

The Witch and the Sorceress

by Susan L. Carr

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skeeter451@mysticmuse.net

Rating: NC-17

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Spoilers: Season 7 *Same Time, Same Place*

Author's Notes: A special thanks goes to CN Winters for her permission to use the Red Oyster Bar. Enjoy her most excellent stories located at: [CN's Caldron](#)

Warning: Parts of this story contains scenes of extreme violence. Please do not read if you are underage or could possibly be disturbed by it. You have been warned!

Pairing: Willow/Tara

Summary: Willow returns to Sunnydale from England and dreams of Tara with unexpected results.

Part One

Willow helped Buffy clean up the kitchen after dinner and asked Dawn if she wanted help with her homework.

"No, I'm good, thanks Willow," the teen said. "I'm just gonna write a while and then go to bed."

Buffy put on her best Mom look and asked her younger sister, "Did you finish your homework, Dawn?"

"I did! I swear! You can ask Mr. Jenkins tomorrow if you want!"

"And don't think I won't," Buffy said.

Dawn looked at Willow in exasperation, "Sheesh, see what I get having my big sister work at the high school? What a pain!" She tossed her head and left the kitchen; glad for the excuse not to help them clean up.

Willow watched her go. "I can't believe how much she grew up over the summer," she said to Buffy.

"I know," Buffy replied. "She's no longer a spoiled rotten kid."

"Like you when we first met. She's got that same aura of confidence you had."

"Can you read aura's now?" Buffy asked.

"No," Willow smiled. "At least, not unless I'm actively trying. But I can see that you're starting to rub off on her. You've been working with her? Training her?"

Buffy nodded. "She made me realize that I can't protect her from the horrors of life, I can only teach her what I know so she can protect herself. And I can only watch her back."

"What took so long?" Willow asked.

"I don't know," Buffy replied. "Stubbornness? Blindness? Fear? I guess maybe I thought she could have had the normal life I couldn't."

"Not really possible in Sunnydale, is it?"

"No," Buffy said and sighed. She looked at Willow. "She has grown up a lot this summer. Just like we all did when we were her age."

Willow smiled sadly at the memory.

Buffy changed the subject. "How's the...uh...you know..." She pointed at Willow's midsection.

"Good," Willow said and ran a hand over her stomach. "You really helped this morning. The pain is gone and it's starting to crust over. I should be fine in a few days."

"If you need me again, just ask."

"Thanks, Buffy. I can't tell you how much it meant to me," Willow said. "I still feel your power running through me, but I don't think I should push it."

"Well, let me know when you need a booster shot," Buffy said and folded the dishtowel she was using. "There, all done. I'm off to patrol."

"Alone?" Willow asked.

"Not alone. Xander's keeping me company tonight. We'll probably run into Spike, we usually do sometime during the night."

"How's Spike doing?" Willow said.

Buffy looked uncomfortable. "I don't know. Not good, I think."

"How did it happen?" Willow asked.

"The madness?"

Willow shook her head. "His soul?"

Buffy gaped at Willow. "How...?"

"All things are connected, remember? I can feel it." Willow got a faraway look in her eyes. "His is different than Angel's," she said.

"You can feel Angel's soul?" Buffy looked at her in shock. "He's in L.A.!"

"No," Willow said. "Angel's too far away, but I felt it run through me when I cast that gypsy curse. I could feel it...only for an instant, but it was long enough to get a taste of it."

"And Angel's soul is different than Spike's?"

Willow nodded. "Angel wasn't always good, even before he lost his soul. He only became good after it was restored to him. Two centuries of inflicting horror upon the human race kind of gave him a wake up call."

"And Spike?"

"Spike has the soul of a poet. He spent his life before he was turned yearning for love and passion and acceptance. There was fear and anger in him, but not enough to damn him for all eternity."

Buffy looked confused. "So if Spike has his soul back...?"

Willow completed the thought, "I think you and he have a lot more in common now than you did before."

"Oh my god," Buffy said. "Is that why he's like he is now?"

"Could be," Willow said. "You had people who loved you to help you when you returned."

"And I didn't do that great a job of it," Buffy said. "But Spike..."

"Spike has no one," Willow said completed sadly. "All he has are the memories of his vampire existence."

Buffy sighed, "Thanks Willow. How did you get all wise?"

"That's what Wicca is all about," she said. "The craft of the wise. Tara tried to teach me that, but all I wanted was the power."

"Is that what Giles was teaching you in England?" Buffy asked. "Religion?"

"Yes, mostly," Willow said. "Wicca acknowledges the feminine as well as the masculine aspects of deity, something that the Judeo-Christian and Islamic religions don't, creating an unbalance that can cause strife. Some Wiccans only focus on the goddess, but I'm too Jewish for that. Giles encouraged me to balance the way I was raised with the things I've learned and done. I need to learn to balance the power with the wisdom to use it. I can't *not* use it, I can only try to control it."

"I'm sure you will," Buffy said. "I have a lot of faith in you. And now, I'm off to meet Xander!"

"Good slaying, Buff."

Willow spent some time at her computer making contact with the other techno-pagans on the Net and gathering information. Things were definitely stirring, but just what no one seemed to know yet. She filed the various reports, sent off a brief email to Giles hoping he would check it soon and then logged off.

Upstairs, she saw Dawn's light was off and realized it was late. She was still juiced from Buffy's boost of power that morning, but she thought she would try to rest. Her body still had healing to do, but tomorrow was another day. She changed the bandages on her stomach, wincing only slightly at the sight of the damage there. It was still bad to look at, but it was much improved.

Willow put her pajamas on and then performed her nightly devotion to the goddess. Afterward, she felt grounded and she fell asleep minutes after she turned out the light.

Willow recognized this dream. She first had it a month ago while in England. The pain of Tara's death was as sharp as ever, but with the help of Giles and the coven she was beginning to accept it. And with the acceptance, she was able to allow her memories of her life with Tara into her consciousness. And those memories were filtering into her dreams as well.

In this dream, Willow and Tara were making love. Willow could feel a cool breeze across her back and soft grass under her palms as she leaned over Tara. She could hear no sound, but as she traced her way down Tara's body she saw the light from the moon reflected in Tara's creamy white skin.

The chill breeze caused goosebumps to crawl over Willow's skin as Tara moved her hands over Willow's body. Willow felt a light film of perspiration spring over her body and her breathing grew ragged. She rolled onto her back pulling Tara on top of her. She looked up into the sky and saw the swollen moon glowing red in the night.

The moon? Willow thought. It is a new moon, she remembered. There shouldn't be a moon in the sky and it shouldn't be red.

Tara? Willow thought in her mind, but in her dream she could still hear no sound.

Tara continued her movements over Willow's body and Willow gasped in pleasure. She arched her back in response to Tara's touch and from the corner of her eye glimpsed a stone slab. Fear wormed its way through Willow's delight and she tried to stop her lover, but Tara would not be denied.

Tara, wait, Willow thought again. She felt herself begin to peak as the fear grew. She looked behind her and saw the slab was a headstone.

Oh goddess, Tara! Willow tried to scream as the climax ran through her body. Willow fell back against the ground, breathing heavily, the fear and the pleasure coursing through her in waves.

Tara, Willow asked silently again and for the first time since the dream began she heard a sound. Willow recognized the growl.

Tara? She looked down at Tara and as the blond woman lifted her head, Willow could see the unmistakable gleam of fangs glowing in the red moonlight.

Tara! Willow screamed and woke up.

Willow opened her eyes and glanced out the window, her heart pounding in fear and confusion. There was no reddish glow, the night looked normal. Willow tried to sit up, but fell back against the bed. She looked at the clock and saw it was almost sunrise. She'd been sleeping most of the night and should not be this exhausted.

Finally, her heart resumed its normal beat and Willow was able to rise off the bed. She looked out the window and everything looked calm. In the bathroom, she washed the sheen of perspiration from her face and as she glanced into the mirror she gasped in fear. Her eyes were black.

Willow woke to the noisy sound of Dawn getting ready for school. She climbed out of bed, dimly remembering falling back into unconsciousness only a few hours before. She opened her door just as Dawn was passing her room.

"Hey Willow!" the Dawn said and then took a closer look at Willow. "You okay? You look exhausted. Your eyes are all red and bloodshot and stuff."

Buffy came out of the master bedroom. "Will? Everything okay?"

"I'm fine," Willow tried to smile. "Bad dreams, I guess. Didn't sleep well."

"Want me to stay with you?" Buffy asked. "Today is my day at the school, but I could..."

"No," Willow interrupted. "I'll be okay. I just need some more sleep. Probably still jetlagged."

"Yeah, okay," Buffy said. "I'll come by at lunch to make sure you're fine. Come on, Dawn, let's get going."

Willow went downstairs to make a cup of tea. She thought about eating something, but her stomach turned at the thought. Finally, unable to stay up any longer, she went back to bed and fell into a deep sleep.

Willow awoke feeling better. She could hear sounds from downstairs and realized she had slept the day away. She dressed quickly and joined Buffy and Dawn in the kitchen.

"Hey," Willow said as she entered.

"Hi Willow" Dawn said and grabbed another dinner plate from the cupboard.

"Good morning," Buffy said sarcastically. "Feeling better?"

"Yes," Willow said and sat at the counter. "I slept all day, huh?"

"You were dead to the world when I checked on you earlier. You weren't kidding about the jetlag."

"Yeah," Dawn popped in. "Not to mention getting eaten by Gnarl."

"Dawn!" Buffy chastised.

"What?" the teen stomped. "It's true!"

Willow laughed. "She's right, Buff."

"But she should try to learn a little tact," Buffy said.

"Tact is just not saying true stuff," Willow said.

"Oh god, please don't encourage her, Willow." Buffy said.

"I'm sorry," she said and turned to Dawn. "She's right, but I'm not offended, Dawnie. You know you can say or ask me anything."

"I know, Willow," Dawn said with a happy smile. "Just like Tar...oh god! I'm sorry!"

Willow got up to hold Dawn as the teen burst into tears. Buffy just looked on helplessly as they both tried to comfort each other. As the Slayer, she was used to getting into action mode to solve problems, but nothing except time would be able to assuage their grief over Tara's loss.

Later, Dawn headed upstairs to work on homework and Willow asked Buffy if she could join her on patrol.

"Are you sure, Will?" Buffy said, concerned. "I mean, you're still not a hundred percent and what about the magic?"

"I feel well enough, I'm almost healed and I need to practice controlling the magic. Where better than on patrol?"

Buffy thought about it. "Ok, but if there's trouble, I want you to fade into the background."

"Agreed," Willow said. "Just call me fade-girl!"

Buffy went upstairs to tell Dawn they were both leaving and to get to sleep early and then they left.

They walked through the cool night, both comfortable in their silence. Buffy was enjoying the company of her friend. She realized she had missed Willow while she was away, but was too busy training Dawn over the summer and worrying about the re-opening of the high school to think about it much.

"Did you see Spike last night?" Willow asked.

"No," Buffy replied. "It was a quiet night."

"Nothing unusual?"

"Like what?" Buffy asked.

"I don't know. Strange moon, perhaps?"

"No, no moon at all. Why?"

"Oh, just a dream I had. Probably nothing."

"Let me know if anything strange happens," Buffy said. "You know how dreams are. And especially since we don't know exactly how your power will manifest itself. Okay, Will?"

"Alright, I promise," Willow agreed and felt a twinge of guilt over not telling her about the rest of the dream.

The cemeteries were quiet so Buffy and Willow headed over to Willy's Bar. The owner gave a start when he saw Willow.

"I heard the Red Witch was back," Willy said. "Hey, do me a favor and leave the joint standing, okay?"

Willow looked at him, "Don't piss me off and I'll think about it."

Buffy tried to hide a smile as she asked Willy, "What's the news, Willy? Things have been quiet for a couple of days. Anything happening?"

"You came in here for that?" Willy complained. "Geeez, Slayer. It's bad enough you chase my customers off when there's stuff goin' on, now you're out to ruin me just because you're bored?"

"Cut the whine, Willy, before I give you something to whine about," Buffy said.

"Okay, okay!" Willy threw up his hands in resignation and leaned forward to lower his voice. "Look, the only talk I've heard tonight is that there was some kind of disturbance over at the cemetery on Oakwood last night."

"What kind of disturbance?" Willow asked, concerned. She knew that cemetery all too well.

"Some kind of powerful mojo, that's all I heard. A couple of the poker regulars were out looking for kittens when something happened that scared them. They came running in here green around the gills."

"They here now?" Buffy asked.

"Nah, no game tonight and they cancelled last night's because they didn't have enough ante. Kittens are getting scarce lately."

Willow scowled, "I'm starting to get pissed off, Willy! I like kittens!"

"Hey, don't blame me, Red. I like 'em too! I just provide a service for my customers is all."

"Clem is part of that game, isn't he?" Buffy said, changing the subject. "I don't suppose he's here either?"

"Nah," Willy said. "Home watching his stories."

"Anything else, Willy?"

"Nope, all's quiet in Sunnydale!"

"You and I both know that's not true, don't we Willy?" Buffy said.

"Yeah, and I hope you take care of it, Slayer, I really do." he said ruefully. "Apocalypses are bad for business, you know."

After they left the bar, Willow asked, "Do you know where to find Clem?"

Buffy nodded. "He took over Spike's crypt when Spike left. Been staying there since."

However, the floppy skinned demon could not be found.

"Clem?" Buffy called as they entered the crypt.

"He's fixed the place up a bit," Willow said sarcastically. Clem had indeed made some decorating improvements, but the place had been trashed.

Buffy headed downstairs and reappeared a moment later. "Nothing," she said. "No sign of him."

"What now?" Willow asked.

"Check out the cemetery, I guess," Buffy said and looked at Willow.

Willow nodded and said, "I think I'll pass, if that's okay."

"I kinda expected it," Buffy said and took Willow's hand in a comforting gesture. "You'll be okay? Or do you want me to walk you back first?"

"No, I'll be fine. Think anyone would dare mess with the Red Witch?" Willow chuckled.

Buffy laughed. "I'm sure there are plenty of baddies out there who would try."

"Maybe, but I'll be okay. You go and I'll see you later, Buffy."

Willow walked slowly back to the house, enjoying the night air, but troubled by the events of the night. The news of a disturbance last night at the cemetery where Tara was buried coupled with her dream, was just too coincidental to be ignored. Add to that Clem's disappearance and the state of the crypt just increased her worries. As Willow reached the house she decided she would visit Tara's grave in the morning.

When Willow went downstairs after her morning meditation, she was surprised to find Xander with Buffy in the kitchen.

"Hey," Willow said, getting a glass out of the cupboard. "Good morning, Xander. You're up early for a Saturday."

Willow got the carton of orange juice out of the refrigerator. As she turned around, she noticed the expression of their faces.

"What?" Willow asked, alarm filling her gut.

"Will..." Xander said.

"What is it? Buffy? Is it Dawn? Where is she?" Panic filled Willow's voice.

"No!" Buffy said, "Dawn's fine. She's still asleep."

"Then what?" Willow asked.

"Last night, at the cemetery..." Buffy began.

"Willow," Xander said. "Buffy found Tara's grave."

"What about it?" Willow said, fearing what was coming.

"Will, it was disturbed," Buffy said.

"How?"

"She's gone," Buffy said, looking down at her hands. "I...I think someone took her."

"How?" Willow asked, quietly.

"It looks like someone broke into her coffin, took her and then filled in the grave again."

"You checked her coffin?" Willow asked.

"Yes, Will. Empty. I'm sorry."

"Willow..." Xander began.

"No, it's okay," Willow said, putting up a hand to stop him. "I'm okay. I'm not going to go all veiny. Tara's gone. Whatever that was out at the cemetery, it was not Tara."

Buffy and Xander let out a sigh of relief. "Good, that's good, right?" Buffy said to Xander.

"Yeah, that's real good because I'm fresh out of yellow crayon stories," Xander said and sat down.

"Thanks guys," Willow said. "Thanks for telling me. Thanks for...trusting me."

Buffy smiled. "We had to tell you, Will. You deserve to know."

"Now what?" Xander asked.

"Good question," Buffy said. "Obviously that magical disturbance had something to do with Tara."

"But what?" Xander asked. "From your description of Tara's grave, it doesn't look like someone used magic to do the deed."

"No, but something happened," Buffy said. "Willow, I hate to ask this, but do you think it could have something to do with someone needing something for some kind of magic spell? I mean, Tara was a powerful witch, right?"

"You mean like eye of newt? Horn of toad?" Willow forced a smile, trying to hide her fear.

Buffy nodded, "Yeah, like that."

"I'm not sure," Willow said. "Could be anything. Remember the last time we found dug up dead girls?"

Xander turned a pasty shade of pale. "Please, don't remind me. Besides, this is Tara we're talking about."

"Tara's dead, Xander" Willow said, with strength in her voice. "She's not coming back and no matter what magics are involved, she's lost to us forever."

Dawn came into the kitchen. "Hi guys!" she said cheerily. "What's up?"

"Dawn, we need you to get into research mode. Xander will fill you in and give you a hand. I'm going to see if I can find Spike and try to get some information out of him. Willow?"

"I'll find Anya," Willow said.

"Good idea," Buffy said. "Let's get moving, gang. We have a mystery to solve."

Willow shifted the canvas bag she was carrying with her as she walked quickly through the cemetery. She felt guilty about lying to Buffy—she never had any intention of seeking out Anya—and she felt guilty about withholding information from her friends. However, Tara was her responsibility and she didn't want to involve anyone else, or possibly put anyone in danger.

The sun was lowering in the sky as Willow made her way to Spike's former crypt. The witch cautiously entered and found the same disorder from the day before. However, Willow ignored the mess and quickly descended into the lower level of the crypt.

At first the area seemed empty, obviously what Buffy had seen the day before. Willow placed the bag on the ground and, sitting in a comfortable lotus position, she closed her eyes and opened up her senses.

There! Willow stood and looked into the darkened corner of the dank space.

Lying on the ground, curled up and apparently asleep, was Tara.

Willow sank to her knees as she gazed on her former lover. The blond witch was still wearing the clothes they had buried her in and Willow's heart broke at the sight. She reached a hand forward, past the protection barrier Tara had cast to keep from being seen, but stopped when she realized there was no rise and fall of Tara's chest. She wasn't breathing.

With tears flowing freely down her face, Willow fetched the canvas bag and, reaching inside, removed a wooden stake. She placed the tip of the stake against Tara's still breast and noticed how the sharp point dimpled Tara's pale white skin.

"Please forgive me, my love," Willow said and Tara's eyes opened.

"Don't!" Tara growled and grabbed Willow's hand holding the stake.

"Oh goddess!" Willow cried and tried to lean her weight on the wood.

