Inevitable

by Laragh

Summary

We end up hurting the worst, the only ones we really love
Chapter 1

**Inevitable**

Inescapable; unavoidable; certain

*fate*

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*July*

**Someone Tell Me When My Heart Will Stop Breaking**

“Do you remember when we were just kids?”

Willow’s words burned in Tara’s mind as she stared at the page scribbled in her handwriting.

The swooped letters, the little hearts. Her words had been so full of hope.

Now all she could remember was the beginning of the end and one word in particular shrieked in disgust from the one person she thought could never let her down.

She felt her heart breaking in two.

How had everything gone so wrong, so fast?

On a warm Friday evening, Tara Maclay was hunched over the desk in her bedroom, scribbling music into a notebook.

She always had at least one notebook on the go, full of ink with the lyrics that would flow through her mind. When she had been old enough to start learning instruments, the music followed and she could often be seen jotting down a few notes on the back of receipts or napkins or even her own skin as they entered her head, lest she forget the melodic moment that thrummed through her.

Today the words flowing lightly from her fingers were influenced by something, or rather someone, who had embedded themselves in her mind that day and truthfully, every day.
The silly jokes you've said
Your different colored pens
The secrets you can't keep
The babble in your sleep
Some may call you strange
But me I'd never change
A thing
About you
Oh, about you

She stopped, frustrated.

It wasn’t enough.

It never felt enough.

She could never get down on paper the actual complexity of what she felt.

The deep, resounding feelings that filled her every waking moment.

She put a big X across the page.

She turned to a new page and tried again, this time closing her eyes. The pen hit the paper and the words came; her hand intrinsically knowing exactly where and how to press in the ink to keep the writing neat.

I lived my life in shadow
Never the sun on my face
It didn't seem so sad, though
I figured that was my place
Now I'm bathed in light
Something just isn't right

I'm under your—

Her phone buzzed in her front pocket and she slid her hand in, turning the device over in her palm. Her heart fluttered when she saw who it was from.
A smile bloomed on Tara’s face and she typed out a quick reply,

She pocketed her phone again and closed her notebook.

She moved spritely from her chair, swung a sitting backpack waiting on her bed over her shoulders and left her bedroom behind. As her feet imprinted on the well-worn carpet on the stairs, she called out loud enough for it to reach wherever her mother was in the house at that moment.

“I’m leaving!”

Kimberly Maclay appeared from the doorway of the kitchen, hidden to the back of the staircase. She was a young woman, one you’d easily mistake for having young children and not teenagers, screeching for her attention.

Her light brown hair stopped at her shoulder and that was one of the only differences between herself and her daughter; their frame and features matched identically, right down to the same angular point on their striking cheekbones.

“Staying over tonight?” Kimberly asked as she pushed a dishcloth around the interior of a saucepan.

Tara nodded and Kimberly smiled amiably.

“Okay. Make sure you’re ready on time tomorrow.”

“I will be,” Tara promised, already making a beeline for the front door.

As she went to open it, it opened first from the other side and she just narrowly avoided getting jabbed in the nose.

Donny Maclay pushed himself through the door and sneered when he saw Tara.

He wasn’t very like his mother or sister at all.

He was broad and scruffy and very much took after his father in looks. Not that Tara would know, as she had no memory of him, nor were there any photos to remind her. But she rarely saw a
resemblance between them at all and so had to assume.

“Aren’t you gone yet?”

“Tomorrow,” Tara replied quietly.

“Can’t come quick enough,” Donny muttered under his breath as he walked right past her.

“Donny,” Kimberly chastised with a puffed breath of frustration.

She really wished her kids could get along.

Tara did too. She didn’t know quite why Donny hated her so much; he just did and always had. Her memory was littered with proof of that, from juice boxes being squeezed in her face to bubblegum stuck in her saxophone, to telling the whole school when she got her first period.

It had been a relief when she had gone to a different high school; though even now Donny had graduated from his, he was still living at home and tormenting her.

He stayed put instead of going to college; working some hours at an auto-shop and spending the rest out in some dive bar or sleeping off the resulting hangover. Kimberly did all his cooking and cleaning, meaning all he had to do was roll around the place, grunt and get a dig in at Tara whenever he could.

At least it was easy to strategically avoid him.

And she’d have a total break from him soon. Unfortunately, that meant a break from other things, or people, in her life too. As much as she loved going to camp every year, she missed the only person who’d known her almost as long as her own family had.

“Bye, mom,” Tara called again, not waiting for a response this time before slipping out of the door.

She walked down the path past her front yard, checked both ways before crossing the street and jogged up to the front door of the house that sat directly opposite hers. Her knuckles had barely skimmed the wood when it swung open.

On the other side, Willow Rosenberg stood with a cheerful smile and an even more cheerful sweater.
“I saw you crossing the street.”

“Hi,” Tara returned with an odd mix of bashful familiarity.

Willow stood aside to let her in.

“Come upstairs. I want to show you this funny video I saw online.”

Tara stepped over the threshold she’d stepped over a thousand times before. Living fifty feet from your best friend since you were four years old meant a lot of time spent in each other’s houses.

She followed Willow upstairs, feeling a pang of guilt when her eye-line was drawn to the bounce of her friend’s posterior. It wasn’t that she felt guilty about the associated feelings, but she didn’t want to be like her brother and his friends who so openly leered at girls they were attracted to.

She also didn’t want to get caught. That wasn’t the way she wanted to tell Willow about… everything.

Willow led Tara upstairs and laid on her bed, stomach down with her feet at the headboard and her laptop in front. She maximized a video and pressed replay when Tara laid down beside her.

Tara only half-watched the video, distracted by the sweet smell of Willow’s soap and the way her smile lit up her face when she laughed.

“Did you see? The panda kept sneezing.”

Tara quickly looked back at the screen.

“I liked when it tumbled,” she supplied after a moment.

“Yeah,” Willow agreed with an easy smile, but also with concern in her eyes.

This was the trouble with keeping secrets from your best friend; they knew you too well.

“Are you okay?” Willow continued, softly sympathetic, “Donny being an ass again?”

Tara was relieved to have an excuse given to her.
“Being himself, you mean.”

Willow wrapped an arm around Tara’s shoulders.

“He’s a loser,” she said, with an emphatic squeeze for emphasis, “So are we going to order pizza and fight over whose turn it is to pick a movie?”

Tara smiled. They often followed the same routine when they had sleepovers, ever since their first meeting barely out of diapers — when Kimberly had been asked to babysit when a surprise event came up for Ira and Sheila Rosenberg to attend.

The Maclays had only been living there a week at the time and barely moved in, but Kimberly felt sorry for the small, redheaded child upset at all the disruption and saw an opportunity for Tara to make a friend.

“You can pick,” Tara offered, rolling herself off the bed when she felt her cheeks getting a bit too overheated, “I just need to use the bathroom.”

“Okay, I’ll call in the pizza,” Willow replied as she too got up to choose a movie, “It shouldn’t take too long.”

Tara went into the bathroom attached to Willow’s bedroom. Hers and Willow’s houses had the same basic structure, but Willow’s had been built on and extended to the point that she had an entire level to herself.

Tara envied the space and Willow hated the loneliness.

Tara knew that and had spent a lot of time in the Rosenberg residence, though she’d pulled back as her inner feelings became more apparent to her. Willow had other friends, school friends to fill in the gaps. Tara went to a special school for performing arts so their circles didn’t cross much. They always just had each other around when needed.

This proved to be a mixed blessing of late. Tara could normally control her feelings around her friend, but she’d been aware of them so long now that it was starting to strain. All she could think about when they were together was this big invisible bomb hanging between them. The biggest problem she had was that she had no idea how Willow felt. Sometimes she thought there were signs, other times she convinced herself it was wishful thinking.

That was the other thing about keeping secrets from your best friend — there were too many
opportunities for it all to come out.

She tied her hair up and tried to shift her emotional state to something a little more subtle. She flicked her face with water and patted it dry with the soft towel hanging beside the sink. It was her last night with Willow for a while; she wanted it to be a fond memory.

She returned to Willow’s room, where her friend was walking back into the room from the other side with the box of pizza.

“Good timing. I put on Cruel Intentions. Is that okay?”

“How long was I in there?” Tara asked, sitting quickly on the floor at the foot of Willow’s bed, “But, um, yes. That’s fine.”

Willow pressed play the movie and sat with Tara with the pizza between them.

She loved the familiarity of their routine; pizza, movie and staying up half the night talking.

It was funny; she often had the same routine with Buffy but with Tara it was…different.

They ate in silence until there was one lonely slice left and two bellies too full to eat it. Tara was very aware of their hands resting close together and took hers away, idly nibbling on the skin around her thumb.

“She looks kinda like your friend Buffy,” she commented as they watched the movie, the first thing to come into her mind, “But…kind of mean.”

Willow pulled some pepperoni from the slice and ate it on its own.

“She’ll have to be my pizza-and-a-movie buddy while you’re off being a prodigy.”

“It’s just band camp,” Tara replied bashfully.

“Back to back sessions because you’re just too good at too many instruments to pick one,” Willow said back, nudging Tara’s shoulder, “You have no idea how awesome you are, y’know.”

Tara gulped and hoped a flush wasn’t rising on her cheeks.
“We’re missing the movie.”

They continued watching, but Willow wasn’t long in chuckling and interrupting again as one of the more notable scenes played out on screen.

“Remember when we were just kids?” she asked, an oddly-placed lilt of nerves in her voice, “We used to practice kissing for boys?”

She rolled her eyes in Tara’s direction.

“Then no boys asked us out, of course…”

Tara’s heart began to pound. She worked very hard not to remember that. Or at least, only remember when she was alone with her thoughts.

“W-Were you disappointed when Xander started dating that girl? The cheerleader you don’t like?”

Listening to Willow go on about her friend and crush had never been easy for Tara, especially since Willow had known them both almost the same amount of time and he was acquiring the space she wanted to be in more than anything.

Still, she diligently listened and offered genuine advice on how to talk to him. Willow’s happiness always meant more to her than her own.

Willow scoffed.

“Whatever. Don’t know what I ever saw in him anyway. If that’s his taste…yuck! So much for being treasurer.”

Tara glanced at Willow, her eyes shining with innocent hope.

“Really?”

“Yeah, so over it. I’m not spending my senior year moping over that jerk,” Willow replied bitterly, looking down, “Better than crushing on Buffy I guess. Anyone but me.”

Tara frowned but Willow pulled herself together and looked up and over to her, smiling softly.
“What about you?”

“M-Me?”

Tara clammed up and Willow’s voice grew teasing but laced with something else that sounded vaguely threatening.

“Nate looks at you, you know. I see it when you guys play.”

Nate Williamson was a friend of Tara’s, better described as a bandmate. They wrote music together and sometimes played sets at The Bronze or local events and parties. They also volunteered once a month at the old folks’ home where Tara’s mother worked as a nurse.

He was a nice guy and excellent guitarist; Tara enjoyed making music with him but he did not make her heart a-flutter. Only one person had ever done that.

“I don’t like Nate like that,” Tara replied, looking down at her hands as they tumbled over each other in her lap. She avoided this topic like the plague and in the past Willow had been distracted enough by Xander to not notice Tara’s silence, “I…I don’t like any boys.”

“You’ve never liked a single person?” Willow asked with amused disbelief.

Tara hated this. It physically hurt to have to lie and bottle everything up and then be probed.

“That’s not what I said,” she replied in a strained whisper.

Willow turned, the movie forgotten, with curious eyes.

“Well, who then? Spill!”

Tara paled and continued gazing into her lap in silence.

“Well?” Willow prompted again, giggling at seeing Tara squirm, thinking it for a very different reason, “I knew someone would catch your eye eventually. Who is it?”

Tara could feel green eyes boring into her and had to tuck her hands between her knees to stop them
from shaking. She slowly raised her head to look at her friend-since-forever and heard the word tumbling out of her mouth before she even consciously made the decision to say it.

“Y-you.”

Willow rolled her eyes.

“Oh, haha. April 1st passed a while ago.”

The silence boomed between them, confusion rippling on Willow’s face.

“Tara, what are you talking about?” Willow asked, her voice rising an octave, “Are you… are you gay or something?”

Tara felt the knife stab in her heart and the blood rush between her ears as her secret exploded in front of her eyes.

“I-I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said anything.”

Willow scrambled to stand and put space between them.

“I’m not like that!”

“I’m sorry,” Tara repeated lamely, feeling the shake move from her hands to her whole body as she stood too.

Willow looked like steam might blow out of her ears.

“You can’t just land that on me! You’ve been tricking me all this time, kissing me!”

“I-I stopped it when I realized how I felt,” Tara replied with an echoing voice, “Remember, Willow, I’m the one who said we should stop.”

“I’m not some dyke!” Willow spat in return.

Both of their faces contorted in shock as those words hung in the air. Willow seemed stunned that the word had even come out of her mouth and Tara’s face was frozen in hurt.
Tara broke the eerie stillness to snatch up her backpack.

“I should go.”

“Yeah I think that’s a good idea,” Willow replied with quiet anger, though she didn’t know which one of them it was directed at.

Tara turned before the tears actually fell, but only just. Her cheeks were wet before she got out the door and the collar of her shirt was starting to become damp by the time she rushed across the street and let herself back into her house.

She made a beeline for the stairs and bounded up and into the bathroom, the only place where she could be ensured of some privacy. She was actually grateful for the overpowering stench of Donny’s cheap aftershave because at least it meant he had gone out.

She locked the door, tossed her backpack into the tub and sank down to sit with her back against it, sobbing into her knees to conceal the sounds.

Still, it only took a moment for there to be a knock on the door.

“Tara?” Kimberly called through, “What’s wrong? I thought you were staying the night at Willow’s?”

Tara took in a short breath and closed her eyes to focus on her words and not the tears streaming down her cheeks.

“The pizza upset my stomach,” she called back with impressive restraint on the wobble in her voice, “It’s nothing, I just need my own bed.”

There was silence, then Tara heard her mother speak again, accepting the answer.

“I’ll put a hot water bottle in your bed.”

“Thanks,” Tara croaked back.

She waited until she heard retreating steps before running the faucet to fill up the sink and plunge her face into the cold water. She screamed, though there was no evidence of it but the bubbles that
rushed to the surface carrying her pain.

She emerged from the water with a gasp and let the cold sting dominate her sensations for a moment. She could taste Donny’s aftershave and it made her gag.

She dried her face, her heart still pounding but in a more steady rhythm; one she could use to regulate her breathing. She crept across the hall to her bedroom and sank down onto her bed, looking ahead with a sad gaze.

Her eye landed on the notebook she’d been so happily pouring her heart out to earlier.

*Do you remember when we were just kids?* she recalled Willow’s sweet voice, though it only caused a stab of agony in her heart now, *Yes…when I wasn’t…when she didn’t hate me.*

In a fit of anger, she tore the page straight out and let it float back down onto her desk, slamming the nearest book on top of it just to ram it home.

Again, it wasn’t enough but this was a whole different emotion from earlier. She grabbed the page and squashed it into a tight ball wrought with the tension she felt coursing through her. She flung it as hard as she could but it only ended up a foot away, so she booted it as hard as she could with her foot.

Anger was not an emotion Tara was accustomed to feeling and it fizzled from her as soon as her foot landed back on the floor. She picked up the scrunched ball and smoothed them out.

Those words had really meant something. She couldn’t just throw it away.

She folded the creased paper and tucked it away in her nightstand.

Left with just an echoing sadness, she took off her shoes and curled under her blanket; hiding her face and leaving just the top of her head exposed.

Her door creaked open and she tried to hide from her mother under the blanket.

“Is everything okay? I heard a bang.”

Tara clenched her jaw. If her mother knew she was crying she’d want to know why and Tara didn’t know if she had the strength to lie.
“I just dropped a book,” she said, sounding appropriately ropey for someone with an upset stomach, “I’m fine. I just want to go to sleep.”

Kimberly left and Tara thought she’d gotten away with it, but just a couple of minutes later, the door creaked again and Tara felt the sag of the mattress as her mother sat beside her.

“Sip on this,” Kimberly advised, leaving a glass of sparkling water on the nightstand and placing the hot water bottle on Tara’s pillow, “If you don’t feel better in the morning we can delay—”

“I’ll be fine,” Tara cut off.

Kimberly rubbed Tara’s back and tucked her sheet in before leaving a kiss on top of her head.

“Goodnight sweetheart,” she said before flipping the light-switch and leaving her daughter alone in the darkness.

Tara closed her eyes, bunched sheet in her hands and contemplated in distress just how much of her life she had ruined.

Across the street, in an all too familiar move, Willow removed her hand from beneath her pajama bottoms and cried herself to sleep.

Willow walked at a glacial pace from her house to the Maclay house; the fifteen-second journey stretching into whole minutes.

Finally, she was at the door, but it was another minute until she found the courage to knock.

She felt awful and she just wanted her best friend back.

Kimberly opened the door and seemed pleased to see her. She’d always had a soft spot for Willow.

“Oh, hello Willow,” she greeted, “What can I do for you?”

Willow swallowed several times before speaking.

“Is Tara here?”
Kimberly frowned.

“Oh, sweetheart, she left for camp,” she said softly, concerned, “Didn’t she go over to say goodbye?”

Willow felt like she’d been hit with a ton of bricks. In the flurry of emotion she’d been feeling, she had completely forgotten about Tara going to camp.

That meant six long weeks before she could speak to her face to face again. It physically ached.

“Yeah, no, of course. I-I meant to say is her bookbag here?” Willow covered, whilst clearing her throat, “She said I could borrow a book.”

Kimberly just smiled.

“Oh, of course. You can go up to her room and check.”

Willow nodded in gratitude and made her way up the stairs with her hands in her pockets. She went into Tara’s room and stood aimlessly with a frown because the room smelled like Tara and that hurt.

Worse, she hated that it hurt so much. It shouldn’t hurt to smell your friend’s perfume just because she wasn’t around to smell directly. She bonked the side of her head with the heel of her hand.

I don’t want to smell her! Shut up you useless block of grey matter.

She dropped into the seat at Tara’s desk and picked up the notebook sitting there to lightly bang against her head in the hope it might suddenly straighten her out.

When it did nothing but give her a headache, she dropped the book into her lap with a sigh. It opened on the page before the one Tara had ripped, on the lyrics with the big X through them.

The lyrics were identifiable and personal and Willow knew immediately they were about her.

Mimicking what Tara had felt the night before – anger, panic, and confusion, in different spades for slightly differing reasons — Willow also ripped that page out, tore it in two to get rid of the evidence then scrunched up the paper and tossed it, not even looking long enough to see it roll under the bed.
Only half-remembering to take a book, any book, with her, she trudged back down the stairs, stopping to say goodbye to Kimberly just to be polite.

“When are your parents home?” Kimberly asked, arms lightly folded on her chest.

Willow shrugged. She really wanted to get out of there.

“I haven’t checked their schedule. Next week some time.”

“When was the last time you had a proper meal?” Kimberly asked in that concerned motherly tone, then continued before Willow could answer, “Stay right there.”

Willow went to great pains to stay on the spot but was grateful when Kimberly returned with half a pan of leftover lasagna wrapped up. It looked a lot better than what she’d been feeding herself.

“Thank you, Ms. Maclay,” she said, feeling far too emotional for just the receipt of lasagna.

Stupid Tara and her stupid mother being so stupidly perfect.

She mumbled a goodbye and rushed back home at ten times the speed she’d left. She felt guilty for that thought. She felt guilty for a lot of thoughts. If she could just get Tara out of her damn head.

That’s what she had to do. Put Tara out of her head.

She took her phone from her pocket and pulled up the name she was looking for. She pressed the call button and waited anxiously for the other side to pick up.

“Hey, Xander. Can I come over?”
Chapter 2

An empty pizza box and a stack of DVDs lay strewn across the floor of Tara’s bedroom.

She was showing Willow her new keyboard and a small three-note tune she’d dubbed Willow’s Theme in honor of Willow’s latest obsession with Harry Potter. It was short enough for Willow to play herself, but she seemed less than enthused.

“You’re so lucky you’re good at something. I’m just good at computers and nobody cares about that. Especially boys. Xander only ever asks me over to fix his Sims.”

Tara let her hands fall away from the keys onto her lap. Her hair still fell into her face but her eyes were always brighter when Willow was around.

“I’ve never really had a guy I liked. Not like you like Xander.”

She pulled at her sleeves out of nervous habit before looking across to Willow.

“Are you going to ask him out?”

Her words caught like they hurt to come out. Willow frowned, then shrugged. She didn’t like when she was pushed to talk about him.

“Do you want to kiss him?” Tara prompted some more and Willow suddenly felt panicked.

“I’m kinda scared,” she deduced of her feelings, “I don’t even know how to kiss. What if I suck and he hates it?”

“No one could hate anything about you,” Tara replied sincerely.
Willow smiled and brought some her long hair forward, twirling the ends.

“Maybe I should practice,” she said, casting a sidelong glance to Tara, “Or we should practice? There’s going to be so many new guys in middle school…I bet you’ll find one. You’re so pretty.”

Tara’s brow creased and she looked uncertainly toward the teddy bear sitting on her bed that may have been the object of her practice before.

“How do we practice?”

Willow looked at Tara through her lashes, her green eyes hesitant.

“Together?”

Tara was silent for a moment as she worked out the request.

“Together-together? Like…kiss each other?”

Willow nodded whilst biting the skin around her thumb.

“Yeah. So we know what do to when boys kiss us. They do it on TV.”

Tara felt odd about that proposition. Part of it appealed to her and part of it didn’t and it was confusing to work out which part corresponded to which emotion. She’d never been able to deny Willow’s earnest eyes anything though and there was a tug of something else inside her screaming ‘yes’.

“Okay.”

“Oh!” Willow replied, surprised. She’d almost been expecting Tara to say no, “Okay.”

They sank down to the floor together, huddled close like when they snuck a scary movie from Donny’s collection and watched it even when they knew they weren’t supposed to. Neither moved for a moment, then tried to move at the same time and bumped heads.

“Ow,” Willow said, rubbing the point of impact on her temple while Tara blushed and ducked her head.
When her gaze lifted, their eyes met and they moved closer again.

Their breath was garlicky from the pizza and their lips slightly chapped from the heat but immediately they both pressed in for more when they touched for the first time. Their lips pressed hard enough together that their teeth clacked against each other and they broke apart.

Willow rubbed her front tooth silently for a moment, contemplating if kissing was meant to have this many injuries. It didn’t take long to decide she didn’t care; it felt nice. It felt very nice. She dragged her gaze back to Tara’s.

“…try again?”

Tara seemed more than willing and they came together again, all lips this time but no teeth. It was softer and sweeter and though neither knew any different it felt like a natural fit. It was chaste, yet the most stimulating thing either had ever experienced.

It was fireworks and popping candy and a hot punch to the gut that was confusing and enthralling all at once.

They both had the same thought.

*I think I wanna do this every night.*

They didn’t stop until a creaky floorboard outside the room alerted them that someone was passing and that they weren’t, in fact, in a world all of their own. Willow instantly paled, in contrast to her plumped bottom lip that was bruised from Tara’s caress.

“You won’t tell anyone, will you?”

Tara’s lips were tingling so hard she started to wonder if she’d accidentally consumed some shrimp.

“Of course not,” she managed, pursing her lips together after as if they might lock in that sweet taste she’d never known existed and would never know anything but for the rest of her life.

There was a lull until Willow’s watch, what once had borne Doogie Howser’s face but was now plain digital, beeped on the hour. She used the bed frame as leverage to stand up.

“My parents told me to be home by nine.”
Tara stood too, her hand holding the back of her neck anxiously.

“Okay,” she said, offering a small smile, “Bye Willow.”

Willow’s belly did a flip-flop and she did not like her uncertainty of what that reaction meant one bit.

“Bye Tara.”

Willow hurried downstairs and out, unusually not stopping to say goodbye to Ms. Maclay. She had other thoughts, and feelings, to deal with and her mind was not the focused beacon she had been known to possess.

She let herself in with her house key, as she was accustomed to doing, and didn’t bother trying to find her parents to say goodnight. They hadn’t even told her to be home by nine. They didn’t register her comings and goings much at all anymore unless her mother wanted her for an event or to go clothes shopping.

Her dad still read the Torah with her; that was nice. But she definitely wasn’t seeking him out tonight.

She went straight to her room, closed her curtains, turned off all the lights and got into bed.

She thought whatever she was feeling might go away and hide if she could just hide herself but the quiet just made it all the more palpable.

Not quite sure what she was doing, she reached into her pajama bottoms to see if she could source what was happening to her body.

That night would spark a confusion that would take several years and a lot of heartache to overcome.

It would lead them to the year where it seemed like everything changed, but in fact, it would be the year that everything worked out the way it was meant to right from the very start.
Willow raised her knuckles, hesitated just for a moment, then knocked on the wooden door.

The door opened, but it wasn’t the Maclay woman she’d hoped for.

“Hello, Willow,” Kimberly greeted pleasantly.

“Is Tara here?” Willow asked, feeling a sense of déjà vu as she thought about how many times she’d stood vulnerable on this porch.

She’d been waiting six weeks to even say Tara’s name and it felt dry on her tongue, such was the pain of the memory of when they’d last seen, or even spoken, to each other. Tara had always kept in contact at camp before, but Willow hadn’t received a single message the whole time she’d been away.

It had been a supremely lousy time in her life.

“She’s already headed out to the show,” Kimberly answered, then continued off Willow’s confused look, “She didn’t tell you she’s playing the Bronze tonight?”

_**No. No, she didn’t. She always tells me about her shows in the Bronze. I always go.**_

“No, right, of course,” Willow replied quickly, “I’m, ah, meeting her there. Scatterbrain today, you know getting ready for school to go back and all. I was just double checking the time.”

“8 pm,” Kimberly replied with a fond smile, “You keep my daughter in line and get her home at a reasonable hour.”

Willow nodded tersely.

“Bye Ms. Maclay.”
Kimberly waved her goodbye with an unsure look on her face, but Willow didn’t see. She had her hands stuffed in her pockets as she made her way home, her den of solitude of late.

The door banging behind her rang through the silent house, as did the rubber of her sneakers squeaking on the wooden stairs. She threw herself on her bed and wrapped her arms around her poop emoji pillow, a gift from Tara on her last birthday with the accompanying note that she was ‘poo-fect’. It was icky and funny and it had its pride of place on Willow’s bed ever since.

She brought her phone out to text Buffy to see if they could hang out but got the same message she’d received a hundred times over the past few weeks.

**Sorry, can’t. Soon!**

Never could, these days. At least she’d bothered to text back.

Willow stared at the white wall opposite her and tried very hard not to cry.

Everything was so quiet.

Quiet, quiet, quiet and she could barely stand it anymore.

She was miserable and knew it was entirely self-inflicted.

She’d cried many tears in the passing weeks, but the big heaving sobs were for when she remembered Tara’s face after calling her…

After using the ‘D’ word.

She couldn’t even bring herself to think it.

Sweet Tara who had never said a bad word to her in her life; who’d been her best friend for as long as she’d had memory. Who’d given her a hug the first time they’d met to make her feel better and had always been there for another one whenever she needed it.

Except now.
Now Willow had sent her away in the most insulting way possible because Tara had dared to voice the silent pull between them that had always existed. And it had just grown and grown as they put years on the calendar.

Willow knew it, but she’d never had to question it.

She’d found it strange when she met Buffy and established a sister-type relationship with her because Tara should have filled that role given their history. But she was always just…Tara. And she meant more than a label.

The wall became unbearably monotonous to look at and she pushed herself off the bed again. She couldn’t watch TV because it reminded her of Tara. She couldn’t listen to music because it reminded her of Tara. She couldn’t even take a walk because it meant she’d have to pass Tara’s bedroom window at least twice along the way. She just couldn’t get her out of her head.

She realized the only hope she had to get out from under her own thoughts was to go to Tara and apologize. At least then she’d know Tara didn’t think that she really thought…

She shuddered.

She pounded back down the stairs and swung by the kitchen to get some dinner. She’d eaten the last of the Maclay leftovers she’d frozen at 2 am when she couldn’t sleep, so she reverted to her old reliable.

She dropped a Pop-Tart into the toaster and opened the tab on a can of Mountain Dew. The unforgettable taste of childhood neglect.

With some sugar propping up her courage, she headed for the front door, passing a mirror on the way. She stopped and detoured to the bathroom to brush her hair through and put some bronzer stuff Buffy had given her on her cheeks to liven them up from the ghostly pale they had become. She glossed her lips with cherry chapstick because she knew it was one of Tara’s favorite flavors.

Her brain wasn’t even processing what the implications of that were. She’d just always done it when Tara came over.

She took a look at herself in the mirror. Her eyes looked weary and bloodshot and just sad.

She had to do this.
At least Tara would know she was sorry.

She locked up the house and went to retrieve her bike. She kicked the tires quick to check on them; Donny had a habit of messing with hers or Tara’s bike when the whim took him.

It had gotten dark since she was last out so she turned the flashlight on the bike on as she threw her leg over the saddle. She passed almost nobody as she rode into town; Sunnydale was often eerily quiet.

She parked on the rack two blocks away so no one would see her arriving on her bike. She didn’t need to give any more ammunition to the general high-school aged populous to pick on her for. They did it well all on their own.

She felt nervous as she approached the Bronze and heard music, knowing that once she got inside she’d hear Tara’s voice accompanying it.

She stepped in and was overwhelmed at first at all the lights and sounds.

Being shut out of a social life for six weeks can really do a number on you.

She looked above the crowd and her breath caught looking at Tara on stage; her hair tied back as she enthusiastically played the sax, accompanying her friend Nate as he rapped.

They usually drew a crowd at the Bronze when they played because of…well, mostly because of Nate. He ticked every box in the tall, dark and handsome categories and his voice was as deep as it was dulcet. He was utterly charming in every way and a damn good musician too. All the girls flocked to their shows for him but stayed for their shared performance.

They played a range of styles — covers and originals — and had something for everyone. Tonight was even busier than normal because it was the last weekend before school started up again and everyone was enjoying their last moments of freedom.

Willow was grateful; it made it easier to hang back and be lost in the crowd.

After just a minute or so, she could feel eyes on her.

She cautiously glanced around while staying rooted to the spot.
It only took one sweep for her to be crushed twice in quick succession. The first, when she saw Cordelia Chase glaring at her and then trying to act nonchalant in front of her hangers-on.

A fresh wave of humiliation washed over her as she saw her for the first time since that day.

She hoped Xander wasn’t here too.

Almost worse was the second familiar face she saw; Buffy with a guy, tall and brooding (Willow guessed the new boyfriend, not that Buffy had ever tried to introduce him) and some other dark-haired (and dark-clothed) girl.

It stung because it didn’t seem like Buffy was on a date what with the third guest, yet still hadn’t invited her along.

Feeling truly and utterly rejected, she turned to run, her go-to move when confronted with her problems but before she could make it a step, she heard something to make her stop in her tracks.

Willow turned and watched Tara, lit up like a halo from the spotlight, singing and playing along on her keyboard while Nate offered some soft guitar accompaniment in the shadows.

Willow felt a slow gasp rise in her lungs and bubble out as Tara’s sweet, sweet voice that she’d missed so much spoke to her soul. It was like an electric spark in her heart. Tara’s eyes were closed but Willow still felt like she was singing right at her.

And if you have a minute, why don't we go
Talk about it somewhere only we know?
This could be the end of everything
So why don't we go?
So why don't we go?

Tara looked up and fell off with a soft murmur.

Somewhere only we know...

They got a round of applause and Nate stepped up to the microphone.

“Thank you, we’ve been Insect Reflection!” Nate called out to the crowd, “We’d like to finish things off with something to get you on your feet.”
Someone started playing the harmonica but Willow didn’t see which of them it was.

Her head was swimming.

That was for her.

Tara sang that for her.

*Somewhere only we know.*

She knew exactly the place.

To an unseen glare to her retreating form from Cordelia’s table, Willow raced out and hopped back on her bike, cycling straight to the old park near the quarry.

Not many people came here anymore since the other town park with the maintained landscape and pond had opened, but when they were kids this was the furthest place Willow and Tara were allowed to walk to on their own.

Paradise Park, though it was far from paradise now with overgrown foliage and litter everywhere.

There was an abandoned playground with most of the equipment removed or repurposed somewhere else, leaving just a rusty swing set that was pretty much cemented into the ground and wasn’t able to be dug up easily.

Willow had spent a lot of time here lately. A place to think that was quiet, but not achingly silent as the trees and critters offered some natural background noise.

She’d been thinking a lot too, about a lot of things.

Boys.

Girls.

Herself.

Tara.
She reminisced on when they ‘practiced’ kissing ‘for the boys’ and how she’d never, not once, actually thought of a boy; not even the one she purported to like and knew for sure now she absolutely didn’t.

She’d been the one to start it and she’d been the one who’d just nodded but felt crushed inside when Tara said they should stop.

Because she wasn’t sure she had the technique down, she told herself.

They’d only been making out at least once a week for years and that was nowhere near the ten thousand hours you needed to become an expert in something.

That was definitely the reason.

Not because her friend’s soft, sweet lips sent her to heaven or invoked a rush of feeling like nothing else could. Not because Tara was the only thing in the world that made Willow’s heart go a million miles a second. Not because it also slowed her brain down until reason dissolved and all she knew was how those lips felt.

See, being with Tara, actually being with Tara was so very easy for her to imagine.

She had imagined it, often.

She just hated what it meant.

She sat carefully on one of the worn black leather swing seats, held to the rusted frame by metal chains that just barely hung on. They still came down here often enough when they wanted to talk in private and neither house was available, so she knew just how much pressure she could apply to the seat.

It was a clear night and the late summer air still hung thickly, making you notice every breath as it left your lungs. Willow wished it was a cooler night; she was already sweating enough. Her palms held the chains either side of the swing but they would slide down any time she gripped too tightly.

There was nobody around — there never was.

Willow could remember the area filled with kids when they were really little. They would have to fight for the swings back then, but then the new playground was constructed in the prettier park and
this place had become effectively abandoned.

To most people, it was a dump, but for her and Tara it had become a secret wilderness where they’d spent their childhood having adventures and their teens hiding out from the world.

It was their place.

She stayed there a long time, her heart sinking with every passing minute. She was starting to accept she’d gotten the wrong end of the stick when a soft voice broke through the silence; one she’d missed desperately; one she hadn’t even realized said her name so sweetly until she heard it again after such an absence.

“Willow.”

Willow scrambled to stand, wiping her hands on the front of her jeans. She stared dumbly for a moment, feeling the rush of butterflies that seeing Tara invoked.

“Somewhere only we know, right?” she asked with a nervous upward inflection, her eyes creasing at the Tara’s furrowed brow, “I thought…you were singing it… for me.”

Willow gulped and Tara took a moment to process.

“I didn’t know you were there.”

Willow’s eyes closed painfully.

Great.

Rejection was certainly the theme of the night.

Willow kept her eyes closed so Tara wouldn’t see the tears forming, and was about to quickly pivot and run once again when Tara’s voice echoed out again.

“But that doesn’t mean it wasn’t for you.”

Willow looked up sharply, her unshed tears thankfully staying as a glassy shine in her eyes.
Tara stared back, processing her feelings. Not just from seeing Willow again but that Willow had both been at the show and had come here, to this place, under her unintentional direction.

Willow’s gaze dropped uncomfortably and she eased back down onto the swing.

Tara contemplated what to do next, but she didn’t know. So she just sat, perching on the second swing and letting her sneakers push the dirt on the ground beneath them around.

The silence was as heavy as the air with both of them avoiding eye contact, unsure where they stood with each other.

“How was camp?” Willow ventured after a few minutes, her voice close to cracking.

_How was camp?_ Tara thought to herself _Is she serious?_


The daytime was fine when she had plenty of distractions on hand, the night time had her sniffling into her pillow, trying desperately not to wake the girls she was sharing a room with.

“How Hah,” Willow spat out bitterly, her eyes quickly scrunching up with regret, “Sorry, I’m not laughing at you. I just… I know all about that. Did you hear they wrote a book about my life? It’s called ‘How To Lose Friends And Alienate People’.”

Tara had never seen Willow so low in herself. She’d been dreading seeing her and the wound was still raw but she couldn’t help feeling concerned. Right from their very first meeting, she’d always been the guardian of Willow’s feelings.

“What happened?” she asked softly.

Willow reached across her own chest and lightly scratched under her ear, a distraction technique to focus sensation away from her weakening tear ducts.

“Buffy found a new guy and a new crowd to hang around with; Xander and I aren’t speaking. My parents were home one day, _one day_ the whole six weeks you were gone,” she said, pushing her nail against her skin a bit harder as she went on, “I just… I haven’t had anyone to talk to.”

Tara lifted a hand to rub Willow’s arm for comfort, but her fingers quickly folded in on themselves again.
“I’m sorry you’ve been so isolated,” she said finally, her voice automatically taking on the comforting tone her body was afraid to express.

Willow’s eyes closed and when she opened them again, tears streamed down her cheeks.

“You’re being so nice to me when I was so awful to you.”

She faced Tara, her lower lip trembling.

“I’m so sorry about what I called you.”

Tara looked away. That word had certainly echoed through her head many times.

“You didn’t really,” Tara said in an unconvinced whisper.

It was kind of true; Willow had been voicing her own fear of being labeled such a word, but that didn’t take away from it being so carelessly tossed at Tara like that. The impact was no less.

“I said it,” Willow echoed, her palms squeezing the chains tighter, “But I didn’t mean it. I don’t think like that. I don’t care if you’re—”

They both looked away at the same time, uncomfortable with what wasn’t said.

“I thought you hated me,” Tara eventually replied, “I didn’t think you’d ever want to see me again.”

“You’re not the person I hate,” Willow said through a barely audible exhale, “I could never hate you, Tara. I was…angry.”

Tara dug the toe of her sneaker deeply into the dirt.

“My feelings are not your burden and I should never have said anything or made you feel uncomfortable,” she rattled off, a sentence she’d practiced often in case Willow was willing to talk to her again.

“No, Tara,” Willow replied with a bitter laugh, wiping her eyes with her sleeve, “I wasn’t angry that you told me how you felt…I was angry that you made me confront my own feelings.”
Tara turned, surprised, but Willow kept her gaze down.

“Your feelings?” Tara prompted, struggling not to let her mind rush ahead of herself, “Do you mean about me… or about you—”

Willow looked up sharply again and Tara swallowed the rest of the sentence. She pursed her lips for a moment, gathered her thoughts and addressed Willow again.

“What is it that you want from me, Willow? Why did you come here to wait for me tonight?”

Willow dropped her head into her hands in frustration; she barely knew herself let alone how to vocalize it.

“I just want things to go back to how they were before;” she said eventually, then sighed deeply like she was admitting to a crime, “Except I want more than that. I want that special thing that’s always just belonged to us. I want that part of you that’s just…mine.”

Tara’s head was reeling. She’d thought her friendship with Willow had been toast, and if she was lucky she wouldn’t be outed before she was ready, but here Willow was, not only apologizing for their fight but possibly agreeing that that thing between them wasn’t all one-sided.

“Willow, I’m…I’m a bit confused. Are you saying…what about Xander?”

Willow shook her head.

“The only time I ever really thought about Xander like that was when I was trying to convince other people I liked him.”

*Or myself.*

“When you’re a kid and everyone keeps asking which boy you like and you have no idea or even what ‘liking’ someone feels like, choosing one that actually speaks to you seems like a reasonable idea. Now that’s gone out the window too.”

“What happened with him? Why aren’t you speaking?” Tara asked softly.

Willow’s cheeks flushed with fresh embarrassment. She hoped the night gave her enough cover.
“Just…stupid stuff. But he’s not a …a thing. At all. I know that now,” she replied quickly, and then just as fast moved on, “What about you? Did you meet a sexy flutist at band camp? Make some sweet music together?”

She hadn’t meant for it to come out as bitingly bitter as it had, but she couldn’t deny it had been a frequent thought in the intervening weeks.

Tara noted the jealousy but still wasn’t sure where to place it. Willow had always been protective of their friendship and never hung out with both her and her school friends at once. Tara had seen them from the window across the street but Willow had always wanted it to be just them and never any others when they spent time together.

*I want that special thing that’s always just belonged to us. I want that part of you that’s just…mine,* Tara echoed in her mind, and she couldn’t deny it was true. She glanced downward guiltily.

“Like I said…lonely,” Tara settled eventually and didn’t wish to dwell, “You said you wanted things to go back to how they were before…does that mean friends?”

It was Willow’s turn to scuff her sneaker, her eyes boring into the ground as her body fought her fight or flight response to the questions being posed to her. She eventually looked back up to Tara, slightly desperate.

“Tara, I don’t know…I don’t know what I’m feeling. But I do know…I feel something. And I can’t bury it no matter how hard I try.”

Tara’s hand rested gently on Willow’s thigh.

“You don’t have to bury it.”

Willow almost rebuffed the touch but was stunned into stillness at how much warmth spread through her body. That was what Tara did; just made her feel warm and safe and well, if she was honest—

Willow blinked several times and focused on Tara’s sweet, endearing face looking at her like she was the most wonderful thing in the world. Her heart fluttered; much as she’d like to deny it she was just drawn in.

“Could we…I mean would it be possible if we figure out this thing between us before we go telling other people? I mean can we just…”
She looked at Tara helplessly, who leaned in close enough to whisper.

“Just what?”

Willow was hyper-aware of how close Tara’s lips were and struggled not to stare directly at them.

“What? I mean um…”

Completely drawn in, she closed the space and pressed her mouth to Tara’s, kissing her with less of the awkwardness that had featured in kisses past and all of the longing running deep in her bones.

Willow had never kissed Tara, or anyone else, with no pretense before. This kiss was borne from an actual desire to just kiss her and not practice for anyone else. Part of her was terrified and part of her was thrilled but all of her was pumped with adrenaline as she tasted Tara’s lips for the first, real, time.

Her fists gripped the chain a little too tight but there was too much blood rushing between her ears for her to hear the creaking until it was too late and she was on her way for her butt to meet the ground.

She was momentarily winded, then she tensed with awkwardness. Something very similar to this had happened with an exercise ball in front of the entire gym class and Cordelia had not let her forget it for months.

The feeling of being pulled up and a hand, unintentionally but very much noticeably wiping at the back of her pants brought her back to earth.

“Are you okay?”

Willow still looked slightly shocked as she looked at Tara for a few seconds, then down at her hand where she was still gripping the chain of the swing with the seat trailing on the ground.

Tara glanced in the same direction before their eyes locked again and she brought her hand up to her mouth to cover a snort of laughter. For once, Willow didn’t blush.

Tara wasn’t laughing at her. Tara never laughed at her.

Willow ducked her head and smiled, then joined in with the giggling, a very welcome reprieve to the heavy cloud that had been hanging over her for weeks.
“I broke our seat.”

Tara lifted the other side of the chain and wrapped both sides around the leather seat, which was now just a leather rectangle.

“Let’s keep it as a souvenir.”

She smiled somewhat shyly and Willow offered the same smile back. She finished brushing herself off and awkwardly ran her hand through her hair.

What was the etiquette when you kissed your best friend not-for-the-first-time-but-for-the-first-time-for-real?

“I don’t know what…um…what should we…?”

Tara shrugged one shoulder softly.

She didn’t know either; she hadn’t expected this — she had come to the swings to have a little cry in private.

But she had listened when Willow said she’d like things to be like they were before.

“It’s Friday night. Pizza and a movie?”

Willow seemed pleased and relieved all at once.

“That sounds good. So good.”

Tara wanted to jump up and down or scream in delight or do some kind of happy shuffle. She wanted to do a lot of things — like reach out and take Willow’s hand; feel their fingers intertwine and hold each other like she’d longed to so many other times. But she held herself back, for both of their sakes. Willow was clearly hesitant about this new exploration and Tara fell too hard, too fast — though it would be a denial to say she hadn’t already fallen.

She’d spent too long angst-ing and agonizing about this — about her. She could keep her mouth shut about anything too heavy if it meant she got something. All she’d ever wanted was a chance.
So she held the broken swing seat across her chest and settled for a big grin spread across her face as they turned together to walk from the lot toward the street they called home; Willow walking alongside her bike.

The Rosenberg residence was in darkness as they approached and Willow hung off the gate nervously.

“Do you want to come in? It’s…quiet. My parents are away again.”

“All summer?” Tara asked sympathetically, though she already knew the answer.

“International lecture circuit,” Willow confirmed with a nod, “Great money…no kid…all round good time.”

Willow had actually gone along a few summers to places in Europe and South Africa in her early teens but had seen nothing but lecture and banquet halls. Eventually, she’d just asked to stay home. At least her friends were at home. Or were, when she had had them.

Tara just nodded.

“I’ll just, um, go tell my mom.”

“Cool,” Willow replied easily, “I’ll order the pizza.”

“Cool,” Tara agreed, hiding a crooked smile, “Be back in a few.”

She turned and jogged across the street, letting herself into the house and rushing upstairs with the swing seat lest she got pulled into a line of questioning.

“Hey honey, how was the show?” Kimberly called up the stairs, “Come down and tell me about it.”

Tara successfully hid the swing seat in her closet and came back downstairs.

“I’m going to spend the night at Willow’s if that’s okay?”

Kimberly just sighed in a motherly way.
“Well, I’ve missed you, and I want to catch up, but I can’t say I’m not pleased. I was worried you two had had a fight. She was here earlier all forlorn and was acting odd right after you left.”

Tara swallowed, hoping her face wasn’t giving her away.

“We’re good,” she said casually.

“Good,” Kimberly replied cheerily, “Well I know you two are inseparable so I can hardly deny the reunion. Let me get you some food to bring over. That poor girl never gets a nutritious meal. I’ve been playing doormat tag with her, leaving stuff on her doorstep. Always get the dishes back on the next day or two, sparkling clean.”

She paused, shaking her head as she walked back into the kitchen.

“Thank you. For doing that,” Tara answered, following and hanging out in the doorframe, “I’m sure it meant an awful lot to her. But we’re ordering a pizza tonight.”

Kimberly changed course and retrieved a plastic Tupperware container instead.

“Cookies,” she said, smiling as she handed them over.

“Thank you,” Tara repeated, leaning over to hug her mother.

Kimberly rubbed Tara’s arms and pulled back to look at her.

“You look good. Better than earlier. You had a good time at camp? I thought you were sad it was your last time.”

Tara just smiled back.

“One door closes…”

“Oh, young wise one,” Kimberly chuckled, “Don’t stay up all night preaching and pecking.”

“W-what?” Tara asked, eyes widening.
“Just something my old mom used to say,” Kimberly replied wistfully, “I don’t know if she knew what it meant herself.”

Tara didn’t know much about her grandparents, just that they’d died when her mother younger than even was. She was sure she’d asked as a child but at some point, she understood the responses she got back were pained and had stopped. But every now and then she would get snippets and it was nice to hear.

“Just have a nice night,” Kimberly finished, “And please tell Willow there is always a meal here whenever she needs it.”

Tara nodded gratefully, gave her mother another quick hug and turned for the door. She encountered Donny coming down the stairs, who looked past her and shoulder-bumped her as he passed. Tara frowned and huffed out a breath but didn’t break stride and just walked out without giving him any satisfaction of a reaction.

She hurried faster over to the Rosenberg’s, already eager to see Willow again; to hear her voice, her laugh, her strange stories. To see her bright eyes, her smile and that way Willow looked at her. Part of her brain was screaming ‘danger, danger’ but a larger part just understood that whatever it was between them was worth exploring.

She lifted her hand to knock, but Willow must have been waiting as she opened it before her knuckles made contact.

“Mom made cookies,” Tara said as she stepped inside and held out the container.

Willow took it and swallowed audibly. Kimberly’s kindness had meant a lot to her, not just in the previous weeks, but years.

“Your mom is the best.”

“She’s pretty good as moms go,” Tara agreed.

There was an awkward lull and Willow nodded to the right.

“Um, I got us drinks and snacks. Pizza will be 20 minutes.”

Tara walked into the living room with Willow behind her and sat on one end of the couch, next to the end table with one glass of cherry cola and one with Dr. Pepper, along with a couple of bowls of chips and candy.
Tara closed her hand around her glass and took a sip.

She licked her lips as she swallowed it.

“I knew you tasted familiar,” she whispered, mostly to herself, but Willow was sitting only a foot away and heard.

She blushed her hand brushed over the cylindrical tube in her front pocket as if it was a lucky charm.

She didn’t really know what to do.

This was so familiar and yet so utterly different.

Things were decidedly weird.

She kept rolling her palms down her thighs until she got to her knees and there was no jean left to rub. To keep her hands occupied, she leaned across to get her glass of Dr. Pepper but misjudged the length of her torso to how far she needed to reach. Gravity betrayed her as her upper body started to drop.

She saw her face about to collide with Tara’s crotch an agonizing 1.3 seconds before it happened and putting her hands out to stop it would have only made everything even worse and so she landed right exactly there.

Tara’s hands flew upward on contact and became rigidly tense so she wouldn’t feel Willow’s face pressing into her or the accompanying feelings that needed very little stimulus for her to notice.

Willow scrambled to get up, miraculously staying on her feet and not throwing herself to the floor in the process. She brushed herself off and realized just how open the curtains were.

That could have been bad.

Very bad.

Especially if she’d been leaning over for a different reason. She quickly closed the curtains and sat back on the seat she’d vacated, leaning forward with hands clasped together above her knees.
“Are you ok—” Tara started but Willow quickly cut her off.

“I’m not gay.”

Tara stopped talking and nodded.

“Okay.”

Willow slowly looked over her shoulder.

“That doesn’t bother you?”

Tara just shook her head evenly.

“I’m not asking you to be anything you’re not. Or do anything you don’t want to do,” she said clearly, “I would have been happy to know we’re friends again.”

“I never wanted us not to be,” Willow retorted quickly, still looking uneasy, “What…what do you want from me?”

“I’ve never wanted anything from you, Willow,” Tara replied with soft eyes and a look close to yearning, “I’ve only ever wanted you to be happy.”

Willow’s gaze lifted and settled on Tara’s, knowing her eyes mirrored that look, much as she wanted to deny it. She found herself moving in without realizing her body was in motion and her lips were connecting with Tara’s. She lived for that instant connection, that moment where her mind shut off and she allowed herself to just enjoy the sensation.

She remembered exactly the last time they’d kissed properly before Tara had stopped them. She relived it in her mind often, wishing she’d known it would be the last so she could have savored it more.

She hadn’t anticipated another chance and physically gasped into the kiss like it was her first drink of water on a parched throat.

“Are you okay?” Tara asked, pulling back for a moment.
“Yeah,” Willow replied in a short exhale, barely letting the word complete itself before closing the gap between them again.

This kiss was like no other that had come before it; no guise of exploration or restraint shown. Willow found her hand touching Tara’s face, where she’d always sat on them before to stop things from getting ‘weird’. Feeling Tara’s jaw movements inside and outside of her mouth filled her with physical sensations she was nowhere near ready to process yet. She dropped her palm to Tara’s neck but there was just as much going on there to excite her.

Tara’s pulse was racing and the hair was standing up on the back of her neck and eliciting that kind of reaction just made Willow intoxicated. Her first unabashed experience of consuming Tara would burn into her brain and start a very slow descent down a very scary rabbit hole.

The doorbell was the first thing to part them and Willow pulled away gasping. She was startled by the sudden influx of air and the disorientation of her time perception making those twenty minutes feel like three seconds.

“Shit.”

Tara was a little dazed in the eye and smeared at the mouth but was the first to react to the doorbell ringing a second time. She stood up to answer it, but this prompted Willow into action, who immediately jumped up.

“No, no. I got it,” she called back, her feet not able to carry her quick enough.

Tara sat back down and wiped the sticky streaks of chapstick she felt around her mouth. Willow carried the box of pizza in, after giving the delivery guy a pretty hefty tip without even realizing. She slowly strode back to where she was sitting before, pizza in her lap. She suddenly turned to Tara, eyes slightly panicked.

“I want everything to be the same but everything is very different. That was very different.”

Tara chose not to ask if she meant that in a good or bad way. She felt like Willow’s body and mind were sending conflicting answers to that particular question.

“I’m still just me,” she said in a comforting tone, “We’re still just us.”

She placed a hand over Willow’s.

“Willow and Tara.”
She could see the stress lines still wrinkling Willow’s beautiful skin and it broke her heart to think she was causing her distress.

“Yabba and Dabba,” she tried, her voice just managing not to break.

Willow blinked and slowly began to smile.

“I haven’t thought of that in years.”

The Flintstones was often on TV when they were little as it was one of the few cartoons Donny would watch as well. They created a double act of Yabba (Tara) and Dabba (Willow) and performed various plays or went on various adventures under the heading ‘Yabba and Dabba Doo ___ ’ with the theme changing from anything like outer space to princess cowgirls. One time they tried to do a science lab but Sheila was not impressed when her $200 face cream was used as part of an experiment.

“It’s crossed my mind once or twice,” Tara admitted quietly.

Willow bit the corner of her bottom lip and looked back at Tara, pacified if still a little antsy.

“Can we take it slow?”

Tara sighed in relief.

“As slow as you like,” she promised, squeezing Willow’s hand, “And…whatever, you know, happens… I'll still be here. I'll still be your friend.”

“Of course we'll be friends!” Willow replied empathically, “That's not even a question!”

Tara lifted her hand and brushed some hair from Willow’s ear.

“Promise me one thing?”

Willow glanced up, her eyes glassy with vulnerability. Tara made sure to keep her gaze.

“Be yourself.”
Tara had no idea of how difficult a question she’d just asked. Willow’s eyes flickered closed and nuzzled into the feeling of fingers brushing her cheek. When the lingering became too intimate, Willow quickly flipped the lid on the box.

“Pizza’s getting cold.”

Willow stuffed a slice into her mouth and Tara nibbled more delicately on hers.

“It never tasted as good when I wasn’t eating it with you.”

Tara hadn’t meant for that to come out as evocative as it sounded, but her lips were still swollen from kissing and she couldn’t help the undertone it produced from them pillowing her words.

Willow downed the glass of Dr. Pepper still sitting there and got up to get the bottle for a refill. Tara watched her go a bit awkwardly and so was prepared on her return. Before Willow could take a seat or pop the cap on her soda, Tara had taken a couch cushion and whacked her with it.

“Hey!” Willow protested, shocked at first.

She stared at Tara for a tense second, then broke out in a grin and lunged for another cushion.

They ran around the room chasing each other with the pillows until they collapsed laughing on the couch. The mood shifted, they put on a movie in the background and talked and laughed through the night, sharing intermittent kisses.

They eventually passed out right there, Tara lying with her feet up on the ottoman and Willow curled up in her lap, though with her face in a more appropriate upward direction.

They slept there the whole night, surrounded by empty bottles of soda, a half-eaten pizza, cookie crumbs and the low buzz of the television.

Willow was the first to stir when she heard muffled banging. She rose from Tara’s lap, not without a little blush, and rubbed her eyes. Her ears picked up on that sound again and she crept over to the window and pulled back the curtain.

Her eyes immediately widened in horror.
“SHIT!”

Tara startled awake.

“What, what?!”

“My parents are home!” Willow screeched, diving around the room to gather the trash.

Tara tried to help but the front door was already opening and Ira and Sheila already had them in their sights.

“Hello Mr. and Mrs. Rosenberg,” Tara said with strained sleep still in her voice, “I should… head home.”

She motioned for Willow to call her behind their backs, who nodded discreetly and ran a hand through her bedhead to try and tame it a bit. Tara slipped out with a small wave and a wink, Willow was pretty sure, which did not help her reddening face.

“Mom, dad,” Willow greeted, cringing at the stiffness of their reunion embrace, “I um, I wasn’t expecting you.”

“Clearly,” Sheila replied, arms across her chest, “Is this all you’ve been up to all summer? Lazing around eating junk, not even sleeping in a real bed?”

Willow looked toward the floor.

“I thought you were coming home next week.”

Ira shook his head.

“No, sweetheart, we wanted to be home before you started school. Your senior year is very important,” he said with genuine warmth in his voice, “Oh it’s nice to see you.”

He hugged her again and Willow was able to melt into it for a few moments. His eyes followed the room but he was kind enough to not say anything.

“Well, …what’s new?”
Willow almost laughed; he had no idea.

“Same old Willow.”

She glanced idly at the half-pulled curtain and saw Tara letting herself into her house across the street.

*Brand new mess.*
September

It's Hard To Fight These Feelings When It Feels So Hard To Breathe

Hi 😊 good morning

Hi 😊

I had so much fun the other night.

Yeah, that was nice 😊

I hope you don't think that I just want... I mean, I really like just talking and hanging out with you and stuff.
We've been friends for 15 years. You don't need to convince me of that.

Right 😞

Well, um, maybe we can talk and hang out some more?

You free?

I'm on my way to a music class.

Maybe tonight?

I mean if you're not doing something, you could come over and we could do something...?
Tonight...
That sounds really nice
But tonight, I, uh, already have plans with people
Other

Oh. Um, that's okay.
Another time.

Absolutely!
It's just tonight, it's kind of a specific crowd.
You might feel out of place.

I better get to class

Well, um, I'll see ya later.
Okay?
Willow watched the read receipt pop up but minutes ticked by with no return message received.

Several hours later, Willow sat on her bed in her newly ironed jeans, phone to her ear with a jaded look on her face.

“I know. Talk later.”

Willow hung up the phone on a rushing-off Buffy and felt like throwing her phone against the wall. She’d blown off Tara to make time for Buffy when she had finally seemed interested and now she was the one being blown off. Again.

At least they’d actually got to talk for a few minutes on the phone. It was better than brief chats at the lockers or between classes before Buffy went to hang with her new crowd. Willow still knew nothing about them, though.

She didn’t care too much anyway, or at least not as much as she had before. She had a kinda-new thing going on as well. She’d found filling her time with Tara to be a much more enjoyable distraction lately.

She pulled up her message log with Tara and stared at the unanswered final message. Her thumbs tapped either side of the screen until she gathered the courage to bring up the keyboard.

Willow hesitated as she thought about what she wanted to say.
She rambled on for a moment before getting to the point.

She waited anxiously for a response, even more so when those three mocking dots appeared and seemed to animate threateningly in front of her.

Anyway, I know it’s late.
But I thought...
Maybe...
If you still wanted to...
Do something?

She waited anxiously for a response, even more so when those three mocking dots appeared and seemed to animate threateningly in front of her.

Finally, the new message popped up and never had Willow been happier by a lack of words.

😊

She jumped up from the bed and hurried downstairs, swinging out of the handrail.
“I’m going out…” she called through the house, continuing under her breath when not even the air moved in response, “Not that anybody cares.”

She slid just her house key into the short front pocket and closed the door behind her softly. She hurried across the street, where Tara was waiting at the front door, leaning against the frame. It made Willow’s heart skip a beat just to see her smile.

“Hi,” she greeted, holding her hand up and waving, before quickly putting it back down when she realized it looked dumb.

Had she always been this awkward around Tara, she wondered? Or was she just more aware of it now?

“Hi,” Tara greeted, her eyes giving an extremely subtle once-over to Willow’s body, just a flick downward and then looking back up between her eyelashes.

No one would pick up on it, but since Willow had started actually allowing herself to look at Tara, she noticed it every time and it made her blush to her ears.

“You look good,” Tara complimented, stepping back against the door to let Willow walk through, “Not quite up there with last Halloween’s outfit, but…I like it.”

Tara brought them up to her room, where Willow sat on the chair at the desk and glanced down to hide her even redder face.

“Yeah, well, never letting Buffy dress me again. You can undress me,” Willow offered then nearly choked on air, “I mean dress me! With the clothes you make! Design!”

The door closed behind them and Tara sat on the edge of her bed, with a few feet between them, kindly pretending Willow hadn’t said what she said.

“You guys haven’t been hanging much lately, have you?”

Willow just shook her head without looking up.
“She’s found more of a…leather mini skirt kinda crowd.”

“And you’re still fighting with Xander?” Tara asked sympathetically.

Willow shrugged one shoulder.

“They’ve all found people who are…exciting to be around. And I’m just… me. Reliable-Dog-Geyser Person.”

Tara reached over and caught the edge of the cushioning on the chair. She wheeled Willow over right in front of her and hooked her legs around the base to keep it stable. She slid her hands over Willow’s thighs and leaned in to press a feather-light kiss against her lips.

“You excite me more than anything or anyone I’ve ever known,” she whispered, brushing her lips down Willow’s jawline and falling off with a nip just under her ear that would have Willow staying up late every night for the next number of weeks remembering.

Tara removed her hands and sat back with a smile as if she hadn’t just released a ball of sexual energy inside Willow.

“How was class?” she asked, very aware of the squeak in her voice.

“You are a guaranteed smile on my face” Willow thought as Tara zipped by her and opened her laptop.

She closed her legs and stood up, needing to move to break down all of the thoughts and emotions that were just triggered.

“How was class?” she asked, very aware of the squeak in her voice.

Tara looked over her shoulder and smiled reassuringly as if she just knew it was what Willow
needed to calm.

“Good. Nate and I ended up doing some impromptu street performance after and made a few bucks. Some people joined us from school and set up across the street, so we had a sing-off.”

Willow put her hand in her pocket to toy with the key, just to give her something to do.

“Did you win?”

“There are no winners, just enjoyment,” Tara answered easily, tapping the space bar once before turning fully to Willow.

Music suddenly burst from the speakers and Tara hunched over laughing at the startled look on Willow’s face. She held her hands out for Willow to take.

“It’s more fun if you dance to it.”

Willow took one hand and Tara immediately pulled her into a twirl. Willow giggled and twirled Tara back and they soon got into the synthpop beat.

Holding onto each other’s arms, they swung around together, feet scrambling to move faster and faster.

Everything became a blur to Willow except Tara’s beaming face; her vision just a kaleidoscope of Tara’s smile. Willow gasped a soft breath.

Everything was so easy when it was just the two of them.

“SHUT THE FUCK UP!”

Donny’s booming voice and loud fist banging on the shared bedroom wall startled them both, making them both fall flat on their asses. Tara scowled as she stood, tapping the space bar to stop the music, then offered a hand to help Willow up.
“I’m sorry he’s such an asshole.”

Willow pulled herself up and ended up standing in very close proximity to Tara.

“It’s okay,” she said with an audible swallow, her eye line naturally glancing toward Tara’s lips, “The Maclay women make up for it with their beauty and cooking.”

“Do you want to come over for lunch tomorrow?” Tara asked with a charming smile, “My mom is baking pies for church and there’s always extra…”

Willow’s eyes scrunched up tight. She really didn’t want to piss Tara off again.

“I can’t, I’m so sorry. My parents want me to go to some luncheon. I…If I could get out of it, I—”

Tara pulled Willow forward softly.

“It’s okay. I’m sorry I was short with you earlier,” she apologized, her thumb brushing skin below the hem of Willow’s shirt, “I just miss you when you’re not around.”

Willow’s eyelids fluttered at the contact.

“I could… ‘help you with some homework’ during the week.”

“You could ‘help me with some homework’ right now, study buddy,” Tara offered and brushed her lips against Willow’s.

Willow’s eyes glanced furtively toward the door, but she relaxed again when she saw it was firmly closed. She took a step forward, gently pushing Tara along the way until the back of her knees hit the bed. Tara sat down and moved back so she was sitting sideways on the bed, back against the wall. Willow scooted down beside her, purposefully angling herself so she’d be hidden behind the door if it opened.
Willow ducked her head in to go for the kiss but paused just shy of Tara’s lips.

“You’re not working tomorrow, right?”

Tara shook her head, confused. Willow waved it off dismissively.

“Shame, I could’ve snuck you into the closet.”

She suddenly realized what she said and her face grew pained and guilty.

Tara brushed the back of her finger on Willow’s cheek.

“It’s okay, Willow. I…” she started, then finished with a sympathetic smile, “It’s okay.”

“Why?” Willow croaked out.

“Because I like this,” Tara replied, dropping her hand to tickle Willow’s wrist instead, “And I like… you. And I’m not in a rush.”

Willow nuzzled her forehead against Tara. Being alone was the only time she felt safe enough to voice her feelings.

“I tried to figure out when things changed,” she said quietly, meeting Tara’s gaze from the position of their foreheads touching, “But they didn’t. They just evolved. You were always important to me. It just expanded to include more feelings, more…”

Desires

“More,” Tara finished for her and Willow looked at her gratefully.

She always just knew exactly. The only person with whom Willow felt effortlessly understood.
“When I let you closer, I only want you closer,” she said with a heavy sigh, “But…”

“But?” Tara prompted softly.

Willow met her gaze.

“I don’t want to lose you.”

Tara lifted Willow’s chin to look directly at her as it tilted downward again.

“Willow, I promise. No matter what. No matter how you feel. You won’t lose me. I’m here, however you want me.”

Willow felt Tara’s warm breath hit her lips and all she wanted was to know their softness once more.

“I want you,” she breathed before closing the kiss.

They kissed slowly at first, brushing lips until they were bruised.

Tara loved those kisses; when she could feel herself inhaling Willow’s breath on its exhale.

She had gone into this prepared to have her heart broken but also ready to resume their friendship at Willow’s request. She would cry a lot, privately if Willow called things quits, but not as much as if it broke their bond irreparably. The ball would always be in Willow’s court and all Tara could do was hope she wasn’t the only one that had her feelings getting stronger and stronger each day.

Willow, an eternal ball of contradiction, both hoped that her feelings would go away completely so she didn’t have to deal with them and also that she never stopped feeling as alive as Tara made her feel when they connected. She couldn’t balance the Willow she was with Tara and the Willow she presented to the world.
Right now her only solution was to discover an island they could run away to together, alone. Then she might actually be able to embrace this without all her fears of what the world would think of her. While she worked out those logistics, kissing did a pretty good job of keeping her mind off of it.

Time passed quickly, as it always did when they were in this position until Willow’s watch beeped on the hour. She glanced down at it.

“I guess I should head home.”

“Okay,” Tara replied softly, “Text me about that homework?”

The evocative upward lilt on the end of that sentence was not lost on Willow, who found her hand squeezing Tara’s thigh.

“Maybe I could stay for five more minutes.”

Tara didn’t argue against either event and welcomed Willow’s lips back onto hers. Willow’s fingers curled a bit further, pushing her nails against the denim of Tara’s jeans. She felt a little squirm beneath her hand and quickly retracted it, holding it up in a panic.

“I’m sorry.”

Tara shook her head.

“No, it’s fine, I lik—”

The door-handle moved and Willow nearly fell off the bed trying to get some distance.

Kimberly walked in, with a warm smile for them both.

“Hey girls,” she greeted, folding her arms lightly across her chest and leaning against the door, “Willow are you staying the night?”
Willow shook her head furiously.

“N-No, Ms. Maclay, I have to get home,” she said, pushing herself up and scrambling out, “Um, bye.”

“Bye honey,” Kimberly called after her.

“Bye,” Tara echoed, trying not to show her annoyance.

Kimberly turned back to Tara and looked at her with concern.

“Are you okay, Tara? You look a little flushed,” she said, her brow furrowing, “So did Willow actually. Do you need to open a window in here?”

Tara stood up and stayed at the door, politely inviting her mother to leave.

“I’ll do that.”

Kimberly took the hint and bid her daughter goodnight. Tara leaned back against the closed door, huffed out one breath of frustration, then pushed herself away.

She walked past her keyboard and moved a big storage container of old fabric and materials out from under her window so she could reach up to open it.

She watched Willow, almost at her house, turn at the sound and lifted her hand to wave out to her.

Willow paused, then smiled over her shoulder and waggled her fingers back. It was hard to hide the smile that broke out on her face in front of Tara, though it did dower appropriately as she approached the final steps into her house.

“Mom, dad, I’m home,” she called to the barren room.
Even when it was occupied, everything was so quiet and solemn.

“Willow?”

Willow looked up as she hung her keys on the hook, surprised by another voice in the room. Sheila had appeared from her study, a tablet in one hand and a stylus pen in the other. Her face was angled down at the screen.

“Yeah, mom?”

Sheila looked up, briefly.

“Have you been working on your college essay?”

Willow held back an eye-roll; it wouldn’t be received well if it was caught.

“I was hanging out with Tara, mom. We just listened to music and... stuff.”

She hoped her cheeks didn’t color, but Sheila was barely looking at her anyway.

“Now is the critical time—”

“To get my applications in tip-top shape,” Willow echoed softly, “I know. I am.”

Sheila glanced at her, nodded once and turned back toward her study.

No goodnight.

“Sleep well, dear.”
Okay, some goodnight.

Willow brushed past and continued on into the kitchen. Ira was standing over the countertop, running a knife through an avocado.

“Hey Dad,” Willow greeted, her tone ever-hopeful.

Ira looked up with a fond smile.

“Oh, Willow, hello my darling,” he said, straightening up his posture, “You’ve caught me making a bit of a midnight snack.”

Willow looked at the clock on the microwave.

“You’re an hour early.”

“Better an hour early than—“

“A minute late,” Willow finished with a smile.

Ira opened the avocado and shook his head disdainfully.

“These blasted things, either hard as rocks or rotten to the core.”

Willow walked past him to get to the food cabinet.

“There’s a solution to that,” she said, reaching into the back to pull out a jar, which she presented to him, “Eat peanut butter instead.”
Ira held Willow against his chest and kissed the top of her head.

“Wise to the bone,” he commented, and then released Willow to untwist the lid, “And crunchy too. Smooth peanut butter is for—”

“People with no bite,” they finished together, laughing in tune with each other.

Willow hurried off to the fridge while Ira peanut-buttered the toast.

“Wait ‘til you try this!”

She stirred together two glasses of strawberry milk, popped a straw in each and brought them to the table, where Ira followed with the plate of toast. To Willow’s surprise, he didn’t balk at the drink.

“My mother used to take my brother and I to get a shake every Friday,” he reminisced happily, “This was my favorite flavor.”

Willow smiled over the straw.

“It’s my favorite too.”

Ira cut the toast diagonally and offered half to Willow. He put a hand on her shoulder blade and then brought his hand down on top of hers across the table.

“I missed you this summer, sweetheart.”

Willow had a gob full of peanut butter, but her eyes shone as she struggled to get it down with the aid of some strawberry milk.

“I missed you too, Dad,” she replied eventually, blushingly wiping her mouth with her sleeve.
Ira patted her hand and took his back.

“Were you out this evening?”

Willow nodded with avoiding eyes.

“I went across the street.”

“I’m so glad you’re still chummy with that girl. It’s good to know you have someone so close when we’re gone.”

“Tara,” Willow said, her face doing that very annoying thing again where it lit up at her mention, which Willow readily tried to conceal, “She, uh, needed help with her homework.”

Ira smiled.

“Yes, Tara. I remember you put on your little plays together. She seems to have grown into a sweet girl.”

Willow pursed her lips together; Tara’s taste still lingering on.

*Her lips are sweet.*

“She is…she’s amazing. Goes to that special performing arts school out in Las Brujas. She’s brilliant at music, plays all kinds of instruments and she’s in a band. And she makes things too, like designs them I guess? Altering clothes and making accessories, that kind of thing. I told her she could sell it on eBay if she wanted, I’d help her set it up, but she’s already pretty busy with all her music and other commitments.”

Ira looked at her curiously.

“You sound quite enamored.”
Willow’s eyes widened.

*Stop it. You’ll give yourself away.*

Ira didn’t seem to dwell too long though.

“It’s lovely to have a friend to look up to. Will she be pursuing music in college? Julliard perhaps?”

Willow shook her head.

“No, that’s…not her style,” Willow answered, then paused a moment as she considered the next part of her sentence, “She’s always wanted to go backpacking when she graduates.”

“Shame to waste such a talent, if it is as you say,” Ira mused.

Willow shrugged one shoulder.

“She’d say she’d learn more spending a day walking the cobbled streets of Italy than sitting in a classroom.”

“What do you say?” Ira prompted.

Willow paused again. This was definitely a time she needed to give the ‘expected’ answer.

“She should be using her talent to get scholarships and a good education.”

Ira patted Willow’s shoulder again.

“Your wisdom extends beyond snack choices.”
Willow forced a smile and sucked the last of her strawberry milk through the straw.

“I guess I’ll go work on my essay.”

“Let me know if I can provide any resources,” Ira offered helpfully, before getting up to bring the dishes to the sink.

Willow nodded.

“Thanks, Dad. ‘Night.”

“Goodnight honey,” Ira offered with a departing smile.

Willow left the kitchen and went straight upstairs to her bedroom. She went to her desk and diligently read over her college entry essay, making yet more tweaks for the nth time. As the bells of Sunnydale’s many churches struck midnight, she got ready for bed and got under her covers.

She thought about reading but didn’t feel like concentrating, so instead used her phone to bring up photos of Tara she had stored on it.

The room was dark but for the glow of the screen; but for Willow, Tara’s smile was blinding.

She used to think she envied Tara's body before she knew it was an attraction, but some envy still remained: for her smile. That smile brought her joy when it was shared with her and pain when she compared it to her own lack of one.

Willow did everything she was supposed to but nothing she did made her radiate happiness like Tara seemed to. She envied Tara’s ability to be happy and everyone still like her.

Her biggest struggle was fighting against the belief that her happiness was an indulgence.
And that was how Tara’s smile made her soar and knocked her down all in one go.

Despite that, there would never be a night where her image wasn’t the last thing she looked at before going to sleep.

“Willow, fix your collar, it’s sticking out.”

Willow caught her mother’s discerningly stern gaze in the rearview mirror from the back seat and immediately set about smoothing out her collar.

She quickly checked out her buttons and hemlines to make sure they were neat, but it didn’t stop Sheila doing it again once they exited the car, while Ira was handing the keys off to the valet.

Willow was well used to the routine and didn’t fight it. She knew any trip to the country club would involve every facet of her appearance being scrutinized.

“And please, Willow, use your napkin when you’re eating. Do not embarrass me in front of Babette Babcock again.”

One smudge of cream cheese and I’m branded for life.

“Okay, mom.”

Sheila finished primping Willow and straightened up.

“That shirt looks very well on you.”

Willow broke out in a smile.

“Thanks, mom.”
The three of them headed into the large building, where Willow immediately identified the smell of expensive (though not necessarily pleasant) perfume and newly buffed leather shoes. She’d never really made any friends here; the best thing the place had going for it was its Caesar salad.

Ira, upon glancing at Willow’s face, suddenly stopped to pat his pockets.

“Oh, I forgot my keys.”

Willow guessed he just said that to make her smile, but it worked.

“You gave them to the valet, dad.”

Ira chuckled at himself and wrapped his arm around Willow in a sidelong hug.

“What would I do without you?”

Willow leaned into the hug, but suddenly startled when they walked into the restaurant and she saw Tara standing behind the bar with her hair tied up, filling a tray of waters.

Being around Tara and other people at the same time was bad, bad, bad.

Other people who knew her parents; who included her parents.

The very people she most desperately could not reveal her attraction to were just one lingering glance away from figuring out her deep, dark secret. The Chases might even be there. Then everyone really would know.

“I, uh…I’m gonna go get water,” Willow said and ran off without waiting for a response.

She approached the bar, laying her hands down flat on its surface to stop them from twitching.
“I didn’t think you were working today.”

Tara looked up and smiled in greeting.

“Hey, you. I got called in to cover a shift.”

The skin under Willow’s nails grew white as she pressed her fingers deeply against the mahogany wood of the bar. She purposefully angled her gaze upward to stop herself from noticing how hot Tara looked in a waistcoat.

“Did you make that?” she asked, nodding to the blue scrunchie in Tara’s hair, adorned with white felt stars, “It’s really pretty.”

_Danger._

“Could I get some extra napkins to stuff in my pockets? I’m extra paranoid,” she added on hastily.

Tara ducked down and returned with a stack of them, which she handed across.

“Stay away from the cream cheese,” she advised with amusement, “You wouldn’t want to provide more embarrassment to a woman who deals with it every time she has to introduce herself.”

A man passed behind them and glanced momentarily at Tara, who adjusted her posture.

“Can I get you anything else ma’am?”

“Don’t do that,” Willow snapped, stuffing the napkins into her clutch purse, “I hate that.”

“It’s my job,” Tara replied quietly.
Willow started to respond but suddenly felt an arm around her shoulders, guiding her away.

“Come along, Willow,” Sheila instructed, stopping for a moment when she spotted Tara, “Oh hello, Terri. I didn’t realize you worked here.”

“It’s Tara,” Willow interrupted, leaving out the ‘you’ve only known her for over a decade’ part.

Sheila just smiled pleasantly.

“Can you get my husband and I two glasses of seltzer and bring them out to the veranda?”

Willow wanted the ground to open up and swallow her. She hated being in this position, but Tara just took it in her stride and smiled right back.

“Of course, ma’am. I’ll be right out.”

Willow offered a pained look of apology as she was led away, but Tara was already busy fetching glasses from behind the bar.

Willow did a round of hellos of her mother’s friends and was eventually told to sit with the eldest son of the Babcocks, Richard Jr. or ‘Dickie’. Dickie seemed just as put out to be seated with her as she was with him.

“Great, a ginger,” he murmured under his breath

“Great, an asshole,” Willow murmured under hers.

Both intended for the other to hear it and shared a look of mutual disdain.

Willow would be a legal adult soon, why did she keep putting up with this shit?
Thankfully Tara wasn’t long in giving her a reprieve as she brought the water out to her parents and dropped an unasked for, but very much appreciated drink to Willow too.

“Half lemonade, half sprite and a dash of grenadine,” Tara announced, already knowing Willow’s favorite, then as she straightened back, spoke quieter into Willow’s ear, “With a cherry on top.”

Willow flushed and her companion seemed annoyed to not get any attention.

“Hey, get me a coke.”

Tara pursed her lips and nodded dutifully before turning on her heels to fetch the drink.

“She’s hot,” Dickie as if he had even half a chance.

Willow just stood up and moved away, making a half-hearted excuse about going to the bathroom. She crept the long way around, seeing who was around and who wasn’t. Thankfully, there was no sign of Cordelia, so she wouldn’t have to deal with any of those snarky comments until tomorrow when she was back at school.

She went into the extravagant restroom and sat on the sofa, using her phone for entertainment. If she was sure her mother wouldn’t walk in, she would have kicked her feet up too, but she resisted.

When she’d wasted as much time as she could get away with, she left the bathroom again but found herself being yanked by the arm sideways.

“What the—” she exclaimed startled, only to make out Tara’s smiling face in the dim light of the janitor’s closet.

“You wanted to sneak into a closet right?” Tara grinned.

Willow gulped audibly. Her mouth opened and closed a few times before she finally shook her head to force some clarity to her thoughts.
“I’m really sorry,” she said finally.

Tara placed her hands on Willow’s bare upper arms.

“There was nothing wrong with what you did last night. I was fine with it.”

Willow grew crimson and Tara brushing against her skin was not helping.

“No, um…my mom. These people. Ordering you around and stuff.”

Tara shrugged one shoulder.

“It’s my job. It’s no big deal,” she said, gazing softly into Willow’s eyes, “I know you’re not like that.”

Willow felt her breath catch at the way Tara was looking at her.

“You look very, very pretty today.”

Willow felt her chin being tilted up and did not resist as Tara’s lips landed on hers. Tara pulled back and rested their foreheads together.

“You taste good too.”

Willow pursed her own lips, tasting the cherry chap on them. She just wore it all the time now, always anticipating a kiss might be near.

“I like it best when you don’t have anything on them though. You’re sweet enough.”

Willow blinked in surprise.
Tara liked her when she was just…her.

That was something she’d never contemplated. In fact, she’d never actually contemplated why Tara liked her at all.

“Why do you—”

Suddenly the doorknob turned and the door was pushed in, getting wedged by the mop and bucket sitting against it. Willow jumped back. Another big push on the door removed the obstacle and it opened completely, streaming light in.

It was the man from behind the bar earlier, and close-up Willow could clearly see ‘manager’ printed on his nametag.

“What’s going on in here?” he asked, eyes narrowing at Tara.

“She was just trying to help me find my coat,” Willow blurted, and Tara looked uncomfortable.

“This is a janitor’s closet,” the manager replied, obviously disbelieving.

Willow looked around like this was a surprise.

“Heh, so it is! Silly me!”

He held the door open for them, inviting, rather forcefully, for them to step out.

“I can help you find your coat, ma’am,” he said cordially, then not quite as much, “Tara, there’s an order waiting to go out in the kitchen. Please wait for me after it’s been delivered.”

Tara nodded and left, hanging her head. Willow started to back out the other way.
“Uh, you know, now I think about it, I left my coat in the car! Um, thanks!”

She went out to the grounds and realized she was on the completely wrong side and had to walk the entire length of the building to get back to the clubhouse. As she got closer she started to rush because she’d been gone awhile and her mother would undoubtedly ask questions.

When she got there, everyone was taking their seats for the meal. Sheila beckoned Willow over to their table.

“There you are,” she said, her voice clicking slightly, “Can we get Terri to bring us some more waters?”

“It’s Tara,” Willow insisted, sitting and folding a napkin in her lap, “And I’m sure someone will be around soon.”

Willow nervously glanced around to see if Tara was nearby. She finally caught sight of her in the doorway behind the bar that led back to the manager’s office, handing her nametag over to him.

Willow looked on out of the corner of her eye with a sinking feeling in her stomach as she watched Tara being fired and a sinking feeling in her heart that she was doing nothing to stop it.
A boy leaned his long frame against a set of lockers, almost standing to its full height.

His skin, tawny and warm made his dark eyes draw you into their depths invitingly. His tight black curls sat neatly atop his head and were thick enough to run his hand through, which he often did when engaging in conversation. He was clean-shaven in the mornings but stubble was starting to show by the end of the school day. He would start to rub his chin as the afternoon scratch set in, making him frequently look like he was thinking hard about something.

Tara closed her locker door and was not startled to see her friend standing so close.

“Nate. Hi,” she greeted with a smile.

“Hey birthday girl,” Nate replied, flashing a white smile, “Feel different?”

Tara moved away from her locker and Nate fell in step with her. Tara shrugged her shoulder.

“Not much has changed.”

“You can…pawn something,” Nate suggested playfully.

Tara shook her head resolutely.

“I don’t own anything worth pawnning except my instruments…and they’re not going anywhere.”

Nate swung the books in his hands from one side to the other.
“Gamble?”

Tara shrugged again.

“No money either.”

“Buy cigarettes?” Nate asked with a desperate tone.

Tara’s nose scrunched up.

“Gross.”

Nate half-sighed, half-laughed.

“You’re not going to do anything fun now you’re legally an adult?”

“I’m going to go get a free coffee at Calma Beans,” Tara offered as a reasonable alternative.

“I thought you liked the coffee at that Espresso place in your hometown,” Nate questioned, bushy eyebrow raised comically.

Tara laughed.

“I do, but they don’t give it out for free.”

“Okay, okay,” Nate agreed, settling back into a soft smile, “Want some company?”

Tara nodded.
“Sure, but I’m going to a job interview in an hour.”

“Sweet,” Nate agreed and threw an arm around Tara’s shoulders to walk them toward the parking lot.

He opened the passenger side door of his truck for Tara and helped push her up into it.

“Hey shorty,” he grinned as he closed the door over again.

He threw his books in the back and hopped in the driver’s side.

“You want Calma right? On 9th?” he asked as he buckled up.

“9th,” Tara answered. Her interview was just a couple of blocks from there.

“9th,” Nate repeated, tapping the wheel as he pulled out of the lot, “How do you think you did on Montrose’s pop quiz? I can read any piece of music you put in front of me but when they start throwing those Greek letters into math I’m out.”

“I have a, um, friend, who helps me with math and other homework,” Tara answered, glancing out the window, “We make up songs together.”

“You cheatin’ on me?” Nate asked with a smirk and arched eyebrow.

Tara just smiled and shook her head.

“They’re not real songs, they’re jokey songs. Like ‘letters to the left of me, numbers to the right, here I am, solving quadratics with you’.”

Nate laughed.
“Hey, it’s good, but I bet you can’t make sweet music like we can.”

“It’s just different,” Tara answered cagily, “She’s not a singer, she just likes the fun of it.”

“And you?” Nate prompted.

Tara smiled again.

“I like to see her have fun.”

Nate continued to grin cockily as he reached for the radio button.

“I’d still kick her butt at a game of radio randomizer.”

He fumbled with the stations until he found something he liked.

“Yes! You in?”

Tara grinned.

“I’m in.”

Nate tapped out the beat, using his whole body in the seat to feel it.

Who me? Not you, oh yes, who's he?
I even dig yo' man's style, but I love yo' profile
Whisper in your ear and get you all shook up
But don't blush, just keep this on the hush

Sometimes Nate took on the female vocal, just so Tara would be forced to test herself with the male.
Tara closed her eyes and visualized the tempo so she’d be in rhythm when her bar came up.

_I hope ya not, 'cause your thighs got me hot_
Only one plan, that’s to rise to the top
I told you before when I first pursued
I want a interlude, in the nude

Nate clapped twice, in tune before putting his hands back on the wheel and taking a corner.

Tara could only smile; locked in a car with Nate was the only place she felt comfortable enough to sing songs usually outside of her comfort zone, and only because he’d join in if something like Disney songs came on too. There was a loss of inhibitions when you were both willing to embarrass yourself.

Plus there was just something about driving along in a car that just made you want to sing along with whatever was playing.

He joined back in for his part and they sang the last refrain together.

_ I had to let you know that I got a crush on you!_

“Yes!” Nate hollered, grinning from ear to ear, “You’re the best white girl rapper I know, you know. I wish you’d do it at a show.”

“Just so I can make you look good in comparison,” Tara teased.

Nate reached over and placed his hand over Tara’s, engulfing it with the large size of his palm.

“You make me look good, but not in comparison. I make the best music of my life with you,” he said sincerely, lingering on Tara’s hand for a moment before taking his back to swing the truck into a parking spot.
Tara jumped down a lot easier than she’d climbed in, grabbed her bookbag from where it had been sitting between her legs and held it by the top handle. The lights on the truck flashed as the doors locked and she headed toward the café, where Nate held the door open for her.

“Thanks,” she smiled.

She wasn’t blind to his attention, but he was like that with everyone. A natural born flirt. And he was right — they did play great music together, so their dynamic worked.

She approached the counter and extended her smile for the barista.

“Can I get a medium hazelnut Fleetwood Macchiato please?”

Before she could redeem her birthday reward, Nate was handing over cash.

“Use your free one for the way home,” he said with a wink, “Happy Birthday.”

“Thanks, Nate,” Tara repeated and spoke thanks again when the barista offered her a birthday wish.

“I’ll get a small Sweet Chai O’ Mine,” Nate said and waited for the drinks while Tara got them a table.

After chatting for a few minutes about other things going on at school, Tara noted the way Nate was tapping his hands against the table.

“I like that beat.”

“I’ve had it in my head all day,” Nate replied, tapping a little more forcefully, “I’m thinking of it as an interlude to that song we wrote last week…”

He hummed for a moment before contributing some lyrics off the top of his head.
“So, what’s up, what’s up, tonight’s the night, we’re feeling good; Skin on fire, blazing heat, let me show you what you mean to me.”

“Oh whoa, oh-whoa-oh-oh…” Tara improvised a harmony with him and he clicked his fingers and nodded enthusiastically.

“Yes, you got it. We gotta write that down, that…”

He beatboxed the tune again and Tara took out the music notebook in the front pocket of her bookbag to write the notes down.

“You’re getting it wrong,” Nate complained, looking over her shoulder.

“I am not,” Tara protested.

“It’s—”

He started beatboxing it again and swiped Tara’s notebook to get it down as he saw fit.

“Hey!” Tara exclaimed and snatched it back, heart hammering.

She gulped at the surprised look on Nate’s face.

“Sorry. Just. It’s my notebook.”

Nate nodded, holding his hands up.

“Yeah of course. Sorry.”

Tara put the notebook down and opened it to an appropriate page, then slid it back across the table.
“You can write it how you want it.”

Nate declined with a polite smile.

“Your writing is prettier than mine anyway.”

“Okay, but you have to sing for me,” Tara replied light-heartedly, “I wouldn’t want to get them wrong again.”

“Alright, alright, alright,” Nate replied in his best McConaughey.

Together they worked out the melody and tried out a few harmonies.

Nobody around them paid any attention; most were other students from their school and were well used to it or doing similar themselves.

As Tara was packing her notebook away, her phone lit up with an alarm.

“Crap! I have to go.”

“Want me to drop you off?” Nate offered, already standing.

Tara stood and threw her bookbag over her shoulders.

“I’m good. See you tomorrow.”

“Can you bring your sax?” Nate asked, his fingers running through his hair, “I want to practice for the show this weekend in our free period.”
“You know most of them are, um, half-deaf, right?” Tara replied with a grin.

Nate shrugged one shoulder.

“But they’re full-generous with those delicious butterscotch candies.”

“I’ll bring it,” Tara promised, downing the last of her coffee and making a beeline for the door.

“Good luck,” Nate called after her, “Hey I never even asked where it—”

Tara was already gone, and Nate watched her leave.

Tara walked the few blocks to the place of her interview and got her compact mirror out of the side of her bag to tidy herself up. She took off her sweater and stuffed it into her bag then pulled at the hem of her V-neck so it plunged a little deeper at the chest.

Finally ready, she opened the door and crossed the threshold with the hope she’d come out employed.

Tara turned the key in the door, but before she could open it, she heard her name being called from behind.

“Tara!”

Tara looked over her shoulder and her face lit up when she saw Willow jogging past the gate toward her, holding a cupcake with a lit birthday candle in her hands.

“Hey. I’ve been keeping an eye out for you.”

“I’m sorry, I would’ve let you know I was going to be late today if I’d known,” Tara apologized, shuffling her bag over the shoulder it was hanging off so that it didn’t fall, “I had an interview.”
Willow briefly looked guilty.

“Yeah?” she prompted unsurely.

Tara smiled and nodded.

“I got it.”

Willow threw one arm around Tara.

“That’s amazing!” she exclaimed happily, “Where is it?”

“Burger joint in Brujas,” Tara answered shortly, “It’s better hours and easier to get to after school as well.”

Willow pulled back from the embrace, cheeks flushing under her smile.

“That’s so great, Tara,” she repeated her glee as the guilt of her inaction finally lifted, “I’m still so sorry about what happened at the club.”

Tara shrugged.

“It’s not your fault. He heard me make that remark about the guest and then got caught in the janitor’s closet ‘fraternizing’ with another. I should have known better, he never liked me. Besides this new place has way better tips.”

Willow nodded along and kept Tara’s gaze even after she’d stopped talking. After she realized she was staring, she extended her arms to present the cupcake.

“I know your mom probably baked you something delicious but… Happy Birthday,” she said earnestly, producing a lighter and lighting the candle for her, “I picked a special candle.”
Tara blew it out and it almost immediately reignited.

“See? It’s extra-flamey,” Willow grinned, “Did you make a birthday wish?”

Tara’s lips sloped into a half-smile.

“She’s standing in front of me.”

Tara took a step closer, but after a furtive glance around, Willow stepped back and cleared her throat. Tara rubbed the back of her own neck regretfully.

“Sorry,” she said, turning back to finally open the door, “Come upstairs?”

Willow nodded and they walked into the house together. It was quiet, but they headed straight for the stairs. Halfway up, Tara reached back for Willow’s hand.

Donny’s hungover head popped out from the living room and watched their retreating forms.

Upstairs, Tara let Willow into her room, backed up against the door until it was closed and flicked the lock on the door.

Willow sank down to perch on the edge of the bed, still holding the candle and its light, flickering away.

“Didn’t really anticipate the putting out part.”

Tara came and sat next to Willow, then lifted her hand to her mouth and licked the pad of her thumb and index finger. She squeezed the flame through it, which extinguished, leaving just a puff of smoke.

Willow gulped. She was sure that was intentional by how slowly Tara had done it.
And that was bad news because she was pretty sure she’d only lasted so long into her adolescence without acting on, or acknowledging, her feelings for Tara because Tara wasn’t actively trying to turn her on. Now it was nothing short of torture.

“I got you something.” she blurted, “I mean apart from the cupcake. I got you something.”

Tara took the cupcake and slid her finger through the frosting, lifting it to her mouth.

She wasn’t trying this time but that didn’t stop it affecting Willow greatly.

“You did?”

Willow stared dumbly for a moment, then shook her head.

“Did what?”

Tara smiled and Willow’s world lit up. For many years she’d wondered why Tara’s smile always made her feel so happy so instantaneously.

Sometimes she wished she could go back to wondering.

“You said you got me something, silly.”

“Oh!” Willow replied suddenly, “Yeah, uh huh. It’s um…well, I hope you like it.”

She slid her hand into her front pocket and produced a small pink pouch. She handed it to Tara shyly.

Tara smiled and took it. She held it in her hand and pulled the strings so it opened up. She let the contents fall out and a silver bracelet pooled in her palm. She found the ends and pulled it taut so she could see the charm affixed in the middle. It was an odd shape, a curve on one side with jagged edges on the other, almost like a lima bean.
She wasn’t quite sure what it was, that was until Willow pulled up her sleeve and showed Tara she was wearing a matching one.

Tara put the shapes together and realized they made a heart.

Her breath immediately caught.

This was really the most Willow had expressed anything to her outside of whispered nothings and emotive kisses. Tara understood why, completely, and was willing to wait as long as it took. But this symbol meant a lot and she had to hold back tears lest Willow get the wrong idea.

“I love it.”

“You do?” Willow asked in relief.

She worried it might be too childish or something. They’d made friendship bracelets as kids and Willow just wanted to give something more.

“I’m glad. I just…” she paused and slid it over Tara’s right wrist, “I wanted to give you something that…”

Tara brushed their fingers together.

“You know you can talk to me about anything, right?”

Willow slowly lifted her gaze to Tara’s.

“I’m…scared.”

“I know,” Tara replied, softly, sympathetically, “I’m scared of my mom finding out too.”
Willow’s eyes closed briefly.

“I’m not just scared of my parents. I’m scared of…”

_The world._

It was too much to contemplate. She leaned against Tara’s chest and took comfort from her embrace. Nothing in the world made her feel the way Tara’s arms did. She could have been four years old again every time they closed around her.

“You smell like safety and home.”

Tara’s hand smoothed out the back of Willow’s hair; fingers curling the ends affectionately. She smiled.

“I think it’s just baby powder.”

Tara felt Willow’s answering smile against her neck.

“No, it’s you.”

Tara picked up the cupcake from beside her and dabbed the frosting against Willow’s nose.

“Now you smell sweet too.”

Willow giggled and tried to retaliate, but Tara twisted away and stuffed the whole thing in her mouth, leaving just the case.

“Hey, none for me,” Willow pouted.
She crumpled the paper wrapping sadly.

“You think I could get in on your mom’s church pies this Sunday instead?” she asked hopefully, “My dad won’t flip his lid if I leave out the church part.”

Tara finally swallowed the mass of cake in her mouth and wiped at her lips.

“Yes, but you’ll have to come to the nursing home. She’s bringing them there afterward and Nate and I are going to play for the residents.”

Willow nodded eagerly.

“I love to watch you play.”

Tara lay back and drew circles on one of Willow’s hands.

“I love…” she started, eyes looking up through her lashes, “To do a lot of things with you.”

Willow could see specks of frosting left behind on Tara’s lips and, well, she had missed out on a taste. She climbed up alongside Tara and rested her head on the pillow alongside her. Her eyes glanced between Tara’s eyes and lips before she finally pressed her mouth against Tara’s.

She sucked Tara’s bottom lip softly, remembering how she’d learned to do this; remembering the first press of their innocent, awkward lips together and how she got a strange feeling in her stomach and nothing had ever quite been the same ever again.

How she’d tried to Resolve Face herself into Definitely Not Wanting This and yet had taken this position each and every time it was offered to her.

She wasn’t an addict, she could quit at any time. But since she was definitely In Control, she may as well enjoy it.

Her fingers touched Tara’s jaw and upon its natural responsive movement, she teased her tongue into
Tara’s mouth.

It was just too easy to get lost in a Tara-kiss.

Tara lived for these moments because Willow’s kiss was when Tara knew Willow’s heart was right there with her.

They kissed until their position lying down so close together was becoming precarious and then suddenly Tara’s door handle slammed down sharply and the door heaved.

Willow gasped audibly, her heart suddenly pounding as she anticipated the door opening.

“It’s okay, it’s locked,” Tara reassured quietly as she slid down the end of the bed to stand.

She fixed her clothes and hair and looked back to Willow for confirmation she looked presentable. Willow looked stunned but managed to nod.

Tara unlocked the door and jerked it open, frowning when she saw it was Donny on the other side.

“What?”

“Why is your door locked?” Donny asked suspiciously.

“Because you just barge in all the time,” Tara retorted, gesturing indicatively.

Donny sneered at her.

“You know you’re 18 now, maybe you’ll finally stop acting like a little princess.”

Tara looked down and spoke quietly.
“I don’t know why you hate me.”

“Because you’re—”

Kimberly appeared, coming up the stairs with a weary look on her face.

“Could we get a break from this for one day?” she requested them both, then focused her gaze on Donny, “It’s your sister’s birthday.”

Donny stormed off, flipping them the bird on the way.

“It’s always her something,” he muttered before his door slamming reverberated throughout the whole upper level of the house.

Kimberly massaged her temples for a moment and took a steady breath. She hated to think he had his father’s temper. She really hoped her nurture won out on his nature, but Donny was a very angry man and truthfully Kimberly was a bit afraid of how far she could push him.

She looked back to Tara and placed a hand on each shoulder, looking at her daughter and wondering how she got to be in this position; Tara was a little girl singing into a plastic microphone only yesterday, or so it seemed.

“Happy Birthday, my darling,” she said, kissing Tara squarely on the forehead, “I’m so sorry I couldn’t be here when you woke up. Have you had a good day?”

Tara smiled and nodded.

“Nate and I got to write, and I got the job.”

Kimberly cupped Tara’s face in her hands.
“Oh honey, I’m glad. I know you were worried about starting to save again.”

“Yeah, I’m really happy. I should be doing pretty well by the summer,” Tara replied, pleased, “I should get good tips too.”

Willow appeared in the doorway, pulling awkwardly at the ends of her sleeves.

“Um, I’m gonna go.”

“Oh Willow, I’m sorry, I didn’t know you were here,” Kimberly said, offering a smile.

“She came over to say Happy Birthday,” Tara covered quickly, “And um, she was going to tag along on Sunday if that’s okay.”

“Of course,” Kimberly nodded, “We’d love to have you.”

Willow nodded and caught Tara’s gaze.

“Happy Birthday, Tara,” she said for Kimberly’s sake, her eyes sending the true message.

“Thank you,” Tara replied in much the same way, “I’ll text you later.”

Willow smiled, waved with her fingers and went down the stairs and out the door. Kimberly put her arm around Tara’s shoulders and brought her in the same direction, veering off into the living room.

“You know your main gift will be presented later,” she said, almost skipping over to the coffee table where something large and bulky was covered with sheets of wrapping paper, awkwardly stuck down in places, “But I had to mark my little girl’s journey into adulthood.”

“Mom,” Tara chided gently.
“Just open it,” Kimberly replied giddily.

Tara wasn’t sure the best way to unwrap the object, so tore from the middle down until it was sitting in a pool of its own wrapping.

“It’s second hand, but it works a charm,” Kimberly said, a hint of nervousness in her voice.

Tara’s eyes move from awe to joy to delight in the space of a few seconds. She turned and threw her arms around her mother.

“Thank you so much!”

Kimberly returned the hug, a little tighter than normal. It had meant a few extra night shifts to cover the cost of a decent sewing machine for Tara, but that hug made it all worth it. She kissed the top of her daughter’s head.

“No more staying up until 2 am with that little needle and thread.”

Tara pulled back and looked at her mother cynically.

“You can’t tell me what to do, I’m 18 now.”

Kimberly shook her head, pained; some real, some exaggerated.

“Don’t you start that too or I’ll call you my little girl in front of your friends.”

Tara tucked her head under Kimberly’s chin.

“Don’t worry, I’m never going to be like him.”

Her eyes threw themselves upward and though Kimberly couldn’t see it, she knew who that
inflection belonged to.

“You were great pals when you were babies, you know. Everything changed when we…moved.”

“It’s not my fault Dad ran out on us,” Tara replied, exhaling sharply through her nose, “He can’t blame me.”

Kimberly patted Tara’s back twice and released her.

“Let’s not darken this day. I came home at lunch and made your cake, did you see it?”

Tara shook her head and followed her mother into the kitchen, her only concern now about how quickly she could put together some new band shirts.

“You didn’t have to wear a shirt.”

Willow ran her fingers over the lettering on the front of the shirt, spelling out ‘Insect Reflection’ with an image of a beady-eyed ant looking in the mirror.

“I like it. I get to be your groupie.”

Tara’s hand slid across the wall they were sitting on to cover Willow’s hand.

“You’re much more than that.”

Willow quickly lifted her hand and scratched the side of her nose.

“You, um, did a really good job. I love the eyes.”

“Thanks, I had fun,” Tara replied, taking her hand back from the encounter and running it along the side of her saxophone case, sitting between her legs, “Of course now I’m the go-to for fixing socks
and stuff too. I drew the line at Donny’s underwear.”

Willow’s face scrunched up and Tara nodded.

“Yeah, exactly.”

Tara’s phone buzzed in her pocket and she took it out to read the text.

“My mom got held up, are you okay if we bike it?”

Willow glanced down at the case between Tara’s knees.

“Will your sax be okay?”

“Yeah, it’ll fit on the rack,” Tara said, jumping down from the wall and hiking her case over her shoulder.

Willow planted her feet on the ground and together they walked over to Willow’s driveway. Tara kept her bike there too, just to make it a little more difficult for Donny to interfere with it.

Tara secured her case to the back of her bike and they set off together. It was only a couple of miles to the care home Kimberly was a nurse at, and on a Sunday morning, the roads were pretty clear.

It was a bright day and a beautiful ride passing through the autumnal landscape of the Sunnydale country roads. The trees were still in their twilight of being fully dressed with their changing-color leaves thick on their branches.

The sun was shining, and Willow knew this primarily because of how the shine caught Tara’s face.

Tara would look up when they hit a sunny patch and let it radiate her face, casting a glow on her honey-colored hair. She looked positively beautiful and Willow was awestruck.
The part of her brain that needed to be focusing on cycling was momentarily taken over, causing her to skid off the road and fall under her bike.

“Willow!”

“Yeah?” Willow asked dumbly, responding before she could even realize what had happened.

Tara abandoned her bike on the dirt and threw herself down beside Willow, tossing the bike off her.

“It’s okay, baby, don’t move.”

Willow realized she was on the ground when she felt the gravel grazing her palms.

“I’m okay…” she said, wincing as she pulled herself up on her elbows.

Tara checked Willow’s head, making sure she wasn’t bleeding.

“Did you go over on a rock?”

Willow looked up at Tara and found herself in the same predicament that had gotten her into this situation in the first place. She averted her gaze and hoped desperately her genetic predisposition to blushing was not giving her away this time.

“Heh, yeah, must have.”

“Should I call an ambulance?” Tara asked with concern.

Willow shook her head definitively.

“No way, I’m fine. I want to see you play.”
She glanced at her shoulder, where there was a small rip in the fabric of her t-shirt. She smiled softly at Tara.

“Makes it look cooler.”

Tara returned the smile and briefly brushed some hair away from Willow’s brow. She was careful not to linger so as not to make Willow uncomfortable, but to her surprise, Willow leaned in and hugged her.

“You’re okay,” Tara reassured in her ear, “I’ll get my mom to look you over when we get there.”

Willow just nodded and let Tara help her up and brush herself off.

“Let’s walk the rest of the way,” Tara suggested, hoisting her bike up to wheel alongside her, “Are you okay to walk? It’s not far from here.”

“I can walk,” Willow confirmed, “Really, I’m fine. I’m pretty used to falling over.”

Tara aimed a wistful smile at the ground as they set off along the side of the road, on foot.

“Remember when we did Yabba and Dabba Doo Superheroes and you tripped over your cape?”

“You mean the pillowcase I stuck in the back of my shirt?” Willow asked incredulously, “I ended up inside the thing!”

They laughed together and Willow kept her gaze on Tara for a few moments, thinking about all of the time they’d spent together; all of the experiences they’d shared.

“When did you know?” she semi-blurted, the words coming out as her mind wondered.

Tara didn’t pretend she didn’t know what Willow was talking about. She pushed her bike in silence.
for a moment.

“That’s a multi-layered question.”

“You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to,” Willow replied quickly.

Tara just shook her head and didn’t rush her response.

“I always knew I never liked boys the way other people liked boys,” she answered finally, smiling almost sadly, “I would get jealous when you talked about Xander and for a long time I thought that was because I was jealous that you had a boy you liked and could talk about and be normal.”

Willow looked down guiltily but Tara was still speaking and didn’t notice.

“I spoke to some people online, the ones without depressing spelling. They recommended some… relevant media to watch, and I did.”

Willow looked up with wide eyes.

“Like…porn?”

Tara could only laugh.

“No, like movies and TV shows and stuff.”

Willow seemed relieved and embarrassed all at once, but Tara didn’t let her off the hook.

“The porn out there is not…good.”

The grip Willow had on the handlebar tightened as she tried desperately not to imagine Tara watching porn, or more specifically what she might be doing while watching it. That was a ‘no, no’
thought if ever there was one.

Thankfully Tara seemed to think she’d tortured her enough and continued her story.

“I watched what I could…at first it seemed overwhelming but it was good because the people ‘in the know’ told me what was a good portrayal or a bad portrayal…gave me a narrowed-down list to watch and see what I thought.”

Willow turned her head, noting how lightly Tara talked about what for her held her heart so heavily.

“And what did you think?”

Tara smiled and that sun betrayed Willow again, cursing her with falling in love.

“I thought it was like opening my eyes after being underwater. It gave me a picture of what my life could be like and I realized it fit the way I felt myself being happiest. I…recognized myself.”

Willow stared pensively at her feet for several moments.

“I don't know who I am,” she said finally, so soft only Tara and the trees could hear, “I only know who everyone else wants me to be.”

Tara placed her palm under Willow’s shoulder blade so she would look up.

“I just want you to be happy,” she said as their gazes met, “And that’s how I knew I liked you. Because I wanted you to be happy even if it broke my heart.”

Willow’s heart began to thud and staring into Tara’s eyes seemed like the only important thing in the world at that moment.

*I recognized myself.*
Willow felt like she was pulled from a dream as a male voice broke their silence with the sound of tires screeching.

Nate had pedaled past them and spun around on a brake to face them. His guitar case was strapped over his chest and held on his back and he was greeting them with a pleasant smile, oblivious to the moment he’d interrupted.

“Why aren’t you riding?”

Willow began to shrink in on herself but Tara took the heat.

“My chain was getting stuck.”

“Want me to take a look?” Nate asked, and Tara quickly shook her head.

“I can fix it later. We better get to the home.”

The three of them picked up the pace and made it to the elderly care home in just a few minutes. Willow went to the bathroom when they arrived, needing a moment after the unexpectedly deep conversation of their journey. Tara went to set up with Nate but jumped down when she saw her mother bring in a stack of pies into the rec room they were set to play in.

“Hello, sweetheart,” Kimberly greeted, “Sorry I couldn’t collect you guys.”

“It’s fine,” Tara replied easily, “But, um, Willow fell off her bike on the way, could you check her out? Discreetly?”

Kimberly nodded knowingly and Tara returned to the two stools that essentially made the ‘stage’ for them. There was no AV equipment or anything to set up like when they played clubs or events but Nate was always professional and liked to make sure everything was perfect no matter the audience so it was always a little while until they were ready to play. Tara busied readying her mouthpiece while Nate checked the tuning of his guitar.
Kimberly spotted Willow come through and hang back in the doorway. She caught her eye. She motioned for Willow to come over and led her back to a private treatment room.

“Do you need some help with something?” Willow asked, hands in her pockets but genuinely offering.

Kimberly tapped the examination table.

“Sit up.”

Willow just nodded and sat up. Kimberly went through a few cognitive tests and checked her over for bruising or tenderness.

“What happened? Did the sun blind you?”

“Something like that,” Willow replied absently.

Kimberly took her gloves off and tossed them.

“I think a bruised ego more than anything else, hmm?”

Willow blushed.

“Yeah, I think so.”

“I’m betting nothing a slice of peach cobbler can’t cure,” Kimberly replied with a wink, then ran her thumb over the rip in the shoulder of her t-shirt, “You’ll have to get Tara to fix this.”

“No way, it’s punk Ms. Maclay,” Willow said with a grin.
Kimberly laughed.

“I thought punk was in my day,” she said, shaking her head to herself, “Punk was how I got pregnant. Take every precaution.”

Willow pressed her hands into the table to give her the leverage to jump down.

“Not on my radar.”

The sound of a few guitar strings floated down the corridor.

“Sounds like they’re starting,” Kimberly said, opening the door for Willow.

“Thanks, Ms. Maclay,” Willow answered politely, “Can I help you serve the pies?”

“I’d appreciate that,” Kimberly smiled, “And I’ll make sure to save a big slice for you.”

They walked back into the recreation room and behind the little table where Kimberly had left the pies. She began slicing them and Willow would put them on a paper plate and bring them around to the residents watching Tara and Nate play.

Willow liked to sneak a peek whenever she could too. Tara was always so graceful on the sax and the songs they sang for this crowd were always so soft and ethereal.

Give Tara another one of those sun halos and Willow would easily believe she was an angel incarnate.

Nate started to strum some Elvis and it was a joyful sight when some of the residents got up to slow (very slow) dance together.

Willow watched Tara carry the tune to the room, smiling at Nate as he accompanied her.
“But I can’t help, falling in love with you…”

Nate harmonized and it felt like a punch in the gut for Willow. She’d always loved listening to Elvis and heard that song often. But now she paired it to her situation and couldn’t feel the same rush the song was meant to impart. She wished desperately to be able to help falling in love.

It was intimate to watch them together like that, to watch them open to each other and allow themselves to create together. Their connection was so raw and public and everything Willow never allowed herself to give in to.

She was surprised at the intensity by which the jealousy hit her.

And then Tara found her in the crowd and smiled, and it was a smile just for her. It punched her gut in another way that was even more intense and scarier. She was often so busy worrying about what everyone else would think if they knew, she didn’t see their connection pummeling her so powerfully.

She had to look away and scooted around the room with her head down, collecting paper plates before excusing herself to the bathroom again. There had been so much face-splashing lately, she thought she might wash away entirely. At least then she wouldn’t have so much inner turmoil twisting her up inside.

She sat on the steps at the front door for a long stretch of time before she saw someone sit beside her.

“There you are,” Tara smiled and again Willow felt her belly jump.

It was amazing how the absence of people suddenly made her bodily reactions feel good.

“You okay?”

Willow could only nod silently, but Tara’s face remained sympathetic.

“Does this place remind you of your Bubbe and Zayde?”
Willow neither confirmed nor denied, so Tara assumed and gave her a hug.

Willow closed it and the sun bathed them together.

And how could any of this be wrong when it felt so, so right?

They stood together when Nate came out, guitar on his back and hopped onto his bike.

“Great set, Tare, see you at school!”

“Bye,” Tara called after him as he sped away, “Mom said we can put our bikes on the car and get a ride with her.”

“Great,” Willow agreed and they went to wait at the car.

Kimberly came out and they loaded up and set off for home. Tara sat in the back with her sax and Willow took the front with Tara’s mother.

“That Nathanial boy grows more every time I see him,” Kimberly commented airily as they drove, “He’s very nice. Sweet. He always looks so thoughtful. And a great musician to boot.”

“You’re worse than the grandmothers in the home,” Tara replied wryly.

“I’m just saying, he’s nice,” Kimberly replied with a single definitive nod, catching Tara’s eye in the rearview mirror, “A lot nicer than the boys I was dating at your age.”

“You had two kids at my age,” Tara shot back.

“I’m aware,” Kimberly replied with a sigh, “I’ve been very pleased that you’ve chosen to focus on your music instead of boys during high school. But if you like—”
“I don’t,” Tara interjected quickly and sternly.

“Okay, okay,” Kimberly replied defensively, putting up two fingers on the wheel in place of her hands, “What about you Willow? Or do you already have a new guy?”

Willow looked immediately caught out.

“No. No new…guy,” she said with a nervous chuckle, “I’m um, focusing on getting into a good college.”

Kimberly’s eyebrow arched.

“I guess there’s no convincing my girl of the same?”

Willow very briefly glanced to the back seat.

“I’ve never known Tara not to know her own mind.”

Kimberly smiled at her.

“That is very true, Willow, and I wouldn’t have her any other way.”

“I’d have her lots of ways,” Willow replied automatically, which was immediately followed with a sharp inhalation of breath, “I-I mean, I, i—I would, I would have her any way she is because she’s Tara, she’s always been Tara, always been there so yes, however she um, is, is what I will have. Yes.”

Kimberly just nodded and Willow used the mirror to look into the backseat.

Tara winked and Willow flushed to the very root of her being.
Stop, she thought, *stop, stop, stop*.

With a heavy heart, she looked out the window sadly.

The full trees didn’t seem quite as beautiful as before, but deceptive.

The leaves would die, it was what they were supposed to do, and nothing she could do would stop it.

She closed her eyes so the tear threatening to fall wouldn’t, remembering that one aching line that her brain had turned so bitter.

*But I can’t help falling in love with you…*
Willow pulled her boots over her calves and checked out her outfit in the mirror.

It was the one day a year her mother didn’t harass her about what she was wearing to a family dinner, because it wasn’t with her family. It was with Tara’s.

Willow had always had Thanksgiving with Tara’s family, mostly to get away from her mother ranting about it representing the destruction of the indigenous peoples.

She didn’t disagree, at all, but did it really matter if she shared some mashed potatoes with Tara’s family? If you took out Donny’s scowling and purposefully making a mountain of cream on his dessert just so Tara couldn’t have any on hers, it was everything Willow wanted for a warm, familial engagement. Good food, thankful reflection and a bubble fight with Tara whilst they did the washing up.

She opened her nightstand drawer and took out something she’d brought especially for Tara and the wrapped candle she always got for for Ms. Maclay for inviting her over. Donny got nothing but her contempt.

She slowly crept downstairs, avoiding the creaky step and holding the candle away from her body so the plastic didn’t crackle. A dash across the floor would see her home free without enduring a lecture on the consequences of enjoying some pie.

Just a few more steps and she’d—

“Willow—”

Willow looked like she’d been poked with a hot iron as she bolted for and out the door.

“Sorry, already late, bye!”
She didn’t wait to see if the door opened again as she skipped over to the Maclay house. It was a nice day, despite winter looming; the kind of day she and Tara would have often gone to hang out in their overgrown park, but they didn’t go there anymore. Their respective bedrooms had become havens to their secret but it boxed them in at the same time.

Willow liked the control.

Tara just liked any space with Willow in it.

She knocked on the door and Donny answered, or rather unlocked it and walked away, leaving Willow to let herself in. This wasn’t uncommon; at least he answered it at all. She walked through the house to the kitchen in the back and was greeted by two similar Maclay smiles.

“Hi honey,” Kimberly greeted, from where she was standing over a bowl, making pastry.

“Hi honey,” Tara echoed in a way that sounded like she was mocking her mother, but Willow knew was sincere.

She had to try not to blush as her erratic teenage mind floated the idea that the potatoes Tara was handling would be put to much better use handling something else.

“I got you a candle, Ms. Maclay,” she squeaked out, thrusting it forward.

“Oh, that’s lovely, Willow,” Kimberly replied, holding her hands up for a moment to show they were covered in butter, “We’ll put it in the centerpiece.”

Willow left the candle on the small circular table that sat in front of the sliding door leading out to the back porch. Many summer days had been spent with them running around in their swimsuits spraying each other with the hose and running inside soaking wet to share sandwiches and cut up strawberries.

She approached Tara.

“I got you something too,” she said, opening her jacket like she was hiding drugs, where she produced a can of whipped cream, “Extra whip for the pumpkin pie.”

“Quick, hide it before the Demon Barker of Bleak Street gets a hold of it,” Tara replied with a smile, that special smile that only Willow could elicit.
Willow giggled but Kimberly just sighed heavily.

“Tara, don’t call your brother names.”

“Because he’s been so helpful today preparing dinner?” Tara asked, her tone only hinting at sarcasm despite the overt nature of what she said. Her mother treated her with enough respect for her to give it back, but this was a sore point.

Kimberly rolled up her ball of dough and placed it in the refrigerator.

“Do you two want to set the table for me?” she asked, purposefully moving on.

Tara washed her hands of potato peelings, dried them and held a hand out for the cream.

“I’ll go hide that.”

Their fingers brushed as it passed hands and Willow ducked her head before she could see Tara hold back a shiver. Tara disappeared for a few minutes, upstairs to her bedroom, and when she returned she joined Willow in the dining room. She closed the door leading from the kitchen behind her, enclosing them in the room.

Willow looked up as the door clicked and her breath caught. She’d literally watched Tara grow into the woman she was but it still stunned her just how beautiful she was. Especially since she started to recognize the look Tara returned; that dark look in her eye and the way her lips would purse a little in her direction.

_Dark eyes, pink lips_ Willow thought, feeling the familiar thud in her chest Tara always evoked _Now my heart is racing._

Willow had compared herself to almost every other girl in her life growing up, but never Tara. Tara just held her admiration in so many different ways, and in so many different forms over the years, but always constant. Even when it scared her, she couldn’t turn it off.

She needed Tara to know that, to know all of the things she was too scared to say, sometimes even to herself. Her arms opened and Tara fell into them in a couple of strides, holding on tight.

“I needed that,” she sighed into Willow’s ear.
For a whole second, Willow felt no fear and just the swarm of happy emotions of knowing Tara needed her too.

The other door, the one leading into the living room, opened then and the sounds of football on the TV interrupted them. Willow quickly stepped away and went back to folding napkins while Donny’s eyes darted around the room.

“Where’s the cooler?” he barked, then got aggravated when Tara shrugged, “I left it in here!”

“Don’t yell at her!” Willow piped up automatically and had to try not to shrink when Donny glared at her.

“What’s it to you anyway?”

The kitchen door swung open and Kimberly stood there, red from the heat of the kitchen and tense from overhearing the hollering.


“She hid my cooler!” Donny protested.

Kimberly gestured back toward the kitchen.

“I put it on the back step, I kept tripping over it,” she lied. She’d just hoped it might slow down his slinging of the beers.

Donny brushed past and they heard bottles knocking together moments later. Kimberly ran her hands over her apron and put on her smile again. Fake it ‘til you make it; it had gotten her this far.

“You girls are doing a lovely job. The table looks great.”

Tara glanced at the barely-dressed table that had nothing but placemats and scattered silverware, but just nodded politely.

“The worst thing to happen to this household is all the bars in town being closed,” she commented bitterly when they were alone again.
“Why doesn’t your mom just kick him out?” Willow asked, shaking her head. It made her so mad how badly he treated his mother and sister. She didn’t even know how they could come from the same family, but he’d been the same ball of anger and disdain for as long as she’d known him.

“Who knows?” Tara brushed off and Willow dropped it.

She started to gather the silverware and arrange it properly.

“Buffy texted me,” she said after a minute or two.

“Yeah?” Tara asked, a pleased smile gracing her face as she knew the friendship had been on the rocks.

Willow’s smile wasn’t quite as big.

“Yeah, just to complain about her mom going out of town or something.”

“For Thanksgiving?” Tara asked sadly, and received a nod, “You could have invited her here, my mom wouldn’t have minded.”

Willow looked down and shrugged one shoulder.

“She has her new crowd. I don’t even see her much in school anymore, I think she’s cutting or coming in late or something. Last time she was just asking to copy my homework.”

Tara let her hand stoke across the edge of the table, smoothing out the tablecloth.

“It’s funny, I’ve never really met her,” she said after a moment, an unintentional lilt in her voice as she tried to sound neutral about it all, “She’s been your friend for a couple of years. Only ever waved across the street. A-and Xander. I mean, uh, they don’t even know I exist, right? I know all about them, but…”

Willow’s shoulders tensed but she worked not to make it show up in her voice.

“Hey…”

Tara ducked her head.
"I-I mean, t-that's totally cool. It-it's good. It-it's better."

Willow was starting to feel very uncomfortable.

"I've never met your school friends."

"You know Nate," Tara countered quietly, "I'm friendly with some other people…you can meet them if you want. I'll borrow the car, bring you over to Brujas some evening. There's a café we hang out at, play music sometimes in the evenings. It's like The Bronze but less…rowdy. They do music puns with the coffee, you'd like it. I'll buy you a Macklemocha."

Willow felt like she was in a bubble that was being threatened with a big needle, ready to burst it at any moment. She dropped her hand and looked at Tara.

"Tara, it's not like I don't want my friends to know you. It's just…well, Buffy's like my best friend, my other best friend and she's really special. And there's this whole bunch of us, and we sort of have this group thing that revolves around school, and-and I, I really want you to meet them. But I kind of like having something that's just, you know, mine. And I, I usually don't use so many words to say stuff that little, but do you get that at all?"

Tara inhaled softly.

"I do."

She glanced down at the half-heart hanging from her wrist. She rubbed her thumb over it for a moment before looking up again, where Willow had gone back to the silverware. Willow had said something similar before, the night they 'first' kissed. Did Willow even know it was true?

She watched Willow move back to folding napkins and raised her head a little.

"I am, you know."

"What?" Willow asked, without looking up.

Tara breathed the word so softly it was almost inaudible.

"Yours."
Willow paused everything and she thought even her heart might have stopped for a beat. But in that room, with just themselves and the whole world locked behind two closed doors, she let herself react without fear and the smile bloomed on her face.

She spent so long paranoid that people would spot her feelings, she never appreciated how they were returned.

She strode across and kissed Tara square on the mouth for several long seconds.

She parted with a smile but her eyes started to crease.

“Why do you like me?” she asked, perplexed.

“Because you’re wonderful,” Tara answered as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Because to her, it was.

That was too much for Willow to believe; too much responsibility; too acknowledging of a question she wished she hadn’t asked.

“I, um, need to use the bathroom.”

Tara just smiled and nodded.

“Sure.”

Patience.

She sometimes felt cursed with falling in love with her best friend but figured she was already ahead of the curve by having some of the feelings returned. So patience was her friend. Only Willow could figure out what she truly wanted and either way, Tara was at the end of the road as a friend or a lover.

All she could do was try to make the journey as smooth as possible and make sure she didn’t influence the direction.

Sometimes love meant holding in your pain while they worked through theirs. You have to trust
they’ll be there when it’s your turn.

Tara trusted.

More than anything in this world, she trusted Willow. And so she took in a deep breath, remembered that smile that had lit up Willow’s face and trusted that one day Willow would allow herself to embrace those emotions for more than minutes at a time.

Patience.

And maybe she would write a broody song or two to let out those feelings.

A make-out session didn’t hurt either. Or a quiet night in with herself under the covers.

“The goddamn TV shut off! I was watching the game!”

She put her hand behind her neck and rolled it.

Deep breath.

Patience.

She opened the door to the living room but Willow was already coming down from the stairs.

“I’ll fix it.”

Tara mouthed ‘thank you’ and returned to the affix Willow’s candle to the centerpiece; a circle of popsicle stick turkeys from throughout their early years. When Willow came over for the second year, Kimberly had had her do one to add to it.

It hadn’t been the first time a piece of Willow’s art had been kept, but it was the first time it had been used for decoration and not student analysis.

This sense of belonging had made it so easy to dismiss her feelings for Tara through adolescence. It was only when she became such good friends with Buffy that she started to realize things were not as they seemed.
But then, she’d always known.

Tara was different.

Tara was…her secret.

Willow glanced sideways as Tara retreated, still feeling the sting of the cold water she’d splashed on her face. Maybe they could still run away to that island together…

She got the TV fixed up and joined the other two women in the kitchen to help with whatever needed chopping or stirring or basting. She would do whatever was asked; this was the one day a year she felt part of a real family.

Finally, when everything was served up, Donny carved the turkey in such a way that made him seem pained for having to move off the couch but also that he’d stab you with the knife if you tried to take over for him.

He then sat and grudgingly waited for Kimberly to say a quick blessing and for everyone to say what they were thankful for.

“I’m thankful for my children, my home, my job and security, and to know such an exceptional young person like you, Willow,” Kimberly said, her same mantra every year.

“I’m thankful to be sitting around this table, with all of you,” Willow replied in much the same way.

Donny mumbled something about his bike and all eyes fell to Tara to finish them off and let them eat. Tara paused for a moment before speaking.

“I am thankful for the serenity of faith in those I hold dear,” she said, passing a discreet, crooked smile across the table to Willow. “And for the belief that the path of my destiny is clear.”

Willow’s brow creased thoughtfully and Kimberly laughed as she picked up the bowl of mashed potatoes to hand around.

“Never compete with a songwriter,” she said wryly, “Dig in everyone. So, Willow, have you all of your college applications submitted? Still thinking of Harvey Mudd?”

Willow’s gaze was broken and she glanced in Kimberly’s direction.
“Yes, ma’am,” she answered, taking the potatoes and sliding them toward Donny, “Hoping for Early Decision. I did okay in my SATs last year—”

“Top marks,” Tara interrupted in an undeniably proud tone.

Willow blushed and Kimberly patted her on the back.

“I’ll keep my fingers crossed for you.”

“Thanks, Ms. Maclay,” Willow smiled, “And thank you for this dinner, it’s so good. Sure beats microwaved turkey bacon.”

After dinner, they sent Kimberly off to relax and started clearing up. It was a tradition now, and they usually worked it so most of the washing up was done before the meal was even served and they had more time to kid around together.

As Willow finished wiping down the table, Tara poked her head in, holding a plate in both hands with a slice of pie resting on each. She jerked her head toward the stairs, and Willow hung the cloth on the back of the nearest chair and followed.

They went up to Tara’s bedroom, closed the door behind them and sat cross-legged on the floor with their pie in their laps.

“Wait,” Tara instructed and reached under her pillow to pull out the bottle of cream she’d hidden there earlier.

“Sneaky dessert is the best dessert,” Willow giggled.

Tara made a mini-mountain on top of Willow’s pie.

“Oh, you have something…” she said to Willow, generally gesturing toward her face.

Willow’s hands flew to her face in horror; this situation could range from broccoli in the teeth to booger in the nose and until she knew she was at DEFCON 1.

“Where?”
“There,” Tara pointed randomly again, “Right…there.”

She squeezed the can so a torrent of cream sprayed over Willow’s nose.

“Hey!” Willow said in shock, as cream dripped from her nose onto her pie.

She stared, still, for a moment, then pushed their plates away and lunged at Tara.

“I will so get you back!”

She smushed her face against Tara’s so the cream transferred against her nose and mouth. Tara giggled and only pretended to fight it.

Eventually, she gave up the guise completely, taking Willow’s face in her hands and kissing her. There was a mess of sticky cream melting into their skin and seeping into their kiss but it didn’t deter their lips from seeking each other out.

Only when their skin was literally sticking together and impeding movement did Tara get up to pluck a couple of make-up wipes from the pack sitting on her nightstand.

She handed Willow one and sat on the bed to wipe her own face.

“Wanna know a secret?” she asked as she folded the wipe up and tossed it in the trash.

Willow felt like she had enough secrets going on, but nodded anyway. Tara pulled out the second drawer of her nightstand and pulled out a clear plastic folder. She handed it to Willow, who took it, confused. When Tara didn’t explain, Willow opened and took out the paperwork inside. Her eyes grew wide as she saw what she was reading.

“You did the SATs?” she asked, a gasping lilt in her voice emphasizing her surprise, “You got 1360! 610 math, 750 English!!”

“Don’t sound so surprised,” Tara replied, pulling at her sleeve, “I do write a lot.”

Willow looked up quickly.

“No, no! I just…why? I didn’t think you were…I mean, what about the big trip?”
“I’m still going on the big trip,” Tara answered, taking her folder back and hiding it away, “But when I come home, it’s possible I’ll want to further my education and I’m just covering my bases.”

Willow’s eyes lit up.

“So you’re thinking maybe…just starting college a year later?”

“Maybe,” Tara shrugged, “The whole reason I want to travel is to see life outside of my bubble… learn about myself and how I see my future.”

Willow’s face turned pouty.

“You’re so talented. You could do so much—”

Tara slid back down to the floor, interrupting Willow’s flow.

“When you go to college, are you going to become a guidance counselor?” Tara asked, receiving a confused shake in return, “Then would you mind not counseling me?”

Willow noted the clipped tone and dropped it.

“Why didn’t you tell your mom?”

“Because she had to go back to school later in life and it was hard and she would prefer me not have to go through that…” Tara replied with a sigh, “But I don’t know yet what I want. I don’t want to end up doing something I hate. I might not go to school at all and I don’t want to get her hopes up.”

Willow shook her head. College was just what you did. There was a linear progression through life and college was a very defined part through high school and grad school, or maybe straight through to a career, though any career that was acceptable for Willow to have would require grad school.

Acceptable to who?

She blinked, balled her face wipe and threw it toward the trash. It missed, and she stood up with a blush to pick it up.
“Sometimes I don’t get you at all.”

Tara sat with her knees up, plate on them while she ate her pie.

“Usually you get me very well,” she replied with a wink, “Hey, I heard String Cheese Incident is playing The Bronze next week. Do you want to go?”

Willow sat back down and took her own pie into her lap.

“Um…we went before.”

Tara nodded.

“Yeah, it was fun.”

They’d danced at each other, if not quite with each other, but Tara had still had fun just being out with Willow. Of course, that was before…

“I think I’m busy that night,” Willow said and Tara noted that she hadn’t said which night it was.

“Yeah, of course. No problem.”

Willow gnawed on her lip as she pushed the pie around the plate.

“Did you come up with your thanks earlier on the spot?” she asked after a pensive moment.

“Kind of?” Tara answered, musing over it, “My thoughts work in lyrics sometimes and you…give me plenty to think about.”

“It was about me?” Willow asked, though she already had a fair idea.

Tara brushed the backs of her fingers along Willow’s arm.

“When it comes from my heart, it’s usually about you.”

“You have faith in me?” Willow asked softly, thoughtfully and slightly awed.
“Endless,” Tara answered without hesitation.

Willow paused for a moment. People often had expectations of her…but faith…faith was not something she often felt in spades.

“And the…path of destiny?” she asked slowly, trying to work it out in her head.

“I think we’re meant to be,” Tara replied honestly.

Too much, Tara thought as she saw the fear skitter across Willow’s face, though she thought perhaps there may have been the briefest moment of joy before it.

Patience.

“Wanna listen to some music?” she suggested lightly before Willow could dwell, “Before we go clean these up and get covered is dish soap bubbles?”

“Yeah,” Willow agreed, almost breathless.

Tara jumped up and turned on an 80s playlist, low so that Donny wouldn’t bang on the wall. The low hum of music took the starkness of the silence from the room.

Willow lay back on the floor, staring up at the ceiling. Tara lay beside her, but with a bit of space so she didn’t crowd her.

I’ll do anything that you want baby, anything at all. I’m waiting for you to see… you mean the world to me.

After a moment of watching Willow’s unmoving eyes, she brushed their hands together.

“Want me to shut that brain off?”

Willow blinked slowly and exhaled a breath as her head turned toward Tara.

“Yeah.”
She turned her body closer and Tara met her the rest of the way, closing the connection mouth-to-
mouth.

They engaged in some mindless making out, but with hearts full of what words just couldn’t convey.

Yet.
Willow finished tying the last gold balloon to the wall and jumped down the last rung of the step-ladder she’d been standing on.

“Don’t jump like that, Willow. It’s inelegant. And where’s the dress I picked out for you?”

Willow snapped the ladder into a flat form and made sure any eye-rolling was not in her mother’s vision.

“I’m going to get changed and Tara’s going to help me with my—”

“Oh, are Terri and Kerri coming?” Sheila interrupted, “I hope that delinquent son of hers knows he’s not invited. I’m not starting off a New Year dealing with his teenage alcoholism.”

Willow didn’t even know where to start with that list of offensive statements, but she wasn’t given a chance anyway as Sheila picked up one of the hors-d’oeuvres and peered at it with scrutiny undeserved of a plate of pastries.

“What are these? They’re supposed to be wild mushroom bouchees.”

Willow came over and pursed her lips to hide a grin.

“Um…I think these are pigs in blankets.”

The doorbell rang in the background, while Sheila dropped the little wrapped piggy and held her hand like she’d been contaminated.

“Oh, those inept caterers. Do not let your father see this. I’ll get rid of them.”
Willow didn’t need to be told twice.

They still didn’t go back to the restaurant where Ira had accidentally been served real bacon instead of turkey bacon. And she hadn’t even been in double digits when it happened.

Willow didn’t keep kosher herself, but only in secret. Besides, Ms. Maclay made really nice pigs in blankets for her sometimes and the ones being thrown into the trash didn’t look like they could be any competition. The weenies looked a little, well, weenie.

She skidded out of the room to answer the door, but her father was already there. Willow tugged the living room door closed behind her and Ira glanced over.

“There you are, Willow. I was just saying hello to your friend.”

He stepped aside and Willow’s face lit up.

“Tara.”

She hadn’t seen her…

She hadn’t seen her Tara in a while with the holidays keeping them both with their families. She rushed over and, forgetting herself, threw her arms around the girl. When Ira cleared his throat to indicate the cool breeze being let in by the open door, Willow pulled back with a blush.

“Um, Tara’s going to do my make-up.”

Buffy had always done it in the past but Buffy had still been… unavailable of late and Willow had been a little unavailable herself.

Willow could have done her own make-up, but she wasn’t going to pass up an opportunity to hang out with Tara. Plus, she liked Tara’s unique flair.

“Not too much now,” Ira advised as he shut the door.

Willow threw him some side-eye.

“Dad, I’m nearly an adult.”
He pulled her into him, her head hitting against the top tuft of chest hair protruding from the top open buttons on his shirt.

“You’ll always be my little girl.”

“Dad!” Willow protested loudly, pushing away and grabbing Tara’s hand to tug her along, “Um, don’t go in there.”

She pointed at the living room door.

“You’ll get roped into…straight stuff,” she said, her eyebrows lifting in horror as she contemplated her words, “Like, like, straightening stuff. Like…the streamers! And balloons.”

Ira nodded and walked off in the other direction, lifting either side of his undone bowtie and approaching the mirror in the hallway.

“Fair warning, thank you, Willow.”

“We better hurry upstairs,” Tara interjected, lips quirked up on one side, “I’m not very good at straight stuff.”

Willow’s cheeks flamed and she stared wide-eyed at Tara for a moment before pushing on her back toward the stairs. She closed the door behind her and watched as Tara unzipped her backpack on the bed, chuckling.

Part of her was angry for teetering way too close to the edge of a revelation she was nowhere near ready for, but most of her listened to Tara as she laugh and the angry burn turned to sizzling desire. She flicked the lock, a reflex at this stage, and strode over, standing just behind her.

Tara put an eyeshadow palette down and turned the rest of the way to face her.

“Hey, you.”

And Tara kissed her, with the achingly soft purpose that filled all of their kisses; that made Willow feel like they were lifted off their feet and floating. Tara-thirst was very real and the quench was the most satiating of experiences. She was so lost she didn’t even realize Tara had parted from her and was speaking.
“Huh?” she asked, not-so-elegantly.

“Did you have a nice Hanukkah?” Tara repeated, stroking a brush against her palm to get off any residue.

“Oh,” Willow replied, blinking several times, “Um, yeah. How was Christmas?”

“Like every other holiday with my brother around. Actually, it was pretty nice. My mom made eggnog. She wasn't going to bring it over to you but I told her you’d come over for it. Don't want to be in your Dad's bad books,” Tara answered with a sigh that turned into a smile, “So what are you wearing tonight?”

Willow walked to her closet and opened the door, revealing the dress hanging on the back of it. It was silver and gold like Sheila’s color scheme and managed to be frumpy and clash horrendously with itself at the same time.

“Oh. It’s…it’s nice,” Tara said, trying not to react externally as she was internally.

She failed.

“Uh, oh, well, my mom picked it out,” Willow replied upon seeing the look on Tara’s face.

Tara reached out and ran her fingers along it, only making her cringe more.

“Do you have to wear it?”

Willow nodded sadly.

“It’s been picked out and approved.”

Tara motioned her head toward the closet in a silent ‘Can I?’ and Willow stood aside to give her access.

“Put the dress on,” Tara advised as she rooted through the contents of Willow’s wardrobe.

Willow went into her bathroom and reluctantly pulled the dress on. The tight shoulder straps and taffeta underskirt weren’t any more comfortable than the first time she’d tried it on. She robot-walked
back into the room and was surprised to see Tara actually smile softly when seeing her, and not in the way Cordelia smirked when appraising her outfits.

“Wow, you really can make anything look beautiful.”

Willow didn’t blush, not on her cheeks, but somewhere much deeper inside that made her heart race with the extra flow of blood.

She looked down and took a side of each pleated skirt in her hands.

“But please tell me you can do…something?”

“I can do something,” Tara confirmed, and produced a small travel-sized sewing kit she carried around with her from the front pouch of her backpack ever since an unfortunate incident in school with a pair of tight pants she’d bought off the rack, “But it will need to be drastic.”

Willow let go of her dress and spoke easily.

“I trust you.”

Tara folded her arms cautiously. She’d made minor alterations to some of Willow's clothing before, but mostly just fixed the occasional tear.

“It-it's not like anything that we've ever—”

Willow smiled and put her hand on Tara’s arm.

“I trust you.”

Tara’s heart glowed, as Willow’s just had moments before and she gestured Willow forward. She had her do a turn and made the plan of attack in her head.

The first to get attacked with the scissors was the underskirt, being hacked away until the dress transformed from whatever mess it was before into a more free-flowing princess cut style (or the best she could do without ripping it to the seams completely). Willow was relieved at the immediate change in comfort.

She watched as Tara worked in a blur, snipping and pulling things here and there, completely ridding
her of those ugly shoulder straps and repurposing them into a band around the waist, pulling more attention to Willow’s chest.

A necessary change, Tara thought.

Definitely not done for any selfish reasons.

If she had time and her real sewing machine, she could have really transformed that dress and take out the glaring back piece that looked like it had been plated in gold, cheap gold at that. Instead, she utilized a fuzzy white scarf to wear over Willow’s shoulders and let it fall down her front. She loved quirking up an outfit and that did it wonderfully.

She had Willow sit down to do her make-up and used a shimmering green, matching Willow’s eyelids to it so it emphasized the already beautiful green that shone around her pupils.

Then, again for totally non-selfish reasons, she gave Willow a deep red lip.

“Okay, go look,” she said, running a brush through Willow’s hair once to settle it.

Willow stood up and took two steps toward the mirror, then stopped still.

“Whoa,” she said, turning on her side and swishing the end of the dress, “I look…I mean, you did….”

She straightened up and gulped at her reflection. Where Buffy went dark and subtle, Tara went bright and vivid. Willow had been told she looked smoldering under Buffy’s palate but she looked dazzling under Tara’s and she liked that too.

“Whoa,” she repeated, eyes widening as she looked down and up again, “Gosh, look at those.”

Tara looked down shyly.

“I think you look amazing,” she said, then softer but not quite under her breath, “But I always think you look amazing.”

Willow glanced over, then found her feet and closed the gap. She put her hands on Tara’s shoulders and very softly pressed their lips together.
“You don’t just look amazing, you are amazing. You have no idea how talented you are. Seriously, I ___”

The door handle jostled and then a hand smacked against the wood.

“Willow? Why is the door locked?”

Willow hurried over and opened the door to her mother.

“Uh, hi, sorry, didn’t want one of the caterers to stumble in here needing to use the bathroom,” she said, glancing away as she cringed at the telling off they’d probably gotten from Sheila, “Or to cry in.”

Sheila huffed.

“Well guests are arriving, you need to come downstairs,” she stated, then paused for a moment and really looked at Willow for the first time, “You look…”

She looked her up and down again, then nodded once. The closest thing to a compliment Willow had received outside of her schoolwork in a while. Sheila turned on her heels and headed back down to the party, while Willow sighed but was smiling to herself over her mother’s reaction.

“Well, have to go play the dutiful daughter.”

Tara kept her gaze downward as she packed her things up again.

“You should join a drama class. You’d be good.”

Willow paused and frowned.

“Was that…”

“Shade?” Tara finished for her, raising an eyebrow, but Willow’s brow just creased in confusion so Tara explained, “That’s what we call it when someone is being…sassy, I guess.”

Willow’s eyes narrowed slightly.
“Who’s ‘we’?”

Tara brushed it off without an answer.

“Don’t you need to go downstairs?”

Willow heard the music start to play and nodded. She wasn’t sure about their exchange, but there were more pressing matters.

“Are you staying?”

Tara glanced up.

“Do you want me to?”

Willow offered a confused smile. As if there was anything but one answer to that.

“Always.”

Tara smiled softly and nodded.

“I’ll be down in a minute.”

Willow threw a wink and turned out of the room.

Tara made herself look a bit more presentable with the make-up and took her sweater off so she was just in her dark jeans and flowing shirt. She slowly made her way through the throngs of people who had suddenly shown up. They all looked the same; suburban white couples in expensive clothes with fake nails and faker laughs. They were all academic associates of the Rosenbergs and notably, Kimberly was the only neighbor to attend, despite not being the only neighbor invited.

Willow was on her ‘rounds’, aka being shown off, so Tara slunk off into the corner by way of the hors-d’oeuvres. She’d had her fill of turkey leftovers at this point. At the end of the table, near the zucchini fritters, there was a sudden rush of silvery, gold fabric and then Willow was standing in front of her. Close.

Very close.
Dangerously close.

“Hide me,” Willow panted, eyes darting around enough that she didn’t notice Tara’s breath so heavy against her lips.

Tara gulped and looked down, shaking her head slightly to compose herself.

“Who am I hiding you from?” she asked, impressively coherent.

Willow puffed out a breath.

“Dickie Babcock.”

Tara’s eyebrow arched.

“What’s his real name?”

Willow met Tara’s gaze, pained.

“Dickie Babcock.”

Tara visibly winced.

“Ouch.”

A boy with greasy hair and a face that screamed ‘entitled’ walked by, but was more interested in the food so passed by without noticing. Willow exhaled a breath of relief.

Tara realized she recognized him from the country club and then put the name together, placing him and his family. She understood why Willow would want to avoid him.

“I’m almost done with the parentals, I think,” she said to Tara with an appreciative smile, “Think you could grab us a couple of sodas and find us some primo couch real estate? We can play ‘rate the most pretentious smile’.”

Tara eyed the floor, smiling.
Willow brushed past again as she was silently summoned by Sheila’s hand motioning her over. Tara poured a diet cola for each of them respectively, the easiest drink to access. She weaved her way through the crowd and couldn’t help stopping a foot from the Rosenbergs chatting to their friends, to watch the ripple of Willow’s back muscles as she tensed during the conversation. She so desperately wanted to reach over and relax that tension.

“…so thrilled that our Willow here got early decision into Harvey Mudd. Of course, with her genes…”

Another round of fake laughter hit the ceiling but Tara just felt a thick haze settle around her.

She pushed through to the closest object available for sitting, the loveseat, and stared ahead; working out what she’d just heard.

Finally, Willow found her again and gratefully took the cola and downed it in one go.

“Phew. I think I’ve paid my debt to society for any past and future crimes. Hey, think you could bunch up for a little Willow butt in there?”

Tara finally lifted her gaze.

“Did you get accepted to Harvey Mudd?”

“Oh,” Willow replied, paling slightly, “Um, yeah.”

She shrugged, but her face betrayed her.

“When did you find out?” Tara pressed.

“Couple of weeks ago,” Willow answered, looking around awkwardly.

Tara met Willow’s eye.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” she asked, clearly hurt, “That’s your dream school.”
“Yeah. It was. Is, I mean,” Willow corrected quickly, “We haven’t really seen each other.”

“In a few days,” Tara answered, “Not two weeks.”

Willow felt like she was being punched in the gut by the tone of Tara’s voice.

“Is it loud in here?” she asked, fanning herself with the scarf, “Do you want to go back upstairs?”

Tara was silent so Willow brushed her leg against her.

“Please Tara,” she said sincerely, “Let’s talk about this somewhere…quieter.”

Tara considered it, then nodded. She put the glass down and followed Willow back upstairs. She sat on the bed while Willow locked the door and hung the scarf from the back of it.

The room was painfully silent but Tara didn’t give Willow a reprieve and waited for her to speak.

“I didn’t purposefully keep it from you,” Willow said eventually, “I didn’t tell anyone but my parents, and only because they’d already opened the letter.”

Tara looked up with a creased brow.

“Why wouldn’t you tell people? I don’t understand. It’s your dream.”

Willow shrugged one shoulder.

“I guess I don’t want to think that far ahead right now.”

Tara stood and took Willow’s hands.

“Aren’t you happy?”

Willow stayed rooted to the spot, gazing into Tara’s eyes, grateful for the excuse to tell the truth.
“Yeah, I’m happy.”

Tara smiled softly; it’s not like she wasn’t used to Willow’s quirks.

“I’m so proud of you. C’mere.”

She cupped Willow’s face and kissed Willow’s lips and Willow was in heaven. A perfectly soft, plump, warm heaven. She pressed herself into it and Tara willingly pulled her in. Willow wasn’t expecting it and tumbled forward, making them fall onto the bed in a heap. Tara’s legs hung off but Willow was stretched across her entire upper body.

The smallest of conscientious hip rolls would have had her straddling Tara and pressing together fluidly. Instead, their bodies remained in inexperienced disarray but their faces stayed pressed close yet again that evening. Willow’s impulse was to scramble up with a chorus of apologies but heaven was right there staring her in the face.

Tara was in a much more precarious position. Not only was Willow on top of her, breath warm on her lips, but Willow’s cleavage was very much exposed and just a heaved breath away from thrusting into Tara’s face. She was trying so desperately not to look that her eyelashes seemed permanently fused to her lower lids.

Willow could feel a new heat burning between them, the embers from earlier stoking into a full-blown flame. It was new and terrifying and enthralling all at once. Willow was a teetering on panic but it quickly subdued and was replaced with excitement when Tara rolled them over and Willow experienced what it was like to have a warm body on top of her.

Her breath left her lungs for a moment, only returning when she gasped as Tara’s lips pressed into her neck and she knew what it felt like to be marked.

Never in her life had Willow been so aware of her ears as a tickling, thumping sensation sparked there and shot downward; further and further south each time Tara kissed her there. The collar on Tara’s shirt scratched her exposed collarbone and she had no idea how a brush of fabric could make her feel so wild.

She wasn’t sure she liked it.

Or, more accurately, she wasn’t sure that she liked that she liked it.

She used both hands to pull at Tara’s collar, which Tara took as being pulled back up and obliged with landing her lips to Willow’s mouth, really smearing her lipstick now. Willow moaned, a deep moan from the back of her throat. Her fingers tensed and there was a ‘pop’ as the first closed metal
button on Tara’s shirt released from the pressure.

Tara pulled away from the kiss, flushed and looked down at the position of Willow’s hands. Thinking she was waiting for permission, Tara shyly nodded.

Willow’s eyes widened and she looked at her now quaking hands, putting together what the silent exchange meant.

_She—oh, she’s saying I can…oh…OH…well…okay. They’re just boobs. I see my own all the time._
_No big deal._

She slowly pulled her hands further apart, nearly jumping each time a metal button popped. She didn’t dare look anywhere but Tara’s face until the shirt was just left hanging and Tara’s bra-clad breasts were just sitting there in view.

Willow’s eyes finally fell on them.

Her world would never be the same.

_Wrong. Wrong Wrong Wrong, I was wrong. Wrongy MCRongerson. Wrong._

She hadn’t seen Tara in any state of undress since they were tweens when Kimberly took pity on her and brought her bra shopping with them when it was apparent Sheila wouldn’t make the time to. Willow had been jealous, then, of how Tara was developing. Now, envy was the last thing on her mind.

The swell of Tara’s breasts; the supple curve; the nipples she could see, hardened under the fabric all covered in that sweet, all-too-kissable skin.

This was too much.

Willow was INTO it and that was NOT OKAY.

_Danger, Will Rosenberg. Danger!_
“Wait…what?”

Tara looked down and immediately clutched both sides of her shirt, pulling them across each other to hide what had been seen. She turned her back to Willow, sitting on the edge of the bed, still catching her breath from their activities.

“Shit.”

There was silence for a full 30 seconds before Willow finally gathered herself enough to speak.

“Is that a tattoo?”

Tara slowly released the tight hold on her shirt until the black etchings on her skin were visible again.

It was a musical staff, notated in a way Willow couldn’t read. It stretched across Tara’s ribs, right under her breasts; the top, in fact, was hidden under the wire of her bra. It highlighted the taut muscles Tara had there from all her breath training.

Willow wanted to trace the lines and shapes but held back.

“Is it real?” she asked, though she already knew the answer.

Tara just nodded.

“When did you get a tattoo?” Willow asked again, hurt.

“Last summer,” Tara answered, a shallow echo to her voice, “At band camp.”

Willow’s brow creased.

“How? You were underage.”

Tara’s lips pursed before she answered.

“A friend knew someone.”
“A friend?” Willow prompted, knowing she was only getting snippets of the story.

Tara finally raised her gaze.

“A girl.”

Willow physically felt herself shatter.

“…oh.”

Tara immediately began shaking her head emphatically.

“It’s not…it wasn’t…nothing happened.”

Willow avoided Tara’s gaze, only minorly relieved.

“But you wanted it to,” she said quietly.

Tara shook her head again, closing her eyes like it might all go away.

“It wasn’t like that. It wasn’t…real. It was a reaction. I never had any real feelings for her.”

“You hid the tattoo so…” Willow replied accusingly, making Tara’s eyes snap open with anger.

“You hid your college acceptance.”

“I had a reason,” Willow retorted.

“I did too!” Tara replied, looking like she was near tears, “I was embarrassed, okay?”

She rubbed the heel of her hand against her eye to stop herself crying.

“I was heartbroken over our fight.”
Willow immediately felt a pang of guilt and allowed Tara time and space to continue speaking. After a minute or so, she did.

“She was the only person who was nice to me. Everyone avoided the weird crying girl who had to clear snot out of her saxophone. She’d just slip me a Kleenex and wait after classes so I’d have someone to walk to dinner with.”

Looking back, Willow would realize this was the moment she knew she was in love with Tara because her first reaction to hearing this was feeling grateful that someone had been kind to her love and not the feelings of jealousy that bubbled underneath.

Unfortunately, at that moment, the jealousy was still all too easy to access.

“We snuck off one night and got drunk. I convinced her to bring me to the guy who did her tattoo. It was this cool design, a feather floating around a flute—”

Willow stood up, her foot stomping on the way down.

“I knew you were going to meet a sexy flutist!”

Tara just looked bewildered.

“Why do you keep saying that?”

“Everyone knows they’re the sluttiest of the band players,” Willow replied snidely.

Tara gave Willow a look that Willow never wanted to see directed at her again: disappointment.

“That’s ridiculous and totally misogynistic and I just lost some respect for you.”

Willow knew that was true and looked down, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Sorry that I insulted your secret camp girlfriend.”

“Emmy wasn’t my girlfriend,” Tara protested, having to stop herself from adding on ‘are you?’, “She wasn’t anything but a friend. Yes, okay, I stupidly tried to kiss her because I was sloshed and she was nice and I was hurting so much. And she very politely turned me down and I was totally
“humiliated.”

She sniffed and it broke Willow’s heart.

“And I went back to my room and looked at my slideshow of photos of you and cried for the millionth time.”

Tara finally sought Willow’s gaze again.

“I was hurting and acted dumb but all it did was make me realize how much nobody could compare to you. You rejected me, pretty harshly—”

Willow looked away but Tara stayed on her.

“And you were still my whole world.”

Willow’s eyes moved back again because Tara’s eyes silently demanded it.

“Can you get that at all? Just…clutching onto something, anything, when you’re feeling lost? I know it was wrong and I know I would have hated it if we actually did kiss. But we didn’t.”

Willow’s arms fell to her side, then she dropped beside Tara on the bed with a ‘poof’ of utter deflation.

“Something…something similar happened to me.”

Tara didn’t even have to ask. Her forehead muscles tensed.

“Xander.”

Willow nodded slowly, regretfully.

“It was that day you left for camp,” she said and took in a breath like she would when she was about to release a babble, “I thought I could prove—”

Whatever she was going to say was suddenly gone, popped like a balloon.
“Well, it did the opposite of what I wanted it to.”

Tara didn’t want to feel tense. She wanted to be reasonable and understanding but her stomach burned, and not in the pleasant way it had earlier.

“So the reason you’re not speaking to Xander is that you slept with him and didn’t like it?”

Willow shook her head desperately.

“No—Cordelia walked in.”

“So it’s because he cheated on Cordelia with you and got caught,” Tara deduced, “She won’t let him speak to you?”

Willow’s eyes creased.

“Almost.”

Tara took a moment to respond.

“Sorry?”

“Almost cheated,” Willow corrected purposefully, “She walked in before I could do anything but surprise the shit out of Xander by jumping him. And I saw the look on her face…I thought I’d enjoy seeing Cordelia getting some comeuppance but I just felt sick. I thought I was going to throw up right on top of him. I ran, I was halfway down the street before I even heard Cordelia screaming. I haven’t spoken to him since. The idea of him hating me on top of everything else…”

She paused for a moment and swallowed.

“It was like this big slap in the face. I thought I had romantic feelings for him and friendship feelings for you but I’d completely inverted it. He was the friendship and you were the…”

Tara was stunned as she got her head around both of their revelations of the evening. It was a lot, but also completely nothing at all.

“…so we’re arguing over the fact that neither of us had sex last summer?”
It was funny, but Willow wasn’t in much of a laughing mood. She stood up and walked toward her balcony door.

“I need to cool down.”

Tara waited for a moment, then two, then stood up to follow Willow out.

She was sitting on the ground, legs bent and tucked under so her dress stretched over her knees and kept her modesty. She really did look stunning, if not a little morose at that moment.

Tara sat beside her, using the wall to guide her back down. She said nothing, but left her hand flat on the ground, near Willow’s. After a few moments, Willow covered it with her own.

Their fingers linked together and Tara scooted that tiny scooch closer so that there really wasn’t an inch between them. She looked out into the night sky and used their conjoined hands to point upward.

“Remember the ones we made up when we were little?”

Willow smiled softly and nodded. Tara returned it and sighed into the night.

“There's not a star left in the sky tonight that hasn't been wished on.”

She leaned her head on Willow’s shoulder.

“My wish would be to forget about our ‘almost’ mistakes…especially since I know mine meant nothing.”

Willow brushed their palms and looked into Tara’s eyes.

“And you know mine meant nothing if Xander is the best I can come up with as a surrogate.”

Tara frowned.

“You should try to talk to him. You were such good friends, maybe he’ll understand—”
Willow quickly shook her head.

“I see how Cordelia looks at me in school. I can't put him in that position again.”

“How does he look at you?” Tara asked softly.

Willow closed her eyes.

“I don’t wait long enough to find out.”

Tara thought Willow might be pushing Xander away in the same way she’d pushed her away, but honestly, she was just about managing their own situation without trying to intervene in another relationship.

“Things fall apart. They fall apart so hard.”

“No kidding,” Willow sighed on an exhale.

“But this didn’t,” Tara continued softly, “We cracked but we didn’t fall. And we mended.”

Tara turned her head to Willow.

“And I feel whole when I’m around you.”

Willow swallowed and met Tara’s eye.

“I feel like that too.”

Tara smiled; the smile that Willow loved when the corners of her mouth and eyes would crease; the smile that made Willow’s heart skip a beat; the smile that made her feel like if evoking it was her only accomplishment in life, she could die happy.

“I think that we came up with a good resolution,” Willow said, holding Tara’s hand a little tighter, “Forget the bad stuff.”

“And do what makes you happy,” Tara added softly.
Willow gulped at the weight of that and tried to relax. She leaned in and Tara met her halfway for a reunifying kiss. It wasn’t as heated as the kiss they’d parted from, but it was soft and sweet and everything they needed at that moment.

It was warming, enough to distract themselves away from their exposed skin, even in the cool winter evening. With just the moon to bathe them, they stayed tucked in the quiet corner of the balcony until a loud, obnoxious voice floated up to them.

“Hey, that you Rosenberg? I’m feeling generous if you want a smooch at midnight.”

Willow never moved so fast in her life. She shot up, twisting herself in the process and getting preciously close to going right over the railing had she had even a little bit more momentum. Tara caught her by the waist to stop her but was immediately shaken off.

Willow looked down at Dickie Babcock munching on a pile of pigs in blankets stacked in his hand that he must have raided from the trash. She pulled a face and with her heart hammering scoffed in his direction and turned on her heel to march back into her bedroom. Tara followed her, still in shock at how close she saw Willow come to tumbling off the balcony.

“Willow, you—”

“He could have caught us!” Willow hissed, pacing and wringing her hands nervously, “Anyone could have walked out and seen us!”

Tara stopped and swallowed.

“Would that be totally awful?”

“Yes!” Willow almost shouted, her hands smacking against her face in alarm, “Your top is open, oh my god, oh my god! What was I thinking, we can’t take our clothes off, anyone could walk in!”

Tara looked down and quickly began buttoning herself up again.

“The door is locked,” she said quietly.

“What if we forget?!” Willow asked in a fluster, “No way, no way.”
Tara finished fixing her shirt and walked over. She wasn’t sure Willow would be receptive to being touched, so she kept her hands by her side.

“Just breathe for a minute, baby. Breathe.”

Willow couldn’t help but respond to the comforting tone. It wasn’t the first time Tara had called her baby and it felt something akin to her heart melting and spreading its warmth throughout her whole body. It was a quick enough moment that she allowed herself to feel it and calm herself down.

She reined in her breathing but kept herself at a distance.

“I should be with my parents for the countdown.”

Tara just nodded.

“You should fix your lipstick,” she said, and fetched it for Willow, “Let me.”

She touched up Willow’s lipstick and wiped her neck of any residue of the lip gloss Tara herself had been wearing. Willow blushed as she realized what Tara was doing with the wipe.

“Thanks.”

“Don’t have to thank me,” Tara replied, pulling Willow’s hair forward at her shoulders.

Instead, Willow leaned in and rested her forehead on Tara’s chest for a moment.

Tara wrapped her arms around Willow and held on for them both.

With another quick once-over for anything out of place in their appearance that screamed ‘we were making out up there’, they headed back into the party which had thinned slightly but still had a lot of people filling out the large function room.

Tara decided to copy Willow and found her mother for the New Year countdown. She barely heard a single number as she watched Willow fend off Dickie’s advances, though it was obvious she didn’t need help and rebuffed him easily.

Tara didn’t even realize it was all over until her mother poked her and she heard the bars of Auld Lang Syne from some of the men in the room.
“Happy New Year,” Kimberly said, giving her daughter a sidelong hug, “Any resolutions?”

Tara looked down at the bracelet hanging from her wrist and glanced across the room to where its match was hanging off another.

“Believe,” she answered finally, dragging her gaze to her mother, “You?”

Kimberly smiled, it brightening her face as Tara’s smile did her own.

“I like yours. Can I borrow it?”

Tara chuckled.

“Sure.”

“I’m going to head home. I saw Donny’s bike come in a little while ago. Are you okay here or do you want to come with?”

Tara looked around; she knew no one but she also didn’t want to abandon Willow.

“I’m good. I’ll be quiet coming in.”

Kimberly nodded, kissed Tara’s head and went to say her goodbyes. She was lost in her own thoughts for a bit until she felt a glass being pressed into her hand. She looked up and Willow was smiling down at her.

“Cherry cola. Found a can of my secret stash. Are you bored? Do you want to pick the music? My parents are too tipsy to notice.”

Tara smiled naturally. That was a generous offer, considering how much she knew Willow craved her parents’ approval.

One of Willow’s greatest attributes was how thoughtful she was. The flip side of that was being full of thoughts, not always positive. Tara wished she could help with that.

“Thank you,” she said finally, taking the glass, “I’m okay…alone with my thoughts.”
Willow gave Tara a curious look, but accepted it and moved away again. Tara found the quietest corner, where she could still keep an eye on Dickie if needs be. She knew staying wasn’t all based on chivalry… in fact, it was all based on fear. She didn’t want to lose Willow to blind panic.

Not again.

Willow waved from across the room and Tara waved back.

She relaxed.

Her eyes and mouth creased.

She was happy. At that moment, with their eyes meeting across a room, she was happy.

And that was more than something to hold on to.

That was her anchor, and there was no letting go.
The first time they met did not start out as an occasion of joy.

In fact, Willow was pulled screaming and crying from her house and across the street.

She had been playing with her favorite abacus and what with it being attached to her wall, she couldn’t bring it with her. This resulted in her trying to squirm out of her father’s clutch, pulling his bowtie undone in the process.

Ira was trying his best to soothe her.

“Maybe I should stay home with her. You said you had a sitter—”

“Ira, you have to ignore the bad behavior at this age or it encourages the attention seeking,” Sheila advised, holding the end of her ball gown up so it wouldn’t get dirt on the hem.

“She’s not a dog,” Ira replied sullenly but smiled when the idea seemed to calm Willow down. He tickled her tummy, “Woof woof.”

Tears still stained the four-year-old’s cheeks but she smiled and cuddled into Ira. They arrived at the house across from theirs and Ira put Willow on her feet, holding onto her shoulders for support. Sheila rang the doorbell and a young woman barely out of her teens answered.

“Hello I’m Sheila Rosenberg, I live across the street—” Sheila started her spiel, stopping when the person on the other side wasn’t quite who she expected, “Oh, are you the babysitter?”

“No, I’m the resident,” the woman replied, trying to not show the signs of confusion as to why the well-dressed family she had seen walking in and out of their house, but had never actually spoken to, were doing on her doorstep, “How can I help you?”
Sheila’s eyes narrowed for a moment.

“She’s fine,” Sheila dismissed and extended her hand again, “I’m Sheila, this is my husband Ira and our daughter Willow. We’ve been meaning to introduce ourselves.”

The other woman somewhat warily shook Sheila’s hand.

“I’m Kimberly.”

Sheila looked at Kimberly with barely-disguised pity.

“Is it just you and the children?”

Kimberly didn’t dour under the gaze; she’d endured a lot worse than a pretentious suburban neighbor.

“Yes, Donny and T—“

“So listen, Kerri,” Sheila interrupted and Kimberly thought she might have seen Ira wince, “The woman who lived here before you, so sad to see she’s passed on.”

“She just moved to Toledo to be closer to her fam—” Kimberly started but was once again interrupted.

Sheila seemed to like the sound of her own voice.

“Yes, well, she’s left us in a bit of a lurch. You see, she would watch over Willow here when we had events. And as you can probably tell from our dress, we have one tonight. Hosted by my university, we simply must attend. The sitter I had arranged has proven to be unreliable.”
Sheila took Willow and thrust her toward Kimberly. Kimberly instinctively held the crying child against her leg, stroking her hair in comfort.

“Oh—”

“She won’t be a bother, just put a book in her hands if she’s getting on your nerves, or a calculator works,” Sheila said, calling over her shoulder as she grabbed Ira’s elbow and led them both away again.

Kimberly watched them go in shock for a moment, then shook her head and bent down to Willow’s level.

“Do you want to come in and play, sweetie?”

“We’ll be back by 11,” Sheila called back, her voice carrying through the wind.

“We’re very grateful,” Ira added on, waving to Willow, who clung harder to Kimberly’s pants leg.

Kimberly rubbed Willow’s back, trying not to show her disdain for the young girl’s parents.

“Come inside, honey.”

She led Willow inside and to the living room, where a young boy was strewn across a bean bag watching Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles on TV while a slightly younger girl was playing with her My Little Ponies.

“Did you say your name is Willow sweetheart?” Kimberly asked, and received a reluctant nod in return, “This is Donny and Tara. Tara, Donny, this is Willow. She’s come over to play for the evening.”

Donny barely looked up, but Tara did. Her hair was messily pulled into a zig-zag parting and could probably do with a cut to stop it falling into her eyes, but her gaze lifted and caught Willow’s eye.

Willow stared back, making Tara look away momentarily, but then she got the confidence to slowly approach.

“Hi, I’m T-Ta-ra.”
Willow looked Tara up and down and slowly extracted herself from Kimberly’s legs. Tara’s presence felt safer.

“’m Willow.”

Tara’s little face was full of empathy for her scared new friend.

“Are you s-sad?”

Willow slowly nodded and Tara offered her open arms.

“Do you wan’ a h-hug? When I’m sad Momma gives me a hug and I, I feel bettah.”

Willow smiled and accepted. Tara’s hug made her feel like when she ate too much Jell-O and she liked it very much.

“Wanna play p-ponies?” Tara offered, prepared to give Willow her pick of the lot.

Willow shook her head furiously.

“I don’ like ponies.”

Tara didn’t seem too put out.

“Yur hair is pr-pretty,” she told Willow sweetly, “You look like d’Little Mermaid.”

Willow’s eyes lit up.

“She’s my fav’wit.”

Tara jumped up and down excitedly. She’d never had anyone to watch with before.

“We have d’vid-yo! Wan’a watch??”
Willow nodded eagerly.

“Yah!”

Tara went up to her brother.

“Don-nee, can we w-watch Ariel please?” she asked politely.

Donny just scowled.

“I’m watchin’ this!”

“Donny, you had the TV all day,” Kimberly advised from across the room, “Give your sister a turn, please.”

Donny jumped up and threw the remote across the room, barely missing the two girls’ heads.

“Donny!” Kimberly exclaimed as he stomped out through the kitchen to the backyard to kick his soccer ball against the wall.

She knew he was still confused about all the changes in their life lately and she couldn’t bring herself to discipline him harshly, so she let him go.

She set up the video for the girls and took a seat on the couch, taking out the newspaper she’d saved so she could look through the job section. Partway through the movie, Donny returned with his hands stuffed in his pockets.

“Mom I’m hungry. I want pizza.”

Kimberly put the newspaper down.

“You’ve had dinner. I can make you a snack—”

“I want pizza!” Donny repeated loudly.

Kimberly got up and discreetly checked her wallet, did some mental math and nodded with a sigh.
“Tara honey, Willow, will you eat some pizza?”

“Oh huu!” Tara replied cheerily.

“Yes pwease!” Willow replied a smile stuck on her face in stark contrast to when she’d first come in.

Kimberly smiled. It was nice to see at least one of her children happy. She called for a pizza and poured the kids some juice. Donny sulked up to his bedroom when it arrived, so Kimberly let the girls eat in front of the TV.

Willow giggled as Tara made the cheesy pizza stretch as far as she could make it. Tara seemed to enjoy making Willow laugh.

“Willow, ar’ yew my b-best friend now?” she asked shyly.

Willow nodded as she gobbled her bite of pizza.

“Are you mine?”

“Yeah I’m yours,” Tara replied with a bashful duck of her head.

She’d never had a best friend before, apart from Donny, but he didn’t seem to like her much lately.

Willow reached out and took Tara’s hand.

“Your hand makes my hand feel like sparkles.”

Tara giggled.

“Your hand makes my hand feel like unicorn magic.”

They played around pressing their hands together and giggling together each time they clasped.

A few hours later, they had passed out together on the couch, Tara’s slightly larger body spooning Willow’s. Kimberly covered them with a Flintstones blankie and kissed them both on the forehead.
When a knock came to the door, Kimberly braced herself to deal with the brazen Sheila again, but it was just a weary-looking Ira. He said hello and extended a hand with a fifty dollar bill in it.

Kimberly looked at it for a moment, then raised a hand to refuse.

“That’s…okay. Maybe our girls could keep playing together. We haven’t had a chance to make many friends yet.”

Ira smiled softly.

“That would be nice for Willow too.”

Kimberly offered an understanding look.

“They fell asleep together. Why don’t I bring her over in the morning?”

Ira just nodded cordially.

“Thank you. Was she a handful? Kids say the darndest things sometimes and she can be her own unique little person.”

“Have you ever listened close to the games they play, or the little songs they sing?” Kimberly replied affectionately, “You should have heard them tonight, they made up a little double act.”

“It’s nice to hear,” Ira smiled, “She often plays alone. Well, we’ll see you in the morning.”

Kimberly said goodbye, turned off all the lights and settled to sleep in the armchair. She didn’t like letting Tara out of her sight lately. She noticed the peaceful smile on her daughter’s face as she slept and it made her smile too.

She also noted the smile on Willow’s face, though she had no idea it was because it was the first night in months she wasn’t having nightmares about ponies.

Kimberly fell asleep for the first time hopeful for their future in this place.

The girls spent their first night ever in each other’s arms with no idea of just how much they would have to overcome to stay there.
Donny kicked the dirt under his boot as his bike yet again stalled instead of starting.

“Goddammit!”

He hurled his helmet off his head and stomped back inside, grunting along the way. If he was an actor being method for an upcoming zombie movie, he’d win an Oscar. But he wasn’t. He was just an asshole.

“Mom!” he called gruffly; a demand, not a request, “I need car keys.”

Kimberly came out from the kitchen, drying her hands on a dishcloth.

“What happened to your bike?”

“Needs juice,” Donny grunted.

Kimberly sighed to herself but didn’t push.

“Are they not at the door? Your sister took the car out yesterday.”

Donny scowled harder at the mention of Tara and bounded up the stairs.

“Stupid dumb bitch thinks she owns the place,” he muttered on his way up, before explosively barging his way past Tara’s bedroom door.

She wasn’t there. He snarled at her perfectly made bed and her perfectly tidy room and everything else that went along with Little Miss Perfect.
His eyes scanned the surfaces to see if he could spot the keys, but there was nothing. He tried to yank open the drawers, but Tara had become wise to him years ago and they were all locked. He dropped to his knees to peer under the bed, but it was barren under there.

Except for something buried away in the corner, seemingly forgotten and covered in dust. Donny reached, then hesitated. It was probably some nasty tissue that had slipped down from under Tara’s pillow, or worse, some old food wrapper that could have anything growing on it.

But it wasn’t often there was something misplaced in Tara’s room and curiosity got the better of him. He laid down flat on the floor and shuffled in enough that he could reach the far corner.

He was pleased to find on contact that it was just an old piece of crumpled paper. He flattened it out crudely and read the words scribbled.

The silly jokes you've said
Your different colored pens
The secrets you can't keep
The babble in your sleep
Some may call you strange
But me I'd never change
A thing
About you
Oh, about you

His eyes narrowed but he didn’t have time to do much but glance over it when Kimberly shouted up the stairs.

“Donny, did you even look? They’re right here.”

