Her eyes snapped open, and Giles was on the floor, and Xander's fist was still clenched.

Oh, goddess, was her first thought, and then she was out of her chair, heading for Giles.

But he was on his feet before she got halfway there, and then Willow saw Xander's eyes go wide, a split-second before Giles hammered him back against a wall.

"You sodding idiot!"

She tried to call his name, but he wasn't hearing anything. Not hearing Xander's panicked, cut-off pleas, or Anya's outrage.

"You have a problem with me, that's fine," he was saying, hands buried in Xander's shirt, pinning him. "But you hit me, and it's not just me you're hitting." Pulled away, just enough to slam Xander back again, hard enough to make the charms rattle. "Hurt my child and you will be very, very sorry. Do you understand?"

And Xander was already nodding, frantically.
Giles just sighed, and then he was stepping away, looking away.
“I need some air,” he said, vaguely directing the comment back at her. Stay away, it meant, and it hurt.
He stalked out the door without another word.

* * *

He woke to find himself on his feet. Odd position to wake in. His arms hurt.
Somewhere nearby, a voice, female, said, “Wakey, wakey. Argh! These humans. They’re just so fragile! It’s so inconvenient.”
Denial surged through him like nausea, and fell from his lips in a word.
“No.”
He opened his eyes, and it was true, anyway. Glory.
“Yes,” she said, “Yes, yes, yes. And it’s about time, too. You have something that’s mine, and you’ve had it way longer than you deserved to.”
He jolted against the chains holding his arms over his head, but they were solid. His heart hammered.
“No, no, it’s not--”
Glory rolled her eyes and shook her head. Rolled a few steps closer, all sneering eyes and shiny red silk. Touched him. He shuddered at her slim finger on his jaw. Too familiar. Too horrifying. The denial still pulsing in him, begging for this to be a nightmare, begging her to just leave him alone.
“Oh, silly, silly human. You really think you can convince me this isn’t my shiny key? I mean, it’s not even like you hid it all that well. I know it is. Innocent. Human. Can’t get much more innocent than never born, can you?”
Her finger trailed down his throat. Turned and pressed, and he felt her nail slice through skin, felt warm blood and brighter, hotter pain.
“He’s not--”
“Don’t much care, hon. Now, be a sweetie and hold still for me, will ya? He’s not much use to me all wrapped up in your innards.”
His shirt ripped, easy as tissue paper. Her finger again, sliding down, drawing a line of chilled horror from his sternum to his navel. And it isn’t until her nail slips into his skin like a scalpel that his reeling mind stumbled over the only answer.
“He’ll die,” he gasped.
She stopped, and relief made him weak and cold.
“What?”
“He can’t--” he’s gasping for air, for reason, for calm, “can’t live outside of me. Not yet. Too... too young.”
It’s a lie, he thinks, but he needs it to be true, to convince her, so much that there isn’t a trace of deceit in his voice.
“Oh,” she said, “Oh... OH!” With rising frustration. And then, with an air of forcibly regained poise, “Fine. Fine. We can work with that. We’ll just have to... keep you around a bit longer.”
But he doesn’t have time to be relieved. Because then her hands flash up to his temples, and for a moment, there’s a horrid sensation of something squirming in his brain, and then...
Darkness.

* * *

It wasn’t until Willow got home and Giles wasn’t there that she began to panic.

Chapter 29

Time stopped when she saw him.

Literally.

Buffy dangled in the middle of a kick, the scabby minion at whom she aimed frozen with an expression of horror and resignation. Xander grimaced as he gripped his axe, grappling with another minion, both of them still as statues. Spike's mouth was wide in a roar, fangs bared.

Glory's eyes were stopped, mid-roll.

And he hung in the middle of it, arms over his head, suspended by a chain from the ceiling. He looked around, vaguely. His eyes empty and confused. Far too untouched by the chaos. Dried blood on his jaw, and down his stomach, but otherwise unhurt.

