



Banner by DEATHISYOURART

Title: Devil's Paradise

Author: Seductivembrace

Pairing, Characters: Lindsey/Tara, Darla, Anyanka

Rating: NC-17

Summary: Set during BtVS S.5 *Family* and AtS S.2 *Darla*. This fic is a result of the fantabulous banner DEATHISYOURART made for the LJ community WATCHERSDIARIES' reverse Art-a-thon event that was held. One vengeance demon. Two wishes. Four people suffer the consequences.

Disclaimer: Joss said I could, so I am.

A/N: In this story, Tara and Willow have dated but have never done the deed, I guess you could say...

Chapter 1

Sunnydale

The demon watched with interest as the blonde witch called forth the power of Blind Cadria while hidden within the dark recesses of the magic shop.

'Rather drab looking. I can see why she'd want to try and be invisible,' Halfrek thought as the girl finished her spell and backed away from her unsuspecting friends. Still, the girl was due a wish, years of being wronged and suffering the pain of it had finally caught the interest of D'Hoffryn - which was why she'd been sent to Sunnydale instead of taking

her long overdue vacation. She just hoped the girl's wish was worthwhile; her last client's wish hadn't brought her the satisfaction she'd come to expect with her job.

After another moment, the witch left, and with a quick look around, Halfrek snapped her fingers, and she, too, disappeared.

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Tara sat on the floor where she'd been thrown just moments before by the demon the Slayer had just killed. Her father stood in the doorway, staring at the carcass that lay at his feet.

"What in god's name *is* that?"

"Lei-ach demon. Fun little buggers. Big with the marrow-sucking," Spike announced without preamble, stepping into the main part of the shop.

Mr. Maclay looked about the room, taking in its occupants, before returning his gaze to the petite blonde woman in front of him. "I don't understand."

"I'm not sure I do either..." the Slayer's voice trailed off. She looked away from the man and pinned Willow's friend with a look.

"I'm sorry... s-so s-sorry! I was... trying to hide," Tara stammered out in apology. A quick glance at Buffy revealed how upset the girl was, and Tara's shoulders slumped in defeat. It was hopeless, she'd never fit in here with these people. Better if she just disappeared.

Willow crossed the room and knelt down next to her girlfriend.

Tara raised tear-filled eyes to the redhead. "I didn't want you to see... what I am."

"Tara? What?" Willow's face clearly showed her confusion.

"Demon," Mr. Maclay interjected. "The women in our family... have demon in them. Her mother had it. That's where the magic comes from. We came to take her home before..." He paused in his explanation, sighing. "Well, before things like... *this* started happening." He gestured to the room at large, as if that explained everything.

Giles moved forward, bringing Willow's friend into his line of sight. "You cast a spell on us, to keep us from seeing your... your demon side," he concluded. He turned to Buffy. "That's why we couldn't see our attackers."

"Nearly got us all killed," Buffy grumbled, her arms folded across her chest.

"I'm s-sorry," Tara stammered again. "I wish..."

The angry auras of nearly everyone in the room seemed to press in on her, and before anyone could stop her, Tara pushed herself awkwardly to her feet and raced out the back door of the shop. Once out in the back alley, she leaned wearily against the brick wall. The tears she'd struggled valiantly to hold back spilling over onto her pale cheeks.

"I wish I wasn't me," she whispered to no one in particular. "I wish I was someplace else... far, far away."

Tara gasped in shock when a demon suddenly materialized right in front of her; its face looked like the skin had been peeled off, the muscle beneath left to shrivel into grotesque disfiguration.

"Wish granted!" it hissed.

A burst of blinding light seemed to engulf them both. Suddenly, the demon disappeared. Tara's eyes rolled into the back of her head as the alley disappeared too.

Back inside the shop, Willow was just about to rush after her girlfriend when Anya spoke, her words causing the witch to grind to a halt and stare in astonishment.

"Oh, just let her go. I'm sure she'll be fine. Besides, it really *was* her fault that we were very nearly killed. If she hadn't reversed that spell in time, we would all be demon fodder right about now."

"That's quite enough, Anya," Giles interjected, sensing a brewing argument.

"Shut up!" Willow shouted at the same time. Her eyes narrowed as her anger threatened to consume her. "I wish you would just disappear!"

Anya froze in the middle of counting the money in the register, for once no words able to escape past her parted lips. Spoken wishes weren't something to be bandied about with no thought to the consequences. And given the witch's evil glare, she just prayed no one was around to hear —

As the others turned away to deal with the dead demons littering the floor, as well as Mr. Maclay and his family, Anya disappeared.

Out in the alleyway, Halfrek had just uttered the words that had sealed her fate.

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Los Angeles

"Darla? What are you doing?" Lindsey asked as he opened the door.

Darla didn't answer, and whispered something he couldn't hear into the phone.

"Hang up the phone. It's okay."

Lindsey stepped inside the office and crossed the room to stand behind the former vampire. His fingers closed over the handset and gently pried it from her grasp. "It's okay. Alright? Just put it down."

Lindsey ignored the frantic calls of some male - Angel, from the sound of it - frantically yelling her name into the receiver and severed the connection by resettling the handset in the cradle.

"Mr. McDonald, is everything okay in there?" a guard called through the closed door a moment later.

"Yes, we're fine," he yelled back.

The door opened to reveal a balding security guard and Lindsey frowned, not liking the way the man eyed Darla from head to toe before turning to address him.

"Mr. Manners said you might need some help with her." The guard's eyes raked over Darla's frame again, giving clear indication what help he'd like to be giving, and Lindsey saw red. He moved towards the man and physically shoved him from the room with his good hand, locking the door after he'd ejected the leering bastard.

He rushed back to Darla's side, bringing her trembling body to nestle close to his chest. She didn't seem to mind the touch, although she remained stiff in his embrace.

"I'm sorry about that," he murmured against her hair. "Come on, I'll get us out of here."

"Yes. Someplace very far away," she whispered in a shell-shocked tone.

Outside their door, Halfrek stood over the unconscious figure of the security guard. Her eyes gleamed with demonic delight, thrilling that she was once more able to use the powers given her. She could feel the former vampiress' wish on the tip of her tongue, and was just waiting for those magic words to be verbalized.

After the boredom that was Sunnydale, she'd decided on a trip to Los Angeles, hoping some pitiful soul would spark her interest. Though, truth be told, it had been rather fun

granting the red-headed witch's wish. In all honesty, she was doing her friend, Anyanka, a favor; the boy she'd been seeing wasn't right for her. If her friend had a bit of wits about her, she would have realized it too; he was only with her because he couldn't get anyone else, and enjoyed mocking her attempts at being human. Knowing Anyanka like she did, Halfrek knew she'd adapt soon enough to her new surroundings. She felt a moment's regret that perhaps she'd gone a little overboard with the mousy girl's wish, but quickly shrugged it off. She was a demon and didn't have time for such trivialities as guilt.

It was purely by chance that she'd found out about the return of Angel's sire, Darla, though the woman was a tad on the human side now. Everyone knew about Angel, the vampire with a soul that called Los Angeles his home, who night after night went against his kind killing demons all over the city; the milk toast that caged a darker, sadistic version of himself. As much as that sickened the vengeance demon's sensibilities, the return of Angelus and his penchant for wanting to destroy the world was a far greater crime. So after speaking with D'Hoffryn, she'd gotten special permission from her boss to keep the two apart by whatever means necessary – provided, of course, that she could have her powers “activated.”

Barely two days had passed before she'd concluded that her best bet lay with the girl. For centuries, Darla had been guilt free and living the life of luxury among demons. To be forced to endure the strictures of her soul, Darla would be the first to crack.

Standing outside the door, she grinned in delight as those magic words were spoken. Her face shifted into those of her demon, the barked words, “Wish granted!” ominous-sounding in the empty hallway. And to show she wasn't completely heartless, she let the boy toy go too. Something to keep the former vampiress happy in her new “home.”

That she dropped them in Anyanka's lap was her own perverseness.

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Chapter 2

El Paraiso del Diablo, Texas
1867

Lindsey lazily stretched his arms over his head and promptly fell over backwards when the chair he'd been napping in leaned back too far on its hind legs to remain upright.

“Ow! Fuck! What the hell?”

He rolled to his feet as the sound of someone's laughter drifted towards him. A voice calling out a taunting, "Didn't break yer neck now, didja', Marshal?" just confused him even more.

Lindsey's eyes made a quick sweep of the room he was standing in, taking note of the antiquated furnishings, the wooden floors, the shotguns mounted on the wall and locked behind a glass-covered cage. A glance down at his own attire caused his eyes to widen in astonishment.

Gone were the light blue button-down shirt, dark slacks and tie, as well as the expensive leather dress shoes. In their place were well-worn, dust-covered boots - complete with spurs - covering his feet, faded button-fly jeans that molded his thighs. A brown leather vest lay over the coarse, blue long sleeve shirt; on his left breast a Marshal's badge was pinned in place. The items that seemed to stand out the most were the matching Colt .45 pistols secured to his hips. How he knew their exact make was anyone's guess; he'd long since given up what to think.

Then there was his hands.

Both of them.

Lindsey didn't have time to dwell on it, however, as the front door opened suddenly to reveal a man dressed in similar garb.

"Afternoon, Marshal."

"Pete."

The man's name seemed to roll off his tongue, as if he'd been here years instead of just mere moments. Pete Thompson, one of three deputies he oversaw here in the town of El Paraiso del Diablo, Texas. *Devil's Paradise.*

"I'll take over if'n you wanna git somethin' to eat."

"Yeah... uh... yeah," Lindsey replied. "You do that."

Lindsey darted out of what he soon realized was the local jailhouse, stopping abruptly when he got his first good look around. He'd seen damn near every Clint Eastwood western ever made and had *some* slight inkling of what to expect. But even so, as his blue gaze swept up and down the buildings that lined either side of the dirt road, he couldn't prevent his jaw from dropping slightly.

The boys at Wolfram & Hart had obviously done their homework. The buildings, the carriages, right down to the costumes of the people that greeted him warily as they passed him on the walk – they all looked one hundred percent authentic.

Sounds of boisterous laughter caught his attention, and his feet moved off in that direction. As he drifted closer to the noise, he tried to figure out why Holland would want to pull a charade like this. Surely not for his trying to form some type of attachment to the former vampiress?

Sudden insight into Holland's mind had him hurrying down the walkway, oblivious to the wide berths given him by the town's inhabitants.

'Please, god, don't let Darla be inside there.'

He soon reached his destination and paused outside the swinging double doors of the saloon, a place called *The Morning Star*. Bracing his hands on either door, he pushed them inward and stopped just inside. His eyes scanned the relatively small crowd, dismissing the occupants as possible threats. Conversations halted momentarily when the men inside paused to see who had entered, then reluctantly began again... only in a much quieter tone.

As if they feared upsetting him.

Interesting.

"What'll it be, Lindsey? Your usual?" the bartender warily called out to him from his place behind the counter.

Lindsey didn't react to the man's knowledge of his name, but did take him up on his offer. Cutting through a few tables and nodding at some of the men that offered a polite greeting, he made his way towards the L-shaped bar. He sat down on the stool closest to the wall so that his back was protected against attack and he could keep the room's occupants in view. He nodded his thanks as a shot of whiskey was set before him.

"Yer just in time for the songbird, Marshal," the bartender told him. "'m thinkin' you'll like this one."

"Songbird?" he mouthed to himself once the man moved away. Surely Darla wasn't *singing* for this crowd.

Feminine laughter – *her* laughter – drew him out of his seat. A crowd of men were gathered around a circular table situated in a corner of the room, no doubt watching others playing poker. One of them shifted suddenly, and Lindsey's eyes nearly popped out of his head as he finally caught sight of Darla.

The corseted bodice molded her torso like a second skin and pushed her breasts up so high that they were precariously close to toppling out of the thing. How they managed to stay hidden seemed to defy the law of physics. A black choker was draped around her slender neck, a cameo pinned to its center so that it nestled into the hollow of her throat. Her blonde hair was swept off her neck and twisted up in some elaborate "do." He thought she looked stunning.

And apparently so did all the men congregating around her table.

Lindsey stepped away from his chair and walked towards Darla. He'd not secreted her away from Angel - though he'd still yet to figure exactly how he'd managed that - to have her fawned over by men left and right, especially when he was standing right here.

She seemed to sense his approach and she lifted her eyes from her cards to meet his. Her smile grew wider, falsely so, as her eyes grew colder.

"Get up," he ground out once he stopped beside her chair. Most of the men had fallen back leaving an open place right next to her.

"Why, Marshal Lindsey! How *good* to see you again," she drawled in a fake Texan accent. "Would you like to sit in on a hand?" She gestured to the table in front of her that was set up with cards and chips. "You boys won't mind if our good Marshal sits a spell, now will you?"

"I said get up."

His tone of voice alerted her to his anger, but she'd been a vampire for centuries before he'd even been born; his ire was child's play compared to what she'd experienced at the hands of the Master on one of his gentler days.

"You wouldn't want me to get in trouble now, would you?" she sneered. "This is my *job* after all."

Job? Surely Holland hadn't set her up as a prostitute in this farce, Lindsey thought.

The men around the table sensed the tension between the two, collectively holding their breath while waiting to see who would be the first to back down. The decision was taken out of their hands when a man walked up and pulled Darla to her feet.

"Hey, doll-face. Yer mine for the next hour," he told her, leaning into her neck and nipping lightly at the smooth flesh below her choker. Darla turned and gifted him with a radiant smile.

"Mmmmm," she purred enticingly and wound her arms around his neck.

"Darla," Lindsey growled her name.