Donny paused for a moment, then stuffed the piece of paper in his pocket and hopped back up. He quickly opened his bedroom door to toss the paper in amongst the other mess, then bounded down the stairs, grabbed the keys from his mother’s clutch without a thank you and stomped out the door.

In a neighboring town, Tara was at her locker in the break room, changing out of her work uniform.

Another woman came in and offered Tara a smile, before going to her locker to retrieve a Vitamin Water. Her long, dark hair reached right down to her thighs when she bent back to pour the contents past her lips. When more than half was gone, she wiped her mouth, twisted the cap back on and returned it to her locker.

“Was that group hassling you, Tara? The young guys are always the worst.”
Tara shyly settled her fresh t-shirt over her hips and looked over her shoulder, shaking her head.

“They’re harmless. I’d take them over the snooty customers I used to have to serve any day.”

The other woman sighed for a moment, then straightened herself back up and fixed on a smile.

“Gotta get back out there. Just ran in between tables,” she said, waving her fingers as she headed for the door, “Have a nice evening.”

Tara smiled softly in farewell and grabbed a brown paper bag resting on the bench beside her.

“Thanks, you too, Nascha.”

She left out the back door, unlocked her bike from the stand, put the bag in the basket at the front and hopped on.

It was only a short ride to where she needed to go, a nice change from her usual slog back to Sunnydale.

She had to keep her mind on the prize; her lack of car meant more money going into her Big Trip fund, the round-the-world jaunt she’d been dreaming about since she was 12 and saving for almost as long.

Her mom had promised her the base ticket as her 18th birthday/graduation present but she was on her own for the rest, so every dollar saved was another dollar toward a life-changing experience.

She’d been working since she was legally allowed to at 14, stacking shelves until she turned 16 when she got the job at the country club. This job was the first outside Sunnydale but since she went to school out here, it evened up in terms of travel time to and fro.

Plus her calf muscles were super defined now from all the cycling.

She rode up the driveway at the house she was going to, waving to the man mowing the front lawn on the way.

“Hi Tara,” the man called over the mower, waving back.
Tara hopped off her bike and leaned it against the wall.

“Hi, Mr. Williamson.”

Mr. Williamson indicated with a thumb over his shoulder.

“He’s in the garage.”

Tara nodded gratefully, grabbed the brown paper bag and walked around to the garage. The door was closed, so Tara knocked on the metal, then bent down and opened it upward. The whole garage had been converted into a mini-studio, fitted with instruments and equipment for recording. Tara dreamed of having a space like it and utilized it whenever Nate asked her over.

He was standing behind a keyboard and sent a bright smile across the space as she walked in. Tara waggled her fingers and pulled the garage door down behind her.

“Hey Tare,” Nate greeted, his fingers skimming across the keys before settling into place, “What do you think of this?”

His fingers pressed smoothly across the keys and his deep, dulcet voice sang along with the jaunty tune.

“Hanker Oatmeal takes your hunger hankering for good.”

Tara played it over in her head.

“Is that your jingle for Mr. Simmon’s class?”

Nate nodded.

“Yeah,” he said wearily, “And it sucks.”

“No,” Tara replied, quickly, then added on in a kind tone, “It maybe trips over itself a little bit. I like the tune though. Play it again.”

He played the jingle without singing and Tara started to answer it in a hum. Her eyes were closed, or she would have seen Nate staring at her, a bit in awe.
He snapped out of it when Tara’s eyes open again.

“What about…‘Hanker Oatmeal, you’ll hanker for more.’”

Nate played the final two notes over again, whispering under his breath until he figured out the right cadence. He grinned.

“I think you just did my homework for me.”

“Not the first time,” Tara replied with a bashful smile, “The music is the hard part.”

“Have you done yours?” Nate asked, standing up from the keyboard and offering it to her.

Tara positioned herself behind the keyboard and put the paper bag on the floor by her feet. Her fingers brushed the keys and found where they needed to be.

“Pick up your very own Dolls Eye Crystal today by calling 555-0121,” she said in her best announcer voice, before playing the jingle tune she’d created, “The crystal that spellbinds and blows your mind!”

Nate laughed and clapped twice, the sound booming between his large hands and echoing around the room.

“I love it. What the heck is a Dolls Eye crystal?”

“I saw it in the window of a magic shop downtown,” Tara answered, “Downtown Sunnydale, that is.”

Nate raised an eyebrow.

“Sunnydale has a magic shop?”

Tara’s face scrunched.

“It’s had a few come and go. It’s a weird little town.”
“What’s it do?” Nate asked curiously.

“Weren’t you listening?” Tara replied with an elusive crooked smile, “It blows your mind.”

Nate smirked, nodding slowly.

“That’s good actually. I’m intrigued. I want to learn more.”

Tara spun off the small seat and thrust the paper bag toward Nate.

“Speaking of blowing your mind… I brought you spicy wings.”

Nate eagerly grabbed the bag and dropped into a bean bag chair to tear it open.

“Sweeeeet,” he said, popping the top on the take-out box and picking up a sticky wing, “Still like it there?”

Tara nodded noncommittally.

“It’s not as bad as people make out. Waitressing is waitressing.”

Nate shrugged and cleaned a bone with his mouth.

“Well, you make good wings.”

“I merely deliver,” Tara replied earnestly, then moved off and picked up one of the guitars, “I want to work on our set list for the show on the 14th. Maybe come up with a few more originals. I feel like we could make our set a bit meatier y’know?”

Nate toasted that with a chicken wing salute and listened as Tara tried out a few chord progressions. Nate nodded along and then suddenly picked up the beat. He jumped up and headed for his keyboard.

“I could add in some—”

“Don’t touch it with those sticky fingers!” Tara protested immediately, pained to see any instrument
She picked up the wet nap that had been with the regular napkins beneath the wings and brought it over to him. She perched next to him on the keyboard seat and tore the packet open with her teeth, plucking out the wet napkin and holding Nate’s hand up to clean off the sauce residue.

Nate stared at her mouth as it tore the packaging, then down at his hand as her fingers looped through his. His gaze slowly lifted and Tara, sensing the look, just smiled in his direction.

Then, in a fleeting second, Tara realized Nate’s face was moving toward hers. Her eyes widened and she hurried so much to back away, she ended up on her ass on the ground.

“W-What are you doing?”

Nate’s mouth suddenly went dry and he shot up, one hand reaching behind to rub his neck free of tension, while the other extended to help Tara up.

“Shit, Tara. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I thought…I thought wrong, clearly.”

Tara slowly took Nate’s hand and pulled herself up. Nate held on; clutch lingering and gaze searching Tara’s.

“You don’t feel anything?”

Tara took her hand back, looking awkwardly apologetic.

“Nate, I’m sorry, this isn’t…” she started and watched his eyes fall.

Her heart started to pound as she contemplated whether to say the next thing or not. Ultimately her mouth acted before her brain decided and she heard the words echoing as if she wasn’t the one saying them.

“Nate, I’m…I’m gay.”

That was the first time she’d ever said those words aloud. She’d alluded to some people that she liked girls but that huge three-letter word had never left her lips. Her whole body was shaking.

Nate was silent for what felt like forever.
“Oh,” he said eventually, tone neutral and giving nothing away, “That’s…less of a blow to my ego. I think.”

Tara was snapped from her fear and into annoyance. Nate saw the look on her face change and immediately held his hands up.

“I’m sorry, that was a dick thing to say. I just had no idea.”

Tara folded her arms into an X shape across her chest and looked down. She wasn’t sure this had been a good idea until suddenly she felt enveloped by Nate’s huge frame.

“Hey, c’mere,” he said, his soft lyrical voice comforting in her ear, “You know I don’t care right? You’re my friend no matter who you love.”

Tara relaxed into his embrace. That certainly was a lot easier than telling Willow. She started to rub her eyes free of the few tears of relief that had filled them. Nate kindly made no comment, but went to the beer fridge in the corner and took out a bottle of water. He guided Tara to take a seat on the keyboard chair again and stepped away, pressing his back up against the wall.

“Have you told anyone else?” he asked eventually.

Tara had to consider the question.

“Well not…exactly,” she said, guardedly, not wanting to give anything away that could hurt Willow, “I’m kind of…with someone.”

“Kind of?” Nate questioned.

Tara could only nod.

“It’s complicated,” she answered, averting her gaze again, “She’s not…out. She’s scared. But I love her.”

Her lips couldn’t help but smile at the thought of Willow.

Nate noticed. He smiled too.
“Hey, you’re in love,” he said, his voice full and his hands coming over to cover his own heart, “That makes my heart happy. It does. You deserve that, babe.”

Tara looked up again, eyes still slightly clouded.

“I’m sorry if I—”

“You didn’t,” Nate interrupted, holding a hand up to stop her, “Hey, a guy had to have hope. You’re rad.”

He pushed himself off the wall and came toward her.

“But it doesn’t change…this. I hope. I love creating with you. Are you still in?”

“I want to be,” Tara said sincerely, unsure where they stood now, “I really enjoy our partnership … and our friendship. But…”

Nate allowed her the time to finish, but when she didn’t, spoke up.

“I understand what’s on the table. I just want to keep making music with you. No funny business. Friends?”

He offered his hand, which Tara took and was pulled into another hug. Tara let out a bubbling laugh and Nate smiled at her, a little sadly.

He let out a hearty sigh, releasing the enormity of everything that had just happened and relaxed, stretching his hands behind his head.

“So… who’s your secret boo?”

Tara’s eyes creased for a moment in thought, then she smiled and turned toward the keyboard.

“Say that again.”

Nate’s truck pulled up on the curb outside Tara’s house. He turned off the engine.
“Great jam sesh,” he complimented, then paused for a moment to look at Tara, “I’m glad you told me. And don’t worry, no one will hear it from me. Not that you have anything to hide.”

Tara leaned across the center console to hug Nate, feeling invigorated and liberated.

As they hugged, she felt his phone vibrate in his top pocket and a familiar tone play.

“That noise has been going off all evening, what is it?”

“Dating app,” Nate admitted, grinning and Tara could only laugh.

“Of course.”

“Ladies love me,” Nate boasted playfully, “Almost all of ‘em.”

Tara jokingly punched his arm.

Across the road, and up a floor, Willow peeked out from her bedroom curtains and watched the exchange in the dim light of a street lamp. She felt a pang of jealousy.

She looked on as Tara exited the car, took her bike from the rack at the back and waved Nate off. Then Tara’s gaze flicked upward and Willow knew she was spotted. Tara didn’t seem bothered though, she just waved as her face lit up animatedly.

That smile. That radiance.

Tara was so ethereally beautiful.

If Willow knew nothing else, she knew that.

After a moment, Willow noticed Tara was gesturing at something. Her bike, she realized.

“Oh,” she said out loud, understanding. She nodded. Tara could tie her bike up over there so Donny might leave it alone.
She made her way through the quiet, empty house and around to the side gate to unlock it and let Tara in. She was waiting.

“Hey,” she said with that bright smile as she wheeled her bike alongside her.

“Hi,” Willow returned, waving her hand again in an awkward little wave, “You were with Nate?”

Tara just nodded.

“Yeah.”

She desperately wanted to share with Willow the freedom she was experiencing from saying her secret out loud, but she was scared it would make Willow pull away.

Patience.

“Hey, we’re playing a show at the Bronze in a couple of weeks. Will you come along?”

Willow brightened and nodded.

“Yeah, I’d love to. I love listening to you play. You guys, I mean, but you especially.”

Tara smiled bashfully but let her gaze meet Willow’s.

“Can I give you a hug?”

There was such hope in Tara’s voice; it made Willow’s heartbreak to think she thought the answer would be ‘no’.

And then she realized, that’s exactly what she’d done before; any time she was afraid they were being watched. That really broke her heart. She never wanted Tara to hurt, especially not because of her.

That look Tara had given her when Willow called her...that word. Willow thought she might die on the spot if she ever saw it again.

“I’d love a hug.”
Tara closed her arms around Willow and sighed contentedly.

“I miss you when you’re not around.”

Willow swallowed and took in a soft, but sharp breath, feeling Tara’s body against her and gaze penetrating inside her.

“I never felt like this with anyone before,” she whispered, “You only have to smile and I’m dizzy.”

Tara beamed. She kissed Willow and Willow let her. It was quick and chaste but the feelings between them lingered through a nose nuzzle.

“It’s getting late,” Tara said softly, “Want to hang out tomorrow?”

Willow nodded quickly.

“Yeah, definitely.”

Tara pecked Willow’s lips one last time and moved off with a wave.

Willow watched her go, feeling like the Grinch when his heart grew three sizes. Being alone in the dark was usually a source of fear but for Willow, at that moment, it provided the absence of it. No one could see her, no one could judge her.

Her world was small and fit into a five foot four retreating frame.

For the first time, she really wanted to keep this feeling deep inside of her and not push it away.

Tara meant everything.

She couldn’t lose that.

She wouldn’t.
Willow awoke to a stream of light as her curtains were thrown open and allowed in the morning sun.

She sat up, groggy and confused, and finally made out the figure of her mother when she brought a hand up to shield her eyes from the bright intruder. The only thing she wanted shining that brightly at her this early was Tara’s smile.

“What are you wearing?” Sheila’s stiff voice asked as she moved over to Willow’s closet and began looking through it.

Willow looked down at her Insect Reflection t-shirt, although technically it was Tara’s. Her one, with the cool rip, was folded away to be worn to Tara’s shows. The one Willow was wearing was one she had talked Tara into giving her as a ‘replacement’, that just happened to smell like Tara and was fitted to Tara’s body and so was the clothing equivalent of a Tara-hug.

“It’s a t-shirt, mom,” she answered gruffly, though a quick glance by her mother made her drop the tone quick.

“You have proper nightwear to wear to bed,” Sheila scolded and Willow just rolled her eyes.

Well, she thought about it.

“Can I ask what you’re doing?” she enquired politely, dropping her chin discreetly to inhale from her shirt.

“Picking out what you’ll wear to the club today,” Sheila replied airily.

Willow sat further up, sharply.

“What?”
“Pardon,” Sheila corrected with a click of her tongue, “I told you, Willow. We’re meeting up with the Babcocks at the Valentine’s Day brunch.”

Willow’s eyes widened.

*It’s Valentine’s Day??*

She then registered the rest of the sentence and withheld a groan.

*Shit.*

“Do I have to go?”

“Yes,” Sheila replied in a way that it was obvious no more complaints would be entertained.

Willow’s brow furrowed.

“Wait, I thought you and Dad were leaving for Canada today?”

“This evening, yes,” Sheila nodded, “We’ll continue on to the airport after.”

“And abandon me there?” Willow asked, unsure whether to be annoyed or hopeful.

“Don’t be ridiculous, we’ll call you a car,” Sheila said, shaking her head.

Willow sighed.

*At least I’ll still have time to change before Tara’s show.*

“Can I pick my own clothes?”

Sheila responded by laying out a denim dungaree dress and long-sleeved white top.

“Wear this. Be ready for noon.”
She left without another word and Willow silently seethed.

_Eighteen years old…I am nearly eighteen damn years old._

She kicked the clothes off the end of her bed and brought her knees up to her chest, pouting for a minute. She knew how that outfit looked on her and she looked like a child.

She felt like a child.

Remembering how Tara had transformed her at New Year’s, she decided it was time to transform herself.

She could show her mother she could be trusted to look presentable enough for the cronies at the club. Just because her wardrobe contained lots of bright yellows and fuzzy pinks didn’t mean she couldn’t try for something a little more elegant. She’d never even been given the chance. So she decided to take it instead.

Her mom would just have to deal with it.

A plan started to form in her mind.

She checked her watch.

She should have just enough time, as long as she was quick and wasn’t too fussy.

She jumped out of bed, dressed in some old clothes, grabbed her wallet and snuck out the back of the house.

As long as she wasn’t delayed, her parents would never even know she left.

She hurried to the mall where there were no less than three generic chain hairdressers. Willow chose the one that was the least full and got seated almost immediately after refusing a wash. This was an in and out job.

“Cut it all off!” she announced heartily as the young man who was to cut her hair stood behind her.
He arched a perfectly sculpted eyebrow.

“All of it?”

Willow’s eyes widened.

“Oh, well…” she replied sheepishly, “Not…all of it.”

She brought her hand to just above her shoulder.

“Maybe like, to here.”

After a few checks that she was happy with the length, the hairdresser got to cutting. Willow’s heart pounded a little as the snips of red fell past her arms to the floor. This was the first time she’d even come to a hairdresser without it being at her mother’s instruction. She marveled at how utterly ridiculous that was as the thought floating through her mind.

Finally, the hairdresser removed her gown and held a mirror up to the back for her to look. Willow’s smile broke out across her face.

“Perfect.”

She quickly paid and left, the bounce in her step matching the bounce in her new ‘do. She walked right past Sears, past the ‘trendy’ stores where she’d probably run into Cordelia and to a store at the other side of the mall that Tara talked about but she’d never actually been to.

That was going to change today.

She approached the older lady at the register.

“Hi. I need a dress.”

The woman, wearing a dark brown, earthy dress that reached her ankles and a braid that went on forever, closed the stock book she’d been looking in and offered her attention.

“I’m sure we can help you. What is it for?”
Willow just smiled.

“For me.”

Forty minutes and no less than five dresses jostling inside store bags later, Willow dashed back across town and sneaked back into her house. It was as quiet as it ever was and she wasn’t caught even when she slammed the door a little too loudly.

She tiptoed back up to her room and laid her new dresses out on her bed. She was still smiling from ear-to-ear; she loved each and every one of them.

Some were bright, some were darker; some were plain and some had designs; some were evening wear; some were daytime; some toed the line and could be used as both but she had picked each one herself and was looking forward to wearing them.

She picked out the one she was going to wear; it was soft, long-sleeved and burgundy with paler red circles blended into the print. It was so comfortable, Willow felt like she was wrapped in a blanket.

She checked the time and had just enough to give it a quick iron before pulling it on. She resisted her brightly colored leggings and went for the black ones with the flecks of silver and a pair of grey boots that matched nicely.

She brushed through her hair again, finding it odd when the bristles touched her skin on the back of her neck. Finally, she looked at herself in the mirror and smiled.

Today was her day.

She skipped downstairs, where her parents were getting their coats on at the door.

Sheila looked at her, surprised.

“Oh Willow, you cut off your hair!”

Willow brushed her palm over the back of her hair and over her now-exposed neck.

“It’s just a sudden whim I had.”

Sheila peered at her and Willow realized she was trying to figure out had it been like that when she
woke her up.

“I like it,” she said in a reasoned tone, though still threw a discerning eye over the outfit, “That’s not what I picked out.”

“Do you not think I look nice, mom?” Willow asked, with a purposefully sweet smile.

“I think you look lovely, sweetheart,” Ira interjected and Willow beamed.

“Thanks, dad.”

“You do look nice,” Sheila added on, her tone unsure but ultimately accepting, “Well…lets go then.”

Willow grinned.

Victory.

She followed her parents out to the car and was smug the whole ride to the country club. In fact, it lasted right up until they entered the restaurant and she was reminded of where they were. For an expensive club, the place was decorated with cheap heart cut-outs and lackluster red balloons.

Worse: their dining companions.

Dickie Babcock looked about as uncomfortable in his shirt and tie as Willow would have been in her dungaree dress. She momentarily felt pity for him.

They were made to sit together at the table, exchanging sour looks and bumped elbows for the entirety of the brunch.

After their plates were cleared, Dickie’s mother Judy looked toward them with hopeful eyes, completely oblivious to the animosity between them.

“Why don’t you two go have a walk around the grounds? It’s a lovely, crisp day. Beautiful time for a stroll.”

“Oh, I’m sure Willow would love to,” Ira interjected before Willow could protest.
They both eyed each other and grudgingly stood; Dickie throwing his soiled napkin straight onto the tablecloth.

Willow crossed her arms over her chest as they walked out from the restaurant into the courtyard.

“Don’t try anything,” she said guardedly, and Dickie just scoffed.

“As if.”

“You tried to kiss me on New Year’s,” Willow retorted with a scowl.

Dickie’s top lip curled with disgust.

“My parents told me I had to ‘cause no one else would.”

Willow looked down and swallowed audibly.

Ouch.

*Except someone did. A very beautiful someone.*

“Yeah well I’d rather be anywhere but here,” Willow shot back, “I’d rather hang out with a tarantula than with you.”

Dickie rolled his eyes, a slow and concentrated effort to make sure Willow knew just how annoyed he was.

“I don’t want to be hanging out with you either!” he said, then added on in a mutter as he kicked some dirt in front of him, “I’m missing a comic writing seminar for this. Got the ticket weeks ago.”

Willow stopped by a stone wall separating the golf course. She sat on it and looked at Dickie, surprised.

“You write comics?”

“What’s it to you?” Dickie asked with narrowed eyes.
“Jeez, nothing,” Willow said with an annoyed click of her tongue, “I was just asking.”

Dickie considered her for a few moments, then said a word that barely left his lips.

“Sorry,” he said, some internal wall dropping, “My parents think it’s stupid and I should only be drawing for architecture or cartography or something.”

Willow resisted the urge to comment on him knowing a long word. But wow, could she relate to that.

And he said sorry.

Maybe she could try to make conversation.

“What do you like to draw?” she asked, still a little cagily but with some empathy showing, “I doodle sometimes.”

Dickie leaned up against the wall, hesitated a moment, then produced his phone and pulled up some pictures.

Willow’s eyebrows lifted right into her brow. They were impressive.

“These are really good,” she said, finally, sincerely.

She brought her hand up behind her neck, feeling the ends of her hair tickle her skin.

“If you want, you can go and I’ll cover for you.”

Dickie eyed Willow suspiciously.

“Why?”

Willow looked down at the grass and the dead patches at the base of the stones.

“Because I know what it’s like to have parents you can’t be yourself around.”
Dickie seemed to perk up at the idea but didn’t move, yet.

“How do I know you’re not gonna rat me out the second I leave?”

Willow shrugged.

“You don’t. But you’d rather be somewhere else, I’d rather be alone…seems like it works for both of us.”

Dickie played it over in his mind and then made a running start, calling back over his shoulder.

“I owe you one, Rosenberg.”

“We’re leaving at six!” Willow called after him, “I’ll meet you back here!”

“Got it!” Dickie called back, already several feet away.

Willow swung her legs off the wall and contemplated what to do.

The restaurant was out of bounds; she’d be questioned why Dickie wasn’t with her.

She didn’t particularly want to stay out here, with couples lounging on the grass having picnics or relaxing after brunch.

It just reminded her that she couldn’t be like that with Tara.

And never could?

She jumped down from the wall sharply, almost tripping over her boots but managing to steady herself without messing up her new dress. She smiled and shook her hair out. She was going to walk around and show her new look off to every damn person in this place.

Hours later, her shoes were making the patch of dead grass she’d jumped down onto earlier even larger as she paced back and forth.

Finally, Dickie jogged into view, securing his tie back around his neck.
Willow marched up to him, furious, and poked his chest.

“I told you six!”

“Chill, there was a creator there I got talking to,” Dickie replied with complete disregard for her anger, “My parents didn’t figure it out did they?”

“No, but my parents had to go to the airport!” Willow protested, “I had to pretend I wanted to stay here with you just so I could cover for you!”

Dickie paled.

“Oh god, they don’t think we’re,” he had to stop himself from gagging, “kissing do they?”

Willow’s face contorted in disgust.

“Ugh, you are such an ass. Why did I cover for you? I’m supposed to be watching my—” she stopped and shook her head, “I’m going. Bye.”

She stomped off at speed.

“Hey Rosenberg,” Dickie called after her and for some reason, Willow turned around, “Thanks.”

Willow just rolled her eyes and hurried out to call a car.

Now she was late. Late, late, late. She’d had plans to go home and change and eat and leisurely get to the Bronze to get a good spot for Tara’s show, but now she’d have to ask the driver to drop her right there and step on it!

The evening Sunnydale traffic decided to toy with her and she had to jump out near the Pump and speed-walk the rest of the way, cursing under her breath. She’d spent the day bored and alone and now she might miss Tara’s performance because of Dickie Dickhead Babcock.

When she finally got into the Bronze, she didn’t even try to scope out if Cordelia or anyone else was there. She didn’t have time, not today. Especially because she could hear Tara’s sweet voice already playing out over the speakers.
She could hear her, but not see her. There was a crowd and she had to fight her way through it until finally she pushed through a group of girls ogling Nate and she could see the stage.

Most importantly, she could see Tara, hugging the microphone stand like it was a lover and singing as sweetly into the microphone as if it was too.

Tara’s face lit up in surprise and delight but didn’t break stride when she spotted Willow. She lifted her hand to discreetly wiggle her fingers in a wave. Willow’s heart leaped into her throat and she waved back, awestruck. She’d listened to Tara sing for years but it never failed to make her burst with pride.

Willow bopped along to a few songs with not a care in the world.

Her dress swayed against her legs, her hair swung against her neck and she felt free.

Her heart sped up when she spotted Tara getting her saxophone secured around her neck. Willow really did love to watch her on the sax. Nate set up a backing keyboard track and fixed a guitar over his chest.

“We’d like to end the night with a new song we’re debuting for you here right now,” he said into his microphone, shooting a look over to Tara to confirm she was ready, “This is Secret Boo.”

Willow didn’t think too much about the name, she was too busy watching Tara’s mouth close around her mouthpiece and bellow out that beautiful, sultry sound.

Tara played the opening notes, gradually slowing until Nate’s guitar beat took over fully and Tara replaced her mouthpiece with her microphone pressed up close to her mouth.

_Hush, shush, quiet down_  
_Tilt those lips, no need to frown_  
_Covert, furtive, underground_  
_It don’t matter, I’ll still drown_  
_In you_  
_Oh, in you_

If Willow thought Tara was getting up close and personal with the microphone stand before, it was practically molded to her body now. The song was erotic, making the hair on the back of Willow’s neck stand up.

_You…_
Willow was entranced by Tara’s breathy voice but slowly her expression changed to confusion as the lyrics caught up in her brain.

Rooted like a willow tree
As deep in you as I can be
You call my name
You have me there
Clinging to the dirt of our affair

Willow’s face suddenly fell.

Everything started to feel hot and restricting; the distinct feel of panic rising.

Tara’s head tilted back and took in a long breath, while Nate sang an elongated note.

Now...

His breath hitched like he was about to launch into a fresh verse, but instead, he closed it with a grin and Tara took over the unexpected rap.

—booo I hope one day you hear me
I hope one day you feel me
I hope one day you know just how much I hold you dearly
You know you got me addicted
You know you got me afflicted
But I hold on tight to you because I know this ain’t constructed
We don’t have to broadcast it
But our thing ain’t the culprit
I’m spinning on your axis
Boo now please don’t bounce us

The crowd loved it and roared for Tara, who dropped her head for just a moment, before returning to her position at the microphone to taper off the song.

Secret boo
You make my vision skew…

Tara found Willow’s gaze in the crowd and lingered.

I’m just as scared as you
But I’ll see this through
Because I—

Tara winked and pursed her lips as if she was blowing a kiss.

—’m your secret boo too

Nate played them out on the guitar, while Tara caught her breath and enjoyed the praise they were getting from the crowd.

“Goodnight Sunnydale!” Nate called out and the group of girls to the side of Willow squealed.

Willow thought she was going to be sick.

Her heart was pounding between her ears and every person bumping into her felt like a steamroller about to flatten everything in her life.

She did the only thing she could think of.

She ran.

She always did.

The crowd was just as dense as it had been when she came in, if not more so, making Willow struggle to get through. She worked herself into a frenzy by the time she pushed herself through the back doors onto the alleyway behind. She put her back up against the wall and cast her eyes furtively
around for anyone that might be staring at her funnily.

No one else was there, so she focused on catching her breath.

She had almost recovered, externally at least, when Tara appeared through the doors, momentarily letting out the noise pollution of the follow-up band before they banged shut again.

“There you are,” Tara said, her face bright as she practically floated over, “You look so pretty.”

She put her hands on Willow’s neck and ran her fingers through the ends of Willow’s hair.

“This dress and your hair! I love it. You look beautiful.”

Willow stepped out of Tara’s grasp, her facial muscles tense. Tara frowned.

“Are you okay?”

Willow wouldn’t meet her gaze.

“How could you?” she asked, her voice echoing.

Tara immediately felt tiny, but she had no idea why.

“I-I don’t understand.”

“That song!” Willow wailed, although in a whisper.

“Was it the rap?” Tara asked, looking down with embarrassment and her voice grew quiet, “I knew I should never have let Nate convince me to do that.”

Willow had actually been impressed, and more than a little turned on, by the rap. That made everything so much worse.

“No!” she protested, and could see the stunned look in Tara’s eye, “You sang a song about me, publicaly! You used my name!”
Tara shook her head quickly, resolute.

“I would never out you like that. It was coded, no one knew, not even Nate knows who it’s about, honey—”

“Don’t call me that!” Willow hissed again, throwing her arms up, “You made it all, all...sexual!”

“It was a metaphor, I w-was talking about emotions,” Tara replied, a tight knot forming in her belly, “I wasn’t trying—“

“Stop! Just stop!” Willow spat and she watched Tara’s eyes crease, but not from that lovely smile that usually graced her face.

“I’m sorry,” Tara replied, her voice strained as she struggled to swallow a lump, “I would never have...I would never hurt you on purpose.”

She tried to reach out but Willow slapped her hand away and immediately regretted it. Unable to take the hurt look on Tara’s face, she turned and pounded the pavement as fast as her boots would allow, hearing Tara’s pained voice slowly get lost in the wind.

“Willow, I’m sorry!”

Willow just kept walking, her own demons screaming loud enough to drown anything else out.

Turning on the opposite end of the street Willow walked onto, another young woman was running away from her demons. Both lost in their own worlds, they didn’t realize they were on the same path as each other until they collided.

“Sorry, sorry,” Willow spoke in a winded tone, her vision hazy for a moment until it settled and she realized she recognized her bumping buddy, “Buffy.”

Buffy seemed startled to hear her name, then relaxed when she saw who it was.

“Willow,” she said, filling an awkward lull pretty quick when she noticed Willow’s ‘do, “Hey, you cut your hair. It looks great.”

Willow blushed, curling the ends of her hair between her fingers.
“Uh, yeah. Thanks. It’s new,” she said, finding herself oddly nervous to be around the person she’d known as a sister for years, “Must be on your way somewhere important.”

Buffy let out a sigh.

“Just home to mope.”

“Mope?” Willow asked voice etched with both concern and curiosity.

Buffy rolled her eyes.

“Dumped. On Valentine’s Day.”

“Oh,” Willow replied, face falling into sympathy, “I’m really sorry. That sucks.”

Buffy just nodded and despite everything, Willow hated to see her friend in pain.

“Do you want to talk about it?” she offered sincerely.

Buffy looked at Willow for a long moment, then finally cracked smiled; a mix of relief and the comfort borne from friendship.

“My place?”

Willow smiled back the same way and nodded. They walked to Revello Drive, cracking easy jokes that told of their comfortable bond but also their lack of communication in a while.

When they arrived, Buffy was pounding the staircase before the front door had even closed and Willow was following close behind.

Joyce looked up from her position on the couch, channel-surfing and brightened as the two sped past her.

“Oh, Willow, how lovely to see you!”

“Thanks, Mrs. Summers, you too!” Willow called back as she quickly ascended the stairs with Buffy, as she had so many times before and then flew by the first bedroom, “Oh hey Dawnie.”
“Hi W—” Dawn started to reply, clearly excited to see her, but Buffy pulled them into her room before she could even finish.

Buffy opened the door to her bedroom and the first thing to strike Willow was how different it looked. Buffy had changed the position of the bed, taken down all of the posters that had been there before and added in more lamps in what seemed like an attempt at ‘mood lighting’.

“You changed your room,” Willow commented a bit unnecessarily, her hand reaching across her body to grab her opposite arm, “I guess it’s been a while.”

Buffy perched on the end of her bed and nodded solemnly.

“Yeah, it has.”

Willow looked at her friend, the one who’d changed her life and high school experience so much, and just saw sadness. She couldn’t hold a grudge when Buffy’s eyes were so forlorn. She came and sat right beside her on the bed. She put her hand on top of hers and offered a kind smile.

“He must have been pretty special.”

Buffy’s shoulders slumped and she leaned her head on Willow’s shoulder.

“I thought so. I just totally fell for him.”

“What happened?” Willow asked, giving Buffy a sidelong hug.

Buffy was silent for a long moment.

“He just changed after we…”

Willow nodded along, then her eyes widened.

“Oh, OH! Wow!” she said, unable to hide the surprise, “You guys…?”

Buffy blushed and nodded.
“Yeah. I called you to talk about it but it rang out.”

Willow paused. She had seen a missed call or two from Buffy, but she’d ignored them.

On purpose.

To make Buffy see how it felt.

She felt guilty now.

“I’m really sorry.”

“No big,” Buffy replied, but her tone indicated otherwise.

“Yes, big,” Willow protested, putting her arm around Buffy’s shoulders, “I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you. He sounds like a jerk.”

Buffy sighed and sat back up, rubbing her eyes.

“I guess I got caught up in the secrecy of it all,” she said wistfully, then further explained off Willow’s look, “He was older. It was…thrilling. I’d sneak out at night and meet in places no one would see us, like the graveyard.”

Willow’s eyes widened as much as physically possible and Buffy grimaced as she heard her own words back.

She flopped back onto her bed.

“I think I lost my damn mind,” she reasoned, shaking her head, “And somehow I think I still love him. But it just couldn’t…work. He decided to move to LA to make it hurt less, but it doesn’t.”

She made her hands blow up and looked to the ceiling sadly.

Willow lay down beside her, both on their backs, looking upward.

“Was it, um…well, I saw you hanging out with this other girl sometimes…”
Buffy covered her face with her hands.

“Oh her. Yeah, she just showed up one day. She’s the one who kept convincing me to sneak out and stuff. She was intriguing. But then she fell in with an even worse crowd. I ended up knocking her out when she tried to fight me one night.”

“You knocked someone out?!” Willow asked in disbelief, “Jeez, Buffy, no wonder you haven’t been available.”

Buffy crossed her arms over her chest.

“I guess I got caught up in the bad girl vibe for a while. The excitement, the naughtiness…the leather.”

Willow frowned.

“I don’t think the cleavage-y slut-bomb look is you, Buff.”

Buffy actually chuckled.

“I don’t think so either,” she said, turning her face toward Willow with a smile and taking a moment to appraise her outfit, “I like this look on you, though. It’s…surprisingly subdued.”

She glanced down at Willow’s feet kicking at the end of the bed.

“Are those the boots I gave you for your last birthday?”

Willow brightened and nodded.

“Uh huh.”

“I didn’t think you liked them,” Buffy admitted. She’d never seen Willow wear them.

“I did, I do!” Willow replied resolutely, “I was just…waiting for the right moment I guess.”
Buffy’s grin grew curious.

“And tonight was the night?” she prompted, raising an eyebrow, “Trying to impress someone?”

Willow’s face changed, noticeably and Buffy shot up, mouth hanging open.

“Has Xander finally seen the light?”

“No! God no,” Willow protested, feeling a wave of what could only be described as ‘ickiness’ and she wondered how she ever believed she had a crush on him.

“Someone else taken your fancy?” Buffy teased, poking Willow in the belly, “Come on, you have to tell me!”

Willow sat up against the headboard and clutched one of Buffy’s pillows to her chest.

She would have to leave, right now, if she wanted to keep getting away with this.

She couldn’t look into Buffy’s eyes and lie.

“It’s complicated,” she answered finally, very aware of the passing seconds and the intent look on her friend’s face.

Buffy’s brow creased in confusion.

“Why complicated?”

Willow sighed and steeled herself.

What was happening? Was she actually about to say—

“It’s complicated… because of Tara.”

Her heart was racing and she felt on the verge of puking, but she managed to keep it in so that was a plus. More tentative seconds passed as she moved between her eyes boring into Buffy’s face for a reaction, and looking away to avoid one.
“Tara?” Buffy asked, bewildered, “Your friend from across the street? You mean Tara has a crush on Xander?”

Willow’s eyes shut tight and she shook her head.

“No. Never mind.”

Buffy put a hand on Willow’s leg.

“I know I’m missing something here. Help me— Oh!”

All the air rushed from Willow’s lungs.

Why had she done this?

This was everything she was terrified of. Her mouth opened before her brain caught up as she rushed to explain.

“There's something between us. It-it wasn't something I was looking for. It's just powerful.”

Buffy stood up and awkwardly massaged the back of her own neck. She paced up and down the length of the bed and forced a cheerful tone as she processed what Willow was telling her.

“Well, there you go, I mean, you know, you have to — you have to follow your heart, Will. And that's what's important, Will.”

Willow’s gaze faltered.

“Why do you keep saying my name like that?”

“Like what Will?” Buffy asked in that same painfully chirpy tone.

Willow’s eyes stayed painfully open because if they closed for a second she’d burst into tears.

“Are you freaked?”
“What? No, Will, d—” Buffy started, then stopped herself and sighed, “No.”

She sat back on the bed and looked Willow in the eye.

“No, absolutely no to that question.”

Willow felt the sincerity and while half of her was screaming ‘panic, panic, panic’, some part of her stayed grounded and recognized she had an opportunity to release all the dark, painful thoughts she’d been wrapping herself up in all these months.

“I am,” she said, barely audible.

“What?” Buffy asked softly.

Willow very slowly, hesitantly and while shaking met Buffy’s eye.

“F-Freaked,” she replied with a tremor in her voice, “I want her but I don’t want to be…”

Her head dropped into the pillow and she started to sob. Buffy didn’t hesitate for a second, she wrapped her in a hug, as best she could in this position.

“We can’t control who we fall for,” she comforted, then added on wryly, “Or I wouldn’t have fallen for such a monster.”

A laugh broke through Willow’s tears, shocking her enough to stop them. She lifted her head and swiped at her eyes until Buffy got up and offered her a tissue.

“Thanks,” Willow said, and looked at Buffy in such a way that they both knew she meant for more than the tissue.

Buffy took both of Willow’s cheeks in her hands and smiled.

“You’re my best friend, and nothing could change that. Especially something that makes you happy. Or someone.”

Willow thought she could actually feel pressure evaporate from above her shoulders. Her negative feelings hadn’t just disappeared, but they’d lifted for that moment, and even when they pressed down
again, the weight wouldn’t seem so heavy.

Buffy pressed a quick kiss on the highest center point of Willow’s forehead and released her again.

“Hey, you wanna order a pizza? All this reuniting makes for quite the hunger pang.”

“Yeah, I’d love some pizza,” Willow replied through a tearful laugh. She hadn’t eaten since brunch and the reminder of food made her stomach ache in a much better way than it had been just minutes before.

Buffy went about ordering the pizza, while Willow cleaned herself up and gathered her thoughts.

It still scared her when she thought too much about it, but there was a definite relief that the person she cared the most about in the world, apart from Tara, had embraced her after she revealed what she had considered her biggest shame.

“Pizza’s coming!”

Willow trashed her tissues and hurried back from the bathroom, the thought of the pizza making her stomach rumble.

When the pizza arrived, they sat on the floor together and dug in, catching up on some of the more minor aspects of the last few months of their lives.

After they’d gorged themselves, they lay on their backs on the floor, both quietly contemplative.

“Can I ask you something?” Buffy asked after a long time of companionable silence, which Willow enjoyed greatly.

She was so used to the lonely kind.

“Yeah,” she answered softly.

Apparently, she was an open book tonight.

“You’ve known Tara forever right?”
Willow nodded evenly. Buffy propped herself up on her elbow.

“And you’ve never dated anyone else?”

“No…” Willow replied, starting to become unsure of Buffy’s tone, “Not really.”

Buffy finally just asked what she was thinking.

“So how do you know you’re not confusing your friendship feelings?”

Willow paused. It was easier to speak like this, staring upward with nothing staring back but a white ceiling with no agenda.

“Because I wish I could tell you I was and not have to deal with…everything. I wish I could walk away. But then she looks at me and…I just…I can’t describe it.”

Buffy lay back down.

“I get that,” she sighed wistfully, “Theundescribable.”

“In,” Willow corrected.

“In what?” Buffy asked with her mouth pursing, trying to figure it out.

Willow just chuckled.

“Insane, as in I must be,” she said, picturing Tara’s smile and trying to forget how they’d left things. Tara was probably furious at her for blowing up like that, she thought, “Insane for her and not in a friendship way. Because, no offense Buffy, but I never looked at you and thought your lips looked too dry and I should fix that with my own mouth.”

Willow blushed as she realized what she said, but Buffy seemed to be thoughtfully musing it over.

“And you think that about her?”

“Only once,” Willow reasoned, a wrinkle slowly growing taut in her furrowing brow, “Or twice. A day. Since we were 11.”
“What about Xander?” Buffy pressed, not to persuade, just to understand, “You’ve been crazy about him the whole time I’ve known you.”

“Xander was like a surrogate,” Willow explained, immediately feeling a sense of sadness and loss, “Girls had to like guys, so I picked a guy. I even made myself believe it for a long time. It’s so weird because if I hadn’t fixed this idea of having a crush on him as part of my life, we might not have even stayed friends and he is a really good friend.”

A melancholy breath pushed past her lips.

“Or, was. We’re not friends now after my failed seduction attempt, of course.”

Buffy nodded along, then her head turned sharply.

“Wait…what?!”

Willow sighed, turned on her side and filled Buffy in on that whole debacle. Buffy’s eyebrows grew further and further upward until they almost disappeared into her hairline.

“Damn…I really have missed a lot.”

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m glad it didn’t happen,” Willow added on quickly after the story, “But…I got used to having him around, the big lug. But I daren’t face the wrath of Cordelia.”

Buffy shrugged.

“They broke up, you know.”

“They did?” Willow asked, and now that she thought about it, he hadn’t seen him hanging out of her at school, but she had been running the opposite direction any time she saw either of them.

“Like, during the summer,” Buffy confirmed, then continued in realization, “Actually, it must have been right around that time…”

Willow covered her face with her hands.
“Great. I’m sure he absolutely hates me, even though he’s way better off without Queen C. I feel like I’ll be leaving a trail of destruction when I leave for Claremont.”

“Claremont?” Buffy asked, wondering what else she missed, but was able to figure this one out in time, “Wait, you got into college?! Where you wanted, Harvey Milk??”

“Harvey Mudd,” Willow amended, smiling bashfully and a little uncertainly.

“That’s the one!” Buffy exclaimed and rolled over to throw her arms around Willow. “That’s great, Will. That’s really great.”

Willow’s shortened name didn’t sound so weird anymore.

“I’ve been slacking off so much I’ll be lucky to get a place at UCSD. My mom would be happy if I stayed local though.”

“I’ll come visit,” Willow offered, then tacked on, “If you want me too. I won’t be that far away.”

“Of course I do,” Buffy replied as if Willow was nuts to think she’d say any different. She paused and sat up, cross-legged, “I know things have been distant between us, but I don’t want that anymore.”

Willow sat up in the same way.

“It’s not your fault.”

Buffy put her hands on Willow’s pointed knees.

“Will, I miss you. And it is my fault. I’ve been wrapped up in my own stuff. I’ve been a bad friend.”

“Well, I haven’t been Miss Available either,” Willow replied in an apologetic tone, “I-I kept secrets. I hid things from everyone.”

She looked down for a moment.

“I wanted to tell you, but I was so scared.”
“You can tell me anything,” Buffy replied emphatically, “I love you. You're my best friend.”

Willow looked back up, smiling in delight.

“Me, too. I love you too.”

They leaned in and embraced tightly until Willow pulled back a tad.

“Platonically.”

They both started laughing and Buffy picked up the pillow she’d been leaning on and smacked Willow with it, who giggled, feeling almost high at being able to make such a joke so freely. When they settled again, Buffy started and stopped talking a few times.

“So why aren’t you with her tonight…?” Buffy questioned cautiously, “Valentine‘s…?”

Her voice dipped and Willow knew she was reminded of the very recent break-up.

“We…I…” she didn’t want to admit to how she’d acted, “It’s complicated?”

Buffy nodded in understanding.

“You know what isn’t complicated?” she said suddenly, jumping up, “Ice-cream!”

Buffy hurried off to get them a tub and two spoons but turned back at the door at looked at Willow, unusually shy.

“Will… you wanna stay over? Have a slumber party?”

Willow smiled softly. She could see the look in her friend’s eye. Buffy needed her, probably to have a good cry, and Willow had already had hers. There was only one answer, the truth.

“I’d love to.”

Tara crept slowly along the street from The Bronze, her feet dragging behind her.
She was worn out from a restless night of sleep and her guitar case was heavy on her back.

She’d run home, a mess, after Willow had blown up at her and Nate had been kind enough to drop her saxophone home, but the guitar had been left behind by accident since Nate had had to pack up by himself.

Thankfully, Tara had her name and phone number on the case and the owner of The Bronze had called her when he found it that morning. The last thing Tara had wanted was to face the world or even get out of bed, but she grudgingly dressed and headed downtown to collect it.

As she passed by the Espresso Pump, she spotted a familiar bobbing head of red hair sitting alone at a table.

She hesitated, unsure whether to go in or not, but her heart hurt too much to just walk away. It was fairly busy and Tara stood out with her guitar case on her back, but Willow still didn’t spot her until she got to the table.

“Willow,” she said softly, eyes creased with pain instead of their usual brightness. She sat at a slight angle on the opposite chair to accommodate her case and reached across the table, taking both of Willow’s hands, “Can we please talk?”

Willow took in a sharp breath as she took in Tara’s appearance. Tara always put herself together nicely but her clothes were disheveled, her hair brushed but with no care in her parting. Her eyes were red raw and she’d clearly been crying all night.

Willow frowned but didn’t move her hands away and began to return a tender look. She opened her mouth to speak but before she could, a large circular mug was placed in front of her, a little chocolate heart sitting in the foam.

“Mocha, right?” a male voice asked, his eyes slowly moving between the two women.

Willow looked up at him and felt Tara’s hands snatch away from hers.

She didn’t like it.

She really didn’t like when she realized she was usually the one to do the snatching. Was that how Tara felt when she did it to her?
She realized two sets of eyes were on her and looked between the two of them, scrambling her brain for a response.

“Right,” she said eventually to the boy, swallowing quickly as she glanced back to Tara, “Um…”

Tara felt her stomach turn. The boy was holding another mug of plain black coffee, which he took a casual sip from.

He wasn’t wearing a uniform.

Willow was not receiving table service.

“I—I’m sorry, I didn’t—” she stammered, almost falling as she turned around herself to get up out of what seemed to be ‘his’ seat, “I’m sorry.”

The boy just nodded at her cordially.

“Hey. I’ve heard your music. I like your sound.”

“T-Thanks,” Tara replied, averting her gaze as she tried desperately to get out of there, “I j-just came in for a coffee, so I-I’ll leave you to your…”

She gestured at the table and hurried off to join the coffee line, the only dignified escape route possible. Unfortunately, there was already a few people waiting and she ended up only a foot away from them, arms crossed over her chest to hold herself in place.

At the table, Willow desperately sought Tara’s gaze out of the corner of her eye but to no avail.

“So, this is nice,” the boy said evenly, now sitting opposite her, “You. Me. Coffee.”

He’d asked to buy her a coffee when they were in line together and Willow had said yes after floundering for a moment, from years of having politeness broken into her.

“Yeah. I like coffee,” Willow reasoned and unable to take the thrum of awkwardness between them or the waves of pain she could feel in spades from Tara.

She couldn’t take it. She stood up and brought her mug with her.
“Um, I was actually going to get this to-go, so…”

The boy, sweet and affable, stood with her like this was a normal way to have an exchange.

“Maybe we could do it again…officially some time?”

Time slowed down for Willow for a moment.

Was this happening?

This was happening.

There was little to misinterpret; this boy was asking her out.

Here it was, the thing she thought she wanted most of all for so many years — and it felt empty. A boy — a nice boy, a cool boy — was asking her out and she felt…nothing. And ‘nothing’ was the opposite of what she felt for Tara.

For Tara, she felt everything.

Being with Tara terrified her, but not being with Tara terrified her more. She couldn’t do this, she wouldn’t — to either of them. It was time to take a step, even if it was just a baby one.

“I’m sorry, I’m seeing someone,” she said, and actually heard the sharp intake of breath from the line, “I’m going to get them to put this in a to-go cup. I’ll… see you.”

The boy just nodded once, dejection hidden in the purse of his lips.

“Yeah, sure. Bye.”

Willow took out her wallet and the boy held up a hand, looking at her for a sincere moment.

“Please.”

“Well, um, thanks,” Willow said quickly, and moved off quickly for both of their sakes, “For the mocha. Really kind of you.”
She turned away from his desolate smile and stepped into line with Tara; their shoulders brushing together.

Tara’s heart was hammering and she was too scared to look at Willow. Her eyes stayed fixed ahead unnaturally.

Until she felt the barest hint of a pinky brush against her own. Her eyes flickered over to Willow who smiled back, a little sad but also full of sincerity.

Willow saw the lump protrude in Tara’s throat as she swallowed. She stepped in for her when they moved up in the line and the barista looked at them expectantly.

“Can I get a medium hazelnut macchiato and an extra to-go cup please?”

She paid and they took their respective cups when they were ready and headed toward the exit. The chatter and music got fainter with each step taken away from the busy street.

They wordlessly moved toward the direction of their own houses, from the main town to the quieter residential streets.

Willow couldn’t help but notice Tara sneaking glances and smiling like she couldn’t believe they were walking together each time their eyes connected.

Why had Willow never seen that before? She’d looked and watched and witnessed those looks for… for years when she actually thought about it, but she’d never appreciated the entirety of what it meant.

*If I can make someone else that happy, why can’t I make me that happy?*

When they were on an abandoned, sleepy street with no one else around, Tara brought up a hand to shyly tuck some hair behind her own ear.

“Um, about—”

“That was nothing,” Willow cut in quickly, splaying a hand out in front of her and shaking it from side to side indicatively, “He just arrived at the same time as me and asked to buy me a coffee and my brain spazzed for a moment. It really was nothing, really.”
She did the sneaky glance this time and made sure their eyes locked.

“I wouldn’t do that to you.”

Tara swallowed and Willow watched relief flood her face. It brought back her guilt and she began to wring her hands around her coffee cup.

“I was actually on my way home from Buffy’s. I was gonna bring you a coffee as a peace offering.”

Tara stopped, her eyebrows rising closer to her hairline.

“Wait. You guys hung out? That’s great, I’m so happy for you!” she said, flinging her arms around Willow, then pulling back sheepishly and falling back into step with her, “I, um, I know you’ve missed her.”

“Yeah,” Willow said, smiling softly as her breath caught a little from Tara’s embrace, “Yeah, it was good. It was…good.”

Tara nodded agreeably but her fingers kept tapping her cup.

“Before, I, um…I actually meant about last night.”

“Tara,” Willow started, taking in a deep breath, “Tara, I’m so sorry. For how I acted. You didn’t deserve it.”

Tara quickly shook her head.

“I should never have sung a song about you without checking with you first.”

“No, I overreacted. I got scared but I should have just talked to you,” Willow pressed, then smiled to herself, “It’s really flattering actually. The first song I’ve ever had written about me.”

Tara looked down bashfully.

“Not the first.”
Willow smiled slowly with a hint of intrigue. They fell back into silence for a while, both in their own thoughts.

“Tara?” Willow said eventually, her voice echoing softly.

Tara looked in her direction and Willow spoke again, only loud enough to be a whisper on the wind, between them and nothing or no one else.

“Wait for me?”

Tara felt Willow’s pinky fully curl around hers and her heart soared as high as it had ever been.

“Forever,” she answered without a beat, holding Willow’s pinky in place.

Willow’s heart fluttered and she looked at Tara, who just smiled and held their fingers tighter together.

Willow squeezed back in the same way and just gazed at her from the side.

This was the most Willow had ever allowed herself to feel everything Tara outside of their bedroom walls. And it was nice. It was really, really nice. She couldn’t stop smiling.

They walked on the road instead of the sidewalk and stopped between their houses, neither wanting to part.

“My parents are out of town,” Willow said, trying not to fidget with the lid on her cup, “Do you want to come inside?”

“I’d love to,” Tara answered simply, but full of joy.

Willow brought them over to her house and inside and felt oddly awkward as if she’d never had Tara in her home before.

“Um, do you want a different drink or anything?”

“Oh, no, I’m good,” Tara replied, waving her half-full cup of coffee, “Actually can I use the bathroom?”
Willow finally snapped out of it; it was Tara, for god’s sake.

“Yeah, of course, you know where it is. Here, I’ll take your cup.”

She took Tara’s cup and watched her go up the stairs. Very definitively watched a certain part of her sway with each step.

Her cheeks reddened, but she didn’t look away until Tara’s body curved out of sight. Willow looked around and wondered whether to go into the living room, but that was still a little bit too public to the street outside, at least for the smooch or two she planned on stealing. Curtains closed during the day was suspicious.

She skipped upstairs to her bedroom.

“Will?” Tara’s voice called a minute or two later from outside the bathroom.

“In my room,” Willow called back.

Tara walked in, where Willow was sitting on her bed, the coffee cups still in her hands, grinning.

“I just took a sip of my mocha and then your hazelnut latte and it was basically liquid-y coffee-light Nutella.”

Tara set her case down under Willow’s window and walked over to her.

“Let me try,” she replied, sitting beside Willow and taking each cup to try, “You’re right, that’s really good.”

“How have we never tried this before?” Willow giggled, “We’ll make our own blend and be millionaires!”

Tara returned the laugh and Willow couldn’t help scooting over and planting a kiss on her lips. Tara recovered from the surprise and quickly returned it. Willow pressed her palm against Tara’s cheek and caressed her jaw while pulling away slowly.

“Sorry. I’ve been turned into a crook,” she said, adding on sheepishly, “To steal a kiss.”
“You can’t steal what’s freely given,” Tara replied sweetly.

Willow had a flashback to when they were kids; Tara giving her the Barbie she wanted to play with even though Tara had been playing with it first. Willow hadn’t had to say anything; Tara just knew.

“Tell me about Buffy,” Tara broke Willow out of her thoughts, “If you want. Last time we talked about it, she wasn’t being very communicative.”

Willow drank the last bit of her mocha, left her empty cup on the nightstand and lay down on her stomach. She started recounting the story to Tara, who slowly moved closer as she finished her coffee, then lay on her back alongside Willow when she was done.

“So, yeah, she ended up pretty weepy for the night what with being dumped on Valentine’s Day, but we had great friend-time and it just felt so good to connect again.”

“That’s really wonderful,” Tara empathized, then corrected herself, “Not about the break-up. That must have been very difficult. I-I’m guessing. I don’t know her.”

Willow’s brow fell sadly.

“Tara…”

Tara just smiled it off.

“I got you something,” she said, changing the subject as she threw her legs off the bed and walked over to her guitar case, “For Valentine’s Day.”

She opened the little pouch on the front, while Willow looked on, curious. Tara turned toward her again, something closed in her palm.

“I was going to give it to you last night but…um. Anyway. I knew you wouldn’t want something, uh…obvious. But I thought this was pretty.”

She laid back down and opened her hand, revealing a pink-purple crystal. She offered it to Willow shyly, who took it and turned it over in her hand.

“It’s gorgeous,” as she turned it and watched the reflection of the rock in the sun shining in the window, “So cool.”
“It’s called a Doll’s Eye crystal,” Tara explained, “I had to write a jingle for a class and I recognized this in a store window. My grandma, my mom’s mom, was big into crystals and my mom keeps a small collection of them.”

“It’s like a family heirloom?” Willow asked cautiously.

Tara shook her head.

“No, I bought a new one for you.”

“Oh good,” Willow replied with a relieved sigh, “I just wouldn’t have been comfortable.”

Tara nodded understandingly.

“I went in and asked the owner about it. He said it was for spellbinding and… you’re spellbinding to me.”

Willow suddenly became very aware of her heartbeat.

“He also said it electrifies reactions,” Tara added on, “Whatever that’s supposed to mean.”

She grew more nervous as Willow remained silent.

“I-if you don’t like it—”

“I love it,” Willow interrupted, clutching Tara’s hand, “I-I feel bad. I didn’t even remember what day it was, meanwhile, you got me this cool gift and wrote me that cool song.”

She looked up at Tara through her eyelashes.

“It was really cool, by the way. It was… sexy. I didn’t know you could sing like that. You know all…seductive and stuff.”

Tara felt a pressure in her stomach at the way Willow was looking at her.

“Y-you think I’m seductive?”
Willow reached up and brushed her fingers against Tara’s jawline, then tilted her chin down and leaned up to kiss her. Tara immediately melted, her body falling over toward Willow. Willow shifted herself onto her side and crossed her arms behind Tara’s neck, making it known certainly that she wanted Tara close.

Tara’s hand settled on Willow’s waist as she welcomed Willow’s tongue against her lips. She’d thought she’d blown it all last night and this was heaven.

The kissing got deeper and both of their hands migrated. Tara’s curved just slightly, so that her fingertips were brushing over the fabric on Willow’s ass and Willow’s palm was molded to Tara’s breast. Tara had just thrown a tank top under her shirt that morning, so this was as close to bare skin as Willow had ever felt. Without the thick material of a bra, the tightening of Tara’s nipple was playing out across her palm and driving her crazy.

Her other hand moved away from massaging Tara’s neck and brushed down Tara’s chest to where the hem of her shirt was riding up from the belabored breathing of its host. Her fingers connected with skin and she experienced the most erotic sensation of her young life: Tara moaning into her mouth.

Her hand bunched the material of Tara’s shirt for a moment, but she released it quickly in favor of her hand slipping beneath to find Tara’s skin again. Tara was a normal and healthy 98.6 degrees, but Willow’s fingertips still tingled and burned as they caressed what was underneath.

Tara felt like she couldn’t quite catch her breath, but it was suffocating in the best possible way. Willow’s hands and body were pressing into her in all sorts of ways and it was more than anything she’d ever felt before — Willow was near and far and always and everywhere and everything.

This was what they’d always had; secret moments shared in the heat of the afternoon, but today it felt more.

Tara was so caught up in it all, she didn’t realize Willow’s hand had crept lower until she suddenly felt the brush against the top of her panties that sent a wave of arousal flooding through her.

Willow paused and looked at her breathlessly.

“Should I stop?”

Tara was almost afraid to move.
“You d-don’t owe me anything.”

Willow dipped her hand a *skosh* lower and continued to fix Tara with an unbroken stare.

“Should I stop?”

Tara gulped.

“I-I want what you want,” she said, returning the intent look to make sure there was no confusion, “And only what you want.”

Willow kept Tara’s gaze for a few long seconds, then kissed each corner of Tara’s mouth. She left another kiss fully against Tara’s mouth, soft and sweet on her lips.

Tara felt Willow’s hand slide out from her underwear and breathed out once, just to calm and gather herself. That was okay. She would hate if Willow did anything she wasn’t comfortable with.

She was thrown off course again immediately though, when Willow just popped the button on her jeans, pulled down the fly and slid her hand back in, going right under her panties this time until there were fingers gliding and—

“Oh my god,” Tara rasped, fireworks going off behind her eyes.

Willow mouthed ‘whoa’ as she tentatively explored this new place. It felt similar to when she touched herself, but also very different too. Tara felt hotter and wetter and just so much more inviting.

Her fingers explored Tara’s lips and pretty quickly she felt a little bump.

Tara’s breath hitched and her thighs twitched and Willow was immediately bewitched.

She proceeded gently and brought her gaze up from her disappearing wrist to Tara’s face.

Tara’s cheeks were pink and her nostrils were flaring and she was biting on her bottom lip hard enough to nearly draw blood. Willow thought she’d never looked so beautiful.

She felt molten, deep in her core and light in her heart and dizzy in her mind.
It was intoxicating. Tara was intoxicating.

She had a little idea of what she was doing; she’d done it to herself plenty, but her fingers still explored, finding where Tara dipped and curved and feeling that wonderful wetness flow for her. It was the most exciting and satisfying sensory experience of her entire life.

She learned pretty quick that she loved the short moans Tara made when she brushed against her clit and brought the pads of two fingers up and over them repeatedly. She listened as Tara’s breath grew more and shallow.

Then there was a quick jerk and a caught breath and Tara was panting above and felt white-hot below.

Willow realized what had happened, what she’d made happen, and slowly grinned. She watched Tara’s face until her eyelids flicked open.

“You okay?” she whispered softly.

“Yeah,” Tara replied in the same way, unable to stop herself from smiling.

Willow kissed Tara’s forehead then her lips, soft and sweet like the one that had started it all. She reluctantly pulled her hand out, watching Tara exhale slowly at the same pace.

She glanced down at her hand and was kind of startled by the evidence making her fingers shimmer in the daylight. How did she clean off? She couldn’t remember what she did when she was alone. Nothing really, it was dark and she just rolled over and went to sleep. And it was never this much.

She had no idea of the etiquette here – was it rude to just wipe it off? Did she wait for it to dry, try to rub it off against her skin, excuse herself to go to the bathroom?

“Sweetie?” Tara asked, not for the first time.

Willow snapped to attention with several rapid blinks.

“Sorry?”

“Do you need this?”
Tara was shyly offering her a tissue, plucked from the box on her nightstand.

...or I could just do that.

Willow blushed and accepted it gratefully.

“Thanks.”

She twisted the tissue around her fingers and crumpled it on the nightstand. She then fixed up Tara’s open jeans, complete with an awkward little pat on the button when she tied it.

Tara watched Willow smile at her clumsily and reached up to brush some hair from Willow’s face. With the beginnings of strength returning to her, she pushed herself up and pressed their lips together. She used the leverage to softly push Willow onto her back while she lay alongside her, essentially reversing their positions. Willow bent her arm at a right angle above her head and Tara covered it, linking their hands together.

They kept kissing and Tara’s hand slowly crept down Willow’s arm, over the swell of her breasts and paused, palm flat on her stomach.

“Do you want…?” she asked lightly, no pressure.

Willow looked down at herself, wondering if she was about to have an experience that would change her forever.

Heck...that already just happened.

“I’m kinda nervous,” she admitted.

Tara followed her gaze down, and then back up again.

“Have you?”

Willow squirmed.

“Not with anyone else in the room.”
She paused, first with embarrassment, then shock as she realized something.

“I don’t cry anymore,” she whispered to herself.

She hadn’t even realized she’d been slowly absolving herself of her internal shame that she’d stopped crying immediately after pleasuring herself — if she could even call it that. It had always been more like hate fucking herself but lately, no…

“C-cry?” Tara asked, confused.

Willow’s eyes widened as she slowly navigated them toward Tara.

“Chai,” she covered, not very smoothly, “I don’t…chai anymore. Went through a phase. Back on the mochas.”

“Oh,” Tara replied, nodding along, used to Willow’s topic jumps, “D-Did you want me to get you another drink?”

Willow looked up at Tara, eyes glassy with vulnerability. She clutched Tara’s shirt and pulled her in.

“No, I want you to stay right here.”

She tucked her head into Tara’s neck and kissed below her ear.

“You can if you want.”

Tara ran her fingers down Willow’s hair.

“Do you want?”

Their eyes met and Willow nodded.

Tara smiled and played with the short ends.

“I really do love this cut.”
Willow blushed and reached to cover Tara’s hand, giving it a squeeze. Tara slid her hand onto Willow’s cheek and tilted her up for a kiss.

Willow relaxed, her fingers massaging Tara’s fingers until she was pulling her hand away.

Tara’s hand brushed over Willow’s knee and Willow suddenly froze.

“Um…”

Tara stopped and looked up, waiting for Willow to make the next move.

“We, can’t, um…” Willow gulped, “We can’t take our clothes off…a-anyone could walk in.”

She laughed nervously and Tara just looked at her kindly.

Both the front door and Willow’s bedroom door was locked; Willow’s parents weren’t even in the country and no one ever visited anyway, but she wasn’t about to argue. She remembered Willow freaking out at New Years and she would never want to make her uncomfortable.

“Show me what’s okay,” she said softly.

Willow melted under that soft, trusting and trustful gaze. She linked their hands again and shyly guided it under the skirt of her dress, then brought her grip up to the wrist, making Tara’s hand skate over her thighs.

Willow’s quite loose-fitting leggings suddenly felt very restrictive. She felt pressure over her pubic bone and goosebumps broke out across her flesh. Finally, Tara’s fingertips skated below her bellybutton and Willow thought it was so stupid that her body was reacting like this when Tara had probably grabbed the same spot in hugs or posing for photos a hundred times since her memory began.

Except then the elastic waistband on her leggings was giving way to Tara’s hand, and her underwear was accommodating the same bulge and then Tara was touching her somewhere she definitely never had before.

“Oh,” Willow breathed out.

Never had her mind offered so little thought, her mouth offered so little words and her body given
her so, so much sensation.

Her neck arched into the pillows, straining her throat and causing the subsequent gasp to whimper into the air.

Tara was a very tactile person, in fact, it was the reason she got into music; being able to touch things in different ways and produce beautiful sounds spoke to her soul.

She was thinking about this because that little sound that got caught in Willow’s throat was the most beautiful thing she had ever heard. It made her body react in ways she would never even be able to express or even the sweetest of chord progressions could ever replicate.

Two fingers glided Willow’s length, learning how she felt intimately. She laid her head on the pillow alongside Willow, enjoying watching her face as the expressions changed with each little movement.

She pressed her lips under Willow’s ear and almost immediately felt Willow’s face turning to hers and capturing her in a kiss. Tara’s hand stalled for just a minute in surprise, but a soft push as Willow’s hips lifted and returned to the bed made her fingers twitch again. They rolled over Willow’s clit and Tara felt a pulsation between them; she didn’t know if it was hers or Willow’s heartbeat.

The kiss got more heated and the pace of Tara’s rolling fingers only increased in kind.

Willow’s hand clutched the back of Tara’s shirt, then fell down to cup her butt. She squeezed and gasped simultaneously as the heat began to throb in her belly and spread out. It was entirely different to feeling an orgasm building by herself; the journey was as important as the end goal. The lack of control was surprisingly alluring. The intensity was…

She whimpered again as clenchings of pleasure rocked throughout her, followed by a rhythmic thumping inside that passed in seconds but held her in that moment for an age.

She had to blink several times for her vision to return from the firework/fuzzy screen hybrid it had momentarily turned into. She glanced over at Tara with scarlet cheeks and an awkward smile, who just pressed a warm kiss against her cheek. Tara slowly popped her hands from underneath Willow’s leggings, letting it rest on her fabric-clad thigh.

They lay together for a little while, silent; just being with each other.

“You okay?” Tara whispered against Willow’s neck.
Willow just smiled and nodded.

“Yeah.”

She was the best she’d ever felt, in fact.

Tara kissed Willow’s pulse point once, then twice; soft, barely there kisses that made Willow shiver right to the base of her spine.

Tara thought Willow might be cold and rolled over to reach for the blanket hanging off the end of the bed. On the way, something sharp dug into her lower back.

“Ow!”

Willow lifted her head to see what the problem was but was surprised to hear Tara giggling as she reached under herself and brought out the Doll’s Eye crystal.

“Why are you laughing?” Willow asked, lips quirked up in amusement.

Tara held the crystal up between them, twisting it around.

“In my jingle, I said the crystal would ‘blow your mind’. I had no idea. I was just looking for a rhyme.”

Willow blushed, but couldn’t stop the amused twitch of her lips breaking out into a full-blown grin.

“I don’t think I ever thought that phrase could be literal,” she said, pressing her palms against her forehead where a thin layer of sweat was drying, “Seriously, I don’t even think I can remember the quadratic equation right now!”

They laughed together and naturally fell toward each other, pressed together at the hips and faces with barely any space between them at all. Tara brushed the hair from Willow’s face and Willow leaned right into it. She loved when Tara touched her like that; those little caresses that warmed her skin and lit the flame inside her.

They’d always been like this, she thought. Close. Drawn to each other. Physical, affectionate. And she’d always felt like it was something to hide.
Why...why?

Tara brought the crystal up and closed it into Willow’s palm.

“But seriously…I thought you could keep it and hold onto it when…when we’re apart.”

Willow was drawn from one source of agony to another. She really hated thinking that in mere months…

“It’s beautiful,” she said as she closed her fist and held it against her heart, “So, um, have you gotten your ticket? Planned it all out? I can’t believe…I mean, I’m so glad you’re getting to do it. The Big Trip.”

“My mom is getting me the ticket as a late birthday gift when I graduate,” Tara replied, her eyes lighting up as she spoke, “But I have a pretty good idea. I’m going to start with skiing in New Zealand and I think I’m going to try a bungee jump there. Did you know that’s where bungee jumping originated?”

Willow shook her head, watching how animated and joyful Tara became as she spoke about the trip.

“I’ll keep going west from there. Australia, up through Asia…and maybe train across Europe or see some of Africa then come home through South America. It sounds like it’s nothing more than a quick hop when I say it like that, but I want to take in everything, see everything. I want to go on safari in South Africa like you did and see the Sydney Opera House at night. See the temples in Thailand, tour the cobbled streets of Rome, boat through the falls in the Amazon,” she gushed as she closed her eyes for a moment and basked in the anticipation. She opened her eyes again and looked at Willow, shyly, “All of your stories are what made me want to do this, you know. I was so jealous of all your adventures.”

Willow’s eyelids closed, feeling a stab of guilt. She never knew she’d been the source of Tara’s fascination with travel. She’d figured it was karma that her deception was what was taking Tara away from her.

“I-I lied,” she admitted, wincing as the words came out of her mouth.

Tara’s brow creased but she didn’t move away.

“What do you mean?”

Willow’s jaw tensed for a moment. She felt angry at her younger self for forcing her current self to
deal with the fallout of this.

“I lied about doing all those things,” she said a bit more forcefully.

“…you didn’t go overseas?” Tara tried to deduce, even more, confused since she definitely remembered Willow being away, and missing her.

“I-I did, but…” Willow stopped and sighed, “It wasn’t like how I said it was. I was stuck inside hotel rooms. I never saw anything. I watched pay-per-view movies and ordered room service and if I was lucky the restaurant we went to in the evenings was a bit of a drive away and I got to see the area that way. I made it all up. I’m sorry.”

Tara’s hand paused in the middle of stroking Willow’s hair.

“Why did you say…?”

Willow looked down.

“Because I wanted to sound cool.”

“But I’ve always thought you were cool,” Tara replied, genuinely confused.

Willow’s head shot back up and even more embarrassingly, she felt tears starting to fall on her cheeks.

“Hey,” Tara replied softly, wrapping her up in a hug.

Willow lifted her sleeve to her eye and wiped it.

“Are you mad?”

“We were kids. It doesn’t matter,” Tara comforted, kissing the top of Willow’s head, “And you put the idea in my head, so I’m grateful. Don’t worry about it.”

Willow exhaled a shaken breath.

“Sorry,” she said, sniffling to herself, “I just wish…”
“What?” Tara replied gently.

Willow kept her glassy gaze on Tara’s.

“I just wish your trip is everything you dream it to be.”

Tara put her palm under Willow’s chin and lifted her up into a soft kiss.

“As close as a dream can be without you.”

That was the moment Willow realized that gazing into each other’s eyes was more than just a cliché.

And even if it is…I’ll happily be one.

Several hours later, when the sun had already set, Tara walked across the street in darkness and let herself into her house. She brought her guitar straight upstairs to put into her closet safely.

“Tara? Is that you?” Kimberly’s voice called up the stairs.

“Yes!” Tara called back and turned around to come back down.

She smiled at her mother as she landed back downstairs, who looked at her strangely, not that Tara noticed.

“I’m going to get a drink, do you want anything?”

Kimberly shook her head as Tara moved past her.

“No. Thank you.”

Tara poured a glass of sweet tea from the jug in the fridge and downed it all in one go.

“Thirsty?” Kimberly asked with a raised eyebrow.
“Apparently,” Tara replied with an easy smile, refilling her glass.

“Sit with me for a bit?” Kimberly requested and Tara nodded amiably.

They went into the living room and sat on the sofa together. Tara hugged a cushion to her chest and just smiled.

“You seem brighter,” Kimberly commented, with a bittersweet look on her face.

“Just hung out with Willow,” Tara replied, shrugging one shoulder, “She…made me feel better.”

Kimberly nodded along, lips pursed together.

“Mmhhm. I’m glad you’re feeling better,” she said eventually, and lapsed into silence again for several long moments, “Were you really with Willow?”

Tara was startled by the question.

“Where else would I be?”

“Nate’s?” Kimberly asked, her tone probing, “Or…another boy?”

Tara’s brow only knitted tighter. Kimberly sighed.

“That crying last night was not ‘bad show’ crying. It was ‘bad boy’ crying. I’m quite familiar. And you’re very chipper all of a sudden.”

Tara’s jaw clenched and she sat forward.

“You honestly couldn’t be more wrong.”

Kimberly’s arms folded lightly over her chest.

“Did you trip and fall today?”

Tara held back looking at her mother like she was crazy.
“What? No.”

“Get into a fight with the suction end of a vacuum cleaner?” Kimberly wondered aloud, though her tone was a lot heavier on the sarcasm than she normally was and it unnerved Tara.

“What are you talking about?”

Kimberly reached out and pressed her fingers right under Tara’s pulse point. It was surprisingly tender.

“Well something bruised your neck pretty good and you’re telling me it wasn’t a boy.”

It took a moment, but then Tara’s eyes suddenly widened and her hand shot up to cover the apparent hickey on her neck. She turned her body so it was angled completely away from her mother to hide the blush she knew was rising on her cheeks.

Kimberly reached out and put a hand on Tara’s shoulder.

“Okay, you don’t want to tell me, fine. You’re an adult, you can do your own thing,” she said in a reasoned tone, “But are you being safe?”

Tara’s shoulders just tensed more.

“Mom, seriously—“

“it’s very important—” Kimberly pressed.

“It’s not an issue,” Tara interrupted, clutching the pillow tighter.

Kimberly sighed again.

“I’m sorry, Tara but it is an issue. If it’s about money—”

“Neither of us has slept with anyone else, okay?” Tara spoke in a rush, “There’s no issue here.”
Kimberly’s voice started to verge on annoyance; she knew Tara knew better, she’d raised her to be sensible about these things.

“And you’re not the least bit concerned about pregnancy?”

Tara’s mouth was trembling as she swallowed; her jaw tensing in the process.

“No, not really.”

Kimberly’s heart began to beat a little faster. She had to take in a breath before she was able to speak again.

“Why is that?” she prompted, suddenly terrified Tara was about to tell her history was repeating itself, “Well?”

The last bit came out a bit stronger than she’d intended.

With her back still to her mother, Tara’s voice broke out through a sob caught in her throat.

“B-Because she’s a girl.”

Kimberly blinked.

That wasn’t what she expected.

Tara tried to stand and bolt, but Kimberly snapped to attention and caught her shoulder.

“Tara, wait. Please, sweetheart. I love you. Nothing could ever change that.”

Tara slowly sat back down, but with her gaze downward. Kimberly wrapped her arms around her and tucked Tara’s head under her chin.

“Oh, honey-bun. Did you think you had to hide that from me?”

Tara swiped at her eyes.
“I know you go to church. And read the bible.”

Kimberly kissed the middle of Tara’s messy parting.

“Sweetheart some of that book…well, some of it is just really dumb,” she said, matter-of-fact, “But now and again in spouts up some wisdom.”

She pulled back and held her daughter’s sad face in her hands.

“Like ‘Love is patient, love is kind’,” she said softly, “And I don’t believe restricted by something as superfluous as gender.”

Tara’s eyes filled with fresh tears and Kimberly allowed her to cry the relief into her chest. No matter how big or old or far away she got, Tara would always be her little girl.

She got her a tissue and refreshed her drink and after a little bit, Tara was composed, if not still silent. Kimberly had a hand on her back and was rubbing in circles like she would when Tara wouldn’t settle as a baby.

“I’ll tell you a secret. I always felt more of an affinity with Wicca. The spirituality and nature…that spoke to me. My mom had dabbled growing up, you see, so I knew a little. We were San Franciscan hippies. It’s even why I called you Tara, after the earth goddess,” she said in a fond tone, which faltered, “Your father…well, he didn’t approve. He wanted to call you Sally.”

“Sally?” Tara asked, brow furrowing. She didn’t feel like a Sally.

“After Mustang Sally, a horse that he won a lot on over the years,” Kimberly replied with a disapproving clipped tone, “But he wanted Donny to be named after himself so I won that one. In the end, he didn’t associate himself with the paperwork too much and you were Tara. But I wonder if I did you a disservice because he never liked the origins of your name and so I suppressed that part of me. And then after him, coming to a small town already a single mother…I never felt able to express myself in that way.”

She tugged Tara into another sideways hug.

“All I want for you is to always feel able to be yourself.”

Tara cautiously turned her gaze toward her mother, focusing on the first part.
“I kind of knew that. About you being interested in Wicca. You’ve mentioned your mom before. I’ve actually read up on it myself. There’s a Wiccan shop downtown. Well, a magic shop. But it has Wiccan stuff. You should check it out,” she suggested softly, “It’s called Uncle Bob’s Magic Cabinet. The name could use some improvement, something snappy like…The Magic Box. Or something. But it seemed, um, authentic. It’s on Maple Court. Near the Espresso Pump.”

Kimberly nodded agreeably.

“Maybe I will. Thanks.”

They were both quiet for a few moments, pensive.

“Who is she?” Kimberly asked eventually, softly.

“You don’t know her,” Tara answered immediately, stilted.

“I’d like to,” Kimberly replied with a hopeful lilt.

Tara shook her head.

“She’s not…”

“Okay. That’s okay,” Kimberly reassured quickly. She lifted her hand and brushed some of Tara’s hair away, “Do you love her?”

Tara slowly turned her face until her eyes met her mother’s. She nodded repeatedly in quick succession and Kimberly started to stroke her head again.

“I’m happy for you. I hope she makes you very happy.”

A quiet sob left Tara again as she shook with the relief of sharing that secret. Kimberly just held her for as long as she needed.

Eventually, the tears dried and Tara felt like she could barely keep her eyes open. She stood up, looking down to hide how red she knew her eyes must have been.

“I’m going to head to bed. I didn’t sleep great last night.”
“Okay, honey,” Kimberly replied, standing too, “Just remember, I love you, always.”

Tara gave her mother a hug, mumbled a ‘thank you’ and left the living room to head upstairs.

Kimberly exhaled slowly as she sank back down onto the couch, taking everything in.

She took a deep breath and glanced over her shoulder to the Rosenberg residence, with a face full of concern.
Willow walked into the Maclay kitchen but paused when she saw Kimberly sitting at the table.

“Oh, hey, Ms. Maclay,” she greeted politely, “Is it okay if I get a drink?”

“Oh, course, Willow, you’re at home here,” Kimberly replied with a welcoming smile, if a bit tired, “Are you ever just going to call me Kimberly?”

Willow returned the smile as she opened the fridge.

“Not a chance, Ms. Maclay.”

She poured a glass of apple juice, while Kimberly looked on covertly.

“Doing homework?”

“Uh huh,” Willow replied easily, “Study buddies.”

“I’m glad you’re both working to keep up your grades,” Kimberly said, taking a long sip from her cup of tea.

Willow’s hands fidgeted around the glass. Kimberly thought she knew why, so was surprised when Willow came to sit with her.

“What’s up?”

Kimberly set her tea down and nodded. Willow considered her question for a few moments before she asked it.
“Don’t you think she should go to college?”

“Yes,” Kimberly answered unequivocally.

Willow’s brow creased.

“But you’re letting her go away.”

Kimberly just chuckled wryly.

“It’s not my choice.”

“But, you’re paying for it, or some of it anyway,” Willow protested, “And, and her music. Her talent. She could get into all kinds of schools, all kinds of programs, scholarships. Taking a year out could be…catastrophic for her entire future.”

Kimberly took in a slow breath and leaned toward Willow.

“Well, honey, if losing my parents at fifteen and getting pregnant at sixteen to an…unsuitable man has taught me anything, it’s that there is always more than one avenue in life and that no dream can’t be picked up again even if it has to be put on hold,” she said with a sadness pricking the corner of her eyes, “Especially if you’re not even sure what that dream is.”

She smiled.

“And my Tara is working out her dream. I thought music might be it, that’s why I sent her to her school. But even if it isn’t, her high school years have been filled with the freedom to express herself. You won’t remember, but she had a very bad stutter when we first moved here. There was a time I worried about how she’d ever communicate with the world. Then she picked up an instrument and I knew.”

Willow bit on her bottom lip as she listened.

“Doesn’t that make you feel like she’s wasting that? That opportunity you gave her?”

Kimberly shook her head.
“I didn’t give it with any expectation.”

Willow sat back in her chair, while Kimberly finished off her tea.

“Besides, the things she’s going to see and learn…there is a lot more to education than a textbook. It’s what she needs to know what she wants to come back to.”

“So the trip isn’t her dream, exactly…” Willow replied, slowly working it out, “It’s like…the catalyst. To know what she wants.”

Kimberly smiled over at the family photos sitting on a shelf above the table.

“If she’s only ever one thing, I want it to be happy,” she said, with some melancholy but mostly hope, “And I’m living proof that school does wait. Is it as easy? No, but it’s always there in some shape or form. I’d much rather her go away for a year to find herself and come back knowing what she wants, then to choose a path now just because it’s expected and end up 10 years down the line with a life she hates.”

Willow was silent, so Kimberly leaned in and patted her hand softly.

“The catastrophes we build up in our mind are never usually as disastrous as we think,” she said with a wink, “Sometimes they turn into the best thing you ever did.”

Willow blinked several times, then stood up and smiled appreciatively.

“Um, thanks for the talk, Ms. Maclay. I’m sorry if I was pushy.”

“You care about her,” Kimberly stated understandingly.

“Yeah, I l—” Willow caught herself, “She’s my best friend.”

Kimberly smiled and Willow downed the last of her apple juice, before placing the glass in the dishwasher and heading back up to Tara’s bedroom.

“How’s the calculus going?”

“It’s functioning,” Tara joked and Willow had to quickly sit down beside her on the floor before her legs gave way due to that smirk.
“Hey, did you know it’s um, Pi Day?”

“Pie day?” Tara asked, using the eraser end of her pencil to scratch above her ear, “I didn’t know there was a day. I would’ve asked my mom to make some.”

Willow giggled.

“No, not pie, Pi. Like the number. 3.14159— you get the picture.”

“I didn’t know it got its own day,” Tara replied, smiling at Willow’s lightly flushing cheeks.

“Well, today’s date is 3/14…Geddit?” she said, slightly giddy, “It’s also Einstein’s birthday. He was born in 1879. What am I even saying? Hey, we should make up a pi song.”

It only took a second for Tara to catch up with Willow’s conversational jumps; it was a skill she’d learned early. But before she could answer, Willow’s face was scrunching up as she tried to imitate…something.

“Pi is fly, it ain’t a lie,” she attempted to rap and immediately knew she should never, ever try to do that ever again, “Okay well, there’s a reason you’re the musician.”

“That was good, sweetie,” Tara encouraged kindly, “I find it easier to keep a melody sometimes.”

She stood up and took her guitar from its stand, put the strap over her shoulder and sat down crossed-legged again with it sitting in her lap.

She hummed first, then strummed a tune.

“Sweet or not, Cool or hot The best kind of Pi Is the one you’re taught.”

Willow giggled.

“Do more,” she asked, eyes bright with the kind of awe only Tara could bring on.
Tara changed up the tune slightly and smiled adoringly at Willow.

“This isn’t a complex equation,
You see
It’s you plus me
Equals less than 3."

Willow’s heart fluttered and she couldn’t stop staring as the melody altered once more. Tara seemed a little nervous, but it didn’t show in her voice when she decided to add lyrics.

“With you,
I feel my heart entwined
Love is patient,
Love is kind.”

Tara saw Willow working out what she’d just sang and shyly tucked a piece of hair behind her own ear.

“You don’t need to say it back. I just wanted you to know.”

Willow’s mouth opened, then closed. This happened several times before she took Tara’s hand and lifted it to her mouth to kiss her knuckles.

Tara let out a low laugh of relief; at least Willow wasn’t bolting out of there.

After a minute or two of silence, Willow spoke, still holding Tara’s hand clutched in her own.

“You weren’t lying when you said you’d written more than one song about me.”

Tara shook her head.

“Those were just ditties,” she said bashfully, “I do have another song I wrote for you…but I always wanted it to be just for you. I didn’t write it to share it so I’ve never sung it at a show or anything.”

Willow frowned.

“Why haven’t you played it for me?”
“I wasn’t sure if you were open to hearing it,” Tara answered honestly, “But I think you might be now?”

“Can I hear it?” Willow asked, offering a smile of encouragement.

She gave Tara her hand back, who held it motionless for a moment while she closed her eyes. They started an almost imperceptible tap before falling into their starting place on the guitar.

“I call it Crayola Heart.”

She opened her eyes again, with great effort as she wanted to close them and shield her vulnerability, but she wanted Willow to feel as much of her heart as she’d put into the song.

(All of it.)

I’ve stared for hours
Trying to ascertain
The subtle spectrum
That you ingrain

I know your stare but your eyes still strain me
Emerald, chartreuse, mint cream maybe?
I see your depths, but not in vain
Your soulful spark:
My heart’s terrain

Willow was captivated right off the bat. This was truly a serenade.

It’s not black or white
It’s rainbow baby
That swell of light
I know I’m in safety

I can clearly see from our own hue
That this pigment on my heart is nothing new
My true colors belong to you

Our chromaticity, intensity, luminosity
Shines
Take this injection of color
Don’t be afraid to be mine

Willow’s heart was beating fast now, as she processed the words a split second behind the emotions Tara’s voice evoked.

Head of fire
Heart of gold
Your copper tones
Bright and bold
-ly falling into those sad eyes
Jade, Kelly, Apple Green?
You’re my everything in-between

Willow swallowed softly as Tara swung back into the chorus

It’s not black or white
It’s rainbow baby
That swell of light
I know I’m in safety

I can clearly see from our own hue
That this pigment on my heart is nothing new
My true colors belong to you

Our chromaticity, intensity, luminosity
Shines
Take this injection of color
Don’t be afraid to be mine

Don’t be afraid, Willow thought, If only it was that easy

Sometimes I can see your undertone exposed
I see your white pain
The blue feelings you’ve imposed

I only wish I could make you see
Make your eyes open
To the shades of your beauty
Not the parts you see broken

You think that you’re flat
But I see what’s true
You fear a scarlet G on you.

Willow took in a sharp breath.

It wasn’t like she didn’t know Tara knew her; she did — better than anyone.

Always had.

But hearing herself being laid out flat like that from a conversation they never even had was a punch in the gut and a hug to her heart all at once. Tara knew her deep down depths and still wanted her.

It’s not black or white
Oh, It’s not black or white
It’s rainbow baby
That swell of light
It’s rainbow baby

I can clearly see from our own hue
That this pigment on my heart is nothing new
My true colors belong to you

Our chromaticity, intensity, luminosity
Shines
Take this injection of color
Don’t be afraid to be mine

It’s not black and white baby
We’re living in color

Tara played out a few endnotes and let her hand fall motionless again. Willow took in several long, slow breaths.

“You used chromaticity in a song,” she said eventually.

“You taught me that word.” Tara smiled softly.

Willow swallowed again and stared at Tara for a second.

“You’re amazing,” she said eventually, making Tara look down, “No, you are.”
Tara looked up from the floor with a crooked smile.

“I just have an amazing muse.”

Willow shuffled forward, closer. A hand on Tara’s knee, up her thigh, anywhere, she just needed to touch her.

She rubbed that spot for a second or two and wondered how to respond. There were so many things she wanted to say but couldn’t find the courage to. But maybe she could show Tara she didn’t want to be like this; she wanted to be an open book for Tara’s eyes only.

“Can I talk to you about something?”

Tara lifted the guitar away and leaned it against her bed.

“Anything.”

Willow scooted over so she was shoulder-to-shoulder with Tara.

“You know how I didn’t tell you about Harvey Mudd?” she proceeded cautiously, receiving a nod in return, “There was… kinda a reason.”

Tara turned her head but didn’t say anything. Willow wiped a sweaty palm on her jeans.

She barely knew how to voice what she was trying to say.

“It didn’t make me as happy as I thought it would,” she said finally, “I keep thinking I made the wrong decision.”

“The wrong school?” Tara asked softly.

“See, that’s the thing,” Willow replied, throwing her hands out in frustration, “I love the idea of that school, I do. It concentrates on all the things I love, it has a great reputation, a good student life. Everything I could want.”

Except you.
She paused and swallowed deeply.

“Um, but something just feels off. Like it’s the right path but I’m going in the wrong direction? Oh, I don’t know, I’m not even making sense.”

She sighed, banging her head back with a soft thud.

“I don’t know what to do, I…I wanna know, but I don’t.”

Tara put a finger under Willow’s chin and tilted it toward her. She brushed the back of her fingers against Willow’s cheek, both of them smiling when she leaned into it.

“Do you remember what I told you at New Year’s?” she asked softly, “Do what makes you happy.”

That moment could have made Willow believe in magic; she was sure she could feel it twinkling around them and fizzing over her skin.

Not for the first or last time, the moment was ruined by Donny.

He barged into Tara’s room, making Willow grab the nearest exercise book and pretend to be writing in it.

Donny didn’t notice; he barely glanced in their direction.

“Gimme the car keys.”

Tara folded her arms at her waist and looked down to avoid his gaze.

“I need them to get to work. I’m in until closing and it’s not safe to cycle that late—”

Donny’s old, mucky boot took a loud and threatening step toward Tara.


“No,” Tara protested, trying to keep the tremble out of her voice.
Donny leaned down with his fist balled.

“I said gimme!”

“Hey!” Willow shouted, jumping up and in front of Tara, “Back off!”

Donny’s lip curled in disgust.

“What’s it to you?” he sneered, “Oh, I get it. You’re her little g—”

“Just stop,” Kimberly’s tired voice came from behind Donny’s looming frame, “This is ridiculous.”

She stepped into the room, in a robe, eyes flashing between anger and exhaustion. Just what she needed when trying to sleep off a night shift.

She surveyed the room, but couldn’t glean what exactly had happened. Same fight, different day.

She was, however, surprised to see the math books scattered about.

They were actually doing homework.

Maybe she’d been wrong about them.

“She won’t give me the car keys,” Donny grumbled.

“I need it,” Tara said to her mother, “I’m working the late shift.”

Willow was still shielding her, and the hands that were entwined behind her back.

Kimberly sighed.

“Donny, I promised Tara the car today, so she gets it.”

“Of fucking course she does,” Donny spat and stormed out, hitting Kimberly’s shoulder with his
along the way.

She stumbled and Willow reached out to steady her.

“Ms. Maclay!”

Kimberly looked at the door, worried, then patted Willow’s hand.

“It’s okay, sweetheart.”

The front door slammed loudly and Tara stood, looking like she might burst into tears.

“I’m sorry, mom, I don’t try to start fights with him.”

Kimberly came over and gave Tara a hug.

“Just try to keep it down, okay?”

Tara nodded quickly.

“I’m leaving soon anyway. I won’t make any noise.”

Kimberly took Tara’s face in her hands and kissed her forehead. She left again and Willow gestured awkwardly at the door.

“I’ll get out of your hair,” she said, then waited for a beat before looking Tara in the eye, “Don’t let him bully you. You’re so much better than him. I don’t even know how you came out of the same gene pool.”

Tara shrugged one shoulder, gaze still downcast. Willow pulled her into a hug, which Tara closed immediately.

Willow lifted her hand to Tara’s shoulder and up to her neck, splaying out her fingers there. She turned her head and pressed her lips softly to Tara’s.

Tara pulled Willow’s hips in and returned the kiss.
Across the hall but with a view through the sliver of open door, Kimberly snuck out of the bathroom as quietly as she could.

That was certainly confirmation.

Without disturbing them, she crept into her own room for some much-needed sleep. Thank god that was her last night shift for a while.

Willow walked Tara down to the garage to make sure Donny hadn’t tried to flatten a tire or anything, but he seemed to have just stormed off. Willow made her check the brakes anyway. She had zero trust when it came to Tara’s brother.

When Tara had driven around the corner and off the street safely, Willow returned home. Her mom was ‘home’ but not actually home. Willow went into the kitchen to see about getting a snack and saw a note affixed to the refrigerator.

_Gone to LA for the night_, she read, _Guess that means Oreos for one._

She grabbed the bag of cookies and headed up to her room to change into sweatpants and her (Tara’s, actually) Insect Reflection t-shirt; her favorite lounge clothes.

Once comfortable, she pulled her book bag onto her bed and lay on her stomach to finish off the homework she hadn’t completed at Tara’s.

As she was finishing up, she got a message from her father that he wanted to Skype. Willow took her iPad from the drawer in her nightstand and loaded up the app to call her dad.

She giggled when she got a close-up of a wrinkled forehead.

“Dad, you need to hold it further away.”

The camera shifted and finally settled on Ira’s face at an appropriate distance.

“There’s my girl.”

“Hi, Dad,” Willow replied, waving her fingers, “How’s it going?”
They chatted for a while about what they’d missed in each other’s lives over the past few days until Ira had to go and get ready for a business meeting.

“Dad, wait,” Willow said before he hung up, “Can I ask you one thing?”

Ira nodded amiably and Willow reached for the back of her neck, massaging the spot where her hairline ended and tension began.

“Well, um, I wondered…” she started, then focused her gaze on her father, “If I could only be one thing, what would you want it to be?”

Ira considered it and with a twinkle in his eye, answered Willow in a way he thought unexpected and supportive.

“Successful.”

Willow smiled a smile that didn’t reach her eyes.

“Thanks, Dad. See you soon.”

“Bye dear,” Ira signed off and the camera bounced from the screen.

She put it on the bed beside her and returned to the bag of Oreos.

Tara brought a set of dishes back into the kitchen and over to the industrial set of sinks.

Though waitressing posed some difficulties, she never envied that job. She always made sure her dishes were well scraped of anything lingering before she brought them over to the dishwasher.

“Thanks, Tara,” the dishwasher said with a smile. He appreciated that gesture.

“No problem, Paulie,” Tara replied with a returned, if slightly tired, smile.

When she turned her manager, Wes, was approaching her. Tara loved the girls she worked with; they all looked out for each other.
Her manager, not so much.

He kept his head above the water enough to never attract trouble, but he was incompetent at best, often on a power trip and Tara had caught him more than once perving on the servers.

“Hey. You can knock off if you want.”

“Really?” Tara asked, unsure.

Wes nodded.

“Yeah, those people you served just left and a crowd of young guys just took up two tables. They seem pretty hammered. There’s no need for all of you. I’ll send Madeline and Nikita out. I think that’s all we’re going to get tonight.”

Tara took the hint. He had his favorites, due to no fault of the girls’ own.

“Great,” she said evenly, “Thanks.”

She’d miss out on some tips but she was plenty ready to go home anyway. She slipped past and through the bar, letting Madeline and Nikita know they were the chosen ones tonight and headed right through to the break room. She could hear that loud group of guys hollering as she went through the door, but thankfully they were blocked out as soon as she closed it.

She changed out of her uniform and headed out to the car to go home.

Once there, after parking in the driveway, she glanced over to the Rosenberg’s house, but Willow’s bedroom light was off, so Tara opted not to disturb her.

She let herself in and heard the television, so poked her head into the living room to see her mother curled up on the couch.

“Hey.”

Kimberly looked up with a smile.

“You’re home early, sweetheart.”
“Knocked off early,” Tara explained, sitting down beside her mother, “Quiet night.”

Kimberly offered Tara some chocolate and put her arm around. She’d miss this when Tara was gone.

And honestly, she was a little scared of being left alone with Donny.

Think of the devil and he doth appear, at least a little while later when one of his friend’s cars pulled up outside the house. He stomped up the path and let himself into the house.

Tara thought she’d avoided him for the evening when she heard him stomp upstairs but moments later his feet came back down them and he stumbled into the living room with Jack on his breath.

“There you are, you little slut,” he slurred with contemptuous eyes toward Tara.

Tara looked taken aback. Kimberly’s eyes grew wide.

“Donny!”

Donny pulled a face at them.

“All ‘butter wouldn’t melt’ preachy innocent, meanwhile, you’re showing your tits and ass off to anyone in the tri-county area!”

Kimberly stood up, anger flaring in her eyes.

“Stop it right now.”

Tara’s head tilted down and she closed her eyes. Donny fed off her obvious uncomfortableness.

“She tell you where she works, hmm?” he asked his mother smugly, before scowling at Tara, “I saw you. Sneaking off in that washcloth you call a uniform. You didn’t even look around to see who was watching you.”

Tara lifted her gaze, her jaw tense. Kimberly looked between them, eyebrows raised a half-inch.
“What on earth are you talking about?”

“Honkerburger,” Donny said, spitting on the ‘b’, “She works at Honkerburger. That goddamn breastaurant over in Las Brujas. In two pieces of nothing showing herself off with no respect for anyone.”

He shot Tara a venomous look of hatred.

“You know what it’s like for your buddies to leer at your sister’s tits while she lets it all hang out?”

“It’s not like that,” Tara said, almost whispering.

“You’re right, your ass is hanging out too,” Donny scoffed.

“Donald Edward, that is quite enough,” Kimberly snapped.

Donny’s nostrils flared in anger at being scolded.

“You think that’s bad? That’s not your only secret, is it?”

Tara’s eyes widened to saucers.

Donny put his fingers through his belt loops and rocked back and forth on his heels.

“She’s gay, she’s a frickin’ lessssssbian,” he said, smirking first at the horrified look on Tara’s face, then at his mother, “What do you think about your perfect child now?”

“Donny, enough—” Kimberly began but was cut off.

“I can prove it!” he said, reaching deep into his pocket and producing an old, crumpled piece of paper, “Look, they’re about her stupid, dorky friend!”

Tara felt like she was about to throw up. It was bad enough he knew about her, but Willow? She’d freak out. She might never talk to her again.

She jumped up and tried to snatch the page, but Donny anticipated it and lifted it higher.
“It was just a stupid crush,” she tried to cover, but her voice was breaking.

“Yeah right,” Donny scoffed.

“Donny, I said that's enough!” Kimberly shouted, “None of this is any of your business. You are acting like a child right now.”

Donny’s eyes bugged, making a vein pop in his forehead.

“So she gets away with being a dyke too?! Oh now I’ve really heard it all.”

Tara’s face crumpled. He could, and would, make her life a living hell with this information. Her heart was thumping between her ears; she could barely make out her mother shouting at Donny.

“Apologize right this second.”

“I don’t believe this!” Donny screeched, “The perfect fucking princess can never do wrong! Never fucking ever!”

He made a lunge toward Tara.

“Fucking dyke slut. I swear by god I will beat you down.”

Tara flinched, but Kimberly caught Donny by the collar on his shirt before he made any contact. She was half his size, but well used to handling patients for her job. His off-balance center of gravity only helped her drag him out to the front door.

“Get out of this house right now!”

Kimberly watched Donny trip over himself to get down the lawn with anger pricking at her eyes.

Years, this had been going on; years she spent separating arguments until she’d eventually just given up. But that cruelty, the rage. It was a slap in the face of how bad things really were.

The sound of Tara hyperventilating brought her attention back and she realized she couldn’t see Donny anymore. She closed the door again and hurried in again, sitting with Tara and gathering her into a hug.
“Darling…”

“If he says anything…” Tara sobbed into her hands.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart,” Kimberly soothed.

Tara shook her head desperately.

“Mom, you don’t understand.”

“I do,” Kimberly said in a resolute tone, only for Tara’s eyes to fill with fresh tears, “Hey, listen.”

Kimberly wiped the tears from Tara’s eyes.

“I do.”

Tara’s brow creased and all Kimberly could do was offer a consoling smile.

“I know about you and Willow,” she said, and heard Tara’s sharp intake of breath, “It’s okay, sweetie. I see how you look at her. And how she looks at you. And I understand this feels so very big right now, but I promise, it’s going to be okay.”

Tara looked at her mom like she was a little girl again, hoping she could make it all go away.

“She is not ready, Willow, she’s not, she won’t, oh god—”

She dropped her head into her mother’s lap and cried.

“It’s okay sweetie,” Kimberly comforted, stroking Tara’s hair, “Leave Donny to me.”

“Please, Momma,” Tara cried, muffled as her words came out in gasps of air, “I don’t care what he does to me, but Willow…”

The pain in Tara’s voice broke Kimberly’s heart. She closed her eyes and wondered if she would even be able to rein in her son. She didn’t know how, but she’d have to.
“I promise you that I will sort this out.”

Tara awoke in the middle of the night to what sounded like a door banging in the wind.

It was repeated and annoying and enough to stir her out of bed. She checked her own door first, but it had been closed securely. And she couldn’t hear any wind.

She opened her door and quickly realized the source of the noise as Donny let himself in and made his way up the stairs.

If she thought he was drunk before, he was absolutely steaming now. One foot barely made it in front of the other, his eyes were sunken and every part of him reeked of stale beer, cigarettes, and dirt.

He stumbled up the last step and faked it into a curtsey.

“Ooh look, it’s the pwincess.”

Kimberly’s came out of her room. She’d left the door open so she’d hear Donny come in, and hadn’t been able to sleep anyway.

When her eyes adjusted to the light, she got a fright. She could have been looking at another man, one she hadn’t seen in many, many years. She had to bite her lip to contain a gasp.

“We’re not doing this again. Go to bed, Donny and we will be having a conversation in the morning.”

“Let me guess,” Donny replied, putting on a gruff angelic voice, “Tara is great and Tara is perfect and I wish she was an only child.”

“That is not true,” Kimberly replied in a heartbroken tone, “How could you think that?”

Tara wanted to take a step back from him; that stench was eye-watering, but she was frozen on the spot. Donny slurred in her direction.
“She gets the ffffffff-fancy equipment and the ffffffff-fancy school and the ffffffff-fancy trip around the world! What do I get? To be forgotten.”

Kerry pressed her fingers against her forehead.

“Donny I told you if you wanted to go to college I would find the money. You decided not to. I paid for all of your football stuff in high school, your Scouts even though you quit them both. You wanted a bike for your 18th birthday and you got it. It is time to grow up, Donald. I’ve let this petty sibling rivalry go on too long. You are a man, you better start acting like it! Why do you behave this way? Why do you antagonize your sister so god damn much?!“

Donny’s face contorted in rage and his fist flew to his mouth. His eyes bulged and terrified both women, but not as much as his booming voice did moments later.

”Because he hit me too!”

Kimberly’s brow creased for a moment, then flattened in slowly-dawning horror.

“W-what?”

Tara was tense between mother and son as they stared each other down.

“He hit me too and you did nothing,” Donny spat, gurgling on air before attempting and missing a swipe at Tara’s arm, “First time the little princess here gets a slap across the face and you had your bags packed in an hour.”

The world was spinning for Kimberly. She thought she might throw up.

“Donny, I didn’t…I didn’t know,” she said, her voice an echoing whisper as she closed her eyes and a single tear fell out, “I should have.”

She opened her eyes to give her son the remorseful gaze he deserved.

“Donny I’m sorry.”

Donny’s chest continued to heave in rage, while Tara shook beside him, more confused than ever.

“W-What is he talking about?”
Donny screamed, really screamed and he grabbed Tara’s shirt with both fists.

“Oh just shut the fuck up for once you stupid—”

With his balance off and his strength uncontrolled, one misstep sent Tara flying down the stairs. The thump of her body against the wood made the walls shake uncomfortably until there was a crack and then silence.

Eerie, strained silence.

Donny stared down the stairs in shock and looked on in slow-motion as Kimberly’s feet pounded each step down.

Kimberly, cheeks wet and eyes frantic, kneeled by an unconscious Tara at the foot of the stairs.

“Donny, what did you do?!?”

Her voice was just an echo to Donny, who thought he might be next down the stairs if he didn’t move away, or throw up, or both. He watched his mother reach for the phone and instinct kicked in; he bolted. Kimberly didn’t even realize he was coming down the stairs until he was already passed her and out the door.

Her fingers shook as she dialed 911 to request an ambulance. Her nurse training kicked in, but so did her maternal instincts, so she held her daughter steady while choking back the tears.

Across the street, Willow woke still fully dressed, star-fished on her bed with her phone on one side of her and a half-eaten bag of Oreos on the other. She was unsure at first what had woken her up, apart from the uncomfortable position and questionable nutrition choices, but then noticed unusual red and blue lights flashing in her window.

Her eyes squinted to shield herself from them and she scooted off the end of the bed. She walked over to her window and had to rub her eyes with her fist to make them focus. Finally, she was able to make out what she was seeing; a parked ambulance on the street and Tara being brought across the lawn in a stretcher, Kimberly at her heels.

Willow’s heart jumped into her throat.

“Tara!”
Her palm hit the window with a thud, leaving its imprint behind as she sped out of her room to get outside.

As her socked feet hit the tarmac, the second paramedic was swinging the back door of the ambulance closed.

“What happened?!” she shouted, voice high and panicked, “What’s happening?!”

There was a seconds-long siren and the ambulance drove off, leaving Willow in the middle of the road, in the middle of the night, in the middle of a crisis.

She stayed there until the lights flashed out of existence and she realized her feet were burning from running over stones and pressing into the rough ground almost barefoot. She looked down, her smiling Tinkerbelle socks a stark contrast to how she was feeling at that very moment. She glanced at the Maclay house, which was all locked up, and then back at hers, the door swinging open.

She hurried back inside and rushed around to find her shoes.

Finally, she found them peeking out from under her bed, where she’d kicked them off earlier. She shoved her feet into them and did her best to tie them on the move. She only just remembered to grab her keys before rushing out the door again. The bang could have woken the neighborhood, but the ringing only added to the one already in Willow’s ears.

She rushed around to the side of the house and grabbed the first bike there, not even noticing it was Tara’s. She pushed it off the wall and immediately felt the deflation of the wheels as she pressed the bike into the ground.

“Dammit, Donny,” she swore under her breath and let it fall again.

She rounded the corner to the back of the house where hers was locked up, but the Tire Bandit had been there too. Donny didn’t often go for her bike; he must have been really pissed. That scared Willow all the more.

She put her hands on her head and tried to breathe for a second and figure out what she was going to do. She could walk, but it would take a while and Sunnydale was creepy at night. She doubted there would be many cars hanging around waiting for a rideshare notification; this town was a desert past 10 pm. Probably because of the creepiness.

Her mom had taken her car, and Willow would have been in definite trouble if she took it anyway.
She suddenly remembered another bike, her father’s, though she hadn’t seen him on it since she was learning to ride one herself. Luckily it was tucked away in the garage and away from whatever sharp object Donny used to puncture the other tires.

*Probably his nose.*

“Heh,” she sniffled at her own little joke, quickly dabbing her sleeve against her eye.

*She’s okay…she’s okay…‘okay’ people get taken off in stretchers all the time…*

She jumped on the bike and forced the pedals through a few creaky rotations as it slid down the drive, finally getting into a rhythm as it rode onto the street.

The saddle was so uncomfortable that Willow spent most of the ride standing, which was not easy on this rusted hunk of metal, but her feet kept pushing and pushing, burning through the tears of worry that wanted to wet her cheek.

Finally, she got to the hospital, barely even parking the bike. In fact, the wall parked it for her when the breaks didn’t respond all too enthusiastically and she just about avoided a trip to an ER bed herself.

Stumbling off, slightly dazed for a moment, she pushed through from the dark night into the fluorescent lights of the emergency room.

There was beeping and muffled shouting, the occasional scream of pain. It smelled like a rotten soup of antiseptic and burning metal with a side of BO crackers.

Willow walked across the floor, sticky with god-knows-what, to the front desk.

“Was Tara Maclay brought in?” she asked, her voice hoarse from all the air she’d gulped in on the bike ride.

“Are you family?” the man behind the counter asked, glancing away from the computer for a moment.

Willow blinked several times.
“Um…”

He looked at her apologetically.

“Sorry, I can’t give out information unless it’s family.”

Willow’s eyes closed and she really had to stop herself from bursting into tears. She turned back and took a proper look at the waiting room, spotting an open seat near the door. The only seat left, for a reason — it was drafty and uncomfortable and hidden behind the main doors so that they slammed at you every few minutes, but Willow sank into it.

No phone to text Tara, no clue how serious the situation was.

She’d just have to wait.

________________________________

Kimberly was sitting by the bed in the ER treatment room while Tara slept beside her.

They’d examined her and taken x-rays and given her painkillers and she’d fallen asleep again pretty quickly, having mostly just been groggy when she’d come around in the ambulance. Her arm hurt, she’d said.

You’re okay, love, Kimberly had soothed and Tara slipped back into slumber while Kimberly sunk into self-hatred.

Her head was in her hands and her stomach was in her throat.

One child was injured, the other was off the rails. Both of them were in pain and it was entirely her fault.

How could she not have known?

And how did she let it get…here?

She knew her son’s genes, if not his pain and it was so strikingly obvious her greatest fear was coming to life — her son was turning into his alcoholic, abusive father but it was not because of him. It was because of her.
It made sense, now, with hindsight. How he’d changed when they moved to Sunnydale; how he’d
gone from doting brother to evil sibling. How her sweet boy’s eyes changed, hardened with anger
and resentment.

She always thought it was from being uprooted and taken away from his father without knowing
why. She’d even brought him to doctors and counselors but he would just sit in silence, then come
home and pull his sister's pigtails, responding to no discipline or correction or any attempt at
intervention.

They told her he probably missed his father, so she’d tried to get him into sports, scouts, anything
with good male role models. Football was the only one he wasn’t asked to be removed from but he
had removed himself once he discovered beer.

Kimberly had tried to go to one of his games, with Tara in tow, but he had freaked out and refused to
participate so Kimberly never went again.

She should never have given up.

Why had she given up?

She knew why: time and money and every other life stress. She thought he missed his father and she
could never give that back to him. It wasn’t an excuse, but it was the reason. Living under his cloud
of resentment had become so normal, that she forgot it wasn’t.

And this was the climax; sitting with her daughter’s broken body while her son’s broken soul roamed
somewhere unknown.

She stayed in that state; too broken to cry, to move even, until a doctor burst into the room. He barely
looked at them as he rattled off his name and orthopedic standing before he put the x-ray film into the
illuminator. Kimberly put her hand on Tara’s shoulder and gently woke her.

“Fracture of the ulna…radius looks intact.”

He attached a new film to confirm.

“You are a lucky young lady, we should be able to treat this non-operatively. You must have gotten
a direct blow just as you landed… it was a stair fall, right? This looks like a classic nightstick injury
where you lift your hand to block something attacking your face.”
“Yeah, I feel really lucky right now,” Tara remarked groggily.

“You are. 90% of the time I see falls like yours, both bones are broken and require surgical plates, or there’s associated dislocation or countless other complications,” the doctor replied gruffly, “Or if you hit it a little higher up the bone, months of therapy or permanent loss of functioning.”

Kimberly’s sunken eyes were brimming with concern.

“She’s a musician. Will there be any lasting damage?”

“You’ll regain 85-95% functioning in the wrist and elbow. Depends on what she plays and how often,” the doctor replied evenly, “I need to set that bone and then I’ll get someone to bring you down to the casting room. Nurse!”

He aggressively called a nurse passing by the door, who clenched his jaw but resisted the urge to roll his eyes. He was on her way in here anyway.

The doctor told the nurse what he needed to know, and the nurse nodded diligently. He was looking forward to his shift finishing up soon. The nurse came up to Tara and brought a blood pressure cuff to secure on her good arm.

“Hi, I’m Adam. The doctor needs to align the bones before they go into the cast. It’ll be over quickly and we’re giving you more pain meds,” he reassured kindly, “How are you feeling? Any dizziness, nausea, blurred vision or confusion or pain cropping up anywhere else?”

“No,” Tara answered, letting herself be poked and prodded without complaint so that it would just be over.

The doctor returned and pushed past Kimberly to crouch alongside Tara.

He touched her arm and she groaned. She heard her mother choke back a sob, so just closed her eyes and braced herself.

She went to her happy place; lounging on a beach with white sand and clear water. Sand so soft her feet couldn’t tell when it became water; water so still it didn’t even ripple when it enveloped her. Best of all, Willow holding her as they floated together in peaceful tranquility with no absent parents or murderous brothers or societal expectations to weigh them down.

Just the two of them, together, alone.
Wearing nothing at all.

She was able to stay in that place, half imagining, half dreaming as she lay in a drowsy state from the painkillers, all the way down to the casting room.

The technician was a woman in her mid-fifties who was light on her feet as she walked around the room and wore the wrinkles of someone who’d spent a lot of time laughing. She introduced herself as Charlene and explained to Tara what she was going to do as she gathered the equipment.

“What’s your favorite color?”

“Willow-green,” Tara answered, a dozy smile gracing her lips.

She still couldn’t work out the exact shade of Willow’s eyes, so she’d decided it deserved to be one all of its own.

“Well, I’m not sure about that color, but I do have regular old green,” Charlene replied with a cheery smile unbecoming of the early hour, “Some of the kids call it Kermit green.”

Tara’s head slowly tilted to one side.

“Does that make me the rainbow connection?”

Charlene sailed over on a wheeled stool.

“You’re funny,” she said with a deep chuckle, “Hold still for me now. We’re going to wrap this soft material around your arm and then bind the cast on top. It’ll just take a couple of minutes.”

Tara suddenly realized the doctor from before was back, locking her arm in place as the cast was applied. A pained groan passed her lips once or twice when it was done and he turned her arm to feel how it was sitting. They wheeled a portable x-ray over and checked the placement before finally Tara was turned back over to an orderly to return to her room.

She stared down at her green arm and felt a wave of anger that this had happened. She wasn’t even out of the woods yet; anything but full function might hinder her finger dexterity and make her lose ability on some of her instruments.

Anything that brought her joy, he took. She wouldn’t let him take Willow from her too.
She thanked her nice orderly as she got out of the wheelchair and Kimberly helped her back into the bed. Her happy place was not working and she was really starting to feel grouchy.

“This gown is so scratchy.”

Kimberly moved toward the end of the bed, where a plastic bag was hanging off.

“I have the pajamas they took off you,” she said, opening the bag and taking the pajamas out, “Let me help.”

She pulled the collar of the gown away from Tara, who twisted away.

“No, don’t!”

Kimberly backed away and Tara kept her back to her mother while she changed, with cursory glances over her shoulders. She was able to pull her pants up one-armed and gingerly put her arms through the top. The only struggle came when she tried to use her restricted fingers to close the buttons. She wished she’d just worn a t-shirt or tank but, ironically, she’d dressed in her proper pair for comfort after the rough day she’d had.

Kimberly hovered on the other side of the bed, trying to respect Tara’s privacy. She watched Tara’s shoulders rise and fall with her arms as each button and decided to come around.

“Honey, you need help with the buttons.”

Tara tried to grab both sides of her top to yank them across each other and shield herself, but she wasn’t proficient enough yet in cast dexterity.

“Stop! I said I’m fine!”

Kimberly lifted the loose fabric away from Tara and stared at the surprising markings etched onto her skin.

“When did you get a tattoo?” she asked evenly, after a moment.

Tara snatched the fabric back and worked out a way to pull the hole over the button one-handed instead of working the button through the hole.
“Last summer.”

“When you were 17?” Kimberly asked with a quiet gasp.

“Oh, I’m sorry, is an underage tattoo the worst thing a child of yours has ever done?” Tara replied sarcastically.

Apparently, she’d lost her filter too.

Kimberly looked stung and walked a few feet off to the side, her back to Tara with arms loosely folded over her chest, but the rest of her body rigid.

Tara fixed herself up and put her legs back up on the bed. She covered her lower half with the blanket and turned her head to the side, watching the hospital world go by outside the window.

After a minute, Kimberly turned back around, a permanent line of tension on her forehead.

“This is not an easy situation for anyone, Tara,” she said, unable to hide the choke in her voice, “I’m realizing that your brother is an alcoholic.”

“Yeah, no shit,” Tara replied and Kimberly was shocked because Tara had never sworn in front of her.

She sank down into the chair beside the bed.

“Tara…I’ve supremely let him down.”

Tara’s eyes flashed with pain that went much deeper than her broken bone.

“He’s spent my whole life torturing me.”

Kimberly smiled sadly, her eyes glassy with unshed tears.

“He didn’t. You were best buddies…once. He loved being a big brother. He brought you in for show and tell at pre-school when you were a baby.”
Tara just looked bewildered; that was not the Donny she had in any living memory.

Kimberly dropped her face into her hands.

“I wanted to save you, to save you both and I’ve just let all of this spiral out of control.”

Tara turned it over in her mind, but she was just more confused than ever.

“What are you talking about? And what was he talking about last night?”

Kimberly straightened up, her cheeks pale. After a few false starts and several calming breaths, she spoke.

“I always told you that your father left us. But that wasn’t true. I left him.”

She started to shake her head, her nostrils flaring as she struggled to control her breathing.

“He was…not a good man. I knew that he was cheating on me, and using family money to drink and gamble. He was older than me when we met and I was impressed by him, but years and kids made me see his true colors. Thankfully he never asked me to marry him as I probably would have said yes,” she rolled her eyes at herself, “He started to scream at me, in private at first, then in front of you two. He would tell me I was a monster, try to control me. Then he started hitting me. I was at my wit’s end, and I looked into what I could do to get away. I was saving money, planning on bringing us all back to San Francisco.”

She wiped the corner of her eye quickly.

“Then one day, you were playing with your toys and he thought you were being too noisy. I heard him yell at you from the laundry so I came out to bring you outside and he was pulling you up by your shirt collar.”

Her chest rose more aggressively with each breath.

“Your little face was so terrified. As I was running over to you, he slapped you hard across the face and dropped you,” her voice caught as the memory played out in her mind, “Donny came over to comfort you and I kicked your father out of the house.”

Her eyes closed painfully.
“Just like I kicked Donny out.”

She swallowed and offered her attention back to Tara.

“My aunt who took me in after my parents died and continued to support me even after I ran off upstate and got pregnant…she lived in Santa Barbara. I gathered what money we had, our favorite things and anything I could fit in the car that could be sold and we left that night. We lived with her for a few weeks until I figured everything out. San Francisco was way out of our budget and the cheapest properties in the area were in Sunnydale. She helped with the deposit. She died a couple of years later and the inheritance allowed me to go back to school, with a few scrapes along the way.”

Tara remained stony-faced.

“Did he ever try to find us?”

Kimberly nodded.

“Once. He found my aunt. She wouldn’t tell him where we were. I’m sure he went home to that sister of his after that. The poor woman was beaten into submission by their father.”

She looked down.

“I always felt most sorry for her little girl, Beth. The cycle was just going to continue. That’s why I was so determined to get you out, to get you both out.”

Tara was silent for several long moments, parsing together that story and what Donny had said the night before. She thought about how Donny had treated her his whole life. It was, at least, an explanation, not that it made the physical or emotional abuse any more tolerable.

“I don’t remember any of that. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because I hoped you’d forget. And you did and I don’t regret that. I’m glad you have no memories of that man,” Kimberly’s voice burst with emotion as she spoke, “But your brother does, even more than I realized. I-I should have known. But I didn’t. I failed him.”

Tara didn’t think her mother being around her was going to benefit either of them right now.
“You better go find him,” she said curtly, “Before he beats up someone that will press charges.”

Kimberly just nodded and gathered her things to leave.

“Mom,” Tara said when she was at the door and Kimberly looked over her shoulder, “I’m not living in the same place as him.”

Her stare remained hard as Kimberly tensed.

“And if he breathes a word about Willow I will press charges and never be in the same room as him for the rest of our lives.”

Kimberly swallowed, nodded once and continued out of the room.

Tara closed her eyes; she was reeling.

She’d always thought her father was a deadbeat, but never that it had gotten as bad as it did. She couldn’t help feel sorry for a little Donny dealing with all of that and retaining the memories. He had been a victim too. But it didn’t absolve him of making her his own victim.

With too much playing on her mind, she fell asleep until the same nice nurse from earlier came to check on her blood pressure.

“Holding steady,” he said, as he noted it on the chart, “Would you like me to send your friend up? It’s not strictly visiting hours, but she’s been sitting out there all night so I won’t say anything if you won’t.”

Tara’s brow creased in confusion.

“Young, red hair?” Adam offered as an explanation upon seeing the look.

Tara’s eyes widened considerably.

“Willow!?” she asked in a gasp, “Willow is here? Yes, please send her up!”

Tara waited somewhat impatiently until she saw Willow pass by the window directly opposite her bed. Willow looked through it, saw Tara was there and picked up speed. She looked disheveled, exhausted and so thoroughly relieved to see Tara’s face.
“Tara,” she croaked as she came through the door and rushed to her side, “Tara, are you okay? I saw the ambulance take you, I didn’t know what happened, are you okay?!”

She leaned in to hug Tara, but noticed the cast and pulled back again.

“Tara…”

“I’m okay, I’m okay,” Tara reassured, squeezing Willow’s hand as they fell into her good one, “You’ve been out there all night?”

She cocked her head and frowned.

“Are you wearing my shirt?”

Willow looked down in confusion for a moment.

“I-I like to sleep in it,” she answered in a preoccupied tone, “Tara, what happened?”

“It’s just a broken arm and a few bruises,” Tara played it down, “It was…”

She sighed.

“Donny got drunk, like really drunk. He grabbed me and threw me down the stairs.”

Willow’s eyes bugged out of her head.

“What?!”

“Sit down,” Tara said, and Willow complied, but didn’t let go of Tara’s hand.

That alone made Tara smile, but it faltered when she saw the concern etched across Willow’s face. Tears suddenly sprang to her eyes as she felt the vulnerability of the whole ordeal pierce through her.

The legs on Willow’s chair dragged closer to the bed and Tara felt her hand clutched tighter.
Slowly, she told Willow the story her mother had told her and how she’d ended up lying in that hospital bed.

“That’s...horrible,” Willow said, shaking her head to herself, “For all of you…but this…this is not okay. All these years, everything he’s done…it is not okay.”

She started to get choked up.

“He could have broken your neck or given you a brain injury or…”

Her eyes grew wide again.

“Your music!”

“I’ll be okay once it heals, the doctor said, probably,” Tara said, lifting her cast and gingerly wiggling her fingers as she wondered what instruments she might still be able to pick up and play.

Willow watched her do it with an ever-growing snarl on her face.

“I’d like to break every one of his fingers off and feed them to him,” she said, only lifting her chin higher when Tara raised an eyebrow in her direction, “Occasionally, I’m callous and strange.”

Tara’s lips quirked upward on one side.

“I like strange.”

Willow finally smiled and started to lean in when a woman wheeling the lunch cart pushed into the room. Willow immediately pushed right back and dropped Tara’s hand.

Tara quietly chose the salmon and tried not to show her hurt. The tray was slid in front of her and she started to tear the plastic utensils out of the pack. She’d missed breakfast; she was starving. She figured Willow must be too. She’d stayed out there all night, and that told Tara more than the dropped hand.

“Hey,” she said softly, rearranging the tray so the bowl of soup and bread roll was closest to Willow, “Have the soup.”
Willow shook her head.

“No way, I’m not eating your lunch.”

Tara held out the spoon for her.

“It’s minestrone, that’s your favorite soup.”

“After ice-cream,” they said together and both broke out in smiles.

Tara pushed the spoon insistently.

“Please.”

Willow offered a grateful look and scooted in close again so she was sitting in front of the tray. She helped Tara cut up her fish and vegetables and pulled back the foil lid on the orange juice.

Tara drank the juice and Willow drank the milk and they shared the slice of apple pie, though Willow did only take tiny forkfuls so Tara would get most of it.

By the time they were finished, Willow’s hand was in Tara’s again.

“Can I borrow your phone?” Tara asked, “I need to call work and tell them I won’t be in.”

“Yeah, sure—” Willow started to reply, then looked stricken as she felt her pockets, “Shit. I didn’t bring it. I got scared when I saw the ambulance, I wasn’t thinking straight.”

“Oh, that’s okay, don’t worry about it,” Tara replied quickly.

Willow suddenly jumped up, grateful for something to do to help.

“No, no I’ll get one!”

“Willow wait—” Tara began, confused, but Willow was like a bullet when she wanted to be.

Sure enough, just a few minutes later, Willow returned waving an old cell phone.
“Got one, see? They keep these burner-type phones at the nurse’s station, too cheap for anyone to want to steal them. Some people still do though. I saw it in a documentary on Netflix, he tried to stick it up his butt,” she rushed out, not allowing Tara to speak before she continued, “I’m sure this hasn’t been up anyone’s butt. What’s the number?”

“Oh,” Tara replied, briefly scratching her ear, “Um…I don’t know off the top of my head actually.”

Willow shrugged one shoulder.

“That’s okay, what’s it called again? I’ll look it up. They have an internet station in the family room. It’s right around the corner, I’ll only be a minute.”

Tara started to pale.

“You know, it doesn’t matter.”

Willow’s brow creased in confusion.

“But don’t you need to let them know?”

“Well…yes,” Tara replied with a gulp, “It’s…it’s H-Honkerburger.”

“In Las Brujas right?” Willow asked, with little reaction, “Is there just the one?”

“Um, yes,” Tara replied, eyeing up Willow unsurely.

Willow noticed and her face scrunched up.

“Are you okay?”

Tara cautiously met Willow’s gaze.

“You’re not mad?”

“About what?” Willow asked, frowning.
“A-about where I work,” Tara replied with a slight nervous quickening of her words.

Willow thought for a moment but still couldn’t work it out.

“Why would I be mad about where you work?”

Tara suddenly felt like a heavyweight was pushing down on her shoulders.

“A lot of people, they…don’t like that sort of place…or judge it…because of the uniforms and stuff.”

“A lot of people are assholes,” Willow replied curtly as she finally started to get it, “Have you been hiding this from me intentionally?”

Tara hated that inflection of hurt in Willow’s tone.

“I didn’t really tell anyone,” she said, “Nate knew, but—”

“You told Nate but not me?” Willow asked, really showing her hurt now.

“He picked me up from work when it was raining once. I would have missed a show if he didn’t, that’s all,” Tara explained, “I didn’t want to hide it but people have ideas, and they’re mostly wrong. Even I thought it would be worse than it is. The manager is a bit of a jerk, but the other girls aren’t and the customers are mostly really nice.”

Willow took a moment to take it all in.

“Do you get harassed?”

Tara shook her head.

“No more than I did at the country club. And they were worse tippers.”

“Typical,” Willow rolled her eyes, “Is the uniform uncomfortable? It’s not the kinda clothes you usually wear.”
“It’s just a uniform,” Tara replied, still a bit downcast, “One of the girls dresses like a goth in her downtime, another is a Mormon. I only have to wear it inside those walls.”

Willow’s hand slowly crept up to find Tara’s hand.

“I support whatever you do. You don’t have to hide things from me.”

She lifted Tara’s hand to kiss her knuckles, and Tara would have swooned if she wasn’t already lying down. She lifted her hand to touch Willow’s cheek.

“I—I have to tell you—”

“How are you holding up?” Adam the nurse returned for another vitals check, and Tara was worried hers would be all out of whack with Willow there. She regulated her breathing and made herself look away.

“Oh. It’s okay. Just aches a bit.”

Willow made a motion that she was going to leave, which confused Tara but she was busy getting attended to.

Tara waited while her blood pressure and heart rate were taken, relieved that it was normal.

“I’ll see about getting you some more painkillers,” Adam said before going off again.

Tara sat, quite sad, but perked up when Willow returned unexpectedly, with a small piece of ripped paper with a phone number on.

“Oh, thank you,” Tara replied, understanding.

Willow shrugged, a silent ‘no big deal’.

“I’ll let you make your call.”

She looked so tired and Tara was once again overcome by the tenderness Willow had shown.

“Honey, go home, get some sleep. I’m so sorry you got a fright,” she encouraged, “My mom will
bring my phone in. I’ll stay in touch. Honestly…I was going to try and get some sleep anyway.”

Willow was exhausted and she didn’t want to intrude on Tara’s sleep either.

“I’ll come to see you again this afternoon if they don’t let you out.”

“Thank you,” Tara answered, a smile filling her face when Willow kissed her forehead.

Willow walked back out of the building and to where she remembered leaving the bike, but it was gone. She was extremely confused as to why would anyone would want to steal that rustmobile. After a quick look around, she realized the trash had been collected and apparently it had been taken along with it. An assumption Willow really couldn’t argue against.

She just sighed and turned, ready for the long walk home.

In another part of town, Kimberly dragged her feet behind her as she walked. Between night shift adjustments and this ordeal, she hadn’t slept in more than 30 hours and that was before all of the stress she’d been under as she tried to figure out how she was going to fix her broken children.

No matter what, one was going to hurt more because of this.

She wandered around the supermarket, trying to pick out Tara’s favorite treats but was so unsure. She thought she knew; watermelon jolly ranchers, cherry Twizzlers, peanut butter M&Ms. But she hadn’t known her daughter was gay or had gotten a tattoo either, so what did she know?

She paid for everything and continued on to the hospital, stopping after she parked just to breathe for a second. This was not going to be easy.

She braced herself and made her way into the hospital and to Tara’s room. She tried her best to seem chirpier than she was, hoping the makeup hid her red-rimmed eyes.

“I got you some treats and magazines,” she said as she came in, hanging the shopping bag from the end of the bed and placing the overnight bag on the nightstand, “How are you feeling?”

Tara was curled up on her side, silently frowning.

“Pretty crap, really,” she said, sniffing, “My manager told me I can’t perform my duties with a cast, so I might as well not come back in.”
Kimberly was torn between indignation and relief, though she recognized the latter wasn’t very feminist of her. Still…

“I can’t say I’m not pleased you won’t be going back there,” she admitted, knowing how worried she’d be if she thought of Tara working there, particularly late at night.

“You don’t know anything about it,” Tara replied curtly, “There are good people there. And now I’m down everything I would have saved between now and when I leave for my trip.”

Kimberly’s head dropped. Her jaw clenched. Her feet pressed themselves into the floor and kept her in that spot when all she wanted to do was run from this situation. She hadn’t felt like this since the morning the two pink lines showed up. It was too much responsibility.

She finally raised her head and pulled herself into the seat next to Tara.

“I found your brother.”

She swallowed, finding it hard to keep moisture in her mouth.

“He hadn’t gotten into any more trouble,” she continued, nodding along, “And he’s sorry.”

“Sure,” Tara replied, throwing her eyes upward.

“He is,” Kimberly insisted, “He thought he’d killed you. He was very upset.”

“That he didn’t succeed?” Tara replied, almost a sneer.

Kimberly didn’t expect Tara to make this easy on her, but she was making it so much harder.

“He knows he’s out of control,” she said, voice wobbling, “I’ve gotten him to agree to rehab.”

Tara’s eyes closed for a moment, then opened again, but downcast.

“Well, that’s good. I’m glad…I’m glad he’s doing something.”

Kimberly reached for and took Tara’s hand, relieved to hear her say that.
“I’ve been in touch with a residential center I worked in doing my nurse training. They’re good, they have a great success rate. They said they’d give him a bed today. It’s a 90-day program, it would give us all some…breathing space.”

Tara’s eyes narrowed.

“Why do I feel like there’s a big ‘but’ coming?”

Kimberly’s whole body started to shake. She didn’t even know if she could get the words out.

“But I would have to use the money I set aside for your trip ticket to pay for it,” she said, a hand flying up to her mouth, then covering her eyes to stall the tears.

Tara’s bottom lip wobbled but she tensed stoically, refusing to give any reaction. She closed her eyes to stop her tears, but one slipped out anyway.

Kimberly squeezed Tara’s hands tighter.

“It was for you, so you can decide—”

Tara’s eyes snapped open as she snatched her hand back.

“Don’t put that on me like there’s even any choice.”

Kimberly felt a pang of guilt as her arm fell away from Tara.

“I’m so sorry Tara. I’ll work to get the money together for your ticket as soon as—”

“Go,” Tara interrupted, her head and heart throbbing now alongside her arm, “I said leave!”

Kimberly obliged and left, wiping her eyes with her sleeve along the way.

Tara tucked her chin into her chest and pressed the nurse call button, hoping he’d hurry up with those painkillers.
She was too afraid to sleep, as it seemed every dream was snatched away.

Willow returned to the hospital by way of a car this time, for which her thighs and calves were most grateful.

She’d gotten just a few hours sleep, but a bed and a shower had been heaven after her night and she felt much more rested.

She walked around the block, making a couple of stops, then returned and went into the hospital and up to Tara’s room.

“Hi,” she greeted when she saw Tara just lying on her bed, absently staring into space.

“Hey,” Tara returned, eyes glassy and limbs floppy as she tried to sit up properly, “You look pretty.”

Willow blushed as she took the seat beside Tara.

“You couldn’t not look pretty,” Willow replied, casting a glance around to make sure no one was passing or looking before placing a kiss on Tara’s cheek, “I wouldn’t use a double negative for just anybody, you know.”

Tara reached out and gently ran a finger in a half-circle pattern on the collar of Willow’s shirt.

“You definitely have some double positives…”

Willow cleared her throat and gently guided Tara’s hand away.

“They gave you some more pain meds, huh?” she asked cheerily, “Good. Hate to think of you in pain.”

She kept Tara’s hand and ran her thumb over the knuckles.

“When I broke my wrist that time in 2nd grade, my parents wouldn’t let me get a colored cast. How lame is that? My mom said they were ‘gauche’. As if everything about me wasn’t already ‘gauche’. I think that’s when I started picking out brighter colored clothes,” Willow mused aloud, “I just laughed at her though, because white light is basically a hidden rainbow, so technically my cast was all the colors.”
“Now you’re the rainbow connection,” Tara giggled, throwing her hands up in delight, “You were mine and I was yours and one day you’ll let the light at the end of it shine on us.”

She poked Willow gently in the chest, then laid her palm flat and slowly frowned.

“It’s lonely where you are.”

Willow felt the hair stick up on the back of her neck and a brief wave of nausea pass through her stomach. She quickly stood and started rooting through the bag she’d brought in with her.

“Um, I brought you one of those falafel pittas you like so much. Did you get my text? I wasn’t sure so I got the tahini on the side.”

The delicious smell made Tara sit up straight.

“Sorry, Will, I’ve been distracted,” she said, reaching for her overnight bag, “I didn’t take anything out yet.”

She unzipped the front pouch and retrieved her phone. A few missed messages, from Willow and her mom, and a few from the girls at work telling her to get well soon.

Willow brought the table up to Tara and put the pitta on there with the cherry cola she’d bought with it.

“I didn’t want to just show up unannounced again but I saw your mother drive off with Donny and I didn’t want you to be alone,” she explained, helping Tara by unwrapping the sandwich, “I hope she was dropping him to a bus station to go somewhere far, far away. And even then, she should have made him walk.”

Tara nibbled on the corner of the falafel.

“He’s off to battle his demons with a baseball bat made out of my dreams.”

Willow paused; that amount of bitterness had never been something she’d known Tara to possess.

“What’s going on?”
Tara sighed deeply.

“Where to start?”

“I find usually the beginning is a good place,” Willow encouraged softly, “As slow as you need to.”

Tara told Willow what her mother had told her, growing more upset as she explained.

“I lost my job, I lost my trip,” she cried softly, “I’ll lose y—I’ve lost everything!”

Willow sat in the chair right at Tara’s side, an arm across her waist. She really couldn’t believe this and was so mad at Donny and Kimberly, but she recognized who she needed to be right then and it was being a support to Tara.

“Tara, no. What about all the money you’ve saved for the trip yourself?”

“I need that for the actual trip to y’know, live for a year, do the things I want to do, see the things I want to see. I’d already be doing it frugally. I guess I could cut out some stops, maybe? I don’t know, I’d have to work it out, price everything up again.”

“No, you’re not missing out,” Willow replied, shaking her head, “I promise you, we’ll find the money somewhere else. Your dream is not over. He won’t take this from you too.”

Tara shook her head, despondent.

“I’ll never raise that much, especially not in time. My mom has been saving for a long time, so have I and I’d been hoping to save between now and summer and—”

Willow made Tara meet her gaze.

“Do you trust me?”

Tara nodded without hesitation.

“Of course.”
Willow kept Tara’s gaze, intently.

“I promise you will go on that trip. Just as you’d planned. Doing everything you want to do.”

Tara finally nodded and Willow held her quietly and reassuringly until there was a knock at the door.

“Can we come in?”

Tara’s eyebrows rose in surprise as she saw a group of the girls she regularly worked with huddled by the door.

“Hi! Um, yeah, sure,” Tara replied, sitting herself up properly, “Um, Willow these are all the girls I work with. This is my, um, this is Willow.”

Willow waved a little awkwardly and pushed back on the chair to stand.

“I’ll let you talk.”

She passed by the girls as they came in and huddled around Tara. She sat in the corridor to wait, twiddling her thumbs and trying not to think about how attractive they all were, or how much of them Tara regularly saw.

In the room, all of the girls were espousing how lousy Wes the manager was to Tara for cutting her like that.

“We wanted to give you this,” one of them said, handing an envelope over to Tara, “We know how hard you save for your adventure, so we pooled our tips. Even Paulie put in.”

Tara looked in the envelope and felt a lump form in her throat.

“You don’t have to do this.”

“We want to,” Nascha said with a firm but affectionate smile, “You’ve covered shifts for every single one of us. We’ll let you rest but we just wanted you to know we’ll miss you on the floor.”

“And we’re complaining to head office too,” Madeline added.
Each other came around to give Tara a hug individually, which almost left her in tears. As they left, Nascha hung back so it was just the two of them.

“Tara?” she said softly, pulling up the chair. “This conversation is just between us for the moment.”

Tara seemed confused, but Nascha’s brilliant white smile was on display.

“The area manager is getting rid of Wes. She’s training me to take over.”

Tara’s eyes widened and a grin lit up her face too.

“That’s amazing, congratulations.”

“I know you’ll be graduating and then traveling, but when that thing is off if you want to pick up a few shifts just let me know,” Nascha continued with a wink, “In the meantime I’ll make sure you get everything you’re owed and that you stay on the books, yeah?”

Tara rubbed the heel of her palm against her eye. She didn’t want to look weak in front of her prospective future boss.

“Thank you.”

Nascha just gave her a hug and followed the rest of the group out, while Tara cried silently into her hands. Willow came back in and rushed over when she saw.

“Hey, did they upset you?”

Tara shook her head.

“No, they pooled their tips for me, and I might be able to get some work again when the cast comes off.”

Willow stroked Tara’s hair and smiled reassuringly.

“See? We’ve got a head start already.”
Chapter 12

The First Day Of Kindergarten

You Were A Child, Crawling On Your Knees Toward Him

Willow stared ahead at the large building looming in front of her and clutched the straps on her bigger-than-herself backpack.

Ira took a knee beside her and gave her a gentle, encouraging push forward.

“Look at all the other kids running inside, they can’t wait to go in and have fun.”

Willow looked down at the grass and scuffed her newly-shined shoe.

“I wanna be with Tara.”

Ira took her hand and brought her along into the school.

“She’s in another class, honey. You’re in Ms. Finnergans’s class. Look, there’s Cordy Chase. You know her, you were in tennis club together.”

Willow looked over at the familiar girl and noticed she was showing off the latest Barbie to a gaggle of other girls in the class. Willow had her Barbie in her backpack and wondered if they could play together.

“Okay, Daddy.”

Ira smiled proudly.

“Oh, you’ll be just fine, honey. You’re my big girl now. You’re going to learn all kinds of things. I’ll collect you after school and you can tell me all about it okay?”

Willow bent her arm to bring up her Doogie Howser wristwatch, tied securely on.
“When the little hand is on the one and the big hand is on the twelve?”

Ira nodded reassuringly.

“That’s exactly right. Let’s say hello to your teacher.”

Willow came along agreeably, met her teacher and was shown her cubby. Ira hung back to let her get used to him being gone, watching his little girl grow up before his eyes.

“I’d give all I have, honey, if you could stay like that,” he sighed before leaving her with a lump in his throat.

Willow was led to a circular table where some other children were coloring and given a sheet to join in. Willow was immediately content and started in on a drawing for Tara, of them playing make-believe as witches, their current favorite game.

As she was coloring in the broom head a nice, bright yellow, she pushed the crayon into the page a little too hard and it snapped in half. She stared down at her own hand in shock, then clasped her fist closed as tears sprung to her eyes.

Beside her, a boy with floppy brown hair haphazardly rubbed a red crayon over the page, making an edge-to-edge picture of a Ferrari. He stopped when he noticed Willow’s unusual stance and looked at her, scratching the side of her head.

“What’s wrong?”

Willow’s eyes flew to him, panicked.

“Nothing!”

The boy just kept looking at her and his soft gaze comforted Willow. She slowly opened her fist and revealed what was inside.

“I broke the crayon!” she whispered, nearly sobbing, “I’m gonna get in trouble!”

The boy blinked several times, then took the crayon, threw it back into the basket with the rest and shook it so it mixed back in. Willow stood shocked at the act of utter rebellion and threw her arms around the boy.
The boy just smiled goofily.

“I’m Xander.”

“I’m Willow,” Willow replied, sitting back down to finish her drawing, “This is me and Tara. We’re best friends.”

Xander started in on the wheels.

“I wanna be best friends with Spock.”

Willow giggled at the funny name.

“Who’s Spock?”

After a while, Mrs. Finnergan came around and bent down between them both.

“What a lovely picture, Willow. And you, Xander. Can we hang them on the wall?”

Both children nodded and helped affix their creations to the wall above their cubbies.

Willow decided to fish her Barbie out of her backpack and approached Cordelia and the girls sitting around her. She held her doll tightly in her hands and nervously approached.

“Can my Barbie play too?”

Cordelia, already adept at an eye-roll, slowly brought her gaze to Willow’s.

“This is only for Barbies with boyfriends.”

“And you haveta have a boyfriend to join the group,” a younger girl with platinum hair and a slightly absent stare added on.

Willow frowned, working out the mechanics of that word. A boy that was a friend?
“Boyfriend?”

“A boy that you want to hold hands with and stuff,” another of the girls almost fearfully explained.

Willow’s eyes lit up excitedly.

“Oh! I have a boyfriend that’s a girl! Her name is Tara and we watch lil’ mermaid and do yabba dabba!”

Cordelia’s mouth dropped with shock.

“You can’t have a boyfriend that’s a girl!”

Willow frowned again.

“Why not?”

“’Cause you marry your boyfriend when you grewed up! You can’t marry a girl!” Cordelia exclaimed and began cackling, “Willow wants to marry a girl! Willow wants to marry a girl!”

“No, I don’t!!” Willow interjected quickly, feeling rising panic at the jaunting and all of the eyes starting to close in on her, “I wanna marry a boy!”

Cordelia jumped down from her perch on the cubby shelf and narrowed her eyes at Willow.

“Which one?”

Willow’s eyes darted around the room until they landed on the familiar kind face that had gotten her out of her last predicament. Her finger jabbed in his direction.

“Him!”

Cordelia followed the point and snorted some more.

“Stinky Xander Harris?”
Xander looked up and Willow felt a need to defend him.

“No, he’s nice! He doesn’t smell bad!”

“Whatever,” Cordelia retorted and led her cronies away to another area of the room.

Willow’s heart was pounding through her tiny body and her grip was so tight on her Barbie, it almost snapped in half too. Not wanting to stand in the middle of the room alone, she approached Xander again, who was playing with his own doll.

“Hi,” she said shyly.

Xander looked up and across to Cordelia, then back at Willow.

“She sucks,” he said indignantly, “I’m only stinky sometimes.”

“We should make a club,” Willow said, eyes wide with excitement to have a shared passion, “A ‘We Hate Cordelia’ club!”

Xander looked at her curiously.

“Can I be president?”

Willow frowned. She wanted to be president.

“You can be treasurer,” she suggested.

Xander smiled affably. He had no idea what that meant.

“Okay.”

Willow’s eyes cast from side to side conspiringly.

“Will you be my boyfriend?”

“Okay,” Xander agreed again easily.
Willow held her Barbie up to him.

“Does your G.I. Joe wanna marry my Barbie?”

Xander shrugged.

“She has to help him fight Doctor Mindbender!”

“Okay!” Willow agreed loudly, her little eyes darting to make sure Cordelia and the first incarnation of The Cordettes saw, despite just becoming President of her first club.

Xander tried to snatch Willow’s Barbie and she ran after him.

“Hey! Give her back!”

As she followed Xander into the corner to play, she spotted her picture hanging on the wall. It made her feel happy and was confused why she felt happy when Cordelia had said it was so wrong. She didn’t like it one bit and the emotional turmoil was far beyond what her growing mind was capable of working out.

She just knew something was wrong, something was off and that from now on, Tara had to be a secret. Her secret.

When the big hand finally crept up on the twelve, Willow waited in her classroom for her dad to come in and collect her. She just nodded that she’d had a good time and took his hand. When she heard Tara call her name across the lawn, she pulled him faster.

Tara figured Willow mustn’t have heard her. She shrugged and ran to her mother to tell her about the day and how much she’d loved the xylophone she’d gotten to play on. She could just tell Willow later at home.

Willow looked through the car window at her best friend in the whole world jump into her mother’s arms and for the first time in her life, she experienced guilt.
Willow hummed as she secured the seal on a padded envelope and added it to the growing pile.

Tara, sitting opposite on the floor of Willow’s bedroom and stuffing the envelopes before she pushed them over to Willow, recognized the bars of ‘Heigh Ho’. She watched Willow’s hands move in the same sequence for each package and it made her smile.

“Quirky,” she said as she caught Willow’s gaze.

Willow looked at Tara peculiarly as her fingers deftly pressed the sticky seal down and her wrist flicked it so it sailed over her shoulder and landed in the waiting box behind her.

“Huh?”

“If you were one of the seven dwarves,” Tara clarified through a laugh, “You’d be Quirky. I guess that would make you the eighth.”

Willow’s eyes narrowed playfully.

“You’ve tried that one before, Maclay. I know you mean ‘insane’.”

Tara smiled for a moment, then crawled over to Willow on her hands and knees. She pressed a gentle kiss under Willow’s right ear.

“Insanely smart,” she whispered, bringing her mouth around to kiss under Willow’s other ear, “And talented.”

She faced Willow and kissed her lips; soft, sweet and lingering.

“And beautiful.”
Willow flushed right down into her chest and reached out to cup Tara’s cheek. Her fingers splayed out against Tara’s skin and ever-so-softly held her chin to keep her there so Willow could keep kissing her.

Tara parted with a kiss to the corner of Willow’s mouth and returned to her spot. Willow blindly reached for the next packet, while waiting for her belly to stop doing flips.

“You’re the talented one. Your designs are gorgeous.”

Tara hadn’t believed any of her crafty things would ever be sellable but had finally agreed to try if it brought her closer to raising the funds for her trip ticket.

Willow had used her computer skills to facilitate.

“I can’t believe how many orders we got,” she said as she put the most popular sale, a repurposed guitar string made into a bangle with different gemstones, into an envelope, “I’ve been making these things for years…mostly just to occupy my hands. I can’t believe you were actually able to sell all my old junk.”

“Most people have fidget spinners, you make art,” Willow replied affectionately, “And it’s not junk Tara, it’s couture design. They’re one of a kind pieces. I can’t believe you had this much and I didn’t know about it! I thought you showed me all the stuff you made.”

Tara shrugged one shoulder.

“Only if I wear it myself, usually. The rest are just experiments.”

“Well you’re very good at experimenting,” Willow replied, then realized what she said and blushed, “Um, did your mom get mad that you blew off school to make extra stuff? I would have blown off class too to help you if you’d told me.”

“Sweetie, you wouldn’t blow off a class if your head was on fire,” Tara replied, shooting a crooked smile across the room, but it faltered, “She’s not picking fights right now.”

Willow noted the quiet tone. Tara had talked with her and cried with her in the first few days after the ‘incident’ but everything had quieted down as routine invariably snuck back into their lives.

“Are you still mad at her?” she prompted gently.
Tara shrugged one shoulder, not looking up.

“It’s messed up for everyone.”

Willow nodded, eyes trying to catch the emotion on Tara’s face.

“How’s…?”

“I don’t ask,” Tara replied, just barely hiding a sigh, “My mom goes to see him at weekends. He hasn’t abandoned the program, at least.”

She pushed another envelope across the floor.

“I can’t thank you enough for helping me out with everything. All of this printing and packing, setting up the website stuff… I couldn’t have done it without you.”

“Well, I’ve only been telling you forever that you should have an online store! It was your genius idea to market it as a pop-up,” Willow replied cheerily, “An online pop-up shop, it’s kinda so crazy that it works. It was super cool to actually start trending too, even if it was just for an hour.”

She picked up her phone and opened the spreadsheet where she was keeping a tally of the money.

“We’ve raised almost half of what you need. If we sell out the stock of what you’ve made we’ll only be a few hundred bucks away from what we set out to make.”

Tara shook her head, awed.

“That’s crazy,” she said, and grew quiet for a moment, “It’s great, phenomenal even but…it’s not enough to get there. I was thinking about pawning my instruments. Even if I go back to work when I get the cast off, I’m looking at scaling the trip back or sitting out another few months to save up again.”

Willow looked up sharply.

“You have to go this year!” she replied loudly, then stumbled over her words as she rushed to continue, “And you can’t sell your instruments! There’s no way! They mean so much to you, Tara. Promise you won’t?”
“Okay,” Tara agreed, a small line of confusion furrowed on her brow, “I just think it might come down to a choice…and I can always buy another sax.”

Willow pursed her lips, then tried to speak nonchalantly.

“You know I do have some m—”

“And again, you are so generous to offer,” Tara interrupted in a stern but sincere voice, “But I can’t. I just can’t. Nothing is worth things getting weird between us.”

Willow’s lips grew into a smile.

“Yeah, wouldn’t want to do anything to mess up our friendship.”

Tara offered a small grin.

“I’ve been babysitting and I’ll be picking up shifts again soon. That will help. Nate mentioned some shows he’s going to book for us. Basically, I don’t have a single minute to myself…but everything helps.”

“While Donny gets to swan around in a luxurious treatment center,” Willow sneered.

“Your prom is next weekend, right?” Tara cut her off, very much intentionally changing the subject.

“Is it?” Willow asked with a shrug, though she did know it was happening from all the posters around school.

She and Buffy had already agreed to sit it out and have a slumber party.

“Yeah, I think so,” Tara replied, an undeniable note of eagerness in her voice, “Are you going?”

“Nope,” Willow scoffed, “Buff and I are doing a girls’ night instead. Seems less…high school hierarchy.”

“Oh, okay,” Tara nodded to herself, “Well, um, thanks again for all of this…really, I’d have zero chance of still getting to go on the trip if it wasn’t for you.”
Willow scooted closer and kissed Tara’s cheek.

“You don’t need to thank me. I’d do anything for you.”

Their foreheads rested together and each pair of lips sought the other for a quick peck. Willow nuzzled against Tara for a moment, before grudgingly dragging herself away, but with determination on her face.

“Next box!”

“Pass the pizza.”

Willow lifted the pizza box to slide across Buffy’s bedroom floor to her, but it was decidedly light.

“We ate it all.”

Buffy frowned deeply.

“That makes me sad.”

Willow lifted the lid to confirm and frowned too.

“Sorry Buff. There’s still cookie dough.”

She held up the tube with a conciliatory smile. Buffy took it and scooped some up in her fingers.

“Cookie dough never lets me down.”

Willow frowned at Buffy’s demeanor and tried to think of a way to distract her.

“Do you want to work on your French?”

Buffy shook her head.
“There is nothing I want to do less right now than French homework,” she sighed as she picked up her phone.

After a minute of her thumb moving about the screen, her bottom lip protruded in a pout.

“I keep seeing pretty dresses and I keep wanting me to be in one too.”

She showed Willow the photo log of all of their classmates arriving at prom. Willow brow scrunched.

“You’re the one who said we should sit prom out…that you didn’t want to be surrounded by lame couples making lame poses, listening to lame music and—”

“Yeah, I get it, lame,” Buffy cut her off before arching a sculpted eyebrow at Willow, “Except maybe… it’s kinda not? We could…swing by…check it out?”

“I don’t think it’s a swing-by kinda thing,” Willow reasoned evenly, “What with the endless planning people put in.”

“We’ll sneak in,” Buffy replied, grinning now.

“Buffy,” Willow replied, lowering her voice lest anyone else inside the closed room heard them, “It’s school property.”

Buffy started bouncing on the spot.

“It’s better than sitting in on a Saturday night, right? And the music won’t be lame. I heard they’re getting a good band.”

“So, what?” Willow asked, biting the corner of her lip, “You want to gatecrash our own prom?”

Buffy nodded eagerly.

“In pretty clothes.”

Willow looked down at her multicolored sweater and faded jeans.
“I am not prom appropriate.”

Buffy’s eyes grew wide with excitement and she jumped up.

“Well lucky for you…”

She hurried over to her closet to throw the doors open.

“I have ‘appropriate’ for every occasion there is!”

Willow stood behind Buffy as she tried to hoist herself up to sneak in the bathroom window at the school.

It was not made easier by the fact that they were in dresses, bare-legged and getting scratched by the wall.

“Is this really worth it Buff?” Willow asked unsurely.

She’d actually enjoyed dressing up with Buffy but this seemed nuts. That window was barely big enough and she had no idea how she was supposed to do it when Buffy, the strong one, couldn’t even get up.

“Maybe we could try and sneak past the entrance? Ooh, we could try to distract them and steal the ink stamper.”

Buffy hopped down off the wall, sighing.

“Okay, honestly?” she asked, opening her purse and producing two tickets, “I have tickets. I bought them before I split with he-who-must-not-be-named. I didn’t think I wanted to go without a date, but I don’t see why a guy should make or break my only prom.”

Willow looked at her friend, exasperated.

“If you have tickets, why are we trying to climb in through the bathroom?!”
Buffy reached across herself to hold her arm meekly.

“I miss the excitement. I miss being wild.”

“Well wild on me equals spaz, so can we please go in the normal way?” Willow half-joked, half-huffed.

“Well we’d be breaking the habit of a lifetime, but I guess if ‘normal’ is so important to you,” Buffy replied, nudging Willow’s shoulder.

Willow offered a slight smile but averted her gaze.

Willow started to feel a bit nervous as they walked into the school and headed toward the gymnasium. There were definitely some people she’d gone to great lengths to avoid this past school year and she felt a bit like she was walking into the lion’s den.

They got their hands stamped and walked through the door, where the normal gym that haunted Willow’s dreams had been transformed. Everything was a stark red and black, accented with masquerade masks and tall feathers on the walls and some candelabras with candles away from anywhere there could be dancing.

“What…is this theme?” Buffy questioned, looking around, “Cheap Vegas showgirl?”

Willow noticed one of the homemade posters still adorning one of the walls.

“Illusions,” she read.

Buffy picked up the hem of her dress and moved toward the masses.

“Well, I’m going to illude myself over there!”

“That’s not a word,” Willow replied, though quickly followed her, “Wait, I’m coming!”

They coasted through the room until they found a spot to huddle and chat in. They spent a while commenting on the other clothes and giggling at the bad dancing to the generic playlist blasting out of the speakers.

After a bit, Buffy excused herself to go to the bathroom and after a quick glance around the room,
Willow declined to join her, figuring it was probably where her nemeses were hanging out.

She made her way over to the punch bowl. As she ladled her second scoop of the fluorescent drink into her red solo cup, she heard a voice, or more so a laugh, that made the hair on the back of her neck stand up.

She furtively glanced over her shoulder and confirmed that Cordelia was approaching her at speed. Willow immediately folded in on herself.

“Wow, I can’t believe someone actually asked you to prom,” Cordelia cackled, staring at Willow intently.

When Willow just looked down, Cordelia snickered.

“Oh my god, they didn’t, did they? You came alone! What, not even—”

“I d-didn’t come alo—” Willow started to reply, but was caught off by what felt like a cacophony of laughter around her.

Cordelia sure knew how to make her singular presence feel like a gang even without her cronies hanging on. Where were they anyway?

“Willow doesn’t have a date,” Cordelia shrieked, almost doubling over with laughter, “Willow doesn’t have a date!”

Willow felt some droplets of punch fall onto her wrist as her hand began to shake.

That taunting hit her somewhere deep.

She tried to eye an opening she could push through, but an unexpected rescue came to her in the form of a voice she hadn’t heard in a long time.

“Leave her alone.”

Cordelia stared Xander down for a moment and looked hurt before averting her gaze.

“I should have known you’d still defend her,” Cordelia sneered, though her own voice was close to breaking as she tried to stumble an insult out, “I hear Hallmark is making the movie about you two. I
hope you weren’t cheated out of the rights.”

Willow felt a rush of embarrassment and guilt. As horrible as Cordelia had ever been to her, she’d done her wrong as well.

“I really am sorry about—”

Cordelia held her hand up, just shy of saying ‘talk to it’, as she was aware that it was no longer the 90s.

“The stench of dork is just too much. I’m getting out of here before it clogs up my pores.”

She turned on her heels and left but didn’t go to anyone and just stood around by herself, checking her watch and looking like she was waiting for someone.

Willow stared down at her cup, very purposefully avoiding Xander’s gaze, though she could tell he was still there by the presence of his old but newly-shined shoes.

After a moment or two, that joking voice she’d come to value so much as a friend spoke up again.

“I hear the punch is extra-punchy this year.”

He held up his own cup as a demonstration or a toast, he didn’t even know himself which it was.

Willow finally looked up and felt a rush of emotion at seeing her longtime friend.

“Xander,” was all she could say, swallowing a lump and offering a small smile, “Hey, you scrub up well.”

He fidgeted with his bowtie but smiled back.

“Long time no speak.”

Willow sighed deeply.

“Long…long time.”
Xander bounced back and forth on his toes.

“I texted ya, but you didn’t reply.”

He continued to smile, no animosity in his tone or attitude.

“Honestly, I blocked your number,” Willow admitted shamefully.

“Was I sending too many fart jokes?” Xander joked and Willow couldn’t help but laugh, but then shook her head.

“I thought you’d be really mad at me. And I didn’t think I could handle you mad at me on top of… everything else.”

“How come you thought I’d be mad?” Xander asked as if it was an amusing thought.

Willow’s eyebrow arched.

“Um… breaking up your relationship? A-and the events leading up to it.”

Xander waved a hand.

“Pfft, pretty, popular… who wants a girl like that anyway?” he asked, but followed it up with a single shoulder sheepish shrug, “She never really liked me anyway. She was probably going to dump me as soon as school started back up before her friends found out. I thought we’d made peace earlier this week when I helped pay off her prom dress but I guess she’s still mad.”

Willow frowned; why would Cordelia need help paying off a dress?

“I think it’s me she still hates,” she supplied uneasily, “Hard to change a habit of a lifetime.”

“She’s been going through some stuff with her family,” Xander said with a sad bob of his head, “Lost her friends anyway.”

Willow swallowed. Did she actually feel sorry for Cordelia?
“Irony’s kind of ironic that way.”

There was a small silence and Willow’s heart started to speed up. She had not anticipated that reuniting with Xander might go so easily.

“Are you mad now? That I haven't spoken to you for months?”

“Not that I was missed,” Xander said, smiling sadly, “Felt like you and Buffy went off and just forgot about me.”

“No, no,” Willow replied quickly, “Buffy and I…there was a whole mess…we all just…poof!”

She made her hands blow up indicatively.

“And then…I was so embarrassed about what I did. I was…temporarily insane.”

“I figured,” Xander bobbed his head along easily, “I mean no one of sound mind would take on the wrath of Cordelia willingly. I kinda thought it was a weird prank. Then I thought it was just an elaborate ruse to keep me out of the gang. Or maybe flunk out.”

He grinned boyishly.

“Turns out I need a Will in my life or I just become a lumbering oaf of stupidity.”

Willow quickly shook her head.

“No, I’m the bastion of stupid in this situation,” she replied, her cheeks flushing hotly. “You were collateral damage of my own confusion. I used you to work out some feelings and I'm really sorry. And I’m so, so sorry that I just ran away and blocked you out of my life and made you feel…god, that’s awful Xan. I’m so sorry. I was so concerned about myself I never stopped to think about how it affected you.”

“Did you?” Xander asked, dropping his chin to look at her, “Work out the feelings?”

Willow blushed some more.

“Kinda.”
Xander’s hands knocked together awkwardly.

“I think maybe I would have kissed you back,” he said, looking up to meet Willow’s eye, “Given the chance.”

Willow swallowed deeply.

“I don’t think that would have been good for anyone.”

Xander held up his hands, mimicking a scales.

“That mistake or losing my virginity to a malevolent force dressed in leather,” he said, lifting each side up and down, “Either way I’m coming out on bottom.”

“Hey, you’ve been reading that word of the day calendar I got you,” Willow chuckled nervously then swallowed again, “I-I didn’t know.”

Xander shrugged.

“Buffy knocked her into next week.”

Willow looked up, wide-eyed.

“Wait, it was HER?” she exclaimed, mouth dropping, “The cleavage-y slut bomb?”

Xander frowned a bit.

“Where ya been Wills?”

Willow frowned too.

“In my own little world, I guess,” she said in a tone that may have been sad but was fighting against it. She looked back up to Xander’s eyes, “But I definitely worked out that you’re one of my best friends and not…”

Xander held a hand up.
“Say no more. The Xan Man has gotten the 'just friends' speech often enough to fill in the rest.”

“Can we be?” Willow asked hopefully, “Friends again?”

Xander bumped Willow’s shoulder playfully.

“Will you help me bump my chemistry grade? I’m trailing a fail here and risking not graduating.”

Willow wasn’t sure if that was a joke or not, but her answer was the same either way.

“You bet.”

Xander opened his arm in offering and Willow immediately closed it, her drink sloshing as she did so.

“Whoops!” she giggled, feeling utter relief that this wasn’t hanging over her head any longer.

Xander smiled at his friend-again.

“Oh, and I missed ya, Wills.”

Buffy suddenly came screeching up to them on the heels of the hug and threw her arm around each of their shoulders.

“Are we all back to being the three amigos again?”

“Well, Jesse was just here too…” Xander started, then shook his head when they spotted him across the floor trying to chat up Cordelia, “If he still wants to go there after all the stories I told him…It's his funeral.”

They all laughed and for the first time in a long time, Willow felt like everything was normal again.

“Hey, Xander needs help with schoolwork too…so maybe we can start studying together.”

“We can be study buddies,” Buffy suggested.
Willow cleared her throat.

“Um, or, a study group,” she said more definitively, “Let’s go with study group.”

They all refilled their cups and fell back into conversation and observation as if there’d been no conflict in their friendship at all. Willow was on cloud nine, feeling as elated as she ever had been.

The music stopped through the speakers and there was a brief moment of dissatisfaction in the crowd until a melodic male voice spoke into the microphone.

“Good evening everyone. Are you having a good night?”

There was a cheer from everyone except Willow, who frowned. She knew that voice.

“We are Insect Reflection and together we represent our insignificance in terms of the karmic cycle. The universe is really big and we’re really small - we hope our music reminds you why we matter at all. Let’s do it! Sunnydale High class of 2018!”

He started strumming a guitar and if Willow didn’t know before that Tara was there, she knew as soon as Tara opened her mouth to sing. She stood on her tiptoes to try and see over the crowd and could just about make out Tara’s face and the harmonica she was holding in her hand, which was still mostly covered in green fiberglass.

“Hey, isn’t that your… friend’s band?” Buffy asked with a pointed look at Willow, “I didn’t know it was this band.”

“I-I didn’t either,” Willow replied with a gulp.

Tara was serenading the crowd but it only took a few seconds for her to find Willow.

In any room, their eyes would always find each other. Willow watched Tara’s expression change, but her voice didn’t falter.

“Did they say they were going to play Karma Chameleon?” Xander asked cluelessly, “I like that song.”

Just then, a girl with mousy brown hair approached Xander.
“You want to dance?”

“Uh…” Xander hesitated, “Why?”

Anya shrugged.

“You’re not quite as obnoxious as most of the alpha males around here. Plus I know you don’t have a date,” she said, then appeared to get angry when Xander didn’t reply right away, “Fine. Look, I know you find me attractive. I’ve seen you looking at my breasts.”

Xander smiled.

“Nothing personal, but when a guy does that, it just means his eyes are open.”

Anya rolled her eyes.

“Whatever. Look, do you wanna dance with me or not?”

Xander was silent for a moment, looked at Buffy and Willow, then followed Anya’s…body out onto the dance floor.

A few minutes later, after Jesse struck out with Cordelia, Buffy took pity on him and offered to dance. Willow pushed her way toward the top of the stage and waved demurely at Tara.

Tara looked right at her, but it was piercing in a way Willow had never felt from her before, and not in a good way.

“Ever fallen in love with someone you shouldn’t have fallen in love with?”

Willow felt a knot in her belly. She’d never known Tara to look at her and not see love and adoration returned. She pushed back out into the crowd, got some more punch and went to join in with the others dancing.

The band finished up for the king and queen to be announced, but Willow didn’t hang around to see who it was. She left the school and walked around to the back where Tara had come out to take a break.
“Tara!” Willow called when she saw her walking away.

Tara stopped and Willow jogged up to her, as best she could in a dress.

“Tara,” Willow said again when she got to her, “I didn’t know you were playing tonight…why didn’t you tell me?”

“Thought you weren’t coming,” Tara replied curtly.

“I wasn’t,” Willow answered honestly, “It was a last minute thing.”

“With Buffy. And Xander,” Tara replied in a clipped tone, “Thought you weren’t talking.”

Tara’s tone made Willow want to throw up. Tara had never been angry with, ever, not like this. Even when Willow had called her that horrible name, she’d just looked sad.

“W-We weren’t.”

“Seems like you’re doing a lot of things you weren’t before,” Tara replied, hurt dripping with every word, “Without me.”

Willow shook her head repeatedly.

“It’s not like that Tara, I swear,” she protested, swallowing repeatedly as her mouth went dry, “Y-you were here anyway.”

“You didn’t know that,” Tara replied in disgust, “You didn’t even know if I was busy. You never asked.”

Tara’s eyes shut with tears and she turned her head away.

“I wouldn’t have asked you to declare in the middle of the dance floor. When have I ever pushed you to do anything you weren’t ready for? It would have meant something to me to ask me and no one else would have had a clue.”

Willow stood, silent and helpless and watched as Tara’s pain played so animatedly across her face.
“It never even crossed your mind that this might be something that you might ask me along to.”

Willow’s voice choked up.

“You know I can’t.”

“I know you won’t,” Tara returned harshly, shaking her head, “I only did this show so I could afford tickets to my prom. I was going to ask you but I think you’ve been pretty clear that that’s not something you want to share with me.”

Willow’s mouth opened and closed wordlessly.

“I…”

“What?” Tara prompted, and waited.

Willow’s jaw set to stop from trembling.

“I’m sorry,” she said eventually.

Tara closed her eyes for a second, then reopened them and nodded.

“Me too,” she replied sadly, “I’m glad you’re talking to your friends again.”

She turned and walked back toward Nate's truck.

“Tara—” Willow called, but Tara was gone and someone else was calling Willow’s name.

“Willow!” Buffy called, coming toward her with Jesse, Xander, and the new strangely literal girl following behind, “There you are. We’re all going to go get shakes, are you coming?”

Willow had to take a moment to gather her thoughts.

“No, um…”
“Are you okay?” Buffy asked, stepping toward her in concern.

Willow nodded.

“I just have a headache.”

“Probably from all of the vodka,” Anya offered, “You were consuming a lot of the punch.”

“It had vodka in it?” Willow asked, feeling it roll around her stomach even more.

“Oh yes,” Anya nodded, “Lots.”

Willow clutched her head.

“I’m going to head home. Do you mind if we call off the sleepover?”

“Yeah, that’s fine, we’re thinking of making a night of it,” Buffy replied, smiling at the newly put-together gang, “Are you sure you don’t want to come?”

Willow nodded again. She wanted to go home. And cry.

“I’ll wash the dress.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Buffy reassured, “Just call if you want to join in. Come on, we’ll drop you on the way.”

Willow smiled gratefully and gave her a hug. She made sure to unblock Xander’s number in the car and tried not to show how she was really feeling inside. Thankfully it was a short journey and she didn’t have to fake it for long.

She stood on the path outside her home and looked across the street. Tara’s light was off but that made sense.

She went straight up to her bedroom and threw herself on her bed. Her dress caught as she was going over and she jumped back up again to tear it off. She dropped it to her feet with its confusing complexity of memories seeping into it on the floor. She’d gotten Xander back, but had she lost Tara?
A sob released itself from her throat at the thought and she curled up in sweatpants and her (Tara’s) IR t-shirt, for the small comfort it gave.

She didn’t know if it was the alcohol or bile at the back of her throat, but it burned with each new cry into her hands.

Why was she like this? Why was she trying so hard to hurt them both?

After a good cry, she suddenly bolted upright.

Maybe she could make this better.

She ran over to her closet. She frantically searched through it and fished out two separate hangers. Checking them front and back, she ran back downstairs and across the street to the Maclay house.

It was late, but the living room lights were on and so was the one in Tara’s bedroom, so she knocked. Kimberly answered the door and didn’t even ask, just opened the door to allow Willow inside.

Willow hopped up the stairs and knocked on Tara’s closed bedroom door.

“I don’t want any tea!” Tara called through an obviously strained voice.

Willow knocked again and the door swung open aggressively a moment later.

“I said I’m fine—!”

Tara swallowed as she saw Willow standing there, both of them noticing the other’s red-rimmed eyes.

Willow thrust each hanger, one an earth tone with greens and browns and the other a neutral black, toward Tara.

“Which one?”

Tara just looked bewildered and Willow swallowed deeply.
“Which one should I wear?” Willow repeated, looking right into Tara’s eyes, “Which one matches your prom dress better?”

Slowly, realization dawned on Tara’s face.

She smiled and shakily pointed to the green.

“That one.”

“Thanks for doing this, Buff.”

Buffy hummed as she looked through Willow’s limited makeup collection.

“Well, I had to make sure you looked your best. This is like a real prom with a real date,” she said, arching her eyebrow playfully, “Isn’t it?”

Willow, sitting on her bed, ran a hand over the patterned dress she had yet to put on.

“Kinda.”

Buffy came over and sat next to her.

“Are you rethinking…?”

Willow shook her head.

“Not about how I feel,” she said with a sigh, “It just gets stronger.”

She paused.

“I just…”

She shrugged.
She couldn’t say for sure if she would have extended this offer to Tara if she hadn’t been drunk on vodka and misery that night.

“It’s hard sometimes. And I know I’m the one making it harder. I hurt her and…I never ever want that.”

Buffy patted Willow’s shoulder.

“I know I don’t ‘get it’ exactly…but I know what it’s like to keep a relationship secret. I’m always here if you need to talk.”

Willow felt herself welling up.

“That means so much. I was so scared for anyone to know and…”

Buffy turned and pulled Willow into a hug.

“Willow is Willow, no matter who you love.”