"No!" Tara growled and pushed Willow off.

Willow flew through the air and crashed against the stony wall of the crypt. Pain flared through her head as it crashed against the wall and Willow fought to remain conscious. She saw Tara approach her, elongated teeth gleaming and vampiric visage at the fore, and then the world went black.

Willow felt a rough cloth pressed against her eyes and a trickle of moisture run down one cheek. She reached up and pulled the cloth away from her face and painfully opened her eyes. Clem was standing before her and he took the cloth from her hands and dipped it into a basin filled with water.

"Good evening," the cheerful demon said, wringing out the cloth and moving around to press it against the back of Willow's head. She hissed at the pain and gingerly felt the large bump there. She looked at her fingers and was happy to see no blood.

"Clem," Willow croaked. "What happened?" She looked around and saw she was in the upper level of the crypt, propped up on Clem's comfy chair.

"Good question!" he said. "I just got back this evening and found you here like this. By the way, welcome home! Have a nice trip?"

"Yeah. Thanks," Willow said absently. "Where have you been? Buffy and I were looking for you yesterday and found your place like this." Willow waved a hand and indicated the mess.

"Oh that? Well, that happens on occasion. Nice place like this, sometimes the folks around here are a little jealous. Perhaps I won too much at the poker game last week. Who knows? Not like I'd carry a grudge or anything."

Willow blinked at his cheerful optimism. "Have you seen anyone around? Perhaps someone who shouldn't be here?"

Clem frowned. "Like who?"

Willow shrugged and changed the subject. "Buffy wanted to ask you about some funny magical going-ons at the cemetery across town the other night. Willy said a couple of your poker buddies might have seen something."

Clem looked a little uncomfortable.

"What?" Willow demanded.

Clem's skin quivered a bit "Oh, just they saw a strange red glow coming from one of the graves."

"A red glow?" Willow asked.

"Real powerful like...well, just powerful."

"Like how powerful?" Willow demanded.

"Oh, just like, you know...like last spring when...at Rack's..."

Willow nodded. "And your buddies were afraid of it?"

Clem nodded enthusiastically. "Oh yeah, not many around here wants to mess with that kind of power, I can tell you that!"

"That's very wise of them," Willow said. "Look Clem, perhaps it might be better for you if you found another place to stay for a while. I mean this one seems to have bad luck attached to it, getting broken into and all."

"Oh?" Clem said disappointed. "Well, there was a nice little place I heard was empty across town. Perhaps I should...?"

"Perhaps you should," Willow agreed. "You call on me if you need a favor or anything, Clem. We're friends and friends help friends out. Agreed?"

"Sure thing!" Clem said and started gathering up his stuff. "I'll be out of here in a jiffy, don't you worry none!"

"And Clem?"

"Uh huh?"

"I was never here and you haven't seen me."

Clem paled at the tone of her voice. "You bet!"

After Clem left, Willow checked the lower level of the crypt and found it empty of any magical residue. Tara had left. Probably to feed, Willow thought and felt nauseous.

To busy herself, Willow attempted to straighten up the crypt, but soon she collapsed on the chair sobbing.

She had done this, she knew. She had turned her lover into a monster. A vampire, a creature she had been fighting against for so many years.

And Buffy! Willow thought. She was the Slayer, chosen to destroy Tara's kind. Willow knew Buffy would not have hesitated to kill Tara as she herself had done earlier. Buffy would consider it mercy.

Willow used the washcloth to wipe the tears from her flushed face. She tried to compose herself. She was still responsible; she had to deal with this one way or another. Willow settled down to meditate to try to recover from the headache the injury was causing her.

After some time, Willow heard a sound and looked up. Tara stood before her.

"Willow," Tara said.

Willow tried to swallow against the dry fear caught in her throat. *Now is not time to show fear*, she thought to herself. She stood and straightened her back. "Tara," she answered.

"You're human," Tara said, walking around Willow, eyeing her.

"You're a vampire," Willow said and had to force back an inane laugh.

Tara completed her slow walk around Willow and looked into Willow's green eyes, a confused expression on her face. "You're my sire," she said and Willow blinked. "You made me. I can feel it," Tara continued. "I can feel my connection to you. Can you?"

Willow shifted her thoughts inward and found there was indeed a link between her and the vampire. She realized the connection had been there since she had awakened from her dream, but she had not been aware of it.

Willow followed the connection back to Tara and almost staggered back from the assault. Tara was a barely controlled cauldron of emotions. Anger, envy, fear, curiosity, desire, passion, and above them all, hunger, roiled within her. Willow fought for control. Tara continued to watch.

"How?" she asked Willow. "How could you make me?"

Willow took a breath. "Magic," she answered.

Tara again walked slowly around Willow, looking closely at her. This time, Willow could feel Tara's examination of her through the link. It was almost as if Tara were tasting her.

"You've grown powerful, Willow," Tara said. "Much more powerful than I knew before I...died."

"Do you remember that?" Willow asked.

Tara touched her chest and looked down. "Shot," she said. She looked at Willow. "Who?"

"Warren," Willow said, bitterness in her voice. "The king of the nerds. He was after Buffy and shot her. You were a bonus gift. Buy one, get one free."

Tara thought for a moment. "And Warren?"

"I killed him," Willow said and Tara gave her an evil smirk.

"Quickly?" Tara asked.

"No," Willow said. "I tortured him to death."

"Good," Tara said. She looked around the crypt. "Clem is gone?"

"I sent him away," Willow said.

Tara nodded and looked again at Willow. "Willow. My Willow." Tara moved forward and caressed Willow's cheek. Willow leaned into Tara's cool hand.

"Tara," Willow began. "Buffy..."

"She was shot, you said. But she lives. I felt her earlier as she patrolled through the cemetery."

Willow nodded. "I healed her and then I tried to kill her. And then I tried to destroy the world."

"What stopped you?"

"Xander," Willow answered.

"Xander!" Tara laughed. "You mean he finally did something right?"

Willow smiled then her face grew serious again. "Tara, if Buffy finds you..."

"She'll slay me," Tara completed.

"Yes," Willow said and closed her eyes. "You should leave Sunnydale."

"No," Tara said. "Kill her, then she's not a problem."

Willow gasped. "No, Tara, I won't kill her and neither will you."

Tara looked at her, confusion on her face. "Why not?"

Willow sighed. "Tara, after we buried you, I went back to England with Giles. I've been learning about Wicca and the goddess and the power and beauty of the Earth."

Tara laughed, "About time! I've been trying to get you to pay attention to that since we first met. All you cared about was your power." Willow could feel Tara probing her through the connection they shared. "It's so much stronger now...and darker."

"I know," Willow nodded in agreement. "But I was in England trying to learn how to control it. "

"Did you?"

"I learned so much, but I still have a long way to go."

"Then why did you come back?"

"The Hellmouth," Willow said. "I can feel it, Tara. It's getting ready to open again and I'm afraid this time it will succeed. I came back to help Buffy stop it from happening."

"So you would help the person who would kill me?" Tara said.

"I have to, Tara. It's what I do. I've been fighting this fight since I was a teenager. I can't turn my back on it now."

"Then why?" Tara asked, anger crossing her features. "Why bring me back? And why bring me back like this? You've been fighting vampires all that time, why did you do it, Willow?"

Willow silently looked at her former lover. Tara approached her, smooth features turning as her anger grew, demon eyes flashing yellow. "Why, Willow? Why pull me from my grave like this? I am not the lover you knew in life!"

"I know," Willow whispered as Tara reached her and, grabbing her arms, slamming the smaller woman against the harsh wall of the crypt.

Willow cried out from the pain and at Tara's inhuman strength.

"Why?" Tara shouted in Willow's face.

"It was an accident!" Willow screamed.

Tara released Willow in shock and the redhead slid down the wall to collapse in tears.

"It was an accident," Willow sobbed. "I didn't mean to bring you back, Tara. Not after Buffy, not after I recovered from the madness over losing you. It...it was a dream. I cast the spell in a dream. I'm so sorry, Tara."

Tara kneeled down in front of Willow. "And so you came here to kill me," Tara said. "With this."

Willow lifted her face up and looked at the stake Tara was holding.

Willow nodded.

Tara grabbed Willow's hand and pressed the stake into the palm. "Then do it!" she said savagely and tore open the filthy blouse she had been buried in. "Finish it! Take care of your little mistake Willow. Clean up after your own mess. You wouldn't want Buffy and Xander to find out about your dirty little secret now, do you?"

"Tara..." Willow began and stopped as Tara pressed the sharp end of the stake against her chest, holding Willow's wrist with her other hand.

"Go ahead, Willow!" Tara taunted. "No one has to know about it! No one you know has seen me, not even Clem. Do it and then you can go back to being Good Little Red Willow Rosenberg. Why, I'm sure if you're a good girl, then Buffy and Xander and maybe even your parents will forget all about how you tried to destroy the world and everything in it. Hey! Here's a thought! Why not go back to chasing after Xander Harris like the love-sick puppy dog you used to be and maybe they'll even forget about you being a dyke? Go ahead Willow!"

"No," Willow said and tried to pull the arm clutched in Tara's grip away.

"Why not? Isn't that what you want? To be a good girl, Willow? Isn't that why you even started playing around with magic in the first place? So you can impress Buffy and the other Scoobies with how good a witch you could be?"

Willow growled. "No!"

"Finish it, Willow!"

"No!"

"Do it!"

"No!"

"Why not?" Tara roared.

"Because you're mine!" Willow's eyes flashed black as she threw the vampire from her with a burst of dark power. Tara landed several feet away on her back. Before she could rise, Willow had tossed the stake aside and jumped on top of Tara, straddling her and pinning her to the ground.

"You are mine, Tara Maclay!" Willow hissed. "In life, or in death, you are mine! You belong to me. I made you and I don't need a sliver of wood to unmake you. Do you understand me?"

"Get off me!" Tara growled as she struggled to escape Willow's grip.

"Say it, Tara!" Willow demanded.

"No!"

Willow half lifted the vampire from the floor and smashed her down again. "Say it, Tara! "

"Yes!" Tara screamed. "I am yours!"

Willow's lips crashed down upon Tara's in a frenzy of passion and the vampire responded in kind. Willow knew that she would have to deal with the consequences of her actions later, but for now she didn't care. She had claimed Tara as her own and now she would reap the reward.

Part Two

Willow and Tara take a little road trip out of Sunnydale. Who says you can't go home again?

Buffy jumped over the headstone and pushed Xander out of the way of the vampire ready to pounce on him. She slammed the vampire in the chest as Xander went flying.

"Ewww!" Buffy said, wrinkling her nose. "Didn't your mother teach you to shower when you wake up?"

To Buffy's disappointment, the creature did not respond to her taunting, it only continued forward towards the slayer.

Buffy grabbed the arm the vampire thrust towards her throat and twisted it behind its back in a move she'd performed a hundred times before. To Buffy's disgust, the arm came free in her grasp.

"Gah!" she cried and threw the arm away from her. It landed next to Xander who hastily crawled away from it as it continued to twitch.

Buffy pulled a stake from her sleeve and rammed it home in the vampire's chest. It exploded in a pungent cloud of dust.

"Oh gods!" she coughed. "What a stink!"

Xander looked back toward the arm, but it too had disappeared. He stood up on shaky legs.

"Uh, Buffy," he said. "Excuse me if I'm wrong, but I don't think that was your average, garden-variety vampire."

"No," Buffy said, the worry evident in her voice. "Looked like one, I mean, fangs, bumpy head, ugly face and it poofed like one, but the stench! And I ripped its arm off like it was attached with string cheese."

"Almost like it was more dead than usual," Xander speculated.

Buffy looked at him, her eyes narrowing in thought.

"Almost like a zombie," she said.

Xander's eyebrows climbed his forehead. "A zombie vampire? Can life on the Hellmouth get any more weird?"

"Yeah, it can," Buffy said darkly. "I'll walk you home and then we'll call it a night. Come by in the morning and we'll check it out. See if Willow and Dawn found out anything useful."

"Buffy," Xander said, a sick look on his face. "You don't think this is related to Tara's body being missing?"

Buffy's expression matched his own.

"Let's hope not," Buffy's tone was grim.

Buffy walked into the darkened house on Ravello Drive. She headed upstairs and peeked in on Dawn who was sleeping peacefully.

Buffy looked at Willow's closed door and debated whether to bother her friend or not. Buffy cracked open the door and looked toward the bed through the dim light from the hall.

"Willow?"

The bed was empty and unused.

Buffy threw open the door and turned on the light as she entered. Nothing seemed to be out of place or disturbed. Buffy turned on her heels and stomped down the stairs.

She picked up the phone and was about to dial Xander's number, when she heard a key in the lock.

"Buffy?" Willow said.

"Willow!" Buffy said and put the phone down. "Where have you been? Do you know what time it is?"

Willow's face darkened at Buffy's tone. "I was out, Mom. Does this mean I'm grounded?"

Buffy blinked in surprise. "No! No, I'm sorry, Will. Just threw me when I found you gone."

Willow nodded and started up the stairs. "Okay. 'Night."

"Willow!"

Willow stopped and looked down at Buffy and raised an eyebrow.

"Will, is everything okay?" Buffy asked.

Willow sighed and Buffy could feel the tension ease a bit.

"I'm fine, Buff," she answered. "I'm gonna take a shower. If you want to talk why don't you meet me downstairs afterwards?"

Buffy considered as she looked at her friend. Willow looked tired, as she had ever since she had returned from England. She wanted nothing better than to allow her friend to rest, but as the Slayer she had a responsibility to save the world, even if it meant using her friends. And Willow had come home to help.

"See you in a few," Buffy said and turned toward the kitchen.

Willow dried her hair with a towel as she left the bathroom. She knew Buffy was waiting for her, but was reluctant to face the Slayer at the moment. Willow sat at her desk and looked at the small mirror tacked to the shelf. Her eyes were bloodshot and red-rimmed, but fortunately there was no sign of black. The magic she had used against Tara earlier that evening had had no lasting effects.

Willow flushed at the memory of the passion she shared with Tara that evening. At first Willow imagined it was more passionate because of the time they had been apart, but Willow knew that wasn't true. Not even when Tara had taken her back after months of separation was it as intense.

Vampire sex, Willow thought. Raw, wet and primal. No Sarah McLachlan love there and even wilder than the wildest monkey love. Willow had ravaged Tara like she never had before, taking her roughly again and again, claiming the vampire as her own. Willow opened up the towel wrapped around her and looked down at her body. *And it looks like Tara had done some ravaging of her own,* she thought grimly. Welts, scratches and the occasional bite mark surrounded the newly healed skin on her stomach.

Willow sighed and grabbed a pair of pajamas. Time to face the music, she thought as she began to dress.

Buffy was sitting at the large dining room table, a pile of books stacked near her and a pot of tea and cups laid out on the table. She glanced up at Willow as she entered.

"Hey," she began. "I need you to check for any references about strange vampires."

Willow frowned and grabbed a cup as she sat at the computer on the table. "Strange vamps?"

"Yeah," Buffy said. "Xander and I fought a really creepy vamp tonight. It was like a cross between a vampire and a zombie."

"A zombie-vamp?" Willow asked, her brow furrowing in confusion.

"Weird, I know." Buffy said and picked up another book. "Remember those zombies we fought senior year? It was like those, all smelly and scaly and flaky. But it was also a vamp...fangs, typical vampire face, and it definitely set off my vamp senses."

"That is weird," Willow said.

"So, I need help getting a handle on it. I don't like surprises." Buffy continued to turn the pages of her book.

Willow could feel her friend's eyes on her as she booted up the computer. She knew Buffy wanted to talk further about her whereabouts tonight, but was respecting her privacy. Willow wanted to share with her best friend, but this thing with Tara was too new and she couldn't trust Buffy not to immediately go after her.

"Did you talk to Anya today?" Buffy casually asked, still looking at her book.

"No," Willow said, not lying, but not telling Buffy she had not bothered to look for Anya. "Must be off somewhere exacting vengeance."

Buffy sighed, fearing that a confrontation with Anya would come sooner than she was prepared to deal with. "Dawn and Xander didn't find anything useful about what I found at the cemetery."

"Oh," Willow said. "Well, that's okay, Buffy. This weird vamp should take center stage. I think it represents more of a danger to you than a missing body."

"Will..." Buffy began and finally looked at her friend.

"What?"

"Are you okay? I mean, with Tara being the missing body and all?"

Willow felt tears in her eyes. "Tara's dead, Buffy."

"Yeah, but what if some freak has taken her and..."

"Buffy!" Willow said sharply. "She's dead. You remember where you were when you were dead? You were there before I took you away from that place. Do you doubt that Tara didn't deserve to go there too?"

Buffy sat and felt her own eyes mist. "Tara had the most gentle soul of all of us...even Mom."

"Exactly," Willow said and reached for her friend's hand.

"Yes, Willow," Buffy said. "Tara deserves to be there."

"And nothing will disturb her, Buffy. No matter what happened or happens to the shell that contained her soul, she'll stay at peace."

Willow wanted to continue, but suddenly a strange feeling swept over her body. Every inch of her skin was suddenly flushed with an unnatural heat and she felt herself breaking out in a sweat.

"Willow?" Buffy asked, pulling her hand away quickly. She looked at her hand as if it was contaminated, as if she had touched something unpleasant. She looked back at Willow. "What's wrong?"

"Oh goddess!" Willow cried and gripped the edges of the table in her hands.

"Willow!" Buffy cried, alarmed. She realized that the hair on the back of her neck was standing up and she looked around in confusion for a danger she couldn't see.

Willow jumped up and ran for the bathroom, a hand to her mouth. As the contents of her stomach came gushing out into the bowl, she realized what was causing her nausea. Tara was feeding.

Buffy followed a moment later and grabbed a washcloth and held it under the tap. "Willow?"

Willow shook her head as another contraction hit her, but this time she could only dry heave. After what seemed an eternity, the sensation faded,

but Willow knew with an unnatural certainty that Tara had killed her victim. Through the connection with the vampire, Willow felt the bloodlust for the kill and the joy and satisfaction it brought her undead lover.

Willow pulled some paper off the roll and wiped her mouth. She grabbed the bottle of mouthwash sitting on the sink and swigged, spitting into the bowl. After several rinsing repeatedly, she finally put the bottle back on the sink. Buffy reached down and held the cool cloth to Willow's fevered forehead. "Come on. Let's get you to bed."

The Slayer half-carried the shaking redhead to her bedroom and laid her down on the bed. Before she even realized what she was doing, she grabbed a crucifix from the nightstand and pressed it to Willow's chest.

"Buffy?" Willow asked weakly. "What are you doing?"

Buffy tossed the cross back. "Sorry. Slayer senses. Felt a vampire. If there can be zombie-vamps, then why not body-possessing vamps?"