"Sorry, Marshal. Duty calls. You want time with me, you gotta pay up. Just like the rest of 'em. Now, if you'll excuse me?"

She didn't wait for his reply. Just turned her back on him and allowed herself to be led up the stairs to the second story of the saloon.

Lindsey stared after her retreating back for a moment, stunned. What the *hell* had just happened? And why? How did he turn into one of the good guys, straight out of a bad western? And Darla. Why had she reverted back to her pre-vampiric profession?

Nothing came to him, and he slowly trudged his way back to his spot at the bar.

"Leave the bottle," he told the bartender, his shot glass having been topped off. He was definitely going to need it.

Fingers running the length of the piano pulled him from his silent musings about his current situation, and Lindsey lifted his head to see a female wearing a costume similar to Darla's, step onto the small stage next to the piano.

Silence settled over the saloon as the girl began to sing. Her soft, husky voice seemed to call to him, and Lindsey grabbed bottle and glass and sought a seat closer to the raised platform.

At some point, the piano man stopped playing, and just her voice could be heard. Thoughts of Darla, of his current situation, were forgotten as her voice held him captive. The lyrics washed over him and called to his inner musician. His hands itched for his guitar.

All this before he'd even gotten a good look at her face.

If Darla was an angel, this girl was a goddess. But it was her eyes that held him spellbound. Pain, not unlike his own, seemed to radiate from deep within their blue depths. It was like looking into a mirror and seeing himself reflected right back at him.

As the last notes fell from her lips, the men rushed the stage, eager to have a turn at the "songbird," and he was just about to get up - to claim the girl for his own - when she started in with another song. Everyone backed away and resettled in their seats... and waited. This time when she finished, Lindsey was the first that stood, easily snagging her hand before anyone else could reach her. Others objected, but at a sharp look from him, they backed down.

She said nothing as he led her away towards the stairs. Put up no fight. It was like she was broken. Whatever backbone she might have possessed once upon a time had been crushed by this life.

The life of a whore.

As they reached the steps, another girl came bounding down from the upper level. Her chipper attitude was at odds with her profession; it was like she actually *enjoyed* the attention of the men vying for her body.

She blocked their ascent, and Lindsey looked at her quizzically. She ignored him and stared intently at his face, looking for... *something*. Finally, she nodded approvingly.

"Hurt her, and there's no place you can hide that will protect you," she told him ominously. Oddly enough, he believed her. There was something *off* about the woman.

Anya put her hand beneath Tara's chin and forced her to look up. "Don't worry. He'll give you lots and lots of orgasms," she told the girl matter-of-factly.

Tara gave a brief, resigned nod, but other than that, did not react to the blunt words of the girl in front of her. It was no more than she deserved – forced to play the whore in some place of her own making.

The ex-vengeance demon had taken great delight in telling her about her past exploits, and how once granted, a wish could only become null if the owner's power source was destroyed – like hers had been. Anya had gone on to mention that she personally knew the particular vengeance demon that had granted her wish, grumbling under her breath at having been subjected to her "friend's" wish. Her hope of rescue had been squashed when Anya had explained that Halfrek always kept her distance from her subjects, so they were none the wiser. Though, she had managed to hear her friend's voice as she'd been cursed to this alternate... whatever.

Tara heard, rather than saw, Anya flounce off down the remaining stairs to make herself available for the next man that could afford an hour of her time. She felt her hand pulled as the Marshal resumed his trek up the stairs, and she offered no resistance, just plodded along behind him.

"Which one?" he asked once they reached the top.

She opened her mouth to reply, but found the words stuck in her throat. Instead, she led him to her room – the one she'd woken in that morning, alone and confused. At least until Anya had barged inside. Tara had taken comfort in the former demon's presence; then she'd had it spelled out for her exactly what was expected as one of *The Morning Star's* "girls." The only reason she hadn't been on her back before now was

because Anya had spoken to the bartender, fabricating a tale of her singing abilities, and that she'd need a few hours to prepare her voice before taking what passed for an excuse of a stage.

He'd grumbled, but the ex-vengeance demon had been adamant about her talents and how it would increase business, and in the end, the man had reluctantly given in. After he'd left, Tara had hugged the girl tight in thanks for the reprieve.

Now those few hours had gone, and the Marshal was the first in line in a crowd of men that were eager to sample her wares.

'Don't think about it,' she silently told herself and she opened the door to her room and stepped inside.

The soft click of the door as he closed it behind him resounded in her ears. She stood frozen in the middle of the room, staring out the window into the late afternoon sun. The silent chant came out of nowhere. A defense mechanism to seal herself off from what was about to happen. Pleas to be anywhere but there echoed in her mind until they consumed her.

So intent on her fruitless task, she didn't hear him as he stepped up behind her. His hands on her bare shoulders caused her to stiffen momentarily before she forced herself to relax. To submit.

To accept her fate.

The kiss to her shoulder was unexpected, as were the arms that wrapped around her body and just seemed to want to hold her.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he whispered softly, his voice slightly muffled against her hair. "Hell, I'm not even sure what I'm doing here... I just... I just couldn't let them touch you."

Tara crumbled at the reminder of his words, her stoic expression giving way to grief as the tears she'd held back since waking to this strange, new world finally fell.

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Chapter 3

"Shhh..." he whispered to the lost girl as he turned her in his arms and pulled her against his chest. Why he was so concerned about her welfare, Lindsey didn't know. But the thought of another touching her brought out his long dormant protective instincts.

When her tears subsided, Lindsey guided them to her bed and eased her down onto its narrow surface. He knelt in front of her and undid the lacings of the boots she wore and slipped them off. He didn't bother with her constricting clothes, not wanting to frighten her more. Instead he just lifted her legs up on the mattress so that she could stretch out on top of the covers.

He didn't look her in the eyes as he quickly removed his own boots and gunbelt, hanging the latter on the bedpost closest to him. His vest and shirt were stripped away and carelessly tossed to a vacant chair, leaving him clad in only his jeans and socks. Paying no attention to her shocked gasp, he settled on the narrow bed beside her and drew her into his arms. She stiffened, but eventually relaxed when he did nothing more than hold her.

"What's your name?" Lindsey murmured against her forehead.

Tara bit her lip anxiously. To tell him her name would make the nightmare real, and right now, she wanted nothing more to wake up in her girlfriend's arms, relieved that the last few hours had been nothing but a bad dream. Even if the lawman's arms wrapped around her back, her cheek pressed against his bare chest, left her feeling somewhat safe... and cherished.

Lindsey put his hand beneath her chin, applying gentle pressure to force her to look up at him.

"Your name?" he coaxed.

"I..." Her eyelids lowered, shielding herself from his penetrating stare. Then she tucked her head, breaking the fragile hold he had on her as she attempted to look anywhere but at him. "It doesn't matter. It's whatever you want it to be."

The silence was deafening after her comment, but Tara refused to open her eyes and look at him. She'd cried once already, and to see the borderline pitying look in his eyes would be more than she could handle. She chose instead to get mad. Mad at herself, her fate. Mad at the gut-wrenching existence she'd lived for most of her life that culminated into her being reduced to this.

"Trixie. Lulu. Rosie. Mae... Take your pick," she spoke suddenly. "Besides... in an hour you'll be gone and—"

"Shhhh." Lindsey silenced her tirade with a finger pressed lightly to her lips. Then replaced his fingers with his lips, doing nothing more than lightly brushing them against her own. He felt her stiffen at the contact but she didn't try to push him away. Rather, she seemed to wait, as if seeing what he'd do.

His body was telling him to shuck his pants and slide into her liquid warmth, but for once, he ignored his dick and concentrated his efforts on her full, lush mouth. Nipping lightly at first the top lip, then the lower. Tracing his tongue along the outer rim. He was rewarded minutes later when she relaxed against him, her breathy sigh catering to his bruised male ego in the wake of Darla's rejection.

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Tara didn't know what to think. Until that very moment, her gift of reading other's auras had lain dormant. But, now? Vibrant reds slammed into her, yet were tempered by streaks of blue and pink. But it was the white that surprised her, interspersed among the red. Confirming his gentle manner, his healing capabilities.

It allowed her to relax in his embrace and accept his kiss for what it was - an attempt to soothe. Her hands lifted to rest against his bare chest, but were still only a moment before they began to roam. To acquaint herself with the male body pressed so intimately against hers. He seemed to like her touching him, his groan against her mouth causing shivers to tingle along her spine, her nails to clench reflexively into his skin.

Tara found herself rolled to her back, the Marshal braced on his arms as he loomed over her. Entranced by the blue of his eyes, a color much like her own, she could do nothing but stare up at him in fascination as he looked down at her. He was so... hard. His body a lean machine of coiled muscle. He was everything she'd avoided in the past, had shied away from to prevent being dominated. Much like the males in her family had been dominating their women for centuries.

But for some reason, with him, she found it didn't matter. Maybe it was the aura that surrounded him - the tarnished warrior vibe she could see radiating about him. How he seemed to want to do better, be better, but just needed a purpose. A reason to step away from what he'd been to become what he was destined to be.

"Marshal?"

"Lindsey. Call me Lindsey," he whispered.

"Lindsey." She spoke his name softly, confirming his request. "I like it."

"Yeah... well... It's the only one I got, so I guess I've got to, too."

He winked at her, and Tara found herself grinning. Which was a shock in itself. Here she was, banished to the past by a vengeance demon, forced to become some doxy in a two-bit western town. Was actually *in* bed with a man, the town's lawman, and just minutes away from being deflowered good and proper. Well, maybe not good and

proper, but definitely deflowered. And yet she was smiling up at Lindsey, the man who was about to take her virginity.

She had to question her sanity. Or what was left of it.

The tears came unbidden this time. Proved her weakness. Goddess, she wished they would just stop already! But rather than take advantage of it, the Marshal just settled himself beside her and pulled her close once more. His continued tenderness was her undoing, and the floodgates let loose again. She clung to him while she cried out her grief for what her life had become, and for what still awaited her.

Lindsey never said a word, just soothed her as best he could until her tears dried up and the occasional shudder wracked her body.

'*Safe,*' was her last thought before the emotional upheaval from the last several hours took its toll and she slept.

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Lindsey watched the saloon girl as she slept peacefully in his arms. There was a story there, and he wondered briefly if the senior partners had something to do with it. Just like they no doubt had something to do with him and Darla being there.

Carefully, so as not to wake her, he pulled his arm from where it was cradled beneath her head. She frowned in her sleep at having been disturbed, but didn't wake up. Good. The girl needed her rest.

He stood and snagged his shirt from where he'd thrown it. His aborted attempts to get her into bed not bothering him in the least. He'd take his time with this one, no sense rushing things. She was just starting to trust him, and he didn't want to ruin their tentative - whatever it was they'd initiated - by pushing her to do something she'd later regret. He had enough regrets to last him a lifetime.

In the meantime, he'd have a word with the barkeep. The girl was going to be off limits. He didn't mind her singing and serving drinks in the bar, but she was definitely not to be touched by the customers. And if it took a bit of roughing up some of the saloon's clientele to show that his word was law...

His sinister grin and malevolent thoughts would have made the senior partners proud.

With his shirt buttoned and tucked in his pants, he snagged his gunbelt and looped it around his waist securing the buckle before bending over and tying the stays about his thighs. As he reached for his vest, his eyes encountered the Marshal badge winking at

him and he chuckled self-derisively at the irony. From lawyer to lawman – only the senior partners could think up something that twisted.

Something else caught his attention then, and he stared at the hand clutching his vest. The one that Angel had hacked off with a sword. A closer look at his wrist revealed no line to indicate some type of procedure had been performed to fix it. His hand was just as it had always been. There. Now he knew that the senior partners had to be behind his current predicament. He just wished he knew what they hoped to gain...

Putting the thought aside for now, Lindsey backed out of the girl's room, keeping one eye on her face to make sure she didn't wake. With his hand on the knob, he pulled the door closed softly behind him. He turned to tiptoe away and bumped into the girl from earlier. She was watching him, her hands on her hips, head cocked to the side assessingly.

"You don't look like a man who's had any orgasms." She frowned at him for a moment and continued to look him over, as if trying to resolve the matter in her mind. Her sharp gaze as she eyed him knowingly from head to toe made him regret every lewd look he'd cast a female's way. He felt like he'd been stripped bare and left to be ogled by all those that passed. "Well, it's not for want of trying since your penis looks uncomfortably hard."

"Whoa! Okay!" His hand reached instinctively to his crotch, covering himself. "Do you mind?"

"I'm just saying. You've been up here for over an hour. Do you need some pointers? Or maybe Tara might need –"

"Tara? Her name is Tara?"

"Yes. Although, she mentioned that she might change her name. More to fit in around here. I'm keeping my name though. Anya has a nice ring to it, don't you think? Adds a bit of mystery. Should keep the men lining up at my doorstep."

"You... ahhh... really enjoy your work, don't you?"

"What's not to like about orgasms? And money? Money for sex...? It's like the American dream."

"Uhhhh..."

"Don't tell me you're one of those men who thinks it's all right for men to have all the sex they want, but women can't." Anya cocked her hip to the side, arms akimbo as she quirked a brow at the Marshal.

"No... uhh... no. Just making an observation. I'm all for women being liberated. If sex is your thing, then go for it."

"Yes," she nodded intently. "Yes, sex is my thing. And then there's the money."

"Right. Money and sex."

"Yep." She nodded again, pleased he seemed to understand.

"Look... ah. I've got to go. Have to speak with the barkeep before I get back to work. You'll keep an eye on Tara? Let me know if anything... uh... happens to her?"

"Happens? Like what?"

"Just let me know if any of the men bother her."

"Well, of course they're gonna bother her. She works here."

