

# Willow

by Laralee

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Chapter 1 of 1

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I have often wondered if I stand alone in my thoughts and feelings concerning parenthood, or if other mothers and fathers could find common ground in the opinions I harbor. In the dawn of my days as a father, I clung to the notion that everything involving my child left me feeling weary and worn to my very bones in some way or another. The sensations I felt when looking at my daughter, whether they be of delight, of fear, of panic, or of pride, struck me in a way that left me feeling skinned and unmasked...and as one who so carefully locked away everything he felt, it was certainly a powerful shock if nothing else. To look at her was to touch a copper wire live with current, one which was directly and securely tightened around the soul.

I was told during the months leading up to Willow entering this world that parenthood would change me in ways I could never imagine. Arthur Weasley was particularly fond of reminding me that I would never be truly prepared for what was to come and not to bother trying to prepare myself because it would all be for naught.

"Severus," he would say, his blue eyes studying me with sharp seriousness, *You're about to receive a precious gift in that little one, and if there has ever been an opportunity you don't want to squander, it lies in her.*"

It was effortless to take what he said at face value. I wanted very much to believe in the things he said, if only to lay the faults of my own father to rest. Arthur had, after all, experienced fatherhood seven times over and had lived to tell the tale in one piece. If he could escape with only a slight dusting of grey in his hair after bringing up an entire brood, it was certainly possible to make it through unscathed with one. In hindsight...it was a fool's dream. I walked head-first into that new chapter of my life, never anticipating everything...the good and the bad...that it would involve.

Willow came on a quiet Thursday, thirteen days into the month of July. I remember that day as though it were a vividly clear dream. Hermione and I had spent the evening with her parents and had only Apparated home before she felt the first fluttering of distress. She was determined to prove it was nothing but phantom signs of labour and refused to leave for St Mungo's until she was absolutely certain. That night, forty minutes after arriving at the hospital, Willow was born nearly a month and a half prematurely. Hermione's pregnancy had been rife with its troubles, severe bouts of nausea and fatigue that even the most potent potions could not ease. It was of no great surprise when the endeavor came to its close with a whole new set of plights.

Breathing came as a struggle for Willow, and the sounds she made as she forced the air down into her frail lungs often haunted my dreams long after she had made a full recovery. That was the first moment I felt helpless, watching the arrhythmic rise and fall of her chest, wishing I could bear the heavy burden for her. It was utter madness. She and Hermione remained at St Mungo's for observation nearly a week before they would allow me to bring them home.

She was a petite, delicate thing, born just shy of thirty-two weeks, and even then we knew she would be fair in both appearance and disposition. Her tiny features, then indistinguishable and purely infant, were reminiscent of a fragile, priceless china doll, one that would surely crumble to pieces with the faintest touch. The first moment she was in my hands was the moment I decided that nothing would ever cause her grief or harm, so long as it was in my power to prevent it. The real truth of the matter was

lost to me in that golden, transcendent moment, but I would eventually come to realise I had made a promise that was not in my power to keep.

I had vowed the day we brought her home to be the stronghold in her life, but I had underestimated the consequences of living with and loving a child...my child. Her softness and innocence were intoxicating and contagious in a way I had never dreamed. It was easy to become wrapped around her very being, to feel her gentleness surround you before it moved inward, carving out its place somewhere deep inside. Willow had a way of bringing out the best in people, Hermione said, and when it was just the two of us together, me staring down into her sweet sleeping face as I promised her the world, I was inclined to agree. Willow was our bundle of hope, our future swaddled in an absurdly pink blanket, and we loved her dearly for it.

All new parents have the delusion that their child is the only perfect baby in the world, but we knew without a doubt that we were correct where Willow was concerned. It could easily be seen when Hermione held her to her chest, her hands very nearly covering all of Willow's fragile little body as she was soothed into a restless sleep, and even more so as she grew. She was almost a month old when we were able to detect the first bits and pieces of ourselves in her. Willow had neither my hair, nor her mother's, but somehow the precise mixture of genetics had come together to colour flimsy wisps that sprouted atop her head a chocolate shade of brown. Her eyes, which were shaped like Hermione's, were dark grey in colour, but despite the darkened tint, they were bright and clear, and eager to watch the world as it unfolded around her. She had my cheekbones, though I wasn't able to see it until she grew older, and Hermione's mouth. Her nose was surprisingly her own, a dainty combination of her parentage that suited her face well.