"Oh no," Willow moaned, realizing Buffy could sense Tara through her. She groaned and pushed herself halfway up on the bed and leaned against the headboard. "No, I'm definitely not a vampire."

"Are you okay?" Buffy asked as she sat down next to her friend.

"Yes," Willow replied. "I think it was something I...ate." Willow swallowed down the remembered taste of blood in her mouth.

"Stay away from the Doublemeat. Those veggie burgers are not all they're cracked up to be," Buffy offered.

Willow gave the Slayer a ghost of a smile. "Okay, I'll stay away from that place."

"Look, Willow. About tonight...I'm worried about you. It's not like you to be all secretive. You've always been honest girl, ever since I first met you." Buffy took Willow's hand in her own.

"I'm sorry, Buffy," Willow said. "I know I've got a lot of making up to do and it's going to take a lot of time before you and Xander and Dawn and even Giles can learn to trust me again. But Buffy, I swear to you by the Earth and the goddess that I will allow no harm to come to you or those you love and I swear that I will never use magic again against you or Xander or Dawn or anyone else you love." Willow squeezed Buffy's hand in promise.

Buffy squeezed gently back. "Thank you, Willow. That means a lot to me. But please, please promise me that you'll include yourself in that as well."

"Me?" Willow asked.

"Yes, you!" Buffy said. "You're one of those whom I love and hold dear. Please don't bring harm to yourself, alright?"

Willow smiled sadly. "I'll try, but you know we are all responsible for our own karma."

Buffy nodded and let go of Willow's hand. "Now, get some sleep. We'll worry about zombie-vamps tomorrow."

Willow woke to the sound of the phone ringing in her ear. She reached over to the nightstand, wincing at the bruises that had sprung up overnight and picked up the handset.

"Hello?"

"Willow," Tara said in her ear. "Good morning, lover."

Willow sat up in her bed, ignoring the pain of her stiff muscles as she heard the low sultry voice.

"Tara?" Willow said, keeping her voice down.

"Who else would it be? How many other lovers do you have? Pick up a couple in jolly old England? Or maybe you satisfied a few of your girlhood fantasies with a certain bespectacled Watcher while you were there?"

Willow ignored the taunts. "It's daylight. Shouldn't you be resting?"

"Got things to do, people to see! Or is that people to do, things to see? In any case, time is a-wasting and I want you with me. Meet me around the corner in twenty minutes. Pack an overnight bag."

"What? Overnight...? Tara, what are you talking about? It's daytime, are you ready to go poof?"

Tara laughed, "Oh ye of little faith, my darling. Get dressed. I'll be waiting."

Willow placed the handset back in its cradle and rubbed a hand over her eyes. She glanced at the clock and saw she had been sleeping only a few hours. The weariness threatened to wash over her and all she wanted was to get back to sleep, but the tone in Tara's voice compelled her to get up. She quickly used the bathroom, grateful that the doors to both Buffy's and Dawn's rooms were still closed and then hastily dressed. She threw a few things in a bag and left a scribbled note on her bed for Buffy.

Leaving the house, the cool autumn air helped clear her head. She walked quickly and as she rounded the corner she saw a black van idling at the curb. It looked eerily like the nerdmobile, including the blacked out windows. As she approached, the passenger door opened.

"Tara?" Willow asked as she looked into the van.

Tara was sitting behind the wheel of the van. The windshield and windows had been soaped over leaving only a sliver clear to view the road.

"Get in, beautiful," Tara said with a smile that brought warmth to Willow's stomach.

Willow climbed in the van and threw her bag in the back. She closed the door and looked at Tara as the blond put the van into gear and drove away from the curb.

"You're looking better," Willow commented. "Cleaned up a bit, got some new clothes." Tara was dressed all in black: jeans, boots and a Melissa Etheridge tee shirt. Willow noticed the black biker's leather jacket hooked over the back of Tara's seat.

Tara chuckled as she drove. "After you left last night, I made a new friend over at that dyke bar you always tried to get me to go to. If I had known it was that much fun, I would have gone with you. Oh well, plenty of time in the future, right?"

Willow cleared a small space on her window so she could look out at the passing scenery. "So, she took you home and you helped yourself to her stuff after you killed her."

"Don't worry, hon. She went with a smile on her face." Tara laughed and then looked at Willow who sat in silence. "What? Don't tell me you're jealous!"

Willow thought about it and realized she was not jealous; the girl had meant nothing to Tara. For Tara, she was only a means to an end. "No,"

she said finally turning to Tara. "Not jealous. Just a bit upset about the killing. I felt it."

Tara nodded. "I know. I'm sorry about that." Willow's heart skipped a beat as Tara made that quirky movement with her lips that was so reminiscent of the old Tara whenever she felt chagrin or embarrassment. Then Willow remembered the chagrin Tara was feeling was because Willow was a partner to murder.

Tara continued, "I think in time we'll learn to control this connection, block out certain undesirable feelings."

Willow was touched by the sincerity in Tara's voice. She knew that she was sitting next to a cold-blooded killer, but it wasn't as if she hadn't associated with or was even friends with cold-blooded killers before. Life on the Hellmouth was bound to make for some strange bedfellows. And she could feel through the connection she shared with the vampire that Tara truly regretted the pain she had caused Willow.

"Where are we going?" she asked as she noticed Tara was heading for the freeway.

"I've got a thermos full of coffee if you want it, but you might want to get some rest. I doubt you'll be getting much sleep tonight again." Tara said, pointing to the space between the seats. Willow picked up the thermos and opened it. She breathed deeply and realized that Tara had made it just the way she liked it.

"Thanks for the coffee," Willow said, pouring some into a travel mug she found near the thermos. "Want some?"

"Not now, my love. Maybe later." Tara said and smiled sweetly at her.

"Where are we going?" Willow asked again.

"Oh, just a little road trip. Some things I need to take care of."

"Road trip? What things?" Willow asked, a cold feeling of dread replacing the warmth from the coffee.

"Just some unfinished business," Tara said and Willow shivered at the tone in her voice. "I'm feeling the need for closure."

"Tara," Willow asked for the third time. "Where are we going?"

Tara smiled again at Willow, but this time it brought no comfort.

"Home," Tara said and Willow's heart dropped.

Willow spent most of the day in silence. She dozed for a few hours and woke up when she felt the van jolt. She peered out the window and saw it was dusk. Tara was maneuvering the van carefully down a badly maintained dirt road.

"Good morning, sleepyhead," Tara said with a note of cheer in her voice.

"Where are we?" Willow asked.

"Almost there," Tara said and turned the van off the road onto an even worse track. To Willow, it looked like a horse trail.

"This is not a road," Willow pointed out.

"Right you are!" Tara said. "But it's good enough to get where we're going and the van will be hidden."

"You lived here?"

"Nearby. See the creek up ahead?" Tara pointed.

Willow peered through the trees and saw a glimmer of water. She nodded.

"That creek runs past the old homestead," Tara said. "I spent countless hours exploring the countryside around here on horseback. I know it like the back of my hand."

"How far are we from the ranch?" Willow asked. She knew Tara's family boarded horses, but never made much more than living at it.

"A mile or so," Tara said. "We'll wait here a while for things to settle down and then go pay our respects."

Tara stopped the van, parking under a tree where it was nearly invisible from the trail. She grabbed a few things from the back and opened the driver's door.

"Coming?" she asked Willow and jumped out.

Willow checked to see if there was any coffee left in the thermos and then headed out of the van. With the sun down, the night was chilly, but not unpleasant. "Tara?" she called.

"Over here!"

Willow followed the sound of Tara's voice and found her setting up a picnic at the edge of the creek. A small gas lantern provided a soft yellow glow. Tara looked up as Willow approached.

"Hey," Tara said and opened up an ice cooler. "Sit. Make yourself comfortable."

Willow sat at the edge of the blanket Tara had laid out on the ground. She watched as Tara pulled out a wine bottle and a couple of glasses from a picnic basket and set them on the blanket. Tara smiled at her and laid out several wrapped packages and a couple of blood bags from the cooler. Willow recognized them as being from the same blood bank they got Spike's supply.

Tara followed Willow's gaze to the bags. "I'm not going to hunt tonight, but I still need to eat."

Willow nodded. "It's okay. It's better." She grabbed the bottle of wine. "Corkscrew?"

"Here," Tara said.

Willow opened the wine and poured herself a glass and emptied the contents of one of the bags into the other. Tara smiled at the gesture and lifted her glass in a toast.

"Here's to us and new beginnings," she said and looked at Willow expectantly.

"New beginnings," Willow agreed and clinked her glass against Tara's.

Tara handed Willow a sandwich and then leaned back on one arm as she sipped from her glass. Willow watched Tara as she took a bite of the sandwich. She probed through the connection and found that the taste of blood in Tara's mouth did not bother her. Tara chuckled and looked at her.

"Not like last night, is it?" she asked Willow.

"No," Willow said. "No bad feelings."

Tara nodded. "Not the same feeling for me either, my love. It's cold, lifeless, devoid of passion. Just a bit of nourishment. Like drinking a tasteless protein shake instead of sitting down to a full meal at a five-star restaurant. It's survival, not life."

Willow sighed. "I'm sorry, Tara. I'd prefer it if you didn't kill."

"I know," Tara said and looked at the creek. "I would like to promise you I won't, but I can't lie to you, Willow."

"Thank you for honesty at least." Willow said with a touch of bitterness in her voice.

"It's true, Willow," Tara said. "I can't lie to you. You're my sire, you'd know a lie in an instant."

Willow nodded, accepting the truth of this. "But you'll still kill?"

"I'm a killer, Willow. It's what I am. It's what you made me to be."

Willow closed her eyes and breathed a heavy sigh. "Spike doesn't kill. Neither does Angel."

Tara laughed. "Spike doesn't kill because he can't, not because he won't. Angel doesn't kill because he has a conscience and a mission to serve the Powers That Be. I'm sure he could be just as ruthless as the rest of humanity."

"Couldn't I...?" Willow began. "Tara, couldn't I be your conscience?"

Tara looked at her. "You, Willow? You be my conscience? I think you need to work on your own conscience first before you can be mine, don't you?"

Willow nodded. "I guess you're right," she acknowledged. She finished her wine and Tara poured her another glass. "So, what happens now? Why are we here? And is it so bad that you're trying to get me drunk?"

Tara laughed. "No, my love. I'm not trying to get you drunk. And as for tonight, let's worry about that later. Right now, I'm enjoying being here with you. It's a beautiful night, don't you think?"

"Is this where you'd come to look at stars?" Willow asked looking up at the sky.

"Yep!" Tara said and stretched out on the blanket. She reached a hand over the blanket to Willow and tugged the redhead closer. "Come lay beside me? Please?"

Willow put aside her wine glass and snuggled into Tara's arms. As Willow laid her head on Tara's chest, she sighed, missing Tara's former warmth and the reassuring beat of her heart.

Tara picked up on Willow's emotions and kissed her gently on the forehead. "I'm sorry, Willow. I'm not like I was before. I can't be."

"I know," Willow said. "I can't expect you to be." Willow thought for a moment. "It's like how lions and wolves and even hyenas have to follow their nature and hunt and kill cute little bunnies and baby deer for survival. You can't expect them to be anything other than what they are. It's just that..." Willow stopped.

"It's just that my kind does not hunt cute little bunnies, do we?" Tara finished for her.

"No, you don't," Willow said and pressed her face into Tara's chest to hide her shame.

Tara ran her hands over Willow's back and lifted up the back of her shirt. Willow shivered at the cool touch and the even cooler night brushing over her skin.

"You know what it's like, don't you Willow?" Tara asked, not stopping the motion of her hand.

"What...what do you mean?"

"The hunt," Tara said and deftly undid the snap of Willow's bra. "You've hunted, haven't you?"

"Yes," Willow said and shifted in Tara's arms to allow freer access.

"You hunted down a god after she hurt me," Tara said and pulled Willow's shirt over her head. "You paid her back in pain and then took back what she had taken from you. You took back what was yours."

"You!" Willow said as Tara pulled off her bra and then lowered her mouth and took Willow's nipple between her teeth in a gentle bite.

"You hunted your own baby deer, my little lioness. Did you feel the power when you took its life?"

"Yes," Willow moaned.

"You hunted down my killer, didn't you Willow?" Tara asked as she looked up at her lover.

Willow met her gaze.

"Yes!" she replied savagely, her eyes flashing in anger. "He killed you and he hurt Buffy. She would have died also if I hadn't removed his bullet from her chest and healed the damage it did to her. Not even the modern marvels of medicine could have prevented her death. I only wish..." Willow stopped, her anger turning to amazement.

"You only wish what?" Tara asked, a secret grin on her face.

"I only wish I hadn't killed him so quickly," Willow admitted.

Tara growled and allowed her demon face to emerge, eyes flashing yellow in the night. "You're as much a predator as I am, Willow. Is it any wonder you brought me back this way?"

"No, I understand it now," Willow said. "I won't ask you not to kill. I won't like it when you do, but I won't ask it of you."

Tara smiled and her features smoothed to normal. "Thank you, my love. I wouldn't expect you to be anything but what you are either. I know you'll continue to fight by the Slayer's side, and I won't like it when you do, but I won't ask you to stop."

"Good," Willow said and grabbed Tara's face between her hands. "Now that we understand each other, can you just be kissing me now?"

Tara growled again as her lips met Willow's and demanded entrance. Willow ran her hands through Tara's hair as she pulled the blond vampire's head closer and thrust her tongue inside Tara's mouth, tasting the metallic copper of the blood Tara had consumed. Willow moaned with pleasure.

"Tara," Willow gasped as she at last broke the kiss.

Tara lifted herself off of Willow and sat up, straddling Willow's thighs. She looked down at the half naked redhead glowing pale in the darkness of the night.

"Willow," she breathed. Tara's hands moved to Willow's waist and began to undo the buttons on her jeans.

Willow felt her breath quicken as Tara's hands completed their task and then slid under the rough fabric of the denim.

"Naughty Willow," Tara chuckled. "You left the house without panties on. What would your mother say?"

Willow raised herself up and slid her hands under Tara's tee shirt. "Who's naughty now? Hmm? No bra? Not like you, Tara."

Tara closed her eyes as Willow's hands caressed her breasts, bringing the nipples erect. Tara grinned down at Willow and with a quick movement lifted the shirt over head. She pressed her hands against Willow's, increasing the pressure.

"Oh, I'm naughty, lover. I'm very naughty," Tara purred.

"Skin," Willow whispered. "I want more skin."

Tara leaned back and before Willow could miss her presence, Tara had both of them naked and was pressing the full-length of her body against Willow's.

"Like that?" Tara asked.

"Oh yes!" Willow moaned and pressed her breasts against Tara's.

"You feel so warm," Tara whispered as she began to nibble from Willow's neck to her nipples, running her hands along Willow's back and down to caress the rounded cheeks.

"Oh goddess, Tara!" Willow begged and felt Tara's cool fingers slip deep into her warmth. Willow's hand clenched the blanket underneath her and arched her back in pleasure. Tara pulled her fingers out almost all the way and then pressed in again causing Willow to cry out. Tara added another finger and cried out as she felt Willow's pleasure through the connection.

Willow screamed Tara's name as her body arched off the blanket. Tara held Willow with one arm and thrust into her until Willow's body stopped convulsing. Tara held Willow, relishing her warmth as the redhead's breathing returned to normal.

"Tara," Willow said softly. "Tara."

"I'm here, Willow," Tara said and held her closer as Willow snuggled in her arms. "You should sleep."

"I know," Willow whispered softly and ran a hand over Tara's cool body. She slid the hand downward and sought out the wetness she knew was always there for her, in life and beyond. Sliding a finger between Tara's lips, past the damp blond curls, she let out a deep chuckle and rolled the vampire onto her back, looking into blue eyes darkened in passion.

"But I'm not going to," Willow whispered and in leaned forward to taste her lover.

Part Three

Willow and Tara's road trip continues. Family reunions can be so trying.

Willow watched Buffy and Dawn stroll through the cemetery. The sisters were engaged in conversation, but Willow could hear no sound except for the wind rustling through the trees.

Buffy? Willow called soundlessly. *Dawn?*

The walking girls ignored the witch.

Willow felt danger rising from the Earth. She turned and ran ahead of the Summers sisters hoping to head off the threat.

Willow ran through the maze of headstones, trying not to trip. As fast as she ran the quicker Buffy and Dawn seemed to follow. She glanced back and whimpered in terror, realizing she could not prevent what was about to happen.

Willow put on a burst of speed, but a hand reached out from a grave and grabbed her ankle. Willow crashed to the ground.

She tried to catch her breath, but was assailed with a horrible stench oozing from the creature crawling its way out of the grave. She recognized the thing from Buffy's description of the zombie-vampire. Willow wrenched her ankle free and crawled backward away from the thing. It followed Willow as it freed itself from its grave.

The vampire reached for Willow again and raised its yellowed eyes to meet Willow's.

"Sire!" it whispered.

Willow screamed.

"Willow!"

Willow gasped for air and sat up, clutching the blanket under her. She looked at Tara, kneeling next to her and holding her shoulders.

"Tara?"

"Shhh," Tara said and pulled Willow in for a hug. "You're awake. It's okay."

"Buffy! Dawn! They're in danger!"

Tara laughed. "Of course they are. They live in Sunnydale."

"No! You don't understand!" Willow said, pushing back to look at Tara. "They need me."

Tara gave her a serious look, but her eyes were still full of glee. "Willow, my love. We're a long way from Sunnydale, so unless you're planning on teleporting us back to there, then we're stuck here until our business is finished."

"Tara..."

"Willow, do you want to use a spell to get us back to Sunnydale?"

Willow sighed. "No, I'm not ready...no."

"Fine, then," Tara said and let Willow go as she stood up. "Get dressed, sweetie. As good as you look sitting there—good enough to eat, actually—we really must be going."

Willow ran a hand over her face to clear the confusion. She looked at Tara who was clearing up the remains of their nocturnal picnic. Her connection with the vampire was strong and even though she had created Tara and was technically her "sire" in vampire-lingo, Willow didn't think she had enough control over Tara yet to prevent her from wanting to do violence to her family. However Willow believed she was strong enough to stop Tara from doing violence, if it came to that. Tara was powerful, but her magic had been based in light and the vampire had not yet had time to match Willow's level of experience. Tara might be able to manipulate Willow's emotions with ease, but when it came to magic, she just an amateur.

"My clothes?" Willow asked.

Tara threw a bundle into Willow's lap as she passed on her way to the van. Willow dressed quickly and folded the blanket she had been sitting on. Tara grabbed it from her, threw it into the van and closed the door.

