

She couldn't remember her mother's voice.

Raine's father sacrificed himself to save Raine from a vampire. Now he was left with his mind in tatters suffering from an advanced state of Alzheimer's set upon him by the same vamp. His strong voice was quickly being replaced in Raine's mind by the weak tentative voice of his current state. She hated that she was forgetting. She hated that she couldn't remember her Mom's voice.

Raine had taken her father's place running MacEnroe Motors. Not an easy job for a seventeen year old. Raine was concerned over how many people might come to depend on her in the same way they did her father and whether or not she would live up to the expectation. Working on cars just before and after school didn't seem enough. "Bobby! Where are those spark plugs?!"

From the cellar Raine hears Bobby. "Coming! I'm having some trouble."

Raine wasn't surprised. The cellar was a mess. "I'll be right down." She grabs the oil rag off her shoulder to clean her hands. She goes through the back door that leads to the basement of their property. Raine was born at MacEnroe Motors. By the time she came along, Danny had the business going for three years and was starting to make a profit that he felt comfortable raising a family with. He owns the property, a maintenance garage, apartment on the second floor with converted attic that Raine uses as her room, and a barn behind the property where they store old cars, spare parts, and anything that will simply clutter their small quarters.

"Bobby? You do know what spark plugs look like? Bobby?"

Downstairs, Bobby is holding a box of spark plugs in one hand and trying to put some books away into an opening in the wall with the other. The books keep falling and he is getting frustrated. Raine comes down and picks up the books for him.

"What's keeping you?"

"Oh, the box was on the shelf over there and I tripped when I pulled it off and I fell against the wall and then the bricks fell out and the books came out with them. Then I ..."

"It's okay, Bobby. I'll take care of these. Take the plugs up and change them out with the ones in Malcolm's Volvo. I pick up here then I have to get breakfast ready. Are you going to stay around today?"

"S..sure Raine. We gonna fix the place up right? I'd feel bad if I didn't help. "

Bobby starts up the stairs. Raine smiles, Bobby can often be naïve, but he seemed to usually know the important stuff. Like the fact that Raine could bend a muffler with her bare hands. Yet, without being told, he just keeps that information to himself. He

wasn't sneaky about it, just very considerate of privacy. Sometimes Raine wondered how much Bobby really knew about Farmingham and the things going on around it.

Turning her attention back to picking up the books Raine noted that they were heftier than most books. "No wonder you were having . . ."

The book in her hand was actually a manuscript titled 'Exquisite Hurt: Travels in Darkness'.

" . . .trouble."

Raine leafed through the pages and a postcard fell out and floated in front of her as if caught by wind current. She picked up the yellowed card and read the dainty handwriting . . .

They are keeping me another week. I'm absolutely hating it here with these grumpy bores! The food is bad and the company is worse.

I can hear you laughing at my expense now. I try to amuse myself thinking about you having to change Raine's diapers . . .

Be sure to kiss her for me and give her my love. You, I'll slap around when I get back for not convincing me to stay home in the first place.

ooxxxx

George.

It came from London. Raine closes her eyes in the hope that the memory of her mother would come clear. "Mom . . ."

She finishes putting the books away and heads back up to the house. Perhaps she might get her father on a good day and find out what the stash was all about, but today was just too full to go that way. Breakfast had to be made and ready before her father awoke . . . and tea absolutely had to be ready before Mercy came out of her bedroom! Despite running a little late, Raine was going to be able to get breakfast on the table on time along with a little extra for Trim and the others who were to show up sometime in the morning. She figured on scrambled eggs, tea, coffee for her and Dad, toast, jam and .

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. . . there was someone in the kitchen.

As she stepped into the room Raine smelled the distinct aroma of Eggs benedict, with a hollandaise sauce to die for. Sausages, Bacon, gently crisped and . . .what was that? . . . Hmmm, waffles and maple syrup. “Mercy? When did you get pass tea and biscuits for breakfast?”

The woman in the kitchen turned around. She was wearing a silky pink robe and her auburn hair dropped bouncily around her shoulders. Despite the fact that the woman did not belong in Raine’s Kitchen, Raine took a moment to take her in. Her features betrayed a woman who took cared for her look. Even this early in the morning her eyes showed no sign of morning, just a deep brown that threatened to make anyone who looked at her drown in their comfort. If this woman was on TV peddling anything the ratings would soar. . . that was it. This woman was on television!

“Chloe Clark?”

Chloe opens the refrigerator and takes out a pitcher (that last known to Raine was empty) and places it on the center of the table. The pitcher was filled with orange juice. Raine had seen Chloe almost daily as the anchorwoman for the network news. Other than that, Raine saw this woman once before when she was helping Mercy move. Chloe was Mercy’s “girlfriend”.