She continued to grow, the months flying by in a senseless blur...another facet of parenthood Arthur Weasley would preach about at great length...and I finally understood what he meant about not squandering my opportunity. I refused to turn into my father, with his indifference and his apathy. We taught her things early, and we taught them often. We talked to her every moment the occasion presented itself and sometimes when it didn't. We listened, even in the early days when gibberish was the only thing that found its way to her voice. We easily discovered early on that Willow possessed her mother's desire to learn, and in some moments, that yearning surpassed both of our expectations.

She developed a strong interest in magic, but that was to be expected. Magic was commonplace in our home, and we used it in front of her from the start. Even when she was still only toddling about the house on unsteady feet, she would watch with rapt fascination, paying attention to every detail, every sweeping motion made by the wands we held. We would sometimes bewitch her things to dance and sing, and we would be rewarded with that same familiar, eager twinkling of her eyes and peel of delighted laughter. We would read her *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* until she drifted off, quietly clutching her favorite blanket. We immersed her in our world every time we could, and watched with keen eyes for any sign that her magic was beginning to awaken.

We were never given the slightest piece of evidence, and by the time Willow had celebrated her fifth birthday, we were more than anxious. The countless Healers she visited told us to simply wait...that children grew into their abilities at their own pace. Hermione and I were encouraged to help usher in her magic by means of tutoring and teaching, and that was precisely what we did from that day forward. The collection of beginning spell books belonging to the Hogwarts library migrated to our home at an alarming rate. We read together; we practiced spells and worked to improve her concentration, but at the end of the day, the only thing we were able to yield were the frustrated, disappointed tears that fell from her eyes. Never once did it occur to us that she simply could not do it.

Two more years eventually came to pass, and on the eve of her seventh birthday we were informed of the rare possibility we feared. The malignant notion had been hiding in the back of my mind for some time, but I refused to give it any thought. It held no merit, no truth, in my eyes, and to think such thoughts left me feeling as though I were doing Willow an immense injustice. I wouldn't allow it, but that didn't mean it wasn't so. Hermione and I eventually came to understand that the nature of Willow's birth might have delayed or prevented the manifestation of her abilities altogether. There was no other explanation as to why a healthy child, born to two magical parents, would not inherit the power of magic.

*Magic is born, not made.*

Those were the five words a Healer of pediatrics told us the fateful day our dreams for Willow smashed to jagged pieces. It was never the same after that, though Hermione and I sought desperately to provide her with a sense of normalcy and acceptance. Magic in our home was used in moderation, notwithstanding Willow's complaints. We slowly began to change our routines to suit what was best for her. It would have been an egregious farce to claim it came easily for her mother and me. Some days fared better than others, but we persisted in spite of it all for Willow's well-being. Despite every obstacle we overcame, we could not change the fact that we possessed magic and Willow did not. That was the most difficult thing of all, knowing we had something she so desperately wanted but were without means to give it to her.

The moment the thread unraveled for Hermione was when she came across Willow sitting cross-legged on the floor of her bedroom pretending a Muggle pencil was a wand. She was nine, and it broke her mother's heart into thousands of razor-edged shards. She would flick the point of the yellow number two in the direction of a random plaything, and very softly, almost pleadingly say a spell that should have come easily for her. When the trinket refused to move or disappear, she pushed it under her bed and out of sight with her bare foot, a cheerless little smile curling her lips. That night Willow wished upon the stars to be like her mother, and Hermione cried herself to sleep.

There was absolutely nothing I could do to ease any of the pain they felt.