Willow’s cheeks flushed lightly and Buffy tapped her back with a smile.

“Well, let’s get you ready for this thing,” she said as she swayed over to Willow’s docking station, “We need some tunes.”

She went through the playlists to find a good one to get ready to.

“What’s ‘T Time’?” she questioned, her eyebrows rising when some R&B began playing, “The T is for…trigonometry? Oh. Tara.”

Willow rushed over with bright red cheeks and quickly flicked a different playlist on.

“So should I wear my hair up or down?” she asked with a speedy need to change the subject.

Buffy was just as happy to move on and sat Willow in front of her mirror to experiment with some different styles. They finally decided to keep it down and Buffy would straighten it. Willow changed into her dress and Buffy applied light make-up but didn’t overdo it.
Buffy presented Willow in the mirror, smiling behind her.

“I wouldn’t go for the long sleeves myself, but you know, it looks great on you.”

“Thanks,” Willow replied with a bashful smile.

Willow looked at the clock hanging on her wall through the mirror.

“Hey, could you hang around for a couple of minutes?”

“Sure!” Buffy agreed.

They went downstairs and Willow was very grateful her parents had gone on another trip so they could be home for her graduation. She didn’t want to have to explain this.

After a few minutes, the doorbell rang and Willow stood up nervously.

She opened the door and her breath was instantly taken away.

Tara was in a dress of very similar style to Willow’s, but black with a floral design. They weren’t traditional prom dresses, but neither of them had ever been traditional dressers. Tara’s hair was down too but as shiny as it had ever been and softly bouncing below her shoulders.

Willow found herself falling in love with everything from the small crinkles at Tara’s eyes to the way her sleeves flew out at the wrists and how the creamy white skin of her calves contrasted against the dress where the hemline fell.

She swallowed several times as her eyes gave Tara the more-than-once-over and finally noticed an absence of something.

“Look at you, no cast.”

Tara twisted her freed arm around shyly.

“All healed.”
Willow finally stepped aside to allow Tara in.

“You look gorgeous.”

“So do you,” Tara complimented shyly as she walked inside.

Willow closed the door behind them and Tara handed her something. Willow wasn’t sure what it was at first, but as she took it she realized it was a leather purse with a thick but not-to-heavy chain strap.

“I knew you wouldn’t want me to get you a corsage,” Tara explained quickly before Willow could look at her strangely, “So I made you this.”

Willow started to smile, but it turned to stun when Tara continued.

“I-I used the swing. I’ve been working on it a while.”

“Wait…our swing?” Willow said, eyes wide as she turned the purse over in her hands and took it in for all its glory, “The one we broke the night we…”

Tara nodded shyly and Willow stared at her, in awe.

“You…you made this from that?” she asked, tears almost springing to her eyes at the thought and time and consideration that must have gone into it, “This is amazing. Thank you so much.”

She threw her arms around Tara’s neck and kissed her, hard.

After a moment, Buffy cleared her throat and made Willow pull away.

She blushed, but she couldn’t stop smiling. She went over to show Buffy the purse.

“Look what she made. From an old swing!”

Buffy’s eyebrows lifted, impressed.

“You made this? Wow. You’re talented.”
“So talented.” Willow gushed, then shyly took Tara’s hand, “I wanted you to meet Buffy. Properly.”

Tara’s eyes softened and she smiled in recognition of what Willow was doing.

“Tara, this is Buffy. Buffy… this is Tara.”

They shook hands and Willow glanced between them nervously.

“She got me ready tonight.”

“You did a great job,” Tara said to Buffy, though her eyes were all for Willow.

Willow was staring right back with what only could be described as heart eyes.

Buffy watched the exchange for a minute or so before deciding she was very much superfluous to requirements.

“So I’ll see you guys around!” she said, walking away awkwardly toward the door, “Enjoy your prom!”

“Bye,” Willow and Tara both echoed, but not without taking their eyes off each other.

Tara brushed her hand along Willow’s arm.

“You really did tell Buffy about us.”

Willow swallowed and nodded. Tara smiled and linked their fingers so their palms squeezed together.

“I’m so proud of you.”

Their moment was interrupted by a beeping sound from outside. Tara smiled and tugged Willow’s hand.

“Our ride is here.”
Willow quickly transferred everything to her new purse and proudly wore it on her shoulder. She followed Tara outside but stopped short when she saw a black limo waiting for them.

“Tara, this is way too much money! You’re saving every penny.”

“We’re collecting others on the way,” Tara replied easily, “Everyone chipped in, so it wasn’t expensive. I know this is big for you…I wanted it to be special.”

Willow was touched and smiled as the driver opened the back door for them. The seats were plush inside and lit up by luminous under lighting that changed colors.

“Cool,” Willow giggled as she slid across the seat, “Ooh, they have fancy sodas!”

She picked out a green one for herself and a red one for Tara and felt über suave as she cracked the tops off the counter.

The long necks of their bottles clinked as the limo set in motion. Music played and Tara put her arm around Willow’s shoulder.

Willow snuggled in. It took her an entire minute to realize how comfortably she’d gotten into that position. How unselfconsciously it felt to fit into Tara’s side.

She thought of all of the moments she lost, that they lost because she was afraid of…what, even?

“Tara?” she turned as the romantic music swelled.

_The touch of your hand says you’ll catch me if ever I fall._

Tara’s hand covered hers and Willow opened her mouth to speak, but closed it again and leaned up for a kiss.

_You say it best when you say nothing at all._

She cupped Tara’s cheek while she kissed her, then tucked her head under Tara’s chin.
They had the limo to themselves for the entire journey into the next town, where the school and the rest of the prom attendees were being picked up. Tara stepped out to open the door at the first house and Willow heard a loud cheer as everyone greeted each other. She grew a bit nervous again as everyone piled in, particularly as she and Tara got separated.

Tara mouthed ‘sorry’ and smiled apologetically across the car before introducing her around, just as ‘Willow’.

The only person she vaguely knew was Nate, but she waved and said hello to the group. They were as you might expect a group of performing arts students to look, heavy on the alternative aesthetic and expressive in their demeanor. Willow was kind of surprised that this was Tara’s circle; she certainly was much shyer on home ground. Then again, she still seemed to be the quietest of the group.

Not unexpectedly, when a catchy tune came on, everyone started breaking out in harmonies.

Willow smiled; they were a fun bunch and Tara certainly fit in with her voice. Hers was the most beautiful, of course, and there wasn’t a human being on earth living or dead that could compete with her as far as Willow was concerned.

Much to Willow’s gratitude, no one pressured her to join in and she was happy to bop along in her seat and share ‘secret’ smiles with Tara.

When they got to the school, everyone piled out and Tara hung back for Willow, the last one out of the car. Tara didn’t try to take her hand and shrugged her shoulders when the others headed for the photo booth outside the auditorium.

“We don’t have to do the pose thing.”

Willow opened her mouth. She wanted so desperately to be able to throw caution to the wind, but no words came out, just silent cowardice. Tara smiled understandingly and gestured her forward.

“Come on. I’ll show you around.”

Willow gulped and tried not to hang her head as they bypassed the line for photos and headed straight inside.

“I never asked what the theme was.”

As they walked in, it became abundantly clear. The decoration standard was so much higher than it
had been at SHS. Fairy lights hung from the ceiling and the walls were decorated with quotes from famous lovers written in different mixed media styles. Black and silver balloons were formed into arches and strewn loosely about and glow in the dark stars were dotted at different places along the walls.

“Written In The Stars,” Tara answered.

“Wow,” Willow breathed, “It’s so…pretty. Hey look, it’s like those lights you have up in your room.”

Tara smiled shyly.

“I may have offered an idea or two.”

Willow could only smile back.

“Of course you did. Only you could be responsible for something this beautiful.”

She linked her arm with Tara, who beamed at the contact.

Tara brought Willow out to the dark corridors and showed her around the school. Willow was surprised by how similar it was to SHS at first, a normal high school, but as they continued through the building, the specialized art and music rooms were revealed.

“So this room is completely soundproofed?” Willow asked, turning in a full circle.

“Yes,” Tara smiled, enjoying her childlike expression.

Willow looked straight up at the ceiling and suddenly let out a loud scream.

Tara jumped and covered her ears with her hands as her heart thumped steadily out of her chest.

“Oh my god, Willow. A little warning next time!”

“Sorry,” Willow replied sheepishly, “Could definitely do with a room like this when my parents are around.”
Tara placed a finger on the collar of Willow’s dress and she let it drop, following the neckline down to her chest.

“You can scream at my house…”

Willow blushed considerably; Tara’s tone was so innocent she would have almost thought it to be a genuine offer and not a double-entendre, were it not for that inquisitive finger brushing against the exposed bones in her collarbone. That finger told her everything she needed to do and it was not lost on Willow that it was generally that finger involved in getting to know her.

Tara took her hand back and smiled demurely.

She brought Willow back to the auditorium, through the back doors, outside and around the building and in again, so the cool air would calm Willow’s cheeks.

“I hear they cut the pizza into star shapes on the snack table,” Tara said with a grin as they entered the party again, knowing that would get Willow’s attention.

Willow, sure enough, quickly looked at her, then over to the large table in the corner.

“Any chance the punch is spiked?”

Tara shook her head.

“No, nobody here would get someone drunk without their consent.”

“No, you have to be a Sunnydale High asshole to do that,” Willow muttered under her breath, “Is it okay if I go snack? I kinda forgot dinner.”

Tara nodded for her to go ahead, so Willow went and grabbed a biodegradable, of course, paper plate to sample the snacks on offer. She was impressed by that too. Even the punch had starfruit floating in it.

After a moment, she felt something brush up against her back, then Tara’s familiar warm voice whispered in her ear.

“I asked them to play a song just for us.”
Willow shivered as the hair on the back of her neck stood up. She turned around to respond but Tara was already backing away from her, grinning and throwing her a wink.

Willow was confused for a moment until she tuned into the song playing.

_We don't have to take our clothes off_
_To have a good time_
_Oh no_

Willow felt a fresh blush rise, but deeper this time, much deeper. Tara was teasing her way more than ever tonight, and while part of her felt paranoid that she was pushing the boundaries in public, she also felt excited to get the attention and for once, the latter was outweighing the former.

Tara spun around as she saw the penny drop with Willow, grinning as she disappeared into the crowd of dancers. Whilst still lost in the thrill of her little joke, she bumped into a short girl with black ringlet curls, who was standing over the stage, unpacking a microphone.

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

The girl turned around and a smile lit up her face.

“Tara.”

Tara’s face made the exact opposite expression.

“Emmy.”

“Hi,” Emmy greeted, throwing an arm around Tara in a warm hug.

“Hi,” Tara returned, quickly swallowing to get some moisture in her mouth, “Um, what are you doing here?”

“I was invited,” Emmy replied with a grin, then lifted the box beside her indicatively, “I’m with the band. We’re playing later. I didn’t know this was your school. We never really got a chance to talk about it at camp.”

Tara paled and felt the elation she’d been feeling begin to shrivel.
“I’m really sorry about…the last time I saw you. I’m still so embarrassed.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Emmy waved a hand easily, “How’s the tattoo holding up?”

Tara looked down at her chest as if her dress might become transparent and revealed her inked skin.

“Oh, it’s fine?” she said, more than slightly distracted, “I like it. It maybe wasn’t the wisest decision, but it worked out.”

She cleared her throat and looked remorseful.

“I haven’t touched alcohol since,” she admitted, then added on quietly, “Or cornered any unsuspecting girls.”

Emmy laughed, which startled Tara.

“You definitely didn’t corner me,” Emmy replied, lifting and dropping her eyebrows once, quickly, “And if you think I said no because I didn’t like you, you were wrong. I said no because you were so clearly hung up on someone else and not thinking clearly. It wouldn’t have been right.”

Emmy looked far away for a moment as if recalling a fond memory.

“I was worried I was going to have to talk you out of a tattoo with her name on it. It was a relief when you said you just wanted a musical score,” she laughed again and Tara’s face momentarily flashed with guilt, “Of course if I hadn’t been drinking myself I wouldn’t have let you get it at all, but hey…it’s a story.”

Tara tensed; wondering if the ‘story’ had been shared amongst a lot of people.

“Well, um, good luck with your set.”

“You playing tonight?” Emmy asked as she unstrung the microphone.

“No, I’m here with—” Tara started and stopped herself, “I have someone with me, so…”

Emmy nodded along with Tara, then placed a hand on her arm and squeezed.
“Tara, you have nothing to feel badly about. Everything is so cool between us. I’m glad I was able to help you through something, even a little. That was a gift. I’d hate to think there was any bad energy between us. Have I made you feel uncomfortable?”

Tara felt the waves of harmony flow from Emmy to her and she flooded with relief.

“Thank you,” she replied sincerely, “That means a lot. And no, you haven’t, at all. It’s all my own stuff. But you’ve really made me feel a lot better.”

Emmy nodded once, still grinning from ear to ear; she seemed to suffer from the polar opposite of resting bitch face.

“Oh I’m so glad to hear that,” she said and went in for another brief hug, “I’ll see you around, Tara.”

“Emmy?” Tara asked, approaching shyly like they hadn’t just had the conversation they’d had, “The ‘story’…have you told people…or that it was me?”

“Your story to tell, Tara,” Emmy replied with a friendly wink, “I’m just the bit player.”

Tara exhaled quite a-many emotions in one short breath. Many months of worries dissipated in one go, except…

She waved at Emmy and turned back to find Willow. She didn’t have far to go, Willow was still making friends with all of the food on offer at the snack table.

When she spotted Tara approaching, she lifted a cookie to her lips and nibbled on it, purposefully slow and evocative.

Tara swallowed.

She had to ignore that.

For now.

She took Willow’s elbow in her hand and brought her into the corner.
“So, um, I was just speaking to, um, that girl up there with the band,” she said, gesturing toward the stage.

Willow looked over and spotted who Tara must be talking about.

“Is she a friend?” she asked with a smile, though it was faltered as she suddenly wondered if she’d made a faux pas, “Oh god, she’s not a celebrity I should know, is she?”

“Sh-she was,” Tara replied unevenly, “A friend I mean. Not a celebrity.”

She heard Willow make a sound of relief and tensed as she said her next sentence.

“I haven’t seen her since…band camp.”

“Oh?” Willow nodded, which gradually slowed as she worked out what Tara was saying, “Oh.”

She gulped.

“So she’s…”

“The girl who couldn’t make me forget about you,” Tara replied softly, her eyes piercing Willow again but this time with utter love and devotion.

Willow suddenly felt nauseous but tried not to let it overwhelm her.

“So she’s…here. Emmy. The Emmy. Not The Emmys, but the Emmy.”

“I didn’t know she’d be here,” Tara replied, trying to keep her voice low and respecting Willow’s space, “I bumped into her, literally. But we had a good talk. She made me feel less embarrassed about what happened.”

Willow blinked several times as she processed everything. Tara’s words were familiar, and she could only be happy that Tara was given the same respite of bad memories she was granted with Xander.

“I’m glad you got to see her again,” she said finally, nodding to herself mostly as a reminder that that was the right and deserved a response, “I know you were embarrassed. I know how much a relief it can be to know a stupid, crazy moment is really in the past. So I’m glad you talked.”
Tara almost looked more relieved to hear that than her conversation with Emmy.

“Thanks for understanding.”

She didn’t try to push a hug but she brushed her pinky against Willow’s, who smiled softly and linked them.

Another girl came up then and asked Tara about fixing some lights that had broken.

“Will you be okay for a few minutes?” Tara asked, looking at Willow intently enough to know she could say no and Tara would stay.

“Of course,” Willow replied, nodding her reassurance, “I haven’t even tried the star pretzels yet. They’re like a doughy Star of David. My dad would approve.”

Tara smiled at Willow’s humor and very discreetly pursed her lips in a kissing motion before walking off with her peer.

Willow walked around the table again, furtively casting glances at Emmy every so often to try and get a better look at her. After picking up a pretzel, covert glance #7 became a failed attempt as she was no longer on stage. Before Willow could even react, she realized instead that the girl was making a beeline straight for her.

Emmy arrived in front of Willow with a swing of her arms and a cheery smile.

“So I think you must be Willow,” she said, offering her hand, “I’m Emchelle but everyone calls me Emmy. Love your dress. Very mother earth chic.”

Willow tried not to choke on the bite of pretzel she’d taken and quickly wiped her hand on her side as she swallowed.

“Oh, hi,” she fumbled Emmy’s hand, “Hi. I said that. Hi.”

She tensed for a moment, then frowned.

“You know my name.”
“Tara talked about you a lot,” Emmy said brightly, “Last summer.”

She put her hands on her hips in a friendly manner.

“Do you know how I knew who you were?” she said, her eyes kind and tender as Willow shook her head, “By the way she stares across the room at you. I knew you must be the same girl because she looked like that when she looked at photos, but much sadder. Now I see joy.”

Willow reached across her body to hold her arm, looking around uncomfortably.

“We’re kinda low-key.”

Emmy nodded, respectful.

“Just don’t mistake low-key with low-love. She adores you. Don’t underestimate how special that is.”

Willow did a double take.

“I don’t, I—”

“I’m not trying to get up in your business, or harass you,” Emmy interjected quickly, her whole body moving to emphasize her words, “I’m just saying recognize that that special look in her eyes. That’s because of you. You give that to her. Don’t be afraid to own that. You are a bringer of joy, of Tara’s joy, and that is a role made just for you.”

Willow stared at the, slightly strange, woman who’d come up and invaded her space in the most polite and kindest of ways and immediately flipped the basket of insecurities inside her head out into the cold.

She was reeling slightly and as was often the case for her when too many thoughts and feelings bombarded her at once, the most inappropriate one burst to the forefront.

“I’m sorry I called you a slut!” she said, loud enough to get the attention of two guys getting a cup of punch.

Her hand flew to her mouth as her eyes grew wide in horror. She dropped it and smiled awkwardly at Emmy.

Emmy looked at her neutrally for a few long seconds, then her whole body bounced into a smile.

“Thanks for your honesty. I’m glad you worked on that. Be proud. Go you.”

Willow stared in disbelief at this perpetually cheery woman.

“Damn, Tara really must love me if she’s choosing me over you.”

Emmy laughed, a deep belly laugh that actually made her hunch over.

“You’re funny, Willow. I can see why you’re the ‘chosen one’.”

Willow waved her pretzel around, slightly uncomfortable with the attention on them.

“Well, you know, chosen people and all.”

Emmy threw her head back and laughed some more.

“You’re a hoot,” she said, then glanced over her shoulder to where her band was finishing setting up on stage, “We’re about to start our set. Hope to see you out there dancing.”

Willow nodded, then took a step forward between them.

“Um, Emmy?” she said, awkwardly fidgeting with her sleeve, “Thank you. For this and…being there for her when I cou—wouldn’t.”

“Living your best life is thanks enough,” Emmy replied, clapping her hands together and doing a slight bow, “Be brave.”

Willow watched the living embodiment of a ray of sunshine skip off, in slight disbelief.

“Probably super annoying before coffee though,” she muttered to herself as she finished off her pretzel.
The band started up and the floor filled up again. There were lots of very skilled dancers, and even the ‘bad’ dancers were at a level Willow could only dream of.

Willow went to the back of the room and spotted Tara chatting to a couple of friends they’d been in the limo with. She began to walk toward her, her hands spinning around themselves nervously.

*Be brave, be brave, be brave, be brave.*

She got to Tara, who instantly turned to give her full attention.

“Are you having a lousy time?”

“No, no, not at all,” Willow replied quickly, “I-I just, came to see…um…if you needed another drink or anything?”

She kicked herself for chickening out, but not enough to gather the courage.

“Oh, I’m fine, thank you,” Tara replied with a smile.

“I’m gonna go listen to the band,” Willow said, throwing her thumb over her shoulder indicatively.

“Do you want me to come?” Tara offered.

Willow shook her head that it was okay.

“No, you talk to your friends.”

She brushed her pinky against Tara’s again as she passed and felt that nice warmth settled in her belly. She moved to the front of the crowd and noted the band was a three-piece of girls. Emmy seemed to be doing backing vocals and keyboard. Another girl was playing guitar and adding in an occasional echoing vocalization, and the lead singer was dancing with the microphone stand as she sang into it.

Willow didn’t even know if they were doing covers or originals, she didn’t recognize any of the songs, but it was fun and pop-y and easy to dance to on her own.
She didn’t notice Tara casting glances her way and smiling.

A few songs in, she was as into it as everyone else in the crowd, and not a single person was sneering or jeering in her direction. A new song started and she felt the beat immediately.

*Hoping, waiting for a chance I was never taking*  
*Safe here, this fear, behind the smile I was faking*

Her dress swished at her feet and she swayed and swayed.

*Despite doubt, I stepped out into the future unknown*  
*This I’m facing, heart racing, but I know that I’m not alone*

Willow looked over to Tara just in time to see her laughing at something Nate said.

Nate threw a lazy arm around Tara and gave her a friendly pat on the back. Willow felt an uncomfortable shift inside her. She used the clapping at the end of the song to escape out the back door to get some air.

There was a bench against the outside wall, a strangely plain white one considering the robust artistic expression she’d seen displayed elsewhere in the school.

She stretched her legs out and closed her eyes, still able to hear the faint pump of the music as it blasted through the auditorium.

She wasn’t sure how long passed, but she was pulled back into the moment as a screech of loud music as the back doors opened again. Willow thought she’d been caught out, but it was just Tara approaching, smiling somewhere between relief and exasperation.

“There you are. I’ve been looking all over for you,” she said, placing her hand delicately on Willow’s knee, “You are having a lousy time.”

Willow shook her head.

“I just needed a break,” she said, leaning back with an arm stretched out either side of her, “And this trusty bench was here waiting for me.”
“Do you like it?” Tara asked shyly, “It’s one of my senior projects.”

Willow’s eyebrows shot up.

“It is?”

Tara nodded.

“You inspired it,” she said with a smile.

“Me?” Willow asked in surprise, and suddenly nervous that Tara saw her as a plain, white bench.

Tara ran a hand along the armrest.

“You told me in the hospital that you had a white cast but that white light is really just hiding the rainbow. I liked the symbolism of the color hiding in the ordinary.”

Willow was stunned, but also confused.

“Wait…rainbows?”

Tara bent down to get her purse, which she’d left at her feet. She fished out her phone.

“It’s better in the sun, but…” she stood and turned on the flashlight, waving it over different places on the seat and arms.

Willow finally realized there were flashes of silver and when the flashlight hit one at the right angle, it produced a light spectrum on the spot of the bench directly opposite. Upon closer inspection, Willow realized they were sculpted pieces of glass built into the frame that mirrored rainbows.

“When it’s sunny you get a bunch of pocket rainbows all at once,” Tara said, showing off a few more of the spots.

She sat again and Willow looked at her in awe.

“You are extraordinary,” she said, completely overcome, “The planning, the design, getting all those
angles right…you’re amazing. You’re so amazing.”

“You’re amazing,” Tara returned softly.

Willow shook her head.

“My greatest accomplishment this year is getting Buffy and Xander up a letter grade.”

“And you think that’s not amazing too?” Tara asked in disbelief, “You helped them get better grades, improve their education. Shared your time and knowledge so selflessly.”

Willow cast her eyes downward.

“I am not selfless. I am quite selfish in fact.”

She crossed her arms lightly over her chest.

“Case in point…I’ve been jealous of Nate for a long, long time.”

Tara remained quiet for a few moments.

“Can’t you trust me?” she asked eventually.

Willow just nodded.

“It’s confusing for me. I thought I’d be jealous of Emmy…but I’m not. I totally get it, in fact. She gets inside you and makes you shine a light on all your positives in like 10 words. It’s crazy,” she laughed to herself, “She respected you and treated you right when you needed a friend. I’m not jealous of that. I appreciate it.”

She kept nodding, verbalizing what she’d spent a good chunk of the night thinking about.

“Admittedly, I got a little jealous when I saw all of your co-workers at the hospital that day. I wasn’t lying when I said I didn’t have a problem with it, it was just when I saw them and how gorgeous they are…but I also get that that is me being insecure, not me thinking that you actually wanted any of them. I know it’s not a real threat or anything more than my own pettiness.”
She grimaced.

“But Nate…it’s always bugged me. It bothers me seeing you together, seeing you interact. Seeing
how he looks at you…I still think he had or has a thing for you, but that’s between you guys because
I do trust you. But it still made me so angry.”

Her face bunched and released.

“I think tonight, I finally realized, I’m not jealous that you want him in any way, or even that he
wants you…I mean who can blame him, right?” she stopped and looked up to Tara, swallowing,
“I’m jealous that he doesn’t have to hide it.”

Tara exhaled a slow breath.

“Oh.”

All she could do was place her hand on Willow’s thigh and meet her gaze softly.

“You don’t either.”

Willow closed her eyes. Every day she believed it more and more.

Tara felt a dull ache in her chest, one she’d been feeling more and more each day too with the weight
of one particular conversation they’d never had: what would happen when she left.

It felt so pointless to Tara when she didn’t even know when she’d get the money together, much as
Willow assured her it would happen.

She felt Willow lift the hand on her thigh and kiss her knuckles and Tara felt everything else
evaporate. She took her hand back and cradled it as if her favorite star had just kissed it.

Whenever the moment for that conversation came, it wasn’t right now.

Willow looked at Tara and offered her hand again. She might not be able to do this front and center,
but she could do it out back in their own little private corner.

“My dance?”
The smile that lit up Tara’s face could have sustained Willow for years. Willow stood and brought Tara with her to a patch of grass directly under the moon.

Tara looked away bashfully at the intense stare Willow was giving her.

“What?”

Willow put her arms around Tara’s neck.

“Sorry, I just…” she sighed happily, “I can’t take my eyes off you.”

They swayed in that spot, arms around each other and nothing but each other in their thoughts.

Under the shadow of the night sky and every star that populated it, another line of their story was written.

A tale as old as time.

And just like time, no matter how much they had of each other, it was never enough.

It was bittersweet.

But it didn’t have to be.
Tara checked her hair in her bedroom mirror, smoothing out the few stray pieces of hair poking out from her zigzag part.

She sat on her bed and brought her phone out in front of her. After fixing her position and leaning her head back at the most alluring angle she could think of, she found Willow’s name and pressed the little video icon. She waited for the call to connect.

Willow’s face filled the screen a moment later, her teeth flashing through her grin.

“Hey.”

Tara lifted her hands and waved her fingers by her shoulder so they were in-frame.

“Hey you,” she said, eyes momentarily falling to Willow’s lips, “You alone?”

Willow nodded and Tara bit the corner of her lip, ducking her head nervously for a moment.

Then she met Willow’s eye through the screen again and broke out her best Marilyn.

“Happy Birthday to you…Happy Birthday to you…Happy Birthday, Miss-President-of-the-Sunnydale-High-School-Math-Science-And-Computer-Clubs…”

Willow giggled, which just made Tara’s smile brighter.

“Happy Birthday to you.”

Willow was blushing, her smile as wide as her face.
“Wow.”

Tara’s gaze captivated Willow, playful and erotic all at once.

“If you want, I can come over and say Happy Birthday like I mean it.”

Willow spluttered and had to pat her own chest to stop from a deep cough from breaking out.

“I, ah, would love for you to give me a, um, meaningful Happy Birthday,” she said, eyes shining and clearly excited, “But I am alone in my room, not my house. My parents are home.”

“Oh, right,” Tara replied, blushing lightly, “Of course. That’s great, I’m glad. Will I get to see you today?”

“Yeah, of course!” Willow nodded eagerly, “I just have to go to the bank but then I’m free until dinner with my parents later.”

Tara’s nose scrunched up with her smile and it made Willow’s heart flip.

“Going to the bank on your birthday?”

“I have adult responsibilities now,” Willow replied sagely but wasn’t able to keep up the pretense without laughing, “Just want to get some stuff out of the way. And then the obligatory dinner.”

Tara sighed softly.

“That’s okay, I’m working an evening shift at Honkers anyway. The new manager is being so nice offering me shifts, I kind of have to take them whenever she gives them,” she said, her eyes betraying her tiredness, “Meet me after you go to the bank?”

Willow nodded.

“I’ll come get you.”

Tara pressed two fingers to her lips and blew a kiss, which Willow accepted with a smile before hanging up. Tara put her phone beside her on the bed and opened the middle drawer of her nightstand. She lifted out a gift box and removed the lid, looking through the contents.
She picked out one of the smallest contents and turned it over in her palm. It rolled from side to side, delicately pressing against her skin.

It was nice, but it didn’t feel enough, somehow; not special enough.

Then she had an idea.

She went to her sewing box and took out a needle, sticking it straight through the top. She used a piece of thread to get the measurement she needed but at that point became stuck with how to proceed. She didn’t have long to complete her plan, nor the resources.

She closed her eyes and quickly got a brainwave.

She pocketed the small item and hid the box away again, then began rooting through her closet. She found a plastic bag in the corner that would work for what she needed and grabbed it by the handle.

She threw open her bedroom door and pounded down the stairs, realizing too late that Kimberly was letting herself and Donny in at the same time.

Tara stopped on the bottom step.

She knew her brother had day release but she hadn’t intended on being around for the welcome party.

The three of them all froze at that moment but Tara didn’t back down from his gaze.

He looked dreadful but still healthier than ever. Eyes sad but brighter than she’d ever seen, skin fresh, beard neatly trimmed.

The last time she’d seen his face it was a blur fading to black as she lost consciousness tumbling down the stairs, yet somehow he still looked more stricken than her to come face to face.

For the first time in memory, he didn’t try to use his height to laud over her. He stood back, unthreateningly and spoke without slurring or aggression.

“Tara—”
“Can I borrow the car?” Tara interrupted, facing her mother entirely as if he wasn’t there.

Kimberly opened her mouth dumbly.

“Um—”

“I won’t be long, I just need to go to the pawn shop,” Tara continued insistently.

Kimberly blinked twice and offered the keys.

“Yes, of course.”

Tara grabbed them and sauntered off, leaving Donny shuffling away in her wake and Kimberly’s eyes darting back and forth to each retreating child.

When Tara was out of the driveway, Kimberly finally shut the door.

Kimberly was back at the door several minutes later when someone knocked.

She was slightly tense with it being Donny’s first trip home, but just smiled in relief when she saw it wasn’t a foe.

“Hello Willow, Happy Birthday, my dear,” she said, leaning across the threshold to give Willow a hug, “I’m sorry, I didn’t get a chance to bake you a cake this year.”

“That’s okay Ms. Maclay, I’ll get some for dessert later,” Willow replied brightly, “Is Tara here?”

“She’s popped out,” Kimberly replied in kind, “But she shouldn’t be long, she said she just had to run to the pawn shop.”

Willow gasped.

“What?!”

She felt her heart clench.
“No! She said she wouldn’t!”

In the middle of a sharp breath, she spotted Donny over Kimberly’s shoulder, coming from the kitchen with a can of soda. She felt rage boil over and when Kimberly would later tell the tale, she’d swear she saw Willow’s eyes turn black for a moment.

“This is all your fault!” she screeched, pushing past Kimberly to get up in his face.

Kimberly hurried over and took her shoulders from behind.

“Willow, sweetheart I know you’re just looking out for Tara—”

Willow spun around to face her, just as angry.

“Does he even know?”

She looked back at Donny, venomous.

“Do you even get it, how much of your sister’s life you’ve ruined?” she spat, “I know she won’t have said because even though you’ve done nothing but abuse her for over a decade, she’s still too freakin’ nice. You just take, take, take, sucking everyone into the void with you.”

Kimberly pulled Willow away with more force.

“Willow, that’s enough. That is enough!”

Willow brushed off the grip but kept her gaze on Donny, who was just standing there in silence.

“I’m glad you got help but it doesn’t erase all of those years and it sure as hell doesn’t erase Tara sacrificing so much just to gather the money she needs to get away from you. She loves each and every one of her instruments, they’re her babies!”

“Willow, Tara didn’t take her instruments,” Kimberly interrupted in annoyance, “You can go up and check her room if you want, but I saw her walk out of here with nothing but a plastic bag that wouldn’t even fit her neck strap. I don’t know what she was doing, but it has nothing to do with her music.”
Willow heaved a few deflated breaths and released the fists that had balled at her sides. She kept her gaze on Donny, who remained stoic and unwavering in holding her gaze.

“She’s still working her ass off for every spare dollar for the money you pretty much stole. Someone needed to say it. You don’t just get to indulge your own problems and ignore how much it’s hurting other people.”

His eyes flashed with something that was hard to identify because it had so rarely embodied him: empathy. Willow was unnerved by it and turned away, stomping back through the garden to the yard.

“I’ll wait outside.”

She pulled the door closed loudly behind her and angrily pounded down the driveway to sit on the short wall. She waited, her arms folded over her chest.

When the car finally turned back into the drive, Willow jumped up. Tara hopped out of the car, a smaller plastic bag hanging off her wrist and had a big smile on her face.

“Hey birthday girl,” she greeted, giving Willow a warm but respectable hug.

Willow had to close the hug but pulled back after a moment.

“You didn’t sell your instruments, did you?”

Tara frowned.

“What? No.”

Willow took a step back and sighed.

“Your mom said you went to the pawn shop. I thought you’d sold them and…I know how much they all mean to you. They’ve always been just… yours… and…I just don’t want you to lose what’s…” she paused and looked at Tara vulnerably, “Yours.”

Tara lifted her hands to hold Willow’s upper arms, but they dropped again when she saw a fleeting look of apprehension on Willow’s face. Instead, she put the tips of her shoes against the tips of Willow’s shoes so that they were touching in some, small way.
“I will never let go of what’s mine.”

Willow glanced down at their shoes and back up at Tara. She cracked a tiny smile, but it turned sheepish as she lifted her hand behind her neck and rubbed nervously.

“I may have freaked out a little bit.”

“Define ‘freaked out’?” Tara asked, brow creased in concern but lips tugging the corner of her mouth curiously.

Willow averted her eyes for a few seconds.

“I yelled at Donny… a lot.”

Tara considered that for a moment.

“Did he threaten you at all?”

Willow shook her head.

“No, he kinda just took it.”

Tara slowly smiled and very discreetly hooked her finger through a loop on Willow’s belt, pulling her just the barest inch forward before releasing her and rubbing her finger against the curve of Willow’s hip.

“My hero.”

Willow’s toes pressed into the ground as she tried to steady her knees that threatened to quake.

“So, uh, why did you go to the pawn shop?”

The bag on Tara’s wrist blew in the breeze.

“You’ll see.”
The glint in Tara’s eye just made for sensation overload for Willow.

“Can we go somewhere I can give you a smooch?”

Tara’s eyebrows shot up; Willow hadn’t even looked around to make sure no one could hear her. The street was empty, but she hadn’t checked and was unselfconsciously grinning at Tara with hope.

“Um, yeah,” Tara replied, smiling ear-to-ear, “And where I can give you your gift.”

“Will it be in that order?” Willow asked, leaning up on her toes this time, making her overall bouncy and excited.

Tara swallowed as Willow’s breath briefly met hers before Willow landed back on her heels.

“What order you’d like.”


Tara automatically hummed the tune those letter notes produced, whilst Willow glanced either side of her where their respective houses were. The people residing in each were not who Willow wanted as company.

“Um…anywhere but between these houses?”

Tara glanced from side to side and nodded.

“Right,” she replied, tilting her chin toward her own house, “They’ll be going to lunch soon…we could hang out at our spot until then.”

“We haven’t been there since…since the swing,” Willow replied, language coded but face expressive, “The now beautifully unrecognizable one.”

“I guess we’ve been squirreled away,” Tara mused thoughtfully, not without intention, “There’s only one swing left now…but we could share.”

Willow smiled and nodded and they started walking down the street in the direction of the old park.
After they turned from their street, Tara felt Willow’s hand swing into hers and her heart stopped beating for a moment. She wasn’t going to draw attention or make Willow feel uncomfortable, but she couldn’t help the smile that took over her face.

It was still there, though etched with some confusion, when they arrived at the entrance of the Paradise Park. Or at least, what used to be the entrance.

Willow stepped forward, brow creased.

“Hey, what’s going on?”

Tall metal railings extended the length of the area with yellow construction signs attached every few feet saying ‘Caution: Construction in Progress’ as well as notices of planning permits.

Willow read one, frowning sadly.

“They paved Paradise and put up a parking lot.”

Tara smirked quietly and squeezed their palms together.

“Well, like you said, we haven’t been here in months. Maybe it’s time to find a new hideout.”

She paused for just a moment, looking straight ahead.

“Or maybe we don’t need a hideout at all anymore.”

Her eyes cast a sidelong glance toward Willow, who met her gaze and smiled softly.

“That doesn’t solve our current predicament.”

“Why don’t we just go get a coffee?” Tara suggested.

“Oh, like normal people?” Willow giggled, “I’m in.”

They walked to the Espresso Pump, where Tara had to push Willow’s hand away when she tried to pay for her mocha.
“Willow, stop. It’s your birthday. Let me buy you a coffee. You’ve helped me get so much income, it’s the least I can do. And um, did I mention it’s your birthday?”

Willow acquiesced and waited outside for Tara to bring the drinks since all the tables were taken up. It only took a few minutes for Tara to come out and offer a cup.

“Iced mocha, extra whip, and caramel drizzle.”

“Thank you,” Willow replied, smiling down at her perfect drink, which Tara hadn’t even needed to check with her if it was what she wanted.

Tara closed her hands around her own cup.

“You want to visit the other park? I guess it’s the only park now. I hear it’s pretty. I’ve only walked past, never through.”

“I’ve been in it, but never with you,” Willow replied sweetly.

Their new path led them toward the park and they remained side-by-side along the way.

“So how does it feel to be 18?” Tara asked, eager for some insight into Willow’s changed behavior.

Willow closed her eyes with the sun beaming on her face and considered how she was feeling.

“Freeing,” she said eventually, with a single sure nod of her head.

Tara could only smile.

“That’s good,” she replied, evenly but with the delight clear in her voice, “That’s great.”

Their arms brushed and the small pawn shop bag rustled between them.

“I kinda want to give this to you in private, if you don’t mind,” Tara said, then added on quickly when she saw the look on Willow’s face, “Don’t worry, it isn’t anything inappropriate.”

Willow blinked several times but Tara didn’t give her an opportunity to respond.
“What did your parents get you?”

Willow shrugged.

“Money.”

“Hence the bank,” Tara replied, not laboring the point at all, knowing Willow wasn’t the biggest fan of the impersonal gift from her parents. It was the reason she’d gotten Willow the gift she had, “I’m really glad we came, I mean, um, ventured out today. This is really nice, just taking a walk.”

They got to the entrance of the park and both of them threw their empty coffees into the trash can there. Everything was luscious green, the flowers were in bloom and there was a guy with a guitar playing music just for everyone to enjoy.

“Well, who wants to be cooped up on a day like this? The sun is shining, there's songs going on…” Willow started, her eyes following two young guys as they passed and how their gaze lingered on Tara, “…those guys are checking you out.”

“What?” Tara asked in confusion, turning to look, “Wh-What are they looking at?”

Willow rolled her eyes playfully.

“The hotness of you, doofus.”

Tara’s eyes scrunched and she looked back again to the retreating guys.

“Those boys really thought I was hot?”

Willow nodded, a grin pulling at her lips.

“Entirely.”

Tara’s eyes widened and she suddenly turned in the direction she’d been looking in.

“Oh my god. I’m cured! I want the boys!”
Willow grabbed Tara and pulled her back, smiling and shaking her head. Tara giggled and Willow linked their pinkies.

“Do I have to fight to keep you? ’Cause I'm not large with the butch.”

Tara smiled, thoughtful. She didn’t experience getting checked out at a lot, especially not like that — from people that didn’t know or speak to her and were just reacting to how she looked.

“I'm just…not used to that. They-they were really looking at me?”

Willow just looked at Tara with utter adoration.

“And you can't imagine what they see in you.”

Tara received the emotion on Willow’s face and realized the reason she stood out because she was returning the same look back. That kind of happiness was captivating.

“I know exactly what they see in me.”

She took Willow’s hands in hers.

“You.”

Willow was overcome and tried to wave it off.

“I don’t think so. You don’t want them to mistake my dorkiness for you.”

Tara just smiled and swung Willow’s hand between them. She'd never gotten to do that before.

“I’m a dork too.”

Willow barked a laugh.

“As if! You’re a cool musician, amazing creative person, and all-round non-dork.”
Tara shrugged one shoulder.

“I was a shy kid turned band geek who only stopped being teased because I went to a progressive school. To me, you were always the cool one.”

Willow’s mouth hung open.

“Me?”

“Yes, you,” Tara insisted, “You remembered every fact you ever read, and you showed me cool tricks like the Coke and Mentos one and you could reel off math like a human calculator. Oh, and you were never, ever scared of the monsters under the bed. You were my cool monster fighter.”

She brushed her thumb over Willow’s knuckles and smiled.

“You’ll always be my cool monster fighter.”

Willow swallowed deeply. They were silent for a while until Willow spoke again.

“You were right, this park is pretty. Seems silly now that we kept going back to hide in some overgrown bushes.”

Tara nodded.

“It does. But I’m glad we got here.”

Willow rested her head on Tara’s shoulder and they continued walking through the park. They stopped at the pond to skip stones and Willow let Tara twirl her when the busker/good Samaritan passed by playing. Today she only had eyes for Tara. At least until this high passed.

“He’s not as good as you,” Willow said quietly so only Tara would hear, “His music is pretty but it doesn’t speak to my soul.”

She briefly pecked Tara’s cheek, admittedly with a quick and furtive look around first, then shyly looked away.

They walked through to the opposite entrance and decided to head back to Tara’s house from there since it should be empty by now.
And so, she was frustrated to get home and see the car still in the driveway. She let herself into the house with Willow behind her, and Kimberly appeared from the living room.

“Why are you still here?” Tara asked arms crossed lightly over her chest.

Kimberly let out a short breath of sadness at Tara’s body language.

“You took the car keys,” she said softly.

Tara held up her hand and looked at the car keys jangling in them. She blushed.

“…sorry.”

She shoved the keys at her mother, who took them.

“Donny, let’s go,” Kimberly called back toward the living room, then looked at the two girls hopefully, “You know you’re both welcome to come to—”

“C’mon,” Tara said, grabbing Willow’s hand and pulling her upstairs.

Donny appeared in the corridor and waited respectfully until Tara was out of sight.

Kimberly put an arm around his shoulder.

“It will take time,” she said softly, “Old wounds don’t heal overnight. You know that.”

Donny nodded, shoved his hands in his pockets and followed his mother out to the car.

Willow closed Tara’s bedroom door behind them and watched Tara stand over the desk with her back to Willow, fidgeting with papers.

Willow walked over and put her hand on Tara’s back, swiping it across from one shoulder blade to the other.

“Doesn’t it drive you nuts that she took his side in all of this?”
Tara shrugged one shoulder.

“He’s her kid too, and there’s…deeper issues between them.”

Willow nodded.

“Right. About your dad.”

Tara sighed, trying to settle her hands.

“I don’t remember him but they do and they went through hell. And he was just a kid himself,” she said, some hurt in her tone but not collapsing under it, “It’s not an excuse for everything he put me through…I can’t even bear to be around him…but they’re hurting too and I’m not going to make it worse on everyone. That’s why I just want space.”

Willow wrapped her arms around Tara’s middle and rested her chin on Tara’s shoulder.

“Does that include from me?”

Tara smiled and rested her hands over Willow’s, finally finding what she needed to keep them still.

“Never.”

She enjoyed Willow’s embrace as she opened her laptop and set some music to play.

“Suddenly I see,” Tara hummed and sang, “This is what I wanna be.”

She turned in Willow’s arms and crossed her hands behind Willow’s neck.

“Do you… want your birthday present?”

Willow nodded eagerly and Tara smiled.

“I believe you wanted a kiss first.”
Willow closed the gap and pressed her lips to Tara, so quickly that Tara let out a squeal of surprise.

Willow giggled against Tara’s mouth and Tara looked down with a smile.

“Close your eyes for a second.”

Willow complied and Tara guided her back until the back of her knees hit the bed. Willow sat and waited patiently, hearing some drawers opening and general rustling. Finally, something was placed in her lap and she opened her eyes. A wooden box, like a jewelry box, neatly treated and soft to touch.

Giddy, Willow placed her hands either side of it.

The box had two girls dancing under a rainbow designed on top, some etched and some carved, making a striking contrast. Willow ran her finger over it delicately, in awe. When she lifted the lid, the first thing she noticed was the underside of the lid had a collage of photos decorated in the shape of a heart. Upon closer look, it was all of them through the years. There was writing carved into the wood on all four sides.

*Every memory of you in here...Is everything that I hold dear...Near or far, wherever life takes us...You are the thing that makes me most joyous.*

“Tara...oh my god,” Willow said softly, her breath taken away.

After staring at the collage for several long moments, she realized the box actually had contents.

Lots of contents.

Notes they’d passed to each other as children, friendship bracelets they’d made, even old yellowed tickets to the first movie they’d seen in the theater together; the first movie they’d seen in the theater at all. There were rocks they’d found in funny shapes as exploring tweens, mouse ears from a trip to Disneyland, a glow in the dark star that had adorned the wall at prom.

Willow’s gaze slowly moved back up to Tara, stunned.

“You kept...you kept all of this?”

Tara smiled bashfully.
“You know me…never able to throw a scrap away in case I can use it for something later.”

Willow looked down again and there were two larger objects in the box, a teddy bear, and a small black box. She picked up the teddy bear first and stroked his soft fur, smiling. He had a heart pattern on his stomach too, an unusual beige tint with spots of color. It took a few moments for her eyes to focus and recognize the colors were characters, and another to realize she knew that pattern. Her head shot up.

“This…this is the Flintstones blankie we played with…it was our cape and our magic carpet and…”

“I found it going through old boxes for supplies when I was gathering things to sell,” Tara explained, a crooked smile forming on her face, “It was ratty and basically falling apart…so I thought I could come up with a better way to preserve it.”

She stood up and went over to her windowsill, picking up an identical bear and bringing it back. She brought it close to Willow’s, where the bears interlocked in a hug.

“A Willow-bear and a—”

“Tara-bear. A Tare-bear!” Willow replied, grinning, “I love it.”

She leaned in and pecked Tara’s lips, leaving the bears by them. She lifted out the velvet box.

“What’s this?”

Tara nodded at her to open it. Inside was a gold chain, with an unusual pendant hanging off of it. It was a tiny glass bottle, about the size of her pinky finger with a rolled up piece of paper inside and a cork sealing it.

“Message in a bottle,” Willow replied, smiling, “Cool.”

“I had this rolling around in the box, but I just this morning thought I’d like it to be a bit more…special. So I added the chain,” Tara replied, blushing, “I knew you would be mad if I spent any of the trip money, so I went to the pawn shop to trade instead.”

Willow looked concerned for a moment.
“Wait, what did you trade?”

“The video games I bought Donny for his birthday, which he definitely isn’t getting this year,” Tara answered curtly.

“Good!” Willow replied triumphantly, “Why were you still buying him birthday presents anyway? Has he ever gotten you even one?”

“Can we not talk about him anymore?” Tara requested gently.

“Sorry,” Willow replied, shaking her head and glancing down at her hand again, “I know there’s a story. Jog my memory.”

Tara began drawing circles around the bottle sitting on Willow’s palm.

“It was summer. We were nine and we were playing mermaids at the beach,” she said, smiling fondly, “You saw a glass bottle wash up and you got so excited, you thought it was a message in a bottle. But—”

“It was just an old Orange Crush bottle!” Willow replied, shock on her face for a moment, then a pout, “I still won’t drink it out of spite.”

Tara reached up and brushed her fingers against Willow’s cheek.

“You were so disappointed. I remember because I thought the look on your face was the saddest thing I’ve ever seen and all I wanted to do was take it away.”

She paused and ran the chain through her fingers.

“I wanted to get you gold because it lasts forever.”

She took in a steadying breath and met Willow’s eye.

“I know it’s not fair to ask you to wait—”

Willow closed her hand around Tara’s, the necklace dangling between each palm. Nothing was more intoxicating, more satiating or more emboldening than Tara holding onto her and promising to never stop making her feel whole.
There was fear, terror even, and nerves and nausea and the very distinct feel of panic right at the back of her throat that she never seemed quite able to swallow, but there was also Tara sitting there, earnest and true and she could not deny where her heart lay.

“It lasts forever,” she said softly, then once more for emphasis, “It lasts forever.”

Her gaze stayed locked in affectionate stasis until it finally broke and she ran her thumb over the bottle.

“What does it say?”

Tara smiled softly.

“It’s up to you to read whenever you want. It’s your message in a bottle.”

“Well, I’m going to make you read it to me,” Willow challenged playfully, “So maybe we’ll just have to stay together long enough for one of us to give in.”

She lifted the chain and held it around her neck.

“Until then, I’ll keep it safe.”

Tara reached behind and closed the clasp, leaving the bottle hanging neatly in front of Willow’s chest.

“I love you, Willow.”

Willow swallowed, clutching the bottle in her fist. She opened her mouth, closed it again and when it opened again she found Tara’s lips covering hers and a tongue slipping inside.

Her belly turned to mush and hands fell slowly between their laps. She touched Tara’s thigh and felt a soft moan fall into her mouth.

Her hands moved to Tara’s waist and she started to lean over, only to scramble to catch her memory box when it started to fall. She carefully packed her things away, set them on the floor and sprung herself on Tara, who fell back on the bed in surprise.
Her head hit the pillows and she took in a soft breath as Willow steadied on top of her. Keeping Willow’s gaze, her hands slid along Willow’s shoulders and up to meet behind her neck.

Willow’s eyelids fluttered as Tara’s fingers caressed the short hair already standing at the back of her neck. She held her weight up with one hand while the other curved around Tara’s hip. She kissed Tara once, twice, then three times in quick succession, letting her lips linger on the third.

Tara lightly tickled the back of Willow’s neck before sliding her hands down the collar of Willow’s shirt and grabbed her by the lapels to pull her into deepening the kiss. She swallowed one of Willow’s moans and both of them adjusted their hips simultaneously.

The minutes ticked by and they remained in almost the same position but a lot more energetic. Tara’s top button was open and Willow would kiss down to just above the swell of her breasts and back to her neck, while her hand reached under the shirt to cup Tara’s bra-clad breast.

Her cheeks were red and her hair was mussed and her hips would squirm each time Tara’s fingertips would brush the skin of her lower back and dip under the waistband of her panties to press into her butt.

Tara felt Willow’s body desperately pressing into her and knew hers was only responding in kind. Her heart was pounding between her legs and she felt the strain of Willow touching her as much as she could have even with her shirt off, but with the material still holding her like a prisoner.

Sometimes, like right then, Tara felt sure that Willow wanted to shred every piece of clothing between them, but that fear of being caught seemed profound enough to stop her and Tara would never push. One day they’d be truly alone and until then there was no amount of Willow’s mouth on her neck that could be considered too much.

Her eyes closed and the next time Willow’s mouth kissed below her ear, she turned her head and took Willow’s lips in a kiss. Willow pressed her thigh between Tara’s legs and Tara gasped. Her hands flew to cup the back of Willow’s head and twined her fingers in Willow’s hair.

Suddenly she felt something tickle her right where the pressure of Willow’s thigh was pushing into her so nicely. It pricked through the fabric and then there was a very distinct pulsation against a part of her that had already been aching with its own pulsation. Her stomach dropped and her hips jerked up repeatedly.

“Uhh,” she moaned, head flying back as her top teeth dug into her bottom lip, “Umh!”

Her hips twisted to avoid, or perhaps seek out, more contact.
“Willow, your phone is vibrating! Ringing! Your phone is ringing!” she gasped.


While Willow was talking, Tara swung her legs off the bed and cupped herself as she closed her knees tightly to stem the throbbing.

Willow hung up the phone and took in Tara’s positioning with guilt on her face.

“I’m so sorry.”

Tara blushed and moved her hands to rest on her thighs.

“It’s okay. I know you have plans.”

Willow grimaced awkwardly.

“I’m sorry we didn’t get to…”

“Don’t apologize,” Tara interjected quickly, offering Willow a smile, if not without a wince underneath, “I hope you have a nice dinner.”

Willow leaned over and pressed a lingering kiss to Tara’s cheek. Tara nuzzled and Willow smiled again, feeling more comfortable. She stood up and walked over to Tara’s mirror to fix herself up.

Tara averted her gaze to avoid watching Willow’s butt and started fixing her own very-skewed shirt.

Willow picked up her memory box and stood in front of Tara. Tara looked up and smiled at her with such radiance, it almost bowled Willow over on the spot.

“Tara, I…” she stopped and swallowed, looking down at the contents of her hands, “I love my gifts. They’re amazing.”

Tara covered Willow’s hands, holding onto either side of the box and gave them a squeeze.
“I’m glad,” she said sincerely and stood with Willow, “I’ll walk you downstairs.”

They walked downstairs together and Tara opened the door for Willow.

Willow waggled her fingers.

“Bye.”

“Bye,” Tara echoed, leaning her head against the door to watch Willow cross the street home, “Happy Birthday.”

She closed the door again, shifted her hips a few times and went into the kitchen to get a bottle of water.

Her mother was home again, sitting at the table with her laptop and work binder, probably making schedules for the nursing home.

She looked up and Tara hesitated.

“It’s just me. Donny is back at the center.”

Tara nodded once and continued across to the fridge. She took a glass from the cabinet beside it and used the fridge dispenser to fill it with water and ice. She briefly touched it to each cheek and her forehead before taking it to her mouth to sip. The shock of the cold certainly made the burn in her belly ice over, though a small shiver also went through her spine.

Kimberly watched Tara move about and it made her heart ache how much her daughter was avoiding eye contact.

“What can I do, Tara?” she asked, voice breaking, “How can I make up…”

Tara continued looking downward. Kimberly closed the lid of the laptop and sat back in her chair, pain etched on her still young face.

“Ignoring the problem for all of those years? How he treated you. Brushing it off as sibling squabbles.”

Tara looked up, her gaze penetrating across the room. Her mother had only ever explicitly
apologized for having to use the money. Anything deeper had gone unsaid.

“Acknowledging it was a start.”

Kimberly looked stung, her hands turning over themselves in her lap.

“I know I’ve been focused on your brother’s recovery,” she said, voice echoing, “But you won’t speak to me. I can’t acknowledge anything if you won’t speak to me.”

Tears sprang to her eyes.

“I couldn’t even get a photo of you at your prom. I had to watch you walk across the street from the window just to see what you were wearing. You looked beautiful, by the way.”

Tara looked down again, but not for her usual avoidance.

“I’ve failed you both and you are the truly innocent party in all of this,” Kimberly replied, unable to stop a sob rising in her throat, “And I don’t know how to make it better. I’m your mother, I’m supposed to know, but I don’t. All those years I was terrified I was losing Donny to whatever destructive behavior of the week he was exhibiting, but through it all, I actually lost you.”

Her head dropped into her hands and Tara was over there like a shot. She couldn’t just leave her mother crying and not comfort her; it wasn’t in her nature. She pulled a chair close and placed her palm in the middle of Kimberly’s spine.

“This must be really hard for you. Do you have anyone to talk to? Your friends from work, or church?”

Kimberly barked out a laugh through the tears.

“And somehow I produced a beautiful soul like you.”

She looked up, eyes glassy and it was the first time there’d been a moment between them in weeks.

Tara swallowed and kindly offered some sympathy.

“You lost your parents…You had two babies when you were my age, I can’t even imagine…and you got us out of a terrible situation…” she recounted, realizing it was helping her as much as her
mother, “You’ve sacrificed for us and worked your ass off for us…provided us…me…with opportunities. Everything that happened doesn’t erase all of that. You were, you are, a great mom. But it’s raw and I’m still hurt.”

Kimberly nodded, a swift bobbing of her chin as she listened. Tara felt a bit of relief as she came to a conclusion.

“I know what it feels like to know something will last forever, that a feeling will last forever. This isn’t it. But that doesn’t mean it isn’t very real for me right now. So I just need some time and some space. But maybe we could start eating dinner together again.”

Kimberly took Tara’s face in both hands.

“You are so smart. You’re a gift to the world, never forget it.”

Tara blushed.

“I kinda missed having you chatter at me.”

“Well, I’ll give you chatter. You took a week off school, young lady,” Kimberly laughed as she dabbed her eyes with a tissue from her pocket, “I had to pretend you had the flu when the principal called. I didn’t even know.”

Tara just shrugged.

“All my projects were submitted. It didn’t affect anything.”

Kimberly cleared her throat.

“You were up for perfect attendance. You didn’t miss a single day in all four years before that.”

“Who cares?” Tara replied, holding her hands up, “It’s just a certificate. For not getting sick or needing a day out. That makes me lucky, not special.”

Kimberly gave a pointed stare.

“You get an iPad.”
Tara paused.

“Okay, that would have been pretty cool,” she admitted, smiling a crooked smile, “But still. My point stands.”

Kimberly breathed for a moment, her easiest breath in quite a while. She just looked at Tara and appreciated the moment of peace and harmony restored to the household.

“Did you have a nice prom?”

“Yeah, I did,” Tara replied dreamily.

Kimberly raised an eyebrow.

“You two are…”

“Good,” Tara confirmed with a single nod, “And private, still.”

Kimberly took both of Tara’s hands.

“I promised you, I’ll keep that promise. And Donny knows that too,” she said, before stopping for a moment to gauge Tara’s face, “He’d like to come to your graduation.”

“Excuse me?” Tara asked, eyebrows shooting up.

“He’ll have day release that Saturday,” Kimberly explained, but quickly reacted to the look on Tara’s face, “Okay, too much, too soon. That’s entirely your choice.”

Tara nodded that that was understood and checked her watch.

“I have to get to work.”

Kimberly released Tara with a pat.

“Thanks for talking with me.”
Tara stood and gave a reassuring smile.

“It’ll all work out the way it’s supposed to.”

“You sound sure of that,” Kimberly replied, bemused.

Tara folded her arms lightly over her chest and walked away confidently.

“I am.”

Willow pushed past her parents through the door to her house and made a beeline for the stairs.

“Don’t you think we should discuss this, Willow?” Sheila asked in a reasoned tone as she removed her coat and hung it up on the rack.

Willow hated that tone because it had the effect of making everything she said sound unreasonable. She paused at the foot of the stairs and turned back around.

“About what? How you hijacked my birthday to carry out some bogus matchmaking attempt?”

Sheila’s hands went to her hips importantly.

“Don’t be so dramatic, we did nothing of the sort. You were quite rude to our guests who came out to celebrate your birthday.”

“They weren’t celebrating anything,” Willow scoffed, “They were trying to set me up with their son, who has as little interest in me as I do in him.”

“I think young Richard has a fondness for you,” Ira added in, trying to be kind.

Willow audibly groaned.

She knew it was a bad night when Dickie Babcock had actually been the most tolerable one at the table. He’d even texted her while in the car about their parents plan to ‘encourage’ them and that was the first clue Willow had that she would be pimped out tonight. Of course, he’d only told her to warn
her not to touch him, but she’d appreciated the heads-up nonetheless.

Add in the fact that she’d never given Dickie her number and it was clear there was parental interference in the works.

She would have stamped her foot if it wouldn’t have just made her parents seem all the more superior.

“How many times do I have to tell you I will not ever date Dickie Babcock or any boy!” she shouted, then felt a punching sensation to gut as those words hung in the air. Barely a second passed but it seemed like forever until words spilled out of her mouth again, “That you choose! Any boy that you choose!”

Sheila cast a sidelong glance to Ira.

“She’s trying to assert her independence to provoke our disapproval, classic teenage rebellion. Delayed, but textbook.”

Willow gestured down her body.

“Standing right here. Standing right exactly here! And I’m not trying to provoke anything other than your understanding that there will never be a merged Rosenberg/Babcock empire so just…quit it!”

Sheila’s face blanched with a sharpness that could cut glass.

“Oh Willow, you’re being ridiculous now, I’m not telling you to marry the boy.”

Ira stepped forward, between the invisible swords the two women were wielding. Willow saw the look on his face and the way he held himself tall, the position he took that said he’d have to be the rational male voice to insert some reason into the situation.

So many times she’d wanted to scream at him that their conflicts came from estrangement, not estrogen.

“Maybe we should let Willow make her own dating choices,” he proposed, offering a Willow a smile that tried to be empathetic but just seemed like pity, “I’m sure she’ll choose a nice boy when she’s ready.”

Sheila smoothed her hands out over her pants and adopted a balanced tone again.
“Yes, yes, of course,” she nodded amiably, “I apologize for trying to offer some guidance. You’re still in a perfectly normal stage of socialization development. My own sister, now she was a late bloomer. She had graduated from college before—”

“Can we leave the tales of Aunt Susan the Celibate until after my birthday?” Willow snapped.

Ira stood taller over her, voice turning authoritative.

“Willow, don’t be rude to your mother, she’s just apologized,” he said curtly, followed by a long sigh, “Willow, darling, no one wants to fight, especially on your birthday. It’s a very special day and we love you very much.”

He put an arm around her and Sheila joined him on the other side.

Willow felt trapped.

“I love you, too,” she replied jadedly; not a lie but not a joy either.

“We just want what’s best for you,” Sheila said lightly, and Willow guessed in some twisted version of reality that was probably true.

“I know,” she sighed, not fighting her way out of the embrace, no matter how unnatural it felt.

There’d been a time, not even that long ago, that she craved this kind of affection, would have done anything for it but she’d finally realized that it didn’t make her whole, it just sacrificed parts of herself.

They parted and Sheila patted her back before retiring to her study. Ira offered to make her a hot chocolate but Willow shook her head.

“I’m gonna go out for a bit.”

“I don’t like you being out this late,” Ira said, a note of sadness in his voice, “But you are of age, so I can’t stop you.”

“I’ll be okay,” Willow reassured and tried not to roll her eyes. He didn’t know how late she had or hadn’t stayed out for almost all of her entire teens.
Ira just nodded.

“Happy Birthday, sweetheart.”

Willow gave her father another hug and walked back out the door.

Tara used the soda gun to fill two mugs with frothy root beer and loaded them onto her drinks tray.

“Hey, Tara,” another server, Maddie, called over to her, “Table 26 for you.”

“That’s not my section,” Tara replied without looking around, “Isn’t that your section?”

The grin was obvious in Maddie’s voice.

“You were asked for specifically.”

Tara bristled; that often meant a guy who grossly misinterpreted a connection between them. She brought her tray of drinks over to the waiting table and then weaved her way across the restaurant to the lone person at table 26, head hidden behind the giant menu.

She fixed a smile on her face and placed one hand over the notebook hanging off her apron on her waist, while the other clutch a pen, ready.

“Hi, I’m Tara, welcome to Honkerburger. Can I get you a drink to start?”

The menu fell forward and Willow smiled at her from behind.

“I was going to ask for a tall drink of water, but she’s already here,” she said in an attempt at an evocative tone, but she immediately regretted it and took in a sharp breath, exhaling it along with her next words all at once, “I’m sorry I thought that up on the way over but it was totally lame can we start over?”

Tara just chuckled and tucked the pen behind her ear.

“What are you doing here?”
Willow found that action incredibly sexy and her gaze fell down and took in Tara’s uniform; tight white tank and a bright yellow pleated skirt…or close to it.

“Is that a skort?” she asked, voice high pitched, “Don’t see those much outside the tennis courts.”

“The new manager got us some more comfortable uniforms,” Tara replied, grinning on one side, “Back to you being here…?”

Willow forced herself to raise her gaze.

“I’m, um, here to support my…” she stopped and cleared her throat, begging her peripherals to fail so she wouldn’t still be able to see Tara’s ample cleavage, half of which was tastefully covered but with still an alluring line present that drew the eye in no matter the angle, “Support you.”

Her eyes slowly grew wide.

“And I just realized this probably looks like I’m checking up on you after what I said at prom about being jealous and that is so totally not what this is, I swear—”

“I don’t think that,” Tara cut her off gently.

Willow gradually relaxed and awkwardly played with her sleeve.

“Honestly I had a shitty night and I just wanted to see you. I know you’re working. I won’t hold you up or anything. Just seeing you makes me feel better.”

Tara cast a cursory glance around, smiling and raised her voice a tad.

“You want me to describe all the specials in detail, ma’am?”

“Huh?” Willow asked, then realization dawned, “Oh! OH, yes. Please. I’m very fussy. And allergies! I have so many allergies! If I even look at a peanut—”

“Okay, I think we’re good,” Tara whispered conspiringly, “I’m sorry you had a bad birthday. Your parents?”
Willow nodded.

“Yes, my parents, but please don’t think I had a bad birthday,” she replied, leaving her hand on the side of the table and gazing up at Tara lovingly, “I had a great birthday. There are no amount of negative points that could counterbalance all the positive ones you gave me.”

Tara brushed her hand against Willow’s and Willow immediately felt the lurch of upset and anger and uncomfortable feelings dissipate from her. Unfortunately, it left her stomach a little too empty.

“Actually I’d kinda like some wings. Is that weird to ask you? I was too busy sending angry glares at my parents across the dinner table to actually eat.”

Tara laughed again.

“Of course not,” she replied sweetly, “I’ll get you some food and I can knock off soon. Buffalo, right? Extra bl—”

“—ue cheese,” Willow finished with a smile, “Exactly right.”

Tara threw a sly wink.

“Won’t be long.”

Tara went to the register to ring up the order and deliver it to the kitchen. The new manager, Nascha, was loading glasses under the bar.

Tara keyed in what Willow wanted and glanced down at her.

“Can I ring up my staff meal for a customer?”

Nascha straightened herself up, glanced over to where Willow was failing to discreetly look at Tara.

She patted the back of Tara’s shoulder and grinned.

“Just this once.”

“Thank you,” Tara replied with a smile and keyed in her code.
She tended to her other tables and Maddie delivered Willow’s wings when the kitchen called. Tara cleared her tables as quickly and politely as she could and finally returned to Willow to collect the empty plate of bones.

“It’s on the house,” Tara replied as she lifted the dishes away from the table.

“Oh. Thanks,” Willow replied, hand on her wallet, “It feels weird to tip you, but I should tip you.”

Tara grinned.

“You can leave the tip, the girl whose section this is will get it.”

“Oh, I sat in the wrong place?” Willow replied awkwardly, “Story of my life.”

“Wait by the bar?” Tara requested and received a nod in return before she went back to the kitchen.

She detoured through the break room to grab her bag and met Willow back at the bar.

“Thanks for the food,” Willow said as they walked out.

“No problem,” Tara replied, throwing an arm over Willow’s shoulder in the cover of darkness, “How did you get here?”

Willow took her phone from her pocket and waved it.

“Oh, I got a ride.”

“I drove,” Tara replied, gesturing with a finger pointing in the direction of the parking lot, “I can bring you home.”

Willow reached up and linked her fingers with the hand hanging over her shoulder. She loved how protected and snug she felt under Tara’s arm and her confidence in doing it. Every part of her that had rejected this for so long for fear of being abnormal relished in how normal it felt just to walk along like every other couple. Even if it was only a few feet, in the dark.

Tara took the keys from her bag and pressed the button to open the doors, but nothing happened. She
opened them manually, sighing.

“This thing is going to give out one of these days, I swear.”

She belted up and looked across the car at Willow, who was painfully obviously trying not to look at her.

“What’s wrong?” Tara asked, momentarily concerned.

Willow gulped.

“I’m trying very hard not to objectify you.”

Tara smirked, her lips sloping up on one side.

“What if I wanted you to?”

Willow’s blush was visible even in the dark, but her head couldn’t help turning.

“Do you get to keep the uniform after you leave?”

Tara’s eyebrow lifted on the same side as her crooked smile.

“Is that a request?”

Willow’s head snapped back to look in her lap and Tara reached over to give her thigh a squeeze of reprieve.

“I’ll get you home to bed,” she said, amused, but then found herself the one blushing as she put her hand back on the wheel, “To sleep. Home to sleep.”

She turned the engine on and the radio played out as she pulled out of the lot. Willow loved watching Tara get into her own groove while listening to music.

It didn’t matter what it was, Willow had seen Tara lose herself from Beethoven to Frank Sinatra to Taylor Swift to that crazy Japanese music she played sometimes. It was like the beat entered her nervous system and made her body move in perfect sync, right down her breathing and the way her
eyes moved as they watched the road.

*It's you and me against the world, there's no white flags when you're my girl.*

Willow could only smile as Tara smiled in her direction, illuminated in soft amber as they paused at a traffic light. Tara didn’t need it though, Willow thought, her smile illuminated itself.

Tara pulled up on the curb outside Willow’s house and Willow was overcome by the small gesture of actually dropping her to the door when she could have gone straight into her own driveway and Willow would have just had to cross the street.

Tara turned the engine off and reached for Willow’s hand across the center console.

“Happy Birthday.”

Willow glanced at the red digits of the clock proclaiming it 00:01.

“Not my birthday anymore.”

Tara lifted Willow’s hand to her mouth and kissed her knuckles.

“Then happy new year of your life, which I just know will be filled with joy and new opportunities and will be everything you wish and deserve.”

Willow felt the deepest clarity she’d ever known wash over her.

“I really feel like it will too,” she said, exhaling a soft breath, “See you soon?”

Tara nodded.

“I’m always here.”

Willow left with a lingering smile and quietly let herself into her dark house. She saw her father’s head pop out from his study on her way upstairs and she lifted a hand.
“Night dad,” she whispered.

Ira lifted his hand in the same manner and Willow continued up to her bedroom, checking out her window to see the light go on in the house opposite so she knew Tara was in safely. Once she was sure, she sat on her bed and took out her phone, seeking a number she never thought she’d be texting willingly.

Her face scrunched up in frustration, which was appropriate for the recipient in question.

I'm calling in my fudger
* femur
Goddamnit!
FAVOR!
I'm calling in my favor!

Just call me.
The weight of Donny’s heavy shoes made the steps on the staircase creak as he walked up them.

When he got to the top of the stairs, he reached into an inside pocket in his jacket and retrieved a thick envelope. His thumb flicked through the contents one more time and held the flap closed. He bent his knees and placed the envelope flat on the ground and he pushed it under the doorframe in front of him until it had fully disappeared. He stood again.

He turned to go back the same way he’d come up, but the door swung open unexpectedly.

He looked startled; his mouth opening and closing.

“I-I thought you’d left, I—” he pointed his thumb over his shoulder, “I saw the car go.”

Tara stood in her bedroom doorway, her hair straightened on one side and still wavy on the other, holding the bulging envelope and eyeing Donny up and down suspiciously.

“Mom went to get sunscreen, the ceremony is outdoors,” Tara replied in a clipped tone, holding the envelope away from herself, “What is this?”

Donny stuffed his hands in his pockets.

“I-It’s money.”

Tara’s eyes narrowed. He wasn’t usually the one with the stutter.

“What’s it for?”

“It’s what you need, right?” he asked, eyeing the floor, “To buy your ticket? Is it enough?”
Tara lifted the opening of the envelope, her eyebrows shooting up her forehead as she saw the stack of green bills. She briefly thumbed through them and felt her heart thud as she did the quick math.

“Where did you get this?” she asked accusingly.

Donny scuffed his shoe against the wooden floor and never had his tall build looked so small to Tara.

“I sold my bike.”

Tara was stunned into silence. She looked between the envelope and her brother, meek and docile, and tried to understand.

“What is this, amends or something?”

Donny shook his head, still not looking at her.

“No. That’s step nine. I’m not there yet.”

Tara’s brow slowly scrunched into a frown.

“You can’t just throw me a few dollars and think—”

“I don’t,” Donny looked up and cut her off in such a soft-spoken way it unnerved Tara to the core, “I’m just making up the easiest part of my mistakes. I know the hard stuff will take a lot longer.”

He took a step back.

“I won’t bother you anymore. I didn’t think you were in there. I’m sorry,” he said, those two words passing his lips to her for the first time in his life, or at least many years, “Enjoy your graduation.”

He took the first step back downstairs until Tara’s voice called out to him.

“If you want to sit at the back, you can,” she said, her voice wavering and unsure, “And you need to find your own way there.”
Donny looked back, nodded once and continued downstairs. Tara shut her door and leaned back against it, again looking through it, waiting for the shoe to drop that this was all some practical joke.

When she finally realized that this was really happening, she sank down onto her bed, staring at the envelope of cash that represented her hopes and dreams.

She didn’t know how to feel at all.

She quickly put it away safely into the lockbox she kept her tips in until she could get to the bank and busied herself with finishing getting ready.

When she’d dressed, in a yellow and white patterned summer dress that went just below her knee, she walked downstairs, where Kimberly was waiting for her.

“Oh, sweetheart, you look stunning,” she said, hand over her heart and a lump in her throat, “Where’s your cap and gown?”

Tara gave a resigned smile that every child was familiar with and went to the coat closet. She put her cap and gown on and immediately Kimberly was snapping photos in her face.

“Mom, stop.”

“Just smile for one,” Kimberly pleaded.

Tara fixed the same smile on her face and stood still for considerably more than one photo.

“Mom, we need to go…”

“Okay, okay,” Kimberly replied, sniffling.

“Oh, Mom, please don’t,” Tara said, tensing as she did not want to sit in the car with her mother sobbing over her impending graduation.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” Kimberly replied, the second iteration a little clearer than the first, “Come on then.”

She held the door open for Tara and stepped through it, looking back sadly before getting into the
Tara waited in the passenger seat of the car, tapping her fingers against her thigh. Once they were on the road, she glanced over at her mother.

“Did you tell him to?”

“What, darling?” Kimberly asked in confusion, “Who?”

“Donny,” Tara replied cagily, “Did you tell him to?”

“Tell him to what?” Kimberly asked, her voice rising with concern, “Did he hurt you? He went off on his bike this morning, I thought he’d be gone for the day. It wasn’t there when I got back. Oh god, what has he done?”

“No,” Tara interjected quickly, “No, he didn’t hurt me. I’m sorry, I was mistaken.”

Kimberly’s chest was rising higher than normal.

“If something has happened, I—”

“It’s nothing,” Tara reassured, putting a hand on her mother’s shoulder, “Really.”

Kimberly glanced over at her at a traffic light, worried.

“Honey…”

“It’s okay, Momma,” Tara said softly, “I promise. Nothing for you to worry about.”

Kimberly slowly relaxed and nodded, then smiled. She opened her mouth like she was about to say something, then seemingly thought better of it.

“You have earned this beautiful day.”

The sun was indeed shining and continued to be when they arrived at the graduation ceremony. It was a compact space, a field hockey pitch, which was the only sports field on campus. Tara allowed her mother to take a few more pictures before she went to join her class at the front. She smiled at the
people sitting around her, familiar faces though not ones she hung out with regularly.

Everything felt like a bit of a blur. She’d enjoyed her time at this school, made some friends and pursued interests a lot of teenagers never had the opportunity to. But for the first time, she felt truly uneasy about how her future looked.

She glanced behind and felt a squirming in her stomach as the seats filled up and the ceremony was clearly imminent.

Music played and the senior faculty said a few words. With no valedictorian or other class-ranking rituals in play at this school, suddenly Tara found herself shuffling along with the heard of cap-and-gowns to line up and take that stride across the stage.

The diploma felt lighter in her hands than it should, she thought, considering all it represented. She moved her tassel and looked out to the stage for the photo she knew her mother would want to take and stayed still as she took note of the note one, but two sets of hands clapping for her.

Another name being called had her rushing off the stage before there was a collision. She then waited with the gaggle of giddy students ready to throw their hats and declare their freedom.

Tara felt the sun catch her face as her hat sailed three feet in the air. She felt a perfect moment of peace, right until the shower of hats that had been so carelessly flung into the air rained back down on them all and she got slapped in the face with one.

Her face scrunched for a moment and then she laughed, it bubbling up from her throat and spreading out infectiously amongst the group.

That was it.

It was officially over.

They were done.

*She* was done.

Parents started to come up to their children and so Tara sought out her mother, who was smiling proudly, though with crinkles of concern creased at her eyes.

“Donny said you said he could come?”
Tara glanced at Donny near her and back at her Kimberly. She just nodded and Kimberly threw her arms around her in relief.

“You were wonderful. I’m so proud of you. My baby girl! I can’t believe my baby girl has finished high school.”

Tara allowed her mother to gush and hug and generally delight and despair at the exact same time. Tara started to get way too hot, so she removed her cap and gown and folded them into Kimberly’s hands when she had an opening.

“Would you keep these safe for me? I might want to do an art project or something with them someday. I’m going to go see my friends.”

Kimberly nodded, fixed the straps on Tara’s dress and gave her the thumbs up.

Tara approached Nate and tapped him on the shoulder. She smiled when he turned to her.

“Nate Williamson, official freshman of the Manhattan School of Music.”

Nate threw his arms around Tara and pulled her into a hug, picking her right up and making her laugh.

“Tara Maclay, lookin’ fine as a future student of the world.”

“Maybe,” Tara replied, straightening herself up again, “When are you off to New York?”

“Residence halls don’t open until August,” Nate nodded easily, “Me and the boys are thinking of doing a road trip to get there though. Make a summer of it.”

Tara lightly slapped his upper arm.

“Remember me when you’re famous.”

Nate stopped to look at Tara with a fond smile.

“Hey,” he said softly, his deep brown eyes looking right into Tara’s, “Playing with you was the
raddest of all my time here.”

Tara held her arm across her chest, peering at the ground.

“I would never have played a show if you hadn’t convinced me to start out with you. I’d still be a lonely girl playing piano by herself after school.”

“Thank god I forgot my capo and walked in on you that day,” Nate laughed, kicking the grass by Tara’s foot, “I wouldn’t be the musician I am without you.”

Tara looked up to meet his gaze.

“Me either.”

Nate took her hands, held them in his for several seconds, then finally let her go.

“We’re all hitting a party in a warehouse downtown, open season for the stage,” he said, raising an eyebrow, “What do you say? Give Insect Reflection one last hurrah?”

Tara didn’t hesitate to nod.

“Maybe we’ll finally turn into Eagle Reflection.”

Nate laughed to himself as he led them away from the field hockey field, away from the school and away from their lives for the past four years.

“I never got all that stuff, y’know.”

Tara just smiled, dignified and amused.

“Trust me, it’s funny.”

Willow waited in an alleyway next to two industrial size dumpsters, wishing for the hundredth time that she’d insisted on choosing the meeting point.
She swore he was late on purpose just to make her stand there in the stink.

Finally, a black BMW 3 series pulled up and the driver’s side window slid down slowly.

Willow stepped up, cautiously.

“Dickie,” she ‘greeted’, giving him a nod, “You got it?”

Dickie reached onto the passenger side, lifted a brown envelope and pushed it out against Willow’s chest. Willow took a smaller envelope out of her pocket and handed it to him. He flicked through the bills inside, counting them, and tossed it onto the passenger seat.

“We’re even, Rosenberg,” he stated, raising an eyebrow, “Have a nice trip.”

Willow started to thank him, but Dickie cut her off with a smarmy smirk.

“And hey, if you’re ever looking for a third…”

“You’re such an asshole!” Willow called as Dickie drove off, cackling, “Remember our deal, you keep your mouth shut and I keep mine!”

“I’m not an idiot, red!”

Dickie flipped her the bird out the window. Willow scowled in his general direction and muttered ‘debatable’ before opening the envelope and sliding out the contents.

“Wow,” she whispered as she flicked through it all.

She sealed it back in the envelope so it wouldn’t soak up any garbage stench.

A quick stop at the party store and she would finally be ready.

Tara laid on her side in her bed, her lockbox open as she counted the bills inside.

She had come straight upstairs after leaving the graduation party and returning home, barely missing
another session of maternal gushing. Her dress hung a bit looser on her after the hours of partying and playing.

It had seemed like she had some instrument attached to her every second and while it had been the ultimate in jam sessions, it was physically exhausting. As if the day hadn’t been emotionally draining enough as it was.

And now here she was, a choice on the horizon and she suddenly knew how all of her peers felt choosing colleges.

A knock at the door disturbed her counting and she quickly closed over the box and slid it under her pillow. She stood up and realized it was time to change as parts of her dress poked out in different directions from being disturbed from her lounging about.

She opened her door and before she could even see who was on the other side, she heard and felt a party popper go off in her face.

“You did it!”

Now that voice, she recognized.

“Hi baby,” she said quietly, only loud enough for Willow to hear, “I did it.”

The confetti cleared and Willow was revealed, empty popper in one hand and a congratulations balloon and small boutique bag hanging from the other wrist. Tara stood aside to let Willow into her room, balloon bobbing along after her. Tara backed up against the door to close it when Willow was inside.

“Sorry you couldn’t be there; there was a strict family-only policy. It’s a small campus.”

“It’s okay, but you’re still coming to mine, right?” Willow asked hopefully.

Tara smiled and nodded.

“Of course. I’m thrilled you want me to come.”

Willow glanced Tara up and down and began bouncing on her toes in the same rhythm.
“You look so pretty, I love you in dresses,” she gushed effusively, biting her bottom lip to contain the other emotions threatening to bubble out.

As she took in Tara’s face, she began to slowly frown.

“Why do you also look so sad?”

“I’m not sad,” Tara replied, a furrowed line in her brow.

Willow’s eyebrow arched.

“Have you told your face?”

Tara crossed her arms lightly over her chest.

“I had a great graduation. I said goodbye to everyone and we partied and played and it was wonderful. I should probably change, but I’m definitely not sad.”

“Okay…” Willow replied, unconvinced.

Tara sat on the edge of her bed.

“I guess maybe I’m a little bit, um, pensive,” she conceded, swallowing deeply for a moment before slowly lifting her gaze to Willow’s, “Because I’ve decided not to go on the trip. At all.”

Everything dropped from Willow’s hands, except for the balloon tied on her wrist which flew around wildly as she gesticulated.

“What?!” she exclaimed, mouth hanging open, “But…but why?! You’ve…you always wanted…a-and, and finding yourself and…”

“I’m actually pretty sure of who I am,” Tara replied evenly, “And how I see my life.”

She stood up and crossed the small space to take both of Willow’s hands, trying to ignore the balloon dipping between their line of vision every couple of seconds.

“And how I see my life…is with you.”
Willow felt the air rush from her lungs.

“Tara,” she croaked, her mouth suddenly dry.

The balloon booped her nose and she started aggressively attacking the string on her wrist.

“Jeez!”

She grabbed a pencil from Tara’s desk and popped the balloon, watching the string that was chafing her wrist fall underneath her.

Tara watched the whole thing play out, looking more than a little scared.

“U-Unless you don’t want me too.”

Willow realized how her aggression was misinterpreted and was quick to retake Tara’s hands.

“I want to be with you. I always wanted to be with you, even if it was thousands of miles apart.”

She watched as Tara’s eyes slowly returned the loving stare she was used to.

“I’m not putting this decision on you. I’m making the choice. Me. All these obstacles came up, maybe for a reason and this morning I got all the money and I just wasn’t as excited as—”

“You got the money?” Willow interrupted, wide-eyed.

Tara nodded slowly.

“Donny gave it to me. He sold his bike.”

Both of Willow’s eyebrows rose.

“Whoa. I thought he loved that thing.”
“He does. Did,” Tara replied, frowning, “He came to my graduation…I said he could if he find his own way, which I thought would be enough for him not to bother but…he actually came. And sat silently. And clapped. And held my mom’s purse.”

Willow didn’t have enough time to process all of that before Tara was speaking again.

“Anyway, I was thinking instead of doing a road trip this summer. Nate is doing one and it seems like a cool idea.”

“You’re doing a road trip with Nate?” Willow tried to work out slowly.

Tara looked horrified.

“No, god no,” she clarified, shaking her head quickly, “A road trip with a bunch of guys? No thank you. That car will probably dissolve under the smell by the time they get one state over.”

Willow smiled at the joke, making Tara smile back.

“But I could do it myself, or maybe you’d even come along for part of it. And then I could work for the year…nearly and see if I want to apply to colleges next year. I’d still be living in the real world for a year and I could make smaller trips. It would just be a different way of doing things.”

She seemed like she was trying very hard to make herself believe that.

Willow was frowning deeply.

“Is that really what you want? What about all the plans you made you were so excited about? You can’t go to…South Africa when you have a weekend off.”

Tara played with her own earlobe shyly.

“I just can’t see how I could enjoy it without you.”

Willow blinked once and slowly smiled.

“Wait, just wait for a second, because I think we might actually be on the same page,” she said, stepping up right in Tara’s space so her smile was unavoidable, “What if we did things the other way around? Instead of you staying?”
That line in Tara’s brow furrowed all over again.

“What are you talking about?”

Willow looked around, spotted the small bag where it had fallen from her wrist and presented it to Tara, with a soft, nervous inhale.

“This is your graduation present.”

Tara took the bag and looked for a name to give her any indication of what might be inside. There was nothing, just plain cream cardboard and a maroon ribbon tying both sides together.

She pulled the ribbon free and reached into the bag. She wasn’t sure what she was expecting but was still surprised as she took out a small booklet. As she turned it over in her hands she realized it was a little comic book, just a few pages long.

She found the front page and read the title, stretched out over a rainbow as two characters danced underneath.

_The Adventures of Yabba and Dabba_

“Oh my god,” she whispered quietly as she sank back onto the bed.

Each page had two panels, which had the two of them drawn in one of their different adventures, at all different ages, all plucked from real-life stories, from memories in the memory box Tara had given Willow.

The very last panel was noticeable as it was a singular frame with white space around it that made it stand out. It was also in a different style to the others and Tara immediately found it intimate. It was clearly the two of them in an embrace, eyes locked and Willow was speaking to ‘her’.
“I did the last one myself. I wanted to keep it simple. My doodles aren’t generally immortalized,” Willow chuckled nervously, “Dickie Babcock helped me do the rest. He does comics. He’s actually not supremely awful.”

Tara raised her gaze with an unconvinced arched eyebrow.

“Don’t get me wrong, he’s awful,” Willow clarified, “Just not supremely.”

“Why would he help you do something nice for me?” Tara asked, suspicious.

“Mutual enlightened self-interest. He’s blowing off his parents’ school wishes too, going to art school instead of being the 10th generation whatever at Stuffy White Guy college. Plus he owed me
one,” Willow replied, trying to pretend she wasn’t freaking out at Tara’s non-reaction, “And I paid him.”

Tara put a hand up.

“Wait, I’m sorry…blowing off his parents’ school wishes ‘too’?”

Willow’s heart began to thud.

“Look at the back.”

Tara turned the comic over and gently ran her hand down the colorful page.

There was a drawing of them sitting in a little two-person plane, flying toward an illustration of the globe. It was stylized like a preview of the next comic.

*In our next adventure: Yabba and Dabba Doo The World.*

Tara slowly drew her gaze back up to Willow, keeping the comic in her lap.

“Willow this is absolutely beautiful,” she said, softly and appreciatively, “But I’m sorry, I don’t understand.”

Willow clasped her hands together to stop them from fidgeting nervously.

“Well I was wondering, see, and you can totally say no; you should, in fact, say no if it’s how you feel, and I want you to be really, really honest because I in no way want to impose on you or the journey, or *your* journey, you know and—”

Tara slid the comic off her lap, reached out and slid her hands along Willow’s arms until they broke her grip and she could slide both sets of fingers together. She gently tugged Willow forward the foot or so between them, fluidly moved her hands to Willow’s hips and pulled Willow into her lap.

Willow was impressed with the grace and speed of Tara’s movements, but mostly that no matter how much she looked into Tara’s eyes, she always found a new depth to them.

She swallowed several times.
“I’m sorry, did you think this would make my thoughts clearer?”

Tara trailed a finger either side of Willow’s face, meeting under her chin to tilt it up.

“More like a reboot.”

She pressed her lips to Willow’s softly and lingered just long enough for Willow’s shoulders to relax.

Willow took in and released one long breath.

“Your methods have merit.”

She slid off to Tara’s side, because her thighs spread over Tara’s lap like that was far too distracting, and prepped herself for what she needed to say. She rested her forehead on Tara’s like she had in her comic.

“Ever thought about a travel buddy?”

Tara’s face moved through a flurry of emotions.

“W-What?” she asked, peering at Willow on confusion, “What do you mean? Do you mean for the summer? The road trip?”

“No, forget the stinky road trip,” Willow replied dismissively, “I mean for the real thing, the whole thing. The trip you always wanted just…together.”

Tara was just stunned, blinking rapidly and trying to reconcile everything in her mind.

“How…? What? Why?”

She paused to catch her breath.

“School, Willow, what about school?”

Willow stood up and began to pace, her words coming out frenetic and through pauses.
“I thought about this, I’ve thought about it so much, in so many different ways. And I’m not ready to just trade one institution for another. Another four years of slogging away for some misplaced sense of achievement, I don’t want to do what’s expected of me. I want to learn about the world and myself and all the things that can’t wait, but college can. Even if you say no, and again if that’s what you want, I want you to be honest. But even if you say no, I’m doing this some other way. I’ve already made the arrangements. I couldn’t go to school this year even if I wanted to.”

Tara’s mouth hung open.

“You…cancelled college??”

“I just deferred,” Willow replied quickly, “It’ll all be sitting there waiting for me nice and pretty next year. Books can wait.”

Tara’s eyebrows had essentially merged entirely with her hairline.

“Am I speaking to Willow Rosenberg?”

Willow flopped back down next to Tara and took her hand into her own lap, playing with her fingers.

“You are. Maybe for the first time. This has been a long time coming. I always thought you making this choice would ruin your life…I finally realized me letting other people make or push their choices on me was ruining mine.”

This was a lot for Tara to process; her two dreams were coming together in the best way she never thought possible.

“Is this really happening?”

Willow finally paused, a smile lighting up her face.

“I don’t know. Is it?”

Tara swallowed deeply.

“I want it to be. Are you sure?
Willow nodded, still smiling.

“Yes. And it’s about one of the only things I’ve ever been truly sure of. Are you in?”

“I couldn’t be in more in,” Tara replied, laughing and covering her mouth with her hand, “What do we do? Where do we go from here?”

“It has to be a secret, but only until we can get our tickets confirmed. If you already have the money, we can get them soon,” Willow said, squeezing Tara’s palm excitedly, “I’ll find a good place we can meet to plan it.”

“Why can’t we just do it here?” Tara asked, lowering her voice in line with the secrecy.

“Because if we get caught it could jeopardize the whole thing,” Willow explained, gulping, “My parents are…not going to be happy. I would not put sabotage past them.”

Tara seemed concerned, though Willow was just determined.

“But I’ll be happy…and for once I’m choosing me.”

Tara reached up and caressed Willow’s cheek.

“I can attest that choosing Willow is a choice well made.”

Willow bounced on the spot and lifted Tara’s hand to her chest, putting it over her heart.

“I’m terrified, can you feel my heart?”

“I always feel your heart,” Tara replied softly, splaying her fingers out to feel the thud, “I can’t believe you’ve been planning all this and you didn’t say a word.”

Willow’s eyes were bright with hope.

“You’re really in? We’re doing this?”

Tara rested her forehead against Willow’s, syncing their breathing as she did so.
Tara tied her bike to a bike rack in an alley and walked out onto the street to look up at the sign on the establishment.

She was at the right place, meeting Willow in a bar called O’Malley’s.

She pushed the door open, and the place was almost empty. No one sitting at the tables and just one older man sitting at the bar, hunched over and nursing a beer. The music was melancholy and the interior was drab and there was a lingering smell like what the nursing home Kimberly worked at smelled like, combined with the yeasty smell of beer and sadness.

Tara thought she must have gotten the venue wrong, but then she saw a mop of red hair pop out from one of the booths.

“Tara, hi.”

“Hi,” Tara replied, cautiously striding over and swinging her backpack off her shoulder as she slid in opposite Willow, “Why are we meeting here again?”

“Because it’s one of the only places in town I can be sure my parents don’t know anyone,” Willow replied, just as a plate was placed on the table and slid in front of her, “Plus I like their loaded sausage potato skins. This is kinda my den of pork-eat-ity.”

“I see,” Tara replied, amused, “And I thought I was your dirty little secret.”

Willow choked and grabbed at the glass of soda sitting in front of her to gulp it down. While she recovered, Tara noticed there was a glass on her side as well and smiled as she took a sip: cherry cola. It tasted sweeter knowing Willow always knew what she wanted.

Willow cleared her throat and looked grateful that Tara was pretending not to notice her throat’s protest. She noticed the binder Tara was taking from her backpack and her eyes lit up with excitement.

“Ready to plan our escape?”
“You are going to tell them aren’t you?” Tara asked with a grimace, “Not just send a text from the airport?”

“Yes,” Willow insisted, “But they are going to Freak Out with a capital ‘F.O.’ which is only one letter different from what they’ll probably want to yell at me when I tell them.”

She sighed.

“I just need to be prepared. Everything paid for, organized. I’ll have my bags packed and I was hoping I could hide them in your room.”

“O-Of course,” Tara replied nervously, “Do you think they’ll kick you out?”

“I don’t know,” Willow answered honestly, “There’s nothing they can do, nothing they can change but this is a whole new defying Willow. Unchartered territory. That’s why I have all of my important documents in my safety deposit box, my money is secured in my own account they have no access to, I have my own credit card, I’m organizing my own insurance. To protect myself…and to show them too, that I’m not just making some rash decision.”

Tara started to reach across the table, thought better of it and slid out of her seat to scoot in beside Willow.

“I can’t promise what will happen…but I can promise I’m here for all of it. You have a place by my side as long as you want it.”

Willow hid her face in Tara’s shoulder and held her hand under the table. After a moment, she lifted her head but kept her hand in place, and used the other to pull Tara’s binder forward.

“Can I see?”

Tara nodded and opened the cover.

“This is what I had planned out…before. We can change it up—”

“This is exactly what I need. To take a leap of faith. And I trust you,” Willow replied with a soft sincere smile, “Show me where we’re going.”

Tara returned the smile and began talking Willow through everything.
Willow felt a bit giddy as she realized how thorough and well-organized Tara’s binder was. It was tabbed and color-coded by continent; country in order of direction and seemed to have reams of information of experiences to have in each place like a never-ending binder of multicultural adventures.

Honestly, she was a little turned on, but their conjoined hands were in her lap and Tara’s fingers were brushing her thigh, which didn’t help.

“There’s a basic route, but we can make lots of choices on the fly, get around on trains and buses, cheap point-to-point flights,” Tara explained, tucking some hair behind her ear, “I really wanted to have the info but I didn’t want to limit myself, y’know?”

She looked up at Willow and shyly scrunched her nose.

“These are my must-dos, you can let me know if you have any too…”

Willow had spells of being mesmerized by how Tara described everything; it was as animated as she’d ever seen her.

“Wow, Tara this is…better than any guidebook. Better than every guidebook! Put together! You must have been planning this for—” she paused, her gaze soft on Tara’s smiling face, “Years. You’ve been planning this for years.”

*And you were going to give it all up for me.*

“I wouldn’t be going without you,” Tara replied in a tone that didn’t mean either ‘because of your help’ or ‘without your presence’; she meant both. They’d needed each other to pull this experience of a lifetime off.

“So do we do it?” Willow asked, pupils wide and breath starting to come in light pants, “Do we book the tickets? I mean, you always planned to go in June…I know you were looking at delaying when you were working out the money stuff, but that’s not an issue any longer. It’s soon but why wait?”

Tara squeezed Willow’s hand tighter under the table.

“Leap of faith.”

Willow desperately wanted to give Tara a smooch then and there, and almost did, but chickened out...
at the last second. Instead, she turned to take her laptop out of its pouch and opened it on the table. She shoved a potato skin into her mouth while she waited for it to boot and to sign-in to the free WiFi before pulling up a whole folder of bookmarks. This is where her research would triumph.

“So I’ve been looking up the best types of tickets to buy and I definitely think we should get the most flexible ones, especially after seeing your…” she paused and smiled at Tara, “Our plans.”

A couple of hours, several refills, a surprisingly tasty share plate of pulled pork nachos and almost an entire canister of napkins later, Willow clicked the ‘purchase’ button and they both held their breath for the few seconds it took for the confirmation screen to pop up.

They both stared in stunned silence, then turned to each other at the same time and laughed loudly, disturbing the still lonely old patron sitting at the bar, but he just grumbled and ignored them.

“We’re going!” Willow exclaimed.

“We’re going,” Tara giggled, “I can’t believe it’s really happening.”

They hugged for a few seconds and separated a little awkwardly but still smiling from ear to ear. Tara’s phone buzzed with an alarm and she was genuinely surprised to see so much time had passed.

She scooted out and started to pack her binder away in her backpack.

“I have to go, I’m working a shift. Guess I can tell them I won’t be taking many more,” she said giddily, “See you later, travel buddy.”

She kissed Willow’s cheek and waggled her fingers in a wave.

“See you later, travel buddy,” Willow returned in a dreamy tone.

She waved back and watched Tara leave, biting her bottom lip lightly.

It really was happening and she had taken a major step forward, the biggest one.

Well, second biggest after actually making the decision to go.

She had a small but needily expedient list to take care of; vaccines, visas, insurance, but she knew what she had to do and was already prepped to make the appointments.
This was thrilling, even this part, the administration of it all. She couldn’t imagine what it would feel like when they stepped on, and then off, the plane.

To only know the direction she was going and to be making all the real decisions as they went… whatever they wanted, whenever they wanted, at will. It was so different from how her entire life had been. There was always a practical end goal; her mother had graded her kindergarten drawings in comparison with others of her age group for god’s sake.

Now the end goal was love and life and happiness.

She felt a little nauseous.

Was this thrilling? Maybe it was terrifying. Maybe those two things were connected.

Either way, she couldn’t wait.

She packed up and went up to the bar to pay. While waiting for her card to go through, the drunk guy was peering at her.

“Wanda?”

Willow didn’t look up right away until he grunted. She glanced in his direction but he wasn’t exactly pleasant to look at.

“Are you talking to me?”

“Wanda, right?” he asked gruffly, “Wendy?”

“Willow,” Willow replied, guardedly, “I’m sorry, do I—”

She suddenly inhaled sharply, paling.

“Mr. Harris,” she squeaked, finally recognizing him, though it had been a couple of years and a lot less rough stubble since the last time.

“Willow,” Mr. Harris said with more than a little skeevy undertone, “You doing my boy?”
Willow did what could only be described as a quadruple-take.

“God, no,” she spat like she could taste the words on her tongue. “No, no, we’re not. No.”

Mr. Harris grumbled into his beer.

“Should be. Don’t like that new one. Not a’ bit a’ finesse y’know?”

Willow’s eyes bore into the bartender, willing him to work faster.

“Well, um, I think he likes her, so…” she said, gulping as her eyes flicked toward him nervously, “You, um, you’ve been here all day?”

*How much have you heard?*

Mr. Harris leaned threateningly in her direction.

“You implying something little girl?”

“Nope!” Willow replied swiftly, “I never imply, you must have inferred, incorrectly, of course, not your fault. I gotta go now before they kick me out, no minors after 6! Thanks! Bye!”

She tore her card right out of the machine when it flashed green and ran out, turning the corner to make sure she was out of sight. She kicked her heel back against the wall.

“Dammit.”
“Willow!”

Willow spotted Buffy waving at her and excused herself from her parents to run over. When she caught up with Buffy, they both grabbed onto each other’s arms and started squealing.

“We did it, we’re actually graduating!” Buffy exclaimed, “Does my butt look big in this?”

She turned in her robes, making Willow giggle.

“Don’t want none unless you got buns, hun,” she tried to say seriously but couldn’t, then blushed and waved politely when she noticed they weren’t alone, “Hi, Mrs. Summers. Where’s Dawn?”

“Hello, Willow, congratulations,” Joyce replied softly, “She’s having a day out with her friends.”

“Whined jealously that I was getting an ounce of attention,” Buffy added through gritted teeth.

Joyce shot her a look, then folded into a smile.

“Oh, I see your parents, Willow. I’ll go say hello.”
Buffy linked arms with Willow and pointed across the grass.

“Look, there’s Xander.”

They walked over together and Willow became nervous as she saw his parents standing behind him.

“Will, Buff,” he greeted through gritted teeth as his parents threw daggers at each other, “Please tell me there’s somewhere you need to take me.”

Mr. Harris smirked at Willow.

“Your travel buddy here?”

Buffy’s brow slowly creased.

“Travel buddy?”

“Could I talk to you guys alone for a moment?” Willow said quickly, her voice rising a tad.

She dragged them away from the parents and students congregating around the seating area.

“Thanks for saving me, Will,” Xander replied with an appreciative smile, “It’s not nice being the buffer for eye-knives.”

Willow held her hands in front of her anxiously.

“I really do have to talk to you.”

She glanced between her two friends earnest faces and slowly exhaled.
“I’ve...I’ve decided to defer college for a year.”

Buffy’s eyes bugged.

“You’ve what?”

“Wait, what does defer mean?” Xander asked a furrow in his brow.

“I’m delaying it. I’ll go next year instead of this year,” Willow explained quickly.

A silence lingered, while Buffy and Xander shared a look.

“Are you... sick?” Buffy posited eyebrows scrunched unsurely.

“No, no,” Willow laughed lightly, “No, it’s a good thing. I’m going traveling, with Tara. We have the most amazing plans and—”

“You’re skipping college to become a backpacker?” Buffy interrupted, accusatory.

Willow frowned.

“That’s...over simplistic...but...”

Buffy held her hands up.

“Who are you and what have you done with my best friend?”

“This is very not-Willow, Willow,” Xander added, confused, “But it also sounds very, very cool.”
“Maybe I want to be something else,” Willow replied simply, “Someone not-Willow. Or…more-Willow, actually.”

Buffy shook her head back and forth.

“So overnight you’ve just suddenly decided to throw away all of your life plans just for her?”

“Just for”— Willow started with a defensive inhalation of breath, “Is this about Tara and I being together?”

Xander’s eyes started to narrow.

“Are you guys doing some tricky thing to cut me out ag—” he started, then swung around to fully face Willow, “Wait — together-together?”

Willow watched the concern disguised as anger fill Buffy’s face and she slowly let out the anger she’d felt bunching in her own shoulders.

“I get it. You’re worried because…love makes you do the wacky.”

“Love?” Xander questioned, but neither girl reacted to him.

“That’s the truth,” Buffy exhaled, folding her arms lightly over her chest.

Willow reached out and held onto the flowy arm of Buffy’s robe.

“But this isn’t that,” she insisted softly, “This is for me. I did it all without even telling her. This is me taking on board my own mind — my own happiness. I’ve sacrificed it for too long and I didn’t even realize.”

She took a step toward Buffy, smiling emotionally.
“You were one of the first people to recognize something in me. Becoming your friend was like the first domino in me becoming a real, happy Willow.”

The same smile started to bloom on Buffy’s face and she yanked Willow into a hug.

Xander watched them, eyes wide and threw his hands up.

“Together-together?!”

Both girls broke apart with a laugh and Willow turned to Xander, grinning.

“And you. Your loyalty, your kindness, you’ve shown me what a true friend is. The kind of friend I want to be to you both, wherever I am,” she said sincerely, before wiping at her eye, “And yes, Tara and I are together. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, but this has been…a very big year.”

Xander stood there, stunned.

“My dad said he saw you with a girl and you were all with the get-a-roominess! I thought he was just drunk.”

“He was,” Willow reasoned, through a smile, “But he was also right.”

Xander slowly took it in and could only offer a signature goofy smile for his oldest friend.

“She was those feelings you were trying to work out, huh?” he asked, opening his arms and enveloping her in a hug, “I can’t blame you. She’s very pretty. I hubba-hubba’d when I saw her across the street one time.”

Willow had to choose her reaction to that very quickly and decided to go with the giggle. She laughed into his chest and pulled away just long enough to tug Buffy into the hug.

“You guys have been the best friends I could ever ask for. And just because we’re going in different directions doesn’t mean we’re on different paths,” she said, huddling as close as she could to them.
both, “I have no intention of losing my two best buds ever again.”

Xander used his strength to keep them locked together.

“We won’t lose you either, Wills.”

“I can text you anywhere in a few seconds,” Buffy added, “It’s not visiting from college…but I’ll take a coll-ege of pictures.”

Willow was smiling so much she didn’t even bother to correct her. She wiped at her eyes again, feeling a release of her worries, though there was still one in the back of her mind as she looked around the area.

“Well now that we’re all suitably reassured…” she said, taking in a long breath, “Let’s go blow this joint!”

“Excuse me, sorry, yep, woo hoo we did it, sorry, thank you, excuse me.”

Willow weaved through the crowd of proud parents after leaving the rest of her cheering class, trying not to trip over the ends of the robe.

Unfortunately, she came upon a pair of parents she couldn’t avoid: her own.

“Well done, my darling,” Ira gushed, pulling his daughter into a hug.

“Yes, well done, sweetheart,” Sheila replied, as close to sincere as she’d ever been, “We are very proud of you.”

Willow smiled softly.

“Thank you, really, um could you hold this for me?”

She shoved her diploma into her mother’s hands and tried to move past them, but Ira held onto her shoulder.
“You’ll notice we haven’t given you your present yet,” he said, a wicked smirk playing on his lips, “That’s because we thought you might like to use it right away."

“Can I get back to you in just a—” Willow started, but Ira insisted on reaching into his pocket to retrieve a pair of car keys with a bow pressed on top.

He handed them to her, but Willow just looked at them in her hand, confused.

“Press the button,” Sheila encouraged.

Willow pressed it and a red Volvo sitting in the nearest parking space lit up. Willow did it again as she processed what was happening.

“That’s…that’s a car!”

“It sure is, sweetheart,” Ira boasted proudly, “It’s all yours.”

Willow was stunned into silence.

“Wow,” she replied, face tensing slightly as she thought of what this meant and would mean when she told them everything, “Wow. Thank you, I…thank you.”

She gave each of them a sincere hug, but her face scrunched when she saw something over their shoulders.

“Really, um, thank you! I um,” she waved the keys with a nervous chuckle, “I gotta go show it off! Amazing! Thank you so much! Thank you!”

She lifted the ends of the gown so she wouldn’t trip and ran across the grass to the back row of seats, where Tara was wearing a beautiful maroon cocktail dress, sleeveless with a halter neck and showing off every curve she had. A yellow sash was tied on her waist into a bow sitting on her hip.

This look did not help Willow in the tripping over herself department and she had to grab onto Tara’s arms to stay upright.

“Hi. You’re here.”
Tara greeted her with a smile.

“I’m so sorry I was late,” she said softly, “Our car broke down, I had to run. I saw you cross the stage, you did great.”

Willow noticed Tara’s hair ever-so-slightly out of place against her forehead and it just made her all the more attractive.

“No explosions of embarrassment,” she nodded, but started to frown, “Why were you sneaking off?”

Tara shrugged a shoulder bashfully.

“I figured you’d want to hang out with your friends.”

Willow glanced back over her shoulder and back to Tara with a smile.

“Come hang out with us.”

Tara’s eyes shone happily.

“Are you sure?”

Willow offered her hand, which Tara took with a beaming smile. Halfway back to her friends, she felt the bulge in her other hand and glanced at Tara.

“My parents gave me a car.”

“I’m sorry?” Tara asked, mouth dropping in surprise.

“I know,” Willow replied, shooting her a tense look, “That’s a later problem.”

She brought Tara to her group of friends and showed her off excitedly.

“Everyone, this is Tara. Um, you know Buffy and this is Xander and um—”

Anya placed her hands on Xander’s shoulders, hanging out of him.
“Anya. I’m sleeping with Xander.”

Everyone looked away awkwardly and Tara’s cheeks blushed.

“O-Oh, okay. Um. Nice to meet you,” she said, quickly moving eye contact, “And congratulations to all of you.”

Xander eyed her appreciatively.

“Hubba hubba,” he said again, which resulted in both Anya and Willow’s arms from opposite sides smacking against his torso, “I mean I like your dress. You’re in SHS colors. Go Razorbacks!”

Tara’s blush only grew.

“It was the only one I could find in the right color.”

“Did you add the bow yourself?” Buffy asked in a complimentary tone, “Good eye.”

“Great eye,” Willow replied, pressing herself into Tara’s side for a moment to take advantage of those curves on display.

Anya watched how Willow’s eyes diverted to Tara’s breasts.

“Oh, you’re Willow’s org—”

“Tara and I have known each other since we were kids,” Willow interrupted, straightening up and telling herself to pull it together. Some people knowing didn’t mean she wanted everybody knowing.

Anya looked between them all suspiciously.

“Then why haven’t you all met before?”

“I’ve met Tara,” Buffy offered with a smile.

“I think I bumped into you in second grade once,” Xander said with an awkward smile, “Maybe
that’s why Willow said I couldn’t ask you to dance at her Bat Mitzvah. Too clumsy.”

“That was to protect her toes from annihilation,” Willow butted it, muttering under her breath.

“I went to a different high school,” Tara explained to Anya.

They all lapsed into silence and Anya gave them odd looks.

“You’re all weird,” she said, then lifted a chain around her neck from under her gown and held it up for them to see, “Look what Xander bought me.”

“It’s very pretty,” Tara said, making a point of admiring it, “Oh I made you all these.”

She produced a Tupperware from her purse and opened it.

“Graduation cookies!” Xander said excitedly, taking the first one out, a cap, “Tastes much better than the real thing.”

Tara smiled grateful and handed the rest of them out.

“Thank you, they’re great,” Willow said to her.

Tara turned to her and lowered her voice.

“I have something for you, but I don’t have to give it to you now.”

“It’s okay,” Willow replied softly, “You can show me.”

Tara lifted Willow’s arm up and rolled back the fabric of the gown to expose Willow’s wrist. She smiled at Willow’s bracelet, the one with the half-heart charm that matched her own. The one she should have anticipated being there because Willow never took it off.

Neither did Tara.

She took it off of Willow’s wrist and Willow watched as Tara retrieved something from her purse. She recognized the face of her Apple watch she’d bought with birthday money that had gone missing a week before.
“Hey! I thought I lost that!”

“I stole it,” Tara admitted, then held it out with the strap flat either side, “But just to make you a better strap. You said the original made you sweat and left weird red marks on your wrist.”

Willow looked back down at the new strap; lightweight nylon in a bright but demure blue; Willow’s favorite color. The color of the sky on the sunniest day and the exact hue of Tara’s eyes, though Tara had never figured out the last part.

“I love it. It’s so thoughtful,” Willow said softly, thievery completely forgotten.

Tara turned it over and Willow saw the other side was perforated leather that she could already tell would be smooth and cool against her skin. It was a light brown, almost fawn color and had a discreet etching indented in it — a globe.

“You are my whole world,” Tara said quietly, thankful for the bustle around them shielding their conversation, “And I can’t wait to discover more of it with you.”

Willow wished she’d asked Tara to wait to give her gift now because all she wanted to do was kiss her. She’d always thought those kinds of clichés were corny, but she’d discovered that was only because she’d never heard them come from Tara’s mouth.

After the watch was strapped on, as cool and smooth as Willow anticipated, she gathered Tara in a hug and pressed a flash of a kiss to the corner of her mouth as their cheeks brushed.

Anya watched them out of the corner of her eye. Her gift to them was not disrupting them.

Tara was overcome by Willow’s openness and returned the hug softly.

“I love you,” she whispered in Willow’s ear as they parted.

“I,” Willow started, then pressed a hand to Tara’s cheek for a fleeting moment before letting it fall, “Can I have my bracelet back now? I miss it.”

Tara nodded softly, understanding. She pushed Willow’s bracelet back onto her wrist, the charm bouncing in place as it secured its rightful position, holding court where Willow’s heartbeat could be felt through her pulse.
Buffy jogged back over to them, though neither Willow nor Tara had even seen her leave. She indicated over her shoulder.

“The parents are summoning us all to get lunch.”

“A-All of us?” Willow asked nervously, “Well, um…who wants to ride in my new car?”

There was a round of surprised exclamations about a new car before Xander started to run forward.

“I call shotgun!”

They all slid into the brand new car and Willow spent a few minutes having fun figuring out all the buttons and functions. Tara, ever the bastion of politeness, got stuck in the middle in the back between Buffy and Anya. Buffy was busy singing along with the radio channel and Anya caught Tara’s eye and smiled.

“You seem pleasant and non-threatening to my relationship. Do you want to be friends?”

Tara blinked several times.

“I-I'd love to be friends,” she answered kindly, though with an accompanying face scrunch, “I am leaving soon though.”

Anya shrugged.

“Do you have a phone?”

Tara exchanged phone numbers with Anya whilst Willow yelled at Xander to get his feet off the dash. When they got to the restaurant the parents had picked out, Willow hurried everyone out so she could get in there and run interference between her parents and Xander’s father.

They all threw their caps and gowns in the trunk and went inside.

Willow had to keep her eye on Mr. Harris the whole time, through the speeches and toasts she barely heard and the dinner she barely ate.

After dessert, she passed by Tara and Anya sitting together and Anya had a confused look on her
“But I thought men liked it when we complimented their penis size.”

“I-I believe that’s the case, just not in public,” Tara answered, and Willow had so many questions with answers she never wanted to hear but Mr. Harris was at the bar and Ira was sitting near the bar and she had to go and engage her father in conversation stat lest the two men pick one up.

By the time she and her parents were finally home, she was exhausted just from trying to keep them apart.

She started to thank her parents again for dinner and their generous gift but Ira cut her off as he opened the mail he’d picked up on the way in.

“Why did the insurance company send a letter to confirm your removal from our travel insurance?”

Shit.

Willow reached behind to massage her neck. Running around all day had been for nothing.

Guess I’m doing this.

“I got my own plan,” she answered honestly.

Sheila went across the foyer to read the letter.

“Why on earth?” Ira asked, dumbfounded.

Willow gulped.

“Because I’m going on a trip.”

Ira continued to gape at her.

“Wherever you’re going, our plan would still cover you, probably more comprehensively. Why would you not check this with me?”
“I needed some specialized cover…longer term,” Willow replied evenly, then added on under her breath, “And I didn’t know if you’d still be willing to cover me after this conversation.”

Sheila looked up suspiciously.

“What do you mean ‘longer term’?”

Willow sighed deeply.

“Sit down.”

“Willow—” Ira started, but Willow cut him off.

“Trust me. Sit down.”

They walked into the living room, turned the light on and Willow sat opposite her parents. She took in a deep breath and told them of her plans and her reasoning while they sat in stony silence.

Finally, Sheila broke, a shake of her head that included her whole body and culminated in an eye roll.

“You most definitely are not going off on some flight of fancy instead of college,” Sheila scoffed, “How do you propose you pay for it? Did you think WE would?”

“No, I didn’t,” Willow replied calmly, “I have my own savings and I have other access to funds too.”

Sheila’s eyes narrowed.

“If you think you’re going to use your trust fund for this young lady…”

“I already took it,” Willow replied, her heart hammering but her tone remaining even, “I didn’t need it co-signed once I reached my 18th birthday.”

Sheila stood up, furious.

“Only if you went to college. Your grandparents intended that for your education!”
“The rules were I got a quarter of it when I accepted a college place and one eighth upon successful completion of each year and the last quarter if I graduated with honors, or else my 25th birthday if I didn’t,” Willow replied, responding to her mother’s raised voice by raising her own, “I got accepted into college. I’m still going to college. I still plan to graduate with honors. Just a year later.”

Ira looked up at Willow, wounded.

“How long have you been planning this?”

Willow didn’t want to be the source of that look in her father’s eye, but what he’d never understand was that not doing this would make her eyes sink the same way.

“Longer than I even realized.”

“And not a word,” Ira said, almost with disgust, “Sneaking around behind our backs.”

“You’re barely here to sneak around behind!” Willow retorted, groaning at herself for letting herself be pulled in like this.

“Don’t you raise your voice at your father,” Sheila said, irate, “You had no business accessing that money using a technicality.”

Willow’s jaw clenched and she made herself speak slowly.

“I’m not stupid, okay? I’m not going to party around the world and blow hundreds of thousands of dollars. I’ve put tuition away into a deposit account that I can’t access for a year and that’s not even taking into account the scholarship they gave me so I’ll have extra living expenses. Plus I have a secondary savings account with another lump sum and I have a reasonable budget set out for the trip. Tara has a modest—”

“That family, I knew we should never have befriended a single mother,” Sheila spat, “Look at the kind of irresponsible children she produced! Encouraging her to make this feckless, irresponsible decision!”

“Sheila,” Ira interjected, holding his head in his hands.

“She’s been more of a mother to me than you ever were,” Willow said, her voice now low and palpating with anger that she tried to swallow, “And maybe that’s why I’m making this ‘feckless,
irresponsible’ decision. Or maybe for once in my life I’m choosing to recognize my own happiness. I’ll let you contemplate that.”

She turned to leave but Sheila wasn’t done.

“This isn’t over, Willow Danielle.”

Willow turned back.

“Yeah, it is,” she said, letting her shoulders relax as she really took that in herself, “It’s over. I’m going. I couldn’t even go to school this year if I wanted to, I’ve officially deferred. The ticket is bought. The only choice now is to go or sit around for a year. I know what I’ll be doing.”

She smiled, not to provoke, but just because she knew truly now that this was the decision to bring her happiness.

“So you can accept it…I don’t really care if you like it or not… you can accept it or not, but I’m going.”

She went to leave again but turned back in the doorway.

“And for what it’s worth, I’d like if our relationship — our family — was not something I have to leave behind. I know it’s a shock but I’m an adult and this is what I’ve decided.”

She did leave then, heading for the stairs to her bedroom.

“An adult! You’re a child making a childish decision!” Sheila called after her, “Don’t think you’re keeping that car!”

“Oh, Sheila for god’s sake,” Ira said in annoyance, “It’s already in her name.”

Sheila spun around, eyes wide.

“You put the title in her name?”

“I thought I was doing her a favor, giving her the responsibility of ownership—” Ira protested.
Sheila perched on the edge of a chair.

“Oh Ira, she’s a child!”

“She’s not a child, that was the whole point!” Ira replied gruffly, “It was supposed to be an acknowledgment.”

“She’s making a childish decision,” Sheila repeated, her whole demeanor changing as she tried to revert to her more controlling professionalism, “I knew I should have been concerned about her delayed—”

Ira held up a hand.

“Delayed or not, she’s asserting her independence and maybe for once I won’t be so arrogant as to think it’s just to spite us,” he said, replaying everything Willow had said over and over again on a loop. “She has made her decision, as much as I do not like it.”

He huffed.

“So, just…take a breath.”

He stood and begun to stride over to the cabinet.

“Or a whiskey.”

Willow woke up to a repetitive beeping from the front of the house.

She rubbed her eyes and wandered to the window where she saw a tow truck was trying to align with her new car. She sighed.

“Yep, that sounds about right.”

She hurried to her nightstand and grabbed the set of keys she’d purposefully hidden the night before when she’d heard her father say the car was in her name.

She wouldn’t have argued if they’d taken it back, but if it was hers, it was hers.
And maybe she felt a little bit entitled after all of the years of crap she’d put up with.

She ran outside in her pajamas just as the driver was getting out of the truck.

“I’m moving it off the property,” she said, using her keys to electronically open the door.

The driver stood on the spot dumbly.

“Uhh…”

“I’m moving it!” Willow repeated, sliding into the driver’s seat and turning the engine on.

She was completely boxed in between the house and the truck, so she rolled the window down and stuck her head out.

“Can you move please?”

The driver looked a little scared, which told Willow her mom was watching. She glanced behind and confirmed Sheila was in the doorway, smirking and nodding for the driver to go ahead.

Willow looked ahead, steely.

“Joke’s on you, Mom!” she said to herself under her breath, “I got 103% in Driver’s Ed and the three percent was extra credit for parallel parking better than the instructor.”

The race was on to get out of that spot before she was hooked and as she looked in her mirrors, she saw they’d been pushed in.

“Wow, real mature,” she muttered and she pushed the driver’s side one out and looked through it to check her angle.

It wasn’t The Fast and The Furious but sweat broke out on her brow as she watched the driver hike out his equipment. Finally, knuckles white on the wheel, she got her break and lurched forward, swung around the tow truck and onto the street.

“Victory!” she cackled, lifting a fist triumphantly.
The driver was just staring at her in shock and Sheila scowled from the doorway. Willow sat in the middle of the street for a moment, wondering what she was going to do, then turned and drove up Tara’s empty driveway.

Satisfied, she jumped back out and locked the doors, looking as smug as one could look in a SpongeBob t-shirt.

Sheila marched out to talk to the tow driver, but couldn’t resist calling over to Willow.

“I’ve canceled your insurance, so I wouldn’t be so quick to drive illegally next time.”

Willow just rolled her eyes. She stood around wondering what to do next when the Maclay door opened and Tara’s sleepy head popped out.

Willow straightened up sheepishly.

“Can I come in?”

Tara opened the door fully and Willow walked in, hopping from one foot to the other as her bare soles took the brunt of the hot ground.

“They know,” she said to Tara glumly once inside, “And we’ve moved into the passive-aggressive stage of grief.”

Tara closed the door and brought Willow into the living room, sitting on the couch and holding a cushion to her chest.

“What’s going on?”

Willow dropped into the seat beside Tara, who whipped off her socks and handed them over so Willow could cover her dirty feet. Willow smiled gratefully and pulled them on so she could swing her legs up.

“She can’t take the car back because it’s in my name, so she’s doing everything else in her power to make me suffer. I knew it was a good idea to sneak most of my stuff out. She’d probably try to plant something to get me arrested at the airport.”
“Oh honey, is it that bad?” Tara asked face scrunched.

Willow reached out and brushed some tousled hair from Tara’s face.

“You look really sexy when you’re sleepy.”

She leaned in and pressed her mouth to Tara’s, and felt herself fill with warmth when Tara’s smile spread out against her lips. She started to pull Tara’s bottom lip into her mouth when she heard Kimberly’s voice float out loudly from the hallway.

“Good morning!”

Willow shot back, casting her eyes toward the door and sighing in relief when she thought Kimberly hadn’t noticed.

“I thought your mom was at work,” she whispered, “There’s no car.”

Tara cleared her throat, glancing away guiltily.

“Um, it broke down, it’s in the garage,” she explained.

“Oh yeah, you said that yesterday,” Willow replied, bringing her knees up to her chest, “Is it okay?”

“The mechanic said it’s cooked unless they replace the engine,” Tara answered, folding her legs out to stand, “Do you want some juice?”

Willow nodded and Tara moved to go into the kitchen, where her mother was making coffee.

“Good morning,” Kimberly repeated, an ever-so-slight amused curl on her lips.

Tara blushed as she took down two glasses.

“Um, Willow told her parents about the trip and they’re…reacting. If she needs to stay…?”

Kimberly nodded softly.
“Yes, of course.”

Tara filled the glasses with orange juice and headed back out of the kitchen, smiling at her mother along the way.

“Thanks, mom.”

Tara brought the juice back to the living room and handed Willow a glass before resuming her seat beside her.

Willow sipped on her juice and sighed.

“Do you think I should give it back?”

Tara sat cross-legged and rested her chin on her fist.

“Well, they gave it to you for graduating high school and maybe for going to college. You’re still doing that, so I don’t think it’s ‘unearned’. But…you won’t use it while we’re gone.”

Willow nodded.

“That’s true. I don’t even have anywhere to put it,” she said, then looked at Tara with a whine, “But it’s a brand new car and it’s mine and I want it.”

Tara smiled at the adorable pout.

“I think you’ve become pretty good at knowing what’s the right thing to do for you. Trust yourself. I do.”

She brushed her hand on Willow’s thigh, who smiled at the delicate maneuver and accompanying words.

“Thanks. Without you believing in me…I’d never have believed in myself.”

She covered Tara’s hand, then covered her own belly as it rumbled.

“Do you want to order some breakfast?”
“Let’s make some,” Tara suggested with a flirtatious jolt of her eyebrows.

“I make amazing Pop-Tarts,” Willow offered with a wide grin.

Tara mused it over.

“How about pancakes?”

Willow’s eyes lit up, then momentarily glowered.

“Is Donny here too?”

Tara shook her head.

“He has another 30 days in the program. He’s not coming home for good until after we’ve gone.”

Willow seemed relieved.

“Good. I have permanent indentations on my hand from being stabbed with a fork trying to eat around him,” she said, pushing her hand out for inspection, “Look!”

Tara closed her hand around Willow’s fist and gently lowered it. She leaned in so their faces were close.

“I’m very sorry. Is there any way I can make it up to you?”

Willow felt Tara’s breath on her lips and didn’t even try to look away uncomfortably, instead just continuing to grin.

“Funny shapes.”

Tara giggled, briefly nuzzled her cheek against Willow’s and stood up. Willow followed her into the kitchen and did hang back a bit while Kimberly was there drinking her coffee.

“We’re making pancakes,” she explained, smiling softly as Tara reached for a mixing bowl, “Funny
“Sounds delicious,” Kimberly replied and after glancing back and forth between the space Willow was putting between them, she kindly played the oblivious card, “You know, I think I might just take this coffee back up to bed and savor my last morning before 6 am bus rides.”

She slid out of the kitchen chair, mug in hand and walked out of the kitchen, closing the door behind her. When it clicked shut, Willow embraced Tara from behind, resting her cheek on Tara’s shoulder.

“What do you need?”

“Eggs and milk, please,” Tara replied as she measured out some flour.

Willow went to the fridge and took out the carton of eggs and jug of milk. She cracked two eggs into the bowl and Tara mixed them together. Willow smiled; it had been a while since they’d done this but it used to be a weekly event when they had sleepovers at Tara’s house. They made them with Kimberly until they were about 13 and then by themselves.

They would have been allowed to do it unsupervised earlier if it weren’t for an ill-advised but extremely fun egg fight when they were 10. It was a hot summer’s day and it caked into their hair and it was not pretty. But very, very fun.

“I miss doing stuff like this with you.”

Tara pursed her lips and considered her words.

“We’ve been cooped up in our bedrooms a lot.”

Willow was silent for a moment, then grinned again.

“Not for long!”

“Not for long,” Tara smiled in agreement, “Turn the burner on for me?”

Willow prepped the skillet and Tara finished off the batter and brought it over.

They laughed together making funny and sometimes completely indistinguishable shapes.
“You have not lost your touch,” Willow complimented as she finished off her stack with a rhombus she was particularly proud of, “Best pancakes there is.”

“Wait until we taste the crepes in Paris,” Tara replied, eyes shining with excitement, “Or the blinis in Prague.”

“I have my very own pancake guide!” Willow giggled, then covered her mouth and leaned back, “Oh. Too much.”

Tara scooted her chair closer.

“Want me to rub your tummy?”

Willow nodded shyly and Tara put her hand over Willow’s t-shirt, rubbing where SpongeBob’s face was.

A minute or two later, Kimberly made a noisy spectacle of coming downstairs and into the kitchen, so Tara had pulled back before her mother ever reached the door.

She brought their plates to the dishwasher and loaded them up while Kimberly apologized and refilled her coffee.

“What are you girls up to today?”

“Jammie day?” Tara suggested, with a knowing grin in Willow’s direction, “You even came prepared.”

Willow nodded keenly. They hadn’t done that in a long time either.

“Can we watch all our favorites?”

“You bet,” Tara agreed, “Start with The Little Mermaid and work our way through the years.”

(With multiple shared grins during ‘Kiss The Girl’)

Willow clapped her hands and hurried out of the room.
“I’ll get pillows for a fort!”

Tara smiled, watching her go.

“I’m sorry, do you mind us taking over the living room?”

Kimberly shook her head.

“I’m glad to see her a little more relaxed. Especially considering she apparently had to flee here in her pajamas this morning.”

“She’s getting there,” Tara replied, nodding her head, “I don’t push. Patience.”

She smiled softly and pushed off the counter.

“We left you a plate of pancakes under the aluminum foil.”

She went into the living room and kneeled in front of the TV, loading up the VHS player that they kept around for only this purpose; so they could watch the old videos they’d done as children.

Willow ran in with pillows and blankets from Tara’s room concealing her almost entirely and tripped over the couch and onto the floor. Thankfully, being wrapped entirely in bedding, she didn’t feel a thing.

“I’m okay!” she shouted, twisted herself out and jumped up.

She started to build up the pillows until they were suitably high enough to fix the blankets over.

“Your best work yet,” Tara complimented as she crawled underneath.

Willow joined her.

“My understanding of math and angles has improved considerably since the last time I built one.”

“You always understood math,” Tara retorted playfully.
“Yes, but now I understand it considerably better,” Willow replied, giggling, “And not even any Donny here to kick it down.”

“Definitely an improvement,” Tara replied with a crooked smile.

They watched a very fuzzy version of The Little Mermaid, both singing along unselfconsciously.

Kimberly stood in the doorway and felt more than a little nostalgia. She could only see the tops of their hair and they could easily have been four years old again. She had to swallow a lump that formed in her throat and leave them to it before she burst into tears.

She’d been happy and relieved when Tara had told her she’d gotten the resources to make her trip and surprised that Willow was going with her (if not additionally relieved she’d have someone there if needed). But now she really had to face the fact that they’d be gone soon.

She sat down at the kitchen table and took out her phone.

She wondered what were these dating apps all the kids were talking about?

Time passed and she heard the television turn off, then Tara going upstairs to the bathroom. Moments later, Willow came into the kitchen and approached her.

“Ms. Maclay, can I talk to you?”

Kimberly set her phone down.

“Of course, honey. Is everything okay?”

Willow nodded and sat beside her.

“Well, um…”

She blushed.

“Sorry, I didn’t prepare anything to say properly. I just, um, wanted to say ‘thanks’, I guess, though now I say it, it doesn’t sound anywhere near enough.”
Kimberly frowned in concern, but let Willow speak.

“You’ve always been like a parent to me…the real kind who looked out for me and fed me and…put me in my place when I needed it.”

Kimberly started to smile, which made Willow smile too.

“My parents shoved money at me and they’re probably spinning right now that it’s allowed me to make this choice I’m making,” she said, scratching the back of her neck, “They also gave me a pretty sweet graduation gift. It’s kinda sitting in your driveway right now because my mother tried to have it towed lest I feel some actual enjoyment from it.”

“Oh,” Kimberly replied in surprise, she hadn’t ventured outside yet, “Well, it’s a big shock, Willow. I’ve known Tara’s plan for years and…even with the hiccup, now I know it’s happening I’m still a bit stunned. I won’t see her for a year. Or you either. It’s a lot.”

Willow shook her head sadly.

“I haven’t ‘seen’ them for more than a fleeting moment in years. It’s like when they travel for their reasons I’m supposed to raise myself, but once I’ve done it and decided I’m going for my reasons it’s a big hullaballoo.”

She stopped, determined not to let her emotions get the better of her.

“Anyway, the car. I wasn’t sure what to do. But I decided to keep it,” she continued with a resolute smile, “And I was hoping I could keep it in your driveway while we’re gone.”

Kimberly paused.

“Oh, um—”

“And, y’know, it’d be great if you could keep it busy for me,” Willow cut her off, looking her in the eye, “You know, stop it from rusting up and such. I mean, otherwise, it would just be sitting there. Doing nothing. I’d be happy to know it was…taken care of.”

Kimberly inhaled softly as she realized what Willow was doing. She covered Willow’s hand with her own and had to fight off that lump once again.

“Yes, of course, I’ll do that for you sweetheart,” she said, just about holding back the quiver in her
“Thank you so much!” Willow gushed, throwing herself into Kimberly for a hug.

She pulled back sheepishly after a moment.

“Um, we can figure out insurance details and stuff if you want.”

Kimberly nodded stoically.

“Good idea.”

She stood up and walked out and Willow saw her swipe at her eyes as she went off to find her documents.

From the doorway, Tara appeared and mouthed ‘thank you’.

“She really is doing me a favor,” Willow replied softly, “And this works for everyone. There’s no one I trust more than a Maclay. Woman. Maclay woman. It’s another worry off my chest.”

She smiled happily.

“Now all we have left to do is count down the days.”

Chapter End Notes

This week's second update will be early (Wednesday) because I will be out of the country on Friday. Next week’s schedule will be as normal :)
Chapter 17

June

Come on, Come On, The World Will Follow After

Tara was sitting on the couch, sifting through her travel documents and sorting them into a plastic folder.

“Do you have all your visa information?”

Tara looked up at her mother walked in and sat beside her.

“Don’t need one for New Zealand or Australia and the other ones are all available online. Willow’s already applied for some for us already.”

Kimberly put an arm around Tara’s shoulders and gave her a squeeze.

“I can’t believe you’re really off tomorrow. I’m going to miss you so much. Can you Skype your old mother between adventures?”

“Of course, Mom,” Tara replied, smiling, “Thanks again for getting us the nice hotel room for when we arrive…I don’t think Willow has fully wrapped her head around the idea of a hostel yet.”

“Well now is the time for new experiences,” Kimberly mused with a returning smile, “The least I can do, considering everything.”

Tara leaned her head on her mother’s shoulder.

“It all worked out…I’m going…Willow is coming with me… Donny is getting the help he needs…it’s okay.”

Kimberly brought her other arm around and held Tara against her. She kissed the top of her daughter’s head and held her for a precious few moments; moments she’d miss.

“Where is Willow? I feel like I haven’t seen her in a week,” Kimberly asked when Tara pulled away
to continue packing her documents.

“She’s been staying with her friends, saying goodbye,” Tara replied, quickly tucking her hair behind her ear to stop it flying in front of her eyes, “She doesn’t want to lose them again.”

“Again?” Kimberly asked, raising an eyebrow.

“It’s been a rough year for everyone,” Tara sighed, then smiled to herself, “And the best one too.”

Kimberly pretended not to hear and leaned back, arms folded lightly on her chest.

“Still…frosty across the street?”

Tara lifted her hand and shook it in a ‘so-so’ motion.

“Her mother is preaching to her about the best way to spin this on her résumé, but Willow says that’s better than literally running her out of the driveway. She said her dad looks sad but is hugging her more than when she was studying for her Bat Mitzvah. He told her she did the right thing lending you the car.”

“I’m glad she’s not leaving totally estranged,” Kimberly replied with relief in her voice, “And that I won’t have the wrath of Sheila Rosenberg on my back every time I go to work. I’ve never had a car that nice in my entire life! Not even a rental. Gosh, it’s even the first new car I’ve ever driven!”

Tara chuckled.

“Sometimes I don’t even know how we live on the same street,” she said, then her eyes creased with curiosity, “How did we end up on this street? How did you afford it?”

Kimberly pursed her lips for a moment.

Oh well, she thought.

Tara asked.

“Someone was murdered in this house.”
Tara’s head spun around.

“What?!”

Kimberly’s eyes widened slightly, questioning her decision.

“This was a nice home, on the nice street—”

“Where someone was murdered?” Tara interrupted, shocked.

Kimberly reached out to hold Tara’s shoulders, rubbing her upper arms in a calming motion.

“It happened twenty years before we ever moved in. The poor woman that lived here with her husband, they were burgled and the husband was killed. Her children grew up and she lived here alone for a few years but she was never happy by herself so she moved to be closer to them. She was happy to see a new family make new memories and put the bad ones behind.”

“Where did it happen?” Tara asked cautiously, then paled when Kimberly didn’t answer immediately, “It was my bedroom wasn’t it?!”

“I never asked,” Kimberly answered honestly, “This house is much nicer than we ever could have afforded. You had your own bedrooms, a yard, it was close to town, schools. That burglary was the only one ever on this street, which was actually unusual; Sunnydale had quite a high crime rate. It was unfortunate it turned so tragic. But it gave us an opportunity to live a nice, quiet life and I took it.”

Tara blinked several times as she took that in.

“Why didn’t you tell us?”

“Tell children someone had been murdered here?” Kimberly laughed softly, “The street had forgotten about it, so I did too. They were more concerned with the single mother tarnishing their image.”

Tara frowned.

“I didn’t know you caught flack for that,” she said, closing her eyes and opening them again on her mother’s face, “You protected us from a lot. You were barely older than me.”
She offered a look of appreciation that every parent yearns for and wrapped her arms around Kimberly.

“Thank you, Momma.”

Kimberly exhaled softly; that was powerful to hear after the past few months. She enclosed Tara in another hug and cradled her like she was a little girl.

Her phone beeped in her pocket and Tara looked up at her mother with a slowly-spreading grin on her face.

“Was that a notification for that dating app?”

Kimberly looked both shocked and affronted as she whipped her phone out from her jeans and held it against her chest.

“How did you know?”

“That thing goes off for Nate every two seconds. I found myself humming it on the way to school,” Tara replied, her smirk teasing but then tender, “I’m happy for you. I’m glad you’re getting out there.”

Kimberly relaxed a little and smiled gratefully. Tara nodded toward her phone.

“Let me see him, let me see your match.”

Kimberly cautiously moved her hands back and unlocked the screen. She smiled.

“He seems…cute,” Tara said, looking to her mother for confirmation, “Is he cute? I mean, I’m not a very good judge, but… I think he seems cute.”

“I think he seems cute, yeah,” Kimberly laughed softly, “It’s been a very long time since I’ve been on the lookout for cute.”

“Mom. One of the benefits of having us so young — you’re still a hot, young thing who is now free of her responsibilities,” Tara replied insistently, “If you think he’s cute, message him.”
Kimberly’s hand hovered over the keyboard.

“Maybe it’s not the right time to be starting something, Donny will be coming home soon…”

“And Donny is a grown man who’s finally taking responsibility for his life,” Tara finished, keeping her mother’s gaze, “It’s time you do, too. You deserve to be happy.”

Kimberly put her phone in her lap and kissed Tara square on the forehead.

“I’ll message him later. Right now I’m spending some time with this amazing woman I seem to have raised.”

“I can’t believe we won’t see you for a whole year.”

Willow looked down at the floor beneath her crossed legs.

“I know,” she agreed with Buffy, who was sitting opposite her in much the same way, “It’s insane, really when you think about it.”

Buffy glanced off to the other side of Xander’s bedroom, where he was reading a book.

“…especially now with both of you going.”

Xander looked up and closed his book.

“Everything in life is foreign territory. Kerouac. He's my teacher. The open road is my school.”

Willow smiled at him.

“I think it's neat, you doing the backpack, trail mix, happy wanderer thing too.”

Xander shrugged sheepishly.

“I'm aware it scores kinda high on the hokey-meter, but I think it will be good for me. You know, help me to find myself.”
“Preaching to the choir here, baby,” Willow agreed.

“You were the inspiration,” Xander smiled back, “Wish I had the funds to do it your way. And the hottie by my side.”

Willow blushed and Buffy turned to him.

“What about the chick trying to hang off your arm?”

“If she still wants to hook up when I come back, I won’t resist,” Xander admitted.

Willow turned back to Buffy and reached out to hold both of her hands.

“You’ll be in college. Meeting so many new people, oh and going to parties!”

“Your cool points shoot up without us around,” Xander agreed with a dopey smile.

Buffy looked around at her pals and felt the depth of their absence already.

“I’ll miss you guys.”

“We’ll stay in touch,” Willow promised, “Well, I will. It won’t be that much different than if I went off to college anyway.”

“No visits,” Buffy said, looking down sadly.

“No visits,” Willow confirmed with a matching tone, “But lots of pictures and messages and video chats. And I promise I’ll bring you back a present.”

Buffy raised her eyes, eyes lit up.

“Will you bring me back Italian leather boots?”

“Probably not,” Willow laughed and Buffy joined in.
“I want in on the giggles,” Xander said, moving over to sit amongst them, “Or something that sounds a bit more manly.”

Willow changed one hand over to Xander and Buffy did the same so they were all sitting enjoined.

“And as our lives change, come whatever,” Willow promised to them both sincerely, “We will still be friends forever.”

“You’re sing-speaking again,” Buffy said with an arched eyebrow.

Willow pouted.

“Yeah, but I mean it! It's a relevant song!”

The nods she got in return weren’t as definitive as she’d like, so Willow got up, went over to the corkboard on Xander's wall and took a tack from it. She hid it in her palm and when she sat back down whipped it out and stabbed each of Buffy and Xander’s fingers.

“Ouch,” Buffy said, tugging her hand back, “What the hell, Willow?”

“OW!” Xander yelped, taking his finger and nursing it.

Willow grinned and did the same to her own fingertip. She held it out between them.

“Blood oath. I meant it. Friends forever.”

Xander and Buffy exchanged looks.

“This is super creepy, Will,” Xander said cautiously but extended his hand again, “But I’m in.”

“In,” Buffy agreed and held her finger out.

They pressed their three pricked fingers together and spoke in unison.

“Friends forever.”
They all waited a moment until it became awkward.

“Was something supposed to happen?” Buffy asked, her eyebrows knotting together.

Willow frowned.

“I dunno. I saw it in a movie.”

Buffy and Xander exchanged a look.

“…did anything good happen after?” Xander asked.

Willow shook her head.

“No, they all died.”

Buffy drew her hand back.

“Nice one Will.”

“Now I'm going to be looking over my back all night,” Xander said with a squeak in his voice.

“I thought it would be cool!” Willow defended, starting to pout again as she looked at the little pinprick on the pad of her finger.

Xander and Buffy exchanged a long stare.

“She's a weirdo,” Xander shook his head.

“A total weirdo,” Buffy agreed.

Willow started to look down and Buffy and Xander shared a smile before coming around to hug her from either side.

“But she's our weirdo,” Xander said affectionately.
Buffy rested her head on a now-smiling Willow’s shoulder.

“And we wouldn’t change her for anything.”

Willow finished tying her phone charging cable around the power adapter and tucked it into the side pouch in her rucksack.

She swung it onto her shoulders and looked around.

“Can’t say I’ll miss you too much, room, but hey, at least you were always here for me.”

She nodded once, spun on her heels and left the room, pulling the door closed behind her.

She went downstairs, where her mother was loitering but was pretending to just be passing through. She closed the book she wasn’t actually reading and tried to act nonchalant.

“Oh, are you leaving now?”

Willow nodded.

“Yeah, mom. We’re catching the noon shuttle.”

She glanced at Willow’s backpack.

“Is that all you’re bringing for this entire…year?”

“My stuff is in the car already,” Willow explained politely, “This is just for the bus.”

Sheila nodded in acknowledgment.

“I emailed you information on online TEFL certification.”

Willow opened her mouth and closed it again.
“Thanks,” she said eventually, sincerely, “But we do have a lot of other plans and work visas are a whole other minefield, so…”

Sheila nodded again, then surprised Willow by leaning in and giving her an awkward hug and pat on the back.

“Well, let us know you’ve arrived safely.”

“I will,” Willow replied, smiling widely, “Thanks, mom.”

Sheila moved off and Willow trailed the last step where she spotted her father waiting at the door. She gripped both straps on her backpack and slowly crossed over. She stood in front of him and looked up into his face like she was a kindergartener about to start her first day of school all over again.

“I really hope you’re not disappointed with me, Dad.”

Ira sighed wistfully.

“In another life,” he said with a sad smile, “Another world, perhaps I would have done the same. But I will miss you desperately.”

He extended a white plastic bag toward her.

“I got you this. Silly, really. I just thought you might like some home comforts.”

Willow took the bag, pulled the handles apart and saw a box of strawberry milk powder. She felt herself get choked up and looked back at him.

“Thank you so much, Daddy.”

She threw her arms around her and cuddled into his chest. They stayed like this for several moments until eventually Ira pulled away and cleared his throat, clearly emotional.

“You sure you don’t need a ride?”
Willow shook her head.

“Ms. Maclay is taking us to the bus station.”

She opened the front door and took a deep breath before stepping over the threshold.

“Bye dad,” she said, then called back into the house, “Bye mom. I’ll keep in touch.”

“Bye darling,” Ira said, keeping his shoulders tense.

Sheila approached the door and stood by Ira. They held onto each other and Willow thought it may have been the first time she saw them embrace in a long, long time.

Willow waved all the way down to the gate, then jogged across the road and rang the doorbell at the Maclay house. Tara answered and Willow suddenly felt the first real rush of excitement.

“Ready to get out of here?” she asked with a grin.

“Yes,” Tara replied with an answering smile, “I couldn’t sleep at all last night knowing this was a murder house.”

Willow began nodding in agreement, then did a double-take.

“Huh?!”

“I’ll tell you later,” Tara replied, amused.

Kimberly marched down the hallway then, looking at them like she had when they dressed up as Ariel and Sebastian for Halloween when they were five.

“Look at my little travelers,” she said, putting an arm around each and pulling them into her, “Are you sure you have everything?”

“Yes, mom,” Tara intoned for the nth time, though good-naturedly.

Kimberly raised an eyebrow.
“Are you really sure?”

Tara looked confused and Kimberly just grinned as she took a bag hanging on the hand rail and slid a box out, which she presented to Tara.

“Nice!” Willow said, whilst Tara’s eyes widened.

“Mom,” Tara said, shocked, “This is way too much. You already got us a room.”

Kimberly leaned in and kissed Tara’s cheek.

“You missed out on perfect attendance, you deserve it. And now you have no excuse not to Skype your mother.”

Willow took the new iPad box from Tara’s stunned hands and started reading the back.

“I can set it all up for you on the shuttle.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Tara said, but Willow just smiled.

“I want to, it’s fun,” she said, winking at Kimberly as if she wasn’t the one who had gone out to get it on her behalf, “Great gift, Ms. Maclay.”

Kimberly smiled at her knowingly and put another arm around Tara’s shoulders.

“Come on then, I’ll get you to the bus station before I turn into a blubbering mess.”

“Wait,” Tara said, suddenly remembering something.

She went upstairs and returned two minutes later with two bags.

“Christmas and birthday presents,” she said, handing the bag to her mother shyly.

Kimberly held her hand over her heart.
“Tara…”

She handed off the other bag.

“Give these to Donny on his birthday. If he’s still sober. They’re just video games, but I didn’t get a chance to wrap them.”

If Kimberly wasn’t sure before, she was then of two things; that everything would really be okay and that she didn’t need to worry about her baby going off to explore the world.

She still would worry, of course, but with a reassuring inner voice.

“He’ll appreciate that. I’ll put them away safely,” she said in a resolute tone as if her voice wasn’t cracking.

She went to put them in the closet under the stairs and Willow leaned toward Tara.

“I thought you traded those in.”

Tara shrugged.

“I bought them back.”

Willow inhaled from Tara’s neck for a moment, then pecked her cheek.

“You’re the best person. I can’t believe I get to do this with you.”

Kimberly returned and grabbed the keys.

“Come on, girls. Can’t be late.”

They bundled into the car, which Kimberly started with a smile.

“Don’t worry, Willow, your car and I are becoming fast friends. I’ll take care of your baby if you take care of mine.”
“Mom,” Tara groaned.

“Deal!” Willow giggled at the same time.

As they pulled from the drive, Willow saw her parents standing in the doorway watching her. She raised her hand and her parents waved back right until they went out of sight. Willow sat back in her seat, arms wrapped around herself, smiling.

Tara sat in the front so Kimberly could bask in the last few minutes of her presence. Willow didn’t mind; she was about to get her for a whole year.

They got to the bus station and Willow brought their luggage to the bus while Tara and Kimberly said their goodbyes.

She watched Kimberly cup Tara’s face and Tara look down and shut her eyes. There was a final tight hug and then Kimberly hurried back to the car she’d purposely parked behind the building so Tara wouldn’t see her cry.

Tara marched past Willow straight onto the bus and Willow quickly followed her on. She gingerly sat into the seat beside her.

“Are you okay?” she asked softly.

Tara nodded, cheeks wet.

“Yeah,” she croaked, “Just…hitting me.”

“Do you want some space?” Willow asked gently.

Tara took Willow’s hand and turned to look at her, shaking her head.

“You sure you’re ready for this?”

Willow just nodded lovingly.

“I’ll go wherever you will go.”
She sat as close as she could and let Tara lean against her as she sniffled to herself.

“We could have flown from Sunnydale to LA you know,” she mused as her butt wiggled uncomfortably in the seat.

“It would have cost hundreds of dollars,” Tara murmured back and Willow just sighed.

She noticed Tara had fallen asleep when there was no reaction to the first bump of movement as the bus set off. She didn’t mind; it saved her having to pretend she hadn’t already set the iPad up.

She looked above Tara’s head out the window and watched as they drove further and further toward the town limits. Finally, they passed the ‘Now Leaving Sunnydale’ sign and Willow just continued to smile.

Tara slept the whole way and while Willow didn’t mind being a pillow, they actually hadn’t seen too much of each other as they prepared to go away and Willow missed chatting with her.

She woke Tara five minutes before the bus arrived so she’d have a moment to wake up properly.

Tara rubbed her eyes and sat up in her seat.

“I’m sorry, was I uncomfortable?”

“No, you were fine,” Willow reassured, “Well, these seats aren’t great, but you’re always comfortable.”

Tara’s cheeks flushed lightly as she blinked away the sleep.

“I feel like I just fell asleep. Were you bored?”

“A little,” Willow admitted, “But it’s no biggie. I’m glad you got some sleep if you didn’t last night. By the way, murder house?!”

Tara chuckled and briefly recounted what her mother had told her. Willow’s eyes were wide by the end.

“Your mom is right, I’m glad we didn’t know that growing up! Can you imagine how Donny would have terrorized us?”
“Thankfully, I don’t have to,” Tara replied and started fanning herself, “This bus is warm.”

Willow lifted her backpack from between her feet and produced a handheld portable fan.

“I have an extensive checklist of travel comforts,” she said with a smile.

“If I didn’t love you already…” Tara murmured as she flipped the switch and let the cool air blow in her face.

Willow glanced away and noticed they were pulling up to the airport.

“Hey, we’re here.”

Tara turned the mini fan off and hung it from her wrist by the strap attached. They disembarked the bus and collected their luggage.

“I still can’t believe I’m going to be living out of this thing for a year,” Willow commented, “With everything I wanted to bring originally I would have needed five of these. I guess we’ll be getting to know a lot of local dry cleaners.”

Tara’s eyebrow arched just a tad.

“More like laundromats.”

“Oh, right, yeah,” Willow nodded, “Of course. Hey, let’s get into that air conditioning.”

Tara followed Willow’s lead in getting them checked in and through security, hoping the lines wouldn’t be like this everywhere they went. The last time she’d lined up like that had been when her mother took them to Disneyland for Donny’s 10th birthday, and she didn’t have a pretty new headband to distract her this time.

“Those scanners are…intense,” she commented as she pulled her shoes back on at the other side of security, “I feel like they could see what I had for breakfast.”

“Well, there’s no way Ms. Maclay sent you off without something you love…that reminds you of home…” Willow replied, tying her hoodie around her waist, “Hmm…wait, I know, American flag French toast!”
“Correct,” Tara replied, grinning, “Impressive.”

“I know my Maclay women,” Willow said with an answering grin, “Speaking of food, wanna go grab some lunch? I just had a Pop-Tart this morning.”

Tara nodded and slung her bag back over her body, double checking her passport and boarding pass were in the back pocket.

She fell in step with Willow as they entered the terminal and was surprised by how much it seemed like a mall. They even had a food court. Willow stopped in front of the gourmet burger place and Tara’s eyebrows rose as she read off the menu.

“That’s pretty expensive for a burger…you don’t even get fries with it.”

“So I guess that’s a no to the caviar and champagne bar too?” Willow replied jokingly, then cleared her throat when Tara didn’t laugh, “Kidding…”

She glanced away.

“It’s an airport, so all the prices are jacked up,” she said, searching the names for something to stand out, “Sushi?”

Tara’s face scrunched up.

“Is raw fish the best idea when we’re about to get on a twelve-hour flight?”

Willow pursed her lips.

“I’m sure it’s perfectly safe, but, sure, okay, I get the fear,” she nodded quickly, then pointed, “Hey, look, there’s a bar and grill. It’s that or Panda Express and I don’t think we want our last image of America to be our bad interpretation of Chinese food.”

Tara raised an eyebrow.

“You lived off that stuff in high school.”
“I never said it wasn’t delicious,” Willow countered, a little impatiently, “I don’t mind where we eat, just as long as we eat kinda soon, please, baby?”

She stood up on her toes and gave Tara a pleading look, whose smile just spread across her face at the pet name.

“The grill sounds great.”

“Great!” Willow replied, pleasantly surprised, “Let’s grab a table!”

They found a table and sat with their bags tucked under it. Tara reached across and held Willow’s arm.

“I’m sorry if I’m being fussy,” she said apologetically, “I’m just really budget-conscious. I-I don’t want to miss out on things because I overspent on food.”

Willow returned the gesture with an understanding look on her face.

“You’re not being fussy. Everything will be fine.”

Tara dragged her fingers down Willow’s arms to grip her hands. Willow smiled for a moment and folded her hands back into her lap.

“What do you want? I’ll go up and order.”

Tara looked up at the menu board.

“I’ll have the chicken cobb salad,” she requested, “And water, please. Tap. Here.”

She opened her wallet and gave Willow the money, who loitered awkwardly for a second. She wanted to treat but she didn’t want to seem like she was only doing it because of their conversation.

“Um, ‘kay,” she said eventually, taking it uncomfortably.

Tara tried to work out the hesitance.

“Is that not enough?” she asked, looking past Willow again to the menu.
“No, no, it’s plenty,” Willow replied quickly, “Still or sparkling?”

“Tap,” Tara repeated, looking at her oddly for a moment before letting it go.

Willow jumped up and paid for their order, bringing Tara back her change.

“It’s kinda weird, we’ve never really gone out to eat together,” she chuckled with a nervous undertone, “Ordered in pizzas and stuff but that’s it.”

Tara nodded; that wasn’t a revelation.

“You went to the mall with your other friends,” she explained, “You really only liked to hang out with me in more private spaces.”

Willow’s face slowly bloomed into realization.

“…oh.”

Tara reached across for Willow’s arms again.

“It’s okay, I liked being alone with you, too.”

Willow smiled softly, looking down.

Their number was called and Willow collected the tray and brought it back to their table. Willow finished her tacos faster than Tara finished her salad, but they had plenty of time and nowhere to go so she didn’t mind sitting back and waiting. It wasn’t the worst thing in the world to get to watch Tara eat.

When they were finished, they found their gate and nabbed a couple of seats together before it got too crowded.

After a while of Tara watching passing gates board and disembark, she began tapping her fingers on her thigh.

“Lots of waiting.”
“Yep, we’re going to have to get used to that,” Willow replied, adjusting slightly as she too ‘got used’ to the hard plastic seat that differed from the lounge ones she’d experienced in the past, “Hey, wanna play a waiting game?”

Tara nodded.

“Sure.”

“I like to play Airport Reporter,” Willow replied, kicking her legs out for comfort.

Tara settled her head on Willow’s shoulder.

“How do you play?”

Willow cast her gaze around the gate area and discreetly pointed out a lady standing by a pillar, charging her phone. Her stiletto was tapping impatiently and she was staring at her phone intently.

“See that lady over there?” she whispered, “Eldest child, perfectionist, married her childhood sweetheart and has been cheating on him regularly since college. She told him she was coming out west for a conference but she was really meeting a citrus farmer she met on Plenty of Fish. But the joke was on her because he actually ‘farmed’ cocaine and just wanted to use her as a mule.”

“Wow,” Tara replied, slowly understanding the game.

“You do one,” Willow encouraged, nodding toward a man sitting two rows in front of them, “That guy.”

Tara turned her head and considered him; a slightly disheveled guy in an old suit with just a backpack and airport gift shop bag sitting between his legs.

“He had to move away for work but couldn’t afford to bring his wife and child with him. He hasn’t seen them in three months but now he gets to go home for his son’s birthday with a teddy bear from the airport he’s going to be bringing his whole family though because he can finally move them all out so they can be a family again.”

Willow wrapped an arm around Tara’s shoulder.
“You’re too nice for Airport Reporter.”

Tara’s nose scrunched.

“I’m sorry.”

“Never be sorry for that,” Willow replied with an adoring smile, “Want me to show you how to use your iPad?”

“Yeah,” Tara smiled back, “Hopefully I’ll be better at that.”

She lifted her bag onto her lap and unzipped it. She searched through her things and eventually found it in an inside pocket.

“Is this it? When did it get into a pouch?”

“I played around on the bus,” Willow explained, “Made sure, I mean, ah, set it all up. For the very first time. The, um, OS might be different from what you’re used to.”

She showed Tara the button to turn it on and they spent a while personalizing it to Tara’s tastes.

“You can put a picture as a background,” Willow said, showing her the setting, “But you’ll need to load some up first, or take them.”

Tara smiled shyly.

“Oh, can I take one of us—”

“Look, the plane is here!” Willow interrupted, pointing out the window as the plane came into the gate.

Tara looked up and was momentarily blown away by the size. She packed away her iPad and made her way over to the window to get a better look. Willow followed her, leaning back against the window.

“It’s crazy to think it’s going to fly us across the world, right?”
“Crazy,” Tara repeated quietly.

Willow pointed to the end of the plane.

“Do you see that spiral shape? It’s called a Koru. It’s supposed to look like an uncurling fern leaf. The silver fern is like the national symbol of New Zealand and the koru is a big part of the Māori art and symbology.”

Tara smiled at Willow’s expressive face.

“I love learning from you.”

Willow blushed and looked down, but caught Tara’s gaze again and smiled.

Thankfully it wasn’t long before boarding commenced and Tara got to stand in another line. This one was even more claustrophobic, but it was nothing compared to the pushing and shoving as they made their way up the aisle of the plane.

“Just sit in the seat and let me handle this,” Willow said, nodding for Tara to sit into the window on the two-seat section she was very glad she pre-booked for them.

Tara complied, eyeing Willow seductively a little bit and Willow used her resolve face to get their bags into the hold with little ruckus.

“Phew,” Willow breathed as she sat in beside Tara, “This is my first time in coach.”

“This is my first time on a plane,” Tara countered with a small shake in her voice.

Willow ran a hand down Tara’s arm.

“Are you scared?”

“A little,” Tara admitted, looking down shyly, “It seems much smaller inside.”

“Reverso-Tardis,” Willow joked, and Tara cracked a smile, though she only knew the reference from other references Willow made.
Willow linked their fingers.

“I’ll hold your hand. I’ll keep you safe.”

Tara swallowed and kissed Willow’s cheek gratefully. She cuddled into Willow as best she could over the armrest.

Willow started to smile until she felt the stare of the man standing in the aisle waiting to get down to his seat. He wasn’t much older than them, or at least not more than his mid-twenties. He was scruffy and wearing a Doctor Who t-shirt that would have been the first thing Willow noticed had it not been for his hard glare.

“Disgusting,” he muttered under his breath and Willow’s stomach lurched.

She glanced furtively at Tara and the people ahead and behind him in line but he had said it so low no one else had heard. Willow wanted to snatch her hand away, but Tara was holding on so tight. She grabbed the blanket she’d stuffed into the seat pocket in front, tore it from its packaging and threw it over their hands.

Tara lifted her head and looked at her and Willow tried to smile through the palpitations.

“Kinda cold.”

“Oh, okay,” Tara replied softly and laid her head back again.

Willow looked straight ahead, refusing to meet the eye of any other passenger that passed. Her second hand clutched the outside armrest, knuckles white until Tara began to subconsciously rub her knuckles with her thumb under the blanket and she felt some calm. Her eyes went in that direction every couple of minutes to make sure they were still covered.

Finally, the plane was boarded and a female voice with a delightful Kiwi lilt came over the PA system.

“Kia Ora, ladies and gentlemen, my name is Tui and I’m your head flight attendant onboard this flight today. On behalf of Captain Campbell and the entire crew, welcome onboard New Zealand Air flight NZA1, non-stop service from Los Angeles to Auckland. Our flight time today will be twelve hours and ten minutes and we will be flying at an altitude of thirty-five thousand feet with a ground speed of 550 miles per hour. At this time, make sure your seat backs and tray tables are in their fully upright position and that your seat belt is correctly fastened. Your portable electronic devices must be set to flight safe mode at this time and for the duration of this flight. Please remain seated until the captain has switched off the fasten seatbelt time. We hope you enjoy your flight today
with New Zealand Air. Thank you.”

Tara started to sit up.

“Tara, I switched your iPad already, just check your phone,” Willow advised.

“Thank you,” Tara replied sweetly and took her phone out to switch the setting, “That accent was cute, huh?”

Willow couldn’t help but smile at Tara; she knew what she thought was cute in the immediate vicinity.

“The cutest.”

Tara sat back and intently watched the safety demonstration intently. Willow completely lost herself in amusement at Tara’s serious expressions and double-checking of her seatbelt and it took everything in her not to laugh. Thankfully, Willow had an excuse to laugh as she watched the safety video. She’d seen a boring demonstration or two in her time, but this one was stylized as the Lord of the Rings and she followed every second of it.

The screens turned off again and Tara turned to Willow.

“Is your seatbelt secure?”

Willow nodded solemnly.

“I promise.”

Tara sat back and settled her shoulders.

“Cabin crew, prepare for take-off.”

“Here we go,” Willow whispered, fixing the blanket again and taking Tara’s hand beneath it, “It might help to close your eyes.”

“W-why?” Tara asked nervously, “D-does something happen?”
“No,” Willow reassured with a soft laugh, “No, it’s just fast and it might be easier on your stomach. Oh, and!”

She reached into her pants pocket and retrieved a pack of gum. She popped one out of the pack and gave it to Tara.

“Chew this until we’re in the air. It helps pop your ears. They get all blocked by the attitude and swallowing helps.”

“Thank you,” Tara replied, throwing the gum into her mouth.

Willow squeezed her hand.

“You’ll be okay.”

Tara nodded and rested her head back, closing her eyes. The plane turned and taxied for a minute, then began accelerating. Her grip tightened on Willow, who didn’t complain for a moment, and everything tensed.

After a few minutes of her hand being squeezed to a level she wouldn’t feel again until childbirth, Willow gently prodded Tara. She cracked an eye open cautiously.

“We’re in the air,” Willow said softly.

Both of Tara’s eyes opened in surprise.

“We are?”

Willow nodded.

“Look out the window.”

Tara turned her head and ducked it to look out of the rounded window. They were above the clouds and the sky was all kinds of wild reds and purples from the setting sun. The wing of the airplane stood out importantly right by her window and glided through it all majestically.

“So cool…” she breathed, the most magnificent sunset she’d ever seen, “That’s even better than sunset at the beach.”
“Pretty cool and pretty-pretty!” Willow replied cheerily, “Wait until you see it pitch black. It’s eerie and cool all at once.”

Tara sat more comfortably in her seat.

“So this is it. We’re flying.”

“Yup,” Willow smiled, “I’m afraid this is where it gets super boring for oh, eleven hours and fifty minutes or so. But I put games and stuff on your iPad and they have movies and other videos on these little monitors.”

Tara nodded and got her earbuds out. Willow winced. They were on the wing and Willow knew Tara’s little earbuds would be entirely useless. Hers were noise-canceling and a lot better quality. She couldn’t in good faith let Tara suffer like that.

“Here, use mine,” she offered nonchalantly, “They’re, um, more comfortable.”

Tara took them hesitantly.

“Don’t you need them?”

Willow shrugged.

“I’ll read or something.”

She took out her phone and loaded up her Kindle app to find something to read while Tara found some movies to watch. She got a Sprite when the drink cart came around and a little pack of pretzels and thought this flying thing wasn’t so bad.

Willow meanwhile had abandoned reading and was sipping on ginger ale to calm her motion sickness. When the dinner cart landed upon them, Tara took the headphones off as the flight attendant addressed her with a smile that Tara thought must start hurting her face if she had to maintain it for the whole flight.

“Spaghetti bolognese or chicken curry?”

“Chicken curry, please,” Tara answered quickly and Willow reached out to flick Tara’s tray down
when Tara didn’t.

“Oh, right,” Tara added, smiling gratefully, “Thanks.”

She peeled away the packaging on her containers of food and began to eat.

“Everyone says airplane food is the worst. It’s not that bad.”

Willow was lying on her side facing Tara, arms crossed lightly over herself.

“The science behind it is pretty cool. Your taste buds and smell receptors change, numb essentially, because of the altitude, so they enhance the flavor of the food.”

Tara opened the little pod her lemon meringue pie was sitting in and nodded along.

“How come you’re not eating yours?”

Willow looked at her meal and thought she felt a little better. She peeled back the foil on her main and as the smell lifted to her nostrils, her stomach lurched.

Her hands flew to her seatbelt and Tara reacted, grabbing the side of Willow’s tray and lifting it before she bolted and sent it flying everywhere.

By the time Willow had returned, the trays were clear and Tara was holding a small bottle of airline-branded water for her.

“Are you okay?” she asked, concerned.

Willow nodded and took the water bottle with a grateful, though shaky hand.

“Yeah. Just…rocky back here, I guess.”

“I saved you the crackers,” Tara replied softly, “Do you want me to rub your tummy?”

Willow blushed, but it just looked like the regular color on her pale cheeks.
“I think I’m just going to try and sleep. They’ll turn off the lights soon.”

“Can I do anything?” Tara asked, but Willow just shook her head and closed her eyes.

She was exhaling in annoyance after only a minute.

“The engine is so noisy.”

Tara opened the front pouch of her backpack, where there were overflowing packs of earplugs. She’d invested in various forms of disposable and long-life plugs after reading all of the travel blogs.

Willow gratefully took a plastic packet of orange foam ones and twisted them into her ears.

“That’s much better,” she said a little too loudly to compensate, which made Tara giggle and put a finger against her lips.

Willow smiled sheepishly and lowered her voice, popping one plug out again.

“Whoops,” she said, then leaned over to try and peer through the space between their seats, “Is there anyone sitting behind me?”

She hadn’t paid attention as she’d stumbled back to her seat from the bathroom. Tara peered through sneakily to assess the situation.

“Yes, but no one behind me.”

Willow frowned, disappointed.

“I don’t want to be that asshole that reclines into someone else’s space.”

“Swap with me,” Tara suggested.

“Are you sure?” Willow asked but suddenly felt so exhausted she hoped Tara would say yes.

Tara nodded.
“I’m not tired, I slept on the bus. And I won’t have to wake you if I need to go to the bathroom.”

They swapped seats and Willow gratefully lay back at full recline without remorse. She fixed the other plug back into her ear and adjusted the little pillow under her neck for comfort. She felt Tara fix the blanket over her and whispered ‘thank you’ with a gentle smile before almost immediately drifting off.

The lights did dim soon after, but Tara was comfortable watching the small screen in front of her. When the latest movie finished, she remembered she needed to get up and circulate her legs, so she did a circle, though it was more of an oval, around the plane.

She saw all manners of open mouths, drooling, snoring and heard more than one baby screaming. She was starting to understand the pitfalls of air travel, which was compounded by her use of the restroom on the way back. She tried not to outwardly grimace at the people standing outside in just their socks that were about to walk into that closet of fermented urine. She was glad she brought her own baby wipes and hand gel and gave her hands a thorough going-over back in her seat.

She played with the monitor in front of her seat until the map and information channel came up. It was so crazy to think they were right in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. She leaned back to peer out the window from her aisle seat and decided Willow was right, it was eerie but not in a frightening way. The flight was so steady, it was like it wasn’t moving at all.

Her eyes fell away from the window and onto Willow’s peaceful face, with her mouth moving every so often and mumbles coming out. Tara had always been amused by Willow’s sleep antics as a child and as they’d grown, but she really hadn’t witnessed it in a while.

It was odd how many natural friendship exchanges had suddenly ceased to exist that night on the swing when they’d kissed for the first time ‘on purpose’. She really hoped Willow’s recent behavior and the fact that they were leaving the constant presence of family meant this was changing for the better.

She grew tired too and decided to try and sleep, even if it was uncomfortably upright. She kept Willow’s headphones on her ears in lieu of earplugs and played some calming music she used at home to relax.

It worked, and neither of them woke until the lights flicked back on and the cart came around with breakfast.

“Hey,” Willow greeted sleepily as she pulled her seat up, “Wow, I was really out.”

“Not long left,” Tara replied, stretching her arms above her head, then grabbing her neck, “Oof.”
“Oh, I know that look,” Willow replied sympathetically, “Twisty neck cramp?"

“That sounds about right,” Tara replied through a silent groan.

Willow’s eyes glanced around and then she reached out and lightly massaged her fingers against Tara’s neck. Tara moaned appreciatively and Willow retracted her hand.

“Oh, um, breakfast.”

They got trays with scrambled egg and sausage, as well as yogurt and a fruit salad. Willow was starving and tucked in without issue and Tara ate slower but finished everything too.

“This is good airplane food,” Willow concurred with Tara from earlier, “This is better than the food I’ve had in some business class. I’d buy these yogurts.”

“Maybe they’re a brand, remember it and we can look,” Tara suggested, “It is pretty tasty.”

Willow nodded and turned the pot so she could look. She stretched her legs under the seat in front when the trays were taken but kept her seat up since descent was imminent.

“When we get there, everyone goes crazy and jumps up. I think we should just wait it out and go after everyone. I don’t want you getting pushed around.”

Tara’s eyes shone gratefully and she lifted her hand to cup Willow’s cheek gently.

There was the last rush of people moving around the cabin and using the restroom and flight attendants coming around to check seatbelts. Tara held each armrest securely as she prepared for whatever this part felt like.

Finally, there was a light thud and Tara looked at Willow, alarmed. Willow patted her hand.

“It’s okay. That’s it, it’s over.”

“Did we land? Was that it?” Tara asked, surprised, “I didn’t even feel it until the bump.”

Willow smiled.
“That was the wheels. It was a smooth landing. It's okay.”

Tara smiled excitedly back and stretched around to look out the window, even though it was only runway.

They gradually slowed to nothing and that friendly voice spoke to them again across the PA.

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Auckland Airport.”
“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Auckland Airport.”

Tara saw the shuffle Willow had spoken of as all the passengers around them seemed to brace themselves to jump out of their seats.

“Local time is 5:17 am and the temperature is 11° Celsius/52° Fahrenheit. For your safety and comfort, please remain seated with your seat belt fastened until the captain has turned off the fasten seat belt sign. At that point we will have we have parked at the gate and it is safe for you to move about the cabin. At this time, it is safe for you to use your mobile devices. Please check around your seat for any personal belongings you may have brought on board with you and please use caution when opening the overhead bins, as heavy articles may have shifted around during the flight. If you require deplaning assistance, please remain in your seat until all other passengers have departed. One of our crew members will then be pleased to assist you. On behalf of New Zealand Air and the entire crew, I’d like to thank you for joining us on this trip and we are looking forward to seeing you on board again in the near future. Haere mai.”

Tara rubbed her eyes and kept her hand on her seatbelt.

“Do we have to do all the security again? Take our shoes off and everything?”

Willow shook her head.

“No, we just have to go through immigration. Show them our passports and those arrival cards we filled out. They might ask to see our ticket to Melbourne so they know when we’re leaving.”

Tara smiled at Willow softly.

“I’m so glad you’re here with me.”

Willow felt her belly flop but in a nice way this time.
“I’m so glad I’m here with you too. But you would have figured it out. You’re so smart.”

Tara rested her forehead on Willow’s for a brief moment.