Chloe had spent the night.

Chloe was in Raine’s kitchen.

Chloe had spent the night.

Chloe made breakfast.

Chloe had spent the night.

“MERCY!!!!”

Tales of the
New
Slayers

The Strangeness of Kindness

By the time everyone had sat down for breakfast, Chloe was dressed and looking like anchorwoman Barbie. Mercy dressed in patched up low cut jeans with a black tanktop showing the tribal tattoo on her chest centered above her cleavage. Raine had her working jeans, still dirty from the week before, and an oversized red and black plaid shirt. Danny was dressed in jeans and a polo shirt.

Mercy took a bite of her eggs. “Hmm, I miss this. You ready for today Raine?”

Raine entertained her waffles. Today was the day they unpacked boxes, cleaned and painted the garage and finished up the barn. “You have me all day.”

Mercy takes a cherry from the table and playfully puts it into Chloes mouth. Raine looks away “Would you guys chill.”

Mercy takes another bite of her breakfast. “As if you and Kamiko sat in your room playing Parcheesi. I heard you.”

“What?! Are you bugging my room now? What kind of freak guardian are you turning out to be?” Raine realized as she defended herself that Mercy had a huge mischievous smile on her face. “You didn’t hear a thing did you?”

“Gotcha.”

Mercy dodged a piece of toast thrown her way.

Chloe pushed away her breakfast. “I’m sorry I startled you this morning Raine. I drove up from Boston to help you guys last night, but you were out.”

Raine took another bite of her waffles . . . “Hmmm... you’re forgiven. “

Despite the morning feast Chloe prepared, Raine prepared breakfast for her dad. Danny was happiest eating his scrambled eggs, toast and coffee. “Good breakfast.”

There was a knock on the door. Raine got up . . . “That’s probably the gang come to help, I’ll get it.”

Raine opened the front door expecting Delia to greet her in her standard army workout clothes . . . instead, it was a short stocky man, barely above five feet tall, wearing leather chaps, and a leather jacket sparkling with pins of various shapes, sizes and slogans up and down the sleeves. He sported a headband, cut off driving gloves and bifocal glasses positioned delicately above a reddish nose and wide garden gnome smile.

“Hi, we’re Bikers for Christ!”

“MERCY!!!!”

Mercy steps up behind her. She looks at the odd man and smiles broadly. “Pigpen! How the hell are you!?”

The man’s smiled quite impossibly widened. “Mercy! Sweet God in heaven are you a sight! You still seeing that fancy pants girly girl . . .”

Mercy brings a finger up to her lips to hush him, but it’s too late. Behind her Chloe was looking on. “Good morning, Father. How’s the congregation?”. Raine felt a palpable tension in the air.

Raine opens the door widely. “Come in, uh... Father?”

“Pigpen’ll do. We’re really sorry to hear about DannyMack, Raine. You’ve all been in our prayers since we heard. We’ve come to lend a hand.” He hands Raine a newspaper advertisement seeking a Mechanic for MacEnroe Motors. “You won’t be needing this.”

“You want a job?”

“No, no my dear. My work is with the lord Jesus. Several of our members are mechanics. They have volunteered to pitch in until you folks are on your feet. With your blessing of course. You have eight mechanics at your disposal, each donating at least two days a month. You’ll be able to keep the garage open. At the very least, we’re ready to clean up the garage, and give the building a well deserved paint job. Our pleasure of course.”

Raine and Mercy excitedly give Pigpen a hug. “Careful girls, I’m a man of God. But oh God that feels good!”

Trim walks in the door carrying three pizza boxes. “Raine, you know you have a motorcycle gang outside. Is this a threat or, um, family?” He stops short when he sees Pigpen. “Nevermind. Pizza?”

“It’s eight o’clock in the morning, Trim.”

“Okay, I got nachos in my backpack.”

Mercy walks out with Pigpen. “Let me show you the garage. Thank you for coming out, you’re sweet.”

“We do what we can.”

Raine grabs the pizza boxes from Trim and heads to the kitchen. “These are going to be lunch! . . . by the way, this is Chloe, a friend of Mercy’s. Chloe, Trim, Trim Chloe, Trim behave.” Trim’s eyes took on the look of saucers . . . “Chloe Clark. You’re Chloe Clark! You know . . . Chloe Clark . . . you’re like the reason I do current events homework!”

“Thank you. You know Raine long?”