"Not if I can help it," Lindsey muttered under his breath as he moved down the hall towards the stairs.

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Lindsey smiled to himself as he walked back towards the city jail. It had taken very little persuasion on his part to convince the barkeep to see things his way. He'd just told the man that he was staking a claim on the "songbird" and that the other men would have to content themselves with the two new girls and the other women that already worked in the saloon. He'd raised his voice so that everyone in the tavern had heard him, his eyes making contact with each occupant, staring until they nodded their head in understanding. When he'd completed his circuit about the room, he turned back to the barkeep and told the man Tara was sleeping.

His grin alluded to the fact that he'd worn the girl out, when it couldn't have been further from the truth. But he'd seen the sudden recognition in the man's eyes. How he smirked conspiratorially. He'd left then, claiming that he had to see to his prisoner, the comment causing the tavern's occupants to still momentarily.

He let himself in the door, covering a smile as he watched his deputy lurch to his feet at his presence.

"How's our prisoner, Pete?"

"He's just dandy," the prisoner answered for the flustered deputy. "Though, can't say the same for you, Marshal, once my brother rides into town."

"Shut up, Clance," Pete hollered back.

"You gonna come make me, *Deputy*?" he sneered the moniker.

"Sorry 'bout that, Marshal. Clance's got a mouth on him since his brother's developed a reputation for being a fast gun. What with the duel he won last week up Chipoto way."

"You just wait, Marshal. Clem's gonna come spring me. See if'n he don't."

Lindsey walked to the open doorway that led to the jail's iron cells. He stepped just inside, leaning up against the wall as he looked over his prisoner.

"So, your brother thinks he's a gunslinger now?" he commented as he pulled one of his Colts out of its holster and twirled it around his finger. He stopped suddenly, catching the gun by the butt and pointing it at the unkempt man backing away from the bars. Lindsey eyed his gun, cocking it from side to side as if inspecting it for any flaws, not bothering to look at his prisoner.

"What's that, Clance?" Lindsey commented when the man didn't comment. "Couldn't quite hear you there."

Clance sat down on his bunk and looked away.

Lindsey set his pistol to twirling around his finger for a moment before reholstering it. Finally pushed away from the wall and went to rejoin his deputy in the other room.

"Anything else I need to know about?" he asked Pete.

"Nah. Been kinda' a quiet week."

"Good. I'm headed back to the saloon. Come get me if you need me." Lindsey raised his voice. "Or, if Clance feels like getting out of line again."

"Will do, Marshal."

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Chapter 4

Tara woke about an hour later. Eyes still closed, she stretched her arms over her head, a smile on her lips as she thought about what she and Willow were doing later. When her hands encountered the wrought-iron headboard, she momentarily frowned in confusion.

It came back to her then. Her wish. Being transported back in time. The lawman.

Lindsey.

He'd said to call him Lindsey.

She sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed. She didn't feel any different. No soreness or disheveled clothing to indicate that anything had been done to her. By all outward appearances, nothing had happened.

Tara glanced around for a sign that he'd been there. Except for her boots that had been tossed haphazardly to the floor by him, she came up empty. Confused, she hurriedly grabbed her boots and laced them up on her feet. The faint sounds of laughter could be heard from downstairs, and she was sure that with the Marshal now gone, others would want their turn.

She swallowed her rising nausea and forced herself to walk towards the door and the saloon below. It wasn't like she had some place else to go. She could run off, but how far would she actually get? And would she really be any safer out there on her own?

As she passed by Anya's room, her cheeks flooded with color, the ex-demon's exuberance easily heard through the closed door. Tara increased her pace until she was all but running down the stairs just to escape the sound. Her hurried steps brought the room to a standstill, and she could have kicked herself at drawing everyone's attention her way.

Feeling suddenly trapped, her eyes darted nervously about the room, waiting for the next man to step up and stake his claim. No one moved forward, and Tara waited for the other shoe to drop.

"You there... new girl... come get this tray."

Tara's head swiveled towards the man behind the bar who was gesturing towards the circular tray waiting at the end of the counter. She nodded frantically, descending the last few steps and weaving her way between the tables to do what he said. A few of the men leered when she walked past, but not one of them touched her.

Confusing, but she wasn't one to look a gift horse in the mouth.

"Y-y-you wanted m-me?" she asked upon reaching his side.

"Take that tray to the far table, then hurry back. I'll have the Marshal's dinner ready and you can take him his plate."

At the bartender's words, her eyes frantically scanned the room until they encountered his piercing blue stare as he lounged at a darkened table in the corner. His lips quirked in a half smile, and she could feel herself blushing all over again. She mentally shook herself and turned away, snagging the tray of beer before her new boss could yell at her.

"Well, aren't you a prime piece of flesh," one of the men drawled out when she began setting mugs on the circular table.

"Leave 'er alone, Willy. This one's the Marshal's." The second man turned to her saying, "Sorry, ma'am. Meant no disrespect."

Tara nodded, unable to speak. She quickly placed their empty mugs on the tray and hurried back to the bar.

She was the Marshal's?

She didn't have time to think about it, however, because a steaming plate of food was thrust her way. A thumb jabbed in the direction of the lawman's table, his brusque voice telling her to get a move on.

Ignoring the wild beating of her heart, Tara forced herself to put one foot in front of the other until she'd reached Lindsey's table.

"Did you sleep alright?"

The whispered words brought a blush to her cheeks, and with her eyes remaining steadfast on the plate of food, she nodded quickly.

"Is that my lunch?"

Tara lifted her head and looked at Lindsey. The twinkle in his eyes indicated his teasing, and she breathed a silent sigh of relief, nodding. The corner of his lips lifted slightly, and she couldn't prevent the answering smile she gave him, wobbly though it was. She managed to find her voice as she set the plate down in front of him.

"The bartender s-said it was your dinner, t-though."

"Yeah, that's what they call lunch 'round these parts. Supper is your evening meal," Lindsey explained.

"Oh.... o-okay. Is there anything else I can get for you?" she asked.

"I'm good for now. Maybe a refill in a bit," Lindsey replied, nodding towards his half-filled mug.

Tara nodded again, saying, "Just let me know."

"Sure thing... Tara."

Her eyes flew up to his face. "How did...?"

"Came across your friend when I left your room earlier. She's kinda..."

"Strange?" Tara offered.

"That would be one way of putting it, yeah," Lindsey chuckled. "Tell me, how did you two meet up?"

"We... ahh... I kinda knew her in another life."

"Before coming here?"

The sympathy in his gaze brought tears to her eyes, and she willed them away, nodding briskly.

"Well, I'll let you get back to work..."

At her stricken expression, Lindsey could have kicked himself. Ignoring the others in the saloon, he quickly snagged Tara's hand and pulled her down onto his lap.

"Hey... shhh... It's all right. You're not... Hell." Lindsey leaned his head back against the wall and contemplated banging it a few times against the hard, unyielding surface. He was a lawyer for fuck's sake. He was *supposed* to have a way with words. But around this particular girl, all he seemed to do was make her cry.

As she clung to his vest, Lindsey did his best to explain what he meant.

"Shhhh... Baby, don't cry. When I said 'work', I meant it in the literal 'can-I-take-your-order' sense. Not the... well, to put it bluntly... what your friend, Anya, seems to enjoy so much."

There! He'd said it. And hopefully he was clear enough that she wouldn't mistake his meaning. She was such a delicate thing, and he'd bet that the girl had never uttered the word sex, let alone actually done the deed.

Lindsey felt her shudder, then she seemed to collect herself and sit up. He felt a jolt go through his body when she gazed down at him, her blue eyes shimmering with gratitude. His hand lifted of its own accord, his thumb brushing back and forth along her full lower lip while his fingers cupped her jaw.

"So beautiful," he murmured, coaxing her head down towards his.

Their lips made contact and the inhabitants of the saloon seemed to fade away. Her startled gasp provided the opening he needed, and Lindsey slid his tongue inside her mouth. She offered up no resistance at his gentle invasion, allowing him to explore at his leisure. Oblivious to the cold stare directed his way by another blonde female holding court with several other males at a nearby table, Lindsey deepened the kiss, thrilling when he felt Tara's tentative response.

She leaned into him, her fingers sliding up to toy with his hair - a secret turn-on of his. He wanted nothing more than to sweep Tara into his arms and stride swiftly from the room. But she wasn't ready for that just yet. Instead, he reluctantly broke the kiss, pulling back to look up at her slightly bemused expression.

Her eyes opened and, realizing where she was and what she'd been doing, blushed a becoming shade of red. He thought she was amazing. Her honest response soothed his jaded soul and he leaned up to give her a quick peck on the lips before helping her up off his lap.

She was trying to look anywhere but at him, but he was having none of that. His thumb flicked over her palm where he still held her hand.

"You'll be alright?" he asked her softly.

Tara nodded, unable to look him in the eye. "I... uh..." She hazarded a quick glance at his face, forcing herself not to melt at his expression. "Thanks," she whispered, then reluctantly pulled her hand from his grasp and walked off, back to the bar.

The next several hours were spent refilling drinks, and singing the occasional song for the saloon's customers. The other girls working in the saloon came and went - especially Anya. Tara would have cringed for the ex-demon if she'd been anything other than happy about her current situation. Instead, she concentrated on keeping her boss happy, which meant she ran herself ragged carrying tray after tray of various spirits to the waiting customers. By the time the sun had set, her feet were already aching.

Unfortunately, things were just starting to pick up inside the town's only means of entertainment.

Hiding a grimace at the blisters that were no doubt adorning each heel, Tara continued to serve the customers until she was abruptly snatched about her waist by one of the men – sending her tray and empty glasses crashing to the ground.

The noise seemed to topple that of the boisterous crowd, and when the saloon's occupants saw what had caused the commotion, all noise came to an abrupt halt.

Tara sat unmoving on the man's lap, shocked into motionlessness by his groping hands. His evil aura, as well as those of the others at his table, seemed to slam into her; her eyes darted around frantically in search of her savior.

Lindsey.

Only, he wasn't where he'd been earlier. The table in the far corner was vacant. And none of the other occupants seemed in any hurry to help her out.

She was alone. With an evil, drunken gunslinger doing his best to cop a feel.

Tara tried to make herself as small as possible. His suggestive comments causing her to swallow the bile steadily rising in her throat. Then his hand found its way into her hair, yanking her head back painfully. Tears sprang into her eyes, both from his rough treatment and because of the disgusting things he continued to whisper in her ear. Things that he was going to do to her. Things he was going to let his friends do to her.

His taunts were the only thing that broke the uneasy silence. Leastways, they were... until two distinct clicks seemed to reverberate around the room.

She didn't know what to make of the noise. But the man beneath her did. Apparently, so did the others at the table, because they seemed to part like the Red Sea, upending chairs in an attempt to put as much distance between themselves and her as possible.

~*~*~*~*~

When the barkeep's boy had raced into the jailhouse, Lindsey had felt a moment's panic. The boy had babbled on about how he needed to get to the saloon right away – before the girl got hurt. It was the 'girl' that propelled him to his feet, racing out of the jail much to the astonishment of his deputy. His one thought to get to Tara.

As Lindsey stepped from the darkened shadows near the rear entrance of the saloon, none of the fear he'd felt showed. The ominous clank of his spurs marked his progress into the room, just far enough to ensure a clear shot. His face was a stony mask, the twin pearl-handled Colts cocked and aimed at the man still manhandling Tara. He forced his attention away from the girl and noted the body language of the man still

sitting at the table. There was no way that gunfire wasn't going to be exchanged. He just needed to make sure that Tara would be out of the crossfire.

"Let. Her. Go. Now." The whisper-soft words were overly loud in the room.

Steely blue eyes watched as the man tightened his grip, ready to throw her off him so he could get to his six-shooter.

Lindsey had to admit, the man was fast. But he'd had the advantage, his guns already drawn and aimed. The second Tara was out of his line of site, he fired. Twin shots that caught the man dead center in the chest when he turned. No one moved as he jerked from the dual impact, everyone too shocked to do anything but stare in wide-eyed amazement as the Marshal killed the youngest son of one of the richest – and most corrupt – ranchers in the area.

Lindsey ignored them all, intent on reaching Tara. He knelt down at her side, drawing her up off the wooden floor where she'd been thrown and into his arms. She clung to him, her body shaking in the aftermath, and he did his best to soothe her while guiding her towards the stairs and up to her room.

"Somebody do something with that," he called over his shoulder to no one in particular, not bothering to turn around.

"Uh... Marshal?"

Lindsey paused on the first landing. He turned around, eyes sweeping over the incredulous stares of the saloon's inhabitants.

"Yeah?"

"You know who that was, right? Who you done killed?" one of the men called out.

"Was a fair fight," another argued. "You all saw him go for his gun. The Marshal even waited till he turned around before firin'."

"Ain't gonna make no difference once the Man finds out," the first man replied.

Others began murmuring their assent, nodding and talking amongst themselves over the Marshal's predicament. Lindsey just waited. When no one appeared to be forthcoming with the information, he questioned the saloon's inhabitants. "So, who was it?"

"'Twas Max Shockwell, the youngest son of Sam Shockwell. He's gonna be comin' after you now, Marshal, make no mistake about it. Don't matter that is was fair and all. See,

Mr. Shockwell... he's the law round here... leastways until you showed up. When word gets back to him that you killed his son—"

The man's words were cut off by an elbow to the ribs from his friend. You didn't talk about the Man like that. Not when he had spies in town. It wasn't safe for your continued good health.

"Let him come," Lindsey threw over his shoulder, once more starting his journey up the stairs. "I've faced worse things in my time than a badass rancher, and I'm still alive."