“I’m looking forward to fresh air and stretched legs.”

Willow laughed.

“Me too. Soon.”

The plane began to disembark and Willow nodded for Tara to go ahead when she saw a gap. The guy standing behind them was much kinder than the one Willow had encountered on the way in and helped them get their bags down from the overhead compartment.

Willow went through immigration first so Tara would see how easy it was and Tara followed through moments later.

“That wasn’t bad at all,” she said as she packed away her passport, “What now?”

“We catch a car to the hotel,” Willow answered, “That's it, baby, we’re here.”

They walked outside and Tara stopped to inhale the air. It felt fresh after so long in the airplane, and different she thought too…clean and pure in her lungs and electric through her blood. She may have been imagining it, but it felt real to her.

She saw Willow on her phone trying to connect to the airport Wi-Fi and suddenly registered what she’d said earlier.

“Wait, um, isn’t there shuttles and buses available and stuff? Taxis are expensive.”

Willow rubbed the side of her face, the air wasn’t quite cool enough to stun her tiredness away.

“I’ll pay for the car, it’s no big deal.”

Tara shifted uncomfortably, which irritated Willow.
“I’m exhausted, Tara, please, do we have to fight about this? Do you really want to cart our luggage around this whole airport and then navigate our way around the city with it at this hour?”

The hurt look on Tara’s face had the power to stop Willow's tiredness and her words.

“Shit, I—I’m sorry,” she said softly, “Can we just get the car?”

Tara just nodded and looked away.

Willow smiled in relief and pointed down the terminal road a bit.

“There’s the pick-up zone.”

They made their way over and Tara pulled up the reservation to get the address of the hotel they were booked into, thanks to her mother.

“The pictures look really nice and it’s right in the middle of downtown,” Tara explained to Willow when they were sitting in the car, “I have to say, I’m very grateful there’s a real bed and not a bunk bed coming my way.”

“Bunk bed?” Willow asked with a scrunched up face but didn’t have time to contemplate as Tara caught her attention to show the city coming into view.

It was twilight and the city was waking up; the tall buildings still lit in their evening lights and shimmering in the surrounding water.

Their hotel was at one of the harbors.

“This is stunning,” Willow said as they stood right on the water’s edge at the front of the hotel, “I’m blown away.”

“Thank you, Momma,” Tara smiled, “She’ll want lots of pictures.”

They wheeled their bags inside the grand reception area which was all marble and sleek surfaces. There was big plush seating for people to lounge in and multiple water features were lined with lanterns.
“Thank you, Momma,” Tara whispered again as she looked around in awe.

She never would have picked something this extravagant for herself, never been able to afford it either. She knew the only reason her mother could was because she’d traded in a bunch of credit card points that Tara secretly suspected she’d been saving for herself to go on a little break.

The closest she’d ever been to somewhere this fancy before was in her junior year when she’d been part of a youth orchestra playing in Los Angeles and she’d run in to use the bathroom in the Four Seasons when their bus broke down.

She let Willow lead the check-in and admired the art adorning the walls. The desk clerk with a name tag that said Theo, and a reserved but bright hairstyle that said he was restraining his flamboyance, welcomed them and found their reservation.

“Ah yes, I see you here…we would be happy to store your belongs until check-in opens at 2 pm,” he said with an inexplicably cheery tone considering the hour.

Willow frowned, slowly turning it into a pout.

“We’ve been traveling for 24 hours. Is there anything you can do?”

“We are pretty busy this weekend…” Theo mused as he typed into the computer, “There’s a deluxe room available in the same type, but it’s an extra 75 New Zealand dollars per night. You seem like nice girls, I can do it for 50.”

“Done!” Willow replied eagerly as she whipped out her wallet, “Credit okay?”

Tara watched with concern as Theo ran the card but bit her tongue. Her neck cramp reappeared and she brought her hand to just under her hairline to massage it.

She watched Willow get the credit card shaped keys to the room and be given instructions to get to the elevator. Willow pressed the button for their floor and bounced up and down on her toes.

“That’s a high floor, the view should be amazing.”

“Hope so,” Tara replied, opening and closing her palm around the handle on her case; a subconscious release of frustration.

Willow checked the room number written on the key pouch once again when they arrived at the
floor and led Tara down the corridor to the door of room 1113.

She slid the key into the reader and back out. A green light flashed and Willow put pressure on the door handle to open it.

The door opened right into the room. It had plush grey carpet, a huge king bed with crisp, white sheets, and a compact four-person table right beside the sliding glass door that led to the balcony.

“Nice,” Willow said, lifting leaving her bags on one of the two footstools that sat at the end of the bed alongside each other.

Her gaze paused on the large, but most notably, only bed in the room. Her brow creased.

“Did your mom book this room?”

“No, she booked a different room,” Tara muttered, but Willow had already stepped toward the windows.

“Check out the balcony! I was right about the view!”

She slid the door open and stepped out, then popped her head back in excitedly.

“I know we’re exhausted, but do you want to just sit here and watch the sun come up together?”

She looked so earnest, Tara struggled to hold onto her annoyance. Willow had only done something nice for them, after all.

“Yeah, that’d be nice,” she agreed softly and followed Willow out onto the balcony.

The view, indeed, was amazing; a clear scape of the harbor and lit-up city architecture, all illuminated in a soft orange glow.

“I’m on the other side of the world,” she whispered in awe.

Willow smiled softly at Tara’s profile taking in this new experience. She’d never been here either, but experiencing it with — through — Tara was amazing. It was the best filter.
She pulled up one of the chairs and put it beside Tara for her to sit into. Tara did it almost subconsciously, her weary legs responding before her mind registered what they were doing.

Willow sat in a chair beside Tara and watched her eye follow the skyline.

“Thank you,” she said, putting her hand over Tara’s.

Tara turned to her with a gently sloped, curious smile.

“For what?”

“Just being you,” Willow answered, shyly looking away.

Tara reached out and touched Willow’s cheek.

“You’re such a sweetie.”

She put her arm around Willow’s shoulders and pulled her in close.

They watched the sunrise drench the city in brightness together silently, quietly pondering all it would have to offer.

Tara woke lying beneath crisp sheets she barely remembered slipping under before she had crashed.

Her mouth felt fuzzy and desperately cried out for her toothbrush. She looked across the bed but the other side remained unslept in, as smooth and tucked in as when they’d first walked into the room.

Her eyes cast downward to the watch sitting on her wrist, but she hadn’t changed it from California time yet. She was too groggy to figure out the time difference, but when she turned over she saw an alarm clock beside the lamp and noted it was lunchtime.

Good, she thought. If she got up now and lasted until that evening, she’d been in a good position with her jetlag, or at least operating on local time.

She started to hear some clacking noises and lifted her head off the pillow. She saw Willow sitting at the table on her laptop, fingers flying as they usually did. Tara sat up fully and Willow looked over to
“Hey, you’re up.”

Tara made a noise of agreement as she got out of bed. She walked into the bathroom and realized her toothbrush was still packed, but there was a packaged one on the complimentary toiletry tray that seemed a whole lot more appealing than rooting through her luggage.

She ran the faucet and splashed her face, then used the washcloth folded neatly on the marble surface to dry it. It was the softest material she’d ever touched to her skin. It felt like she was being caressed by a cloud.

She squeezed toothpaste from the little tube provided and actually moaned for a moment when the mintiness instantly refreshed her mouth. She gave each tooth a thorough brushing and rinsed her mouth several times until her tongue moved around cleanly.

She glanced down and realized she hadn’t even gotten changed before falling asleep and was still wearing the t-shirt and sweats she’d traveled in. She definitely needed out of them and into fresher clothes. She walked back into the room and unzipped her suitcase.

She cast her eye toward Willow as she found new clothes to wear.

“No, I was wired.” Willow replied, her fast tone indicating she probably still was, “We’re so central here, we can walk to anywhere in the city. I know you wanted to do the Sky Tower, and I found this cool discount card we can pick up to get in cheaper. Plus get other things at a discount too, and not just here, when we travel south too. We can use it with the accommodation booking portal you found for us to use and build more points. Then we can redeem them for other accommodation. It’s a perfect loop of savings.”

Tara massaged the back of her neck again and picked out jeans and a nice blouse.

“That’s great.”

Willow sat back in the chair, hands crossed over her stomach.

“I’m starving. I almost raided the $20 Kit Kats in the mini bar. Do you want to go grab some lunch?”
“$20 Kit-Kats?” Tara asked in confusion as to why anyone would ever pay that, “Um, yeah, we can get lunch. Is it okay if I shower first? I’ll be quick.”

Willow nodded.

“Sure. I’ll find us a good place to eat.”

Tara paused for a moment.

“Could we maybe walk around the area and find a place together?”

“Oh, okay,” Willow replied with a shrug, “Sure, that sounds nice.”

Tara set her clothes down on the bed and lifted her as-yet unemptied luggage up onto the bed. She unzipped her snack pocket, which hadn’t been totally annihilated during the flight and took out the Kit-Kat that happened to be sitting inside. She brought it to Willow and offered it with a soft smile.

“The price is one kiss.”

Willow beamed and jumped up to accept the candy bar and proffer the kiss.

Tara felt Willow’s arms slide around her neck and then her lips press against her softly. All of Tara’s tension lifted with that first press of Willow’s lips and she relaxed into the embrace.

“I have to shower, I have to shower,” she mumbled, forcing herself to pull away.

“I have chocolate,” Willow returned, grinning, and dropped back into the chair to tear open the candy bar.

Tara went back into the bathroom and closed the door. She put her clothes folded on the lid of the toilet and pulled the door back on the huge, golden-hued shower.

Her entire bathroom at home would have fit into that shower. It had jets at various levels and the main shower head was as big as her face.

She undressed and stood into the stadium of a shower, her fingers trailing around the various knobs trying to figure out which to turn. She twisted the one she thought seemed most likely to start the main shower head and was promptly sprayed in the ass with freezing water. She screamed as her
hand desperately sought the knob again to twist it off.

After a moment, there was a knock on the door.

“Uh…is everything okay?”

“Fine!” Tara screeched, making the decision to step out of the shower while she figured out the complicated system, “Just…fine!”

She huffed out a breath as water dripped down her legs onto the luscious bathmat beneath her feet and reached in again to figure out how to wash her damn hair.

Finally, water poured out from the top, taking just a moment to warm until it was comfortable enough for Tara to step under again.

The water got hot quickly and soothed her weary bones. She tilted her head forward so it ran down her neck and over her arching back, enveloping every muscle along the way.

She realized pretty quick she had nothing to actually wash with and had to pick up each little hotel-branded bottle sitting on the shelf to identify what it was. The soap was nice, but she had a lot of hair and needed every bit of the shampoo, even filling the bottle with water at the end to make it stretch a little.

Tara spent a lot longer in the shower than she’d ever spent in a shower before. At home, someone was always banging on the door to hurry up, or the hot water would cut out or, once, a missing check in the mail on a final reminder electric bill made the entire house plunge into darkness while Tara had a head full of suds. It all led to showering being a quick event.

Eventually, there was a familiar knock on the door, but it wasn’t the aggressive voice of her brother or the urgent voice of her mother than usually accompanied. It was the sweet, keen voice of the woman she loved if a little overly-keen at that moment.

“…Tara?”

Tara came crashing back down into the moment and remembered the promise of food.

“I’m coming! Sorry!” she yelled as she turned the shower off and stepped out to grab a towel.

Everything here was a cloud and she didn’t want to get dressed, but she couldn’t delay any longer.
She bundled her hair up in another towel and quickly dried and dressed in her fresh clothes. She let her hair down and toweled it through before quickly hanging the towels back up again and opened the door to a plume of released steam as she went to dig out her hairbrush.

“I’m so sorry, I lost track of time.”

Willow was leaning against the doorframe, smiling softly.

“Sounds like you were having some fun in there.”

Tara looked up, eyes wide.

“I-I wasn’t…”

Willow’s whole body lurched with panic.

“Oh god, no, I didn’t mean…!” she started stumbling over her words, “You were…there was yelping and…no I wasn’t, I just…!”

Her mouth opened and closed wordlessly and Tara turned away to brush her hair, blushing.

“I’m um, ready,” she said as she sat on the edge of the bed to slip her shoes back on.

Willow crossed her arms over herself awkwardly.

“You should bring a sweater. It’s winter here, don’t forget.”

Tara nodded and met Willow’s eye with a soft, absolving smile.

“Oh yeah, thanks for reminding me,” she said, fishing out a blue sweater to pull on, “We need to find a supermarket too and get shampoo and stuff. I used up all of those little bottles.”

“Right,” Willow nodded, “Yes, we shall do that.”

“We shall,” Tara replied with a hint of a teasing tone.
Willow stepped away from the wall, her eyes narrowing just a tad.

“You’re making fun of me.”

Tara’s nose scrunched.

“Just a little.”

Willow walked over and linked her arm in Tara’s.

“Jerk.”

Tara pressed a quick but insistent kiss to Willow’s cheek, who blushed as she led them out of the room. They got to the elevator and Willow pressed the button for going down. The doors opened and an older couple was already inside. Willow dropped Tara’s arm as they crossed into it and stood in the corner to be as out of the way as possible.

They got to the lobby and let the older couple out before following.

“Are you okay?” Tara asked quietly as they crossed the lobby and out into the street.

“Yeah, why?” Willow asked; her tone shy, just about, of defensiveness and trying to seem airy.

“No reason,” Tara dismissed, “So which way should we go? Along the harbor?”

Willow nodded in agreement and they hadn’t even walked a blocked when they turned a corner and had a wealth of shopping and food choices at their feet.

They didn’t end up walking far before settling on a place to eat since they were both pretty hungry. Tara suggested the first place that looked cheap to avoid any conflict and Willow would have eaten anything at that point.

It was an open kitchen that was reminiscent of a soul food kitchen at home with a mix-match of table styles. They picked a two-seater at the window with a glass top that looked like it could be garden furniture.
The menu was written on a board above the order counter, scrawled in chalk.

“I’m gonna get the kiwi burger and kumara fries,” Willow said, her pronunciation just slightly off, but enough to raise a giggle from two guys at a nearby table.

“Beetroot, I guess that’s beet? And fried egg,” Tara read, nodding, “…interesting. Delicious I’m sure.”

“What would you like?” Willow asked.

Tara inhaled around her.

“All this beautiful water is making me crave seafood,” she said, reading through the few fresh fish options, “The mussel pot special looks good…especially at half price.”

Willow started to stand, then sat again when she spotted those guys watching her to see what pronunciation she'd flub next.

“Would you order for us?”

“Sure,” Tara agreed and went up to the counter to place the order.

She was given the receipt and two cups inside each other with two sets of silverware wrapped in a napkin sitting inside. She brought them back to the table and put the silverware packages down.

“What would you like to drink? He said pick anything from the fridge.”

“Try L&P,” one of the men from the nearby table called over, “Kiwi classic.”

“Thanks,” Tara replied, looking to Willow to see if that was okay.

Willow nodded tersely and Tara went off to get two bottles. She sat back down and poured them into each glass.

Willow held her cup in her hands and lifted it to her mouth. The smell was strong and almost medicine-y. She took a sip and it was unusual; a little fizzy, a little salty, a little bitter. The lemon hit bubbled across her tongue and she wasn’t quite sure what that overall flavor was, but it was unique.
Tara did the same and she smiled, lifting her cup in greeting at the recommenders.

“Hey, thanks.”

They returned the toast and threw their eyes over the two for a few moments.

“You ladies new in town?”

“Just landed,” Tara replied sweetly.

The guy closest turned in the chair.

“If you need tour guides…”

“We have tour guides,” Willow interrupted curtly, “Thanks.”

The two boys grumbled in each other’s direction and stood up to leave. Willow watched them go through the door and raised an eyebrow at Tara.

“You really need to get better at realizing when someone is checking you out.”

Tara frowned.

“I don’t think…” she started, then shook her head, “It doesn’t matter anyway. I think that’s our food. Whoa.”

A huge pot of mussels was placed in front of her, sitting in a broth that made Tara’s mouth water, with a big hunk of homemade bread beside it.

Equally, Willow’s burger was the size of her head and she needed to cut it in quarters just to be able to eat it.

“Okay, so far, I love New Zealand,” Willow giggled, “Dare you try this unique combination?”

“I’ll stick these, thank you,” Tara replied, running a spoon through the broth and lifting it to her mouth, “Wow, this is amazing.”
Willow continued eating, her eyes lighting up when she tried a kumara fry.

“Tara, try these fries! They’re so good!”

Tara tried one and agreed that they were easily the best fries she’d ever tasted. She pulled the loose shell on a mussel open and lifted it to her mouth. It was salty and buttery and tasted like the ocean and hit Tara’s craving just right.

“This is actually really good,” Willow said as she ate her burger and Tara giggled at the beet juice dotting her nose from the sheer size of it.

“What?” Willow asked, finding Tara’s laugh infectious even without knowing why.

Tara lifted her napkin from her lap, reached across the table and wiped her nose clean.

“Oh,” Willow said, blushing as she saw the napkin come away, “Willow the Dinosaur, Barney’s long-lost companion.”

Tara rested her cheek on her palm and looked up coyly at Willow. Her foot slipped out of her ballet flat and reached across the underside of the table. She slipped it under the hem of Willow’s jeans and rubbed her shin.

“With imagination…”

Willow felt a knot in her stomach at the look Tara flashed in her direction, telling her everything that was happening in Tara’s imagination at that moment. She hid a smile toward the floor and shoveled some fries in her mouth to replace the squeeze of arousal in her stomach with fullness.

“So good. Salty. Have some more.”

Tara plucked a fry from the basket and knowingly ate it slowly between her fingers.

Willow gulped and downed the rest of her L&P in all of its unusualness because it would cool her off and wet her throat and dammit, now her brain was the one using its imagination.

She watched Tara bring a mussel shell to her mouth and suck the mollusk free, the broth she’d dipped the shell in wetting her lips and lightly dribbling down her chin. Tara wiped her mouth and
never in her life had Willow wanted to be a napkin more.

She busied herself with finishing her meal to distract herself from those feelings and avoided looking at anything that involved Tara’s mouth.

They finished their food and paid with little commotion and walked back onto the street. There was a nice breeze, which Willow appreciated on her warm cheeks and Tara started gathering her hair up in a ponytail.

*Kill me now,* Willow thought as she saw the loose hair on the nape of Tara’s neck wave freely in the wind, *Or she’ll do it for me.*

“Well, you wanted to find a supermarket, right?” Willow asked, averting her gaze.

“Well, can we find one near the hotel and do a loop?” Tara asked, her arms settling by her side again, “So we’re not carrying a bunch of bags around?”

“Well, good idea,” Willow nodded, “I can map it.”

She pulled out her phone and found a store where they could pick up some necessities just a block away from the hotel in the opposite direction they’d turned in when leaving.

They decided they’d keep going in the direction they were in and find it later, and so spent the next number of hours exploring the downtown area and all it had to offer in shopping and food options and entertainment.

They took a lot of leaflets and pictures of event posters to save and come back to later and spent the day laughing and planning together. Because they wanted to do so much, there would never be enough hours in the day, but now they had options.

As night fell, they found themselves overlooking some different water; a stream running through a park about a half mile from the hotel. A rope bridge was suspended across it, with the rope braided in such a way that you could safely weave your legs through and sit over the stream in its gentle sway.

Tara was lifting her chin toward the same sun she’d watch rise that morning as it set and made the stream gleam.

Water rushed beneath then and the trees rustled in the wind and if you listened closely you could hear the rope swinging through the air. The birds' songs were dying but Tara had always loved the end of a song best; the note that resonated and held you in its essence even after it was over.
“Listen,” she said to Willow, who was sitting alongside her, “That is the sound of peace.”

Willow looked at the last rays of sunshine hit Tara’s face and smiled softly.

“Yeah.”

She rested her head on Tara’s shoulder, who extended the opposite arm around and held Willow to her tenderly.

“You getting tired?”

Willow nodded against Tara’s shoulder.

“Yeah, it’s hitting me.”

Tara let her hand fall away gently.

“Come on, let’s get you back to bed. We’re not too far, I don’t think.”

Willow paused and inhaled the sweetness of the moment.

“One more minute.”

A few ‘one more minute’s later, Willow was almost snoring on Tara’s shoulder and Tara forced them both up. She kept an arm around Willow’s shoulders to help her along but had only wandered out of the park entrance for a moment or so when she realized she wasn’t quite sure which way to go.

“Um, do you know which way to the hotel? I know we came this way but is that…?”

“Use the map app,” Willow mumbled sleepily.

Tara took out her phone and pulled up the map app, but it just remained a grey screen.

“It’s not working.”
“Lemme try, lemme try,” Willow replied, taking the phone and poking at it with frustration, “You don’t have any data.”

She tried to take her own phone out of her pocket but ended up sending both phones skidding along the sidewalk. She stumbled to pick them up and Tara eventually grabbed them both and pulled Willow up straight again.

“It’s okay, it’s okay. Look, I can see the harbor between those two buildings. If we walk along it, we’ll find the hotel eventually.”

They walked, Willow mostly shuffling, to the edge of the harbor and thankfully the hotel was about five blocks away, with a little street weaving. When they were in the elevator, Willow had her head against the wall and was mumbling.

“Supermarket…”

“We’ll go tomorrow,” Tara soothed, “You need to sleep. If you sleep all night we’ll be on a good schedule. Come on, just a few more steps…”

Willow took the few heavy steps to their room and crawled toward the bed. Tara helped root out some pajamas and Willow made herself get up to go into the bathroom and minimize a disruptive sleep by changing into them.

Tara pulled back the sheets of the freshly made bed and saw their things had been tidied up. She made a note to be a bit more careful in the future; she was embarrassed that someone else had had to tidy up her mess.

Minutes, too many minutes, later Tara approached the bathroom door and knocked.

“Willow? Are you okay?”

There was no answer so Tara carefully pushed the door open and peeked inside.

Willow was wedged between the shower and the wall, toothbrush half hanging out of her open mouth as she snored.

Tara silently took the toothbrush out, pushed Willow’s jaw closed and pulled her, half-conscious, into bed.
She plugged Willow’s phone in to charge, folded the clothes that had been abandoned in the bathroom and went to sit on the balcony to overlook the twinkling lights of this new city.

“I can’t believe you almost passed out, you big baby.”

“I did not ‘almost pass’ out,” Willow huffed, “I stumbled for a moment, but not because it was so high! My shoelace just got under me!”

Tara grinned as they arrived back at their hotel room door.

“You’re wearing slip-ons.”

Willow looked down at her shoes with a look of disdain worthy of their betrayal and followed Tara into the room. She kicked them off and threw her sweater over a chair as the room was plenty warm without it.

“Okay, maybe I was a little wobbly.”

They’d spent the morning getting a bus tour and history lesson around the city and the afternoon visiting the famous Sky Tower and all its 1074 feet of glory. They had been 700 feet in the air with views 50 miles in any direction and Willow, admittedly, did have to sit for a moment as she took it all in from that great height.

On their way back to the hotel they stopped at a food truck and gotten some noodles, which they’d eaten walking along the harbor with wooden chopsticks.

They hadn’t decided what they were going to do that evening yet. Willow wanted to look through the leaflets they’d collected the day before and Tara just wanted to spend some more time together, though she wouldn’t mind if they… stayed in.

“Is this room too high up for you?” Tara teased and Willow just stuck out her tongue.

Hiding a smirk, she sat on the bed against the headboard and threw her legs up. She put her phone onto charge as it was nearly dead and crossed her hands behind her head.

“This bed is so comfortable. I didn’t wake up once last night.”
“You were out cold,” Tara replied, standing in front of the mirror to brush her hair, “I slumped a little at lunchtime today but I’m glad I powered through it.”

“Yeah, me too,” Willow agreed, “The bus tour guide helped. He was funny and this accent is very uplifting. I really like it here.”

Tara glanced at Willow through the mirror as the brush glided through her hair. She gave the ends another few run-throughs to rid any knots there and put her brush on the desk.

She gave herself the once-over in front of the mirror and turned to face Willow.

“What?” Willow asked, smiling across the room at her.

Tara walked toward Willow slowly and when she got to the foot of the bed, she began climbing over her, to an ever-increasing wide-eyed stare from Willow. Tara held herself up with a palm flat above each of Willow’s shoulders and pressed their lips together softly.

“We are finally…”

Her hips pressed into Willow’s, who gasped in a shaky breath of air as Tara’s lips scorched her throat. Tara sat back up so she was straddling Willow and smirked downward.

“Completely…”

Her hand went to the top button on her own blouse and pulled it free.

“Alone.”

Willow watched each button come loose in slow motion, feeling a heavier and heavier pressure in her chest.

With one button left and cleavage gorgeously wrapped in pink lace on display (with a tantalizing glimpse of blank ink that was still so sexy), Willow suddenly shot up straight.
“I-I can’t.”

Tara’s eyes widened and she immediately grabbed either side of her shirt closed with one hand.

“Oh,” she said quickly, clearing her throat as her cheeks grew pink, “Oh, that’s fine. That’s totally fine, no problem. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have—”

“I just, I have my period,” Willow waffled and immediately a silent tension came down around them.

Tara blinked several times and finally caught Willow’s eye. Willow felt the cutting stare and had to stop herself from shaking.

“You had your period last week,” Tara said quietly, “You said you were relieved you wouldn’t have it on the plane.”

Willow’s mouth opened and closed, caught in the lie.

“I…”

“Is this about my tattoo?” Tara asked, gripping her shirt closed tighter, self-consciously.

“No, no!” Willow protested, waving her hands in front of her, “I think your tattoo is really pretty, I do! Actually, I think it’s really, um…it’s not your tattoo, it’s not your tattoo!”

Tara’s eyes closed as she looked down.

“Are you attracted to me?”

“Of course!” Willow replied, words coming out in a rush of panic.

Tara looked up again, hurt in her eyes.

“I’m not trying to pressure you. You know I would never do that.”

“I know,” Willow replied surely, “I know that Tara, I…”
She trailed off and Tara’s brow creased.

“Sometimes I feel like you want to tear my clothes off and then…” she said, swallowing before huffing out a couple of quick breaths, “I just… can you just be honest with me? You know I’ll wait, forever, I will. But I need you to be honest, I just need you to be real with me. Can you please tell me what’s going on, can you please just tell me what you’re feeling?”

“I’m disgusted!” Willow blurted and once again her vision skewed into slow motion as she watched the muscles on Tara’s face ripple with multiple flashes of hurt.

“No,” Willow started shaking her head, all the blood draining from her face, “NO! I said that wrong, no! NO!”

Tara stepped off the bed on shaky legs and speedily buttoned up her shirt, missing out on one on the way so it sat on her awkwardly, misaligned.

Willow followed her, falling into the wall with the speed she sought to get off the bed.

“Tara, not you, never you! I’m not disgusted by you. It’s me, it’s all me!”

“You’ve made your feelings perfectly clear,” Tara said, voice fraught as she slipped into the pair of shoes she’d taken off near the table and bolted for the door, “I need air.”

“Tara, wait!” Willow called after her frantically, rushing out and catching the door again before it closed and locked them both out, “Tara!”

She watched Tara disappear around the corner and glanced back at the door her arm was holding precariously open. She pushed her way back in and fell about the room to get her shoes on. She lifted her phone and called Tara’s number, but it just buzzed on the table in mocking silence.

“Dammit!” Willow screamed, before quickly throwing her sweater back over her and stuffing her phone and the room keys into the front pocket.

She sprinted down to the elevators, but Tara was already gone, so all Willow could do was wait with tears threatening to roll down her cheeks for it to come back up so she could get down. She pressed the button for the lobby aggressively and waited the age it seemed for the elevator to descend.

She ran straight through the lobby and skidded through the revolving doors to get out onto the street. She looked up and down each side of the street desperately, but Tara was nowhere in sight. She ran back in and up to the check-in desk, slapping her hands on it to steady herself.
“D-Do you know my girlfriend, she just ran out of here?” Willow asked, with no conscious thought that this was the first time she’d referred to Tara as such out loud.

The woman behind the desk nodded.

“Yes, ma’am, I know her.”

Willow took a key card from her pocket and slid it across.

“If she comes back, can you give her this? She forgot hers. Room 1113.”

She took the key and put it in a new pouch, writing the number on it.

“Of course, ma’am. 1113.”

“Thanks,” Willow rattled off again before stepping off to hurry back outside.

She stood in the same place she had a minute before, this time weighing up her odds.

She looked at her watch.

The Sky Tower opened late.

She turned and headed for there, running in the hopes the wind would whip her cheeks and scare the tears away.

She paid the entrance fee and it was only halfway up to the 51st level she was destined for that she realized Tara had run out with nothing, no money or anything, and would not have been able to get up here even if she’d wanted to.

She looked out of the glass elevators as they ascended higher and higher above the city where she had no idea Tara was, hurt and alone because of her.

She’d seen that look on Tara’s face once before; when she’d told Willow she liked her and Willow had…reacted. This time was even worse, somehow.
She covered her face with her hands and felt a little tug on her pants leg. There was a little girl standing with her parents, smiling cheerily at being allowed to stay up so late.

“Is ‘kay, not so high. Not so bad,” she said, “Daddy scared too.”

The girl’s father cleared his throat but didn’t lift his gaze from the floor. Willow attempted a smile, but it was strained.

The kid looked exactly like Tara had at that age, the age they’d met, and she was suddenly flooded with years of memories; not one of which made her feel disgusted.

One little suffix could have stopped this from ever happening.

Because she was not disgusted, she was disgusting, but not for the reasons she’d thought right up until this moment.

She was disgusting for putting that frown on Tara’s face. She was not disgusting for the thousand smiles she’d put there. Tara’s smile lit up the world and some of it was because of her. Some of Tara’s smiles were because of her and that could only be a good thing.

All of her walls started crumbling in an elevator full of people but no one paid any attention as she hunched down and put her head against her knees.

A hand poked her side and she looked out to see the little not-Tara stretching her arms out.

“Wan’a hug?”

“Don’t bother the lady,” the girl’s mother said, putting a guiding arm around her daughter.

“She’s okay,” Willow reassured, a little choked and smiled at the girl before the doors finally opened.

She straightened up and immediately left only to realize she needed to step back into the elevator to go down again.

She got lost in the shuffle of people coming back down, and though she appreciated the speediness of the lift, the 80 seconds dragged as she struggled not to have an emotional breakdown.
She stopped on the street when she was back on it and tried to take stock of everything.

Her internal rollercoaster was going to have to pull up to the station because Tara was out there somewhere in a city she didn’t know, upset and without any phone or money or anything but the shirt on her back.

She took her phone out of her pocket on the off-chance there was a missed call and Tara was safe in the hotel room, but there was nothing. She shoved it back in her pocket and tried to think of the places they’d seen, the ones Tara wanted to go back to.

It was only after walking another mile of dark streets that suddenly, she knew exactly where Tara would be.

*Listen…that is the sound of peace.*

She closed her eyes and wracked her brain. Where had that been? She knew it was a park near the hotel, but she barely remembered coming home from it, she was so tired. She pulled up a map, but there were at least six parks within a mile radius of the hotel.

A Google search for any of their names + rope bridge brought up nothing, so with technology failing her, she set about pounding the pavement to search each park.

Two hours, five parks and her voice raw from asking people about rope bridges and if they’d seen Tara (with accompanying photo) later, she crossed through the entrance of the last park and immediately heard the trickling of water.

*Stream, you idiot. The bridge is over a stream.*

Without bothering to check to see if she would have in fact found the park a lot quicker if she’d searched for a stream, she picked up the pace again and jogged further in until she saw the rope bridge swinging in the moonlight. Someone was sitting with their legs through the ropes, holding the ones on top between their fingers.

It would have been beautiful; it was beautiful, in fact, until Willow got close enough to see the utter sorrow on Tara’s face. It hit her hard, but so did the relief that she’d found her. She ran and skidded on her knees beside Tara, clutching her chest with one hand.

“Thank god I found you,” she panted, hands dropping in the dirt as she caught her breath, “Please let me explain, Tara.”
“I think you were clear,” Tara replied, her voice hollow, her stare unrelentingly forward on some unknown fixed point.

Willow stayed on her knees on the ground where the bridge started.

“No. I wasn’t. I was possibly the most unclear I’ve ever been.”

Tara didn’t react; she stayed completely unmoving apart from the gentle swing of her legs out and under the bridge. She looked broken and it made Willow sick to her stomach.

“Tara, you do not disgust me. You, you’re…you’re so beautiful.”

Tara’s eyes shut and Willow felt more panic rise in her throat.

“Please listen. I know I don’t deserve it but please…please listen.”

Tara finally turned her face toward Willow, her eyelids heavy with the weight of her pain.

Willow remembered seeing those eyes for the first time again. The comfort they’d instantly brought. The little face that had brightened her life so effortlessly and so immediately.

She started talking before she even realized her mouth was opening.

“I saw this little girl and she was you except Australian, at least I think she was Australian, I’m still not totally sure on the accents, I mean they were in the Sky Tower so I don’t think they were local, of course, they might be from another part of the country and doing the touristy stuff and actually now that I think about it maybe it was South African but…” she stopped and took in a breath, “But this isn’t helping.”

Her butt sank so it hit her heels, her body deflating.

“I said what I said…because I disgust me. I thought…I thought I was disgusted because…because you’re a girl,” she said, swallowing and finding herself now unable to meet Tara’s eye, “But I’m really disgusted that I’m such a coward. Disgusted about how many times I’ve hurt you just to avoid my own hurt. I’m disgusted that I let how everyone else sees me affect how I behave when yours is the only opinion I actually care about.”

Tara stayed silent but didn’t rebuff her. Willow focused the spot where the moon hit the stream and watched the water trickle along.
“I kept negotiating with myself in my head.”

Her eyelids flickered closed and she swallowed, clearly struggling to get out what she needed to say.

“I would…okay, it’s like this.”

She took in a deep breath and lowered her voice.

“I would think, ‘okay, Tara’s touching me but it’s not really real if we don’t kiss during’, then ‘it’s not really real if our hands aren’t under our shirts too’, then ‘it’s not really real if we keep all our clothes on no matter what we do.’ Really thought I’d outwitted myself pretty good on that one.”

She let out a single, sad chuckle as Tara’s brow began to crease.

“In the room,” Willow continued, gulping, “When you…when I realized what you were suggesting… I was bottoming out. There was nowhere left to negotiate. If we did… it, properly, and I liked it — and I knew I was going to like it — that was it. I was officially…that. And I didn’t want to be…that. I didn’t want something else for people to ‘other’ me with for life.”

Tara inhaled softly and Willow looked at her with eyes starting to brim with tears.

“You’ve been so patient. You let me have you however I wanted you and I took advantage and I didn’t even really realize it until right now.”

She looked down again briefly, hiding her face as a sob threatened to rise in her throat.

“I’ve been trying, I really have. I know it probably doesn’t seem like it but I have. I’ve spent so many nights…”

Her voice started to wobble.

“I cried and cried,” she explained, dangerously close to doing the same right at that moment, “Up late at night. And I hurt. And I tried to fight and I cried to god. And it didn’t work. So just now it all culminated tonight and I had a moment, a panicked moment and I made you feel like shit and that sucks. But I adore you in every way there is and I think about that and you and I want it, I don’t want you to think otherwise.”
She made herself look at Tara again, showing her vulnerability.

“You asked if I’m attracted to you. I’m so attracted to you it terrifies me.”

Tara couldn’t help but reach out, intending to caress Willow’s cheek. Instinct made her start to pull back, but Willow leaned in and nuzzled, her eyes closing for a moment as she clearly took in comfort from the action. She didn’t flinch when a couple walked past them.

Tara exhaled slowly.

“Willow…” she said softly, trying to take in all of that information.

She blinked for a moment, sliding her hand down to Willow’s shoulder and squeezing it.

“Doing…anything with me doesn’t mean some absolute…I don’t care how you identify, I never did.”

“I know you don’t, but I do,” Willow replied, her voice hollow with pain and low, embarrassed, “I do; as much as I don’t want to, I do. I’m scared of what those words mean to the rest of the world.”

Tara opened her mouth to say she understood, she’d felt like that too, but Willow rushed in first.

“But I finally get that I can’t do this anymore. I can’t live in this in-between place that denies how important you are to me. I can’t bear all the pain I’m causing…both of us. I want to change. I want to be brave.”

Tara’s eyes softened and she brushed her fingers against the nape of Willow’s neck. Willow gulped.

“It’s not—” she stopped to take a moment before speaking more clearly, “I can’t promise I’m going to change overnight. I know I can’t just flip a switch. But I will change how I deal with those bad feelings. I’ll talk to you and I’ll push myself and whatever else I need to do. I’ll rise above this, rise above this doubt.”

“Willow, I love you,” Tara said, inadvertently gripping the back of Willow’s neck tighter, “All I’ve ever done is try to love you.”

“I know. And all I’ve ever done is deny it,” Willow replied sadly, “I don’t want to hurt you anymore.”
“If you want to stop hurting me, then stop hurting yourself,” Tara replied plainly, maybe as plainly as she’d ever spoken to Willow, “You have to be real with me. I never know where I am with you. This stuff, and at your prom and a bunch of other times. I feel like I’m just an experiment or a thrill but you’ll never actually see me as someone you’ll commit to, that you want to be in an actual relationship with. I feel that you just want our friendship and…someone to make out with or flatter your ego or something.”

Willow’s face scrunched.

That hurt.

It was deserved, but it hurt.

“Tara, no, I…” she said, swallowing several times as her mouth went dry and heart began to thud but also determined to say it, “I’m in love with you.”

“You are?” Tara asked, eyebrows lifting in surprise.

“Of course I am,” Willow replied, in a tone that could only be described as bewildered, “How can you even ask that?”

Tara’s hand moved back to Willow’s shoulder, holding her there lightly.

“You never told me.”

Willow’s face slowly fell.

“And I never showed you. Not enough. Not clearly,” she said, shutting her eyes tight as her heart squeezed to a similar tautness, “I guess I always thought in the back of my head what I was doing was okay because you knew…”

She shook her head to herself.

“It’s funny, I used to tell you I loved you all the time, before…It was as easy as saying hello. But then the words meant more and I couldn’t admit it because that was another ‘tick’ in the not-straight box.”

“You can’t even say ‘gay’, can you?” Tara asked, though gentle it still made Willow squirm.
She swallowed again.

This was all very raw and they were so very public but she owed Tara being honest for once.

“I get it. My issues are hurting you and they're hurting us. And maybe the right, proper thing is for me to go away and become a better me by myself. And if you ask me to do that I will. I'll do this trip on my own, I'll make sure we're not in the same place at the same time, I'll take this journey and hope you find your way back to me.”

She scooted closer on her knees.

“But if there's any chance you think we can work this out together…I love you and I just want this to work. I am so sick and tired of being afraid all the time. I just…”

“What?” Tara prompted softly.

Willow exhaled, keeping Tara's gaze.

“I just want to be happy. And you're a big part of that.”

This was everything Tara had ever wanted to hear but she knew Willow, and she knew Willow was great at telling people what they wanted to hear.

“We can't stay in this stasis. I need to feel like you want a real relationship. Not this…rollercoaster. Not one way behind closed doors and another outside. Because if all you want is friends…or friends with benefits…you have to tell me. I-it’s not fair. I promised I’d always be your friend and I will, but I can’t if you—”

“I don’t mean to cut you off,” Willow cut in, sniffling, “But I’ve never wanted to be just friends. I didn’t always understand what that meant, but I do now and I don’t feel any different. I want you to be my…everything. You are my everything.”

Tara’s heart fluttered at the emotion passing over Willow’s face. She watched as Willow took in two short breaths, then crawled on her hands and knees and leaned in to kiss Tara square on the mouth.

Tara could almost feel Willow’s heart thudding just from proximity. She knew how much this was taking and the gesture Willow was making. It was hard not to melt into it until she felt her cheek get wet.
She pulled away and cupped Willow’s cheek, rubbing the tear away with her thumb.

She mouthed ‘it’s okay’, which just made Willow duck her head to hide more tears.

“I have to ask you to be patient. And I know you have been, so much. But if you stick with me I promise I’ll do better. I know that might not mean anything right now but…this is like the very last push off the cliff and I was hanging on by my fingertips. I’m going over,” she said, raising her eyes to Tara’s, “But you make me feel like I can fly.”

Tara could feel her own tears pricking.

“I really need you to mean it this time, Willow. I’ve held back so many times.”

“Don’t hold back,” Willow replied quickly, “Kick me up the ass. If I hurt you, tell me. I won’t run anymore. Nothing is worth feeling how I felt tonight when I couldn’t find you. That’s not who we are. Whatever it is, I’ve…I’ve always been able to find you.”

Tara’s heart burst and she let herself feel the affection behind those words. For better or worse, she was in this. She always had been. She held her hand over Willow’s.

“I trust you.”

Willow sat up, hope etched on her face.

“You wanna try this for real, real? Even…if I’m not perfect?”

“I don’t want perfect, I just want you,” Tara replied in a breath, “The real you.”

Willow shook her head again.

“I don’t deserve you.”

Tara frowned in frustration and had a rare moment of abandoned restraint.

“You don’t get to decide your worth to other people.”
Willow fell back on her butt, stunned as she processed those words.

“Well, shit.”

And with that epiphany, long-ignored neurons went to work igniting new connections that would ultimately heal them both.

They fell into a silence as everything hung in the air between them.

Reconciled but raw: hope and fear and the impending sense that there had been a massive shift and they were both entering into something unknown.

Finally, Willow broke the spell by reaching out to touch Tara’s arm.

“You're freezing,” she said, instantly whipping off her sweater and putting it over Tara’s shoulders.

Tara started to refuse, but Willow insisted and covered Tara’s ice-cold arms.

“Let’s get you inside.”

Tara didn’t protest, the small bit of warmth only highlighted how cold she actually was. It was probably only 45 degrees or so and she’d been sitting in the path of many bustling trees and the associated wind for hours.

She had to stretch her legs for a moment before she could walk while Willow was wiping her own butt and knees free of the dirt she’d sat in.

As they headed for the entrance of the park, she looked around and was surprised to see no one was paying them any attention.

She felt like they’d just put on an entire stage show but other couples were just enjoying their stroll, or people were walking through focused on their music or own thoughts. Even the groups of teenagers were throwing a ball around or laughing at each other’s antics.

No one even looked in their direction until Willow accidentally stumbled into one man, who even then just smiled and apologized and continued on his way.
The way home was filled only with city noise, despite them walking close enough that their elbows kept brushing.

When they got to the hotel, Willow suddenly doubled back when they reached the elevator.

“Wait, one sec.”

The doors opened before she was back and Tara stood in, keeping it open with her arm. More people arrived and before Tara had a chance to react, she was pushed back into the corner and the doors were closing.

Willow jogged back with the second key card and stared at the empty place Tara had been.

Ouch.

She despondently pressed the up button and rode the elevator alone up to the floor.

Tara was waiting when she got there and Willow handed over the key card awkwardly.

“Guess you need this. I gave it in at the desk in case you came back.”

“I didn’t just…” Tara tried to explain, “People just piled in.”

“It’s okay,” Willow dismissed, ducking her head to hide.

As they walked down the corridor, she glanced over at Tara and really noticed how red and raw her eyes were under the bright lights.

For the eighth hundred and seventeenth time in her life, Willow felt guilt and it had only compounded every time since the first.

Once inside the room, Tara went straight into the bathroom and spent quite a while in there.

Willow just sat at the foot of the bed with no idea how to feel.

She wanted to cry, but she didn’t feel she deserved the sympathy it would invoke. Everything still felt so strained. She’d explained, she’d apologized—
She suddenly jumped up and went to the bathroom door. She placed her palm flat on it.

“Tara?” she called through, “I don’t think I said sorry. I am, I’m…I’m so sorry.”

Her hand slowly fell away.

“I’ll leave you alone now.”

She went back into the room and felt lost in the small space. She had never been claustrophobic, but she felt it now.

Tara came back out dressed in her pajamas, face clean and hair tied up.

“I’m going to go to bed. I want to go to the market tomorrow and it starts at 8 am.”

Willow internally squirmed uncomfortably. Tara’s tone wasn’t harsh but she was exhausted and little shoulder devils told Willow she was fed up. Of her.

“I can see if I can get another room for the night.”

Tara looked at Willow strangely.

“Why would you do that?” she asked and briefly ran her hand across Willow’s spine as she passed by.

That small gesture of affection meant so much to Willow, like laying a jacket over a puddle of self-doubt so she could step over it.

“I might go to bed too. Walked around a lot today.”

Tara nodded and Willow moved into the bathroom. She sat on the toilet lid and started rolling her neck to try and relieve some of the tension.

As she rolled it to the right, she spotted her pajamas sitting on top of the radiator. Tara must have put them there to warm them up for her when she was in there.
The puddle started to drain.

She changed into them and brushed her teeth, then used a washcloth to clean her face. When she looked at herself in the mirror, her eyes weren’t red like Tara’s but they were sunken and slightly twitchy with anxiety. She quickly glanced away and folded the washcloth up again.

Back in the room, Tara was already lying in bed. Willow crept over to ‘her’ side, the side she’d been sleeping on. She’d never had a side of the bed before; she just rolled around wherever she wanted.

Except when Tara had slept over, and then no matter how she fell asleep they seemed to end up pressed together in some way.

For warmth, she’d always told herself.

In California.

In fact, the last year had been the least cuddly they’d ever been. Willow figured she’d rejected it so much that Tara had stopped trying.

As she looked across the vast expanse of bed, a chasm of her own making, she desperately wanted to go back to the days of curling up together beneath one blanket.

Now it was so complicated.

But did it have to be?

She looked over at Tara again.

“Could I put my arm around you?”

“Of course,” Tara replied without hesitation or complication.

Willow slid across the sheet and through the barrier of her own mind and slid her arm comfortably around Tara’s waist. She awkwardly settled her head above Tara’s shoulder, who simply turned her head and gave Willow a brief kiss.

Willow almost burst into tears.
All she could see in Tara’s tender gaze was how much hurt she’d put there earlier.

“You know what I said to Donny, that day of my birthday when I went off on him?”

Tara shook her head and Willow lips pursed together, pained.

“I said, ’you don’t just get to indulge your own problems and ignore how much it’s hurting other people’.”

Her eyes closed to hide.

“Such a hypocrite.”

Tara sighed deeply.

“Willow, there is no equivalence.”

“But there’s still some truth,” Willow replied sadly.

Tara placed her hand on Willow’s cheek to force her to open her eyes.

“The truth is that losing yourself in your mistakes is no better than ignoring the mistakes to begin with,” she said, not breaking Willow’s gaze for a second, “And the truth is nothing without promise. Without acknowledgment of how to move forward and not drown in a pool of what was. Without a commitment to be better.”

She sighed again, though lighter this time.

“If you meant everything you said—”

“I did,” Willow replied quickly.

“Did you listen to what I said?” Tara asked with an arched eyebrow.

Willow nodded.
“Yes, every word.”

“The part about hurting yourself?” Tara asked pointedly, “Beating yourself up?”

Willow swallowed deeply.

“Hard to change the habit of a lifetime.”

“I know,” Tara replied through a soft breath, “But you can start tonight.”

She kissed Willow again, who accepted it gladly with a smile to Tara’s mouth as the doubt- puddle evaporated.

It would fill again, but for now, it was gone.

Tara moved her hand over Willow’s head and fell off at her neck.

“Goodnight, Willow,” she whispered as her arm naturally fell to hold Willow’s around her waist.

Willow felt the most peace she’d ever felt by falling asleep with the scent of Tara’s lotion on every inhale.

“Goodnight, Tara.”
Chapter Notes

Please note this fic earns it’s M rating in this chapter; please read or do not read accordingly

**Auckland**

*(Part 2)*

*Every Breath, Every Hour Has Come To This*

“Thanks!”

Willow took the two bottles of water from the vendor and stuffed her change into her wallet. She hadn’t quite mastered the new currency yet and so was paying for everything with bills and shoving the change back into the pocket. She’d come to dread the places she couldn’t pay with her card.

She walked from the little café out onto the deck of the boat. She brought the drinks back to Tara and slid onto the bench beside her on the side of the boat where they had the best view of the water and surrounding islands.

Tara smiled gratefully as she opened her bottle of water.

“We need to get reusable ones. This plastic is so bad for the environment,” she said as the bottle squeezed the air out under Tara’s grip, “It’s so beautiful isn’t it?”

Willow smiled back and nodded.

“Very.”

The boat sailed by one of the islands in the gulf and Willow began pointing.

“Look! Look, little penguins!”
She jumped up to take a picture but misjudged her footing and went skidding on the slick surface. Tara caught the back of Willow’s shirt before she risked being thrown overboard and both of them ended up on their butts, but at a safe standstill.

“Whoops,” Willow said, blushing profusely as a few laughs carried through the wind from the other people on the boat, “Thanks for saving me.”

They helped each other stand; Willow avoiding the gazes of anyone around her, though if she had looked at them, she would see they weren’t looking back anymore.

“That was close. I can see the headline now, Safari Skidding Stupidity: Dumb Tourist Gets Eaten By Orca.”

“Whale,” Tara whispered, looking past Willow.

Willow started to shake her head.

“Actually orcas are dolph—”

“Whale,” Tara interrupted louder than before and pointed in front of her.

Willow spun around and gasped softly as she saw the humongous outline of the whale in the water just a few feet in front of them.

“Whoa.”

Everyone gathered around the railing to watch the whale slowly come to the surface.

“It’s frickin’ huge!” a young boy, seemingly another American tourist, shouted causing a scowl from his mother and a shushing from his father, while most everyone else just smiled.

The whale started to lift its tail fin and moments later it made a resounding smack against the water again, causing a ripple in the water that shook the boat for a minute and a ferocious splash to soak everyone standing over the railings.

Willow spat out some of the seawater that went into her mouth whilst Tara ran her hand over her face to dry it somewhat. They looked at each other and started laughing.
Things hadn’t been tense between them, but they had been a little…off, at least in Willow’s mind. She felt awkward in their interactions. But Tara’s laugh was her happy place and laughing with her was as natural as breathing.

Willow smiled coyly and looked away to take some pictures.

She felt Tara’s arm slide around her waist and a squeeze of fingers around her hip bone. She wanted to look around, to see if anyone was looking, judging, but she didn’t.

She faced forward because she knew the only way she was ever really going to move past this fear was to genuinely stop caring. Until then, fake it ‘til you make it.

Besides, it felt nice to be held like that. Just the loose grip made her feel steady, protected. And she would be lying if she said the soft caress of Tara’s thumb above the waistband on her pants, brushing against the small patch of skin where her shirt rode up, wasn’t disproportionately sensual.

They rode out most of the rest of the boat ride like that, mostly silent but to highlight some wildlife to each other, and continued to get the occasional spray of water from the more playful amongst them.

As they approached the harbor with the sun starting to set, they hiked up to the top deck of the boat where they could sit and watch it disappear beyond the horizon.

“Okay, we definitely need to get out of these wet clothes,” Tara said as they disembarked, thanking the crew member helping them off as she did so.

“Lucky the hotel is just a block away,” Willow replied, her shoe squelching for a moment as she stepped onto the grass, “That was really amazing.”

Tara smiled.

“Yeah, it was.”

She brushed her hand lightly against Willow’s.

“My mom will be so jealous we saw dolphins.”

“I got good pictures,” Willow replied, somewhat bashfully, “You can send them to her.”
“Thanks,” Tara replied gratefully.

They got back to the hotel and wrung themselves out as best they could before entering the lobby. They moved into the elevators as quick as possible and Willow pressed the button for their floor. Just before the doors closed, another older couple stepped in. They took one look at them both, clothes slightly stuck to them and hair bordering on frizzy and promptly stepped back out.

Willow took offense and scowled at them as the doors closed.

“Sorry our clothes aren’t perfectly waterproof!”

Tara pursed her lips, but couldn’t help the laughter tumbling out. Willow looked at her and joined in until they were both almost doubled over.

They just about composed themselves by the time they got into the room and were sobered completely when they stepped into the room and were hit with a blast of heat like they were at one of the volcanoes peppered around the island.

“Whoa,” Tara said, pulling the collar of her wet shirt away from her neck, “It’s hot in here.”

Willow grimaced and went over to the thermometer after dropping her stuff at the table.

“I’m so sorry, I turned up the heat this morning because we got up early and it was chilly. I forgot to turn it back.”

“It’s okay, don’t worry about it,” Tara reassured, “It’ll help our clothes dry out.”

Willow turned into the bathroom and grabbed a towel, which she tossed across the room.

Tara caught the towel and threw it over her neck.

“Thanks, baby.”

Willow nodded in acknowledgment with a curious smile on her face as she ducked back into the bathroom.

That hadn’t felt weird at all. The whole day hadn’t, in fact.
Honestly, if Willow was being truthful with herself, she had only felt things were off because Tara hadn’t ‘tried anything on’ with her since ‘that’ night. Willow didn’t know if she just didn’t want to anymore or…”

*Maybe she’s waiting for me to do it.*

Willow peeled her clothes off and sunk down to sit on the closed toilet lid. She thought some more as she idly wiped herself down with the towel.

She’d unloaded a lot on Tara that night and woken up to a few things too. Tara hadn’t known she loved her, because she’d never shown her.

*I’ve always put the brakes on…I guess now I have to step on the accelerator.*

Tara had put herself out there so many times, so even if Tara rejected her, it was her turn to put up or shut up. It was her turn to make up.

Starting right now.

She nervously stood up.

She wrapped the towel around her and went to the sink to brush her hair, her teeth and give her underarms another roll of deodorant.

*Am I really doing this?*

She crept out of the bathroom and watched Tara, sitting on the side of the bed with her back to her, changed into a tank top and some shorts she slept in while tossing her hair through the towel.

Willow gulped as she watched Tara throw her slightly curled hair back. Unkempt hair shouldn’t be so sexy.

“Do you mind if I put on some music?”

“Sure, go ahead,” Tara replied nonchalantly, with no idea of how she was affecting Willow, or how much she was just cementing in Willow’s mind what she wanted to do.
Willow brought her phone to the clock radio on her nightstand, which doubled as a docking station. She found the T Time playlist and set it to play low, just a bit over background noise. Sade was first up and Willow glanced at Tara out of the corner of her eye, but there was no reaction or recognition of the music Willow always played when they got close.

Though they'd never been as close as Willow was about to suggest.

Willow turned the music up just a touch higher but Tara just moved the towel down from her hair to her arms, still clueless to the tone Willow was trying to set.

Willow bit her lip, watching Tara’s shoulder muscles ripple from behind.

She took in a long, silent breath, then flicked her fingers over the tuck of her towel and let it pool at her feet, leaving her very much naked.

She took a step forward and then suddenly stilled, the enormity of it all hitting her. Two shorter breaths followed and she brought one knee up onto the bed.

Tara felt the sag of the mattress and then some additional trembles through the bed as Willow crawled over to her, but still wasn’t paying much attention. That was until she felt a hand brush away hair from the back of her neck and then soft lips pressed into the spot below her ear and then further into the crook of her neck.

Still completely unaware of the sight that was waiting behind her, Tara tilted her neck to offer more skin and closed her eyes to really savor it, as she’d learned to do from any affection from Willow.

Willow kissed along Tara's shoulder and with her eyes still closed, Tara turned her head and found Willow’s lips, kissing her softly.

She held Willow’s chin under her fingers and opened her mouth to encourage Willow’s tongue into it because honestly, it had been a while since they’d made out properly and she missed it.

She felt Willow’s tongue slide against her lips and she moaned, her hand sliding behind Willow’s neck so her fingers brushed the downy hair at the nape. Her hand slid back over Willow’s shoulder so the base of her palm sat above her collarbone. She could feel the deep thump of Willow’s heart through her skin and her eyes fluttered open to question it.

Her eyelids flickered several times as they focused and then looked downward, realizing Willow was naked. Her eyes shot up sharply to meet Willow’s timid gaze.
“Only if you want to,” Willow said quickly, quietly; enclosing her bottom lip under the top nervously.

Tara took in a soft but audible breath as she realized what was happening. She lifted a hand and cupped Willow’s cheek, running her thumb over Willow’s lips.

“Are you sure?” she asked softly, “Because I meant it. I don’t mind waiting if you’re just honest with me. I don’t want anything you don’t want.”

Willow very gently bit the pad of Tara’s thumb and watched as her pupils completely blew out with arousal. It stirred a level of eroticism in her that she hadn’t known was there.

“I want you,” she said emphatically and emboldened from being on the end of such a penetrating stare.

She brought their faces close together and tugged Tara’s bottom lip between her teeth.

“How’s that for honest?”

Tara now knew why Willow’s heart was pounding so hard because hers was doing the same.

She caught Willow’s neck again and pulled her into a proper smooch. The towel fell off her lap as her waist twisted to be closer to Willow. Her butt scooted back until she could swing her legs onto the bed and she fell back until her head hit the pillows.

Her palms stayed flat on Willow’s collarbone, holding her up on top. Her eyes stayed locked on Willow’s eyes for several seconds before they dropped to finally fully take in Willow’s body.

“Wow.”

She’d imagined this so many times; so many ways but even the most fleeting glance overwhelmed her in a way she hadn’t, couldn’t, anticipate.

Her fingers had touched Willow’s skin, but never so unrestricted, so unconstrained by clothing as a mask for fear.

Willow was soft with gentle curves that Tara knew were there, but were often hidden. Her breasts sat perky and surprisingly symmetrical on her chest with dusky pink nipples taut with no chill in the air to blame it on. Her stomach was flat and met her hip bones at the apex of a V where a flash of red
hair flamed between her legs.

Tara’s stomach somersaulted as she felt a direct response between her own legs.

She dragged her gaze upward to where Willow was trying and failing not to look nervous. Tara pushed herself to sit back up and brought her mouth to Willow’s ear.

“Wow,” she breathed again as she sunk her lips into Willow’s neck.

Willow gasped softly; even the touch of Tara’s lips felt electrifying in a way she’d never known before. She turned her head in and sought a kiss, which Tara gave willingly.

She felt hands wrap around her and roam her back; the longest contact on her bare skin she had ever received. Heat was pooling between her legs and she was scared by how aroused she was becoming, by how out of control it made her feel, but being pressed close gave her a feeling so warm and encompassing she couldn’t imagine being outside it ever again.

She broke the kiss and Tara immediately sought it out again; hungry, thirsty for her. Willow let her lips be taken for another searing moment, then placed a hand on Tara’s cheek to stall again.

Tara’s eyes fluttered open in question and Willow paused to take in just how beautiful Tara looked with her lips bruised and skin flushed.

“I love you,” she said through a soft and awed inhalation of breath.

Her thumb brushed Tara’s cheekbone.

“I haven’t said it since that night…and I don’t want you to think I was just saying it to get out of something…I wanted to wait and say it again when you wouldn’t think I…”

She closed her eyes and shook her head, feeling a babble rise in her throat and threaten to ruin this moment.

“I love you,” she said again finally, surely.

Tara put a finger under Willow’s chin and guided their lips together softly.

“I love you too.”
Willow smiled against Tara’s mouth as it descended on hers again and she forgot everything but kissing the woman she loved.

Tara fell back again and took Willow with her this time.

Willow was hyper-aware of her naked skin scratching against Tara’s clothes but somehow it didn’t feel so terrifying anymore.

Lying with Tara; kissing, necking, giggling.

Just embracing the comfortable connection in their own private little world.

And it really had been awhile.

“We haven’t made out in forever,” Willow said as she stole another kiss and briefly curled her tongue behind Tara’s lips.

“I know,” Tara smiled with a soft laugh, then an even softer look, “And if you only want to make out, that’s okay.”

Willow paused. Tara was giving her an out if she wanted it.

She looked down at Tara and tried to remember how long it had actually been.

Tara’s Prom.

She remembered now.

How she’d almost ‘given in’ that night.

Remembered falling into her bedroom and locking the door to the empty house.

Keeping the lights off because she knew if she saw more than a flash of Tara’s face in the darkness she would have lost that knot of control she was holding onto in her stomach.
Letting Tara’s hand disappear up her dress and under her panties to give her that perfect moment where she was free of fear or insecurity or worry…

…and then she’d closed her eyes and fallen asleep because she’d wanted Tara too much too much to touch her back and there was too much else up in the air to let that part of her unravel.

Willow closed her eyes, back in the moment on the bridge, remembering Tara asking if she just wanted a friend that gets her off.

It had felt so harsh at the time, even after everything that had been said, but Willow saw it now. All of the untruths she’d allowed fester just to try and hide the real truth.

“All of the mistakes I’ve made,” she started, words coming without her planning them, ”None of them have been because I don’t want you.”

Tara curled some hair around Willow’s ear, comforting her as her voice took on a note of strain.

“I know.”

Willow swallowed deeply.

“I have to keep telling you because…I told you so different for so long. I have to know that you know.”

Tara’s hand trailed down Willow’s back and she felt the twitch in her spine and the way Willow shifted in microscopic movements to keep their skin touching.

“I stayed,” she said, keeping Willow’s gaze locked on hers, “Because even when your head denied…your body never did. And I knew you’d catch up. You were never one to fall behind for long.”

She smiled but Willow gulped again and felt Tara’s hand curve on her cheek.

“Darling,” she said gently; a tone so loving Willow didn’t think she’d ever experienced from anyone ever before or ever would again, “Don’t be afraid.”

Willow slowly smiled; the most real smile to grace her face in a long time, a lifetime.
“I’m not,” she said through a single, heavy breath, “I want you.”

Tara curled her fingers around the back of Willow’s neck and pulled her that last inch down until their faces were touching.

“Oh, then you better hurry up and undress me so you can come get me.”

Willow felt arousal spill from her and she would have been embarrassed had she not been so stunned. Tara placed a finger straight under Willow’s chin to close her mouth and it snapped Willow’s attention forward.

She caught the hem of Tara’s tank and pushed it up under her breasts. Tara’s tattoo peeked out, so striking against her creamy skin. Willow ran a finger over the clef and brushed against the underside of Tara’s breast. Tara lifted her arms over her head and let them rest in a circular shape on the pillows.

Willow was panting slightly in anticipation as she peeled Tara’s top up and over her head.

She actually knew Tara’s breasts quite well, by touch.

It wasn’t gay if she only pawed at them and didn’t look, you see.

Clothing cocooned confession.

God, she felt like an idiot.

Especially because despite knowing the curve of Tara’s breast in her palm and how her nipple tightened under her thumb, she was not prepared for the full slight beneath her. They were bigger than she could tell by touch or scattered glances of cleavage. She couldn’t feel more than what could fit in her hand, she supposed.

More surprising was the color of Tara’s pigment where her areolae swelled up to her nipples. She hadn’t really considered that anyone would look anything different to her own lightly blushed pink nipples, but Tara’s were a dark purple and covered a larger expanse of skin.

She felt an immediate oral fixation; her mouth actually watered at the thought of taking them between her lips.

Her hands slid down Tara’s chest and cupped each breast fully. Tara’s back lightly arched into the
touch and Willow gasped at that subtle display of desire. She rolled Tara’s stiff nipples in the space between her fingers and watched Tara’s face flutter with pleasure as did so; teeth lightly digging into her bottom lip and nostrils flaring in perfect sync to when Willow pinched her fingers together.

Watching Tara’s face when she touched her had always been Willow’s guilty pleasure, but now she felt the pedal swing entirely from the ‘guilty’ end to the ‘pleasure’ end.

“You are so beautiful.”

Tara’s eyes settled on Willow’s, glassy and dark, and Willow was suddenly desperate to get Tara’s shorts off and remove that last barrier between them. It was a move a long time coming, much longer than her stripping off and kissing Tara’s neck.

She wasn’t sure what made her do it, but she scratched Tara’s stomach muscles lightly on the way and made Tara’s hips jerk right off the bed. A short groan left Tara’s lips and rang in Willow’s ears, reverberating straight between her legs and only adding to the absolute pool forming there.

She didn’t know how it wasn’t gushing down her legs; it felt like a dam ready to burst.

She curled her fingers beneath the elastic waistband of Tara’s shorts but just before giving that final tug, she looked up at Tara for confirmation.

“Yeah?” she asked breathlessly.

Tara’s chin hit her chest so she could meet Willow’s eye. One messy eyebrow arched on her sweaty brow.

“Are you joking?”

A giggle rose in Willow’s throat and burst out, lighting up her whole face.

Tara lifted a hand and cupped Willow’s cheek.

“You are so beautiful when you smile.”

She brushed her thumb over Willow’s lips and dropped her hand while lifting her hips from the bed again. Willow swallowed to put a little moisture back in her mouth before dragging the shorts down and off Tara’s legs.
Tara bent her knees together and back to help and then let her legs fall open in a V around Willow.

Heart pounding anew, Willow took in Tara’s body; the very thing she’d been so afraid to embrace for so long.

It was terrifying but only in that she could lose this.

Lose her.

She laid down on top of Tara, their hips touching first and then their chests before the final sublime slide of limbs where they got the first press of each other between their legs.

“Oh god,” Willow breathed, her head falling into Tara’s neck to plant wet, open-mouth kisses there as the barest brush of Tara’s thigh made her quiver all over.

She suddenly became overwhelmed by the prospect in front of her. Her lips had never trailed deeper than the swell of Tara’s breast and she didn’t know if what she desired to do was what Tara desired her to do.

Her mouth stalled on Tara’s throat when she felt her larynx protrude on a deep swallow and she slowly pulled her head away.

Tara kept her neck tilted for a few moments until the lack of contact became noticeable. Her eyes opened and head turned to the other side to see Willow frozen.

“Hey…” she said softly, brushing her fingers on Willow’s cheek.

Willow averted her gaze, embarrassed.

“I-I don’t know what to do.”

Tara just smiled softly.

“Me either. We’ll figure it out.”

Willow’s eyebrows rose as if to say ‘really?’ and Tara’s index finger gently tickled under Willow’s ear affectionately.
“Do you remember when we were young and we were playing Twister with Donny? Remember he bet us our allowance he could beat us and if he didn’t he’d leave us alone for a week?”

Willow stared in confusion for a moment. This wasn’t the most optimal time to rehash a childhood memory.

Still, the words triggered the images and Donny breaking the spinner right off the board when he lost.

She nodded that she remembered and Tara smiled fondly.

“He thought he had it all sewed up because we were too young to realize that having two people just hurt our chances. One of us was more likely to fall over the other.”

She twirled a strand of Willow’s hair in that finger and gave it a light tug that Willow found surprisingly arousing.

“But we took our time and we were careful and we twisted our bodies together until he had nowhere left to go but down and we anchored each other up. We figured out how to get our bodies to move together and come…out on top.”

Willow felt Tara’s knee bend and her outer thigh be caressed with Tara’s inner one.

“This is like that…but with kisses.”

Willow’s anxieties fluttered away; even if she wasn’t confident she felt in very good hands.

“And boobs,” she joked; Tara’s resulting smile filling her with the confidence she was lacking.

She made a spinner board in her mind and mentally spun it, but there was only one answer her brain was going to return; what she’d wanted since the moment Tara’s top came off.

Left nipple, mouth.

She met Tara’s eye and smiled shyly.
“Can I?” she asked, referring to nothing and everything all at once.

Tara returned the same smile.

“I’m yours.”

Willow pressed her lips to Tara’s lips softly, then ducked her head lower to Tara’s chest.

She pressed kisses in concentric circles around Tara’s breast until she got to the where the skin puckered and swelled. She could see how taut Tara’s skin was pulled together and it felt so natural now to close her lips around it and soothe it with her tongue.

Tara moaned and her skin just seemed to grow even tighter and strain for more touch. Willow found that reaction fascinating and enticing and was quite willing to give what was asked.

Tara’s chest heaved as each breath became more and more labored.

She’d dreamed of this so many times.

When Willow would stop just short; when she was alone in the dark; when she would lick the pad of her finger and pinch herself in the hopes that it might just satisfy that craving for the sensation she did not know, yet yearned for.

Willow’s mouth was hot and wet and reminded her of how she felt between her spread legs. She imagined Willow’s mouth touching her there the way it was touching her now and she was sure she must’ve left a wet patch on the sheet such was the strength of her reaction.

Unable to be so passive with the massive thumping between her legs, she cupped each of Willow’s shoulder blades, gripping her with four fingertips digging into Willow’s back and her thumb pressing into collarbone on the other side. She massaged those spots a few times, digging into Willow’s skin in time with the twitches of her clit, then gently tugged Willow back up and kissed her.

Willow’s brow creased; worried she’d done something wrong.

“That was so good,” Tara whispered between kisses before Willow could even ask the question, “I want yours.”

She put Willow onto her back and sat back to look at her. Willow might have felt self-conscious only she was too busy looking at Tara too. She ran her hands down Tara’s side and held her by the hips.
Her hand pressed flat over Tara’s bellybutton with the heel of her palm brushing against the hair on Tara’s mound. Before she could process the molten wave she felt inside her as she caressed Tara’s skin, she watched Tara’s head drop to her breasts and felt lips close around her nipple.

“Oh!”

She was surprised by how intense her belly burned as Tara’s tongue ran around her. Her nipples had never been that sensitive to her, never an area she lingered when by herself, but Tara’s mouth was something else entirely and she felt a correspondingly intense responsive twitch in her clit.

Tara’s mouth left her and even in the warm room, she felt a chill hit it and highlight the loss. Tara didn’t leave her hanging in desperation though, as two fingers reached up to twist the peak as her mouth landed on the other side.

Willow felt her breath catch in her throat at the duality of sensation and if she looked down she’d see her chest had become a bright red.

Tara’s palm rolled around her breast and squeezed her flesh and Willow thought, hoped, there might be little nail marks left in her skin; something that left Tara’s brand on her and marked her in the way she’d been so afraid to until now.

Tara felt Willow’s body writhe into her, so willing and wanting and open in a way she just never had been before. It went beyond the lack of clothing, Willow was expressive and eager and giving herself over entirely. It was on a plane Tara had never even known before.

The music was still playing; Massive Attack she thought now.

She’d never been in charge of this playlist mostly because they usually did ‘stuff’ in Willow’s house. Willow was the one who seemed to need more sound in the room when they were getting hot and heavy anyway. Though Tara did have ideas for melodic enhancement to these moments, she actually liked to listen in other ways.

For Tara, her music was how the susurration of the sheet echoed in her ear as Willow’s body wiggled and squirmed; how the headboard banged lightly off the wall when Willow’s torso lifted and dropped sharply back into mattress, driving it backward; when Willow’s head rose and her neck strained back and made the pillows deflate with a whoosh.

All of this still paled in comparison to the symphony of sounds Willow herself was making; the low moans, the sharp gasps, even the slap of thighs as her legs grew straight and pressed together to try and quell the pounding between them.
Tara had played in front of hundreds, sometimes even thousands, of people in the band, as part of orchestras, even busking on the street but nothing was as exhilarating; nothing made the hair on the back of her neck rise with more intensity than playing Willow’s body to the best of her ability.

Her hand rolled over Willow’s breast one last time and started to slide across the expanse of her stomach. She felt Willow’s muscles jump and then a tremble as her fingers brushed past Willow’s mound. She tapped her fingers there as a tickle of anticipation before sliding between Willow’s lips.

Willow moaned, but it turned into a deep groan when Tara moaned too, around her nipple. Her hips twisted and Tara’s fingers slid down more, pressing against her opening for the first time ever.

“Oh shit,” Willow gasped before a whimper fell out of her mouth when two of Tara’s fingers slid back up over her clit.

Tara left Willow’s nipple as a taut, wet nub that made her hiss with pleasure when the friction of Tara’s body ran over. Tara made a point of slowly returning to fully alignment with Willow. With her hand still sliding over Willow’s clit, Tara pressed their mouths together again and felt a string of words and wordless moans fall down her throat.

She toyed with Willow’s tongue and felt a shiver go down her spine when Willow grabbed her cheeks with both hands and kissed her back so desperately.

Two fingers sank deeper again and really toyed with Willow’s opening this time, both of them twitching with anticipation. Willow was slick and Tara could already feel an even deeper heat enticing her inward.

She paused with her forehead on Willow’s and waited until their eyes connected. She raised her eyebrows slightly in question and Willow quickly nodded, her face flushed.

Tara pressed her fingers into Willow’s opening; barely inside, just to the length of her short nails, a half-knuckle. It was like rubbing against silk but so much hotter, a heat Tara just wanted more of.

She slid her fingers up more, maybe a little too quickly, and felt Willow stretch around her.

Willow’s face scrunched and she took in a sharp breath as she processed this new sensation.

“Oh, ah! Mmm…”
Tara’s cheeks immediately drained of their color and her hand snapped back, earning a smarting clench from Willow who immediately missed the intrusion.

“I’m s-s-so sorry,” Tara stammered, her throat tightening like she was about to throw up.

Willow gasped with the ache of the loss; though the despairing look on Tara’s face hurt her much more.

“You did nothing wrong!” Willow said quickly, waving her hands in front of her wildly. “It’s my fault, I’m not—”

“No, absolutely not, I…” Tara started to interrupt, but Willow stopped her with a hand on the shoulder.

“You didn’t hurt me,” she said, staring Tara in the eye to make sure she heard her, “You didn’t. I was just surprised, I…I didn’t know how it would feel.”

She squeezed Tara’s shoulder and her hips rolled toward Tara again. Her voice lowered an octave.

“I don’t want to stop. I wanna try again,” she said, evocative and sure, before she smiled a little, “Maybe just slower.”

Tara closed her eyes, exhaling two short breaths.

“I should have known that. I never asked you if you’d ever…”

She shook her head and quite a few thoughts flew into Willow’s head but she focused on coaxing Tara back into the moment.

“It’s okay. C’mere.”

She sought Tara’s lips and only had to wait a second until the kiss was returned. She felt Tara’s hand touch her cheek, her fingers wet from her brief quest inside. Willow caught her own scent and her stomach churned with arousal. She wondered if Tara smelled the same.

She turned her head and kissed Tara’s fingertip as they sped past before Tara began to disappear back down her body.
Willow’s eyes fluttered closed again as she felt Tara’s hands fall over the curves and peaks of her body back down to her thighs. Willow opened her legs again in anticipation of Tara’s hand finishing its journey there, and so was surprised when instead she felt a mouth seep into her wetness.

“Whoa-oh!” she gasped, followed immediately by a long groan as Tara’s tongue licked her length.

Her legs fell open completely, helplessly. Never had she known something to pull from her and fill her all at once but Tara was doing it and doing it so well.

Tara found herself swallowing again and again and she couldn’t even tell whether it was from the amount of wetness Willow was producing or just how much her mouth watered for it. She’d known Willow’s scent but never close like this, never so deep in her nostrils that it made her brain hazy. Her taste on top was the definition of intoxication and Tara couldn’t stop herself from imbibing.

Willow groaned and moaned and writhed as her body asked for more and more. The clenching inside her just became more and more intense as she craved that feeling of completion she’d briefly flirted with.

“Tara, I…” she moaned, pressing her hips high to meet Tara’s mouth over and over again, “I-I want it. I need it. You. Inside...Please...Oh, please...”

She wouldn’t have imagined herself one to beg but the pull inside her was so deep and unrelentingly empty.

Tara looked up and paused, her lips glistening. She sat up a bit and wiped her arm across her mouth before bringing her hand to Willow, cupping her.

Willow hissed with pleasure and Tara’s fingers were immediately hit with wetness. She, somewhat nervously, dipped her index finger at Willow’s opening, which was completely gushing at this point.

She pushed in very gently to the first knuckle and faced no resistance.

“Is that okay?” she asked, watching Willow very carefully for signs of discomfort.

She felt Willow squeeze her finger; once, then twice and both of their eyelids grew lidded.

“Yeah…” Willow sighed, her hips dragging right back against the sheet, “More.”

Tara wanted it just as much, wanted to feel everything Willow’s depths had to offer.
“Are you sure?”

Willow nodded quickly and found her hand twisting in the sheet as Tara’s second finger stretched her, but so deliciously this time.

“God, yes, Tara!”

Encouraged, Tara began to gently move her fingers in and out and used her expertise in time-keeping to find the rhythm Willow was setting instead of trying to control it herself.

It was a sight to watch Willow unravel; so uninhibited to how she’d ever been before. She’d always hid a little when she came, obscuring her face in the pillow or Tara’s neck but now her whole body was as open as it could be and losing itself in Tara’s touch.

When she was confident her fingers were only pleasing Willow and not adding any pain, she figured out how to angle herself again to return her mouth to Willow’s throbbing clit.

She felt Willow’s thighs tremble when she did so and suddenly she was like a volcano inside; gushing and red-hot and overflowing.

A new sound joined the Willow symphony, a higher pitched cry which Tara realized after a moment was peppered with words.

Words she did not understand but recognized.

It almost sounded like listening to Willow read the Torah at her Bat Mitzvah.

She looked up to try and reconcile what she was hearing but was distracted watching Willow’s back arch and her breasts thrust upward so invitingly. She reached up with her second hand and palmed one breast; the groan it produced only making her wetter. She couldn’t focus on herself right now though, so she released Willow’s breast and let her hand settle on Willow’s stomach.

She massaged there and felt Willow start to jerk, teetering right on the very edge. She watched Willow’s hand twist and turn in the sheet until her knuckles were white, then her fingers curl under themselves. She slid her hand off Willow’s stomach and moved it up the sheet, linking her fingers with Willow’s.

Willow’s fingers caught her and squeezed her tight just as her inner muscles did at the exact same
time and released all the way down Tara’s wrist.

Tara didn’t dare move, nor could she really, because Willow had her held down on all sides. She slowed her mouth and just rested her lips on Willow as she caught her own breath and felt Willow catching hers.

When Willow relaxed her grip, Tara slowly withdrew from all quarters and lifted herself back above Willow’s body. Her eyes were closed so Tara just pecked Willow’s lips and lay down beside her.

She was sweaty, though not as sweaty as Willow’s glistening body. And she was wet, though not as wet as Willow’s glistening lips, still engorged between her legs.

Though with a minimal movement of her own thighs chafing, Tara thought she may very well be just as wet as Willow, but with no satiation.

At least, of a physical kind. She was definitely very satisfied by knowing the feeling of Willow’s heartbeat around her fingers; from hearing the cries that had fallen from Willow’s mouth, coming from a place deep inside that Tara had never reached before; from seeing her spent body thrown back on the bed still catching the breath Tara had pulled from her.

That was definitely satisfying.

Extremely.

After a few minutes of processing everything on her side, she glanced over to Willow, whose eyes were open again, staring up at the ceiling in silent contemplation.

Tara felt a moment of panic rise in her throat, but she pushed it back down. If Willow was panicking too, her adding to it wasn’t going to help things.

She slowly shifted onto her side, holding the sheet up against her chest and casually throwing the other side over Willow.

Willow didn’t really react and Tara swallowed deeply.

“Willow, did I hurt you?”

Willow blinked several times as she turned her gaze to Tara as if remembering she wasn’t alone in the room.
“No, no,” she said evenly, shaking her head from side to side, “Not at all.”

Tara exhaled a gentle breath of relief.

“Are you okay?” she asked softly, “It’s okay if you feel weird. We can talk about it.”

Willow stared at Tara for several moments, taking in each delicate feature on her face. She blinked twice more, heavy lids that closed for more than a second each time and released a breath that made her shoulders slump back gently into the mattress.

“I feel like I’ve felt weird my entire life…and this is the first thing that feels completely right.”

Tara slowly smiled and Willow returned it, then suddenly became very aware of her own body again and the lingering sensations running through her.

“Oh-kay, new muscles.”

Tara’s hand disappeared under the sheet and moments later settled on Willow’s tummy and rubbed gently.

“You okay?”

Willow looked at Tara like she was the moon and the stars.

“I’m wonderful.”

Tara moved her head down to rest on the pillow beside Willow.
“I think so too.”

Willow saw the truth in Tara’s eyes and felt the tenderness in her belly rub and knew she was the safest she had ever been.

Tara kissed Willow’s eyelids and bridge of her nose and trailed off at her ear.

“I love you,” she whispered.

Willow nuzzled her nose against Tara’s cheek and left soft kisses there. Before she could return the sentiment, Tara spoke again.

“Can I ask you something?”

Willow nodded and willed her legs to shift from their jelly-like state so she could comply with whatever request Tara made of her.

And oh wow, she was going to do whatever Tara asked of her. There was definitely an awakening somewhere but she was going to need it to press pause for a moment because—

“Were you speaking in Hebrew?”

Willow did a double-take as she shifted from her own thoughts to Tara’s question.

“Wh-what?”

“When I was…” Tara paused and looked bashful, “Um, it sounded like you were speaking Hebrew.”

Willow shut her eyes tight and tried to remember. Tara was…and then she…yep. Her eyes sprung open, wide.

“Yeah, I have no idea where that came from.”

“Oh,” Tara replied, nodding along, “Okay.”
“My dad would be proud,” Willow joked, then pulled a disgusted face, “Not that I will ever tell him.”

She reached up and tucked some hair behind her own ear shyly.

“It’s um, a prayer, a blessing. We say it to celebrate special occasions…for being thankful for new experiences.”

She cast a furtive glance at Tara to gauge her reaction, but Tara just looked back casually.

“Most people just say ‘oh god’.”

Willow was sure she could see the smirk tugging Tara’s lips into a crooked smile, but all she could focus on was the glint in Tara’s eye, the new flicker of untamed passion and it made her feel wild.

She splayed her fingers out on the back of Tara’s neck and drew them close.

“Do you?” she asked, with only a brief moment of stammering in her words when she felt Tara’s hot breath hit her lips.

Tara felt her stomach clench as she allowed herself to feel the thumping between her legs again.

“Why don’t you find out?”

Willow’s eyes clouded with arousal and she tugged Tara that last quarter inch into a kiss.

Her legs behaved themselves as she rolled onto her side and coaxed Tara down onto her back. She pulled Tara’s bottom lip into her mouth and released it before quickly popping kisses down into Tara’s neck. Her hand found a pert breast and her lips felt the inhalation of breath on Tara’s throat when she closed her hand around it and brushed the nipple.

She started to kiss down Tara’s body, finding the temperature of Tara’s skin to increase the lower she got. Just below Tara’s bellybutton, she found her hands sliding on Tara’s thighs and could feel all the wetness spilling out. She felt her heart start to hammer.

It wasn’t that she was unfamiliar with the area in question. She knew where Tara’s coarse hair became slick skin; exactly where the bump in Tara’s flesh lay and exactly how to engorge it; knew what it felt like to make Tara wet but already this was so different.
She was used to her hand disappearing under Tara’s clothing, sight unseen. She was used to her hand being trapped there with only a limited amount of movements possible. She was used to Tara’s arousal being contained but here she was, on display and overwhelming every one of her senses.

She kissed above Tara’s stomach, her lips slowing.

After a minute or so, Tara brought Willow’s head back up to her and kissed her softly.

Willow felt Tara’s hand on her cheek, thumb caressing her cheekbone and opened her eyes to see Tara looking at her, unassuming and patient.

Willow relaxed a little; it was comforting to have someone just get you and what you need.

“I still don’t know what to do,” she admitted.

That wasn’t strictly true, she knew what to do.

It wasn’t like she hadn’t fantasized about this plenty of times.

She knew the mechanics and she’d also just experienced Tara turning her on and letting the faucet of pleasure overflow through her.

That was the real problem; she didn’t think she could make Tara feel how Tara had made her feel.

“What you always do…what you want to do…what feels right…all of the above.”

Tara’s smile was so genuine and soothing, Willow felt herself calm down a little.

She could start with the first one.

Her hand moved diagonally from Tara’s thigh and her fingertips sunk between her lips.

“Wow,” she whispered as her fingers began to glide so easily.

Instantly wet, she brought them back over Tara’s clit with ease. Tara’s body shuddered, a shudder
Willow knew; a shudder Willow loved because she knew she was doing something right.

She repeated the movement as she had so many times before, but it was so much more this time. She could hear her fingers as they moved, could feel the skin on Tara’s thighs as they quaked, could smell Tara’s arousal as it permeated the air.

As Willow got faster, her fingers would fall lower and lower on each downward slide as she struggled to maintain friction with Tara gushing more and more arousal with every passing second. On a particularly slippery push, three fingertips lightly flicked Tara’s inner wall right at her opening.

Willow gasped and quickly balled her hand into a fist, while Tara moaned and tried to push into the touch that was now gone.

Willow watched Tara’s face and listened to her moans and had to make a decision.

Want to…feels right…okay, here I go.

She brought her fingers back down there and ventured inside, just one this time. The sensation was mind-blowing and the sounds coming from Tara as she moved in and out felt just as good as when Tara was touching her.

Except the music was still playing and muffling some of those noises and that was not okay.

As much as she liked Prince, he was not making her feel like a sexy motherfucker.

She reached out with her other hand and popped the phone from the speaker.

“Do you mind if I shut that off? It’s drowning out the good stuff,” she gushed, then blushed, “Um, I mean, y’know…”

“I do know,” Tara breathed, smirking lightly but with her eyes also silently pleading not to stop.

Willow saw it and pushed in with two fingers, slowly. It wasn’t a stretch at all really but she studied Tara’s face just in case.

“Okay?”

“Oh yes,” Tara moaned.
Willow tried to use her other hand to rub Tara’s clit while she moved in and out but it was a bit of a ‘rub your tummy and pat your head at the same time’ kind of situation and she couldn’t quite pull it off.

She looked down at the way her hand was moving and after a minute or two of watching hypnotically as she disappeared inside, she let her fingers slide all the way out and up to rub before plunging back inside.

That really seemed to get Tara going, her back arching and body twisting as her unstifled moans were rising toward the ceiling.

There was a rising inside Tara too, that beautiful swell that was growing below her stomach and was just a few well-timed thrusts away from imploding. She rolled her hips harder as sweat broke out on her brow and she strained for what her body wanted so badly.

Willow felt Tara get so hot she thought the flesh might actually melt off her fingers but it only made her dig in more. She thought, too late, that that might be a bit too rough, but instead felt Tara immediately come around her.

Willow’s hand was trapped again as Tara’s thighs clamped together but it was a cage she’d never fight to flee.

“Wow,” she whispered in awe, almost entirely inaudibly as Tara pulsated and contracted and made Willow feel as close to heaven as she ever had been.

Or at least a level draw with when their positions had been reversed.

She stayed there as long as she could, then pulled her hand away, looking at it like something so profound had changed that would never be the same.

She would never be the same.

She curled her fingers into her palm and though they were soaked, she had no concern with wiping them like the first time she’d ventured beneath Tara’s panties. She was very content with letting Tara absorb into her skin.

She lay back down beside Tara and watched the gentle heave of her chest settle peacefully. When Tara’s eyes opened, she reached out lazily to brush her fingers on Willow’s cheek.
"You felt good."

And Willow just laughed, because that felt like the understatement of the century. She turned her head and kissed Tara’s fingertips.

"You felt so good."

She leaned in and kissed Tara’s cheek and found her arm curving around Tara’s waist. She needed to stay close.

She was almost asleep when she felt Tara start to shuffle.

"It’s so hot in here. I’m going to open the balcony door."

"No, don’t!" Willow exclaimed, shooting up suddenly, then looking sheepish when Tara raised an eyebrow, "I um…I like the heat."

She didn’t care for the heat, actually. At home she always kept a cool room, preferring to add a blanket if needed rather than be uncomfortably warm.

Tara knew this, of course, so figured out immediately that Willow didn’t mean the heat, she meant their heat; that heaviness in the air that was thick with their combined scents and the energy they’d expended.

"Okay," she agreed easily.

Willow started to look guilty.

"Never mind, if you’re too hot—"

Tara put a finger against Willow’s lips.

"I have never been more perfect than I am at this moment."

Her finger trailed down Willow’s jaw and off her chin. Willow started to duck her head to rest on Tara’s shoulder, but it popped back up at the last second. She bit the corner of her lip shyly.
“Was that okay?”

And now it was Tara’s turn to laugh at the understatement.

“It was so much more than okay.”

She held her hand up and Willow linked their fingers and settled back with her arm over Tara’s waist, conjoined hands at her hip. Her cheek rested on Tara’s shoulder and the rest of her body naturally curled around Tara. One leg was thrown between Tara’s to tangle their limbs together and never had she felt so comfortable to just melt into another body.

Never had she felt so little anxiety about…this.

Or anything.

There was nothing in the world but the simple curve of Tara’s ankle around hers.

She watched herself wiggle her toes against Tara’s and smiled when Tara did it back.

Tara couldn’t help but think in the silence.

“Did you ever imagine it could ever be like this?”

Willow sighed softly.

“Only in my weakest moments.”

A smile graced Tara’s lips, one that didn’t quite reach her eyes but stayed on her face, contemplative.

“Funny. Thinking this could be true were some of my strongest.”

Willow frowned, also contemplatively.

After another stretch of silence, she spoke up quietly, almost so low Tara wouldn’t hear only there were so close and there wasn’t another sound in the room.
“I don’t know why you put up with me sometimes.”

“Oh, Willow,” Tara sighed sadly.

She sat up, which made Willow frown more because she had been enjoying the cuddling immensely.

Tara pulled her hair into a ponytail, then let go, letting it all fall around her shoulders again. She turned to face Willow and caressed her neck tenderly.

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres,” she said emphatically with a pointed look, “That’s why.”

Willow tucked some hair behind her own ear again and forced a smile.

“I didn’t know this is what they meant when they said to know someone biblically.”

Tara knew a Willow-deflect when she heard one but it wasn’t the time to smother Willow out of her insecurities. At least not verbally. She opened her arms and gestured Willow into them, kissing her on top of her head when she settled.

“C’mere.”

She closed her arms around Willow’s middle and let them hang loosely and rested her chin over Willow’s shoulder.

Willow sighed happily and started running her fingers through Tara’s fingers. She lifted Tara’s hand and followed the lines on her palm.

“How are your hands so soft and smooth when you play so much?”

“I take care of them,” Tara explained, “Moisturize…file.”

Willow nodded, then stopped suddenly.

“Wait, you file your nails or your fingers?!”
Tara curled her fingers into a ‘C’ shape and ran her thumb over them to show Willow.

“There’s little calluses there, they help me play guitar. I keep them as small as I can,” she said, dropping her hand to rub them against Willow’s thigh, “I don’t want to miss out on the feeling of touching… other things.”

Willow felt a new tingling start at the base of her spine and turned her head in to kiss Tara’s neck.

“You’re a badass.”

Tara chuckled and she may as well have done it around Willow’s clit for how much it turned Willow on.

“I was always jealous of how well you played, you know,” she said, changing gear in the hopes her body might calm down and she wouldn’t reveal herself to be an insatiable fiend, “But I am just not gifted in the musical arts. As you know.”

Tara smiled at the memory.

“I liked teaching you guitar. I would have kept doing it, but you wouldn’t.”

Willow shook her wrist out in front of her.

“I got my hand stuck in the, the…”

“Soundhole,” Tara provided, but Willow just frowned.

“Don’t dumb down the terms for me.”

Tara smiled again.

“That’s really what it’s called, honey.”

“Oh,” Willow replied sheepishly, “Well, anyway. I’m glad I found out at the ripe old age of 10 and that my parents bore witness and never forced me to take lessons in anything else.”
Tara’s hand ran down Willow’s arm and took her hand, holding it by her stomach. She then took Willow’s other hand and held it higher, positioning both as if she was holding an invisible guitar. She used her fingers to move Willow’s fingers in the right motions to ‘play’.

“I remember you being quite good at the… fingering,” she said in a low voice right in Willow’s ear, which she then dropped to an even lower whisper, “You’ve only gotten better.”

Willow felt her stomach bottom right out and quickly turned in Tara’s lap.

“Okay, yep.”

“What?” Tara asked in confusion and surprise.

Willow took Tara’s face in her hands and pulled her forward.

“Now, you c’mere.”

Tara allowed herself to be pulled into a kiss and then pulled under Willow’s body and then pulled beneath the sheet so Willow could pull another orgasm right out of her.

With a fresh layer of sweat cooling on their bodies, both heads popped out, hair tousled and cheeks red.

“Water,” Willow gasped, trying desperately to lick her lips.

Tara raised her head just an inch off the pillow and looked around aimlessly.

“Where?”

Willow frowned and cast a hazy eye around her room. She spotted her backpack on the floor at the foot of the bed and sluggishly turned herself around to reach for it. She had to keep shuffling forward until she almost fell right off, but then felt Tara’s hand close around her ankle. Willow grabbed the bag, shuffled back and threw herself alongside Tara again.

“Teamwork,” she said, holding her hand out for a high five before she unzipped the bag and produced the bottle of water from the bottom.
As she downed the liquid down her grateful, parched throat, Tara looked over her shoulder to the other contents in the bag.

“Are those chips?”

Willow passed the water over and dug out the bag Tara was referring to.

“Pitta chips!” she said victoriously, reaching in for a tub poking out, “WITH pesto hummus.”

Tara glugged some water and wiped her mouth with her arm.

“Oh if I didn’t love you before…”

Willow giggled and cracked open both the chips and the dip. They both dug in with plenty of hunger and little grace but neither cared.

“This is so unattractive,” Tara said, using her hand to cover her mouth so she wouldn’t expel anything she was enthusiastically chewing on.

“I don’t even care,” Willow replied, doing the exact same thing.

They both looked at each other and giggled, the smiles exchanged through their eyes if not their covered mouths.

When Willow had finished chewing, she wiped at her mouth and leaned over for another kiss on Tara’s cheek.

“I love you.”

Tara caught Willow’s hand between them and squeezed it.

“I love you too.”

Her fingers brushed over Willow’s knuckles and god help her if Willow didn’t feel something bloom again.

She felt like a broken faucet; any minor touch had her overflowing everywhere.
With just enough cognizance to get the chips and dip off the bed so they weren’t rolling around in a basil-y mess, she launched herself at Tara again and was met with a quite willing response.

Many hours later, with the room in darkness but for slivers of light breaking through the curtains, they lay in a tangled heap of limbs and sheets, passed out together.

Tara was the first to stir to a pattering noise somewhere in the distance. She raised her head from the pillow, which she quickly realized was Willow’s breast and enjoyed a moment of staring before moving her gaze away.

She brought her hands up to rub her eyes and gently stretched, trying to avoid too much motion that might wake Willow.

Her body felt odd — like she’d run a marathon but had also just gotten a thorough post-run massage. Muscles worn out but relaxed and an echo of past exertions aching deliciously in one place in particular. It was like a pleasure hangover but she enjoyed the dizziness.

Everything felt full; her breasts, her heart, her…oh, her bladder.

She carefully tried to extract herself without waking Willow and thought she got away with it as she slid off the bed and hurried toward the bathroom, holding the sheet to her chest with the rest of it trailing behind her.

Willow woke as the sheet scurried past her legs and then heard the click of the bathroom door closing. It took a moment, but just a moment, to put that together with the empty bed and figure out where Tara was gone, but that moment was a sick feeling that this had all been a dream.

But then she smelled Tara’s vanilla-y scent on the pillow and she knew it was real. She glanced down at herself in the dark and wondered if her body looked more womanly. She felt more womanly, whatever that meant.

The bathroom door opened again and Tara crept into the room. Willow watched her walk over to the curtain with raised eyebrows. Not even the cover of darkness could stop her noticing Tara’s round butt staring back at her. As Tara peeked out of the curtain, a ray of light shone in and hit her like a perfect halo.

Willow could only nod silently in agreement with the early sun.

She picked up on the same sound that had woken Tara and noticed little droplets on the sliver of
glass that was exposed.

“Is it raining?”

Tara jumped, dropping the sheet and quickly bent to pick it up again with a blush.

“You’re awake.”

“Mm-hmm,” Willow replied, smirking at the flash she got.

Tara pulled one half of the curtain back, enough to let the light in and show Willow it was bucketing down outside.

“Yes, it’s raining. Pouring, in fact.”

It was Willow’s turn to blush as the stream of light that came in very much focused on exactly where she was lying, and she suspected on purpose.

“Glad we’re not on the boat today,” she said, casually rolling onto her stomach, “There’s nothing planned for today at all actually…did you want to…do something?”

Tara leaned back and made a point of dragging her eyes down Willow’s body slowly.

“Well, there’s no point in going out just to get… wet.”

Willow was completely captivated by this new, bold tone Tara had adopted.

Being friends for so long, there had always been a certain comfortableness and familiarity between them, but Tara seemed to have a whole new self-assuredness and it made Willow tingle in all the right places.

She smirked.

“I guess we’ll have to entertain ourselves indoors.”

Tara smirked back and started to step toward the bed but stopped when Willow pointed at the door.
“Wait, put the Do Not Disturb sign up.”

“The what?” Tara asked, brow scrunching adorably.

“On the door there. The hanger that says ‘Do Not Disturb’. Just hang it outside,” Willow explained, “It’ll stop housekeeping from coming in at an… inopportune time.”

Plus Willow got to see a little more of Tara’s butt moving about.

Tara checked the things hanging off the inside of the door.

“I don’t see it.”

“Oh?” Willow asked innocently as if she hadn’t hung it there the day before already, “Check outside?”

Tara hid her body behind the door and pulled it open just enough to check if the sign was hanging off the outside doorknob before quickly closing the door again. She turned back with a blush.

“It’s there but I think the cleaning lady caught me.”

“You were just checking the sign,” Willow replied with a soft shrug, “She doesn’t have secret x-ray vision. She doesn’t know what we’re doing in here.”

She ran her palm over the sheet where Tara’s body had vacated.

“Or what we…should be doing.”

Tara crossed over to the bed in record time and slid back onto the under the sheet.

“And what’s that?”

Willow yanked some of the sheet Tara had wrapped around her body over her, tugging them together in the process.

“Sharing the sheet.”
She turned her head in and kissed Tara’s lips; both of them smiling against each other.

Tara started to lean over on top of Willow, but after she brushed her hand over Willow’s stomach, there was a squeal. Tara’s hand sprung back.

“What is it?”

Willow’s face bunched up in a grimace.

“I have to pee. Sorry!”

Tara could only chuckle.

“Go,” she said, lightly pushing Willow away as she slid off the sheet and scurried off into the bathroom.

When she was finished washing her hands she looked in the mirror and paused for a minute. She turned her head from side to side, then up and down and ran her hand down her neck.

She looked the same.

She sure as hell didn’t feel the same.

She tried to isolate the many feelings, physical and emotional, that poured through her and she realized her reflection was different. She was smiling.

Unconditionally, unreservedly smiling.

And she didn’t hate the person who was staring back.

She picked her toothbrush up from the sink and tossed it to her other hand, humming as she wet it and spread some toothpaste across the bristles.

“Why’d it take so long to see the light? Seemed so wrong, but now it seems so right What a lady, what a night.”
She quickly ran the toothbrush over her teeth to freshen her mouth for the copious activity she planned on doing with it. She rinsed and quickly splashed her face before returning to the bed, more comfortable with her nakedness than she’d ever been, even on her own.

“Sorry,” she apologized for the disruption, “Very unsexy.”

“I think you have a lovely voice,” Tara countered sweetly.

Willow hesitated with her legs almost on the bed.

“I meant the running off to pee,” she clarified, then blushed as she realized what Tara meant, “You heard that?”

“You peeing?” Tara asked with a raised eyebrow.

Willow shook her head.

“No, the—” she stopped and tensed her jaw to stop from talking, “I think I’m going to shut up now.”

Tara crept closer, smirking with a mixture of amusement and seduction.

“I think I might be able to help with that…”

The last word Willow would use to describe Tara was ‘predatory’ but there was no other word to describe the look in her eye as she climbed over Willow. Yet instead of feeling helpless, Willow willingly surrendered as Tara molded their bodies together and kissed the breath from her lungs.

Outside, the rain poured and poured, soaking the city.

Plants drank, puddles formed and most people grudgingly got on with their day tolerating the disruption, except for the inhabitants of room 1113 who focused all their attention to the dripping between each other’s thighs and not what was sliding down the window pane.

Tara lay upside down on the bed, chewing on a protein bar for dinner that had been rummaged from the bottom of her cabin bag when they’d run out of their supply of local snacks.

Willow’s feet were by her head and she couldn’t resist reaching one finger out to brush the sole of
the nearest one. Willow’s feet immediately tucked in beneath her.

“Hey!”

Tara giggled.

“You have cute feet. I was just admiring.”

Willow turned around and threw her naked body alongside Tara.

“Your admiration felt a lot like tickling.”

“It’s my love language,” Tara countered, biting a peanut butter chip from the bar, unintentionally and effortlessly seductive.

She offered the end of her bar to Willow by holding it against her mouth and brushed her thumb against Willow’s lips as she pushed it inside.

Willow had to close her eyes because she probably would have choked if she tried to eat and look in Tara’s eyes as they were at that moment.

She’d spent the whole day watching them close-up and how they changed based on movement, or sound, or words, or stage of climax (that was her favorite bit to watch) and she didn’t think she’d ever reach a point where she wouldn’t find them fascinating.

She’d spent 15 years looking into the same pair of eyes almost every day and somehow they managed to be so comfortably familiar and newly thrilling all at once.

She felt Tara’s finger trail under her chin and down her throat right as she swallowed. It dipped into the hollow and Willow had no idea how Tara could be turning on again after everything they’d gotten up to in the past hour, the past several hours, the whole day and night.

It shouldn’t even be possible. Surely there was a point where it was enough, but she didn’t seem to be reaching it today.

Tara’s lips ghosted that same spot, lingering there for a moment before kissing back up to Willow’s mouth. She kissed the corner and gently turned Willow onto her back, letting her body roll on top before she finally quenched the mutual thirst for a kiss.
Willow’s hands ran from Tara’s scapula down her spine and took two handfuls of her butt. It still felt naughty but any residual weirdness was well and truly gone.

Her hands, Tara’s hands, mouth, teeth, thighs; it didn’t matter. Any part of Tara was welcome to touch any part of her and she considered it a personal mission to know Tara’s body in the way she knew her personality and humor and love.

Because, oh boy, did she know Tara’s love. She’d never appreciated it enough because she was so afraid to admit it even existed but even in just a few days of lifting the veil she’d become so aware of it, like an invisible security blanket that was always there but only now could she see it in all its glory and was able to hold on tighter.

She could also hold Tara’s ass tighter, and did, squeezing her buns and using the leverage to move Tara’s body gently on top of her.

The grinding got a little more intense and Willow’s hands ended up in Tara’s hair, pulling her closer and thrusting her hips upward.

Tara gripped Willow’s bucking hips and kept the them both locked together at the mouth as she sat back in the midst of the passionate kiss. She sat in the middle of the large bed and spread her legs outward, holding Willow in her lap with a leg tossed either side of Tara’s waist.

Willow could almost feel Tara burning between her legs from the close proximity, especially when Tara would lightly tug at her hips. Tara’s hand reached over and brushed over the hair at the apex of Willow’s thighs. Fingers dipped into her wetness and over her clit and Willow dropped a string of moans into Tara’s mouth.

She quickly dropped her hand between Tara’s legs and found her wet and ready and eager for her touch. She found Tara’s clit quickly and circled her fingertips back and forth, subconsciously taking on the same rhythm Tara was using on her. It worked, letting their arms slide without getting in each other’s way. They both had to scoot back together once or twice but they never broke the kiss, just smiling against each other when they had to make the little readjustments.

Willow started to come first, reducing her participation in the kiss to a few sharp breaths but only slowed completely for a few moments before resuming the pressure of her fingers so Tara could follow. It was only about a minute or so later that Tara shuddered into Willow’s neck and finally slumped forward.

Tara left a messy kiss on the side of Willow’s neck and moaned just under her earlobe.

“You’re so good at this.”
Willow shivered at the feel of Tara’s breath on her skin and sighed happily.

“I am?”

Tara left a light kiss below Willow’s ear, so light Willow thought she might have imagined it, and fell back onto the bed. Her head hit the pillows and her back did a perfect arch as her legs stayed open in a V around Willow.

“Mnhhm.”

Willow couldn’t help her eye being drawn down to Tara’s very open legs. Tara’s words echoed in her ears and she licked her lips.

“M-maybe I could—”

Suddenly there was a knock on the door, which came as a complete shock to the two of them who had forgotten that other people, or anything else in the world, also existed.

Tara looked at Willow to see if she knew who it was, but Willow just shook her head silently. Tara nodded in that direction.

“Go get it.”

“Why me?” Willow asked frowning.

“I can’t,” Tara explained.

Willow held up her hands in question.

“Why?”

Tara blushed, but it was coy.

“I can’t move, I just…”
“So did I!” Willow replied indignantly.

Tara lazily reached and brushed her hand against Willow’s outer thigh.

“You’re already halfway up, and you’re closer to the door…”

There was another knock and Willow sighed as she found her legs under her and quickly threw on the hotel robe as another knock rang out.

“I’m coming, I’m coming.”

“You were a minute ago,” Tara whispered, but Willow heard it and shot her a look.

Willow went to the door and only opened it enough to poke her head out, but Tara was quick to cover herself up with the sheet just in case.

A man stood on the other side, walkie-talkie in hand. Willow’s eyebrows lifted in anticipation.

“Hi.”

The man looked relieved and hooked his walkie back to his belt.

“We’re just doing a welfare check, ma’am. We do it on all rooms with the do not disturb sign up for an extended period. Is everything okay?”

Willow knew her blush would be all too evident under those harsh hotel lights.

“Uh huh. All good.”

He just nodded, relieved there was no mess to clean up. He held up his hand as she began to walk away.

“Sorry to bother you, ma’am.”

“No problem,” Willow replied in a high-pitched voice, slamming the door closed again quickly.
She leaned back against it and smirked at Tara’s hasty attempt to cover up. She returned to bed, dropped her robe and climbed over Tara.

“I’m just holding a girl hostage and rendering her immobile through a series of…” she stopped, embarrassed, then grew more embarrassed at her own embarrassment, “Um…kisses. And…”

“Kisses,” Tara echoed, pressing her lips to Willow’s softly, just for a moment, “And…?”

Willow collapsed beside Tara and scurried under the sheet with her.

“This kinda…”

“Love?” Tara suggested.

“Love,” Willow agreed with a slow smile, “I kinda forgot the real world existed.”

“Me too,” Tara replied, finding Willow’s hand under the sheet and linking their fingers.

She leaned her head down against Willow’s shoulder and Willow turned her head in to kiss the top of Tara’s head.

“I’m starving,” Tara said, briefly running her hand over her stomach before lifting her chin up to smile at Willow, “But I’m not leaving this bed for anything.”

She pecked Willow’s lips again and then her nose scrunched up.

“Well, just for a minute.”

She smiled softly and scooted out of bed to go into the bathroom. When she came out a few minutes later, Willow was checking her phone.

“Oh, now the real world really is back,” Tara said with a wry smile as she joined Willow in bed.

Willow placed the phone screen-down on the sheet.

“Sorry.”
“It’s fine,” Tara replied as she snuggled in, “What’s happening on the outside?”

Willow shrugged one shoulder.

“Nothing.”

She brought her phone up in front of them and showed Tara the random social media chatter.

“…it all seems so trivial. Doesn’t it? I mean how can life just seem so the same out there when…”

Tara brushed some hair from Willow’s brow.

“When it changed so much in here?”

Willow shook her head with self-derision.

“Silly.”

“Not in the slightest,” Tara replied and leaned up to kiss Willow’s cheek.

Willow smiled at Tara and shoved her phone away again. They cuddled up and chatted comfortably until there was another knock on the door.

Tara’s eyebrow arched in annoyance.

“Again?”

Willow smiled and threw her legs out of the bed.

“No, it’s me this time,” she said, getting the robe back on and opening the room door, stepping outside it, “I’ll bring it. Thanks.”

Willow grinned as she pushed a cart in with two silver domes sitting on it.

“Food, glorious food.”
Tara sat up, holding the sheet to her chest.

“Room service?” she asked anxiously, “Isn’t it crazy expensive?”

“Don’t worry, I got it,” Willow dismissed, then frowned when Tara continued to seem concerned, “You said you were hungry.”

Tara felt conflicted but she couldn’t — wouldn’t — let them fight now.

Not today. Willow was only being kind.

She finally smiled.

“Thanks. That was really sweet. What have we got?”

Willow beamed and rolled the cart by the bed. She took the first dome off.

“I wasn’t sure what you wanted, so I got us a platter.”

Tara’s belly rumbled as she took in the spread. There was halloumi cheese, a variety of dips, arancini, cubed watermelon, flatbreads, rolled prosciutto and mini bruschetta. It was like the fancy platters Tara used to have to serve at the country club but had never actually had opportunity to sample.

Tara spread some hummus on a flatbread with halloumi and prosciutto and took a bite. She couldn’t hold back the smile.

“‘Kay, is ’eally goog!”

She blushed and swallowed what was in her mouth.

“Okay, it’s really good.”

Willow shed the robe once again; surprised, but also not, that nakedness was actually becoming her preferred state of being, at least when it was just her and Tara.
They ate each and every bit of the platter (the quantity of contents actually meant to generously serve four adults), and barely left any crumbs. When they were done, Willow cleared everything back to the cart.

“Dessert?” she asked with a mischievous smile and just as Tara was about to lean in to claim said dessert, Willow took the second dome off and revealed the actual dessert.

Two imperfect discs of meringue, separated by layers of berries and cream with the fresh fruit of the juice running down the sides.

It was a pretty good second choice, Tara reasoned.

“It’s pavlova,” Willow said as she handed Tara a fork, “National delicacy but not one of those objectionable ones made from questionable animal parts.”

Tara made the fork glide through the meringue, making it crack and flake with a crunch as she scooped it onto the utensil. With a little bit of everything perfectly balanced, she held it out for Willow to eat.

Willow smiled and closed her mouth around the offering. It all melted together on her tongue and as she swallowed she felt Tara’s thumb brush an errant bit of cream from the corner of her mouth. Not to be outdone, Willow offered Tara some of the dessert in the same way. They fed the whole plate to each other, often purposefully dabbing cream in opportunistic places just to rub or kiss it away.

Willow dragged her finger across the empty plate to get the very last bit of it and brushed it on her own lips with a grin. Tara returned the smile, leaned in and kissed Willow and very slowly pushed Willow onto her back and hovered over her on her forearms.

She gently nuzzled their noses together.

“I love you.”

Willow closed her eyes as Tara peppered kisses along her jaw. She brought her hand to Tara’s cheek and opened her eyes as she smiled.

“I love you too.”

Tara kissed Willow for a moment and rolled off, holding her stomach.
“I ate so much.”

Willow brought the blanket around them comfortably. She snuggled in.

“A little rest is probably a good idea anyway.”

Tara’s arms found their way around Willow to hug her close.

“But just a little.”
Tara skidded out of the hotel, still trying to smooth out the collar on her sweater with Willow on her heels tucking her shirt into her pants.

Willow pointed ahead aggressively.

“There!”

“Where?” Tara asked, looking between a line of different cars.

Willow ran to a Toyota and opened the back door.

“This one!”

They both slid into the back seat, panting and their driver smiled at them through the rearview mirror.

“Hey ladies. Off to the bridge?”

“Fast, please,” Willow requested politely. She fixed her seatbelt over her body and threw Tara some side-eye and lowered her voice, “This is your fault.”

Tara looked at her incredulously.

“Me? You were the one who…!”

“You bent over!” Willow hissed.

“I was putting my shoes on!” Tara retorted, finally settling her sweater around her neatly.
Willow crossed her arms over her chest lightly.

“You knew what you were doing.”

Tara rolled her eyes and took in a deep breath to catch her lungs up from the run from the room.

Willow watched Tara’s chest lift with the breath and found her hand automatically creeping toward Tara’s thigh.

Tara caught Willow’s hand as her fingers brushed the inseam of her jeans and pushed it off.

“Stop it!” she whispered, though her harsh tone contrasted greatly with the blushing smile blooming across her face.

The car got them to their destination fast, as requested, and parked in a little lot that lay parallel to the bridge. Their driver lifted his hand to wave goodbye.

“Enjoy the climb. Don’t look down, huh!”

Willow and Tara returned the friendly smile as they rushed out of the car toward the little unit where they were to check in. A young man stood in there with an iPad and smiled as they came in.

“Kia ora.”

Willow stepped forward.

“Um, hi. I’m Willow, um, Rosenberg,” she said, blushing lightly, “This is my girlfriend. Tara. Sorry, we’re a little, um, late.”

Tara looked at Willow, shocked for a moment but Willow didn’t notice as the man with the iPad came to greet them.

“That’s no problem, you’re the only two booked for the tour, eh!” he said cheerfully, “Some people got spooked by the rain we’ve been having but couldn’t ask for a nicer day out there. Let me run you through how things’ll work today and then we’ll get you suited up. I’m James, by the way.”
After a short but thorough briefing, they were brought to get into the safety suits and don helmets for their climb across the Auckland harbor bridge. The suit was grey and black and zipped right up to the neck.

“I feel like a Ghostbuster,” Willow said as she turned out the cuffs, “I keep expecting a 40-year-old white guy to come over and tell me I’m ruining his childhood.”

Tara laughed and Willow looked down bashfully.

Another woman approached, cheery.

“I’m Shan, I’ll be your guide today. Looks like you’ll be getting a private tour. Lucky, eh? First, we’re going to be climbing under the bridge to get us to the walkway, so keep those helmets on securely. Let’s clip you into the railing here.”

Willow went ahead of Tara, but they trailed closely together as they started the ascent up to the top of the massive, sprawling bridge that stretched out over the water.

They walked under the structure at first and were given an informative lesson on the history of the building of the bridge. They got to a stairway that led them up to follow the outer curve of the bridge and immediately they could see the city and the harbor for miles.

Cars sped past beneath them and it was exhilarating to watch them zoom past and be so high above them.

Both kept their nearest hands on the railing to keep some steadiness in the somewhat-shaky arching walk but Willow kept looking back to smile at Tara and see if she was finding it just as thrilling.

At the very top, the wind was whipping their faces but the sky and water reflected a serene blue against each other and the sun poking out from behind the clouds made the cityscape glimmer in the distance. It was awe-inducing.

Shan had a camera to take pictures of their reactions and caught them both with various city and water backdrops.

“It’s amazing up here,” Willow said loudly to Tara to be heard over the cars rushing below, “I thought I’d be scared but I’m not.”

Tara smiled and snuck a very quick kiss on Willow’s cheek from behind. It was a split second but Shan caught it in a picture and then stayed a few feet away to let them enjoy the feeling of being on
The journey back down was more of a leisurely stroll but things started to bustle again as they returned to the small building they’d arrived to and prepared for the second stage of this adventurous morning.

They’d gone up and now it was time to go down.

They took off the coveralls and helmets and were fitted with new harnesses that attached over their chests and around their waists.

There were a few more people waiting this time and they joined the group to follow them back under the bridge. They went across a walkway to a new staircase that brought them to a small pod set up with equipment and crew and had a window behind it where everyone was brought to wait for their turn.

They were safely behind a see-through wall but it did nothing to stop Willow from seeing how far down it was. With no trusty clip to keep her anchored this time, she started to feel nervous.

It only grew as the first person in the group finished getting set up and jumped from the launch pad like it was only a few inches down. Willow felt her stomach drop with him.

Tara noticed Willow start to sweat on her brow and discreetly took her hand between them.

“Honey, are you okay?”

Willow turned to her, pale.

“I don’t think I can do it,” she whispered, a quiver in her voice, “The scared stuff, definitely hitting me now.”

“You can, I know it,” Tara whispered back confidently.

Willow was moments away from a full-blown freakout.

“No, I can’t, I can’t. You go, I have to leave, I—”

“What if we did it together?” Tara interrupted her voice still low and not disturbing a single another
person in their midst.

Her hand held Willow deceptively tight with just enough pressure to be reassuring but not too much to make her feel trapped.

Willow’s breath evened a little bit.

“C-Can we do that?”

“Yeah, we can do a tandem jump,” Tara replied with a soft smile, “We can make each other brave. Please? I could use the help.”

Willow gulped and blushed.

“Yeah, okay,” she replied, feeling a weak but renewed sense of gumption, “For you, I can…I can do that.”

Her heart was still hammering but it was easier to breathe through it. Surprisingly, she felt herself get calmer as she got closer, but she thought that might be because they started to tether her to Tara.

Where Tara went, she would go too, and that was the safest feeling in the world.

Their feet were weighted down and the ropes were attached and everything started to feel very real. Though the line between terror and elation started to ebb in the latter’s direction.

The ledge grew near and Tara started to feel her anxiety rising as well. But then Willow squeezed her hand at just the right moment and they shared a look and stepped forward together.

A three-second countdown felt like at least fifteen as they both stood on the edge, arms wrapped around each other, staring down at the vast body of water beneath them.

Tara looked at Willow and mouthed ‘ready?’

Willow shook her head from side to side, but then a slow smile spread across her face and she was the one to bring them over the edge and free-fall 130 feet to the water’s surface.

Willow screamed a series of, or perhaps one very long, giggle as they fell; their arms wrapped around each other as tight as could be. Just before the upward swing, they locked eyes and Willow
didn’t hesitate for a moment to shut herself up with Tara’s lips. She allowed her arms to go freely and gave herself over to the rush of it all.

Tara’s exuberance was quieter but no less profound as colors and shapes rushed before her eyes and then Willow’s lips were on hers and her whole world was in a spin. When Willow’s arms let go of her waist, Tara did the same and their bodies slowly swayed and bobbed to a halt.

“Whoa,” Willow breathed as the ropes steadied and their bodies began to be pulled upward.

“Whoa,” Tara agreed, swallowing deeply during the time it took for the brief ascent.

They stumbled back onto the platform and it was a blur of getting freed from the ropes and joining the rest of the group to return back down to the ground.

Willow looked through all of the pictures and video that had been taken of them and though initially, she considered those extra packages to be a bit of a scam, she felt something like liberation in her heart when she watched the video of the jump and how freely she’d kissed Tara in the moment. The photos on the bridge were quite intimate and Willow realized their guide must have known what was up and passed no remark.

In fact, she continued to take pictures of them. It was another flicker of hope that pushed away some of the fear of being othered that lived in her deep down inside.

“Can I get copies of everything? Thanks.”

James the iPad guy handed her an envelope with a USB key and business card with a link to download. Willow had never as easily parted with a couple of hundred bucks. She would never forget this experience or the 30 or so seconds where she’d felt utterly free.

Willow made her way out to the front of the building where Tara was waiting.

“Hey.”

“Hey!” Tara greeted enthusiastically, folding her arms around Willow.

Willow smiled at the surprised envelopment but completely understood. They’d been bonding emotionally and physically more than ever lately and sharing that adrenaline rush only added to it.

They reluctantly parted but stayed close.
“We have to get back to the hotel,” Willow said, holding the envelope with the media in it close to her chest so she didn’t lose it, “They could only extend check-out for an hour. We didn’t plan this very well.”

“Well we didn’t put staying in bed so much on the itinerary,” Tara replied as she blushed and reached behind to scratch the back of her neck, “They have a shuttle that drops us around the corner from the hotel over there. Oh, it looks like it’s leaving.”

They both hurried toward the bus but went different ways around a lamppost and Willow skidded right through a patch of mud still in a puddle from yesterday’s rain.

Tara heard the thump of Willow hitting the ground and spun back around.

“Willow!”

Willow grimaced as she let Tara help her back up. Her chin was smeared down her neck and her hands were covered in mud she had to sheepishly wipe on the grass and then against her pants.

“I’m okay.”

The bus turned out onto the street in front of them. Willow sighed.

“Guess I’m walking. No one is going to let me in their car like this. Hey, you go ahead.”

Tara shook her head.

“I’m sticking with you.”

She brushed her hand against Willow’s and Willow smiled as their palms touched, mud be damned.

The walk back to the hotel took them straight along the harbor back into the city and really was a lovely way to get their last views of the city.

“I almost can’t believe we’re leaving…” Willow said sadly, “I know we’ve only been here a little while but…it just feels like so much has happened.”
Tara squeezed Willow’s hand.

“We’re not leaving it behind, we’re bringing it with us.”

Willow briefly leaned her head against Tara’s shoulder.

“I love how you see the world.”

They arrived back at the hotel and hurried quickly through the lobby.

“I think they think we’re the most uncouth guests they’ve ever had…” Willow whispered as she repeatedly pressed the elevator button.

“I got used to that attitude when I worked at the country club,” Tara whispered back, smiling playfully.

Willow swallowed guiltily. That one still hung on her mind.

They stepped into the elevator and Tara pushed out a breath of reminiscent frustration.

“Thank god I got out of there. I could never have justified quitting but I hated it there.”

Willow lifted an eyebrow, surprised.

“Really?”

“Oh yeah,” Tara replied, then smiled apologetically, “No offense.”

Willow quickly shook her head.

“Zero taken. I hate it there too,” she replied, then slowly continued, worried about putting this out there and having her guilt compounded, “Does it not bother you, you know…being fired…having that on your record?”

Tara shrugged gently.
“I don’t think one job at 17 is going to follow me around. And it pushed me into the job at Honkerburger because they were the only place I could find that didn’t ask for a reference. I made good money there. The country club people never tipped. I might not have been able to scrape together the money for the ticket when the accident happened if I’d stayed there.”

Tara gently brushed her shoulder with Willow’s and lowered her voice.

“And it was never your fault.”

Willow should have known better than to think she could sweep that under the rug without Tara ever knowing. Tara always knew.

“I should’ve stuck up for you,” she admitted, “I just let it happen.”

“I slacked off is the truth of it,” Tara replied evenly, “And I got caught insulting a guest. I forgot it wasn’t just the two of us giggling in your bedroom. That’s my fault.”

She smoothed her hand over Willow’s hair.

“Really, it’s for the best I don’t work anywhere where you’re also going to be because you’re just far too tempting.”

Her hand fell off at Willow’s neck and flicked a tiny pebble stuck there with mud. Willow blushed.

“I need to take a quick shower.”

She went straight to the bathroom when they got back to the room and Tara went about checking everywhere to make sure they hadn’t left anything unpacked.

As she shoved some empty wrappers into the trash can, she felt her phone buzz in her pocket and took it out to see her mother requesting a video call. She accepted it and sat at the foot of the bed, offering a smile through her front camera.

“Hi, mom.”

“Oh hello, sweetheart,” Kimberly’s voice came through as she picture focused, “Oh, it’s good to see you.”
What time is it there?” Tara asked, glancing briefly at her watch.

“5:45 pm,” Kimberly explained, “I’m just getting ready for a night shift. I thought I’d try you before it got too late. Or early. Or…well, it’s all very confusing. Where are you two?”

Tara leaned back on one arm, holding the phone up to her face with the other.

“We’re just gearing up to leave Auckland. We got a free ferry pass with the car rental so we’re driving down to Christchurch but we’re stopping along the way. We’re going on the ski tour from there and then we leave for Melbourne.”

Kimberly rested her chin on her fist and listened to Tara, smiling.

“It’s all so exciting. Are you having all the fun you dreamed of? The adventure?”

Tara hesitated cautiously for a moment.

“We did a bungee jump today.”

Kimberly’s face fell and her eyes widened.

“You did WHAT?!”

“That’s why I didn’t tell you beforehand,” Tara replied, swallowing, “Everything is okay. Nothing was broken or dislodged. Just a lot of endorphins and adrenaline.”

Kimberly sighed and shook her head.

“Yes well in future please continue to not tell your mother when you’re about to throw yourself off cliffs.”

“It was a bridge,” Tara replied cheekily and received one of those trademarked ‘looks’ that only a mother could give.

Willow came out of the bathroom wrapped in a towel with freshly de-mudded skin.

“I think I’m just going to toss those clothes, I don’t have time to wring them out and I don’t want to
pack muddy clothes…”

She saw Tara was on the phone and mouthed ‘sorry’. Tara gave her a quick once-over and briefly cast her gaze back to her mother.

“Um, I have to go. I need to pick up the rental car before we check out.”

“Please be careful driving on the wrong side of the road,” Kimberly pleaded.

“Yeah, uh huh, bye,” Tara nodded and hung up without waiting for a response.

“Is that your mom?” Willow asked without realizing Tara had hung up, “Tell her I say—”

Before she knew it, Tara was pressing her up against the dresser.

“Oh, hi.”

“Hi,” Tara replied breathlessly.

Eighteen or so minutes later, they ran down the corridor with their luggage weighing them down, tucking their clothing into places to preserve modesty yet again.

“This one was definitely your fault,” Willow said, face still bright red.

“We can argue later,” Tara replied, poking the elevator button repeatedly, “The guy who phoned from the lobby said they’d charge us another night if we didn’t check out in 10 minutes.”

“Not the coitus interruptus I learned about in health class,” Willow muttered sullenly under her breath.

She looked at Tara’s sex-swept hair and leaned up to press a kiss to her cheek.

Previously tucked shirts were untucked by the time the elevator doors opened in the lobby and they had to extract themselves with serious blushing as they pushed past the people waiting.

Tara looked at the time on her phone as they got to the line at the desk.
“Are you good with these if I run to get the car?”

Willow thought that was a good idea. She wasn’t even sure an open lobby could dissuade her from pouncing on Tara at this point.

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll just drag ‘em outside. Go.”

Tara ran off and Willow spent several minutes in line just exhaling and trying to calm down every jumping nerve inside her body.

She tried not to think about how she’d been just minutes before; bent over the bed while Tara had one hand between her legs determined to get the job done while the other held the room phone to her ear and spoke politely to the desk clerk telling him they’d be right down.

She tried, but it was futile. The memory was forever burned into her brain.

She was pretty sure she had given them away with a telling, high-pitched cry and so approached the desk with an even more furious blush.

It was the same polite but animated young man who had checked them in that first morning.

“Checking out?”

Willow wordlessly slid the room keys across the desk to Theo, whom she was sure was smirking. A spool of purple hair flicked mockingly, seemingly by itself.

“I hope you enjoyed your stay and found your satisfaction.”

“W-what?” Willow asked, her heart hammering in a fresh, erratic rhythm.

Theo just smiled innocently, the same way Tara smiled innocently when she used some spicy talk.

“I hope you enjoyed your stay and found everything to your satisfaction.”

Willow took the receipt that was handed across and folded it into her purse.
“Thanks. Um...bye now.”

She tried to slink away without drawing any more attention to herself but failed spectacularly when she tried to bring all of the luggage with her and managed to make it all fall in different directions.

A bellhop kindly came over to help her out the door and she silently shoved some cash into his hand and waited as inconspicuously as possible. This whole morning had left her feeling very exposed.

A little while later, an old grey three-door compact car that looked like it might just be older than she was pulled up on the curb. Tara popped the trunk and hopped out to lug the bags in.

Willow looked at it, slightly unimpressed.

“This is...a car.”

“Were you expecting a truck?” Tara asked with a smile.

Willow shook her head.

“No...but maybe something a little sexier.”

“Well, this is what I got,” Tara replied with some concealed frustration, “You gonna help me?”

Willow nodded and quickly helped Tara load everything up. She automatically went to get into the passenger seat but found herself sitting in front of the wheel, confused.

A moment later, Tara knocked on the half-open window.

“I think you’re in my seat.”

“Right,” Willow blushed, “It’s on the other side. Autopilot.”

She went around to the passenger side and buckled herself in. She watched Tara check her mirrors and start the ignition and smiled to herself.

“Wow. Wow. You’re actually making this jalopy look sexy.”
Tara offered her a coy smile and a wink so sly Willow wasn’t sure she even saw it.

Sometimes Willow wasn’t sure if Tara was being provocative on purpose or if she was just imagining it because she liked the rush it gave her. It used to be a rush of fear, or at least that’s what she covered the actual feeling with. Now she was beginning to allow herself to feel it for real and it was all still a tad confusing.

“You don’t mind driving?”

Tara shook her head.

“I think it’s best.”

“Hey, I’m a great driver!” Willow protested indignantly, “I got 103% in Driver’s Ed!”

“You just don’t have much practical experience. You never drove at home,” Tara replied delicately, “And I need you to give me directions.”

Willow took her phone from her pocket and put it in the little holder on the dash.

“You know they call out the directions step-by-step these days.”

“I bet its voice isn’t as pretty as yours,” Tara returned sweetly.

Willow blushed lightly and distracted herself by keying in their destination to the map app.

“We’re staying in the… Kai Iwi Motel right?” she asked, resisting the urge to pull a face, “Sounds… motel-y.”

“It was the cheapest place with a safe parking lot,” Tara answered with her eyes on the road, “Am I going left or right?”

“Turn left at the 1st cross street onto Halsey Street,” the app called out right on cue.

“I have to say, maybe I was wrong,” Tara said with a grin, “Pretty cute.”
“Hey,” Willow said with a pout, taking her phone in her lap and tapping the button to turn the voice off, “I’ll call them out. I’m not losing you to some skanky cute-voiced navigator.”

Tara briefly reached over and rubbed the back of Willow’s head affectionately before returning it to the wheel.

Willow smiled and leaned into Tara’s hand, then settled her head back against the headrest.

“Will I play—take the next right—some music, or—”

She paused, eyes slowly widening as she reached out to push her fingers through a little flap on the center console.

“Is this…a TAPE player?!?” she asked, incredulous and amused, “How did you even find a car this old? It must have taken real effort.”

“Most of the rental places didn’t want to rent to an 18-year-old, or they wanted crazy money for it. I had to compromise,” Tara replied calmly, “It’s a car. It will get us where we need to go.”

“If we’re lucky,” Willow muttered, then sighed, “Guess no tunes.”

Tara dropped a hand into the side pocket and brought up a cassette tape up between two fingers.

“I prepared.”

Willow took it and turned it over several times.

“You brought a tape?” she asked, eyebrows disappearing into her scalp, “A TAPE? I didn’t realize this was a DeLorean.”

“I didn’t realize you were Carol Burnett,” Tara shot back with a slightly cocky grin.

Willow opened the cassette case and suddenly had a memory of being small and Tara teaching her how to rewind with a pen. Even way back then CDs were more popular. Tara had just liked them.

“Where did you even find this? I don’t think I’ve seen one since I was 5 years old. Keep ahead until the turn-off for the highway. We’re good for a while after that.”
“I’ve been making mixtapes for years,” Tara answered, tapping her fingers against the steering wheel.

“What for?” Willow asked, confused when it was so much easier to make compilations with technology.

Tara’s lips twitched at the corner.

“Fun.”

Willow ran her thumb over the ‘road trip’ label on the tape and the ever-so-slightly frayed edges.

“How come you never made me a romantic one?”

Tara’s back shifted uncomfortably.

“Because you’d laugh at me.”

“No, I wouldn’t,” Willow replied, brow creased and tone affronted.

“You’re laughing at me now,” Tara replied, casting Willow a momentary pointed look.

“No,” Willow replied quickly, placing her hand on Tara’s upper arm, “No, I promise. I think it’s cool. And it’s very you, very retro. Very…quirky.”

Tara smiled sideways.

“Two peas in a pod, you and me.”

Her pinky lifted from the wheel and Willow wrapped her pinky around it.

“Let’s see how this works,” she said as she slid the tape into the deck and pressed play.

‘Mr. Blue Sky’ played and Willow started to bop along in her seat.
“Hey, I like this one!”

“You don’t trust my choice in music?” Tara asked, her smirk teetering toward teasing, “You’re the one who plays Barry White during sex.”

Willow’s mouth hung open, first in shock at Tara’s brazen statement, then in a huff as she registered the insult.

“Hey! Those are classics!”

Tara nodded along, seemingly in agreement, but her smirk was still there as her eyes playfully bounced, taking in Willow’s affront.

“But what’s your excuse for Kings of Leon?”

Willow’s mouth snapped shut.

“It’s relevant! ‘Sex’ is literally in the title!”

Tara’s face scrunched up.

“I don’t like to think about…”

She threw some fingers off the wheel indicatively, but Willow just looked blank. Tara sighed.

“Blowjobs,” she whispered with a brief curl of disgust on her lips, “Especially…at that moment.”

Willow looked like she’d been slapped.

“THAT’S what it’s about?!”

“Look at the lyrics,” Tara replied, concentrating on the road for a moment as she did a difficult merge and had a brief surge forward when she glanced in the wrong direction as another car passed.

The track changed to ‘Road To Nowhere’ but the more striking noise to fill the car was Willow’s sharp gasp as she googled the aforementioned lyrics and read a line she’d previously never picked up on. She pushed her phone face down between her legs, scandalized as if she’d seen images of the
actual act and not just a tame lyric about it.

“On reflection, I should have left it up to you. This is your area.”

Tara shook her head.

“No, I don’t have a bigger claim on music than anyone else.”

Comfortably in her lane, she glanced over at Willow and reached over at a moment, brushing her fingers against Willow’s cheek and down her arm.

“Besides…I like the soundtrack your body makes.”

Willow felt her skin tingle every place Tara touched. She gulped.

“So…no music then.”

Tara brought her hand down and danced her fingers along Willow’s thigh.

“Well, a song is more than just the lyrics. You put the right notes together and it can make you laugh or cry or…feel things. There’s definitely an opportunity for the mood to be set. Or…enhanced.”

Willow’s legs snapped together at Tara’s touch and Tara took her hand back, smirking.

That smirk did things to Willow she blushed just thinking about, never mind saying.

“Have you ever listened to a song and felt a little shiver at the base of your spine? Like your ears don’t just hear it, your body actually recognizes the rhythm?”

Willow nodded slowly.

“Sure. Makes you wanna dance.”

“Exactly,” Tara replied, lips brushing with a grin, “Barry White just…does not make me want to dance.”
“Harsh,” Willow said with the start of a pout.

“I’m not mocking your choices,” Tara reassured quickly, “They have a very solid, old school vibe. Massive Attack certainly have a wanton vibe I can get behind.”

Willow was still pouting.

“That sounds like code for ‘lame’.

“Darling, no,” Tara replied, squeezing Willow’s thigh for a moment, “They’re classics for a reason. I guess I just…march to a different beat.”

Willow smiled softly and covered Tara’s hand on the wheel affectionately for a second.

“That’s true. Tell me your beat.”

Tara was contemplative for a moment as she focused ahead on the road.

“A good sex playlist has five songs, total.”


Too short.

Especially for Tara, in Willow’s experience.

“Yes, five,” Tara nodded definitively, “After that, you should be making your own music.”

Willow had to bite her lip to stop herself from the soft moan that threatened to come out at the look Tara shot her way. It was hard to maintain her indignation.

“I guess good ole Barry doesn’t make your five.”

Tara’s chin lifted and her eyes blinked slowly several times, then her head started to bob.

Willow had watched this many times; Tara getting into the music space in her head, but it still
captivated her how much Tara’s body was just taken over by an invisible beat.

“I’d start with ‘Always Be My Baby’.”

“Mariah Carey?!” Willow asked incredulously with a teasing smile, “You’re giving me shit for Barry White but your first choice is Mariah Carey?”

“Yes,” Tara replied assuredly, “It’s mid-tempo and it’s fun but it still has that R&B undertone. It’s perfect for setting the mood. You hear those vocables, that ‘do do doop do doop da dum’ and it hits you like a slow shiver. It’s the ‘come a little closer’ song. It’s fun. It’s rhythmic. The dance floor seduction, if you will.”

“I definitely will,” Willow answered, a little too quickly.

Tara smiled.

“Then the real seduction starts. You want the tone to shift enough to know that ‘this is happening’. You have to go in strong, so I’d pick ‘Redbone’, maybe controversially… but those opening bars just make me want to move my body… against another body. Against your body.”

Her body rolled in the seat, a subtle movement but Willow swore she could see the shiver rise on her spine.

“Then I’d move onto ‘Acquainted’. Those drum beats, ooh. Every time. I get that squeeze in my belly like every touch is the first. The beat change is straining and elongating and it lets you get lost for a few minutes.”

The way she said ‘ooh’ made Willow feel her own beat between her legs.

“And then I’ve always been a fan of ‘I Wanna Be Yours’ when things are revving up. It’s very visceral, it’s very sexy, it’s like that moment when you know the tide is turning and you’re getting down,” Tara continued, looking off to the side yet still engaging Willow with an occasional smirk, “And the sultry overtones gnaws on that gut feeling, the fire in your belly, that stretch where you’re ready to give yourself over. It’s the perfect interlude.”

She paused, her cheeks starting to lightly color and her breath speeding up just enough to be noticed.

“Then, well, this is where things change up a bit. This is where it all hinges, this is where you change from mood to pace. Your outro. It has to pack a punch but also transition you perfectly into the rest of the act.”
She paused and shot that smirk at Willow again so quick she barely had time to register it.

“Going fast I would maybe play something like ‘S&M’. It’s a bit on the nose but it’s fun and fast is about fun.”

Willow watched Tara roll her neck like she was stretching it but she saw it for the vulnerable exposure it was.

“Anyway, I’m much more interested in going slow,” Tara added on, her tongue leaving her mouth for a moment to wet her dry lips, “And for that I would absolutely end on ‘I’m Kissing You’ because it’s rich and romantic and I know by then I’ll be consumed by how my lips feel against your skin.”

She gasped softly, her lids closing for a second longer than was wise behind the wheel.

“Yeah, that’s perfection.”

She could hear Willow’s breath quickening and knew her own was quivering.

“And after that, it’s all going to fade away because…”

She let out a shaken breath.

“All I’m going to be listening to is you.”

Willow didn’t know if she could cope with the sexual tension building up in the small space.

“I-I don’t think I know some of those.”

“I’ll have to play them for you sometime,” Tara offered, her voice so wonderfully melodic, full of all of the promise hidden in her words.

Yep, Willow definitely couldn’t take it.

Her hand slapped around for a button to roll the window down and it eventually landed on the crank handle. She turned it several times until a cool breeze was rushing past her cheeks.
“Sounds good! Great! Just…swell!”

“Swell,” Tara agreed and Willow had never felt so good about being mocked.

After a moment, Willow frowned.

“Wait, who were you listening to all that with?”

Tara arched an eyebrow and pursed her lips as her cheeks turned pink.

“Myself.”

Willow gulped again and tossed her face to the other side again to get some air on her cheeks.

She spent a while just looking out the window and marveling at how beautiful the scenery even surrounding the highway was.

Lush greens, hazy mountains, and blue sky. She’d been driven up and down the California coast and seen many an overhead landscape from a plane but there was nothing quite like this.

“So…” Tara spoke out with a nervous lilt over the opening organ music of ‘Where the Streets Have No Name’, “You used the ‘g’ word today.”

Willow turned her head from looking out the window toward Tara. She smiled softly, peaceful, a feeling she was still getting used to.

“…gumdrop?” she asked, grinning as her lips popped the ‘p’, “Gnome? Gravi—”

“Girlfriend,” Tara interrupted, a little too quickly.

Willow’s mouth closed silently. It lasted just a bit too long for Tara, whose knuckles tightened on the wheel and she looked ahead, steely.

“Sorry, just forget about it.”

“No, I’m—” Willow started to reply, feeling an unpleasant squeeze on her heart at the look Tara was
trying to hide on her face, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to shut down. I was just surprised. I hadn’t realized…it must have just felt right at that moment.”

She looked down at her lap where she saw her hands twisting around each other and she made herself flatten them on her lap.

“I’ve always been a little scared of that word, actually. Not just because of its…description,” she said, tone dropping guiltily for a moment, “I’ve just always known you as you my… my friend. My best friend. I was afraid of the change. I know that’s stupid when so much else has changed…or…well, I guess it hasn’t really, has it? This, us, has always been…just always been.”

Nothing but Bono’s voice filled the car and Willow felt her heart start to hammer nervously.

“A-are you? Do you want to be?” she asked, just above a whisper, before casting her eyes in Tara’s direction to seek an answer, “My girlfriend?”

Tara’s hands slid up and down the wheel for a moment. She took a few even breaths and then glanced back at Willow.

“I think the question has always been ‘are you mine?’”

Willow was surprised by how little hesitation she felt in answering that.

“Yes,” she said, closing her hand over Tara’s on top of the wheel.

She could only look on from the side as Tara’s whole face lit up, her posture straightened in the seat and her shoulders relaxed right down.

It really hit Willow hard that Tara shoved down her own feelings to cater to her. She wanted to be a real girlfriend to her, an equal, a caretaker of Tara’s heart whether it was aching or soaring.

She felt Tara’s hand slip out from under hers on the wheel and cover it again, squeezing her tenderly.

“Girlfriend still has ‘friend’ in it, you know.”

At that moment Willow knew that she would be with Tara for the rest of her life.

Unable to express or even fully comprehend the feeling that sat deep in her bones, she just leaned
over and pressed a lingering kiss to Tara’s cheek, only breaking with the loud sound of her lips popping off to turn up the volume on the tape.

“Hey I love this one!” she gushed, radiating happiness, “Life is a highway, I wanna ride it all night long!”

Tara only knew Willow to sing when she was really relaxed, and even then often only when they were making up homework songs and she thought they were being hilarious. Feeling just as bright as the sparkle of Willow’s teeth showing as she sang through a smile, Tara joined right in and sang with her girlfriend as they drove along the highway.

“If you’re going my way, I wanna drive it all night long!”

They spent the next stretch of road cycling through the ‘A’ and ‘B’ sides of the tape and singing along loudly, which had been Tara’s express intention when she made them.

Road trip songs have to be the kind that can be screeched at the top of your voice without breaking the windows and Tara’s selection did just that. They also mostly had titles relating to driving or traveling, but that was just for her own whimsy.

As one of the last songs played, Willow pointed excitedly at a welcome sign.

“Hey, look! We’re here!”
Chapter 21

Rotorua

*If I’m Going To Be Someone Equally Free, There Are Things That I Must Unlearn*

“Aww.”

Willow frowned as the tape clicked into silence.

“I was enjoying that.”

“Don’t worry, I made a few more to cover the trip,” Tara said as Willow slid the cassette back into the case, which she noted did in face have the number ‘1’ next to ‘Road Trip’ on the label.

“Of course you did,” Willow replied fondly, reaching over to squeeze Tara’s shoulder, “I love you.”

Tara smiled back and Willow dropped her head back against the rest, pensive for a moment.

“You know I mean I’m in love with you when I say that, right? It’s just, I said ‘I love you’ before we were, uh, and…well, I guess I meant it then too, huh.”

“It’s a mind-trip sometimes,” Tara agreed with an elongation of her soft smile, “I know what you mean when you say it. Funnily enough, you not saying it all that time makes me sure now. I’m glad you didn’t blur the lines and you waited until you were sure you were returning the same words I was. That you cared for me enough not to mess me around emotionally like that.”

Tara’s words were like a massage on Willow’s heart, relieving some of her grief.

“And I love you, too,” Tara finished and Willow wrapped her arms around herself because she needed a squeeze and her squeeze of choice was busy driving.

She got a little lost in her own embrace and didn’t realize Tara was looking for her attention until she felt a tugging on her sleeve.

“Sorry, what?” she said, shaking her head out of her daze.
“Directions, please,” Tara said with some urgency in her voice.

“Shit!” Willow replied, scrambling to pick up her phone under her, “Um, turn to Ha, um… Hip, I mean Hap…I don’t think I can pronounce these names just from text! Uh…okay, next left! 30 feet!”

Tara turned onto a city street that looked distinct from the surroundings they'd come up. There was lots of buildings that hadn’t been updated in a while and lots of people walking around, smiling and waving at each other.

“It’s like driving through the Pleasantville but in the 90s,” Willow commented, then suddenly pointed to something outside Tara’s window, “Look, there’s a video store! An actual video store! I thought our old battered copy of The Little Mermaid might be the last the world but that place is full of them!”

Willow began to roll down her window, but almost immediately started winding it up again.

“Whoa, what is that smell?”

“They don’t call it the geothermal wonderland for nothing.” Tara replied, nose scrunching as she too caught the pungent sulfuric scent that was unique to this particular town, “It bubbles up through the street cracks. Pretty cool when you think about it.”

“Very cool,” Willow agreed, rubbing her hand under her nose to ‘lose’ the smell, “And also very stinky. I didn't get much time to research every stop along the way. I didn't know it smelled like this here.”

“Well I’ve only spent the last half-decade or so doing it, so don’t worry,” Tara said, slowing the car at a stop light, “Besides, we’re traveling to have experiences, not just read about them.”

“Next right,” Willow said as the light went green, “Makes me a little glad I’m not hanging around tomorrow. I don’t know if I could cope with a whole day of that stink.”

She brushed against Tara’s arm.

“You sure you don’t want to come? Keep me company?”

“I know you really enjoy it, but the Lord of the Rings was never really my thing,” Tara replied carefully.
Though it hadn’t stopped her sitting through each and every movie with Willow in a dark theater when they had special showings pretending they were on a date, though. With Xander on Willow’s other side, her pretending to be on a date with him while he obliviously munched on some popcorn.

“The scenery is supposed to be really beautiful,” Willow added in, voice rising hopefully.

“I believe it. Even the highway scenery was beautiful,” Tara nodded, then cleared her throat, “Honestly Willow, it’s too expensive.”

Willow’s brow creased.

“It’s cheaper than the bungee.”

Tara sighed but contained it so it wasn’t obvious. She knew Willow knew she had a budget, she had shown Willow it in her big binder. Willow had used it as a reference for her own budgeting but seemed to be throwing caution to the wind a lot more than Tara ever could.

“The bungee was a special expense…something on my ‘must do’ list. And it was amazing, I’m still all tingly from it. But we’ve been away for more than a week… and there’s 51 more to go. I can’t do every single thing.”

Willow opened her mouth.

“I’ll—”

“No,” Tara cut her off before the words could even come out, then continued firmly, “Which way?”

Willow looked down at her phone glumly and directed Tara the rest of the way to the motel.

Tara got the keys and helped Willow bring their stuff in. It was small, just a double bed in the corner with wall shelving over and alongside it, a trash can and a rectangular window six inches below the ceiling that even if they stood on the bed to look out of, would only see a brick wall.

Willow stood to the side and spied each corner as Tara lifted her bag onto the bed to unpack the few things she wanted to hand, like toiletries and her phone charger.

“Um, is the door to the bathroom invisible?”
Tara looked over her shoulder, brow furrowing a little.

“It’s down the hall.”

“Shared bathrooms?” Willow asked as if she’d just been asked to drink a rat smoothie, “What if you have to go in the middle of the night?”

“The same thing you do at home?” Tara suggested with a raised eyebrow, “Go and come back to bed?”

“Big difference from where we’re leaving,” Willow grumbled.

Tara pursed her lips and tried not to get annoyed.

“Welcome to backpacking, hun.”

“It is super cheap,” Willow tried to reason, but immediately her eyes wrinkled with concern, “But doesn’t that make you kind of nervous?”

“Not really,” Tara shook her head, “It's clean, it's functional, the bed is even vaguely comfortable…”

She pressed down on it indicatively and Willow came over to perch on the edge.

“No memory foam mattress, I’m guessing.”

Tara didn’t really have time for Willow being grumpy but had to admit feeling a little turned on.

Willow’s pout had always done that to her. Her lips were puffed out and her eyes were dark and dangerous, even if it was just the danger of being on the other end of a scowl.

She wanted the bungee jump, and not their emotions, to be the only up and down they remembered of this day. Willow would have to get used to these types of lodgings. The place they were in right then would probably be amongst the nicest they stayed in, anyway. It was private, for one.

She casually slid sideways to where Willow was sitting and sat delicately into her lap.
“I’ll be your memory foam mattress,” she offered, caressing Willow’s plump, pouty bottom lip with her thumb, “I’ll never forget the press of your body against me.”

Willow’s eyelids grew lidded as Tara’s hips moved into her in a gentle grinding motion.

This was a pretty prime position to be in, Willow thought.

Tara’s legs spread open on top of her, just needing a single head tilt up to Tara’s lips or down to her breasts; her hands now free to roam every inch of Tara’s gorgeous upper body. Even fully clothed, Willow was immediately stimulated everywhere at once.

Forgetting her grump entirely, Willow made the best use of her optimal head positioning to begin kissing Tara’s neck; the best of both worlds. Her cheek would brush Tara’s cheek, her lips would find the swell of Tara’s breast and she got to pay special attention to that spot under Tara’s ear that made those sweet moans float into her ears.

Her teeth may have given it a little nibble and suddenly they were both tumbling back onto the bed when Tara’s hips responded a little too forcefully. They giggled as they collapsed back together.

“You wanna get some dinner or are you full of car snacks?” Tara asked, brushing some hair from Willow’s face as gravity made it fall into her eyes.

Willow wanted Tara’s hand to make its way off her face and move lower, but she had to admit a low rumbling of hunger in her stomach alongside the arousal.

“I want dinner,” she answered, turning her cheek in to nuzzle Tara, “In a minute.”

They cuddled for a few minutes before getting up to head out.

“I’ll go ask where to go to eat at the desk,” Tara said, swapping out her light sweater for something warmer.

“Guess I’ll try out that shared bathroom,” Willow replied grudgingly.

They left the room and went in different directions. Willow found the bathroom and grimaced at the row of showers. It reminded her way too much of gym class, although at least each one here had a privacy door. She’d always hung back to help gather the balls or clean up the equipment just to avoid using them with an audience. Her reputation as a Teacher’s Pet actually helped her sometimes.
There was just one other young girl in there, who was applying lipstick in the mirror but the row of sinks was pretty caked in make-up. Greasy soap stains were pointed against the dark splotches of fake tan and old bunched tissue were strewn under and between sinks.

Willow went into the first cubicle which she was happy to find was fairly clean compared to outside but when she was finished she found the only trace of toilet paper was a sliver the size of her pinky finger stuck to the empty roll. It wasn't surprising considering most of it seemed to be around the sinks anyway, but it was frustrating.

Not feeling like doing the cubicle shuffle in front of lipstick girl and whoever else may have walked in since she arrived, she took her phone out and brought up her chat log with Tara.

A minute or two later there was a knock on the door and Willow recognized the Birkenstocks poking in from underneath it.

“Will?”

“Yeah,” Willow grumbled, clearly embarrassed.

A pack of tissues was pushed under the door.

“No one else is here, don’t worry,” Tara reassured, “I’ll wait outside.”

Willow finished up and washed her hands before meeting Tara outside.

“Now we know to carry tissues around,” Tara tried to joke softly when she saw the grump returned on Willow’s face.

“Is this really worth saving a few bucks?”

“It’s not a few when you multiply it over a year,” Tara replied, gently squeezing Willow’s arm, “I got good recommendations for dinner. There’s a whole al fresco style street food area with bars and restaurants and stuff. Sounds really cool.”

She dropped her hand to link her fingers with Willow and smiled.
Willow was a sucker for that smile.

“I am pretty hungry.”

“Then let’s go eat,” Tara replied, swinging around to walk them forward and out of the building.

The sun had set while they’d been inside but the streets were lit with enough bright light to get around unaided.

They’d only walked a little ways down the street when Willow’s nose scrunched up again.

“That smell is not very appetizing. How do the locals stand it?”

Tara shrugged one shoulder.

“I’m sure they get used to it. I’m kind of getting used to it already. They say some tourists miss it when they leave.”

“I’ll believe that when I smell it,” Willow replied with a grin and Tara bumped her shoulder playfully.

They walked into the main hub of the city using the directions Tara had scribbled on a pamphlet and arrived at a long street, more like a covered walkway, that had music pumping and was lit up in blue, red and green hues. Inside, restaurants and bars all bled into each other, al fresco style as Tara had been told, and a lot of people were walking around barefoot to take advantage of the naturally heated sidewalk from the geothermal activity bubbling below.

“Hey, this is cool!” Willow said as they stepped through, “Smells better too.”

They picked out a place to eat that seemed to have the most customers already present. A lot of them appeared to be Māori too, which was always a good sign when the locals liked to dine somewhere.

They self-seated and picked up the menus sitting at the table already, reading over it until their server came, one of the young Māori man in a tight white t-shirt that his bicep muscles were rippling out of, approached to take their order.

“Kia ora, my name is Te Koha. What can I get for you this evening?”
His smile was charming and he was clearly used to people feeling charmed by it.

“I’ll get the vegetarian noodles, please,” Tara asked politely, handing her menu back to him.

“Is that all you want?” Willow asked across the table.

“Uh huh,” Tara nodded.

“Okay,” Willow shrugged, “Can I get the stone grilled rib eye, please?”

Te Koha wrote it down and stuck his pen back behind his ear. He seemed curious more than annoyed that they weren’t fawning over him. He, admittedly, had always done pretty well with the American tourists over the years.

“Can I recommend a local craft beer to go with your steak tonight?” he offered, “Or perhaps a signature cocktail?”

Willow stared at him, a little caught off guard.

“Can I get a… Negroni?”

“With ice?” Te Koha asked.

“Yep,” Willow nodded swiftly.

Te Koha looked at Tara, who tried to quickly read the back of the drinks menu.

“I’ll try a… cider. That’s a hard cider, right?”

“You mean alcoholic? Oh, yeah, all our ciders are alcoholic out here,” Te Koha nodded, “Would you like to try one of our elderflower and lime or strawberry pomegranate flavors?”

Tara tried to imagine each of those flavor profiles.

“I’ll try elderflower and lime?”
“Coming right up, ladies,” Te Koha said and began to back away, then peered back in curiously, “Canadians?”

Willow shook her head.

“Californians.”

Te Koha smiled to himself, seemingly amused.

“Huh.”

He directed his smile back at them and nodded cordially before weaving back through the tables.

“What’s a Negroni?” Tara asked when he was out of earshot.

“I don’t know; I heard it on a TV show,” Willow admitted and started to grin, “I kinda forgot we can legally drink here. I feel naughty.”

Her nose scrunched in confusion.

“And what’s an elderflower?”

Tara held her hands up in a shrug and they both giggled.

Their drinks were brought down on a tray by a bar hand and Tara poured her bottle of cider into a curved glass while Willow held her short, round glass and glanced around, not sure if she wanted everybody to be looking at her or nobody.

Tara held her longer glass fully around her palm, appreciating the cool condensation against her fingers. She took a sip and was pleasantly surprised. The last time alcohol passed her lips was straight vodka from the bottle at band camp. She’d enjoyed it only because the biting taste was a good mask for the taste of rejection.

“This is really nice. Whatever elderflower is, it’s delicious.”

Willow took a bigger gulp of her deep red concoction than necessary and had to suppress her
coughing as she struggled to swallow.

“That is strong,” she wheezed.

She caught her breath and licked her lips, then quickly took another sip. Tara’s lips quirked upward.

“But good apparently.”

Willow frowned.

“It’s weird. Kinda bitter. Like grapefruit. But… enticing. My mouth feels tingly and naked like when you stop kissing me and I want more.”

The ice rattled against the glass as Willow lifted it to her lips again.

“Want some?” she offered Tara.

Tara shook her head.

“I’ll save my naked lips for you.”

Willow turned as red as her drink and had to use her napkin to dab at her mouth and hide her sudden influx of color.

By the time their food arrived, the restaurant and all of the surrounding ones had every table and bar stool occupied and there was a lot of cross-talk throughout the walkway as people maintained conversations from all sides. Te Koha was clearly being sent to the tables with women by the manager and Willow and Tara started to giggle together as they realized he’d tried all of his moves on them too.

Willow’s steak was brought down on the hot stone and placed in front of her with the sides in little pockets on the board the stone was sitting on. Sea salt was crackling underneath it and the meat had a beautifully caramelized char.

“See, you just slice it and cook it how you want it,” Willow explained as she cut into her steak, “They used to do it at the club.”

“I know, I served it to you once,” Tara replied, picking up her fork to twirl her noodles, “I can’t tell
Willow blushed.

“Right. Sorry.”

“Not your fault,” Tara smiled.

Willow turned her slice of meat over on the hot stone to get it to the pinkness she desired.

“I really hated you serving me,” she said, then suddenly went wide-eyed when Tara’s eyebrow arched, “Not, no! I mean, not that you were bad at it! You weren’t, you were awesome! Just…my parents were always so rude and… tipping you is weird and I really hated that whole place.”

Tara nodded along.

“If it makes you feel any better, your parents never tipped.”

Willow’s mouth dropped open as her slice of meat sizzled toward well done.

“Are you serious?! That’s even worse!” she said with a disgusted look on her face, “Assholes.”

She realized her meat was burning and quickly lifted it from the heat and dipped it in the sriracha mayo. She chewed thoughtfully before swallowing it.

“You know what the club motto is?”

“‘Ex nihilo nihil fit’,” Tara recited verbatim, “I had to read it on every single damn napkin I folded.”

“Do you know what it means?” Willow asked and Tara shook her head, “‘Nothing comes from nothing’. You have to work hard to succeed, basically. Most of the people there have been there for generations, inheriting the same money. Even families like mine at the very least got a mega head start. They’ve never worked hard in their lives.”

She paused and frowned.

“I guess I haven’t either.”
A silence hung in the air for a moment.

“You worked hard for your grades,” Tara supplied kindly, “And you’ve been working hard to shift those unhealthy attitudes.”

She brushed her hand atop Willow’s.

“You’ve been hiding, never letting it show. Always trying to keep it under control.”

Willow looked over vulnerably.

“You see me.”

Tara smiled softly.

“I do.”

Willow gulped and tried to take a sip from her glass. She realized it was empty.

“Gonna get another one of these Negronis. You want?”

Tara still had half a glass, but just nodded and briefly rubbed Willow’s arm as she passed.

A few hours later, their dinner plates had been cleared and they’d relocated to the bar where a group of locals was talking with them about what it was like living in California.

A round of tequila shots appeared from somewhere and Willow giggled as she picked up the salt cellar.

“Hey Tara,” she said, looking at her with glassy seductiveness, “C’mere.”

Tara frowned with drunken confusion but it turned into a look of arousal as Willow lifted Tara’s hand, kissed it and then shook salt onto the spot. She lifted a lime wedge and put it flesh-out between Tara’s lips, then downed the shot, licked the salt from Tara’s hands and brought her mouth close to suck on the lime, their lips painfully almost-touching.
There was a round of cheers until Willow’s head reeled back, face pinched and she spat the sour wedge into her palm. She grinned and raised her arms triumphantly and a fresh cheer went around the bar.

Te Koha cleared the shot glasses with a knowing smile. He lifted two fingers against his temple and offered a salute.

“My sister, too. Takatāpui wahine. On the house, yeah?”

Tara made some clueless nodding motion and sat on her bar stool, a little stunned by the public display. There was some lime juice still wet on her lips. She licked it off and followed Willow with her eyes as Willow hurried over to the dart board as the people who had been playing there moved away.

“I wanna try!”

Tara saw her chance and rushed to follow. She stood behind Willow and folded her arms around Willow’s waist from behind. She wasn’t sure if she was drunk on cider or the thrill of Willow’s open affection but her hands firmly held Willow there and her fingers dipped under the hem of her shirt.

“You gotta square your hips,” she whispered in Willow’s ear, aware there were eyes on them but maybe for the first time not self-conscious about being the target of strangers’ gaze.

Willow held a dart in a prime throwing position and leaned back against Tara.

“I didn’t know you knew how to play darts.”

Tara’s nose brushed the back of Willow’s neck.

“I don’t.”

Warmth spread in Willow’s stomach that burned more than any alcohol ever could and her arm jerked, sending the dart flying only a few feet in the air but still only narrowly missing hitting someone in the packed space.

“Whoops!”

Te Koha came over to them and picked up the dart from the floor as he offered them a friendly smile.
“I think you have a little too much on board for a thing this sharp, eh?”

“I’m per-fet-ly sharp,” Willow tried, then snickered and leaned into Tara to whisper, “I said per-fet-ly.”

Tara pressed her fingertips into Willow’s skin, a hidden movement under the cover of clothing.

“Maybe we should go home.”

“Noooo, I’m having fun,” Willow protested, but still felt the air rush from her lungs when Tara pressed right up against her back.

“I can think of something more fun.”

Willow was immediately convinced and spun around, pointing jaggedly toward the exit.

“This way?”

They started to rush out, but some of their new bar pals shouted them back.

“Eh, you were going to tell us about the Zodiac Killer!”

Willow stumbled wordlessly for a moment.

“Um, real bad guy. Killed some people, sent letters to newspapers with codes that were never cracked. One was. I think. Um. Never caught. Senator in Texas. Almost became president. Bad situation.”

She looked to Tara for confirmation, who nodded swiftly.

“So he’s still out there?” one of the guys asked.

“The puzzles weren’t solved?” his buddy added in.

“Never,” Willow replied, then looked to Tara wide-eyed, “We should, we should go solve them.”
Tara’s eyes widened in hesitance but she slowly agreed.

“Uh huh, yeah, we should.”

Willow grabbed Tara’s hand and started to drag her away.

“Great, we'll, uh, go check it out and uh, we’ll give you a call.”

“Yeah, this could blow the whole thing wide open,” Tara couldn’t help but add in before turning her back to rush out Willow.

The walk was just about ten minutes — just a few blocks really — but they made it in seven, even factoring in the occasional stumble.

Willow pulled Tara into their room giggling and backed her right up against the wall. She kissed her again, deeper this time, letting her tongue slip into Tara’s mouth.

Tara’s hands cupped Willow’s rear and pulled her close, feeling that first press of skin at their stomachs where their shirt rode up as they rubbed against each other. She pushed Willow back until she fell down onto the bed and jumped on top, knees either side of Willow’s legs.

She leaned down to press a line of kisses along the exposed rim of skin toward her navel.

Willow let out a soft moan of pleasure and Tara felt herself respond in a particularly wet way. She sat back and started to lift her shirt over her head. With her arms trapped, her head got stuck when it didn’t come off as cleanly as she’d like.

“Will…little help?” she asked as her body twisted to free herself.

Finally, after more than a minute of fighting, her head came free and she threw the garment off her arms with a red face and mussed hair.

“Will?” she panted softly in confusion as her eyes focused again.

Willow lay beneath Tara, eyes closed and mouth open as she snored softly.
Tara slumped as her breath caught up with her and she forced two strong exhalations to calm the twisting squeeze in her stomach.

“H’okay,” she breathed as she moved off Willow and gently massaged the back of her neck to rid herself of just a little tension.

She changed into pajamas and made her way to the bathroom, where there was just one other girl at the other end of the sinks wiping off her make-up (and leaving the wipe on the sink). Tara wasn’t too impressed by that either but she knew what she was getting into so just ignored it. The nice buzz from the cider helped in keeping her unbothered and she found herself smiling into the mirror as she brushed her teeth.

When she got back to the room, Willow hadn’t moved an inch, so Tara did her best to get Willow’s shoes off and the blanket out from under her to cover them both.

As Willow’s nose whistled, Tara pressed a light kiss to her cheek, wished her sweet dreams and closed her eyes beside her.

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Tara hummed along with a nameless radio station as she drove back to the motel to meet Willow for the evening.

She pulled up in the parking lot and slid out of the car, locking it up before making her way to their room.

“Hey, you’re back,” she said to Willow when she stepped in and saw her lying on the bed.

She closed the door behind her and came to sit on the bed by Willow.

“This town is so stunning. Everyone is so friendly and kind. The culture is so beautiful — I saw the most amazing art today in this little village and the food, they cook it right in the ground, it’s just gorgeous, so gorgeous. They showed us their war dance—”

“The Haka?” Willow asked, her tone a little weary.

Tara nodded.

“Yes, it was magnificent. The hair is still standing on the back of my neck,” Tara replied, smiling fondly, “How was your day? Was the Lord of the Rings tour as beautiful as you thought? Did you
“Do anything else today?”

Willow looked uncomfortable and visibly braced.

“You’re looking at it.”

Tara looked confused.

“You mean you’ve been resting since you got back? That’s okay.”

Willow kept frowning.

“Been resting… all day?” she said, then felt an uncomfortable burn at the way Tara was looking at her, “I could barely move when I woke up, everything hurt so much. It was early when I woke up and you were already gone. Weren’t you hungover? I swear, I’m never drinking again.”

“A little, but that’s why I got up to get out in the air,” Tara replied, brow creased, “You didn’t go on your Lord of the Rings tour? You were so looking forward to it…and it was two hundred bucks.”

Willow shrugged.

“I can go tomorrow instead.”

Tara stopped and sighed. She decided not to even ask if that meant paying for it again.

“We’re supposed to be leaving tomorrow.”

“Can’t we just push it a few hours?” Willow asked, leaving out the fact that she’d already rebooked the tour without checking, and yes, at the additional cost, “The bus will be back in the afternoon. We could still do the sunset on Mount Victoria like you wanted.”

Tara withheld a second sigh.

“Yes, okay,” she replied eventually, then shook her head, “So you just stayed in bed all day?”

“No,” Willow replied in a grumble, “I went to the convenience store on the corner to get food too. They had microwave pizzas… they’re like crack for hangovers. Thankfully they also had a
microwave because the kitchenette here had grime everywhere and I think I would have poisoned myself.”

Tara thought about laughing but didn't. Instead, she stood and made a hand motion for Willow to do it too.

“Well, come on then.”

Willow frowned.

“Where are we going? I was kinda just hoping for cuddles.”

“I promise cuddles are in your future,” Tara replied, offering her hand to Willow.

Willow didn’t hesitate. She hoped she would never hesitate to take Tara’s hand ever again.

Tara led them back out to the car, double checked the backseat to make sure a small backpack was sitting there, and sat in on the driver’s side.

Willow looked over at her curiously as they buckled up.

“Did we say we were going to solve the Zodiac Killer’s ciphers last night? I keep getting flashes but I feel like that one must have been a dream.”

Tara pursed her lips to contain a laugh.

“We really wanted to…” she started, casting a teasing sidelong glance Willow’s way, “Be alone.”

Willow’s cheeks reddened.

“Did we…?”

“Sleep together?” Tara asked with a serious nod, “Oh, yes.”

Willow bit on the corner of her lip and Tara just couldn’t hold back that grin.
“I got a solid eight hours.”

Willow’s brow creased for a moment, then her eyes widened in horror.

“I passed out, didn’t I?”

“But very cutely,” Tara giggled, reaching over and pinching Willow’s cheek, “Adorable snores.”

Willow gently slapped Tara’s hand away, blushing more but smiling too.

“Stop…”

She shifted in her seat and looked at Tara apologetically.

“Sorry. For falling asleep.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Tara replied softly, “You must have been a lot drunker than I realized anyway. Definitely more than me. Though I’m not surprised. I looked up those Negronis this morning. It would punch my cider right out of the ring. Not to mention the tequila.”

Willow’s head fell softly back against the rest. She had a flash of doing the tequila shot and almost kissing Tara, then practically dry humping somewhere on the floor. She gulped and shifted her gaze uncomfortably out the window.

“My headache this morning sure said so.”

So did her wallet but she hadn't really cared.

“You’re about to relax like you’ve never relaxed before,” Tara replied, before a hint of a smirk played on her lips, “Well, apart from…”

Willow cleared her throat and sunk down more in the seat. She gazed aimlessly out the window as they drove out of the city. After thirty minutes, curiosity was getting the better of her.

They were driving down a gravel road and Willow looked around slightly alarmed by how far off the beaten track they seemed to be going. How could Tara even know where they were?
“Uh…where are we?”

“We’re at the payoff for the smell,” Tara replied cryptically and nodded over her shoulder, “Grab that backpack.”

Willow looked behind and snatched the bag. She opened it up and took out a towel wrapped up with other fabric.

“Are these our swimsuits?”

Tara just smiled.

A mile of rickety road, an awkward change in the backseat of an almost empty parking lot, and a short walk a couple of hundred meters down a bush path later, they arrived at a swimming hole with a waterfall.

The water fell into a stream with a large pool of water sitting beneath before it continued downstream in little rivulets. A canopy of trees surrounded it from the top of the waterfall, offering a covering of forest.

“Come feel the water,” Tara encouraged as she carefully walked into the natural hot spring; the water hot and relaxing on her muscles at first touch, “You’ll never be able to enjoy a regular old hot tub again.”

Willow looked around a little self-consciously at the other people enjoying the spring and waded in after Tara. It was like being wrapped in a hug that went with you and she sighed happily as her body became weightless.

Tara grinned over her shoulder.

“Worth it, right?”

Willow smiled and nodded.

“Very.”

They swam under the waterfall and Tara sat on a big rock beneath it. She splashed Willow as she passed, whose mouth hung open indignantly.
“Hey!”

She splashed Tara back and it soon descended into a back and forth punctuated with giggles raining down with the heavy flow of water.

Tara reached out after a heavy splash when Willow closed her eyes to shield them and gently pulled her toward her lap. Willow instinctively twisted away and when Tara mistook it for playing, trying to hold Willow in place until Willow forced herself away aggressively.

“Stop!”

Tara held her hands up, away from Willow.

“S-Sorry.”

“No, I…” Willow started, immediately regretful.

The waterfall sounded hollow as silence hung between them until eventually Willow went and sat beside Tara, her hands skimming the surface of the water as they twisted around in her lap.

“Do you remember learning to swim?”

Tara slowly turned her gaze to Willow.

“Do you mean getting thrown into the creek by Donny and my mom screaming at him while she waded in fully clothed to get me?”

“I kicked him but my little toes didn’t have much impact,” Willow replied through a sigh, “He burst my floaties anyway.”

She lifted her eyes.

“You said if I held your hands, your floaties would keep us both up. But I was still scared so you gave me your floaties and you held my hands instead.”

Her eyes closed and she narrowly missed letting a tear escape.
“Tara…”

“Hey…” Tara comforted softly without touching her.

Willow opened her glassy eyes and mouthed ‘I’m trying’.

‘I know’, Tara mouthed back.

Under the water, Willow’s hand found Tara’s and their fingers linked comfortably, familiarly.

Tara smiled and brought Willow directly under the waterfall so they could feel the cascading warmth directly on their shoulders, hopefully working out any tension that might be there.

In a brief lull of visitors when they had the whole pool to themselves, Willow momentarily pressed her body into Tara’s.

“This is really beautiful. You were right,” she whispered, “Definitely a close second.”

Tara returned the whisper in Willow’s ear.

“I didn’t say close.”

Tara swam away backward so Willow could see the cocky grin on her face and Willow contemplated how much this side of Tara belonged to her.

Tara didn’t grin like that for anyone else, didn’t open her body or her mind for anyone else, didn’t allow herself to be known the way Willow got to know her. That was a privilege Willow didn’t intend to lose.

She followed Tara until she was backed up against the rock wall and kissed her; just for a moment, a split second longer than a peck, but an extension of promise.

She backed away and did feel conscious of the new family sitting nearby but instead she focused on the sweet smile on Tara’s face and how that made her feel. Turned out, it was a hell of a lot stronger than a kernel of insecurity.

“Catch me if you can!” she challenged and quickly swam away.
They chased each other around, playing like kids until the family with actual children arrived in the water and they decided to let them have the pool to themselves.

Back at the car, Willow dried herself off with the towel and tossed it over to Tara.

“I feel invigorated.”

“Good word,” Tara said as she ruffled the ends of her hair.

Willow watched Tara toss her hair to one side and felt a quickening of her heartbeat.

“You are so beautiful.”

Tara stopped with the towel around her neck and smiled over the car.