“We’re very close. We even share the many of the same interests . . . “ He looks around and is disappointed not to see Wiley among the group. “So you know Mercy from the station?—is that hollandaise sauce I smell?” Chloe and Trim go to the dining area, Trim places a hand over his heart. “Raine! You’ve been holding out on me!”

Raine closes the refrigerator. “Take a seat. I think the rest of us are done.” Trim sits across from Danny and starts digging in. Chloe takes Raine aside.

“Raine, I think I should tell you, about Mercy and me . . .”

“I’m not dumb, Chloe. I helped Mercy move out remember.”

“Not that. It’s . . . it isn’t general knowledge. I want to keep it that way. The people at the station would have a fit if . . .”

“Said and done, Chloe. I’m not exactly posting bulletins myself.”

“Thanks.”

There is another knock on the door. “I better get that . . .”

A concerned woman stands at the door knocking cautiously. “Raine MacEnroe?”

“That’s me. You Calista?”

A look of relief came across the woman’s face. “Yes. I’m here for Danny.”

“Thanks for coming out so early today. He’s just finishing breakfast. His bag is packed and in the living room. I’ll get Mercy.”

Raine steps out the door. She sees Mercy trying out a motorcycle while four of the Jesus bikers look on. They all are laughing and talking. “Mercy! The nurse is here!”

“I’ll be right there, Honey. I think one of your friends is here.” Mercy points across the lot where a red sports car sits silently with a small u-haul trailer attached. The doors open and Wiley comes out of the driver’s side dressed in a skirt and blouse combination that complemented the color of her car. Kate came out of the back seat dressed casually, and Delia poured out of the passenger side in her military green.

“Hi guys, you want breakfast?”

Wiley’s otherwise movie star looks were marred by a scowl. “I’m up for it. This one had me up at five in the morning.” She motions to Delia.

“Listen, I had to sleep in while waiting for you. We could’ve gone through the drive-thru for something to eat. You said no.”

Wiley turns to Delia, fuming and pointing at her car. “Look at what you did to my car! What if someone who knew me was working at the drive thru? “

Delia was exasperated. “What’s your problem.”

While her two bickering fellow teens walked over to the house, Raine turned to Kate, who had wisely stayed back. “and?”

Kate looked like she had been hearing the debate for hours. “The trailer is Delia’s stuff. Wiley doesn’t think it should be attached to her car. I should have walked. What’s going on?” She looked in the direction of the bikers. Raine noted that Mercy was not among them anymore.

“Bikers for Christ, the short one is father Pigpen. They’re going to fix up the garage. You eaten yet? We have a good spread going.”

“You cooked?” It wasn’t meant as an insult, but Kate had a hard time imagining her vampire slaying friend doing anything domestic.

“No . . . it was . . .”

From the house, they both heard Wiley exclaim. “Chloe Clark!!”

Kate recognized the name. “Is there something on the news we should know about?”

“Nope. She’s a friend of the family.”

“Chloe Clark is in your house?”

Raine and Kate start for the house. They hear Wiley squeal once more . . . “Chloe Clark!!”

“Yep. Apparently so.”



Inside, Danny was ready to leave with Calista. Mercy was showing them out the door. Kate slipped past them to give Raine a moment with them. “Everything cool?”

Calista had a friendly professional smile on her face, but her eyes were taking in the host of visitors in the house. “We’ll be fine. You know that too many distractions are not good for Danny right now.”

“We needed a day to get things done around the house. That’s why you’re spending the day together. Have a good time, Dad.”

“I will. Bye George.”

Mercy and Raine stood silent. Calista obliviously asked “Who is George?”

Mercy continues to usher them out, leaving Raine somewhat shocked in the house. In a trained and comforting voice the nurse spoke to Danny. “That’s not George. Danny. That’s Raine. Your daughter.”

“I know.”

Raine doesn’t push the issue. She was told that her father might start forgetting who she was. She looks on the wall along side the doorway, and sees several family pictures that had all but become wallpaper to her. In the center, there is one of her mother, Georgina MacEnroe, holding Raine as a baby and in turn being held by a healthy and strong Danny Mack. George MacEnroe died six years ago. Raine was eleven. Her mother’s death was a shock to everyone. Raine remembers her father answering the phone and suddenly going pale. He didn’t say anything to Raine that night, he had just pulled her close, held her and cried. Raine learned the news the next day and her life changed forever.

Somehow she thought that she would still remember her mother’s voice.

“Raine?”

Mercy was at the door again. “You okay, Sweetness?”

“Y . . .yeah. Just thinking.”