She dropped to her knees.

"Oh, god, baby. Oh, god. No."

She lost sight of him, in a blur of tears, but heard him say, softly, almost mournfully, "Too dark. Not time yet."

Senseless. She gasped a sob and staggered to her feet. Stumbled to him, and was horrified when he flinched at her touch.

"Can't!" he said, sharply, with the tone of voice he used to train Buffy. "Not yours... not... mine--I... there's... it's strange," he said, his voice growing softer as he grew more confused.

She reached up along his arms, touched the chains and they turned to vines and fell away under her hands. He fell too, and almost sent them both to the floor, trying to put too much of his weight in her hands. She stumbled, trying to hold him, trying to coax him towards the door.

He resisted. He looked back to Glory.

"I need to be here," he said, words that sounded almost lucid, but no less insane.

"No, no, baby. Come on, please. Please!"

But he shoved her away, hard enough that she hit the floor. His look of disdain melted her.

"Here," he said.

Her control shattered, and the room burst back to life around them. Shouts and crashes and clanging weapons. Buffy's kick landed, and the minion staggered back, tripped over Willow and went down.

Glory took two steps towards Giles, and Willow screamed out, throwing all her life into one word, "Thicken!" And Glory was stopped. For a moment.

It was enough. Spike got hold of Giles' arm, and Buffy kicked another minion out of the way, and they fled.

This was what failure felt like, Buffy decided, hours later, as she sat in an abandoned gas station in the middle of nowhere, beset by an army and tracked by a Hellgod, with an insane Watcher, and a half-dead Xander.

She watched Ben take Xander's pulse, feeling the whole thing just get a little unreal.

Willow sat down beside her. Her eyes nervously tracked Giles as he prowled along the perimeter, peering out between the boards over the window.

"He wouldn't have liked it. The magic I did," she said. "He doesn't want me..."

"You had to, Will," Buffy said, gently. Aching.

"Yeah. I still... have to. But all I could find to fix him was this thing... have to be right next to her. And..."

Buffy reached for her hand and gripped it as a tear slid down Willow's cheek. Giving comfort was, at the very least, something to do. Even if there was so little comfort to give. So little hope.

"I'm so sorry, Willow. So--" Her voice broke. "God."

Willow looked down at their hands in her lap and sniffed.

Then she raised her free hand and gently tugged on a chain around her neck, pulled it up out of her blouse. A ring of gold bounced down to hang over her chest. Glimmered in the dull light. Willow's fingers dropped down to caress it.

"He... we... god, Buffy I have to get him back."

Buffy's breath was caught in her throat.

"Oh. Oh, god. Willow, you--"

Willow pushed on, through tears. "We didn't want to tell anyone yet. Not while things were so--but we."

Then she was reaching in her pocket, fumbling something out. Her driver's license.

"See? It... every time I see it, I-- it makes me smile."

Buffy took the card with numb fingers and stared at the name. Willow Giles. They were... And then they were both startled to their feet as Giles attacked one of the boarded windows, shouting his latest mantra about needing to be somewhere.

Willow ran to him, but he only knocked her away. Spike dragged him back and tussled with him, until Giles gave up and settled down, glaring at Spike.

And then, *Ben* freaked out, for no apparent reason.

And then Glory was there, out of nowhere.

Giles was shouting, pointing at Dawn.

Glory was laughing.

Grabbing her sister.

Gone.

He blinked, and found himself in the middle of a battlefield.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a flash of Buffy running towards a tower that stood like a skeleton against the sky.

Willow's hand gripped his arm and she leaned over him. Her ring dangled down and traced over his sleeve, and it was all so real, so sane, so quiet, even in the chaos.

"Willow, you--"

"Couldn't let you stay gone."

He gripped her hand and looked into her eyes, so glad to be able to truly see them again.

"What the hell is going on?"

After she told him, he went to the tower, and found Ben lying in his own blood, coughing weakly.