“Angling for those cuddles?”

Willow’s nose scrunched happily.

“Always.”

Willow came running around the corner to the parking lot of the motel and rushed right up to Tara, who was leaning against the car.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry the bus left late and then I got a little, kinda-sorta lost finding my way back here.”

“Why didn’t you text me?” Tara asked in frustration, “I thought you’d gotten into an accident or something. I’ve just been waiting here.”

Willow held up her phone with a dead screen.

“My phone died,” she explained, then popped the trunk and rooted through her backpack sitting amongst the other luggage, “And I left my power bank…here!”
She popped the cable into her phone, turned it back on and slammed the lid back down then sidled up to Tara, pressing a lingering kiss on her cheek.

“I’m so sorry.”

Tara was starting to pick up on the long cheek kiss of apology that Willow had started doling out, but damn if it didn’t work.

“We gotta go,” she said, but the exasperation was mock at best.

“I know, let’s do it!” Willow replied, speeding around to the passenger side, “I even pre-downloaded the map earlier so I am all ready.”

She had her belt on before Tara had even sat in.

“Jeez, Tara, come on,” she goaded, grinning as Tara shot her a withering look as she sat into the car.

She started the car and quickly got on the road for the journey down to the end of the island to get the ferry across to the South Island.

“Was the tour good at least?” Tara asked once she was settled comfortably, directions at the ready and the second of her road trip mix tapes playing in the background.

Willow smiled and nodded.

“Everything was so vibrant. I didn’t know green could be that beautiful.”

Tara’s eyes left the road for a moment to stare lovingly at Willow.

“I did.”

Willow blushed lightly but had to stare ahead without response lest that compliment completely overwhelm her.

“They, uh, showed us all the sets and the hobbit homes…then we got to go to the bar that’s in the movies and had lunch and these special drinks they brew. It was really fun.”
“I’m glad you had a nice time,” Tara replied, her sweet smile turning into a chuckle, “I would have been hearing about it for the rest of my life if we came all the way to New Zealand and you didn’t get to see the Hobbit Land.”

Willow didn’t miss the ‘rest of my life’ reference but it seemed entirely natural.

Her first memory was of Tara and she wanted her last memory to be of Tara too.

She didn’t know what might happen in between, but Tara was her constant.

Once they turned onto the highway, Willow’s eyes were closing and she was stifling yawns.

Tara noticed and reached over with her nearest hand, stroking Willow’s hair for a moment before returning it to the wheel.

“Tired, baby?”

Willow nodded.

“Too much grog.”

“Or did I wear you out last night?” Tara grinned.

Willow giggled sleepily, smiling widely but with her eyes closed.

“Definitely.”

Tara smiled fondly as some memories pushed to the forefront of her mind.

“Have a nap. We have a long time to go.”

Willow exhaled deeply, barely fighting it.

“Won’t you be bored?”
“No, I like driving. I find it peaceful,” Tara explained, “And it’s a straight stretch of road for hours, so I don’t need your expert navigation.”

There was no response so Tara glanced over.

“Will?”

Willow’s breath was even and she was slumped on the seat.

Tara brushed some hair from Willow’s eye, turned the tape down to a low hum and focused back on the road and the beautiful surroundings.

Or at least, the second most beautiful, she thought.
Chapter 22

Wellington

We Push And Pull Like A Magnet Do

Willow stayed in dreamland curled up on the passenger seat, imagining sunset on the hill with Tara's arm around her.

The road was smooth and so she wasn’t woken until the repeated, and eventually annoying, ping of a phone indicating incoming messages kept bouncing around the small car.

Her neck rolled to the side as her eyes opened and she lifted her hand to massage the cramp that was forming there.

The sun had moved since last Willow had last seen it and the highway had narrowed to two lanes. It was far less busy — deserted almost.

“Hey sleepyhead,” Tara greeted enthusiastically, maybe slightly bored after all of the silence, “I was going to have to wake you soon. You’ve been asleep for hours. I saw the most amazing cloud, it was huge, just a big circle but the sun was sitting right behind it so it was lit up like a giant flaming O.”

Tara smiled awkwardly when Willow didn’t respond straight away.

“Maybe you had to be there.”

“No, it sounds cool,” Willow replied quickly, then frowned when that annoying ping went off again, “Is that your phone that keeps going off? It’s not mine.”

Tara nodded.

“Yes, sorry. You can mute it if you want.”

Willow sat up, momentarily choking herself on the belt she forgot was there. She picked up Tara’s phone from where it was sitting in the cup holder between them.
She opened the screen to mute it and watched as another message came in.

“Anya?” she read and looked at Tara bewildered, “As in Xander’s…plaything Anya?”

“Xander’s girlfriend, yes,” Tara answered, slightly pointed.

Willow stared at Tara’s phone, then back up, utterly confused.

“…why is she texting you? Why does she have your number?”

Tara inhaled and exhaled the same even breath slowly.

“We’re friends. She likes to get my opinion on a lot of things.”

Willow’s eyebrows lifted right up into her hairlines.

“You’re…friends? Actual friends?”

“Not like you and I are ‘friends’,” Tara clarified.

Willow’s mouth dropped open.

“Why would you even say that?!”

“You have a history of being confused by that term,” Tara replied, tongue-in-cheek, which swiftly turned defensive with a quick glance toward the look on Willow’s face, “I’m joking.”

Willow’s arms settled tightly across her chest.

“Well apparently being friends with Anya does nothing for your humor,” she muttered, but loud enough. She knew it was loud enough.

Tara’s jaw clenched and her hands tightened on the wheel. Willow wasn’t one to insult her. It really got her goat; another thing she wasn’t used to experiencing, unless it was around Donny.

“Wow,” she breathed.
“What?” Willow snapped.

“Nothing,” Tara replied with elongated annoyance, “Absolutely nothing.”

Pained silence hung where it had once been peaceful and lingered for a few tense seconds.

“You know, you are so jealous,” Tara exploded from nowhere, although in reality it was many years a-coming. Her chest visibly heaving with anger while her eyes remained hyper-focused ahead, “You’ve always been jealous of every meaningful friendship I’ve ever had. I avoided making other friends just to be open to whatever emotional whim you couldn’t deal with next.”

Willow scoffed derisively.

“Oh, I’m sorry I’m disrupting your ‘meaningful’ friendship with Anya, the woman who knows nothing but her own baser sexual instinct and how to use the pages from ‘Tact for Dummies’ as fire kindling.”

“You must have learned from her because ‘tactful’ is the last word I’d use to describe you right now,” Tara retorted harshly and tensed up everywhere.

She wasn’t a confrontational person, especially with Willow.

Willow’s lips pressed so tightly together they almost disappeared and her eyes stayed peeled angrily. She shook her head several times before throwing her hands in the air.

“What is this?! We don’t ever fight and now we’re fighting over Xander’s stupid girlfriend?!”

Tara blinked heavily.

“She’s not stupid, she’s my friend.”

Willow just turned her body as best she could to angle her back to Tara and allow herself to watch the rolling hills outside the window.

A little while later, her own phone buzzed between her legs, startling her slightly. She checked the screen quickly and instantly paled.
She glanced over her shoulder, and then fully, at Tara, whose knuckles had barely loosened their grip on the wheel.

She gulped and bit on her lower lip.

“You’re going to hate me.”

Tara’s fingers straightened out for a moment before she adopted a looser hold and she heaved out a breath of release.

“Willow, I don’t hate you, I love you, I just—”

“We missed the exit,” Willow blurted quickly.

Tara’s head snapped toward Willow.

“Are you kidding me?” she raged, her face turning red in contrast to Willow’s white, “All you had to do was tell me when to turn off. It’s all you had to do!”

Willow blanched at the harsh tone.

“Why are you being like this?! This isn’t you, this isn’t—”

“What?!” Tara challenged loudly.

Willow’s mouth opened to yell back but then she suddenly saw a blur of color from the corner of her eye.

“Tara!” she screamed, looking ahead in horror.

Tara’s gaze quickly averted to where Willow’s was and she spotted a single red car sitting motionless as Tara barreled toward it, having veered naturally to the position she was used to driving in when her concentration had been diverted.

The woman behind the wheel was just staring in shock with the car stalled and Tara just narrowly missed her by swerving back into her lane, luckily with no other vehicles to avoid.
Willow clutched her chest as her heart beat wildly out of her chest.

She swallowed a jab about Tara calling her a bad driver as they pulled over into the shoulder. She heard the skid of the other car as it got the hell away from them and watched Tara’s head drop onto the wheel.

She was visibly shaking.

Willow wasn’t sure if a comforting hand would be a help or a hindrance, so she kept her arms to herself and her mouth shut.

Eventually, Tara lifted her head and her eyes were clearly full of unshed tears.

“How long will it take us to loop?”

Willow blinked several times to process, then picked up her phone in a daze and looked at the re-routing options.

“Um, there’s traffic…m-maybe an hour or more.”

Tara exhaled a slow breath.

“We’re going to miss the boat.”

“There’s another late night one,” Willow replied softly, having already anticipated the problem and checked in the moments since, “Hey, we’ll save money not having to stay anywhere tonight.”

“Fine, whatever,” Tara replied, not curt but exhausted, “Just find the nearest place I can get a coffee.”

Willow nodded silently and did a quick search on the map app.

“The next exit is less than a mile. There’s a gas station right off it.”

Tara turned the engine back on, swiped at her eyes and pulled back into the lane once a couple of oncoming cars had passed and left the road plenty clear for her.
She kept watch for the exit but Willow did quietly tell her when to turn and where to find the gas station.

Tara parked and stepped out of the car, but when Willow tried to follow she found Tara had locked her in. She banged on the window.

“Seriously, Tara?!”

Tara turned, looked at her for a moment, then pressed the unlock button. The shaken look on her face made Willow think maybe it hadn’t been intentional.

Willow let herself out, took in a long breath of air and walked around to the other side of the car where Tara was trying to pump gas. She was fighting with the pump and losing so Willow put her hand gently on top of Tara’s and took the head.

“I got it,” she said softly, “It’s okay.”

Tara wordlessly handed the keys over and went into the store, getting an unlidded cup of black coffee and sitting down in the seating area with her head in her hands.

A few minutes later, Willow followed. She paid for the gas and soda for herself and went to sit opposite Tara at the small square table. She was hungry but she didn’t want to just scoff something in front of Tara like this. Even if it seemed like a long, long time since lunch at The Green Dragon Inn.

Tara finished her coffee and seemed to come together more, color returning to her cheeks and the shake in her fingers steadying.

Willow reached across and cautiously held Tara’s arm, her hand sliding down to link their fingers. Tara closed her hand in Willow’s and hung on, taking some strength from it.

“Do you want anything to eat?” Willow asked after a moment, and not just for her own gratification. Tara had been driving for hours, “They have a sandwich bar and a hot food section too.”

Tara nodded.

“Yeah, okay. Will you just pick something out for me?”

“Sure,” Willow agreed, squeezing Tara’s hand before letting go.
She returned minutes later with a tray and placed one of them in front of Tara along with a can of cherry cola.

“Lasagna okay? I got it with a side salad.”

“Thanks,” Tara replied, picking up the packet with a napkin and plastic utensils.

Willow frowned and held the other plate up.

“You can have my BLT if you want. I don’t mind.”

“No, this is great,” Tara replied, trying to offer a weak smile, “Thank you. I’m starving.”

“I figured,” Willow nodded, “Well there’s no rush so...take your time. Level out that blood sugar.”

Tara cut up her lasagna but was distracted. After a minute, she looked back up at Willow, eyes welled.

“Willow, I’m so sorry. I almost—”

Willow reached back over and took Tara’s hand.

“Everything is okay. We’re okay. No one was hurt, the car is fine. Everything is okay.”

Tara cracked the can on her soda, both wishing and thankful that it wasn’t something stronger, and downed half of it in one go.

“I bet you’d be great at beer pong,” Willow commented with a smile.

Tara smiled too and finally paid proper attention to her food.

They both ate slowly but hungrily, focused on eating and feeling more human.

“This is way better than the last gas station meal I had,” Willow commented as she scrunched up her nose, “I learned the hard way that sushi should never have a use by date seven days in the future.
And also that use by dates lie.”

“Hard to give sympathy for that one,” Tara replied, a more real crooked smile venturing out on her face.

“Fair,” Willow replied wryly.

By the time they were heading back to the car, it was dark and Willow was worried.

“Do you want me to drive?”

Tara shook her head.

“You’re not on the insurance.”

Willow nodded slowly.

“Are you okay?”

Tara nodded back.

“Yeah, I’m okay.”

Willow tossed her the keys and Tara opened the car for them. Once they sat in, they figured out the best way to get back toward the city.

“We missed sunset,” Willow said guiltily, “We’ll still have time to kill once we get back on the right road. I could look for somewhere to hang out for a while?”

Tara sighed tiredly.

“I read that the cars line up early for the boat, so I think we should just go there. We can sleep quicker if we’re first on. We’ll just be sitting around anyway.”

“Yeah, that sounds good. Wind down,” Willow agreed, “And I just got us more snacks and drinks in there in case we need them.”
Tara just reached over and briefly squeezed Willow’s thigh, before turning the car back on and setting off again.

Willow couldn't quite smile, but did feel comforted by the interaction.

Tara drove with great care as they slowly navigated the night streets once they finally arrived at Wellington and over to the harbor.

She was hyper-aware of her position on the road, her eyes peeled and tiring quickly.

She barely saw any of the city she'd hoped to spend the evening in but they would have to pay extra if they didn't return this car on time so there was no option to stretch another night out of it.

At the very least, the drive along the harbor offered some scenic beauty to take with them.

“Wow, it’s beautiful,” Willow commented as they drove toward the docking station on the water, “Look at that reflection of the moon.”

“Stunning,” Tara agreed, the weariness evident in her voice.

She would have happily used the wheel as a pillow at that point but just about managed to keep her eyes open long enough to check them in on the ferry and get the car secured on the lower deck.

Upstairs there was inside and outside seating, and Tara just collapsed into the first chair she found inside. The chairs were reminiscent of airplane seating, but there was more leg room and she was asleep in seconds as soon as her body stretched out.

Willow took off her own sweater and put it over Tara, holding onto her own arms for warmth as the sea breeze gusted through the open doors. As more people got on board, staff started giving out blankets and Willow got one for each of them.

She sat beside Tara and rested her head back so she could look sideways at Tara’s face. Her tired lines evened out leaving her skin clear and unblemished with worry.

She looked so soft.
She always had.

Willow remembered being a small child and nuzzling into Tara’s neck at sleepovers because she was softer than any blanket. It had made Tara giggle, then.

She still giggled now, Willow thought, when her head lost itself in Tara’s neck.

So much had changed, yet so much stayed the same.

She’d always been drawn to Tara and she was an idiot to think she could ever deny it.

“I’m sorry,” she said, quieter than a whisper and took a fistful of blanket for something to hold onto as she gazed out the large windows to the outside deck.

Tara woke a few hours later, barely remembering falling asleep, to a much fuller but pretty silent cabin. Someone was brushing their fingers against her cheek and she was very grateful to see it was Willow when her eyes finally focused.

“Are we there?” she asked gruffly, lifting her head to get her bearings.

“Not quite,” Willow replied quietly, then offered her hand, “Come with me?”

Tara wanted to take every second of sleep she could get.

“Will…”

“Please?” Willow pleaded hopefully.

Tara couldn’t refuse and started to stand up, catching the blanket and Willow’s sweater sitting underneath it before it fell to the floor. She looked at it in confusion.

“Why do I have your sweater?” she asked, looking up at Willow, “And why don’t you have a blanket? It’s freez—”

Willow put a finger against Tara’s lips but accepted the blanket back and covered herself with it. Most everyone else was sleeping or playing on their phones but a few people were already sitting on the outside deck in the twilight. Willow led them past them and to a little spot near the bow where she’d laid her blanket out for them to sit.
“I know it’s not sunset…” Willow said apologetically, “And I know it’s not on top of a mountain…”

Tara glanced out over the water and the alpine landscape beginning to show against the horizon of the rising sun. She realized why Willow had woken her and briefly brushed Willow’s thigh affectionately.

“I’ve always preferred sunrise anyway.”

Willow smiled and snuggled into Tara’s side. Tara put her arm over Willow’s shoulders and they just watched the gradual ascent of the sun and its glistening reflection in the water.

“About…before,” Willow said when she thought they’d both woken up enough to talk, “I was being a jerk. I just…”

She stopped and sighed.

“I don’t get it. She just seems so…not you. But friendships are weird; lots of people would say mine are too. And I never want to stand in the way of you having a friend. I never knew that I was.”

Tara sighed too.

“It’s not your fault that I made certain choices,” she said, shaking her head to herself, “And it wasn’t like I…I didn’t think ‘oh I can’t talk to this person in case Willow gets jealous’.”

Willow turned to look up at Tara.

“What was it? So I understand.”

“You know, I don’t even know. It wasn’t conscious,” Tara replied, biting her lip as her eyes glazed for a moment, “I guess so much of our history has been sub-conscious.”

She was quiet and pensive before speaking again.

“When we started school and got put in different classes, I was so upset. I got into the habit of waiting for you to come out at recess but you would always stay in. You had that special job, what was it?”
Willow pursed her lips guiltily.

“Teacher’s Helper.”

“That’s the one,” Tara nodded, “I guess I left it too long because then everyone’s friend groups were formed. And then the years just passed and even when the teachers intervened and told the kids to talk to me, I was too shy to talk back.”

Willow’s brow creased.

“You were never shy like that with me, I never…“ she said helplessly, “And you never said anything. At home.”

Tara just smiled.

“Home had you. I was always happy when I was around you,” she said sincerely, “And things changed in high school.”

Willow nodded slowly.

“They sure did.”

Tara glanced upward for a moment, thoughtful, then back down to Willow.

“Y’know, I didn’t hold back socially because I needed to be available to you…I held back because I wanted to be available to you. When I thought all friendships were supposed to feel like you…there could just never be a comparison. It was only when I realized how I really felt about you that I could value other friendships.”

Willow frowned as she thought about how she’d taken the literal opposite approach with Xander and how she’d messed them all around in the process.

“Teacher’s Helper wasn’t a real job,” she blurted, then looked away embarrassed, “I made it up. I needed an excuse to not come outside.”

Tara silently offered her time to continue and Willow felt like her stomach was being dragged up through her throat as a vivid memory played out in her mind.
Tears pricked and she felt like a child again, that child. She looked away to hide it.

“I think I called you my girl-boyfriend or something to that effect and Cordelia picked up on it,” she said with such contrasting casualness she may as well have been talking about the weather, “Thus started her bullying career.”

Tara, of course, heard even the barest quiver in Willow’s voice and silently held her tighter without demanding anything.

“So you were protecting me from her?” she asked softly.

Willow scoffed.

“You know, even a few weeks ago I would have let you believe that to give myself an ego boost,” she said self-deprecatingly, “But no. I was protecting myself.”

She bit her bottom lip so hard it almost bled.

“I remember her laughing at me so vividly, remember wanting to run away,” she said, her breathing growing gradually heavier, “Remember feeling so ashamed because ‘Willow wants to marry a girl’.”

Immediately Tara was hit with the heaviness of Willow’s words and how it made so many things suddenly click into place; like opening the doorway to a part of Willow’s soul she’d never seen before and getting hit with the weight of everything inside before she could walk through.

“Oh, Will,” she said on an exhale, her eyes closing but her arm remaining strong.

Willow blinked several times, slightly stunned by how she was feeling. She’d buried that so much so that no one could hurt her more with it, but sharing it with Tara made her feel like a weight was lifted. Now when she remembered she could see it happening, but all she felt was Tara’s arm wrapped around her, keeping her safe.

This had gone so wildly away from what she intended when she asked Tara to sit outside with her.

“So, um, what I’m saying is,” she said with a monstrous clearing of her throat, “If Anya is your friend, then I support that.”

Tara inhaled, taking in all of the information that had been shared and exhaling the emotion.
“Thank you.”

“And let’s let the cute robot voice guide us from now on,” Willow suggested, finally turning her head back to Tara with a smile.

Tara tenderly kissed the corner of Willow’s mouth, a discreet move that couldn’t be picked up by anyone even if they were looking their way.

“I think that’s best.”

Willow noted the respectful gesture and how Tara had made it feel so intimate. She turned her head in the crook of Tara’s neck. She nuzzled and Tara giggled quietly.

Willow smiled.

“Go get some more sleep?”

Tara shook her head.

“No. Let’s ride it out together.”

Willow opened her mouth to speak right as a ray of light lit up Tara’s face and shone on her like she was heaven-sent.

“Baby,” she said almost imperceptibly, “You… light up my world like nobody else. I hope…I hope you know that. Even when I’m…”

She swallowed and Tara just smiled.

“It’s nice to hear.”

Willow nodded, understanding.

She settled against Tara’s side and watched the rest of the sunrise as it played out across the face of the woman she loved.
She thought she might finally be ready to stop being ashamed of it.
Chapter 23

Christchurch

Remember Those Walls I Built?
Well, Baby, They're Tumbling Down

“Ah, home, let me go hooooome! Home is wherever I'm with you!”

Willow laughed as she fell back against the passenger seat, taking in multiple breaths having expelled so much from singing at the top of her voice with not a care in the world for how she sounded.

There was a clicking sound as the cassette finished and Willow frowned through the panting.

“Aw, the tape is over. That was our last one.”

“It’s okay, we’re almost there,” Tara said, a finger lifting from the wheel to point out signs for Christchurch, “I’ll leave you at the bus station with the luggage so you can put it in the locker. I’ll drop the car off and meet you back there. Okay?”

“Got it,” Willow replied, breath finally evening out, “Better gather up my junk.”

She leaned down to get her assorted snack wrappers and promptly banged her head when the car suddenly jolted and screeched.

“Ow.”

“Sorry,” Tara replied, taking her foot off the accelerator.

“Lucky you’re cute enough to forgive easily,” Willow replied with a grin, “Even if the only piece of junk around here isn’t the stuff littering the floor.”

“Are you talking about my butt?” Tara challenged.

Willow’s mouth dropped open.
“No, I—!” she stopped and saw Tara’s crooked grin quirking up on one side, “Jerk.”

She turned her head to look out her own window.

“If I was talking about your butt I would have said piece of sexy.”

She knew Tara’s cheeks were blushing without looking and grinned in victory.

Her grin slowly faded as they moved off the highway and into the city.

So much land that had clearly been occupied once lay barren. Buildings were half-built, some partially destroyed and empty spaces remained, disorientating in their surroundings of the areas of the city that had been rebuilt.

“God, I…” she had to stop and swallow, mouth dry, “I forgot about the earthquake.”

Tara nodded solemnly.

“It’s so confronting,” she said quietly, “I know we’ve had a shake or two back home, but…nothing like this. The worst I’ve seen is a cereal box falling to the floor.”

Willow shook her head.

“Me too. I can’t even imagine.”

Willow reached across and gripped Tara’s shoulder, squeezing it and letting her thumb caress Tara’s upper arm. She kept her hand there, grounding her until they arrived at the bus station. Tara idled the car, missing the protestations of the engine as she hopped out to help get the luggage on the curb so Willow could bring it to the storage locker.

“Will you be okay?” Tara asked through the open window as she belted back up in the driver’s seat, “I’ll only be a few minutes. The rental place is just around the corner.”

Willow rested her arms on the windowpane and leaned in to drop a quick kiss on Tara’s cheek.

“I’ll be fine, sexy-butt.”
Tara wasn’t sure whether to be embarrassed or thrilled and the smile she offered ended up an unusual combination of both. She could hear Willow chuckling as she drove away and Willow thought she could almost see the steam from Tara’s cheeks as the car sped down the street.

She looked back at the luggage with her hands on her hips and worked out how to get it all into the bus station and over to the luggage storage lockers. She was weighed down at all angles and precariously wheeling along one bag with her pinky finger but she finally waddled everything over to where she needed to go.

“Damn,” she puffed out a breath as she gratefully dropped everything from her person, “I am not cut out for weightlifting.”

A man opening the locker next to her glanced over and Willow smiled back awkwardly.

“Just chatting to myself about my complete lack of muscle tone. I do that sometimes.”

He nodded his head and secured his headphones back over his ears.

“Good to know I’m a loon on every continent.” Willow muttered as she packed their things into the locker.

She had just closed the door on it when she felt an unexpected tug on her arm.

“Run.”

Willow spun around, surprised to see Tara there so quickly and so out of breath.

“Wha…?”

“Run,” Tara repeated insistently and dragged Willow along by the hand without giving her much choice.

Willow did her best to keep up as they sprinted across the station, ran down an escalator and nearly knocked into people along the way, only stopping when they were hidden behind a column on a lower platform.

Willow placed a palm on the wall and hunched over to catch her breath.
“God Tara,” she panted, her other hand holding her side to prevent a muscle cramp, “What the frilly heck? Why are we running?”

Tara leaned back against the column and closed her eyes.

“The car crapped out on the way in. It just gave in when I was in the parking lot. I was going to say something but they gave me back my deposit while the guy went out to bring it in and I heard a ‘hey!’ and I just ran.”

“They chased you?!” Willow asked, eyes wide.

“I didn’t stick around long enough to find out,” Tara answered, wiping a hand over her brow, “It could have bankrupted me, I just reacted. Oh my god.”

Willow rolled her eyes.

“I told you it was a piece of junk.”

“It got us here, didn’t it?” Tara retorted, resting her hands on her thighs.

Willow pursed her lips.

“Don’t they have your credit card?”

Tara shook her head.

“No, I used cash. That’s why we had to run.”

Willow looked Tara up and down, contemplating what she’d done.

“I can’t believe you did that. You never do stuff like that,” she said, her voice low and admittedly turned on, “That’s so…bad. Even if we paid more to rent it than the thing is actually worth.”

Tara picked up on the tone and raised her chin, looking down at Willow seductively.
“I can be bad when I want to be.”

Willow had always thought, and admired, the fact that Tara was a paradigm of good; a kind person who made the world better just by existing. That was the person she’d fallen in love with, had always loved, and always would love but by god if she wasn’t turned on by the brief flirtation with trouble.

She looked around. The platform was empty. She took a step forward and looped a finger into Tara’s belt loop.

“Hey, do you want to go somewhere and—”

“Yes,” Tara interrupted.

Willow felt a quiver shoot between her legs.

“You don’t know what I was going to say.”

“I know what you were going to say,” Tara replied, soft and evocative.

Willow felt fireworks go off in her belly.

With a quick look around, it was her turn to drag Tara across the station until she found them a bathroom. She brought them in the door but immediately stepped back when she was assaulted with the dirt, unpleasant smells, and some very suspicious stains.

“Yuck, okay…nope,” she declared definitively before suddenly having a brainwave, “Come with me.”

She took them back upstairs and out of the station, causing Tara to have a good look around to make sure there were no angry men in rental car logoed polo shirts running around with pitchforks. She was suitably relieved that it wasn’t the case but didn’t even realize Willow was taking them into a fancy hotel lobby until they were walking inside.

She opened her mouth to object because this definitely did not look like the kind of establishment that might rent by the hour and there was no way she would let either of them pay for a whole night when they were leaving in a few hours anyway.

But Willow just kept walking until they found the equally fancy restroom, complete with potpourri,
gleaming surfaces, and a huge couch.

Willow checked all of the stalls were empty then double backed to lock the door.

“I saw us pass this place on the way in. I’ve been in so many fancy hotel bathrooms that have a sofa and I always wondered why.”

She clutched Tara’s shirt and walked backward until she sat on the plush couch.

“Now I know.”

She pulled Tara into her lap and into a kiss, sliding her arms around Tara’s neck to keep her close.

Tara moaned into Willow’s mouth and pressed herself into Willow’s body. Her lips were greedy like she’d been in a drought, desperately coming back for more even when they parted for less than a second.

Willow’s hands dropped down to Tara’s waist and she brought Tara down so she could move on top of her.

The couch was particularly comfortable, definitely more so than the ferry seats they’d bunked down in and probably even more so than the motel bed. If Tara’s body wasn’t raging with a sudden rush of hormones and Willow’s thigh wasn’t pressing down somewhere very insistently, she was pretty sure she’d have fallen asleep easily.

But Willow’s thigh was there and Tara’s pants were thin and things were getting really out of control, really fast.

She felt a pulse radiate between her legs and her hands clutched at the back of Willow’s shirt. Willow’s leg thrust once more and Tara’s head fell over the arm of the sofa and she emitted a long groan.

Willow, rosy-cheeked and grinning, pressed her hips right into Tara when her head popped back up.

“Did you just—”

The doorknob of the restroom door suddenly rattled as someone tried to come in.
They both froze until it stalled again, then released a common breath. But the relief only lasted a few moments until the handle moved again, more aggressively this time.

“Hello?” a male voice called out, accompanied by the sound of a hand slapping the door from the other side, “Hello, is anyone in there?”

“Uhnh,” Willow said, eyes widening.

She jumped up and looked around, then pulled Tara up too and pointed to a stall. Tara’s brow creased in confusion, so Willow pushed her into the nearest stall and closed the door over.

She made a quick check in the mirror to make sure she looked as inconspicuous as possible before going over to the door and flicking the lock. She made a show of yanking it open.

“So weird!” she exclaimed, making an exaggerated ‘phew’ motion, “Door just jammed.”

There was a middle-aged woman in a tennis outfit that looked like it had never seen the inside of a tennis court staring at her with narrow eyes and a man in a tailored suit and a nametag declaring him to be a manager waiting on the other side.

“Are you a guest here?” the manager asked, also adopting a narrow-eyed stance.

Willow’s lips closed in on themselves.

“Ummmm…”

The manager crossed his arms over his chest.

“I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

“Okay then,” Willow replied speedily and then raised her voice loudly, “Leaving now. Walking out to the front of the hotel. Heading on out in that general direction.”

The manager peered inside when Willow moved past him and nodded that everything seemed in order. He apologized to the woman and returned to the front desk.

Tara stayed, feeling somewhat trapped in the stall for several minutes until she heard a flush of the toilet and the turning on and off of a faucet. She anticipated her escape too early as the woman
remained at the mirror when she came out.

Tara blushed even further and quickly scrubbed her hands for show.

“This establishment used to have standards,” the haughty woman muttered and Tara stuffed her hands in her pockets and got out of there as quick as she could.

She looked up and down the street when she stepped out of the building, but couldn’t see Willow anywhere. Then she felt a tug on her arm and she was pulled around the corner where Willow collapsed into her, laughing.

It took Tara a moment, but her laughter soon joined and they both had to use the wall for support to stay upright.

“Oh my god,” Tara breathed, her legs squirming as she felt a reminder of what they were doing before getting caught.

Willow straightened up properly.

“I don’t think I’ve ever run, fled or skedaddled so much in my entire life.”

Her hands flattened over her stomach, the drive-through breakfast they’d gotten at the break of dawn long forgotten.

“Are you hungry?”

“Yeah, I’m starving.” Tara nodded, pulling herself together, “We only have a few hours. Why don’t we find somewhere to eat and just walk around, see the city?”

“But avoiding this hotel or the car rental place,” Willow advised wisely.

Tara smiled.

“Exactly.”

“I’m in,” Willow agreed happily.
“I read about a place that does waffle burgers,” Tara suggested coyly.

Willow’s eyes widened.

“Sold.”

Tara shyly offered her hand. Willow took it in a swing and smiled over at her. She didn’t look around to see if anyone was watching them.

After a quick Google, they discovered the burger restaurant was just a city block away. This rumbled the hunger in their stomachs and they made their way there just as it was opening for lunch. With their pick of seats, they got a cozy circular corner booth which they sat in on the same side.

After a quick look through the menu they placed their burger orders; fried chicken for Tara and maple bacon and beef for Willow. They opted to share curly fries and a strawberry shake and looked and felt like two giggling tweens on their first date as they settled in.

“Good god, that's a lot of shake,” Tara said when their milkshake was delivered, piled high with whipped cream, fresh strawberries and even cotton candy.

“It’s delicious!” Willow replied, already twirling some cotton candy around a finger to pop into her mouth.

Tara located one of the straws hiding amongst the toppings and took a languid sip of the thick mixture.

It was creamy and syrupy and so sweet it hurt her teeth but she could only agree with Willow.

“It is delicious,” she smiled, just as sweet as the receptacle from which she was drinking, “I hope there’s something green on the burgers. Leafy green, not… gummy green.”

Willow laughed and playfully dotted Tara’s nose with cream. Tara scrunched her nose up and waved it about, making Willow giggle more. She leaned in and kissed it off and then kissed Tara's lips quickly; both actions done in the same moment, a split second.

She settled back in her seat, still smiling happily. Tara licked her lips and looked at Willow adoringly.

“You taste… like strawberries.”
“Makes sense,” Willow replied, grinning from the side of her mouth.

Their burgers were brought down to them, both encased in pillowy waffles instead of a traditional bun.

“Leafy green!” Willow announced when she saw some romaine lettuce sticking out, “Totally offsets the rest of it.”

“Oh yes, definitely,” Tara nodded seriously, with an accompanying crease in her brow that Willow found oh so adorable.

They giggled together again and didn’t see an older waiter smile at them fondly as he passed by.

Neither of them thought they’d be able to finish their monstrous serving when the plates first touched down, but there wasn’t a single crumb left on their plates when they were finished.

“Y’know, I was gonna go chicken,” Willow said as she rested her hands on her stomach, “Chicken and waffles, it’s a classic right? And you know how I like the classics.”

Tara sent her a secret grin that actually made Willow blush as she matched her smile.

“But then I said to myself, ‘Self!’,” she said importantly, “I said you’re on the other side of the world! Push the boat out. Try something new. And I did. And I was triumphant.”

Tara ran her hands down Willow’s arm.

“You’re such an inspiration,” she said with mock exaggeration.

“Seriously, it was so good,” Willow gushed with bright eyes, “Do you think they’d do something like that at the Doublemeat Palace at home?”

“They could do something like it,” Tara replied helpfully.

Willow’s nose scrunched.

“Yeah, you’re right,” she sighed, “Y’know, I had a dream once set in the DMP where an old lady
had this thing like a giant eel come out of her head.”

Tara all but shuddered.

“That's disgusting! What did it look like?”

Willow looked at Tara wryly.

“Well, let's put it this way: if I wasn't gay before…”

Willow hadn’t said that word yet but Tara didn’t draw attention to it. She just squeezed Willow’s knee under the table and stole the last curly fry.

“Betrayal!” Willow said with a huge grin and mocked being stabbed through the heart, “Though those that are betray’d do feel the treason sharply, yet the traitor stands in worse case of woe.”

“The course of true love never did run smooth,” Tara countered and Willow smiled toward her lap for a moment.

Tara squeezed Willow’s shoulders from behind and gently pushed her.

“Come on, let’s go pay. We need to walk all of that food off.”

“Aww, but I ate all my lettuce,” Willow pouted, then bumped Tara’s shoulder playfully.

They paid separately and walked back out onto the street, where they noticed a tram going by. It was old-fashioned in the style of what it would have looked like in the 1800s with a red and yellow color scheme to make it stand out.

After watching people just jump on, they followed and took seats that allowed them to look out on the city as they looped around.

On their journey, the mix of new and old architecture in the still-rebuilding city really stood out.

The resilience of the community was amazing to see.

“Some people are so strong,” Willow said in amazement,” And they have no idea.”
Tara smiled sadly at Willow, wishing she could see it in herself.

“Yeah. I know.”

Willow caught her looking.

“What?”

Tara just shook her head.

“We’ve officially looped,” Willow said when she began to recognize landmarks again, “What do you want to do next?”

“I saw a lot of parks. Let’s go walk in one,” Tara suggested.

Willow nodded and they got off at the next stop. They decided to forgo Google and just wander until they found a park. As Tara had said, there were plenty and even in winter the leafless trees stood majestically banking the river.

Their hands joined again but they didn’t talk for a while as they finally walked off their big lunch. The first word spoken between them was to point out gondola-style boats that were being steered down the river.

Eventually, they walked long enough to see where the boats disembarked and also embarked in the first place.

“Do you want to do it?” Willow asked with a sweet smile, swinging around to face Tara.

Tara frowned for a moment.

“Oh, um…” she started, running her hand back over her hair, “Can we find out how much it is?”

“I’ll pay for it,” Willow shrugged.

“Let’s find out how much it is,” Tara suggested gently.
Willow just nodded and they approached the boathouse to enquire about the ride.

“That’s actually pretty reasonable,” Tara said when they had all the information. She squeezed Willow’s hand, “Let’s do it.”

Willow beamed and quickly paid before Tara could even think about getting her wallet out.

“You didn’t have to do that,” she said softly.

“No biggie,” Willow replied with a smile over her shoulder.

Tara reached one arm across her body to hold her own shoulder uncomfortably. She felt so small when Willow did that. She had to keep reminding herself it was only kindness.

Then one keen look from Willow telling her to come on blew her back up again and she felt whole.

She took the offered hand as they were led through the boathouse onto the dock outside where a flat-bottomed boat with a man standing atop with an oar was waiting.

Tara climbed in first and Willow almost fell in top of her. They laughed as they steadied themselves together and moved to a sitting position. They were the only ones there, so they were able to sit back and stretch their legs out.

The boat pushed off from the bank and after a few shaky seconds as it found its footing, it steadied and felt like gliding through silk.

Willow linked her arm with Tara and then their hands under it. She was really getting into hand-holding. It was so cozy and intimate. Just their palms brushing made her heart do all kinds of funny things.

After a few minutes of the journey, Willow lifted their conjoined hands and pointed to the riverbank.

“Look at all the willows.”

“I’m looking at the only one I need,” Tara replied softly and Willow’s eyes lit up.

The gentle motion was so relaxing that Tara almost found herself nodding off.
“I could fall asleep right here.”

“Me too,” Willow murmured.

“We can sleep on the bus,” Tara supplied easily. “We should start to head back to the station when we finish the ride, actually. We can’t miss the bus.”

“Okay,” Willow agreed easily, “I’m glad we got to see the city today. And thanks for all the driving you’ve been doing for us.”

“You don’t have to thank me,” Tara replied softly.

“Maybe I don’t have to,” Willow shrugged, “But I want to. Sometimes it’s important to say things. Right?”

Tara looked down and lowered her voice.

“Right.”

Willow looked at her a little funny but didn’t say anything.

The rest of the boat ride was quiet but their hands never broke and many an intimate gaze was shared.

It lasted longer than they had anticipated and so when they banked again, they picked up the pace to get back to the bus station. They retrieved their luggage and boarded the bus that would take them to the ski lodge, thankfully without issue or delay.

After finding seats and setting off, Willow turned excitedly to Tara.

“I’ve never skied you know.”

She grabbed the armrest as the bus hurtled along the road in the darkening sky.

“No?” Tara asked.
Willow shook her head.

“No, my parents weren’t into the cold,” she replied, holding her arms lightly across her chest, “I actually never would have even thought of New Zealand as a skiing destination.”

“When I first started planning the trip, and I was deciding whether to go east or west first, I read an article about the ski season over here and noticed it coincided with when I was planning to leave,” Tara explained, body jumping slightly when they went over a speed bump, “I decided it was too serendipitous not to pay attention, so the decision was made.”

“I probably would have gone east and followed the summer,” Willow shrugged to herself, “But this has been great.”

Tara smiled a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes and closed her eyes. Almost immediately she felt Willow’s head on her shoulder.

The smile reached a little further.
When they arrived at their lodge accommodation, Willow was impressed with the authentic feel.

It had been too dark to see much but the outline of the slopes and a blanket of snow on the way in but the lodge had a real wood fire and plush rugs and felt very cozy.

Willow didn’t realize there was such a thing as ‘too cozy’ until they walked into their room.

There were eight single beds in four corners with a nightstand separating them and the only available space located under each bed. It was not what Willow was expecting when she’d walked into a warm log cabin. Visions of four poster beds and luxury thread counts were being quickly put to pasture.

“…really?” she asked, unable to hide her disappointment.

Tara walked to the bed in the nearest corner which backed onto a radiator. She hiked her bag up onto the bed and began taking out her necessities.

“What’s wrong?”

Willow walked over like she was being dragged, glancing at the other beds with eyes that almost looked wounded.

“Are other people in here too?”

“Yes, sweetie,” Tara replied with a reprieving smile, “It’s a backpackers’ lodge.”

Willow sank down onto the single next to Tara’s.

“And these are our beds?” she asked, emphasizing the plural.
“Well, yeah,” Tara nodded slowly, “Do you want to change to the room with the bunks? They’re mixed—”

“No!” Willow said quickly, placing a hand protectively on her spot, “I just…we don’t get to… snuggle?”

Tara winked slyly.

“We made out in a hotel bathroom, I’m sure we’ll figure it out.”

Willow blushed and stood up to turn her back to Tara and hide it.

“I meant actual snuggling. Gotten used to you hogging the blanket.”

Tara rolled her eyes playfully and came around the bed to wrap her arms around Willow’s middle.

“And I still think we’ll figure it out,” she whispered, leaving a kiss on Willow’s cheek from behind before releasing her again to return to her unpacking.

Willow smiled, feeling warm all over from where Tara had embraced her. That’s what had come to mind when she imagined them in a log cabin.

“I see you snagged the warm bed all for yourself,” she said in mock indignation.

“Only because I know you’re a toasty oven hot water bottle all on your own,” Tara teased.

Willow blushed some more but didn’t hide it this time.

“Only because your feet are like walking icicles in comparison,” she retorted, sticking out her tongue.

“I’ll find someone else to warm them up,” Tara suggested.

“No you will not,” Willow replied abruptly with the most adorable furrowed brow Tara had ever seen.
“Okay then,” Tara agreed heartily and it took Willow a moment to realize she’d been played.

By then, two more girls came into the room who had been on their bus with them.

“Hey there!” the one in front, a blonde woman a little bit older than them with an Australian accent greeted.

The brunette behind her waved as they took the beds opposite.

“Hi ladies.”

“Hi,” Tara welcomed, somewhat shyly, “Um, I’m Tara. This is Willow.”

“Americans yeah?” the blonde girl asked, “I’m Toni, this is Char. First time on the slopes?”

“It is,” Tara confirmed.

“It’s our fifth time, been coming since Year 10,” Toni professed excitedly, “10th grade for you yanks.”

“Yeah, kinda figured that one out,” Willow muttered and Tara shot her a momentary look.

“It’s nice to meet you both,” Tara returned kindly.

Three more women claimed beds in the room, a two-some of 40-something friends and a lone traveler in her late 20s. Everyone introduced themselves and it became obvious pretty quickly that Toni was the loudest of the bunch.

“Who wants to get smashed? I know all of the best bars with all of the hottest bartenders.”

There was a general murmur of agreement, apart from a hidden, pained look from Willow and an awkward but passable smile from Tara.

“Uh, I think I’m going to stay in,” Willow announced, sitting down on her bed definitely.

“You are?” Tara asked, tone unsure.
Willow nodded.

“Yeah, didn’t get much sleep last night, obviously. Wanna be fresh for the lessons tomorrow.”

Tara lifted her hand behind her own neck and massaged it.

“Oh, um, okay,” she said, glancing between Willow and the rest of the girls, “Um, you know, I’ll stay too. She’s right, could use the sleep catch-up.”

Toni shrugged one shoulder.

“More hunks for us!”

“No kidding,” Willow replied under her breath.

The group left and Willow grinned up at Tara.

“You can thank me for getting us out of that one when we’re in private.”

Tara’s hand slid down to grip her opposite arm.

“We didn’t have to get ‘smashed’ you know. Or drink at all if you didn’t feel like it.”

“I would have had to get more than ‘smashed’ to deal with that Toni and her ‘hunk’-chasing,” Willow said sarcastically, “Did you hear her call us yanks?”

“I don’t think she meant anything derogatory by it,” Tara replied through a soft sigh, “And thinking we might be into ‘hunks’ is a reasonable assumption…I suppose.”

Willow frowned.

“Hey, we’re not…I mean…” she paused, considering her words, “We’re not telling them we’re…”

Tara glanced at the floor.
“Not if you don’t want to.”

“I just don’t want them to get weird about it,” Willow replied quickly, “Have to share a room, don’t want it to be awkward.”

Tara nodded.

“Sure, Will,” she agreed without looking up, “Hey, I need to use the bathroom.”

She grabbed her towel and toiletry bag, deciding to shower now instead of standing in line in the morning. A few women were readying themselves for a night out in the bathroom, but the row of showers was completely free.

She released the curtain from where it was rolled up until it hit the ground and placed her toiletry bag on the little shelf. She took out the plastic bag she had tucked in its side pocket and hung it over her towel sitting on the little courtesy hook. She secured her clothes in there as she undressed and tied it at the top so they were safe from any stray water.

Willow had done the towel-dash in the motel but Tara was a bit more modest than that and preferred to keep her undressing behind closed doors, or curtains, especially without any private space.

It took a little dancing around to get a comfortable temperature if a little on the lukewarm side. It felt like weeks since her last shower, even though it had only been about 36 hours. But a lot of driving, a poor night’s sleep on a boat and a day of sightseeing followed by a bus journey had made her feel grimy.

It really felt like months since they’d left Sunnydale, in some ways, not just weeks. It was hard to imagine how long a stretch of time there still was left.

She used the opportunity of having no one waiting on her to enjoy her shower, give her hair a good wash and condition and top up where she needed with her razor. A fresh teeth brushing left her feeling like new.

She arrived back into the dorm room, where Willow was lying on her stomach on the bed, legs kicked up. She had her phone in her hands, which she waved at Tara.

“You know it’s only an extra twenty bucks a night to get a private double since we’re each paying for a single anyway. I checked.”
Tara sighed, feeling a weight reappear on her shoulders.

“I want to get to know people.”

“You’re not getting to know them in your sleep,” Willow countered in a sing-song voice.

“I’m not getting to know them at all,” Tara replied curtly under her breath, but immediately regretted it, especially when Willow looked at her unsurely for a moment. Tara never spoke to her like that.

“What?”

Tara looked at Willow apologetically.

It was only the first night and she’d really enjoyed the space to have a long shower. Plus she was exhausted and falling into bed sounded like heaven.

“I said get up for a second. Please.”

Willow cautiously stood up, holding her phone to her chest. Tara moved around to the other side of Willow’s bed and pushed it a few inches closer to her own.

“Close enough to hold hands until we fall asleep, not too close to be conspicuous.”

Willow looked between the two beds and then to Tara, eyes soft.

“Thank you.”

Tara came back around and cupped Willow’s cheek, rubbing her thumb over Willow’s jawbone.

“You’re welcome.”

She tilted Willow’s face up and pressed their lips together tenderly for a few moments.

“I’m going to turn in,” she said softly, “I’m more tired than I realized.”

Willow nodded, then caught Tara’s arm before she left the embrace.
“Hey?”

Her fingers brushed Tara’s upper arm.

“I love you.”

Tara covered Willow’s fingers with her hand and gave them an affectionate squeeze.

“I love you too.”

With no one else in the room, she quickly changed into pajamas and got under the covers.

Willow slowly got herself ready for bed and turned off the lights before getting into bed too.

She’d just settled when she saw a shadow off to the side and it took a moment for her eyes to focus and realize it was Tara’s hand held out in the space between their beds.

She smiled. Tara had waited.

She reached out and felt a sense of peace wash over her as their fingers linked.

They both fell asleep in minutes.

Tara brought a plate of toast over to Willow, who was sitting on her own in the communal kitchen while the other occupants of their room and people from other dorms gathered in clusters to eat breakfast.

“Can you believe how noisy they were coming in last night?” Willow asked quietly.

“It was only for a minute,” Tara reasoned softly.

“Long enough to wake us,” Willow muttered.
Tara offered the plate.

“Eat. We’ll need energy for the slopes.”

They ate up and made their way to the rental unit to get their gear ready for the day on the mountain.

“You look so cute,” Willow said when Tara appeared in white pants and red ski jacket.

“You’re adorable,” Tara returned as she took it Willow’s multi-colored spackled attire.

She reached forward and settled Willow’s goggles on her face.

“Actually, it’s kinda hot.”

Willow blushed, but it was thankfully hidden.

A car horn sounded indicating the shuttle up to the mountain was outside and there was a rush from all corners as people gathered their equipment and headed out of the lodge.

“Do you mind if I take the window seat?” Tara asked as Willow went to slide in, “I’ve never seen real snow before.”

Willow smiled softly.

“Sure thing.”

She shuffled back out so Tara could take the window seat and sat beside her. She lifted her goggles again so she could watch Tara watch the gentle dusting of snow on the ground grow as they picked up passengers from the other accommodations and made their way to the base of the mountain.

Willow felt an unfettered sense of joy when they were leaving the bus and Tara jumped down from the step into the snow and grinned as her boots sunk into it.

She remembered being small children and jumping in mud puddles, and her mom getting mad when she came home dirty. She thought that was the end of mud puddle fun for her but the next time Kimberly told her to just have fun and then had washed everything she was wearing before sending her home. That had been one of the first times Willow had wondered where ‘home’ really was.
As Tara crouched down to touch the snow and run it through her fingers, Willow couldn’t resist making a sneaky snowball in her hand and aiming it right at the back of Tara’s head.

Tara grabbed the back of her head like she’d been shot and spun around, shocked. When she saw that Willow was her assailant, she reached out and pushed her shoulder.

“Hey!”

Willow stuck her tongue between her teeth to contain the laughter.

“I would have been jealous if I wasn’t your first snowball fight.”

“Oh, it’s a fight is it?” Tara asked and promptly dropped to form her own snowball to launch at Willow.

They chased each other around in a small circle flinging hastily made and often just crumbling flecks of ice at each other until they went barreling into someone and nearly made him poke his ski pole through his own foot.

“So sorry,” Tara gulped as he shot them an entirely hidden yet undeniably pointed look from under his goggles.

“Very sorry,” Willow echoed, grabbing Tara’s arm and pulling her away.

They moved away from the angry man, desperately trying not to laugh.

Moments later, they heard his voice for the first time as they watched him walk up on the slope to see above everyone.

“Alright, ski beginners, gather ‘round! Let’s get you kitted out!”

Willow’s eyes widened and she turned to Tara.

“Switch to a snowboarding lesson?”

“We better hurry,” Tara replied quickly, already pushing Willow toward a different group of people.
The woman leading this group started handing out snowboards from a large mesh bag.

“How many people here already do board sports?”

All the other hands in the group shot up and Willow and Tara exchanged a wide-eyed look.

Many, many tumbles, slips, trips and flat out face-planting later, they both shoved the boards back into the mesh bag to the grateful look of the instructor and other group participants. They happily stumbled away from the mountain to the mini-lodge that stored their belongings and sold hot drinks.

Tara went to get them hot chocolate while Willow retrieved her bag with their phones and snacks she’d brought for lunch.

The few benches were already taken up, but they took advantage of their padded clothing and sat in the snow at the base of the mountain.

“So…” Willow said as she accepted the Styrofoam cup at Tara, “We suck at this.”

Tara just smiled.

“Yes. I know she said everyone falls at first but it felt like we fell a spectacular amount.”

“My bruises have bruises,” Willow agreed, tenderly rubbing her covered shin, “Oh, food!”

She unzipped the front pocket and took out the peanut butter sandwiches Tara had made for them earlier, opening the resealable bag to hand her one.

“These are so good,” Willow said as ate hers hungrily.

“I learned how to scrape the peanut butter across the bread from a Cordon Bleu chef,” Tara returned with a crooked smile.

Willow reached out and brushed some errant nut butter from the corner of Tara’s mouth.

“I love that smile.”
A gust of wind blew at her face and she rubbed her sleeve over her nose to take out the brunt of it. Tara reached over and rubbed the red spot on the tip.

“I love that frosty little nose.”

Willow smiled and tucked her chin into Tara’s palm but backed off when people from their room passed by and said hello. Tara waved and Willow was cordial but more than her nose was frosty.

“Willow,” Tara said quietly, swallowing, “I know it's morning but last night's on my mind.”

“Oh?” Willow asked, raising an eyebrow.

Tara’s heart hammered a little too fast and she looked down.

“Never mind. Let’s get back out there.”

At the end of the day, on the shuttle back to the town, a worn-out Willow snuggled into Tara’s side.

“I think I’ve had my fill of snowboarding,” she said, trying not to swing her legs so as not to hit her many bruises against anything, “What do you want to do for dinner? I’m starving.”

“We could get a cheap bite from one of the bars,” Tara suggested hopefully, “I bet we can get a good recommendation.”

When they got back to the lodge, Tara hurried off to use the bathroom and Willow dragged herself around, feeling every bruise that dotted her legs as she did so. Tara greeted the others in their room politely when she returned. They all returned a greeting politely as well but mostly talked amongst themselves and headed out to the kitchen together in their own little group.

Willow was sitting on her bed, head buried in her phone, but looked up when Tara came over.

“Hey, I asked at the desk like you said, one of the mountain bars will do pizza delivery to the lodges, cheap too,” she said, brow furrowing slightly when Tara didn’t respond, “That’s what you wanted right?”

Tara watched the backs of their roommates as they left and blinked several times.

“Yeah,” she responded eventually, shaking her head to herself, “Yeah, great. Will you order?”
“Yeah, sure,” Willow smiled, “If there’s one thing I know how to do it’s ordering a pizza for us! We should really be watching a movie too.”

Tara looked blank and Willow’s eyebrows lifted.

“Pizza-and-movie Fridays? Our number one tradition for over a decade?”

“Sorry, yes,” Tara replied quickly.

“Are you okay?” Willow asked, concerned.

Tara nodded.

“Just hungry.”

Willow held her phone back up.

“I’ll make the call.”

The pizza came and they ate alone, sitting on Willow’s bed.

“That was…seriously cheesy,” Willow commented, leaning back with her hands over a full belly, “I can’t even think of a good pun. It’s fondued my brain.”

She stuck her tongue out between her teeth, grinning.

“Got there,” she said triumphantly, then frowned when she noticed a spot of grease on her collar, “Shit. This was like my last clean shirt.”

Tara, not quite as full and feeling like moving, jumped up first to crush the box, then to go back over to her own bed.

“You know, it’s a good time to finally get some laundry done. With everyone else…out.”

Willow nodded along.
“Yeah, I’ve been getting dangerously low on underwear too.”

Tara found her coin purse and put it in her pocket.

“I’ll go buy some detergent.”

“From where?” Willow asked, her brow creased.

Tara indicated over her shoulder.

“They sell it by the cup at the desk.”

“Oh,” Willow replied, “Will you get me some?”

“A cup will be plenty for us both,” Tara said, her voice rushed.

“I was always a ‘throw it all in together and hope for the best’ kinda gal,” Willow admitted bashfully, “But I probably need to rethink that what with only having a couple of weeks’ worth of clothes on my back.”

“Why don’t you gather up your stuff and I’ll just throw it in with mine?” Tara suggested.

Willow shook her head.

“I can’t ask you to do that.”

“You’re not, I’m offering,” Tara said, hiking her bag of laundry on her bed for Willow to add to, “It’s silly to do two extra loads, and not very environmentally friendly.”

“Thanks, that’s really sweet,” Willow replied, trying not to wince as she stood, “Let me help.”

Tara shook her head.

“You need to rest those legs. Get into your PJs so I can wash that shirt.”
Willow shrugged and changed and handed Tara her stained shirt.

“Are you sure you—”

“I got it,” Tara cut her off and hurried out with the bag of laundry.

She just had to get out of that room.

She bought a cup of detergent at the desk and was directed downstairs to the laundry room. It was predictably empty and Tara sighed. She didn’t know what else she was expecting.

Laundry had always been her job at home and she’d always found it relaxing, even when she’d had to sort Donny’s boxers. She’d even had an occasional flirt with passive-aggression and not used fabric softener on his clothes.

She realized as she sorted their clothes that neither had brought any whites with them, which lessened the job considerably.

She followed the instructions stuck to the machine and got their wash on, then just stood there as it started to rattle.

She looked around and decided to wait it out, so she pressed her back up against the wall and slowly slid down into sitting. She took her phone from her pocket and twirled it around in her hand, before unlocking it to pass the time.

She noticed her mother was active on the messenger app they used and sent her a quick message to ask if she was up.

Moments later her screen lit up with an incoming video call and then the comforting image of her mother’s face, excited to see her.

“Hey Momma,” Tara greeted softly.

“Hello my darling girl,” Kimberly returned, “Why are you so little? Use that thing I got you with the bigger screen.”

“Oh, it’s up in the room, sorry,” Tara replied, holding the phone further away to get more of herself on screen, “And the camera is the same size.”
Kimberly peered at her.

“Where are you?”

“Doing laundry,” Tara answered a bit flatly.

“Oh, has reality hit?” Kimberly teased, “Can’t stay out partying every night. I saw those pictures with those handsome young Maori men.”

Tara arched an eyebrow and Kimberly had the decency to blush.

“Though I don’t suppose you were admiring.”

Tara decided to move on quickly.

“Why are you still up? Isn't it 1 am there?”

“Just off nights. Adjusting,” Kimberly said with that ever-present tired smile of hers, “What time is it there?”

“About 8 o’clock,” Tara replied through a breath, “At night. On Friday.”

Kimberly looked at her encouragingly.

“Are you just in from a day of skiing?”

Tara shook her head.

“We did a last minute change to snowboarding.”

“And?” Kimberly prompted.

Tara smiled.
“And we fell over a lot. We’ll do some skiing next, probably. And there’s nature walks and stuff. We’ll fill our time, I hope.”

Kimberly looked through the screen, concerned.

“You don’t sound yourself. Are you tired?”

“No,” Tara shook her head, then frowned, “Maybe. I had an early night last night but it was a long day.”

“Well the mom in me says to get enough rest,” Kimberly said, though her eyes twitched with mirth, “But you also have the rest of your life to get enough sleep. Enjoy your adventures.”

Tara nodded slowly, eyes flicking to the side for a moment.

“How are you and Willow getting on?” Kimberly asked when there was no response.

“We’re good,” Tara answered evenly, “She seems to be enjoying things. How’s everything at home?”

“Oh you know, same old same old,” Kimberly sighed softly, then paused for a moment before continuing, “Donny is home. For good.”

Tara didn’t answer and Kimberly felt the need to fill the silence.

“He’s doing well. Got his job back at the auto shop. He’s hoping to save up for a deposit to get his own place in a few months.”

“Good,” Tara answered after another moment when it was obvious her response was wanted, “I’m glad things are working out.”

Kimberly’s brow creased slightly.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah,” Tara nodded quickly, “Hey, I need to go and switch the clothes out to the dryer.”
“Okay honey,” Kimberly replied, lifting her hand to her mouth to blow a kiss, “Thanks for squeezing me in. I miss you and I love you and I’m so happy you’re having the time of your life.”

Tara looked away again but recovered before her mother noticed.

“I’m here any time you need me,” Kimberly added in as she waved her fingers in a goodbye.

“Thank you, Mom,” Tara said sincerely, “I love you. Talk soon. I’ll try and hang out with more hot men for you to ogle at.”

“Behave, young lady,” Kimberly replied and threw Tara a wink.

Tara smiled and waved and the picture dropped from the screen. She looked up at the washing machine still whirring away and sighed, dragging up her knees and wrapping her arms around them in silence.

Finally, when the clothes were washed and dried, she hiked them back upstairs and found Willow snoring softly in the room.

She dropped the bag on her bed and sank down beside it to sit, wondering what to do.

She’d love to talk to the Scandinavian solo traveler they shared a room with, or the identical triplet brothers she’d seen at breakfast, or even just be a passive witness to any of the shared stories the unique group of people staying in the lodge on these same few days would tell.

She could go and find fellow travelers in one of the bars to hang out with. Everyone had been friendly, in the lodge and on the slopes; she had no reason to think she wouldn’t be welcome. She’d been asked earlier if she wanted to come out.

Willow wouldn’t mind, or even notice; she was fast asleep.

But she felt like that six-year-old who had waited too long to make friends again and couldn’t summon the courage to just go out and approach anyone.

She got up and began folding the laundry, just to busy her hands instead of her thoughts. As she finished up, she was contemplating changing into some of her new clean clothes and checking out a bar, even if she just soaked up the atmosphere, alone with a drink, when she felt a toe poke her leg.

“Hey.”
Tara looked over and Willow was smiling at her, sleepy and adorable.

“Hey,” she returned, feeling her heart speed up a little at Willow’s soft smile.

“I fell asleep,” Willow said, sitting up with a groan as she rubbed her eyes, “Did you fold it and everything? I was going to do that part at least.”

“It’s no big deal,” Tara shrugged, “I’m pretty fast at it.”

Willow tried to stand and hand to hold onto the bed.

“Oh god, it hurts to move,” she said, sighing, “I think I’m just one giant bruise.”

“Oh, baby,” Tara comforted gently, “The only thing I can’t rub better without making it worse.”

Willow took a step forward and pressed her lips to Tara’s happily.

“This always helps,” she said, nuzzling her nose off of Tara’s, then tilting her head at a small angle as she looked in Tara’s eyes, “Are you okay?”

Tara opened her mouth and let out a breath.

“Yeah,” she said, taking in a new breath to build herself up, “Do—”

“I think a shower is going to kill me but it will be worse if I don’t,” Willow unintentionally cut Tara off as she walked away, waddling like a penguin, “Hey do you think they sell earplugs at the front desk too? I don’t want to deal with the noisy homecoming again.”

Tara’s shoulders shrunk and she held her arms loosely across her chest. She had earplugs, plenty of them, but she actually found herself getting excited at the thought of strolling down to the front desk to see what was happening.

“I’ll check for you.”

“You’re the best,” Willow smiled over, sweet and true and it made Tara feel guilty.
She offered a weak smile, helped Willow gather her things for a shower, and sat back onto her bed, twiddling her thumbs.

She was starting to wonder if she and Willow had the same idea of ‘adventure’ and what that meant for the next year of their lives.
Chapter 25

Melbourne

Goodbye To You, Goodbye To Everything That I Knew

“I don’t think I want to eat kangaroo.”

Tara watched Willow flick through a leaflet as they sat on the shuttle bus from the airport. Her arms were settled tiredly on her chest and her head was held up by one giant knot instead of a neck.

“I don’t think it’s a requirement, sweetie.”

Willow rolled her eyes playfully at Tara and smiled.

“I know that. They just have a list of Aussie foods to try. Tim Tams look good though. I wanna do a Tim Tam Slam!”

The bus pulled up on the curb and Tara poked Willow in the arm.

“This is us.”

Willow jumped up and took her backpack with her as she hurried to get off before the bus closed the doors.

“Oh, watch your step hun.”

Tara grabbed onto Willow’s backpack to steady her as they stepped off the shuttle and onto the sidewalk outside their hostel.

Willow felt herself falling forward and then being whooshed back until her feet finally settled on the pavement.

She smiled bashfully over at Tara.
“Don’t know what I’d do if you weren’t around to keep me on my feet.”

Tara briefly squeezed Willow’s shoulder before they made their way into the hostel to check in. Willow navigated them to their room going by wall signage and dropped her bag on the floor with a look of unrepentant disgust.

“Bunk…beds?”

“Yes,” Tara replied slowly, leaving her bag down beneath the ladder to the top bunk, “I told you there would be bunk beds.”

Willow just stared at the wooden frame of the structure.

“I thought you were joking,” she said in disbelief, before adding on in a grumble, “Why does the accommodation keep getting worse?! It’s like the curious case of the lowering standards.”

Tara saw two other guests in the room, whom she hadn’t even had a chance to say hello to yet, roll their eyes behind Willow’s back. Her eyes averted, embarrassed, and she tried to sound optimistic for Willow.

“Remember how we always wanted bunk beds as kids? Now we have them.”

“We were six,” Willow answered flatly.

“Look, just try to settle in?” Tara requested quietly, “I’m going to go to that supermarket on the corner and pick us up some essentials, okay?”

She rubbed Willow’s back but didn’t linger before grabbing her purse with her wallet and reusable shopping bag she sourced in Auckland and left the room.

She returned thirty minutes later with new shampoo and shower gel and some drinks and snacks but found their designated bunk void of Willow or their belongings. She felt a tap on her shoulder and turned to see Willow standing behind her, grinning.

“Where are the bags?” Tara asked, her tone lowering as her eyes flashed uncertainly.

Willow curled her finger forward.
“Come with me. I have a surprise.”

Tara looked back at the room they were retreating from in confusion as Willow led her down the hallway, produced a new key from her pocket and let them into a new room.

It had with one queen bed with matching nightstands holding pretty little orange lamps. There was art on the walls and a door that led to an en-suite and a pretty decent view of the city from the large bay window with curtains that matched the soft orange of the lamps.

It was a very nice, pretty, private room and Tara felt like she was a house of cards being toppled over.

“What…?” she exhaled in confusion, her bag of groceries dropping to the ground by her feet.

“They said we could just switch because we hadn’t used the beds,” Willow said, sitting on the bed with a bounce and a smile, “It’s just a few more bucks. I’ll pay for it.”

Tara bristled and closed her eye.

“I don’t want you to pay for it,” she said sternly, her nostrils beginning to flare, “I want to pay my own way.”

Willow's eyes moved back and forth uncomfortably.

“Okay then…”

Tara’s breath grew more labored and she felt like actually stamping her feet, though did rein in the urge.

“I don’t want to pay for this room. I was happy in the other one.”

“You were happy in a bunk bed?” Willow asked in a derisive tone.

Tara threw her hands up, which had started to shake. Her body had anticipated where this was going while her mind still reeled with the surprise of it all.

“I was happy to…to meet people, to talk to them, find out where the good places in the city are to see and eat and hang out.”
Willow tilted her head downward.

“Have you heard of the internet?”

Tara’s jaw clenched.

“Do you know how condescending you sound right now?”

It was Willow’s turn to bristle; she wasn’t very used to Tara challenging her.

“I’m sorry, I’m not trying to sound condescending,” she said, slowly sliding off the bed into a stand, “I just don’t get why anyone would choose that room with strangers who snore and smell and give you no privacy over this one.”

“Well you don’t have to get it,” Tara snapped, but it immediately settled into a more calm and resolute tone, “You don’t have to get it, but I do. You get the room you want and I’ll get the room I want. It’s no big deal. We don’t have to do every single thing together.”

Willow was hurt that Tara didn’t want to share a bed with her but tried to hide it.

“Okay. You do that.”

“Okay,” Tara nodded, blowing out a last breath of tension, “Okay, I’ll go tell them I need a single bed before they fill up.”

Willow’s pretense dropped.

“Are you really going to needlessly pay for a shared room when I’m getting a private one anyway? You’re just cutting off your nose to spite your own face. You’re the one wasting money!”

Tara closed her eyes and shook her head.

“I knew you were just trying to trick me.”

“Trick you?!?” Willow exclaimed in disbelief, “I’m trying to give us some time, some space together. Is it so wrong to want to share a bed with you, to have a little affection?”
“Well now you know how I felt for the past year,” Tara spat back and felt her stomach recoil as she watched her words hit Willow’s face.

She knew that wasn’t fair.

She didn’t like being this person.

She didn’t like what all of this inner and now outer conflict was doing to her.

Her head dropped and her voice followed.

“I don’t think this is gonna work.”

Willow’s brow furrowed as deep as it ever had.

“Hey. It is, i-it's working.”

Tara just looked at Willow but couldn’t take the look on her face and looked down again.

Willow took a step forward, wringing her hands.

“Tara, please. I need you, baby. I need you. I don't need all this, I-I don't, I…let me prove it to you, okay?”

“I don't know, I just…think we both need some…I don't know, space,” Tara swallowed unable to take Willow looking so upset, “Oh, I can't believe I'm saying this.”

Tara’s voice was an echo as she said out loud the niggling thought that had been in her back of her mind for a while but she’d refused to acknowledge before.

“I think we should do our own thing for a few weeks. Maybe meet up back in Sydney before we’re supposed to leave?”

“Are you serious?” Willow asked, her voice verging on breaking, “Are you saying you're gonna leave me?”
Tara’s head shot up.

“I’m leaving for a few weeks. I’m not leaving you,” she said, the definitive language of the statement not lost on either of them.

“Uh, if I’m not there, you are!” Willow protested angrily, her eyes becoming visibly glassy, “That’s exactly what that means!”

Her fists balled all her sides.

“Do it then! Pay, pay your own way! GO your own way! You can go your own way! Don’t pretty it up!”

Tara’s eyes started to shine with unshed tears too.

“Willow…” she said softly, pained, “You said in the park that day if I needed space you would give it to me.”

A single tear fell down Willow’s cheek as a wealth of guilt and pain and fear washed over her face. Her anger dropped, but the hurt was even worse to see.

“I thought we’d figured that stuff out, I thought we were doing better…I thought I was doing better. I’m really trying, Tara. I know I hushed up at the mountain but I really thought the others might be uncomfortable but I don’t care about them, I just care about you. I’ll do better, I promise, Tara!”

Tara felt her own lip start to tremble.

“I know, Willow, I know you’ve been trying. On that stuff, it’s great, it really is. I feel your heart opening and I love and appreciate every step you’ve made,” she said sincerely before her head dropped and she continued quietly, “That’s what makes this so hard.”

She furtively wiped at her eye because she couldn’t break down. Even at this moment, she had to stay strong for Willow. She inhaled deeply and raised her head, determined to speak clearly.

“This is a different problem. This is a clash we’ve never had. We rushed into this trip together, we had no idea what it was going to be like and I think I just need a few weeks to see what it’s like on my own so I can come back and we can figure out how to move forward together.”
Tara saw the moment Willow broke as her shoulders deflated and then began to wrack with silent
sobs.

Every muscle in Tara’s body was tensed and strained as she fought to make Willow understand.

“I am not breaking up with you. I’m not, Willow. This is best for me but it’s for us too. Because I
love you…because I love you too damn much to let this pull us apart when a little breathing space
could keep us together.”

A tear escaped but Willow’s eyes were shut so tight Tara didn’t try to hide it.

“And if you don’t believe that, then…” she stopped and exhaled, “Then, I won’t go.”

She nodded definitively to herself.

“If you honestly don’t think that I love you and that I’ll come back to you, then I’m obviously doing
something wrong and I’ll stay until you truly know deep in your heart how I feel about you.”

So many voices screamed at Willow to take the out, to make her stay.

But she couldn’t.

Because she did know.

And Tara had never asked anything of her, so if she was asking this then she had to let her—

“Go,” she pushed out the word like it was acid on her tongue.

She refused to open her eyes.

It almost startled Tara.

She really had to do it now.

She wordlessly grabbed her backpack and put it over her shoulders, then approached Willow to kiss
her goodbye, but without opening her eyes Willow turned her cheek when she felt Tara’s breath get
close and refused it.
“Just go.”

Tara blinked, then nodded despite Willow not being able to see her and backed off to head for the door.

With one look behind her, she walked through and left the room.

“I love you, Willow.”

Willow broke when she heard the click of the lock secure back into place and burst into the tears she’d so desperately held in.

She dropped right where she was on the floor, her feet connecting with the abandoned grocery bag that Tara had let fall.

Her eyes opened, pained and glassy, when she spotted a pack of Tim Tams falling out from the top of the bag that Tara must’ve bought for her when she’d been out.

With a gut-wrenching cry she picked up the pack and looked at it; all of Tara’s love for her represented in brown packaged confectionary.

Willow held the cookies to her chest and sobbed.

Willow was curled around a pillow with red eyes in the same room Tara had left her in.

The curtains were pulled, the lights were off and her saddest playlist was currently playing Death Cab for Cutie.

She hadn’t even left the room in the days since Tara left; had only sat under the spray of water in the shower without actually washing her hair or body because the hot water burned her skin and gave her something else to focus on.

She was just about surviving on the food Tara had bought for them before but was getting to the point of eating a tin of tuna with no utensils.

She’d never felt like this before.
So shut down.

The only thing that had come close was when Tara left for band camp after they’d fought last summer but she’d been so bogged down in the tentative first steps of actually acknowledging her feelings, the raw pain hadn’t felt quite so…well, raw.

Tara had said they weren’t breaking up, but that was surely just a line, Willow could only think. Tara’s natural inclination was to play down badness, to comfort. She’d realize how much fun she could have without a Willow-shaped-person attached and come back to say goodbye for good.

If she came back at all.

Her pillow was still wet with the tears that would rush from her eyes as she thought of everything she’d lost so quickly.

The rug was completely pulled from under her; she’d had no idea Tara had hated traveling with her so much.

She’d thought they were closer than ever.

It stung in her heart and rolled around in her stomach taunting her into feeling like she was going to throw up. Except she couldn’t, she’d tried, and she was stuck with the bile burning through her and reminding her of everything she’d done wrong.

*Even trying my hardest…I’m not good enough. I’m never good enough.*

As she stared off into space, her sniffles were interrupted by a new email notification on her laptop. She was going to ignore it, as she had the dozens of emails and other message notifications she’d received over the past few days, but the flash of a name caught her eye before it disappeared.

![Tara Maclay](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

It’s not a mixtape but...

She shot up and yanked her laptop into her lap, wondering if she’d imagined it, but she hadn’t.
The name was right there.

She put her fingers over the trackpad but they were damp with her tears and the cursor wouldn’t move. With frustration, she slapped her hand against her thigh and dragged it along her pajama bottom to dry it. She quickly tried again to pull up the tab again.

She stared at Tara’s name, bold and confronting, and cast her eye to the subject line. Her brow knotted.

*Mixtape?*

Hovering for a moment, she finally clicked it open and found herself holding her breath in anticipation.

> It’s not a mixtape, but...  Inbox x

* Tara Maclay  <tarmaclay@gmail.com>  

  to me ♥

  Love,

  T xx

The breath fell from her body as she took in the short message, or rather the lack of message.

“Huh?” she asked out loud, desperately scrolling for some more communication.
Did Tara forget to write anything? Had it been an accident? Her heart was beginning to sink.

On her third scroll, she realized the one word in the email was actually a link. She hovered over it and saw it linked to a playlist. Still confused but starting to put the mixtape connection together, she opened it in a new tab.

Short she thought to herself but a soft smile bloomed when she noticed the title, *She’s thinking of me.*

She ran her cursor over the short list of songs and she flashed back to being in that beat-up car, cruising down the highway and laughing together. She suddenly gasped.

*This is her sex playlist!*

Her eyes widened considerably.

*And she’s thinking about me!*

She rolled off the bed in an urgent heap to attack her backpack and find the pouch where her earbuds were hiding. She practically ripped them from their holder and dived back onto the bed so she could start the playlist.
She heard the opening notes and smirked but after just a few seconds she felt the sensual beat blast between her ears in a way she’d never appreciated of the particular song before.

Imagining Tara’s ‘dance floor seduction’ she felt the beat thump through her whole body. The lyrics were lost, unimportant. The intention of this music was entirely centered around how those notes sunk deep under your skin.

She chuckled, low and slow.

*Oh, she’s good.*

Her eyes closed and the last unshed tears fell from them and into her smile.

“Suck it, Barry.”

She tried to remember what Tara had said at the time — when they talked about this. Something about rhythm and dancing mirroring the body’s reaction to sex and damn if she wasn’t getting *exactly* what Tara was talking about. The songs slowly lapped together, bringing her from one reaction to the next.

The last song came on, the one Tara had pretty much explicitly stated was the one she wanted to make sweet love to Willow to; the last thing she wanted to hear before Willow was moaning too hard for any music to be heard at all, and Willow found her hand lost underneath her pajama bottoms in a flurry of movement and emotion.

It was a reflex borne of years of anguish to relieve herself in this way; but she wasn’t trying to beat the emotion this time, she was embracing it.

It didn’t even take the whole length of the song; Tara was right, the rest of the playlist had set the mood and she was more than ready by the time she got going.

Her eyes opened as she finished and her body relaxed.

She breathed softly for the last few seconds of it and removed her earbuds with a soft sigh.

She stared up at the ceiling, one hand still on her thigh and felt a physical brain shift, like some part of it was actually clicking into place. Everything was clear.

Pity was doing nothing for her. She’d traveled this far to better herself, not wallow in thoughts of
self-deprecation that were as old as she was.

The first thing she had to do was get up and showered and then out of that room.

Her fingertips brushed the sensitive skin of her inner thigh and her mind flashed with Tara.

She smiled.

It was time to have the faith in herself that Tara had always believed in.

Willow slowly walked down a hallway, her backpack large on her body and her fingers nervously playing with the strap.

Why did this feel like the first day of Kindergarten again?

At least she wasn't going to have to deal with a taunting Cordelia this time.

She found the dormitory she was looking for and stepped inside. All but one pair of bunk beds had belongings on them, but only one set had any actual people on it; a woman on the bottom playing on her phone as it charged and a man on top, snoring into his pillow.

Willow approached the empty bunk and set her backpack quietly onto the bottom bed.

The girl in the other bunk, a little older than Willow but similar in build, except with dark black hair, looked up curiously and regarded Willow for a few moments before speaking.

“New in the city?”

Willow was slightly startled and it took a second for her to recover and respond.

“Um, I’ve been here a few days. I just moved from another hostel,” she explained, tucking some hair behind her own ear and averting her gaze and adding on quietly, “Heard this place is good for solo travelers.”

The girl swung her legs over the side of her bed to sit up.
“American?”

Willow nodded.

“Yeah. California.”

“Brit,” the girl answered with a large smile, “Northumbria, but I don’t expect you to know where that is.”

Willow smiled, couldn’t help but at the level of friendliness and offered a small wave.

“I’m Willow.”

“Allie,” Allie introduced herself, then jabbed the mattress in the space between the slats on the upper bunk above her head, “This lug is David.”

David awoke with a sharp inhale that ended up a snort and looked out from over his pillow with a confused look on his face and mussed hair.

“Huh, what?”

“You were snoring,” Allie called up, loudly and pointedly though she continued to grin widely at Willow.

David blushed and cleared his throat.

“Sorry.”

He rolled himself up and slid down half the ladder then jumped down the last foot of space. He bent over to kiss Allie briefly, then made his way out of the room, presumably to the bathroom, smoothing out his hair with the palm of his hand.

“Love is not laughing at someone’s just-woke face,” Allie rolled her eyes playfully then shot a smirking nod in Willow’s direction, “Or their O-face, am I right?”

Willow smiled appeasingly but wasn’t sure she agreed.
She laid her hands in her lap and bit her bottom lip in thought.

“Can I ask you something?” she said, trying to sound nonchalant, “Do people mind sharing a room with a couple?”

Allie lifted her chin.

“If you’re uncomfortable—”

“No, no,” Willow interrupted quickly, holding up her hands, “God, no, sorry.”

She pushed out a breath before turning back toward her new roommate.

“I’ve been traveling with my girlfriend,” she said, only stumbling for a moment on the ‘g’ of girlfriend, “And I was worried about being open about it.”

She looked down and her voice quieted.

“But I have a history of that so maybe I was just telling myself other people would care as an excuse.”

Allie looked at Willow and her face took on an affectionate look that one might display toward a little, unworldly sister.

“Pick co-ed rooms. Coupling of some sort is always a possibility in co-ed rooms, so generally people who are more uptight about that kind of stuff won’t choose them.”

Willow considered it and felt her lips twitching.

“Thanks,” she said, smiling growing larger, “That really helps.”

“And don’t have ever have sex in a single,” Allie advised sagely.

Willow looked horrified.

“I would never.”
“Smarter than me,” Allie said with a grin and Willow blushed, “Learn from my mistakes.”

Willow looked away with wide eyes but Allie continued conversing.

“She’s not here?”

Willow frowned in confusion, but then realized what Allie was talking about.

“Oh, Tara.”

She paused.

It still hurt, even if she was trying to move forward.

She still missed her presence.

“She’s doing her own thing for a bit,” she answered, a bit aloof, “And so am I, I guess. I haven’t done the cheap, backpacking thing before. I can be a bit…insular. Trying to fix it. Learn how to do this right. And cheap. And fun.”

Allie nodded, clearly getting a good idea of the kind of situation she was dealing with.

“Always remember, DFS,” she advised, keeping Willow’s gaze as if to impart how important this was, “Do Free Shit.”

Willow laughed and Allie chuckled in return.

“Seriously, though. Obviously, free activities are great, but there’s everyday stuff too. Always get the free hostel breakfast, find bars with the best deals on alcohol, pre-drinking is even better. And always pick the place where you’ll need the least transport. Have a few cheap meals you can make quickly in these shitty kitchens and you’ll find you stretch your pound.”

Willow’s shoulders started to ease as she relaxed into the camaraderie.

“Been doing this a while?”
Allie nodded with a lot of weight that seemed experienced but not exhausted.

“Six months. Trekked through Asia. Definitely feeling the penny pinch here, but it’s a great city.”

David came back and sat to talk with Allie, so Willow turned away to busy herself with sorting her belongings.

After a while, the couple stood and started to leave, but Allie lingered at Willow’s bed.

“We’re going on a graffiti hunt. Checking out the street art and the laneway bars. You wanna come?”

Willow’s natural inclination was to politely refuse but she made herself shut her mouth before she did so.

“Yeah,” she found herself saying with a smile of not-entirely-forced enthusiasm.

She stood and held her shoulders proudly. A little forced but still firmly forward.

“Yeah. Okay. Thanks. I think that would be really cool.”
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

This is an itsy bitsy teenie weenie yellow polka-dot chap-tini. To make up, the next chapter is really long AND I’m gonna post it early :D So you can expect another chapter Wednesday and then Friday’s as scheduled. I humbly hope that will make up for this little ‘un.

Adelaide

I'll Spread My Wings And I'll Learn How To Fly
I'll Do What It Takes Till I Touch The Sky

Willow rocked out of her dormitory with a smile on her face and a spring in her step.

“Hey Ricardo,” she greeted the man sitting behind the hostel desk, concentrating hard on the phone sitting in his lap, “How are the Crows doing?”

“All even, Madam Willow,” Ricardo replied with an uneasy tone.

“Better not jinx ‘em!” Willow called back as she skipped out onto the street.

She rounded the corner and she was right on the doorstep of the central market, a huge building packed with stalls of local produce.

She enjoyed a leisurely stroll through and bought some seasonal apples and mandarins, a pack of caramelized almonds that she’d become obsessed with and then headed right through to one of the small cafés located within the market.

As she walked in there was a rousing cheer from the majority of people who were watching the local AFL team play on the television affixed to the wall. Willow swung up onto a free stool at the café’s bar, still smiling.

“I’ll pretend the cheer was for me,” she said to the barista behind the counter, “Can I get a flat white and a lamington please?”
As she waited for her coffee she overheard two people, a guy and a girl, nearby talking about heading out to Ayers Rock.

“I just came back from Uluru,” she interjected politely in a break between their conversation, “Make sure you check out the camel train!”

“Cheers,” the woman replied, lifting her cup of tea as a toast and sending a smile across the bar.

Willow’s mug and plate were placed in front of her and she tipped her cup up toward the woman.

“Cheers.”

She took a sip and licked some of the errant foam from the corner of her mouth. She reached for her cake but before she could dust her mouth with its coconuty goodness, her phone started ringing. She took a very swift bite, wiped her lips free of the flakes and took her phone out.

She thought it might be one of her dormies hitting her up for where they were going to go for dinner in Chinatown that night and so her eyes nearly bugged when she saw the name flash up on the screen. She couldn’t answer it quick enough.

“Tara?!” she asked in a rush, but another cheer went up in the café and she couldn’t hear a thing.

She pushed herself off the stool and ran out back into the main shopping area where it was still noisy but she could make out the call if she stuck her finger in her ear.

“Tara?” she repeated, heart beating in her chest, which only increased as she processed the panicked, garbled voice on the other end, “Whoa, whoa, calm down. What’s wrong, what’s happening?”

She closed her eyes to try and hyper focus so she could make sense of what Tara was saying.

“Baby, breath. I can find you, okay? I can always find you. Just stay put right where you are and stay on your phone. I won’t leave you. Do you have water? Take a long breath and then a long drink.”

Abandoning — completely forgetting, in fact — her coffee, cake, and purchases, she broke out into a run, dodging customers and merchandise and every annoyed glance shot her way in the process.

She sped back around the corner and into the hostel where Ricardo was visibly celebrating behind
the desk.

“No jinx! We win! We win!”

“Sorry Ricardo, emergency!” Willow called back as she hurried into her room, “Tara, I’m getting my computer right now. I can track your phone. It’s gonna be okay.”

There was only one other person in the room, a man sleeping in the corner whom Willow hadn’t really interacted with and knew almost nothing about. He was American going by his accent and he was hanging out with two other guys he liked to boss around. He fell so far outside of Willow’s radar; she hadn’t given him more than a passing glance.

He started to mumble annoyances at Willow, but she had bigger fish to fry.

She took her laptop out from the locked nightstand and impatiently bashed the internet connection button to get it to load. She could only get up one bar that wouldn’t even load her email. She searched desperately through the other open signals and connected to the college which the hostel backed onto. It stabilized but still not enough for the programs she wanted to run, so she unhooked her laptop and walked around until the bars started to fill.

It picked up a full signal right outside the men’s restroom, which had the connecting wall to the school. Willow grimaced for a whole second before holding her breath and pushing herself through the door.

It was empty, most of the hostel was during the day, so she locked the door behind her and sought out the area of the floor that looked the least defiled.

“You still there, baby?” Willow asked as her programs finally popped up, fully connected, “How far into the bush are you? Did you follow a trail? Tell me what happened.”

She listened as Tara’s voice evened out a bit, though still with a scared undertone brimming beneath. She brought up the phone tracking app and tried to get it to find where Tara’s phone was broadcasting from.

“The active tracking isn’t working but I should still be able to isolate your coordinates…” she said, biting her lip as she tried to keep Tara talking, “Tell me where you started walking from, how far you’ve gone. Or how long you’ve been walking, even. Anything that helps pinpoint you.”

Willow was able to grab Tara’s coordinates but it put her in the middle of nowhere.
“Ugh, the main map doesn’t place you anywhere discernable, goddammit…” she blew out in frustration under her breath but tried to keep her voice positive, “I’m overlaying as many maps as I can find. I’ll find you, baby…”

Finally, Willow was able to generate enough data to find a path out of the area.

“Okay, okay, I think I’ve got you! I don’t know if I can guide you back onto a trail, so I’m just going to get you out of the bush and onto the main road. You need to head directly east. The terrain shouldn’t be too bad.”

She paused to listen to Tara for a moment.

“Use your compass app. You do have it, I installed it before we left California. Look in your travel folder.”

She waited a few minutes, repeating reassurances to Tara until the little red cursor on her screen suddenly started to bounce.

“Hey, hey, the tracking just activated! I can see you moving, you’re going the right way. I know it all looks the same but you’ll break through onto the road soon.”

Finally, after what seemed like forever to her and must have felt an age to Tara, she heard a relieved noise that might have even been a cry. Willow tried to keep her voice even.

“There’s a gas station a quarter mile away, a little less even, on the opposite side of the road. You can see it? Okay, head there. I’m going to send a car to pick you up.”

She heard the shuffle of faster walking as Tara headed to the gas station.

“It’s two minutes away. A Nissan Patrol. His name is Charles and he’ll take you wherever you want to go.”

There was silence but after a bit, Willow noted the cursor was moving on the map again at a greater speed this time.

“Are you in the car?”

There was nothing for a moment, then Tara’s voice came clearly on the other end.
“Willow, where are you? I want to come home.”

“Home?” Willow questioned softly.

The answer came without hesitation.

“To you.”

Willow swallowed several times.

“I’m heading to Sydney tomorrow.”

“Okay,” Tara replied through a shaken breath, “Text me where you’re staying. I’ll try and get a flight to get there quicker.”

Willow clutched her phone to her ear, emotion pouring out of her voice.

"I don't care how you get here, just get here. If you can."

Willow heard two sweet words that made her heartache and leap for joy all at once.

“I’m coming.”

The line went dead but Willow could see Tara was being brought safely back to the main town area where she must be staying. She didn’t know whether to laugh or cry or some ugly combination of both but didn’t get a chance to do either as someone started to push and shove at the door, trying to open it.

Remembering she was sitting in god knows what in the men’s room, Willow quickly jumped up and unlocked the door. Her sleeping roommate fell through the threshold and gave her an odd look.

“ Weirdo,” he said with a sneer that turned into a leer, “Bet you’re a firecracker in the sack.”

Willow pushed past him and headed back to her room.

“All you women are the same,” he called after her.
He pushed into the bathroom, mumbling.

“How could you say you loved me and do that to me?” he said in a mocking effeminate voice before scoffing, “Because you deserved it, bitch!”

Willow heard the last line and assumed it was directed at her but Dickie Babcock had been good training in how to deal with a doofus: ignore as much as possible. She’d utilized this often since traveling from co-ed dorm to co-ed dorm and usually at least 90% of assholes would just give up if you ignored them.

She sat down on her bed, holding her laptop to her chest as her heart finally started to calm.

Not even a creep could ruin this.

Tara was coming home.
Willow’s fingers moved around the trackpad on her laptop, following nothing in particular on screen.

She lay sideways on her bed, pressing refresh on webpages she wasn’t reading just to have something to occupy herself. Having a private room again actually felt weird after the last few weeks of sharing. Everything was so quiet.

A knock at the door disturbed the silence and Willow jumped. She slid off the bed and approached the door cautiously.

Tara hadn’t been in touch with her since that phone call and Willow had no idea when she planned to arrive.

Willow had already been faked out once by a maintenance man coming to fix the curtain rod. The poor guy had no idea why a surly teenager was sitting on the bed throwing daggers at him the entire time he was there.

Her hand closed around the doorknob and she felt butterflies start to flutter in her belly. She slowly turned it and opened the door.

Despite wishing and hoping and even anticipating it to be Tara on the other side, she still gasped when she saw it was really her.

Tara held the strap on her backpack over her shoulder and smiled softly. She waited for a moment and when Willow remained frozen, she shrugged one shoulder softly to distribute the weight of her backpack.
“Can I come in?”

Willow shook herself out of her stupor.

“God, yes, of course,” she said, stepping aside, “Sorry.”

Tara walked into the room and set her bag down by the foot of the bed. Willow closed the door and backed up against it.

There was pause which Willow accredited to herself because she just couldn’t stop staring.

Tara’s skin was glowing and Willow thought she must have been outdoors a lot to pick up the kind of tan she had in winter. Her hair was up in a messy bun that just looked so effortlessly sexy to Willow and the smile on her face was bright and assured.

Willow opened her mouth—

“You look great,” Tara interjected before Willow could say the exact same words.

“Huh?” Willow asked, startled.

She looked down at herself; her clothes were clean and neatly tucked but it was nothing special.

She didn’t consider that Tara was seeing the weight lifted from her shoulders or the lightness in her step or how her eyes were full of unreserved adoration; the ‘unreserved’ part new to see.

“You look beautiful,” Tara repeated softly, “It’s so good to see you.”

Willow pushed herself off the door.

“It’s so good to see you too.”

They both stayed where they were, a bit of an awkward lull between them.

“I don’t think I said thank you,” Tara said after a moment, “For saving me that day.”
Willow shrugged one shoulder bashfully.

“I didn’t…”

“You did,” Tara insisted, “I was…terrified. I don’t know how I would have gotten out on my own. I’d already been wandering around for an hour. If I hadn’t had good battery life and you…”

She looked down and Willow saw a quiver in Tara’s hand as she balled it by her side.

Willow felt her heart clench. She’d never actually pondered the danger Tara had been in lost in the bush; she’d been too focused on finding her and then excited about seeing her.

Tara lifted her gaze again and exhaled a breath.

“And all I could think about…it was ‘not you’.”

Willow felt like her stomach dropped right out of her. She barely managed to hold in a whimper.

She didn’t manage to hide her facial reaction though and Tara quickly reached a hand out into the air.

“Not ‘not…” she started, quickly stopping herself when she realized she needed to be clearer, “I’m not explaining myself well. It was the absence of you.”

Willow looked unsure, and still a little hurt, as Tara’s hand fell back. She held both hands clasped in front of her.

“It was every amazing piece of nature that I saw and you weren’t there to share it with me. It was every joke someone told when I would look over to see your reaction…but you weren’t there. It was all the sights that just weren’t as awe-inducing when I couldn’t see the awe in your eyes too.”

Willow frowned for a moment, then started breathing normally again as her brow lines evened out again.

Tara bit her lip for a moment then searched her pockets for her phone.
“I kept thinking about the comic book you made me,” she said, flicking through photos to find the
digital copies of the pages she had stored, “I would read what you wrote and I realized you were
right all along.”

She held up the picture of the back page with Willow’s lovingly drawn doodle.

“IT sure would be prettier with you.”

Willow’s face broke out in a slow smile.

“I have to admit,” she said, barely holding in a grin, “I stole that from a song.”

Tara just laughed.

“I know you did.”

She put her phone down again.

“I just kept thinking about how we could have figured all this other stuff out if we just talked. I know
we have different ideas but I want to try and make it work.”

Willow took a tentative step forward.

“I don’t think our ideas are that different.”

“You said about how you wanted to have traveled the world the other way?” Tara asked unsurely,
particularly since that was probably the one thing they couldn’t change, their basic directional flights
were booked.

Willow frowned again. It took her a moment to even remember saying that.

“No, Tara, you misunderstood,” she said, shaking her head, “I said that’s what I would have done.
What I guess I forgot to say was how glad I was that I had you and your plans because this way is so
much better! Following summer around the globe would be crazy, do you know how hot it gets?”

Tara laughed again and it fed Willow’s soul.
“Following off-peak is cheaper and less touristy and I was so on board with your plans from the beginning,” Willow continued softly, “I’m so sorry I didn’t make that clear.”

Tara raised her hand to her face and looked contrite.

“I think maybe it was my ears that were clogged.”

Willow shook her head.

“No, you definitely had reason to object to how I was…being. I didn’t realize it, Tara. I was acting like we’re still just chilling out at home and I was so insensitive to how big a deal this is. Getting to travel like this is such a huge, amazing experience and I was being a child. Taking it for granted. Taking the fact that I have money to fall back on for granted. You were so clear with me before we left, we even made up that budget together and then I’m like oh look at me so important I’m just going to ignore all of that.”

Tara’s mouth opened in surprise but Willow was quick to continue.

“I hate that we’ve been fighting, I hate it,” she said emphatically, “But I figured out…it’s because we’re actually being real with each other. We’ve always had this…thing…us…but now we’re being honest. It’s the same path but new ground and we’re figuring out where the new bumps in the road are.”

She smiled easily.

“And I say bring it on, even when it sucks, because that’s how we’ll figure out the best way to fit with each other,” she said, biting the corner of her lip shyly, “And we’ll always fit, even if we have to adjust from time to time.”

Tara seemed a little stunned so Willow took advantage of the opportunity to speak and finally get out everything she’d been processing over the past few weeks.

“You said we don’t have to do every single thing together and that’s true. If I wanna do a certain tour or you wanna go out on your own or stay somewhere else or…whatever. Doing this together doesn’t mean every last thing. That’s not healthy,” she paused to take a breath but wasn’t anywhere near done, “And as for the room situation…I was being a snob.”

Tara turned her head.

“Well…”
“I was being a snob,” Willow repeated with a certain nod, “I get it now. I didn’t. At first. But I tried to push myself and I did, I pushed myself, Tara. I stayed in dorms and I talked to people and I made myself be social. And after a while, not even a long while…it wasn’t scary anymore. It was fun. I felt fun, like I was fun.”

Tara could only blink several times.

“Wow.”

Willow nodded softly to herself.

“I met this nice couple in Melbourne and they kinda took me under their wing. I guess I was major third wheeling but after a few days, I got more comfortable talking to people at breakfast and stuff. They went on to Perth and I decided to move on too and it was…freeing. Just being open to conversation, being friendly. Everyone knows people will move on so it’s not weird or sad. Each person who leaves brings in a new person with new experiences to share…”

She stopped for a moment and her tone grew more introspective.

“I’ve only ever had friendships that fell into my lap. You moved in across the street and I colored next to Xander in Kindergarten and Buffy wanted help with homework. I never really worked at it. I accepted loneliness, a lot of loneliness…I mean that time last year when I lost all three of you for those few weeks…I literally talked to no one but the delivery guys for over a month. And even though it sucked, that’s what felt comfortable. So I didn’t know I was doing it here too. I was just clinging to you because you’re what I knew.”

She met Tara’s eye.

“Thing is, during all the great conversations and fun experiences…what I wanted more than anything was for you to be there too. I just kept thinking man, this is so great…but imagine how spectacular it would be with her,” she said, beginning to turn her fingers over each other in front of her as they fidgeted, “That’s what I want. To be my own person…who also just happens to belong to you.”

Tara had begun to feel a little bombarded by everything but that last line hit her right in the heart.

“That’s what I want too,” she said, ducking her head for a moment, “Wow, Willow, you’ve really…you’ve really thought a lot about all this.”

Willow shrugged self-deprecatingly.
“Daughter of shrinks, I’m not completely clueless on the emotional intelligence front. Just had to get a little over myself first.”

“I never thought you had to get over yourself,” Tara interjected quickly, “Honestly Willow, I didn’t expect…I hoped we could make the trip work but you’re really laying it all on the table. And I’m so proud. A-And I hope that you—”

“Realize my insecurities are not a reflection of your actual feelings?” Willow guessed intuitively, then held a hand up apologetically, “Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

Tara’s eyes flickered with surprise.

“No, that’s…”

Willow nodded.

“I know. I hate myself but I’m selfish and egocentric. An impressive trifecta of contradiction.”

“No, Willow,” Tara shook her head sadly at that summation, “We just need to talk better. This isn’t all on you.”

Willow closed her eyes and smiled almost sadly.

“It’s a process but I promise to listen better without a Willow-filter,” she said, then swallowed a little nervous lump in her throat, “And Tara…I really, really need you to be honest with me. You’ve always cushioned my feelings, I’m seeing that now. You held back to make me feel better about myself.”

She kept Tara’s gaze as much as her insides were screaming to look away.

“You’ve talked about how I hurt myself and put myself down and berate myself with my own thoughts…but you hurt yourself too when you value your emotions less than mine,” her voice started to break a little bit, “And I really think we could both stop hurting ourselves if we just keep each other in check.”

A tear escaped but it accompanied a shaken laugh.
“‘Cause you’re the only one I want kicking my ass.”

Tara’s hand covered her eyes and her thumb and index finger swiped inward to gather a few stray tears.

“‘You’re the only one I want kicking my ass too.”

She blew out a breath and smiled at Willow through watery eyes.

“I figured out this great word as I was traveling. Compromise. Have you heard it?”

Willow laughed and Tara flicked the corner of her eye dry with her sleeve.

“It’s this crazy thing where two people work together to come up with a solution that works for both of them. I’ll give you an example. A compromise to our room problem might be that each time we go somewhere new we compare private rooms versus shared rooms and decide what works best based on cost and itinerary and how social we’re feeling.”

“Really, Tara, I’ll do the dorms with you,” Willow replied with a shrug. It felt like such a minor issue now, “I mean it, I’m not just saying it. What did I think college was going to be like? We don’t even have to stay in this room, I just thought some space…I just thought it would be good to—”

“Talk?” Tara asked softly.

“Yeah,” Willow smiled easily, “Just talk. Figure this out. That’s all I want.”

Tara reached up and gently brushed her loose hair back behind her ear, pensively.

“This is all so great, Willow. I wasn’t expecting it. I thought…”

Willow felt her throat start to close. Tara shook her head downward.

“Things fall apart. They fall apart so hard,” she stopped and sighed, “You can’t ever…”

She paused for a breath and to look at Willow.

“Put them back the way they were.”
“Tara?” Willow asked helplessly and with concern at the change in Tara’s tone.

Tara looked solemn and contemplative.

“I'm sorry, it's just…” another deep sigh left her mouth, “You know, it takes time. You can't just… have a phone call and expect—”

Willow’s face flashed with guilt.

“I know.”

Tara’s brow creased.

“There's just so much to work through. Trust has to be built again, on both sides…”

Willow’s face bore the same fall into distress as it had on the day Tara left.

“You have to learn if…if we're even the same people we were, if you can fit in each other's lives.”

Willow continued to look at Tara, resigned. Tara’s eyes were glassy as she tried to express everything she’d been feeling since the phone call.

“It's a long…important process, and…”

Finally it culminated in what she was truly trying to say.

“Can we just skip it? Can-can you just be kissing me now?”

Willow’s eyes widened and her whole face lit up.

It took her about 0.7 of a second to stride across the space between them. Her hands tangled in Tara’s hair and she claimed the kiss she’d been so bitterly regretting rejecting when Tara had left.

Tara’s hands pulled at Willow’s waist and she quickly started pushing Willow back toward the bed.
Willow fell onto the mattress and happily welcomed Tara’s weight on top of her. As she scooted back she felt her laptop still sitting there from earlier and did her best to guide it to the floor without breaking the kiss.

“Wait,” she said suddenly, already breathless, but Tara didn’t mind waiting because Willow was leaning over the bed toward her laptop on the floor and Tara was getting a pretty good view of her behind.

Music started to play as Willow returned fully to the bed and Tara recognized the song immediately.

She smirked.

“So you did get my email.”

Willow smiled bashfully.

“Sorry I didn’t reply. I was going to but I wanted to respect your need for space and I didn’t want you to feel obligated to reply back to me.”

Tara reached out and took a handful from the end of Willow’s shirt, pulling them together.

“Willow I have to tell you,” she said, licking her lips when their breath hit each other’s mouths, “Your personal growth is really turning me on.”

She tugged Willow in the last quarter-inch and immediately sucked Willow’s bottom lip into her mouth.

They both moaned softly and Willow found herself on her back again but Tara’s thigh was sliding between her legs this time. She felt warmth roll over in her stomach and grabbed Tara’s cheeks to pull her in closer.

Tara sat back in Willow’s lap and released her hair.

Willow watched her, enthralled.

She could see Tara’s body almost imperceptibly grinding with the music and her arousal spiked.
“Do dooop do doop da dum,” Tara sang along softly, her body bouncing on top of Willow’s lap. “You get it now?”

“Oh, I so get it,” Willow breathed erratically.

This had been exactly how she imagined Tara, alone that day back in Melbourne. Listening to this music. Wanting this so badly.

One hand fell behind Tara’s back and Willow couldn’t get enough. She clawed at Tara’s shirt and Tara quickly moved to lift it over her head.

Willow felt her mouth go dry watching Tara reveal her upper half. Every inch of abdomen sent a new wave of excitement through her and when Tara’s breasts bounced into view behind the pale pink bra she was adorning she let out a quiet moan.

“You’re so hot,” Willow said, a little mesmerized.

Her hands went for Tara’s belt, snapping it open in a flurry of movement and Tara pushed her hips forward encouragingly. Her pants were bundled away from her, whooshed past her legs without even touching them. Willow’s palms pressed against Tara’s thighs and she felt them melt into Tara’s skin, her muscles twitching and reminding Willow what it felt like to be between them.

Tara’s hands slid over the fabric of Willow’s shirt, smoothing it out as her fingers found the top button.

She popped it and worked the rest of the way down.

She pushed it away from Willow’s shoulders and was surprised with a fully bare chest.

Two fingertips trailed down either side of Willow’s collarbone and rolled over her nipples, instantly inviting them to stiffen. Willow’s chest thrust up and Tara gladly cupped both her breasts and gave a generous squeeze. Her lips dropped into Willow’s neck and peppered her sensitive skin with quick kisses until she moaned.

One hand fell down between their bodies and worked the button on Willow’s pants free. She slid her hand under the fabric. Her fingers pressed against the cotton of Willow’s panties and easily seeped into the wetness there.

Willow felt the slight abrasion of the material of her panties push into her lips and then against her clit with the added pressure of Tara’s fingers. She gasped and pushed her hips up for more friction.
Tara’s fingers slipped past Willow’s panties and took direct contact, rolling her fingers over Willow’s clit.

She used the music as a guide, letting it flow through from her body to Willow’s and echo the sensual thump they were creating between them.

She felt Willow squirm and feeling equally keen, she grabbed Willow’s pants and tore them from her legs. Willow aided this by kicking her legs whilst giggling and watched with darkening eyes as her panties were lost over Tara’s shoulder.

Her legs closed shyly and Tara immediately reached behind herself to unsnap her bra. She brushed it aside as it fell from her arms and gently scooted between Willow’s legs again. Her hands rested on Willow’s knees and slid down her thighs where she parted them enough to cup her between her legs as she laid on top of her.

Willow breathlessly and impatiently waited for Tara to find her footing on top of her but could only wait so long with Tara’s lips hovering so close to her. Her heartbeat was thumping so palpably in Tara’s palm, she didn’t know how it didn’t beat right through.

Tara melted into the kiss for a moment, moaning as her thighs slid against Willow’s thighs and she felt the heat pour out of her girlfriend. She felt Willow’s hand cup her cheeks and she opened her mouth to tease Willow’s tongue with her own.

Her other hand took Willow’s breast in her hand and rolled her thumb around the nipple again. When it grew so taut she could feel Willow’s abdominal muscles straining, she brought her mouth down and offered some warm, wet relief. Her tongue was hot on Willow’s straining flesh, turning her puckering areola a deep pink.

The song changed to the final track and Willow didn’t know how time had passed that fast.

She felt first the emotional swell of the music and then the physical swell between her legs as Tara kissed her and kissed her and kissed her. Now she knew why time had passed that fast. Lost in Tara’s kisses.

Tara’s lips smacked hungrily against Willow’s skin, taking in her breasts and abdomen and right down to the end tine of the V where Willow’s hipbones met. Her hands followed the curves and lines of Willow’s body until she was once again opening Willow’s thighs and lowering her mouth to taste where she glistened.

Willow’s thighs quivered as Tara’s tongue dipped between her lips and she thrust her hips up wantonly.
A few months ago, she had barely been able to imagine this.

She would gift herself flashes in the dark for a momentary relief followed by deep shame but the thought of being open like this, touched like this, even just naked with Tara made her want to shrivel away with embarrassment and fear.

Even with her hand lost in Tara’s panties or Tara’s in hers as they’d started to explore, she’d shut her eyes tight and focused only on sensation.

Vulnerability had seemed so terrifying, but it wasn’t. It was empowering to trust and be trusted.

Also, Tara sure knew how to use her mouth.

This wasn’t a surprise to Willow, but boy did she love the dependability.

She felt Tara’s finger push against her opening and groaned with the immediate throb of need. This feeling; allowing herself to embrace this feeling of humming desire was so overwhelmingly delicious. She could barely stand it when Tara tried to enter her so delicately, still a little gun-shy about hurting her.

Her inner muscles squeezed around her to pull her further inside and Willow let out a momentary sigh of relief when Tara began to stroke her more deeply.

She felt herself losing control quickly, too quickly, but she was powerless to stop it. A jolt of pleasure shot up her spine and then spread out over her middle and she was lost.

When her thighs stopped jerking, she took in a new breath and her eyelids opened, searching, but Tara was already anticipating her need and was pulling her close.

“I’m here, I’m here.”

Willow relaxed again and curled herself around Tara’s side, her arm thrown against Tara’s waist and her leg tangled between Tara’s legs.

She smiled and her eyes closed again softly. All she could hear was both of them breathing.

“Hey, I didn’t even notice the music stop. And I was super into it.”
“Told you,” Tara replied and Willow could see the crooked little smirk that was on her lips without even looking.

She lightly tickled Tara’s side and giggled as Tara screamed and squirmed.

“Hey, hey, okay!”

Tara threw her legs off the bed and Willow looked alarmed for a moment before Tara glanced at her over her shoulder.

“Where’s the bathroom?”

Willow’s eyes blinked with relief and she pointed.

“Turn left and down the hall.”

Tara stood up and found her pants and then quickly looked around for her shirt.

“My hoodie is just there,” Willow offered, “Key is in the pocket.”

Tara pulled the hoodie over her head and left the room, turning around before the door closed to smile at Willow and wiggle her fingers in a wave.

Willow blew out a long breath, then immediately bent over and out of the bed to hike up her laptop and pull up a webpage. Her eyes moved back and forth over the page right up until she heard the key in the door and swiftly put the laptop back on the floor and pulled the sheet over herself inconspicuously.

“The locks actually work on the toilets here,” Tara said as she walked back in, “That’s a step up from where I’ve been staying.”

Willow laughed a little too loudly and Tara looked at her fondly, if not also a little strangely. She sat back on the side of the bed.

When she didn’t immediately begin to strip off again, Willow bounced impatiently.

“Aren’t you going to take your clothes off?”
Tara looked back with that same smile that only Willow could elicit.

“I just got back in the room,” she protested with little conviction, “But if you insist.”

She threw a quick wink in Willow’s direction and quickly threw off the pants and hoodie again. She slid back under the sheet with Willow and pressed their bodies together as she went in for a kiss.

Willow pulled Tara in by the back of her head and rolled them slightly so she was hovering half on top of her. She kissed down Tara’s jaw and into her neck while her hand closed over Tara’s breast, fingers splaying to take as much as she could. She pressed her body further into Tara as Tara’s hands touched her cheeks and cupped her ears and wound in her hair in a never-ending quest to touch more of her.

Willow’s four fingers curved under the waistband of Tara’s panties at her hip and she dragged them down Tara’s thigh. Tara’s knees bent together and lifted to help get them off and they ended up hanging around her ankle and falling down her foot to the floor.

Willow slowly kissed her way down Tara’s body. She could feel her heat before seeing it but when her eyes landed it was more than obvious how aroused Tara was. Still lying on Tara’s side, she slid two fingers between Tara’s lips, wetting them and finding her clit to give it a rub and offer Tara some relief.

“Mmmm,” Tara moaned through a vibration of her pursed lips.

While she’d spent years quietly pining for Willow, the last few weeks without her had brought new yearnings born of new experiences and more than one morning she’d had to go off for a cold shower after an active dream.

Willow had always been a little tentative with her so Tara tried not to audibly react when Willow’s hand moved away. She watched Willow move to kneel between her legs and opened her knees to give her space.

She waited patiently and with a sweet smile that put no pressure on anyone, but her face became wide eyes and a lightly gasping mouth when Willow grabbed her by the hips and tugged her down.

Willow was smirking and something had changed, Tara knew, but she had no idea what.

The look of surprise and arousal mixed on Tara’s face made Willow feel confident. She dropped her hand a little lower and easily slid two fingers inside Tara, going right up to the knuckle without
hesitation. She watched Tara’s eyelids flicker and grow lidded.

Her other hand lay palm-down over Tara’s stomach and stayed still for the moment as her fingers dragged themselves in and out of her. When she had Tara warmed up, though it was a lot hotter than warm, she started to curl her fingers inside on each upward thrust.

Tara’s body writhed with Willow’s slow, confident strokes, her hips rising faster for each and every one until—

“Holy sh—” she gasped in surprise, her whole body jerking forward as her g-spot was stimulated for the first time, “Oh my god.”

Willow did it again and Tara fell flat on her back and really started to grind into Willow’s hand.

“Yes, yes…yes!”

Willow was enthralled watching Tara truly lose control, more than anything she’d offered her before. Tara’s body was strained and her knuckles were white from clenching the sheets. She’d thought Tara felt hot inside before, but she was really molten now and so slick Willow could only just keep up the friction.

She listened as the sounds coming from Tara’s mouth grew less and less coherent until finally, Tara’s neck strained back into the pillows, her lower jaw quivered and her whole body tilted upward.

Willow started to move the hand on Tara’s stomach, massaging it lightly and hearing verbal confirmation of enjoyment when Tara’s orgasmic moans elongated over several seconds.

“Wow,” Tara breathed, placing a hand in the middle of her chest as the flush died down.

Willow’s fingers fell out of Tara, not able to hold onto their spot with the results of Tara’s orgasm evident right out to her thighs. Willow looked down between Tara’s open legs, so pink and swollen she wouldn’t be able to close them. She felt a desire take hold inside her somewhere deep and primal.

Her knees popped out from under her so she was lying instead of kneeling and her arms moved around Tara’s thighs to rest either side of her waist. With her face close and only her own nerves keeping her away, she swallowed her own anxieties and allowed her face to get up close and personal.

“Whoa!” Tara yelped.
She hadn’t noticed Willow moving into position.

It was almost too much, almost, but Willow was delicate and attentive and moving her tongue in ways Tara couldn’t discern but felt amazing and honestly, Tara thought she might cry if Willow stopped.

“Yes, yes, yes…” she called encouragingly, though her voice was growing hoarse, “Oh, Willow, that feels so good.”

She felt Willow’s hands squeeze her thighs for more leverage to bring her tongue further down and her head started to roll back and forth on the pillow. Willow seemed to be having fun exploring her so Tara’s clit wasn’t the focus of attention, but every time her tongue rolled over it, Tara was brought right to the edge of a second orgasm.

When Willow’s tongue lingered for more than just a second, rolling a second time over where she was throbbing so needily; that was the moment Tara broke and came again in waves and waves from top to toe. It was unlike anything she’d ever experienced.

Tara didn’t think she could find a single point on her person where pleasure wasn’t tingling under her skin. Like a phantom limb, satisfaction extended beyond where her physical body ended.

She couldn’t move; she was completely molded to the bed but she was aware of Willow’s presence moving up her body. Finally, her face was hovering close and Tara could see she was hesitating in kissing her. Tara bridged the uncertainty and lifted her head enough to bring their lips together. It was a whole new wave of satisfaction.

Willow relaxed immediately and Tara was able to bring a limp hand up to press against her cheek. Willow broke the kiss to take in a breath and Tara used her thumb to gently wipe the corner of Willow’s mouth.

Willow licked her lips instinctively and looked down shyly.

“I’m sorry I didn’t do that before now.”

Tara’s hand froze with her fingertips brushing hair behind Willow’s ear.

“You didn’t…you didn’t feel obligated did you?”
“Oh, no, no,” Willow replied quickly, “I wanted to. Before, when we first…”

She wanted to continue avoiding Tara’s gaze but tried her best to keep it.

“I was intimidated. I just…didn’t know what to do. I felt like that time at the science fair when the judges asked me about the difference between app design and web design and I blanked and didn’t know the answer.”

Tara frowned slightly.

“But you did know the answer. You won. You finally beat that guy’s butt.”

Willow shook her head.

“They circled back to me. I checked my notes. On the app. What with it being a note-taking app,” she explained with a small shrug, “But I mostly remember the moment of floundering…not the moment of winning.”

Tara lifted her head enough to peck Willow’s lips.

“Do you know how many people I bragged to that my best friend built her own app?” she asked, her lips curling sideways affectionately, “Plus I used it all the time for taking notes and doing homework. Your different colored pen options were inspired and much easier than doing it by hand.”

“I only thought of it when you pointed out to me that that’s, you know, insane,” Willow admitted with a sheepish smile.

“I said ‘quirky’, ” Tara amended, then paused to slowly grin at Willow as her fingertips tickled the nape of Willow’s neck, “You were amazing.”

Willow shrugged again.

“The standard was pretty low that year and—”

“No,” Tara interrupted through an exhaled laugh as she raised an eyebrow pointedly and let her palms slide down over Willow’s collarbone, “You. Were. Amazing.”

It took a moment, but then Willow realized all at once that she was still very much naked atop Tara.
“Oh,” she said with a blush rising in her cheeks, “Really?”

Tara nodded slowly.

“Oh yes.”

Willow dragged her upper teeth over the corner of her bottom lip.

“Well you know it takes 10,000 hours to become an expert in something. So I’ll have to keep putting the time in. If you’re available.”

Her eyelashes fluttered and Tara clearly found it arousing by the way her pupils enlarged. She trailed a finger down the side of Willow’s face and placed it on Willow’s chin to tilt it down to kiss her.

“I’ve always been taken.”

Willow relaxed against Tara’s body and returned the kiss slowly before gradually falling off alongside her.

“I wanted to make you feel as good as you made me feel.”

Tara chuckled.

“I think you went above and beyond.”

Willow smoothed her palms out over the sheet half-strewn across her stomach.

“I read some things,” she admitted, voice rising an octave higher, “Watched a video or two.”

She stopped and frowned.

“Those weren’t so helpful.”

Tara’s head turned on the pillow, her lips holding in a grin and her eyes a mix of sympathy and amusement.
“Oh honey, did you watch lesbian porn?”

“I don’t think those girls are even real lesbians!” Willow whispered in a shocked tone.

Tara stroked Willow’s hair comfortably and kissed her temple. She twirled the front strands of Willow’s hair between her fingers and let them glide down to curl the ends.

“I wanna see,” she said after a minute or so of affectionate silence.

“Huh?” Willow asked, her brow wrinkling on one side.

“Whatever you read,” Tara clarified with a curious smile, “I want to see it.”

Willow’s lips moved from side to side dubiously for a moment, then hesitantly reached over to pick her laptop up again off the ground.

“I mean, I-I looked around, y’know, but…this mostly.”

She passed it off to Tara self-consciously and continued to watch her face as Tara scrolled through the webpage she had up. Tara kindly made no mention of the fact that Willow already had the page open.

Tara’s face gave nothing away as she read and Willow started to tap the sheet nervously. Right when she thought she couldn’t take another second of the uncertainty, Tara closed the laptop.

“Okay, I think I’ve got it.”

“Huh?” Willow asked again, then her eyes widened with both realization and surprise as Tara climbed back over her and kissed down her body, “Oh!”

Tara’s hand moved between her legs and Willow exhaled softly.

“Oh.”

That was the last whole word that left Willow’s mouth for a while.
By the time Tara was returning to the spot beside her, Willow’s mouth just hung open while her hair spread across the whole pillow as if she’d ionized the atmosphere with her moans.

As Tara’s shoulders settled with what one could call a hint of a swagger, Willow remained breathless and staring at the ceiling.

“You added in some moves of your own.”

Tara shrugged softly and made her fingers walk up Willow’s arm.

“You researched…I imagined.”

“You always did have an amazing imagination,” Willow complimented, then giggled under her breath, “Yabba And Dabba Doo… It.”

She giggled again, which in turn set Tara off.

“You made yourself laugh so hard,” Tara said, smiling at Willow with unadulterated affection, “C’mere.”

She gently gathered Willow up to spoon her, closing her arm around Willow’s waist and resting her chin on Willow’s shoulder.

Everything was quiet for a long time, so quiet Willow thought Tara may have fallen asleep. She couldn’t quite check without jostling them both and everything was just so comfortable and peaceful and right again that she didn’t dare.

“Tara?” she whispered quietly enough that it wouldn’t wake her if she was.

There was an immediate tightening around her waist and a soft kiss on her shoulder blade.

“Yeah?”

Willow slid her palm down Tara’s arm and linked their fingers where her hand rested over her stomach. She held Tara’s hand there for a moment and closed her eyes.

“I think I’m kinda gay.”
There was a silence for a minute, then Willow felt Tara’s smile on her neck.

“That’s okay, I still love you.”

A laugh bubbled past Willow’s lips and the bats in her stomach settled back into butterflies.

“Stop,” she laughed as she turned onto her back but remaining entwined with Tara at the legs.

She’d been so afraid of saying those words for so long, she was sure she’d sputter and falter but they came out easily.

“It’s not the perfect description…that would be more like ‘Tarasexual’,” she reasoned, touching Tara’s cheek for a moment, “But it’s close enough. And I’m okay with it.”

Her soft yet determined smile nearly made Tara cry. She’d helplessly watched Willow struggle for so long but she knew the journey of acceptance was ultimately a solo one.

“I’m so proud of you sweetie.”

It took everything not to let her voice shake, but she did it. Willow was being strong and deserved for Tara to be too.

Willow began drawing idle circles on Tara’s shoulder.

“I realized the ‘not being okay with the gay’ part was never about liking boys or girls. It was about hating myself. And the only antidote to that is to accept yourself. I’m not like ‘oh yay, self, we’re awesome’ or anything but…it’s a start.”

“Oh honey,” Tara said, pressing a hand over Willow’s heart, “That’s twice you’ve said you hate yourself.”

“Yeah, but isn’t it better to say it out loud than bury it deep?” Willow asked, holding Tara’s hand there and rubbing Tara’s fingers with her thumb, “That’s what I’m finally starting to get. That… air is negativity’s kryptonite and keeping it inside leaves it in a nice warm, moisture-laden, perfectly pH-balanced swamp of growth.”

Tara kissed the spot under Willow’s ear.
“Stop trying to turn me on. I haven’t recovered yet.”

Willow laughed again and Tara thought it might have the most real and the freest sound she’d ever hear come from her girlfriend. She kept her hand on Willow’s heart and brushed her fingers over Willow’s collarbone.

“Thank you for trusting me.”

Willow dropped her hand to Tara’s waist, pulling her leg in to further entwine with hers. Her hand stayed curved at Tara’s hip, fingers splaying out over her butt.

“Thank you for waiting.”

Tara nuzzled her head into the crook of Willow’s neck.

“I would have waited forever.”

Willow’s brow lines furrowed into a v shape as she stared contemplatively toward the ceiling.

“Why? I’m not fishing for a compliment, I just…everything I put you through. I wouldn’t have stayed with me. You deserved better.”

Tara inhaled a long, soft breath, not even noticing they were breathing in sync.

“I guess that’s a two-parter,” she replied, taking time to be careful with her words, “The first, because…I believed we were…fated. I know that sounds lame, maybe. But that’s what I felt. That I just had to have patience. Even if you were with other people…you’d see what I saw between us eventually. Of course, there was a huge chance I was just infatuated and setting myself up to have my heart broken. That’s what I thought when I went off to band camp that time. I hadn’t blown my chance, my chance was never there.”

She paused and Willow began to feel the familiar push of guilt start to push in from the corner of her mind.

"The second part was…faith,” Tara continued and smiled to herself, “I knew how much it took for you to admit there was anything at all there, so when I came home and you did and you kissed me…I just kept reminding myself of what I knew before. Have patience. We’ll get there.”
“We’ll get there,” Willow repeated softly to herself, very aware of the use of the plural pronoun.

Tara never placed the blame on her. They’d gone through everything to get to this point together.

“Wow.”

That felt like an anchor to pull her from her old self-deprecation. Something shifted in her mind and she felt like she had alone in the private room; it just clicked into place.

“Hey,” she said, squeezing Tara’s hip, reaffirming the connection, “You’ve said that before. You believed we were meant to be…even when I didn’t. Wouldn’t.”

Her mouth scrunched to the side as she paused for a moment in thought.

“Did you always…?” she started, then stopped and changed her wording, “When did you…?”

Her eyes widened and she suddenly sat up straight, jostling Tara off to the side.

“Wait. Whoa.”

She clutched the sheet to her chest and turned her wide-eyed stare over her shoulder to Tara, who was kindly pretending she hadn’t just been accidentally shoved away.

“I never asked you anything about all of this. I-I just acted like this all started the night you came out to me but…you had a whole journey before that…I never once asked what it was like for you. Wait, did I just push you?”

“It’s okay,” Tara replied to the last part first, but before she could say it hadn’t hurt, Willow had taken her hand and was looking at her with a deeper gaze than befitting a clumsy body movement.

“It’s not,” Willow said, closing her other hand around Tara’s too so she was holding it enclosed in both of hers, “You deserve to be heard too.”

Tara breathed softly and pecked Willow’s lips.

“We talked about it a bit once. I told you about seeking out gay media but that wasn’t really the full story, just one aspect of it.”
Willow carried Tara’s hand to her face and kissed it.

“Tell me? Tell me your story. I wanna hear it.”

Tara’s eyebrows rose just a tad on her brow, conveying her quiet surprise.

“Oh.”

She slid her back up against the wall and brought her knees to her chest, wrapping her arms around them. She smiled softly, to herself at first, then shyly at Willow.

“Okay.”

She rested her chin on her folded arms and considered her thoughts for a minute before starting.

“I knew I was gay that time we were 14 and you wanted to watch every Bring It On movie back to back.”

Willow head physically reeled back a little bit.

“Wow, there’s an interesting memory to replay with hindsight.”

Tara chuckled as her eyes shone with a range of memories playing behind them.

“I knew that I didn’t like boys. When you would talk about Xander…when you wanted to practice kissing for him…I just knew I didn’t feel the same way about any boy.”

“Neither did I,” Willow said through a little laugh.

“You were pretty convincing,” Tara replied and for the first time, Willow recognized a little bit of bite in her tone.

She didn’t interrupt and Tara visibly exhaled before continuing on, voice soft again.

“It wasn’t just that movie. Being so fascinated with how all of those girls moved together just kind of
cemented a lot of other moments together.”

She stopped again. This felt a little weird, not because she didn’t want to open up, she just never had. A lot of thoughts and memories rolled around at once as she tried to make sense of them in an easier to explain linear manner.

“About a year before that, we were having a sleepover and we fell asleep with the TV on. I woke up in the middle of the night and this movie was playing. I kept watching instead of just turning it off and going back to sleep for some reason. It was about these two girls, teenagers and it just showed them being together and kissing for real and... it was difficult, but also so easy. The feelings were just natural. I watched it right through to the end, where they’re happy and hugging despite all the crap in their lives. The credits played and I saw it was called ‘The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love’ and that was honestly the first time I ever realized two girls could be in love like that. I knew what gay meant I just…didn’t realize girls could be in love like girls and guys are in the movies. I’d never seen it.”

She smiled.

“That was when I started to write my own songs. I’d dabbled in short little melodies but I picked up the pen one day and I just felt myself become a conduit for the lyrics. Like my muse was awakened,” she explained, then tilted her head gently as she looked at Willow, “And you know, I called you my muse but I don’t think that you were necessarily my muse in that sense. I think…my own truth was my muse. But my truth was that I loved you.”

Willow’s expression started with slight disappointed but slowly brightened into a much fuller sense of connection and understanding. She scooted closer to Tara and offered her silent presence to continue listening.

Tara held her hand out to find Willow’s again, finding comfort and courage in the embrace.

“I think I probably should have come to it quicker, and maybe I even did but just deep down denied it so I wouldn’t have to deal with it. I would get these little flashbacks as I was trying to go to sleep, like when we would have our Barbies marry each other. I guess I was more scared of confronting what was going on between us than who I was,” she paused again and shifted her recollection, “That day, before the cheerleading movie… we kissed. For…quite a while. So my tummy was warm and my lips were tingly and you put the first movie on. Skin was showing and limbs were flying and I believe there was even some thrusting. It was the first time I’d really been...stimulated. You know, it actually wasn’t until a few weeks after that when we had a sex ed class and I learned how women get turned on that I finally put it all together. So it was all a bit like a slap in the face but also one I knew was coming if that makes sense.”

Tara held up her other hand in a partial shrug.
“So then came the big gay dive.”

Willow’s head jerked forward.

“I’m sorry, the what?”

Tara smiled but ducked her head to hide it.

“Well, it’s kind of like how you sought out that stuff earlier, except for… everything even remotely suggestive or indicative of lesbianism. It’s what I talked to you about before, seeking media.”

“Like…?” Willow prompted a bit cluelessly.

Tara blinked several times; there was a lot of information she’d learned in that time, too much to impart all at once.

“Well, see, there’s more to being gay than…”

She gestured between them.

“Screwing a girl?” Willow offered, reading a bit too much into the fact they were still both naked.

Tara’s lips pursed, but they couldn’t help falling into a smile despite the brashness.

“I was going to say falling in love with your best friend.”

“Is that a unique gay experience?” Willow wondered, mostly sarcastically.

“It kind of is, actually,” Tara laughed.

“Really?” Willow asked, eyebrows rising together sharply.

Tara nodded.

“Little bit.”
Willow frowned a little bit, then sat up straighter.

“Teach me how to be gay.”

“Oh, it’s not like that, there’s not just one way to be gay,” Tara clarified quickly, “There’s just…a community. A culture.”

Willow just shrugged so Tara did her best to condense her experience.

“I sought out movies and TV shows. Found community boards online. Not all of them had awful spelling,” she added quickly, “I loved finding music where women were singing about other women. I’d always changed the pronoun in my head and I hadn’t even realized it. I even snuck out to a gay bar when I was 16 to see a band I knew of play a show.”

“In Sunnydale?!” Willow asked incredulously.

“No, in Brujas,” Tara replied, chuckling to herself at the idea of a gay bar in Sunnydale.

Willow nodded slowly.

“And you got in?”

“I think they knew I was…a newbie,” Tara replied with a fondness in her voice, “The bouncer got a nod from the barman and I wasn’t going to risk being kicked out by trying to order a drink. They just let me enjoy the show.”

“Did you?” Willow asked softly, enraptured in Tara’s tale.

Tara nodded, still smiling with a faraway look in her eye.

“I think my eyes must have been bugging out of my head. The crowd kind of parted to let me up to the front, or maybe I just remember it that way. I’d never seen so many women just being open with their girlfriends. Hugging and dancing and swaying and kissing and laughing and just…being normal. That was my real moment of acceptance. That’s when I knew I was really okay.”

“Did you get hit on?” Willow asked, her tone rising with curiosity and her chin lifting in something akin to a challenge.
Tara shook her head.

“Like I said, I think there was an understanding. I think everyone probably recognized themselves a little and let me process in my own little way,” she explained, rising and dropping a shoulder, “Not that anyone would hit on me anyway.”

“Uh, wrong,” Willow dismissed, “Patently wrong. The wrongest you’ve ever been. More wrong than that time I thought boobs wouldn’t be that great.”

Tara’s eyebrow arched and Willow quickly averted her eyes.

“Nothing.”

Tara shook off a frown and looked away bashfully.

“It didn’t matter anyway.”

She raised her gaze to meet Willow’s.

“I was totally head over heels for the girl across the street and it was becoming harder and harder to deny it,” she explained, squeezing Willow’s hand as she spoke, “You were the person I was singing about. You were the person I wanted to hug and dance and sway with and laugh with and kiss.”

Willow turned Tara’s palm over and drew shapes in it.

“Well, we were kissing. Until you said we should stop. Rejection City, by the way. Do you know how hard it is to feel rejected but you won’t even admit why in the first place?”

Tara looked at Willow sympathetically that was nothing if not sincere. She’d felt like she was rejecting herself when she stopped it too.

“It felt wrong when I knew what I was getting from it, but wasn’t sure what you were. I never wanted you to feel used.”

Willow didn’t need to be told it was a kindness to them both; she knew that Tara was kindness personified. But to finally voice it between them went a long way to covering the memory of that sting with a layer of emotional Neosporin and finally allow it to start to heal.
“Did you know I really did like you?”

Tara’s lips vibrated as she puffed a breath past them. That was a complicated and loaded question.

“I always felt what we have,” she answered honestly, “But you were adamantly in love with someone else and I just wanted you to be happy. But of course, I had some hope. I never would have told you if I didn’t. I guess that night when you sort of dismissed your feelings for him I thought maybe…I dunno, honey, I didn’t plan to come out to you that night. I certainly didn’t plan to tell you I liked you. I had a moment of bravery or stupidity maybe. I was so pent up and you were so important to me, even beyond my romantic feelings. It felt wrong to lie to you. Everything just sort of tumbled out.”

Willow didn’t like this memory. She didn’t like to be reminded of how cruel she’d been. She didn’t like to remember the look on Tara’s face or the word she’d used or how that night had been the closest she’d ever come to physically hurting herself. But for the first time ever, she didn’t bury it; she looked at Tara’s eyes and let it replay between them and offered her a silent apology that words could never convey.

Tara reached out and caught her hand behind Willow’s neck, rubbing there gently.

“I loved you. I love you. And sometimes love hurts.”

She leaned in to rest their foreheads together.

“And sometimes love heals.”

She sighed softly and pecked Willow’s lips.

“And ultimately it is embracing that we’re different, but still the same soul.”

Willow felt Tara’s forgiveness heavy in the air and was completely stunned to find she actually forgave herself too. She kissed Tara’s lips again, a gentle promise.

“Always.”

Tara smiled and went in for another soft kiss. They naturally shifted back down to lying together, Tara on her back with Willow curled into her side. They quietly cuddled for quite a while until Willow turned her head back up toward Tara.
“Did you have anyone to talk to about all of this…stuff? You just…you handled it so…well, you handled it. Unlike me.”

“I talked to people online,” Tara replied evenly, “They were very helpful. They understood. Taught me the jokes.”

“There’s jokes?” Willow asked with the start of a pout, beginning to feel very left out.

Tara smiled and squeezed Willow’s shoulder.

“I’ll teach you about the U-Haul in our second lesson.”

Willow snuggled her head back on Tara’s chest.

“I always knew I could talk to you…even though I didn’t, I knew someone else knew and didn’t hate me for it. And then I told Buffy and then Xander and they were okay with it too. Well, maybe a little odd at first, but things were pretty odd before I told them anyway.”

Her brow gradually furrowed as she continued to think.

“You know what’s weird?”

“Japanese commercials are weird,” Tara answered reasonably.

“Yes,” Willow agreed with a single resolute nod of her head, “And also…how I got asked—even asked myself—if I could just be mixing up friendship feelings for you. No one ever questioned that I liked Xander even though I’ve known him almost as long.”

Tara stroked Willow’s back; a soothing comfort for her words.

“You’ve reached the heteronormativity realization portion of your gay awakening.”

Willow’s head popped up, frowning.

“It sounds horrible. When does it stop?”
Tara balled a fist and offered it to bump.

“When we smash the patriarchy.”

Willow couldn’t help but smile and tried to return the fist-bump but awkwardly hit Tara on top, and then Tara tried to go in again and Willow got her on the bottom. They finally connected at the knuckles and laughed.

“Can we smash it before dinner maybe?”

Tara smiled back, then brushed a hand over her middle.

“Actually, dinner would be really good right now. I came straight from the airport.”

“Me!” Willow suddenly squealed, making Tara jump in place, which made Willow blush, “I mean, let me! Please?”

Startled but hungry and feeling in a very trusting place, Tara held her hands up.

“Okay. Sure. Thanks.”

Willow threw the blanket off and started running around to throw some clothes on.

“I’ll be right back,” she promised with a kiss before speeding out the door, “I love you!”

Tara felt the reverberation of the door shake the mattress and threw her arms over her head and across the pillows.

“Wow,” she whispered to herself as she started to process the last few hours.

She hadn’t expected all of this.

She glanced down at her naked self.

Well, okay, she’d certainly hoped it might end up this way, but not the rest of it. That kind of conversation between them had been such a long time coming and she could physically feel the glow that was emanating from her body. She’d always known Willow’s love was there, but to be given it
so freely and honestly was everything she’d waited for yet it still caught her by surprise.

“Wow,” she repeated, grinning and for the first time identified what it must feel like to have a ‘partner’.

She’d spent her life alongside Willow but really felt like now she was with her. It was an ending and a beginning all at once but she’d been ready and was ready now to step into whatever they discovered they were when truly together.

Her hands settled on her stomach, forming a heart shape and it let out a discontent rumble. Tara tried to recall where Willow might have run out to, to get food but she had been a little nervous on the shuttle bus and hadn’t paid enough attention to the neighborhood to remember.

She hoped it would be carby; she was starving. She’d had an apple before leaving for the airport and a snack pack of Brazil nuts she was given on the plane and now her stomach was really starting to protest.

Thankfully, Willow was only gone another 10 minutes and Tara was alerted to her return by hearing her bump against the door from the other side and then swear loudly.

Tara slid out of the bed, pulled her panties and shirt back on and opened the door whilst hiding behind it in case anyone else passed by outside.

“Thanks,” Willow said sheepishly as she came into the room.

Tara was surprised to see her carrying two bowls and not a pizza box.

Willow put the bowls down on top of the locker and opened the drawer, pulling out a resealable bag with a brightly colored pouch inside.

“Do you want some ice tea?” she asked, holding up the bag to show her, “You can get these powder mixes cheap in the Asian supermarkets. I just add it into my water bottle. Easy to seal up and carry around.”

Tara nodded, impressed.

“That’s a great idea. I’d love some,” she said, going to her own bag to take the water bottle from the side pocket, “Thank you. Dinner smells great.”
Willow mixed up their drinks and shyly handed Tara over one of the bowls. Tara recognized it as tuna casserole.

“Okay, it’s nothing special,” Willow admitted, sitting cross-legged on the bed, “But it’s cheap and easy to make in a hostel kitchen and the ingredients are easy to find so it’s a good traveling meal…”

Tara’s eyebrows lifted in surprise.

“You cooked this? I’ve watched you burn pop tarts.”

Willow stirred her food around the bowl to avoid Tara’s gaze bashfully.

“That was more laziness than lack of skill.”

Tara looked down at the wonderfully creamy looking dish, so familiar to her.

“My mom makes this.”

Willow nodded.

“I know, she showed me how one day,” she explained, “When my parents started leaving me alone. I guess she felt sorry for me. She taught me this and grilled cheese and pita pizza one afternoon.”

Tara was slightly blown away.

“She never told me.”

“She dropped over casseroles and stuff all the time too. I never asked, she would just leave it at the door for me,” Willow said, then smiled softly, “Your mom is the best.”

“Yeah, she is,” Tara agreed, then took her first spoonful of the casserole, lifting her hand to wipe the sauce from the corner of her mouth, “Willow, this is really good.”

Willow shrugged one shoulder.

“It’s not your mom’s.”
“It’s different,” Tara deduced, immediately going in for more, “Did you add something?”

“Just a little mustard,” Willow replied casually.

Tara reached across to squeeze Willow’s knee.

“It’s really good.”

Willow’s face lit up and she sat up a bit straighter.

“I usually put peas in it…you know, some easy green that I could keep in the freezer. But I remembered when your mom taught me she used green onions so I went to the market early this morning to get some.”

Tara dragged the spoon from her mouth, taking every last bit from it hungrily.

“I’m very impressed. You’ve been holding out on me.”

Willow caught Tara’s gaze and held it for a moment.

“Not anymore,” she stopped and smiled, “I will make you the best pita pizza you’ve ever had. You wanna know the secret?”

Tara looked at her curiously and Willow grinned wider.

“A can of chili.”

Tara’s face scrunched up and she shook her head.

“Oh, Willow, no.”

“Sweet chili sauce base, can of chili, sliced jalapeños and top with cheese. It’s a revelation,” Willow replied, laughing, “You just wait, Maclay. I’ll turn you over to the dark side. We have chili. In a can.”

Tara snorted with laughter and held her hand over her mouth to cover it but failed miserably. Willow
laughed harder at Tara laughing until they were both just in convulsions with each other.

“Oh my god,” Tara breathed as she finally regained control of it enough to start eating again, “Oh, I missed you.”

Willow smiled softly and rubbed her shoulder next to Tara’s.

“What did you get up to? Did you stick around Melbourne at all? I stuck around for a week and then went onto Adelaide. I went to a few more places but I really liked it there, I kept going back. Did you go to Philip Island? I saw the kangaroos and koalas. I loved the koalas so much I went to a wildlife park so I could hold one. That’s what made me go to Adelaide in the first place, it wasn’t really on my radar before that,” she babbled happily.

Tara smiled too; she missed that babble.

“I spent some time farming.”

Willow’s head spun around.

“Huh?!”

Tara caressed Willow's little shocked face.

“In exchange for room and board. It was actually pretty fun.”

They spent the next hour catching up on their travels and finishing their meal and just breathing easy again to be back in each other’s presence.

“That is not a real thing!” Willow exclaimed in disbelief as Tara recounted her latest tale.

“It is!” Tara protested adamantly.

“No way,” Willow dismissed, shaking her head.

“Look it up!” Tara demanded, arms folded over her chest and chin raised in challenge.

Willow looked at Tara skeptically and reached for her phone. She unlocked it, launched the browser
and started typing into it. Her fingers swiped a few times and then she raised one hand.

“Okay, I will concede that a bush turkey is a real thing,” she replied reasonably, but the grin started to spill out all over her face as she turned her phone to show Tara the picture she’d loaded, “But you’re telling me that THIS is what chased you out into the bush?!”

“Yes!” Tara replied indignantly, “He was vicious!”

Willow broke out in fresh laughter, her arm repeatedly thumping the bed.

“Tara, it says it’s the world’s dumbest bird!” she said, cackling, “A seagull would be more threatening!”

“Shut up, Willow,” Tara replied, rolling her eyes, but it was getting more and more difficult to hide the obvious mirth.

Willow dropped her phone but not her smirk and climbed over Tara.

“Make me.”

Tara balled her fists in Willow’s shirt and pulled Willow on top of her, lying down fully to enjoy the press of her body.

Their lips found each other and Tara’s hands smoothed out between them and found their way to the small of Willow’s back. She easily lifted Willow’s shirt back over her head and rolled them over so she was back on top.

Willow’s hand slid down Tara’s front, popping the buttons and getting it over her shoulders. Tara popped Willow’s jeans and she hadn’t even bothered to put panties back on so one quick tug left her nude again. Willow’s fingers were in the waistband of Tara’s underwear before the last bit of fabric even swiped her ankle and Tara lay down again beside her to kick them off.

She rolled onto her side and pulled Willow to her, moaning from her core when their bare skin touched everywhere. It felt just as electric as the moment she’d first walked in the door.

“Come closer,” she whispered, pulling Willow in by her ass.

“I don’t think that’s possible,” Willow whispered back.
Tara took Willow’s hand and pressed it between her legs.

“It’s possible.”

Willow’s fingers found their place and she heard Tara moan in her ear. Tara’s hand pressed on her thigh and she allowed her legs to open to be taken in the same way.

They’d never tried to do this together this way, and their arms got into a bit of a tangle, but this wasn’t their first game of Twister.

They worked it out wordlessly and moved their bodies against each other slightly clumsily.

“Sorry,” Willow said quietly when her hip bumped Tara’s and her fingers dragged themselves further out.

“I liked it,” Tara returned, smiling against Willow’s lips and feeling an answering smile back.

She purposefully bumped their hips and Willow giggled. Tara’s other hand touched Willow’s face and brought her in to kiss her with the thirst rising in her throat. It slid around to the back of Willow’s neck and held them together, not that Willow had any intention of moving away.

Willow felt Tara’s hips start to really grind into her hand and then that burst of swelling heat she was becoming addicted to. She felt her own thighs become wet with spillage and her eyes shut tight as her stomach knotted.

Tara watched Willow’s chin tremble and how the shaking muscles rose into a nostril flare then a brow lift and finally her whole neck tilted back so sharply she could almost see the moans quiver upward.

She bit inside her lip to try and control the tension but she was too far gone. Her back was arching in seconds as Willow fell into her, panting.

It took Tara another few seconds, but she finally managed to put a lazy arm around Willow and pull her closer.

Willow happily threw her limbs over Tara’s body and rested her cheek on the pillow beside her. She watched Tara’s face, eyes closed and breathing softening, for several minutes; following the few beads of sweat as they faced their journey of oblivion down her brow.
When they’d relaxed completely again, she brought her hand up and curled her fingers around Tara’s hair.

“Hey,” she broached after a few close starts, thankful Tara’s eyes were closed, “We’re… putting it all out there tonight, right?”

“And then some,” Tara chuckled, the laugh reverberating softly through her whole body.

Willow was distracted for a moment as her eyes followed the length of Tara’s body and she quickly pulled the sheet over them. It felt safer somehow like they were in one of the forts they’d built as children.

“Um, can I ask a weird and totally embarrassing question that I’m only asking while I have the feelin’-good nerve?”

Tara glanced over with a curious wrinkle of her forehead and nodded. Willow stalled for a moment, then threw herself onto her back, looking toward the top of the sheet.

“I can’t look you in the eye when I ask this.”

“Oh boy,” Tara replied, her shoulders shifting in an anticipatory brace.

There was another lapse into silence except for the almost audible tension of Willow’s jaw clenching.

“Do I…do I pull a weird face when…” she started her face turning a fresh beet red, “When we’re…”

Her body squirmed uncomfortably.

“WhenIcome,” she rushed out in one breath.

Tara blinked slowly.

“Oh.”

Willow rolled her hands around on top of her stomach, desperately trying not to jump up and hide.

“Someone said I pull a weird face and I’m trying not to be all insecure-y about it, but…”
Tara did a double-take.

“S-Someone said…?” she started, turning her face fully toward Willow, “Wh-Who was watching you…?”

Willow actually returned her gaze to Tara, confused by the question until suddenly her eyebrows popped in surprise.

“Oh, no, god no!” she spluttered quickly, “It was a general discussion, not even a discussion, just a sentence. A joke, really. It was like ‘love is not laughing at your partner’s o-face’ or something. But…well, yours isn’t funny. It’s sexy. So I didn’t get it.”

She closed her eyes and looked away again.

“You know what, never mind,” she said, sitting up and reaching for her water bottle, “Do you want more tea?”

She went about chugging from the bottle until she felt Tara’s hand press up along her spine and curl over her shoulder. She heard Tara’s body scooting up behind her and then felt a kiss on her neck from behind.

“You look hot. You…”

Tara paused and Willow felt hot breath on her ear.

“You coming makes me come.”

Willow felt her mouth go dry and jumped in place when Tara popped a quick kiss on her cheek and fell away back under the covers.

“And anyway, funny can be sexy.”

Willow took a moment to calm herself, smiling widely and finally lay back down beside Tara.

“You’ll have to fill me in on those trailer jokes so I can really try to turn you on.”
Tara turned herself on her side and slid her hand over Willow’s stomach.

“You don’t have to try.”

Willow drew little circles on Tara’s hand.

“Did you get turned on when we were close but before we were ‘close-close’?”

“Did I get turned on when we would touch before we started dating?” Tara translated.

Willow nodded.

“Yes.”

“Of course,” Tara answered honestly.

Willow pursed her lips for a moment.

“Can I ask you something else?”

“Uh oh,” Tara replied with a teasing grin, “Go ahead.”

Willow danced her fingers between Tara’s on her stomach.

“When I was trying to research how to…make you happy,” she said, rolling her eyes at herself and her own coyness, “Um, well, it was really hard to find good information, y’know? And it made me wonder how we…you…define…‘it’.”

She looked over at Tara.

“I feel like we had sex for the first time in Auckland, but we did stuff before. We…got each other off. Does that count?”

“There was no penetration or oral copulation so it was legally ambiguous,” Tara rattled off quickly.

Willow’s brow knotted.
“That’s a…weird answer,” she said, rolling the words around in her head, “Legally ambiguous? Oral copulation?”

Tara bit her lip.

“I may have checked it out,” she replied quietly, “Just…in case.”

“In case?” Willow prompted, at a loss.

Tara swallowed deeply.

“I-I was 18. You were 17. I worried if your parents found out they might…”

Willow’s eyebrows lifted as far as they could on her forehead.

“Try to have you arrested?!?”

Her head sprung back on the pillow.

“Wow.”

Tara started to tense up and avert her gaze guiltily until Willow’s fingers linked with hers.

“You were scared too. Maybe not for the exact same reasons but…”

Willow held their palms together and looked at Tara with regret.

“I’m sorry.”

She lifted Tara’s hand to her mouth to kiss it and Tara pulled her hand back with Willow with it to kiss her properly.

Willow’s hand curved around Tara’s rear and pulled her closer.
“Would you?” she asked, keeping Tara’s gaze the whole time now, “Have had legally *unambiguous* sex with me? If I hadn’t been so…”

Tara smirked as she went in for another kiss.

“I figured it would probably be worth the misdemeanor.”

Willow giggled as Tara messily kissed her neck. After a moment Tara’s lips fell off at her shoulder and they were both lying there, content.

Willow found Tara’s hand again, just completely addicted to the feeling of their linked fingers, holding each other strongly.

“What was the gay bar like? Is it like The Bronze with rainbows?”


“Polish people?” Willow asked, confused.

Tara hid her smile in Willow’s neck so as not to seem mocking.

“No, like stripper poles.”

“Oh,” Willow replied, not trying very hard at all to stop the images suddenly flashing through her mind, “I want to go to one. Can we go to one?”

“Sure,” Tara agreed easily, “We could go tonight if you wanted.”

“Do you think they have one here?” Willow asked excitedly.

“A gay bar in Sydney?” Tara asked, smiling kindly, “Yeah, I think so.”

Willow sat right up.

“Let’s do it!”
“Okay,” Tara replied with a chuckle, throwing her legs off the bed, “I need to grab a shower.”

Willow stretched out her legs before standing.

“Okay. I’ll bring our bowls back to the kitchen and get ready. Do you have shampoo and stuff? My little caddy is right there if you want to use it.”

“Thanks, honey,” Tara replied as she got herself ready to head to the showers.

Willow dressed, brought their bowls back to the kitchen, cleaned up and skipped back to the room. She smoothed out the sheet on the bed and hiked her bag up to look through her clothes and what to change into for going out.

She didn’t have a whole wardrobe to choose from like at home but she’d packed with as much variety as possible to suit her for any situation. This, however, was not a situation she’d been in before.

Tara returned in the sweats and t-shirt she’d headed to the showers in with her towel wrapped around her hair.

Willow looked up helplessly from where she had every item of clothing laid out on the bed.

“Help.”

Tara quickly brought the towel from her head while giving her hair a quick shake through it and hung it on one of the three coat hooks on the wall.

She came over to the bed and surveyed the options.

“Okay, strip.”

Willow chuckled goofily.

“Yes, ma’am.”

She undressed down to her underwear and Tara held a few items of clothing in front of her before picking out a pair of dark jeans and a deep purple long-sleeved top with a diamante front.
“Try this?”

Willow put the clothes on and Tara accessorized her with a bright white belt for contrast and a deep silver chain that hung well past her chest. She found the mirror in the closet door and held it open for Willow to check herself in.

Willow looked at her reflection and adjusted the shoulders on her top a little.

“I look okay?”

“I’ll be fighting them off,” Tara promised with a wink and a smile.

Willow ducked her head for a moment and rose it again, smiling softly.

“Should I straighten my hair?”

“If you want to,” Tara agreed readily.

Willow looked in the mirror and her recently-brushed but slightly wavy hair.

“How do you prefer it?”

“I prefer it how you prefer it,” Tara replied, watching Willow watch her own reflection.

Willow glanced at Tara.

“Do we have to play this game? Your opinion is important to me.”

Tara looked a little surprised at Willow not beating around the bush. It wasn’t what she was used to but she appreciated what it meant.

“I like it a little rugged,” she admitted, smiling bashfully, “That kinda sexy bedhead look.”

Willow grinned and threw her head down, shaking her hands through it and then throwing it back.
“Like this?”

Tara laughed and reached out to calm Willow’s hair just slightly, still leaving it tousled and fluffy on her shoulders.

“Yeah, exactly like that.”

Willow looked in the mirror, then at Tara grinning and stuck out her tongue as she grabbed her hairbrush to tame it back down smoothly.

“Hey, I liked it.”

“Well, I prefer to not resemble a lion’s mane,” Willow retorted, sliding the handle of the brush into her pocket.

She secured it so it wouldn’t fall and stepped toward Tara.

“Want me to dry your hair?”

“That’d be nice,” Tara replied softly.

Willow got out the travel-sized blow dryer that she’d picked up in Melbourne when the reality of hostel life really set in.

“Sit here,” Willow guided when she found a suitable outlet near the bed, “Please.”

Tara gathered any hair hidden under the collar of her t-shirt out and brought her hairbrush over to Willow. She sat in front of her at an angle on the bed so her full head was available.

She expected to hear the blow dryer fill the room with white noise, but instead felt Willow’s arm close around her chest from behind and kiss her neck.

“It’s so good to have you back.”

Tara held Willow’s overlapping hands over her collarbone.

“It is so good to be back,” she replied, then threw a warm smile over her shoulder, “With my girl.”
Willow beamed and started kissing Tara’s neck again, who couldn’t help but tilt her neck into it.

“You better stop or we’re never getting out of here…”

“Not the worst fate in the world,” Willow murmured.

Tara angled her neck back enough for Willow to kiss her lips and Willow slowly moved her hands back to Tara’s shoulders, giving them a squeeze before getting back to business and sliding the dial up on the blowdryer.

She ran her fingers through Tara’s hair as she dried it enough to brush through.

They used to do this, a lot. Play around with hairstyles and make-up once they were allowed. Tara had always liked any expression of color and Willow had loved how she made all of her mother’s clothing choices feel unique and fun.

“Tara?” Willow asked as she started to part Tara’s hair in the zigzag pattern Tara had taught her when they were 11.

“Yeah?” Tara replied, enjoying the inadvertent massage she was getting.

Willow noted Tara leaning into her and added some pressure for a real massage.

“Did I ever make you feel excluded when I became friends with Buffy?”

Tara was silent, unreactive at all as she considered her words.

“I was glad you had a friend in school.”

“That’s not what I asked,” Willow replied firmly though her tone was gentle, “A lot of the stuff we used to do together I started doing with her. This kinda stuff. Girly stuff.”

Tara again said nothing for several moments.

“I didn’t feel excluded because you were doing stuff with Buffy,” she answered finally, “I guess I felt a little excluded that you never asked me to hang out with you guys, or even introduced me…but
I understand now.”

Willow bent her head down and pressed her cheek to Tara from behind.

“I’m sorry,” she said sincerely, “I’m not just giving you lip service— hey, lip service would be a good name for a lesbian rock band.”

Tara chuckled and Willow smiled at her laugh.

“I’m not trying to beat myself up. I’m just recognizing how I’ve hurt you so I know not to do it again.”

Tara reached behind and stroked Willow’s head.

“I don’t mind you doing girly things with other people,” she said, turning her eye line enough to catch Willow’s gaze, “As long as I’m the only one you do girlfriendy stuff with.”

Willow pecked Tara’s lips sidelong.

“My one and only. Always.”

Tara turned and held Willow in her lap. She kissed her again, smiling into it.

“How should I do my hair?”

Willow brought Tara’s hair forward and ran her fingers through the silken ends. The zigzag had turned into a weird spiral so she shook it out and did a normal part in the middle.

“What are you wearing?”

“You mean you don’t like the sweats and old t-shirt look?” Tara mock-protested.

“I’d love the garbage bag look on you,” Willow replied sweetly.

Tara dropped a kiss on Willow’s cheek and moved them apart so she could pick an outfit. She finally settled on a patterned backless dress with dark oranges and greens with bright yellow tights to contrast; three colors that should probably only ever be seen together on a flag but Tara seemed to
own the clash and wear it proudly.

“Those are funky,” Willow complimented the tights, “Hey, together we kinda make a rainbow.”

“Oh, do we?” Tara asked coyly as she pulled on some beat-up sneakers to complete her outfit.

Willow pulled Tara to her by the waist.

“Sneaky, Maclay, sneaky,” she grinned, “You look gorgeous just like that. Don’t change a thing.”

Tara spread both sets of fingers behind Willow’s neck and pulled her in for a kiss. She planned to make up for each and every one she missed. And then some.

“But we have to add a little sparkle.”

A while later they emerged from the room together embellished with some light make-up and a little glitter balm on their cheeks. Willow had opted to give her hair a quick straighten in the end because she thought it looked better with the long sleeves — Tara didn’t try to break down the logic of that one; she still thought Willow looked great.

They approached the hostel desk where two male workers were tossing paper balls into the wastebasket. They stopped when they saw people approaching and one guy stood to help them.

“Hello there. How can I help?” he asked in a Nordic accent.

Willow looked at Tara and then back at him.

“We were wondering…”

She looked at Tara again, who nodded encouragingly.

“If you had a suggestion for a good bar?”

She paused, smiling nervously.

“Of the rainbow persuasion?” she finished with a squeak in her voice.
The worker tossed his gaze to the other very well-groomed guy who slid over in his place. He had a Mexican flag pin on his shirt above a hastily scribbled name tag that said ‘Rafael’.

“I can give you a recommendation but it’s not always like the straight girls expect.”

Willow linked her fingers with Tara’s and brought their combined hands on top of the desk. Rafael smirked.

“Well alright then.”

Primed with a trustworthy rec from someone in the know, they headed out together to walk the city. They were staying near Circular Quay and their route took to the water’s edge, where they could see the Opera House across the harbor.

“God this city is stunning,” Tara commented in awe.

“I hadn’t seen this area yet,” Willow replied in a similar awed tone, “Wow…those angles.”

Tara placed her palm on the small of Willow’s back.

“Are you getting excited by geometry again?” she asked, brushing her fingers at the base of Willow’s spine and making her shiver even through her top, “How did that song we made up go?”

Willow swallowed to get some moisture back on her lips.

“All sides connect, the polygon effect; place your compass on the vertex before you bisect,” Willow half-sang in a very quiet voice so as not to be overheard by anyone else passing by.

Tara brought her hand around to hold onto Willow’s waist.

Willow noticed her casting furtive glances in her direction and realized she was checking for a reaction.

Tara had only put an arm around her shoulders or waist like this in public if it was dark and no one else was around. It was dark, but they were under the bright lights of the city with a lot of people milling about.
To commit to everything had been said, and just because it felt good and she was sick of holding herself back, she leaned her head down on Tara’s shoulder and put an arm around her waist too.

She couldn’t see but could sense Tara’s smile, especially when a kiss was placed on the top of her head.

They strolled down and picked up the buzz of the city, getting a little lost on the way but they hopped on a train to get downtown. Tara had so rarely left Sunnydale growing up, it was so exciting to hop on a tram and be catapulted into such an apex of culture and activity so quickly.

“There it is,” Willow nodded ahead when she saw the name they’d been given lit up in neon against a building across the road.

They hurried across a crosswalk at a break in traffic and joined the line against the red brick wall.

As they shuffled along the line, security signs started to show up adorned along the wall. Willow lifted a finger against one in particular that said ‘No Thongs’.

“Let me tell you, that sign seriously confused me the first few times I saw it. I was doing a mental catalog of all my underwear!”

Tara bit on her bottom lip to stop from laughing too loudly.

“I first saw it at the beach and was alarmed by quite how many people were blatantly disregarding it.”

“Oh, you were scoping out the women in skimpy underwear, huh?” Willow teased.

Tara’s nose scrunched.

“It was mostly men, actually.”

Willow’s nose did similarly and they laughed quietly together.

When they got to the front of the line, the bouncer checked their IDs, gave them the once-over and nodded for them to go inside.

Willow clutched Tara’s arm as if they were entering a haunted house as they passed the coat check
and walked through a curtain into the bar.

The décor was purple, the lighting was red and the bar sat in the middle of the floor in an oval shape to serve customers coming in from the dance floor on the right and the various seating areas on the left. Willow only had The Bronze as a reference but it didn’t seem that different, apart from the darker lighting.

That was until a drag queen passed her in six-inch heels adjusting her breasts and Willow started to get a feel for the colorful clientele.

“Excuse me,” she said when Willow stood rooted to the spot.

“Sorry, ma’am,” Willow replied, almost falling off to the side as she tried to jump out of the way.

She realized Tara had moved ahead toward the bar and hurried behind her. She was fascinated as she looked around and saw couples of all descriptions being openly affectionate. There were friend groups and even solo people enjoying a drink but her eyes were hyper-focused to find the female couples. She realized she’d never even seen a gay couple kiss outside of television before.

Amidst her careful but pointed glances, she didn’t notice Tara trying to get her attention until her sleeve was pulled on.

“They have 2-for-1 cocktails, do you want one?”

Willow drew her gaze back to Tara and processed what she said.

“Sure,” she agreed quickly, “Whatever you’re having.”

Tara pointed to a red sofa with a low table in front of it that a group had just vacated.

“Go nab us that couch.”

Willow wandered over and sat on one side of the loveseat. It was soft and had high arms that she could relax back against. She was barely in place when a woman approached from the other side and folded herself effortlessly into the empty half of the sofa.

“Hey there,” she said, tossing her short, dark curls behind her head.
Willow sat up a little straighter.

“Oh, hi.”

While she wondered what the etiquette was on saving seats in Australian gay bars, the other woman rested her head on her palm and smiled at Willow like she’d known her forever.

“I’m Dusk.”

“Dusk?” Willow questioned uncertainly.

“Family name,” Dusk dismissed, “New here?”

“Yeah, uh huh,” Willow replied, adding on sheepishly, “It’s my first time.”

Dusk glanced what looked like toward Willow’s chest but was apparently her empty hand.

“No drink?”

She clicked her fingers which startled Willow for a moment before she could reply.

“Oh, my gir—” she started, but then she stopped short with her eyes widening as another young woman hurried over and handed Dusk a glass of sparkling rosé, “That was…speedy.”

Dusk handed the glass out for Willow to take.

“I believe you should treat a lady like a princess,” she replied with a smirk that Willow had no idea how to place, “And I certainly have no problem with princesses.”

“She’s definitely not a princess.”

Both Dusk and Willow looked up where Tara was standing with a smile on her face and two tall glasses of something red and pretty.

Dusk cocked her head at Tara with a raised eyebrow.
“And you are?”

Tara lifted one finger from her glass and pointed it at Willow.

“Hers.”

Dusk pursed her lips.

“No offense meant.”

“No offense taken,” Tara replied, cordially but pointedly, “She, however, is.”

Dusk stood and flicked her curls again.

“Go shopping in a bargain basket this weekend?”

She moved away while Tara took her rightful seat and handed Willow one of the glasses. Willow looked at Tara expectantly.

“What just happened?”

Tara’s mouth found the small black straw and took a sip from her drink.

“You just got hit on. And I think my fashion sense was insulted.”

Willow’s eyes widened again.

“Me?! I never got hit on in The Bronze.”

“Or maybe you just didn’t notice,” Tara replied and before Willow could reply she leaned over, lifted Willow’s chin with her finger and planted a kiss on her lips.

This was definitely the most populated place and most unambiguous display of affection they’d ever engaged in but all Willow felt was a tingle at the base of her spine that rose through the back of her neck and made their kiss quiver.
Willow felt the air hit her lips as Tara parted from her and only had eyes for her and not to any reaction around them (or non-reaction had she actually looked.)

“That was kinda possessive but totally hot.”

“Mission accomplished,” Tara grinned and sipped on her drink again.

Willow blushed and looked down for a moment before settling back into the sofa. She brought her glass up and pinched the straw to guide it to her mouth.

“She’s nuts if she doesn’t think you’re gorgeous. You even look good in thongs!”

Tara smiled sideways.

“The underwear or the flip-flops?”

Willow giggled under her breath and looked up through her eyelashes.

“Well both but I know which one I’d vote for you to wear,” she bit the corner of her lip and placed a hand on Tara’s thigh, “What’s a princess? I’m sensing it’s not good.”

“It’s short for pillow princess,” Tara explained, putting an arm over the back of the sofa so her hand neared Willow’s head and she could play with the occasional strand of hair, “It’s not necessarily bad, depending on everyone’s expectations. It means you don’t…return the favor. Your head stays on the pillow.”

“And miss out on all the fun?” Willow asked, aghast and Tara laughed.

Willow smiled.

“What is this? It’s good.”

“It’s a Tight Snatch,” Tara replied, deadpan.

Willow choked but covered under the drape of the neon lights and twirled the straw around the glass.

“Dangerously good,” she said, lightly licking her lips and throwing some teasing side-eye in Tara’s
direction, “But, then again, you knew that.”

Tara seemed a little shocked and Willow continued to grin.

“You did order them.”

Tara had spent years hiding her blush around Willow; it was still a thrill to be made blush on purpose. She scooted intentionally closer so she could drag her foot along Willow’s lower leg.

“I know what my girl likes.”

Willow leaned back, smiling and had another look around the bar. She saw art and flags and portraits and realized she really did have a lot to learn about this community. She’d always rejected herself so much she’d rejected this too and it sat in her oddly, like if she knew she was Jewish but nothing about the history.

She closed her eyes for a second and had a moment of recognition.

“I know this song. I’ve known a few of the songs that have played. Where have I heard them?”

Tara smirked over her straw.

“I’ve been indoctrinating you in secret for a while now.”

Willow’s mouth dropped in amused shock and she lightly pushed on Tara’s shoulder. Tara laughed and Willow smiled; god how she loved that laugh.

Because I know you’re too good to be true I must have done something good to meet you.

“Who is this?”

“The Veronicas,” Tara replied, a pink light hitting her and highlighting her sparkly cheeks, “They’re Australian. Twin sisters. One of them is queer.”

Willow lowered her voice with concern.
“Can we say that? I read that we can but it still feels weird.”

Tara squeezed Willow’s arm softly.

“You don’t have to if you’re not comfortable with it.”

The music coming over the speakers stopped and behind the dancefloor, a guy rocked up to a microphone at the top of the stage while three girls with guitars stood behind him in a triangle formation.

“We’re continuing our locals night with some live music for you all here tonight. Please welcome to the stage our resident band of todger dodgers, Lip Service.”

The bar broke out in applause and the guy left the stage and returned behind the bar while the three ladies started up a high-tempo rock song.

Willow squealed and nearly sloshed her drink everywhere.

“Hey! Hey, I just said there should be a lesbian rock band called Lip Service! And there is!” she exclaimed in thrilled disbelief, “Did you know?”

Tara shook her head, smiling.

“I hadn’t heard of them.”

Willow rocked her shoulders triumphantly.

“I’m getting the hang of this gay thing without even knowing it!”

Exhilarated, she threw the rest of her drink back and offered Tara her hand.

“Wanna dance?”

“I’d love to,” Tara replied without hesitation and sucked the dredges of her glass through the straw before standing with Willow and heading over to the dance floor.
They found a spot and joined hands and started to bop and twirl each other around with the rest of the crowd.

Several songs in as Willow threw her head back in another laugh, she noticed Tara looking down to hide tears that were pricking her eyes. Willow stopped and moved closer, keeping both sets of hands locked.

“Tara?” she asked softly, close enough to communicate despite the loud music.

Tara lifted her gaze and sniffled, her eyes clearly glassy.

“It’s just so nice to see you let yourself be happy.”

Willow squeezed Tara’s hands tight to stop her own sudden burning of tears.

“It’s nice to let myself be happy.”

Her eyes closed and she fought them back, laughing.

“What’s wrong with us; crying at a concert?”

Tara returned the laugh and dropped her hands to Willow’s waist, pulling her in close.

“No more crying.”

She pecked Willow’s lips and took her hand to give her a twirl.

“Shut up and dance with me.”
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

This one is a milder 'M'

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**Sydney**

*(Part 2)*

*I Want The World To Know, Got To Let It Show*

Willow woke with her face pressed into her pillow.

She pulled her head away sharply when she got a mouthful of cotton and felt her breathing become obstructed.

She just about avoided turning into a spluttering mess by quickly covering her mouth to cough. After scrunching her face up sleepily for a moment, she settled her cheek back on the pillow.

Her eyes focused on Tara sleeping soundly beside her and her hand crept up from where it was thrown around Tara’s waist to play with the hair falling down her back.

She didn’t mean to wake her but moments later Tara’s eyelids fluttered open anyway.

“Hey,” Willow greeted softly, lifting her hand to brush some hair from Tara’s cheek and behind her ear.

“Hey,” Tara returned with a little sleep gruff Willow found adorable, “What time is it?”

Willow looked over Tara’s head to the clock and saw bright light streaming in from behind the blinds.
“We missed breakfast,” she deduced, then looked back at Tara, “Did you know they call Rice Krispies ‘Rice Bubbles’ over here?”

Tara’s eyebrow arched and Willow smiled sheepishly.

“I’ve been eating a lot of free cereal.”

Tara nuzzled against the pillow and smiled sleepily.

“I’ll give you a free smooch but you have to claim it in the next five seconds.”

Willow shuffled over a couple of inches on her belly and pressed her lips against Tara’s.

“Good morning,” Tara murmured as she kissed Willow several times, slowly.

Willow settled her head on the pillow beside Tara.

“Good morning.”

Her palm brushed more hair from Tara’s neck and she tried to toss her leg over Tara’s leg but was stopped by a sharp ache in her hamstring.

“Oof, what did you do to me last night? My legs are killing me.”

“You don’t remember the wild time we had?” Tara asked, half of her grin visible poking up from her mouth.

Willow looked slightly alarmed and Tara reached up and squeezed Willow’s shoulder playfully.

“We danced, you goof.”
Willow’s eyebrows rose and looked to Tara as if to say ‘really?’ as she lifted the blanket, confirming their nudity.

Tara blushed slightly under the streams of sunlight.

“Okay we danced a little more when we got back but you can’t blame that on your cramp — you barely moved your legs.”

Willow frowned something close to a pout.

“Oh no, was I a pillow princess?”

Tara leaned in and whispered in Willow’s ear, who felt herself waking up everywhere.

“Oh, now I remember,” she replied as her eyes settled back on Tara, as if she’d forgotten in the first place, “I remember everything, baby.”

She stole another kiss and let it linger.

“Last night was the best night of my life.”

Tara’s eyebrows lifted in soft surprise and she pressed her palm to Willow’s cheek, who turned her head to kiss it. Tara brushed her thumb over Willow’s lips then leaned in and kissed her again.

“I love you.”

Willow smiled softly in return.

“I love you too.”
Tara dropped her hand down Willow’s back and off at her hip before closing her eyes again, still smiling.

Willow closed her eyes for a moment too then turned her head in the other direction and reached for her phone, hanging out of the back pocket of her jeans which were strewn over the nightstand. She unlocked it and saw it hanging on in single-digit battery territory so looped the cable of her charger out from around the nightstand and plugged it in.

It lit up with brightness and Willow held it over her chest as she checked out her new activity.

After a few minutes, she let her arm fall gently onto Tara’s back to get her attention.

“Look, we took cute selfies.”

Tara’s brow creased in the middle.

“We haven’t taken selfies in…” one of her eyes popped open, “I don’t think we’ve ever taken selfies. You never wanted to take photos together.”

Willow’s jaw clenched guiltily for a moment while Tara pulled herself close enough to look at one of the pictures Willow pulled up.

“They’re blurry. Is that your thumb?”

Willow nudged Tara’s shoulder playfully.

“Hey, I did the best I could with so much tight snatch in me.”

Tara smirked and tilted Willow’s hand to get more light on the screen.

“Your pretty purple top looks completely black.”
“Everyone’s a critic,” Willow muttered dryly.

Tara cuddled into Willow’s side.

“I’m sorry,” she said sincerely, “All I see is your gorgeous smile.”

“You’re lying but I’ll take it,” Willow replied, kissing the top of Tara’s forehead, “What do you wanna do today?”

“We should go get some brunch,” Tara suggested.

Willow pouted.

“I don’t wanna move.”

Tara bent her elbow and rested her head on her upturned palm.

“If you think I’m letting you stay in bed every time we’re hungover…”

Willow smiled to herself and didn’t protest.

“We have to check out of the room soon if we’re not staying…”

Tara glanced down at Willow’s hidden chest rising and falling below the sheet and then between them and their close proximity. It was too tantalizing to let go.

“One more night?”

Willow smiled even wider and pressed a lightning-fast kiss to Tara’s cheek before throwing the sheet off.
“I gotta go to the bathroom.”

“Okay,” Tara replied softly, stretching her arms out behind her head.

Willow got her robe from her bag and unrolled it to throw over her. As she was leaving, Tara sought out her own phone and almost as soon as opening the first social media app, there was a message in from her mother requesting a video call.

Tara briefly got out of bed to throw on a tank top and fish out her iPad. She tossed the lamp on for some light and sat back in bed with her legs under the sheet to hide the fact she wasn’t wearing anything below the waist.