Mercy shuffles in a large duffle bag and leaves it beside the door. “Ugg. Well, when you’re done, see if Trim has left any food for anyone else. We have company.”

More company?

Raine looked out the door and her stomach threatened to rebel. She saw a gap toothed mountain man and a hillbilly Adonis walking toward the house. “Torry and Darby?”

“Be polite honey . . . they don’t spend much time indoors.”

Torry walks right up to Raine and opens his arms for a hug. Raine’s slayer abilities kicked in immediately gauging the speed and direction of the wind based on Torry’s body odor. “Raine! How are you doing girl. We thought we’d come down to the big city and give Danny Mack’s girl a hand. I hope you don’t have dinner plans, I brought chickens!”

“Chicken?”

“No, chickens. Six of em. They wouldn’t shut up all the way here. “

“Right.”

Raine prayed for the apocalypse. Instead, she got Father PigPen who came over to the door. “Torry, that you? You ole dog?”

“Christ almighty! Pigpen!!”

“Watch it, Torry. Name in vain and all that.”

“Sorry sir. Your forgiveness sir.”

“That’s what Jesus is about, Torry. Just try not to abuse the privilege.”

“Yes sir. I brought chickens, my tools, AND my banjo!”

PigPen puts an arm around the bearded fellow and leads him into the house. “Come in my good man, we must catch up. “

Raine noted Pigpens deflection and immediately started to like the minuscule minister. Her relief went away immediately when she realized that Darby was standing at the door staring at her.

“...uh...hi Raine. R...Remember me? I...I’m Darby.”

How could she forget. The six foot, dirty blonde athlete barely could put words together, but his glare gave away more than his fair share of puberty blues. She estimated him as being about nineteen or twenty. “Hi Darby. . .come in, make yourself comfortable. Introduce yourself to the gang. They’re in the dining room.” She pushes Darby over to the dining room while Mercy watches. From the dining room they hear him meekly state “Hi. I’m Darby.”

Mercy grabs Raines shoulders and gives her a good squeeze. “He likes you.”

“Yip--pee. Can we talk?”

“Sure hon, what’s up?” Mercy had a huge smile on her face. She was enjoying the company.

“Mercy. This is a nightmare. It isn’t nine in the morning yet and this place is a zoo. What did you do send out a mass mailing!?”

“I asked a few friends for help. That’s what friends are for Raine.”

“A few?!”

“Some come in pairs and some come in gangs. Your friends are here too.”

“But they’re normal!”

Raine regretted the words as soon as they came out of her mouth. Kate came out of the dining room. “Raine! Delia’s giving Trim a wedgie!”

Raine gives Mercy an apologetic look. “He probably deserves it you know.”

“You should do something. People are eating. I’m going to get the congregation organized. We’ll get started on the garage.”

Raine steps into the Dining room. The room looks smaller than usual. Delia has Trim on the floor in a wrestling hold, her foot holding him down and her left hand tugging his underwear out of his pants. “Owwwww!”

“Delia, let him go!”

Delia does as she was asked. “You didn’t see what he did with the sausage!”

Raine raised a hand by way of warning, the room fell silent. “I don’t want to know. If everyone is finished, we’re supposed to finish cleaning out the barn. It’s going to be our new hang out, so we should put some work into it. . .shoot . . . where is Wiley and Chloe?”

Trim gets up and adjusts himself. “They’re in the bathroom.”

“Together?” Raine didn’t want to think about it. She already was a bit uncomfortable with Chloe spending the night, she didn’t even want to consider what was happening in the bathroom. Fortunately, she didn’t have to. Wiley comes into the room, if it were possible for her to look lovelier she managed to find the spell. Raine was taken back. “Raine, come on . . . join us, this’ll just be a minute . . . Chloe’s fantastic.” She grabs Raine by the arm and pulls her toward the bathroom.

In the restroom, Chloe has a make up kit set up on the vanity. Various colored foundations, blushes, powders, mascara, eyeliners, shadows and lipsticks littered the small counter. Chloe was working on a testing a mix on her hand along the lines of an alchemist. Wiley forces Raine to sit next to Chloe who is now prepared with a cotton swab. “Raine, you should always cleanse your skin in the morning and at night.”

“Chloe, I don’t wear make up.”

Wiley whispers to Raine “Duh!, Do this Raine, it might help with your problem. If guys go for you maybe . . .”

Chloe chimes in. “It doesn’t hurt. Your skin will end up fresh and toned. Really, there’s no better way to start the day. With those cheekbones you’ll look amazing.”

Wiley smiled brightly. . . “Amazing. You start wearing make up and I’ll bet the rumours will stop. I told Chloe all about them. She can be trusted, she’s a journalist.”