"Hey, Rupert," he said, smiling slightly.

He knelt beside him, this good man, who'd helped him when he'd been nearly hopeless. He felt cold inside. Glory is Ben. Ben is Glory.

"Can you move?"

“Need a-- a minute,” Ben said. “She could have killed me.”
The cold spread a little further through his chest, hurting.
“No, she couldn’t,” he said, softly.

Chapter 30

So, Buffy was dead.

Spike had lifted her from the rubble and carried her, cradled like a child in his arms, back to her home, and they had laid her on the couch where her mother had died. Then, they'd found somewhere quiet and secluded and dug a grave for her.

Then he and Willow had simply stayed with Dawn, their house, recently bought, standing empty.

And life had somehow gone on. The sun rose and set. They cooked and cleaned and paid bills and made love, and just... didn't fade away. It seemed, often, to Giles, though, that they should have. That maybe, in some ways, they had. That he had.

The others went out every night, fighting the vampires, trying to clean up the demons that had spawned from the brief opening of the portal.

He couldn't fight, of course. Not now. Walking or standing for long periods of time was about as energetic as he could currently hope to get.

He was at the dining room table now, with a collection of texts before him. Dragon-slaying, he was finding, was rivaled only by fishing for tall-tales. Unfortunately, tall-tales did very little to aid him in figuring out how one actually goes about slaying a dragon in a practical manner, with an eye towards safety.

He was tired, and he was aching with all of his being for a drink. Just one drink. God, this was killing him.

He groaned and rolled his shoulders back, reached behind himself to press his thumbs into the small of his back. Pain was his most constant companion lately. The fiery tangle that centered over his spine just above his hips, and snaked up either side of his back, settled into a low, constant tension in his neck, an ache that never faded from his temples.

The door opened.

A few moments later, Willow walked in. She was dangling a stake and a cross from one hand, and she utterly **reeked** of magic. But what could he say? It was necessary.

"One dead dragon," she said, and her voice carried the same exhaustion he felt.

"Dead?" he said.

He should have felt exultant, or at least relieved, but instead what he felt was something like anger. Like jealousy.

The dragon had been his. Should have been slain by the knowledge he'd give them. It was all he had left.

All he said was, "The others?"

"All ok. I'll... I'll tell you about it later, ok?"

She pulled out one of the other chairs and turned it towards him, and then dropped into it, her limbs splayed with the disregard of one too tired to have the energy to arrange them.

They were silent. They sat, facing each other, not really looking at each other, in the pale yellow light. Then, she slipped out of her chair, down to her knees on the floor, and inched forward until she was between his legs. He breathed in sharply, deeply not in the mood, but

then, instead of touching him, she merely leaned against him, her head turned to the side, resting on his stomach.

And then, Eric shifted inside him, and she slipped her arms around him, and he saw a small smile on her lips, and he understood.

Understood several things, actually. He understood that she was listening to Eric, and he understood the peace she was drawing from it.

He slid his hand into her hair, gently held her close, and loved the warmth of her skull under his hand, the softness of her cheek against his stomach. Loved the child inside him, and loved her arms around him.

And he understood then that everything would not be all right.

Because everything already was.

Epilogue

"Ow!" she said, then she woke up. Well, possibly she'd been awake when she said ow. It really wasn't that important, cause the main point was she was now awake, and her ribs hurt where Giles had elbowed her, and it was, like, three in the morning.

And Giles was sitting on the edge of the bed with his arms around his stomach and--
Oh, crap.

"Giles--"

She sat up and knee-walked across the bed, steadying herself on his shoulder and then kind of falling against his side. Beside him, now, and even in the half-light from the street outside, she could see lines of pain drawn around his eyes.

"I'd say it's time," he grated, between clenched teeth.

Oh, wow. Oh wow. And oh crap. Again. Just because.