Once he'd disappeared out of view, the men went back to what they were doing. Back at her spot at the poker table, Darla stared at the balcony where Lindsey had disappeared from sight. Her eyes narrowed in contemplation, and she vowed she'd get even for him choosing the other girl over her. Even though she'd rebuffed his claim on her, she had still viewed Lindsey as hers. To tease and torment until she finally allowed him into her bed.

But he'd turned her game back on her. Casting her aside for another. And that wasn't something that she could let him get away with.

Shuffling the cards with a dexterity that caused a few men at the table to swallow hard, she commented, "So, who's this Mr. Shockwell?"

Four sets of eyes glanced nervously over at the next table – towards the man she'd taunted Lindsey with earlier. Obviously one of Shockwell's spies. She'd have to have a little chat with the man later, get him to give her an introduction to the rancher.

Her smile widened maliciously as she thought of the revenge she'd have on Lindsey, and Darla dealt the cards expertly about the table, making sure to pad hers with the winning hand.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Chapter 5

When they stepped out of sight from the lower levels and further into the hallway, Lindsey felt Tara's legs give out. He didn't slow in his stride, just lifted her up into his arms and bore her the rest of the way to her room. She seemed to cling to him, and he felt a thrill go through him that she trusted him enough to see to her welfare.

As if he'd let anything happen to her now.

"You!" he barked out, spying a child about eight years in age loitering in the hall. "Come open the door for me."

The boy jumped to his feet at the command, hurrying forward to meet him at the door. He twisted the knob and pushed the door inward, stepping out of the way as Lindsey strode into the room. Gingerly, he set Tara down on the bed and started to remove her boots, uncaring whether the kid had left or not.

Lindsey didn't see her wince in pain at having one high-heeled ankle boot pulled free since he was too concentrated on his task. He did, however, see the mangled stockings and narrowed his eyes, lifting her leg by the ankle to examine it closer.

And exploded.

"Dammit, Tara! What the hell – ?"

Lindsey set her foot down and stood abruptly, choking back his tirade. Failing to notice how she shrank in on herself, wary of his sudden burst of anger. He turned towards the open doorway and saw the boy still standing there, unsure if he was supposed to leave or not.

"What's your name, boy?" he ground out.

"Timmy, Marshal." the boy stuttered out. "Timmy Westlake."

Lindsey reached into his vest pocket and pulled out a coin, using his thumb to flick it in Timmy's direction. The boy grabbed it out of the air, his eyes wide as he stared at the money held in his hand.

"Get me a basin of hot water and some towels, and be quick about it."

"Yessir, Marshal! Right away!" Timmy nodded emphatically, hurrying off.

Lindsey heard the clatter of footsteps as the boy raced downstairs, and a reluctant grin came to his lips. He turned back towards Tara, the corner of his lips turning down when he caught sight of her huddled form on the bed. He took a step forward and winced when he saw her jump.

"Tara?" he called out softly, not wanting to scare her. He took another step, and then another, ignoring how she drew in even further on herself. When he reached the edge of the bed, he knelt down taking her hands in his. She flinched at his touch, but didn't pull away. "Tara? Baby? What's wrong?"

It was a long time before she dared look at him, and Lindsey forced himself to wait. She finally lifted her head, eyeing him warily, like he was going to strike her at any moment. And he had to wonder if this had been the norm for her – cowering in fear of a man's anger. It made him sick to his stomach just thinking about it.

"S-sorry," she mumbled softly. "W-wasn't t-thinking. I... I j-just wanted... I didn't want to make him mad so that he'd –" Her voice, low though it was, broke off abruptly, and she turned her head away, refusing to look at him.

"Tara... look at me, sweetheart." His voice was soft, soothing. "Please, Tara. I'm not going to hurt you... ever."

She turned to look at him again, and Lindsey could have kicked himself at the fear he could easily see in her blue eyes. "B-but you were s-so... so mad."

"Yes, I was. I still am, actually. But not at you. Not really. I'm mad that you stayed on your feet far longer than you needed. Didn't you take a break?"

Tara shook her head but didn't answer.

"Tell me you at least ate something."

Again she shook her head in the negative, and Lindsey tamped down his rising anger. The girl needed a keeper, that was for damn sure. She was far too innocent for the likes of this place. Too naïve to remain at the saloon and not be taken advantage of.

The boy, Timmy, returned then, stepping through the open doorway, his arms laden down with water and towels.

"I've got yer water and such, Marshal."

"Bring them over here, then tell the barkeep I want two plates of food brought up," Lindsey told him.

The boy bobbed his head in agreement. Small drops of water dribbled over the rim of the bowl Timmy carried, marking his progress into the room. Lindsey watched the scene without moving, until the boy had finally gained his side. He grabbed the bowl from his hands, and set it down beside him, rather than have to worry about the water spilling completely as the boy tried to set it down himself. Timmy seemed to sigh with relief at having his burden taken off his hands, eagerly handing over the towels Lindsey had requested.

"I'll be back shortly with your meal, Marshal," the boy called out, racing to the door. This time, he pulled it shut behind him.

In a no-nonsense manner, Lindsey returned his attention to Tara, taking care with her remaining boot. She sat there unmoving, trying to hide the pain she felt at having it taken off. Lindsey ground his teeth and remained quiet when he felt her flinch. When the second one fell to the ground with a thud, he eyed the stockings adorning both legs.

"We need to get your stockings off," he told her, refusing to look her in the eye. Instead, his gaze remained transfixed on her legs. He congratulated himself when his voice didn't quaver. There was just something about removing a woman's stockings that lent itself to further exploration. Only, right now, he needed to tend her feet, not ravish her upon the bed. He reined in his rising libido and concentrated on raising Tara's frilly skirts. Careful to lift them only as far as the top of her stockings.

It wasn't working.

He swallowed hard, feeling himself swell within the confines of his jeans. The top of her stockings were finally exposed, and he mentally cursed when he caught sight of the garters that held them in place. His hands were shaking as they moved towards the stays holding them up, so much so, that it took him a minute to work the fastening free. Then he was rolling the silk down her leg, exposing her pale, creamy flesh to his gaze.

He couldn't help the finger that trailed along the expanse of skin - he wasn't a saint, had never professed to be. He felt her shiver at his touch and his head lifted, his eyes honing in on her face. She didn't appear to object to the caress. Her expression was a cross between confusion and the beginnings of arousal. It was all he could do to return to his task, sliding the material down past her knee and calf, then to her ankle.

Lindsey took his time there, careful not to aggravate the broken blisters on her heel and the balls of her foot. Knowing that even as he did so, it wasn't going to be enough. The pus and blood had dried and the silk was stuck to her skin.

"Just pull it off fast." The whisper-soft voice sounded in the room. The husky sound was unexpected, working its way past his defenses and driving him to hardness once more. He nodded, leaning forward to press a kiss to her exposed knee... and gave a sharp tug to the material clutched in his hand.

She jerked and sucked in her breath around the pain, letting it out in a slow exhale. Lindsey gifted her with another brush of his lips against her knee before leaning back to reach for the bowl of hot water.

"Put your foot in here," he encouraged softly. He lifted his head as he said it, taking in her warbly expression and how she struggled not to cry. He smiled, adding, "It'll help with the pain, and I don't want to take a chance of it getting infected," adding under his breath, "god knows medicine in these days was archaic."

Tara stared at him for a minute, unsure if she'd mistaken his last comment. *These days?* She shook her head. Surely she must have been imagining things. Sliding her foot into the basin, she hissed around the heat and pain, plunging her foot in until the water

covered her ankle. Her foot seemed to throb for a moment, then subside, the heat of the water actually comforting to her injured foot.

Then there was the added distraction of the Marshal working on her other stocking. His touch affecting her in ways she didn't want to examine. But it was there, nonetheless. The glide of his fingers against her bare thigh caused shivers of... something. Snaking their way through her limbs until she felt the insistent throb between her legs.

Goddess.

The feel of his lips upon her flesh, the open-mouthed kisses he trailed along her other leg caused her to squirm a bit. Whether to get closer or away, Tara wasn't sure. Maybe closer. Just as she was about to examine that thought for its veracity, she felt the tug of her other stocking. How it re-opened the blisters on her foot as it was pulled free.

Again she hissed in a breath around the pain, blinking back tears. She barely felt her leg lifted and set in the basin of water, though she did feel the sting as the open wounds were enveloped by the water. She felt the same throbbing pain, the same dull ache, then the heated water did its job. The tension ebbed from her body and she sank back against the mattress, her eyes closing on a happy sigh.

The gentle splash of water barely registered, but soon the smell of something flowery perfumed the air tickling her nostrils.

"Not sure about the antiseptic properties, but it's soap," Lindsey murmured, taking one of her feet from the basin and gently laving it with the soapy washcloth.

Tara had never had anyone bathe her before - well, not since infancy, at least. She moaned, her mouth falling open as his thumbs massaged the aches right out of them. He took his time with each one, making doubly sure he'd not missed anything, and she couldn't help wonder if he would pay this much attention to detail with the rest of her body given the chance. She could feel her face flame with the thought, and her eyes flew open to see him staring up at her.

The red radiating from his frame slammed into her, causing her to gasp. Her tongue darted out, unconsciously, licking lips suddenly gone dry. *Has it gotten hot in here?*

She lay there, reclined upon the bed, unmoving as he sat up from his heels with the intention of moving closer. The washcloth fell forgotten from his hand to splash softly into the basin. Her fingers tightened upon the bedspread, caught in his predatory gaze, her body immobile as he crawled up the bed towards her.

"Marshal?" she whimpered, unused to the feelings coursing through her.

"Lindsey," he corrected, his voice barely above a whisper. He settled himself beside her, one hand sliding up her bare leg, then higher still. His head leaned down, intent on ravishing her lips.

There was a knock at the door, followed by a, "Marshal, I have your supper here."

Lindsey dropped his chin to his chest, eyes closing in frustration while he cursed under his breath at the interruption. He silently counted to ten, willing himself back under control. It wasn't enough and he continued on to twenty. Still didn't help, but he leaned away from Tara and opened his eyes to see her staring up at him.

He groaned at the sight, her eyes pleading, the tension in her body palpable. Just begging to be kissed. And he did. Swooping down to claim her lips in a harsh kiss, his hand sliding around to the back of her neck to hold her in place. She gasped and his tongue stole inside to mate with hers. Broad, sweeping strokes that let her know how he felt, showed her the effect she was having on him. He could feel his control slipping, their kiss quickly escalating into something more.

Another knock sounded and he broke away, panting heavily. He rolled to the side and sat up, leaving Tara in much the same condition on the bed. He gained his feet, shouting out a terse, "Come in."

The door opened, and Timmy walked in bearing a plate. Behind him was a girl, perhaps a year younger, carrying another.

"Just set them on the table," Lindsey told the pair. He pulled out a few more coins. "For dinner, and split what's left with your friend," he told the boy, handing over the silver.

"Yessir, Marshal. Come one, Gilly. Let's go!" The girl followed him out of the room, their eyes round as saucers, eyeing the money the boy held in his palm.

When they'd gone, Lindsey shut the door and locked it. Only then did he set about removing his gunbelt and vest; he looped the twin Colts over the bedpost within easy reach and dropped his vest on the chair. He returned to the bed, his hand reaching down to help Tara sit up. Then he leaned over and lifted her into his arms.

"Marshal!"

"Lindsey," he reminded her yet again.

"Lindsey. P-put me down," she told him. "I can still walk."

"Not on those feet, you can't. I'm not gonna run the risk of you getting an infection. Now, I'm gonna set you down, keep your feet off the floor."

Tara nodded helplessly, giving in gracefully. She felt herself lowered onto the chair, and dutifully did like he asked, though she was sure she looked ridiculous. He sat down next to her and before she had a chance to object, pulled her feet up onto his lap. The move forced her to turn and face him. It was either that, or end up sprawled on the floor. At least he wasn't looking at her, but rather at the plate on the table in front of him.

"Eat your dinner," he told her, picking up his fork and knife and cutting into the steak. Tara sighed, angling her plate so that she could reach it a bit easier and did like he asked.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter 6

Tara toyed with the food on her plate. Her stomach was in knots, and she'd only taken a handful of bites before she finally pushed the plate away in disgust. Lindsey had yet to release her feet from his lap, so she was forced to continue looking his way. Not the most comfortable of positions, but she couldn't fault the view.

He'd stopped eating for a moment when she'd shoved her dinner aside, his brows arched in surprise, looking like he'd been about to say something. Her back had stiffened in preparation of a comeback. But then he turned back to his own plate, continuing to demolish his steak with precise movements. Cut. Spear. Lift. Bite. Over and over, until the huge slab of meat disappeared. What amazed her even more was that the heaping mound of mashed potatoes and vegetables weren't spared either. Lindsey wasn't an overly large man, his hardened attitude and the authority of his position as Marshal, Tara figured, was what gave the impression that he was. And yet, he ate like a man easily twice his size.

She wondered where he put it all, because as her eyes raked over his body, she could tell there wasn't an ounce of fat on him. Her cheeks pinkened at her bold assessment, but what surprised her even more was that she didn't force herself to look away. Just continued to watch him while he ate, noting how his jaw worked while he chewed. The way his lips wrapped around his fork, slowly drawing the food into his mouth.

She was mesmerized. Entranced.

Goddess, he was beautiful.

He wore his hair longer than most; at least to Tara, it was long, the front bangs covering his eyes whenever he happened to lean forward. Eyes she knew for a fact were almost the exact same shade as hers. Wounded eyes. Again, not unlike her own. But beneath the pain, there was a steely resolve burning brightly within their depths. When he'd

knelt beside her after killing the man that had been manhandling her, she'd seen a glimpse of it. Right before he'd masked it. She'd witnessed it again when he got a good look at the damage done to her feet. It was that look that had cowed her there upon the bed, her body shaking as her mind was sent hurtling back in time, back to when her father and brother had used whatever means they thought up to keep her in line.