Chloe gives Raine a knowing smile. “She’s right Raine, you start going through a regime like me and those rumors will stop. Everyone knows gay women don’t wear make up.”

Raine gives in.

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When everything is done, Wiley grabs Raine to parade her through the house. As they pass Mercy raises an eyebrow. “Nice.”

Raine’s now fully made up and mascara’d eyes shoot darts in Mercy’s direction.

In the living room, Darby sits alone on the couch. He looks up and Raine swore she heard angels singing as he laid his pearly blues on her. “Raine? Y...you look . . .”

“Fabulous!” Wiley says. “Where’s everyone else Darby?”

“B...barn. I . . . wow!”

Raine let Wiley pull her around for the dog and pony show. She had it on good authority that the stuff washed off.

Mercy and Chloe watch the two girls leave out the back door. Mercy puts an arm over Chloe’s shoulders. “You did good.”

“Raine’s a beautiful girl, it was easy. Now if I can get her guardian to do something about her hair.”

Mercy runs her hand over her crew cut. “Hey! I’m going to let it grow, just a little more. You ready to start here in the house. Laundry, dusting, cleaning all the standard kitchen patrol duties. I don’t think I’d have any problem getting Wiley to help you. “ then in a mockery of Wiley’s voice . . . “yo’ah like a goddess, y’know! Oooh Chloe!”

Wiley pulled Raine out the back door and toward the barn behind the MacEnroe Motors garage. The sound of motorcycles filled the air as several bikers pulled in to the space between the two buildings. Raine counted twelve bikes in all, most of them carrying two people. Pigpen walks away from the newcomers toward Raine and Wiley.

“Hey girls, where should we . . .Raine? That you?”

Raine realized that there was nothing she could hide behind and raising her hands to her face just seemed silly. She stopped letting Wiley pull her . . . it took a little effort, but Raine was stronger than her. “Yes father. She made me do it.”

“It looks good on you. Listen, I’m going to have them park their bikes across the street.”

“Sure!”

Wiley tugs at Raine’s arm again. “C’mon we have to show everyone how pretty you look.”

Wiley learned quickly that Slayers growl.

In the afternoon, the police arrived. A cruiser pulled into the lot and a raven haired young officer made his way through the people working toward Mercy. They had a few words, mostly good natured and then the officer left.

Raine had gotten used to the make up and watched the conversation from a distance as she moved the last of the garbage out of the barn and into the dump run pile. Torry’s pick up truck pulled in to the lot to pick up more garbage for the dump. Raine took the chance to go speak with Mercy.

The Garage looked better than it had in a long time. Mercy looked tired, and she had paint all over herself from the spontaneous paint flinging fight that happened an hour earlier. Darby was still cleaning it up. “What was that all about?”

Mercy looks in the direction of the departing police car. “Some of the neighbors were starting to worry. I explained what was going on and we’re cool. How about you?”

“I can’t believe this, all these people . . . for dad?! I knew people liked him, but some of these folks came from a real long way. Did you think this would happen?”

“Honey, I invited Pigpen and Torry . . . the rest is a surprise to me. Mr. Oellette and some of your dad’s old classmates just showed up and brought lunch . . . and their kids I might add. About the stuff in the barn . . . nothing is going to blow up, right?”

“Naw, that’s Delia’s stuff, she need a place to keep it, and since you are cool with the whole scene I figured it would be okay for her to have one of the horse stalls in the barn for it.”

“Now wait, honey . . . I’m cool with the whole scene? I’m just accepting that there is nothing I’m going to be able to do about it. I’m still going to come down on you if . . .” Mercy noticed that Raine’s attention was focused behind her. “What?”

Jacqueline’s car had pulled up on the curbside and Raine’s usually calm watcher stepped out as a couple of bikers crossed her path chasing a chicken.

“Hmm, she’s got her serious face on. I better see to this. “

Mercy eyes Jacqueline and grows quite serious herself. “Yeah, you better.”



“I hope you came to help, cause I don’t think I’m going to be able to get away to chase groovy ghoulies this afternoon.”

Jacqueline looks down her nose at Raine, a motion that always puts the slayer into “yes, ma’am” mode. “This is a new look for you. “ She looks over to the house and sees Darby standing next to a ladder looking at Raine longingly. “Interesting. Raine, I’ve been doing some checking on your, . . . uh . . . new domestic situation and I’m finding it quite unsatisfactory.”

“Then get some work pants on and help the congregation with the cellar. We’re still trying to get the sulfur smell out of it.”