"Yeah," she said, trying to sound calm, but failing so completely the effort wasn't worth it. "Uh, yeah. Yeah. You, uh, you remember the ritual?"

He nodded, once, tightly. His eyes were squeezed shut. Her heart hammered, seeing him like that.

But then he drew in one slow, careful breath, and relaxed, at first just slightly, but then more and more.

He let out the breath in a sigh.

"Giles," she chided gently, rubbing his shoulder, "You are not remembering your breathing."

"God, that hurt," was his response.

She slipped off the bed and reached under it, finding the cardboard box of supplies they'd stashed there and slowly beginning to feel more in control.

"Yes, I know," she said, unable to resist letting a hint of slow teasing into her tone, "And that's why there's the breathing, to help it not hurt so much."

"Thank you, Doctor Rosenberg," he muttered. She was sorting the supplies out onto the floor around her as he stood up. "Turning on the light," he added.

She braced herself, and then the room flooded with lamplight. She squinted as her eyes worked on adjusting, and suddenly realized how tired she was. She hadn't gotten in from the nightly Slaying until after midnight.

She listened to Giles' feet pad across the carpet, over to where they'd already set up most of the stuff they needed.

It was as she was sorting out the candles and inks that her hands began to shake.

Ok, part of that would be the terror. She hadn't been able to quite quiet that sensation, especially not since Xander had said, "Well what if something goes wrong?" And she'd said, "It won't," and he'd said, "But what if it does?"

Because this birthing ritual really should work just fine. Really, it should, but if it didn't? Not a whole lot of safety net. Actually, no safety net at all. At least, probably not one that would save Giles and the baby, because that would involve explaining to the emergency room that

hello, this pregnant man was having complications with a mystical birth, and by the time they got all that sorted out--

Well.

That really didn't bear thinking about, and besides. She could do this. She was good at this stuff. Magic.

And so, she thought, a lot of the shaking was probably not so much fear as it was anticipation. This was it. Her chance to do this big spell and bring a life into the world. Bring their son into the world.

And if she could do this, then she could be absolutely sure that... that, well... the fact was there was another life out there somewhere that needed her, and if she could bring forth this one, maybe that other one wouldn't seem so daunting.

She sat back on her heels, with the supplies she needed gathered in her hands, and then she rocked up to her feet.

Giles was already kneeling in the center of the power circle, nude, with the candles lit and widely spaced around him. The sight of him caught her off-guard, because her mind had been so full of thoughts of rituals and chants that she hadn't really prepared herself to be faced with her husband, naked. He had one hand resting on the curve of his stomach, his eyes turned down towards the floor. Candle and lamplight caught on the curls on his chest and his thighs, and the shadow between his legs didn't quite obscure his cock. Strong biceps, slightly tensed... tension all through him, really. Ever since he'd told her this morning that he was feeling contractions, he'd been more afraid than she.

But he was still beautiful, even like this, even so worried, even in pain.

She sank to her knees just outside of the circle in front of him, several feet of space between them, too much for her to reach across to touch.

"It'll be ok," she said, and she really believed it. "Giles, he'll be fine."

His eyes lifted up and met hers, and they stayed there for a while, before he cringed, and groaned.

"Breathing, sweetheart," she said. "And lie back, ok?"

He did so, though with obvious effort, and he was at least attempting to breath to the right rhythm. Still, sweat was breaking out on his brow, and she had to wonder if it was always this bad, or if it was because he was a guy, and things were already not working the way they were supposed to.

She decided that was another subject it was best not to dwell on and then said the proper words and entered the circle, then crawled over and knelt beside him.

He reached for her instantly, then settled his hand on her thigh.

"Hey," she said, softly, as she dipped her fingers in the ink and began to carefully trace patterns on his chest, "I promise, next time, if there is a next time, I'll be doing the hard part."

His only answer was to grip her thigh a little tighter.