"Come on," she said taking Willow's hand and leading them along the horse trail that ran parallel to the creek.

"Don't we need light?" Willow asked.

"No," Tara said brightly. "I can see just fine."

Willow sighed again, dreading the events to come. She had no idea what Tara was planning. Willow had only met Tara's family once and she had always respected Tara's reluctance to speak about her pre-college life. Goddess knows, Willow thought, she had little to do with her own family after she left home and her parents still lived right there in Sunnydale.

Willow saw a dim glow ahead as the trail turned away from the tree-lined creek.

"That it?" she asked.

"Yes," Tara said. "Home, sweet home."

"Tara, what's going to happen?"

"We're going to visit. They should just be sitting down to dinner right about now, but don't be disappointed if they don't invite us to join them."

"Dinner?" Willow said. "A little late for that, isn't it?"

"Maybe for other families, especially out here in the sticks, but not mine," Tara replied.

Willow looked at her in the dim light. She could see the gleam in Tara's eyes and the reflection from the stars off her very white teeth.

"Why?" she asked.

"Oh, that was a courtesy to me!" Tara said and pulled her along. "By the time I finished with the horses and cleaning out the stables, it was late to be starting dinner. Dad and Donny would very patiently wait until I had it served. I imagine they have cousin Beth serving them these days. Poor thing was always too stupid, even to know when to get out."

Willow shook her head at the mock sympathy in Tara's voice. "You mean they just sat around while you did all the work?"

"Uh huh," Tara said. "By the time I'd finish serving them and cleaning up, it'd be nearly midnight. That's the only time I had to free to do homework."

"They didn't care about your schoolwork?" Willow asked, shocked.

Tara let go of Willow's hand to open a small gate leading through a wooden fence. "Nope," Tara said, the cheer never leaving her voice. "The only reason I was allowed to go to school at all was because the truant officers would come by if I missed more than a couple of days. Dad figured I'd flunk out eventually and they'd stop coming around." Tara waited for Willow to walk through the gate and then carefully closed it behind her.

"How'd you manage to get to UC-Sunnydale?" Willow asked.

"Mother," Tara said, taking Willow's hand again and leading her along the path past a large, but obviously decrepit barn. "Before she got sick and when this was a profitable ranch, she managed to squirrel away a small trust fund for me. Dad couldn't touch it, as much as he tried."

"So when you turned 18, you took off for Sunnydale?" Willow asked.

Tara nodded. "For 18 years they told me I was half demon," Tara said as they reached the house. She looked at Willow, allowing her long bangs to cover her face in that shy look that Willow remembered so well. However, Willow could see the wicked gleam of Tara's grin. "And now, the demon's come home."

The house was an old, two-story ranch house that had seen several years since its last whitewash. A low-watt yellow light dimly glowed by the front door. A wooden deck ran around the perimeter of the house and Willow stopped at the bottom step.

"Tara, wait," Willow said as she looked up at Tara standing on the riser above her. "It's late, and they're probably not even home. I mean, we shouldn't just barge in like this, it's rude to not call beforehand and...and...we don't even have any presents! How can we visit without bringing presents! That's the height of rudeness!" Tara allowed her to ramble on a moment longer. "And besides, you're supposed to be dead! The police...they would have..."

Tara laughed, "Oh, I already took care of that, my love." Tara held up a small bundle of herbs that Willow recognized immediately.

"Oh..." Willow said in a small voice. "They won't remember you were killed."

"Nope, we don't want a little thing like that spoiling our fun, now do we?"

"Tara..." Willow began. "I can't..." Willow was unable to complete the sentence as her thoughts tumbled around in her head like marbles in a

glass jar rolling downhill. What if she couldn't stop Tara? What if things got out of control? What if she got out of control again? She had worked so hard with the coven in England to control her magic. She was terrified of losing it again. And if she stepped through that doorway and Tara did something to her family, then Willow would be just as guilty as the vampire. More guilty, in fact. She had created Tara and was responsible for everything that Tara did.

"Willow," Tara said and squeezed her hand in reassurance. "I promise you I won't force you to do anything you don't want to do. I just want you here with me tonight. Okay?"

Willow looked into the dark blue eyes flecked with gold from the porch light. She felt like she was standing at the edge of a precipice. If she went into that house and bad things happened... Willow was afraid to complete the thought. On the other hand, if she didn't go into that house, bad things would surely happen. Maybe could prevent whatever Tara was planning. Willow decided. She nodded and followed her lover.

Tara went to the front door and knocked brightly. The door opened a few moments later by a worn, tired-looking girl with blond hair pulled back in a ponytail. Several greasy strands had escaped the rubber band.

"Cousin B-B-Beth!" Tara stuttered. Willow looked at her sharply. Tara's stutter had almost ceased completely by the time of her death and Willow had yet to hear the vampire stutter. Then she realized why Tara was pretending—she needed an invitation.

"Tara!" Beth cried. "You're back!"

Tara nodded. "Yes, I am! Can we c-c-come in?"

"We?" Beth asked.

"You r-r-remember Willow, d-d-don't you?" Tara pulled Willow into the light from the doorway.

"Willow?" Beth said, her eyes narrowing. "Did she drive you back?"

Willow stood there silently, understanding Beth's confusion. The poor girl was so desperate for Tara's return to release her from her drudgery that she was willing to grasp at straws. Willow remembered her intense dislike of Tara's cousin from the time they met in Sunnydale and resented the bullying tone in her voice. She hoped the girl would stop her whining and not let them in.

"Beth, it's c-c-cold out here," Tara scolded. "Let us in."

Beth hesitated a moment longer and then opened the door wide. "Oh, alright, come in. But don't get Uncle upset, he's already in a bad mood and you know what that means."

Tara stepped through the door and Willow followed. "Big mistake, girly," Willow said to the girl as she passed. Beth's brow wrinkled in confusion.

The living room was clean, but like the rest of the house, shabby. Willow guessed it hadn't seen new furniture since Tara's mother was alive. The ceiling was vaulted, with the second story bedrooms running around the opening of the large area, giving it a wide open feel it really didn't have. To Willow, the house looked like a typical southwestern lodge, complete with moose head above the fireplace.

Beth led the way down a hallway and into the dining room. Over Beth's shoulder, Willow immediately recognized Tara's father and brother sitting at the table.

"Beth? Who was at the door?" Tara's father asked.

"Uncle!" Beth said trying to be enthusiastic, but Willow could hear the fear in her voice. "It's Tara!"

"Tara?" Mr. Maclay said and stood up.

"Tara!" Donny also stood up, so fast his chair fell over.

"Hello, boys!" Tara said and strolled into the room pushing past Beth. Willow slowly entered the dining room. She realized that at one time it probably was a warm and comfortable room to share fuzzy moments with family and friends, but time and neglect had taken its toll.

Mr. Maclay looked first at his daughter who flopped down in one of the chairs at the table and then at Willow, standing near the door. Beth moved around the room to stand in a darkened corner, as if to hide herself from any further attention. Donny just stared at his sister with a stupid expression on his face.

"Tara," Mr. Maclay said and Willow remembered the stern tone of his voice. "Why is she here?"

Tara picked up a butter knife from the table and began to twirl it around. "You remember Willow, Dad."

Willow knew the stutter was gone from Tara's voice forever.

"Yes," Mr. Maclay said. "I remember her from that...demon store. She was one of them...those people...witches, demons, degenerates!"

Tara laughed. "Those people, as you call them, were my true family, but Willow is so much more than that. Aren't you Sweetie?"

Willow ignored the hand that Tara held out for her. "Mr. Maclay, a lot has happened since you last saw Tara. She's not the same person she was. Perhaps you should be a bit more careful with your words?"

Mr. Maclay scowled at her. "I don't need some freak witch telling me how to handle my daughter. Now, why don't you just leave? Thank you for bringing Tara home, but we are her blood kin and we don't need interference from outsiders. Donny?"

Donny moved towards Willow, but she stopped him with a dark look. "Touch me, hick boy and you'll never touch anything else again."

Tara chuckled. "I wouldn't try it if I were you, brother. You should see the last guy who messed with her. Not a pretty sight."

"Tara!" Mr. Maclay began. "If you have not come to your senses and have come home for good, then why are you here?"

"It's time you answered for Mother," Tara said and Willow shivered at the tone of her voice.

"Your mother?" Mr. Maclay began. "What are you talking about? She's long gone."

Tara nodded. "Long gone, perhaps, but she didn't have to be. Did she?"

"Your mother died from cancer!"

"Yes, but where were the doctors? Where were the treatments?"

"Tara you know we didn't have the money for that!" Mr. Maclay protested.

"That's not true, and even if it was you had resources. You could have sold some land, perhaps even worked a bit harder and earned some money for insurance. There were also government and state agencies that could have helped."

"No!" he said, emphatically. "We don't need outsiders. We take care of our own. We always have and always will!"

"But that's just it, Dad," Tara said and tossed the knife back on the table as she slowly rose from the chair. "You didn't take care of your own. Whenever she could get an appointment with a doctor I had to drive her, you were always too busy doing nothing to do it. The only reason she lasted as long as she did, was because of the magic we were able to do, but she was so weak and I was so young and only one person. She needed more."

"She didn't need that evil magic of yours!" Mr. Maclay said advancing on his daughter. "If anything, that only hastened her end! And ensured she's now burning in hell!"

Tara jumped towards her father and grabbed the man by the throat, demon face bulging in anger. She flung him against the wall and hissed in his face, "Which is where you'll be before this night is over, Dad!"

Donny rushed past Willow on his way to his father's aid, but Willow reached out a hand and grabbed him by the arm. He spun around and raised the other hand to strike her, but then it stopped in midair, his eyes bulging in terror.

"Wha...?" Donny whispered staring into Willow's black eyes.

"What did you do?" Willow demanded. "You bastard, what did you do to her?"

Tara looked at her lover from where she was holding her father against the wall. "Why don't you take a look, my darling?"

Willow looked into Donny's frightened eyes as his pupils grew wider and wider until Willow felt like she was falling through them into another dimension. She watched through Donny's eyes as the stuffing from a teddy bear gleefully flew about a small, little girl's bedroom. She looked up and saw a weeping Tara, no more than 6 years old, her dirty blond hair falling across her face as she tried to put the stuffing back into her other shredded bears.

Willow held up a small pen knife in her dirty boy's hand and growled, "Shut up or I'll put your eyes out like this!" She took the knife and with two quick flicks cut the eyes off of the bear she was holding.

"No, Donny. Please!" Tara begged as Willow reached for another bear and laughed at her sister.

"Don't you tell, Tara! Don't you dare tell!"

Fast forward, this time to a beautiful spring day as she raced along, the horse beneath her straining as she urged it faster by smacking its flank with the crop she was holding. She laughed as the wind brushed against her face and she saw Tara on her own horse trying to outrun her. Tara looked back in terror as Willow quickly gained, realizing she had no chance on the smaller mare.

Willow raised the crop as she drew even with Tara and brought it down across Tara's back in a vicious swipe. The young girl, not even a teenager yet, cried out in pain, spooking her horse who, already panicking from the chase, spun off quickly, causing Tara to lose her seat. A moment later, the girl crashed to the ground and the mare raced off.

Willow slowed her horse and brought it around in a big circle to where Tara lay on the ground, clutching her arm. Willow could see it was bent at an unnatural angle.

"Donny, help me," Tara begged.

Willow laughed. "Don't you tell, Tara! Don't you dare tell!"

She yanked on her reins and turned away from the weeping girl, leaving her to make her own way home.

Fast forward, this time walking into the barn to look for Tara to tend to their mother who had asked Willow to fetch a cool drink. Willow resented the whining old woman and hoped she'd hurry up and die already.

Over the sound of the cicadas buzzing in the dry heat and the soft murmur of the horses, Willow heard another sound, one she did not recognize right away. But then she heard a soft girlish giggle coming from one of the empty stalls and strode over to it, kicking through the loose hay with her boots.

She threw open the stall's door and there, pressed up against the rear of the stall, her head thrown back in passion, was her sixteen-year-old sister. Holding Tara upright, hands working their way under her sister's tee shirt was the Forrester girl, her dressage blouse unbuttoned and her lips pressed to Tara's neck.

The girls froze in place, unable to move as Willow laughed at the sight. "Well, lookit this!"

"Donny! N-n-no!" Tara begged.

"Oh Tara, this is gonna be so much fun!"

Willow flashed quickly through events, from sharing the gossip at school until it reached Mr. Forrester's ears, who pulled all of his horses from the ranch to gleefully watching her father as he dragged Tara into the barn away from the prying ears of her dying mother and mercilessly beat the girl with the horse whip for losing them their biggest source of revenue to joining in with her friends in the endless daily torment that was Tara's high school life.

Fast forward, this time again walking into the barn to look for her sister. It was nighttime, with the few remaining horses quiet in the early evening and the only sound the soft swish, swish of the broom and Tara's gentle weeping for their mother, barely cold in the ground.

Tara looked up at Willow, wiping a hand across her face to dry her tears. "W-w-what?" she asked.

"Dad and I are gettin' hungry, girl. Ain't you done yet?" Willow said, strolling over and peering in the wheelbarrow where the used hay from the stalls waited to be rolled out to the compost pile.

"N-n-not yet," she said. "S-s-soon."

"Well, what the hell is taking so long?" Willow snarled. "Not like we've got a barn full of horses here to take care of. Not since you and your little friend scared 'em all off."

Tara hung her head, her face flaming red in the fluorescent overhead lights.

"Things have gone all to hell cuz of you, Tara!" Willow yelled, walking up to Tara and yanking the broom from her hand. "First you chase off all of Dad's boarders, then Mom dies and we're left with no insurance and a pile of funeral bills and now Dad has to spend good money to get that trust fund of yours released."

"N-n-no!" Tara said, looking at Willow with determination. "That's for c-c-college. Mother wanted m-m-me to go to college."

Willow sneered. "You ain't goin' nowhere! You know they don't let demons into college."

"I'm n-n-not..." Tara began, but stopped as Willow backhanded her across the face.

"Don't you sass me, girl! You know damn well I have every right to put you down," Willow warned.

"Donny, p-p-please," Tara begged. "I just want to f-f-finish my chores and go to bed."

Willow grunted. "Yeah, I bet you do. Tell me, Tara, you missing that girlfriend of yours?"

Tara remained silent, hidden behind her bangs, a small trickle of blood dripping from her cut lip.

"Know what you need Tara?" Willow said, reaching for her sister. "You need guidance. You need someone to control that demon of yours, with its unnatural tendencies."

"Please, just l-l-let me f-f-finish and I'll g-g-get dinner r-r-ready."

"Not right now, Tara! It's lesson time!" Willow brutishly pushed Tara into the same stall she had found Tara with the Forrester girl. Tara tripped over the sill and fell heavily, striking her head on the bare boards.

Willow stalked into the stall and dropped to her knees, straddling her sister. She pulled out her buck knife from its sheath at her belt and smoothly cut away Tara's tee shirt, revealing the girl's full and lush breasts.

Tara, stunned from the blow to her head, struggled weakly, but Willow laughed at her efforts and held both of Tara's hands in her strong grip of one hand, as she pressed the point of the knife to Tara's throat with the other.

"Don't you fight me, girl!" Willow snarled into Tara's face, hot breath brushing back Tara's bangs. "I'll stick this knife in you faster than you can realize. And don't think anyone would blame me for killing a demon. Everyone knows how evil and disgusting demons are. You should be grateful!"

"No, Donny, please!" Tara begged

"Shut up, demon!" Willow snarled and stuffed the torn shirt into Tara's mouth, cutting off her cries.

Willow cut at Tara's jeans and panties with the knife, then tossed aside the shredded garments. Tara struggled, and Willow smacked the blond

across the face again, slamming Tara's head into the floor, stunning her nearly unconscious.

Willow fumbled at her belt and jeans until she was able to free herself and then roughly shoved Tara's legs open. She lowered herself and brutally entered Tara, ignoring the girl's faint whimpers through the gag.

"Goddamn demon," Willow grunted, thrusting into Tara again and again. "It's all your fault! Everything is your fault! Think you're gonna get out of here and go to college? I don't think so! I don't care how smart you think you are, you ain't going nowhere! You're gonna stay right here and take care of Dad and me the rest of your life. We're the only ones who can control your demon, girl!"

Willow thrust a final time and screamed as her climax ran through her body. She collapsed on the semi-conscious girl under her and rested a moment, catching her breath, ignoring the weeping girl.

Finally, Willow got up, adjusted her clothing and said to the naked girl huddled on the floor of the horse stall, "Don't you tell, Tara. Don't you dare tell!"

Willow found herself staring into the frightened eyes of Donny Maclay. With a snarl of disgust she threw the young man aside. Tara was still looking at her, holding her father by the throat against the wall. Beth was sitting in the corner, huddled in fear. Nothing had changed, no time had passed.

"Did he know?" she asked the vampire, nodding toward Mr. Maclay.

Tara looked at her father and backhanded him with a vicious blow. The man crumpled to the ground, unconscious. Willow glanced at the man and could find no sympathy in her for him. All she felt was the rage that was filling her being.

"Of course he did," Tara said, a note of cheer in her voice, but the demon face still visible. "He's the one who found me in the stable, naked, crying and Donny's cold spunk mixed with my blood all over the floor. I had to clean it up the next day."

"He did nothing to this piece of garbage?" Willow looked at Donny who was trying to crawl out of the dining room on his hands and knees. "Contineo!" she said and raised her hand. Donny froze in place.

Tara smirked. "Donny said my demon tempted him, forced him to do what he did. Dad punished him by taking away Donny's car privileges for a week. After that, everything was back to normal."

"Oh Tara," Willow whispered. She went to Tara, who hugged the redhead in a fierce grip.

"Tara, I'm so sorry. Why didn't you do anything? Go to the authorities? Run away?"

Tara shrugged. "The authorities around here are very similar to those in Sunnydale; they turn a blind eye on family squabbles. As for doing something, well, Mother taught me that all things come back in time. Karma would take care of Donny's crime and Dad's indifference."

Willow leaned in to give Tara a deep kiss, marveling at the new sensation of the vampire's fangs against her lips. Willow broke the kiss and looked into Tara's yellow eyes. She understood now. Tara was still manipulating her, but Willow accepted it and embraced it. Leaving Sunnydale and coming to this house was only an inevitable step in the journey she had begun the day Tara was murdered. The horrors that Tara had suffered at the hands of her family needed an answer and Willow was willing to provide it. When it came to Tara, the rage could not be denied.

"What do you think?" Tara asked, the knowing smirk on her lips pulling them into a pout.

"Karma's here," Willow said, and turned to Donny. "Come on, hick boy. Willow's got a special treat for you. Want you to meet someone special." Donny jerked to his feet, and moved toward the doorway like a puppet on a string.