After a time, she focused on his lips, and her thoughts turned to the kiss they'd shared earlier. She could feel her cheeks flame anew at her wantonness, but it did nothing to deter her from wanting to experience it again. His lean body pressed flush against her own, fingers twining in her hair while he ravaged her mouth, tongue plundering at will, coaxing her from a tentative response into a passion that matched his own. The knock on the door from the child standing outside with their dinner ignored as both were swept away by its intensity.

The second knock had been like a jolt of cold water to their overheated flesh. The throbbing between her legs caused her to pant heavily, and she felt shame that she'd wanted the boy gone. Because she wanted Lindsey settled back on top of her, his hard angles pressing into her softer curves, his hands and mouth making her feel things she'd never felt before. Things she had no right feeling.

So far gone in her reverie, Tara failed to notice Lindsey push back his plate, his gaze swinging round to hers. Failed to miss how his eyes darkened as they took in her flushed features, the way her eyes lay at half-mast, lending an exotic air about her. Failed to notice how her feet pressed intimately against his instant erection.

Lindsey was on his feet with Tara's legs wrapped around his hips before the thought to protest him carrying her even entered her mind. He nuzzled her neck, drawing reluctant moans from her parted lips, as he strode quickly across the room and back to her bed. Laying her back upon the mattress, he followed in a seamless motion to lie on top of her, moaning with pleasure when her breasts crushed against his chest, hardened nipples digging into his skin practically searing him through their clothes. His cock nestled in the junction of her thighs, and he couldn't help thrusting slightly against her. Doing it again when her body responded instinctively, her supple legs wrapping around his waist and drawing him closer. His mouth attacked her lips, his tongue renewing its acquaintance with the interior of her mouth, sliding in and out, mimicking the motion of his hips. When he could stand it no more, he tore his lips away to kiss a path along her jaw. Again his tongue darted out, leaving a wet trail the length of her neck down to her collarbone. His lips closed over the jutted bone a moment, delivering a whisper-soft kiss.

Then his track began anew, his destination, the twin mounds straining to topple over her tight corset.

Lindsey could feel his control start to slip. The prize of her plump flesh filling his mouth enough to make him take what he wanted with no regard for her feelings. Whether this, what they were doing, was what she wanted in truth, or if it was just something that was happening because she'd been swept away by lust. And if it was, so help him, he'd find the will to make himself stop.

Taking several deep breaths to calm himself, he finally lifted his head and took in her flushed face. Her hands had been gripping the sheets before, but now they were in his hair, massaging his scalp, directing him lower. Back towards her heaving bosom.

"Tara, look at me," he urged. He needed to see. "Tell me you want this. Come on, baby, open those gorgeous eyes and tell me you want me."

Tara struggled to do as he asked, finally opening her eyes to see Lindsey staring down at her. Her mind a haze of lust, their combined auras so bright it was difficult to keep her eyes open, she struggled to remember what it was he was asking of her, why he'd stopped the delicious magic he was working upon her body. Her legs tightened about his back, causing her mound to brush against him. She gasped as she felt a jolt go through her core at the contact, the sensation causing tiny ripples of pleasure to snake along her limbs. She wanted to feel more of the same, so she arched her hips, feeling the hard bulge in his jeans rasp over her clitoris.

"Fuck." The expletive was torn from Lindsey's throat as she rubbed against him. The tenuous hold on his control, again threatening to snap. "Tara," he practically begged. "Tell me, baby. Don't want to hurt you."

"Lindsey," she murmured huskily. "I... I... oh goddess..." Her voice trailed off, eyes rolling up as the pressure within her continued to build.

'She's gonna come just rubbing against me,' he thought in amazement. And there was no way he wasn't going to be buried inside her when that happened. His fingers fumbled with her skirts until they encountered...

Oh God.

Had he said that aloud? He chanced a glance at Tara just to be sure, but figured he hadn't because her expression hadn't changed. His fingers brushed against the damp curls covering her sex and he was rewarded with a husky moan that went straight to his dick. Smiling wide when she gasped his name. He slid a finger inside and marveled at her tightness; he pumped it in and out, all the while gritting his teeth because he wanted it to be his cock that was buried inside her. Stretching her. Slowly, Lindsey introduced additional fingers when he felt her body could handle it. While he

continued to pleasure her with his hand, he used the other to work the fastenings of his jeans. Shoving at them frantically until his cock sprang free.

His breath hissed out at the sudden release of pressure and he returned his attention to bringing off the writhing woman beneath him. Angling his fingers until he'd found her sweet spot and sending her body hurtling over the edge. He groaned as her inner walls began contacting around his fingers, and he hurriedly removed them, pausing for just a moment to coat his length with her juices. Then he positioned himself at her opening and slid home.

He was right, she'd been a virgin. Her body stiffened at his invasion, but she was too far gone in her orgasm to worry about the slight discomfort his penetration had caused. By the time the last tremor had seen its course, the pain was just a memory, and the steady rhythm he'd set had her clinging to him, once more caught up in the dance.

Lindsey was with her for her second climax. Braced on his hands above her, his body arched back, driving his pelvis into hers. His eyes closed, and the look on his face was one of ecstasy as he emptied himself inside her.

Her name, a whispered prayer from his parted lips.

~*~*~*~*~

Lindsey could have kicked himself.

He'd been so caught up in the moment, he'd not even bothered to remove his pants. Or her clothes.

Cursing himself for being all kinds of fools, he reluctantly slid free and knelt between her thighs to pull his pants back up, though he didn't bother with buttoning them. Tara's face was turned away, her eyes closed, but he managed to catch her wince of pain. Saw the way her body stiffened slightly.

"Be right back, baby," he murmured and climbed from the bed. He strode purposefully from the room, careful to make sure the door clicked shut, and hurried down the back stairs to retrieve a fresh basin of warm water and more clean towels.

When he arrived back at Tara's room, he could hear her crying softly and his eyes widened in sudden realization. Full of self-recriminations, and silently cursing himself yet again, he sloshed water over the rim of the basin as he rushed back to her side to reassure her.

“Tara? Baby, I’m here. I just went to get...” He broke off, holding up the ceramic basin in explanation. Not that she noticed, completely turned on her side and facing the wall as she was.

Lindsey set the basin on the ground near the bed and sat down next to her on the narrow mattress. His hand reached out to caress her arm, trying to get her to roll over onto her back and look at him. Thankfully, she followed his gentle prompts, though her face still remained turned away – like she was unable to bear the sight of him. He leaned away from her and retrieved one of the washcloths, dropping it into the basin. After wringing out the excess, he carefully raised the hem of her skirt and began gently washing away the dried blood on her thighs.

“What are you...?” she gasped, her eyes flying open. She stared in mortification at where his hand was slowly running the white cloth over her mound. “Oh goddess!” Her face flamed at the intimate act of him cleaning her.

“Lindsey...”

She drew his name out in a breathy tone, a mixture of need and embarrassment.

“Shhhh... How does this feel? I’m not hurting you, am I?” His eyes scanned her face for any signs of discomfort.

“A-awkward... Uh... n-no... d-doesn’t hurt... but... Really... I can...uhhh...” She tried to bring her legs together to get him to stop, but all it did was trap his hand between her legs. His knuckles banged against her clit and she moaned, and her eyes squeezed shut at the jolt of pleasure that lanced through her body.

“Relax, baby. Let me take care of you.”

He forced himself to keep still until she relaxed her legs, thereby freeing his hand. Only then did he finish cleaning her up, tossing the washcloth back into the basin when he was through.

“Time to get you out of these clothes.”

“B-b-but...” Tara couldn’t very well say that she didn’t know if she had something else to put on. “I-it’s ok... I’ll just wear this, i-if it’s all the same to you.”

Lindsey just smiled indulgently and helped her to sit up so that he could reach the fastenings of both her corset and her skirt.

The flimsy outfit seemed to fall away leaving her completely exposed to Lindsey’s gaze, and Tara hurriedly placed her arms over her breast in an attempt to cover herself.

Rational thought must have left her then, because she leaned back against the mattress when he told her to, then lifted her hips so that he could pull her skirts down and off her legs. His red hot aura forced her eyes closed, his heated gaze making her blush ten shades of red – all over her body, she was sure. Thankfully, he allowed her to pull the covers up to shield her nudity.

She felt him get up from the bed, heard his soft footsteps as he walked barefoot towards the door. It creaked open and she heard a slight thunk sound she couldn't identify, then another creak as the door was carefully shut.

The turn of the key and the clink it made as the lock slid home was unusually loud in the quiet room.

Behind closed eyelids, she could tell the room got a bit darker. More footsteps were heard as he neared the bed again. Her body stiffened. An unidentifiable, soft whoosh sound, another creak or two in the floorboards, and then Tara felt the bed dip.

In an instant, she knew what that last sound was. As Lindsey snuggled next to her, wrapping one arm about her waist and the other beneath her neck, then draping a bare leg over hers, she realized that it had been his pants sliding down his legs that she'd heard. It was a good thing it was dark inside the room; as it was, Tara felt that her blush was bright enough to light the small space. But she was too scared to open her eyes to see if it was true.

"Relax, Tara. I just want to hold you," he murmured in her ear, feeling her body tense next to his.

She shivered, undone by the raspiness of his voice, how his breath teased unknown nerve endings along the outer rim of her ear.

"I've n-never done this b-before," she told him honestly. "Slept with someone..."

"I know, baby. It's alright. I'm not going to do anything. Just gonna hold you. I don't feel comfortable leaving you here by yourself. We're just gonna go to sleep, okay?"

Tara nodded, eyes still firmly shut. She tried to let her mind drift, to enable her body to relax, but it wasn't working. The Marshal was too much of a distraction for her peace of mind. Never mind the bulge pressed against her hip.

It was much, *much* later before she finally drifted off to sleep.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Pleasure unlike anything she'd ever felt before pulled her from a dreamless sleep. Tara opened her eyes to see the Marshal's head buried between her legs, his tongue and lips doing things to her that she'd not thought possible. A blush stole across her body even as she gave herself over to the sensation. Modesty and embarrassment giving way in the face of the near bliss of his sinful touch. Her fingers found purchase in his hair, holding him in place.

"Lindsey."

His name was a husky moan torn from her lips, drawn out slowly as he slid two fingers between her folds and thrust them deep inside her pussy. Her heels dug into the mattress, and she pushed her hips up against his face, trying to drive them even deeper. His tongue flicked her clitoris in tandem to his hand's vigorous thrusts; blunt teeth alternately nibbled and sucked on the swollen bud, causing Tara to writhe beneath the onslaught.

After last night, her body now knew what to expect, and goddess, did she crave it. That final release that sent her hurtling out of her own body and into a plane of unknown origin, drifting weightlessly along in post-coital euphoria. A place where nobody could touch her, save the man that sent her there.

He angled his hand, rubbing it across some hidden spot, sending a thousand tremors racing along her limbs. She gasped; her eyes flew open, unconsciously drawn to where he was tonguing her expertly.

His eyes were closed, long lashes lying softly against his cheek. Beautiful, she couldn't help but think. His face was a study in concentration, so in tune to pleasuring her he'd not noticed her riveted gaze. There was something very erotic about watching a man getting you off – and actually enjoying doing so.

Another brush against that sensitive spot and her eyes fluttered shut once more; her fingers slipped free from his head to clutch frantically at the sheets. His movements were more frenzied now, Tara could feel herself stretch to accommodate another of his fingers. The attention to her clit nearly drove her wild, his tongue...

Goddess!

More.

Had she said that aloud?

Didn't matter.

All that mattered was him. She needed him.

She arching into his mouth again, trying to tell him without words what she wanted.

Him. Filling her until she didn't know where she ended and he began.

"Lindsey."

A gentle plea.

Her eyes opened. Locked with blue burning with need. Silently conveying... unable to speak the words.

Maybe with time they'd come.

For now, he seemed to understand.

His fingers slid free. She watched as he paused to lick each one clean, another task he didn't seem to mind at all. Then he was gliding up her body, positioning himself at her opening, and sliding home.

~*~*~*~*~

Lying there, Tara thought that she'd never want to move again. She was surprised that no one had come up to her room to fetch her downstairs. Especially when the small clock on the dresser told her that it was getting close to lunchtime. She felt wicked for thinking it, but spending the morning in bed with Lindsey had been fantastic; she couldn't have asked for a better lover.

A vision of Willow popped into her head, and she resolutely pushed it aside. Anya had as much as told her that there'd be no going back, that the two of them were now stuck here.

And she decided to embrace this new future wholeheartedly.

Her eyes closed, and she could practically see it unfold before her.

The Marshal would spend his days keeping the peace. She'd play waitress down in the salon. Or... maybe she could open a more respectable diner, one that catered to entire families. Serving food and drinks yesterday hadn't been all that bad, her attire not withstanding; most of the men had been rather nice once Lindsey had set them straight. Their nights could be spent doing much the same as what they were doing now. Maybe in a few years they could have a baby...

"A baby!"

Tara sat up abruptly, clutching the sheet to her chest, her mind racing with the sudden implications of their recent activities.

They hadn't used any kind of birth control. For all she knew, they hadn't even *invented* it yet.

~*~*~*~*~

Lindsey had been dozing, his hand idly stroking Tara's bare arm, debating about whether or not he should throw on some clothes and get them something to eat when Tara shouted.

Baby?

Ok, not quite what he'd been expecting lying there with her wrapped in his arms. But now that she'd mentioned it – more like shouted it in horror – he could see the need for some type of discussion on the subject.