* * *

It got to a point, somewhere that night, when almost all he could think about was the pain. It was dark outside, and Willow had turned off the lights, so there was nothing but the glow of candles, and he didn't have the heart or the energy to tell her he would have preferred the light. Because, in this dark it seemed hopeless. All he could think was it hurt too much, something had to be wrong, perhaps the spell wasn't working at all.

The contractions hurt too much to speak through, all he could do was silently rant. Curse Ethan's name, for causing all this in the first place, and his own for being fool enough to not stop him, and even Willow's, for being so calm and so matter-of-fact.

Other times, the anger left him entirely, and it wasn't just sweat running down into his hair. Tears, of pain, partly, but mostly from the thought he couldn't seem to quell, the thought he said out loud, now, as another crescendo rose in him, "God, something's wrong, Willow, something has to be wrong."

"Nothing's wrong," she said, so quickly it almost had to be a lie, or just something said to placate him.

His body seemed to clamp down tight as a vice and it forced a small cry out of him and then, "This is going to kill him," he said. The words that had been haunting him since the first

time he'd felt those muscles clenching.

"It's not," she said.

"How do you know it's even working?" he snapped.

"It's working," she said.

"Stop bloody saying--"

And then the candles flared. For a split second, it crossed his mind that it could be theatrics for his benefit, but a glance at Willow showed her just as surprised as him. And then she began to chant, laying her hands palm up, with the blanket across them, over his stomach.

He dropped his head back and magic, her magic, swept through him, warm as a hot water bottle, soothing away the pain as though it had never been there.

The next time his body drew tight, he felt nothing but that warmth brightening and intensifying.

"Oh," he said, softly.

Willow smiled through her chant, a small I-told-you-so smirk.

He pressed his palms to the carpet and watched the candlelight eddy and flow on the ceiling.

The third time, the light, the warmth, flared up inside him as sharp as explosion heat. It crashed through his whole body, starting in his abdomen, and just slamming down his legs, up his chest, through his arms, through his skull, like glorious fire. It made his back arch and he couldn't see through the bright, couldn't hear through the roar. He gulped in a breath and then-- it was gone.

He exhaled long and shuddering. And felt different.

"Oh," Willow said. The backs of her hands were heavy on his stomach, then they lifted away. "Oh, god, Giles."

He had to shut his eyes. Couldn't believe that those words were good, because then it would kill him if they weren't. Perhaps this was just a lull in the spell.

"Giles," she said, again, and then...

"He's beautiful."

Then he could breathe again, and it seemed it was the same moment he let that first breath back out that he heard the first choking, almost angry cry. His arms were weak, but he pushed himself up, half-sitting, and looked.

Willow held something wrapped in a blanket in her arms. She was looking down at it and saying something. Then she looked up at him and she smiled, and then she said, "Lie back."

He did, against the pillows, just slightly propped up, and then she came up closer, and laid the blanket-wrapped, whimpering bundle on his chest. He caught it in his own arms and cradled it close, and it moved. Kicked. And that feeling was... familiar.

"Eric," he said, and then tugged back a corner of the blanket, to find a small, scrunched red face. Mouth open in mid-squall, eyes squeezed shut, he was the most beautiful thing Giles had ever laid eyes upon.

He was only distantly aware of Willow pressing her hands again to his abdomen, and only half-heard her say "Let the spell be ended," and he barely felt the final change.

He was too busy looking at that little chin, those little eyes, that little nose. Too busy touching tiny delicate, grasping fingers.

He did notice when Willow stretched out beside him, and he turned his head to kiss her before she got settled in against his side. She sighed and snuggled and reached up to gently stroke Eric's arm, which he'd thrust up out of the blanket.

It was captivating, seeing Eric's fingers close around Willow's knuckle.

But then, a bit of worry crept back in, and he said, "We should get him to the hospital."

Willow kissed his throat.

"I know. In a minute."

And, he was too content just holding him--Eric, his son--to do anything but agree. It could wait a few minutes.

~*~

The End