“No Raine, you don’t understand . . . this woman, Mercy Johnson. The watcher council actually had files on her. I think that we need to contest her guardianship of you. Perhaps there is a grandparent, an aunt, an uncle?”

“What are you talking about! Mercy has power of attorney and was actually listed as my guardian should anything happen to Mom and Dad. ”

“That’s the thing about this . . . thing. Quite simply, Mercy Johnson may have gotten your mother killed.”

Raine felt her heart fall and skip a beat.

Mercy walks up behind Jacqueline, her face strict with eyes that could kill. She stands uncomfortably close to the watcher, every word a dagger. “ You want to tell her why any of that is your business.”

Raine looked at the two women she respected the most. “Tell me.”

Jacqueline straightened her glasses and avoided Raine’s gaze. Then quietly . . . “Your mother was a potential.”

Mercy grabs Jacqueline’s arm and holds it tightly. “More.”

“Um... yes . . . , she was also a watcher. In, um , her own way.”

Raine was at a loss. Wells of emotion started to pop their lids and boil over. “Do you two know each other?”

“No Honey, we just met. But I’ve know enough about the Watchers to know they are more interested in control and power than anything else. “

“and my Mom? “

“We have to talk.”

The right buttons were pushed, Raine’s eyes start to tear up. “In the barn.” She turns around and heads to the barn angry, upset and a touch frightened.

Mercy watches Raine disappear into the barn then turns to Jacqueline.

“You bitch.”

“Raine is my charge.”

“Can it, sister. Raine is my responsibility and this is technically my house . . . get out.”

“Your attitude can endanger Raine, she needs someone either ignorant of or supportive of her . . . activities. You don’t have the training or access to . . .”

“I have access to thirty plus bikers that’ll physically toss you into your tin box and roll it away at my request. GET OUT.”

Jacqueline shrugs and walks back to her car. “Fine. You can have this one Ms. Johnson.”

Mercy wasn’t about to let her have the last word. “Jacqueline?”

“Yes?”

“Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?”

The two women stare at each other challengingly.

In the barn, Raine looks at all the work her friends had done. The place looked better than it ever had. The second level had a large opening for its former use as a hayloft that allowed Raine to look at the house, and it was high enough that she got a good view of neighborhood. Fortunately, Farmingham’s buildings were often short one story affairs. She wanted to punch something. Lately, that seemed to be the only thing that gave her relief.

She let the tears and mascara flow. In an effort to wipe her eyes, she made the streaks on her face worse. It didn’t matter. Why would Mercy or Jacqueline for that matter keep anything from her. She hears footsteps coming up to the loft and quickly tries to compose herself.

Darby steps up into the loft. He sees Raine and walks purposely halfway to her, as if testing the waters. “R..Raine?”

Raine doesn’t turn to look at him. “Not now, Darby. I’m not interested. Actually, you have no idea how uninterested I am.”

He looks down to his feet as if talking to the floor somehow made things easier for him. “I know how angry you are. How one part of you is screaming for attention, to be someone’s reason for being . . . and how the other part is tugging at you to find that reason for yourself because you’re afraid that someone really isn’t there, or if they are, they won’t be for long. Someone is there, Raine.”

Raine keeps looking out the window hoping that Darby doesn’t see her cry. “You don’t know me, Darby.”

He turns to walk away. “Sure. But I . . .uh . . .just . . . want to. . . sorry, bye.” When he reaches the edge of the stairs he stops and still not looking at her he adds. “Funny thing about love, Raine. It comes in lots of flavors. Look around you.”

Raine considers his words while looking at the house from her perch. Pigpen’s congregation was just about finished with the garage. Torry was loading the last of the garbage for the dump, Chloe was setting up picnic tables with Wiley and putting out a variety of foods and snacks for everyone. Others had taken it upon themselves to clean up the lot, mow the lawn and across the way she saw a couple of bikers enjoying themselves as they cleaned out the chimney. Below, Delia and Kate were painting a fence while Trim was apparently supervising. Raine turned to Darby . . . “We don’t know each other well enough to talk about love.”

Darby wasn't there. In his place stood Mercy. "You care to elaborate?"

Raine didn't let it show that she was startled. She stood up and practically lunged toward Mercy. "Why did you LIE TO ME!?"

Mercy put out her hands and caught Raine by the forearms, stopping her from hitting Mercy on the chest. "About what?"

"You knew about the Watchers? You know something about my Mom, you knew all this Slayer crap was more than urban legends. YOU KNEW! So if you're not lying to me then you sure as hell are keeping things to yourself that concern me. . . and Mom! What happened Mercy!? Why is Jacqueline all bent out of shape?"