For me, the breaking point came about quite differently. It was in the form of a letter that wasn't even addressed to me, but Willow put it in my charge nonetheless. She was ten, only weeks shy of her eleventh birthday, when she handed me a folded slip of parchment one of the mornings I was expected at Hogwarts for a pre-term staff meeting, and said in a polite tone of warning, "*Don't peek. It's for the Headmistress.*"

When I asked what could have possibly been so secretive that even the messenger couldn't be privileged to the contents she assured me that it was nothing of great consequence, merely an inquiry into Minerva's summer. I conceded, refusing to break the trust she had placed in me for the sake of easing my curiosity, and the folded slip of parchment found its way into my pocket where it became lost in the events of the day. The letter eventually came barreling back into the forefront, as most hidden, horrible creatures do, and managed to catch me completely off my guard. It had fallen out of my pocket and landed face-up on the stone floor of my office, and I found myself reading it before I could stop.

*Professor McGonagall,*

*I hope you've enjoyed your summer holiday. My Dad says the start of the new school term will begin very soon. He doesn't seem as excited as me. He says he plans to take me with him when he comes to visit next time. I think before any of the students arrive. I'm very excited to go, but I was really hoping when he went away to teach I might go with him too.*

*My Mum and Dad don't know I'm asking you this, but I think you can keep a secret. I am asking if it would be alright to come with him for a while to see if my magic works there. Maybe we could find a way for me to borrow some magic from someone. I'm not asking for forever. I would never ask someone to give up something so special for their whole life. I would like to know what it feels like to be like my Mum and Dad even if it only for a little while. I've seen how happy it makes them, and I want to have that. I want to know what it is like to have magic in my hands and make things move when I point a wand at them or think about them. I know I'm asking for a lot, and I know there is a chance it might not work, but I would very much like to try one time to see if coming to Hogwarts might help me. I think it might help.*

*Mummy and Daddy are unhappy because I'm not like them. I know they are, but they never say it. I want to make them happy and proud of me. And I didn't know who else to ask except you. Please, Professor McGonagall. If you can could help me make them happy I would like for you to please try.*

*Please try.*

*Willow S.*

As I stood, looking down at her note in a dazed horror, I was hit with the sudden, sickening realisation that Willow had not only told me a grievous lie, but she had done so with the hope of protecting me from the truth she believed I would never be able stomach. She had been right.

That wrecked moment of helplessness had eclipsed all the rest.

The letter was never delivered to Minerva, and I could never find it in myself to show Hermione. In truth, there was very little I could do after reading her carefully-penned plea. That night was one of the only nights I was late in returning home. I sat alone in the dark, dingy seclusion of my office, and for the first time in the eleven years that Willow had been in my life, silent tears of my own fell for her and what she could never have. I kept asking myself, what on earth I had done. What had we done to give her the impression that we were anything but swollen with pride for her?

It hit me, later that night as I lie awake in bed, in one of those dreadful instances of clarity one experiences during their lifetime that painfully reminds us of how irrevocably flawed we are, even when we think we're doing the right thing. I had unwittingly set her up to fail in my haste to prepare her for the world...that was the only way I could make sense of it. Hermione and I had spent the majority of Willow's life building up this whimsical world full of magic, filling the vulnerable and trusting catacombs of her mind with glorious expectations and promised dreams, and she could never be a true part of it.

No one can find fault in a parent's desire to rear a responsible, well-educated, and equally well-rounded human being. In time, I've come to understand, hidden deep within a parent's desire, is also unknown and unintentional likelihood that the child might become slightly damaged in the process. I speak from not only experience as a father, but also from the standpoint of one who received enough damage to nearly shatter their childhood beyond repair. There is no preventing it, though we try just the same. Even though I had never and would never raise my hand or my voice to Willow as my father had to me, even though I gave her everything I believed she needed and more, I had still managed to tarnish and perhaps crack the delicate thing that she was. We had never stopped to consider the consequences of providing every opportunity for her, because we assumed she would always have those opportunities.

That night, sleep never came for me. My thoughts were centered on the folded slip of parchment still hidden in my trouser pocket, and the chocolate-haired girl who trustingly placed it in my hands. It was still dark when I left Hermione's side, slipping out of our room with the letter in hand. I knew Willow would doubtless be asleep, but what I had to say to her couldn't wait any longer.

As I turned the corner for her room, the light from under the door caught me unawares, and I would be lying if I said my feet did not falter. She had been awake after all. Out of curiosity, my ear fell upon the closed door and I heard her voice. She was reading her favorite story aloud...*The Fountain of Fair Fortune*...undoubtedly from the beaten copy of *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* handed down to her from her mother. From the day it had been confirmed she would never have magic of her own, she had immersed herself in the pages containing that particular story, sometimes reading it several times a day. She found solace in the words of a fairy tale that she had obviously lost in us.