"What about her?" Willow asked, pointing to Beth.

"Poor thing," Tara said. "I'm afraid the lights are on, but no one's home. Don't worry, I won't hurt her, but I want her to see the ending of what she's been a part of all these years. She knew what went on here, she blamed me for it and for her sorry lot in life."

Willow recognized that Beth was beyond help and turned back towards Donny.

Tara grinned. "I need to fetch some things of Mother's from the attic. Don't start without me."

"I won't," Willow promised. "It'll take a bit for him to get here. Don't be long, though. I wouldn't want you to miss the show."

Tara laughed, "I wouldn't miss it for all the blood in the Red Cross!"

Part Four

Willow crosses the line again.

**It was on Monday when my lover told me
Never pay the Reaper with love only
What could I say to you, except I love you
And I'd give my life for your's
Bif Naked "Lucky"**

Willow stepped out of the house, not bothering to glance back at the terrified man following her. She stopped in the clearing between the house and the barn and with a wave of her hand Tara's brother continued into the darkened barn, his movements jerky like an automaton's. Willow waited a moment as she watched him with her mind's eye until he disappeared into the barn, and then made sure he was tied securely by conjured restraints. A reddish glow emanated from the doorway and through the cracks in the wood.

Willow threw back her head and looked at the stars shining above. The cool peaceful night suddenly shivered with the power she released from her.

"Come to me," she demanded in a dark voice, the sound transcending barriers as she summoned from beyond her dimension. Another burst of dark power rose from her, engulfing her in its red light as it shot into the sky. Willow's red hair blew back from her face from the energy.

The light faded as the power was released and Willow sank to her knees to rest and wait. From inside the house, she could hear large objects being tossed around and she glanced back as a large dresser came flying through the upstairs window and crashed to the ground. A moment later cousin Beth came running out of the house. Willow watched in amusement as Beth ran over and dropped to the ground in front of her.

"You've got to help me!" Beth pleaded with Willow. "She's gonna kill me!"

Willow looked at her. "Did she hurt you?"

"No, but..."

"Did she try to hurt you?" Willow asked.

"No, but there's something wrong with her! That's not Tara!"

Willow smiled sadly at the girl. "You're right. You don't remember, but Tara died months ago."

Beth looked at her in confusion, then her expression turned horrified as Willow's words broke Tara's spell. "I know," she whispered. "They...they told us she had been killed last May. Then...then..."

Willow waited.

"What is that thing?" Beth finished.

"That's Tara," Willow answered.

"But..." Beth tried to reason.

"She's a vampire," Willow said.

"Vampires aren't real!" Beth insisted and Willow rolled her eyes in impatience.

"After all you saw in Sunnydale, do you really believe that?" Willow asked. "Vampires are very real, and your cousin is one."

"No!" Beth insisted. "You're a liar! Uncle told me. You're a witch and a liar! Tara's dead. That's not Tara. She'd never hurt anyone. Donny! Where's Donny? He'll help me."

"He's in the barn, but I'm afraid he can't help you."

"He will!" Beth cried.

"He's a bad man, Beth," Willow said. "You know that, don't you? You know what he did to Tara."

"No!" Beth said. Willow watched as the girl pulled up chunks of grass from the ground. "It was Tara's demon that forced him to do terrible things. He'd never..."

"He did," Willow said, the anger thickening her voice. "There was no demon in Tara, not then. It was just Donny's sick, perverted self that caused him to rape his own sister. And now he's going to pay for it."

"What? What do you mean?" Beth looked at Willow through the darkness.

Willow remained silent, not caring to answer the babbling woman. From behind her she could feel Tara exit the house and approach them. Beth jumped up from the ground when she saw the vampire's approach and ran into the barn, crying out for help.

"Jumpy little thing, isn't she?" Tara said walking around to face Willow. Willow looked up and saw Tara was carrying her father across her shoulder. The man was showing signs of returning to consciousness.

"Scared of you for some reason," Willow said with a small smile.

Tara laughed. "Fool. She's got more to fear from you than she does from me. Isn't that right, lover?"

"Only if she gets in my way," Willow replied and then looked out into the darkness. "It's coming," she whispered.

Tara sniffed the air and nodded. "I'll get things ready then while you make your deal," she said and turned towards the barn, still carrying her father.

Willow waited. She noticed that all sound had ceased except for something large and ungainly crashing through the trees just beyond the fence. For just a moment she contemplated ending this madness now, but then the memory of what Donny did to Tara came rushing back and again her anger strengthened her resolve. She would see this out to its bitter end.

The beast crashed through the fence and approached Willow where she rested on the ground, apparently calm on the outside, but inside she was shaking in fear. Willow thanked the goddess this creature was not of the Earth. It stood before her, nearly seven feet tall, its skin thick and scaly and black in the moonlight. Willow was grateful it wore a black robe that barely covered the ponderous bulge she knew was there.

"You summoned me, sorceress?" it hissed and Willow fought to keep herself from shivering at the sound.

"I did," she said, surprised her voice sounded so steady. "I need a boon, something only one of your kind can perform."

The creature tilted its head towards the barn. "In there?" it asked.

"Yes," Willow replied. "The younger man. He needs payback for something he did."

The creature nodded. "Payback is what we do best. And what do you offer in return?"

Willow looked the creature in the eye, "I send you back to your world, unharmed."

The demon laughed, "I don't think so, sorceress. I'm here now. I'll stay. I like this world."

Willow thought quickly. If she allowed the demon to remain, it would probably find its way to Sunnydale, where at least Buffy would have a chance to kill it, but not before it caused untold havoc.

"No," she said. "I'm only concerned with the one in there. I don't want you bringing trouble down on innocents."

The demon laughed. "There are no innocents in this world, sorceress. You should know that." It paused. "Very well, I will not ravish any *innocents* as you say. I'll stick to those like your boy in there. I'm sure I can find plenty to keep me amused. Don't you think?"

Willow knew it was true, the world was full of men, and women, like Tara's brother. "Agreed, then. You take care of him inside, and I'll allow you to remain here."

The creature bowed before Willow who finally stood up and led the way into the barn.

Inside, Willow took note of Tara's father hanging from the rafters, his wrists shackled to chains, his legs dangling free and his mouth gagged. He was conscious and facing the stall where Donny had raped his sister, where Donny himself was now restrained, his arms and legs spread out and the front of his body pressed against the back of the stall. Cousin Beth was trying unsuccessfully to free him from the ensorcelled restraints. Tara was sitting on the fence of another stall, watching her cousin's futile attempts with amusement. She looked up as Willow entered the barn and joined her on the fence.

"Hey," Tara said and kissed Willow tenderly. Willow kissed her back, again enjoying the sharp danger of Tara's fangs.

"Hey, yourself," she said, taking Tara's cold hand and interlacing their fingers together.

Tara looked up as the demon entered the barn. She gave an evil chuckle.

"Kroka demon, eh?" she said and squeezed Willow's hand playfully. "You are so bad! What did you offer it?"

Willow was about to reply, but stopped at Cousin Beth's scream of terror as she saw the demon. Beth began to run out of the barn, but Tara stopped her with a wave of her hand.

"Stay, Beth," the vampire said and Beth crumpled to floor near her uncle. "I want you to see what happens to rapists in the hands of an expert."

"What...what is it?" the girl cried, trying not to look at the demon who was sniffing at Donny.

Tara laughed, the glee evident in her voice. "That, my dear cousin, is a kroka demon. They're not from this world, but they sometimes show up here when summoned for revenge, particularly against vermin like my sweet brother there."

Beth shrieked as the demon removed its robe and stood before its audience. Mr. Maclay jerked against his restraints, his eyes bulging in terror as he looked upon the demon. Donny, his face pressed against the wall, could not see the demon and could only whimper in fear.

Tara clapped her hands in appreciation. "Very nice, kroka! You are a fine specimen. Please, on with the show!"

The demon bowed and turned to Donny.

Willow again took Tara's hand in her own and looked away from the scene in the stall as Donny's whimpers turned to screams. She looked at Tara whose yellow eyes were glued to the demon's actions. Tara felt Willow's gaze and turned to look into her lover's eyes.

"Thank you, my love," Tara said, reaching her other hand to caress Willow's cheek. "This is the most amazing thing anyone has ever done for me."

Willow returned the caress. "Only for you, baby," she said and Tara nodded.

"I know," she replied. "And I know how hard it is for you. What did you promise the demon?"

"It can stay," Willow admitted.

"Hmmm, I see," Tara said. "You know what it'll do if it stays here, don't you?"

Willow nodded and blushed her shame. Tara squeezed her hand in reassurance. "It'll be alright, Willow. I promise."

Willow looked at Tara's father, who had ceased his struggles. "Uh, Tara?" she said. "I think Donny's deflowering was a bit much for your dad," Willow nodded toward the man.

"What?" Tara said, jumping off the fence and approaching her father, the anger flashing in her eyes. She released the restraints and grabbed him as his limp form fell to the ground. Tara held him up and shook him as she looked into his face. With a roar of anger she threw him to the side.

"Dead!" Tara cried.

Willow looked away as Tara took out her anger on her father's corpse. The kroka demon also ignored the vampire's rage as it continued its ministrations on Donny, who barely seemed conscious. Willow noted it was only the demon's skill that ensured Donny was still alive at this point, but she knew he would not be much longer. Again she felt nothing but cold rage against the man who had brought such harm to Tara, just like she felt nothing for Tara's father who had beaten and practically enslaved Tara, in addition to the mental abuse he had inflicted on her.

Instead, Willow wondered what she should do about the kroka demon that she had summoned into this world. Left alone, it would inflict the same horrors it was inflicting on Tara's brother on others.

Willow heard a final curse from Tara and looked up just as the vampire issued a final kick to the battered corpse.

"Feel better?" she asked as Tara rejoined her on the fence, licking her hands clean of blood.

"Much," Tara said, her voice once again cheerful. "You?"

Willow glanced up as Donny let out a final scream that ended in a gurgle as the kroka demon tore him apart from the inside out.

"Not necessarily better, but satisfied," she said, turning again to her lover. Willow jumped off the fence and bent down in front of Beth. The blond girl's eyes were staring sightlessly and a trickle of drool was running down one side of her chin. Willow waved a hand in front of Beth's eyes and frowned at the lack of response.

"She gone?" Tara asked, unconcerned.

"Afraid so," Willow replied. She took the girl's limp hand in her own and lifted her to her feet. Beth followed wordlessly as Willow led her to the barn's entrance.

"Go on, girly," Willow said, letting go of Beth's hand and giving her a light push in the direction of the road that ran past the house. "You don't want to be here for the end. Go find a home in some nice psych ward somewhere. They won't believe a word you say, but at least you'll be well treated."

Willow watched as the girl was taken by the darkness.

Willow turned back to the demon and was grateful to see that it had donned its robe again.

"The task is done, sorceress," the demon said with a final bow to Willow.

"Thank you for your service," Willow said. "I would remind you of our bargain. No innocents."

The kroka's laugh turned to a gasp of surprise as its face contorted in agony. It turned around and Willow could see a fire axe buried to the haft in its back. Standing behind the kroka, a cheery expression on her face was Tara.

"Oops! Did I do that? So sorry!" Tara ducked as the kroka swung one clawed hand at her face. Tara followed through with a kick to its abdomen. With a roar of rage, the demon caught Tara under the chin with a punch that sent the vampire crashing through the barn wall into the yard outside.

Willow followed the demon outside, chanting the words to a spell. To her dismay, there was no effect on the demon. Tara picked herself up from the ground as the demon approached her.

"Don't bother, Willow," she said, jumping up and catching the demon in the face with both feet. As she fell back to the ground she said, "Your magic is useless against it. You made a deal remember? Let me handle this."

Willow watched helplessly as Tara and demon fought for what seemed a very long time. Every hit the demon landed on the vampire, Willow felt in her gut, but she was still amazed at Tara's skill in handling herself, making her wonder again just where vampires learned to fight. Finally

with a back flip, Tara jumped over the demon and grabbed the axe handle that was still sticking out of its back, wrenching it free. With a roar, Tara swung the axe and neatly beheaded the kroka. Tara fell to her knees in exhaustion and Willow rushed to her side.

"Are you alright?" Willow asked, cradling Tara's battered face in her hands.

"Nothing a bit of time won't cure, my love," Tara whispered.

"Tara, why?" Willow sad. "You didn't have to do that."

"I know," the vampire replied. "But I couldn't let it stay here and you couldn't send it back to its world."

"I made the bargain," Willow protested. "The price was mine to pay."

Tara nodded, "But I couldn't let you pay it. The cost was too high for you. You're not ready for that yet, Willow. Warren, Rack, Donny, even my father, yes. But you'd never be able to handle the price of any innocent blood on your hands and despite whatever deal you made with it, you know that innocents would have gotten hurt in its path. I couldn't let you do it, Willow. Not for me."

"Oh Tara," Willow said and gently let her forehead rest against Tara's. After a moment, she sat back and said, "Wait here. I'll clean up this mess and we'll head back to the van. Do you have everything you want from the house?"

Tara nodded, "Just that chest over by the porch. I'll get it."

"No, you rest," Willow said and levitated the chest over to them. She stood up and with another wave of her hand the body and head of the demon floated back into the barn.

"*Ignis incede!*" she said and the barn was suddenly ablaze.

Tara chuckled softly. "I hope we're not in for a rainstorm this time."

Willow looked at her. "Oh please. I think I've learned a bit more control since then." With another incantation, the house was also on fire. Willow lifted the chest. "Do you need help? Can you walk?"

Tara stood up. "I can walk. Come on. Let's get out of here. I'm suddenly tired of this place."

By the time they reached the van, Tara could barely walk, so Willow got behind the wheel and drove off, watching as the orange glow from the burning ranch faded from view.

Watching the clock, Willow drove as far as she could, then checked them into a highway motel just before sunrise. Inside the room, she got Tara's wounds cleaned up and the vampire into bed before the sun rose over the horizon. Willow crawled into bed and snuggled against her sleeping lover, the warmth from the blankets unable to dispel the illusion that she was sleeping next to a corpse.

Tara left the motel room shortly after sunset, the hunger burning inside her. Willow spent the time her lover was gone in the shower, trying to drown out the lust and the excitement and the hot taste of blood in her mouth as Tara made her kill.

When Tara returned, the couple quickly packed the van, both eager to get back to Sunnydale.

As Tara pulled the black van off the freeway exit leading to Sunnydale in the early morning hour, she asked Willow, "By the way...what did you tell your roommates?"

Willow sighed, "Told them I had a job interview and was flying up to San Jose."

"Think they bought it?" Tara laughed.

"Probably not, but I think Buffy will respect me enough to keep quiet about it. I made a promise to her and I intend to keep it."

"What promise?"

"That I would not harm her or Dawn or Xander nor use magic against them again." Willow looked at Tara. "That promise binds you as well. You're not to hurt them in any way."

"Ooooh. Sire gets big with the butch!" Tara taunted.

"I mean it, Tara!" Willow said.

"And when the Slayer comes for me with Mr. Pointy?" Tara asked. "What then?"

"You run," Willow said.

"We'll see," Tara said. "But I'm sure Buffy won't agree to that."

"Just stay away from her," Willow ordered.

Willow's prediction proved correct; Buffy was more concerned with her zombie-vampire problem than Willow's whereabouts. Willow merely explained the Silicon Valley company she interviewed with insisted Willow relocate, rather than telecommute from Sunnydale and Buffy dropped the matter.

"What's the sitch with the vamps?" Willow asked Buffy the next day at the Espresso Pump where the two women were meeting.

"Getting worse every night," Buffy replied, sipping on her mocha. "Damn things keep coming out of the ground, no matter how long they've been dead. Had one Night of the Living Dead reject leave his legs behind as he pulled himself out of the ground. Xander got him as he was crawling away from his grave."

Willow shuddered, but had no reply.

Buffy continued, "Weird thing is they all seemed to be headed in the same direction. Same way those zombies at my coming home party were making a beeline for Mom's mask."

"The same direction?" Willow asked. "Any idea what they're heading for?"

"Nope," Buffy replied. "Didn't pay much attention until last night. They all seemed to be heading to the northwest, though. Seemed to be more last night than the night before, too."

Willow remained silent, suspicion growing in her gut.

"This keeps up, the cemeteries will be fresh out of corpses soon," Buffy quipped and Willow gave her a ghost of a smile. Both knew the Sunnydale cemeteries were plenty stocked.

"So, want to do the Bronze thing before patrol tonight?" Buffy asked.

Willow shook her head. "Oh, you know Buff, I'd really like to, but I'm sorry. Got plans."

"Willow!" Buffy said with a tease in her voice. "Are we getting back to doing normal stuff?"

"Normal stuff?" Willow asked, confused for a moment, then remembering. She gave her friend a smile. "Oh! You mean like shop? Go to school? Hang out? Save the world from unspeakable demons? All that girl stuff, you mean?"

Buffy laughed, "Yeah, girl stuff! And date, I hope?"

"No. Yes. Maybe. I don't know," Willow said. "It's...you know...complicated."

"Whenever are things not complicated with you, Willow Rosenberg?"

Willow laughed. "Okay, fine. Make all the fun you want. I deserve it."

Buffy chuckled a moment longer, but then grew serious. "Look, Will. I know it's soon, hell ten years from now will still seem soon, but don't shut the door to your heart on anything that might come knocking."

Willow looked deep into Buffy's eyes. "Like you have, Buff? You've been afraid to let anyone in your heart since Angel. And that was such a long time ago."

Buffy looked down at her hands resting in her lap. "I know. It's been hard finding anyone who..."

"Measures up to a centuries old vampire with a soul?" Willow said. "Time to move on, Buffy. He is. You need to."

Buffy smiled, "Okay, best friend pact time. You and me! Let's promise each other that we'll both move on. Deal?"

Willow nodded and shook Buffy's hand. "Deal."

"Oh!" Buffy said, glancing at her watch. "Gotta run! The troubled youth of Sunnydale High are crying for attention. Catch ya later, Will!"

Willow spent the rest of the day searching for Anya, but the vengeance demon was not to be found. Willow considered summoning her but, remembering what Anya had said about her travel restrictions, decided to wait. By the time the day's shadows were lengthening, she was feeling hungry, so she stopped first at the butcher shop for blood and then the Chinese take-out and hurried to the crypt before Tara woke.