"Calm down, sweetness, I've never lied to you. When we met I did not know you were a slayer. Then when I figured it out, we had other issues to deal with. I didn't lie. I chose my battles. Something your mom would have done, Sweetness."

Raine pulls away, letting everything that was bothering her about the day assume control. "and why do you do that?"

"What?"

"Call me 'Sweetness'. You call everyone 'honey' or something like that to make them think you're a hick or something . . . You call me sweetness only when we're alone. . . what's that about?!"

Mercy walks past Raine and sits at the edge of the hayloft barn door. She wasn't bothered by the height or the potential fall at all. "That's what she called you. She used to say that there was too much bitterness in the world and that you were a piece of sweetness in a sour world. I babysat you for the first three years of your life Raine. You were everything to her. She used to tell me she'd move heaven and earth for you. . . .

One of my earliest memories was of her. Back then, Farmingham was really a one horse town. My sister and I lived in the orphanage that used to be where the greenhouses are now. I used to sneak out regularly and one morning I spied her alone in a field. She was working out, but she was so graceful that it looked like a dance. I started showing up to the field every morning, rain or shine, she'd be there. Better and more beautiful with each dawn. She was about your age then.

I never knew what she was training for, but I figured out that she knew I was there and didn't mind the attention. She started to volunteer at the orphanage and we got to know each other. My sister was always the good one, I'd get in trouble a lot. I think maybe because your mom used to take care of the problem kids. So I became a problem. One day, I was in for some stupid thing yet again, and she looked very sad. She told me that I had to start behaving because she wasn't going to be around."

Raine was calm. She realized that this was hard for Mercy.

“ . . . You see Raine, your mom was training to be a slayer. She had a watcher assigned to her since she was four. The watcher was one of the administrators at the orphanage. When the time came, George was passed up as the chosen one. She had gotten too old and despite all her training and ability, it came down to someone else randomly selected by fate to make the world safe for mankind. That was the day she was given the news and as a consolation prize was offered a position with the Watchers. The next day she and her watcher were on their way to England. “

“Despite our age difference, she was my best friend and she was leaving without any reason. “

Raine started to feel terrible about bringing all of this on. She thought to stop Mercy, but couldn't find a place to interrupt.

“I didn't see her again until high school. I got busted for smoking pot and somehow they figured that the way to fix me was to give me detention again. Idiots. – it's not like I had anywhere to go anyway. Maddy had been placed with a family in New York and my foster parents were assholes who looked at me like some sort of paycheck. Anyhow, that day I sat in the classroom with my heavy cloak of piss poor attitude and then I heard her voice. 'I thought I told you to stay out of trouble?'

When I looked up, all the years in between didn't matter anymore. She looked at me with that wide Cheshire cat smile that seemed to lift up her whole body and lighten the hearts of everyone around her. If you care to know, you have that same smile when you let your guard down.

Your mom had become a watcher and had gotten married to Danny. It didn't take long for me to get in the loop and I even did the wannabe slayer thing for a while. George had a potential to train, but I was included in the training. I got buffed, centered and nowhere. Your mom cared for her potential slayer, she gave a damn about her life and living, and the council made your mom's life a living hell. She started rebelling, doing things her own way and sometimes flagrantly doing the exact opposite of what the Watchers wanted. Without the benefit of a slayer on her watch, your mom became a respected and often feared Watcher.

I lived in Europe for a while, let's say I needed to explore my options. When I returned here I started working with your mom again. We were in Boston and by then and she had a slayer assigned to her. By that time I worked as a paramedic and was flying . . . I helped her out a bit, but really stayed away from the frontline. She had lot's of problems with her slayer and the council and it seemed that the combination was becoming more of a menace to her than the demons and vampires.

You were in fifth grade when we received word about something big even by supernatural standards happening in the city. I remember because George couldn't stop raving about you and how well you were doing in school. Everyone was in on this one. The slayer was supposed to get the big bad in position for your mom to cast a spell on it. Everyone but the slayer showed up. Your mom dropped the scroll and moved in on the beast to fight it herself. She was a sight to behold. All that training, all her life came down to that moment. While she fought, I grabbed the scroll and started the spell."

Mercy was crying. Unlike Raine, she made no effort to hide her tears. She started taking deep breaths as if it was difficult to breathe. "I screwed it up."

Raine puts her arms around Mercy. The older woman sobbed like a child, putting her head against Raine's chest and holding on to Raine in desperation. "...it didn't go away . . . it just stayed there and beat her. . .over and over. I tried again, but it just laughed at me."