I lost track of time, standing there with my head resting on the other side of the door, listening to her read as if she was speaking to an old friend. Her voice rose and fell with each trial the characters faced, each of them coming alive from the brittle pages.

"Good Sir..." I heard her say, realising she was nearing the end of her tale, "...*You must bathe, as a reward for all your chivalry...*"

I listened on, expecting to hear her tell of how Sir Luckless, amazed at his sudden and unusual luck, took to the water in a flourish, eager to receive his fair fortune, but Willow's intentions were different.

"No, *Amata*" she said, her tone reflecting that which she designated for the knight. *Willow should be the one to bathe. The water of The Fountain of Fair Fortune will give her back her magic... magic that will make everything better.*"

In that moment, every thought in my head disappeared in a sudden, white explosion of hopeless agony and guilt. Without thinking, I pushed through the door and into her room, where I found her sitting atop her bed, cocooned in the mass of linens and blankets. She cast a fleeting, startled glance in my direction, and clutched the book close as if it contained a precious secret.

"*Why aren't you sleeping?*" I asked, and Willow lowered her head, hiding beneath her hair.

Before I could say another word or take another step, she blurted, "*Do you think it could ever be real?*" When she looked up from the book in her hands and I could tell she had been crying...an act she never permitted her mother or me to see unless brought about by dire straits. "*I want it so badly to be real...*"

"*And if it were real?*" I said. "*Would you seek it out?*"

Her eyes found mine and she stared at me, as though searching for the answer she thought I wanted to hear. She looked away as a single silent tear slid down her cheek and told me, "*More than anything*"

"*Because it would make everything better, yes?*" The question hung suspended between us, and I produced the letter she had intended for Minerva, slipping it carefully into the palm of her hand.

"*Everything,*" she answered, looking down at the slip of parchment clutched between her fingers. *Everything would be better...*"

To put into words what I felt in that moment is nothing short of impossible. Watching Willow weep that early morning out of deep-seated frustration was difficult in and of itself, though not nearly as grueling as accepting there was not damn thing I could do about it. Did I love my daughter? Without question the answer was yes, and with everything that I had. Did I wish the fates had been kinder with the hand they had dealt her? Every day, but that did not mean her mother and I loved her any less.

I learned quickly, that parents could always prepare their children for the future, but they would never be able to lay their future neatly at their feet...that was the hardest thing to accept about being a parent. I would have to find my own solace in the fact that Willow would eventually come to understand and accept the fact that, no matter what she tried to do or wished would happen, her situation would not change. She would have to remember in her grief for herself and what she couldn't have that her mother and I loved her no less.

Others would, on occasion, ask me how I felt about fathering a non-magical child, as though lumping my anger, my frustration, and my sorrow into a neatly packaged bundle was a simple matter. I think that I may say, and not without shame, that I felt a lot of negative emotions, but never toward her...denial being the most prevalent. I still cleaved with relentless hope that fate would find it right to bestow upon her the talents that had been given to her mother and myself. To this day, part of me still longs for her to experience magic to its fullest, because if anyone deserved it, it is her.

She would *never* be a Squib in my eyes. That term is far too crass, too vulgar, to describe anything about her...she has always been a delight and in no way a disappointment to me or her mother. She is our perfectly imperfect daughter, and I believe I speak for Hermione when I say if we had to do it all over again, she would always be what we want - laughter, heartache, and all.

She is our Willow. She our world, and even though she will never cast a single spell, she has filled our lives with more magic than she will ever know.

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**Author's Notes:** As always, dear readers, reviews are welcomed and greatly appreciated. A special thank you to Meladara, who took the time to give this a quick once over. This story was written for Orlando\_Switch, who so graciously provided me with a prompt of her choosing.

Orlando's prompt: Turns out that the only child of the lovely Granger-Snape family has inherited neither his/her parents brilliant mind, nor their magical strength. In other words, the child has average intelligence and average magical abilities. How do SS/HG deal with having a child that is so different than they both are?