She had settled down to eat her dinner and watch the evening news on Spike's TV when she heard a noise from the lower crypt. As Tara emerged from below, Willow's throat grew dry. Tara took her time as she walked slowly up the steps leading to the upper level, knowing and loving the effect she was having on her sire. Tara was dressed in a black silk blouse, the material hugging her waist while at the same time accentuating her voluptuous breasts. Willow nearly groaned when she fastened her eyes on Tara's exposed cleavage. As more of Tara was revealed, Willow's eyes traveled down to where just a strip of pale white skin was peeking out from between the blouse and a pair of hip-hugging leather pants. Tara's bountiful hips filled the sleek leather nicely, Willow noted. Finally, Tara's feet clad in a pair of shiny black boots emerged, completing the outfit.

Willow's eyes traveled back up Tara's body as the vampire approached her, still following her slow and steady course. Tara's blond hair cascaded over her shoulders and down her back. Willow couldn't remember Tara's hair ever being that rich or full before, but she liked it now. Tara's face glowed pale in the dim light of the crypt, her lips full and red, devoid of makeup, but with that characteristic smirk that was so Tara. Willow's own lips smiled in welcome.

Willow set aside the container of lo mein as Tara finally reached her. The vampire placed a hand on each of Willow's shoulders as she climbed onto the armchair, straddling her lover. Willow's own hands slipped comfortably around Tara's waist and she pulled her closer as Tara leaned down to place a searing kiss on Willow's lips.

"Mmm," Tara murmured breaking the kiss. "You taste good. Let me guess, Fong Lee's Chinese Kitchen?"

Willow chuckled. "Our favorite. Want some?"

"Maybe later," Tara said, running her hands down Willow's arms and back up her sides, finally cupping Willow's breasts through her shirt. "Right now I'm hungry for something else."

"Oh yeah?" Willow said, her breath quickening. "What would that be?"

"Can't you tell?" Tara said and then claimed Willow's lips again. Willow moaned in pleasure as she felt Tara's need for her through the connection they shared. Desire and passion and even love for Willow filled the vampire's being.

"Willow?" Tara asked, nuzzling in Willow's neck, her cool lips pressed to Willow's beating pulse.

"Hmmm?" Willow replied.

"Come hunt with me tonight," Tara whispered.

Through the connection, Willow felt Tara's desire turn to blood lust. "What?" she asked, pushing Tara back.

Tara met Willow's look, her eyes darkening with passion. "Hunt with me, my love. I could feel you inside of me last night when I killed. You felt it, didn't you? The excitement? The heady rush of life rushing through my veins? I want you with me when that happens. Please, Willow. Be there for me?"

"Tara..." Willow began, but was interrupted by the sound of the crypt door opening.

"Yoo hoo!" a familiar voice called. "Clem?"

"Oh gods," Willow whispered.

Tara sat up, but did not release Willow, who was struggling underneath her in an attempt to stand up. She looked at the figure at the entrance and said, "Hey Anya. Ever hear of knocking?"

The vengeance demon blinked. "Tara," she said, walking into the crypt and placing a basket on the tomb near the entrance.

"Tara, let me up," Willow said quietly and Tara finally stood up and helped Willow to her feet, but interlocked her hand with Willow's as they both turned towards Anya.

"Well, congratulations Willow," Anya said looking at the couple. "I see you managed to bring her back. More impressive than that interdimensional spell you did last week that had such a great result on your anatomy. I trust this is more pleasurable for you than that was."

"Anya..." Willow stopped, not knowing how to begin to explain.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," Anya said, ignoring Willow as she stared at Tara. "I was looking for Clem. I've got the night off so I came for a bit of poker. I'm getting quite good at it, thank you for helping to teach me to play."

Willow glanced at Anya's basket and saw it was moving slightly. She released Tara's hand and went over the basket. Anya continued to stare at Tara.

"Clem doesn't live here any more, Anya," Tara explained. "I think you can find him at the cemetery near the university."

"I see," she said, finally turning to Willow who had carried the basket to the door and was releasing the kittens outside. "Hey! Those are mine!"

Willow shooed the last tabby out the door and handed the basket back to Anya. "Find another hobby, Anya," she suggested.

Anya shrugged, "Yeah, sure. Who am I to argue with someone who can raise the dead and create vampires? You certainly proved you can kick my ass the last time you were evil."

Tara smirked and looked at Willow. "Did you really?"

Willow just shrugged and gave a small nod.

Anya sighed. "Well, I am glad you're back, Tara. I've missed having you around and we were friends even after you were smart enough to leave Willow for the evil she did to you. I'm sorry you were killed."

"Thank you, Anya," Tara said, smiling at the brunette. "I'm glad to be back."

"Good," Anya said, nodding her head emphatically. "You should be glad. Life is always better than death, even if you are technically still dead. And I'm sure Willow is happy you're back, but I doubt she'll ever admit to it. She'll just continue to feel all guilty about everything, although what she did to Warren was classic vengeance."

"I'd like to hear about it, sometime," Tara said with a gleam in her eye.

"I'll be happy to tell you. Speaking of vengeance..." Anya turned to the redhead. "You reek of it, Willow. What have you been up to?"

"Uh..." Willow stammered.

"Willow helped me take care of a few things concerning my family," Tara answered for her lover.

"Oh, very good," Anya said with a smile on her face. "I knew that brother of yours was no good when they were here last time. I considered summoning my friend Halfrek on your behalf at the time, but Xander talked me out of it. He said what was past was past and I should let sleeping dogs lie, whatever that means."

"Well, the dog will never rise again, thanks to Willow," Tara said with a fond smile. Willow just shook her head in exasperation and sat on the arm of the chair, unable to find any way to positively contribute to the conversation.

"Really?" Anya said, intrigued. "What did she do?"

Tara began to explain in rich detail the events as Willow just sat there and listened. Willow felt as if the subject of the vampire's narration was someone other than herself. As she listened, she could barely reconcile the idealistic and innocent girl she used to be with the person she was today. When did she lose that combination of idealism and innocence she knew she had when she pledged herself to helping her best friend fight evil? Was the price for fighting evil to eventually succumb to it? And after all the evil things she had done, was she even worthy enough to continue to fight at the Slayer's side?

Willow looked at the two women talking before her. While it was true that Anya and her had never been that close, Willow knew they were so much alike which caused most of the tension between them. Most of Anya's long life was spent committing evil acts, but Willow understood vengeance all too well, so she could not fault the demon for the service she provided. But Tara was another story altogether. When Tara's family had unexpectedly arrived in Sunnydale, for the first and only time in her life Tara cast a spell that was against her Wiccan beliefs. And Willow knew that Tara's action was done out of fear and not malice. Tara had given a lot of her time and effort into making up to each of the Scoobies in an attempt at redemption for that one simple act.

Willow flushed with shame again at her memory of the spells she had cast in an attempt to control Tara when things began to go bad for them. While in England, Willow had discussed what happened with the high priestess of the Devon coven and the woman made her realize just how evil her actions had been. Willow knew she had treated Tara worse than Tara's family had treated her. At least when they attempted to beat her into submission, Tara had the choice to leave. Willow never even gave her that choice. Looking at the vampire, Willow knew that this was the Tara she deserved, not the one who had died in her arms.

Anya looked at Willow. "Well, you get points for creativity, but when it comes to vengeance you're still an amateur, Willow. Kroka demons are more trouble than they're worth. You're lucky Tara was there to kill it."

"Thanks, Anya," Willow said, and Anya ignored the sarcasm in her voice.

"Thank you for the tale, Tara," Anya said. "I'll be going now. Come see me if you get bored. It'll be even more fun thumb wrestling with you now that we're both stronger."

"Okay, Anya," Tara smiled. "Take care."

Willow was about to stop Anya before she left, remembering that she wanted to ask Anya a few questions, but before she had a chance the door of the crypt flew open and a horrible stench invaded the space. Willow jumped up in fear as three scaly vampires stumbled in with more following behind. As she pushed Anya and Tara out of the way of the approaching fiends, she had a brief moment to realize that Buffy had been right—they were straight out of a B-movie horror flick and she knew without a shadow of a doubt that they belonged to her.

Part Five

Willow sorts out the truth about the zombie-vamps as Tara leads her further into darkness.

Willow watched as the zombie-vampires ignored her and went for Tara and Anya. The vampire and the vengeance demon quickly assessed the situation and immediately covered each other's backs as the first of the undead reached for them. Willow rummaged in her backpack and pulled out a stake.

"Tara!" she called and Tara caught the stake as Willow tossed it to her.

"Thanks Sweetie!" Tara called and staked the vamp she was fighting off.

"Hey!" Anya protested as she threw a punch at a vampire who was trying to grab her neck. "What about me?"

Willow ran to a wooden chair propped next to the refrigerator and smashed it against the wall. Picking up two of the shattered legs, she used both to stake a pair of vampires who were trying to reach the fighting demons and then handed one to Anya.

Tara cursed as one of the vampires slashed at her with long, filthy claws. Willow saw dark blood well from Tara's chest through the tear in her blouse.

"Oh gods!" Willow whispered to herself. She looked to the crypt door and saw that more of the creatures were pouring in and the small space was quickly filling up, hampering their efforts to fight.

Clouds of stinking dust began to pile up in the crypt as the three women fought the vampires and still the tide did not stop.

"Willow!" Tara cried. "Do something!"

"Yes, Willow!" Anya echoed. "Now, please!" Anya looked like she was in better shape than Tara, but both appeared to be weakening.

Willow thought quickly as she staked another vampire, but as soon as the dust cleared the space was filled with another. Finally, an idea formed in her head.

Looking towards the entrance, she saw that the stream was beginning to taper off and only a few more entered the crypt. She pulled a packet of

powder from her pocket and muttered an incantation. "Tara!" she called. "Get below! Now!"

Tara nodded and staked another vamp. Pushing her way through the crowd, she ran for the opening in the ground and dove in headfirst. With a mental push Willow sealed the opening with the slab. "Anya, duck," she called and the vengeance demon dropped to the floor and covered her head with her arms. Before the vampires could reach for Anya, she tossed the powder into the air and cried, "*lumière du soleil!*"

The crypt was instantly filled with a bright white light. The vampires filling the crypt didn't even make any expression as they were instantly turned to dust. Two more vampires entered the crypt and were instantly destroyed. Willow held a hand over her eyes and made her way to the opening. Peering out, she saw that the cemetery was peaceful.

"*Éteignez,*" Willow intoned and the light in the crypt returned to normal.

Willow went over to help Anya to her feet. "You okay?" she asked.

"Nice trick," Anya said, dusting off her clothes. "Thanks for the warning."

"No problem," Willow said, looking around at the mess.

"Why weren't they attacking you?" Anya said, looking at the redhead.

Willow sighed. "I'm not sure, exactly," she explained. "I think it's because I created them."

"What? Are you crazy as well as evil now, Willow?" Anya said. "Ok, I can understand Tara, you're probably missing the orgasms at the very least, but what use could you have for these things?"

Willow rolled her eyes. "I didn't do it on purpose, Anya. I think the spell that made a vampire from Tara's body somehow opened a portal that's allowing other corpses to rise as vampires."

"Tara is not like these vampires," Anya said. "And she smells better!"

"I know," Willow replied. "But I think that since the spell was focused on Tara, she rose as a normal vampire, the only exception being that her sire is human."

Anya nodded. "And these other vampires were just caught up in the energy of your spell. Since you're also their sire, they didn't attack you, but they were seeking you out."

Willow nodded. "Buffy said the other night they were all headed towards the northwest. That's the direction where Tara's family lived."

"Well, it could be a portal or just excess energy." Anya thought a moment and then let her eyes look at Willow from head to toe. "I don't think anyone's realized just how powerful you've become, Willow, not even you."

"Believe me," Willow sighed. "I scare even myself. I never intended to bring her back, Anya."

"She's back now, Willow," Anya pointed out. "And you have to take responsibility for her just like you have to take responsibility for your other children."

"Can you help me research this?" she asked. "It's getting worse and I need to stop it before someone gets hurt."

"Not now," Anya said. "I have to head out on a vengeance call. Come by my apartment tomorrow, I've got a few books you managed not to destroy. We'll find something."

"Thanks, Anya," Willow said, the sincerity evident in her voice.

"You are welcome, Willow," Anya said and vanished in a twinkle of light.

Downstairs, Willow found Tara sitting on the bed resting against the wall.

"Hey," Willow said, softly.

"Hey," Tara said back. "All clear?"

"All clear," Willow answered. She set down her pack and pulled out a bottle of water and her small first aid kit. Using a dampened end of her bandana, Willow began to clean up Tara's wounds.

"That hurt, baby?" she asked in a small voice.

"Not really," Tara smiled. "Just stings a bit."

"I'm sorry," Willow said, feeling guilty. "Anya promised to help me find a way to stop them."

"Might be a portal funneling the demonic energy from another dimension," Tara said, thinking.

"That's what I thought, smarty-pants." Willow spread ointment over the wicked scratch on Tara's face. She winced as Tara pulled back from the pain. "Anya said it might be just excess energy left over from the spell that made you."

"Could be," Tara said and then smiled at Willow. "The kroka demon was right. You have graduated to sorceress, my love. Congratulations."

Willow gave her a wry smile. "I don't think UC Sunnydale has a degree for that, do you?"

Tara laughed. "No, probably not, but maybe Giles can send you one from England. You and Anya meeting at the Magic Box?"

Willow shook her head. "The shop hasn't quite recovered yet from my last visit. Her apartment."

"Okay," Tara said. "I'll lend a hand."

Willow noticed that Tara's blouse was torn in several places and pulled it up to look for more wounds. Tara stopped her by placing her hands on Willow's.

"I'm not hurt, Willow," she said. "I'm hungry. Let's go hunt."

"No," she said, a worm of fear crawling through her gut. "I can't, Tara."

Tara smiled into Willow's eyes and gently squeezed the redhead's hands. "You can. I know you can."

"Tara..." Willow began, but stopped as Tara opened herself up to Willow's senses through the connection they shared. Willow was filled with Tara's hunger and her vision clouded red with desire.

"Oh gods, please Tara. Don't do this to me," Willow begged.

"It's okay, Willow," Tara said and stood up, guiding Willow to her feet. She moved to the armoire and quickly removed her torn blouse and replacing it with a fresh shirt. She led Willow up the stairs and grabbed both their jackets.

"Come on, sweetie," she said as Willow dumbly followed her, Tara's hunger blinding her to all sensibility. "This is going to be fun!"

Two figures made their way through the darkened streets of Sunnydale. Willow noted they were in what passed for the city's red light district where vampires and demons blended easily with drug dealers, prostitutes and their pimps. Willow, giving in to the hunger filling her senses, was amused at Tara's easy confidence as she sought out her prey—human Tara would have rushed to her destination, not even stopping to look around. Willow, of course, was intimately familiar with the area from her visits to Rack.

As if reading her mind, Tara asked, "That magic dealer still around, Willow? I'd like to talk to him about daring to touch what's mine."

Willow smirked at the low growl in Tara's voice. "Afraid not, Baby. Rack couldn't handle a little taste of his own medicine. Of course, I really didn't give him a choice on how much he willing to give."

"Gods," Tara mused. "What I wouldn't give to have been there. I'll bet it was delicious. How about rat girl? You do her, too?"

Willow shook her head, her attention drawn to an arguing couple a half a block away. A skinny, greasy man dressed in black jeans, pointy-toed boots and a dirty black and white shirt unbuttoned to reveal a gone to gray wife-beater underneath was holding tight to the arm of an equally thin girl no more than seventeen years old. She was clad only in a thin cotton dress that barely reached the tops of her thighs and a pair of pink stilettos. Willow could see the outlines of her erect nipples through the thin cotton and guessed it was caused by the cold night and not from the attentions of the man.

Tara followed Willow's gaze and gave a little smirk as the man pushed the girl into an alley off of the street. She slipped her hand into Willow's and said, "Let's go."

Tara took her time leading Willow into the alley. For Willow, the journey seemed to take forever, the narrow opening of the alley looming larger and larger in her sight as if it was a doorway into hell. Part of Willow's mind screamed at her to stop this madness, stake Tara now and try to gather up the shreds of her former life, but Willow knew she was way beyond stopping now. Not after Warren, not after Tara's family. With Tara's hunger pulsating inside her and enflaming her desire, Willow knew she wanted this to happen. And it would.

The vampire and the sorceress moved into the alley and Willow heard the sound of flesh striking flesh, the noise muted as if it were being played underwater. She watched as the girl fell to the ground at the man's feet,

blood pouring down her chin from her split lip. Willow breathed a small sigh of relief. At least he had just made it a little bit easier for her.

"Get up, you lazy bitch!" he growled at the girl, and lifted her to her feet and slammed her against the wall. The girl cried out as the rough texture of the bricks of the building cut through her thin dress.

"Let her go," Willow said, her voice soft, yet commanding.

The man turned to Willow and Tara, a snarl on his face as he assessed the potential threat. Dismissing the newcomers, he replied, "Go away, little girls. This is none of your business."

Tara laughed. "Only partly right, scum. She's not our business. You are."

The man roughly pushed the girl back to the ground as he turned towards Willow and Tara. "And what business can you two dykes possibly have with me?" he sneered.

As the vampire approached the man, Tara morphed into her demon face. "Oh, maybe dinner?" she growled and reached for the man before he could even scream.

Willow closed her eyes and leaned up against the brick wall as Tara's fangs attached to the man's jugular and began sucking with a greedy passion. Willow, her breathing erratic, pushed down the sensation of nausea that followed Tara's first taste of blood and instead concentrated on the desire building within her lover with each luscious drop. After a moment, Willow was able to smile. Tara was right; it was similar to a five-course meal at a posh restaurant.

While Tara finished draining the man, Willow gained enough self-control to finally check on the girl still weeping on the ground. Willow laid a hand on the girl's shoulder and shook her gently to get her attention.

"Hey," she said softly. "You okay?"

The girl finally turned her reddened eyes towards Willow. Willow scowled at the darkening bruise swelling up on the girl's cheek.

"I don't..." she began in a squeaky voice. "Where's Bobby?"

Willow glanced over her shoulder and saw Tara roll the man's body into a garbage dumpster and drop the lid down with a crash. The girl jumped at the sound.

"Don't worry about Bobby," Willow assured the girl. "He won't bother you again. Do you have anywhere to go?"

"No," the girl said. "Bobby said if I was good enough he'd let me stay with him, but I don't know where he lives."

Willow dug into her pocket and pulled out some bills. "Here," she said, handing the girl the money. "This should be enough to get you out of town. Trust me when I tell you that if you stay here, you'll end up dead or worse."

"But where would I go?" the girl asked, clutching the bills awkwardly in her hand as if she was unused to the feel of currency.

"Go to L.A.," Willow told her, helping the girl to her feet. "Head for a place called Angel Investigations and tell Angel that Red sent you. He'll help you."

Willow walked over to Tara who was leaning up against the dumpster, one boot resting against the cold metal and both arms crossed over her chest. Together they watched as the girl hurried from the alley. "Think she'll make it?" Willow asked Tara.