She put the call through and waited for the screen to change to video.

“Hey, mom,” she greeted, angling the tablet upward, “Are you stalking my online status again?”

Kimberly let out a huff through the screen.

“Well, you never told me if you got to Sydney safely.”

Tara waved the hand not holding the iPad about in front of it.

“All limbs attached.”

Kimberly pursed her lips; she knew when she was being made fun of.

“So you’ve met up with Willow again?”

“Mmmh,” Tara nodded.
Kimberly tried and failed to hide her exasperation at the lack of information.

“And everything is okay?”

“I never said it wasn’t,” Tara countered, but relented under her mother’s stare, “Everything is good. Great.”

“Okay, okay,” Kimberly replied, smiling finally, “Well I am very glad to hear that. I’m much happier knowing you’re with someone on your travels.”

“Well—”

The door opened again and Willow pouted at Tara for a split second before making a jump for the bed and on top of her.

“Aww, why’d you put a shirt on; I much prefer the unobstructed vi—”

“My mom is on Skype!” Tara squealed as she tried to shove the iPad screen-down to avoid any view of Willow’s body starting to pop out from her robe.

Willow’s mouth hung open and they both stared at each other in shock for a moment.

“Hello Willow,” Kimberly’s slightly muffled voice came from the obstructed speaker.

Tara yanked the iPad up close to her face.

“Mom, I gotta go.”

“Goodbye, girls,” Kimberly replied hurriedly and the call ended abruptly.

Willow stumbled off the bed and back against the wall, sinking down as she contemplated what just
happened and what it meant.

“Shit. Shitshitshitshitshitshitshit. Did she hear me properly? Would she guess? Can we tell her I was joking around?!”

Tara’s head dropped into her hands.

“Willow—”

“Oh god, what did I do?! Willow straightened up to pace while she panicked, “Why didn’t you tell me she was right there!”

Tara jaw was clenched, her shoulders rigid with tension.

“It just—”

“Oh my god!” Willow interrupted as she took in a sharp inhalation on the way to hyperventilating, “Oh my god Tara I just outed you too! I’m so sorry, I’m so, so sorr—”

“Willow, she already knew,” Tara cut her off, loud and short.

Willow stopped and spun to face her.

“What?”

Tara couldn’t keep Willow’s gaze and glanced down at her lap.

“She already knew about me,” she repeated, her voice turning into a hollow echo, “…about us.”

A slight v formed in Willow’s brow.
“You told her but you didn’t tell me you told her?” she asked, the words heavy on her tongue.

“Donny—”

“DONNY knows?!” Willow exploded, her eyes bugging out of her head.

Tara looked down again to hide the tears springing to her eyes.

“He guessed, okay? He found lyrics I wrote about you and he guessed and he told my mom but she already suspected anyway.”

“When?!” Willow asked, pushing her hands down on the end of the bed.

“A few months back. Before I broke my arm,” Tara replied weakly.

Willow had to turn her back when she heard the tremble running through Tara’s voice.

“So you’ve been lying to me all this time. Allllll this time, even after yesterday?”

Tara sobbed silently but Willow could hear the ragged breath through the eerie silence in the room.

“I would have told you but—”

“But what?” Willow asked, the hurt in her voice mirroring Tara’s.

Tara’s hands covered her face and when words came, they were dripping with shame.

“I was scared. I thought…I thought if you knew you would run. I was being selfish. I’m so sorry, Willow.”
Willow slowly sunk to sit on the end of her bed, her back still to Tara. She could feel the mattress shaking with Tara’s cries but still couldn’t hear it at all as Tara tried to conceal it completely. Willow knew she wasn’t crying to elicit sympathy or tug on Willow’s heartstrings; she was crying because it hurt her to hurt Willow. And Willow got that, truly.

“You’re right,” she said quietly, slowly twisting her body and turning her head to look at Tara, “I would have run. Back then, if I knew Donny knew especially…I would have shut you out. I would have…pretended we weren’t anything. If I got scared enough I might have even gone off to college early. I had the credits. I would have run.”

Her hand crept across the sheet and found Tara’s, letting their fingers link together. Tara looked up, hair falling into her red-rimmed eyes and Willow cemented the embrace by pressing their palms together.

“Will we add it to the list of times you’ve saved me from myself?”

Tara’s eyes crinkled and Willow scooted over the few inches to gather her and hold her. One arm wrapped around Tara’s back and the other held Tara’s head against her collarbone. The affection was too much for Tara, who cried louder into Willow’s neck.

“I’m so sorry, Willow.”

“It’s okay,” Willow replied softly, grateful to be on this side of the situation where she could extend some of the patience and understanding Tara had always offered her, “I forgive you.”

She felt a fresh spring of tears fall onto her shoulder and rubbed Tara’s back soothingly.

“No more secrets?”

Tara lifted her head and nodded quickly while swiping at her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” she said again, sniffing deeply as she pulled herself together, “They won’t tell anyone. Donny; he hasn’t so far and he’s been keeping his head down, getting sober. And my mom won’t either, she would never.”
“It’s okay,” Willow repeated securely, meaning it, “It’s okay.”

She cupped Tara’s face, wiping the last tears away with her thumbs and pressed her lips to Tara’s sweetly. She felt Tara relax under her and lingered so their breath trapped between them and evened out.

“Still wanna get some brunch?”

Tara laughed, releasing whatever was left caught between her shoulders.

“Yeah, that’d be nice,” she agreed, then gestured with embarrassment toward her face, “I think I need to…”

Willow nodded and smiled.

“Yeah, of course. Go ahead. No hurry.”

Tara slipped off the bed and headed across the room.

“Hey,” Willow called softly, “I love you.”

Tara inhaled softly. She felt that more than ever before at that moment. She smiled back, grabbed her toiletry bag and headed for the bathroom.

Willow stared at the closed door for a few moments, then nodded once definitively.

She knew she needed to get dressed, but first, she grabbed her laptop and pulled up a tab to compose an email.
The next morning, Tara returned to their room from her morning teeth cleaning and smiled at Willow checking her reflection in the mirror.

She was wearing a pair of black slacks and a blouse with a collar perfectly starched out at a Sheila Rosenberg-approved angle.

“You look very poised,” she complimented, though thought the nicest part of the outfit was how the pants curved around Willow’s ass.

“I actually scheduled a call with my parents,” Willow admitted in a casual tone.

“Ah,” Tara replied.

That explained the collar, though Tara was a bit surprised.

Willow hadn’t mentioned anything the day before when they’d had brunch at the beach, gone on a cliff walk and had an impromptu surf lesson as the sun set over the water, but then again, they hadn’t been on their phones much.

“That’s great.”

“Yeah I didn’t expect them to get back to me so quickly,” Willow replied and Tara was starting to recognize the nerves Willow was clearly trying to conceal, “I only emailed yesterday, but they’re both home right now before they head on a circuit tomorrow so they basically only had this evening.”
Their evening, our… now. Anyway, it’s a take it or leave it kind of situation. You don’t mind, do you? It won’t take up our whole day or anything.”

Tara shook her head. She was glad Willow was staying in touch with her parents considering how everything had been when they left, but she also had no interest in sticking around to hear it. It drove her crazy how they dismissed their daughter so much.

“I will give you some space and go out and get us coffee.”

“Will you make mine a flat white?” Willow asked as she experimented with a few different types of tucks.

“Moved on from mochas?” Tara asked with a curious and bordering-on-teasing smile.

“Embracing the local culture,” Willow returned with a smile through the mirror.

Tara walked over and hugged Willow from behind.

“I’m proud of you,” she said, planting a kiss on Willow’s cheek and taking Willow’s hands away from her clothing, “And you don’t owe any part of yourself to their expectations. You look perfect when you look like yourself.”

Willow craned her neck back and kissed Tara’s jawline.

“Thank you, baby.”

She believed her, but she still fixed her collar again once Tara had left.

When she was certain it was as stiff as it could be and realized that her tuck would be lost as soon as she sat on the bed anyway, she opened her laptop and opened Skype to await the call.

As her fingers tapped nervously against the casing, she kept hearing notifications that weren’t coming up on her screen. She finally realized it was Tara’s iPad hidden under the pillow and pulled it
out to silence it.

Before she could, she noticed Tara’s mom’s name pop up as online. Her eyes cast over to the time on the clock. Her parents were punctual, but she was even more so and had a few minutes until their scheduled time.

Her finger hesitated over the name for a moment, before she bit the bullet and sent the call request.

It was answered, quickly, and Willow immediately lifted a hand to wave once Kimberly’s image popped up on the screen.

“Hi, Ms. Maclay.”

Kimberly’s eyebrows lifted in surprise but she just smiled kindly. Willow had never known her to do anything but.

“Oh, Willow. Hi.”

“Sorry for the switcheroo…I just saw your name pop up on Tara’s iPad and…” Willow started to explain, feeling the words tumble out of her mouth as she tried to rationalize her spur of the moment decision, “I…well…I felt like I owed you an explanation for yesterday.”

Kimberly cleared her throat.

“Really, Willow, there’s no need.”

“Tara told me,” Willow continued, just as uncomfortable but pushing through, “That you’ve been keeping our…my…secret. I just wanted to say thanks.”

Kimberly’s brow knitted together and her chin lifted to indicate she was listening. Willow swallowed to keep some moisture in her mouth.

“And I wanted to tell you that I don’t expect you to keep the secret anymore. I don’t wanna keep the
secret anymore. I’m done with the secret,” she said, very aware of how many times she was saying ‘secret’, “It doesn’t feel so scary any more. Well, it does. But I’m ready to step up to it. In a way, I know my heart is waking up. Or, I guess, it’s been awake but it’s finally throwing back the curtains and seeing the light.”

She rubbed her palm over her thigh.

“Plus, well, I don’t know how much you saw but I was kinda, uh, naked yesterday and see, I don’t want you to think I just—”

“Willow,” Kimberly interrupted loudly.

Willow sucked in a breath and grimaced.

“Stop explaining things.”

Kimberly pursed her lips in the exact same way Tara did when she didn’t want to be seen to be agreeing with something negative (but definitely did agree). Willow exhaled slowly and got her mind back on track.

“I love Tara. I’m in love with Tara. And this has not been an easy road for either of us. Since I decided that I was sick of hiding I keep thinking about what the best way is to do this for Tara…but I think I need to do it the best way for me. So that I can be my best self for her.”

She finally smiled, soft yet nervous.

“And I think we’re gonna be okay.”

Kimberly’s smile settled on her face. She closed her eyes for one extended second and opened them to a widening smile.

“I think so too,” she agreed.
Willow felt unexpectedly overcome at that admission but didn’t have much time to process it as her laptop started to play the incoming call tone.

“I-I better go Ms. Maclay, there’s a call from my parents coming in.”

“Goodbye, Willow,” Kimberly replied softly, “Thanks for calling.”

“Bye Ms. Maclay,” Willow answered quickly, knocking off that call and turning to center herself at her laptop before swiftly answering the other one, “Hi mom. Hi dad.”

Sheila was the first to come on screen, or an up-close view of her chest did anyway and Willow waited patiently for them to fix the camera before trying again.

“Hi mom, hi dad.”

“Hello, Willow,” Sheila greeted first and even though her gaze was quite neutral, Willow felt an urge to smooth out her hair, “It’s good to see you, dear.”

“Hello sweetheart,” Ira added, offering a slightly jaded smile, “You look well. How have you been?”

They spent a few minutes catching up while Willow worked up the nerve to discuss the reason she’d asked them to call in the first place.

“So, I kinda wanted to talk to you guys about something,” she blurted during an opportunistic lull in the conversation, “I wanted to say, well, to tell you really, to let you know, y’know, be in on the—”

She was interrupted by a familiar click of her mother’s tongue.

“Willow, how many times have I told you, verbosity leads to unclear, inarticulate communication.”

Willow’s jaw clenched. Why did she let her mother do this to her?
“Be sincere, be brief, be seated; right mom?” she almost spat, her cheeks turning red as an anger rose in her voice, “Well I’m sitting down and I’m probably the most sincere I’ve ever been, so here’s the shortest way I can say it: I’m gay.”

She let out a few short exhales and started to feel panic rise in place of the anger, though recognized she may never have gotten the words out at all if it weren’t for it.

Willow thought the screen might have frozen by the sheer look of shock on Ira’s face, but Sheila cocked her head at Willow with that look of concern of hers that had always felt like pity.

“Well, Willow, despite your brusque manner of delivery, I have to say, I’m quite proud that you’re making such a strong political statement.”

Willow blinked several times, slowly. She was tempted to just toss the laptop in the air and let the screen crack and remove them from her sight.

“I’m not making a political statement,” she instead replied, calmly.

“Well, whatever you’d like to call it,” Sheila dismissed but with a smile that was nothing but placating and missed an eye roll to seem complete.

“The truth,” Willow replied, her palms holding the casing of the laptop so tightly her knuckles were white, “My truth. That I’ve fought against for a long time but I refuse to anymore.”

Ira remained motionless. Sheila looked at Willow like she was three years old and missed the potty.

“Willow, darling, it is quite common for girls your age to experiment—”

“That isn’t what this is,” Willow interrupted, and saw the flash of anger in her mother’s eyes at being spoken over.

“Oh, how can you even think you know something as prodigious and profound as this? You’re a child.”
“I don’t think you’d like the answer to that question,” Willow replied, her tone mocking and smug and way, way, way too much like her mother.

“Well I can see what this traveling is doing to your manner and it’s nothing good,” Sheila retorted without a trace of irony.

Willow felt the anger tremble down her spine and then poof, it disappeared. This wasn’t what she was here for. She wouldn’t be under their thumb and she wouldn’t sink herself to their level either.

“You know what? I can’t blame you for thinking this is experimenting. I tried to convince myself the same thing for a very long time too. I just hope that you come to realize that this is what it is and won’t change. And that it doesn’t hurt you as much as it hurt me…and I hope you don’t have to carry any guilt about hurting someone along the way.”

She paused and exhaled. Her shoulders slumped, her collar dislodged and she didn’t give a damn. It had been uncomfortable anyway.

“I don’t know if this is obvious or not, but Tara and I are together. We have been for a while and no, she didn’t tempt me away from college like a voyaging serpent, I decided I was doing it before I ever even asked her if I could come with her.”

“It’s entirely normal for intense female friendships to go through a period of transference—” Sheila tried but Willow raised her voice, not angrily, but with an authority she’d always had to suppress before.

“This ‘period’ has been going on since we were four years old. We’ve gone through so much together and it’s just kept bringing us closer together. Even separation just brought us closer. I’m not infatuated or desperate or misinterpreting feelings. We have a real, strong, passionate, romantic, intimate love that has ripped my heart out and put it back together. And yes, I’m young, but that doesn’t take away from everything we’ve experienced and everything we’ve built. I’m crazy about her but being willing to actually build our relationship is the only time I’ve felt sane. I’m not naïve. I’m learning how to be the other half of a whole. It’s not all rainbows and butterflies. It’s compromise. We’re gonna keep growing with each other and I won’t hold me or us back just to be palatable. I won’t deny it anymore but it’s entirely up to you how you take it. That’s all I have to say so if that’s all you have to say too then I guess that’s it ‘til next time. Sorry if that wasn’t brief enough for you, mother.”
It was Sheila’s turn to be frozen, looking like she’d been slapped and Willow was set to lower the lid and shut this down completely when Ira flickered into action.

“Is this…do you…are you happy?”

Willow paused and smiled sadly.

“Do you know that’s the first time you’ve ever asked me that?” she asked and saw the concern etch across her father’s face before she continued, “I’m ecstatic. I am the happiest I’ve ever been and I plan to continue to be so. ’Cause I have found someone that I think is beautiful. And I have fallen in love. And I’m telling you, she means everything to me. She makes me feel nothing else matters. Not even what the world thinks of me.”

Ira’s brow just knotted some more and Sheila sighed in that martyred, derisive way she knew so well.

“To think we thought she was calling for a contact at the University of Sydney to audit classes.”

Willow decided that she’d offered enough discussion on her end. Anything else could only come in time.

“Thanks for taking the time to talk to me. I hope your lectures go well. Bye.”

She closed the laptop without waiting for a response and slowly, very slowly, exhaled.

She felt a weight lift off her shoulders and started to laugh as she held the laptop to her chest and her legs kicked out with joyous relief.

When Tara crept back in a while later, Willow was lying on the bed with her hands clasped over her stomach, thumbs rounding around each other and feet rolling around off the bed.

She shot up into a sitting position as Tara walked in, putting a cardboard cup holder with two Styrofoam cups down and continued to hold a brown paper bag.
“Hey!”

“Oh, you look happy,” Tara replied, her voice exhaling with relief, “I was worried. I got you the extra-sprinkled donut with a side of chocolate croissant to make up for…”

“My shitty parents?” Willow asked with a disconcerting grin.

“Oh, well—” Tara started but Willow waved it off.

“I don’t care. I have the best girlfriend and she makes up for everything else.”

She scooted off the end of the bed and yanked Tara forward by the hips, making the bag tumble to the floor as she was pulled right on top of Willow.

“Oh, okay!” Tara said with an uneasy tone but darkening eyes, “Are you high?”

“Just on life,” Willow replied before muting them both by taking Tara’s lips in a hungry kiss.

Tara held herself up on her palms above Willow’s shoulders and broke the kiss breathlessly for a moment.

“Are you okay?”

Willow breathed out the buzz she felt under her skin but it prickled right back in with arousal when she saw Tara’s large pupils staring back down at her.

“I just want you really bad,” she replied, hoisting herself up on her elbows, “Is that okay?”

Tara pressed her hips down against Willow’s.
“Very okay.”

Their lips met again in a more certain rhythm and Tara took great pleasure in popping that collar and flinging it off of Willow.

“Why did you even bring that thing? It’s so not you.”

Willow's eyes blinked downward.

“My mom made me bring one professional outfit.”

“Do you like it?” Tara asked, patient and considerate.

Willow hooked her thumb into the belt loop.

“The pants are fine.”

“But…” Tara prompted softly.

Willow raised her eyes to Tara.

“I hate this shirt.”

Tara very casually placed her hands on either side of the Willow’s shirt, under the swell of her breasts near where the buttons met in the middle. Willow thought she might bunch it up to kiss her stomach and so gasped in surprise when Tara just ripped that shirt apart.

Willow had always known Tara to have strong arms — she’d seen her hoist around enough bulky instruments — but she’d never seen quite a blatant display. It was pretty hot.

“Oh no. Your mom will have to blame me,” Tara said in a mock-contrite tone followed by a steady
look downward, “You are too good to be in anything that doesn’t make you feel as amazing as you are.”

Willow was overcome, body and mind, but luckily Tara was ready to keep the conversation going.

“Your butt looks great in these. They’re coming off safely,” she said as she unzipped Willow and started tugging them off.

Willow burst into giggles which were aimed toward the back wall as her head tilted back under the strength of her laughter.

When they were off, Tara brought herself back up Willow’s body and hovered over her. Willow could see her eyes had grown slightly unsure about what she had done and so wiggled her shoulders insistently.

“You need to get me out of this thing properly so I never have to see it again.”

Tara smiled and happily helped Willow pull herself out of the destroyed shirt.

Tara found Willow bouncing again as soon as the last finger fell from her sleeve and she’d barely taken a breath before they were both naked again. Almost immediately, Willow was kissing toward the V of her pubic bone, making her squirm at an increasingly erratic pace.

Her hand grabbed the back of Willow’s neck and pulled her up into a searing kiss; its heat matched only by the slow flow between their legs which bundled toward each other in search of friction.

Tara grabbed Willow’s butt first but Willow was quick behind, following Tara’s movements as they pressed together as close as possible. She let their hands come together and disappear between each other’s legs.

Neither were very subtle about it; Tara understood Willow was twitchy and needed a bodily release and Willow understood that Tara loved being tactile with her.

They’d been playing this game for far longer than they’d ever been having sex; with shoulder rubs or
elongated hugs or even kissing, practice or otherwise, but this was definitely the most fun way of expressing themselves to each other.

Tara had always known the right muscle to dig or the right place to squeeze or the right swipe of her tongue to make Willow fall apart before, so it was no surprise all of those skills had transferred to this arena. And yet, every movement felt like a revelation.

Tara had always been a bit of a passive receiver of affection in their relationship. It had never bothered her but she had to admit being an object of affection and in particular Willow’s attentive and perfectly angled hand made the music swell and the fireworks pop off and made her experience that perfect moment where she wholly felt the divinity of their enduring connection.

And even when it was over, Willow was still there, holding her even closer, if that was possible.

Tara loved that Willow liked to cling to her after; that in her most vulnerable moment Willow would attach to her like she never wanted to let go.

Willow placed messy kisses on Tara’s neck as she finally stopped clenching inside.

“Did you?” she asked, quiet and unsure.

“Yeah,” Tara nodded breathlessly.

“Yeah?” Willow confirmed, raising her gaze and smiling.

“Oh yeah,” Tara breathed, resting her sweaty forehead on Willow’s, “Have you ever seen fireworks go off behind your eyes even though your eyes are open?”

“Well, yes,” Willow answered matter-of-fact, “At a fireworks display.”

Tara bumped her nose playfully against Willow’s.

“You’re such a meanie,” she said, her tone indicating she didn’t mean a word of it, “Why did I fall in
Willow nuzzled back and stole a quietly gasping kiss.

“I guess you saw something in me.”

“I see a lot in you,” Tara replied, going in for a last lingering kiss before settling her head back down on the bed, only realizing now they were completely sideways with no pillow in sight, “Do you want to eat now?”

“Oh,” Willow giggled through a huge smile, “Just give me one minute for my legs to work.”

Tara rolled her upper half just enough to pick up the dropped bag of pastries, holding it to Willow with a grin.

“Food.”

Willow would have gone bright red if she wasn’t already.

“Food would be nice,” she squeaked, clearing her throat repeatedly to try to return her voice to normal.

She gladly accepted the florescent pink donut to shove in her gob and swallow her embarrassment.

Tara reached for the cups and brought the holder between them.

“Coffee is cold,” she said as she took a sip and threw the sheet over their legs as the lukewarm liquid dropped into her stomach.

“Still caffeine,” Willow replied, taking a large chug from her cup anyway. She grimaced, “Okay, the mochas definitely go down easier cold.”
“You are obsessed with going down today,” Tara returned innocently, causing Willow to choke.

Tara just lovingly rubbed Willow’s back and all Willow could do was bask in the affection and acceptance and rest her cheek just under Tara’s chin.

When they finished their breakfast, Tara had moved on to stroking Willow’s hair.

“I guess we better go check out. If it was a cheaper city we might be able to justify a private room. Part of me just wants to say screw it,” she said, her lips curling up in a crooked smile, “I think you know which part.”

Willow giggled.

“Hey, we gave it one last hurrah,” she replied smugly, turning her face in to kiss Tara’s collarbone.

She kissed up Tara’s neck and along her jaw to finally meet her lips. They both savored it for a long minute before naturally parting with a peck and separating to get dressed again. Willow found a much more comfortable, much more ‘her’ outfit with a signature pop of color, and Tara just redressed in what she’d been in before.

“You go switch rooms, I’ll make sure all our stuff is packed,” Tara suggested, a little muffled as she held a hair tie in her mouth while pulling her hair up into a ponytail.

“Okay,” Willow agreed cheerily, stretching her arms high above her body as she walked out, feeling a satisfying pull on all of her relaxed muscles.

She headed out to the front desk and swapped their room booking, then found Tara waiting in the hallway with their luggage when she circled back around.

“We’re just across the hall,” Willow said as she read the number on the room key and spotted its twin on a nearby door.

She grabbed her own luggage and they walked diagonally across to their 12-person, 6-bunk dormitory; the cheapest room in the hostel to make up for their additional night luxuriating in the
private room. There was just one set of bunks available and only one other person, an older woman, still in the room; packing her things up, ready to check-out.

The five occupied set of bunks were messily made which made the corner set they were set to move in to stand out.

“Bottom or top?” Tara asked as they walked across the room.

“Bottom, I guess,” Willow replied and threw her bag into the bottom bunk, “You seem more like a top.”

Tara paused and glanced over.

“I do?”

Willow looked back at her and nodded.

“Yeah, you get claustrophobic.”

“Right,” Tara replied and walked up two of the steps on the ladder.

She sat in the space where it hung so she could unpack as she needed to.

Willow secured her belongings and stood up on the frame of the bed so she was somewhat in height line with Tara.

“Hey, I saw a brochure for The Blue Mountains out at the desk. Looks like some great views. Do you want to go today?”

“It’s a sight to see, being out and about,” the departing traveler two bunks yonder offered with a Canadian twang as she settled two backpack straps on her shoulders, “Even the train ride up there is a beauty. Visited just yesterday myself and if it wasn’t for my old hip I’d be back again today. Can’t walk as far as I used to.”
“Thanks for the tip,” Willow replied with a smile, “We don’t mind walking.”

She returned a smile to them and headed out of the room. Willow turned her smile to Tara.

“I hope we’re still adventuring when we’re her age.”

Tara leaned over and pressed a quick kiss to Willow’s lips before hopping down.

“If we’re going, we should go and not waste the morning.”

“Mmhh,” Willow agreed with a nod.

Tara let her hand rest on Willow’s hip.

“Find a spot to come back to when we’re 60.”

She kissed Willow again, who felt her heart start to flutter at all of that soft promise.

“Um, gimme a sec?” she asked, a little dazed.

Tara nodded.

“Yeah, sure. I’ll use the bathroom before we go.”

Tara used the bathroom, checked herself in the mirror for a minute and fixed her hair a little. She smiled at her reflection when she was done.

When she got back to the room, Willow was sitting on her bunk, fumbling awkwardly at her phone.
“Are you okay?” she asked, concerned.

Willow looked up, briefly back down at her phone where her thumb tapped on it once before she shoved it deep in her pocket.

“Uh-huh,” she replied, taking Tara’s drawstring bag hanging from the post and tossing it to her, “We have to catch the train to the mountains from central. We can get there for the next one if we hurry. And we kinda need to or we won’t have long up at the mountains at all.”

“Let’s go,” Tara replied with appropriate hurry.

Willow grabbed her small purse, threw it over her shoulder so it lay across her chest and joined Tara to make their way to the local train station. They caught their first, short inter-city train to the main hub and bought their tickets onward to the mountains.

It was a bit of a rush but they finally got to the right platform with a minute or so to spare.

“Hey, check it out. It has two levels, like those double-decker buses they have in London,” Willow said as she caught her breath from running, “Wanna go upstairs?”

Tara just nodded silently, her chest obviously heaving as her lungs burned from the run. Her cheeks were red and Willow really wanted to kiss them. People were bundling past and even bumping into them to get on board, so she had to bank the thought for later.

They walked up the small set of twisting stairs and got the last set of seats together on the side facing the platform.

“This is great, we’ll have a view the whole way,” Willow said as she stepped aside to let Tara have the window seat.

She linked her arm with Tara’s and cuddled into her side. Tara glanced over in surprise.
She still had to get used to Willow being so openly affectionate too, or more specifically that she wasn’t dreaming and it was okay to feel this happy.

Being in New Zealand felt like a year ago; being in Sunnydale felt like a lifetime.

She brushed her fingers against Willow’s arm and looked out the window while the A/C cooled her cheeks back to a normal color.

The journey brought them through city and suburbs and past a few more stations until they were rocketing through so many trees and bushes and stone cliffs it was like their own private park tour that stretched on for miles and miles.

They were quiet for the journey, saving energy for their day of exploring, but Willow’s phone repeatedly pinged with notifications.

“Your phone is blowing up,” Tara commented, breaking her gaze away from the landscape for the first time.

Willow fished her phone from her pocket quickly.

“Probably stupid updates,” she dismissed, long-pressing the off button without checking, “Doesn’t need to be on right now.”

She returned it to her pocket on vibrate and gently tugged on Tara’s arm.

“I think we’re getting close. I’m gonna use the restroom quickly.”

She headed down the carriage but less than a minute later Tara realized they were pulling into the station. Panicked, she hurried down to follow Willow but didn’t know which direction the restroom was. Thankfully Willow came bundling down the hall toward her, still buttoning her pants with wet hands.

“It came up so quickly!” she gasped at Tara when she got to her, “It was all trees then wham!”
“Come on!” Tara laughed as they jumped out onto the platform milliseconds before the doors closed again.

Willow fell into Tara’s arms, giggling and then scrunching up her nose as she inadvertently wiped her hands on Tara’s shirt.

“Sorry.”

“Just tell me it was water,” Tara replied, holding back a grin.

“Gross,” Willow returned, though through a smile, “Of course it was.”

There was a bunch of little shops and cafés right off the track in the little town that would be their base to all of the sights the mountains had to offer. Tara went into a small store to get them some snacks to make a picnic lunch and Willow went into a café to get them some fresh, hot coffee. There was a line, so Tara finished first and joined Willow to order.

The barista was of aboriginal descent, tall with unblemished skin the color of the coffee she was making and perfect rivulets of brown curls cascading down past her shoulders. As she pushed the cups at the collection point, Willow suddenly turned flustered.

“Oh, um…” she fumbled with her wallet and then just grabbed the handful of coins that were weighing it down to leave in the tip jar, “Have a nice day.”

The barista smirked and Tara was 90% sure she saw her eyes glance up and down Willow’s body.

Tara kept her gaze on the ground as they walked back outside.

“You just tipped her like twenty dollars,” she said eventually, fingers tapping the cup nervously.

Willow’s eyes bugged.
“I did?!”

“Yes,” Tara replied through an exhale, “Must’ve really liked her.”

“Huh?” she asked, frowning for a moment before her eyes also became wayward.

They lapsed into silence as Willow tried to figure that out.

“Oh!”

She shook her head repeatedly.

“Oh, no. Not—no.”

She paused and sighed.

…I can’t work out their coins,” she admitted after a long moment.

Tara blinked once.

“I’m sorry?”

Willow scuffed her shoe on the ground.

“I’m supposed to be a math genius…can spot a wayward semicolon in endless lines of code…” she said in a low, chiding voice, “CanNOT remember which coin is which without staring at them and counting it out in my head, at which point the person waiting for the money or in line behind me is getting impatient and I get flustered. I’d barely gotten used to the New Zealand coinage and then…”

She looked up at Tara apologetically.
“I’m sorry I’m such a dork.”

Tara’s shoulders visibly relaxed.

“You’re my dork,” she claimed proudly, “Why don’t you let me carry cash for tips and things if it’s bothering you. We’ll work it out.”

Willow smiled gratefully.

“I can do the currency exchange rates in my head like a champ though.”

Tara threw her arm around Willow’s shoulders.

“We’re a math made in heaven. Get it?” she smiled, then brought her bag over her shoulder so it was in front of her, “I got you a present.”

She reached in and produced a koala stuffed toy holding a little rainbow flag on a keychain.

“He’s for e-koala-ty,” she said with a silly grin, “You said you loved the koalas so…”

Willow was completely touched and took her new little buddy, holding him to her chest before quickly attaching him to her wallet for safety.

“Thank you so much.”

Tara shrugged one shoulder bashfully but was smiling.

“We should catch the bus. Do you want to do the cable car ride? I don’t think we’ll get to do everything but that looked fun.”
“Uh-huh, yeah!” Willow agreed eagerly, “I’m in.”

They found the stop for the hop-on-hop-off bus that would ferry them around to whatever feature they decided to visit and finished their coffees while they waited.

The bus drove them into the heart of the mountains and left them at a look-out point, which they walked through to get to a cliff ledge. There, a large gondola lift was sitting ready to fill. They took seats near the front where they already had a pretty open view of the wide rocky terrain.

“Glad I’m not scared of heights,” Willow commented wryly.

“Aw, I would have held your hand,” Tara replied with a soft smile.

Willow suddenly grabbed Tara’s hand and held it between hers.

“I’m terrified.”

Tara felt her heart swell and she thought she maybe felt one of the little dents that had formed over the years that she never acknowledged pop back into place.

The car moved off and began a slow descent down the cable line.

“Tara,” Willow whispered after a few moments, staring wide-eyed downward.

The floor had turned transparent and they had a completely unobstructed view of the surrounding valley with its cliffs and iconic rock formations as well as the dense and still vibrant rainforest below.

“Wow,” Tara repeated, feeling giddy and a little nauseous all at once.

It reminded her of how she felt in the moments after Willow kissed her on the swing.
She looked down at how high they were.

She saw how far they’d come.

She clung to Willow and watched as she pointed out all of the different peaks and troughs of beauty they were immersed in. She slowly scooted so she was standing behind Willow with one hand splayed on Willow’s hip. Willow just leaned back against her and enjoyed the view while her body got used to what it felt like to accept support.

“That was amazing,” Willow gushed when they arrived back on the mountain, “Did you see those waterfalls?”

Tara nodded.

“I did. I was gonna ask if you wanted to walk the trail down there?”

“Are you sure?” Willow grinned, “With your history of bushwalks?”

Tara pursed her lips and Willow giggled.

“We better bring a stick to beat the turkeys off.”

Tara accepted her teasing with a smile and let Willow get it out of her system.

They went to the information board to figure out the route they needed to take and eventually decided on the best one.

It was an hour’s walk, but they could go out the other side and catch a bus back so they set off in that direction. It didn’t take long for them to feel completely lost in the wilderness of overhanging trees and rainforest bush yet the trail was completely defined and they knew they were safe. They could even still hear the hustle and bustle from the look-out.

After a brief narrowing of the path where they had to go one-by-one, they fell back in step with one
another and Willow swung her hand to connect with Tara’s. They smiled at each other and Willow continued to take sneaky glances until she was ready to speak.

“I have a question,” she said and saw Tara look over with an encouraging look to continue, “You said the other day ‘when we started dating’ and it stuck with me. I realized…we never actually dated. We never went out on a first date, or any date really. I know that’s—”

She paused and stopped before she blamed herself.

“I know nothing about us has ever been traditional,” she amended instead, “And I don’t feel like we’re less than just because of it. But I also want to be that person with you. I mean, I know how to kiss you…I know how to love you…I’ve done those things for years. But I don’t know how to date you.”

Tara was quiet and contemplative for a while, but it didn’t panic Willow; she felt peaceful on this walk together.

“We’re on a date right now,” Tara said eventually, surprising Willow.

“We are?”

“Sure, why not?” Tara smiled, “And what’s to say cuddled up listening to music or watching a movie isn’t a date? Just because we didn’t make a big deal of it doesn’t mean it doesn’t count. We’ve had date nights since we were kids.”

Willow slowly matched Tara’s smile.

“I like that. Why make it more difficult than it needs to be?”

“Exactly,” Tara replied with a squeeze of Willow’s hand.

Willow looked ahead as she rolled that around in her mind and found more questions forming.
“So when is our anniversary?”

“There’s a question,” Tara exhaled softly, “If I had to define it, I would say the night I came back from band camp and we decided we were trying it for real. Even though it took us a year to say the words, I think that’s the night we became girlfriends.”

Willow noted the use of ‘we’ despite knowing the delay was all on ‘her’ and learned a lesson in her heart about the responsibility and accountability of being in a relationship; problems were not her sole burden to bear. Tara’s answer still did make her a little sad.

“But that means…we missed it.”

“Yeah, we did.” Tara acknowledged in a similar sad tone, “I was thinking of you on that day though.”

Willow remembered something.

“That’s the day you sent me the playlist.”

She smiled and leaned against Tara.

“Tare-bear?”

“‘Tare-bear’?” Tara questioned, her lips curling up in amusement, “That’s a new one.”

“You came up with it really, when you gave me those matching bears on my birthday,” Willow replied, leaning her head on Tara’s shoulder for a moment, “And you’re just as cuddly as a koala bear.”

“Does that make you my Willow-Pillow?” Tara questioned playfully.

Willow’s face scrunched.
“I think that crosses the ‘too cheesy’ line.”

“And Tare-bear doesn’t?” Tara asked with a booming laugh.

“No, because you cross the ‘cutie’ axis and it remains steady,” Willow reasoned assuredly.

Tara shook her head affectionately.

“What was your question?”

“It wasn’t a question,” Willow said, smacking a long kiss on Tara’s cheek, “I’ve just wanted to do that all day.”

Tara dropped Willow’s hand, only to wrap an arm around her shoulder so they could walk even closer together. They reached one of the small falls and found a spot to eat their late picnic lunch with a soundtrack of kookaburras and running water.

When they were finished, they walked through to the other side of the trail and were at a new lookout to take some pictures from. After an afternoon of smaller walks to different landmarks to really pack in as much scenery as possible, they fell into the train home together on weary legs.

“Sorry,” Willow said as her lolling head bumped into Tara’s shoulder.

“It’s okay. I’m exhausted too,” Tara replied softly, cradling Willow’s head for a moment and kissing the top, “Want to just head back to our room and crash? We should miss the dinner crowd and have some quiet for a while.”

“Yeah, if you’re okay with that,” Willow replied sleepily.

“We’ve had a big few days,” Tara replied in a soothing voice.
Willow sat up straighter and stretched her neck back, breathing slowly.

The rode the train from day into night and arrived back to their hostel as everyone else was leaving for the evening.

“Bunk beds have never looked so good,” Willow commented, sitting on her bottom bunk and slipping her feet out of her shoes.

Tara left for the bathroom to change and brush her teeth and Willow just changed right there in the room since it was empty. Tara returned with her hair free from her ponytail and hanging off her shoulders. She stuffed her clothes into her laundry bag and bent her knees to look into Willow’s bunk, where Willow was lying with the blanket loose over her waist, staring upward.

“Hey.”

“Hey,” Willow replied, turning her gaze and smiling softly.

Tara looked over her shoulder, then leaned in to press a kiss to Willow’s lips.

“I had a great day. Thank you,” she said, pulling back for just a moment before going back in for three quick pecks, “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight baby,” Willow echoed, running her hand down Tara’s arms as she straightened back up and ascended the ladder to her bunk.

Tara slipped under the covers and found the prong of the phone charger she’d snaked up to plug her phone in to charge. She rested her head on the pillow and closed her eyes for a moment to rest them. She realized too late that the light was on and she was elevated enough for it to be a constant nuisance.

Too lazy to move for another few minutes, and not wanting to disturb Willow to ask her to turn it off, she pulled her phone toward her to catch up on whatever she’d missed for the day. She’d never been one to check her phone every five seconds but she was even less attentive these days. Life happening outside a screen was so much more exciting.
She opened her messaging app and responded to the messages her mother had sent her, confirming she was in fact still alive and unharmed but was a tad confused when she saw a message asking if Willow was okay. She switched apps and mindlessly scrolled to catch up on the lives of her peers.

Nate seemed to be Mr. Popular at college already even though he’d just started, which was hardly surprising to Tara. Anya was posting endless pictures about about having to rescue Xander in Oxnard and she could see Donny had bought a new bike.

She was glad for him. She was too happy to hold onto any anger.

She almost missed Willow’s post completely but for the picture attached that made her stop and scroll back up to read. Her eyes scanned the words, slowly widening until she suddenly sat up straight and brought the screen close to her face to confirm she was really reading what she was reading.

After reading it three times, she brought herself to the edge of her bed and hung her upper half upside down over it so she could look into Willow’s bunk.

Willow looked at Tara expectantly as to why she’d appeared like Batwoman. Tara just held her phone up (or down, depending on how you looked at it) with the post open.

Willow gathered what was going on and swallowed deeply.

“Oh. Yeah,” she said, fixing a nervous smile on her face, “I came out.”

Tara remained still, her mouth parted in surprise and eyes fixed on Willow.

“Your parents,” she said in an echoing, stunned voice.

“I told them,” Willow replied, gnawing on the corner of her lip, “On the call this morning.”

Tara’s brow knotted together.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”
Willow reached back to massage her own neck; her gaze not quite meeting Tara’s.

“At first I kinda felt like…euphoric that I finally did it. And then we…well, did it,” she said with a small grin tugging her lips, “And we were having a nice day and…”

She lifted her eyes to Tara’s face.

“And I didn’t want you to think I did it for…props or something.”

Tara suddenly disappeared back up into her bunk and Willow grew concerned that she’d done something wrong, but Tara returned a moment later when she jumped right down off the bed frame and sat in on Willow’s bed. She reached for Willow's hand and held it enclosed in both of hers.

“I would never have thought that.”

Willow smiled apologetically and they just looked at each other in silence for a moment until Tara jumped up again. This time, she pulled her own sheet from her bed and tucked it around the bed frame so it shielded the bottom bunk completely.

“Um…what are you doing?” Willow asked in confusion when she saw Tara fighting the sheet into a corner.

Tara’s head appeared from behind the newly-made privacy screen.

“I need to hold you. Can I hold you?”

Willow exhaled softly.

“You don’t need to ask,” she replied, her voice low and harboring the tiniest tremble of emotion, “You don’t need to ask that ever again. No matter where we are or who we’re with.”
Tara came in from behind the sheet and crawled into bed with Willow. She wrapped her arms around Willow’s body to hold her in the little cocoon she’d made for them. It was a whole step up from their childhood forts.

Willow hadn’t realized she’d been shaking, but did feel it all settle as Tara’s arm held her waist and the other stroked her hair; enveloping her completely.

“I’m so proud of you.”

Willow cuddled into Tara’s side and kissed her shoulder blade.

“When I realized your mom and Donny had known all this time… And Buffy and Xander, they know, even Anya…Hell, even Xander’s dad and Dickie freakin’ Babcock have known for months now and the world didn’t implode.”

Tara curled the ends of Willow’s hair in her fingers, lightly tickling her neck in the process.

“How did it go with your parents?”

Willow could only smile at the wisps of fingertips at her skin.

“Probably as well as can be expected. My mom thinks it’s a politically-motivated phase. My dad seemed shocked but didn’t dismiss it. It definitely was nothing like the thousand and one scenarios I always played out in my head.”

Tara kissed the top of Willow’s head and moved both arms down to squeeze her middle.

“I’m so proud of you,” she repeated in an even more emphatic voice, “Have you looked at the comments?”

Willow shook her head against Tara’s chest.

“I’ve been too scared,” she admitted sheepishly.
Tara lifted her phone up for Willow to see and after looking at Tara for a few moments for courage, she took it and expanded the comments.

She inhaled sharply as she saw the volume and started to laugh with relief when they were all positive; congratulating her and expressing support. Even Cordelia had commented something not-entirely-hateful about her at least not jumping on anyone else’s man again.

Willow had heard she was in Los Angeles now, pursuing acting.

Like Tara with Donny, she wished her well.

The smile on Willow’s face gave untold joy to Tara. This was the reward for all of her patience.

“Look at the last one.”

Willow scrolled to the end of the post.

Willow took in what it meant for Tara to be able to post that publicly and added a heart to the comment to acknowledge it back. She put the phone down next to her own and leaned in to kiss Tara’s lips.

“I love you.”

They shared several long, slow kisses and settled back into snuggling.
“Wanna have a music date?” Willow suggested.

Tara nodded softly and Willow got her phone and earbuds, offering one to Tara.

She let Tara pick the music and they just listened together; mostly silent and occasionally changing cuddling position. Generally just processing big emotion with quiet affection.

“Can I pick one?” Willow asked softly and Tara handed over the phone.

“Oh course.”

Willow pulled up a particular playlist she’d listened to when she had missed Tara when they were apart. She picked one and smiled shyly at Tara.

“I can’t write songs like you can. But…”

Tara returned a curious smile and secured the earbud more firmly in her ear. They both turned on their sides to face each other and Tara’s eyes closed so she could listen properly to what song Willow had chosen to express herself with.

Well you’re not what I was looking for  
But your arms were open at my door  
And you taught me what a life is for  
To see that ordinary, isn’t

Tara’s eyes flickered open and Willow was already staring back at her.

And you don’t hold back  
So I won’t hold back  
And you don’t look back  
So I won’t look back

Willow rested her forehead gently on Tara’s forehead and silently linked one set of fingers together at their waists.
We are, we are, we are tonight
We are, we are, we are forever

“That was beautiful,” Tara said as the song played out, “Thank you for playing it for me.”

She put a finger under Willow’s chin and tilted it up to kiss her tenderly.

“It’s hard to be open,” Willow sighed softly, “But I want to be. Even if it risks you not liking who I really am.”

Tara shook her head from side to side.

“I’ve always known all of you. I’ve just never had all of you.”

“I’m yours,” Willow breathed and suddenly her face softened, “And I never knew ‘til just now that it feels just as good to say that as it does to hear it.”

They kissed again and cuddled closer so that they were touching at almost every point. They didn’t bother separating to go to sleep, leaving the top bunk barren and the bottom bunk filled entirely by their two bodies in the small bed.

They both slept right through the rambunctious return of their razzled roommates and without moving from each other’s arms.

Willow was right.

Never had a bunk bed felt so good.
Liked by xanman, thebuffster, cordychasingdreams, patronsaintofthewomenscorned and 57 others

geekinfestedroots Okay. This is hard. Harder than I’d like to admit. Part of me is screaming ‘put the phone down, do it another day’. And I could. No one is pressuring me to type this. Except myself. I’m finally ready to be honest.
So here it is: I fell in love with the girl next door.
Our whole lives have been intertwined since the start and culminated in this moment.
An imperfect photo taken in a perfect moment. Two imperfect people that are perfect for each other. And me taking this opportunity to tell the world how hopelessly in love with this girl I am because there will never be a perfect time but she will always be my perfect woman.
I love you, Tara. I’m working on loving you too. I promise prom is the last time I’ll ever deny a photo with you.
I’m yours, today and always 💘
#l_dr #gaynow
“Wow.”

“Wow.”

“Wow.”

“Wow,” Willow repeated yet again, her mouth retaining a shocked ‘o’ shape, “…I don’t know what to say.”

“Wow?” Tara suggested and Willow could only nod.

“Wow.”

Willow closed her hands around the railing of their private balcony that looked out over the pool and swim-up bar of the resort they were staying in. It was shaded by so much plush greenery, it was like a giant personal cabana; they even had a private tree offering them cover out there on the balcony.

Peeking between the trees was an endless stretch of fawn-colored sandy beach and glistening turquoise ocean sitting behind it. She wouldn’t have believed such a view was even real was she not standing right in front of it.

Tara came to stand beside Willow, placing a hand on the small of her back.

“Tell me how you snagged an ocean view room. I know it wasn’t included in the deal we found.”
Willow hesitated with a nonchalant look, but it faltered and her face scrunched bracingly.

“I used my parents’ loyalty number,” she admitted in a rush, then continued off Tara’s sidelong look, “My dad said I could! Come on, it’s your birthday and it didn’t cost any extra. And we never stay in hotels so this is the only chance I’d get to use it.”

Tara just smiled and rubbed her hand in circles on Willow’s back.

“I’m grateful. It’s a beautiful room.”

Willow sighed, relieved and looked back out at the vast view.

“There’s not many places you get this kind of view for this kind of price,” she said, then wiggled her shoulders smugly, “Plus, now we’re ‘oh, we’ve weekended in Fiji’ people.”

Tara rolled her eyes playfully and Willow bumped into Tara’s side.

“I think there’s a couple of coconuts down there with our names on them.”

They moved in from the balcony and started to get changed into their swimwear.

The room wasn’t gigantic but it was plenty bigger than a pair of corner bunk beds. They had a big queen bed, crisp clean linen, and a multi-spray shower all to themselves so it may as well have been heaven.

Tara pulled a pair of khaki shorts over her navy swimsuit and turned to see Willow struggling to tie the top of her red bikini behind her back.

If they were in a cartoon, Tara’s eyes would have been a foot in front of her face.

“Wow, it isn’t even my birthday until tomorrow,” she said in quiet awe.
She took a step forward and tied the strings together, while Willow looked in the mirror self-consciously.

“Should I wear my one-piece?”

“No!” Tara replied abruptly, then blushed and looked at Willow apologetically through the mirror, “I mean, um, you should wear what’s comfortable.”

Willow exhaled and let her stomach relax.

“But this looks okay?”

“Oh yes,” Tara nodded surely.

“I bought it before we left. It was kind of a little fantasy,” Willow explained, adjusting how the bottoms fell over her hips, “Before, when…when I would have my bad thoughts. I would imagine us having a little private island away from everyone else and the world where we’d just hang out. In our bikinis.”

Tara raised her eyebrows and grinned.

“Hang out?”

Willow smiled back.

“There was definite smoochies.”

Tara held Willow’s hips from behind and kissed Willow’s shoulder blade.

“I love this a lot.”
“Okay then,” Willow replied confidently, “Let’s head down to the pool.”

They left the room and made their way down the elevator to the pool level.

The pool was lagoon-shaped with water rushing in from a fall over a rock formation. The still water stretched out in curl formations and dipped to a hollowed-out cave where the bar was built into the walls.

They were able to settle in an actual private cabana in a double deckchair with plush seating and fresh soft towels given to them on arrival.

“The weather is so nice,” Tara said as she shook her towel over her side of the chair and lay on top of it, “Warmer than Australia, even.”

Willow sat on her side of the large chair and checked the widget on the screen of her phone.

“Phone says 75° and clear skies.”

“Perfect,” Tara replied, her eyes already closed blissfully, “I can’t believe I’m actually sitting here and it’s not in a dream.”

“Want a fruity cocktail-in-a-coconut to complete the look?” Willow offered cheerily.

“Yes, please,” Tara replied with an answering smile.

She opened her eyes, though it definitely wasn’t to watch Willow’s retreating figure dip into the pool and swim quite gracefully into the cavern to order them drinks.

She also definitely didn’t purse her lips to contain a laugh when Willow climbed out of the pool a few minutes later holding two coconuts in front of her chest in an accidental but criminally comical display.
Willow offered Tara one of the coconuts with a pretty pink umbrella-embossed-straw sitting in it and Tara got her first up-close look of Willow quite so wet.

Or at least, her first glimpse of the way the water clung to Willow’s skin and highlighted every taut movement of her abdomen. They’d never showered together, though now Tara was regretting that immensely, and Willow had always been in a towel or half-dried already when Tara had been in the same room.

“Granks,” Tara squeaked out, in probably her most awkward fumble of words yet.

She used to be so good at hiding her attraction but once she’d exhaled and was allowed to show it, it was hard to suck it back in.

“Huh?” Willow asked with a confused, if not slightly amused, look on her face.

Tara hoped she could blame the sun for the color of her cheeks. She took a quick and long sip through the pretty pink straw, her savior.

“Great,” she said again with some composure regained, “Thanks. It’s really nice.”

Willow threw her legs up and stretched her body out; water droplets already rippling to nothingness by the sun overhead peering out from between the clouds.

“The water is soooooo nice. It’s not ice-cold but it cools you off a little, plus it’s soft and silky like you’re touching…” she paused and offered Tara a knowing grin, “Well, something soft and silky.”

Tara lifted her coconut up to toast and Willow knocked hers against it.

They both lay back and enjoyed taking in the sun’s rays in their beautiful surroundings.

After a while, when Willow was reapplying some sunscreen, she noticed Tara was untangling her earbuds.
“What are you listening to?” she asked curiously.

Tara had a music app open on her phone and Willow read the name of the artist from the side before Tara said it.

“Nate put up a new song,” Tara said as Willow’s lips pursed. She pushed the plug of her earbuds into her phone, “He never sent it to me. He usually sends me everything. Guess I have to get used to him being his own man now. I mean music wise, of course.”

“What’s it called?” Willow asked, using one finger to push Tara’s phone into a vertical position so she could see the screen better, “Flower Girl. A childhood dream he never got to fulfill?”

Tara chuckled and shook her head.

“Some girl he’s fallen for and doesn’t feel the same apparently. I’m not sure, I’ve only skimmed the lyrics.”

“Doesn’t happen that much with him, huh?” Willow mused, “A girl rejecting him?”

“I guess not,” Tara replied in a tone that could only be described as a vocal shrug.

“Can I listen?” Willow requested, scooting a little closer.

Tara offered the left earbud for Willow, as they had often when they listened to music together. Guitar sounds started, rough and slightly eerie with definite drawn-out notes of melancholy.

Nate didn’t start singing for more than 30 seconds but when he did his lyrics filled out the music with ease. His voice was rich and melodic and boomed; it had never surprised Willow how the girls had flung themselves at him after shows. She had actually always loved how evocative and soft Tara sounded in contrast when they harmonized.

His voice had a strangled effect on this track, Willow noticed straight away; a yearning. One she recognized.
Violet, violet, violet, Vi...
I guess I'll never be your guy
It’s time for me to say good-bye
Because you’re not

One of Willow’s eyebrows furrowed downward as those words swirled in her head and she tried to work them out before more were thrown out in a slow rap.

That tiara of yours makes me extraneous
But I still think you and me
We could have been glorious
Sax blown mouth, white key skin
The only girl I ain’t been in

Willow’s eyebrows drew sharply upward this time and she glanced over to Tara, who was listening with her eyes closed and gently bobbing her head along.

I remember that first day
The one that changed everything
I knew in that moment
What people meant by worshipping

I strum; you hum
We make sweet music together
A rhythmic communion
An enduring forever

Willow started to frown; her top teeth clenching on the bottom.

But our forevers are marked
They can’t be with each other
We love the same way
And your same love is another

Violet, my never-flame
I’ll always burn bright
Violet, be my friend
Whosever flame you ignite

Violet, I think I loved you
But tonight ain't our night
Some percussive shaking rang out the track and Tara smiled, still tapping the beat on her leg.

“It’s really good. I liked the broody funk rhythm he made with the wah. What did you think?”

Willow looked at her expectantly, but Tara just stared back.

“You know this is about you, right?” Willow broached carefully.

“No it isn’t,” Tara dismissed quickly.

“Yep,” Willow insisted with a nod of her head, “Definitely.”

“You’re being silly,” Tara replied, gathering her earbuds back up to stuff into her small bag, “He’s never called me Violet in my life. Why would he?”

“I don’t know why he’s calling you Violet, but he’s talking about you,” Willow replied with a small scoff, “It’s time to say goodbye because you’re not’.”

“And?” Tara prompted, throwing up a hand.

“Good BYE because you’re not BI,” Willow said with enough heavy emphasis to almost spit the words.

“Willow, you’re reading way too much into it,” Tara said and then looked at her pleadingly, “Drop it.”

Willow held her hands up defensively and laid back down on the chair.

“It’s catchy, I’ll give him that,” she said, before adding in a mutter under her breath, “Even if it is about wanting to bang my girlfriend.”
Her eyes fell to Tara’s thigh and saw she was still tapping and even though it was silent, Willow could tell it was rhythmic.

“You haven’t played music in a while, huh?” she asked sympathetically.

“I guess not,” Tara replied in a breezy tone that still did nothing to suggest she ‘guessed’ anything.

Willow was quiet for a moment before noting the sucking sound coming from Tara’s straw as she finished her cocktail.

“I’ll get us a fresh coconut,” she offered.

Tara tucked her phone away and smiled.

“I’ll come with you.”

Willow nodded eagerly and Tara stood to slide her shorts off before they both sat on the edge of the pool and dipped in.

“Ooh, you’re right, the water is amazing,” Tara said as the pool enveloped her from the neck down.

They swam up to the bar and waited while the bartender served another pool-goer at the other end.

Willow sat on one of the little rock stools and took Tara’s hand under the water.

“I’m sorry, I was being a jerk before.”

Tara shrugged one shoulder and smiled softly.
“Don’t worry. It’s just in the past. I don’t care about anything right now but you, me and paradise.”

Willow smiled and gestured around them.

“Well, then you’re in the exact right place.”

Tara awoke to the sound of rustling and opened her eyes to see Willow standing on the balcony, fussing over some tissue paper at the little table out there where they’d shared dinner last night.

She was in shorts short enough to be considered hotpants and a clingy tank-top with a generous round neckline and no bra. Tara could make out the swell of Willow’s breast from her sidelong view and it took her mind a few extra seconds to catch up with how quickly her body was waking.

Willow glanced over and saw Tara’s eyes opening. Her face lit up and she grabbed something small from the table, closing it in her fist.

“You’re awake!”

She hurried back over the threshold from the balcony, flipped the object in her hand in a 180° and pulled a string coming from the end, making a party popper bang and release a flurry of confetti just above Tara’s face.

Tara startled and Willow smiled awkwardly.

“Whoops, sorry. Too much?”

“Just a bit,” Tara replied, sitting up and holding a hand over her top where her heart was beating faster, “You really love those party poppers.”

Willow jumped onto the bed on her knees and bounced by Tara’s side.

“Happy birthday!”
Tara’s smile softened.

“Thank you.”

Willow leaned in and pressed her lips to Tara’s.

Then again.

And again.

And again.

And again.

“That was a lot of kisses,” Tara said a bit breathlessly when Willow finally pulled away completely.

“Nineteen, to be exact,” Willow replied with a proud smile.

“Ah.” Tara replied, grinning as she stretched her back, “Well each one was lovely.”

Willow bounced again.

“I got you a present!”

“Oh, that’s so sweet,” Tara replied as Willow sprinted out to the balcony, grabbed something from amidst the tissue and hurried right on back.

“I tried to wrap it but I think it’s best if I just give it to you.”

Tara just smiled and nodded understandingly. Gift-wrapping had never been Willow’s forte.
“Last year I got you a bracelet…with a sneaky charm,” Willow said with a little sadness in her voice, but it brightened when Tara just raised her wrist and showed the little half-heart hanging off the silver band, “Well, this year I just wanted to get you something that wasn’t trying so hard to hide my charm for you.”

She opened her hand to reveal a thin gold ring sitting on her palm with a design that looked like three left-facing arrows. She rolled it up to hold between her fingers, while Tara’s eyes widened considerably.

“It’s a thumb ring,” Willow announced cheerily, but faltered at the confused look on Tara’s face, “I read that that’s a lesbian thing. Did I read wrong?”

Tara’s hand clapped over her mouth as a strangled sound of restrained laughter came out. She took a moment to compose herself but a smile was breaking through her fingers.

“No, you…” she started, dropping her hand down and clearing her throat, smiling openly now, “It’s lovely.”

Willow seemed relieved and held the ring in a pinch hold with each set of thumbs and forefingers.

“I went for a walk this morning and found a little store where they had homemade jewelry made here on the island. It’s called an ‘Ua Taletale’ design,” she said, focusing hard as she emphasized the foreign words, “It means ‘rolling wave’. And I’m here to roll this wave with you wherever it takes us.”

Tara placed her hand over her heart again, this time as it fluttered beneath.

“I love it,” she said sincerely and happily as she offered her left thumb for Willow to slide the ring onto, “I love you.”

She leaned in to take a kiss and her hand rested on Willow’s thigh. She could see down Willow’s top when her eyes glanced downward for a moment and she realized she still had that tiny bikini on underneath.
It was so skimpy Tara could barely tell there was anything there at all, especially with that tank top clinging to her like water. Tara’s mind had wandered to a shared shower more than once after yesterday’s day by the pool and she spied an opportunity.

“Hey, do you want to—” she started quietly, but it was too quiet.

Willow was already tugging at her hand.

“Come on, I have breakfast ready on the balcony.”

Tara hoped there would be a cool drink on offer after the abrupt change in intention and sure enough, Willow had a pitcher of freshly-squeezed orange juice ready on the table, which did happen to be Tara’s favorite. There was also bagels, cream buns and lots of fresh fruit.

“This looks really good,” Tara said genuinely as Willow pulled out her chair for her chivalrously, “Thank you.”

Willow poured her some juice and Tara began cutting into the fruit.

“These mangos are amazing,” she said as she crisscrossed the fruit with a knife and popped it out to eat, “So juicy.”

Willow watched the juices run down Tara’s chin and squirmed in her seat.

“Heh. Yeah. Yum.”

They ate breakfast leisurely, a bit too leisurely when they realized they were going to be late for their planned excursion. Willow used the bathroom while Tara changed into her bathing suit and a pale yellow sundress, and threw a few things into a bag she held on her shoulder.

They hurried down onto the beach that they’d spent the morning overlooking.

They boarded a catamaran boat and sat together on a net stretched out directly above the shimmering
aquamarine water.

“I feel like I’m in a movie or something,” Tara said as she stretched back on her arms and tilted her head back toward the sun, “Like Audrey Hepburn with her hat and sunglasses.”

Willow tripped as she tried to step onto the net and Tara had to reach up and grab her middle to steady her.

“Those flip flops are way too big for you,” she commented as she glanced down and saw Willow’s footwear, at least two sizes too big and also different colors, “Why is one pink and one yellow? Did you put on mismatched ones?”

“No!” Willow protested, her butt bouncing for a moment as she sat and lifted her feet to show Tara cartoon characters grinning on the soles, “They’re Spongebob and Patrick, see!”

“Where did you get those?” Tara asked, both sides of her mouth curling upward in an amused grin.

“Beach seller,” Willow answered, stretching her legs out and crossing one over the other, “All the small sizes were gone.”

“To children?” Tara teased and Willow stuck out her tongue.

“Don’t act like we didn’t just watch Spongebob together last week in that little rec room.”

Tara smiled crookedly.

“I love Spongebob. I just don’t want you to meet him if you go overboard.”

They spent a couple of hours sailing around the surrounding islands, eventually landing on one to get lunch at a barbecue and watch a traditional dance ceremony.

Afterward, they loaded back onto the boat and were brought out to the middle of the ocean, where they donned flippers and snorkel gear and got ready to jump into the water.
Willow waited at the end of the boat and held her hand out for Tara so they could step in together. They both giggled as they made a splash.

They didn’t let go as they swam around the coral, using their free hands to point out the tropical fish they saw passing.

They swam a little away from the rest of the group and Willow brought Tara behind a large reef, where she popped the mouthpiece of the snorkel out of her mouth, did the same to Tara and pressed their lips together as bubbles escaped upward and a school of colorful angelfish passed by.

They surfaced to empty the snorkels that had filled with water and took in a deeper breath whilst exchanging smiles.

“Look, a clownfish,” Willow said when she spotted a lone traveler in the clear water below.

They fixed their snorkels back in their mouths and followed the clownfish to a sea anemone where a blue starfish was also hanging out. They shared excitement that they’d found Nemo’s home and ignored the eye-rolls that fellow divers gave them as they giggled loudly while climbing back onto the boat.

Neither of them put their clothes on as they found a spot on the net again, choosing instead to dry out in the sun until they docked back at the beach outside their resort.

The sun was starting to move in the sky and was just beginning to turn orange.

“That was incredible,” Tara said, a permanent smile fixed on her face as she strolled barefoot, letting the soft sand trail between her toes.

“It was—” Willow started to agree but quickly tripped over an errant pebble and again needed Tara to steady her.

Tara ended up pulling her quite close and found herself blushing as their nipples clearly brushed through their thin clothing.
“You should take those things off. Enjoy the sand. It feels so good against your skin. Here, I’ll take ‘em.”

Willow slipped the flip-flops off and handed them to Tara, who tucked them into her bag.

“Our restaurant is up there. Can you see it?”

Willow pointed to a hill up ahead where they could actually see the terrace of the restaurant sitting on top of the cliff.

“Up for the trek?”

“Absolutely,” Tara nodded, “I just can’t get enough of all of this scenery.”

It was a relatively short walk, 15 minutes or so, up the hill to the restaurant, which they both did barefoot without any complaint. It was a safe trail with no precarious turns or edges. No cars, or even other people, passed by as they ascended atop the cliff that overlooked the whole beach. They strolled hand-in-hand as the sun very slowly moved lower and lower.

They got a table for two in the outer corner of the terrace, private and with an unobstructed view of the blue sea and the red sky darkening to purple.

“Wow,” Tara said, grinning, “I just keep saying that.”

“It’s accurate,” Willow grinned back, “Wow, wow, wow.”

She made sure to take plenty of pictures to make everyone back home jealous.

They ordered two passion fruit mojitos and toasted Tara’s birthday while they waited for their food to arrive; a seafood platter with a mahi-mahi dish in place of the shrimp, green papaya salad and an Asian slaw with coconut bread.
They had been living on cheap meals that could be made in a hostel interspersed with fast food and even the day before had just shared a pizza on the balcony, so this was like a banquet.

For dessert, the server brought out a Fijian steamed pudding with vanilla ice cream and flambé bananas, which were flambéed at the table so Tara could pretend to blow the flames out. She did so with a quiet smile and bashful look away from all of the other dining guests.

They stayed there right until the restaurant closed, appreciating the view and each other’s company.

Tara used the bathroom before they left and Willow ended up sitting on a rock outside to wait for her since the restaurant was locking up.

Tara came out, blushing as she made an apology to the nice server who opened the door for her to leave. She hurried over to Willow. She’d put a sweater over her dress to combat the change in temperature now they weren’t on the heated terrace.

“Did you get lost in there?” Willow asked, sliding up into a standing position.

“No,” Tara replied, clearing her throat, “What a beautiful, clear sky. Look at those stars.”

Willow looked up into the night; every star was visible and glistening back down at them.

“What was your favorite again? Constellation?” Willow asked as they started to walk back down the cliff together.

“The Big Pineapple,” Tara answered with a lopsided smile.

Willow smiled back and held up a hand.

“I still like Cassiopeia. I guess I’m just a traditionalist,” she said with a soft laugh, “But I love that every time I look up I see a little bit of Tara staring back at me. They never made me feel small like they do for some people…but knowing yours…that makes me feel infinite. Like we burst from the same supernova and now we just have to keep finding each other again.”
Tara swung her hand into Willow’s and squeezed.

“That’s a lot of pressure to put on ‘Short Man Looking Uncomfortable’.”

Willow snorted and crossed her arm over her nose.

“You know, I thought I knew everything about you…but now I hope I never stop learning.”

They walked quietly and intimately the rest of the way back to the flat strand, but when Tara started to veer toward the hotel, Willow turned them toward the beach.

“This way,” she instructed with a secretive smile on her face.

“What’s going on?” Tara asked, her brow knotting in confusion.

“You’ll see,” Willow replied in a sing-song voice.

They walked further up the beach, amongst other couples taking walks, families on their way home with sleeping children in strollers and even a late-night jogger. Tara smelled smoke before she saw it, though her eyes focused quickly on a small campfire burning kindling just up ahead. There was a small group gathered around it with four logs making a square around it for sitting.

“It’s a drum circle,” Willow whispered to Tara, then frowned, “Even though it’s a square. And there’s no drums.”

“Oh,” Tara replied, trying not to appear as confused as she felt.

“Basically everyone just plays some music however they want,” Willow explained awkwardly, “This was a much better idea in my head.”

“This is amazing,” Tara interjected softly, squeezing Willow’s shoulder.
Tara noticed one of the guys, in a long shirt and shorts that were almost hidden under it, had a strap around his neck with a ukulele attached and another girl with an undercut fade cut on her purple hair was palming a harmonica, which she passed off to a big-boned Fijian guy in a Hawaiian shirt and fedora.

“You were a busy bee this morning,” she said to Willow, then met her gaze with a grateful look, and half-whispered/half-mouthed, “Thank you.”

Willow returned an appreciative smile and they took a seat on the logs. They sat on the connecting corners of two logs with their legs crossing each other. Tara wasn’t sure what to expect — Willow either, even though she’d sought the people out — but naturally the chatter around them quieted. There was a brief murmur of hello around the fire, though no one made any great strides to introduce themselves; they just started to hum and music followed.

Tara felt her body wake up as it felt the rhythm through the air. It didn’t matter if someone was playing a modern song or an oldie — though the Fijian jazz was so good she almost got up to dance on the spot — but no matter the tune, to be present and listening and feeling was like fresh blood; invigorating and visceral.

Tara was enjoying everyone else’s voice and music so much, she didn’t realize people were looking at her expectantly until the ukulele was being pushed into her stomach.

“Oh. Okay,” she said, recovering quickly, “Um. Okay.”

She started to strum one of the only songs she knew how to play on the ukulele.

_Wise men say only fools rush in_  
_But I can't help falling in love with you_

Willow’s breath caught as she heard Tara start to sing.

She hadn’t heard this song in a long time.

She remembered exactly when the last time was; at the nursing home Tara’s mom worked at,
watching Tara and Nate, feeling so desperately jealous and feeling the words were mocking her as she tried so hard not to be falling in love. To admit she already was.

She couldn’t help it then and she couldn’t help it now but now she was so happy to fall; she’d fall forever; she’d fall endlessly knowing Tara was there to catch her.

*Like a river flows surely to the sea*
*Darling so it goes*
*Some things are meant to be*

Willow smiled softly, peacefully and started to hum and then eventually sang along with Tara; just the two of them as the rest of the group gave them the floor. Or the sand, so to speak.

*Take my hand*
*Take my whole life, too*
*For I can’t help falling in love with you*

They shared a loving look as the rest clapped, then Willow found an instrument was trying to be pushed into her.

“Oh, um, I’m a passive participant. She’s the musician,” she said, pointing to Tara with wide eyes, then looking at her pleadingly, “Take my go for me?”

A few words were one thing but she wasn’t the one the limelight needed to shine on in this department.

Tara tensed for a moment as everyone looked back to her. She nibbled on her bottom lip.

“I-I have been playing with something in my head,” she admitted, and played a note on the ukulele to find the key she was looking for, “Willow and I were cruising down the highway in New Zealand, singing along to a mixtape and well…”

She trailed off shyly.
“Forgive me, I’ve never actually played it properly. I call it… Heartstead. I think.”

She made a false start but recovered and continued on with a low tune.

All of my life  
*My home has been one spot*  
Not a town, not a house  
*Or even a thought*

Because home is where the heart is  
*And my heart is you*  
It beats your name  
It bleeds you through

*Home is where I belong to you*

Tara wasn’t looking at her directly but Willow could still feel her gaze, focused somewhere else but meant for her.

All my life I’ve known you deeply  
*I’ve loved you truly, madly*  
Secretly  
Even silent, I was sure, I knew

*Home is whenever I’m with you*

Tara paused and hummed a little quietly.

*Our journey, our story*  
I wouldn’t rewrite  
*Not any hello or any goodnight*  
There just isn’t any other way to construe

*Home is why I’m in love with you*
Willow was looking down, mindlessly watching her toes tense and release in the sand to be inconspicuous, but her smile was a thousand watt.

All these years you still surprise me
Shone through my soul with a whole new beauty
When you said those three little words
Happy. Bravely.
This is a feeling that I'll just never argue

Home is being loved by you

The ukulele strings did a final vibration from Tara’s fingers.

Home is one soul built for two

Tara immediately blushed when she finished and passed the ukulele back to its original owner.

“That’s all I have,” she mumbled, but everyone clapped for her and the person next to her gave her an encouraging shoulder bump.

Tara offered them a smile but her attention was quickly turned to Willow as a hand slid across her knee.

“Wanna go for a stroll?” Willow whispered and Tara quickly nodded.

They hopped up and politely refused a joint that was just starting to be passed around. They made quick goodbyes and said thanks for the inclusion and started to walk in the opposite direction to their resort, toward the far end of the beach, which they hadn’t visited yet.

“They’re going to attract police attention if they keep smoking so openly like that,” Willow said, looking back for a moment, “I wouldn’t want to end up in a cell in a foreign country.”

The beach was really deserted now, especially as they walked further along outside of the scope of any streetlights.
“You sounded really sweet when you sang with me,” Tara complimented, rubbing Willow’s shoulder with her own.

“Really?” Willow asked, a hint of nerves and disbelief in her voice.

“I wouldn’t lie,” Tara replied sincerely, “I always loved our homework songwriting sessions.”

Willow smiled and linked her fingers with Tara’s.

“I loved your song,” she said, then made sure to emphasize, “Your song.”

Tara shrugged one shoulder.

“Just something that’s been rolling around.”

“I’m so lucky,” Willow replied, grinning wildly, “I have so many songs written about me.”

“You’re my muse,” Tara said, squeezing their palms together, “You always have been.”

Willow frowned for a moment.

“Did you write a bunch of angsty songs at band camp last year?”

Tara shook her head.

“I didn’t write any songs at all at band camp last year.”

Willow smiled sadly but before she could speak, they found themselves blocked from walking further by a rock formation. Willow stepped up on one leg to look over it.
“We can go back up to the boardwalk and around or just head back to the hotel. No getting over it this way.”

Tara peered through the rocks and pointed inward.

“There’s a little cave in there. We could just sit for a bit. The tide won’t come in anymore, I don’t think.”

“Okay,” Willow agreed happily.

They helped each other over some of the rocks to get into the mini cave that seemed to have formed naturally. Tara took the towel out from her bag and laid it out for them to sit on.

Tara placed her palm on Willow’s thigh and danced two fingers up toward the hem of her shorts.

Willow smiled at light tickle and pressed her lips to Tara’s cheek, right beside her ear.

“Au lomani iko,” she whispered in Tara’s ear, the words elongated as she worked to get the pronunciation correct.

She pulled away enough for Tara to look to her for an explanation and brushed her fingers against the opposite cheek.

“I love you,” she repeated with emphasis on each word, “I’m planning on telling you in every language I can, in every place we visit. And I’m not even going to use the internet to find out. Little personal challenge I’m setting myself.”

Tara’s palm flattened on Willow’s thigh as her face slowly bloomed into a smile.

“I have a surprise for you.”
“For me?” Willow asked with an arched eyebrow and intrigued smile, “On your birthday?”

“Your reaction is my gift,” Tara replied coyly.

Willow eyes danced with curiosity, so Tara took Willow’s hand and made her cover her own eyes. Willow was impatient but trusting and didn’t peek until she felt Tara’s hand closing around hers to take it away again.

Willow’s eyes bugged out as she saw Tara had disrobed and was now lying there in a new light blue bikini with emblems on it, a union jack and a coat of arms that Willow quickly realized were all parts of the Fijian flag.

“…I know you weren’t wearing that earlier.”

“I changed at the restaurant. I bought this yesterday. There wasn’t much choice in the gift shop,” Tara admitted, awkwardly tugging where the union jack covered her right breast, “But I wanted you to have your bikini-on-a-private-island moment somehow. And this is pretty private so I took my chance.”

“And this is very not,” Willow giggled as she was able to trail her finger between Tara’s cleavage, “God, you’re so hot.”

Tara ducked her head as if to disagree and Willow put that same finger under her chin to raise it.

“No, you are,” she insisted, leaning in to press a soft kiss to Tara’s lips, “Good birthday?”

“Best birthday,” Tara answered emphatically.

Willow rested her forehead on Tara’s and let two fingers follow the strap of Tara’s bikini top.

“I wonder if I can make it better…”

“You make everything better,” Tara replied, moving her face in a small, slow circle so as to nuzzle
their noses together.

Willow caught Tara’s lips in a searing kiss and whispered breathlessly against them.

“Ever gone skinny dipping?”

Tara’s eyes widened scandalously.

“You know I haven’t.”

“I dunno, I’ve heard some pretty wild stories about band camp,” Willow teased.

Tara looked down for a moment, then back up curiously.

“No. Have you?”

“No…” Willow replied, dragging out the vowel as she began to push the waistband of her shorts down her legs, “…yet.”

Tara watched, slightly frozen as Willow whipped her clothes off, then pulled the strings of her bikini top free and jumped up, losing her bottoms and sprinting toward the water with her arms crossed over her chest.

Tara gulped deeply as she watched Willow’s body disappear under the darkness of the water and before she even realized what she was doing, her bikini joined Willow’s forgotten garments in the sand and she was running in much the same way.

She squealed as she hit the water and Willow laughed uproariously. There wasn’t a soul about but them and the moon acting as their personal spotlight as they came together to hold each other with the added buoyancy to aid their closeness.

When they’d frolicked for a few minutes, then made a run back into their little cave. Willow sat on the towel and shivered as her skin reacted to the rippling condensation. Tara saw her tremble and
reached out to rub her arms; misjudging the angle in the process and pushing Willow’s legs down across the rest of the towel while she held herself up on top. Their wet bodies hovered dangerously close, droplets merging between them and journeying down their skin together.

They panted quietly, faces close until Willow pressed three fingers against Tara’s cheek and brought them close enough to touch.

“Yeah?” she breathed, barely audible but for their proximity.

Tara’s heart pounded right out of her chest, but she only ever had one answer for Willow to this question.

“Yes.”

Immediately they tangled and Tara felt herself become instantly drunk on Willow’s kisses.

*What’s the worst that can happen?*

Tara marched ahead briskly with a stony look on her face and her arms folded tightly across her chest, as the door of the police station slammed shut loudly behind her.

Willow hurried to catch up.

"We're never talking about this again," Tara said without moving her gaze from where it was fixed ahead.

"Okay," Willow agreed readily from a step behind her, watching the tag of Tara's inside-out sweater tag flap in the wind.

It was very late, or very early depending on how you looked at it, and the walk back to the resort was eerily quiet. They normally kept the same pace with each other but Willow had to keep a slow jog just to keep up as Tara sped ahead.
She didn’t speak a word as they strode across the lobby of the resort, rode the elevator up to their floor, nor when she took the room key from her front pocket or when she marched across the room in a few steps and locked herself in the bathroom.

She sure did slam the door though.

Willow jumped as the bang reverberated and felt her heart start to race. She sank onto the bed and laid her hands on her lap, looking down at them as they twisted around each other.

She heard the shower start and she let her back fall onto the bed, bringing her hands up to cover her face. She spotted her phone where she’d put it charging on the nightstand and noticed Tara’s wasn’t beside it, as it had been when they left.

She hadn’t even seen Tara grab it before absconding to the bathroom, but she’d pretty much just been a blur of movement anyway.

Willow used her phone to let her fingers fidget, dismissing the notifications that had built up throughout the day and then randomly switched between apps. When she had nothing left to do, her eye was drawn to the time and she did a quick calculation in her head.

It was breakfast time at home.

Worth a shot.

She couldn’t keep this in.
Is that a gay thing?
Like earning your stripes?
Do you earn your rainbow?
Is it a rainbow vest?
Don't you already have a rainbow vest?

No!
Stop!
I got ARRESTED!

WHAT
What happened?!
Oh god are you one of those cocaine donkeys??

No I'm not a drug mule!
We were having sex on the beach 😳

The cocktail?

The act! We were getting down!

Uh I don't need to know the details!

GETTING down, not going down!

What happened??
We were... busy... it was behind these rocks and like 1am, the place was deserted. Then we saw flashlights and suddenly then there were two guys shrieking at us. It took a second to realize they were cops.

I was freaking out. We had nothing on us!

I mean, we literally were wearing nothing. But no money, no ID!

I didn't know if this was one of those bribe-y countries!

Thank god they speak English here!

I was panicking so much I tripped over my feet and they just pounced on us! They were yelling at us not to move and then they were cuffing us and pushing us into the back of the squad car!

It was like a whirlwind. I thought I was going to die.

Worse than that time I read the wrong chapter in Civics and only got a B+!
I had no idea where we were going or if it was going to be like one of those slum jails on TV!

The building was actually pretty nice. Looked kinda like a motel from the outside but like all white brick. It was just a small station and had a pretty open arch doorway.

You're not leaving an airbnb review here Will.

Right!

Sorry

When we got inside the lights were blinding and I saw the guy holding us do a double take. I was confused and looked at Tara but her face was like stone, she was terrified.

Neither of us had said a word since we first saw the flashlights in our faces.

There was just two other officers sitting behind a desk and I saw them exchange a glance and then all four of them huddled together.
I heard him whisper 'girls?"

I guess they're used to long-haired surfer dudes and assumed in the dark

So yep, I was definitely crapping myself now

No idea how they're going to react

They didn't really look like they knew what to do and just ushered us into a cell in the back. There was a drunk guy in there, but he was passed out

I watched Tara sit on the cold metal bench they had to sit on and I could tell she was about to burst into tears. I just sat next to her and let her squeeze my arm. I felt so helpless and scared

After like an hour they brought in this really belligerent guy, we could hear him shouting and threatening them all. They were all trying to wrangle him, there was a lot of crashing
They only had one holding cell. We were shaking like a banana leaf! I think I still have Tara's nail marks in my arm.

They came to get us and we were figuring out who to call or how to stall so we wouldn't be in the cell with Fijian Psycho but they just asked where we were staying and told us to go back there and that it was dangerous to be off the resort alone at night.

Oh and that we have to wear clothes at all times here and that it's not allowed to 'topless sunbathe'!

For once I kept my mouth shut.

I couldn't believe it when they said we could just leave!

They didn't even ask our names!

I wasn't about to argue.

They even offered a ride but Tara was already out the door.

We're back in the hotel room now.
In the bathroom, Tara’s skin was a deep pink as the hot water poured on her from five different spouts.

This shower was even nicer than the one in Auckland but Tara resented that she needed hot water as a distraction when she’d been longing for Willow’s wet, soapy body to be doing that instead just hours ago.

She heard her phone beep with an incoming message notification over the thundering spray of water and looked through the clear glass window of the shower door over to the windowsill where she’d left it.

She’d grabbed it to panic-google what consequences there might be but she quickly realized there was no trail for consequences to follow and had just turned the water on hot to burn away the memories. She turned the shower off and stepped out into the steam-filled room, wrapping herself in one of the fluffy hotel towels. At least that was a comfort.

She unlocked the phone and checked the incoming message.

Her jaw clenched.
She marched out into the room and shoved her phone in Willow’s face.

Willow’s eyes widened and shot from the screen to Tara’s face.

“Oh, Anya’s calling herself your best friend now?” she asked with a sarcastic smile, but it dropped completely when she saw the look on Tara’s face, “I didn’t tell her! I don’t even have her number!”

Her top teeth moved over her bottom lip, digging in.

“I may have told Buffy,” she admitted, her eyes lolling downward cagily, “Who may be having breakfast with Xander.”

She winced.

“And Anya.”

“Willow!” Tara exclaimed loudly.

“I’m sorry!” Willow replied, pained.
Tara’s hand curled around her phone angrily.

“I wish I had a flip phone so I could snap it in your face right now.”

Willow immediately pursed her lips to contain the loud laugh that threatened to escape, but she didn’t do a very good job.

“Are you laughing at me?” Tara asked incredulously.

“No, not AT you!!” Willow replied quickly, “It’s just…the situation. It was so embarrassing.”

“You?!” Tara demanded, every facial muscle tense, “I was on top and you grabbed the towel!”

“They didn’t see anything,” Willow said nonchalantly, “They thought you were a dude.”

“What?” Tara asked sharply.


Tara sighed deeply and stretched her neck back, rolling it to relieve some tension.

“Oh my god.”

Willow returned to her original position; sitting at the end of the bed with her hands twirling in her lap.

“Please don’t be mad at me,” she said in a meek voice.

Tara felt like she’d been slapped in the face at Willow’s tone.
“I’m not mad at you,” she said tenderly, though realized almost immediately she had been acting like it, “I-I’m sorry, Willow, I was caught up in my own feelings. I…”

She felt a huge lump form in her throat and before she knew it she had burst into tears. Immediately they switched roles and Willow was bringing Tara into a hug and cradling Tara’s head on her chest. She rubbed Tara’s back through the towel.

“Hey, I know. That was really scary,” she soothed, “Rollercoasters won’t have the same thrill after that.”

She tightened her hold around Tara’s body.

“It’s over now.”

Tara sobbed into Willow’s open neckline.

“I’m sorry for saying I’d flip a phone in your face.”

Willow couldn’t help the smile, but at least Tara was under her chin and couldn’t see.

“Honestly, that was pretty funny. You’re not very good at threatening, baby,” she said, sighing softly and kissing the top of Tara’s head, “Which is a good thing. What were you going to do, nip my nose?”

A strained laugh suddenly burst from Tara between cries and Willow couldn’t hold it in any longer, she burst into giggles. They both heaved with laughter, inappropriately hysterical and at times completely indistinguishable from tears.

Tara wiped her eyes as she began to recover and suddenly remembered something.

“What happened to the bag?”

“I think I dropped the towel on top of it when they stormed us. We just left them both. Was there
anything in it? Wait, my credit card was in…” Willow’s hand flew into her front pocket and she sighed in relief when she pulled out her card, “Phew. Forgot I paid for dinner.”

“Thankfully we didn’t bring much because of the snorkeling. Just my bathing suit was in there from when I got changed,” Tara replied, sniffling softly, “Oh and your flip flops.”

“Aww,” Willow replied with a pout, “Maybe it’ll still be there if I go down tomorrow.”

“I just want to get out of here as soon as we can leave for the airport,” Tara replied jadedly.

“Forfeited flip flops it is,” Willow said, understanding yet upbeat, “Shame we can’t fit in any more topless sunbathing. In the dark. Under rocks. With your fingers inside me.”

“Willow!” Tara replied, mouth dropping open in shock, “I’m recanting ‘best birthday’ by the way.”

“Hey, your birthday was over by the time they showed up,” Willow argued, “I don’t see why I should get demerited for that.”

Tara gave Willow a ‘really?’ look.

“You’re happy to win on a timestamp technicality?”

Willow nodded easily.

“Yep, I’ll totally take it.”

Tara shook her head.

“You’re so lucky you’re cute.”

Willow reached out to gently massage Tara’s shoulders and Tara suddenly slumped, exhausted.
“I am more than ready to sleep.”

Willow leaned in and pressed a kiss into Tara’s neck,

“I’ll join you in a few. I need to shower real quick too,” she said, jumping up and walking with a wiggle, “That sand-feeling-great-against-the-skin thing really has its limitations.”

“I’ll be sure to tell Anya,” Tara replied, deadpan.

Willow turned and looked at Tara, contrite.

“I’m sorry.”

“I know,” Tara replied softly.

Willow reached her hands out as an offering.

“I love you.”

Tara took them and kissed the back of each of her hands.

“I love you, too,” she said, squeezing Willow’s hands in hers, “And it was still a pretty great birthday.”

Willow threw both fists into the air victoriously.

“I win!” she announced, then swooped in with another kiss, “I win because you’re my girlfriend. I win every day.”
Tara felt a little relief in her heart and gently pushed Willow away.

“Go wash your sandy butt so we can cuddle.”

Willow went to have a quick shower and by the time she came back in the room, Tara was sleeping; her tired, fraught lines finally evened out.

Willow didn’t even get out of her towel as she laid down beside Tara. The very start of the day’s light was starting to peek in through the balcony.

She closed her eyes and laughed herself quietly to sleep in minutes.
Hi mom and dad

Greetings from Fiji!

I hope you’re both well.

Just wanted to say thanks again for getting us the room upgrade.

We had a great weekend. Very relaxed. Boring, really. Nothing of note. Nothing at all.

Take care, Willow

Ira & Sheila Rosenberg

8 El Destino Drive

Sunnydale, California

93104 USA
Look At The Stars
Look How They Shine For You

A dresser of humans.

That’s all Willow could see as she took in the rows of small pods that this hotel was trying to pass off as a sleeping space.

“Guess we’re not hooking up in one of these,” she said as they stood at their assigned row and found their numbered pods.

They were directly opposite each other, in the middle row that sat right about where their heads were from a standing position. There was a little ladder on the wall space between each pod allowing them to hike themselves up and slide in.

“It is a little bit claustrophobic,” Tara said, sliding the little window across on her pod so she could see inside, “But it’s cheap and we’ll only be putting our heads down for a few hours anyway.”

Willow’s head rolled tiredly in place.

“I need to crash.”

“Yeah, okay, me too,” Tara replied and quickly glanced down the hallway before pecking Willow’s cheek and hoisting herself up into her pod.

It had enough room for her to roll over once and about a foot at the end to scoot down with a few inches above her. Plug sockets were built into the wall and she even had a little TV. She thought it was quite cozy considering how compact it was but Willow apparently didn’t feel the same.

“Feels like a morgue but warmer.”

Tara shifted onto her stomach so she could look across to Willow.
“And no toe tag,” she said with a smile that softened her whole face.

Willow couldn’t help but smile back but both of them were startled suddenly when a middle-aged man diagonally to the left slid out like he was under a car and started addressing them irately. He wasn’t shouting but his tone was clear, though his words were incomprehensible to them.

From context, they could deduce it was a half-drunken slur of words telling them to shut up.

He disappeared from sight as quickly as he had appeared and Willow pouted at Tara.

“So much for the politest nation.”

“We were probably being too loud,” Tara reasoned in a much lower tone, “There are other people here.”

“He was still rude,” Willow dismissed.

“Hungover maybe?” Tara suggested with a sloping smile, “Reminds me of, um, someone…”

Willow looked wounded and jabbed herself in the heart.

“You pierce me, right here.”

Tara mouthed ‘I love you’ and Willow’s face eased into a smile.

“Forgiven.”

Tara reached a hand out and Willow did the same, meeting the middle to squeeze together briefly.

“Goodnight…” Tara whispered, and pulled her window closed to enclose herself completely.

Willow could only shrug and settle her head as best she could. It was certainly an experience.

“Goodnight.”
“Ow!”

Willow heard a grumble from above at her loud exclamation but she didn’t really care about what other alcoholic businessmen she’d pissed off because *that hurt.*

She rubbed the spot where her head had met the ceiling, feeling sorry for herself until her window to the world was pulled back. Someone was on the verge of getting a very, very dirty look when she realized it was Tara, face etched with concern. The tension left Willow’s shoulders.

“Are you okay?” Tara asked quietly, reaching in stroke Willow’s hair.

“I hurt my head,” Willow replied, almost petulantly.

“Oh, baby,” Tara comforted, stretching up into the pod so she could kiss the spot her hand had been in, “I don’t think this place is very Willow-friendly. Did you sleep?”

“Yes,” Willow said, though it hadn’t been without its discomfort, “Did you?”

Tara nodded.

“Uh-huh, a bit. I was just watching TV. I was enjoying the Japanese commercials.”

“The weird ones?” Willow grinned.

“They’re the best ones,” Tara grinned back goofily, “Let’s check out. We’ll stay in a better place tonight. Where you can stretch out your entire wingspan.”

“What opulent luxury,” Willow replied dramatically, and pulled at the collar of the hotel-issued pajamas she was wearing, “Do we even get to wear our own clothes? Or maybe even none?”

Her tongue stuck out between her teeth in a hopeful grin.

“Vixen,” Tara replied with a sultry smile.

She felt movement at her back as someone passed by and suddenly remembered they were still very, very public, even if the view inside the capsule was obscured by her head.
“Um, we should, uh, get ready.”

She retreated with her cheeks lightly blushing and went to her assigned locker to get her bag and go change for the day. She waited patiently for Willow to finish getting ready and then they headed into the city to store their luggage and get breakfast.

“It’s like Times Square on steroids,” Willow said as they walked through the packed, dense streets.

Tara felt a little overwhelmed by the so-unfamiliar symbols surrounding them.

“I should have, um, tried to brush up on my Japanese more on the plane.”

“Oh, I have an app!” Willow announced, pulling her phone out from her back pocket, “You hold it up to the word and it translates it.”

She stopped at a vending machine and aligned her phone camera with the writing scrawled across it.

“See, these are…” she started, then frowned when the translation popped up, “Used ladies underwear? That can’t be right.”

Tara, already blushing and pulling at her sleeves, cleared her throat.

“Um, Willow,” she said, discreetly pointing at the imagery embossing the vending machine of women lying with their legs spread and their panties at their knees.

Willow’s eyes bugged and she quickly snapped her gaze toward Tara.

“At least we know the app works?” she said with a nervous smile, quickly stepping away from the machine and rubbing her palms on her jeans, “Remind me to never trust a candy bar from a vending machine here.”

They fell into step back on the street again and after a minute or so, Willow looked up again.

“Tara?”

Tara looked over in answer and Willow’s eyes creased in question.
“Do you know where we’re going?”

“Um, yes,” Tara nodded, then smiled bashfully, “That is to say, sort of. I checked the big map on the wall they had back at the hotel but I got a little distracted.”

“Pull up a map?” Willow suggested.

Tara frowned and crossed her arms lightly over her chest.

“You know I don’t have the same data plan as you.”

“You can download maps at the airport or hotel at each new place you’re in and view them offline,” Willow explained, “Then you don’t need any data.”

“Oh,” Tara replied, feeling a bit embarrassed for not knowing that with all her binders of research she’d done on traveling, “I’ll do that later. Can I use yours for now?”

“What’s mine is yours,” Willow replied sweetly as she passed over her phone, adding in a wink, “Including my data.”

Tara smiled softly and opened the map to figure out where they were going.

“It’s so confusing without street names,” she said under her breath, “It’s down here I think?”

She led them down an adjacent street but didn’t spot a landmark she was expecting and so turned them around to go back to the previous street. This pattern kept up through the next hour of wandering and while it was a great way to see the streets and side-streets, neither of them had eaten since the meal served on the plane that had arrived in the middle of the night.

“Breakfast is turning into brunch,” Willow said, trying to keep the snipe out of her voice.

“I’m sorry,” Tara gushed, reached behind to massage her own neck, clearly a little upset at getting them lost.

Willow immediately softened and placed a hand on Tara’s shoulder, squeezing gently.

“It’s fine, don’t worry about it,” she reassured gently, “Do we have to go to this particular place?”
“I really wanted you to see it,” Tara replied, exhaling through her nose, “I’ll go ask someone.”

There was a newsstand at the end of the street with an older man standing behind it. Tara felt like slinking away unnoticed, but those were the very feelings she wanted to confront by traveling around the world.

It just hadn’t felt as intimidating without the language barrier up to now.

“Um, Konnichiwa,” she greeted and the stand owner and he just looked at her expectantly.

Tara swallowed and brought up the address of the café they were trying to find.

“Um—”

The man took Willow’s phone and peered at it, then picked up a folded newspaper and a pen from his breast pocket and drew some lines. It took Tara a minute to realize it was a sketch of street directions when he handed it over to her.

“Ari-ga…ou?” Tara tried, blushing when she stumbled, “Oh, um… I’ll…”

She handed over some yen and took the newspaper.

“Arigatou,” she said a bit more clearly and had to resist the urge to wave as she retreated.

She returned to Willow, a little more confident that she’d gotten through the encounter and held the paper up victoriously.

“We’re not even that far. I had the right idea.”

“Never doubted you,” Willow quipped as they headed down the right path.

“Yes you did,” Tara replied with an amused quirk in her smile.

“Only my stomach,” Willow replied quickly, “And she can be a bitch when she’s hangry but she doesn’t mean it. She likes when you give her the warm and fuzzies.”
Tara smirked to herself.

“Speaking of warm and fuzzy…”

They rounded the corner and finally, Tara recognized the building front she’d seen in the pictures online when she’d scouted places for them to visit.

“It’s a kitten café,” Tara explained as they walked toward it, “We can have breakfast and play with kitties. I just thought it would be, you know, um fun. There’s a bunch of them in the city but this one has the best rating for treating the cats well. They let the cats come up to you instead of you coming up to them. I know you’re more of a dog person but…”

“I’m not like death to all cats! This is so cool!” Willow replied, her eyes lighting up when Tara let them into the café and she could see the variety of cats walking around inside the barrier set up to stop them getting out, “Whoa! There’s so many!”

The café was clearly set up for tourists and had English translations written for everything alongside the Japanese. They passed the counter to order tea and special soufflé pancakes and waded through the cats to a little table for two with the occasional scratch along the way.

“What happened to the kitty you had when you were a kid?” Willow asked, smiling as a red tabby purred through her legs, “Trixie or something? I remember her being around and then she was just gone one day and you wouldn’t talk about it.”

“Donny happened,” Tara replied gruffly and Willow’s eyes widened like saucers.

Tara quickly waved her hands in front of her.

“Oh no, he didn’t…”

She splayed her fingers and dropped her hand, sighing.

“She was an indoor cat and he let her out. My mom found her run over. She said she’d found a farm to live in with lots of mice friends…I was embarrassingly old when I realized that was a lie.”

She ducked her head shyly.

“Anyway, I asked and she told me the truth. That’s why we weren’t allowed any more pets
“What a jerk,” Willow said under her breath.

Tara shrugged one shoulder.

“He was just a kid too. I’m sure he didn’t mean for her to get hurt.”

Willow would never stop being surprised at Tara’s capacity for forgiveness and knew she too had been a heavy recipient of that.

“You’re right. It’s just hard for me to brush off everything he did to you, growing up. I saw it first-hand. I saw him hurt you,” she stopped and sighed and discreetly slipped her hand into Tara’s, “But I saw me hurt you too. And I trust you when you say that I’m worthy of the forgiveness you’ve offered me.”

Tara wanted to lift Willow’s hand to kiss it but refrained. Two big plates were brought down to their table and Willow’s eyes visibly brightened as she took in the giant pancakes. She liberally applied syrup to accompany the whipped cream already on the side.

They’d have to hold out for a more traditional breakfast because she was very happy to be a catered-to tourist right now.

As they ate, the cats grew more curious about them and began offering more affection. Willow wasn’t under any impression that it was them they were attracted to and not her food, but she enjoyed it nonetheless.

“Oh. I keep thinking ‘okay, that’s the cutest thing ever’, and then they do something cuter and completely reset the whole scale!”

Tara reached over to pet a little black and white one that was sitting between them.

“This little one likes us. Did you see her yawn earlier?”

“Yes!” Willow replied emphatically, “I thought I was going to die.”

“Please don’t,” Tara replied with a sweet smile, “I’m too used to you.”
Willow returned the smile and squeezed Tara’s knee under the table.

“Well…are you going to take care of me?”

Tara gazed down her nose at Willow with a knowing grin.

“Don’t I always?”

Willow squirmed in her chair but couldn’t stop her smirk pulling on her lips.

While Tara went to get more tea, Willow made sure to give each cat that came up to her appropriate attention. Then a new person was served food and suddenly all the attention was diverted elsewhere.

Though sad for a moment, she busied herself with the newspaper Tara had gotten and used her app to read it. She found amusement in some of the translations like when she saw an advertisement for men’s pants come up as men’s bottoms.

“What are you giggling at?” Tara asked as she sat back down with a freshly filled pot.

“Men’s bottoms,” Willow snickered, then jerked her phone away to another part of the paper when Tara looked at her strangely, “Hey, look at this.”

Tara looked over to one of the least colorful ads on the page, just writing and a black and white picture of a house with a curved thatched roof.

“Traditional Japanese Inn here in the city,” Willow read from her phone, “That could be fun!”

“That sounds really nice,” Tara agreed.

“They have a website listed in English, I’ll see if I can book something,” Willow said as she pulled her phone back in front of her.

Tara poured herself more tea and scratched a kitty that came up to say hello. The feel of their soft fur under her nails was the perfect antidote to the stress it had been getting here.

Maybe they’d get a cat someday. In the future.
She looked to Willow and pondered to herself what that future might look like.

“Oh hey, cool, they have these indoor baths that pump healing clay water from underground volcanic springs,” Willow said as she scrolled on her phone, “And they have availability on the accommodation site we use. It’s a little out of the way but I think…yeah, we can still grab the train out there…”

“This sounds wonderful but expensive,” Tara replied with her brow furrowing into a V between her eyes.

Willow checked the price and compared it to the cheapest hostel they could book for that night.

“Twenty bucks more each than sharing at the Y. What do you think? For one night?”

“Do it,” Tara replied without hesitation, “Is it really that cheap?”

“Everything else is just so expensive,” Willow replied with a shrug, “It’s one of those cities. Worse than Sydney, but free spa, so, woo!”

“And hoo,” Tara answered with a sideways smile and a waving fist, “But, uh, maybe I’ll skip lunch.”

Willow reached across the table and snuck her hand over Tara’s.

“Baby, I’ll buy—I’ll share with you. Never skip meals because of money.”

Tara ran her thumb over Willow’s knuckles affectionately.

“My mom had to. Growing up. Before she went back to school. It was we eat or she does,” she said softly, “I remember one time I asked her why she wasn’t eating with us and gave her my fruit cup and she burst out crying. I was only six maybe. Donny sulked off and she held me on her lap and we shared it. I never asked but I always remembered and I worked out the dates later when I was older. I think that was when she decided to do something to change our circumstances. She was in school six months later.”

Willow’s frown deepened as Tara spoke.

“I never knew that,” she said as she gnawed at the corner of her lip, “All those meals she made for me…”
“She had a good job by then,” Tara replied with a reassuring smile.

“But before…” Willow continued, shaking her head, “I ate in your house all the time growing up. She bought us pizza every weekend. And I’m pretty sure my parents never stuck their hands in their pockets, not until they started leaving me alone.”

Tara squeezed their palms together.

“I think she would say it was worth it.”

“To feed the spoiled rich kid from across the street with clueless parents?” Willow asked with an unsure arch of her eyebrow.

Tara shook her head from side to side.

“To make her daughter happy.”

Willow’s eyes softened and she hid a smile toward the floor for a moment before allowing Tara to see it.

Tara finished her tea and they both got down with the cats to make sure each one got a rub before they had to leave. Willow thanked Tara for taking her there and promised the next surprise was on her.

She made true on her promise as she took Tara onto a busy subway train and then on to a building where she conversed at length with a man sitting behind a desk. Eventually, she was given two costumes in plastic; one red, one green from a closet behind the desk. She thrust the green one at Tara.

“Willow…” Tara started, confused as she tried to identify what she was even holding.

“Just put it on. Please? For me?” Willow begged.

Tara sighed; she was helpless to Willow the vast majority of the time.

“Where?”
Willow nodded toward a couple of changing rooms and took the one beside Tara. She pulled the baggy outfit over the clothes she was already wearing, fixed the cap over her head and smoothed the furry thing over her lip with two fingers.

She heard the curtain of the room next door swish open and stepped out at the same time. She looked at Tara, dressed in full Luigi gear, looking back at her, dressed in full Mario garb, and they both burst out laughing.

Willow ran her hands over the straps of Tara’s overalls, then pulled her in for a quick, sneaky kiss.

“You’re the only mustache I ever want to kiss,” Tara murmured as the fake hair twitched against each other.

Willow’s tongue stuck out between her teeth as she laughed.

“Hard same.”

Tara held up her arms helplessly.

“What are we doing?”

A smirk danced on Willow’s lips.

“Remember when we’d play Mario Kart on Donny’s Nintendo when he wasn’t around?” she asked, dragging her upper teeth over her bottom lip excitedly, “Ever wanted to do it live?”

Tara arched an eyebrow and Willow grinned from ear to ear.

Minutes later they were in separate go-karts being brought onto the streets of Tokyo and guided around the whole city with their guide in a kart up ahead.

Tara felt ridiculous and silly and just couldn’t stop smiling at the smile gracing Willow’s face as they had a mini-race around the route.

It was a comprehensive tour, taking them to the Rainbow Bridge and Tokyo Tower as well as through a handful of local neighborhoods.
“That was so much fun,” Tara said, tired but thrilled as they walked back onto the street sans mustache but full of smiles, “This city is crazy.”

“Wanna get some sushi? My treat,” Willow offered with red, windswept cheeks.

“Yeah, okay,” Tara replied gratefully, “Thank you, that sounds lovely.”

They had endless options for their chosen cuisine and so picked the nearest and fullest sushi bar after a short walk around the neighborhood they were in. They sat at two of the last seats around a conveyor belt and looked on as the food passed them by. Tara grabbed them two sets of chopsticks from a container nearby and handed one over to Willow.

They picked out drinks; aloe vera juice for Tara and soy chocolate milk for Willow and then took some of the little plates of sushi and soups which they shared.

“This is so fresh,” Tara gushed, “I love the pickled ginger.”

“And I thought I was the only ginger to have your heart,” Willow replied with a sad face before licking her lips as some wasabi caught on her gum, “Ooh. Spicy.”

“Spicy,” Tara agreed with a smirk, licking her own lips in response.

Over lunch, they discussed what they might do for the latter half of the afternoon and decided to have a more leisurely stroll around the opposite side of the city than they’d seen that morning.

When they had finished, they hopped back on the subway and navigated their stop together huddled against the doors, giggling when they were jostled together by other passengers. They couldn’t help it; they felt like schoolgirls.

When they got to the right neighborhood, they both stood still on the street just looking around in awe for a few moments.

Everything was bright and bold; people dressed as anime characters, loud advertisements projected high above them and story upon story of high-rise buildings advertising electronics. Tara could see Willow with her mouth hanging open taking in all of the gadgets screaming out to be played with. She watched as Willow’s whole body began to drift toward the nearest electronics high rise.

“I…I have to go…I’m being pulled in. I can’t stop it!”
“Go have fun,” Tara encouraged, “I’m going to go over there, I see some street artists. Meet back here in a couple of hours?”

“Yeah, uh-huh!” Willow called back, taking two strides at once.

Tara just smiled and watched her disappear amongst the throngs of people into her own personal heaven. She turned to go in the opposite direction, to a fountain where she’d spotted a woman doing origami in front of a group.

She watched wordlessly for a few minutes before she was silently welcomed into the group and learned, without a sentence passed between them, how to manipulate the paper as beautifully as this woman was.

When it was time to meet up with Willow again, she waited patiently outside the original store. When the minutes passed by, Tara worried Willow might be lost or passed out surrounded by Apple products, but then she saw a flash of red hair buzzing toward her, pushing a box in her face.

“I just saved four hundred bucks on a MacBook!”

Tara’s head reeled back so as not to be smacked in the face.

“Didn’t you just get a new one last year?”

“Yeah, but…savings!” Willow replied eagerly.

“But do you need two?” Tara asked, brow creasing, “You brought the other one with you.”

“Do you want it?” Willow asked with a shrug.

Tara’s eyes turned downward.

“I wasn’t…”

“I know that,” Willow said quickly, “I just, you’re right, I have no use for it now. Wait, here, you take the new one!”

“No, Willow,” Tara shook her hands in front of her face, “I know you love your new toys. I’m sorry I shouldn’t have said anything at all, it’s your business.”
“Well, I’d rather you take the other one than just recycle it for parts,” Willow said, lowering the new box down to hold by her feet, “But it’s up to you. No pressure.”

Tara’s current laptop had also come from Willow when she upgraded, so she wasn’t unused to Willow’s generosity in this regard. She was also pretty sure her mother had taken possession of it at home so she wasn’t sure if she was getting it back.

The iPad was great but she had been trying to do some writing on it lately and it was a bit of a pain.

“Oh, then. Thank you,” she said, running her hand through one side of her hair and bringing it forward, “It’s not worth as much, but I just made this.”

She presented Willow with an origami heart with a Cupid’s arrow going through it. Willow held the box between her legs and took the heart in both hands. She turned it over gently, admiring the artful creases.

“This is worth so much more,” she said, lifting her gaze up to Tara’s, “Aishiteru wa.”

Tara didn’t need to ask what that meant.

“I love you too,” she said softly.

Willow looped her arms around Tara’s neck and embraced her warmly, careful not to squash Tara’s creation.

They got some stares for hugging in the middle of the busy street and more than one accidental bump, but they just stayed like that for a full minute, appreciating each other.

“It’s getting dark,” Willow said eventually.

“Ready to go?” Tara asked, lifting the laptop box by the handle to carry it for Willow.

“Ready to be alone for a minute,” Willow replied, hooking a finger into the belt loop on Tara’s pants and letting it slide discreetly down her thigh.

Tara nodded understandingly and they silently headed back to the subway to collect their bags and head to this supposed traditional inn on the outskirts of the city. Rush hour commuting and jet lag
really ran them ragged and by the time they got there, both were barely on their feet.

“They’re probably not going to have wifi in this place,” Tara said as they approached, “You might not get to do much.”

“I can quell the new-laptop mania for the night,” Willow said, not too convincingly.

“You should get it all out before we go in,” Tara advised.

Willow’s eyes widened and she looked down at the shiny new box swinging between them. She opened her mouth and used her last burst of energy to babble about all of the new features she was excited about.

“…annnnd it has a touch bar!” Willow rattled off, puffing out a breath of exhaustion, “That’s it, gushing complete. Thanks. You’re the best.”

Tara winked and Willow felt a flutter in her tummy.

Finally, they arrived at a gate into a large garden area with lots of stone features and vivid patches of grass and bushes.

“It’s so pretty,” Tara whispered reverently as they crossed over a teeny tiny bridge.

The building hiding behind the garden was a medium-sized, two-story rectangular building with a thatched roof and wooden veranda. The door was open for them to walk in and led to a step where the reception desk sat with a young woman behind it.

Willow moved toward the desk but Tara pulled her back and pointed to a sign with a pair of shoes and an X over it. Willow nodded quickly and they both took their shoes off and left them on a mat as wordlessly guided by the host. She then asked their name in broken English and found the booking. She encouraged them to leave their belongings to be taken to the room and led them through to a small tearoom.

They sat on traditional tatami mats which were surprisingly springy and comfortable.

A pot of tea was brought to them almost immediately and poured.

“Talk about service,” Willow said, sipping on her tea despite not being much of a tea drinker, “Hey do we tip?”
Tara shook her head.

“No, it’s rude.”

“It is?” Willow asked in surprise.

“I think?” Tara said unsurely, “I’m pretty sure.”

Willow nodded and smiled as she held the warm cup in both hands.

“This is so cool. Cozy. I—”

The new host, the one who served the tea, returned with a plate of Senbei rice crackers for them. She softly explained how meals worked and what times the baths and garden were open to exploring.

When they’d finished their tea, they were brought to their room where their bags were already sitting in the corner waiting for them. There were wall-to-wall mats like in the dining room, some scroll art adorning the walls, a few short tables with cushions around them for seating and a futon bed still folded up. Two soft kimonos lay on the futon for them.

Tara went to try on a robe, while Willow played around with the sliding door and delicately touching the paper walls all around the room.

“Guess we’re not hooking up in here either,” she said quietly as she took her hand away, afraid she’d push right through it, “Pretty, but not mega with the privacy.”

“We can have a kiss and a cuddle,” Tara comforted softly, “Come try your robe on. They’re very soft.”

Willow came over and ran a hand along the sleeve.

“‘Yukata,’” she read off the tag, “‘Yukata be kidding me.”

Tara pressed two fingers against Willow’s cheek and turned her face in, then leaned in and gently planted their lips together. Willow didn’t protest.
“Was that just to shut me up?” she asked between kisses.

“No, I love your bad jokes,” Tara replied, then tucked some hair behind her own ear awkwardly, “I mean your jokes.”

“Mmm.” Willow replied, unconvinced but promptly forgot anything but the taste of Tara’s lips as she was pulled closer, “Mmm!”

Tara fell onto her back on the cushioned futon and let Willow fall on top. She smoothed her hand down Willow’s back and slipped her hand under her pants to squeeze her ass.

Willow pressed down and swallowed a moan.

Tara parted and sighed after a few minutes.

“Hey, come on, we have to get to dinner.”

“Do we?” Willow asked with a pout, “I was enjoying dessert.”

“Yes,” Tara insisted, pulling herself out from under Willow and slipping the robe off so she could fix her clothes.

Willow grumbled as she stood up in a similar fashion but perked up when they wandered toward the dining room and smelled food.

Delicious food.

All of the other guests had come to eat and were sitting on the floor at their tables tucking into trays of small plates of food.

When they sat down they were immediately served sake in a decorative carafe with a set of small, intricate cups.

“Look how itty bitty!” Willow said as she picked up hers and held it in her palm for Tara to pour, and giggled while she did so.

“What?” Tara asked, amused as she filled her own cup.
“Drinking age is 20 here,” Willow explained with a sheepish smile, “Feels naughty.”

“I like naughty Willow,” Tara said, smiling crookedly over her sake.

Willow blushed, thankfully hidden in the dark lighting.

Two large trays were presented between them with sections for bowls of various dishes, like a giant bento box.

They had sashimi, grilled fish, eggplant, rice, pickled vegetables, soup; even the tofu was delicious and Willow had not been a fan before. For dessert, they were served a brown sugar sorbet with kyoho grapes and candied kinkan, a Japanese citrus fruit.

“I can’t believe we got a place like this last minute,” Tara said as she used her chopsticks to dip some daikon in soy, “And such good value.”

“I maaaay have had a credit to offset the price a little bit,” Willow admitted, straightening up when Tara shot her a look, “What? You know about it. We get points every time we book a room. It makes economic sense to use it in the most expensive city.”

“We were saving them up to stay somewhere nice to end our trip,” Tara said with a soft sigh.

Willow opened her mouth to speak but quickly closed it. She chewed on the corner of her mouth and nodded.

“You’re right. I jumped the gun. I’m sorry. I should have checked with you.”

Tara seemed surprised that Willow wasn’t arguing.

“Thanks for saying that,” she said, reaching across the table to take Willow’s hand with a tender smile, “And it was worth it. This is lovely. And we probably would have paid a fortune for a meal like this in the city.”

“It was really good, huh?” Willow asked with an answering smile, “You know, I’m a lot less of a picky eater than I thought I was.”

After dinner, they returned to their room where their futon had been fully made up for the evening and was looking much plusher.
“Hey, check it out,” Willow said as she sat down on it, “I thought I wouldn’t like being so low to the ground but it’s a helluva lot better than being part of the human dresser.”

Tara sat opposite her and ran her hand over the blanket. It was soft and she was definitely looking forward to cuddling under it later.

“Do you want to go for a walk around the gardens before it closes?” she suggested, covering Willow’s hand with her own.

“Love to,” Willow nodded, “I just need to use the bathroom and then we can go?”

Tara agreed and waited patiently for Willow to use the restroom, stretching out her legs straight ahead after sitting on them all evening.

They walked back down to the main entrance and Willow paused by the front door.

“Uh, where do we get our shoes back?”

“I think we use these slippers,” Tara replied upon seeing a shoe rack lined up with multicolored slippers. She turned politely to the receptionist, “Do we—”

She just nodded with a smile before Tara could finish and Tara smiled back gratefully.

“Arigato.”

The receptionist bowed and Tara bowed back. Willow tried to bow but felt awkward and clumsy about it all.

They picked out a pair of slippers each and slipped them over their socked feet before heading out into the garden. A path led them in a half-moon shape around the building while the full moon guided their journey.

“It’s like they took one of those little zen gardens you put on your desk and made it into a real one!” Willow said as they passed a rock garden and listened to a small cascading waterfall hit the formation.

“I think it, um, probably happened the other way around,” Tara supplied with a helpful smile.
“Right,” Willow smiled bashfully and swung her hand into Tara’s, “But still beautiful.”

“Very,” Tara agreed with a soft look toward Willow that told her she didn’t just mean the garden.

They sat on a bench between the water feature and an array of perfectly sculpted bonsai trees. Willow looked up at the sky thoughtfully.

“Isn’t it crazy we’re so far away from home but under the same moon?”

Tara rested her head on Willow’s shoulder and looked up silently.

After a while, she felt Willow’s hand rub her thigh.

“Can I ask you a question that I promise is not a trick in any way?”

Tara turned to Willow, her eyebrows muddling together in a mix of curiosity and apprehension. Willow kept her gazed upward.

“If I hadn’t come with you, would you have been with other girls?”

Tara blinked several times, then her mouth curved in the slightest movement of a sad smile.

“I was worried about the same thing with you going off to college. All those new people, shared interests. You’d have your pick of anyone. I thought best case, she doesn’t tell me about them and she’ll still want me when I get back,” she covered Willow’s hand on her thigh and squeezed it affectionately, “I never wanted you to feel like you missed out because of me.”

Willow’s head snapped toward Tara.

“That’s exactly how I feel,” she said, then frowned, “But I don’t want other girls. It doesn’t enter the equation.”

Tara’s smile lifted further up her cheeks.

“And that's exactly how I feel.”
Willow smiled back and gripped Tara’s hand again.

“I was so scared of what I wanted, I didn’t know it would lead me to exactly what I needed.”

Tara leaned in to press a chaste but lingering kiss against Willow’s lips while they had a private moment.

“Anyway, you’re very much overestimating my, um, game.”

“You would have cleaned up,” Willow replied surely.

Tara ducked her head.

“The only other girl I’ve tried to kiss ended up with a lump on her forehead from where I smacked my face against her.”

Willow’s mouth dropped open.

“You never told me that part!” she giggled, “Wow… You gave Emmy a head bump and she was still so nice to you…us.”

Tara nodded.

“She's a saint.”

Willow was silent for a moment, then her nose scrunched.

“It's kinda annoying.”

Tara covered her hand to her mouth to hide a laugh and lowered her voice.

“It's so annoying. Willow, our non-existent relationship would have lasted two days even if I hadn’t been hung up on you.”

Tara placed her hand on Willow’s thigh and drew a circle, slowly lifting her gaze up through her eyebrows.
“I’d much rather be a sinner with you any day.”

Willow felt her heart begin to race and leaned in for a long, tender kiss.

“Wanna go snuggle?” Tara asked softly when they parted.

Willow nodded.

“Very much so.”

They stood with their hands clasped together and headed inside for an early night together.

Outside the locker room for the spa, Willow watched Tara bow for the attendant and go inside the doors.

Willow approached and bowed in the same way and quickly followed Tara inside in case she was sniggered at.

She didn’t think the overly polite girl would have ever done so audibly, but she knew what a mocking eye looked like and she didn’t need to learn it in another language. Why did her bowing always feel so much less graceful than Tara’s? It was the same 45 degree arch of her back.

“I don’t think I arch my back right,” she whispered to Tara as they found a corner of the bench to leave their stuff down on.

“You arch your back beautifully,” Tara whispered back with a wink that made Willow blush.

There was a sign to wash thoroughly before going through to the baths so they both went into a stall to shower and change into their bathing suits. Willow finished first and walked back to the bench, where she was glanced over by another white woman walking through, but Willow quickly averted her gaze because she was just strolling around naked as the day she was born.

Another woman walked past in full view and Willow felt an uncomfortable shiver start at the base of her spine.
“Is everyone…naked?” she said aloud, then tiptoed over to the curtain that separated the changing room from the baths and her eyes widened as she watched the group of naked bathers milling around, “Yep, everyone is naked.”

She backed into the changing room again, which was empty apart from the shower running in Tara’s stall.

“…um…baby?” she called out through a nervous laugh.

“Yeah?” Tara called out softly and for a moment Willow was distracted by her delicate voice carrying through the sound of water.

She positioned herself just outside the shower curtain.

“We have…a situation.”

“Did you try to pee without taking your swimsuit off again?” Tara asked.

“No! That was one time! I was eight! Jeez!” Willow protested, looking around quickly to make sure the room was still empty, “I believe that this is a…nude…event.”

The water abruptly cut off and Tara’s head popped out from behind the curtain.

“I’m sorry?”

Willow swallowed with an uncomfortable look on her face.

“Everyone is naked. I think it’s like, a rule.”

Tara disappeared back into the stall for a moment, then emerged in her swimsuit and went to peek into the curtain to the baths, as Willow had. She turned back, wide-eyed.

“Are we supposed to go in there naked?!”

Willow nodded with a scrunched up nose.

“I-I think it looks like it.”
“S-so we just leave,” Tara replied, crossing her arms over her chest.

Willow looked at the door they had walked in through and ran her palm over her thigh uncomfortably.

“Will they notice we just walked in and out? Is that rude? Are we committing some awful cultural sin?”

“I don’t know, Willow,” Tara replied abruptly, “Why didn’t you check before we came here?”

“I didn’t know I had to look out for ‘nudity required’!” Willow returned, bordering on hysterically.

She sank down onto the bench and held her head in her hands while she thought for a moment.

“Okay, look, there’s towels and the water is murky. We just get to the side and hide quickly. Stay for a courteous amount of time and bail,” she suggested evenly, then pouted when Tara just gave her a sidelong glance, “Okay, fine, I’ll make the first dash.”

She stood up and stripped down, then grabbed a towel from the pile folded on a rack above. It was barely the size of a postage stamp.

“Great,” Tara muttered.

“Not helping!” Willow replied between gritted teeth, holding the towel against her front, “Can you see anything?”

“I can see your butt,” Tara replied, turning her head sideways, “Still cute.”

Willow smiled and wiggled a little, then straightened up seriously.

“Okay. I can do this. It’s like gym class but better, because there’s no Cordelia to make fun of me for not having boobs!”

“We didn’t have gym class in my school,” Tara replied quietly, “Some people did dance but we had single-stall unisex locker rooms.”
Willow frowned.

“We had very different high school experiences.”

She walked over to the curtain with Tara on her tails to watch. Willow slipped out of the curtain and used the wall to cover her butt as she did a quick skid across the floor to get into the large square bath, dropping the towel only at the last second.

“Hot!” she squealed as her body sank in, fighting the instinct to jump up again.

She settled and with a slightly pained look on her face, gave Tara a weak thumbs up.

A breath flared out through Tara’s nostrils as she stripped down to nothing. She opted to wear the towel around her waist and cross her arm over her chest for fuller coverage. She took one step past the curtain when suddenly the attendant, a short, older Japanese woman, jumped out and started gesturing wildly at her.

“Dame! Dame!”

For all her efforts to be discreet, all the attention in the room was now on Tara, who was turning beet red.

“No!” the attendant said, physically pushing Tara back through the curtain and ushering her into the changing room, pointing aggressively at Tara’s chest.

Moments later, Willow skidded in, her legs poking out from under the white towel, red from the hot water and an arm bent behind her to (unsuccessfully) cover her butt.

“Whhhhaaaaatttt is happening?!”

“I don’t think they like tattoos here,” Tara gulped as that pointing finger jabbed her right in the middle of her inked score.

“No good. Out!” the attendant said and Tara didn’t hesitate to tightly tie her robe around her body and bolt for their room.

“Dammit,” Willow swore under her breath, then tried to bow to the attendant to regain some sense of decorum, but only succeeded in dropping her towel and grabbing herself to cover up.
The attendant just shook her head and Willow also squirmed into her robe with her cheeks the same color of her legs. She hurried after Tara, slipping through the door and sliding it closed again.

Tara had her back against the far wall, an actual solid one that wasn’t made of paper and was holding her head in one hand. Willow sank down onto the futon, which had been assembled back to a sofa shape in the brief period they’d been gone.

“You know what I just realized?” Willow asked after a few slow minutes passed by.

“What?” Tara asked through a sigh.

Willow exhaled a slow breath.

“We could have just hung out in the locker room for an extra few minutes before bailing. No need to get naked or go through to the bath at all.”

Tara eyed Willow warily for a moment, then sat next to her.

“We are not making a very good impression on Japan.”

“Better than our impression on Fiji,” Willow replied and saw Tara roll her eyes, “Too soon?”

Tara leaned back, gathering her wet hair behind her, and Willow found her phone in the little pocket she’d packed it in. She unlocked and started typing on it.

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“Yep, it says right here…tattoos are forbidden in the onsen…that’s the hot springs,” she explained, then chuckled, “Heh. It says it’s because tattoos are associated with gangs in Japan. They must have seen West Side Story one too many times if they think you’re involved in some kind of musical gang!”

“Oh god,” Tara groaned, “We should have checked. I-I’ve probably insulted them.”

Willow leaned back with Tara and cupped her cheek.

“Let’s just get out of here. Let’s skip the city and travel the countryside on the bullet train. We might even be able to find a sparse cherry blossom or two,” she said, then giggled, “Plus I want to use one of those fancy high-tech toilets and we might find a cheap hotel with one outside of the city.”
“As long as it's not in public, I’m in,” Tara replied, holding Willow’s cheek to her face and getting comfort from it.

Willow leaned in and pressed a soft kiss to Tara’s lips.

“This is why we’re doing this, baby. We can make our own way.”

Tara nodded against Willow’s palm and watched as she sat up to get ready, certain of one thing going forward.

Her way was Willow.

…and keeping her damn clothes on in public.
“Tara? Hello?”

Tara’s mother’s voice came through before picture but after a few seconds, it settled into a clearer if still slightly pixelated image.

“Well, there’s my darling girl’s face, finally.”

“Ni hao mama,” Tara replied, then added on bashfully, “That means hi mom.”

“Hi daughter,” Kimberly returned with an affectionate smile, “Why is your beautiful face so fuzzy?”
Tara scooted back a bit on her stomach from her top bunk to frame her face better in front of her iPad. She waved her fingers, then rested her chin on her upturned palm.

“The internet can be difficult to get over here. Willow’s been going crazy. We finally found a hostel with wifi but it’s still pretty spotty. It’s busy here but all our roommates are out right now. I’m glad you were free to talk. It’s been a while.”

She let her hand fall and her chin rested over her crossed arms in front of her.

“Is your profile picture new? It’s pretty.”

Kimberly nodded.

“Yes. Thank you.”

Tara sensed the caginess right away.

“Is it for your online dating profile?” she guessed, raising an eyebrow, “Do you have a boyfriend? You don’t have to hide it from me. I want you to be happy.”

“No, no, I’m not seeing anyone,” Kimberly dismissed with a quiet laugh, “I’m still learning how to use all these sites and apps. I’m a little more old school, I think. I did go speed dating last weekend. No suitable men, but I have met a new friend. Joyce Summers is her name. It’s nice to have someone to share my tales of dating woe with.”

“Summers?” Tara asked, “As in Buffy Summers mom?”

Kimberly brow creased curiously.

“Yes, she does have a daughter named Buffy. Do you know her?”

“She’s Willow’s best friend,” Tara answered.

“I thought you were Willow’s best friend,” Kimberly said with an undertone of amusement.

“It’s okay mom, I thought that for a long time too,” Tara returned with a full-blown grin.
Kimberly shook her head but a smile matching Tara’s played on her lips.

“Have you sent me those documents?” she asked in a way that was plain she knew Tara’s hadn’t.

Tara hung her head.

“I know I need to send them to you. We’ve been busy but I’m going to get the new laptop out and finish everything with, um, proper spellcheck and stuff,” she agreed, then added on an explanation, “Oh, Willow gave me her old laptop because she bought a new one but I haven’t used it much yet.”

“So does that mean I can claim this laptop as officially mine?” Kimberly asked, her shoulders bouncing excitedly.

“As if you haven’t already,” Tara retorted.

Kimberly’s hands could be seen to brush over the keyboard.

“I’ve been a bit afraid to touch it much in case I deleted any of your music things.”

“Thankfully I backed it all up before I left,” Tara replied, her nose scrunching for a moment, “Well, Willow did. So, go ahead.”

Kimberly lifted the laptop from whatever stationary point it had been on — the coffee table, Tara guessed by what she could see of the couch — and onto her lap, settling comfortably back.

“Didn’t she just give you this one last year?”

“I’ve learned not to come between my lady and her electronics,” Tara replied sagely.

Tara heard the rustle of the doorknob and braced herself to say goodbye, but was relieved to see it was just Willow.

“My mom is on,” she called over.

Willow bounced over to their bunk, jumped up onto the ladder and swung herself into the upper bunk beside Tara, side by side on their stomachs.
“Hi, Ms. Maclay!”

“Willow went to a panda research center today,” Tara explained, then shot Willow some playful side-eye, “Again.”

“Maybe one day of pandas is enough for you, but I’m just a mere human with normal exotic bear loving tendencies,” Willow replied with a resolute nod of her head.

“Hello, Willow,” Kimberly greeted fondly, “How are doing?”

Willow turned to the screen with a big smile.

“I’m great!” she said enthusiastically, “We finally found a good place to stay with wifi.”

“I told her,” Tara smiled.

“Right,” Willow nodded, then gestured between them and the fact they were utilizing the wifi at that moment, “Did you tell her about the pool table?”

“There’s a pool table,” Tara told her mother.

“We haven’t played yet. We’ve been busy,” Willow added on, then bounced gently on the spot with excitement, “One panda came right up to the observation window today. It was so close to putting its hand on mine.”

“Which do you prefer, koalas or pandas?” Tara asked, turning her head toward Willow, whose face immediately fell.

“How cruel of you to even ask.”

“When did you leave Beijing?” Kimberly interjected in earnest, “How was the Great Wall? I’ve always wanted to go. I think I’m the most jealous of you now, seeing China. Going out to Szechuan Star on Ivy Street doesn’t have the same thrill. How is it?”

“Exhausting and amazing,” Willow answered with a sigh and a smile, “But mostly amazing.”

“Willow wouldn’t let me wave to the international space station at the wall,” Tara added pointedly.
“That’s just a myth; you were going to embarrass me in front of the more savvy tourists!” Willow threw back, her shoulders rising in defense.

Tara turned her head at an angle.

“Oh, but it was fine when you—”

“Don’t you bring that up again, it’s not my fault the wall is so crumbly!” Willow shot back.

Tara looked at Willow silently for a beat, then reached over and caught Willow’s cheeks between her thumb and forefinger, smushing her lips together and making her mimic a fish face.

Willow fought it, weakly.

“Stop it,” she giggled, pushing her palm against Tara’s shoulder.

She pulled Tara’s arm down onto the bed and swooped in to steal a kiss.

“You both look very happy together.”

Willow pulled back with a light blush gracing her cheeks and let her hand slide down Tara’s arm to slip their fingers together. Tara’s thumb caressed Willow’s knuckles and Kimberly just smiled softly.

“I’m going to miss you two tomorrow.”

“We’ll miss you too,” Tara replied sincerely, “We’ve organized a mini-Thanksgiving for our roommates. There’s an American couple, they just arrived but they seem okay. It was their idea. And then there’s a guy from Denmark and two girls from Belgium. They said they’d join in.”

“Are you cooking?” Kimberly asked.

“Uh-huh!” Willow nodded enthusiastically, “We don’t have many facilities, but Tara came up with this great Holiday Bowl idea with tofu — you can’t really get turkey here, but that’s okay because we did a cooking class in Japan and learned how to cook tofu properly and now it’s like our favorite, right?”
“Right. And very cheap,” Tara confirmed, smiling at Willow as she continued to relay the plans.

“And we’re going to mix it up with rice and green beans and corn and stuff and Tara’s going to make mac’n’cheese and pumpkin pie. And we even found a jar of cranberry sauce! It’s a Chinese style one they use with duck mostly, but it probably tastes the same. Oh and tell her the best part!”

Tara turned her smile toward her mother.

“There’s a KFC on every corner so we even get to have fried chicken. It won’t be as good as yours, of course. Are you doing Thanksgiving dinner, mom?”

Kimberly smiled.

“Well, Donny opted to work and earn some extra money and Joyce said she didn’t want to leave the girls again for Thanksgiving but hates cooking the big meal for just the three of them, so she invited me over for some Mexican she’s making. I offered to bring some pies but she says she hates potlucks,” she replied, then got an odd look on her face, “Though her younger daughter did whisper to me to sneak her some Jell-O.”

“Mom is friends with Buffy’s mom now,” Tara explained to Willow.

“Oh hey, that’s great!” Willow replied happily, “Being all ‘single mom’-like superheroes together.”

“And working on the ‘single’ part,” Tara teased her mother lightly, “They went speed dating.”

“Joyce hit it off with a librarian named Rupert,” Kimberly nodded with a fond chuckle, “He’s English and she said she finds that exciting. She’s acting like a teenager around him. Says he has good albums. It’s nice to see us moms can still get besotted.”

“Wait…Rupert Giles?” Willow asked, her eyebrows disappearing into her hairline, “As in our high school librarian?”

“Well, yes, I believe so, actually,” Kimberly nodded.

“Well…that’s really great, Ms. Maclay!” Willow mused with a smile, “I’m glad…I’m glad everyone is finally getting to know each other.”

She looked over to Tara, who smiled back knowingly and winked.
“Well, I wasn’t about to make the mistake of inviting Sheila Rosenberg over again,” Kimberly inadvertently interrupted a moment she could have no idea was going on.

Willow winced.

“I’m sorry my mom is…my mom. I know it sounds a little overwrought, but really, she’s…she’s right. But she shouldn’t go off on people like she does.”

“How are things going with her?” Kimberly asked gently.

Willow bit the corner of her lip.

“I think she’s maybe kinda trying? She sent me an article on the statistical outcomes of homosexuality in adolescents.”

She paused and frowned at the shared, identical look on both Tara and Kimberly’s faces.

“I know that sounds weird but it’s Sheila-speak for saying she accepts it’s not a phase…or at least, it’s not statistically often a phase and she’s prepared to accept if it isn’t,” she explained, shooting Tara a quick smile, “When it isn’t.”

“That’s…something,” Tara replied softly, squeezing Willow’s hand.

“I’m certain she loves you, Willow,” Kimberly added in sympathy.

“Thanks, Ms. Maclay,” Willow replied gratefully, then spotted the time on the corner of the screen “Hey, we need to go soon.”

Tara nodded.

“Hey, we gotta go, mom. We’re doing a tai chi class.”

Kimberly lifted her hand to wave.

“Have fun you two. Enjoy your dinner tomorrow. I love you both.”

“Bye Ms. Maclay!” Willow added before the video dropped and returned to the normal screen, “Um, sorry for kissing you in front of your mom.”

Tara leaned her head in, placed a finger under Willow’s chin and brought her forward to press their lips together.

“Never be sorry for kissing me.”

Willow rested her forehead on Tara’s for a moment then her eyes widened.

“I know we gotta go but I gotta text Buffy! Giles?!”

“Go,” Tara agreed, though she didn’t know the man, she knew it would be text-worthy if her mom was dating someone from her high school.

Willow rolled off the top bunk and took her phone out while Tara made a quick detour to the bathroom. When she returned, Willow was still waiting by the bed.

“How goes it?”

Willow shrugged.

“She says it's better than that Ted creep her mom dated a while back but still weird and she'd rather not talk about it.”

“Sounds like Buffy's having her Thanksgiving tacos in her bedroom,” Tara quipped and Willow laughed.

“You're so funny,” she said affectionately and held Tara's elbow, “Let's go.”

They left the hostel together and went down to a nearby park where they’d walked by the class the day before. It was mostly elderly locals but they were in a spot where a lot of travelers flocked to as most of the public transport ran through it, so they weren’t the only non-Chinese arriving to participate. The locals, to their credit, didn't seem to object by the sea of white faces that turned up to crash their class.
There were no words, no instructor; it just started when all of the regulars began to move their limbs in slow, fluid movements, moving from one direction to the other. The tourists realized it was less of a class and more of a gathering, but it was obviously open to whoever wanted to join and so Willow and Tara both hung at the back and did their best to copy the moves.

It was difficult to keep their bodies moving fluidly, more difficult than Willow had imagined. Her feet kept crossing over each other to keep balanced and she’d have to re-center herself all over again. After her fourth time nearly tumbling into the tiny old lady next to her, they finished the particular passage of movement and the woman began the next one but slower.

Willow realized the little old lady was helping her and smiled gratefully as she began to follow. She’d by no means mastered it but by the end of the session she was doing a jerky, stunted but continuous movement all on her own and was learning to adjust to stumbles without losing control completely.

When she had the progression of movement familiar in her mind, she closed her eyes to see if it helped and was very surprised when she opened them again and the sun was gone. She would have only guessed it had been a minute or two but it must have been twenty for it to have gone from dusk to dark.

“Xiexie,” Willow thanked the lady next to her, with her hands clasped in front of her in a prayer pose and her head just bowing slightly.

Her helper maybe, perhaps smiled (Willow was sure she saw a hint of it) and patted Willow’s head as if to say ‘there, there’. Willow held in a laugh for fear of causing offense and turned to Tara.

“She reminded me of my Bubbe. If my Bubbe was Chinese and a foot shorter.”

Tara smiled and placed a hand on Willow’s waist.

“I saw her helping you. That was sweet.”

Willow felt a new kind of energy inside her, but not her usual one that bounced around inside of her skin; instead it was settled and constant and clear.

“I think I’d like to keep that up. My brain actually shut off for a minute there,” she said, exhaling an easy breath and grinning toward Tara, “Can’t expect you to be around to kiss it off any time I want.”

Tara blushed slightly and nudged Willow’s side.
"That’s great, honey. I just stopped and watched for a while. Their synchronicity was amazing."

Willow nodded quickly.

“That’d really like to learn the wisdom behind it, too. I think some discipline would be good for me.”

Tara raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

“Wanna go get something to eat?”

Willow agreed and they walked out of the other end of the park to find a new place to eat. They’d mostly been eating at the hostel to save on money but they both wanted to try a local place before they continued on their travels.

They’d chosen a trendy city so it would have some concessions for travelers. In a culture so vastly different to what they knew, it was a necessity. Of course, all of the other travelers thought the same so while there were plenty of options to eat, a lot of them already had lines out the door.

Eventually, they were drawn to a particular place, first by smell and then by look when they saw the place was nearly filled with people enthusiastically eating. Nearly, being pertinent as they spotted one table left. Also of importance, to Willow anyway, the menu had pictures and basic English translations. Being tricked into eating duck tongue once was enough for her liking.

They got the last seat inside the packed restaurant, which was also full of eclectic decorations. There were wooden carvings on the wall with shelves filled with teapots, fabric screens separating the various areas of the restaurant and lots of long lampshades hanging overhead.

There was music playing but the chatter of the space mostly drowned it out. With a nice mix of locals and tourists, Tara listened to the language foreign to her ears coming from all sides and she had a moment of wonder to herself that she was really here, really experiencing this.

“Everyone seems to be getting the same dish,” she said as she looked around, then at the menu, “It must be the hotpot here in the middle…you order the soup and then whatever you want to put in it separately.”

“Fried pork sounds good…tender beef….” Willow mused over the menu, “…duck intestine.”

She looked up and scrunched her nose.
“Might skip that one.”

Tara ran a finger around all of the meat and vegetable options on offer.

“I’m going to try the beef tripe.”

Willow grimaced and leaned over the table.

“You know what that is, right?”

Tara nodded.

“Yes. I can get regular beef at home. I want to eat what the locals eat,” she pointed to big exclamation point printed next to the picture, “It says ‘very popular’. What happened to not being a picky eater?”

“All bets are off when organs are on the table,” Willow reasoned, adjusting her back to stave off a shudder.

They ordered with lots of pointing and polite nods from the server and before long a wooden tray was placed between them with two tiers. There was a lit flame on the bottom and a huge bowl on top sitting in a hole in the wood. It had a clear, reddish broth brimming with sliced chilies and floating peppercorns and darkened pockets of oil.

Willow picked up one of the little side dishes she’d ordered, thin slices of pork.

“Is this raw?” she asked, picking a piece up with her chopsticks.

“I think we cook it in the soup,” Tara replied, lifting some bok choy into the broth.

“Ohhhh!” Willow replied, getting it and gently placing the little piece of meat into the soup where it started to sizzle.

She kept her eye on it as it floated and bobbed around, dodging mushrooms that Tara was adding.

Tara watched a peppercorn pop up through a smudge of oil and spun her chopstick around to disrupt it.
“This looks pretty spicy. Maybe I should get us some—”

Willow had not waited and had scooped a full spoonful of the broth straight into her mouth.

Tara watched as Willow’s cheeks turned the color of her hair and her tongue fell out of her mouth in shock. Tara immediately jumped up and hurried up to the bar, pointing at the clear beer fridge, the quickest and coolest option she could see.

“Liang?” she tried, holding up two fingers to indicate how many she wanted.

The server seemed to understand the urgency and quickly thrust two beer bottles into her hands. Tara quickly brought them back to the table, where Willow glugged half of it down in one go.

Tara took a sip too but savored it more.

She’d never really drank that much beer before, at all really. She’d been enjoying sweeter cocktails or cheaper coolers so far along with the occasional shot or two when out for drinks but she liked the malty taste and cool splash of the beer.

“I think I like beer,” she said, checking out the front of the bottle.

“I think I like cold,” Willow replied in a gasp, all but holding the bottle against her tongue.

Their server came over and placed a smaller bowl of white liquid in the raised center of the larger bowl of soup.

“Eat with,” he advised kindly, “Will help.”

“Xiexie,” Tara answered gratefully, then looked at Willow, concerned, “Are you okay, sweetie?”

Willow took another swig of beer, the tip of her nose still red.

“Try this one. He said it will help,” she said, swirling a spoon in the white broth, but Willow still seemed reluctant, “I’ll try it first.”

She took a half-spoonful and slowly tipped it into her mouth.

Willow cautiously dipped her spoon into the white broth and brought it to her mouth. Her nose collapsed then flared at full stretch in one quick motion before settling into a soft twitch.

“It’s like tastebud burn cream,” she said, her shoulders visibly slumping in relief.

Tara shot a crooked smile across the table.

“You must really like it. You made your yummy face. Your strongest yet.”

Her mouth soothed, Willow nonchalantly nibbled on some raw green onion.

“I’m pretty confident I’ve had stronger;” she said, her grin discreetly devilish, “My face is just usually hidden from you at the time.”

Tara’s eyes widened and shot all around the room, but no one was paying them any attention. She blushed and sat up straighter, running her hand back in her hair, all in a fluster.

Her confidence regained, Willow finally retrieved her cooked piece of pork, shook it off of excess spice and ate it without incident.

“Wow, this is actually, really, really good.”

Tara inspected and added some of her tripe, opting not to smell it directly just in case.

She gave it plenty of time to cook before plucking it back out to try.

“What’s it like?” Willow asked unsurely.

Tara tried to chew in only one corner of her mouth.

“Kind of spongey? Like...savory honeycomb,” she replied before shrugging. “It just tastes like the broth, really.”
Tara took another piece and held it out for Willow.

“Have some. Be brave.”

Willow didn’t want to lose face again, so she did it.

She resisted saying it felt like what she imagined chewing on an umbilical cord would be like.

Swallowing it required the rest of her bottle of beer.

“Well it’s no matzo ball soup…” she said, shoving a mushroom in her mouth to mask the tape, “But it’s, um okay. Not as slimy as I thought…”

“It is hard to chew,” Tara conceded, face scrunching for a moment, “I don’t think it’s an, um, regular weeknight dinner contender.”

“Oh thank god, because I really don’t think I could cook it for you,” Willow laughed with relief.

Tara smiled softly, slowly, as she took in the implications of that statement and Willow’s sweet laugh as she’d said it.

“I’m gonna get another beer. Do you want one? Tara?”

“Hmm?” Tara tuned back in, “Sorry? Oh, no. I’m fine, thank you.”

They spent a couple of hours eating their meal; enjoying the novelty of cooking it as they went along; enjoying each other’s company and some beers.

When their table was cleared, Tara rested her folded arms on the table and gently ran her foot along Willow’s calf beneath.

“Can I buy you dinner? I never have. I’d like to.”

Willow smiled graciously and then again at herself for not feeling an immediate need to protest.

“Thank you.”
“My pleasure,” Tara smiled back, hiding it shyly when she felt Willow’s foot return the affection.

They didn’t rush getting home, walking along the streets and enjoying the unusual smells; spices mixed with incense and the unique aroma of the city. Prayer flags hung between the buildings, lining the streets with color and adding to the vibrancy and local flair.

Not long after leaving the restaurant, they met another couple from the hostel, a guy and a girl they’d spoken to at breakfast while waiting for the coffee to brew. It was their last night in the city and they invited them to a live band playing at a bar a few blocks away.

They spent the night dancing to EDM beats from a band consisting of two Chinese guys with long hair and one Chinese woman with a pixie cut. They were the antithesis of everything both Willow and Tara had imagined China to be and were brilliantly loud about it too. It was electric and both could feel that electricity still dancing under their skin when it was over.

They and the other couple snuck back into the hostel in the early hours and while the others’ room was just off the main entrance, Willow and Tara had to negotiate a series of stairs, doors, and hallways to get to their room with their ears still ringing from the loud music.

Willow suddenly found something hilarious as they crept toward their door and Tara clapped a hand over Willow’s mouth to stem the uncontrollable giggling. She bit on her own lip to try and disrupt as few people as possible on the walk down the long hallway.

Once they found their corner of the room, Willow tumbled into her bed, kicked her shoes off, then rolled over and tried to catch Tara with her legs.

“C’mere.”

“Sssh,” Tara replied, just as loud and giggling tipsily as she allowed herself to be caught and brought closer, “What is it?”

She did manage to quieten down that time and Willow mirrored her whisper but not without a silent cackle.

“We’re in China!”

Tara snorted and she didn’t know why but it was infectious.

“I know,” she said, then tried to push back, “Go to sleep, sweetie.”
Willow shook her head.

“Haveta tell ya something.”

There was an annoyed grunt that sobered Tara up a little bit and she hastily placed her finger on lips that Willow was just about to make out in the dark. Willow wasn’t a totally inconsiderate drunk and so scrambled to get under the blanket and held it up for Tara to join her.

Tara glanced around but everyone was sleeping or trying to and she figured this was the easiest way to keep quiet. She stepped out of her shoes and slid onto the sheet alongside Willow, who brought the blanket up above their heads and nestled them in a little cocoon.

Willow’s hand snaked around Tara’s back and she pulled herself closer so their noses were touching and they could hear even the faintest whisper between them.

“420,” Willow announced, before her face scrunched up in confusion, “No. That’s the other thing.”

Her brow lines creased considerably, then smoothed in realization.

“520. I mean, 5-2-0. Yeah, that’s it,” she nodded, satisfied with herself, “That’s how the youth say I love you over here. The numbers sound like the words or…something. The lady drummer told me when I aksed, I mean asked, ASKED… how to say it. Or write it…”

She frowned again.

“Maybe you’re only supposed to text it…”

“The youth?” Tara asked with an amused and affectionate smile at Willow’s bouncing facial movements.

Willow nodded solemnly.

“Yeah, the kids.”

“Because we’re so old,” Tara replied, her glassy eyes soft and focused on Willow’s face.
“Feeling old is a com-sequence of meeting your soulmate when you’re four,” Willow fumbled out, placing her palm over Tara’s exposed collarbone. “And being pretty sure you’ve known them since the dawn of time…”

“You’re philosophical when you’re drunk,” Tara replied, tenderly placing a chaste kiss on Willow’s lips, “And very sweet.”

Willow’s eyes lazily fell to Tara’s lips and her tongue slipped out to lick her own lips.

“Oh, I can be spicy…”

She planted her mouth on Tara’s again and sucked a searing kiss from her that made Tara quiver and surrender for several seconds. She felt Willow’s hand fall loosely over her breast and reluctantly turned her head to the side.

“Will…I want to…we can’t…”

Tara waited for her heart to slow down to a regular rhythm again but winced at Willow’s silence.

“Honey, please don’t be mad at me. We can get a new room tomorrow if you really need to…”

She turned her head back to look at Willow but noticed her eyes were closed.

“Willow?”

Willow exhaled a snore and her hand fell away from Tara.

Tara frowned and slowly extricated herself from under the blanket.

She sat on the side for a moment, listening to the room sleeping before standing up to go to the bathroom and brush her teeth.

When she returned, she downed some Tylenol to get a head start on whatever kind of hangover she’d have the next morning and went up to her top bunk to sleep.
Willow woke up and immediately started to panic when she found herself ensnared by her blanket.

She flapped about like a trapped dog until finally, her hand found air and she was able to yank it off.

“Ugh,” she groaned as she felt last night’s alcohol sweating out through her pores.

Her body did seem to be learning though; each hangover was progressively a little less awful.

She turned to look in the mirror sitting on the wall and grimaced; her hair had not fared well in her fight against the blanket. She swung her legs off her bed and stood up to show Tara how silly she looked, but Tara’s bed was made up and empty.

Willow frowned. They always waited for each other for breakfast.

She quickly ran a brush through her hair and then another over her teeth before making her way to the communal kitchen. She spotted Tara at a little round table with their roommates — at least for the moment — Beatrice and Tom from Minnesota, Lucie and Camille from Belgium and Oskar from Denmark.

Everyone seemed a bit subdued, and Willow guessed they might be hungover too, until Beatrice suddenly stood up over them all. Willow swore she almost saw the rest of them cower.

“We better get going or we’ll be late for the bike tour.”

“Bike tour?” Willow asked, stepping forward.

Beatrice’s head turned to Willow and Willow felt a knot tie in her stomach, because she’d seen that look before, plastered all over Cordelia’s face.

“We would have invited you but there’s a six-person limit and you two would make seven, so…”

Willow hung onto the back of a chair and nodded to the rest of the group as a greeting.

“I thought we were doing Thanksgiving.”

“Oh, we are,” Beatrice smiled in the way Willow had thought of as friendly before but felt off now which made her feel disconcerted, “We’ll be back in time. Tara said 2 o’clock.”
“We’re, ah, cooking,” Tara spoke up, though her gaze was directed at the coffee mug in her hands, “Pumpkin pie is already in the oven.”

“Least you can do really after coming in so noisily last night,” Beatrice ‘joked’, her eyes casting upward and her smirk doing the same, “Must have had fun.”

“As I said, we’re very sorry,” Tara replied through a sigh, politely not mentioning how Beatrice and Tom had loudly swanned in at 4 am their first night, or that Tara was 90% certain they had been engaging in ‘hand activity’ under the covers a few minutes later and not all that discretely either.

Mostly because she was actively trying to block that last thing out.

“Mmm,” Beatrice replied, dropping her hands from her hips, “Well my family always did an early morning bike ride on Thanksgiving so this is just perf, you know?”

“Perf,” Willow echoed and looked to Tara to see if she was trying to hide a secret smile, but she looked a bit miserable, making Willow frown.

Everyone stood and shuffled after Beatrice. Willow took the vacated seat beside Tara, craning her neck after them to make sure they’d gone.

“First impression didn’t last long. Was I that rude the first time we did a hostel?” Willow tried to joke but Tara didn’t look up, “Ouch, okay.”

She pushed the seat back again to stand.

“Do you want more coffee?” she asked and Tara shook her head silently, so Willow mumbled under her breath as she went to get a mug, “And you say I’m the grouchy one with a hangover.”

“I’m not hungover,” Tara replied shortly.

“You could have fooled me,” Willow replied, her tone still light but getting sharper, “What’s wrong then?”

Tara looked up, a line etched into her brow.

“You don’t remember?”
Willow looked blank and Tara’s gaze fell away again.

“You fell asleep last night.”

Willow held up a hand helplessly.

“Was I not supposed to?”

She waited but there was no response, so she poured her cup full of coffee and took a grateful glug before sitting back down at the table.

“Tara…I was pretty drunk, I—”

“So was I,” Tara cut in, her hands so tight around the mug it was at risk of shattering from the pressure, “We were under the covers…”

“That’s why I woke up like that,” Willow nodded to herself, “I don’t know how I breathed under there all night.”

“Do you remember kissing?” Tara interjected so quietly Willow could barely hear, “I was saying we had to stop but you were just asleep.”

Willow frowned.

“So you’re mad that I fell asleep while we were kissing even though you were stopping it anyway? I did this before, I passed out drunk in New Zealand. You thought it was funny, you made fun of me. You weren’t mad.”

Tara audibly swallowed.

“I’m not mad—”

“Then what is all this about?” Willow asked, voice rising in exasperation before her face fell in regret, “Tara, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

But Tara was already pushing off of her chair.
“I need to go do some stuff on the computer. Watch my pie.”

Willow dropped her head against the table and banged it softly.

“Wouldn’t be Thanksgiving without a fight.”

It was just usually with her mother.

She crossed her hands over the back of her neck and sighed toward the floor.

An hour later, with some coffee and food settled in her stomach and no longer able to stare at the cold kitchen floor, Willow appeared in the doorway of their room holding a steamed bun in her hand.

Tara, sitting cross-legged on her top bunk with the computer in her lap, looked up at the sound of her approaching and when she kept Willow’s gaze, Willow took some tentative steps toward the bed.

She stood on the second step of the ladder so she was at the same face height as Tara and offered the bread in her hands.

“Peace offering. Didn’t think you’d appreciate me sacrificing a fawn.”

Tara took the bun and turned it over in her hands.

“I’d never get the blood off your shoes.”

Willow smiled but let it soften in contrition.

“I get it. We were being intimate and falling asleep made you feel like I was bored. But I wasn’t. I was just super hammered and kissing you relaxes me so much. I understand that once is funny, twice is offensive. But it’s not a reflection on you.”

“I knew that. I was just being stupid,” Tara dismissed, embarrassed.

“No, no, you weren’t,” Willow shook her head, reaching out to take Tara’s hand, “I should have just apologized. And I am. I’m sorry.”
Willow watched Tara slowly smile.

“It’s okay,” Tara said, lifting Willow’s hand up to kiss it quickly, “I shouldn’t have stormed out. I’m sorry too.”

Willow’s shoulders bunched up happily, able to breathe the cleared air between them. She leaned in and kissed Tara’s cheek, then gladly accepted one on the lips when Tara turned her head and offered it.

Willow jumped down to get properly dressed for the day and Tara started to gnaw on her steamed bun.

“Are you finished your work?”

Tara shook her head.

“I’m having some trouble actually. I can’t open the word processor. It’s giving me an administration error.”

“Oh, you probably need to change the usage rights and delete my profile,” Willow explained as she picked out a nice shirt to wear for the occasion, “Just go into settings and change folder permissions to open it for now if you want a quick fix.”

“I can’t find it,” Tara replied through a long sigh as she navigated through some unfamiliar settings, “Oh wait, I think it was hidden. A folder popped up. Is it a folder? Oh. It’s asking me for a password. Should I be looking for hidden-backslash-N-percentage-sign-D-3-?”

Willow suddenly went wide-eyed and tugged her black jeans up her legs before leaping back up the ladder to the top bunk and snatching the laptop from Tara.

“You know, it’ll be easier if I just wipe this thing and you can set it up as new.”

Tara held her hands up, a little startled.

“Oh. Okay. You just said it would be easier not to do that so you wouldn’t have to reinstall all the software…”

“What do I know?” Willow scoffed, arms crossed on her chest and holding the laptop tight and secure, “All my settings might not be your settings, y’know, we’re different people and we do things
Tara just nodded slowly.

“Okay, Willow.”

Willow’s eyes darted from side to side.

“Don’t look at me like that!”

“Willow, I’m not looking at you like anything,” Tara replied calmly, “You don’t owe me an explanation for whatever…"

She watched Willow glanced away guiltily and felt her stomach churn.

“Unless…you think you do.”

Willow’s grip grew tighter but she couldn’t avoid Tara’s unsure gaze.

“They were for you! Okay?! I just…it was from before when I thought you were going to be traveling around the world without me meeting exotic ladies and okay, I know it was selfish of me to think I could or should stop you but I just, I thought I could keep you and I’m sorry.”

Tara’s face furrowed in confusion.

“Willow, honey…I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Willow looked all around the empty room and leaned in to whisper to Tara.

“They’re… naked pictures.”

Tara nodded several times, considering her words carefully.

“I understand and I’m not hurt, it’s okay to look—"

“Of me!” Willow clarified in a hiss, then a grimace, “That I may have edited a little bit.”
“Oh honey,” Tara said tenderly.

“Nothing weird!” Willow clarified resolutely, “Just y’know, normal bellybutton reduction and stuff like that.”

Tara looked momentarily bewildered, but Willow’s eyes were closed and she missed it.

“I forgot all about them. I hid them so they wouldn’t be at hand if I got drunk,” she said, then further explained, “I figured I’d be getting drunk a lot.”

“Freshman freedom?” Tara guessed softly.

“Missing-my-girl misery,” Willow corrected with a glum pout.

Tara ran her fingers down Willow’s arm.

“If they were just for me, then let’s delete them. I wouldn’t want a single piece of you edited.”

“So you think my belly button is regular-sized?” Willow asked hopefully.

Tara decided not to tease out the logic of that particular insecurity.

“I think it’s the cutest belly button I’ve ever seen.”

Willow’s face broke out in a smile and she gradually reduced her firm grip on the laptop, eventually handing it to Tara. Tara opened the lid, brought the cursor over the folder it and pressed delete.

“Don’t forget the trash,” Willow advised, watching over her shoulder.

Tara emptied the trash and Willow breathed a sigh of relief.

“Gone forever,” Tara said, reaching out to massage Willow’s shoulder, “I hope you don’t still feel like you need to change anything about you. Pretty, pretty please don’t you ever ever feel like you’re less than.”
She brought her hand around to Willow’s cheek.

“You are perfect to me,” she said, then ducked her gaze shyly, “Sorry, that’s probably a bit overdone.”

Willow opened her mouth to protest, but that last word wrung out in her mind and it dropped open in shock instead.

“The pie! I forgot the pie!”

She jumped down with a thud and Tara was quick on her heels to rush back into the kitchen. Willow flung the tiny one-shelf oven open and noticed that she wasn’t hit with a wall of steam. She hit her finger against the tin and realized it was completely cold. She frowned and reached in to bring out the whole thing in her hands just as Tara caught up with her.

“Well, not…overdone,” Willow said as she jiggled the raw mix.

Tara put her hand into the oven and turned it around.

“It’s like an icebox in there,” she said, turning knobs to try and make it work but there was nothing. She felt a sinking feeling in her stomach but it eased slightly when she was able to get the burners working.

“It’s okay. It’s okay. I can cook it in a skillet.”

“You can cook a pie in a skillet?” Willow asked in surprise.

Tara nodded.

“I can.”

Willow leaned in and kissed Tara’s cheek.

“You are the perfect woman,” she said and added on pointedly, “Perfect to me.”

Willow placed the pie tin down on the counter and Tara surveyed the small space and two-top stove
they had to work with.

“We’re going to have to be in perfect sync to pull off this whole meal with two working burners before anyone else comes back and wants to use it.”

“I think we’re up for the challenge,” Willow replied confidently.

A while later, she skidded across the kitchen to the little fridge, which was filthy and laden with other people’s forgotten leftovers, and made her feel the need to plug her nose as she opened it.

“Somebody stole our green beans!” she said, comically nasally.

“Is there peas leftover from the pasta we made a couple of nights ago?” Tara asked as she furiously stirred a soy marinade into a bowl of tofu.

“Yep!” Willow replied, slamming the fridge door closed.

“Use ‘em!” Tara advised and Willow quickly bolted to get the peas.

She added them to the corn and tofu while Tara took the pie off the burner and put it back into the dead oven to save on counter space.

“Okay, we’re getting there! Can you get me the cheese, please?”

Willow grumbled about getting the stinky jobs but obliged and crossed her arm over her nose to get the cheese she’d bought yesterday. She brought it over to Tara, who looked at it for a moment before peeling away the packaging.

“Willow, this is paneer,” she said, lifting it up to her nose to smell.

Willow looked at Tara blankly.

“Well, I couldn’t get American slices at the local market. I just asked for cheese.”

Tara held the heel of her palm against her temple.

“Paneer doesn’t melt!”
“I didn’t know it was some kind of heathen anti-cheese!” Willow replied defensively.

“You know what, mac and cheese is off the menu. It’s good, it’s fine. Healthier,” Tara nodded repeatedly as if trying to convince herself, “I’m going to get the chicken. All you need to do is mix the tofu and veggies into the rice so we can serve it up family-style.”

“Got it,” Willow replied and went over to the strainer full of rice in the sink as Tara left to go to the KFC on the corner.

Willow brought the rice over near the burner and left it there while she stirred the tofu/veggie mix. She tasted the sauce that was reducing and repeatedly licked the spoon before tossing it into the sink; whatever Tara had put into that needed to be on regular rotation for their meals because it was delicious.

When she felt it was ready, she grabbed the handle and brought it over to the rice to dump it in.

She realized about half a second after doing this that the rice was still in the strainer. She grabbed the handles of it to dump it all into a bowl, but the sauce dripped through onto the floor and she promptly skidded and crashed into the oven which gurgled with sound.

All Willow could hear however was the sound of her ass cracking on the floor as their whole meal scattered out in front of her.

“No! Nononononononono!”

Tara returned at that moment with a bucket of chicken in her hands and looked at the scene in shock.

Willow stared up at her from the floor and forced a pained smile.

“So the good news is…looks like we have chicken.”

“What happ—” Tara started, leaving the chicken on the nearest table and reaching down to help Willow up, but her arm swiftly snapped back when she noticed a light peering out where once it had been dead, “Is the broiler on?!”

She lunged toward it, while Willow spun on her butt.
“What? No,” she said, her mouth dropping open when she saw it, in fact, was, “Shit!”

Tara tugged the oven door open and grabbed her close-to-burning pie by the skillet handle, neglecting to think of the heat.

“OW!” she yelped as she dropped the skillet on top of the counter, where it wobbled but eventually sat still, lightly charred.

“Baby!” Willow yelled, using a chair to pull herself up so she could push Tara to the sink and get her hand under some cold water.

It took Tara a minute to recover from the shock but finally, she released a breath.

“I’m okay. It’s not bad.”

Willow breathed a sigh of relief too.

“I’ll just…I’ll clean this all up. Keep your hand under there.”

Tara let the water run over her pink skin for another couple of minutes until it felt soothed enough to pull it away. She then wet a sponge and got down to help Willow clean.

“I’m sorry, Tara,” Willow said quietly, continuing to find errant peas.

Tara looked up to reassure her girlfriend but their dinner companions, whom Tara never wanted to see again at this point, arrived.

“We’re back…” Beatrice said in a sing-song voice that made Tara hate music for a whole second, “We even brought wine.”

The non-Americans all greeted them politely but didn’t seem like they wanted to be there. Everyone had been excited about this before the other Americans took over. Willow wished they’d never arrived.

Beatrice set the (shitty) wine on the table and looked at the bucket of chicken up and down.

“Oh. I didn’t realize we were doing take-out Thanksgiving.”
“We had some mishaps,” Willow said gruffly.

“There’s also pie,” Tara added weakly.

Willow grabbed the jar of cranberry sauce and emptied it into a bowl which she stuck in the middle of the table.

“And cranberry sauce,” she said petulantly, taking a spoon and shoving it into her mouth with dramatic over-enjoyment, “Yum!”

She swallowed it defiantly, then turned to rest her head in Tara’s neck for a moment of comfort.

“Tara, it tastes like feet that sweat cinnamon,” she whispered, quiet as a mouse.

Tara patted the small of Willow’s back.

“Let’s just sit down and eat, everyone.”

All they had were paper plates with enough chicken for a piece each. Nobody suggested saying what they were thankful for. Eventually, Tara gave up any pretense of having a meal and pushed her chair back to stand.

“Why don’t I just cut the pie?”

Beatrice immediately reached for the knife, then smiled at Tara sweetly.

“Daddy always let me cut the pie at home.”

Tara didn’t fight it but immediately noticed Beatrice was cutting the pie to give her and her boyfriend the nicest looking slices. She asked Willow to help her trash the plates to stop either of them from snapping.

“Well this was fun,” Beatrice said, making no effort to sound like she meant it, “And no dishes!”

“Actually—” Willow started but was cut off.
I’m exhausted after all that riding, aren’t you hun?” Beatrice asked Tom pointedly, who got a seedy look on his face.

“Yeah!”

“Maybe we should go for a little nap?” Beatrice suggested and Tom jumped up in a blink of an eye to hurry her out.

The other three all shared looks of discomfort and Oskar with all of his handsome, angled features tried to smile.

“Thank you for the chicken and delicious cake.”

“It was most pleasant,” one of the girls, Lucie, added, “We think we must go now. Happy day of giving thanks to you.”

Tara thanked them quietly and Willow just nodded her head, throwing her napkin onto the table when they all quickly skidded out there in the very opposite direction of the bedroom.

“I expected this from Bossy Beatrice and her beau but I’m surprised at Camille and Lucie and Oskar.”

“They looked uncomfortable. They probably think we’re crazy going on and on about Thanksgiving and serving them this,” Tara sighed, “Not to mention having to hang out with the other two all day. They’ll never want to meet another American again.”

“So much for thinking having other Americans around for Thanksgiving would be fun. They didn’t care about Thanksgiving at all. They just wanted free food,” Willow said, clicking her tongue in annoyance, “Maybe my mom is right. Maybe this is what you get when you celebrate death. It’s a sham.”

They were both quiet for several long moments until Willow spoke up again.

“I just always had one day where I felt like part of a real family.”

Tara closed her hand over Willow’s.

“You’ve always been family. You’ll always be family,” she said, frowning for a moment before allowing the line to smoothen out, “And maybe next year we could volunteer on a reservation or
Willow turned slowly to Tara and finally smiled.

“I think that’s a great idea. And not just at Thanksgiving. We should look into volunteering more.”

Tara nodded to confirm their future plan.

“But… it’s not a total sham. I do have gratitude. I would like to say that I’m thankful for you.”

Willow ducked her head and Tara rubbed Willow’s thigh affectionately.

“I’m not just saying it to say something or be trite. I’m thankful for how far you’ve come with me… globally and emotionally. I’m thankful for you, Willow. Every day. For fighting yourself and fighting for yourself and for loving me even when it was the hardest thing in the world.”

Willow lifted her gaze.

“No, Tara…loving you was always the easiest thing.”

A head popped back in the door.

“Were you guys going to keep that extra pie orrrrrrrrr…..?”

Willow felt that vocal fry bounce around her brain and aggressively stood up, grabbing the pie and using it to push Beatrice out the door, slamming it behind her.

“Don’t worry that I didn’t even get a slice!”

She looked back at Tara, who reached into the front pocket of her blue hoodie and slid out an oblong pastry in a paper packet.

Willow knew a fast-food apple pie when she saw one; there had been a solid week she’d survived on them once.

“Something told me to get it when I was getting the chicken,” Tara explained.
Tears sprang to Willow’s eyes and she held up five fingers, then two, then made a zero shape with her thumb and forefinger.

Tara remembered.

She reached out for Willow’s hand, which was readily given and brought them through to the rec room so they could forget about their culinary disaster for a few minutes. The dishes could wait — for a minute or two anyway.

Willow lifted herself up to sit on the edge of the pool table. Tara smiled and offered Willow the pie, who took a hold of it and snapped it in half.

“There’s nothing I don’t want to share with you.”

Tara looked around to make sure they were alone, then pressed her lips to Willow, sighing into her mouth. Tara set the pie in her hand on the green cloth and rested her palms either side of Willow’s knees to lean deeper into the kiss.

Neither of them felt the wobble on time.

The plastic legs gave way before they had a chance to react and once again Willow found her butt connecting with the floor but with Tara sprawled across her this time.

Tara pushed herself up on her arms, breathless with shock and looked between the leveled pool table and her girlfriend’s face.

There was a strained moment where Willow looked like she was about to burst into tears, but then her mouth opened and she started to laugh hysterically.

Tara pushed out an exhale, her lips starting to quirk up in a grin and soon she was giggling along with Willow.

This seemed to be their coping mechanism; laughing at the utterly ridiculous situations they seemed to get themselves in.

Barely a minute later, the owner of the hostel barged through and started shouting loudly in Mandarin when he saw the scene.
Tara should have been intimidated, but she struggled to stop laughing.

“What is he saying?”

“Pay for it, probably,” Willow said, standing up and wincing where she knew her butt would be black and blue tomorrow, “Okay, okay!”

She handed over some cash she had stuffed in her pocket, which seemed to placate the owner though not enough for him to leave without giving them a dirty look.

“I can’t believe I’m paying for a broken pool table and I didn’t even get to have sex on it,” Willow muttered and Tara suddenly doubled over with laughter again.

At least, Willow thought it was laughter.

“Are you crying?” she asked unsurely, taking a step forward.

Tara straightened back up, her cheeks strained with giddiness and stained with tears.

“I don’t know,” Tara admitted, her voice catching as she waved her hands in front of her face to calm down.

Willow reached over and squeezed Tara’s arm.

“It’s just money. It’s not even much money. He probably found it on the side of the street anyway.”

“It’s not that,” Tara shook her head.

Willow clutched Tara’s with both hands and rubbed up and down her arms.

“How can I be homesick when I have my home by my side?” she said through a snuffle and a furtive wipe at her eyes.
Willow lifted her hands to hold Tara’s face and leaned in to nuzzle their noses together.

Tara’s body visibly relaxed under Willow’s touch.

“It’s just been a day.”

“Tell me about it,” Willow sighed, “Why don’t we move on from here? What’s the point in staying somewhere around people we don’t like?”

Tara nodded agreeably.

“Where’s next?”

Willow just smiled.

“Wherever we want.”
Chapter 32

Vietnam

I Volunteer The Love I Kept Inside So Long

“I can’t believe how amazing the hostels are here. You can see the entire city.”

“I haven’t even been to a hotel with a rooftop bar before,” Willow responded to Tara’s awed tone as they stood both looked out over a new city with heavy humid air making their light clothe stick to their skin, “This view is insane. It’s insane. And we’re paying like 10 bucks a night to stay here. How is that even possible? Quick, take a picture with me so we can make everyone at home jealous.”

Willow got a selfie with Tara throwing her some side-eye and giggled.

“I don’t know why you put up with me either. But smile as if you love me anyway.”

That smile came easily for Tara and she rested her head on Willow’s shoulder for her to take a picture. That was still new; Willow eagerly clambering for a selfie together, but her whole camera roll was of them both these days, with various scenic backdrops behind them.

Willow turned the camera out over the sprawling city, skipping over to the rooftop’s edge.

“And I thought eating Vietnamese food instead of Chinese on Christmas was going to be the highlight of this trip.”

“You had low expectations honey,” Tara replied, stepping up beside Willow and trying very hard not to look down.

Willow turned to Tara and let her gaze drop for a moment.

“Speaking of low, have I told you hot that dress is on you?”
Tara blushed slightly and stirred the little black straw in the tall glass Willow was holding.

“Did someone slip some vodka into that lime soda of yours?”

“I’m not allowed to think my girlfriend is hot?” Willow challenged playfully.

Tara’s head ducked.

“I guess I’m still not used to it.”

“Well get used to it,” Willow replied, her lip curling upward seductively, “Sexy.”

Tara’s blushed deepened to a noticeable pink and Willow linked her pinky with Tara’s.

“Am I being too much? I may have eaten most of that jumbo bag of M&Ms I got at the airport.”

Tara looked down at their linked pinkies; their primary source of affection for so long.

“You're, you're changing so much, so fast.”

“And that’s bad?” Willow questioned uneasily.

Tara lifted her gaze and smiled.

“No, honey. It’s wonderful. Because I’m seeing who you are when you’re true to yourself,” she said, placing her palm over Willow’s exposed collarbone, “So to answer your question, there’s no such thing as too much of the real Willow. Of my Willow.”

Willow’s eyes shone with emotion and Tara rubbed her thumb over the nearest jutting bone on Willow’s chest.
“Even if you make me flustered. Often and in public.”

Willow’s hand covered Tara’s on her chest and she lifting it to kiss Tara’s palm.

“I’ll try to be more careful with my words. In public. Maybe. But in private and often…”

Tara felt Willow’s implication burn in her belly and the flames of confidence rose through her.

“I meant by how cute your butt is,” she teased quietly with a sultry smirk to answer Willow’s earlier one.

Willow giggled in surprise and looked around at the other hostel guests milling about the bar area and taking in the view, but no one was looking at them. It was a lot easier than she’d ever thought to fly under the radar like this.

She pressed the cool glass against Tara’s cheek, who gulped. Willow then left her glass on the wall and jumped away excitedly.

“Let’s go exploring!”

Tara had heard that phrase so many times while she was growing up.

And just like when they were four years old and exploring meant trying to climb over the fence to pet the dog next door, Tara didn’t hesitate for a moment in following her girl.

“Okay, you’re either leading me into something terrifying or kinky. I guess the latter can also be the former. Oh god, there’s no other people in here is there?”

Tara removed her hands from over Willow’s eyes, who was relieved to find herself in the empty rec room in the hostel.

“Phew.”
The lights were dim in the room because of a failing light bulb and it took Willow a moment for her eyes to adjust from total blackout.

“Did you wanna just hang out for a while?” Willow asked, unsure as to why Tara had brought her in there.