He sat up next to her, wincing slightly when she stiffened at his touch.

"Tara? What's wrong?"

"I-I... y-you... we... and then..." Her cheeks grew red as she stuttered around the words she was trying to get out. She stopped, drew in a deep calming breath and shook her head. "I'm sorry. It's nothing... r-really."

She sighed then, long and heartfelt, trying to get her emotions under control but failing miserably. Her head drooped and she stared at her hands that clutched the sheet to her chest, trying to fight back the tears she could already feel forming in her eyes.

"Tara. Talk to me. I can't help you if you don't tell me what's wrong."

"Wrong?" She gave a depreciating laugh. "What could be wrong? I-I've just had... done... and I..."

"You what?" he asked her gently.

"I-I don't belong here. It w-was... an accident. Only... only now I can't go back... and... and now you..." She quieted, her eyes lifted beseechingly to his. "You can't help me, Lindsey..."

"Sure I can. You just have to tell me what the problem is."

Unable to bear his earnest expression, she looked away, her gaze unfocused on the wall in front of her.

“I can’t... you’re part of the problem,” she whispered barely loud enough for him to hear.

She started crying then. With her knees tucked to her chest, her head resting on top of them, tears slipped silently down her cheeks.

Watching her, seeing her silent torment, was worse than before, when she’d sobbed against his chest.

“Tara, I won’t let anything happen to you. You’ve got to believe me.”

Lindsey tried to draw her close, but her body was stiff. Unyielding. Unwilling, or unable, to be comforted. He didn’t know what to do, what to say, to draw her out of her shell. But seeing her like that was doing things to him.

Suddenly recalling her outburst, he tried to see if that was what was worrying her.

“Tara...” One hand cupped her jaw and coaxed her to look at him. “Look at me, baby.”

She finally did, her soulful blue eyes cutting him to the quick. She looked so lost, more so than before.

“Would it be such a bad thing?” he asked. “Having my baby? I’d take care of you. Both of you.”

“Really?”

Her voice was so small, so unsure. Afraid to hope. To believe in his word. Having been burned one too many times by the men in her life had made her distrust men in general.

“Yes, really.”

Lindsey lowered his head and brushed his lips across hers. Relief flooded through him when she responded, hesitantly at first, then with increasing ardor. Until they fell back against the mattress, once more caught up in the dance.

~*~*~*~*~

Lunchtime came and went, and it was close to dusk before Lindsey roused himself enough to check in at the jailhouse.

“Stay here until I get back. I’ll order us up some supper while I’m gone.”

Tara nodded and watched him leave. Once the door clicked shut, she scrambled from beneath the covers and frantically set about cleaning up the place. A bath was at the top of her list, but she had to settle for using the basin of water and washing up with one of the washrags that had been left with it.

A quick look through the dresser drawers revealed more dresses like what she’d worn yesterday – until she reached the bottom one. The nightgown that lay within was something her grandmother probably would have worn. The white gown was long-sleeved, and when she slipped it over her head, the bottom swished around her ankles. Not exactly what she wanted to greet Lindsey in, but it was much better than the revealing corset-type numbers filling the other drawers to overflowing.

Feeling slightly better now that she was garbed somewhat appropriately, she wandered about the room, picking up discarded items and setting things to rights. She glanced out the window once she was finished; the wooden boardwalks that lined either side of the dirt street were milling with people – respectable men and women slowly making their way home, unattached men seeking out the creature comforts that could be had within the saloon. Even now, the noise from downstairs was getting louder as the place began to fill.

With nothing left to do, Tara settled in at the small table and waited.

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Tara wasn’t quite sure how long she’d been sitting there, having dozed for a bit while waiting for Lindsey to return. A sharp knock sounded at the door, jarring her from her daydream, then the door opened to reveal the Marshal.

He had something in his hands, a box of some sort. His eyes were alight with a mixture of excitement and something else. Something she couldn’t quite place. Even his aura was difficult to decipher.

He’d changed his clothes. His lawman attire had been replaced with a nice pair of slacks and a button-down shirt. The scruff he’d been sporting was gone, and his wet hair was combed back from his face.

He was dressed up and she was sitting there in her nightgown.

Tara watched as he walked inside and placed the box down on the table, gesturing for her to open it.

She rose to her feet somewhat cautiously, not quite sure how she felt about him buying her things – not that she could really refuse, or that she even wanted to. Before she could talk herself out of it, Tara lifted the lid and started at the dress lying amongst the tissue paper.

“Put it on,” he urged.

Tara reached out and gently fingered the blue cotton dress.

“You bought me a dress.”

“Yes. There’s other... uh... stuff, underneath. Undergarments and such.”

Tara looked away from the box and glanced up at Lindsey.

“Hurry. I’ve got a surprise. And I told him I’d be back in twenty minutes... half of which have already gone by.”

Lindsey grabbed the dress out of the box and held it up, shaking it enticingly. He really hoped she’d go along with what he had planned. Not that he could blame her if she didn’t. But he’d told her he was going to look after her, and he meant it.

Tara looked away and reached for the undergarments lying in the bottom of the box. They were white, very soft to the touch. Probably expensive, given the material that was used.

She drew the nightgown over her head, not bothering to cover her nudity; he’d touched every inch of her and then some. It still didn’t keep her face from flaming, however, and she didn’t stop blushing even after the gown had been settled over her frame.

“Think you’ll be able to put these on?”

Lindsey held up a pair of low-heeled, tan ankle boots for her inspection; Tara just nodded.

~*~*~*~*~

“Where are we going?” she asked.

Lindsey had steered her towards the back staircase that led to the outside, avoiding the saloon and its boisterous occupants. Tara eyed the town somewhat warily as they walked. A few people still milled about in the early evening; some called out a friendly greeting to the Marshal when they passed, tipping their hats to Tara respectfully – to which she offered a polite, if somewhat soft, reply.

It was her first opportunity at seeing where she'd spend the rest of her life, and Tara had to admit that the town of Devil's Paradise wasn't as bad as she'd come to expect.

"Not far. We're almost there," he replied somewhat evasively.

Spying the church in the distance, Tara frowned. It didn't dawn on her what he intended until he'd led her inside and towards the altar – to where a man stood waiting for them. Halfway up the aisle, she froze, dragging Lindsey to a halt.

"Lindsey?"

Her eyes were glued to the well-dressed older gentleman holding a book in his hand, and how he was smiling indulgently at them.

"Tara?"

Tara tore her gaze away from the priest and stared up at Lindsey in confusion.

"What... why –?"

"Marry me, Tara."

"Marry you?"

"I told you I'd look after you."

"But..."

"I've got a place... not far from here. Comes with being the Marshal. It's not much. Needs a woman's touch. But, we can make a go of it..."

"But..."

"We can go there tonight," he added in a rush. "Right after the ceremony. You don't have to stay at the saloon anymore..."

"You don't love me, Lindsey." Her voice was low, but no less earnest. She didn't look at him, instead staring at her feet.

Lindsey stepped closer to her; he tucked a strand of hair behind Tara's ear then tipped her chin up so that he could look her in the face.

"I care about you, Tara. Call me crazy, but when you walked into the saloon yesterday... and then you sang? You had me, baby."

He watched her eyes tear up and he leaned down and pressed a soft kiss to her lips.

“Show me, Tara. Show me how to love.”

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Chapter 8

One month later...

Tara sat back on her heels, surveying the work she'd done in her garden. Now midway into the month of December, it had gotten decidedly colder, and she wanted to make sure that her seedlings would survive the harsh elements that the Texas winter might bring.

She glanced up at the sky and noticed the position of the sun; Lindsey would be home in a little while. It had become a habit of his to swing by their home during lunch to visit with her before returning to the jailhouse. Especially since—

Shaking her head to dispel the unpleasant thoughts threatening to take hold, Tara stood and made her way around to the front of the house.

The cemetery stood at the far end of Devil's Paradise, in the opposite direction from the jailhouse, on a hill overlooking the town. A makeshift fence surrounded the tombstones and Tara unlatched the gate and slipped inside, her destination that of the smaller one located in the back corner of the lot.

Her features settled in a slight grimace at the remembered battle she'd had to endure in order to get Darla buried there. In the end, the town had catered to her wishes, though grudgingly - thanks in part to the ranchers that lived in and around the area. The thoughts of a whore occupying what the local townsfolk had thought of as belonging to “good, God-fearing folk” hadn't sat well with a lot of them.

It had only been the last week or so that she herself was no longer privy to the snubs from a few of the “respectable” women. Not that Tara had minded so much. She wasn't about to give up socializing with Anya just because she was now married to the Marshal and her friend was still working at the saloon.

The townsfolk had eventually realized that she was too giving a person to slight someone for the way in which they chose to live their life. That she had a kind word for everyone that crossed her path.

Even for one that had tried to have her killed.

She knelt down before the grave of the former vampiress and placed a handful of wildflowers in front of the marker.

*Darla
May you know peace*

Tara didn't linger. She'd forgiven the woman for what she'd tried to do; it didn't, however, mean that she'd ever forget.

She still had nightmares, waking with a scream stuck in her throat – though they weren't as frequent anymore. The sensation of being tied up, her attacker wielding a knife before her face then placing it against her throat, nicking her skin, prominent in her mind. His sinister voice, the things he whispered with such delight. How he was going to take great pleasure in her pain, causing her to whimper piteously.

She could still see the looming face of Sam Shockwell as he stood before her, his aura a murky gray, devoid of anything good. He'd sworn he'd have revenge on the Marshal for killing his son... by doing the same to his wife.

Another shudder rushed through her body as she knelt before Darla's grave.

Tara was still working on her fear of being cooped up inside dark places; it had been dark in the cellar in which she'd been kept. The only thing she'd been able to see was occasional glimpses of his face, twisted evilly by pain and grief and a desire for retribution. That and the gleam of steel as he'd wield the blade in front of the candles.

She and Lindsey had burned candles all through the night in their bedroom that first week.

Sometimes she'd wake, screaming Lindsey's name, struggling against her captor, until she realized that it was *he* that held her. He that was whispering soothing words in her ear.

"It's just a dream, baby. Shhh...."

He'd make the nightmares go away the only way he knew how. Moving within her until she couldn't think but for the sensation of him filling her.

No, she didn't think she'd ever forget being kidnapped and held as bait for the Marshal.

"Why are you doing this?" Tara asked, tears falling freely down her cheeks as she struggled against the bonds holding her against the wooden chair.

She watched as the woman laughed, and Tara quailed beneath the pure menace of the sound. Shrunk in on herself so that she wasn't tainted by the poison leaking from every pore and enveloping the room.

Tara was patted on the cheek, then the blonde's face was there, right before hers.

"Because I'm evil, honey," she'd murmured. "And Lindsey was mine. My toy to play with and..."

Tara could feel the woman's anger rising and she squirmed in her chair, trying to escape the other's touch. Silently praying to the Goddess Soteria for protection.

"Just because I'm no longer a vampire and am stuck in this body..." Darla broke off and stormed across the cellar. She whirled suddenly, pinning the weeping girl with her eyes.

"My name is Darla. Favored childe of the Master of the Order of Aurelius." She sneered. "Just because I'm locked in this human body... in this farce... I won't succumb to this mortal's soul. Wolfram & Hart think they can bend me to their will...do their bidding. As if I would lower myself to do their dirty work. Never!"

The door burst open just as gunfire erupted from above. Sam's eyes were wild as he took in the scene, then strode forward, eyes gleaming with deadly intent.

Tara knew right then that she was going to die.

Darla had been shot in the crossfire once Lindsey had arrived. He'd managed to shoot her male tormentor as well, but not before the man had let loose with his knife. Lindsey had been able to free her from her bindings before collapsing onto the ground in front of her.

She'd had to make a decision then. Darla or Lindsey. She could see both of their life's forces slowly fading.

Tara had chosen Lindsey.

Cradling his head in her lap, she ripped the dagger from his stomach, her tongue tripping over the healing spell before she could question whether or not it was wise. His blue eyes clouded with pain and confusion as his wounds healed almost instantly. It was the first time she'd not thought of the consequences of her actions when using magic.

He had lived and Darla had died.

In the aftermath of Sam Shockwell's death, other local ranchers had come forward, thanking the Marshal for finally putting an end to the man's tyranny about the area. They'd told Lindsey to take the dead man's ranch as payment, but Tara had shaken her head, more than pleased with the place in town she had. Besides which, the place reeked of lingering evil.

Lindsey had auctioned the ranch and livestock off and used the money to help benefit the town of Devil's Paradise.

The men who'd been working the ranch – those not in cahoots with the corrupt rancher – had been absorbed into other ranches in the area, or had left town to seek employment elsewhere. Those that had been in league with Sam had either died in the resulting gun battle, had hightailed it out of town at the threat of the Marshal's wrath, or had been locked up in jail and sentenced to hang.

The undertaker had been a busy man the following week.

Tara stood up and brushed the dirt off her skirts. She turned and left the cemetery, stopping suddenly at seeing Lindsey standing just outside the gate.

Finally, she walked over and murmured her thanks as he held the gate open for her.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"I came home to the smell of a wonderful stew cooking on the stove and no wife. Figured you'd come up here."

"How did –?"

Lindsey wrapped his arm around Tara's shoulder and drew her to his side. Together they walked down the hill towards home.

"Because that's just the type of person you are, baby. Kind to a fault."

He brushed his lips against her temple.

"It's why I love you."

Tara stopped and Lindsey stopped too.

"You love me?"

Her head lifted, and even without him confirming it, she knew. Red, light blue, a bit of green and yellow... and in the middle of it all... a soft pink. He loved her.