Tara shrugged, not caring one way or the other. "Are you done being the Good Samaritan? The night's still young and I want to play."

Willow had only been to the Red Oyster, Sunnydale's closest approximation to a gay bar a couple of times and then only after Tara had left her. The first time was not long after Tara left, but before she quit using the magic. The club was darker than the Bronze, the music loud and sultry. It was as if the entire atmosphere encouraged secret rendezvous'. Willow, trying to pretend Tara's departure was only temporary, left after only a few minutes.

Tara pulled Willow through the unadorned entrance, through the darkened hallway and onto the dance floor. Wrapping herself around Willow, Tara pressed her lips against the pulse in Willow's neck, gently sucking the spot until Willow moaned in desire. Willow pulled Tara close, their bodies moving in time to the provocative song playing from the sound system. Tara, warm and flushed with the fresh hot blood coursing through her veins, allowed her hands to travel down Willow's back, until they reached the soft swell of Willow's behind.

"Why did we never come here before?" Tara asked, releasing Willow's skin with a small nip. "It's more private than the Bronze and the music's better."

Willow quirked one eyebrow upwards as she smirked at her lover. "And how often did I ask you to go with me?"

Tara chuckled. "You've been here before, haven't you? Without me?"

Willow nodded, a small blush appearing on her face that Tara's senses noted even in the dim light.

"Meet anyone?" she asked Willow, a half smirk on her lips.

Willow nodded again, remembering the encounter. It was on her second visit that a beautiful black haired woman approached her as Willow was heading down the dim passageway after using the restroom. Willow, her heart aching for Tara, first danced with the woman and then allowed herself to be led to one of the private rooms in the back of the club. After that, Willow didn't return while she was trying to kick her dark magic addiction.

Willow related the story and then awkwardly began to apologize before Tara interrupted her with a finger on the lips. "Don't be sorry, Willow. Don't ever be sorry for wanting that, from me or anyone else. Next to blood, sex is the most important ingredient of life. Without blood and without sex, there is no life. Enjoy it, Willow. Revel in it." Tara pulled Willow's head close to her own and whispered in the redhead's ear, "Experience it."

Tara released Willow and slowly walked off the dance floor, a predator stalking her prey. Willow stood there, not moving, as she watched Tara move up to a blonde standing by the wall. Willow realized through their connection that the woman had been watching them as they danced and Tara had been aware of it. Tara leaned in and after a brief exchange of words guided the woman to where Willow was standing.

Tara's eyes were sparkling as she said, "Jen, this is Willow."

Willow tilted her head to one side and took a long look up and down the blonde's petite body, the obvious resemblance to the Slayer quickening her pulse with desire. Willow's sense of time seemed to slow as the music segued into another even more provocative and erotic rhythm. Moving behind the blonde, she placed a gentle hand on the other woman's waist and lightly brushed her body against the other's as she moved around

again to her front. Jen's eyes closed as Willow stepped closer, tightening her grip around the woman's waist as her other arm encircled it.

"Jen," Willow whispered into her ear, her warm breath tickling the blonde hair. She could feel the woman shiver at the contact. "Are you ready for the most dangerous night of your life?"

Jen nodded as she rested her arms on Willow's shoulders and they began moving to the music together. Willow, her eyes closed, could feel Tara moving around them both as they danced, touching and stroking each woman until Jen moaned in pleasure, pulling Willow's head closer as Willow nibbled on her earlobe.

"I want you," Jen whispered and Willow laughed softly in her ear. Willow raised her head to look into Tara's eyes. The vampire was standing behind Jen and smiled at the blonde's statement.

"Come with us," Tara whispered in Jen's other ear.

The vampire led the way through the club past the swaying couples on the dance floor to a dark room where couples swayed to music of a different tune. Tara's sharp eyes picked out a spot in the corner and pressed her back to the wall as she turned around to the other two, her eyes peeking darkly through her loose hair and a wicked grin shining on her face in the dim light.

Willow took Jen by the shoulders and turned the woman around, pressing the blonde's back against Tara as she moved in and claimed the woman by the lips, her weight pushing Jen into Tara's hard softness, her body moving sensuously over the blonde's. After a few minutes, Willow finally broke the kiss and leaned her torso back while pressing her hips forward, slowly grinding, firm and insistent. With quick fingers, Willow unbuttoned Jen's blouse, revealing a dark silk bra that Willow pushed out of her way as she took a nipple in her mouth, one hand moving behind the blonde to caress Tara's cheek.

When she felt Tara's hands move past the woman's hips to the opening of her pants Willow gave her lover more room as the vampire slowly pushed the jeans and undergarment down. Willow could feel the woman's damp desire on her own thigh even through the thick fabric of her jeans as she moved in again, hardening the muscles in her leg and pushing inwards and upwards until the girl gasped in pleasure.

Willow moved one hand between their bodies, allowing her fingers to tease their way past damp curls. She let go of Jen's nipple and looked up into Tara's eyes, wanting to see the desire and need flaring at her

through the darkness. She wanted to see how this made Tara feel and she let out a little moan as she felt the vampire's hunger for blood building again. As she ran her fingers through the girl's wetness that came out to meet her, Willow whispered in the woman's ear, "She won't hurt you. Don't panic. Just relax."

Jen sighed her submission, unable to speak past the sensations riding through her body like a wave. As Willow plunged her fingers deep inside, Tara sank her fangs into the woman's neck. Jen gasped at the dual shock of pleasure and pain and threw back her head against Tara's shoulder and pulled Willow closer, her hips moving rhythmically to match Willow's thrusts.

As Tara drank, Willow could feel the woman's accelerated heartbeat pulse through her, quickening as she approached orgasm. Willow pressed her palm against Jen's center as she continued to move, her fingers rubbing over ridged muscles that were beginning to tighten around her. Willow moved her other hand through Tara's hair in a caress, prepared to pull the vampire away if she lost control, but trusting Tara to keep the promise she made to Jen. Then she lost herself in Tara as the vampire threw open the connection between them and Willow was drowning in the vampire's own sea of emotions.

Willow felt the intimate contact Tara had with the woman pressed between them, a contact more intimate than her own as she rode Jen through her climax. Tara was drinking, not only the woman's blood, but also she was consuming her life, her pleasure, her desire. Willow's hips ground tightly against Jen as her own orgasm ripped through her body and Willow could feel Tara's pleasure matching her own.

Willow waited until her breathing slowed, her head weakly resting against Jen's shoulder. Willow could feel Jen's pulse through her fingers still inside the woman and was reassured at the strong beat. After another moment, she looked up into Tara's eyes. The vampire, a small drop of blood trickling down her chin, was grinning at her. Willow leaned forward and licked Tara clean before moving in for a searing kiss.

A moan from Jen interrupted the kiss and Willow slowly moved back, disengaging their bodies. Willow helped Jen straighten her clothing before giving the woman a deep kiss. Tara once again pressed in from behind and crossed both arms around the woman in an intimate hug as she whispered, "Go home now. Remember this night with pleasure as if it were only a dream."

Willow's skin crackled pleasurably with the release of Tara's magic as Jen moved away from the couple in a daze and disappeared into the

club. Willow slid her arm around her lover and leaned against the vampire. "Let's go, Baby," she said. "I feel the need to have you all to myself right now."

Tara nodded her agreement and they left the club.

Anya spun the yellowing book towards Willow and pointed to the page. "Well, there's your spell, Willow. Seems simple enough for someone of your skill level."

Willow pushed her own book aside and quickly read through the spell. Tara read over Willow's shoulder. The three had spent the morning and most of the afternoon pouring over books with Willow occasionally making a foray onto the Internet to cross check a reference.

"I can't do this spell." Willow dismissed, pushing the book away. "We'll have to find something else."

Tara looked at her in confusion. "Why can't you do it?"

Willow looked back at her. "It's dark magic, Tara. I can't do dark magic."

Anya looked stunned and Tara let out a short bark of laughter. "What the hell kind of magic caused this mess in the first place? Because I'm sure it wasn't a simple Tinkerbell spell."

"It was dark magic," Willow agreed. "But it was an accident. If I do this spell, I'd be calling on the dark forces deliberately. I can't risk it, Tara."

"You have to, Willow," Anya said. "We've been searching all day and this is the best we've come up with. You're the only one experienced enough to cast this spell. Tara can't do it...she might be a demon now, but I don't think she has the power needed to close this portal." She turned to Tara. "No offense."

"None taken," Tara shrugged. "She's right, Willow," Tara added. "Most of my spells were for protection and healing. You were the only one of us who dared to explore the dark arts. It's going to take a while before I can cast a spell of this level. You have to do it."

"I can't!" Willow said, her voice rising in anger as she stood up from the table and paced into the living room. "And I can't believe you're doing this to me, Tara. You were the one who faced down Anya and the others when they wanted me to do magic at that party."

Tara gave Anya a wry smile, "See how quickly she forgets?"

Willow rolled her eyes, "Ok, fine! You're evil now, I'm evil now, Anya's evil now, we're all evil now, but that doesn't mean that we have to give in to it. If I cast this spell, I'll be tempted to do another spell and then another until we'll have yet another apocalypse on our hands. Did you forget the last one we faced, Anya? You were there—was it that much fun watching the world end?"

"No, it wasn't fun!" Anya shot back. "You ruined my livelihood in the process! But think for a moment Willow. Use that great brain of yours. The main reason you lost control before was because Tara died. She was your control, Willow. Before you met her, your spells only worked half the time, but afterwards you were able to finally gain control and your power grew. When Glory took her mind you lost that control and embraced the dark and after she was back you continued to grow in power until even she couldn't control you anymore. How you managed to beat it, I'll never know, but you did and that should prove to you that you could master it now and not bring on another apocalypse."

Willow looked at Tara who stood near the vengeance demon, a half-smirk on her face. "And now I'm back, Willow. As fun as it would be to watch, I don't think you'll lose control again. In fact, you've done a damn fine job of it since I've been back, no matter how much I've tempted you."

Willow walked over the window and peered through the blinds. She looked out at the peaceful street in front of Anya's apartment and wondered when this nightmare would end.

"Look Willow," Anya said, waving a map she pulled from the table. Willow had retrieved the recent disturbed graves reports from the Sunnydale P.D.'s computer and marked the locations on the map. The reports originated from the cemetery Tara had been buried in and seemed to be moving outward to the cemeteries closest to it in an ever-widening circle. "Pretty soon all of the cemeteries in Sunnydale will be coughing up zombie vampires. Do you really think it'll stop after Sunnydale is free of corpses?"

Willow sighed, "No."

"No," Anya emphasized. "I doubt it will, either. It'll keep spreading outward until eventually you won't need to lose yourself into the black magic to cause an apocalypse. It'll happen just fine without you since you've already brought it on."

Tara walked over to Willow and laid a hand on the redhead's shoulder. "You need to do this, Willow."

Willow turned from the window and looked into her lover's eyes. "Tara...I'm afraid," she whispered.

Tara nodded, "I know you are. But I'll be there and I'll help you."

A knock on the door startled all three women. Tara quickly moved to the bedroom and gently closed the door. Anya opened the front door to reveal a haggard-looking Xander.

Xander stepped into the apartment and looked first at Anya and then at Willow.

"Willow," he said. "I've been looking for you all day."

Willow felt her stomach drop with fear. "What's wrong?"

"Dawn got hurt last night. Buffy's with her at the hospital."

"What happened?" Anya asked. "Is Dawn alright?"

Xander nodded, "She'll be alright, thank goodness. Got kicked down by one of those creepy vamps and knocked her head on a tombstone. She was unconscious for a long while and has a pretty good concussion. They're holding her for observation."

"Oh god," Willow whispered, her worst fear realized.

Anya looked at Willow, a stern expression on her face. "Well Willow, does this change your mind?"

Xander looked between the two women. "What? What's going on?"

Willow filled her lungs with air and turned to her friend, "We've been working on this all day, Xander. We have a solution. It's not easy, but I can do it."

"Well good," he said. "Buffy will be happy to hear that. Let's go."

"Xander, wait for me downstairs, please," Willow said. "I just need to talk with Anya for a minute."

Xander looked confused and slightly hurt, but he nodded and left the apartment.

Tara came out of the bedroom, her heightened hearing picking up the conversation. She looked at Willow with concern. "Are you okay, Sweetie?"

Willow nodded, "Dawn will be fine, we've all taken more than a few lumps in our day. I'm just sorry she got hurt again because of me. You two are right, I need to close the portal tonight. Anya, can you gather the supplies and meet us at Tara's grave? I'll need your help holding the circle."

"Sure, if I don't get called away for vengeance, but if I do I'll make sure to have the supplies there."

"Thank you," Willow said and turned to Tara. "Tara, I want you to go to the crypt and stay there. No hunting tonight. There's plenty of blood for you in the fridge. Watch television, read a book, do your hair, anything, but stay in. Don't come out until I get you."

"What?" Tara protested. "I will not! Willow, you need me."

"Maybe, but we can't risk it. If you're there, you could get pulled into the portal when it closes and goddess knows where or in what kind of dimension you'd end up in."

"She's right, Tara," Anya said. "Besides, if Buffy's there, she'll stake you."

Tara ignored Anya and looked into Willow's eyes, "Willow, I want...I need to be there for you. This is dangerous. If I'm not there to protect you..."

"Tara, no." Willow was firm. "Stay in the crypt. I'll do this without you."

Tara was about to protest further, but stopped when she saw the look in Willow's face. Her face darkened in anger and she stalked out of the apartment, slamming the door behind her.

Willow closed her eyes for a moment and then thanked Anya again.

"It's okay, Willow," she said, laying a comforting hand on Willow's arm. "Go help Buffy and Dawn."

Willow nodded and left the apartment, closing the door softly behind her.

By the time Xander and Willow reached the hospital, Buffy and Dawn were nearly ready to leave. Dawn, a stark white bandage covering part of

her head, was eager to get home; like all of the Scoobies, she hated the hospital. Willow explained the spell in cryptic detail to the Slayer on the drive back to the Summers house.

"So I just need to keep the vamps away from you and Anya while you cast the spell? That's it?" Buffy asked, trying to formulate the plan in her mind.

"In a nutshell," Willow replied, studying the spell from the book she had taken from Anya's.

"What makes you think they'll go for you and Anya?"

Willow tried to think quickly. "Uh...they'll probably zoom in on the energy we'll raise to close the portal and try to stop it."

Buffy looked skeptical, but nodded as Xander pulled into the driveway. "Alright. Xander I need you to stay with Dawn tonight, make sure she stays safe."

"Buffy, I can take care of myself!" Dawn protested, trying to look indignant, but wincing through the pain in her head.

The Slayer took a deep breath in an obvious attempt to control herself. "I know you can, Dawn, but the doctor said you need to sleep tonight and you can't protect yourself while you're sleeping."

The teenager frowned at her sister's explanation, trying to find some way to protest, but couldn't since Buffy had just complimented her. She nodded then watched in amusement as Xander jumped out of the car to open her door and give her a gallant hand to help her from the car.

"My lady," he said and Dawn giggled.

"Willow, I think you should get a couple of hours rest before we head out. You look tired. I'm going to try to find Spike and see if he's lucid enough to lend a hand."

Willow nodded and turned to enter the house, feeling the exhaustion wash over her as she slowly made her way up the stairs to her room.

The cemetery was silent as Willow made her way alone past the empty graves to where the soft whisper of candlelight glowed in the darkness. Anya had already begun the preparations. A nine-foot diameter circle of

woven cords surrounded Tara's headstone and a small white altar cloth was laid out in front. Two candles, one silver and one gold, cast the engraved letters of Tara's name in flickering light.

"You can come in," Anya said. "It's not cast yet."

Willow stepped forward and knelt before the altar where she would close the portal. She traced the words on the stone with one hand and felt grief for her lost lover. She thought of what was waiting for her in a crypt, the vampire who had struggled into existence beneath this cold stone and Willow's heart wept again for all that they had lost. It was time to let Tara go, time to bury her again and accept the existence of the demon that wore her face. Willow knew what she felt for the vampire was as diametrically different than what she had felt for Tara, but it was just as strong and could not be denied.

"Where's Buffy?" Anya asked, interrupting Willow's reverie.

"We ran into a group of vamps on the way here. Spike's with her and Buffy told me to go on. The vamps will lead them here so we need to get started."

Anya agreed and began to cast the circle as Willow closed her eyes and began to meditate, reaching inside herself to draw upon her power. She could feel the Earth beneath her feet, clean and pure, but also tinged with darkness and danger, especially this close to the Hellmouth where the evil was stirring from below.

She expanded her senses even further and felt her mind shift into another place. Opening her eyes, she saw the world was tinged a vibrant red. Willow recognized the color from her dream. Willow looked around the circle and could see Anya kneeling in the quarter opposite from the headstone, chanting in concentration as she maintained the circle.

Willow looked beyond the headstone and saw the source of her problems. There, outlined with bright fire was the portal. As Willow watched, a black wisp of vapor sped out of the portal and into her world seeking a corpse to animate. It was time to close the door.

Willow began the incantation, feeling the power rise up in her. She knew without having to look that her eyes had turned black. The forces she needed to call on to close the portal were the same as those she had called on to open it. Only this time, she had to willingly allow the darkness inside her and as much as it sickened her, to Willow it also was a drug. She could feel it rushing through her veins, bulging them outward with a surge of power. Willow could feel the magic in every cell

of her body, she could feel it moving through her, feeding her and consuming her.

Willow faced the portal and thrust both hands towards it, vermilion energy bursting forth and hitting it with a surge of power. Willow felt the heat on her skin as her hair blew in the backrush. As her power poured through the door, it began to tighten, to shrink in on itself. More wisps rushed through the opening, frantically seeking entrance. Willow grinned at their efforts.

Willow chanted the arcane words, pouring more into the spell, calling upon energies she hadn't tapped into since she stood on Kingman's Bluff. She realized that when she had opened the portal, she had tapped into the Slayer's borrowed power and for the first time since beginning the spell, she was fearful she might not be strong enough to finish. Dimly through the scarlet haze she could hear the sounds of fighting and realized that her children had reached her.

Willow tapped the last of her inner strength and was dismayed to see the portal still open. Desperately, she reached to the Earth below her and felt for the darkness breeding there. Throwing back her head, feeling her throat contract from the force of the scream that burst from it, she felt her spirit dive into the blackness, felt the evil reaching for her, trying to claim her. With only the force of her will to support her, Willow claimed the blackness for herself, reached for it, turned it and made it her own.

With a final burst of power, Willow flung the tapped energy into the portal, sealing it shut with a blast that radiated outward. Only Willow remained standing and she looked around, realizing she was back completely within her reality. She saw that everything outside the circle was toppled over, tombstones and trees alike. Probing her senses outward, she could tell that the damage did not extend beyond the cemetery. She saw the Slayer and Spike picking themselves up off the ground and looking around in confusion. Willow realized that with the last of her power she had destroyed the remaining zombie vampires.