It was kind of dingy compared to the bar or even the kitchen and if they just wanted to chill they’d normally lie on one of their beds together, with or without a sheet hung for privacy (depending on how touchy they were feeling).

The bean bags looked like they’d been jumped on a lot, and probably a lot of other questionable movements too given the occasional spurt of paint-patter marks over them. The couches didn’t fare much better.

“Oh,” Tara replied, realizing she hadn’t done her big reveal in the right corner.

She gently turned Willow to a better angle, who noticed a wrapped gift sitting beside an open bag of bánh rán, Vietnamese donuts made from rice and sesame that they’d been having for breakfast every morning. Though they had just eaten dinner…maybe Tara had intended them for dessert?

Willow took a step forward and finally realized there was something beside the gift and treats; a teeny tiny menorah with a pack of birthday candles that were just the right size to fit into it and matches ready beside it.

“Happy Hanukkah,” Tara greeted, a slighter wavier of nerves in her voice, “I-I didn’t light it because I know there’s a special way and I didn’t want to be, um, disrespectful.”

Willow felt her breath catch. She’d never mentioned it was Hanukkah.

Truly, she’d forgotten, but Ira Rosenberg’s daughter could never admit that.

“Tara,” she said, breathless and touched, “Thank you. Thank you so much.”

She turned and enveloped Tara in a hug, who closed it and cradled Willow’s head.

“I got you a gift.”
She reached out to pick up the present and Willow frowned.

“I didn’t get you anything.”

“I just want you for my own,” Tara said sincerely and in a soft, melodic voice, but with mirth in her eyes, “More than you could ever know.”

She held her hands out.

“Make my wish come true?”

Willow grinned and shook her head playfully, taking Tara’s hands.

“All I want for Hanukkah is you,” Willow replied emphatically; then continued, punctuating each word with a kiss, “I. Love. You.”

Tara lifted one hand and splayed all five fingers, then dropped it to two and finally made a zero shape with her thumb and index finger.

“Right?” she asked cautiously, wondering if she was remembering their code from China correctly.

“Right,” Willow smiled and nodded eagerly, then repeated the hand sign to return the visual expression of love, “But I have one better. Or, uh, maybe not better but up-to-date, geographically-wise. Em yêu em.”

She bounced giddily.

“That was a hard one to figure out without the internet. You have to change it depending on age and pronouns and stuff and it’s not super easy to figure out girl to girl.”

“But you did,” Tara smiled.

“I did,” Willow confirmed with the same lift of her lips, “You are so worth the effort.”

She kept Tara’s gaze for another moment, then clutched the wrapped gift to her chest. It felt soft.

“Can I open it?”
“Of course,” Tara replied with a nod and her unceasing soft smile.

Willow sat cross-legged on the floor, which she could at least be assured was cleaned regularly, and turned the gift over in her lap so she could slide her finger under the tape to free it.

Tara sat in front of Willow, their knees almost touching, and watched her peel back the red watercolor paper.

Inside, Willow saw a flash of bright yellow and lifted out the garment inside; a buttoned sweater with a white kitty poking out of the front breast pocket.

“Tara, I love it!”

“Really?” Tara asked hopefully. “I got it in the Hello Kitty store in Tokyo when you were distracted.”

“It’s perfect!” Willow said, lifting it up to bury her face in its softness.

She saw a little clear pouch sitting under where the sweater had been and took it out to unzip.

There were silver chains and various discs of ornamental design attached either end, though they all seemed muddled together. She reached in to pick one up. It was a straight chain with a clip either side and the discs on top embossed with a surfboard. On close inspection, she noticed that all of the chains were in the same style but with different designs on the discs.

“Ooh, what are these?”

“Sweater clips,” Tara explained, sitting with her hands under her thighs to stop them from fidgeting, “I-I thought you might like to accessorize.”

“Oh!” Willow repeated, still not entirely sure what they were but finding amusement in making the clips snap like crocodiles.

“You have so many cute sweaters, I just thought it would be nice,” Tara said, taking the chain from Willow and clipping it onto either side of the collar on her button-up, “You can clip them onto a collar like this or use them to hold two sides of your sweater together without buttoning it.”
Willow looked down at where the chain sat low on her chest.

“It’s kinda like a necklace with no neck.”

“It’s like the front of a necklace. A half-necklace,” Tara replied with a smile, “And, um, I wasn’t sure if you did presents on all eight nights, or what to get you for them, so, um, I’ve been doing a new one for each place we’ve been.”

She briefly flicked them through her hand, showing Willow the Godzilla one and the panda one, then two identical tiles with a red lotus flower as Willow began to understand the references to all the countries they’d traveled in.

“I got these at the market we went to yesterday,” Tara spoke of the lotus clips, “They were actually earrings, I just removed the back. That’s usually the best way to get two matching sides.”

“You made these?” Willow asked, clutching the chain gently.

“They’re not that hard,” Tara shrugged bashfully, “They would be easier with my hot glue gun but Krazy Glue is pretty versatile. And um, I like peeling it off my fingers.”

“That’s what you were doing!” Willow replied suddenly, looking slightly relieved, “I thought you’d gotten sunburned or something. I was getting a little alarmed when you pulled one off the whole length of your finger yesterday!”

“You told me to use more sunscreen,” Tara replied, eyes soft and heartened.

“Well, yeah, I didn’t think burned fingers would be much fun,” Willow replied, blushing lightly as she tucked some hair behind her own ear, “I didn’t mean…”

Tara drew a gentle circle on Willow’s knee and spoke softly.

“I wouldn’t mind if you did.”

Willow lifted her gaze but it quickly dropped again to Tara’s lips.

“Where did you get this?” she asked quickly, taking hold of the mini-menorah.

“eBay,” Tara answered easily, “I got it sent to the hostel when I knew where we were staying.”
“Oh,” Willow replied, nodding, “That makes sense actually.”

She set it back down and opened the little pack of candles.

“Light the candle with me?”

Tara nodded eagerly.

“I always thought it looked so pretty in your window.”

“I was jealous of how good your tree smelled,” Willow admitted as she placed a little candle in each slot.

Tara watched as she struck a match to light the middle candle.

“I was always scared to ask about it after that time when we were little and I asked your dad if you could eat ham sandwiches with me if your rabbi blessed them first,” she said, frowning, “Donny told me that just to make me look stupid.”

Willow waved a hand dismissively.

“Pfft, that’s nothing. You should have seen my Dad's face when a delivery guy came to our house by mistake on Yom Kippur. With pepperoni pizza!”

Tara pursed her lips so as not to laugh but caught Willow’s eye where the mirth shone in abundance. Willow lifted the middle candle up at the top between her thumb and index finger, leaving just enough room on it for Tara to do the same on the bottom.

Off Willow’s encouraging nod, Tara clasped the candle in the same way and Willow guided them up to light the first candle while she said a blessing.

“That was really beautiful,” Tara said when Willow had finished and the middle candle was safely returned to its spot.

Willow reached out and took both of Tara’s hands in hers, across their laps.
“Thank you so much for doing this. Hanukkah isn’t the biggest Jewish holiday, traditionally, but I always liked it. I thought the tale was cool. That the underdog got one up on the big bad army.”

“Tell me the story?” Tara asked.

Willow smiled softly as Tara’s face illuminated in the soft glow of the candlelight.

“Love to.”

Tara got comfortable and returned the smile, giving Willow her undivided attention.

“It should be just up here.”

Willow reached back for Tara’s hand as she led them with the map on her phone.

“Stay close, baby. We’re not in the best neighborhood.”

She clasped Tara’s hand against hers and pulled her closer protectively. They continued walking up the street; Willow’s eyes on her phone and Tara’s on the row of buildings.

“This is it,” Tara said before Willow could, pointing to a sign embedded in the wall.

She rang the doorbell while Willow looked on sadly.

“It’s such a sad word. ‘Orphanage’.”

Tara squeezed Willow’s hand comfortably and there was a sound of a crackling intercom.

“Yes?” a woman’s voice with a clear New Zealand inflection came through.

“Um, we’re here to volunteer for the day?” Tara replied, slightly self-consciously.

“Willow Rosenberg/Tara Maclay?” the voice asked.
“Yes,” Tara answered.

“Have your IDs ready,” the woman said and the crackling sound stopped.

Willow fished out their IDs she was holding in her messenger bag and waited. The door opened and a medium-built woman with black bangs and deep hazel eyes checked them over before allowing them in.

They walked into a long hallway and their hands were promptly shaken before they were led through the building at speed.

“I’m Sadie Bloom. I’m the volunteer coordinator around here, along with plenty of other titles they don’t pay me for. Come on in, nice to meet you. Thank you for your time today.”

“Oh, no, thank you for the opportunity,” Tara said, quickening her pace to keep up, “Someone in our hostel recommended we try to volunteer here but that it would be a long shot.”

Sadie eyes very slightly rolled upward, an action she tried to hide.

“A lot of people like to get this place on their ‘volunteer resume’.”

Willow and Tara exchanged confused looks.

“We don’t have a ‘volunteer resume’,” Willow said, adjusting the strap across her chest, “We just wanted to help…if we could.”

Sadie looked over at them and smiled for a moment, though it turned sad.

“You know, you were the only application the agency sent us that wanted to volunteer today. We often have to turn people away because we have a schedule we keep to but it’s great for them to have some excitement today, eh? Even the most ardent volunteers take the day off to stay at home sleeping off the night before or to go to the beach on Christmas Day.”

“We’ve had our fill of beaches,” Willow replied, shooting Tara a quick glance that was purposefully not returned.

“Been traveling around Asia?” Sadie asked, keeping up the brisk pace, “I did that too and stopped here instead of going home. Ten years later…”
Willow smiled and nodded along.

“Started in New Zealand actually. Great country. Had a lot of fun.”

“Don’t get home enough,” Sadie replied wistfully, “We’re going to bring you into the playroom so it’s a more relaxed environment. The kids learn English in school but you’ll have to communicate with them slowly. We have just a couple of orientation videos for you to watch here explaining what we do and how you can help today.”

They were brought into an office, Sadie’s presumably, and watched videos play on the laptop sitting on the desk. When they were finished, they went through a few questions and answers and were brought through a small courtyard to an adjacent, attached building that was the residential area of the orphanage.

It was a very old but well-kept area, clean, though with peeling paint covered with fun art projects on the wall. They’d both been a little uneasy as to what the conditions might be but this place was clearly run well if a little worn down.

A lot worn down.

Willow exchanged another look with Tara, returned this time; mutually assuring each other of their willingness to stay.

They were brought into a large playroom where a couple dozen Vietnamese children aged between two and twelve were running around after each other. They all promptly stopped and skidded to attention in front of their visitors. The other caregivers went about tidying up while they had a chance and Willow looked at Tara for help. Neither of them expected the sudden intense interest.

“What do you get if you eat Christmas decorations?” Willow tried, clearing her throat to speak louder, “Tinselitis!”

The room was painfully silent.

“Rough crowd,” Willow mumbled.

“Basic English, sweetie,” Tara advised quietly.

“Right,” Willow nodded, gulping as she looked out into the sea of innocent, expectant eyes, “Um…”
Sadie suddenly reappeared from wherever she’d disappeared to holding an old, beat-up but at least fully-stringed guitar, which she presented to Willow.

“We were able to source this for you to use,” she said excitedly, but her eyes narrowed when Willow looked at it helplessly, “It said on your application you played music.”

“Oh, no, not me,” she said, waving her hands in front of her, then pointing to Tara, “She, her. She’s amazing. I just sing sometimes, usually off-key.”

“But with lots of enthusiasm,” Tara added kindly and Willow smiled gratefully.

“The primary language of a child,” Sadie answered before thrusting the guitar at Tara.

“Better than me trying to tell jokes,” Willow said to Tara as she positioned the instrument on herself.

“I have no idea what kind of music they like,” Tara replied, her voice wavering for a moment, “None of Insect Reflection’s songs will make any sense to them.”

“What about our homework songs?” Willow suggested.

Tara shook her head.

“I don’t think they’re going to understand differential equations or geologic time, hun, at least not in English.”

“You don’t have anything new going on up there?” Willow asked, tapping the side of Tara’s head.

Tara glanced at the still waiting children and turned her back.

“I’ve been mentally writing one, but I can’t sing it here,” she whispered quietly, her eyes darting toward Willow, “…it’s about eating out.”

Willow nodded.

“Yeah, I don’t think these kids go to restaurants.”
Tara shot Willow a pointed look.

“Not that kind of eating out.”

Willow’s mouth opened in shock, but she quickly closed it again.

“We’re circling back to that one later!” she whispered insistently, looking over her shoulder again, “What are we going to do?”

Tara tested a string, pleased to find it was tuned.

“Just follow my lead.”

They turned back to the children and the carers had come over to facilitate, allowing introductions to be made. Willow and Tara made sure to wave individually to each child and to say their names to remember them. Finally, they were given two tiny chairs to sit on and everyone sat in front of them expectantly.

“Do any of you ever get bad feelings?”

The kids all looked around and then nodded.

“Do you ever sing to feel better?” Tara asked again and pointed at a sweet little girl held her hand up high, “Yeah, Thuy does. Why don’t we make up a feel-better song?”

There were nods all around and Tara played a few notes to get her bearings before putting her best improvisation skills to use.

“Whenever you feel bad or scared
Just take a breath and know you’re cared-
For
-All those feelings go away
Just know you’re strong and smart and stay.”

They produced some smiles, some of confusion, but everyone stayed engaged, so Tara kept going.

“If you feel tears coming down
Know that it’s okay to frown
But remember it has another direction
Point it up and feel perfection.”

More smiles and giggles encouraged Tara.

“Smile and smile and smile some more
Lift those lips up off the floor
When you laugh, it's your heart singing—“

“—look at all the joy you're bringing,” Willow added softly, watching Tara in awe as she captured the rapt attention of every little pair of eyes in the room.

“Willow’s got it,” Tara replied animatedly, finishing a strum and clapping in Willow’s direction,
“Who wants to write their own song?”

A bunch of hands went up and Willow threw back the front pocket of her bag.

“I have different colored pens for everyone!”

The kids clambered to sit around the big table in the room and fought excitedly over the large collection of pens and pencils Willow had brought as a gift. The caregivers brought paper for everyone and sat around to offer translations when needed.

Tara moved around the circle, helping with rhymes and playing their completed verses for them, as well as showing off a couple of chords so they could play themselves.

She eventually got around to where Willow was with a young 6-year-old boy and they seemed to be doodling on the sheet of paper that had sketchily drawn words on it too.

“Hey Danh,” Tara greeted the little boy with soft blue eyes, and shared a little secret smile with Willow. “Hi Willow. How's it going?”

“We're learning about traditional English rhyming structures,” Willow replied seriously, turning to her little friend, "Do you want to sing it?

Dahn nodded eagerly and held the page up-close to his face.

“Ro-ses ar' red
Vi-lets ar' bloo
Yoo look like a mon-kee
An' yoo smell like its poo.”

“I'm dedicating it to Donny,” Willow added, grinning.

Tara pursed her lips, withholding a smile.

“Heavily influenced by the traditional birthday greeting genre with a large spattering of Valentine's Day overtones.”

“The poo was all ours though,” Willow replied resolutely.

Dahn covered his mouth and giggled.

“Poo-poo.”

“Hey, I know my audience,” Willow said, giggling along with him.

When everyone had written a few lines, they put it all together and had the children squealing with laughter at how ridiculous it sounded; the silliness transcending any language barrier.

Afterward, they agreed on a game of musical chairs; one of the few games that needed no translation or explanation. It ultimately just turned into a giant dance party where they discovered the kids were big Elvis fans so Tara played ‘Hound Dog’ and ‘All Shook Up’ and then ‘Jailhouse Rock’ just so Willow could show off her jiving skills.

Both of them felt bittersweet as they watched the children go off for dinner screaming and laughing with each other and shouting their accented versions of Willow and Tara’s names in goodbye. A few even ran back in for hugs.

Willow and Tara were silent as they left, leaving an envelope behind quietly. They’d already agreed their gift to each other for the holidays would be a donation.

They walked home with linked arms, quietly admiring the decorations the city had hung up and that they could still hear faint Christmas music no matter where they turned. Seeing how much such a faraway place like Vietnam embraced and celebrated Christmas had been a source of amusement for them both and added some levity to the slightly somber ending to their day.

When they arrived back at the hostel, their room was empty.
Probably at the beach, they both thought, remembering what they had been told.

Willow sat on her bottom bunk and wordlessly pulled Tara with her.

They shuffled back to lie down, curling up and inadvertently making a heart shape with their bodies.

“You—” they both started at the same time, then shared a smile.

Neither said anything for another moment, so Tara took the opportunity.

“You were amazing with the kids.”

Willow shook her head dismissively.

“Me? No. You are the who, who was,” she claimed adoringly, “You’re so creative.”

Tara bent her head so the tip of their noses touched.

“I was really blown away by your empathy and how naturally you tuned in to what they needed… even when they didn’t understand you, you made them laugh. That’s special.”

Willow’s eyes fell downward.

“I’m definitely nothing special.”

“No, you are,” Tara replied quickly and surely, then smiled softly when their eyes locked again, “Merry Christmas, love.”

“Merry Christmas,” Willow said, her first time acknowledging it on the day.

It had been a very rewarding first Christmas.

Willow teased Tara’s little smile with her finger.

“And now you have to tell me about this dirty song you’re writing.”
Tara’s eyes scrunched closed, her nose furrowing in the process.

“It’s not... I’m not... it’s not a *song* song,” she said, her eyelids slowly fluttering open to face Willow, “...I just think in music when I’m feeling something... strongly... sometimes.”

“For example...” Willow prompted in a low voice.

Tara felt a hot knot tie in her stomach at the way Willow’s gaze flickered up through her eyebrows.

Her fingertips brushed against Willow’s cheek and jaw.

“Lost in ecstasy...” she breathed in a soft, melodic tone; her thumb roving over Willow’s lips, “Spread beneath my Willow-tree...”

Willow’s heart thumped as she watched Tara’s mouth come toward her, then they were both suddenly startled by the roommates returning loudly; beach towels draped over their shoulders and skin that told a tale of a day lying out in the sun.

They separated quickly, both lying on their backs with chests noticeably rising.

After a few cursory hellos, when Willow was confident they were back to being routinely ignored, she linked her fingers with Tara and slipped their hands under the blanket together.

Tara squeezed their hands together in acknowledgment, content with the contact.

For now.
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

Here be an 'M'

Thailand

When They Dim The Light, Let's Begin
Kissing The Old Year Out, Kissing The New Year In…

“Got it!”

Tara dragged her eyes up from the rim of exposed skin bare on Willow’s middle from where her shirt rode up as Willow lifted her arms above her head to move her arms around.

“Hmm?”

“My signal kicked in,” Willow said, slowly lowering her phone into her lap again, “I can book a hostel now.”

“Oh, right,” Tara replied, sitting up a bit straighter. She’d sort of forgotten they were sitting on a bench outside the busy airport. In her mind, they were very much alone, “Hey, um, get us a private room?”

Willow looked over at Tara curiously. They hadn’t actually had a private room since the one in Sydney. Tara hadn’t suggested it and Willow hadn’t either, wanting to show Tara she was committed to everything she had said before. For the most part, she’d actually been pretty happy with it and the way it helped them socialize — Thanksgiving mishaps aside.

“Are you sure? The shared dorms are mega cheap—”

Willow stopped suddenly as Tara’s hand discreetly fell on her upper thigh and squeezed. It was just a
subtle movement, indiscernible to anyone but Willow herself, but Willow was quick to understand what the press of fingertips meant.

That had been the one major downside to dorm living; there was always a ‘stop’ point even when they were alone. The way Tara’s hand lingered told Willow she wished to stop no more and Willow was not about to rebuff her. Her voice rose to a squeak as her finger moved around the screen with a tremble.

“Uh-huh. Booking now.”

She tapped into the first option and went through the booking process quickly.

“Got one!” she said, leaping up to check out the map of bus routes on the wall, “Okay, so we need to get a bus going to…”

She felt Tara stand behind her and then her hand come up to guide Willow’s hand off to the side.

“This one.”

“Yep,” Willow nodded, swallowing repeatedly to get some moisture back in her mouth, “Route…”

She stopped and gulped again, audibly this time.

“Route 69.”

Tara’s hand brushed across Willow’s wrist and fell away.

“We better hurry.”

“Hurrying,” Willow chirped, hoisting her bag up so they could skedaddle on down to the right bus stop.
They checked the stop and the address with their kindly bus driver before boarding confidently and finding two free seats together.

“Hey, it’s not too bad. I was kind of expecting old and rickety,” Willow said quietly as she slid in toward the window.

She felt Tara’s hand sneakily clasp hers between them and shot her a secret smile.

“There you go making my heart beat again,” she whispered and they rubbed shoulders knowingly.

The bus set off with a small jerk and lurching sound, making Willow grab onto the seat in front of her.

“Maybe a little bouncy.”

It was ‘a little’ bouncy for five or six miles, at which point the ride evened out completely because the bus whined and groaned to a full stop. They heard that puffing sound again and this time saw the smoke to accompany it.

They shared a pained look.

A couple of hours idling by a Thai roadside later, they jadedly boarded a new bus and remained tense the whole way into the city that they would get there unscathed. Willow followed the route on her phone so they knew when to get off, but they still ended up skidding onto the sidewalk when it barely stopped to let them out.

“Jeez,” Willow muttered, placing a hand on Tara’s back to keep her steady, “You okay?”

“Just tired,” Tara replied wearily, lifting her bag up to head inside the hostel they were dropped at.

Willow went to the desk to get their key, regaining a little bounce in her step.

The bounce was gone as she approached Tara again.
“Funny story…” she said, with a chuckle that shook in her throat, “This place has two locations…”

Tara’s eyes sunk even deeper before closing as her facial muscles tensed.

“Have I told you how pretty you are lately?” Willow said, gnawing on the corner of her lip.

Tara lifted her bag back up from the ground.

“Just tell me where we have to go. My eyes feel like they're gonna bleed.”

They went to find another bus stop to cross the city and had to squeeze themselves onto it. This bus ran without engine congestion but in bumper-to-bumper traffic congestion instead, which felt like the worst of the two right then. With the heat from the sheer volume of passengers pressed into the small space, it was suffocating. Willow was lucky to be pressed into Tara; Tara wasn’t faring as well and was getting up close and personal with the armpit of a Thai businessman.

Neither of them wanted to see another bus for a while when Willow finally pushed Tara to get her attention so they could jump off near to the actual place they had a room booked in.

The city actually seemed quite vibrant but they were basically walking corpses as they trudged down the streets and couldn’t appreciate it.

“I think this is it,” Willow said, stopping at a door to a small, narrow building wedged between two larger building either side and checking the sign, which was just some chalk scrawled on a board stuck to the door, “Uh, yeah. This is it.”

Tara came to the counter with Willow this time, mostly for something to lean on and almost cried with relief when she saw the key being handed over.

The relief was momentarily short-lived as she realized they had to climb up two flights of stairs but finally, they got up there. She recognized the room number and what felt like miraculously, the key worked and the lock opened easily.
Willow let them in, but they had to squeeze through one by one as the door wouldn’t open the whole way with the foot of the bed blocking it.

There was just about enough room for them both to stand between the bed and the wall, but that suited them fine right at that moment; neither wanted to be vertical anyway.

Tara pushed herself out of her worn-to-the-sole flats and collapsed stomach-down on the bed, not to move for the entire night.

Willow didn’t even get her shoes off before joining her.

Willow woke with a grumble.

Already this day felt off.

She rolled over and blinked sleepily; taking in her surroundings, remembering where she was.

Where she wished she wasn’t.

The mattress was a lot lumpier than she remembered falling asleep on. Absent was a big lump beside her that would have made up for it all.

She glanced at the empty spot in the bed beside her and sighed. No morning snuggles for her.

She sat up and pulled her bag onto the bed because there wasn’t enough floor space for both her and it. She undressed from her stiff, crinkled clothing and her nose scrunched when she got a whiff of herself.

“Shower, now.” she said to herself, unrolling her robe and pulling it over her before grabbing her shower bag to head off and find the bathroom.

She guessed its location by the winding line out the door, which she quickly saw was because there were only two showers available for use with the rest boxed off as out of order. After unsuccessfully
checking for Tara in the line, she took her place in it, holding her robe close to her body so as not to share any of her stink.

In an unintended and unnoticed show of synchronicity, Willow stepped into the left shower as Tara exited the right, holding her robe closed just as Willow had, though for a different reason. She didn’t have the luxury of modesty, of changing in the shower stall, when there was a line waiting.

She returned speedily to the room with her flip-flops flapping at her heels and knocked at the door.

There was no answer.

She frowned.

She was sure Willow would be up or at least awake; she’d been making her stirring noises when Tara had been heading out the door for the bathroom. Tara had actually wanted to snuggle back up with her but the call of nature had been too strong.

She knocked a little more loudly and pressed her palm on the door but there was nothing.

After a few minutes of awkwardly trying to shrink herself into the wall, she started knocking more insistently.

“Willow?” she called softly, then again a little louder, “Willow?”

“Tara?” Willow’s voice came, but not through the door as Tara expected.

Tara turned around, clutching both sides of her robe together in a fist while the other hand tugged the hem downward so it didn’t ride up. Her eyes widened when she saw Willow.

“I thought you’d be in the room. I left the key.”

Willow’s face took on the same expression.
“I thought you took the key!”

Tara’s head slumped forward with a groan. Willow tossed her hair towel over her shoulder and closed her hand over the doorknob. She turned it, expecting it to be fruitless but at least a show of doing *something*, but to her surprise, it opened.

She glanced over at Tara, who hadn’t lifted her head yet and decided to wing it.

“Oh hey, look, I had it.”

Tara looked up and lifted her fist so her palm lay over her heart. She walked in front when Willow held the door open for her and sat on the edge of the bed.

Willow turned the knob a few times as she walked in and shrugged, before stepping over Tara to have a spot to stand in. She started towel drying her hair and felt the last of the cool water droplets evaporate from her skin.

“Did you get any hot water?” she asked Tara.

Tara watched the v shape in the front of Willow’s robe widen and show her a glimpse of breasts from the side.

“About a minute,” she replied after looking away and clearing her throat.

“A minute more than me,” Willow griped, hanging her towel on a hook on the wall.

“Oh, baby, are you cold?” Tara asked sympathetically but not without some throaty undertones.

Willow felt a little shiver at the base of her spine but she wasn’t sure if it was because of Tara’s words or the way she said it.
“It’s not the warmest room in the world…which is impressive because I know how hot it is outside.”

She glanced down at Tara, whose legs had involuntarily parted along with her mouth.

“I-I could warm you up,” Tara offered, her eyes fluttering upward shyly but suggestively, “If you want.”

Willow didn’t think she could look all that attractive right now with her hair likely sticking out at all angles from its lack of brushing and her skin translucent from her cold shower, but there was no denying that Tara’s look was lustful.

Tara had always had a habit of looking at Willow and making her feel like she was wonderful.

Feeling goosebumps noticeably distinct from those brought on by the brash spray of cold water, Willow stepped over into Tara’s space. She gasped softly when Tara reached out and tugged the tie free on her robe, leaving it open at the front and her exposed.

Tara then tugged either side of Willow’s open robe, pulling her into her own lap and placing her palms down on Willow’s thighs.

Willow felt herself tingle directly under where Tara’s hands splayed out on her skin; the sensation rising quickly and settling between her legs in a liquid heat she had forgotten was quite so there.

An inch up and Tara would start to feel exactly what her presence was doing.

Tara looked up at Willow and pulled her closer, spreading Willow’s legs even further.

Willow gulped as their faces got close enough to feel each other’s breath.

“Hi.”

“Hi,” Tara returned softly before pressing her lips up against Willow’s.
Willow felt the breath rush from her lungs at first contact and was suddenly very aware of how bare her skin was and how bare Tara’s skin wasn’t. She pushed back Tara’s robe at the shoulders, who shrugged the material off and tugged the tie free, then lifted her arms to pull them through the sleeves so it sat crumpled beneath her.

Willow moaned as her thighs brushed Tara’s and used her hand to hold Tara’s face and tilt her up to deepen the kiss. Tara responded enthusiastically and lifted her hands to Willow’s butt, holding her there as they scrambled back onto the bed together.

Willow landed on her back with her open robe splayed out around her body. She opened her legs as Tara climbed between them and exhaled shaken breath as Tara’s body slid up against hers.

She was certainly warmed up now.

She sought Tara’s lips again to resume the kiss and moaned again as Tara palmed her breast between them. She brought her hand around to find Tara’s breast too and rolled her nipple until she could feel Tara’s hips jerking in synced response to her movements.

Tara’s mouth fell into Willow’s neck and Willow felt a gentle but definitely noticeable press of teeth into her skin, making her whole body arch unexpectedly.

“Oh, mmmh!”

Tara’s face rose in concern.

“Did that hurt?”

“So good,” Willow panted, wrapping her arms around Tara’s shoulders to pull her back down again.

Tara began suckling on the skin where Willow’s neck met her shoulder, feeling every shudder through Willow’s back from how close they were pressed together.
With Willow writhing more and more, Tara’s thigh ended up between her legs; pressing with the same intensity of her mouth on Willow’s neck.

Willow groaned with almost-satisfaction and Tara answered with her own upon feeling just how wet she’d made Willow. Feeling that un-ignoreable strong pull below her stomach, Tara started to aim her kisses lower; leaving messy kisses all down Willow’s body as she grew closer and closer to the apex of her thighs.

With one last press of her lips barely above Willow’s mound, and with Willow taut and on tenterhooks waiting for that first dip between her legs, Tara ducked her head ready to feast on what was offered.

Her mouth was poised, Willow’s legs were spread and Tara’s breath was close enough for them both to notice. Tara smiled up at Willow, who thought she might completely lose it at the way the little, crooked incline made her stomach flip, and slid her palms onto Willow’s stomach, scratching lightly.

“Please, Tara,” Willow groaned; Tara’s short nails on her flaming skin feeling every bit as carnal as if she were touching lower.

Tara felt her own pulse of arousal at Willow’s soft beg.

Her cheeks hot, she dropped her mouth; her tongue out and a millisecond away from contact… when there was a frantic knocking at the door.

Willow groaned again, but it was not with pleasure this time.

Tara looked up and over to the door, then up at Willow, who had her arm thrown over her eyes while her chest heaved with labored breath.

There was another knock and Tara shook her head while sliding off the bed to tie her robe back over her body.

There was another knock.
“I’m coming!” Tara said in frustration.

“I’m not,” Willow grumbled and Tara only had a second to look at her before she suddenly saw the door was opening to an unobstructed view.

“Oh!” she said, leaping forward to stop it, standing in the space between it and the wall, looking at the young man on the other side whose eyes were wide with alarm, “Um, yes, can I help you?”

The man gestured her out.

“Come now! Come now! Must go! Fire!”

“What?!” Tara exclaimed, unsure if she was picking up the pronunciation right.

“Fire!” the man repeated and for the first time, Tara could smell burning.

Willow apparently did too because she appeared behind Tara, her robe also fastened back over her body.

“Tara?”

Tara just grabbed Willow’s hand and pulled her out, following the guy toward the exit where the rest of the hostel was gathered along with nosy passersby.

Once they were sure everyone was out, Tara hid behind a bush and held her robe closed yet again, trying her best to ignore the stares of some ogling men passing by who were more interested in the scantily clad women escaping than the fact that there might be a fire. While she tried to disappear into the foliage, Willow went to try and figure out what the hell was happening (and if all her precious electronics were going to be okay.)

“Someone left oil burning,” Willow said when she’d found Tara again, “It’s contained now though, we can go back in.”
“Why wasn’t there a fire alarm?” Tara asked, eyes flashing with concern.

“Broken, I guess?” Willow suggested, lifting her hand to her face to nibble the skin on the corner of her thumb, “I may have been a little trigger happy when booking this place. I didn’t read the reviews.”

Tara crossed the arm that wasn’t holding her robe closed across her waist self-consciously.

“I don’t think I’m comfortable staying here. It’s New Years’ Eve, people will be crazy. I don’t feel safe.”

“Yeah, I’m 100% with you there,” Willow nodded, “I’ll find us somewhere else. With better reviews. And fire alarms. And locks.”

“Locks?” Tara asked and Willow quickly looked away.

“Hmm?” she said, then moved behind Tara to guide her inside, “Let’s just go pack our stuff, yeah?”

Tara didn’t object and walked forward back into the building. They climbed the stairs up to their room and went to opposite corners to get some clothes on because that was the only area with available space.

“ Weird,” Willow said under her breath after a minute.

“What?” Tara asked as she picked out a new shirt from her bag.

Willow lifted her pile of clothing and dropped it piece by piece.

“I just can’t find my bra…I only took it off this morning.”

Tara put her fresh clothing aside and looked through what she’d taken off earlier.
“Um, my bra is gone too,” she said, brow creasing into a furrowed v, “…and the underwear I took off. That’s…weird.”

“Very weird,” Willow agreed.

Tara looked up slowly.

“Did…someone take it?”

Willow suddenly hoisted her bag up onto the bed to check all of her pockets.

“Nothing else is gone…passport, money, laptop, all here…why would somebody just take—”

She suddenly looked up wide-eyed and Tara’s face returned the same look.

“We’re leaving. Right now.”

They both got dressed at the speed of light and left without even leaving the pointless key back to the desk.

They went to the Starbucks at the end of the street to get some iced coffees and breakfast and use the wifi while they planned their next move. If there was anything they could rely on, it was Starbucks being the same in every single country they visited.

Tara played with her muffin while Willow used her laptop to properly vet the local accommodation for them.

“What do you think they’re doing with our…stuff?”

“Best not to think about it, baby,” Willow advised sagely, “Okay, I got us a room in a nice place. They have all the accreditations and good reviews across all the sites. Helpful staff and clean rooms.”
“I’d fork out for a Hilton at this point,” Tara sighed.

Willow chuckled.

“Heh. Someone actually called this the Hilton of hostels on the review site,” she said, before quickly adding on, “Without the Hilton prices. Though it is a little inflated because of the date. You still wanna go private?”

Tara just looked over with an arched eyebrow and a slowly spreading grin. Willow matched it and reached across and tucked her hand into Tara’s.

“I’m sorry I messed up with the room.”

Tara squeezed Willow’s fingers.

“It’s okay. You’ve been amazing planning everything for us. Way better than I could have ever done.”

“Are you kidding?” Willow asked with her own arched eyebrow, “All of this is because of you. You did literally years of research.”

“But you put it all in a spreadsheet we could reference and you get all the best tips from other travelers on social media,” Tara explained, then smiled softly, “Maybe we’re just best when we’re together.”

“That I can toast to,” Willow replied, holding up her iced mocha before taking a large sip through her straw to cool off, “Kinda missing those robes now. Breezy.”

Tara just shook her head and ate a blueberry from her muffin.

They finished their breakfast and Willow packed away her laptop so they could make their way to their new hostel. They didn’t even discuss using a bus this time; it was understood that Willow would order them a cab. Neither felt like trekking across the city again with their all of their belongings as they had yesterday.
Pulling up outside the new building, they noted it was in a lot better shape than where they’d come from. Professional signage was the first promising indication and then the faint, not-overpowering smell of potpourri on their arrival made them both breathe easy.

That was until Willow returned from the desk, looking at Tara with a pained smile.

“You’ve given me that look far too often in the last 24 hours,” Tara said warily.

Willow released a balled fist.

“Right place, wrong time… room isn’t ready.”

Tara sighed.

“Of course it isn’t.”

“We did just book it,” Willow tried to reason optimistically, “We can leave our stuff though. Go out and explore. Spend the day together…”

Tara’s face slowly softened into a smile.

“That would be nice.”

“Here, let me take your bag,” Willow offered chivalrously.

Willow took the bags to the desk to put them in the left luggage closet then returned to Tara with a bit more bounce in her step.

They linked arms and headed back out, stopping almost immediately at a 7-Eleven to buy water, with their usual water bottles still packed with their luggage.
“Forgot how sweaty the plastic is,” Willow said as the bottle rolled around in her sweaty palm, “Bad for the environment and my frustration levels.”

Tara offered to take it but Willow just knocked it back and tossed the bottle instead.

They found their way to the train system, a vast improvement on the bus system, which used elevated rail lines to navigate the greater city. It was comfortable and had a bird’s eye view the whole way into the metropolis.

“I’m always blown away by all the high-rise buildings…the tallest building in Sunnydale is the church with the bells,” Tara said as she looked around, and up, in awe.

“Which one?” Willow joked, then tapped Tara on the upper arm, “Hey, that’s a good idea, actually. Let’s go visit one of the temples.”

“Oh, I’d love that,” Tara replied sincerely.

They found their way to the most ornate temple in the city, a building that enveloped their whole eyeline with colorful monuments and statues.

They stood staring for a moment until a man approached, grinning and offering leaflets offering them a shopping tour.

“Oh, no thank you,” Tara said politely, but he kept pushing the flyer in her face and Willow had to intervene and walk them away.

“Come on, let’s check it out inside.”

They joined the line of other tourists and Thai people waiting to worship.

Willow closed her sweater when she spotted people up ahead stepping aside to lower their sleeves or being turned away for being in shorts. Once inside, they were met with opulent designs; murals of
mythological creatures and mosaics of Buddha against gold walls. Every surface was covered in unique Thai and Buddhist art and was overwhelming but beautiful.

“There’s a goddess named Tara in Buddhism,” Willow read off a plaque, then smiled over, “Sounds right to me.”

“My mom told me she named me after the goddess Tara,” Tara replied quietly and respectfully, “She knew it from Wicca, so there must be some kind of cross-pollination of the religions.”

“There usually is,” Willow replied with a chuckle, then frowned, “Wait, Wicca? I thought she was a Christian.”

“Religion of necessity, I think?” Tara replied with a slight shrug, “She said her mom dabbled and she always wanted to explore it too but didn’t feel comfortable.”

“Your mom wants to be a witch?” Willow asked, eyes lighting up, “That’s so cool.”

“Not the dancing naked kind,” Tara joked, before a line furrowed in her brow, “I don’t think.”

Willow smirked and lowered her voice between them.

“I could be persuaded to convert if we could be the dancing naked kind.”

Tara ducked her head without a word but raised her gaze after a moment with a look that silently said a lot more.

They walked further down the hallway, where Tara stopped to admire a huge mosaic of mirrored glasses until she noticed Willow had an extra pep in her step beside her.

She turned and leaned in quietly.

“Do you need to use the bathroom?”
Willow tried to still her body by hugging herself.

“Yeah, how’d you know?”

“I know your pee dance. You should go find somewhere,” Tara said kindly but insistently.

Willow nodded once.

“Meet you back here?”

“Okay, sweetie,” Tara agreed, rubbing her hand down Willow’s back and off her body.

Willow walked off with purpose, keeping an eye out for any signs that might direct her where she needed to go.

She wound up shimmying back through the entrance line to get outside, where crude designs of men and women guided her to a huge line of waiting people to access a small building with likely few facilities.

Willow grimaced.

This was becoming A Situation™.

She whipped out her phone and did a quick search for bathrooms but it wasn’t the most accurate of findings. A public toilet did pop up but it was still at least 4 or 5 blocks away.

She hurried along the streets with a hyper-focus ahead; her legs crossing and uncrossing every few seconds like she was following an exercise regime along the sidewalk. Though the looks she received from locals all seemed to be accompanied by an eye-roll that screamed ‘American’ so maybe it wasn’t all that unusual.
She finally turned down the right street but all she saw was a tin shed on grass that had an open doorway and a sign proclaiming it to be ‘free toilet’.

Operating under the idiom of ‘beggars can’t be choosers’ Willow skidded inside and was momentarily relieved to find stalls. She pulled her sleeve up over her hand to push open the door and gulped as she was faced with a seat barely elevated off the ground and a raised pool beside it filled with murky water. On closer inspection, there was also the filthiest bucket she could imagine beside it.

With no choice, she unbuttoned her pants and called back her best ‘hide and seek’ squatting skills from her youth to keep herself steady.

"Don’t fall—don’t fall—don’t fall—don’t fall—don’t fall—don’t fall—don’t fall—don’t fall"

With overdue relief, she soon realized there was a very distinct lack of anything resembling toilet paper around. Standing quickly lest she risk the most heinous swirly of her life, she sheepishly huddled away from the toilet and took her phone out to text Tara.

What felt like hours of trying not to breathe through her nose later, Willow heard a rustling outside, then the sweet, sweet voice that solved almost every problem for her.

“Willow?”

“Yeah!” Willow called back, knocking gently on the door she was behind, “I’m sorry I made you leave the temple. Could you get it?”

A roll of toilet paper was passed under the stall, which Willow grabbed and held in revere to her chest.

“It’s okay, I was finished anyway. It was getting pretty hot in there,” Tara called back.

Willow used the bare minimum paper on herself so as not to cause a block and have to spend longer in there, then unwound plenty of tissue to use as a buffer between her and the bucket she was expected to flush with.
“That’s just a byproduct of you being in the room.”

“Are you trying to charm me from your bathroom stall?” Tara asked, her crooked smile apparent in her voice.

A moment passed before Willow spoke again, very aware of the dichotomy of what she was doing and what she was saying.

“Is it working?”

Another beat.

“Yes.”

Finally, Willow was able to free herself from the stall and came out to Tara standing nearby, also careful not to touch anything, clutching the rest of the opened pack of toilet paper.

“What do you have all that for?”

“I had to buy some at the 7-Eleven. They don’t sell it by the roll,” Tara replied, then smiled softly, “I was able to buy a little goddess statue for my mom by a street vendor, though. I-I think he probably ripped me off, but he's just trying to feed his family too y'know?”

“It can be our gift to the next unfortunate woman who comes in here,” Willow suggested.

“The statue?” Tara asked, brow furrowed.

“The toilet paper,” Willow replied with an amused grin as she took the paper and left it by the stall door.

She walked to the sink and tried to figure out the best way to negotiate the taps without leaving her hands germier than before.
“You know there’s a fancy shopping mall like a block away, right?” Tara said, taking a step toward Willow and folding her hands in on herself again.

Willow looked over with a pout.

“I do now!”

“And you literally passed a bunch of McDonalds and stuff to get here?” Tara said sympathetically but quite pointedly.

“I just searched public bathrooms,” Willow frowned as she shook her hands free of water, then continued defensively, “My brain space was taken up with not wetting myself!”

She approached Tara, who was already taking out a small bottle of hand sanitizer from her bag, which Willow applied liberally and gratefully.

“I’m sorry I have so many bathroom-related emergencies.”

“Getting you toilet paper is the, um, most favorable outcome when you tell me you have a bathroom emergency,” Tara replied kindly, “Do you want to go back to the temple or check out the shopping mall with the better toilets?”

“To shop or to pee?” Willow questioned with one arched eyebrow.

“Mostly the first and the second if necessary?” Tara offered reasonably.

Willow nodded surely.

“So normal mall procedure then.”

She leaned in to kiss Tara’s cheek in gratitude and couldn’t help nuzzling for a moment.
“You smell so good I forgot how much it stinks in here for a second,” she said softly, but quickly moved back and pulled a face, “But seriously, I haven’t smelled anything this bad since Xander hit puberty. Let’s get out of here.”

She grabbed Tara’s hand to pull her back outside. Polluted city air had never felt so fresh.

Tara showed Willow the little statue she’d bought and Willow squeezed her hand affectionately.

“My Tara is prettier.”

Tara blushed lightly and packed it away again.

“I want to get a postcard and send it to my mom before we leave.”

They walked to the mall and decided they were hungry purely from sweat loss, so stopped to get lunch before checking out the stores. Both felt slightly disconcerted that they could have easily been in a mall at home, albeit a much grander one than Sunnydale had to offer. The temple had been difficult to navigate but felt like a real experience of the local culture. This was very westernized.

“Confirmed,” Willow said as she met back up with Tara after using the bathroom again, “Much, much better toilet facilities here. Soap and hand dryers and everything. That’s what I get for thinking with my bladder.”

“I think we should go back out onto the streets and see if we can find more local stores,” Tara suggested.

“I like air conditioning but I love you,” Willow mused fondly, “Let’s do it.”

Tara smiled back and they headed back out into the balmy but bustling streets to wander aimlessly and enjoy the atmosphere.

They spent the afternoon exploring, finding a river cruise to sail down and learn a little more about
the history and then did a tuk-tuk ride downtown at sunset, just for the novelty for it.

Strolling down a street filled with food vendors in every available corner, Willow pointed out a particular hanging delicacy.

“Will you eat that?”

Tara tried to keep a neutral, respectful look on her face.

“Do you want me to?”

A grin played on the corner of Willow’s lips.

“Well, yeah, kinda. I bet it’s garlicky. You’ve had it before.”

“Not that piece,” Tara replied, folding her arms over her chest.

Willow shrugged.

“Close enough. I’ve seen you devour a drumstick.”

Tara’s brow line creased and she nodded across the street.

“I’ll eat the chicken feet if you eat the deep-fried frog.”

Willow’s face fell.

“How could you even suggest that?”
Tara’s face took on the grin Willow lost.

“I bet it’s garlicky.”

Willow stuck out her tongue and pointed at another stall.

“Try that, then.”

Tara grimaced.

“What, you’re not going to eat it?” Willow teased Tara, bumping her shoulder playfully, “Oh, who’s the fussy eater now? Come on, try it.”

“No, Willow,” Tara said quietly but insistently, “No way.”

Willow relented, at least partially.

“At least try a cricket if you won’t try the scorpion.”

Willow paid for a little baggie of fried crickets and held it out open for Tara.

Tara picked one up and held it in her palm.

“Poor little cricket,” she said sympathetically, then thrust her hand out, “You eat it.”

Willow’s nose scrunched.

“I don’t know if it’s kosher.”
“You just ate a stick of pork!” Tara protested.

Willow grinned.

“It was delicious, too. Plus its cute little name; ‘moo ping’. Who doesn’t feel good when you smile every time you say what you eat?”

Tara just cocked her head and Willow dropped the smile.

“Okay, okay, I’ll eat it.”

Defiantly, she scooped up a whole handful and emptied it into her mouth. She had to crunch a little but it wasn’t altogether unpleasant. Mostly salty.

“It kind of tastes like bacon bits!”

Tara cautiously tried one but decided that one was enough.

“I don’t think cricket mac’n’cheese would catch on.”

“Not with that attitude,” Willow countered and they shared a smile together this time.

They continued to stroll as the stars got higher in the sky. Eventually, they seemed to land right bang smack in the center of the nightlife; all bustle and neon lights.

They walked through a night market, and though it seemed mostly full of knock-offs and cheap souvenirs, there was some pretty art too. Throughout, they passed bars with bikini-clad women outside trying to coax passersby in. They walked quickly past the first few, but then the bars became so close together that speeding by one just made them walk faster toward another.

Eventually, they were all but shoved into a bar. It was small with neon signs and waitresses walking around in bikinis, so exactly the same inside as out.
Barely anyone was there.

One woman approached them before they even reached the bar, in a pink summer dress that seemed positively puritan in comparison to everyone else working there. She didn’t even try to offer them a table downstairs.

“Burlesque show. Upstairs. I take you.”

“Burlesque?” Willow asked, reaching a hand behind her neck to hold it, “That’s like the…”

She imitated jazz hands but quickly stopped, blushing when she realized she wasn’t making sense.

“I’ve never been to one,” Tara said with a frown.

“Me either,” Willow replied, then glanced over at Tara, “You wanna go?”

Tara shrugged unsurely and the girl gestured at them and started to walk away.

Naïvely, they followed her upstairs.

They passed through a curtain and everything darkened, with just a red spotlight on a nearly-empty stage. There was just a Coke bottle sitting in the middle of the light.

They passed a stocky lady with a lockbox sitting at a table near the curtain, with a guy standing behind her that definitely had done a class or two of Muay Thai.

The room was tiny and smoky and filled with everyone from frat boys to an older Asian couple, sitting close together with their hands in each other’s laps.

Willow was pressured to make a drinks order so ordered two beers but was starting to feel uneasy. Tara began coughing from errant smoke coming from nearby.
Two beers were dropped to their table and Willow held hers, uncomfortably warm, in her hand.

She started to look over to Tara to see what she thought of the place when a woman came out of the stage completely naked. There was no clapping or fanfare or anything but abject horror from Willow as the woman squatted over the bottle and suddenly the cap on the cola bottle popped off.

Willow’s stomach lurched.

“Tara, this isn’t a burlesque show,” she hissed, scratching her arm as she felt her skin begin to crawl at the seediness that felt heavy in the air.

Tara’s eyes were wide toward the floor; her whole body tense.

“W-we should leave,” she said plainly but clearly as repulsed as Willow.

“Right behind you,” Willow replied, standing and pushing Tara to stand with her.

They strode back toward the exit and Tara hung at the curtain while Willow tried to pay off the beers they hadn’t even drunk.

The lady with the lockbox stared Willow down as she approached, her eyebrows knitting together into one. She demanded a sum of money Willow was sure she misheard.

“Huh? No, we only ordered a couple of beers.”

The woman started gesticulating loudly and Willow felt her mouth go dry with fear. She emptied her wallet but the woman demanded more.

“I don’t have that kind of cash on me,” she said with a helpless tone.

This did not seem like the kind of place that accepted Apple Pay.
Thinking quickly and with the large-muscled Thai man standing forward threateningly, Willow threw her thumb in Tara’s direction.

“I’ll just check with her, okay?”

The lady gave one curt nod and Willow sidled up to Tara, heart beating out of her chest.

“Tara, I need you to just nod at me and hold onto your bag,” she whispered, putting a hand there too so it seemed like she was asking for money, “Now turn around and sprint out of here; turn left. Don’t talk. I’ll be right behind you. Keep running.”

Tara’s eyes flashed with alarm and Willow held her gaze insistently.

“Trust me.”

Her hand tightening around the strap of her belt and with her fingers starting to tremble, Tara turned on her heels and ran as instructed. She heard Willow’s footsteps, at least she hoped they were footsteps and not other body parts, hitting the steps. Milliseconds later there was some yelling and then the sounds of the street as she broke outside.

With one look over her shoulder to see that Willow was tailing her as promised, she turned left and weaved through the market until she met its end.

She backed up against a wall to catch her breath and immediately started to look around desperately for Willow.

She realized she’d cut through a group of people releasing lanterns and watched as light floated up into the sky upon their release. The glow radiated downward and Tara was finally able to pick out the face she wanted to see most, searching desperately as well.

“Willow!”
Willow’s eyes flung toward Tara and she jogged over, throwing her arms around Tara’s body and heaving into her as her breath finally caught up.

“What the heck just happened?” Tara panted, gripping the back of Willow’s shirt in her fist.

Willow threw an arm back where they came from.

“Eyebrows had Mr. Beefy’s intimidating chest hair all up in my face…because that’s as high as my face reached!”

“Willow, don’t call them names,” Tara chastised softly.

“They were trying to extort us!” Willow exclaimed, feeling the thump of her pulse right down to her toes, “I thought they were going to tak—”

She suddenly stopped and looked straight over Tara’s shoulder.

“What?” Tara asked, looking over blankly at the row of vending machines, “What is—where are you going??”

Tara spun around as Willow marched past her and stabbed a finger at the glass of a vending machine, the type Tara had hoped she’d seen the last of in Tokyo.

“That’s. Our. Underwear.”

Tara looked bewildered.

“What? No, it’s probably just—”

“That’s our panties!” Willow screeched, slightly hysterical as she shook the machine.
“What are you doing?” Tara exclaimed, throwing her hands up and taking a step back.

“Getting them back!” Willow replied indignantly, before looking over sheepishly at Tara, “Do you have any money?”

“It’s probably a coincidence,” Tara said, trying to ease the situation.

Willow pointed at the middle of the top row.

“I can see my name sewed in!”

Tara got far closer than she was comfortable and gasped softly as she saw two pairs of underwear she recognized.

“Oh my god.”

She scrambled to get some coins from her wallet and handed them over to Willow. Willow vended both pairs and retrieved them in their crude plastic packaging.

“At least you know what they were doing with them now.”

“You’re right. It was better not thinking about it,” Tara replied, her cheeks so pale they stayed white even after she realized people were watching them seemingly buy used panties, “Remind me to keep my underwear locked up with my phone from now on.”

Willow turned one pair over in her hand.

“You have to admit, it’s a pretty impressive turnaround time from acquisition to sellable product. Their business model is efficient,” she said, then quickly looked away at the non-verbal response she received from Tara, “Or not.”

Tara opened her mouth but before she could speak, she felt a drop of water hit her nose. In the time it took her to look up, the clouds had opened and torrential rainfall was beating down on them; the kind
of rain that soaked them to the bone almost instantly. Tara covered her head with her sweater, which was actually Willow’s she’d borrowed earlier, and shouted to Willow.

“I think the universe is telling us to get out of here.”

Willow grimaced in return.

“It’s supposed to be dry season!”

They set off in a run back toward the hostel and Willow whipped out the underwear to use as a rain guard over her.

“Seriously Willow?!?” Tara shrieked.

“I don’t have anything else!” Willow retorted, already picking up pace ahead of her, “You have my sweater!”

Finally drudging into their hostel, Willow threw herself against the reception desk wearily.

“We’ll take whatever room is available. It doesn’t matter how many people it’s sharing with. Anything with a bed. Anywhere warm. I’ll take a blanket on the floor at this stage.”

The polite Thai girl behind the desk asked for her reservation number and offered a friendly smile.

Willow pulled out her phone, and inadvertently the panties she’d stuffed in there.

“Uh…” she started, blushing profusely as she pocketed them again and submitted to the embarrassment as she held the email open to read, “This is it.”

The clerk took it all in her stride and typed into the computer then nodded once.
“Room you ask for not available.”

Willow’s facial muscles tensed, but the clerk continued without noticing.

“We prepare better room, same price,” she said popping under the desk again before returning with a woven basket filled with various goods, “Please accept gift for delay.”

Willow did a double-take in surprise at something actually going right.

“Oh. Thank you.”

The desk clerk slid a key across.

“Bags already in room. Please enjoy stay.”

“Thank you,” Willow replied, snatching it they lest something descend and take it from her.

She held the basket by her leg and walked over to Tara, who held a hand up before she could even speak.

“Let me guess, the sprinkler broke and our whole room is flooded? Or an elephant broke free and stampeded the whole place? Or the rest of our clothes have been stolen to—”

“We have keys and goodies,” Willow interrupted happily, holding up the basket to show her.

Tara inhaled a soft breath.

“Oh.”

“Oh,” Willow repeated, smiling brightly as she brushed their hands together by their sides, “May I take you to our room?”
Tara just nodded silently and let Willow’s hand swing down to hers so they could turn the corner toward the room.

Motivational quotes were embossed on each door and proverbs from all over the world were decorated on the walls in both English and Thai, which was a nice mix of cultures. It was impeccably clean; the soft carpet of the hallway felt plush even with shoes on.

Willow flashed the key at the sensor to let them in and felt some tension leave her when she spotted their bags in the corner, as promised. The room was easily double the size of the one they’d left, with room for the double bed, locker, closet rail and plenty of space to move between.

The temperature was ambient but Tara, the more soaked of the two, went straight over to the heater and turned it on full blast to try and dry out.

Willow backed up against the door to close it and dropped the basket at her feet. She watched Tara rub her hands together above the swell of hot air for a moment before deciding she was just too drenched for it to make any difference and started to strip down to her underwear.

Willow watched Tara’s clothes peel away from her damp skin with just the glow of the moon peeking in the window showing the shimmer against her muscles.

Willow’s eyes roved in a trance for a moment before she pushed herself away from the door and strode over in a few steps, taking Tara’s cold hands in her own. They grew warm from a sudden rush of blood through her skin.

“Maybe we should try body heat.”

Tara felt her fingertips tingle as Willow linked theirs together and gently tugged her back toward the bed. Willow’s hands moved up to Tara’s neck and Tara let out a sound between a hiss and a moan as those warm palms burned her skin so much she was sure she heard a sizzle.

They bumped awkwardly against the bedframe, making Willow glance over her shoulder and painfully away from Tara’s lips.
“I’ll just turn on a light,” Willow said, dropping her hands and making Tara feel the loss acutely.

Tara ducked her head for a moment and caught her breath, then sat on the bed and scooted back to sit against the headboard. She wrapped her hand around the post, appreciating something to hold on to. It had been a while since she’d known anything between the pillow and a wall.

She watched Willow’s outline feel around for a switch, then realized there was one just beside her.

“There’s a lamp,” she called out, reaching out to pull the cord and letting the room flood with low, soft light.

Willow turned back around and smiled at Tara’s form, warm in its glow.

“That’s… really nice.”

She took a step forward before she paused again, her eyebrows shooting up.

“Oh! Um…”

She strode over to her backpack and began zipping and unzipping the pockets while Tara tried to stop from feeling self-conscious as she lounged in her underwear.

Finally, Willow pulled out her travel speaker and Tara could see her fingers were shaking as she set it down and brought her phone out to connect. The panties again decided to peek out with it and Willow finally stuffed them safely back into the pocket she’d just vacated instead of the trash can.

It was a funny story; Tara would laugh about it one day too and they’d have the souvenir. She was definitely going to wash them before repackaging them though. With bleach.

Her thumb ran along the screen of her phone and the recognizable notes of their playlist began to play, low like the light. Willow popped up again, wringing her hands around in front of her as she faced Tara.
“Can I do anything else?” she offered, eager to please.

Tara made a circle with her palm on the bedspread beside her.

“You can get up here.”

Willow’s smile grew impish and she sprung onto the bed with a soft bounce. She climbed over Tara, who shifted downward and slid her hands behind Willow’s neck, bringing their foreheads together to touch.

Willow’s damp clothes against Tara’s bare skin felt abrasive and scratchy but Tara could feel their noses brushing and their breath mixing and the moment their lips fell against each other there was nothing in the world but that sweet sensation.

For a minute or two anyway, until those lips gave way to tongues and both sets of hands were pulling Willow’s shirt out of her pants and over her head.

Tara’s palms slid across Willow’s spine, warm now and getting hotter with each caress of skin.

“Oh Willow,” Tara breathed into Willow’s neck as her mouth left kisses there.

Her fingers slid downward, lapping at the waistband of Willow’s capri pants and dipped beneath to where she expected more light fabric but was met with bare skin.

“Are you not wearing any panties?” she asked, breath labored and pupils dilated with desire.

Willow looked over her shoulder at Tara’s hidden hand.

“We got dressed in such a rush…” she said, slowly turning her head back to Tara’s face, “I guess I forgot.”

Tara’s lips parted and her tongue poked out to lick them.
“Oh, okay,” she said as if her lower half hadn’t just turned to pure liquid, “M-Mustn’t be very comfortable.”

A slow grin spread across Willow’s face.

“Can you help me with that?”

“Yes,” Tara nodded resolutely and quickly tugged her hand away from Willow’s butt and brought both around to undo the button.

Willow moved off to the side so Tara could see what she was doing and lifted her hips when Tara kneeled to pull the pants off.

Tara’s hands spread on Willow’s thighs and her chest flushed as her gaze focused between Willow’s legs. She stared for a moment at the damp display of red hair, then dropped her head to kiss just above.

As Willow took in a sharp breath, Tara started moving upward back toward Willow’s face.

Her hands delved behind Willow’s back and with an accommodating arch, she unhooked Willow’s bra. With a finger pulling on either strap, she pushed it down Willow’s arms and off her body. Her mouth landed on the swell of Willow’s breast, kissing in a circle as she rose toward the dusky nipple, rippling tauter with each press of lips against skin.

Willow’s teeth dug into her lower lip when Tara’s tongue swirled around her nipple. She gasped sharply when she felt a graze of teeth rake against her sensitive skin, shooting sparks straight between her legs and making her body hop off the bed.

Her fingers ran through Tara’s damp hair which still managed to feel soft and silky and then stretched down to free the clasp of her bra.

She fumbled for a moment but slipped all three hooks out, feeling Tara’s bared breasts press into her stomach as it fell away completely.
She pulled at Tara’s neck once just to feel them rub against her again, then again more insistently when the scream of her lips to be bruised with kisses became too loud to ignore. Tara’s mouth stayed open as her head left Willow’s breast to answer the call; her tongue slipping between Willow’s lips as soon as it was able.

Willow’s body arched up into Tara and she rolled them over in one surprisingly graceful movement. Well, until her head knocked against Tara’s head a bit too forcefully.

“Shit!”

“It’s okay,” Tara panted lightly.

She placed two fingers either side of Willow’s face and tapped them gently. She smiled, then let out a little giggle.

“C’mere.”

Cautiously Willow let their faces be brought together again.

After Tara released a little laugh into her mouth, it was infectious and they giggled together between kisses and getting hands lost in each other’s hair.

“Sorry,” Willow mumbled after a few minutes and brushed her thumb over the spot on Tara’s forehead that had been bonked.

Her hand fell away and downward, pushing the front of Tara’s panties against the wetness laying there.

Tara let out a whimper and tried to push her hips up against Willow’s hand.

“Forgiven…” she moaned, her eyelids fluttering open and locking with Willow’s, bashful and yet spilling with desire, “B-But only if you don’t stop…”
Willow knew her pupils must be as blown as Tara’s; her vision was actually hazy with the lust she could feel pouring out and between them. She watched Tara’s smile slope up on one side and suddenly she couldn’t get her hands around Tara’s panties fast enough.

She slid them down Tara’s smooth legs, where they dangled off an angle before falling off a foot pointed downward. It joined the floor in being a closet for the rest of their forgotten clothes.

She cupped her hands around Tara’s hips and gently pulled Tara down before lying between her legs and pressing kisses to the crease of her thigh.

Tara’s legs spread and what was Willow to do? She could resist everything except temptation.

She sank her lips right into Tara, licking her length slowly.

Tara felt Willow moan against her clit and returned the noise, though it got stuck in her throat as a guttural groan fought to be released first.

The urgency passed down and Willow began to lavish her with deep kisses, making Tara slicker and slicker with each flick of the tongue. Tara could feel her inner muscles pulling and yearning and she wasn’t sure if Willow could feel the ripples or was just that in sync with her, but she felt two long fingers plunge into her right at the moment she wasn’t sure she could stand the emptiness a second longer.

Her hand shot back to grab a slat in the headboard.

Yes, she was definitely grateful to have something to hold on to.

“Oh yes,” Tara breathed, rolling her hips up into Willow’s mouth.

Her knuckles were white on the headboard and her chest turned red. The flush continued downward, though only produced a fuller pink. Her insides were swelling with heat but the air felt cold above her; the absence of any weight on top of her making her feel hollow.
Her fingers fell away from the wood and her hands reached down to squeeze Willow’s shoulders.

Willow glanced up and saw Tara’s pleading eyes. Her hand stilled for a moment as she lifted herself back up Tara’s body to kiss her. Tara moaned at her taste on Willow’s lips and wrapped her legs around Willow’s hips to encourage her to plunge those fingers even deeper.

Willow focused on the steady pump and gentle curl of her fingers as her own hips desperately fought for some friction to relieve the hot thump radiating from her middle.

Tara listened to the groans spilling out near her ear and turned her head to kiss Willow’s neck.

“Willow?” she panted softly, unsure if those noises were veering too far into pain territory.

Willow paused and rested her forehead on Tara’s. Their noses bumped against each other as sweat kissed each other’s brows.

“Can you…c-could you…”

Tara felt Willow’s arousal brush against her belly, leaving a wet patch. The heat could have burned a hole right through her.

“Yes!” she moaned in both exquisite enjoyment and answer.

She unhooked her legs and let them roll onto their sides. She brushed her palm against Willow’s triangular patch of red hair as she slipped a hand between her legs. Her fingers glided easily against Willow’s lips and were engulfed, making them both groan together.

Willow had to close her eyes to dull her senses enough to be able to focus on the give and take but Tara didn’t want to make it easy as her mouth started to suckle on Willow’s neck.

“Oh god,” Willow moaned, her other hand stretching behind Tara’s neck and her fingers weaving into the sheet.
Their hips rolled toward and away from each other in a different tempo but even rhythm; their bodies shifting closer and closer together with every wave.

Tara pulled Willow’s ear lobe between her teeth which caused a delightful jerk in Willow’s wrist that Tara felt deep inside her. Willow’s fingers pressed deep enough to open the floodgates and she felt the heat start to swell tightly in her belly. She found Willow’s mouth again and kissed her with all of that intensity.

Her hips thrust forward more insistently and her hand slid over Willow’s hand to guide her into pressing against her clit, which was hopping for attention.

“I got it,” Willow breathed into Tara’s mouth, taking over the movement and feeling a shudder quake through her as Tara returned the hand movement on her, “Oh wow.”

Tara chuckled, deep and throaty and Willow pretty much came on the spot. She threw her head back and groaned loudly. Tara kissed Willow’s bared throat and buried her face into Willow’s neck as her own orgasm washed over her.

Their legs had tangled enough to lock them together but there was just enough space between them to allow their slowed (but not completely stopped) arms separating their hips to elongate their shared blissful moment.

There was a crackle of noise but neither moved much except for Willow to sluggishly open her eyes. They found the window where shots of color were exploding in vibrant bursts.

“Are those really happening or are they in my head?” she asked hazily.

Tara looked over her shoulder as a spherical break of green and blue fireworks erupted in the sky.

She turned her head back and kissed Willow, murmuring against her lips.

“Happy New Year.”

Willow smiled against Tara’s mouth and gingerly lifted both hands to cup her face.
Tara wrapped her arms around Willow’s waist and pulled their bodies flush together. Their lips vibrated through each other’s moans and softly parted.

Tara kissed along Willow’s shoulder blade and looked over at the basket sitting by the door.

“Is there any food in that hamper they gave us? We haven’t picked up any supplies yet…”

Willow threw her leg out and tried to curl her toes around the handle. Despite impressive pinky dexterity, she failed in her effort but was able to push it along the floor enough that she could reach out for it.

“Let me see…toiletries…tea…snacks!”

She started flicking through the little brightly colored packs.

“Dried mango, lychee candy, oolong tea, roasted green peas…spicy dried anchovies. Might give those a miss.”

“I’ll try them,” Tara offered and Willow looked at her with a nose scrunched in disgust.

“Not if you want to kiss me you won’t.”

Tara pulled the bag open and picked out one of the little crunchy critters inside, popping it into her mouth.

Willow’s lip twitched.

“Okay, I’ll try not to take that personally,” she said, her nostrils flaring before she plugged them, “That’s seriously fishy.”

“They don’t taste so strong,” Tara commented with an amused smile.
Sardines on toast had been a regular dinner growing up before her mother went back to nursing school, so she’d never minded strong fishy tastes, but this was a lot milder than the waft upon opening might indicate.

Willow didn’t look convinced so Tara leaned and pressed a soft kiss to her lips.

“See?” she said, smiling as she pulled back.

Willow pressed her lips together for a moment as if to remember the pressure of Tara’s lips against hers. The kiss had not been unpleasant, but the stench from the open bag was ever-present.

“I love you,” she said sincerely, before looking over pointedly, “Or should I say, chan rak ter.”

“You snuck that one in,” Tara grinned, “I saw it at the temple too and was waiting for you to use it.”

Willow answered with the same grin.

“Chan rak ter but that stuff still stinks.”

Tara shrugged and ate another one.

“I like them. They’re like pork rinds but fishy and seasoned.”

“You say that like it’s a good thing,” Willow replied, deadpan.

“You wanted me to eat a scorpion earlier,” Tara challenged.

“I wasn’t gonna kiss you right after!” Willow shot back.
Tara casually picked up another anchovy and popped it into her mouth.

Willow started to pout.

“Your defiance is very sexy and now you’ve put me in a very tough predicament.”

Tara looked across the bed through fluttered eyelashes.

“You want to kiss me too much to resist?”

Tara’s seductive look with those sultry eyes under those thick eyelashes was bad enough but with the sheet half strewn around her naked body and her hair still lightly mussed — Willow already felt sticky between her barely-dried thighs.

She squirmed under the blanket and tried to cover by making it seem she was crossing her legs.

“I am pretty used to having this feeling, so I have that going for me,” she said with some forced aplomb.

Tara rolled up the bag of anchovies and left them back in the basket.

“Luckily, there’s a compromise.”

“I do accept kisses in various other places with no taste buds,” Willow offered graciously.

“No,” Tara laughed, then cast her eyes down Willow’s body in a quick glance, “Well…”

Her gaze settled back on Willow’s face.

“Got a mint?”
Willow struggled to break Tara’s gaze long enough to pick up a little pink and white wrapper from their hamper.

“Uh, I have a lychee candy.”

Tara took it, tore the wrapper and popped the candy in her mouth.

Willow watched Tara’s tongue roll the candy, feeling like one of those fireworks had been set off at the base of her spine.

She took in an inward breath as Tara swooped down to kiss her and released it as a moan back into her mouth.

“How’s that?” Tara asked softly, pulling back just an inch.

“Sweet,” Willow breathed and closed the gap again quickly.

She tried to push Tara onto her back but they collided into the hamper still sitting behind them.

“Ugh,” she said, picking up the basket and pushing it off to the floor again, “Sorry.”

She scooted back toward Tara, her hand floundering above for a moment before it settled on Tara’s hip.

“Sorry,” she repeated.

Tara reached up and brushed some hair away from Willow’s face.

“You don’t have to keep saying sorry,” she said softly, her lips sloping up on one side, “It’s okay if we bump into each other. It’s understood under the, um, first subsection of the ‘bump and grind’ contract.”
She blushed and ducked her head.

“T, uh, believe.”

Her fingers curled the ends of Willow’s hair, who closed her eyes and let it relax her.

“I just feel so stupid sometimes,” she admitted, subconsciously pulling Tara closer by the hip, which was a good thing as she had spoken so quietly it was only just audible between them.

Tara gently brushed her hand down Willow’s arm.

“Why do you feel stupid, love?”

Willow smiled at ‘love’ and relaxed a little more.

“Habit of a lifetime,” she said wryly.

Tara’s eyelids flickered with emotion and she offered a comforting caress to Willow’s face.

“Would you want me to feel stupid if the roles were reversed?”

Willow shook her head and Tara placed a quick, soft kiss on Willow’s lips.

“Your new year’s resolution should be to treat yourself the way you’d treat me.”

Willow had never considered that method. It had merit.

“Okay. I’ll tr—” she paused and blinked once, really considering the vow she was making, “I will. I’ll do that. Will you help me? Remind me?”
“I will,” Tara returned sincerely, glancing down at her fingers drawing a lazy circle on Willow’s hip before moving up to meet Willow’s eyes again, “What should mine be?”

Willow slid her hand behind Tara’s neck, splaying her fingers there and letting her thumb brush the soft hair at the nape.

“Quit looking so pretty all the time and distracting your girlfriend.”

Tara looked down and chuckled silently, then reached up to hold Willow’s arm in place.

“Seriously.”

Willow inhaled and exhaled a slow breath as she thought about what was being asked.

“Well, last year… when I was such a mess… you offered one that stayed with me. And even though it terrified me at the time… it taught me that doing something that scares you opens you up to becoming a better person. And being a better person leads to a better life… if you have the balls to jump into it,” she said, her breath catching behind her words, “So, on that note…”

She turned her head in on the pillow and kissed Tara softly.

“Do what makes you happy.”

Tara felt Willow’s lips press against hers tenderly again and closed her eyes.

She’d almost forgotten saying it but she remembered now; sitting on the balcony, kissing Willow under the stars, promising to move forward. Things had turned chaotic moments later, but here they were. They’d moved forward, and backward and up and down and sideways and diagonal, but always together even when physically parted.

Willow sighed, pulling Tara back into the moment.
“My parents are probably waking up right now…getting ready for their party…planning on how to avoid questions about their delinquent daughter and her lack of accomplishments.”

“Delinquent?” Tara questioned with a raised eyebrow.

“Not going to college is a crime in the Rosenberg family,” Willow replied wryly, “I may as well have gotten probation for a year for an actual crime than to defer a year.”

Tara brushed her fingers over Willow’s arm.

“Well here’s an accomplishment…it’s only been a new year for a little bit and you’ve already made my resolution come true.”

Willow’s brow creased unsurely and Tara looked across the small gap between them adoringly.

“You make me happy…what is it you call me? Doofus?”

Willow’s smile pushed up either side of her face.

“No…” Tara continued and Willow’s smile started to falter, “You make me something more than happy. You make me feel seen. You make me feel known and loved for it. You make me feel safe and secure. You make me feel special. What’s a word better than happy?”

Willow bit inside her bottom lip to stop the giggles that suddenly threatened to bubble out.

It was no use; the urge was too strong and they burst forward along with the one-word thought in her mind.

“Gay!”

Tara immediately joined in with the laughter and they convulsed into each other.
“You make me so gay,” Tara chuckled as she recovered, wiping her eye quickly with a finger.

Willow took in some steadying breaths and released the last few giggled from deep in her belly.

“You were always gay though,” she countered, before adding on quickly when she saw the start of an arched eyebrow, “I just mean, you were always so much surer of your sexuality.”

Tara considered it and slowly nodded.

“I told you about my realization journey. It wasn’t an instantaneous thing. But I had less trouble with it than you, yes.”

“I don’t mean coming out, I mean…” Willow started, then quickly closed her mouth again, “Never mind.”

“No, tell me,” Tara replied, her confusion evident in her too-quick phrasing.

Willow raised an arm and gesticulated aimlessly with her hand.

“You were always so much more…” she started, stopping only to start again quickly, “You knew what you were doing. When we…”

She pushed out a breath of frustration at her own lack of coherence.

“You knew what you were doing.”

Tara’s eyebrow lifted as she understood what Willow was referencing. It didn’t match with her own feelings but she was careful not to deny Willow’s feelings and tried to counteract the insecurity.

“Remember what your report cards used to say? I do because they were always framed in your hallway,” she joked, her lopsided smile turning sultry as she danced her fingers up Willow’s arm, “‘Attentive…dedicated…always picks things up on the first try’.”
Willow tried to smile, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“I mean,” she started, unsure if she should voice how she was feeling and realizing she would want Tara to tell her if she was feeling this way. Starting her new year as she meant to go on, she took a deep breath before continuing, “I just feel like the… the junior partner.”

Tara’s eyebrows rose in surprise, but not without sympathy.

“Do… I act like… the big knowledge woman?”

“No,” Willow replied quickly.

Tara frowned.

“Is that no spelled Y-E-S?”

Willow glanced downward.

“S-O-R-T of.”

She saw the twitch of hurt flash on Tara’s face and her heart sank.

“Not on purpose! Just… how you are. It seems to come easy. The only time I felt confident was when I did all that research that time before we got back together in Sydney. And I think most of that was the adrenaline of seeing you again. And you… you just seem to know. I just seem to… flounder. It’s like a horizontal science fair.”

Tara breathed softly for a few minutes, processing.

“Well… I-I’m not the expert. I mean, I’ve only had the one partner,” she said, adding on pointedly, “You.”
She blinked and turned her head.

“Except…”

Willow’s face suddenly fell but Tara was already looking away thoughtfully.

“I probably allowed my mind to wander more than you. Thought about it more… did ‘more than think’ about it… more. I’m saying ‘more’ a lot.”

Willow’s heart started to calm down a little as she pieced together what Tara was saying.

“Think super hard?”

“Think…” Tara clarified, her teeth dragging over her lip, “With my hand.”

Tara could see the moment where the last puzzle piece connected in Willow’s mind.

“Oh!”

She remained wide-eyed and silent, making Tara’s fingers twitch nervously.

“I-It’s not a bad thing.”

“No, of course not!” Willow replied swiftly and with a continued resolute nod of her head.

Tara’s gaze fell, her hand falling away from Willow’s body.

“Good from… time to time.”
She dropped off lamely and awkwardness bubbled between the small space between them that suddenly felt like a huge chasm.

Willow looked up, down again quickly and then slowly up, reticent.

“Do you still…”

Tara blushed despite herself.

“I—I have, yes.”

Willow gnawed inside her lip.

“Is it…is it because we…we haven’t since, well…Fiji?”

Tara’s mouth promptly opened.

“Will—”

“I know it probably doesn’t even count because of what happened,” Willow continued in a flash, grimacing suddenly, “God, did you even…?”

The pain tumbling around her tummy could be seen on her face.

“Did you, y’know… finish?”

Tara’s mouth promptly closed.

“…just now?”
“No,” Willow shook her head quickly, “On the beach.”

Tara needed a moment to catch up with the jump.

“Oh. No. Not before they…showed up.”

Willow's eyes turned into a squint.

“So you haven’t since…” she paused and her eyes closed fully. She swallowed audibly, “…Sydney?”

“Well…” Tara replied, clearing her throat again.

“Right,” Willow replied softly, “Just not with me.”

Tara placed two fingers on Willow’s cheek, turning it in to face her and shook her head.

“Not with anyone else, Willow. Come on now.”

Willow nodded softly and let out a silent sigh before casting her eyes toward Tara again curiously.

“Where?”

“In the shower,” Tara answered honestly, before adding on quickly, “Only if it was a fully enclosed one.”

She felt the hair on the back of neck stand uncomfortably at Willow’s silence.

“And n-not if there was a line or anything. Does that bother you?”
Willow’s gaze quickly shot back up to Tara.

“No, no. God no. Sorry. I’m being childish. It’s totally okay, not that you need my permission. I just…haven’t,” she said lamely, her eyes flicking away and then back to Tara with a sunken vulnerability, “But…do I…is it ‘cause we can’t or…am I not doing enough? Should I have tried harder? Snuck you away somewhere?”

Tara sat up and took Willow’s hand between hers.

“Willow, no,” she replied emphatically, “It’s a separate thing. Well… I guess sometimes it’s out of necessity when we can’t be together, yes. But it’s not because you lack in anything. And it’s okay to just want to…be alone with yourself sometimes. In addition to. One is not a reflection of the other. Sometimes we watch a movie together and sometimes you just want to chill out and watch stuff on your own, right?”

Willow nodded slowly, understanding that.

“It just never feels like when you do it. It was more like…eating when you feel sick from hunger because you know it will make you feel better…even though actually eating is a struggle.”

Tara frowned, circling her thumb around Willow’s wrist.

“Oh honey, it shouldn’t be like that. That sounds kind of…traumatic, honestly.”

Willow looked at Tara vulnerably.

“What should it be like?” she asked earnestly.

Tara blushed and smiled, somewhat nervous and entirely candid.

“For me, it’s satisfying and makes me feel good about myself and just totally relaxes me. It’s very different from being with you, which is a whole experience unto itself. It makes me feel so close to
you like I want to cling to forever. Like I want you to take me and know me and own me. Alone… it’s just nice to feel in control of myself for a bit. Be lost in my own fantasy.”

Willow nodded and squeezed Tara hands appreciatively for being so honest.

“I guess…I spent a long time feeling pretty shitty afterward. ‘Cause I would think about you. And that made me feel guilty. So I just got it over with quickly when I had to,” she explained, then added on quickly, “But I stopped crying when we got together…slowly. But it’s still like…like scratching an itch. Not anything amazing. I haven’t even tried since I was on my own in Melbourne that time, though.”

Tara felt a small lump form in her throat.

“Y-you cried after? Because you felt bad that you were thinking about me?”

“Not since we…” Willow trailed off and smiled sheepishly, “But it’s still not like with you.”

“It doesn’t have to be,” Tara replied sagely.

Willow looked down and shrugged.

“I think I’d be boring.”

“You’re definitely not boring,” Tara replied resolutely.

Willow looked up with sparkling eyes and Tara moved Willow’s hand onto her thigh with a crooked grin.

“Sounds like you might just to get reacquainted with yourself.”

Willow blushed all over again.
“I’d just feel so awkward. Like I’m not doing it right,” she said, then frowned, “Okay, I’m starting to see the pattern of insecurity.”

Tara gnawed on the corner of her lip.

“If you want, we could do it together…work out the kinks. Or the um…logistics.”

“You’d do that?” Willow asked, surprised.

Tara nodded.

“Of course. I love, um, getting you…there. But I don’t want you to feel like I’m the gatekeeper of your orgasms. You know my body. You deserve to know your own.”

Willow looked down at Tara’s hand still holding hers over her thigh and puffed out a deep breath.

“Okay. In the ‘treating myself as deserving’ theme, this definitely qualifies. So…okay. Let’s do it.”

She jumped on the spot and looked at Tara expectantly.

“Right now?” Tara guessed off the look.

“Um, yeah?” Willow asked, an eyebrow lifting unsurely, “I mean, my refractory period is pretty much zilch.”

“Okay then,” Tara smiled and chuckled to herself, whispering under her breath, “Attentive and dedicated.”

She laid back down and Willow followed suit; settling her back against the mattress.

She moved her hands over her stomach and turned them awkwardly in place. She glanced over at
“It’s hard to be so naked.”

“And nude, too,” Tara replied softly, insightfully.

They lay in motionless silence for a moment before Tara spoke up again.

“You know, I felt guilty at first too.”

Willow’s head turned on the pillow, her eyebrow arching.

“You did?”

Tara nodded easily.

“Not because you were a girl…because you were my best friend.”

Willow’s eyes lit up.

“You thought about me?”

Tara turned her head to look at Willow as if to say a polite ‘duh’. Her cheeks flushed pink.

“I couldn’t look you in the eye for a week after the first time. I would tell myself it wasn’t you I was thinking about; that it was just a woman’s body with no head who just happened to be a redhead.”

Willow’s brow creased in confusion.
“I thought you didn’t picture a head—OH!” Willow shut herself up and stared up at the ceiling wide-eyed, “Wow.”

She only lasted a minute before looking back to Tara curiously.

“Did you…a lot?”

Tara’s shoulders shifted beneath her.

“Well, my mom works nights a good bit and Donny would be out drinking…I had the house to myself a lot,” she reasoned surely, then closed her eyes and smiled, “The first time I swear I thought SWAT teams were about to break through the window and catch me.”

She opened her eyes toward Willow, grinning.

“Then it was like a naughty little secret. I liked to read some erotic stories…the ones with good spelling, anyway. They gave me ideas and stronger fantasies…so I figured out what I liked with a little experimentation. That may be what you were recognizing…I didn’t know what I was doing…I just knew what I liked.”

Willow’s chest was flushed and hiding a steadily thumping heart.

“I’m glad I didn’t know you were reading dirty stories across the street. I think I would have imploded.”

She glanced downward at Tara’s body as if just remembering she was still naked.

“Kinda getting me going actually.”

“Yeah?” Tara asked encouragingly, moving just a little closer so the outs of their thighs brushed, “How would you normally start?”

Willow closed her eyes and lifted her hand into the air. After a brief hesitation and slight false start,
she brought it straight between her legs.

“Have you ever tried…taking the scenic route?” Tara suggested softly.

Willow cracked an eye open uncertainly and Tara took in a soft breath. She let her hand slide across her own belly and slowly crept up toward her breasts. Willow mimicked her movements and felt her body start to respond.

After a few squeezes, her nipples hardened and Willow started to get it. She’d never made herself feel all over her body before. It has always been swift and localized and definitely didn’t have this delightful anticipatory tingling.

Watching Tara do the same to herself definitely wasn’t hurting.

Her hand drifted south at the same pace as Tara’s and as soon as she found her clit again she started rubbing hard, desperate for some contact. Her body was tight and hot from all of the build-up.

Almost immediately she felt Tara’s hand cover hers and slow it down. She whimpered.

Why was Tara torturing her? Didn’t she say the whole point was being in control? She wasn’t in control when Tara’s hand was taking over!

Then almost immediately, she felt Tara angle her hand and give her some relief again by making her do two forward rolls fast and one long one back again with three fingers. Willow thought she must have stained the sheet with the intense warm gush that flowed out of her.

She groaned for the entire length of the back and forth movement. It was a perfect loop of pleasure around her abdomen and dipping lower; over and over and over again.

“There you go,” Tara whispered and kissed Willow’s cheek.

Willow felt the wisp of Tara’s lips on her skin and then she was gone; her hips swaying out of bed and out of the room.
Through a curtain Willow hadn’t even noticed was there before.

She heard a shower start to run and realized their room upgrade included a private bathroom. She really must have had the get-a-roomy eyes to not have noticed that before.

She stared at the curtain for a moment, imagining Tara stepping under the spray. Throwing her head back. Running her hands down her body…

Her eyes closed again, mind flashing with all kinds of fresh images and she felt shots of pleasure shoot to her toes when her fingers picked up their pace again.

She’d felt this before, with Tara, but she was starting to understand what Tara meant about the indulgence of it just being for you. For something that had felt so out of her control for so long, getting comfortable with herself was a whole new layer of relief.

Though admittedly she was still really focused on the physical one starting to push her over the edge.

In the end, it wasn’t the blinding fireworks and emotional eruption that sleeping with Tara was, but it was good and comfortable and satisfying and she retained a sated smile on her face as her arms bent under her head. She lay nude feeling no need to hoist up the covers.

A few minutes later, Tara appeared back from behind the curtain in a towel with her hair very lightly spritzed with water. She smiled at Willow and laid down beside her wordlessly.

Willow slipped her hand into Tara’s and returned a soft smile.

They looked at each other silently for another minute or so before Willow squeezed Tara’s fingers and spoke up just enough that she could be heard between them.

“Thank you, Tara.”

“Thank you,” Tara returned and leaned in to kiss Willow’s cheek again, lingering as Willow
nuzzled.

Tara lifted Willow’s hand to her mouth and kissed her fingers.

“How’d it go?”

Willow grinned in a way that managed to be both bashful and proud.

“Pretty good.”

“Cool,” Tara replied, her eyes creasing happily, almost looking like a wink.

“Cool,” Willow returned evenly, nodding to herself.

She bit inside her lip, looked down at Tara’s thighs peeking out from the towel and back up at Tara’s face.

“So…did you?”

“Maybe,” Tara replied coyly.

“Cool,” Willow nodded again, fixing her gaze up on the screen.

Her lips flared through a long breath, then her head turned back to Tara. After a micro-second she suddenly pounced on top of Tara, giggling.

“Oh, come on, tell me! You knew I was!”

Tara writhed against the attack, matching Willow’s laugh.
“Use your imagination!”

“It’s all worn out!” Willow protested, poking Tara in various points through her towel.

They bounced and laughed together for the rest of the night, behind a door adorned with the words:

‘Being deeply loved by someone gives you strength while loving someone deeply gives you courage’.

And inside a wall that told them:
Hi mom,
Did you know they have a goddess Tara in Buddhism too?
I learned about her in a Temple today.
I hope she helps you feel everything you wished me to feel when you named me after her.
Sa was dee pee mai (happy new year)
Tara
“Is it bad that the first thing we bought when we get to Delhi is a bunch of American candy?”

Willow watched Tara roll her lollipop over her tongue and decided she’d answered her own question with a definite HECK NO.

The raid on the international candy cart had been well worth it.

Tara popped the candy out of her mouth and twirled the stick. The fellow travelers in the minibus from the airport were all jaded and half-asleep but they didn’t have the benefit of a sugar rush.

“I wonder how many licks it really does take to get to the Tootsie Roll center of a Tootsie Pop?”

“They’ve tried to do real scientific studies, it’s really anywhere between 70 and 400,” Willow answered knowledgeably, then smiled fondly, “Remember when we were eight and we tried to do our own experiments, but you kept crunching through to the middle?”

“My stamina in licking has evolved,” Tara replied, her gaze fluttering up through her eyelashes in a sultry display, “I wonder how many it takes to get—”

Suddenly there was a cacophony of beeps and the bus lurched as it entered into erratic city traffic. The whole bus was awake now.

The lollipop went straight down Tara’s throat but thankfully popped right back out again.

“Whoa!” Willow exclaimed, slapping Tara on the back quickly, “Are you okay?”

Tara nodded and rubbed her throat.
“Guess I have a pretty established gag reflex,” she replied, not noticing Willow pursing her lips to keep from laughing. “Maybe we shouldn’t eat in vehicles over here.”

She looked out the window at the chaos of unruly traffic and gulped.

“Or…get in them at all.”

“Yeah, no kidding. I don’t want to taste the rainbow that badly,” Willow quipped in reply, then lowered her voice, “Not the kind that comes in a packet anyway.”

Tara offered a tiny smirk but was more focused on staying in her seat. She hoped their hostel stop was one of the first.

It, in fact, was the very last and they arrived frazzled and very ready to be on solid ground again. They could have used a minute to get their bearings, but almost immediately everyone who’d gotten off the bus was approached by street sellers, a lot of whom were young children, to push their wares.

They had to weave their way out and left a few unsavvy tourists standing there trying to retreat from the mob. Unfortunately, that was the kind of lesson you could only learn by experiencing it. They walked into the lobby of their hostel to check-in and find their room from there.

They were able to nab the corner bunk bed, as was their preference, with only a couple of the other beds claimed and no one else even there right at that moment.

Both of them opted to lie down for a few minutes until their stomachs returned to their usual spot.

When Willow noticed the sun starting to set outside the window, she slid out of bed and stood up on the frame to look in on Tara in her top bunk.

“You wanna go get some dinner or is your belly still north of your boobs somewhere?”

Tara pressed her palms on top of each other over her belly button.

“I think it’s appropriately positioned again,” she said with a small smile, “I’ve been looking forward to going to an Indian restaurant that doesn’t have chicken nuggets on the menu.”

Willow’s nose scrunched.
“You know what’s worse? Anu’s Kitchen was in the top five restaurants in Sunnydale on TripAdvisor.”

“Do we even have five restaurants?” Tara questioned with an arched eyebrow.

“Exactly,” Willow replied pointedly.

Tara sat up and stretched, treating Willow to a brief glimpse of skin as her shirt rode up.

“I just need to use the restroom, then we can go exploring.”

Willow hopped off the bed and Tara climbed down the ladder. Willow looked around and took advantage of a rare moment of solitude in a shared room, pulling Tara to her by the hips.

“C’mere.”

She kissed Tara for several seconds and dipped a finger under the waistband of Tara’s pants.

“I miss it when we’re not… alone-alone.”

Tara lifted her hands to Willow’s face, holding her cheeks gently under her fingers and popped a chaste kiss on her lips.

“All of me loves all of you. Alone or not.”

She left and Willow leaned back against the bedframe, smiling.

She turned back to gather her things for going out and didn’t notice that anyone had come into the room until she heard a rustling behind her. She looked around to see a dark-haired guy shoving something with reflective foil into his pocket.

He sensed eyes and looked up too.

He smiled like he had a secret.

“Hey! No way!”
Willow looked behind herself as if someone else could be there. The man scurried over to the other side of the bed to stand nearer her.

“We met before. Down under,” he said, smirking lasciviously, “You liked to get freaky in the men’s bathroom.”

Willow was bewildered and tried to turn her body away.

“Um, sorry…I don’t remember.”

The guy stepped forward, much too close for comfort.

“I can make you remember.”

Willow backed up and ended up falling down to sit on her bunk.

“Whoa.”

The guy tried to look relaxed and openly sneered in her direction.

“Come on, don’t be a prude. You’re wearing nipple clamps on your clothes for god’s sake.”

Willow’s eyebrows shot upward and she looked down at herself urgently.

“What are you talking about?”

He gestured at the top of her sweater, where the sides were being held closed by her newest set of sweater clips, which Tara had made her with monkey clips after they had visited a gibbon sanctuary in Thailand and learned about conservation efforts. It had been an enlightening and humbling experience and Willow blushed furiously at the association the man was erroneously making.

“These are sweater clips,” she said defiantly, closing her palm around one of the little monkeys, “Clearly.”

“Right, clearly,” the guy scoffed and Willow suddenly had a flashback to being holed up in the bathroom in Adelaide guiding Tara out of the bush.
And that same scoff and same face greeting her when she left.

“Wait, I do remember you. Aren’t you here with your…boyfriends or something?”

A vein popped in his head.

“Boyfriends?!!”

Willow shrugged one shoulder.

“I hear polyamory is very popular these days. Not for me but hey, I don’t judge.”

His jaw clenched and something came over his eyes that terrified Willow.

“I like women! I get a lot of women!”

“Okay, then,” Willow replied quickly, spinning out of bed to hide better behind the frame, “Well, if you’ll excuse me, I have to go meet my girlfriend.”

He dropped the anger again and leered in Willow’s direction.

“If you two are on the look-out for a guy to offer some entertainment I’m a very entertaining guy.”

“We generally find ourselves sufficiently entertained,” Willow replied, clearing her throat silently.

Another head of black hair stuck in through the door and looked straight at them.

“Warren, come on. If we don’t get there early all the pretty ones will be taken.”

Warren smirked at Willow again.

“See ya later sweet cheeks.”

He walked out backward so he could keep grinning at her until he bumped into the doorframe and quickly left through it with a scowl. A minute or so later, Tara returned, rubbing her hands together.
“Everything okay?”

“Yep” Willow replied quickly, shaking her head of the strange encounter, “Starving though. Can we go eat?”

“Yes, absolutely,” Tara replied, gathering her hair up into a ponytail, “Let’s go. On foot.”

“On foot,” Willow agreed quickly.

They stopped by the kitchen to refill their water bottles, where lots of other travelers were gathering to eat. They chatted to a Polish couple about good places to eat and how to spot bad street vendors. When they were accepted as friendly, they were given a flyer for free entry to a bar that the other couple wasn’t going to be able to use before leaving.

They headed back out onto the street which was screaming with car horns and intermittent yelling. Willow wrapped her hand around Tara’s upper arm.

“Do you have your maps downloaded? I don’t want you getting lost in all of this.”

“Yes, honey,” Tara replied diligently but affectionately, “I always do it at the airport when you remind me.”

“You’ll be thankful for my nagging one day,” Willow grinned, which was promptly wiped off her face when a rickshaw sped past them and came inches to running them over.

She pulled Tara back and only the shock stopped her from yelling after it.

“I guess on foot isn’t any safer!”

While Tara waited for her heart to slow again, she had the opportunity to take a slow look around in their surreal, chaotic surroundings. She placed her hand on Willow’s shoulder.

“Just stop for a second. Look around. Smell the air.”

“I can certainly smell it,” Willow grumbled.
“No,” Tara breathed softly, letting her gaze fall on Willow, “We’re in India. We’re really standing on the side of the street in India about to go grab some dinner that the locals eat and go to a bar that the locals go to and we get to live this and experience this in all its insanity.”

She stopped and looked away.

“I’m sorry. It just still stuns me sometimes that we’re here and we’re doing this. We’ve seen so much. We’ve done so much. We’ve grown so much. We’re just so lucky.”

The loud congestion became background to Tara’s sweet voice for Willow, who clung to her again and smiled.

“Yeah, we are. Thank you. Sometimes I need that reality check.”

Tara returned the smiled and squeezed Willow’s hand on her arm. They set off again, more careful about where and how they walked this time.

The city was bustling; completely packed with people. Derelict on one street and abundant on another. Touts everywhere vied for their attention but this wasn’t their first rodeo when it came to avoiding tourist traps.

“Tara, look!” Willow said, suddenly pointing ahead.

Tara’s eyes followed and she saw a cow meandering down the street like it owned it.

“That’s amazing,” she commented, watching it strut along with the old cars and motorbikes weaving around it, “You definitely don’t see that in Sunnydale.”

Willow smiled impishly.

“I saw Cordelia being followed down the street being yelled at by Percy West once but I guess that’s a different kind of shitbox following a cow.”

Tara cast her eyes sideways toward Willow.

“You’re proud of that one, aren’t you?”

Willow nodded with that pleased, devilish grin stuck on her face.
They were staying in the backpacker’s neighborhood, so while they had to continue to dodge the street sellers, they had endless options to eat. Soon the city smells were completely forgotten to that of fresh spices.

They walked through the main bazaar, soaking up the atmosphere and admiring the local art and fabrics. They ended up in a restaurant they noticed had a rooftop that looked out over the market and the stories-high buildings surrounding it. As they walked through to a table, they dodged potted plants and bookshelves.

The whole place kind of looked like a bookworm’s mountain hideaway but smelled like an early morning market place selling spices; rich and earthy and mouth-watering. They sat on a table under the slanted corrugated iron roof like they were in their own little hut and spent a moment appreciating the stars beginning to settle in the sky.

They played it safe with their food for the first night, ordering pakora and butter chicken and naan to share and the taste absolutely lived up to the smell.

“I think that was the best meal I’ve ever had,” Tara said when they were finished, “I didn’t even know pakora wasn’t supposed to be mushy.”

“It was really good,” Willow agreed, “We’ve had so much good food though; I don’t think I could rate it without at least a basic spreadsheet.”

Tara smiled and bumped Willow’s foot under the table. Willow blushed and averted her gaze, but lifted it again quickly.

“Do you want to check out that bar?”

Tara nodded and they slowly extracted themselves to pay and find their way around the neighborhood. With a quick look at their maps to figure out exactly where they were going, they found the bar in question and realized it was actually an open-air terrace.

The bar itself was made from an up-cycled shipping container with big speakers either side. They got a drink each and fell into the crowd, which suddenly became electric as four guys started to breakdance in front of the bar to loud Hindi pop music.

Willow watched Tara’s whole face, then body, light up as she processed the new style of music. It was upbeat and fast and almost immediately Tara was dancing on the spot.
“This is amazing!”

They must have been in a crowd of hundreds, but Willow only had eyes for Tara as she watched her feet jump and tap with the eccentric beat. She radiated joy and it was infectious.

When she held her hand out for Willow to take and join, it was taken without hesitation.

Tara swirled some Greek yogurt on her spoon and turned her back on a penetrating gaze she could feel upon her. She leaned toward Willow across the breakfast table and lowered her voice.

“Why does that guy keep staring at us?”

Willow momentarily glanced up to see Warren staring them down from across the kitchen.

“Garden variety creep,” she answered flatly, refusing to keep his gaze.

Tara covered Willow’s hand and squeezed.

“I’ll keep you safe baby.”

Willow put her other hand on top of Tara’s again and smiled just for her.

“I always feel safe with you,” she answered, rubbing her thumb over the back of Tara’s hand as her eyes found the little blinking clock on the microwave, “Hey, we should head out.”

Tara nodded.

“I’ll clean up and fill up our water bottles. Have you got the train tickets?”

Willow jumped up to head for the door.

“I’ll go print them at the desk.”

“Don’t forget the other ones,” Tara called after her.
Willow left and Tara brought their dishes to the sink to quickly wash up. As she went to follow Willow, she passed the table with Warren and couldn’t help notice his unctuous grin as he laughed with his buddies.

“Two for the price of one, gentlemen.”

Not caring for whatever retail exchange she assumed they were talking about, she left to fill their water bottles and join Willow in the lobby.

“Ready?” Willow asked, taking her water bottle from Tara.

“Ready,” Tara answered with a smile.

The train station was only a couple of blocks away but neither had gone past it since they’d been there. It wasn’t the most modern building, but it wasn’t decrepit either. Old signage, plastic seats; it wasn’t unlike a train station back in the US.

The platforms were busy, very busy as they might expect but their platform was the first one there so they were only seconds on the ground before boarding and didn’t have time to be overwhelmed by it.

It was a relatively short trip compared to how vast the country was, less than two hours, so the train wasn’t a sleeper and had just groups of seats with a table between them. It too resembled a train they might have caught at home. It wasn’t even that busy; they had a choice of seats and Tara noticed little footrests beneath each one as they walked down the aisle.

She sat down comfortably in one seat while Willow sat opposite. The seats even reclined a little. Tara’s eyebrow lifted at that feature. It majorly exceeded her expectations but it dawned on her why pretty quickly.

“Is this first class?”

“Yep,” Willow replied smugly, then frowned off the look Tara gave her, “Come on, Tara, It was $20 instead of $10. We’re not even talking dozens of dollars. There isn’t someone coming round to rub our feet; it’s just enough room to be comfortable.”

Tara looked down.

“I just wish you would check with me.”
“I’m paying for them,” Willow countered.

“I can pay for myself,” Tara replied, soft in voice but firm in tone.

Willow sighed.

“I feel like we’ve had this argument before. Why can’t I treat you or you treat me sometimes? We’ve done it before; you bought me dinner last night.”

Tara shook her head softly.

“It’s different on dates.”

Willow sat up straight.

“Well guess what then?”

Tara looked at her curiously and Willow grinned across to her.

“This is a date. And you can’t tell me a visit to the Taj Mahal isn’t romantic.”

“So romantic,” Tara mumbled as they stood deep in a line of people waiting to enter the monument with the midday sun hot and high overhead and camera flashes going off in every which direction.

Willow frowned, displeased.

“I didn’t manufacture the line.”

“I didn’t say you did,” Tara replied a little curtly, then closed her eyes for a moment, “Sorry.”

Willow just shrugged and kept her hurt eyes forward.

When they got to the front of the line, Willow suddenly realized she’d need to produce the tickets
before they could get through security. She brought her bag forward and started rooting around, casually at first, but more erratic as seconds ticked by and now they were very much at the front of the line.

She looked up and swallowed audibly.

“I think…I think I left them in the nightstand.”

Her face scrunched up awkwardly.

“I’m sorry, I thought I had them,” she said to the expressionless Indian man waiting to check the tickets, “Tara, I’ll pay for new tickets.”

“That’s not the point!” Tara replied, frustrated and uncharacteristically indifferent to their surroundings, “We’ll have to line up for them and then join this line all over again. It’ll take an hour, if not hours.”

The ticket-collector tried to intervene.

“Madams, if you do not possess a ticket please return—”

“Maybe they’ll let us skip ahead again?” Willow said to Tara, now also oblivious to the frustrated people around them.

“It’s just irresponsible Willow, why didn’t you check?” Tara shot back and Willow couldn’t avert the hurt this time.

“Why didn’t YOU check with me? Why is it always on me?”

Tara gestured with her hands in frustration.

“I did, I told you when you were printing the train tickets!”

Willow pulled a petulant face.

“Well…I clearly didn’t hear you!”
“Madams—”

“Shut up!” they both said loudly at the same time; tension bubbling out from between them and to the larger circle.

And that was ultimately what earned them an escorted walk off the premises.

Later, the story of being kicked out of the Taj Mahal before ever getting to see it would be told through laughter with a shared fond smile between them.

Right now, Tara only wore an unfamiliar scowl.

“Well done, Willow. Well done.”

She marched away from Willow, away from the curb they’d been kicked to and disappeared further into the horizon.

“Tara!” Willow called after her, but sensed not to follow, “Damn it.”

She threw her hands up in exasperation and let her head fall into her hands for a moment. What was she supposed to do now?

She slinked off to a quieter restaurant to mope and ordered a cheese paratha and a coke because breakfast seemed a long time ago. She spent a few minutes contemplating whether to text Tara or not but opted against it. She wasn’t even sure this one was entirely her fault. But she realized pretty quickly that she didn’t care whose fault it was, she just wanted them to be okay.

Wow. I guess growth sneaks up on you.

They had to get the train back together, so Willow figured she’d have to see her by then. She knew Tara must have been incredibly frustrated to tell someone to shut up like that. Her redhead temper got the better of her often but Tara never acted like that. Maybe she just needed some time alone.

She stopped pushing around her food and started to eat, piggybacking on the Wifi as she did so to look up the local city and what other attractions it offered.

It turned out, not a lot.
Tara looked west to where the sun was just starting to dip in the sky as it started its descent into nightfall.

She’d spent the day just walking around, seeing nothing but her own shoes walking forward at first, but then she looked up. And she couldn’t look down again.

The poverty was apparent even more than in Delhi with trash overflowing everywhere, all kinds of excrement and flies circling it. Hungry dogs, hungry people. It had hurt Tara’s heart. She felt so ugly for daring to complain that Willow had bought them nicer seats. For speaking with such a harsh tone.

She couldn’t even handle the surroundings for a day. The people who lived here — this was their whole life.

Eventually, she’d just gotten into a tuk-tuk that promised a tour of the city and had gotten out when she’d seen a nice park that didn’t seem too crowded. The grass and hedges were such a vibrant green in contrast to the drab and dark city and she could see water shimmering in front peacefully.

In fact, it had surprised her when she walked to the front of the park that she had almost as good a view of the Taj Mahal as if she was right in front of it; a square full-on picture of its unique shape directly across the river with nothing but the clear sky behind it.

She would have to move in a bit, to get to the train station, but she found herself unable to get up from sitting there, looking on at the monument in all its symmetrical wonder.

She felt a body slide beside her on the bench and didn’t need to look up to know who it was.

Willow’s scent was unique; strawberries and cream decorating a mocha cake, freshly baked with a cup of steaming chai tea on the side. Tara had spent years narrowing down that smell and could always tell when Willow was close by.

Willow didn’t say anything and Tara let there be silence between them for a moment before speaking softly.

“We got to see it after all.”

Willow stared ahead at the view; it looked like a painting, perfectly still.

“Do you know the story?”
Tara shook her head.

“I listened to a podcast guide earlier,” Willow explained, “Not quite the same as listening while you’re there, but I did learn some stuff.”

After another small silence, Tara reached out and lightly brushed her fingers against Willow’s arm.

“Tell me?”

Willow scooted over the last inch between them so their legs hit against each other.

“Back in the 17th century, there was this guy called Shah Jahan. He was just a teenager and he was in line to be emperor but wasn’t yet. His grandfather was this BFD who everyone loved, so he had this legacy to live up to. One day he’s showing off around the royal bazaar, flirting with all the daughters of the statesmen, showing off his dreamy eyes and whatnot. So he gets to one of the little booths and there’s the daughter of the soon-to-be prime minister. And he’s like whoa, you know?” she stopped and sent a sidelong glance Tara’s way and added on softly, “I know.”

Tara met Willow’s gaze but quickly looked away with a blush. Willow turned her head back toward the white building as it took on a soft glow under the orange sky.

“Anyway, that’s it. Boom. Love at first sight. Soulmates, engaged, the whole deal. They knew young.”

She paused again for a contemplative moment but didn’t stop looking ahead.

“He’s not allowed marry her right away, though. They have to wait five years for the court astrologist to pick out the best date for a happy marriage. And in the meantime, he’d had to marry another woman, a princess of Persia, for political reasons. Then, finally, on the allotted date, they were married and fortuitously, it was a very happy marriage. He was devoted to her and she to him. She was his advisor and confidante and just as politically astute as he was. They truly ruled the nation together for nearly twenty years. She had fourteen of his children, though only seven of them actually survived. And then, unfortunately, on her fourteenth child, she hemorrhaged and died in his arms. The emperor was distraught. Crying. Paralyzed. She was buried quickly, but six months later he had her dug up and had a procession in her honor with the streets lined with mourners and was buried again. This was when the emperor got his grand idea to build a mausoleum befitting of his wife. He worked on the architecture himself so he could be sure it represented heaven on earth.”

She smiled as she saw low-lying cloud hug the peaks of the building and had another ‘whoa’ moment of realization that she was here, now, doing this.
“It took twenty thousand men to build it in the timeframe the emperor wanted. The marble was dragged from hundreds of miles away by elephants and oxen. Everything had to be perfectly symmetrical, right down to the mosque and guest house flanking each side. There’s passages from the Quran written in perfect calligraphy into the marble and intricate flower designs are inlaid into it. The garden is full of Islamic symbology to represent paradise forever for his beloved.”

She took in a soft breath and exhaled slowly.

“It’s not just brick, it’s love written in stone.”

Tara’s breath slowly left her body in an awed sigh.

“Wow.”

“Wow,” Willow agreed softly.

They lapsed into silence again, watching the sun travel behind the Taj and cast it in different hues.

“How’d you find me?” Tara asked eventually, though it wasn’t accusatory.

“One of my special skills. I can always find you,” Willow answered, then held her phone up sheepishly, “You checked in and I got notified.”

“I didn’t even know I checked in,” Tara answered jadedly, “Must’ve been when I was taking pictures.”

“Did you take a lot of pictures?” Willow asked, rotating her thumb around the air in a discreet fidget.

Tara shook her head.

“No, only here. I just… walked around.”

Willow nodded.

“Me too. Not much else to do,” she answered, then slowly gulped, “It was intense, just walking.”
Tara’s eyes closed painfully for a moment.

“Very.”

The silence hung until Tara opened her eyes and sent a penetrating stare Willow’s way.

“Made me feel grateful.”

“Me too,” Willow replied quietly.

Tara’s eyes creased and she reached out to slip her fingers into Willow’s hand.

“Willow, I’m sorry I—”

“I’m so sorry I—” Willow blurted at the same time, then continued when Tara stopped, “Messsed up the tickets.”

Tara shook her head.

“You just made a mistake. I shouldn’t have flown off the handle. I’m so embarrassed. I never act like that,” she said apologetically and looked down, “Do I put too much pressure on you to be in charge of things like that? You book all the tickets and accommodation and things. You just seem to know how to get the best deals.”

“No, baby, I’m happy to do it,” Willow reassured quickly, “You did years of research…the day-to-day stuff is the least I can do. And you’re right, I know how to scour the internet. I’m happier knowing I’ve done the best for us. So, no. No pressure whatsoever.”

Tara looked up again.

“If you ever want me to do anything, you’d ask right?”

Willow nodded.

“Yes. And I have. And you have. I know you’re perfectly capable. You got yourself around Australia.”
Willow suddenly saw a tear threatening to spill and reached up to catch it on her thumb before it could fall.

“Baby? Did I say something wrong?”

Tara shook her head again.

“A little PMS,” she admitted. She didn’t succumb to it often but the combination of events today and overnight had her on edge. “And I didn’t sleep well. I kept hearing someone else moving around the room. I was too scared to get down to get my ear plugs.”

“Who was it?” Willow asked and Tara shrugged one shoulder.

“I don’t know, I couldn’t see without sitting up. But it’s no excuse. I wish I could apologize to that man and all the people in the line.”

Willow let her hand fall to Tara’s shoulder.

“Don’t beat yourself up, baby. I’m sorry you couldn’t sleep. If I’d known I would have snuggled you.”

Tara glanced at Willow, a different kind of glassiness coming over her eyes.

“Is that an open offer?”

“Always,” Willow promised with a sweet smile.

“How?” Tara questioned with the smallest of eyebrow arches.

Willow looked around at the few but still very much there people walking around and back at Tara.

“Um…”

Tara blushed as she realized what she’d made Willow think.

“Can we, um, go back and have an early night? Just listen to some music or something?”
Willow’s shoulders slumped in relief of the day’s tension.

“I love doing that. I’ll make us some dinner.”

Tara grimaced.

“It’s not going to be those spaghetti tacos again, is it?”

“Hey, that was an experiment,” Willow replied indignantly but with a smile, “How does your mom’s tuna casserole sound?”

“It’s a date,” Tara smiled.

“Hope it goes better than this one,” Willow replied, scrunching up her nose.

Tara lightly squeezed their fingers together.

“This one didn’t work out so bad.”

Willow smiled and quickly glanced at her watch.

“We better get to the station. I don’t want to be stuck here for the night.”

“Not when I’m craving snuggles,” Tara replied in a discreetly sultry tone.

Willow looked back with flirty eyes.

“And never let it be said that I left a Tara craving unsatisfied.”
Willow woke into darkness, her eyes slowly flickering open.

It was dead of night and though the blanket was barely draped across her body, she was warm.

This was unusual as the room had been pretty chilly previous evenings.

She didn’t remember falling asleep but when she felt an earbud still pressed into her ear and an arm thrown across her waist, she realized they must have fallen asleep when they were still listening to music.

The music had stopped, though.

Tara’s phone had died, probably. Though that explained why she was so warm with all of the body heat.

But what had woken her?

Her ears caught something that sounded like heavy breathing but that had become a sound she was accustomed to from sharing so many rooms with so many different people. But this felt close.

Too close.

And it wasn’t Tara’s saintly respiration.

Tara was nearest the wall and curled into her, so Willow shifted her body on its side facing out so she could see into the room. After a moment of adjustment into the pitch black, she noted movement near the foot of their bed. Slowly, through several heavy blinks, she realized it was a figure with their arm moving up and down near their waist.
She closed her eyes and moved again and this time when she opened her eyes, everything seemed still again.

Frowning and shaking her head, she shifted onto her other side, flung her arm around Tara and tried to go back asleep.

Tara fluffed her pillow in place on her bunk, returning it after taking it the night before to cuddle with Willow.

Her bed hadn’t been slept in so there was no need to make it and she jumped down from the first step on the ladder to the floor.

Willow was sitting on her bed, frowning at her phone. Tara sat in beside her.

“Why so scrunchy?”

Willow slapped her phone against her palm.

“My dad keeps emailing me.”

“That’s good, right?” Tara asked softly, placing her hand on Willow’s knee, “They’re staying in touch?”

“Well, yes. They are. Which is good and probably as close to normal communication that I could hope for. But…” Willow answered cagily, drawing out the last word, “He keeps insisting I visit Israel ever since I told him we were thinking of going to Egypt instead of Turkey. Wants to give me extra money to go.”

Tara’s hand fell away softly.

“Oh.”

Willow reached behind her neck and rubbed it.

“I guess it’s not a major detour…could just go for like a weekend. Get my dad to pay for a fancy hotel?”
Tara’s eyes stayed down and her voice, quiet.

“I hadn’t really considered it.”

Willow sighed.

“Yeah, I know,” she replied, leaving her phone back down on the bed, “I’ll respond later. Did you sleep better?”

“Like a log now that I had my snuggle buddy,” Tara replied with a gently sloping smile, “You?”

Willow’s eyes narrowed slightly.

“Odd dreams.”

“That’s nothing new,” Tara replied affectionately.

“At least I wasn’t speaking in my sleep this time,” Willow replied, squirming uncomfortably, “I’m, um, just gonna go to the bathroom before breakfast.”

“Okay, I’ll wait,” Tara called after her, placing her palms on her thighs for a moment and rubbing them against the fabric, before getting up and turning her back to make Willow’s bed for her.

It was the least she could do considering she’d shared the tiny space with her. Looking at it now she wondered how they even fit without falling out, but they always had just fit together.

She smiled to herself as she smoothed everything out and bent her arms at her hips to nod in satisfaction with the lack of creases.

Just as she was about to turn back, she suddenly found a pair of hands reaching around her from behind and covering her breasts.

She inhaled sharply in surprise.

What was Willow doing?
Anyone could walk in.

It surprised her that it turned her on a little bit.

Except…something was wrong. She looked down.

Those weren’t Willow’s hands.

They were big and rough and the nails were dirty.

And that smell was not Willow’s delicate aroma of afternoon tea. It was that of someone who subscribed to the ‘shower in a can’ philosophy and the distinct minty, rotted waft of someone who uses mouthwash as a replacement for teeth brushing.

She spun around and was met with Warren’s smarmy grin. His body was pressed so close he was almost touching but not quite.

His pants were unzipped but the button was tied so it wasn’t obvious, though it was obvious to Tara as she realized that something had been poking her in the back before she turned.

She stared at him in stunned silence, fearfully immobile until thankfully Willow returned and immediately came over to her side upon seeing the standoff.

“What’s going on?”

Tara slumped toward Willow for protection.

“H-He grabbed me.”

“What!?” Willow spat, her pupils enlarging so much her eyes looked pure black.

“No I didn’t,” Warren said with the air of someone who’d gotten away with this before, “There was a spider on her. Big one. Two big ones, actually.”

He stepped back with a smirk and Willow suddenly gasped quietly.

“I saw you. Last night. You were…” she glanced down, then over at Tara, “He was standing over
the bed touching himself. I thought I was dreaming it but you were really doing it weren’t you? You creepy pervert.”

Warren’s face flashed with anger and he got up close in Willow’s face.

“You didn’t wake up the night before when I came in your face and wiped it off.”

Willow didn’t have a moment to process that as suddenly she saw a fist swinging for his face and it wasn’t hers.

She heard Warren’s nose crack and then a loud, effeminate squeal as his hands rose to cup it.

“You bitch!”

Willow looked over at Tara, shocked, who was looking at her own ruffled hand with the same look on her face.

“What is going on here?” a male voice with an Indian accent boomed through the room before he appeared, skinny but tall and surprisingly well-built, and wearing a nametag with the hostel logo on it.

Warren pointed at Tara petulantly.

“She punched me!”

“He grabbed her chest,” Willow interjected quickly, standing in front of Tara, “And he’s been touching himself in front of us.”

The Indian man looked between them all unsurely for a moment before his eyes dropped to Warren’s opened fly and his face hardened.

“You out of here right now!”

Warren tried to fight him off as he was dragged out but his strength wasn’t comparable.

“She’s lying! They’re lying bitches!” he shrieked as his heels imprinted the carpet, “Dumb whores!”
Willow’s heart pounded in her chest until he was completely out of the room, then she turned to Tara, wide-eyed.

“You punched him for me.”

Tara cradled her lightly bruised hand.

“He hurt my hand,” she answered, flattening out her knuckles again.

Willow stepped toward her and took it tenderly.

“Aw,” she said softly, “Baby. That was…”

Tara expected Willow to say ‘terrifying’ or ‘disgusting’ but her pupils were blown in a whole new way.

“Really hot.”

Tara blushed but a pleased smile tugged on her lips.

“Nobody messes with my girl.”

Willow gently touched the broken skin on Tara’s knuckles and watched her wince.

“I’ll go see if they have some ointment. Sit down, okay?”

She guided Tara to sit on the bottom bunk and headed to the front desk, where their sweet Indian savior was printing a page with a hastily-taken photo of Warren and his broken nose with NO ENTRY in English and Hindi above and below it.

He looked up as she approached and stopped what he was doing.

“Are you both most okay? I must apologize unreservedly.”

“Yeah, I think so,” Willow nodded, reaching across her body to hold one arm with the other hand, “It’s not your fault. There’s creeps everywhere.”
“Man is banned from premises,” he assured.

“That’s probably a good idea,” Willow nodded, “Do you have a first aid kit? For, y’know…”

She twisted her hand indicatively and a hint of a smile appeared on the man’s face.

“Madam has impressive swing.”

“Yes, she does,” Willow replied in a tone unquestionably proud, “Thank you…”

She peered in to read his nametag.

“Manpreet. For getting him out of there.”

Manpreet nodded once.

“You are welcome, Miss…”

“Willow,” Willow supplied.

“Miss Willow,” Manpreet replied, clasping his hands in front of him, “Please do tell me if I may do anything for you.”

“Just the, ah, first aid kit,” Willow said, laying her hands on the counter, “If you have one.”

Manpreet disappeared into the back room and returned with a white plastic container with a little green cross taped on. Willow took it and thanked him again and brought it back to Tara.

She cleaned up Tara’s hand and wrapped a bandage around it gently.

“Is that okay?” she asked tenderly.

“Yes, thank you,” Tara replied, softly tensing and releasing her knuckles to test their sensitivity, “I’m sorry…I think I’ve probably made us miss all the good stuff at breakfast.”
“I think our options are going to be soggy toast or going out,” Willow replied and put an arm around Tara’s shoulders, tugging them close together, “I think a meal is the least I can get you for defending my honor.”

Tara slowly met Willow’s eye, concern shining through.

“Are you okay?”

“You’re the one with the busted up knuckles,” Willow replied with an affectionate smile.

Tara looked away uncomfortably.

“About…what he said?”

Willow took in a soft breath and looked at Tara reassuringly.

“He didn’t really do it.”

“How do you know?” Tara asked with a creased brow of confusion.

“Because it was cold without my snuggle buddy the night before last and I wore a hoody to sleep, tugged up,” Willow said confidently, “Not much more than my eyes were on view. He’s all talk. So don’t worry, okay?”

Tara nodded, relieved; she remembered bringing the blanket up over her head herself that night to keep in the warmth.

But then Willow’s face took on the concern that had left Tara’s.

“What about you? Did he hurt you?”

“It was all so quick,” Tara answered, dazed for a moment before she took stock and realized she was fine and Willow was fine and she was just glad for it to be over, “But, yeah, I’m okay. Glad he’s gone.”

She flexed her hand again, looking down at it in disbelief.
“I can’t believe I punched someone.”

“I can’t believe the first person you ever punched wasn’t Donny,” Willow retorted, laughing at her own joke, “Remind me to stay on your good side when you have PMS.”

Tara snorted and covered her mouth to cover it but her eyes remained alight with the humor of it.

Willow wrapped her arms around Tara and just held her for a few minutes.

“Let’s go get something to eat,” she suggested softly, “Before the others start trickling back.”

Tara nodded and smiled when Willow gingerly held her injured hand in her own.

They walked out and toward the markets, careful to watch every step. There was no room for obliviousness to the streets in this city; a lesson quickly learned.

They made their way to the food stalls and weighed up their options before deciding to get some eggs and spinach wrapped up in chapati. They could eat it easily while they walked around.

The man in the stall whipped it all together in no time, then pointed to three tubs in the front of his cart, next to the barrel of melting ice holding bottles of water and soft drinks.

“You pick chutney.”

“Oh,” Willow replied, peering in, “Um…which one goes best with eggs?”

The vendor grabbed a plastic spoon from a pot.

“You want taste?”

“Thanks!” Willow replied, scooping a full spoon of the first, red chutney and closing her mouth around it.

She made a yummy noise at first as the spoon dragged back over her lips, she licked it again as she swallowed. It was about one-eighth of a second later that her eyes began to bulge.

It was hot.
The hottest thing she’d ever tasted, including the time she’d practically burned her lips off in her haste to try the Chinese hotpot (and the time she really had almost burned her lips off when she’d been too curious with a glue gun as a child.)

Her arms started to flap but before Tara could react or ask what was wrong, Willow was looking around desperately for relief. She spotted the barrel of drinks and plunged her hand into the icy vat, scooping up a few small cubes and firing one into her mouth while she rubbed the other on her lips.

Tara just silently rubbed Willow’s back and looked at the vendor sheepishly, who was looking back with an amused look on his face.

“We’ll take it plain,” Tara said diplomatically and quickly paid.

“Mmspospay,” Willow tried to speak without relinquishing the ice.

Somehow, or perhaps of course, Tara understand.

“You can pay next time. When you’re not doing your best impression of Elsa.”

Willow stuck out her tongue but immediately had to use her lips-ice on it as the other melted to oblivion.

Tara took the two Indian-style breakfast burritos and took Willow away from the laughing bystanders.

She opened the bottle of water she had in her bag and handed it over for Willow to glug down. Willow did exactly that and held the bottle in relief against her lips when the burning finally eased.

“How come I’m the one who always gets landed with the steaming ears and lava tongue?”

“Because you jump into things mouth first,” Tara replied, then glanced over at Willow through her eyelashes, “A trait I’ve enjoyed in the past.”

Willow’s eyes widened as Tara handed off her breakfast.

“Especially with your lava tongue.”
Willow had to shove the chapati into her gob to stop herself from squeaking.

“Eating now.”

“Mmm.” Tara replied, bringing the corner of her breakfast up to nibble on.

She blushed as she realized what she’d actually said and how intently she was watching Willow eat.

The adrenaline was starting to wear off.

She looked back down at her food and let its warmth settle her stomach.

“It’s pretty good actually.”

“Yeah, it’s delicious,” Willow agreed and Tara was relieved to hear the normalcy in her tone, “The vending machine at the Grab’n’Go won’t be able to live up.”

Tara smiled softly.

“What do you want to do today? We never made plans.”

Willow shrugged one shoulder and they walked around another couple of blocks to finish their food. Along the way, she found a flyer roughly stuck onto a pole.

“What about that?”

“A street art tour?” Tara read cursive English above a printed address street corner.

Willow shrugged again.

“Why not?”

“No, it looks fun,” Tara agreed. “I just didn’t think it was your thing.”

“I did a graffiti hunt in Melbourne,” Willow replied with a faux-haughtiness, “I’m cultured.”
“Okay then,” Tara grinned, “I’m in.”

Willow smiled and tapped her pockets.

“I didn’t bring my phone for pictures, do you have yours?”

Tara shook her head.

“No, I locked it up to charge. It died during the night.”

“Right,” Willow replied and glanced at the flyer again, “We have enough time, do you mind if I go back to grab it? It would seem a shame to miss out.”

“Of course,” Tara nodded, “I’ll come with you and refill our water bottles again. You drained them.”

Willow leaned up and kissed Tara’s cheek.

“I don’t know how I’d stay hydrated without you.”

As they headed back toward the hostel, Willow paused and placed her palm gently against her stomach.

“Are you okay?” Tara asked with concern.

Willow shook herself out of it and continued onward.

“Yeah, just those eggs turning over.”

When they were on the steps, Willow suddenly rushed ahead.

“Meet you back here in a few!”

Those eggs went from turning to somersaulting and were determined to leave Willow’s body however they could. The bathroom stalls were the other side of the building, which may as well be Narnia for how unreachable it seemed to Willow.
Sweat broke out on her brow and her stomach lurched in a last and final warning. Willow looked desperately from side to side and spotted an open single room ahead with the cleaning lady and her cart parked outside it. Willow skid toward it and saw the en suite bathroom inside light up as if a golden halo was shining down on it (it was just a dodgy lighting fixture.)

She practically threw herself in and twisted the lock, just about making it to the toilet on time as the cleaning lady began banging on the door and yelling in Hindi.

“I’m sorry!” Willow called out helplessly, her head hanging in her hands as her guts wound themselves up inside her, “I’m sorry!”

She hadn’t even learned how to say it in Hindi yet so she couldn’t apologize properly.

Her hands crossed over her stomach and she leaned forward hoping the pressure might alleviate the pain but it didn’t stop churning.

After a minute, the cleaner stopped yelling, though Willow could still hear the ringing in her ears. Instead, moments later, there was a loud bang of a hand against the door and a male voice boomed through authoritatively.

“Excuse me, this is not a reserved room. You must exit at once and pay a soiling fee.”

Willow knew that voice.

“…Manpreet?”

There was a pause before the voice returned, softer.

“Miss Willow?”

Willow sighed.

“Manpreet, I’m having a… gastroenteric situation.”

“I do not understand this word, Miss Willow,” Manpreet replied, the urgency gone in his voice.
“I just need the bathroom, okay?” Willow shot back quickly, “It was an emergency situation.”

Another pause.

“I see, Miss Willow.”

Willow’s cheeks flamed as much as her intestines.

“I’ll pay for the room. Can you book it out for the night?”

“I will do this for you, Miss Willow,” Manpreet said reassuringly.

Willow winced as a fresh cramp squeezed through her painfully.

“Can you give the key to my—can you give the key to Tara? You remember her?”

“Miss Rambo!” Manpreet replied in recognition, “Yes, I will do this. I will leave you alone now, Miss Willow.”

Willow exhaled softly. She was in far too much pain to focus on the embarrassment but it didn’t stop her face contorting with humiliation.

“…thanks Manpreet.”

She heard the sound of the outer door closing on the room and her head returned to above her knees as she groaned painfully.

Tara checked her watch again as she loitered outside the entrance and tapped her foot gently.

As more minutes ticked by she grew concerned and decided to check if Willow had gotten distracted by her phone. As she stepped back into the lobby of the hostel, Manpreet appeared from nowhere and ran up to her.

“Ah, Miss Rambo, I find you!”

“Have you seen—” Tara started, then stopped and frowned, “I’m sorry, what did you call me?”
“I have key for you,” Manpreet replied, holding it out for her, “Miss Willow reserve new room for you.”

Tara’s eyebrows furrowed in confusion. Maybe in case Warren came back? But they usually talked about these things first.

“Oh.”

“I believe she is suffering from sudden anal leakage and required suitable facilities,” Manpreet attempted to supply helpfully.

Tara just stared at him for several long seconds before finally blinking slowly and taking the key.

“102?” she read off of it, “I’ll, um…yeah. Thank you.”

She blinked again, shook her head quickly and walked past him. The room was only a few feet away so it didn’t take long for her to get there and let herself in. The room had a big queen bed, the biggest they’d had outside of the nice hotels, and though it was basic decor, there was a TV, a mini-fridge and even a little tea set on a tray.

Tara glanced away from the room and at the second door right inside it. She went to knock with her wrapped knuckles, then thought better of it and used her other hand.

“Willow?”

“Tara?”

Willow’s voice was weak and pained. Tara didn’t have to guess why.

“Oh honey, are you not feeling well?”

There was a pause.

“You could say that.”

“Can I get you anything?” Tara asked softly through the door.
“I just wanted you to know where I was,” Willow replied, a bit hastier, “You should go again. Do the tour.”

“I can sit here and talk to you,” Tara offered but Willow was quick to shoot it down.

“I really don’t want you to.”

“You know I'm accustomed to your bathroom emergencies,” Tara replied with a fond smile in her voice, “I really don't mind.”

“Tara, just—” Willow yelled, then an audible groan could be heard, “Just go. Please. Now.”

Willow tensed every muscle in her body until she finally heard the door close again.

This was hell.

Her head slumped into her hands again. She was starting to feel unable to even hold it up by herself.

She closed her eyes and focused on her breathing, trying to use her mind to uncoil the continued cramping.

She had no idea how long she stayed like that, or whether she was even conscious or unconscious at times as everything just became a painful haze, but became startled when something touched her shoulder.

Both hands grabbed the seat to keep herself on it, then she looked to the side to see what had touched her.

It was at this point she was sure she was hallucinating because she saw a plastic carrier bag floating on a long stick that had been stuck through the tiny rectangular open window in the top corner.

Willow cautiously slid the handles of the bag off the stick, at which point it retreated as if by magic. She looked inside where there was water, wipes, a cold compress, a tiny warm hot water bottle, and her phone. Fully charged.

She felt a lump form in her throat and clutched the bag close to her chest for a moment.
She took the compress and pressed it to her cheeks, then just over her whole face for a moment and sighed contentedly. When it got a bit too cold, she took it off again, feeling a little bit better.

She put it on the sink so it was accessible again to her and took the hot water bottle to her stomach. They was definite relief from it and she felt well enough to look at the screen of her phone, where she saw messages already waiting for her.

I'll put my earphones in but I'm staying in the room in case you need me.

No negotiations.

Or I'll show you my right hook.

A laugh escaped and Willow brought her forearm up to wipe tears from her eyes.

She angled her body so the hot water bottle pressed into her stomach by way of her thighs and kept up the pressure. She started to type a response.

Where did you find a hot water bottle?

I've had it.

My mom got me a travel one before we left.

She always used to give me one for cramps

Did you see the art?
We'll see it together when you feel better❤️

I don't know how long this is going to last.

I wanted a rest day anyway

Willow sighed and focused on the warmth on her belly.

Do you feel okay?

I feel fine

I don't get it.

We ate the exact same thing

I think it might have been the ice?

Willow frowned.

The ice?
Her eyes widened in realization.

I think so

The ice!

They wouldn't use filtered water just to keep drinks cold!

Doubtful

Oh god

Tara...

What kind of water was it?

Do you think there was poop in the water??

Tara????????

Fresh sweat grew on Willow’s brow as she awaited a calm, reassuring response from her ever-wise girlfriend.

Willow nearly fell off the bowl.
Willow looked around for the sink lest she start spewing from that end too.

Willow heard a cackle of laughter come in from the room and felt her cheeks flame.

A fresh cramp set upon her and Willow didn’t have time to be indignant any longer.

Hours passed with intermittent check-ins but Willow mostly just endured with her eyes closed; so much so that she fell asleep slumped against the sink, completely exhausted.

She came to by banging her head against the faucet and rubbed the spot, confused as she tried to place herself. She didn’t recognize the bathroom at first but then she remembered barging in earlier.

Ugh. That was embarrassing.
She put a hand on her stomach and pressed gently. She was tender but it wasn’t the Coney Island Cyclone in there any longer.

She was glad that the window was still open.

She lifted herself off of the seat, her legs wobbling a little as she did so. She immediately decided she needed to shower and waddled over to it with her pants around her ankles. She stripped off and welcomed standing under the warm spray and twisting the crick out of her neck.

She wasn’t about to change back into the same clothes, so she put a towel around her and tucked it in so it would stay in place. She opened the bathroom door, letting the steam escape and sighing happily when she found the room a lot warmer than the shared dorm had been.

She always tried to make sure they avoided the absolute bottom barrel accommodation but it had been a lesson along the way that a lot of people didn’t consider heat a basic need.

Almost as soon as she’d stepped out, Tara was walking over to her with a little teacup in hand.

“Hey,” Willow greeted, all the better for seeing Tara’s face.

“Hey,” Tara smiled back softly, gently offering her the cup, “It’s peppermint. It should help. Come sit down.”

Willow sat on the bed and warmed her hands on the little cup.

“How’d you know I was coming out?”

“Well, I didn’t have an Instagram post this time to guide me this time,” Tara replied fondly, reaching over to tuck a piece of damp hair behind Willow’s ear, “I heard the shower. How are you feeling?”

“Raw,” Willow replied, frowning and looking toward the window to see if she could ascertain the time of day, “I don’t even know what time it is.”

“Dinner-ish,” Tara answered, placing her hand down on the bedspread, “I was going to make you some toast but wanted to check with you first in case you thought it would be too much.”

“That’d be really nice,” Willow replied, feeling the relief of having someone take care of her, “What about you?”
“I had a big lunch earlier,” Tara replied with a shrug, then stood to hike a grocery bag from the floor and fish out the pack of bread she’d bought, “I put your PJs on the heater to warm.”

Willow glanced over to the heater and saw her red flannel jammies spread out over them.

“Thank you, Tara.”

Tara just smiled bashfully and glanced down.

“I’ll go make you some toast.”

Willow watched her leave, feeling some love bloom in her heart and crept over to the heater to retrieve her pajamas. She held the soft flannel against her for a moment before dropping the towel and draping her limbs in the warmth.

Its hug was only second to a Tara-hug.

Which Willow hoped would be forthcoming soon too.

She noticed all of their stuff was in the corner, which Tara must have lugged down by herself while Willow was semi-comatose.

She went back to the bed and slipped under the sheets, which felt so much better than the ones in the dorms where she’d actually contemplated laying her towel down to sleep on by how dirty they looked.

She settled her back against the pillows with the sheet draped over her waist and reached for the remote on the nightstand.

Holding it in her hand, she looked around and smiled. This could be their bedroom in the future. Better decorated, hopefully, and she’d like a bit more pop in her bed linen, but this could be them, snuggling up on a Friday night as they always had to watch a movie, but more.

Honest. Sincere. Real.

She flicked through the channels until she found something in English that wasn’t a news channel and checked her phone while she waited for Tara to return. She did after a few minutes with a plate
piled high full of toast.

“Do you have a second, secret, sick girlfriend?” Willow asked with a quiet smile, “Or are you trying to kill me via gluten overdose?”

“Option 3,” Tara answered as she climbed on the bed and sat cross-legged beside Willow, “Sharing is caring.”

Willow picked up a triangle, because of course Tara had cut them into triangles for her, and held it up to Tara’s mouth. Tara bit the corner and smiled bashfully, which Willow returned and took the bread back to her own mouth to eat.

“Good toast,” she complimented and Tara waved a piece around with some mock-snoothereeness.

“It’s all in the burn.”

Willow giggled and took a long sip from her cup of hot tea. She patted the spot next to her for Tara to get under the sheet beside her. Tara kicked off her shoes off and sat alongside Willow, sharing the sheet.

Their hands came together through linked fingers between them and neither minded having to reach over each time to take toast from the plate.

“Xena,” Tara commented as her focus finally landed on the television, “A classic.”

“I never watched it when we were kids,” Willow replied, cocking her head as she watched the two women around a campfire, “My dad didn’t like the promotion of mythological gods. You know, compared to his own totally-not-mythological one.”

“I was always more into the goddesses,” Tara replied wryly and Willow saw a crooked smile hiding behind some chewing.

Willow almost forgot she’d spent the day doubled over in agony such was the sweetness of just sitting with Tara like this.

As the show played out, Willow’s brow gently creased. She leaned over to whisper to Tara.

“Is it just me or is this show kinda gay?”
The biggest laugh rose from Tara’s stomach but somehow she managed to contain it through pursed lips threatening so hard to grin that her jaw shook.

“You know, you might be right,” she managed to get out in a neutral tone with only her eyes betraying her.

Willow looked at her kind of funny but shrugged it off and leaned in against Tara’s slide, resting her head on Tara’s shoulder.

A dance show came on when the episode ended with Bollywood stars that was energetic to watch and then a buddy comedy with subtitles.

Willow watched the reluctant protagonist being dragged around a strip joint with appropriate macho comments being espoused. She poked Tara in the side with her elbow.

“Hey, Tara?”

“Mmm?” Tara replied, brushing her fingers against Willow’s shoulder.

Willow couldn’t help a giggle escaping.

“Tits or ass?” she asked in a gruff voice meant to mimic one of the men on screen.

Tara rolled her eyes playfully, thinking they were exchanging the same mocking spirit, but Willow kept looking at her expectantly.

“Are you serious?” Tara asked after a few moments of uncertainty.

Willow’s nose scrunched.

“I wasn’t but now I kinda am?”

Tara’s mouth opened and closed. She knew better than to ask if Willow meant the women on screen.

“Just Willow,” she settled on after a moment, dropping a kiss onto Willow’s forehead and turning her attention back to the screen.
Willow pulled back a bit and looked at Tara curiously.

“Come on, you have to choose.”

“Why?” Tara asked, holding up a hand airily, “Are you being threatened with having a body part lasered off? Can we negotiate your freedom with all body parts attached?”

Willow gently tugged on Tara’s sleeve.

“It doesn’t have to be about me. Just a…general concept,” she said, her voice rising uncomfortably for a moment, “Just tell me.”

Tara inhaled slowly and exhaled even slower. She let her fingers dance up Willow’s thigh.

“If I have to choose…”

Her fingers pressed insistently enough between Willow’s legs to make her involuntarily gasp.

“Your…”

She then surprised Willow by dropping a kiss on her nearest shoulder.

“Shoulder blade.”

Willow didn’t have enough time to say ‘huh?’ before Tara brushed her lips against Willow’s neck and pressed a kiss into the hollow in her throat.

“And your throat.”

Her mouth dipped as low as the open V of the flannel allowed on Willow’s chest.

“Your breasts,” she whispered and let the tail of the pajama shirt rise enough for her to kiss there, “And your bellybutton.”

Her hand moved then, curving around Willow’s behind and giving it a squeeze.
“Your butt,” she said, smirking a little as she rose her head back to Willow who was looking back at her with an unbroken stare, “And your thighs.”

She grasped Willow’s thigh suddenly, making her jump. Willow’s breath hitched as Tara’s fingers danced down her leg.

“And that spot where your calf muscles tense when you’re excited and send quivers right back up to your…”

Her arm brushed up to press between Willow’s legs again.

“And most of all I love your… lips,” she spoke, her face inches away from Willow’s face now, “Your soft, sweet lips.”

She kissed Willow three times, slowly.

“That I love to kiss.”

Willow’s body was completely still and tingling.

Tara sure knew how to blow her insecurity fishing right out of the water; slapping her down and building her up all at once.

Tara’s hand fell away and she bumped her nose against Willow’s, their breaths mingling hotly for a moment.

“That’s what I choose.”

Willow’s eyes closed and she swallowed deeply as she felt Tara settled back into a sitting position.

Her breath was shaken as it left her mouth and when she opened her eyes again just the sight of Tara made her flush to her bones.

“I’m a breast gal myself,” she blurted, immediately cringing at her own lack of grace.

Tara could only smile and chuckle to herself.
“I know.”

“You already knew that?” Willow asked, frowning with surprise, “Am I too hands-y?”

Tara chuckled again.

“Oh no. I’ve known for a long time. It’s one of the reasons I held out hope that you might like me back. I saw you looking.”

Willow suddenly sat up straight.

“Did you wear low cut tops on purpose to our sleepovers?” she accused, her mouth dropping open when Tara just returned a guilty look, “I knew it! I knew it, I knew it, I knew it! It was one of those back of the brain thoughts I wouldn’t let myself process fully but…grr, you tease!”

“Hey, I didn’t know for sure,” Tara defended, blushing, “You’d always been self-conscious about your size, without merit might I add. I didn’t know if you were looking or looking.”

“So you knew I was kinda gay,” Willow reasoned in a soft voice like it was a revelation.

“I ‘knew’ you were in love with Xander because that’s what you always told me,” Tara replied, her tongue poking into her cheek for a moment, “But I thought…hoped… maybe you might perhaps have a little…curiosity too.”

She smiled fondly.

“I remember once you said we should play spin the bottle…just the two of us.”

She glanced down at Willow’s body.

“Plus your PJs were always a little bit gay.”

Willow looked down and frowned.

“What’s gay about flannel?”
“Um, apart from everything?” Tara questioned with a sincerely arched eyebrow.

Willow lifted her sleeve up and examined it as if rainbows might come shooting out. She decided she was glad she didn’t know about that connection because she probably would have stopped wearing them and they were super comfortable.

She stayed on her side facing Tara and started to draw circles on Tara’s thigh.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Of course,” Tara replied slowly, hesitantly, “But if it’s about your body, I—”

“No, no,” Willow interjected, waving a hand about, “It’s about other people’s bodies.”

Tara’s eyes grew wide like saucers and Willow was actually able to laugh to, and at, herself.

“I can see on your face you think I’m about to jump into a jealousy spiral, but actually it’s the opposite. Because…I know we both have insecurities, but you don’t get jealous. Can you teach me how?”

“Oh, Willow,” Tara replied softly, shaking her head, “I get jealous. I have a long history of being jealous, especially over you.”

Willow’s brow creased.

“Umm no, you don’t. I’ve never seen you jealous, ever.”

Tara shook her head again.

“I was jealous of Buffy when you started hanging out with her, I was jealous of the guys you said you crushed on. Who was that actor guy from the 80s? John Cusack?”

“On reflection, I think it was Joan’s…unique…form that I enjoyed,” Willow replied, blushing to her ears, “My parents would probably call that a unique kind of transference.”

She tried to smile.
“Better not tell them or they’ll want to write a paper on me,” she said, then her eyes and voice grew downcast, “Another paper.”

Tara looked down, her thumbs turning over themselves in her lap.

“I was even jealous of Dickie last year.”


Tara smiled softly, sadly and Willow realized she recognized it and not in a good way.

“I guess it’s hard to notice. I hid all those years of it behind the smile.”

Willow’s heart tightened painfully.

“Years?”

Tara drew her knees up to her chest, boxing herself in.

“That’s about how long you were set on Xander.”

Willow shook her head dismissively.

“But he—”

“Was the love of your life,” Tara interjected quickly, “So you’ve said.”

Willow felt a harsh slap of reality of all of the times she’d whined to Tara about liking Xander…how often she’d kissed her while saying she was practicing for him.

Fuck.

She wisely shut her mouth for a moment to choose her words.

“I’m sorry, Tara,” she said eventually, slightly helplessly but with nothing but sincerity, “I’m so
sorry. It was never real. But I get that it hurt you. I don’t think I understood quite as much until right
now. Which is on me, because you’ve said it. I guess I just…I guess I thought your feelings were as
real as mine were…which is to say, not.”

She placed a hand on Tara’s knee and gently tried to push it down.

“You have to know that every kiss was because I wanted to kiss you. I was just too scared to say it.
And I’m so sorry I ever made you feel differently.”

Tears pricked her eyes and Tara let her legs be lowered again, physically opening up.

“Hey…You don't have anything to be sorry about,” she comforted.

Willow swiped at her eyes.

“You’re doing that thing where you push your feelings down to make me feel better.”

“No, Willow,” Tara shook her head, “Okay, listen…One…my jealousy isn't your problem…unless
you're intentionally invoking it, which I don’t think you were. And two… I only ever wanted you to
be happy. If that was him, then…that was him. I would have supported it.”

Willow reached out and placed her palm on Tara’s cheek.

“You’re a better person than me.”

Tara leaned her cheek in to nuzzle Willow’s hand.

“You don’t give yourself credit. I never doubted you cared about my feelings. You used to tell me to
date Nate.”

Willow’s face scrunched up.

“Nuh-uh.”

Tara nodded.

“You would drop hints about how you thought he liked me.”
“I was fishing! I wanted to know if you liked him too!” Willow could only laugh at herself again, which exploded into uncontrollable giggles, “Sorry, it just seems so stupid now! I mean, Xander’s a great friend but I thought I wanted him and not you and you thought that too?! How stupid were we?!”

Tara couldn’t help but smile as she thought back to what were the more ridiculous times of envy against Xander as a dorky, spotty, awkward kid going through puberty.

“I was so jealous when you chose him to be your Coke and Pepsi partner at your bat mitzvah.”

“Seriously?” Willow asked, eyes wide.

“Seething,” Tara replied, grinning at the silliness of it all.

“I only chose him because he was gonna choose you! I heard him talking about it to Jesse!” Willow laughed, “Stupid idiot ran out on Sprite.”

“Don’t call him that,” Tara chastised softly.

“Yeah, you’re right,” Willow sighed contritely, “Even if I would say it to his face. In fact, I did.”

“I remember,” Tara agreed, nodding, “Your mom wasn’t impressed.”

“When is she ever?” Willow replied wryly and they both slid slowly into silence.

Willow’s hand had remained on Tara’s thigh and she gave it a little squeeze

“Is there anything I can do to repair all those years?”

Tara lifted Willow’s hand to her mouth and kissed her palm.

“You do it every day you wake up and choose to be with me.”

Willow reached to clasp Tara’s delicately bandaged hand between both of hers.
“Let me tell you the whole story. To make you understand that it was never him. I told you a little bit of it before. Do you remember me telling you about Cordelia making fun of me on the first day of Kindergarten…because I said I wanted to marry you?”

Tara nodded slowly and Willow recounted all of her fuzzy childhood memories. The yellow crayon and the bullying and how using Xander as a cover was a lie so old she’d forgotten it was a lie.

“He was the perfect beard. He never liked me back so I never had to actually act on it. And I treated him badly as much as I did you. I don’t deserve all the forgiveness I’ve been given.”

“You were way too young to try and have to work out all of that turmoil,” Tara replied tenderly, “Maybe it’s time to forgive yourself.”

Willow dipped her head for a moment, then smiled up at Tara.

“I’m glad we can talk like this.”

“I am too,” Tara replied softly.

Willow bounced on the spot, showing some excitement.

“I want this. I don’t ever want there to be something so misunderstood between us again. I want to be open about everything. It might take some time and work to get there, but I want it. Even if it hurts or…I want to know everything,” she smiled bashfully, “You might even be able to point out other women you find attractive to me one day.”

Tara opened her arms, which Willow gladly fell into, though looked up quickly for a moment.

“Just to be really clear, today is not that day.”

Tara chuckled softly.

“I know honey,” she said, kissing Willow’s brow, “I only have eyes for you.”

Willow’s face pressed closely into Tara’s chest and her fingers rolled over the curves. She looked up at Tara through her eyelashes and let her hand dip lower, pressing against the front of Tara’s pants as Tara had done to her earlier.
“You know I’m not exclusively inclined toward the northern slopes…” she said with a salacious grin, “I’m definitely a pussy Willow too.”

Tara took in a sharp breath and exhaled it shakily.

“Oh. I, um, I got my…”

Willow nodded understandingly, pressing her lips to Tara again.

“I can wait,” she whispered softly, looking down bashfully, “I don’t think my stomach is up much for bouncing around tonight anyway.”

“Think we can cuddle?” Tara asked and Willow nodded keenly.

“If you’re the big spoon.”

They shuffled down so they were lying and Tara curved her body around Willow’s back. She let her hand slide under Willow’s top and gently rubbed her palm around Willow’s belly in circles.

“Is this okay?” she asked softly in Willow’s ear.

Willow’s eyes closed peacefully.

“Mmm, I like that.”

She rested her fingers gently over Tara’s hand.

“And I love you,” she said softly, recounting the words she’d memorized while Tara had gone to get toast, “Main tumse pyar karthee hoon.”

“That’s the most complicated one yet,” Tara murmured as her fingertips brushed Willow’s tender skin.

Willow exhaled in a soft sigh.

“The words, maybe. Not the feeling. Not anymore.”
She smiled as she drifted off into tranquil sleep.

“Not ever again.”
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

Latter half of this chapter is 'M' rated!

India (Part 3)

It's Oh So Quiet…

“That life-size portrait of Gandhi was just…stunning. I didn’t know monochrome could be so elegant.”

Willow frowned at Tara as she pushed open the door to the hostel kitchen.

“He was kind of a dick, you know.”

“But the art was beautiful,” Tara argued, adjusting the strap on her messenger bag so it didn’t fall off her shoulder.

“I’m just saying—”

“They waur in th’ room tay!” someone suddenly shrieked across the room and they both looked over to see a gaggle of people surrounding a girl whom they’d shared the dorm with previously, a Scottish woman with short, blonde hair and a bit of a smoker’s rasp whose name was Hannah, “Oi, Poppy isnae it??”

“Me?” Willow asked, stepping forward in confusion, “Willow.”

“Aye, ah knew it was a tree,” Hannah replied a little dismissively, “Ye can teel them he was a reit creep.”

Willow walked over and leaned over the table with her elbows sticking out.
“What’s the hubbub?”

Hannah looked at Willow expectantly.

“Dae ye min’ those three bamsticks ’at shared uir room? Wee things wi’ th’ big egos?”

Willow glanced at Tara, who was frowning.

“Uh, yeah, we remember them,” Willow nodded, hoping she was following along.

Hannah smirked.

“Got huckled tryin’ tae buy a gin.”

Willow’s brow creased.

“They got what trying to buy some gin?”

“A gin!” Hannah repeated insistently, “A gin!”

“I think she means gun,” Tara whispered quietly, “They got arrested.”

“That’s whit ah said,” Hannah said with exasperation, though clearly loving the attention of sharing the story, “Big bossy ‘un tried tae punch a polis an’ got held in th’ cells.”

“Not-so-garden-variety creep, then,” Willow muttered, while Tara paled.

“They were really trying to buy a gun?”

“He’s th’ body gettin’ creeped oan noo,” Hannah cackled, “The’s place is mingin an’ we’re payin’ fur it… imagine th’ jail!”

“How’d you find out?” Willow asked, backing up to Tara to silently put an arm around her waist.

“His friends cam back tae gie their bags, freaked it, screamin’ at each other,” Hannah replied with a grin, “They waur arguin’ abit bailin’ heem ait ur jist bailin’. They’re probably oan a plane it awreddy,
Tara tugged on Willow’s sleeve and Willow nodded to her discreetly.

“Well, he got what he deserved.”

“I’ll say,” Hannah replied, flicking her hand back through her hair, “Heard he was wankin’ tae us, the lavvy-heided arsepiece.”

“If you’ll excuse us,” Willow said, extracting them from the conversation so Hannah could go back to bragging to her crowd and Willow could bring Tara off to a quieter corner.

They sat at a small round table near the door and Willow tucked her hand into Tara’s across the middle of it.

“Tell me what you’re thinking, baby.”

Tara gulped.

“Do you think he was buying that…for us?”

“I’m guessing you don’t mean as a belated Hanukkah gift,” Willow replied with her unique brand of peppy sarcasm.

Tara’s jaw tensed.

“He was angry when…” she stopped and lifted her gaze to Willow’s, her eyes betraying her fear, “Let’s get out of here.”

“You wanna get some dinner or go to a bar or something?” Willow asked unsurely.

“No, I mean let’s get out of here,” Tara replied, antsy, then clarified, “Move on.”

She looked down and her voice dropped.

“I don’t feel safe.”
Willow only had to think about it for a second.

“Yeah, of course,” she replied, squeezing Tara’s hand reassuringly, “You’re totally right. Let’s go. I can book us a train out of here tonight. Where do you want to go?”

“Anywhere,” Tara replied quickly.

Willow nodded.

“Let’s go pack up.”

She stood up and pulled Tara into a hug.

“Hey,” she said, smiling softly as she echoed the words Tara had said to her just a few days before, “I’ll keep you safe, baby.”

Tara held onto Willow tight for a few moments, enough to get the strength to follow Willow to their room. She started to quick-pack both hers and Willow’s things as Willow used her iPad to figure out their next move.

“Trains are surprisingly booked up but we can get a couple of spaces heading south if we hurry...we can figure out where to hop off when we’re on it.”

Tara zipped up her bag and placed her hands over the handle.

“Do you think I’m being paranoid?”

Willow shook her head.

“No. And I think we were getting close to our time to move on anyway,” she replied, looking up at Tara with tears suddenly brimming in her eyes, “And god, Tara, if anything ever happened to you…”

She reached out to cup Tara’s cheek. Tara nuzzled into her and they both closed their eyes for a moment to enjoy the contact before separating again.

“Let’s get out of here,” Willow said, helping Tara to lug the bags off the bed.
They dropped their key back to the front desk and Willow thanked Manpreet for all of his care during their stay.

“You are most welcome Miss Willow and Miss Rambo. I hope you enjoy the rest of your stay in my country with minimal buttock disruption.”

“Why does he keep calling me 'Miss Rambo’?” Tara whispered as they left the building.

“That's what you're objecting to?!” Willow asked incredulously.

They debated whether to order a taxi to get to the train station with their bags, but decided they were trying to not take their lives in their hands by leaving so getting into a car was tempting fate on these roads. Plus it was close by anyway, so they just walked.

They had to get to the furthest platform in the station with night descending and throngs of people boarding for commutes or travel. It was more akin to what one might expect when imagining an Indian railway station: utter chaos. They lost each once before holding their hands very firmly together and using brute force to weave through the people.

Somehow, the train was even more crowded than the station. As they pushed into the last cabin they were both overwhelmed by the tight space. Flimsy, wooden benches were nailed into the train walls and every inch of space was taken up by people pushing together to try and get on.

There was a space of maybe six feet of floor space available in the most tucked-away corner; just about enough room for them both to sit huddled up to each other with an old newspaper beneath for protection.

The train was already moving before they could process whether to stay on or not and more people had pushed in so they took that floor space before it was gone. It took several minutes for the shock to wear off before Willow could whisper to Tara.

“I didn’t know it would be this bad,” she said, tears pricking her eyes, “I thought…I thought all the cabins would be sleeper cabins, I…”

Tara just patted Willow’s leg silently. She had to keep her head down to avoid the armpit of the man sitting to her right.

Willow had to keep her bag between her legs and fight to squeeze her iPad out so she could actually figure out where the hell they were going. She grew ever more frustrated trying to figure out their
destination with the almost absent internet signal and constant jostling. Not to mention the floor was about as comfortable as sitting on a bed of nails.

She was ready to toss the iPad against whichever fellow passenger had brought his BO on board with him but finally, after much intermittent searching, she had a clear idea of where they were going.

It wasn’t good.

“I figured out where we can get out the soonest but we’re going to be on here until past sun up…and trust me you don’t want to know how long it would take to get to Mumbai. At the very least we’re switching trains and getting off this floor.”

“Okay,” Tara agreed absentmindedly, then spun her head around to Willow, “Wait…all night?”

Willow looked apologetic and Tara’s head just rolled forward.

It was a long night.

They took it in turns to be each other’s head support so the other might get a few precious minutes sleep, never verbalizing this agreement; just adjusting as necessary.

Willow’s eyes were sore from checking her screen for the time and where possible to refresh her map and watch the train tick a little more forward.

Tara was asleep on her shoulder when she watched the sun start to rise with bleary eyes. Her connection started to strengthen indicating they were heading in a more urban direction and when Willow saw the spot on the map that indicated the station pop up on the screen with the moving dot hurtling toward it, she gently shook Tara’s shoulder.

“Babe,” she whispered quietly enough for only Tara to hear, which was extremely quiet considering the scores of people, “Tara, we’re almost there.”

Tara looked up with equally bleary eyes. She looked around at other passengers, slumped in all kinds of positions, and the world hurtling by outside as it very gradually slowed down.

Finally, the station was in sight and they grabbed onto each other to keep steady as they climbed over people to be as close to the doors as possible while watching it near through the windows.
There were men squatting on the sides of the road openly relieving themselves and somehow it still seemed preferable than another minute in that cabin.

Neither of them realized they were gasping for air until the doors finally opened and they stepped outside and took a breath. It had been so stuffy and it was a cool night. Neither could even imagine what it must be like in the middle of summer.

“People must die,” Willow muttered but Tara didn’t respond because she thought Willow was just making a general remark to the universe and she kind of agreed.

They slogged through the station with the hundreds of other passengers until they realized they had nowhere to go. With some consistent WiFi, they parked themselves at another wooden bench and Willow wearily began looking up some accommodation.

“I never thought I’d see the day I couldn’t bear looking at a screen.”

“I’ll do it,” Tara offered. At least she’d had a little bit of sleep before their exit.

Willow gratefully handed over the iPad and leaned her head back against the wall, using her sweater as a pillow.

Tara scrolled past a lot of no vacancy posts as she searched for somewhere for them to stay. They were usually fine to wait until they got to their destination to book but sometimes the smaller areas were tougher.

“There’s something here…” she said to Willow after a few minutes, “It’s a bit more than we usually spend but all meals are included. It’s just for the weekend. Give us a chance to get our bearings. It’s not a hostel, though.”

She showed the screen to Willow, who cracked an eye.

“Relaxation retreat?” she read off the very basic ad.

“Is that too out there?” Tara asked unsurely.

“I really liked the Tai Chi in China, so not stratospheric,” Willow answered, her arms crossed loosely over her chest, “Honestly as long as I can lie horizontally it sounds like Disneyland right now.”

Tara chewed on the corner of her lip.
“I’m not being pushy, am I? I was kind of hoping to do a meditation class here so this sounds great to me but I don’t want to force you into it.”

“Any bed that isn’t made of a mattress of newspaper,” Willow reasoned jadedly, “Any at all.”

Tara nodded.

“Okay, I have the address. We should be able to get a cab outside. Are you okay to move?”

Willow mumbled an affirmative response and let Tara hoist her up so they could get to the taxi stand outside. Tara haggled the fare, a skill she’d really honed as her confidence grew in their travels.

Willow was impressed watching her; remembering a time the Japan only mere months ago when Tara had paid almost triple for something at a newsstand just to avoid any awkwardness or confrontation.

She was kinda turned on too. Why did weird things like that turn her on?

Oh, right.

It was Tara doing them.

She wrapped her hand around Tara’s upper arm and held on as the cab drove them out of the town and out into the countryside.

She smiled to herself and then over at Tara.

“I’m about to go full cheeseball but I can’t stop thinking about it ever since we not-visited the Taj.”

“I’m ready,” Tara replied in a soft, teasing tone.

Willow felt at peace to be her cheesiest self.

“You make heaven a place on earth. There it is. I had to stay it. You can laugh at me now. I can take it.”
Tara just snuggled into Willow’s side and their hands slid down together to hold.

Willow was enjoying watching the cows graze and the mustard fields go by but as the minutes ticked by she grew concerned about where they were going, or rather where they were being taken.

Just as she was about to turn to Tara to voice her concerns, they turned into a long driveway. The gardens were so green they looked artificial, but that may have just been in contrast to the surrounding land.

The cab dropped them in front of the doors.

The building was made of beige stone, with wooden features like window shutters and an overhanging roof. It looked like Fred Flinstones’s house had been re-engineered for the 20th century…or they’d gotten lost on the way home from meeting The Jetsons.

“Yabba Dabba Doo,” Willow mumbled under her breath.

“I thought it was Tare-Bear now,” Tara replied, misunderstanding the reference.

“It is,” Willow replied affectionately, “But sometimes it’s nice to call back.”

Tara pressed her hand above her stomach for a moment with a conflicted look on her face, then reached out to take the handle of her luggage. They walked past a little rock pool with a water feature trickling down and doing its job of setting a relaxing tone.

When they walked through the doors, the inside matched the outside with bare stone walls and dark wood interiors. The lobby was small, barely more than a hallway and there was only the sound of the wind at their back and the soft clicking sound of the door closing behind them.

There was an Indian woman standing behind a counter with a computer, which Willow thought might be from before she was even born; many large leather-bound notebooks and stacks of pens that looked like they were drying up. That made Willow anxious.

“Namaste,” Tara greeted, placing her palms down on the wooden counter, “Um, do you speak English?”

“Yes, ma’am,” the clerk smiled with a nod, “How may I help you?”
Tara smiled in relief.

“We’re here for the weekend retreat.”

“You are most welcome,” the clerk replied, her voice low and passive, “Please may I take your information?”

While Tara conversed, Willow had a look around at the decoration and symbols adorning the walls. She recognized some as Buddhist symbols from Thailand, some seemed Islamic and there were several Hindi Gods. She swore one even looked like Xena’s weapon but she blamed that on the tiredness.

As her gaze traveled around the room, it fell back on Tara, whom she realized was staring at her.

“Huh, sorry?” Willow asked, reaching for her wallet thinking maybe Tara needed cash.

Then she noticed Tara was pale and her voice was quivering.

“Y—you need to give her your phone.”

Willow laughed, looking side to side between the other two women.

“It’s funny because you made a joke but nobody is laughing,” she chuckled, bile rising in her throat as it dawned this wasn’t a joke. She tugged Tara’s sleeve and brought her over to whisper, “Why do I need to give her my phone?!”

“It’s the rules,” Tara replied quietly, “I guess to stop distractions.”

“You didn’t tell me that!” Willow protested.

“I didn’t know,” Tara said, holding her arm across her body nervously, “Willow, we’re in the middle of nowhere, our lodging choices aren’t overwhelming right now. Can you please just give it up for the weekend? It might be good for y—us.”

Willow looked stricken and the lady behind the desk popped her head out helpfully.

“We keep them in locked boxes here with no one else having access if you are worried for security.”
Willow looked behind the clerk to see rows of little metal boxes hung on the wall which looked like an old set of apartment mailboxes.

She knew that because Xander and Jesse had dragged one from a dumpster outside the hotel once and used it to practice picking locks. Xander had involved her by asking to borrow a hair clip but neither that nor Jesse’s father’s stolen credit card had worked until Willow, eyeing the tiny keyhole and doing the math in her head, suggested a paper clip.

She learned to pick a lock that day but had never put it to use (unlike Xander and Jesse who had been grounded and suspended respectively for trying to get into a cash box and the school office to wipe out a detention.)

Her eyes followed a sign she’d missed before, clearly outlining the forbidden objects.

No alcohol, drugs, cigarettes, sure she agreed with those but electronics? Her precious, precious electronics?

But Tara said she really wanted to do this and Willow didn’t want to disappoint. Also, a bed seemed so close…

Reluctantly, she reached into her bag and slid her phone across the desk. As the clerk opened the box to lock it away, Willow noted Tara had already given over everything else and her face dropped grumpily.

She stared at Tara with her most serious frowny face and Tara looked back helplessly.

It didn’t stop Willow’s arms from folding over her chest.

“And what level are you at?” the clerk inquired in that pleasant up-lift at the end of her sentence that was beginning to drive Willow nuts.

“Level?” Tara asked blankly.

“Proficiency level?” the clerk clarified, looking at them expectantly.

Tara glanced at Willow, who although was still feeling grouchy about her phone, couldn’t resist those pleading eyes.
“Oh! Uh, high, a high level. Very high. One of those… top levels.”

She looked at Tara, whose eyes were wide anxiously.

“Five!” she declared abruptly and Willow blinked several times.

The clerk just nodded and wrote it down.

Willow mouthed ‘five??’ at Tara, who just shrugged.

“Very good, most wise. You will receive the yellow wristband,” the clerk advised and they both deflated with relief, “Here are your room keys and schedule. If you need to speak to staff you may return to this desk, otherwise, our total silence tenant is observed throughout the rest of the establishment.”

Willow’s hand closed around her keys, then she did a double-take.

“I’m sorry, did you say…total silence?”

The clerk’s eyes widened and she scrambled for a pen.

Willow’s eyes widened too as she read and she opened her mouth to speak, refute the offense that had not been taken. Upon realizing she couldn’t she did the next best thing, at least to her scrambled brain at the time, and stuck both thumbs up.
The clerk looked relieved and clasped her hands together in front of her, bowing her head just slightly.

Willow copied the motion and shot her eyes toward Tara unhappily.

Sure enough, above the door into the back of the building was a big sign with ‘Silence’ written in many languages. Their schedule had a map on the back of it, showing them the rest of the building with the residential quarters and then they would have to walk outside across a garden to get to the activity building.

They walked through the heavy door and both stopped.

If they thought it was silent before, this was like a vacuum — the quiet almost hurt their ears. Tara stepped forward first, checking the number on her room key.

Willow watched her and realized they had different keys and therefore different rooms.

They walked down the hallway to their doors, directly opposite each other. Tara felt Willow’s gaze on her and turned to look. Willow looked like she’d swallowed a bee and started gesturing wildly and mouthing words at Tara.

“I can’t have my phone, we can’t even speak! Thanks a lot, I’m glad we’re in different rooms!”

Willow wasn’t sure how easy that must have been to decipher, but the look on Tara’s face told her it had been understood.

Tara just raised her two thumbs sarcastically.

Willow’s mouth opened in shocked indignation and spun on her heels to open her door.

Tara did the same but dropped her keys.

Willow was not above sneaking a peek at Tara’s ass as she bent down to pick them up.

An indignant peek, of course. Sometimes there was a thin line between huffy and horny.
She watched Tara push herself into her room and she did the same. She would have liked to slam the door for the satisfaction of it, but it was on one of those systems that slowed it down to a click.

Instead, she dropped her bag and kicked off her shoes and dropped down onto the little camp bed in the room. She looked around.

It looked and felt like a converted janitor’s closet in its size but there was a huge skylight that made the sun shine directly on the bed and lightened the room much more than it deserved.

There was a rail with a few hangers on it, a plank of wood attached to the wall to mimic a desk with a chair stuck underneath it and the bed she was lying on which felt like it was leftover from some war.

So relaxing she thought to herself as folded her arms under her head and looked up at the bit of cloudy sky peeking down at her. It was too bright so she turned on her side and curled up.

At least it was an actual bed.

She was confused when she woke up and was momentarily blinded by the afternoon sun. She sat up and stretched her back. The camp bed hadn’t been so awful after all. It didn’t even creak when she moved.

They really had nailed that ‘silence’ thing down.

She looked at the door and though it was only a few feet away, it looked like miles. Or rather, what was on the other side of it felt like miles.

Between this and their visit to the Taj, she made a note to avoid words with Tara if either of them hadn’t slept. There was a reason sleep deprivation was a form of torture. And now she had Tara-deprivation too because of it. One of those Hindi Gods was laughing at her.

She checked her watch and then her schedule to see what she might do. She missed lunch but she could grab dinner in a bit. There were a couple of classes starting soon she could try out to pass the time.

When in the back and beyond of the Indian countryside...

She quickly grabbed her toothbrush and freshened up a bit. The bathrooms were deserted so she
figured she was a little late for the start of class and this did not sit easy with her. At All. It didn’t matter if it wasn’t necessarily her thing, she was late for class!

She hurried across the garden without stopping to admire any of the pretty flowers or rock formations.

She found the right room and entered. No one but the instructor glanced in her direction but when he saw her wristband he just clasped his hands and bowed.

Oh boy.

Willow once again copied the motion before scanning the room.

She thought Tara might be here but she must have gone to the meditation class.

She found a seat on the floor and just stayed there for a moment, unsure of what to do.

She peered over at someone else and saw they had a little booklet they were filling in. She saw a stack and grabbed it and a pen.

*Gratitude* she read.

There wasn’t much in the way of direction, Willow guessed because of her purported Level 5 status. Still, she wasn’t a stranger to journaling and this seemed pretty straightforward. Write the things down she was grateful for.

*Coffee…food…*

Her chin dropped onto her upturned hand.

*Kisses and gay love.*

She sighed.

*Having a girlfriend who doesn’t take my shit anymore.*

She sighed again, missing the disapproving looks being sent in her direction.
Stupid journaling making her a rational being.

She knew said girlfriend was probably feeling as ridiculous about their little fight as she was. She knew now what was a real issue and what was a silly, nothing blow-up. This was very much the latter but now they were in this awkward lodging situation and everything sucked and she didn’t want to be grateful, she wanted to be grumpy.

A bell was rung to indicate the end of class and Willow watched everyone else to gather her papers so she did so too.

She tried to keep a pen so she could write an apology note to Tara later, but was apprehended in the doorway and had to try and silently laugh off her ‘mistake’.

It was odd walking around this place; everyone had their heads down, avoiding eye contact lest it be construed as communication. At least this building had the sounds of shuffling people and the scratch of silverware.

Wait.

That was the scratch of silverware!

Dinner!

Willow was suddenly starving. It must be close to 24 hours since she’d eaten. They hadn’t even had a chance to eat dinner yesterday; they’d been so spooked by the story of Warren, they’d just bolted. The train certainly didn’t get a dining cart coming through it.

She let her nose be her guide to the dining hall. The theme continued with dark wood tables and stone benches either side, in rows. It only sat maybe thirty, so Willow could tell immediately that Tara wasn’t there.

She frowned.

Where was she?

She looked over her shoulder longingly for a moment but her stomach ruled her mind and she stepped forward to take a tray and get some food plated up.
Willow had zero clue what she’d been given but it was packed with crunchy veggies and spice and sauce and came with the freshest roti she’d ever tasted. She wolfed down it, and had seconds, though she had to ladle it herself when she server just stepped back as she approached.

When she was full she made her way back to her room and stopped in the hallway outside her door. She gave a quiet rap on the door but could hear it reverberate off the walls uncomfortably. It felt so loud it made Willow clap her hands over her ears.

She waited but when nothing happened she just let herself into her room and laid back down on her bed.

The sky was dark overhead down; stars twinkling back down through the skylight.

It took Willow a few minutes but then suddenly her eyes adjusted and she could see it, clear as day.

The Big Pineapple, staring her in the face.

Mocking her with its bright sparkle and unusual, alluring shape; mirroring she who named it.

Willow tried to close the pillow around her head but it did nothing to stop her thoughts.

She knew it wasn’t Tara’s fault she was hopelessly addicted to her phone but now she didn’t have her phone or Tara and if that wasn’t her idea of personal hell then Satan wasn’t smart enough.

She looked over to her journaling papers, considering whether to read through it all again just to do something when she suddenly caught the top corner of the pile of papers glinting under The Big Pineapple’s shadow.

Tara ran a brush through her wet hair and nibbled on the crackers she’d foraged from the end of her bag.

She had been on her way to dinner and hopefully to find Willow after the meditation class where she meditated on how stupid they were both being, but the instructor had acted like her personal bodyguard and, without words or even body contact, ushered her to a new room labeled ‘private meditation’.

She’d found an exit and slipped out wordlessly but she’d ended up back in the residential quarters
and opted to just shower and scavenge some snacks instead of traipsing back to the dining hall and potentially getting caught again.

Crumbs fell onto the towel wrapped around her and she untucked it and let it fall to her feet. She rifled through the open bag sitting on her bed and found a pair of red shorts, which might better be described as hotpants, that she usually only wore underneath something but she was alone so she didn’t really care.

She pulled a tank top over her head that was getting a little stretched out over the bust, pushed her bag off the bed and was about to lie down when she heard the door across the hall close. It wasn’t hard to make out when it was the only sound apart from her own breathing anywhere nearby.