Mercy held Raine even closer, running her hand over Raine's hair. "Y..your mom... while the thing came for me . . . she finished the spell and the beast went up in flames and into whatever hell it came from. But your mom . . . she . . . I did everything I could Raine, you have to believe that. . . you have to believe that! I did everything I could!"

Evening came in the orange and yellow hues of a campfire. The work was done. Raine's visitors gathered around a fire built behind the garage. Friends, family and neighbors sat on the ground, spare tires, cars, anything they could make comfortable. Pigpen blessed them all and blessed the house, barn and garage with a sermon that spoke of friendship, hard work, love and perseverance.

Chloe was fixing Raine's make up again, while her friends gathered at a table to enjoy the sights and sounds around the homestead.

Wiley gave Raine a mock evil look. "If you start taking to this stuff, I might have to work harder for the boys."

Trim, who was now sitting peacefully with Delia as they both enjoyed a particularly tasty desert pointed toward the fire. "Speaking of which, what's your boyfriend doing over there!"

The group looked over and saw Torry speaking with Darby. Whatever the request . . . Darby resisted, but ultimately failed. Pigpen came up to them with an acoustic guitar and handed it to Darby. Then he set up a microphone on Darby's shirt and made his way back to the gathered congregation giving them a thumbs up sign. Torry had the smile of a proud papa as he picked up his banjo.

Darby started to sing.

*I'm Leaning on a lamp.
You might think, I look a tramp.
Or maybe, you think I'm 'round to steal your car.*

Wiley was stunned. Darby's voice filled the air. Crisp , clear and mellifluously gaining everyone's attention. At this point, his voice was the only instrument in use. "I thought he was . . . doesn't he, like, stutters!?"

*But no, I'm not a crook.
And if you think, that's how I look.
I'll tell you why and what my motives are . . .*

Suddenly the air was filled with music. The banjo sped along leading a touch of rhythm from Darby's guitar and a host of other would be musicians clapping hands, slapping knees and joining in. The song took a decidedly fast turn . . .

*I'm leaning on the lamp post at the corner of the street
In case a certain little lady comes by
Oh me, oh my
In case a certain little lady comes by

Oh, she's wonderful, she's marvelous
She's fabulous, she's beautiful
And anyone can understand why
I'm leaning on the lamp post at the corner of the street
In case a certain little lady comes by*

Chloe finished Raine's make up and Wiley takes charge, pushing Raine toward the campfire where already many of the guests were dancing and raising beers to the stars. Darby finished the song but Torry kept the banjo going and was joined in by a harmonica and someone beating sticks on an old muffler. "C'mon, c'mon!"

Raine and Wiley danced facing each other. Despite the prominence of jeans, leather, and plaid. Wiley seemed to fit in anyway. A party is a party. Raine feels a hand on her shoulder. It's Darby.

"...uh..d..dance? Maybe?"

Wiley urges Raine on. Raine wonders briefly what Wiley's definition of gay was. "No, Darby . . ."

"Maybe . . .l . .later?"

"No Darby. Not interested . . ."

Darby sullenly walks away.

“Raine! C’mon . . . it’s a party.” Wiley prompted her.

Raine stops Darby. “Hey . . .that stuff you said in the barn. . . . Thanks.”

“T..that’s okay.”

“You talked a good game up there, and you sing really well. What’s with the stuttering?”

“I . . .don’t stutter when I sing.”

“Then how come you suddenly were Mr. You-gotta-know-something about love monologue back then?”

“When I talk with you, Raine. It’s like singing.”

He turned away and joined the crowd where several bikers, pulled him to the center again for another song. Raine stood in silence. Wiley and Delia come up to her. “Ahh, how sweet! “

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The haphazard event continued well into the night. Mercy and Raine got back together at the hayloft and watched as fireworks lit the sky.

“They do go home, right?” Raine hands Mercy a cup of tea.

“Raine, that’s the thing about these folks. Wherever they are is home.”

They watched the fireworks zip into the night sky as they both drank their tea. This was home.

“Mercy, I don’t blame you.”

“Thanks sweetness. Maybe I’ll be that forgiving some day.”

Down below, drifting up and echoing in the barn, Darby’s voice ushers in the dawn . . .

*This door swings both ways
Which one will it be.
Will we live in happiness?
Or dwell in misery.*

*This door swings both ways
Lets in earth and sky.*

*Make the most of livin'
If you're not prepared to die.*

*Make the most of livin'
If you're not prepared to die.*

Raine heard her mother's voice, clearly and full of love. "Nothing will keep me away from you, sweetness. Nothing."

The end