"You know I do. How could I not love someone as caring as you? Someone who could see the man I always wanted to be. You see it don't you? Tell me you see it."

Tara stroked his cheek, nodding. Tears gathered in her eyes, but she didn't care. This time she was happy; they were tears of joy.

"I love you, Lindsey!"

She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. Horses trotted by on either side of them as they stood in the middle of the dirt road kissing - Tara was oblivious.

Her husband had finally told her he loved her, and she meant to show her appreciation, and her love.

It was Lindsey that drew away. But Tara didn't mind.

Because he'd taken hold of her hand and was tugging her after him. Back towards their house.

~*~*~*~*~

"I can't believe it's the middle of the afternoon and we're lying in bed."

"We're married. We're allowed."

Lindsey was propped up on his elbow, looking down at her.

"I should be up making something for dinner."

"We've got leftover stew."

"Yes, but -"

"Beside, I'd rather make love to my wife than have her fix me something to eat."

Tara wasn't going to argue with him. She slipped her arm around his neck and drew him down on top of her.

~*~*~*~*~

"Merry Christmas, Anya," Tara greeted upon opening the door.

"Yes, yes... here's your present. Where's mine?"

Tara laughed and took the offered gift, gesturing her friend inside. "Come in, Anya. Your present is under the tree, right where it's supposed to be. Lindsey just stepped out back to get more wood for the fire."

"Well, I can't stay too long... I've got customers waiting for me..."

"Surely you can stay for lunch? You've got to eat."

"Yes... I suppose so. It is free after all... it is free, right? You offered..."

"Yes, silly..." Tara laughed and helped Anya remove her coat and hang it on the rack. "Come get warm by the fire. Can I get you something to drink? I've got the kettle on for tea..."

"Tea will be fine," Anya replied and seated herself in one of the chairs by the fireplace.

Tara walked into the kitchen just as the side door was flung open and Lindsey stepped inside, his arms laden with firewood. She rushed to shut the door behind him, effectively closing off the cold air blowing into the room.

Lindsey shook his head and displaced the flakes of snow that had settled on top of his hair, causing Tara to squeal.

"Lindsey!"

He turned and grinned, blue eyes alight with mischief.

Tara backed away, her hands held up in front of her.

"Uh uh... Go..." she pointed towards the fireplace.

"Anya isn't here yet..." he coaxed, ready to drop the logs on the ground and rush towards his wife.

"She is too," Anya's voice carried from the other room. "And you're not allowed to have orgasms if I can't."

Lindsey looked skyward and shook his head, not even trying to hide the blush staining his cheeks. The woman was more outspoken than some of the fiercest demons he'd come across in his tenure at Wolfram & Hart; he should know, having been subject to the girl's blunt nature on more than one occasion.

How she and his wife were friends was anyone's guess - especially given the extremes in their two personalities.

He sighed and walked out of the room and into their living room. Anya was sitting there with a smug expression on her face.

"I'll give you five dollars if you leave before dessert," he muttered.

Anya wasn't offended; if anything, she seriously contemplated his offer. Was actually set to agree to his terms when Tara came in and smacked her husband on the arm.

"Lindsey!"

Her face was red in embarrassment, and she'd nearly upset the teacup on the saucer she held out to her friend.

"Don't hit him. He has a point. It's too cold to visit with friends on a day like today."

"It's Christmas," Tara protested.

"I suppose you have a point. I guess I can wait a little while... open presents first..." Anya allowed. "But, I'm still leaving before dessert." She pinned Lindsey with an assessing look. "And I'll take that five dollars."

"Of course you will," Lindsey smirked.

It was the best five dollars he ever spent.

~*~*~*~*~

Tara lay tucked against Lindsey's side, one leg draped over his, her head pillowed on his shoulder. Anya had left several hours ago - to see to the single men of Devil's Paradise, she'd said.

Lindsey had offered to walk back with her, but she'd assured them both that she would be fine. The sun was now shining, though there were clouds coming in from the west; it was going to snow again soon.

He'd shuffled Tara off to bed and gone outside to stock up on more firewood, saving himself the trouble of having to do it tomorrow morning.

While he was gone, Tara had slipped into the Christmas present Anya had given her, the one Lindsey hadn't seen yet. Then she'd climbed on top of the covers and reclined back against the pillows, waiting for her husband's return.

Now, nearly breathless in the aftermath of Lindsey's appreciation of her surprise, an appreciation that had seemed to go on for hours, she debated telling him about her second surprise.

"Lindsey?"

"Yeah, baby?"

"Did you mean what you said before... about —"

Before she could get the words out, she found herself flat on her back, Lindsey looming over her. His face was a mixture of hope, disbelief, and happiness.

"Are you sure?"

Tara nodded, smiling tremulously.

"I-It's early yet... but... I can tell. I can feel my body changing."

He placed his hand on her stomach, and the smile that transformed his features brought tears to Tara's eyes. She watched, amused, as he hunkered down so that his face was level with her abdomen.

"Hey, little one. It's your dad. You be a good baby and don't give your mom any trouble in there."

Tara giggled.

Then she gasped and jack-knifed to a sitting position. Her eyes rolled into the back of her head and she fell back onto the pillows, her world going black.

Lindsey managed to gasp her name before he slumped forward onto the mattress.

~*~*~*~*~

Sunnydale
Present time

"Halfrek... I beseech thee... in the name of all women scorned... Come before me," Giles chanted the summoning spell for the vengeance demon.

It had taken a week for the Scoobies to discover what had happened to Tara and Anya, not realizing that both of their disappearances were related at first. It had only been the

mention of that dreaded “wish” word by someone in the group that Giles had put two and two together. Another six weeks had gone by before they’d come up with a name.

Halfrek.

The vengeance demon appeared suddenly in their midst, and Giles cringed at the aggravated expression on her face.

“What do you want?” she demanded, her gaze boring into the watcher’s. “And why are you using that spell to summon me? Only Anyank—”

Giles honed in on the demon’s slip.

“So, you *do* know Anya?”

“Sure I do... Anyanka and I go way back. Why?”

“No reason... just... she’s missing and we were wondering if you might know what happened to her,” he lied, trying to keep the demon’s attention on him, and not on Buffy who was just seconds from snatching the source of Halfrek’s power from around her neck – a blue pendent with traces of red-gold flecks inside.

A second later, Buffy’s arm was around Halfrek’s throat, and she had ripped the necklace off before the demon could react. Crushing the blue stone in her fist caused a ripple of magic to shoot out from the pendant.

When the dust settled, Tara was lying on the ground at Buffy’s feet, unconscious.

~*~*~*~*~

Los Angeles
Present time

The pounding on a door woke him. He rubbed wearily at his eyes and sat up. His sweeping gaze took in the plush furnishings of his office at Wolfram & Hart and he cringed.

“Come in!” he barked out when another round of knocking commenced on his door.

Lilah poked her head inside his office.

“Oh, good. You’re back. I guess the Slayer and her watcher got things squared away then. Let me bring you up to speed on what you missed while—”

“Save it.”

“Excuse me?” Lilah arched one delicate brow and crossed her arms in front of her chest.

“I said save it. I don’t care.” He got up and went to his desk. His temples were throbbing with the mother of all headaches, and his hands dug frantically in his desk drawer for a blank piece of paper. His hand flew across the sheet as he wrote his formal letter of resignation, then he stood and walked from behind his desk and handed it to Lilah.

“See that the Senior Partners get this, won’t you?”

“But –”

“I quit. I’m not cut out for this...”

“You *can’t* quit.”

Lindsey paused at the door and turned around.

“Sure I can. And, as... *shrewd* as you are, you’ll spin my resignation to your advantage... Hell, I was the only one that stood in your way of becoming one of the next Vice Presidents in the company. Think of it as eliminating the competition...”

He walked out of his office and down the short hallway leading to the elevators.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Chapter 9

Lindsey knew he was taking a chance going to Angel’s place, but the ensouled vampire was friendly with the Slayer and her friends in Sunnydale, and he needed to pump him for information before he made the trip to the Hellmouth. To Tara.

He also needed to tell Angel about Darla.

He’d barely made it through the front doors when he was confronted by the wanna-be actress, Cordelia Chase.

“What are *you* doing here?” Disdain was evident in her tone, but he’d come across sharper tongues than hers and ended up on top. An image of the outspoken Anya came to mind and the corner of his lips turned upward in the hint of a smile.

“I came to see Angel.”

“Not the smartest move you’ve ever made,” said vampire growled at his back.

“Neat trick,” Lindsey managed to gasp out before he was swung around and shoved up against a wall and held several inches off the ground by a cool hand at his throat.

“What are you doing here, Lindsey? And where’s Darla?”

Lindsey knew Angel wouldn’t kill him; it didn’t mean that he wouldn’t be subject to his intimidation tactics. Sure enough, just before he felt himself suffer the serious side effects the lack of oxygen were causing him, he was lowered to the ground and the hand about his throat loosened a smidgeon.

“I need help,” he began.

“You’re not exactly helpless, Lindsey.” Angel’s tone was derisive.

“I quit my job.”

“And, what? You think that means anything to me? You’ve played this card before... then went back to Wolfram & Hart when things got rough.”

“Things are different now... I... I met a girl.”

“A girl? What about Darla? I seem to remember you being hot for my sire.”

“We—” Lindsey broke off and looked around the room, noting the curious faces of both Cordelia and Wesley. “Look... is there somewhere we can go? Someplace private?”

Angel’s eyes narrowed on the lawyer. Finally, he nodded and gestured towards his office.

Lindsey turned on his heel and walked off, missing the look the vampire gave his colleagues.

~*~*~*~*~

“Darla’s dead.”

Angel surged out of his chair, sending it careening into the wall behind him. Lindsey stared up at his vamped features, at how he was just seconds away from hurtling the desk and killing him without remorse and rushed to add, “We were cursed by a vengeance demon. Or, as Anya liked to call her... a justice demon.”

“Anya? Who the hell is Anya?” Angel growled.

"She's a former vengeance demon that lives in Sunnydale." He sighed, long and heartfelt. "Sit down, Angel... this may take a while..."

Angel shrugged off his demon and righted his chair. He sat, his eyes boring into the evil lawyer across from him. An evil lawyer, that Angel suddenly realized, who was –

"Who is she? This girl you love?" he asked.

"Her name is Tara. Tara McDonald. My wife."

"Your *wife*?"

"As I said... it's a long story. It started with a wish... two wishes, in fact. And a demon named Halfrek."

"Halfrek... hmmm... doesn't ring any bells," Angel commented.

"It wouldn't. She doesn't run in your circles. She caters mainly to wronged women, whereas you used to..."

"Wrong the women. What's this got to do with you?"

"I'm not sure really. I mean, I know why Tara and Anya were sent there, but not myself and Darla. It wasn't like Darla had been wronged..."

"Darla was with you? Where?"

Lindsey ignored him and held up his hand. The one that had been cut off by the vampire seated in front of him. Flexing the fingers that hadn't disappeared upon his return to the present.

"I noticed it right away, my hand being back. It just... well, after everything else..." he said. "I figured it was the Senior Partners having a bit of fun, giving it back to me." He held out his hand towards Angel. "See... no scars, either."

Angel grunted, but Lindsey didn't notice. His eyes had taken on a faraway look. His mind lost in the retelling.

"She wanted to be far away. Her soul... Darla... she couldn't deal with it. I was holding her, trying to comfort her. She said the words, then *poof*. I woke up in Devil's Paradise. Darla was a prostitute working in a saloon called The Morning Star. I was the Marshal." He laughed; it was a hollow sound. "I thought it was a sick joke. A punishment from Holland because I'd let Darla cloud my judgment."

Lindsey lifted haunted eyes to the vampire.

"Lawyer to lawman..." he murmured. He laughed again. Again it was hollow.

He told his story then. Of how he'd come across Darla. How she'd rebuffed his attempts to help her. Meeting Tara.

He left nothing out.

Even the fact that he was going to be a father.

At some point, Angel got up and retrieved a bottle of whiskey from the shelf behind his desk, pouring two full glasses of the amber liquid and handing one to Lindsey.

"I think she did it to prove to herself that she didn't have to be burdened by her soul," Lindsey explained Darla's actions in abducting Tara. "I wasn't aiming for her, Angel. I swear I wasn't. She just... it was like she ran *towards* my fire, rather than away."

Angel nodded, his shoulders slumping wearily.

"Tara... she saw to it that Darla was buried properly." Lindsey smiled then in memory of his wife's determination. He looked up and saw Angel staring at him with something akin to shock.

"She's amazing, I know. Kindest, gentlest person you'll ever meet. Not sure what she ever saw in me," he added as an afterthought.

Angel opened his mouth to offer some comment, but closed it without saying anything. He poured himself another drink and topped off Lindsey's and allowed him to continue.

"She went up to the town's cemetery once or twice a week. Made sure Darla always had fresh flowers. Didn't matter that Darla had been behind having her kidnapped. Tara... like I said... she was special. I've got to find her, Angel. I know she's friends with your Slayer."

"Buffy?"

"I never understood why someone so innocent would be working as a saloon girl. After I carried her out of that cellar... it took some time. But she told me. She said she'd been upset. That she'd nearly gotten the Slayer and her friends killed because she'd done some spell to make herself invisible to them. Her father had convinced her that she was a demon of some sort. And she'd done this spell so that her friends wouldn't see that

part of her. Only, it backfired. The Slayer and her friends were nearly killed before Tara lifted the spell. She ran out, made a wish... and presto... welcome to 1867."

He looked at Angel, trying to convey the depth of his emotions. Praying that the vampire could see that he'd changed. That she'd *helped* him change.

"I love her, Angel. She's... she's pregnant with my baby. I can't just leave her there... alone."