Hoping she might catch Willow on her way somewhere, she took a few quick strides over to open her door. Willow wasn’t there, but when Tara turned her head to look up and down the hallway, she spotted the back of a familiar head of red hair sneaking back through the door out to the lobby.

Slightly alarmed, Tara followed fast on her tiptoes; her childhood ballet lessons coming back to her momentarily. She pushed the door open slightly but it was pitch black in there; any staff had left for the night with a phone number taped to the desk to call in case of emergency.

Tara heard rattling and had to use her ears to isolate where the sound was coming from as her eyes tried to adjust. Something was scratching and jostling toward the back of the room.

She stepped forward and some moonlight passed through the shutter blinds. Tara could make out Willow’s form, standing in front of the lockboxes, desperately trying to wiggle something into it.

Was that a paperclip?

Realizing what Willow was doing, Tara hurried toward her. She wasn’t sure if it was still larceny if it was your own property but she was sure that it was a whole load of drama they didn’t need. She clasped her hand around Willow’s wrist, who gasped and spun around to see who her apprehender was.

Her head reeled for a moment as she made out Tara’s face. Her eyes washed with fear then relief when she realized who it was. She glanced at her fingers still clasped around the wiggling paperclip and made one last desperate attempt for her treasure.

Tara yanked Willow’s hand away completely and pressed her up against the wall to stop her.

There was complete silence again apart from both of their raging breaths.
Willow could feel Tara’s chest heaving against hers and felt Tara’s eyes penetrating hers. She knew it was defeat but somehow it felt like a victory.

There was a soft ping when Willow released the paper clip to allow it to fall to the floor. Tara’s eyes dropped down for a moment and she released her grip on Willow but didn’t let go. She looked up again to catch Willow’s gaze again and in a split second found her mouth was latched onto Willow’s.

She didn’t even know which one of them made the move.

Willow’s arms wrapped around Tara’s back and slid down to Tara’s butt, pulling her in tight and widening her legs in the process so Tara pressed right up against her.

Tara paused for a single moment with her groin pushed between Willow’s hips and her mouth open on Willow’s lips, breathing through her for a second.

She wasn’t sure that getting caught like this was any better than getting caught trying to break into the safes so with one quick jolt of her body that made Willow moan as they brushed against each other, she linked Willow’s hand with her own and pulled her back through the main door and down the hallway to their rooms.

Willow backed up against the door of her room and looked at Tara in the harsh hallway lighting that just seemed to highlight how bare she was.

Tara with nothing on was a sight to behold but Tara with something-that-was-almost-nothing was a whole other layer of sexy.

She opened her mouth but it was dry. Tara saw it and quickly lifted her finger, pressing it against Willow’s lips.

Willow nodded hurriedly and shoved her hand into her pocket to retrieve the key. She spun around and slotted it into the lock, turning it open so they could tumble inside.

The door closed with a soft click, much softer than the shared panting and ripping of clothing going on behind it.

Willow’s pants fell down around her ankles right as the back of her knees hit the bed and she spiritedly kicked them off to join her shirt and bra on the floor. She fell back onto the bed and Tara climbed on top of her between her legs, whipping her tank top over her head before sliding their torsos together and latching herself onto Willow’s mouth.
Willow moaned again as her hands clawed at Tara’s back, sinking into her soft skin and feeling the muscles ripple. She bit her lip to contain the sounds as Tara kissed off into her neck and down to her collarbone.

Teeth scraped on her throat and only for her dampened voice box she would have cried out loud enough for the whole block to hear.

Tara must have guessed this because Willow felt a hand cover her mouth as the kisses began to circle her breasts.

Her back arched into the touch and her lips enveloped Tara’s middle finger. Her tongue rolled around the tip and suddenly Tara was pressed entirely against her and seeking her mouth desperately.

Willow’s hands flew to the back of Tara’s neck, winding into the back of her hair.

Tara reached between them to grasp Willow’s panties and slide them off of her legs. Her fingers brushed Willow’s hip and over the hair on her mound to finally stroke wetness.

Willow felt Tara moan against her lips. It vibrated through her right down to where Tara’s fingers were caressing her burning flesh. Her tongue pushed into Tara’s mouth and her hips began to rut against Tara’s hand.

Two of Tara’s fingers slid easily along Willow’s lips and slipped inside her. She felt Willow clench and then she clenched too, making her hotpants wet in the front.

They both broke the kiss to groan loudly, too loudly, and Tara buried her head in Willow’s neck to quieten herself. She just wanted Willow to absorb her, to let her be everywhere at once.

Her hips positioned themselves behind her hand with a straight angle and used her weight to reach up and press herself in as deeply as she could. Willow’s knees turned in against Tara’s butt, telling her not to stop.

They didn’t need words for this.

Tara’s shorts began to ride down and Willow reached down to help them along. They fell from Tara’s ankles and she started thrusting harder as their thighs slid against each other.

She reached between them and found Tara soaked.
There was a quick adjustment so Tara could spread her legs a bit more and Willow entered her quickly; unable to resist the hot embrace calling to her.

She wanted to speak, to ask is this good?, is that good?, hey, is everyone looking at you weirdly too? but learned pretty quickly that Tara’s body was telling her all she needed to know.

She could feel the eager rolling and insistent pushing against every part of her and just knew Tara was as lost as she was, now that she shut up long enough to listen.

They’d had sex a few dozen times now and it had always been good, great in fact; but this was transcendent.

Tara’s kiss was slow but her hand was fast and her hips were faster and Willow got to a point where she couldn’t even tell whose body part was moving where; it was just endless swells of pleasure everywhere.

All she could hear was Tara’s breath in her ear, growing more ragged with each passing second. The stars above her started to blur and she clenched inside, causing Tara to groan with pleasure which in turn vibrated through Willow and made her come, clutching Tara’s back tight to her body.

Tara’s hips sped up to help herself get over the edge. She felt it rippling right as Willow’s nails dug into the muscles on her back and her whole body shook. She left indented teeth marks on Willow’s shoulder and gradually fell more against her until Willow was holding her body weight.

Willow sighed happily as Tara pressed against her everywhere and they continued to hold each other inside.

Her hand lazily slid up to cup Tara’s head and hold her right where she was, listening to the way Tara’s breath hummed with satisfaction.

Tonight, Willow was grateful for someone who made her hear music even in complete silence.
Chapter 37

United Arab Emirates

Lights Will Guide You Home And Ignite Your Bones
And I Will Try To Fix You

“Are we sitting together?”

Willow took a half-step forward in the airplane-line shuffle and compared their tickets.

“Uhhh…you’re A and I’m C,” she said, then smiled over her shoulder at Tara, “That’s okay, I’ll just ask the person between us to switch. They’ll be happy to give up a middle seat.”

Tara pressed the front of her body into the back of Willow’s — a move completely hidden amongst the line of people scrambling to get on the plane as if it might depart without them, but entirely felt by Willow.

“You’re so chivalrous,” she said sweetly, or at least it would be sweet to anyone but Willow who could hear the sultriness dripping within it.

Willow cleared her throat softly.

“For my lady,” she said, shooting Tara a small smirk.

“You’ve come a long way from ‘I’ve never sat in economy before’,” Tara teased lightly and didn't mention how far she'd come to be able to say 'my lady'.

“Ugh, did I really sound like that?” Willow whined, “That Willow sucked.”

Tara hiked her bag higher on her back and discreetly kissed Willow’s cheek from behind.

“I fell in love with that Willow. Don’t bag on her too much.”

They boarded the plane and squeezed their way down to their row of seats. After putting their bags in the overhead compartment, Willow smiled at the man sitting in the middle seat. He was a big guy,
an islander, and his shoulders spilled out to the seats either side of him. He had a smile fixed on his face that was unusual to see from anyone on a cramped flight.

“Hey,” Willow greeted, lifting a hand and waving, “Um, I’ll take the middle seat if you want. You can have my window.”

He looked over at her and continued to smile.

“Oh, that’s okay.”

“Or the aisle if you prefer,” Willow said, looking awkwardly over her shoulder as someone tried to move past her, “Both are on offer.”

He cocked his head and straightened it up again.

“I’m good.”

“I don’t mind…” Willow pressed, “Really.”

His smile was starting to become disconcerting.

“I like the middle.”

Willow and Tara shared a look and reluctantly sat into their own seats.

“He likes the middle?!” Willow exclaimed as they walked across the jet bridge from the flight when they finally deplaned on the other side, “And that grin! I swear we’re going to see him on the news for being a serial killer.”

Tara frowned.

“He smelled okay,” she tried to supply helpfully.

Willow glanced at her, side-long.
“Baby if you have the ability to sniff out serial killers you need to become a special hominid member of the K9 unit.”

Tara playfully rolled her eyes and Willow bumped her shoulder with a grin.

They crossed into the airport and through the usual rigmarole of customs and immigration without talking much. Tara still got nervous and Willow had the sense to not put her foot in her mouth when a(nother) foreign jail cell was at stake.

“I need to use the bathroom. Can you wait for me here?”

Willow nodded and backed up against a wall. Tara turned into the bathroom and into a cubicle quickly before a line grew from others who had just gotten off the flight.

When she was finished, she ran her hands over each other under the cold water of the airport bathroom faucet, waiting unsuccessfully for an hot water to appear.

She patted her face to revive her a little bit and blew out some air. The woman beside her looked at her sympathetically and Tara smiled back before heading back out to Willow.

Who was not standing where she’d left her.

Tara looked around and spotted her sitting in a small row of chairs with her head resting on their stacked bags.

Tara approached and sat next to her.

“Are you worn out, sweetie?” she asked, her hand lifting for a moment to stroke Willow’s hair but stalling and dropping again, “You’ll be more comfortable if we head into the city and rest our heads on a real bed.”

Willow huffed out a breath.

“No, I’m just rolling my neck after Samoan Ted Bundy seemed to think his shoulder was entitled to the space between it and my head.”

Tara frowned.
“Ted Bundy was a really small guy.”

Willow smiled over at Tara and reached out to squash Tara’s lips together between her thumb and forefinger.

“You’re like my very own serial killer special on the History channel.”

Tara turned her head away to break the contact and Willow returned to her phone.

“Trying to find us a room. Seeing if I can get us a good deal. Prices are kinda a shock after being in India.”

“Oh,” Tara replied, reaching up to scratch a little behind her ear, “I booked us a room already.”

Willow looked up, surprised.

“You did?”

Tara nodded, her eyes glancing away momentarily.

“Uh-huh.”

“You never told me,” Willow replied softly.

“Sorry,” Tara replied apologetically, “I just, um, I just did it.”

Willow just smiled.

“Are we allowed to speak in it?”

“Haha,” Tara replied with a good-natured roll of her eyes, “Well we’ve been officially demoted to Level 0, so yes. Only paper wristbands for us.”

She stood and took her bag to begin to walk. Willow did the same and followed.

“Who knew Level 5’s weren’t supposed to eat or write or do anything but be in a permanent state of
meditative hush and placidity?”

“Clearly, not us,” Tara replied wryly.

Willow’s hand curved over Tara’s shoulder and she pressed her body closer.

“Nope, we broke all the rules…”

“Stop,” Tara said quickly, playful but with a bit of an edge, so Willow stopped.

There was a small lull until Willow spoke up again.

“Do we need to figure out where we’re going?”

“We can grab a train downtown,” Tara explained, “The hostel is just a block away from the nearest station.”

Willow just nodded and smiled; Tara was clearly taking the discussion they had about working out the logistics to heart and Willow was happy to see her feel confident enough to take the lead. Even if she felt a little uncomfortable being out of control.

As they walked through the airport, Willow spotted their seatmate wandering a bit aimlessly before being approached by security guards with dogs. They sat at his feet and all became clear to Willow.

“Ohhh,” she said, nudging Tara as he was suddenly hoisted off his feet and all but dragged away, “He was high. Eek. I don’t envy being in that interrogation room.”

“C’mon, Will,” Tara replied insistently, putting a hand on Willow’s bag and pushing her toward the exit.

Willow followed, almost tripping over herself, but still grinning a bit.

“Kinda like it when you take charge like that.”

Tara shot her a firm look that was undermined by her red cheeks and curling lips.

They made their way to the metro and got two of the last seats before a bunch of people from a
recently landed flight from London piled on, most of them sweaty and exhausted.

They had people standing over them and alongside them and any notion of personal space had yet again gone out the window. Tara saw Willow put her hand on her neck and roll it from side to side.

“So how's your, you know,” she nodded at Willow’s neck indicatively.

Willow smiled weakly.

“It's between a hitch and a kink, with a side of a twinge. It's okay.”

“I'll massage it for you when we get to the room,” Tara replied quietly.

Willow dropped her hand and brushed their fingers together.

“Well, I’m not going to turn that down.”

Tara lifted her hand away and pretended to scratch her ear again. Willow frowned but then they jolted and she nearly had a forty-year-old man in a football jersey and sunglasses fall into her lap.

She turned her nose away at the pervasive stank of travel and cheap deodorant and man stink and looked out the window longing for the city to come into view.

Thankfully it didn’t take long for the huge skyscrapers to start to dominate the skyline; the steel buildings striking against the lush trees and uninterrupted blue sky. The water shimmered, reflecting the sun in the sky and bounced it back up upon the shining buildings.

“Wow,” Willow said aloud and heard Tara echoing the sentiment behind her.

It was a pretty spectacular way to get their first view of the famously wealthy city. Even from afar, the opulent wealth was apparent.

They disembarked in the city with the hundreds that had been packed in with them. The temperature was pleasant, high 70s, and a big improvement on the stuffy train that had felt like a hundred degrees.

Departing the station, they paused and looked up. It was disorientating to be so low when everything else was so high.
“Tara, where are we going?”

“Um…” Tara replied unsurely.

Willow took out her phone and pulled up her maps.

“What’s it called?”

“I can do it,” Tara replied defensively, taking Willow’s phone and sheepishly turning her back to look it up.

She brought up the directions and nodded to the left.

“It’s just on the other side of that corner.”

They walked down the street toward a particular building but Willow looked in the window in confusion as they passed by to go in.

“…this is a restaurant.”

“The hostel starts on the 20th floor,” Tara explained as they went through revolving doors and exited to the right toward the elevators, avoiding the restaurant completely. “All the space is vertical in this city.”

The doors opened and they stepped inside. It had gold plated mirrors on two sides and a cushioned bench nailed in. When they looked up, the ceiling was a Renaissance painting that did not look like a generic reprint.

Willow had been in a swanky elevator or two in her time but this was the swankiest. It was a far cry from the last place they stayed in while in Mumbai, where Willow had had genuine concerns at times that the ceiling could crumble right on top of their heads.

Willow wasn’t opposed but was surprised. It wasn’t like Tara to pick out somewhere like this. Maybe everywhere just looked like this in this city.

They got to the right floor and the reception area was a little bit more low-key but they still showed off with marble desks and gold leaf wallpaper. Willow took a few leaflets to look at while Tara
checked them in.

“Dubai on a budget,” she waved at Tara as they walked down a hallway to the number printed on keycard in Tara’s hand.

Gold, of course.

“We’ll need that,” Tara replied, taking it and turning it around to read the back, “I knew it was wealthy here but it’s all a bit much, isn’t it? ‘Taxis are public transport here’…wow. The carbon footprint must be huge.”

She opened it to read while Willow started to look around at where they were heading.

Normally dormitory hallways were all open with people coming and going. This could’ve been a hotel floor considering how quiet it was.

“Hey, are we going to a private room?”

“Uh-huh,” Tara replied absentmindedly.

A line appeared on Willow’s brow.

“Here?” she asked, that line furrowing in complete confusion, “In one of the most expensive cities in the world?”

They’d only stayed in the crumbling Mumbai place on Tara’s request because they’d left it late and any other available rooms were too expensive; the extra expense amounting to about $10 a night.

Willow didn’t mind paying more for a private room, but Tara normally was more conscious of it, which made this extra weird.

Though Tara had agreed to move in Mumbai when Willow had voiced her concern and had been apologetic about it too, so maybe she was trying to make up for it now? It still seemed like an odd choice.

“Well we don’t have a water view or anything,” Tara replied turning the key over in her hand so it faced the right way to put in the door they were approaching.
She unlocked the door and held it for Willow to walk in.

Willow dropped her bag and immediately went over to the huge window. They were really right in the epicenter of all of the hustle and bustle.

“It’s not water but it’s still pretty amazing,” she replied, peering downward for a moment before spinning back around when she didn’t like the associated vertigo, “Though I guess any room with a window in this city is going to have a pretty amazing view. How much is it?”

“80 bucks,” Tara answered, stretching her arms above her head and distracting Willow for a moment with the strip of skin revealed between her shirt and pants.

“…would have been $30 each in a dorm in the places I was looking up, so not bad I guess.”

But still more than they’d paid per night in any place, ever, except for Fiji.

“Mmhmm,” Tara said and sat down gratefully on the nearest single bed to her, one of two.

Willow sat down on the other, then suddenly realized what she was doing.

“Wait, hey,” she said, looking down then over at Tara, waving a finger between them, “They got the room type wrong. Two beds.”

Tara shook her head.

“No. I booked a twin.”

“Oh,” Willow replied, trying to work out if Tara had booked the wrong room and was embarrassed about it, “Well maybe if we go down and ask they’ll change us? I’ll just tell them I made a mistake, no big deal.”

Tara inhaled softly.

“Honey—”

Willow stood and strode over to Tara, sitting beside her and taking her hand.
“I mean if we’re gonna fork out the extra for a private room it’s to snuggle, right?”

Tara linked her fingers in with Willow.

“We can snuggle. We’ll just push the beds together.”

Willow’s face fell.

“Have I started kicking or something in my sleep? Is the talking finally getting to you?”

Tara leaned in and pressed a kiss to Willow’s forehead.

“No, baby,” she reassured, “I love sharing a bed with you. Kicking and talking included. We can, next time.”

Willow continued to frown.

“Why next time? Why not now?”

Tara was silent for a moment, then looked at Willow tenderly.

“I booked this room…just to be extra safe.”

“Extra…safe?” Willow parsed out as if saying it slowly might help her make sense of it.

“Well…you know,” Tara paused and sighed, “Homosexuality is illegal here.”

Willow’s head reeled and her hand fell out of Tara’s. Tara put her hand on Willow’s shoulder instead.

“I thought you knew that,” she said softly.

“I-I knew it,” Willow replied, wiping her suddenly-sweaty palms on the bedspread, “But I didn’t…think about it.”

Tara squeezed Willow’s shoulder.
“It’s okay, honey. We just don’t hold hands in public. And we can push the beds together.”

Willow nodded dumbly but her eyes were focused on the floor.

Tara frowned.

“Hey…” she said softly, letting her hand fall away.

Willow sighed.

“I’m exhausted.”

“I know, baby,” Tara comforted, “Let’s go get some dinner. I’m starving, you?”

Willow nodded again.

“Yeah, I could eat.”

Tara offered her hand, then thought better of it and put the key away in her wallet instead.

“Do you mind where we eat?” she asked and Willow just shook her head silently.

Tara would have enjoyed scoping out the city and spending the evening walking around, but Willow seemed tired and out of sorts about the separate beds. Tara knew she must be disappointed but it really wouldn’t be that different to just push the beds together.

She tried to start a few conversations as they ate at a nearby Pakistani B-B-Q place but Willow was monosyllabic and not engaging much.

“I feel like I’m living in the Jetsons or something,” Tara said as they rode down a glass elevator from the 100th floor after a brief detour to a roof garden bar but hadn’t even stayed for a soda in the end, “I know that’s lame.”

“You’re not lame,” Willow answered quickly.
Tara brushed their pinkies together but Willow snapped her hand up and pressed her palm flat on the glass surrounding them.

Back in the room, Tara decided to try and cheer Willow up.

She closed the blinds and dimmed the lights and sat next to Willow on the bed Willow was sitting on, using her phone.

Tara placed her hand over Willow’s phone and gently pushed it away while kissing Willow’s neck. Willow immediately let her phone fall to the bed and her neck tilted for more, though her voice was strained when she spoke.

“I…”

Tara swooped in to take Willow’s lips and Willow melted into them for a few moments before pulling away. She rested her forehead against Tara’s, who started to push Willow back onto the bed, but Willow resisted.

“We shouldn’t.”

Tara panted gently, her cheeks flushing red.

“Are you worried about fitting in the bed together? Because if you want, you can just lie down,” she offered with a shy smile as she drew a circle on Willow’s thigh, “A-and I can get on my knees and —”

“I think I’m just so tired, y’know,” Willow interrupted, head down.

Her knuckles were white and her jaw was tensed.

Tara fell away, deflated.

“Oh. Yes,” she agreed quietly, “Me too. Always tired after a flight.”

After an awkward moment, she stood and hovered.

“Do you want to push the beds together to sleep?”
“We should probably leave them,” Willow replied cagily, “Don’t want to scratch up the floor and they try to charge us or something. Probably a $1000 floor in a place like this.”

The beds were on wheels but Tara didn’t feel like pushing and getting rejected for the third time.

“Yeah, no, of course,” she replied, turning her back to go over to what felt like ‘her side’ of the room, “That’s fine.”

She changed into pajamas and looked over her shoulder, where Willow was already curled up facing away from her.

“Goodnight, Willow.”

Willow’s voice was hollow as she spoke back.

“Goodnight.”

Tara ran her fingers through the soft silk of one of the fabric stalls in the local souk.

Somehow it felt softer each stall she came across.

There were endless alleys of art and sculptures and souvenirs and that was without even mentioning the food outlets and café spots. Almost everything was far too rich for Tara’s taste, but she enjoyed the window shopping nonetheless and the beautiful views over the harbor.

The scents were amazing, from saffron to sugar to the sandalwood in perfume. Tara could almost navigate her way around by nose.

She reached forward to Willow who was just a couple of feet ahead and tugged her arm from behind.

“Willow, come feel this—”

Willow spun around so quickly she almost fell on her ass.
“Don’t!”

People looked over and Willow’s eyes widened and her hand rose to her throat as she took in a sharp breath. She turned away but Tara caught up and stood in front of her.

“Willow, we have to talk about this,” she said softly so as not to garner any more attention, “Clearly I’ve hurt you or upset—”

“I can’t do this,” Willow interrupted, her face a bright purple as she pushed past Tara and ran.

“Willow,” Tara called after her but they were in a maze thronged with people and she was out of her eye line in seconds, ‘Willow!”

A haughty man at a fruit stall shot her a scornful look and said something in Arabic that either meant ‘shut up’ or ‘Americans’ or something equally derisive.

Tara suddenly didn’t feel much like shopping anymore and started to make her way out. Willow had barely spoken a word all day as they toured the city. They’d come to this city at Willow’s request, it hadn’t even been on their original itinerary.

They’d seen a show about the tallest hotel in the world back when they were watching TV in their private room in Delhi and Willow had successfully convinced her that it would be a once in a lifetime experience to get to swim up on its roof.

When Tara had suggested it that morning, Willow had flat out refused to go. Tara had almost spent a whole night’s accommodation budget just to get them up there as a surprise. She was glad she’d waited to buy a ticket now; it would have been wasted money.

And now Willow had run away. It felt like a long, long time since Willow had run away from her. It hearkened back to some painful memories.

She started to sweat as she tried to weave her way out of the people who were happy to stroll. She’d been happy to stroll too but now she just needed out.

She finally exited the souk having bought exactly nothing but a bottle of water on the way out which she guzzled on her way back to the hostel.

She rode the elevator in silence, though with a thumping headache starting to make itself known.
She hadn’t felt so out-of-the-loop with Willow since they first started dating.

That seemed like a lifetime ago. Like two different people ago. A different relationship ago.

She got to the room and let herself in, seeing Willow sitting on her bed with her body hung over her legs.

“Thank god you’re here,” Tara said, closing the door behind her, “What the hell—”

She stopped when she heard a sob echo throughout the room.

“Willow?” she asked, dropping to her knees in front of Willow, who was physically shaking and crying through heaved breaths.

Willow’s eye met Tara’s and she seemed to instantly crumble.

“I can’t do this Tara, I can’t do it, not again.”

“Again?” Tara asked in a soft, soothing voice.

Willow swallowed several times.

“This is…this is what it was like, what it was like in my head except here it’s real, it’s really real and I can’t go back, I just can’t, I—”

“Hey, hey, it’s okay,” Tara soothed some more, taking both of Willow’s hands in hers, “Take a breath. Take a long, slow breath.”

Willow tried to comply and finally got there on the fifth or so attempt.

Tara breathed with her for guidance and spoke to her softly.

“Now name five things you can see.”

Willow blinked several times until they weren’t glassy anymore.

“Four things you can touch,” Tara encouraged.

Willow took one hand back and patted around her.

“Blanket. Pants. Phone,” she rattled off, then squeezed Tara’s fingers between her own, “Tara-Hand.”

Tara smiled softly.

“Three things you can hear.”

Willow closed her eyes.

“Birds. Honking,” she said quietly as her ears picked up the sounds outside the window and the one nearest to her, “Tara-breath.”

“Two things you can smell,” Tara's voice continued to gently call out.

Willow inhaled deeply.

“Toothpaste,” she answered, the open tube still sitting on the nightstand between their beds, and then got the waft of a sweet, familiar scent that was too many things at once and too unique to identify as one thing, “Tara-smell.”

“One thing you can taste,” Tara exhaled.

Willow felt Tara’s body move and then a tender kiss placed on her lips.

She sighed softly.

“Tara.”

She felt Tara’s hands slide down her thighs and opened her eyes again, feeling calmer and able to regulate her breathing better.
“Tell me what’s happening,” Tara requested softly, “In your own time.”

Willow exhaled.

“It’s in my head. Every second, it’s in my head.”

“What is?” Tara asked, her brow etched with lines of concern.

Willow’s eyes were shrouded with hurt.

“It’s illegal. We’re…illegal.”

Tara sat back on her heels a little, pensive.

“This is what it felt like…before I accepted who I am,” Willow continued to explain, “Like my every movement is a giveaway. What happens if they maids see our beds together? Could they tell if we did stuff? What if they can tell by the sheets? What if someone sees us together and guesses, what if they see your thumb ring? I can’t see you in a bikini or a swimsuit; everyone and their uncle would know! I can’t look at you at all. What do I call you? What if I stumble and don’t know what to call you and it’s written all over my face? What if I smell like you? Do I walk a weird way? Do my clothes give me away?”

She threw her arms up as fresh tears sprang into her eyes.

“What if my footsteps sound gay?!”

It was funny, except it wasn’t.

“I keep seeing that guy they dragged off in the airport and imagining it’s me, or worse — you. I just think, how could they see how I look at you and not know. It’s a prison. It was a prison then and now real prison is a possibility—”

“We’re not going to a real prison,” Tara interrupted but Willow just shook her head sadly.

“We’re already in one when we’re living in fear.”

Tara reflected for a moment on the truth of that sentence and also how far Willow had come to
“Actually, she’s gotta say it.

“You’re right,” she replied eventually, “So let’s go.”

Willow frowned.

“What do you mean?”

“Let’s leave,” Tara replied plainly, “I won’t let you feel like you did all those months ago. You’re not that person anymore, Willow. You’re strong enough to lean on me now. So lean on me and let me get you out of here. You had to pull yourself out of your own prison but I can get you out of this one. This one is easy. Just a plane ride away.”

Willow frowned unsurely.

“We’ve only been here a day.”

Tara shrugged one shoulder.

“You’ve seen one flashy skyscraper, you’ve seen them all.”

“What about our trip to the desert?” Willow questioned, lifting her thumb to her mouth to nibble on the skin around it.

“Really, what’s a little bit of sand?” Tara dismissed, “And it’s hard to know if they treat those camels right. I wouldn’t want to support any cruelty.”

Willow’s heart started to beat a little faster.

“Where would we go?”

Tara considered it a moment.

“We took Nepal off the list to come here. We could hop back over. Do they do visas on arrival?”

“Yeah, I think so. I can check,” Willow replied, suddenly excited, “Is it legal there? T-this?”
Tara nodded.

“I think it's a bit of a gay hotspot actually.”

Willow’s eyes grew wide.

“Really? Who knew?” she said, then added on sheepishly, “You, clearly. You always know about this stuff.”

She turned her head and swiped at her eyes to fully compose herself. Tara gave Willow’s legs one last squeeze before standing and stretching her knees. She gave Willow a minute to herself while taking out her iPad to look for flights.

“There’s a redeye out tonight,” she said after a few minutes of searching.

Willow exhaled and stood up to walk over to Tara.

“Wait, don’t book it. I'll can see if I can reroute our original flights. I-I’ll pay for the difference but it might be less expensive that way.”

Tara covered Willow’s hand between them as she sat beside her.

“Nothing is worth you feeling like this for a second, especially not money.”

Willow looked like she might cry again.

“I’ve been so scared,” she admitted.

“Why didn’t you just tell me?” Tara sighed softly.

Willow’s eyes closed.

“I was ashamed. It didn’t seem to bother you. You’re so much stronger than me.”

Tara was silent for a moment, then bumped Willow’s shoulder.
“Well guess what?”

Willow looked up.

“What?”

Tara smiled.

“We’re a unit. A twosome. A dueting dyad duo.”

She leaned in and pressed several small kisses to Willow’s cheek.

“So,” she continued confidently, “The weight of their eyes can’t bring us down.”

Tara hugged Willow sidelong. She brought Willow’s head into the crook of her neck and held her there.

“My strength is yours once you’re willing to take it. And you’ve been my strength more times than you know.”

Willow sighed softly.

“I accept.”

Tara kissed the top of Willow’s head.

“Let’s get out of here.”

Willow threw her arms around Tara and held on for dear life.

When they were both ready, they packed up their things, returned the gold key to the gold lobby and rode the gold elevator to the silver BMW that brought them to the airport.

They ate dinner there and had to hang out at the gate for a while but Willow was on edge right up until they were sitting comfortably in the air.
“Are you feeling any better?” Tara asked quietly after they were served some pretzels.

The flight wasn’t even half full and she could have spoken louder but the lights were dimmed and the cabin was quiet.

“In part,” Willow answered honestly, “The me— us part, yes.”

Tara slid her hand out from under her blanket and brushed some hair from Willow’s brow.

“What’s going on up there?”

Willow silently gathered her thoughts for several seconds.

“We get by, so much,” she answered eventually, then rolled her eyes at herself, “What I mean is, no one guesses that we’re a couple. Even when we’re touching and stuff. It was kinda a huge surprise to me when I stopped caring because it was something I always obsessed about before. I mean I call you my girlfriend and the world is like ‘hey gal pals’.”

Her head turned toward Tara.

“And I guess that’s because we don’t fit some bogus stereotype or whatever but what…what about people that do? That can’t hide it? In places like that? Who are forced to stay there?”

Tara nodded.

“You’re right. It’s not fair, or right.”

“What can we do?” Willow asked helplessly.

“Change the world,” Tara replied softly, then added, “Help the people.”

Her fingers fell down the curve of Willow’s face and she took Willow’s hand in her lap.

“But for now, just rest a little and know that you’re safe.”

Willow started to settle her head on Tara’s shoulder but paused and looked up.
“Tara?” she asked, gazing into Tara’s eyes for a calming moment, “Ouḫibouki.”

Tara’s face slowly blossomed into a soft, serene smile. She knew this routine now, she knew what the unfamiliar words meant.

“When did you get a chance to learn that?”

Willow just shook her head. Telling Tara she’d seen it on a tourist t-shirt didn’t have the impact she wanted for this moment.

“It doesn’t matter.”

Willow squeezed their palms together.

“What matters is that there’s nothing more important than telling you I love you. And I will never forget that ever again,” she stopped and swallowed a lump, then finally smiled, “Hey, you wanna watch some SpongeBob on my phone?”

Tara nodded and Willow handed one of her AirPods over to Tara and found the downloaded files they often watched together on lazy mornings when they were alone.

The episode started playing and they watched as SpongeBob grew multiple hands to get all of his jobs done at once.

“Do you think he acquired special powers or is his ability to grow hands native to his species?” Tara whispered to Willow in the small space between their heads.

“I don’t know, but whatever it is I hope they can utilize it for humans someday,” Willow replied with a salacious grin breaking through the few tears that were finally clearing from her eyes, “It would come in very…handy…”

Tara’s head turned toward Willow and her lips slowly quirked upward on her face.

“Vixen.”

Willow’s cheeks blushed and her head ducked lightly as she continued to smile.
She sensed Tara’s head snuggle against her shoulder and at 30,000 feet in the air, never had she felt more safe.
Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

'M' rated content in this one!

Nepal
(Part 1)

’Cause You Make Me Feel Wild
You Touch My Inner Smile

“Tara.”

Willow poked Tara’s sleeping face again as she stood on the ladder between the bunks so she could reach Tara on top.

“Tara,” she whispered into the quiet room, tapping Tara’s nose repeatedly.

Tara batted Willow’s hand away.

“Stop it,” she whispered back grumpily, cracking an eye open to see the room was still in darkness, “What is it?”

Willow held up a red rose and twirled it.

“Happy Valentine’s Day.”

“Can you two lesbians quit your bloody ear-bashing at this hour?” an Australian roommate barked out from across the room.

Willow made a mocking face over her shoulder but was all earnest smiles again when she turned back to Tara.

Tara lifted her blanket, which Willow scrambled under quickly and pulled it over their heads. They’d
gotten pretty good at learning to utilize mediocre-at-best bed linen to create a little vacuum they could whisper to each other in if they wanted a little privacy.

They had to huddle close together, of course, but it was a sacrifice they were both willing to make.

Willow twirled the rose under Tara’s nose, smiling when Tara visibly withheld a ticklish giggle.

“I had to go out early to pick it out for you.”

Tara closed her hand over Willow’s on the stem and smiled.

“You picked it?”

“Well…I picked it from the florist at the early morning market,” Willow admitted sheepishly “I don’t think there’s a plant left unpruned out there. I wasn’t sure if today would be as commercialized over here but…I guess cupid’s arrow shoots in all jurisdictions.”

Tara leaned in and kissed Willow softly.

“I love it,” she whispered against Willow’s lips, “I love you.”

Willow brushed the petals of the rose against Tara’s cheek.

“You told me you loved not long after Valentine’s Day last year.”

She blushed and sighed softly.

“I wish I’d said it back. I felt it.”

“It’s okay,” Tara replied with an easy, sleepy smile, “I felt it for a long time before I said it too.”

Willow touched her fingertips to Tara’s cheek where the petals had danced. Tara always made everything so easy, even when she didn’t think she deserved it. Her fingers fell to Tara’s lips and ran over them softly.

“…remember what else we did for the first time right after Valentine’s Day?”
Her hand fell away from Tara’s mouth and down to her waist where she pressed it against the seam between Tara’s legs.

Tara’s eyes fluttered closed and Willow brought her hand under Tara’s pajama bottoms. She wasn’t wearing underwear.

Willow dipped her fingers between Tara’s lips and found her clit. She wasn’t tentative like that first time; she knew the exact pressure and movement that made Tara—

A hand closed around her wrist and pulled her away.

“Not with other people in the room,” Tara whispered in a shaken breath, “That’s all I can take without making any noise.”

Willow curled her hand around Tara’s hip instead and gently brushed against the skin above her waistband.

Tara snaked her arm around Willow’s waist and cuddled closer.

“Let’s sleep some more.”

Willow agreed silently by tucking herself under Tara’s chin and closing her eyes.

The rose stayed floating above the interlocking curves of their bodies with the petals falling off in their never-ending quest to get closer.

“This is not the romantic Valentine’s meal I hoped for.”

Willow winced at the scratching sound of chair legs on the tile floor of the hostel kitchen. Her fellow travelers had little concern for any misophonia one might possess, it seemed, as another scraped a spoon against a pan and a third loudly smacked their lips together between each bite of the fish they’d courteously heated up in the microwave.

“It’s really good though,” Tara replied, briefly sticking her thumb between her lips to remove a little piece of cheese that had gotten stuck, “You do great nachos.”
“No one melts cheese on chips like me,” Willow quipped unenthusiastically, “I don’t know what I anticipated…it’s not like filet mignon or oysters are in my repertoire…or our budget.”

She noticed a little piece of guac dabbed on Tara’s nose and smiled. She leaned in and kissed Tara’s nose, then her lips for a chaste moment and finally, settled back.

“On second thought, this is perfect.”

Tara blushed and wiped at her nose.

“It’s not first date food.”

Willow scooped some sour cream up with a chip and stuffed into her gob unceremoniously.

“I don’t plan on going on any more of those.”

Tara ducked her head and smiled, dragging her upper teeth over her bottom lip shyly.

Willow’s eyes were drawn there but she made a point of lifting them to meet Tara’s gaze.

“Do you still want to head to this party on the beach tonight?”

Tara nodded.

“I think it looks fun,” she said, then added in an undeniably sultry tone, “Dancing under the moon.”

The crooked smile made Willow feel a way that was only safe to feel when they were very much alone and could act on it.

“You know I’m down for anything with glow sticks,” she replied as a distraction, then her nose scrunched up, “Well, maybe not anything.”

Tara laughed.

“Where’s your sense of adventure?”
“I can be adventurous,” Willow defended, placing a hand on Tara’s knee and pushing it up her thigh, “Well…if you want me to.”

Her body leaned forward, meaning to engage in some brief but intentful osculation but they were interrupted by a table of guys, a couple of them their roommates, a few feet away sniggering and shooting wolf whistles in their direction.

Willow blew out a frustrated breath and started to stand.

“Go get ready?”

Tara just nodded and they cleaned up the remains of their dinner silently, avoiding the teasing from the table of guys.

“Dudes like that really make me consider single-sex dorms,” Willow said as they walked back to their room, “Except knowing our luck we’d be in with a group of girls who think lesbians only want to ogle or turn them.”

“And then get offended when you say you’re not,” Tara replied, frowning.

Willow’s lips pulled into a small grin.

“Do you remember that German girl in Osaka?”

“The one who told you to keep your eyes to yourself and then went out of her way to try and get undressed in front of you?” Tara asked with an arched eyebrow.

Willow shook her head to herself.

“I still don’t know if she wanted the flattery or the drama of ‘catching’ me out.”

Tara’s hand brushed past Willow’s and she curled her pinky finger around Willow’s pinkie.

“Lucky you only have eyes for me.”

Willow looked sidelong at Tara and smiled softly.
“The luckiest.”

Tara blushed lightly and was silent for a moment before meeting Willow’s gaze.

“I’m glad you’re…” she stopped to consider her words, “I’m glad you’re okay. After Dubai. I could see you were…you were really scared. I’m proud of you for recognizing it and letting me help.”

“Like I said…I won’t go back there,” Willow replied solemnly, “I’ve been doing the gratitude journaling too. It helps. Even recognizing that I got to have a good breakfast. Like this afternoon I was trying to remember what I had. I thought it was a bagel, but maybe that was yesterday. You had two eggs sunny-side-up. I remember ’cause they were wiggling at me like little boobs.”

“Sassy eggs,” Tara grinned and Willow returned it.

“Anyway, I wanted to note it. A lot of people don’t even get that, a regular breakfast. I figured life goes by so fast if you don’t write stuff down it just gets… lost. And I wanna remember.”

“Down to every last bagel,” Tara replied with a nod and sly wink.

Willow linked the rest of her fingers with Tara’s and squeezed.

“Down to every last everything I do with you.”

Tara looked at Willow for a long moment and wondered how she couldn’t love herself as much as Tara loved her.

They got to the room and went over to their corner bunk bed to pick out clothes.

“I saw you doodling in it yesterday,” Tara commented curiously as she decided between shorts or a dress, “Your journal.”

“I do doodle,” Willow admitted, “Sometimes. It helps too.”

Tara nodded.

“My mom always said art therapy was a favorite in the home to supervise. The clients would draw all kinds of things and sometimes even the ones with dementia would remember childhood memories.”
Willow stopped and considered that.

“Yeah, I guess it kinda is like art therapy when I doodle,” she reasoned eventually, “My parents were always too academic to ever talk about practical therapies. Is that what music is like for you?”

“I think that’s what music is like for everyone,” Tara replied, pulling a yellow dress on over her clothes and stealthily undressing beneath it, “In different ways.”

Willow nodded to herself, slowly.

“Huh.”

She absent-mindedly laid out a pair of cargo shorts and a t-shirt. It was just about warm enough to get away with those kinds of clothes, especially if they were going to be dancing.

She smiled.

Dancing with Tara had become her favorite thing for nightlife in each new city they visited. The rush; the freedom was like nothing else.

Especially as they liked to frequent at least one gay bar and absorb the culture from the local establishments. It was a crash course in living as part of the gay community Willow could have experienced no other way. It often made her euphoric as she spun in Tara’s shadow under flashing disco lights.

The full moon tonight would be a change but it didn’t matter what acted as their mirror ball, as long as it was Tara’s arms she was dancing into beneath it.

She lifted her head to ask Tara about the clothes she picked out and realized she was alone in the room again. Tara’s toiletry bag was gone but Willow hadn’t even heard her go. She blushed at getting so stuck in her own thoughts and began wondering some more about using artistic expression to clear your head and how music worked for her vs. how it worked for Tara. It was an interesting discussion to have with herself.

When Tara returned, make-up applied and hair brushed straight, Willow was going to ask Tara’s opinion on it all, but she was too busy being blown away by her girlfriend looking so effortlessly sexy.
“Wow, baby.”

“Do I look okay?” Tara asked, so unsure every time and Willow wondered how Tara couldn’t see herself the way Willow saw her.

Neither realized the other felt the same way.

“You look stunning,” Willow answered, reaching out to run a hand down Tara’s bare arm where a light tan was holding out from the Indian sun.

Tara blushed and smiled.

“Thanks.”

Willow’s hand fell away from Tara’s arm and back to her side.

“I got lost in Willow-brain. I’ll be ready soon.”

“Take your time,” Tara replied easily, “It’s just getting dark anyway. Do you need some help?”

Willow nodded quickly.

“Yes. Always. Especially from you.”

She turned back toward the clothes she had laid out and made a face. She looked to Tara for help.

They looked through the options and eventually swapped the cargo shorts for jean shorts and the tee for a yellow smiley-face tank top that matched Tara’s dress in color.

Willow patted the front of her abdomen when she finished getting dressed, satisfied with the selection.

“Hey, clothes.”

Tara pursed her lips and looked Willow up and down as her mouth quirked up on one side. The only thing better than the denim hugging her thighs or the small bulge of her braless breasts in that tank would be nothing at all.
“Better not get used to ‘em.”

Willow was still getting used to hearing Tara talk about her like that but her standard reaction had shifted from embarrassment to thrill.

“Mmm, yes, ma’am,” she agreed and reached out to tug Tara toward her by the waist.

She loved that Tara towered over her just slightly so their noses angled opposite each other and nuzzled as they kissed. It was little moments like that she’d really grown to appreciate now that she took the time to enjoy a kiss and not just swallow it whole like she was starving and stealing from the back of the pantry; always on edge that she was about to get caught.

“Love you,” she said, pressing her lips briefly to Tara’s cheek before pulling away, “I’ll just be another few minutes.”

Tara nodded and caught herself looking over her shoulder as Willow left the room. Those shorts were really something.

She looked in the mirror to fix her hair again but when their roommates returned from dinner and instantly began hollering and leering, Tara quickly made herself scarce and found Willow in the bathroom over-applying some blush.

“Let me,” Tara said, taking the brush and dabbing some tissue in water, “You have beautiful, rosy cheeks. They don’t need help.”

She tamed the color and stood back, smiling adoringly.

“You don’t need help at all but you do look very pretty tonight.”

Willow kept Tara’s gaze, her pupils wide and eyes glassy.

“I don’t always feel pretty, but I do every time I look at you looking at me.”

Tara started to reach out but they were disturbed by a toilet in a nearby cubicle flushing and they were brought squarely back to their surroundings. Willow turned to the mirror to do one last once-over and then did a little twirl when she noticed Tara looking out of the corner of her eye.
Tara didn’t try to hide her smile and just put her arm around Willow’s shoulders. She kissed the top of her head.

They walked out like that with Tara’s arm dropping so they could hold hands with a light swing between them.

“I’m glad I picked shorts. It’s pretty warm,” Willow said, though she wouldn’t let a bit of sweat let her hand part from Tara’s.

“Look at that moon though,” Tara replied with a sloped smile, her head angled up to the bright sphere beaming down at them in the sky.

“Well, it is a full moon party,” Willow reasoned sagely, “Although I’m not entirely sure what makes it much different from, say, a quarter-moon party. Maybe it’s just marketing? Like howl at the moon stuff?”

“Maybe,” Tara nodded, “I heard people talking about it in Thailand but I never really thought to ask. We haven’t really gone to any parties.”

“We’ve gone to club nights,” Willow replied helpfully, “I like going to those. I feel safe. But it’ll be nice to just sit on the beach if we get tired and not have to fight for a trendy stool that has no business purporting itself to be an object for sitting comfortably.”

Tara just smiled and bumped Willow’s shoulder playfully.

They walked through the city streets and something was different than when they’d walked downtown before. They had to step over more broken bottles and look away from more flickering fluorescent lights as bar signage seemed turned up to eleven, having the opposite effect of its intention to draw people in.

People were falling about, already inebriated and while most were just merry and not aggressive, the whole area was thronged. It was like weaving through the crowd at a concert.

They soon found out why as they crossed from street to sand and looked on at the absolutely packed beach. Everyone was drowning in UV light and wearing enough neon to seem like one giant, moving glow stick. People were screaming and bellowing and it was utter chaos. Everyone was even more utterly intoxicated than they had been at the bars walking down and it was still early.

Willow actually had to stop and catch her breath.
“Holy…”

“Crap,” Tara finished with a squeak and they looked at each other as if to ask was the other okay with continuing on.

There was some trepidation but also curious anticipation and they walked into the crowd without their hands breaking contact.

They found multiple DJs playing different styles of the same thumping music and the party-goers melding between groups as they danced with little discrimination.

They saw people sipping from huge straws coming out of what looked like a kid’s bucket for building sandcastles while others were chugging straight from it to encouraging shrieks from the crowds surrounding them.

Willow approached the bar to investigate and brought back two bright blue buckets, grinning.

Tara took the one offered to her and looked inside at the bright orange liquid, filled almost to the brim, dubiously.

“This is like a…a bucket of booze,” she yelled over the music, “I don’t know if I want to get that drunk out here.”

She took a cautious sip and had to admit it tasted pretty inviting.

“Don’t worry, at this price it’s probably 1 part cheap spirits, 20 parts cheaper mixer,” Willow replied, her eyelids flickered as sweetness exploded across her tongue, “We’re more at risk of our teeth falling out of our heads than actually getting wasted.”

Willow was very, very, very wrong and they were three buckets in before they even realized it. Willow left Tara sitting on an upturned crate, mesmerized and fixated on people skipping over a flaming jump rope, to skip up to the bar and get another bucket of deliciousness.

Everything was floating so nicely, like her whole body was a squeeze of honey rolling off the back of a spoon.

As she bopped in place waiting for her order, a young guy with silver slicked-back hair and a fade on both sides approached. He mimicked her moves in the exact opposite of what a mating ritual might look like. He made a quick order, keeping his body turned toward Willow, then faced her with a similar set of glassy eyes.
“I love your shirt!” he exclaimed loudly in a London accent, throwing his hands up indicatively, “Such vintage Woodstock realness!”

“Thanks!” Willow yelled back, pulling the ends of her yellow shirt down to display it without wrinkles.

“Is it Stüssy?” her new friend asked and Willow shrugged both shoulders.

“I think it’s J. C. Penney.”

“Oh I haven’t heard of him!” the guy replied cluelessly, scrunching his lips up in a pout, “I’m Kale!”

“I’m Willow!” Willow introduced herself giddily, “Isn’t this cool? My friends at home would never think I’m doing something this cool!”

Kale threw his head back and laughed like this was the funniest thing he ever heard.

“Is this your first time?”

“Here? Yeah!” Willow nodded eagerly, gratefully accepting the refill of her buckets as they were returned to her, “Have you tried one of these buckets? They’re like lifesavers you can drown in! Get it? You can drown but they’re lifesavers? Like the candy? But they’re lifesavers? Like the jacket? Because you’re drowning?”

Kale laughed some more and poked Willow’s shoulder.

“You’re funny!” he said and stepped toward her conspiringly, “You met Molly yet tonight?”

Willow frowned.

“I don’t think so!”

Kale arched an eyebrow.

“You wanna?”
“Sure!” Willow replied enthusiastically, but then her eyes narrowed a bit, “But I have a girlfriend!”

Kale laughed over the music once again.

“Oh, I should have known you were family with those shoes.”

Willow looked down at her sandals in confusion. Kale reached into his pocket and looked down at a few little baggies in his palm.

“Better start you off a little light. I have some little twinnies of you. Family goes free first time!”

There was some hollering and Kale looked over his shoulder at a group of guys in various flamboyant colors and tight clothing.

“My friends are calling,” he said, pressing two round chalky pieces into Willow’s hand, “Don’t take both. Sharing is caring, darling! Find us in Fire if you want more!”

Willow looked down at the objects in her palm for a long moment.

“Oh. I. Uh. Um. Thanks? Uh…” she started but when she looked up again, Kale was already halfway up the beach, “Wait, where’s Molly?”

“Next time!” Kale called back with a retreating smile.

Willow shoved the little round things in her pocket, retrieved the buckets and carried them back to Tara without much care as to splashing.

The shift in weight as she sat on the crate drew Tara’s attention to her and Willow instantly started regaling her in the joke she’d made before.

“That’s so funny because they’re lifesavers, like the candy!” Tara giggled uncontrollably as her body fell into Willow’s lap and she looked up at the sky sadly, “Now I want some candy.”

Willow frowned too then her eyes lit up. She shoved her hand in her pocket and produced the contents.

“I got these!”
Tara ran a finger around the edge of one.

“Smiley little things,” she commented, cocking her head to one side, “What are they?”

Willow bit the corner of her lip unsurely.

“Candies! He must have run out of love heart one.”

“Who?” Tara asked, frowning.

“Molly’s friend,” Willow answered as if it was obvious, “Everyone probably wanted one since it’s Valentine’s Day.”

Tara picked one up and held it to Willow’s mouth. Willow stuck her tongue out and Tara pressed it on. She then caught the second between her thumb and forefinger and let it fall down her throat.

“They aren’t very tasty,” Willow complained.

Tara sat up and kept her face close to Willow’s seductively.

“I can show you tasty.”

Willow’s pupils started to blow as Tara’s mouth drenched her lips with kisses. Tara pulled away with a pop and electricity buzzing between them.

With a loose dress strap falling off her shoulder and a kick to free herself of her flip flops, she backed out onto the stand and held her arms out for Willow to follow.

Tara’s eyelids felt like they were weighted down with stones as she fought an internal conflict about whether to open them at all.

Her body ached like the morning after she’d done a double shift at Honkerburger and cycled home and her teeth felt sticky and gritty.
As her awareness moved from her head down she realized there was an actual body weight strewn over her. It very quickly made the decision easy for her about whether to open her eyes or not.

She was grateful to see a mop of red hair over her chest. She knew that head, at least.

She exhaled and grimaced at her sticky mouth as her hand pressed against Willow’s back and her fingers naturally found the protuberance of her muscles.

It took more than a second for her to process that she was caressing naked skin. That meant Willow was naked. And that she could feel that naked skin against her own naked skin.

Eyes now wide, she craned her neck to look down and confirm they were as nude as she thought.

In fact, they were even nuder than she thought. Willow’s butt lay pert and perky over Tara’s legs on full view for anyone who wished to look over. The only piece of her covered was a towel hanging off her ankle like she was complying with some kind of reverse-Victorian dress code.

Tara started to poke Willow repeatedly in the arm, who eventually stirred with a groan.

“Ow, what?!?”

“Shush!” Tara replied in a hushed but frantic tone, “Willow, we’re naked!”

Willow raised her head slowly, smacking her lips together and barely opening her eyes.

“Huh?”

“We’re naked!” Tara repeated erratically, blindly gesturing with her hands.

Willow looked over her shoulder, spotted her own butt and looked back at Tara wide-eyed. She started looking around for something to cover them with and in the process realized she hadn’t the faintest clue where they were.

“Tara…” she said quietly, slowly, “This isn’t our room.”

Tara’s head shot to the side, for the first time realizing they were not where they had left the night before.
She didn’t recognize the room. Or the beds. Or the people sleeping.

Her eyes landed back on Willow, voice shaken and stunned.

“Where are we?”

“I have no idea,” Willow replied, gulping audibly, “But we should get out of here.”

“Where are our clothes?” Tara asked, covering her chest with her arm as Willow extracted herself from her.

“Where’s my phone?!” Willow asked with even more horror in her voice.

Willow quietly creaked off the end of the bed, crouching to hide her body in case anyone woke up. The towel that had been on her foot was on the floor with another towel and was absolutely drenched when she picked it up. She promptly dropped again. Her eyes darted around until she saw an old basketball jersey and board shorts abandoned on the floor. She snatched them up.

She offered them, quite chivalrously she thought, to Tara who looked at Willow as if she had three heads.

“These aren’t our clothes.”

“They’re clothes which is a distinct step up from the nothingness we have on now!” Willow replied in a strong whisper.

“I’m not wearing those!” Tara replied with a resolute shake of her head.

A minute or two of quiet creeping later, they tiptoed out of the room with Willow looking like Brian Scalabrine’s baby sister and Tara doing her best impression of an ancient Roman with the bedsheet wrapped around her body.

“Wouldn’t wear someone else’s clothes but you’ll wear someone else’s sheet,” Willow muttered, though Tara clearly heard.

“We already slept in them, what’s the worst that can happen?”
“Crabs?” Willow suggested facetiously and Tara just shot her an unamused look.

They paused in the silent hallway for a moment until Tara put a hand up against her forehead where a headache was starting to form.

“W-we need to find the front desk. We just crashed in this room, we have to go pay for it.”

“We can’t!” Willow hissed. “These hostels have internal blacklists. If you get put on it you’ll have trouble ever finding a room again.”

“That sounds like a conspiracy theory,” Tara replied unsurely.

“It’s true!” Willow protested. “Manpreet in India told me when we talked about him kicking out that creep! Manpreet wouldn’t lie.”

Tara began to gnaw on the skin around her thumb.

“So then what do we do?”

“We gotta sneak out,” Willow said with a definitive nod.

“We’re on the second floor,” Tara replied tersely, indicating the stairs just off to their right.

“Then we gotta sneak down and then out!” Willow retorted, throwing her arms up.

Tara’s face dropped into her hands and she did the only thing she could; follow Willow down the stairs. On the second landing, Willow suddenly dived toward a pot plant.

“I think that’s my phone!” she squealed, picking it up and wiping off some dirt, then holding her hands in a prayer pose when she pressed a button and it lit up, “Todah rabah rabah rabah!”

She held it to her chest as she straightened up again.

“Do you have yours?”

“I didn’t bring it with me,” Tara replied, then frowned, “I don’t think. What the hell happened last night?”
“Fleeing first, figuring out later,” Willow said snippily and grabbed Tara’s hand to continue to pull her down the stairs.

At the base of the stairs, they suddenly froze when a group of partiers passed them.

But the group paid them no mind and just continued on their way to collapse into their beds looking drunk and strung out — likely both.

They glanced at each other and breathed again, but both looked from side to side unsurely.

“How do we bypass the front desk?” Tara whispered.

“Go out the back?” Willow whispered back.

Tara threw her hands up helplessly.

“How do we know where the back is??”

Willow looked pained for a moment as she looked down two hallways filled with doors and no indication as to where either led. She chewed on her lip as she tried to think, then suddenly jumped on the spot.

“Wait!” she exclaimed, wiping her phone screen rid of some dirt and pulling her translation app. She held it up to the sign on the door to see if it registered, “Yes! Cleaning!”

She scurried down the hallway and held it up to the next one.

“Office!”

Tara quickly hurried after Willow as they darted down the hallway, catching up with her just in time to see the translation pop up at the very last door.

“Exit, it says exit!” Willow broke her hushed tone to yell, grabbing Tara’s hand again and pulling her through to the other side.

With adrenaline and fear they continued to run until they were at a safe distance and back on the
beach. It was barely dawn and other partiers like the ones they’d met at the stairs were dragging themselves home or had just flat out passed out in the sand.

Abandoned glow sticks littered the beach and the empty DJ booths and bars looked so out of place in the sun’s harsh light. They couldn’t seem to go more than five seconds without hearing someone retching or seagulls squawking as they foraged for abandoned food from the night before.

“Look at all of this. It’s disgusting,” Tara said, shaking her head, “It’s like a trash barge exploded at the bay. Some of this stuff will get into the ocean. We have to help clean up.”

Willow looked pained but it only grew as she looked along the beachfront.

“Yeah, okay. We’ll come back.”

After walking for a moment, Willow started to snicker.

“You’re rocking that sheet. You could start a toga line and sell it on eBay.”

Tara was not in the mood and glanced at Willow in annoyance.

“At least I’m not going commando in something some guy’s junk has been in.”

“Ew!” Willow exclaimed with maximum grossness and suddenly dropped the shorts and kicked them away with the rest of the lost clothing on the beach.

Theirs must have been lost in there somewhere too, never to be seen again.

Willow pulled the end of the jersey down toward her knees to hide herself and continued to speak defiantly.

“It’s long enough to be a dress anyway.”

Except now the neckline was the barest gust away from her flashing the whole beach. She had to hold the chest and the hem in place as she kept walking.

Tara remained glum-faced as her eyes stayed on the ground to spot any glass or needles or anything else ready to rip their bare feet to pieces. Her head felt like there was a chainsaw going off inside it.
Flashes went from behind her eyes as they passed by the remnants of the last before, but nothing stuck.

“I can’t remember anything after…” she started, sighing painfully, “I can’t remember anything. What was in those buckets? Illegal Russian vodka?”

Willow rubbed her temple vigorously.

“I remember that guy giving me candy and then…poof.”

Tara stopped in her tracks.

“Wait. Who? What?”

Willow shrugged one shoulder.

“I don’t know, his name was Lettuce or something,” she replied fuzzily, “He gave us the little smiley face candy, remember? Because he ran out of love hearts?”

Realization slowly dawned across Tara’s face as her memories came through for whole seconds at a time. She suddenly clutched Willow’s jersey straps with her fist.

“Willow, those were drugs! We took ecstasy!”

Willow’s mouth dropped open in shock.

“I didn’t know!”

She suddenly reeled back, looking at Tara.

“Wait… did you know?”

Tara pressed her palm against the side of her head.

“No! I don’t think?” she replied unsurely, “I thought…I don’t know, I can’t remember!”
They started to walk again, but not consciously, just to move as they processed the information.

“I can’t believe I did drugs,” Willow said, her voice echoing around her in shock.

“I can’t believe I—” Tara stopped short and paled as she had visions of herself spinning around the way her head was right then, “…did I dance naked on the beach?”

Light bulbs went off in Willow’s eyes and she pulled her phone up again, navigating to the gallery where a video started playing as soon as she’d opened the app.

Techno music played in the background and in the foreground people whooped and hollered as the screen wobbled but clearly showed Tara throwing her hands up in the air as she shed the last bit of her clothing and yelled out names of goddesses she didn’t even know she knew.

Tara was near shaking with horror and Willow could only stare, dumbfounded.

“Your mom will be proud,” she said lamely, and Tara didn’t even have the wherewithal to give her a dirty look.

Willow suddenly gasped.

“Oh no!”

“What?” Tara asked in a frightened whisper.

Willow started stabbing at her phone.

“Did I send it to her? Would I do that?” she asked in a rush before the phone beeped and went black.

Willow looked up at Tara, pained.

“Battery’s dead.”

“Willow!” Tara exclaimed, her hands smacking her own cheeks.

“I’m sorry!” Willow replied, stroking a hand back through her messy hair, “I’m so sorry.”
Tara shrunk into herself and leaned back against a tree.

“There was a time where I could say with certainty you were the only person who had seen me naked. I miss that time. Oh my god, what did we do?”

Willow felt the jersey material rub against her butt and felt a warm burning sensation.

“I think I got sunburned,” she said, rubbing the spot but pulling away quickly when it made her wince.

“At night?” Tara asked dubiously and sighed, “Willow, do we even know where we are?”

“If you brought your phone, we’d have your maps,” Willow replied a little tetchily, but immediately regretted it.

“If I brought my phone it would probably be somewhere on the bottom of the ocean or offered as a sacrifice to Mother Gaia,” Tara replied sarcastically.

“I’m sorry, baby,” Willow replied softly, reaching out to rub Tara’s arm, “Look, we’re on the beach…just the far end. We just have to get to the other side and then we’ll know how to get back to our actual hostel.”

Tara just nodded and they set off again for the long walk home. After a few minutes, Willow piped up again.

“Do you think we had sex—”

“I think we need to adopt a Don’t Ask; Don’t Tell policy about last night,” Tara interrupted, frowning, “We’re never doing drugs again.”

Willow linked arms with Tara and rested her head on Tara’s shoulder for a moment.

“Your love is my drug.”

Tara glanced at Willow sidelong but held Willow’s arm where they were linked.
“You better not have sent that video to my mom.”

Finally, they arrived back at their hostel with bruised egos and likely bruised feet. Mother Gaia must have appreciated the show because their room was empty of the lugheads that also inhabited it and was blissfully silent.

Willow got a pair of PJ bottoms and tugged them on under the jersey, which she then stripped off with zero modesty— it wasn’t like it was the first time in the last 24 hours. She pulled on a happy zebra tee and patted where it bared its teeth in a huge grin.

She’d miss her smiley tank top. It had always served her well in her ‘fake it ‘til you make it’ approach.

She glanced over at Tara who was trying to shimmy into her own clothes without dropping the toga-sheet.

She smiled.

She didn’t have to fake it anymore.

She rolled onto her bed which felt like a luxurious cloud even with its starchy bedding and worn out pillow.

Tara finally got that old sheet off of her body and kicked it under the bed, where it would reside with the dirty jersey unless and until someone else found it there.

She wanted to bathe, she wanted a decontamination shower in fact, but the thought of dragging her body into what, at best, was adequate facilities felt like asking her to walk through the gates of hell.

The only possible thing that could be worse was the ladder. She stared at that ladder that separated Willow’s bunk from hers and felt physically sick at the thoughts of putting her poor feet on any of those rungs or trying to swing herself over onto the mattress.

She perched on the side of Willow’s bed and pushed her gently.

“Move over.”

“Huh?” Willow asked without opening her eyes.
“I’m not getting up on that ladder,” Tara clarified gruffly, “Move over.”

Willow obliged wordlessly and scooted back until her butt touched the wall. She winced again but didn’t verbalize it.

Tara lay down facing Willow, their heads and bodies naturally curling together.

Their eyes were closed for an entire forty seconds before their roommates opted to return from breakfast, or the night before, or from their class on how to make their voices sound like foghorns because that was exactly how they sounded as they scurried in.

Willow and Tara’s eyes opened at the same time and they only had to look at each other for a second before a silent agreement was made.

“I’ll get the room,” Willow said sluggishly, sitting up to move off the end of the bed.

“I’ll get the bags,” Tara answered with a jaded sigh, turning her back completely to the new arrivals so she could throw their few things into their bags.

For once, the guys’ general loutishness paid off as none of them offered to help and she escaped quickly. Willow was approaching her with a new key and led them upstairs where the private room was. She let them in and gravitated right to the gorgeous, big, soft double bed; falling onto it on her stomach. Tara put the bags in a corner and joined Willow with a soft sigh.

“C’mere,” she said and reached out to pull Willow closer by the ass, feeling like engaging in some cuddle therapy now they had the freedom to.

“Ow!” Willow yelped, squirming out of Tara’s touch.

“What is up with your butt?” Tara exclaimed as her hand rose a foot off the bed in response to Willow’s shriek.

“Hey, you like my butt,” Willow frowned sadly.

“I do, that’s why I want to know what’s wrong,” Tara replied, “Show me.”

Willow yanked down her PJ bottoms and Tara brushed the green material of her panties up to get a full cheek view.
Her eyes immediately widened.

“…I don’t think you got sunburned.”

Willow groaned and jumped back out of bed.

“Don’t tell me that stupid flaming jump rope actually burned me,” she said as she stepped out of her PJs and backed up to the mirror to get a better look. Her breath caught on the next inhale as her eyes settled over the mark causing her so much discomfort, “Tara.”

Her head spun around, eyes wild.

“Tara, is that a TATTOO?!”

She tried to rub it off but only received more pain to indicate it was indeed imprinted into her skin.

“OW!”

She stared back in the mirror, twisting her butt around to try and make out the mark.

“Why didn’t you say something earlier??”

“I didn’t notice until now,” Tara replied with a gulp, “It’s close to your skin tone and I was kind of focused on finding clothes.”

Willow let out a pained whine.

“What does it say?”

Tara slunk off the end of the bed and hunkered down to get a close look.

“It’s not English,” she said, careful not to touch the light markings against Willow’s normally creamy white but now pinkish surrounding skin, “It could be Nepalese.”

Willow clutched her hair with both hands in a panic.
“The app, the app. Use the translator app.”

“Did you plug your phone in?” Tara asked, looking around for a socket.

“USE YOURS!” Willow yelled and Tara frowned. Silently, given the circumstances.

She fetched her own phone from a pocket in her bag and pulled up the app.

“I don’t know if it will work on skin.”

“Well, try it!” Willow insisted, thrusting her butt in Tara’s direction.

Tara held the phone landscape and zoomed in on the words printed on Willow’s skin. It couldn’t isolate the image so Tara took a picture to make it steadier.

“Your butt looks really good in this,” she said a little under her breath but Willow heard and glared over her shoulder.

Tara quickly loaded the image to be read and it came up on the screen and started to analyze.

“Oh, the language is actually called Nepali,” she read as the app recognized the language and began to populate the translation, “I didn’t know that.”

“TARA!” Willow screeched, just short of stamping her foot.

Tara’s lips pursed together as finally, a translation popped up on the screen. She hid the phone in her palm and tried to smile calmly.

“Wouldn’t it be cool if you never knew what it said? Like a little mystery?”

“Show me that,” Willow replied curtly, snatching the phone from Tara’s hands.

She flicked the screen into view and slowly felt her stomach drop right out of her. Her eyes lifted to Tara, wide as saucers.
“TUNA AND APPLE SAUCE!?"

“That’s my favorite lunch,” Tara offered meekly.

“This is YOUR fault!” Willow exclaimed accusingly before almost stumbling over herself when she was hit with a strong memory, “Wait.”

She was lying on a tattooist’s chair in a bright shop, the same towel she’d dumped earlier covering one side of her ass as she cackled to a bearded guy holding a tattoo gun.

“Now she can snack on me!”

Willow’s jaw tensed.

“Okay, this is primarily my fault,” she admitted with a gulp, “Oh my god, oh my god. Why the heck would I do this?”

“Because we were rolling,” Tara replied plainly, “I don’t even get changed in rooms with others but I stripped off in front of hundreds of people. We weren’t in our right minds.”

Willow paced back and forth, trying to jolt her memory.

“Wait, I remember. We were dancing and you said you could feel the spirits and charms in the air. You were singing me a song. And I wanted to sing you a song but I couldn’t so I—”
“Got a tattoo instead,” Tara replied, her eyes blinking closed for a moment.

She got a flash of feeling; like she couldn’t get close enough to Willow; like she just wanted them to be fused together.

Willow was apparently remembering similarly.

“. …and then we asked for Aphrodite’s blessing and buried my phone with all the evidence to seal our love to the earth. I remember it all.”

She shook her head.

“There’s an excuse. Aphrodite made me do it,” she said, dropping onto the bed and wincing at the painful reminder, “At least I didn’t bury my phone in the sand. And also that means I didn’t send the video to your mom. I didn’t have a chance.”

She sighed.

“But we can delete your mistakes. Mine is stuck on my ass forever.”

Tara felt guilty and sat with Willow, taking her hand in her lap.

“You can say it means something else,” she comforted softly, “Anyway, It’s small. No one will ever see it there.”

“You’ll see it,” Willow replied with a downward look.

“I think it’s cool,” Tara replied sincerely.

Willow looked up suspiciously.

“Cool?”

“It’s like a joke between us,” Tara replied kindly and inhaled softly on her next breath, “Actually—”

Willow suddenly stood up.
“I can’t sit on it; it hurts too much.”

“You need to cover it,” Tara advising, deflating for a moment before standing, “Lie on your stomach.”

Willow complied and returned to the bed in the appropriate position. Tara sorted through her toiletry things and came back with a tub of something.

“It might hurt for a second, but I’ll be gentle.”

Willow couldn’t help grin over her shoulder and Tara smiled back softly.

“Is that the stuff you use for boob sweat?” Willow asked as she watched Tara unscrew the jar and reach in.

“Coconut oil has many uses,” Tara answered as she gently rubbed the oil between her fingers to liquefy it before rubbing it into the spot, “You’ll have to sleep like this for a few days.”

“Figured,” Willow replied sleepily, feeling the comedown begin to hit her quite harshly.

Tara wiped her hands free of anything that lingered and used the single sink in the room clean them and then brush her teeth.

She joined Willow back on the bed and snuggled up.

“Hey,” she whispered as she leaned in close and bumped their noses together, “You’re not stupid. I love you.”

Willow pecked Tara’s lips.

“Night…morning…whatever.”

Tara’s lips pursed closed but a crooked grin escaped after a moment.

“Night tuna butt.”
Willow’s brow furrowed deeply.

“Tara.”

“Too soon?” Tara asked and Willow smiled despite herself.

She reached out and touched Tara’s hair.

“Do you think she blessed us at least?”

Tara returned the affectionate gesture.

“I’ve been blessed since I was four years old.”

Tara woke for the second time that day in an almost identical position but a lot more comfortable in it.

At least, she was comfortable in the knowledge that they were safe in their own room and that Willow’s green panties riding up her butt was only there for her to see.

Willow was strewn into her side and still sleeping peacefully.

She turned her head to have a better look at the slightly swollen but clean looking ink on Willow’s skin. At least Willow seemed to have gone somewhere safe, if with questionable policies on the inebriation levels of their clientele.

Though she could only say the same of her own tattoo experience; she wasn’t exactly stone-cold sober sitting in the chair.

She hovered her hand above Willow’s tattoo, resisting touching it.

The script was pretty and ambiguous as to its language. Willow could definitely pass it off as whatever she wanted if anybody ever asked about it. Tara moved her hand away and let it rest over her own ribs. She pushed her top up and allowed her finger to follow the notes on the staff printed onto her skin.
Willow started to stir with the movement and Tara quickly pressed her palm flat again.

Willow looked up blearily then dropped her head promptly back down on Tara’s breast. Tara got a jolt but could only smile and started to play with Willow’s hair.

“Hey, you.”

Willow groaned and Tara could feel her nipple harden through her shirt as the low vibration hummed near her skin. It was the first pleasant sensation she’d felt all day.

“I had weird dreams,” Willow mumbled, still fighting to keep her eyes closed.

Tara curled the ends of Willow’s hair around her finger, enjoying how the silky strands slipped through.

“What happened?”

Willow brow furrowed deeply. She turned her head to look up at Tara.

“We were,” she paused for a moment, looking uncomfortable, “Doing stuff. But when I opened your legs it was a waterfall of SpaghettiOs.”

Tara’s eyes widened in slight alarm.

“I think you’re still high.”

Willow groaned quietly again and buried her head in Tara’s neck.

“I don’t think I’m high but I’m…something. Weird.”

Tara wrapped her arm under Willow’s shoulders and rubbed her upper arm.

“It’s called hungover, honey.”

Willow shook her head; her hair tickling Tara’s skin.
“But like a hangover on…” she stopped for a moment, “Oh. Right. Drugs.”

She frowned.

“Buckets are only for building sandcastles from now on.”

“I think if I saw one I’d throw up,” Tara replied with a quiet shudder.

“Well that would be convenient,” Willow said with a small chuckling smirk, “Hey, do we have snacks? I’m starving but nothing could make me leave this bed.”

“Yeah, I think so,” Tara replied and took her arm back to push herself up.

Willow whined and slapped her hands aimlessly.

“I didn’t want you to leave the bed either.”

Tara looked over her shoulder.

“Have you mastered telekinesis?”

“No,” Willow replied grumpily.

“Then one of us has to get up,” Tara returned with an obliging smile.

Willow rolled onto her back and Tara reached over to drag her luggage over between her legs. Sometimes a cramped room had its benefits as Willow discovered when Tara stayed close enough for her to draw circles on her spine.

Tara smiled at the gentle tickle and opened the top compartment to look through her bag. Her tolerance for any kind of effort was still zero and she ended up just upturning it so everything fell onto the floor. That would be a later problem.

“Granola bars, ramen, crackers…” she said as her hand swiped through the contents on the lookout for food, “Jackpot.”
“What?” Willow asked, her chin lifted and interest piqued.

Tara held up an old packet of Pop-Tarts that must have been stuck at the end of her bag for a few months. Willow’s breath caught in her throat.

“I’ve never been more in love with you.”

Tara scooted back and handed the foil packet over to Willow, who ripped into it. It was crumbling and all fell into her lap a bit but she didn’t care and just picked up chunks of the brown-frosted pastry.

She giggled happily as it melted on her tongue and threw a sloppy kiss toward Tara’s cheek.

“I love you s’more and s’more and s’more.”

“Stop…” Tara resisted unconvincingly, “You’re getting the crumbs everywhere.”

Willow held a piece up to Tara’s mouth, who nibbled it and Willow’s fingers a bit at the end.

Willow felt her stomach do a few turns and took her hand back with a light blush.

“We’re lucky all we have is a hangover. I saw cops there last night. Getting arrested once was waaaay more than enough, thank you very much.”

Tara’s brow creased and she suddenly scooted lower and lower on the bed until the blanket was hiding her head in shame.

“Willow, I think we ran away from them,” she said, poking her head back out with a pained look of recollection on her face, “We stole towels from the beach and ran away into the crowd.”

Willow snapped her fingers.

“That’s when I got the tattoo! We ran in different directions. I went back to the strip and was seduced by the artist’s collection of different colored inks.”

She covered her eyes with her hand and after a moment, peeked through.
“Oh god. I asked for an actual tuna eating an actual tub of applesauce. I tried to explain it to him on the app! Thank GOD that got lost in translation.”

She paused with a small pout and glanced over her shoulder at her behind.

“I think.”

“I don’t remember being on the strip at all,” Tara replied, running her hand back through her hair, “For some reason I have Singing In The Rain stuck in my head.”

“Yes!” Willow replied enthusiastically, “I went to look for you on the beach when I was finished. You were splashing in the water and singing that song and luring me in like a siren.”

Tara closed her eyes and shook her head.

“I could have drowned.”

Willow suddenly got a somber look on her face.

“This is why I don’t go wild. Never again.”

Tara rubbed Willow’s back comfortingly and leaned over to kiss her shoulder.

“Don’t speak so soon,” she teased gently, coaxing a smile from Willow, “I like when you go wild in private.”

Willow sighed softly as she experienced her first pleasant sensation of the day. It tugged below her stomach and was just so welcomingly warm.

She looked over at Tara and arched an eyebrow.

“Oh yeah?”

Tara recognized the silent question and let her hand fall away from Willow with a coy smile.

“Aren’t you afraid of the SpaghettiOs?”
Willow watched that inviting quirk of Tara’s lips curl up on one side and began to slink her body over Tara’s under the sheet.

“I’m working on a little O of my own.”

She kissed Tara’s chest where it was bare from the round neck of her tank, then looked up to correct herself.

“Big O.”

Tara smirked and rested her head back against the pillows.

Willow kissed the spot just above Tara’s cleavage again and over to the swell of her breast. She pulled the material of Tara’s tank top down over it and felt her stomach start to squirm when an already engorged nipple popped out.

Willow ran her fingertips over the pebbling skin and slid the nipple between two fingers before leaning down to take it in her mouth. It felt hot, almost as hot as Tara’s moan floating down to her ears. Her tongue ran in quick circles, matching Tara’s ragged breath.

Willow reached up to tug the strap of Tara’s top off her shoulders and then tugged the fabric down over her chest to sit around her shorts. Willow angled herself better over Tara’s chest and moved her mouth across to the other side with wet kisses to her skin along the way.

Her hand molded Tara’s other breast; thumb pressing against her nipple and rolling it for constant pressure. She felt Tara’s little jolts beneath her and began pressing their clothed hips together. Tara only had to pull on her once for Willow to drop her hand and pull the shorts and wound-around shirt away from Tara’s waist.

Willow sat back, kneeling between Tara’s legs for a moment to look at her.

Tara took the opportunity to strip Willow of what she had on. The happy zebra’s face crumpled unrecognizably on the floor with a flick of Tara’s hand. Then with another easy hand movement, Willow’s panties dropped and bunched between them, waiting to join its comrades below when their moving bodies would jostle it off the bed.

“Oh god,” Willow breathed as her eyes traveled up Tara’s body.

It felt an age since she’d seen her like this, though admittedly it had only technically been this
morning. Somehow, having to retrace your steps after ecstasy-induced amnesia didn’t bring the same thrill of nudity that looking at someone baring themselves open for you in the knowledge you’ll keep them safe did.

“You’re so beautiful.”

Tara reached up and splayed her fingers out behind Willow’s neck, pulling her back down so their bodies and then their mouths connected. She swore she heard an actual sizzle as Willow’s hips slid between her open legs and their lips glided for one sweet moment, but it was probably just the sound of their combined moans.

Tara’s hands slid down Willow’s sides and cupped the ink-free cheek to pull her in closer. The press of Willow’s skin electrified her and she had a flash of being high and feeling her blood rushing through her but it was nothing like this rush where it felt like Willow was everywhere at once.

A low groan passed her lips and she tugged on Willow’s butt again.

Almost everywhere.

“Get in me,” she almost-whined in an unusually needy tone.

Willow didn’t seem to mind; in fact, she was quite eager to please and was quick to pull Tara’s knee over her hip and drop her hand to where Tara was begging for it to be. She spent a moment pulling some jerky movements from Tara by playing with her clit but it was clear from the overwhelming gush coming from below that Tara wasn’t in need of teasing.

Two fingers slipped down and curled inside, making Tara’s body rigid for a moment before it arched in a wave down to her hips. Her insides squeezed desperately to keep Willow in.

Willow let out a shaken breath as her own inner muscles squeezed in response. She had to tense and release for a moment to keep her mind focused. The sweet heat engulfing her was a quick reminder of where her attention lay and she did a few quick thrusts to get back in the moment.

She watched Tara’s face for the little details she loved; her neck rolling, her nostrils flaring, how her upper teeth dug into her lower lip and then popped off to release a cry when Willow hit that sweet spot inside.

“Oh Willow,” Tara released on a low moan, the nails on one hand ripping up the sheet beneath it.

Her body started to flush and encouraged Willow who was hyper-focused on every little movement
Tara’s body made as she hurtled toward orgasm. She felt Tara get impossibly hotter inside and then heard a hitched breath as she curled her fingers at the perfect angle.

Tara came with a prolonged groan; her hips lifting off the bed and her hands trying to claw as deep as possible into it.

Willow’s heart pounded as Tara’s heartbeat pulsed so intensely around her. She gently eased off her motions until Tara was still and let her fingers fall out of her. She turned her glistening hand around slowly and brought it closer to her face.

“I can’t believe I used to wipe you off me.”

Tara’s leg fell back down to the bed and she brought her knees together to give a satisfying squeeze between her thighs. She spent a minute catching her breath and watching Willow pop the top of her finger into her mouth before reaching up lazily to brush fingertips against Willow’s hip.

“Let me see you.”

Willow slid her knees up either side of Tara’s hips and sat back on her heels. Her palms lay flat on Tara’s stomach and gently slid up to cup her breasts.

Tara rested her hands over Willow’s hips and let her two index fingers come in from each side to meet at her bellybutton.

“You,” she breathed, her fingers sliding down and off right where the patch of red hair began.

She looked up and met Willow’s lusty gaze.

“Just you.”

Willow let her legs slide open a little more, unabashed and brought her hands back up to fold behind her head. Tara’s eyes glazed over and her hands rose to Willow’s breasts and cupped them fully.

Willow’s head fell back and she moaned. Her skin was flush and buzzing from touching Tara and the brush of fingers against her nipples made her shiver.

“Touch me,” she panted softly, “Touch me. I want to feel your body.”
Tara squeezed Willow’s breasts again before letting her fingertips fall over Willow’s abs and down to tickle her thighs. Willow almost giggled but Tara’s palms replaced her fingers and she felt a sudden gush as they crept between her legs.

“Like this…?” Tara asked innocently as if she didn’t know each light touch was torturous.

“More,” Willow moaned, thrusting her hips forward.

Tara watched Willow’s lips glisten; the dim light of the cheap fixture overhead not impeding the visual in the slightest. She loved seeing Willow all open like this; loved when Willow allowed herself to be vulnerable and so, so sexy in the process.

She dipped her middle finger there and let it glide up to Willow’s clit, rolling the pad over it. She felt, and then saw, Willow twitch in response and increased her speed to really see those thighs move.

Willow almost immediately began seeking more and Tara gradually increased her pace until it was almost impossible to keep her fingers from sliding right down through Willow’s arousal to tease her opening.

Willow eagerly thrust down and Tara thrust up at the perfect moment to fill her and to make Willow throw her head back and cry out a note of pleasure.

Tara liked that very much and rounded her thumb upward so she could pleasure Willow inside and out simultaneously.

Willow began grinding mercilessly onto Tara’s hand, her head rocking from side to side as her eyes shut tight. Everything was hot and clenching and tight and she could feel it building and building as it burst through every nerve in her body. She swung forward and curved her hands over Tara’s shoulders, needing something to steady her lest she take off like a rocket.

“Tara…” she moaned almost painfully as her hips burrowed into Tara so hard she might screw them both into the bed.

Sweat started to form on Willow’s brow as every muscle tensed in anticipation of her climax. Her nails started to dig lightly into Tara’s shoulders and her teeth bit her lip so hard it went white.

“Tara…!” she said again, the note higher and keener and so desperately on edge.

Tara reached up and tilted Willow’s chin down.
Willow opened her eyes at the contact and as soon as she saw Tara looking back up at her it all broke in one shattering convulsion that left her still and gasping for breath.

Tara cupped Willow’s cheek which seemed to be the impetus for her to take in a full lungful and finally she started to relax.

Tara remained where she was and let Willow remove herself after a few moments. Willow slowly fell against Tara’s side and nuzzled into the crook of her neck.

“I feel sooooo much better,” she espoused lazily with a satisfied grin on her face, “Thanks for not grabbing my butt.”

“It was a challenge,” Tara replied, throwing her arm above their heads to stretch it out after Willow gave it a workout, “You’re very irresistible.”

“Stop,” Willow replied shyly, burying her head into Tara’s shoulder for a moment.

Tara just smiled and sighed contentedly.

“I really want to keep this room for a couple of days. I need your closeness.”

“Done,” Willow replied without question, letting her cheek rest on Tara’s collarbone, “We should have just celebrated Valentine’s Day like this.”

“Let’s make a deal to do it like this from now on,” Tara suggested, wiggling her fingers and smiling to herself as she felt the evidence still sticking to her,

“I’m in,” Willow agreed with an easy smile, “You, me and a bed. Everything I need.”

They stayed like that for a few minutes of enjoyable silence until something started beeping from the pile of Tara’s belongings on the floor. Tara began to move toward it and Willow let out a grumpy whimper.

“I thought we talked about this ‘you leaving the bed’ thing.”

“It’s the Skype notification,” Tara replied, tiredly sorting through her things, “It’s probably my mom.”
Willow glanced around. She had no idea what time it was but she could see it was dark outside the small window up high on the wall.

“It’s too early to be your mom,” she said after some guestimation and mental math.

“Not if she’s calling before work,” Tara reasoned and lay back with her iPad in hand when she finally found it. She opened the app and checked the message, “She wants to video chat.”

Willow tossed her head back against the pillows, then over at Tara obligingly.

“Clothes?”

“Clothes,” Tara confirmed and linked her fingers with Willow’s between them for a moment, “We can probably get away with shirts.”

Willow smiled and Tara lifted her hand to smooth some of Willow’s wild mane.

“…and a hairbrush.”

Her hands came round to cup Willow’s face and kiss her softly. Willow smiled into the kiss and continued to smile when Tara parted to get a brush and clothing for them.

Willow gingerly placed a pillow beneath her as she sat up against the wall, feeling the burden of her bad decisions as her weight settled on her rear. Tara threw her the happy zebra top back and Willow smoothed out the wrinkled tail while she waited.

“I can’t remember the last time I ironed…anything.”

“You ironed my black jeans for me in Goa,” Tara replied, checking her hair in the mirror on the back of the door, “When we went to that nice restaurant.”

Willow nodded at the memory.

“Right. We borrowed a travel-sized one from that girl from Finland. I speed-ironed my whole suitcase.”

Tara returned to the bed with a fond smile.
“You were so cute zipping away at it. Like…”

She imitated Willow ironing jollily and Willow gently pushed her, grinning.

“Stop. You weren’t complaining when you looked so sharp with those creases,” she teased, then scrunched up her nose, “Actually I was the one not complaining.”

Tara wrapped her hand under Willow’s chin and leaned in to kiss her.

“No complaints here either,” she murmured as their noses brushed off each other.

The iPad pinged with a new notification and Tara sighed softly as she pulled away.

She turned the screen over and held it between them so the camera angled at their faces. She pressed the call button near her mother’s name and they both grimaced when the camera activated and their faces filled the screen. They still looked a little rough.

Thankfully it was only for a moment before Kimberly’s face took up the space, looking a lot chirpier than they were.

“Good morning you two,” Kimberly greeted warmly, “I guess it’s afternoon for you.”

“Evening,” Willow clarified, dropping her head onto Tara’s shoulder sleepy, “We just had dessert.”

Her eyes suddenly widened and her head shot up, very much alert.

“Dinner! We just had dinner!” she said in a rush, clenching her teeth tight as if it might control her blush, “Um, so what’s up in good ole Sunnydale?”

Tara shot her a side-eyed glare but tried to keep her face neutral. Kimberly, to her credit, continued on without reacting.

“Well nothing as exotic as you, I’m sure,” she replied with that almost-unnoticeable hint of tease in her tone that Willow only recognized because Tara did the exact same thing, “They opened a new restaurant near the university campus. The Razorbacks are playing some big game this weekend, or so Donny tells me. And Joyce’s gallery has been loaned a Georgia O’Keeffe, which is very exciting. I’m going to the unveiling tonight.”
“That explains Buffy telling me her mom was all excited about some weird coochie flower painting,” Willow said to Tara.

“Canvass of a lady garden,” Tara grinned.

Willow giggled and Kimberly rolled her eyes.

“Tara. I taught you to have a better appreciation of art than that.”

Willow’s lips pursed closed to stop from laughing and she looked at Tara, her eyes teasing her with a silent ‘you just got scolded’ with overt overtones of ‘na na na na na’.

Tara lifted her hand to poke Willow’s nose but Willow anticipated it and slapped her away before it happened.

“Girls, really,” Kimberly interrupted like they were six years old again and caught filling Donny’s sneakers with mud.

“Sorry mom,” Tara replied contritely.

“Sorry Ms. Maclay,” Willow echoed, though not without sharing a sneaky, defiant smile with Tara.

The corners of Tara’s lips began to tug upward and she quickly diverted the conversation.

“So, mom, how have you been? Um, how’s…how’s Donny?”

Willow linked her arm through Tara’s and silently linked their fingers together. Tara smiled softly at the sign of support and squeezed Willow’s palm as her mother started filling her in on the goings-on in her life.

Kimberly seemed in good spirits; enjoying a renewed social life with Joyce and getting on well at work. Donny was keeping his head down, working and playing on his new bike and not at any bars. He was moving into his new studio downtown in a couple of weeks.

She hadn’t really seen the Rosenbergs but they were just home after an extended trip and had waved to them in the street.
“Yeah, my mom is home for Spring break season. My dad said he’s been taking a step back from all the travel lately too. Enjoying the peace and quiet at home I think.”

Tara smiled softly and Willow returned it.

“What did you two get up to for Valentine’s Day?” Kimberly asked, not interrupting but filling a natural silence.

The smiles turned to silent, communicative looks and Tara jumped in quickly.

“…we hung out on the beach.”

“Yeah, we did,” Willow nodded honestly, “We…hung out on the beach. It was pretty chill.”

Kimberly nodded, unsuspicious.

“Did you have a nice time?”

“A swell time by all accounts,” Willow answered and held in a squeak when Tara nudged her, “What about you, Ms. Maclay, did you get hit with cupid’s arrow last night?”

Tara was about to roll her eyes at Willow but Kimberly surprised her with an answer.

“Well…I did go out actually, yes.”

Tara’s head reeled a little in surprise.

“Wait. Really?”

Kimberly nodded bashfully.

“I did.”

“With who?” Tara asked, running her fingers through the hair falling by her ear.
Kimberly smiled coyly but her eyes were bright.

“A man that I’ve been seeing.”

“A ‘man that you’ve been seeing’?” Tara repeated with a small furrow of her brow, “I didn’t know you were seeing anyone.”

Kimberly rested her chin on her fist.

“It’s thanks to you actually,” she said to Tara with her smile widening on her face, “I met him when I paid a visit to that store you recommended. The Wiccan one. He owns it.”

Tara’s eyes widened.

“You’re going out with Mr. Bogarty?”

Kimberly laughed.

“Yes, but not the one you’re thinking of. His son. Jeff.”

Tara exhaled a slow breath.

“Oh.”

“He’s taking it over,” Kimberly continued, “Modernizing it a bit. He practices and wants to shed the stereotypical image.”

She paused unsurely for a moment.

“I hope you don’t mind Tara, but I even suggested your name and he seems like he really likes it. I think he might officially rename it The Magic Box.”

Willow smiled at Tara, eyes wide with wonder.

“Baby, that’s amazing. You named a whole store.”
“So is he your boyfriend now?” Tara cut in.

Kimberly sat back and tucked some hair behind her ear.

“We’re just enjoying each other’s company.”

“Okay,” Tara replied, swallowing before quickly nodding, “That’s good. That’s great. I’m glad.”

Kimberly smiled softly, relieved and looked off to the side for a moment before back at the screen.

“Girls, I better go. I’m getting to work early so I can leave early for Joyce’s show. She’s been getting such bad headaches with all the stress, so I want to be there for her tonight.”

“She’s lucky to have you as a friend Ms. M,” Willow interjected, her hand now on Tara’s back where she was rubbing slightly.

“Bye mom,” Tara added, “Thanks for calling. We’ll, um, check-in when we move on again.”

Kimberly waved at the screen.

“Bye girls. Nice to talk to you.”

They both waved until the image popped off-screen again.

“…you okay?” Willow asked when Tara didn’t say anything for a moment.

“Yeah,” Tara replied, slightly dazed, “Yeah. I just need to use the bathroom.”

“Okay,” Willow replied and slid the iPad over to pick it up while Tara got some pants on to go out to the bathroom.

When she returned, Willow looked up from the screen.

“I think I found him.”

Tara raised her eyebrows.
“Are you snooping?”

Willow hesitated, then nodded unsurely.

“Yeah?”

A grin tugged at Tara’s lips.

“Let me see.”

She sat onto the bed with a bounce and peered over at the page Willow had brought up.

“Jeffrey Bogarty,” she read and checked out the picture of a good looking man in his late thirties or early forties with brown hair and some silver stubble, “How do you know it’s the right one?”

“It’s the right name, right town,” Willow replied, using the cursor to highlight the biography section, “Plus he posted on her page last night.”

Willow pulled up the post and showed it to Tara.

“I had a great time with you last night Kimmy. Hope to see you again soon 😊”

“I’m glad he had fun with ‘Kimmy’,” Tara said with a tense tone after reading it for the fifth time.
Willow turned her head at Tara, eyes narrowed and lips smiling teasingly.

“Tara, are you jealous?”

“Of Jeff?!” Tara asked incredulously.

“Not like that,” Willow replied, placing a hand on Tara’s shoulder warmly, “But you never really had to share your mom like this before…”

“Share her?” Tara questioned defensively, “I’m the one who wanted her to get out there, start dating.”

Willow nodded slowly.

“Yeah, but…now it’s really happening.”

Tara swallowed again and looked down, dropping her wall.

“It’s a little weird, I guess,” she admitted, looking up at Willow sheepishly, “Probably less weird than when she found out about you and me.”

Willow rubbed her thumb over Tara’s collarbone and slowly slid it up to cup her cheek.

“Well, I want her to be as happy as you make me. She deserves it.”

Tara smiled softly and leaned in for a peck.

“I want her to be as happy as you make me too.”

Willow rested her forehead on Tara’s and bumped her nose playfully. She tried to shuffle closer but whimpered when her sensitive skin reminded her it was there.

“Let me clean your tattoo again,” Tara said as they parted, “You have to take care of it.”

Willow lay down properly on her stomach and looked over her shoulder at her once unblemished
skin.

“You taking care of it is the only good thing to come out of this.”

Her mouth scrunched up distastefully.

“I wonder how bad laser treatment really is?”

“Bad, I’ve heard,” Tara replied as she sat back beside Willow with the cleaning supplies.

Willow sighed.

“Maybe that’s just scaremongering to stop people getting one in the first—ah!”

“Sorry,” Tara apologized, easing off on rubbing in the coconut oil, “But that was just my hand. Imagine a big laser beam.”

“I know, you’re right,” Willow replied, pouting, “At least I have a permanent reminder not to do drugs again. I’m a walking afterschool special.”

Tara carefully spread some Vaseline over the tattoo and sighed to herself.

“We should actually eat some dinner instead of just saying we did,” she said as she finished up and stood to wipe her hands clean, “I’ll go get us something and bring it back. I could get some dal and roti or pick up some momo maybe?”

Willow looked over at Tara with a less-than-innocent look on her face.

“The KFC on the corner delivers…”

Tara smirked.

“You want to get KFC in a city with some of the most authentic local cuisines on offer AND have them deliver it from a hundred feet away?”

Willow nodded.
“Kinda, yeah.”

Tara’s eyes creased with an affectionate smile.

“I’m in. Sometimes it’s good to be bad.”

She winked and Willow buried her face in the pillow to hide her blush. She pulled the iPad up to her to sign out of her Facebook account and get the info to order their food.

“Share a bucket?” she asked as Tara lay back down beside her.

“Ask for extra wet naps,” Tara replied by way of an affirmative response.

Their food was delivered promptly which Tara collected in the lobby so Willow didn’t have to go through the horrific ordeal of putting on pants to answer the door.

They ate on the bed watching funny videos on the iPad and laughing with each other.

They ended up lying side by side again after changing into fresh pajamas and brushing their teeth, both feeling a lot more human as they readied themselves for sleep for the third time that day.

Willow played with Tara’s hair, curling a front strand around her index finger and releasing it to let it bounce.

“How is it than I can be in the most far-flung places in the world with the most incredible sites and beauty and endless things to see and do but just lying around with you is better than all of it?”

Tara smiled softly.

“You’re definitely still high.”

Willow poked Tara in the shoulder.

“Am not. Shut up.”

“Make me,” Tara challenged and Willow rose to it.
After kissing until they’d put each other into a sleepy stupor, Willow idly toyed with the strap on Tara’s top.

“I do want to capitalize on our time here…the people are so nice. I feel so comfortable. You were so right to bring us here.”

“Tomorrow,” Tara agreed, kissing the corner of Willow’s mouth again, “Tonight…want to capitalize on some snuggles?”

“I’ll underwrite that proposal,” Willow agreed with a lazy grin and looked down between them for a moment, “Guess I’m the big spoon for a while.”

“I’m okay with that,” Tara replied softly and turned herself over for her body to be curled into.

Willow did just that and inhaled from Tara’s neck, drinking her in like lavender soothing her to sleep.

“I love you, Tara.”

Tara felt Willow’s hand slide over her waist to rest on her stomach and she placed her hand there, holding her, and them, in the harmonious lock.

“I love you too, Willow.”
“You sure I can’t convince you to come to my yoga class?”

Willow grimaced as she sipped on a cup of coffee.

“Flexibility is not my forte.”

Tara jutted her foot out under the small table at the café where they’d grabbed breakfast and ran it gently up Willow’s shin.

“I beg to differ,” she said, smiling innocently with her face resting on her upturned palm and her fingers dancing animatedly against her chin.

Willow shook her head, her cheeks only flushing lightly.

“But will you check if they do a Tai Chi class at all? I’d love to do one again. Doing it alone in the bathroom doesn’t quite have the same effect.”

“Of course,” Tara replied, holding her cup of chai between both hands, “What are you going to do this morning?”

“I’m going to head to the market and get my mom something nice made out of cashmere for her birthday,” Willow said with a definitive nod.

Tara smiled affectionately.

“That’s so sweet of you.”

Willow shrugged one shoulder.
“She’s trying…in her own way…plus I can get my dad some socks and get a jump on his birthday too.”

“My sweetie,” Tara commented fondly.

Willow smiled back before checking her phone for a moment.

“I’m gonna head that way now. I read it gets really busy mid-morning. Do you want me to bring you back anything?”

“Why don’t I meet you for lunch afterward?” Tara suggested cheerily, “I’ve been craving some chatamari.”

“Ooh, pancakes could go in bellies,” Willow replied excitedly.

Tara smiled and reached out to caress Willow’s arm.

“I’ll see you then.”

“You know where you’re going?” Willow checked as she stood up from the table.

“I have my maps,” Tara replied, lifting her hand to her head to offer a diligent salute.

Willow chuckled as she pushed her chain back into the table.

“See you later, baby.”

Tara waved as Willow skipped out of sight and Tara sat back to finish her chai.

It had been such a nice, relaxed morning but she needed to move soon. She was meeting up with the nice Swedish girl in her mid-twenties, who worked at the hostel, to go to yoga and she didn’t want to leave her waiting.

That was one of the great things about hostel-hopping around the world; a lot of the workers were fellow travelers who were sticking around for a bit and so they always knew the ins and outs of the traveling experience and the local area.
She was being brought to a yoga class that looked out over the snow-capped Himalayas and was excited to learn from a retired Sherpa who was leading the class and to enjoy a butter tea after.

She stood up and reached into her pocket, taking out whatever coins were in there and leaving them on the table. She smiled as she passed the waitress who came out to collect the mugs and headed back around the corner to the hostel, dodging cars along the way.

This city was every bit as hectic as the cities in India when it came to car chaos. The buildings were beautiful though, once you moved away from the main tourist strip; all aged architecture and temple buildings that reminded her that she was so lucky to be immersed in such a different culture.

She walked through the hostel doors and through the busy congregation of people meeting in the lobby after breakfast or getting ready to go on tours. Tara waved at a few she knew from eating meals together or exchanging stories with.

It felt like flipping Donny the bird every time someone returned a smile and a wave, for every time he made fun of her for not being social. Or it had, anyway. Now she just liked the friendliness and didn’t really think of her brother or any of his torment much at all.

She approached the front desk where two people were standing; a tall blonde white woman with blue eyes as shiny as her hair and a smaller man with light brown skin and deep brown eyes. His dark hair was slicked upward and he had some stubble growing into a goatee on his chin.

Tara greeted them both with a smile.

“Ebba, hi,” she said to the woman, placing her hands on the desk, “Are you ready?”

“Hello Tara,” Ebba returned with a nod, “I will get the yoga mats.”

Ebba turned to go into the break room behind them.

Tara noticed the man’s eyes follow.

She hid a smirk and looked down until Ebba returned with a yoga mat curled up under each arm. She handed one to Tara as she walked back into the lobby.

“Thank you for letting me borrow this,” Tara said as she took it and swung the handle over her shoulder. She paused as they headed toward the door and the smirk started to reveal itself, “I saw Amir looking at you.”
Ebba just laughed.

“Amir should have the luck,” she said but ducked her head coyly in a way that said more than her words ever could.

“I think you mean ‘should be so lucky’,,” Tara replied wryly.

Ebba suddenly clicked her fingers as they passed through the threshold to the building.

“I forgot to hit out the clock. Wait for me one moment?”

“Of course,” Tara replied, leaning back against the door to wait.

Her foot kicked up behind her to rest on the frame and she folded her arms gently across her chest.

Gently reclining her head back, she suddenly felt a deep, resonating boom that seemed like it started in her head and began to radiate out through her ears.

She didn’t even have a split second to process it when things began to shake violently. She was tossed to the floor where her head landed with a bounce against the yoga mat tied around her arm, cushioning it.

There was crashing and screaming but Tara couldn’t quite comprehend it; it was all just hollow, muffled sounds of terror that her brain couldn’t quite catch up with.

The air was suddenly filled with dust.

It caught in her throat and that was the first feeling she actually recognized. Her arm slammed near her mouth to cover it and stem the subsequent coughing.

Her eyes strained to see what was going on around her but she could barely make sense of it all.

People thrown together, furniture collapsed, the lights blinking and fizzling into nothingness.

She saw blood, torn clothing, trapped limbs.
Her brain still hadn’t caught up.

Everything sounded like the frequency disruption when changing radio stations; ringing fuzzily and burrowing into her ears so it blocked everything else happening.

She felt a moving pressure on her back and turned her head to get a better look. She had to lift her hand above her eyes to shield the flickering light and realized someone was kneeling above her with a trail of blood on her forehead.

“Ebba?” Tara croaked, like someone who had been in the desert for days.

She could see Ebba’s mouth moving but still could only hear the rattling between her ears. Then a pressure lifted off her lower leg and she looked behind to see Ebba lifting a fallen sign away from her legs.

Suddenly the painful ringing zipped from her ears down through her body and her foot throbbed for a moment.

Ebba was screaming at her, but in a foreign language, which she seemed to realize the same time Tara did and stopped. Ebba grabbed Tara’s shoulders and shook her gently.

“Are you hurt?!”

“No?” Tara replied in a daze, the blip in her foot forgotten as she started to take in the carnage around her.

Ebba helped her up to sit against the wall.

“Stay inside!” she yelled as she hurried off to help Amir lift a flying lighting fixture off somebody else.

Tara’s eyes darted around the room at the wreckage it had become.

The walls were standing but everything else was in some form of disrepair; lining the floors with its debris. There were groans of pain and some panicked yelling but nobody around her seemed to be unconscious.

She heard sirens in the distance and crawled the few inches to look out the door swinging off its hinges.
Outside was even hazier than inside. Dust everywhere.

Fallen electricity lines, glass from street lamps, crashed cars.

Was a building across the street missing a wall or was that just a wall of dust?

She could barely place herself, let alone her surroundings.

Her heart began to pound as her fuzzy thoughts suddenly honed in on one thing.

“Willow,” she gasped softly, her hands frantically searching behind her for the wall to help her stand, “Willow!”

The yoga mat handle, still strewn around her arm, rolled onto the ground and away from her as she patted her pockets desperately to find her phone. She pulled it out and remarkably, it didn’t have a single scratch on it. Her hand shook as she found Willow’s number but as soon as she tried to dial, the line gave out with a screech.

She looked around and saw a few people in the same position.

No service.

Her hand closed around it tightly as she floundered for a moment wondering what to do.

It didn’t take long to decide.

Her phone was unceremoniously shoved back into her pocket and she tried to make a stride toward the door.

She let out a small whimper.

No.

She had to find Willow.
She heard yelling after her as she escaped but it didn’t stop her; she pushed ahead out onto the street.

It was even worse standing in it.

Some people were buried under things, some of them were unconscious in their cars.

She could smell smoke from flames and could see an electricity wire snapping against the ground, dangerously exposed.

First responders were already there, pulling people to safety and loading who they could into ambulances.

On autopilot, Tara helped.

She pulled a man from a car, she cradled a child into the back of an ambulance and led her wailing mother to her in time for her to go with them.

She walked as she helped, making ground between where she had been and where she knew Willow to be. Numerous people approached to help her too but she just non-verbally indicated she was okay and continued onward.

Heart pulsing, head pounding; she got to the markets.

It kept getting worse.

Buildings were crumbling and she heard glass crunching underfoot with every step she took.

A nightclub named Fire was actually on fire and only for it being the daytime no one was trapped.

She saw someone impaled on a pole that had once housed a trader’s stall.

Her eyes were permanently creased, on the verge of tears, but her vision was already blurry and she couldn’t afford to make it worse.

Not when she didn’t know where Willow was.

How Willow was.
She’d walked this area for what felt like hours now and nothing. Her voice was hoarse from yelling Willow’s name and breathing in the dust. Her eyes stung and each step felt like she was wearing cement blocks around her feet.

A man on the side of the road was yelling and gesturing toward a bus he was standing beside.

“Aspatālā,” he called out repeatedly, then paused for a moment when he saw Tara stopping, “Hospitalā!”

Yes, Tara thought.

She should check the hospital.

She pushed herself onto the bus and stood so she didn’t take a seat from someone who needed it more. She leaned against the pole then looked at it grimly as she remembered the image of the man laying with something similar through his chest.

He was dead, Tara thought.

She’d seen a dead person.

And she didn’t know where Willow was.

She allowed herself a little cry in the corner as she waited for the bus to fill and for them to set off to the hospital.

As soon as the doors of the hospital opened, Tara was almost bowled over by the sounds and smells and general chaos.

She approached the triage desk, one of many people flailing for attention, but stood her ground to try and ask about Willow.

She was met with many blank, rushed stares; each one making her stomach drop even more until suddenly a tall man in a white coat looking frazzled approached her.

“English?” he asked in an American accent and Tara could only nod swiftly.
She let out a quick, loud exhale and described Willow hurriedly on the next inhale.

The American doctor looked around and seemed like he was wracking his brain.

“Does she have any identifying marks?”

Tara started to shake her head and then suddenly gasped again.

“Tattoo. She has a tattoo. Here.”

With shaking fingers, she found the picture she’d taken for Willow the other day.

The doctor, to his credit, didn’t even flinch at having a picture of a panty-clad butt shoved his face with questionable writing. He just looked remorseful.

“I’m sorry. Check the other hospital!” he shouted back at her as sudden loud beeping drew his attention away.

Tara deflated and shut her eyes tight for a moment.

*Other hospital. Okay. Other hospital.*

She found her way back out to the curb and had to walk a few streets away to get out of the way of the influx of ambulances and other vehicles delivering patients.
When she stopped she realized she hadn’t a clue where she was nor where or how she was supposed to get to the other hospital.

Somewhere in the trauma of worry and drowning out the cries of pain that didn’t seem to dissipate no matter which direction she moved, she had a brainwave.

Maps!

Those stupid maps Willow never stopped bugging her about. She took out of her phone and pulled up the downloaded ones for the city. She found where she was and a little part of her exhaled at regaining a bit of control.

She searched for the hospitals and figured which one she had been at and where she needed to go. There weren’t many options and really only one other hospital that wasn’t for specific care or children.

Five miles away.

She looked up at the desolate streets and took a step forward.

Her finger followed the route on her phone, holding onto it for dear life in case she dropped it or broke it and found herself stranded.

It was frightening how easy it became to sidestep rubble, how the smell of burning became normal. She still helped where she could but by now most of the help needed was specialized; retrieving people trapped in, or under, buildings or administering first aid.

About halfway through her journey, Tara suddenly felt her ears start to buzz again.

She brought her hands up to cover them and braced herself but then suddenly every cell phone in the vicinity began to ring out at once, so loud it broke whatever glass wasn’t already smashed.

Tara looked down at her phone vibrating in her palm.

It said ‘Mom’.

They must have restored the service.
Her finger swiped the screen to answer. It took a few tries as her hands still shook.

“Hello?”

Immediately there was a scream from the other end, loud enough for Tara to have to hold the phone away from her ear.

“TARA!” Kimberly’s voice trilled out through the speaker, “I HAVE HER! SHE ANSWERED!”

Tara could hear the panic in her mother’s voice as she continued in a rush.

“Tara, sweetheart, what happened? Are you okay? We heard there was an earthquake. Are you there? Are you okay? What’s happening?”

Tara rubbed her jaw as she processed the questions.

Earthquake.

For some reason, that was the first time the word occurred to her.

“I’m okay,” she said, the words feeling odd her mouth as she breathed in the dirty air, “I have to find Willow.”

“Willow,” Kimberly spoke and Tara heard a ruckus in the background, “Ira and Sheila are here. Where’s Willow?”

“I have to find her,” Tara repeated with a steely determination.

“Find her where sweetheart? Where is she? Where are you? You can’t find her on your own—”

“—now listen here, give me that phone. Tara? This is Ira Rosenberg. Where is my daughter? She’s not answering her phone.”

“I will find her,” Tara interrupted, “Willow and I always know how to find each other!”
She hung up unceremoniously and immediately tried to ring Willow, but it wasn’t even calling, just going straight to voicemail. She sighed once, brought her map back on screen and continued on her journey.

She ignored the calls that kept popping up. They were just in the way.

The area around the second hospital wasn’t as badly affected.

All the buildings in the surrounding blocks had stayed standing and the streets had already been cleared of any injured persons. The hospital was bigger, more modern and Tara was on the point of physical and mental exhaustion by the time she stepped foot in it.

The first nurse she spoke to thankfully had some limited English but couldn’t place Willow. She told her to check upstairs where they were sending overflow patients and Tara started to panic that she’d never even checked beyond triage in the first hospital.

It had been packed; how could the doctor have known for sure Willow wasn’t there?

She entered the elevators and realized she had no idea where ‘upstairs’ was supposed to refer to. Determined not to make the same mistake again, she vowed to check every single floor.

And so, she pressed ‘2’.

It turned out ‘upstairs’ literally meant any and every available space upstairs. Each unit was packed with people being seen by any medical personnel that made it to them. Cots were pushed together side-by-side for people to lie on and some people were being physically carried between treatment rooms.

On the fifth floor, as soon as the elevator doors opened, Tara’s heart sped up when she caught a glimpse of red hair.

“Willow? Willow! Willow!”

She put a heavy foot forward and hurried down a narrow hallway lined with more camp beds. She rounded a corner and put a hand on the shoulder of the woman she’d spotted, turning her gently.

“Willow, I—!” she paused and felt like someone punched her in the gut when she realized the woman bore a resemblance to, but was definitely not Willow, “I—I’m sorry. I t-thought you were someone else.”
The woman nodded understandingly and continued on her way to wherever she was going.

Tara’s eyes scrunched up tight and she dropped her forehead against the nearest wall.

Everything was creeping up on her. She thought she might pass out on the spot and be grateful for it.

Until a tiny voice popped up behind her.

“Tara?”

Tara’s heart leaped into her throat and she turned around slowly to face the other corridor off to her side.

For a moment the horrible hospital smell lifted and Tara could smell strawberries and cream decorating a mocha cake, freshly baked with a cup of steaming chai tea on the side.

She could smell Willow.

Her clothes were dirty and her hair was wild and her face was half-covered in dust and dirt but it was Willow.

“Willow?” she said again, blinking several times to make sure her eyes weren’t playing tricks on her, “Willow!”

She almost fell into the space in front of Willow, her hands falling on Willow’s shoulders and up her face to confirm she was there.

“Tara?” Willow asked again in confusion, her eyes narrow and jaded.

“Are you okay? Are you hurt?” Tara asked in a rush, eyeing Willow up and down to spot any injuries.

“I…I don’t know,” Willow replied sleepily, looking behind her and back at Tara, “…I was asleep…I think? I heard your voice and I just…”

She blinked heavily.
“Where are we? What happened?”

Tara gently cupped Willow’s cheek.

“It’s okay. Everything’s okay,” she soothed, tears escaping her eyes, “Show me where you came from.”

Willow looked up at Tara and still confused but trusting, led Tara halfway down the corridor and into a treatment room that once held a single bed but now was packed with more than a dozen. Willow pointed into a bed in the corner which had become occupied already in the brief time Willow had vacated it.

Willow wobbled and Tara immediately grabbed her around the waist.

“It’s okay, baby. Lean against me,” she encouraged, pressing her back up against the wall and slowly sliding down into a sitting position, cradling Willow in her lap as she got there, “Use me as a bed.”

Willow leaned her head into the crook of Tara’s neck and closed her eyes again, unable to keep them open.

Tara looked around at the people writhing in pain and just held Willow closer, whispering in her ear.

“I’ve got you.”

Willow fell back asleep straight away and it was all Tara could do not to cry again. She didn’t know what to do or where to go so she stayed put and hoped a doctor would be around soon to check Willow and get her home to a real bed.

Do we even have a bed—home!

Tara realized Willow’s parents must be as worried as she was and she had been pretty rude on the phone earlier, even justifiably so. She gently felt around Willow’s zipped pockets in her cargo pants and found her phone.

The screen was completely smashed and utterly unresponsive and it made Tara’s stomach sink when she thought of how hard Willow must have fallen.
She took her own phone back out again and paid attention to the notifications this time.

Lots of missed calls and texts.

She didn’t have the numbers for either of the Rosenbergs, so she rang her mother back. It was answered in a single ring and she was greeted to yet more screeching.

She wasn’t even processing it, she just wanted to say what she had to say.

“I found Willow.”

There was a silence for a brief moment as, presumably, the phone was handed over to Ira.

His tone was much softer this time as he asked a hundred questions, most of which Tara didn’t have the answer to.

He asked how she was, Tara told him what she knew.

He asked where they were, Tara told him what she knew.

He asked if Willow had seen a doctor and Tara was able to give a pretty emphatic no considering the state of the rest of the people in the room.

When Kimberly came back on the phone, Tara started to blubber quietly.

This was really damn scary.

Kimberly was clearly upset too but offered her words of comfort and told her to save her battery and keep in touch and that everything would be okay soon.

Tara didn’t know how, but she accepted the comfort and allowed herself to believe it, even if just to get her through the day, or the night, or whenever it was.

After hanging up, Tara really started to feel the heat of having so many bodies packed into one room. She lifted her shirt over her nose and mouth for protection and held Willow’s like that too.

She was afraid to sleep and too worn out to think of anything else. Every few seconds there would
be loud, erratic beeping reminding her that someone was in a lot worse shape than she was. Even just in the small room they were packed into, someone’s skull was on view and someone else’s shoulder was definitely not in its socket.

Willow would stir every so often and Tara would comfort her back to sleep. She didn’t want her to have to deal with all of this.

*But what if she’s more hurt than I can see? What if she’s hurt her head? What if there’s internal—*

“Wih-low?”

Tara looked up, startled and saw a nurse, a local woman in a different uniform that Tara had seen others rushing about in. She was pushing a wheelchair in one hand and holding a tablet strapped around her other hand; the most high-tech thing Tara had seen all day. Even the computer at the triage desk looked like it had stepped out of the 80s.

The nurse turned the tablet toward Tara and Tara was even more startled to see a photo of her and Willow that they’d taken with the mountains in the background and sent to their parents just a couple of days ago.

“You, yes?” the nurse prompted again when Tara just continued to stare wordlessly, “Come with, please. We have doctor for you.”

Other patients screamed for help but Tara had to block it out.

“You have a doctor for her?” she asked in relief, unsure why they’d been picked out but grateful all the same, “Hey baby, you just need to stand for one second, okay?”

She winced as she stood but was mostly focus on giving Willow the support she needed to get into the wheelchair.

The nurse whipped her away and Tara really had to drag her foot behind her to keep up. The got back into an elevator and the nurse waved a keycard in front of a sensor that lit up the button for the very top floor.

Tara frowned in confusion and it only increased when the doors opened and they exited.

The interior had completely changed.
They could have been in a state of the art facility anywhere in the world and Tara had to look back to confirm that they had just stepped off the same elevator.

“Tara?” Willow’s voice piped up meekly as she woke from all the motion.

“I’m here honey,” Tara comforted, standing alongside Willow and taking her hand.

Willow looked up with sunken eyes.

“Where are we?”

“Hospital,” Tara answered honestly, “They’re going to check you over. Make sure you’re okay.”

She paused and rubbed her hand over Willow’s knuckles.

“There was an earthquake.”

Tara heard Willow intake a sharp breath. She just kept holding her hand as they were escorted down corridors with new logos and rooms that were completely sectioned for total privacy. It gave the appearance that the floor was entirely empty but for them and some medical staff walking around with speed but a lot less anguish than their counterparts downstairs.

They were brought into one of the rooms which could have doubled as a hotel suite. There was a plush hospital bed (a thing Tara didn’t even know existed; the mattress in it was nicer than her mattress at home), a private bathroom, a television, soft towels already laid out shaped like a swan.

“What is this?” Tara asked in disbelief as to how they went from down there to up here and wondering how there could even be a place like this when so many people were packed in like sardines not getting the treatment they needed.

“Private hospital wing,” the nurse answered as she fluffed Willow’s pillow, “We get call from Mr. Hosenberg to find you and treat.”

“Oh.” Tara replied, swallowing.

That actually made total sense.

Tara wordlessly helped Willow to bed, who rubbed the spot on her head where a lump was forming.
“There was an… earthquake?”

Tara nodded as she leaned against Willow’s bed.

“Is it… bad?” Willow asked, her brow creasing.

Tara just nodded again, her eyes closing to stall a tear.

Willow rubbed her eyes, really awake now.

“Are you hurt?”

Tara was pale and sweating now from trying to block out the pain.

“Let’s just get you checked out.”

“And you!” Willow protested, her breath getting labored from the shock of everything, “Tara, you’re hurt!”

“Shush, shush, shush,” Tara comforted again, taking in some calming breaths for herself, “I know you just woke up and you’re scared. I’m scared too. But you Dad has arranged to get you seen up here. I don’t even know where we are but it’s going to be a lot quicker than anywhere else.”

“And you!” Willow insisted again.

Tara tried to wave a hand in front of her.

“I’m fine…I can go through the public hospital downstairs if I need to. My insurance will cover that and… things will calm down. You’ve hit your head. You need to get looked at now.”

“Why would you wait?” Willow asked in confusion.

“Because I know it’s not serious,” Tara replied curtly, dropping her head, “A-and I know I can’t afford whatever the bill would be here. It could be crippling just—”
“You could be really crippled, Tara!” Willow cut in loudly.

Tara leaned more against the bed, panting out a breath.

“Willow—”

“Tara,” Willow replied gently but not letting her continue, “You’re getting checked out. I will pay for it. Don’t be such a dummy. You were in a frickin’ earthquake.”

Tara didn’t have the energy to argue but her eyes welled up.

The nurse returned with a blanket for Willow, who immediately started pointing at Tara.

“Tara needs attention too. She needs to get seen to.”

“Yes,” the nurse replied cordially.

Willow’s brow creased in confusion. She’d expected more than that.

“If you need me to put down a credit card or something—”

“Mr. Hosenberg already pay,” the nurse cut in, “He say treat both.”

“He did?” Tara asked, surprised.

“He did?!” Willow asked, stunned.

The nurse nodded once and said she would be back with wheelchairs to take them to x-ray. Tara was literally bowled over with relief and began to tilt so much she almost fell.

“Hey,” Willow said, catching a sleeve to grab her before she went over, “Hey, sit down. Sit down now, Tara.”

Together they pushed and pulled Tara onto the bed alongside Willow. The relief of being off her feet and Willow right there beside her was too much and Tara started to cry into Willow’s neck.
Willow let her cry for a few minutes; she needed the time to get her head around what the frilly heck had happened.

“Tara, what happened? The last thing I remember is walking to the market and...then...then something blew up and...that’s it. That’s all I have before waking up...hearing your voice...” she paused and looked out the large window for a moment, frowning, “Why is it dark?”

Tara sniffled.

“It’s been a few hours.”

“Hours?” Willow asked in disbelief.

“I didn’t know where you were,” Tara said, her voice straining, “I had to find you.”

Willow’s head reeled back.

“Have you been looking all this time? Walking around like this?”

Fresh tears sprung from Tara’s eyes.

“You weren’t on the street and you weren’t in the other hospital and your phone wouldn’t ring and ___”

“Tara,” Willow said in a low, echoing tone, “Oh Tara.”

Willow held Tara weakly but without letting go and they both just breathed together for a couple of minutes. The nurse returned with another nurse, each pushing a wheelchair for them. They hobbled together into their chairs, hands staying locked until they were physically parted.

Everything was still so surreal for each of them in different ways.

They were brought through numerous testing facilities; x-rays, blood work, scans, examinations. Willow’s body was more physically beat up with cuts and bruises but Tara’s was strained down to every last muscle fiber.

Willow was wheeled back to her room first, feeling a little stronger after sucking down a juice box along the way. She’d changed into a gown for x-ray and caught first sight of her many bruises,
though thankfully they didn’t really hurt yet.

“Hey, when you bring Tara back, can you bring her in here?” she requested as the nurse settled her.

“You want both bed?” the nurse checked, “Pay for two room.”

Willow nodded.

“Both beds. Please.”

The nurse left again and minutes later two men pushed a second bed in the door and put it a few feet from Willow. When they left again, Willow snuck out of bed and pushed it forward so there was only a foot or so between them, just enough room for their wing spans to reach out and join hands.

She stopped by the window on the way back to her bed but she may as well just be staring into space. Everything was pitch black. Willow figured they must be the building on the block with running electricity, probably because of a generator.

It still didn’t feel real.

An earthquake.

She’d lived in Southern California her whole life and had felt a tremor or two but nothing that had felt dangerous. Nothing that scared her for more than a brief moment as she realized what was happening. Her worst experience was the Lucky Charms she’d planned to have for dinner spilling themselves all over the floor.

She felt a bit dizzy from staying on her feet so climbed back into bed and stared up at the ceiling, counting tiles as she waited impatiently for Tara to come back.

Eventually, Tara was wheeled back in and Willow sat up straighter in bed.

“I asked them to let us bunk,” she said, frowning as Tara was assisted, hobbling into bed, “Hope that’s okay.”

“Anything else wouldn’t have been,” Tara replied, giving Willow an exhausted but soft smile.

The orderly gently hoisted Tara’s right leg up at an elevation and Tara winced but didn’t complain.
Willow was about to question why it was needed but then saw how swollen and discolored Tara's ankle and top of her foot was. She gulped and Tara sighed.

“I feel so guilty being up here. You didn’t really see it, Willow, but it’s…bad. How can these doctors and nurses justify staying up here when they’re needed so badly down there?”

Willow had flashes of the corridors downstairs. It seemed like something from a movie or the news. It was hard to believe it was just happening right below them.

“It’s awful,” she replied, swallowing deeply, “I don’t have an excuse. It’s just awful. But I’m grateful to know you’re being attended to. If that makes me an awful person…”

She glanced at Tara who reached out and offered her hand, which Willow gratefully took.

“Then I am too because I didn’t even hesitate when she said she was there to get you help.”

Willow’s fingers squeezed Tara’s hand so their palms held each other.

“They said I have a concussion but everything else is superficial.”

“Poor baby,” Tara comforted, “You should get some sleep.”

“I’ve done nothing but sleep,” Willow replied with a frown, “What’s up with your—”

Just then a man in a white coat pushed past the doors into the room and without even looking at them slapped an x-ray into the viewer and examined it. A skeleton foot flashed into view.

“This one, this one. Fracture,” he announced to the room as he certainly was still not talking to them, “Need alignment.”

“A-Alignment?” Tara asked nervously.

“It’s broken?” Willow asked in disbelief, “But she’s been—”

“When did you last eat or drink?” the doctor asked Tara.
“Before the earthquake,” Tara answered in confusion.

“Did they give you juice?” Willow asked.

“No,” Tara shook her head, frowning, “Why—”

“We arrange operating room,” the doctor said finally.

“Operating—” Tara started to ask but he was gone again, marching down the hallway to another room.

“It’s okay, baby,” Willow soothed while shooting evils to the departing doctor’s back, “Jerk.”

“It’s stressful for everyone,” Tara replied quietly.

Willow looked at Tara’s cowering eyes and swallowed her own concern for the moment.

“Hey, what’s with you and your achy breaky bones?” she teased softly, “Once not enough for ya?”

Tara’s eyes filled with fresh, vulnerable tears.

“I’d take it any day over an achy breaky heart.”

Willow squeezed Tara’s hands.

“It’s gonna be okay.”

“I’ve never had surgery before,” Tara replied meekly.

“I know,” Willow said soothingly, “But you won’t even know it. You’ll go asleep and when you wake up you’ll be back in here with me. We have our own TV and I bet the food is even better than breakfast at the hostel.”

Tara looked down and Willow did too.
“I know. That’s not a comfort when everyone else…” she paused and took in a deep breath, “But you can’t do anything right now. We can’t do anything at all unless we get better. So that’s what we have to focus on right now. Yeah?”

Tara nodded and offered a watery smile.

“Yeah. Yeah, okay.”

“You got this,” Willow encouraged gently, “I’m firmly on Team Maclay on this one.”

She held Tara’s hand firmly and kept her gaze.

“On all ones.”

The same two nurses came in to prepare Tara and Willow noticed one had to come in and out a few times. She figured out they were probably the only two nurses on the floor and the curt doctor had also been the one to perform her examinations.

She felt mildly better that they were obviously operating on reduced capacity so that more people could be helped downstairs but selfishly hoped it wouldn’t impact Tara’s care.

“I’ll be right here baby,” Willow called as Tara was wheeled out of the room, “See you real soon.”

Tara just looked ahead with her head slightly bowed and Willow tried not to feel sick in her stomach.

Her head dropped back against the pillows when Tara was gone, her eyes heavy with exhaustion and feeling antsy. She looked over at the empty space where Tara’s bed had been and at the shared locker sitting between them.

There was a plastic bag with Tara’s clothes sitting on it and Willow could see her phone lighting up every so often through its transparency.

She quietly got up and found her own bag of stuff hanging off the end of her bed. She rooted through it, noting how dirty her clothes had been. She hadn’t even noticed when she’d been in them.

Her wallet was ripped up but intact with everything inside—

*God, do I even have a passport anymore?*
—but she found her phone smashed to smithereens.

She went over to get Tara’s, she knew she wouldn’t mind her using it, but as soon as she put it into her palm it flashed the battery low icon and turned black.

“Damn it,” Willow whispered, but loud enough to be heard by a nurse returning carrying an IV line with her.

“Miss you must stay in bed. We must give you hydration.”

“Okay,” Willow agreed, weakly pulling herself back up onto the bed, “Do you have a charger by any chance?”

The nurse nodded.

“Yes, I get for you. After I put in.”

She poked the needle into Willow’s arm and hung the bag. Willow settled her arm comfortably and gratefully took a charger when it was brought out to her. Before the nurse left again, Willow reached out to touch her arm.

“Would you keep me updated on my—” she paused and swallowed a lump forming in her throat, “Would you let me know when she’s out of surgery?”

The nurse smiled kindly and nodded again.

“I bring you dinner. Try rest.”

Willow sighed and closed her eyes to compose herself for a few moments. She attached the charger to the wall and plugged Tara’s phone in, allowing it to get some juice while she asked her weary body to stop the aches she was suddenly starting to feel as each bruise made itself known.

She was brought a tray of food and laughed to herself, sadly. Apparently, chicken noodle soup was universal.

When she tried to eat she found her hand shaking too much to hold the spoon, so foregoing any graces she lifted the bowl to her mouth and drank it straight from the source.
There were a lot of messages from Tara’s mom, Nate, even Donny. Willow didn’t read them, they were for Tara to see when she was recovered. And she was sure Ms. Maclay was on top of keeping people informed.

Instead, she checked the news and was immediately bombarded with endless coverage and a whole lot of numbers.

Richter scale, 7.9

Depth, 4.2 miles

Persons injured, 2409

Death toll, 459

Rising.

Willow felt an overwhelming sense of guilt suddenly wash over her. She closed the browser and brought up the ringer, dialing a familiar number before lifting it to her ear.

“Dad?”

__________________________________________________________

Tara felt really, really stoned.

While she’d gotten buzzed passing a joint around with Nate after shows before once or twice, she’d only ever been really, really stoned once before and this was almost exactly what it felt like; a gradual awareness of consciousness in a heavy body that didn’t feel like it belonged to her.

It was the reason she had only gotten so baked the one time. She hated it. Her instinct was to panic especially when it just felt like seconds since she had been surrounded by strangers in gowns with bright white lights and the smell of sterility masking death. She’d wanted to get up and run but now she couldn’t.

“Nice boot, cutie.”
Tara’s eyes were lethargic but she could feel they were trying to open, to find that familiar sound.

She knew that voice.

Safety.

Home.

Her eyes fought harder to open and her hand tried to bat at the oxygen mat she was suddenly aware was sitting over her mouth.

“Sssh, you’re okay,” she heard the voice comfort, then a caress on her arm.

Grounding.

Pulling her back into herself.

“Relax, honey. Everything went great. I’m here. Willow’s here.”

Willow Tara thought calmly and let her arm fall back down to her side.

“That’s my girl.”

A hand on her face, stroking her cheek.

Feeling right where she was supposed to be.

It took a few minutes but she came around and remembered everything that had happened if still a bit vaguely. She opened her eyes on Willow and saw relief mirroring in her eyes.

“They said it went great,” Willow said softly, “They’ll fill you in when you’re not so sleepy. You have a sexy boot and some sexier crutches for a while. You’ll have to rest that foot so I guess we’ll just have to stay in bed and cuddle for a bit.”

Tara reached out and weakly grasped Willow’s wrist. She mumbled something and Willow pulled the oxygen mask back a bit to hear her.
“My mom,” Tara repeated, raspy, “…water?”

Willow got a bottle of water from the half dozen that had been delivered to her earlier. She tried to get them to take the excess to where she was sure they were needed, but they wouldn’t.

She unscrewed the cap and helped Tara drink some down with a straw.

“I spoke to our parents,” Willow said as Tara drank, “They’re…freaking out. Understandably I guess. My Dad wants to fly over which is just…nuts, really. But don’t worry, all this…you just focus on getting better, yeah? That’s what everyone is in agreement about.”

She fluffed Tara’s pillows gently, mostly for something to do.

“You should go back to sleep. Heal that body up.”

Tara’s eyes started to close again and Willow quickly lifted her hand to kiss her palm.

“Tara?” she said quietly, her voice quivering, “Thanks for finding me. For…for walking miles…miles… on a broken foot just to…”

She paused to hide her wet eyes but a tear escaped Tara’s eye too and she lifted her hand Willow had taken. With shaking fingers she held up five fingers, dropped it to two and then made an ‘0’ shape.

Willow’s breath caught, remembering their little sign they learned in China.

“I love you too. And you are the best thing that’s ever been mine. You’re my girl,” she said, kissing Tara’s forehead, “You hear that baby? You’re my always.”

She tucked Tara in until she was asleep, then returned to her own bed to watch over her love for the rest of the evening and keep her mind off of the destruction outside.
Willow jumped out of the taxi that had driven them from the hospital, a tiny white Suzuki that barely felt big enough to fit them both in.

The journey had been uneventful, thankfully so as Willow had been nervous about being on the road. The displacement from the earthquake had somehow made it safer to drive with fewer cars on the road causing chaos as they zipped around each other without care or discernible direction. Still, she was grateful to be out of it.

She rushed around to the other side of the car a little too fast, causing a wave of dizziness that she fought by leaning against the car as she opened the door on Tara’s side to help her out.

“She’s still standing,” Willow commented, unintentionally glib as Tara secured her crutches on the ground and pulled herself out of the car in front of the hostel building she’d ran out of just days ago.

It seemed like an age.

“I have no idea what’s it’s like inside,” she replied quietly, looking up for any signs of outer damage, though it seemed not even a window was broken, “The lobby got pretty trashed but I left almost right away. There were so many people. Maybe we shouldn’t just walk in.”

“Tara’s phone line was still down. I tried calling when I got my new phone,” Willow replied, her brow furrowing in irritation, “Only Ira Rosenberg could get a cell phone couriered to a hospital in the Nepali mountains.”
aftermath of an earthquake.”

“He’s just trying to do everything he can,” Tara replied softly.

“No, he’s trying to get us to do everything he wants,” Willow replied with a roll of her eyes.

Tara exhaled a slow breath.

“He paid for… everything.”

“I’ve spent my life feeling obligated to him for money, I’m sick of it, okay?” Willow snapped, but looked immediately remorseful and put a hand on Tara’s back, “Let’s just figure out if we have stuff or not and what our next step is, yeah? And then lie down?”

“Yeah,” Tara agreed with a demure not of her head, “Lying down would be good.”

“Come on, baby,” Willow encouraged, gently coaxing Tara along.

The street outside was clear enough to walk, with debris pushed up against walls, out of the way.

They both stopped to take a look around.

A roof was caved in across the street, a lot of windows and doors were missing. A small temple was toppled on one side. Yet everything was so still.

Such quiet destruction, but people were there too.


They looked ahead at the same time and carefully walked forward toward the place they’d laid their heads before a seismic wave had uprooted them.
Willow pushed the door open slowly but when they peered inside everything seemed okay. Dull lighting and not as polished as it had been, but the floor was clear and the walls were too, devoid of any art that had been there before.

The place was empty, eerily so, but as they walked further into the lobby they saw a familiar face sitting behind the desk, which was now just a barren ledge jutting out from the wall with no fanfare about it.

Ebba looked up at the sound of movement and leaped from her seat.

“Tara,” she said, relief flooding her face as she came around to hug Tara and then Willow.

“Ebba,” Tara greeted back, also glad to see her pal in fit form.

“You are okay!” Ebba laughed, a nervous little trill that betrayed her emotions, “I turned and could not see you.”

“I had to find Willow,” Tara replied apologetically and yet, not so.

Ebba nodded understandingly and offered a small smile to Willow.

“Are you are okay too?”

“Yeah. Just cuts and bruises,” Willow dismissed easily, “Knocked my noggin but acting no weirder than usual.”

Ebba nodded, then suddenly clapped her hands together as if remembering something.

“I keep your room.”

“You kept our room?” Willow asked, perking up, “So it’s…okay? Our stuff is still there?”
Ebba nodded.

“No damage in the upstairs. One old door get loose and lights all crash but everything else just fall over. Picked up, all new again,” she announced cheerily as if selling the place to a buyer.

“Almost new,” a male voice came out from the back, weary but friendly, “Bargain kind.”

They laughed and Tara took a wobbly step forward to embrace him with one arm.

“Amir. Hi.”

Amir nodded cordially, shyly but his eyes were bright and showed affection.

“You are free to stay as long as you need. We offering bed to whoever we can. As long as you don’t mind gas lamp.”

“Torch,” Ebba translated.

“Flashlight,” Willow further translated and they all laughed again.

Tara gripped her crutch tighter as she felt the strength in her leg begin to fade.

“Thank you so much for keeping our room for us. That’s so above and beyond anything we could have ever asked for.”

“Is leg okay?” Amir enquired, seeing Tara’s weight shift.

“Just a few bones that need healing,” Tara replied, ducking her head to hide her pain.
Willow noticed, however, and gently held Tara’s arm.

“I should bring her to bed,” she said, then cleared her throat, “Um, I mean let her rest. She’s supposed to keep it elevated.”

Amir nodded and made a move toward the back room.

“We use real key for now. Electricity still come and go. This safer. One moment please.”

“I will get,” Ebba interjected, smiling kindly at Tara, “I hoped that you would come back safe. You both.”

She turned to go get the key, her arm sliding along Amir’s back as she crossed the space and lingering before falling off. A move that definitely did not go unnoticed. Tara gave a little crooked smirk and even in dim lighting, it was clear that Amir blushed.

While Ebba was gone, Willow suddenly got a concerned look on the face.

“Oh, wait. You can’t use stairs. Our room was upstairs.”

Amir stood up straighter and took out a notebook from under the desk.

“If you can wait twenty-four hours, we can organize downstairs room. I just need fix wires.”

“That is so generous of you, thank you,” Tara replied gratefully, then looked reassuringly at Willow, “I can do a butt shuffle up there. I don’t think I’ll be doing much more than sleeping today anyway. I won’t need to come up and down.”

“You sure?” Willow pressed, “Because you know we can—”

Tara nudged Willow gently with her shoulder, the best she could do with her arms in crutches.
“These are our friends. I want to stay here.”

Willow returned a soft smile.

“I want to stay here too.”

“We happy have you stay,” Amir added, apparently wanting in on the love fest.

Willow and Tara shared a secret smile until Ebba returned with a key for them.

When they got to the stairs, the butt shuffle suddenly seemed a lot more daunting. Tara tried to play it off but her face had drained of color by the time Willow physically pulled her over the top one.

“Let me—” Willow tried to help but Tara was embarrassed and forced herself onto her feet to get down the corridor.

Willow kept close to avoid any stumbles but they got to the room without incident and she let them inside. It was dark, with no lights and the blinds down, but they got some daylight into the room when Willow pulled them up again.

The light blinded Tara for a moment and she dropped to the bed, gratefully turning her back to the sun.

The room looked just as they left it, pretty much. The nightstand had changed position and the things that had been in it had been picked up and gathered on top. Their bags stood in the corner where they always had been. The only thing out of place was the electrical tape covering where the light fixture had been and they only saw that if they looked up.

It was unnerving that everything seemed so unrattled when they both felt so rattled.

But it was also grounding and they both found themselves exhaling a long breath after just being in the room for a minute.
Tara lay back and put a pillow under her injured foot while Willow went into recon mode and started checking everything, ticking off an internal list in her mind as she recounted everything.

“I don’t think anything is missing,” she said as she opened the little safe stuck to the wall and checked the contents before moving onto check the stuff piled on the nightstand, “Passports, money. Our bags and clothes and stuff. Looks like the blow dryer got a little knocked up but—”

She plugged it in and it immediately blew out hot air.

“Wow, still working. Hardy little thing.”

She turned it off again and folded it back on the nightstand with the plug out just in case, after what Amir said of the electricity. They didn’t need anything going kablam in the middle of the night.

She sat next to Tara on the bed and took her hand.

“What do you need? Are you hungry? Thirsty? Want a shower? I won’t have to fight the nurse off to help you with a sponge bath this time.”

She smiled and Tara offered a weak but sincere one back.

“You were very sweet to wash my hair over the sink. I hate when it feels so greasy.”

“I will wash your hair every day. Twice a day!” Willow promised eagerly before dropping her head betraying a moment of nerves, “I just want you to feel comfortable.”

Her pocket started to buzz and she looked down at it disdainfully.

“God,” she grumbled, standing swiftly and turning her back to Tara to answer it.

Tara watched her pace and back and forth with a vein popping more and more prominently in her forehead as the conversation went on.
“Dad, we don’t want a hotel. Our place is standing; we’re lucky. We’re staying. Pay for some rooms for displaced people if you want to book hotel rooms so badly. Look, Tara needs to rest okay? Goodbye.”

She hung up and all but flung her new phone on the bed, instead clenching it tightly in her palm.

Tara let a few moments pass.

“Willow.”

“Ugh!” Willow said, her whole body rigid with tension.

“Willow,” Tara called again softly.

She reached a hand out and Willow hesitated for a moment but then took it and let herself be pulled to sit next to Tara. The rage dissipated with Tara’s hand in hers and she looked at her vulnerably.

“I’m just so frustrated.”

“I know,” Tara soothed gently, “You have valid frustrations. But you’re felling it a little more because your brain was injured.”

“It’s not—” Willow started but Tara lifted a hand to put a finger against her lips.

“It’s still a brain injury, even when it’s mild,” she said, nodding to emphasize the point, “We have to take care of it so it doesn’t get worse. Just like my foot.”

She coaxed Willow up to lie beside her, sharing the pillow as she’d stolen the second one for her foot. She slowly twisted her body onto its side so her foot stayed where it needed to be but she could face Willow properly and stroke her face.
Willow felt her emotions start to crumble at the tender touch.

“Tara,” she said in a strained voice, her eyelids started to quiver.

“I know, honey,” Tara replied in a similar tone.

She leaned in and pressed her lips lightly against Willow, gently offering a kiss. Willow accepted and leaned into it, feeling a release at the affection.

“See how well you fit here?” Tara whispered quietly.

“It’s true,” Willow replied with a little sniffle, “I was made for you.”

Her voice broke as those words came out and she pressed her lips to Tara’s again.

Tears fell quickly but silently between them, two sets of cheeks wet with each other’s emotion while they stayed connected by their lips.

They would stay close enough for noses to touch until they fell asleep, for the first time feeling whole again in days.

A few hours later, Willow quietly let herself into the room, juggling a few packages of aluminum foil in her other arm.

She frowned when she saw Tara sitting up in bed already.

“Drat. I was hoping you’d still be asleep. Are you okay, did you need to get anywhere, get anything?”

She went over to the nightstand and turned the flashlight on, sitting it upright so it acted like a lamp.
“I just woke up,” Tara replied sleepily, rubbing her eyes with her fists indicatively.

“Do you need to pee?” Willow asked helpfully.

Tara pursed her lips slightly.

“I’m fine to get to the bathroom by myself.”

Willow frowned self-deprecatingly as she came over to the bed.

“I'm over-helping, aren't I?”

“You’re just being sweet,” Tara offered kindly.

Willow smiled gratefully.

“I got us dinner,” she said, laying down the parcels of foil, “Amir got us dinner actually. I think his family is making meals for everyone. It smells pretty amazing. You hungry?”

Tara nodded quickly. Willow opened everything up and grabbed the two sets of travel utensils they carried around since watching a guy in Sydney lick a spoon and put it back in the drawer in the communal kitchen.

They had dal and dumplings and roti with chutneys that tasted better than anything else they’d had since being in the country. They murmured their enjoyment to each other and ate quietly for a few minutes. It was their first meal since breakfast before leaving the hospital and even just getting here had been taxing.

“So, we should talk,” Willow said with a mouthful and smiled apologetically before covering her mouth and finishing, “About what we’re going to do? Unless you’re too tired?”

“We can talk,” Tara agreed, lifting her hand to her mouth to pop a stray piece of food in.
Willow grew quiet again, seeing if Tara would speak first but she didn’t.

“Flights are still booked out to Egypt in a couple of days,” Willow said, watching Tara’s face for signs of a reaction, “We have our passports now and they reopened the airport. We could leave if we wanted. We’d just have to find a hospital to check in with for your aftercare.”

Tara nodded, noncommittal.

“Is that what you want to do?”

“I…” Willow replied helplessly, “It’s an option.”

She paused again.

“My dad says he’ll pay for us to just go back to the states if we want. Cut things short. Recover there.”

“Is that what you want?” Tara asked again, also going to pains to appear neutral, “To go home?”

Willow looked across and gently nudged her foot against Tara’s good one affectionately.

“Home never left my side.”

Willow’s hand lay flat on the bed and Tara covered it with hers, giving it a squeeze. They rolled their thumbs around each other for a contemplative moment before taking their hands back to continue eating.

“I know what we went through was a lot,” Tara said quietly after a moment.

“And you much more so,” Willow nodded.
“It was terrifying.” Tara swallowed, “I-I can still see it all so vividly. Which is funny, because everything was so dusty.”

She let out a quiet, sad laugh. Willow swallowed.

“How did you…How? Just how?”

“I had to find you,” Tara replied, still quiet but resolute, “Everything was so dark but knowing that I would find you…that was my light at the end of the tunnel. And sometimes it felt like a teeny Tinkerbell light. But that was enough, as long as I kept going toward it.”

“A teeny Tinkerbell light of hope?” Willow suggested as she caressed Tara's hand with her thumb.

“Exactly,” Tara nodded, “And like Tinkerbell, if you don't believe in it, it dies.”

She lifted Willow's hand so it touched her cheek and closed her eyes to savor it.

Willow kept caressing her there and stayed quiet, comforting her girlfriend.

Finally, after several contemplative minutes, Tara lifted her gaze to Willow.

“I still see the light and it isn't shining on Sunnydale. Not yet.”

She kissed Willow's palm, making her smile, making her oh-so-aware all over again of how lucky she was to share this journey with Tara.

“Does it feel safe for you to keep going?” she asked, moving closer to Tara on the bed just to bask in more of her presence, “And I don’t just mean physically. It wouldn’t be out of the realms of believableness for someone to need a little therapy after all that trauma. I just fell asleep and woke up. You spent hours out in all of that…”
It was hard for Tara to access those feelings again, very hard. But she also felt so grateful that it had turned out as it had.

“If I can have my music,” she reasoned after some thought, “I think I’ll be okay. And if I’m not okay…then I’ll figure out how I can be.”

“We’ll figure it out,” Willow promised and pressed a kiss to Tara’s cheek, “So does that mean… onward to Egypt?”

They both paused. That didn’t feel quite right either.

“We’re on a schedule,” Tara reasoned when the silence hung for too long, “We planned things. A route to see the world.”

Willow nodded.

“Yeah, you’re 100% right.”

Tara tore up a piece of bread in her lap in a bit of a fidgeting move before raising her chin fully.

“But it’s also nothing we can’t change. We opted for flexibility so we could change our minds if we want. We can use that.”

Willow looked up and Tara met her gaze.

“And also… I feel a pull. A pull to stay here. To help. Not forever, but for a few weeks. Until I’m back on my feet, or off the crutches at least. It would be a bit of a nightmare to travel on them.”

Willow’s whole face brightened.

“That’s exactly how I feel!” she replied with a mixture of joy and relief, “That day we spent at the orphanage in Vietnam…it was the first time I didn’t care about my own problems. We helped that day, a bit. In India… we saw so much suffering, all we could do was give people some money to eat
each day. It was something…but it never felt like enough. And in Dubai, there wasn’t a thing we could do to help all the people forced to be there who are persecuted… except get out of dodge ourselves. I felt so helpless. And maybe it’ll never feel like enough. But staying here, doing something… it’ll feel like more.”

Tara smiled down at her legs.

“I don’t know how much use I’ll be.”

“There’s all kinds of ways to help,” Willow reassured quickly, “I –I don’t even know how I can even help, yet. But we can. I know that much.”

Tara nodded softly, then took a moment to think about where they had planned to go and how they would have to divert.

“We’d have to give up Egypt and Greece. Probably do a shorter tour of Europe, skip right ahead to South America,” she said, pausing again and looking at Willow unsurely, “…you wouldn’t be able to go to Israel.”

“I wasn’t going anyway,” Willow dismissed with a wave of her hand.

She wiped her mouth with a napkin and then her fingers as she balled up the empty foil.

“Oh,” Tara replied, surprise evident in her tone, “You were unsure last time we talked about it.”

Willow tried to smile, but it was more of a grimace.

“I was unsure about pissing off my dad, really. But things have been ka-blooey lately with him anyway so…”

“You can blame me,” Tara offered, hating the edge in Willow’s tone, “Tell him I need the help or, or that I’m not comfortable going.”
“Which is true,” Willow replied, a bit clumsily blunt.

Tara’s eyes fell and she played with her food in her lap for a few moments.

“Y-you know,” she tried and had to stop to clear her throat, “You know that I love you and support everything about you, right?”

Willow reached out and brushed her fingers against Tara’s cheek again.

“Tara, how can I know anything else after all of this?”

Tara held onto Willow’s arm.

“What I’m saying is—”

“Tara,” Willow interrupted, though not unkindly, “You don’t owe me an explanation. Besides, I know exactly what you’re going to say and I agree with it. I’m not against going to Israel ever but…I can’t go to the wall and ignore what’s happening over it. It’s not the right time.”

Tara’s thumb caressed Willow’s arm for a moment before falling away. Willow was quiet, then gave a resolute nod.

“He wouldn’t like the idea of me traveling alone after everything that’s happened. I can use that selling point. Or maybe put it on the long finger until oops, we ran out of time.”

“Are you disappointed?” Tara asked gently.

Willow shook her head.

“His faith isn’t my faith. I have faith in what I see. And I see you,” she said with a tender smile, “And I know where my morals lie. That trip is not a trip I can support in good conscience right now.”
She adjusted her shoulders to shake out any tension.

“Besides I can give tzedakah here that are a lot more meritorious than a quick visit somewhere. If he doesn't think that's more righteous, that's his problem.”

She paused and sat back against the wall, clearly closing off the subject.

“What about you? Are you okay with missing out on a few stops? You have to be really honest because this is potentially resent-y stuff if you regret it later.”

“We can always change our minds,” Tara replied reasonably, “Leave when it feels right to leave.”

Willow nodded, happy to be at a consensus.

“You’re right.”

Tara smiled bashfully and looked down at her leg again.

“And honestly, I’m not going anywhere for a while. I feel pretty beat-up.”

Willow jumped up into helper mode.

“My poor baby. Have you taken all your pills?”

“I have to take them with food,” Tara answered, “Do you know where we put them down?”

Willow got the three pill bottles and passed them to Tara.

“Let me get you some fresh water,” she said, getting a big bottle from the corner where Amir had put them when he brought it up for them, “My guns will be incredible hiking these gallon bottles around.”
“As if I don’t have enough trouble resisting you,” Tara teased and Willow’s cheeks lightly flushed.

Tara swallowed her pills; antibiotics, anti-inflammatories and some pretty strong painkillers that had her feeling comfortable when she wasn’t overdoing it.

“Speaking of our parents,” she said as the water washed everything down, “I need to check in with my Momma because I think I need to sleep again soon and she wants me to be in more contact than usual.”

Willow nodded.

“Tell her thanks for talking my dad down. He didn’t say but I know it was her that convinced him in the end that we would be okay without him coming down.”

“She’s incredibly grateful to him,” Tara replied quietly.

“I…” Willow replied, feeling a little stung, “I am too. I just…”

She blinked and Tara reached out for her hand.

“I know,” she said softly, “It’s a lot.”

She squeezed Willow’s hand.

“But they’re just scared too. And he's gone above and beyond in trying to help, even if you think it's not for the right reasons.”

Willow looked down.

“I guess I’m mad for a lot more than badgering me to come home.”
“You left a lot of problems on your doorstep when we left. They didn’t just go away,” Tara replied sagely.

Willow nodded to herself.

“I’ll try to be more patient with him. I guess I am letting my temper get to me a bit at the moment.”

Tara lifted Willow’s hand and kissed her knuckles.

“I’m on your side always.”

Willow raised a smile in Tara’s direction.

“I know.”

She scooted forward and embraced Tara’s upper half gently. After a moment, she pulled back a tad.

“Need to call your mom?”

“In a minute,” Tara replied, resting her chin over Willow’s shoulder again, “This is nice.”

Willow sighed happily.

“This is nice.”

“Thanks, Ebba, see you later,” Willow waved as she parted from the other woman in the lobby and headed down the corridor to her and Tara’s new downstairs room.

It was a ‘suite’ and about the size of a regular hotel room with a private bathroom which made it
much easier for Tara to get around, though she was still sleeping most of the time.

A fact Willow was happy about. Though time seemed almost suspended in the bizarre reality they’d found themselves in, it had still only been a few days since she’d had surgery. That took a lot out of you.

She saw it when Tara waited five minutes too long to take her pain meds and her eyes would look like they were falling out of her head or when her whole body would go boneless just under the strain of an (assisted) shower.

Even going to the bathroom needed Willow’s help with the crutches so difficult to balance on. And though she would just help Tara to the seat and leave until she was tidied up again, Tara still clearly found it embarrassing.

Willow was also grateful that Tara was sleeping so much because she felt better about leaving her alone.

She fished the key out of her pocket as she approached the door but tried to be quiet in opening up. Expecting to see Tara still in that worn-out (but adorable, she had to admit) pose with her arm thrown above her head and her uninjured leg tossed across the whole bottom half of the bed, she got a fright when she saw her girlfriend very much awake, face red with tears as she sat hunched over the bed, holding her boot and hiccupping as she cried.

“Tara!” Willow exclaimed, dropping the key as the door slammed behind her, “What’s wrong?”

She sped over to Tara’s side and didn’t need to wait for an answer as when she got there she saw a crutch had fallen and taken her pill bottles with them as casualties. Willow realized they all must have fallen out of reach and that Tara must be way overdue her medication.

“Shit!” she swore under her breath and got to her knees to try and gather all of the pills up, her hands shaking as she matched up the fallen ones with what was still in the bottles.

She finally got them back in and in a panic tried to count out Tara’s dose.

“Two of these and one…no two…no…”
The labels were in Nepali so she desperately fumbled with the translator app while her heart broke to the soundtrack of Tara’s cries. Finally, she got the correct pills into the little cup Tara took them with.

“Take these, take these, baby.”

She grabbed the cup of water on the nightstand and physically held it to Tara’s mouth to make her drink.

Tara downed the pills and repeatedly tried to catch her breath. Willow ran around to the other side of the bed and carefully crawled on top. She folded her arms around Tara and held Tara’s head to her chest. She stroked her hair and whispered soothingly until Tara either cried herself to sleep or the pain pills kicked in.

Both, Willow figured, probably.

She gently laid Tara down again when her breath had been even for long enough to know she was deep in sleep.

With a very soft kiss to the head, Willow set an alarm on her phone to make sure she would be back long before Tara would need another pill and set Tara’s phone very close to where she slept just in case she was needed any earlier.

After that, she tiptoed back out and left the hostel without stopping to talk to anyone. She made her way around the corner and back into one of the big disaster relief charity tents set up in the area. It was busy, mostly filled with displaced people looking to be brought to shelters or looking for help in other ways.

There was one table dedicated to volunteers and Willow lined up for the second time that day. She patiently let everyone go ahead of her so she wouldn’t take up any unnecessary time until she was the only person left.

“How, I’m Willow,” she introduced herself to the same woman as before, “I was here earlier with my friend Ebba to talk about volunteering?”
The woman nodded that she remembered.

“As we said, we have to run a quick background check—”

“Oh, I know,” Willow replied quickly, “I’m here for something else actually.”

The woman smiled kindly if not a little tiredly.

“How can I help you?”

Willow bit the corner of her lip and smiled awkwardly.

“Any way you could help me find a wheelchair?”

Tara used one hand to turn her wheelchair around a circle of young Nepali children while the other handed out plain navy t-shirts sprouting new red embossment on the breast.

Lakshmi smiled as each child excitedly received and thrust their shirts in each other’s faces to show them off.

Lakshmi was a half-Indian/half-Nepali charity worker who grew up in Canada and returned to India after college to work in the education sector. She’d volunteered after the earthquake because she spoke the language and had ended up spearheading a childcare ring for the local displaced populace who still had parents trying to get to work.

This had all come about through Tara who had started to mend clothing for the locals since she could do it while sitting and at her own pace. But she was also getting bored by herself all day while Willow and Ebba were out on the streets to lend their hands.

Lakshmi had happened to see her one day rolling down the streets with the box of clothes on her lap and after sharing lunch with Amir, who had unused recreation rooms with TVs and tabletop games and even some cheap instruments sitting dormant, their three interests collided.
Now Tara got to spend her mornings doing yoga with Ebba to help strengthen her foot up again and the rest of the day playing music and making up songs with a group of beautiful little children who weren’t burdened by the effects of the quake and just wanted to have fun.

“They love getting their names personalized on their clothes,” Lakshmi said as Tara completed her circle, “That must be a lot of extra work for you.”

“No really,” Tara shook her head with a fond smile, “Gives me something to do when they’re not here. Willow’s putting in long days.”

Lakshmi looked down at Tara sympathetically. She knew that tone. Her own boyfriend was still back in India.

“You miss her.”

Tara wheeled back and set the brake on her chair. Her head ducked.

“She just wants to do as much as possible before we leave again.”

Just then, one of the little girls with a cute, black bob and eyes as brown as the earth scurried up to Tara. She excitedly slapped her hands in Tara’s lap, babbling away.

Change her coloring and she reminded Tara of Willow when they were little, all swingy hair and endless words.

“She says—” Lakshmi began to translate.

“She wants to use the keyboard with me,” Tara cut in with a grin, “I’m picking up a word or two.”

She lifted the girl into her lap.

“Come here Sohana,” she said and wheeled them off together with many giggles to play with the keyboard and make music; the universal language.
As evening turned the blue sky dark, Tara wheeled back to the room and let herself in.

The lights were fixed; everything was fixed, in fact. Even beyond the hostel, the whole street almost looked like nothing had ever happened to begin with except for the buildings that needed to be rebuilt. The further you went out of the main city, the more obvious the lasting damage was but day to day sometimes even Tara forgot that it had ever happened.

Until she tried to stand, anyway.

Or she had a nightmare where Willow was buried in the rubble. She wrote songs in her head when that happened, often matching the tone to the rhythm of Willow’s sleeping breath to remind herself that everything was okay.

She wheeled over to the bed and took all of her pills before gathering her things to have a shower. She wrapped her boot up in plastic to keep it dry, left her chair at the bathroom door and hobbled into the little plastic chair she’d borrowed from the ‘day-care’ to aid in some independence for her bathroom activities. Helping each other with 'bathroom emergencies' had become a bit of a joke between her and Willow but she still appreciated that she could do this for herself again.

After her shower, she wrapped herself in a towel, wheeled back to the bed and sat with her back against the wall to take a breath after the busy day.

A few minutes later, the doorknob jostled and Tara smiled before Willow even walked in the door.

Willow was also brandishing a huge smile as she walked through.

“"I built a house today, Tara!” she announced without preamble, then smiled sheepishly, “Well, not on my own. I mean technically I built about half a wall, but it was half a wall of a whole house!”

“That’s amazing sweetie,” Tara replied, feeling her body react to Willow’s energy; a gentle tickling on her skin that became a tingle.

Willow threw her messenger bag off her body, then reached in and pulled something out.
“And look what I got you!”

She thrust something cylindrical and bright red in Tara’s face. Tara had to take it in her hands to see what it was and noticed immediately it was cold. She turned it around and though it was embossed with an unfamiliar language, she recognized the logo of her favorite cherry soda.

“Wow, I haven’t had this in months,” she said, turning the can over in her hand, “Thank you. Where did you get it?”

“I found it in this Indonesian store near where we were working,” Willow answered brightly.

Tara reached out with one hand, asking for Willow’s in return.

“You’re so sweet.”

She felt a tug between her legs as Willow’s hands brushed against hers but when she tried to lean over to invite a kiss, Willow jumped up and clutched her t-shirt, waving it out.

“I need to shower. You don’t want to smell me any closer.”

Tara pressed the cool can of soda against her suddenly warmed skin on her forehead.

“Don’t know about that,” she muttered as Willow hummed her way into the bathroom.

She heard the shower run and let her head rest gently back against the wall. Her eyes closed but opened again after a few moments because the images running through her mind were not conducive to rational thought. Willow had been so delicate with her lately but she craved the connection to feel it in her bones that Willow was right here, right now. It had been an emotional tug she’d been satisfying with affection but apparently, her body was demanding more.

She took her bottle of lotion from the nightstand and busied herself with rubbing it into her chest and arms.
Willow emerged from the shower, looking cleaner than she had before, not that Tara had minded the little bit of gruff.

Willow came and sat next to Tara in the bed with her legs up in much the same position. She too rested her head on the wall and smiled across the small space between them.

“I’m beat. Did you eat?”

Tara nodded.

“Did you?”

Willow nodded back.

“Yeah, they fed us. It’s nuts, but we’re actually saving money by sticking around. We don’t have to pay for room or board.”

“We should have a meal together one of these days,” Tara suggested, running her hand down Willow’s arm to link their fingers together.

“Yes,” Willow replied with a keen nod of her head.

Tara lifted her hand back to Willow’s cheek, touching it affectionately.

“I know you’re doing so much.”

“You’ve been sew gal night and day lately. I know you’d be out there putting me to shame if you could,” Willow returned, then her eyes widened suddenly, “That sounded like what you’re doing isn’t important. That’s not what I meant, at all! Everyone you’ve brought together and everything you’ve set up in just weeks! All I do is show up and slap things together where I’m told.”
Tara’s hand fell away from Willow.

“Well, I just wanna keep up with you, and I'm… well, I just like to be useful. You know, to the gang? I just… never… feel useful.”

Willow took her hand between them again.

“You are. You're essential.”

Tara looked down at their hands and they played a mini thumb war for a few seconds before smiling again at each other.

“Would you lotion my leg for me?” Tara asked, pre-empting the answer by holding the bottle out.

“Of course I will,” Willow replied, flipping open the cap and squeezing some lotion into her palm.

She rubbed both palms together and then started to rub the lotion into Tara’s lower leg. She massaged Tara’s calf and down to her toes, making sure to get between each one diligently. She rose again toward Tara's knee and fell off there when the towel prevented her from going any further. She found herself blushing as she looked up.

“Um…did you want your whole leg done?”

“Oh,” Tara replied, unable to deny the pleasant feelings Willow’s hands were imparting, “Yeah?”

Tara untucked her towel and let it fall open with a small flick.

Willow’s head averted up at a sharp angle and an even sharper speed.

“Yeah…” she gulped, doing her best not to look down, “You’re gonna have to cover up if you don’t want this to take forever.”
Tara’s heart was beginning to race.

“I don’t mind slow.”

Willow locked eyes with Tara and her hand wobbled toward Tara’s thigh. It made contact and her eyes dropped, taking in the eyeful she’d denied herself earlier. She felt a clench between her legs and slowly started rubbing Tara’s thigh, though it was a complete pretense as any and all lotion had well and truly been imparted.

She rubbed the same circle of thigh until her hands almost began to squeak against Tara’s skin.

Her gaze rose slowly as her hand remained steady. Only her eyes moved from where her own hands rested to take a tantalizing peek between Tara’s legs, up Tara’s torso and the swell of her breasts to finally make contact with Tara’s eyes.

It took their matching, glassy gazes less than half a second of connection before their bodies were flinging toward each other, though admittedly Willow did more of the flinging.

Tara sank down into a lying position, bringing Willow with her lying between her legs. She bunched Willow’s towel in her hand from behind and yanked it right off, leaving them both naked and wanting.

From the hips up their bodies were pressed entirely together as their mouths hungrily stole kisses from each other.

Willow’s arms were flung around Tara’s head and neck, tugging her closer and closer. Tara’s hands flew down Willow’s back to cup her cheeks and pull their bodies together. Their lips slid together below and when Willow broke the kiss to gasp, Tara took the opportunity to savor the sweet and salty skin on Willow’s neck.

“Mmm,” she moaned near Willow’s ear, tugging the lobe gently between her teeth which drew a short, shaken groan from Willow’s lips.

Willow sought Tara’s lips again, taking them in a kiss and suckling Tara’s bottom lip.
Tara could feel her nipples brushing against Willow’s skin as their bodies moved together and when they rubbed right against Willow’s nipples she felt the sparks shoot straight between her legs. She felt a deep throb and then her thighs get wet as she yearned to be touched.

“Willow,” she said needily as she took in a breath.

She covered Willow’s hand sitting on her breast and linked their pinkies, dragging their hands down between their bodies.

Willow felt her fingertips tingle as she brushed against Tara’s arousal and suddenly felt heat pulsate between her legs. It raced through her, overtaking any other sensation and making her grind down to seek Tara’s hand as it first touched her lips.

She felt a brief, fleeting courtship with it on her clit but hadn’t even vocalized the groan when Tara’s fingers reached inside her to give her what she wanted. Her inner muscles squeezed and she heard Tara moan. She returned an answering buck of her hips.

Willow had just about enough coherence to get her hand where Tara needed her to be until they started moving together and all reason was lost. She buried her head in Tara’s neck and used their writhing bodies to follow pace.

For the first time in weeks, the body part Tara was acutely aware of wasn’t her leg or the unsightly knee-high boot weighing it down. It stayed still; perched on its pillow for elevation like it knew it wasn’t the center of attention anymore, while her other leg twisted and coiled around Willow’s legs and against the sheet.

“Yes, Willow,” she moaned into Willow’s ear, tugging Willow in by her butt every so often to reinforce the movements, “Don’t stop.”

Willow wasn’t just right there, she was everywhere.

As her orgasm bubbled beneath the surface she draped a hand over Willow’s cheek to watch her face. She found an extra thrill from working out how close Willow was and started to hang on. Just when she didn’t think she could last a single torturous second longer, she watched Willow’s facial muscles jump and came with an intensity bigger than anything before.
By the time her eyes were clear of stars and seeing clearly again, Willow had moved off to lie beside her and catch her breath.

A sloppy grin was burned into Tara’s face as she felt a delightful flame still fanning between her legs.

Those endorphins were doing everything she needed them to.

She reached down and clasped her hand with Willow’s between them. Willow didn’t pull away but didn’t tug her affectionately like she usually did either. Tara glanced over and noticed Willow gnawing on her lip, looking up at the ceiling at an angle.

Tara looked away and then back as if that might change the troublesome look on Willow’s face.

She waited for a moment, swallowing to get moisture in her mouth without drawing attention to herself. When her body had settled itself down again, she lifted her hand to Willow’s shoulder and caressed her with her thumb.

“You okay?”

Willow blinked a couple of times.

“Yeah,” she said, turning her head slowly toward Tara with a small crease in her brow, “A-are you okay?”

“I’m great,” Tara grinned, but it didn’t produce the usual blush in Willow’s cheeks.

Tara felt an uncomfortable lull between them that didn’t jive with her own reaction.

“…was that okay?” she asked unsurely.

“Of course,” Willow replied but her tone wasn’t quite the enthusiastic rebuff Tara was hoping for.
She shifted her upper body weight onto her side and drew little circles on the protruding bones on Willow’s collarbone.

“Did you…? Did you finish?” she asked, her gaze firmly downward, “I-It felt like you finished.”

“Tara, yes,” Willow replied quickly and with more of the urgency Tara had been seeking before, “Yes, yes. God, yes. Of course.”

Tara’s shoulders relaxed and she lifted her eyes to Willow’s.

“You seem a little…” she paused for a moment to think of an appropriate word, “Off.”

Willow slowly turned herself on her side too so they were facing each other.

“I guess I feel a bit guilty.”

“Oh,” Tara replied, surprised for a moment, “Is it like a religious thing? Because of your dad?”

Willow’s head reeled back at that notion.

“No, no. Not like that,” she said assuredly, then grew quiet for a minute.

Tara let her gather her thoughts and didn’t press the issue.

“I kinda lost control,” she said eventually, swallowing as she looked up deeply into Tara’s eyes, “I could have hurt you.”

Tara lifted her hand to Willow’s face and brushed some hair from her forehead.
“Honey, I would have stopped us if I thought it was hurting me,” she reassured, leaning in to peck Willow’s lips softly, “I have a big boot on. It protects it. Now if you’d rolled me off the bed…”

Willow ducked her head with a smile and Tara used her finger to lift Willow’s chin again and offer her a crooked smirk.

“Besides, you weren’t the only one who lost control…”

She tickled Willow’s neck, who blushed and giggled.

Tara let her hand settle on Willow’s hips and gave it a gentle tug.

“C’mere.”

Willow shuffled further into Tara’s arms and they naturally shifted together until Tara was on her back again so it was less awkward to keep her leg straight. Willow curled around Tara’s side and rested her head above Tara’s breast with her arm thrown loosely across Tara’s chest to make it easy to cuddle in. She twined her legs around Tara’s good leg and settled with a soft sigh.

She felt Tara’s hand brush over a spot on her behind.

“Your tuna butt is looking good.”

Willow rolled her eyes and grinned all at once.

“Shut up, Tara.”

“Make me,” Tara challenged playfully.

Willow lifted her head and tilted Tara’s chin down.
“Gladly.”

“Yes…yes…right there.”

“That feels so good.”

“Don’t stop.”

“Like that?”

“Yes, like that. Just like that.”

“Is this safe?”

“As long as it doesn’t break.”

“I’ll be careful.”

“Yes…yes…oh, that’s it. That’s it…ah, ah, ah…”

Willow slowed down the pace of the ruler stuck inside Tara’s boot in response to the quieting of her satisfied moans.

“You good?” she checked.

“So good,” Tara sighed happily before turning her leg over and back in annoyance, “I can’t wait to get this thing off. It’s like wearing a giant, heavy, sweaty sock for weeks on end without washing it.”

Willow grimaced at that visual.
“Soon.”

“I know,” Tara replied, leaning over to kiss Willow on the cheek gratefully before lying back onto the bed.

Willow came around the other side and sat next to her.

“That, uh, kinda brings us ‘round to The Talk.”

Tara dragged herself up so her back was against the wall.

“The ‘when do we leave?’ talk?”

Willow nodded and pursed her lips thoughtfully. Tara waited but when Willow didn’t speak, she started the conversation.

“You’re doing such amazing work. Helping rebuild the community. I’m so proud of you and everything you’ve done.”

“And the locals are wearing the most stylish clothes I’ve ever seen,” Willow returned, grinning, “Only my girl can make emergency clothing look better than New York fashion week.”

Her tongue stuck out between her teeth as she fought to release a giggle.

“Also I heard a three-year-old who I know doesn’t speak English singing Hayley Kiyoko the other day and don’t you dare deny it!”

Tara tried to hide a grin but failed and they both started laughing.

“But honestly?” Willow said after a moment, scooting closer to Tara, “I’m getting a little tired.”
“And I’m getting itchy feet,” Tara replied softly, “The kind a good ruler scratching can’t solve.”

Willow slipped her hand into Tara’s.

“I think that means it’s time.”

They were both silent for a moment, processing what that meant.

“We haven’t even talked about where to go next,” Tara offered as there was just no way to verbalize everything they’d be leaving behind.

Willow nodded that she understood what was unspoken as well as spoken.

“We can figure it out. We’re not leaving tomorrow. You have to get your X-ray on Friday and it’ll take a few days to organize anyway.”

Tara looked down to hide a tear and Willow squeezed her hand gently.

“I know, baby. Me too.”

Tara inhaled deeply, with a little bit of a sniffle, and exhaled it all with a soft nod of her head.

She lifted her gaze to give Willow a watery smile. Willow kissed Tara’s forehead.

“Hey, I owe you something.”

Tara seemed confused and looked to Willow for an explanation.

“Ma timilai man parauchhu,” Willow intoned perfectly and grinned, “That is the only time I’ve been 100% confident on my pronunciation because Amir drilled in into me for twenty minutes.”
Tara laughed deep from her belly and let the tension leave up through her shoulders. She exhaled a slow breath.

“So, what do you think? Where do we go?”

Willow started to draw little circles on Tara’s palm.

“Well actually…I was talking to my dad…”

“Yeah?” Tara asked encouragingly.

She’d physically been able to track Willow’s brain recovery just by overhearing the conversations she had with her father growing more and more reasoned.

Willow nodded.

“He still doesn’t get our decision about Israel because I didn’t feel like getting into a big political debate so I didn’t tell him everything. But he did have a suggestion instead.”

Tara looked at her to continue and Willow bunched up both shoulders with a smiling shrug.

“Did you know my ancestors came from Budapest?”
1–2013. Extinct Primate, *Ramapithecus sivalensis* (also called *Sivapithecus punjabiensis*), is a primate found in Nepal Siwalik hills between 8.5 and 12.5 million years before.

Dear Mr and Mrs Rosenberg,

I wanted to personally thank you for helping me get the care I needed after the earthquake. I’m very grateful to you both for your kindness and generosity.

I’ll never be able to give you back the money, but I hope you’ll find that loving your daughter will repay you in ways you might not be able to see yet.

I’m looking forward to learning more about your family in Budapest.  I am eternally grateful,

Tara Maclay

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