Angel could see the sincerity in the man's eyes and sighed.

"Come on."

Lindsey scrambled to his feet and followed the vampire out of his office.

"Cordelia, we'll be back."

"Back? Where are you going? And with the evil lawyer?"

"He's not evil."

"*Right...*" The sarcasm was evident in her tone.

"Cordelia..." Angel sighed, not wanting to get in a discussion – that he'd probably lose even though he was right – with the girl.

"Fine... but if you come back all '*Angelus*,' I'm *not* going to be happy," she grumbled and flounced off.

"Nice girl," Lindsey muttered.

"You get used to her."

~*~*~*~*~

Angel had misgivings about being in Sunnydale again. He'd not been to the Hellmouth since he and Buffy had had their disagreement about her current boyfriend, Riley.

Now he was back. And about to meddle in the lives of one of her friends.

"We'll stop by Buffy's place first. With it being Christmas, I doubt she'll be at the campus."

"Alright..."

The house on Revello Drive was awash with light when Angel pulled up to the curb. The Christmas tree gleamed with multi-colored lights, the tree large enough to nearly span the entire window.

Angel caught a glance of someone walking into the room and frowned.

What that hell was *Spike* doing there?

"Come on," he told Lindsey and climbed out of his car.

Once on the front step, he rang the doorbell. It opened almost immediately to reveal the Slayer. A surprised one at that.

"Angel!"

"Hey, Buffy. Merry Christmas," he told her solemnly. "You mind if we come in for a bit. We need to talk to you about something."

Buffy's gaze flitted between the two males before finally nodding and letting them step inside. She shut the door and turned around to see her mother walking out of the kitchen and down the short hallway.

"Mrs. Summers," Angel greeted, somewhat warily.

"Angel." A stiff nod. "Who's your friend?"

"This is Lindsey. We won't stay long... I... I just need to talk with Buffy for a minute. Sorry to intrude."

Joyce waved aside his concern and gestured towards the living room.

Lindsey was the closest and turned to walk into the room. He gasped suddenly at seeing Tara sitting in a far corner, smiling softly at something a blond male was saying.

"Tara?" he called out softly.

She looked up, and a smile transformed her features.

"Lindsey!" she cried.

The occupants of the room watched in astonishment as the two raced towards each other.

They stopped, mere inches apart and drank in the sight of the other. Lindsey lifted his hand and caressed his wife's cheek, his eyes unnaturally bright at having found her.

"Tara," he murmured, then lowered his head and kissed her.

His arms encircled her back and pulled her up against his chest, continuing to ravish Tara's lips much to the shock of the others. Particularly the redhead that walked into the room bearing two drinks in her hands.

"Tara?" she whispered.

Tara froze upon hearing Willow's confused voice penetrate the haze of happiness that had settled around her at having been reunited with her husband. Reluctantly, she pulled back and looked over Lindsey's shoulder to see the girl's stricken face.

"Willow... I..."

The redhead tore out of the house before Tara could stop her, the cups in her hands falling onto the floor.

The misery in her eyes was apparent as Tara looked up at Lindsey.

"It's alright, Glinda... I'll go after the girl," Spike told her. "See that she gets home safe." Besides, with Angel and Buffy making lovesick faces at each other, he figured it was better to make himself scarce - the sight was too nauseating by half.

Spike's departure galvanized the others into action. They slipped silently from the room and went to congregate in the kitchen.

Leaving Lindsey and Tara alone in the living room.

Tara drew him down on the couch beside her.

"H-How did you find me?"

Lindsey smiled.

"You told me where you were from. Just so happens that ours is a small world." At her confused look he explained. "You're friends with the Slayer. I knew somebody that once dated the girl. It was a simple matter of contacting him... I always knew I could find you... the biggest thing was... did you want me to?"

"Oh, Lindsey! Of course I did!"

She threw her arms around his neck and hung on for dear life. His arms circled around her back and she felt so safe, so loved. Suddenly she remembered something and pulled away. Her hand delved into her pocket and pulled out a ticket. She handed it to him.

“What’s this?”

“A bus ticket. I was going to LA tomorrow. To find you,” she told him.

“Really?”

“Yes, really. I love you, Lindsey. There’s no place I’d rather be than by your side.” Her head dipped, remembering the shock on Willow’s face. “I was going to tell her... just before you got here. That I met someone else.”

“I’m sorry...”

“I am too. I didn’t want to hurt Willow. Especially after she chose me. But—”

“You fell in love with someone else.”

“Yes. And you need me... much more than she does. And I need you too. I love you.”

Lindsey nodded and drew her close, nestling her against his side.

“Merry Christmas, Tara,” he whispered quietly.

“Merry Christmas, Lindsey.”

~*~*~*~*~

“We should probably go,” Angel mumbled. “I’m sorry... I didn’t expect Tara to be here. I only came here first because I knew she was Buffy’s friend.”

Buffy nodded, lifting wounded eyes to gaze at her ex.

First her, and now Willow. Not to mention a hellgod that seemed bent on finding her “key” and a mother dealing with her recovery from brain surgery. Her life really didn’t need any more complications than it already had.

“I’ll stay at the mansion and leave for LA tomorrow night,” Angel told her as they walked towards the front door.

“Alright.”

"Look, Buffy... I'm sor—"

"Don't. It's okay, Angel. It's not your fault."

"But still... It's Christmas, and now I've ruined it..."

"It'll be fine. A cup of mom's hot chocolate, and things will get back to normal."

The two shared a wistful smile.

"Well, as much as can be expected on the Hellmouth anyway," she clarified.

Angel nodded. He reached out to give her a hug, but at the last second... stopped. Out of the corner of his eye he caught Lindsey and Tara standing and coming towards him.

"Time to go, Lindsey," he told the man.

There was an awkward moment when Tara's eyes met Buffy's. The sorrow both held.

"I'll talk to Willow," Tara told Buffy. "Explain what happened..."

"Okay."

Tara turned and walked to the door. Buffy's voice halted her quiet retreat outside.

"Tara... wait! Don't go. All of you... stay. It's Christmas."

"Buffy? Are you sure..." Angel asked.

"Yes. Christmas is about friends and family. I'd like to think we've reached that point, Angel. So... stay... all of you."

"Buffy..." Tara began.

"You especially, Tara. I'm sensing a story here, if you're willing to share." Buffy turned to the male glued to her side. "I'm Buffy, by the way. Buffy Summers."

"I know who you are, Buffy. Well... sorta. My name's Lindsey. Lindsey McDonald."

"It's nice to meet you. Why don't you come into the kitchen? It smells like mom's making hot chocolate. Very yummy. Even Spike can't turn it down."

Angel grumbled at the mention of his erstwhile grandchilde, but followed along docilely enough. Joyce greeted them with a mug of hot chocolate, and when Angel took a sip, he had to agree that Spike had a point.

The hot chocolate was delicious.

~*~*~*~*~

"You alright, Red?" Spike asked once he'd reached the girl's side.

"Go away..."

"Can't. Told the Slayer I'd look after you until you got home. Can't let the nasties get her friend."

"What do you care? You're just a demon. You don't have any feelings," Willow cried. "It wasn't *you* that just got dumped by your girlfriend... and on Christmas no less."

Spike bit the inside of his cheek to keep from flaying the girl alive with his tongue. His anger at her insensitive words wouldn't help matters.

"She loves him."

"So! She's *supposed* to love me."

"Glinda's been gone nearly two months... Has she even told you what happened?"

Willow stopped, her mind replaying the events of earlier. How Tara had not wanted to go to Buffy's and had wanted to talk. She had brushed her girlfriend's protests aside and practically dragged her to Buffy's house.

"She... she wanted to," the redhead finally admitted. "I just didn't want to hear. I knew something wasn't right. That things had changed between us. I didn't want to—"

She started crying then, and Spike reluctantly drew her into a comforting hug. The things he did in his love of the Slayer.

"I'm sorry, Red. But, Glinda... she wouldn't hurt you on purpose."

Willow shuddered in his embrace.

"Doesn't make it hurt any less," she whimpered.

"Nothing does, luv. Except maybe a little time."

When she got her emotions under control, Willow pulled away and made to continue home.

"Don't you want to go back? Joyce was just getting ready to make hot chocolate..."

"No. I don't want to be the cloud that rains on everyone's parade."

"They're your friends, Red. It's Christmas."

"All the more reason for me to go home and mope in private."

"What about Harris? You think he's not hurting too? But he's still there."

"Xander?"

"Didn't see the demon bird at the Slayer's house. And you have to admit, he wasn't as forthcoming with the insults to me as he usually is."

"Oh my god, you're right! I was so busy focusing on Tara, that I barely paid any attention. What kind of friend *am* I?"

Spike quirked his brow but didn't comment.

"We've got to go back..."

Willow started walking back towards Buffy's house and Spike fell into step beside her.

"Always knew you were a smart girl."

"I forget sometimes. Maybe it has something to do with living on a Hellmouth," she joked.

They reached the front door and Willow grabbed Spike's hand before he could ring the bell.

"Thanks, Spike... for coming after me. For bringing me back. I know you didn't have to."

"Didn't want to upset the Slayer's shindig. She's been planning it for a while, after all."

Willow took note of his embarrassment, and grinned.

"It's good she has you around... looking out for her."

"Yeah... well..." He shuffled his feet and looked away. "Bloody hell, Red, ring the bell already," he snarled.

Willow rolled her eyes at the vampire's blustering, but did like he asked.

The sound of running steps could be heard, then the front door was flung wide.

"Willow! You came back!" Buffy cried, hugging her friend tightly, much to the amusement of Spike.

"Spike talked me into it," Willow confessed, once Buffy had let up on her death grip.

"Hmmm... I guess that good deed warrants some of mom's hot chocolate then..."

"With the li'l marshmallows?" Spike asked hopefully.

"I'm sure she's got some stashed away somewhere," Buffy laughed.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Epilogue

Devil's Paradise, Texas
August 2001

"...he's going to meet you guys at the airport.... Don't worry, he's taking the 'Beast,'" Tara laughingly told her friend, referring to the huge SUV that Lindsey drove when he was out and about on their ranch. "Plenty of room for everyone."

Tara laughed delightedly at something that was said.

"Well, I had to swear that I could calculate the exact date of delivery, and that I wasn't due to deliver for another week. I swear, you'd think I was the first female ever to have a baby the way he was acting..."

"For me, maybe," Lindsey cut into the phone conversation, causing Tara to shriek in fright.

"What? No! I'm ok... Lindsey just decided to scare me half to death..."

"Well, tell him to stop," Willow laughed. "That's my niece or nephew he's messing with."

"I'll tell him. Now, I better let you go so you guys don't miss your flight. Give my love to everyone, and I'll see you all soon..."

Tara rang off and disconnected the portable phone. She leaned her head back and saw Lindsey standing behind her.

"You're back early. Hank told me you guys were going towards the north end of the property."

"I let him go by himself. He took a few hands with him. I didn't want to be too far away in case you needed me."

He leaned down and brushed his lips over hers.

"How's my lovely wife?" he murmured against her mouth.

"She's fine. Willow and the others are leaving for the airport now. Their flight gets in about 9 o'clock tonight."

"Good." Lindsey came around the couch and swept his wife up into his arms and walked back towards their bedroom.

"Lindsey! It's the middle of the day!"

"So?"

"So! And I'm as big as a house!"

"And a lovely house it is too..." He wiggled his eyebrows at her, causing Tara to laugh... and blush.

"You're insatiable."

"You know it. Can't ever get enough of you... *won't* ever get enough of you."

~*~*~*~*~

Tara greeted her friends with smiles and tears.

They were all there: Joyce, Buffy, Dawn, Willow, Xander... and Spike. Giles was in England at the moment at the Watcher's Council's behest; the head councilman had died from a sudden heart attack and arrangements needed to be made to secure his replacement. He was going to follow along as soon as he was able, though it was doubtful he would make the birth.

Spike stepped inside at her warm welcome, giving her a brief hug and kiss like the others. It was when his eyes went wide upon hearing the two accelerated heartbeats thumping away, instead of just the one that Tara had to mentally shush him with a quiet voice inside his head.

It was a surprise she was saving for the birth.

Though, how anyone could *not* guess she was having twins by looking at the size of her stomach was beyond her.

The last six months had been rife with problems for her friends in Sunnydale, though they'd dealt with it with the resilience they'd always exhibited.

It was a miracle that Joyce was even with them. Before Tara had left, she'd noticed the elder Summers' aura flooded with white, and had urged her to get checked by her physician. The worry in her tone must have reached the woman, because she'd gone back. They'd found a blood clot and had performed emergency surgery on the woman.

Tara swore her ribs still hurt from where Buffy had hugged her tight in gratitude.

Glory had been defeated as well. Spike had been the one to determine that the hellgod had to share time in a human's body. Giles had been the one to kill the man, because the vampire was still unable to hurt humans.

Seeing Spike's aura made Tara wonder if the chip was even needed anymore. The other Scoobies all seemed to agree with her assessment. It was only the thought of what damage removing the piece of metal from the vampire's brain would cause that held them back.

Maybe she and Willow could work on something.

That thought led her to others about her friend. The rough patch they'd had before getting to this point. Tara had explained everything to Willow, from the wish to the thought of never seeing her friends again... how Lindsey had taken care of her and how the two had eventually fallen in love.

Willow had finished out her year at Sunnydale University then transferred to a college in England. The school had ties to a powerful coven, and they were helping Willow learn about her capabilities. She had the month of August off and had flown to Sunnydale to meet with her friends before making the trip to Texas.

There was another person in her life, but Willow was taking things slow. Tara was happy for her.

For all of them, really.

Herself included.