"Nice work, Willow," Anya said as she stood up and opened the circle. "Now if you don't mind, I'll be leaving." With a wave of her arms, the vengeance demon teleported away.

Willow slumped to the ground in exhaustion. Buffy kneeled in front of her friend, dismayed to see her friend's black hair, something she had hoped never to have to see again.

"Willow?"

The sorceress's head hung down, her hands lying limply in her lap, her breathing ragged. "Willow!" Buffy said more sharply.

"Buffy..." Willow began. "You should have..."

"What Willow?" Buffy asked, taking Willow's damp, cold hands in her own "What should I have done?"

"Killed...me."

Buffy's hands tightened in shock, but Willow didn't even flinch as her bones ground together. Buffy realized what she was doing and let up the pressure, but didn't release Willow's hands.

"Why, Willow?" she asked.

Willow took a deep breath, her strength slowly returning. "Evil, Buffy. I'm evil."

Buffy released one hand to tilt Willow's head up to face her. Buffy was relieved to see the familiar green eyes, the veins already fading from her face and her hair changing. "Willow, you've done evil things, but you're not evil. You just need to control the black magic..."

"No! Not black, not white. It just is. It's me. I am the magic, Buffy. And I'm evil. I did this."

Buffy looked at her in confusion. "What?"

"This," Willow waved her hand at the destruction surrounding them. "I caused this. The zombie-vamps. I did something...I didn't mean to do it, but I did...and it opened the portal, it allowed them to be. I created them."

Buffy tried to think past the confusion in her brain. "That's why they were moving towards you. You're their..." She stopped as a cold ball of fear filled her gut.

Willow nodded and completed Buffy's train of thought. "Sire. I'm their sire."

Buffy sat there, stunned, Willow's revelation cutting through her soul. Even the world of the undead had its rules of order, and the siring of vampires was one of those fundamental rules. Only evil begets evil. And these zombie-vamps, however unusual, were clearly evil. And if Willow was so powerful that she was able to transcend the natural and

supernatural laws...Buffy feared to complete the thought and grasped at a straw.

"Willow, you said you did something to open the portal. What did you do?"

Buffy saw the despair in Willow's eyes replaced with fear.

"Buffy, I didn't mean to. It just happened! Please! Please don't hurt..." Willow stopped, her throat closing with terror.

"Willow, I'm not going to hurt you. Tell me what you did." Buffy demanded, but Willow just shook her head.

"Not me," Willow shook her head. "Don't hurt..."

Buffy interrupted her friend by giving her a rough shake by the shoulders. "Willow! What did you do?"

The redhead slumped forward again, tears breaking through her fear as she sobbed against her friend. "I'm sorry," she cried. "I'm so sorry!"

Buffy hugged her tightly. "Just tell me, Willow," Buffy repeated, softly. "Just tell me what you did."

"She sired me," a familiar voice said from the darkness. Buffy looked up as a figure strolled toward the kneeling pair. Willow stiffened in her arms and Buffy could feel goosebumps crawl their way down her back as her Slayer senses kicked in.

"Oh god," Buffy whispered. "Tara?"

Part Six

Willow's secret is revealed and Buffy must decide what to do.

Willow heard the whispered horror in Buffy's voice as her friend realized what Tara was. She had known from the beginning that this moment would come. As she pushed herself out of the Slayer's arms she wiped both hands down her wet face, drying it and adding strength to her resolve; the time for tears was over. Now was the time to face the consequences of her actions.

"Tara?" Buffy whispered again as the vampire stepped into the light illuminating the area surrounding her grave.

Willow felt her throat tighten with a combination of love and desire as she focused on her vampire. Tara was dressed much as she had been since rising, clothing designed to accentuate the voluptuous body the old Tara usually tried to hide. This Tara had nothing to hide and even her posture spoke volumes—hands tucked playfully in her back pants pockets, elbows swinging freely as if she didn't have a care in the world, but her torso was held with confidence and her long blond hair swung free.

But it was Tara's face that told all, her lips blood red and rich and full of danger, tilted up in a smirk that only Tara could pull off and her eyes full of dark humor as she looked at the Slayer. Willow realized that Tara's quirky sense of humor that no one seemed to understand had turned into a dark hilarity in the vampire. Glancing at Buffy, Willow could see that her friend understood it all too well.

"Willow," Buffy said, standing up and putting herself in a defensive posture. Tara stopped near Willow and faced the Slayer, looking at her with a curious expression on her face.

"Willow," Buffy repeated. "What did you do?"

Willow pushed at the ground and tried to stand up, but lacked the strength. Buffy frowned as Tara tenderly reached a hand towards her lover and helped Willow to her feet.

Willow took a fortifying breath and, leaning against Tara, faced her friend. "I haven't worked out all the mechanics of it yet, but basically I transmogrified Tara's body into a vampire and opened the portal to a demon dimension that allowed a demon essence to animate the body. It's basically the same as when a normal vampire is sired, except that I

created her body. She's a vampire in every way. I even share the same connection with her as her sire."

Buffy blinked, trying to absorb Willow's babble. "That night you were sick...when I sensed a vampire...it was Tara I felt?"

Willow nodded, a sad look in her eyes as she watched her friend.

"Tara made you sick?" Buffy asked and Willow nodded again, giving Buffy time to come to her own conclusions. When Buffy's confusion changed to a grimace of disgust, Willow sighed.

"I feel it when she kills, Buffy," Willow said in a soft tone. "I can feel everything she feels as she hunts; the excitement, the bloodlust, the passion and I can taste it as well." Willow held nothing back.

"Oh god," Buffy prayed. "How could you do this, Willow?"

"I didn't mean to," she sighed again. "I know that's no excuse, but it's the truth. It happened during a dream. That night after you juiced me with your Slayer power, I dreamed Tara was a vampire and during the dream I made her one. In the morning I was as exhausted as I am now. I knew something had happened, but didn't know until after you told me about Tara's grave."

Buffy gave a short bark of cynical laughter. "You couldn't dream she was a guardian angel? You had to dream she was a vampire?"

Willow shrugged, "The magic came from me, Buffy. I'm a killer, and so is she."

"Willow, you were a killer," Buffy emphasized. "You've worked so hard..." Buffy stopped when she saw the look in Willow's eye. "Oh," she said in a small voice. "Who?"

Willow stood taller, the rage evident in her voice. "The brother who raped her when she was only seventeen, the father who allowed it to happen." Willow paused, regret clear in her voice. "Her victims since she rose. I'm responsible for them, too."

Buffy looked ill. "Her family? Why, Willow? The human world has laws for dealing with that. It wasn't your responsibility!"

"The human world?" Willow scoffed. "What does that have to do with reality, Buffy? Tara is my responsibility and I would do what I did to those bastards again if I had to."

Buffy brushed aside the tear running down her face and then slowly reached behind her and pulled a stake from its customary hiding place. "I guess you *are* a killer, Willow. But I need you right now. I need your magic and I need your power until I know exactly what we're up against. But I don't need another vampire. Stand aside. I'll take care of this." The Slayer jerked her head towards Tara, who just smirked wider.

"No, Buffy," Willow said, stepping between Tara and the Slayer. "I won't let you stake her. She's mine."

"I'm not giving you a choice, Willow," Buffy growled. "Stand aside."

"No!" Willow cried. Buffy watched as Willow's eyes began to turn black and she prepared to strike before Willow had a chance to lash out, but she stopped when Willow's eyes faded to their normal green.

"Will?" Buffy asked.

"I can't, Buffy," Willow said, defeated. "I swore not to use magic against you again. I could, but I won't. Never again. But please, Buffy, don't kill her. I need her. I love her."

"I'm sorry, Will," Buffy said, the regret in her voice. "I have to."

Tara stepped from behind Willow and faced the Slayer.

"I forgave you, you know," the vampire said to the Slayer.

"What?" Buffy said, confused.

"You asked me not to," Tara shrugged and Willow shivered at the humor in her voice. "You even begged me not to forgive you. But I did."

Recognition dawned in the Slayer's eyes as she remembered falling to her knees in front of Tara after confessing her sordid affair with Spike. The anger she felt that this creature standing before her now had memories of that moment was nearly overwhelming. "I know," Buffy said softly.

"You were the only one who did forgive me. That's why I have to do this."

"I understand," Tara nodded and jumped aside as Buffy lunged at her.

The Slayer was surprised at the move, not expecting Tara to move so quickly. Tara was a fledgling, newly risen and Buffy expected to plant the stake firmly in her chest. Buffy quickly turned and launched a new attack against the vampire. Tara countered each punch, managing to

deflect each thrust of the deadly stake. After a few more rounds, Buffy paused.

"What are you doing?" she asked, backing up and putting space between them.

Tara grinned and spat out a mouthful of blood caused from one of Buffy's punches. "Defending myself."

"Why aren't you fighting back?" Buffy said.

"Can't," Tara said. "My sire ordered me not to hurt you, so I can't. But that doesn't mean I'll just let you stake me. I may be evil, but I'm not crazy."

"You're different than other vamps," Buffy said, wiping sweat from her brow. "Stronger. Faster. Is it magic?"

Tara shrugged, "Willow's magic, maybe. She did a good job. I guess my experience as a Scooby paid off as well."

"I'm sorry, Tara," Buffy said. "I can't let you exist. You know I loved you—as much as I love Willow. Tara would never have wanted this. You're the opposite of everything she was."

"Yeah, well, nobody's perfect, Buffy," Tara laughed. "Not even you. I forgave you for loving Spike, how about you return the favor and forgive Willow? And not only for making me, but for everything from before. The trouble with you Scoobies is that you're all so painfully lacking in forgiveness. Give it a try and I think you'll be able to face anything."

Buffy nodded, recognizing the wisdom of Tara's words, knowing they came from the remnants of the personality of the body the demon now inhabited. "Alright," she said finally and then launched herself again towards the vampire.

This time Tara was not expecting the attack so she simply stood there as the Slayer leaped.

"No!" Willow yelled, both combatants having forgotten her presence. Before the Slayer could react, Willow had moved herself between her friend and her lover as the stake came down with deadly precision, penetrating her chest.

Willow felt the point of the stake pierce her skin as the force of Buffy's blow pushed her against Tara's hard body. As if in slow motion, Willow

felt Tara's arms catch her and the world tilted as the two of them fell backwards. Willow felt no pain, but she could hear the grating of the wood against her sternum as it moved deeper inside her. She looked up at the stars and as the darkness took her she hoped that the hell dimension she ended up in would at least have stars so she could on occasion see them.

Buffy looked on in horror at her best friend lying on top of the vampire. Ever since that night Faith accidentally killed the deputy mayor, Buffy had lived in fear that one day she too would stake a human, but in all of her nightmares, she'd never thought it would be her best friend.

"Buffy!" Tara said jerking the Slayer out of her shock. "Help me!"

"Tara? Is she...?" Buffy said, kneeling next to the vampire who was now holding Willow's head in her lap.

"No, not yet," the vampire said, feeling the weak pulse in the redhead's neck. "But she will be if we don't do something."

"Ambulance..." Buffy said, trying to look anywhere except the blood welling around the stake in Willow's chest.

"No time for that," Tara said. "She's dying, Buffy. Help me."

Buffy looked at Tara. "How?"

"I can heal her," Tara said. "But I don't have enough power to do it on my own. She told me how you gave her your Slayer strength to help her heal. I need that now."

Buffy hesitated, looking into the vampire's eyes. All trace of mirth was gone and all Buffy could see was frantic desperation.

"What do I do?" she asked.

Tara placed one hand on Willow's chest and the other on the stake. "When I pull this out, she's going to gush. I can smell the arterial blood. We need to close the wound before she loses too much blood."

"How can we do that?" Buffy asked.

"With magic, but it takes time and she may not make it anyway," Tara said.

A thought popped into Buffy's mind that drove her fear deeper into her gut. "You could stop that though, couldn't you?" she accused Tara. "Turn her and save her that way."

Tara nodded, "I could Buffy, but I won't. She hasn't asked me and I wouldn't do it unless she did."

"And if she never does?" Buffy asked. "She'll grow old and die. What then?"

"On the day that Willow dies, so do I. And that day will be today unless you help me, Buffy."

Buffy heard the urgency in her former friend's voice and nodded. "Do it. Save her. I need her, Tara."

"Me too," Tara whispered and pulled the stake from Willow's chest.

As Tara had predicted dark blood spurted from the wound. Tara clamped one hand on the wound, slowing the flow. With her other she grabbed Buffy's hand.

"Place your other hand on top of mine," she said. "And then give me your strength."

Buffy did as Tara told her, closing her eyes as she felt the vampire pulling on her offered power. It was different than when she'd lent her strength to Willow to help her heal the raw wounds from the demon's attack. Then Willow had softly probed, feeling with her senses the power Buffy had inside her, gently reaching as Buffy allowed it to flow from her. Now, Tara urgently pulled and Buffy could feel her power being extracted from her as if it were flowing as quickly as Willow's blood. Buffy wanted to protest, to stop the vampire, but she knew if she did Willow would die. A brief thought that she had placed herself in a vulnerable position crossed her mind. If Tara wanted to, she could easily kill the Slayer at this moment.

Buffy's thoughts faded as she concentrated on helping her friend. She drifted. Only when she felt Tara's hand slip from hers did she open her eyes.

"How is she," she asked as Tara once again felt Willow's neck.

"Weak," Tara whispered. "But I think she'll live."

"I'll get an ambulance," Buffy said and tried to stand. Only then did she realize how weak she felt. Tara had pulled more out of her than Willow had before.

"Already on its way, luv."

Buffy looked up and saw Spike leaning down to peer at Willow. She had completely forgotten about him.

"Thank you, Spike," Buffy said and looked at Tara. The vampire witch was huddled over her sire, obviously more exhausted than Buffy.

"Are you alright, Tara?" Buffy asked.

"I'll be fine. Just take care of Willow, please."

Spike looked at the blond vampire curiously and cautiously placed a hand on her chin and gently tilted her head up to face him.

"Well, well. Red's bird," he said with a smile on his face. "Welcome back, little sister."

Tara smiled at Spike, too worn from her spell to banter with him. "Thanks," she finally whispered.

Buffy heard the sound of the ambulance pull up to the cemetery gates. "Spike," she said, finally finding the strength to stand up. "It'll be dawn soon. You get Tara someplace safe. I'll go to the hospital with Willow."

"Alright, pet," Spike said, his face momentarily furrowing in confusion. Then it cleared. "I'll protect her. You take care of the tree."

"Buffy..." Tara began.

"I won't hurt her."

Tara nodded. "Thank you," she said and finally let go of Willow, still lying unconscious on the cold ground. She allowed Spike to lift her to her feet and lead her away.

Buffy watched them leave and then looked down at Willow.

"Oh Willow," she whispered as the paramedics approached. "What am I going to do with you now?"

While Willow was in surgery to repair the damage not healed by Tara's spell, Buffy called Xander. She tried to protest when he insisted on coming down, but Xander refused to listen. Looking at the clock on the wall, Buffy tried to figure out what time it was in England and then just decided to call anyway.

"Hello?" the familiar voice of her Watcher sounded through the electronic connection overseas.

"Giles," Buffy said, relief the relief evident in her voice. "Oh god, I wish you were here."

"What's wrong, Buffy?"

"It's Willow," she said and then stopped, not knowing how to begin.

"Willow?" Giles said, fear tingeing his tone. "Is she alright?"

"No," Buffy said, tears starting to fall, her voice small and scared. Buffy huddled against the pay phone in the hospital waiting room. "She's in surgery."

"What happened, Buffy?" his tone gentle, yet commanding in his own familiar way.

"I staked her, Giles," Buffy said, a sob escaping her. "I staked Willow."

Giles said nothing as Buffy related the events of the night. Finally, her story exhausted, Giles whispered. "Dear lord!"

Buffy, her tears finally having dried, gave a short laugh. "Dear lord is right. What do I do now, Giles? Finish the job on Willow? Kill my best friend? Turn her in to the police? Not that they could prove anything on her, I'll bet. I'm sure she didn't leave any evidence again. Willow knows how to clean up after herself."

"I don't know what to advise you, Buffy," he said finally. "I didn't think Willow was able to harness the power required to create a vampire. You said that Willow did it in her sleep after you gave her your power to heal?"

"Yes," Buffy answered.

Giles sighed. "Then I'm afraid you are just as responsible for Tara's existence as Willow is. Just as you're responsible for Willow's life now. I don't think you can bring yourself to kill her Buffy. Do you?"

"No," Buffy said. "I couldn't let her bleed to death. I need her, Giles."

"I know," he said. "And from what you've said, she needs Tara."

"And Tara is a vampire and she kills," the bitterness in Buffy's voice was clear.

Giles sighed. "This is not easy for you, Buffy, I know. But the decision is yours and yours alone. You're the vampire slayer. I can only tell you that all the signs indicate that what's coming is going to take every resource you can muster. There are rumors among my Council friends that the Council itself is frightened. You can't do it on your own. You need every ally you have. From the healing spell she cast tonight, it sounds like vampire Tara is just as powerful as human Tara. Probably more so with her supernatural strength."

"Sounds a lot like making deals with the devil," Buffy fumed.

Giles let out a soft chuckle. "And we all know that you've never done that before."

Buffy saw Xander and her sister enter the waiting room and hurry over to her. "I've got to go Giles, Xander and Dawn are here."

"Very well," Giles said. "Please keep me informed of Willow's condition. And everything else, for that matter."

Buffy hung up the phone and turned to the waiting pair, dreading having to repeat her story again.

Soon after Xander and Dawn arrived at the hospital, the surgeon informed them that Willow was out of danger and resting in recovery. Buffy checked on her still-unconscious friend and then the three of them drove back to the house. Once there, Xander and Dawn listened in stunned silence as Buffy told them about the battle and its conclusion.

"Willow killed Tara's father and brother?" Xander asked, unable to comprehend.

Buffy nodded.

"Why?" Dawn asked.

Buffy sighed. "She said Donny had raped Tara and Mr. Maclay let it happen."

"Her brother? He raped Tara?" Xander asked. "You mean...before?"

"Before she came to Sunnydale," Buffy nodded.

"Oh god...Tara," Xander whispered. "How could he? She was so sweet, she was the best one of us all."

Dawn, her face hard, said, "I'm glad Willow did it. I'd kill him, too."

"Dawn, please. Let's not get into this discussion again. What Willow did was wrong," Buffy said.

"No it wasn't," Dawn retorted. "It was justice. I wish she had let me help her."

"And Tara?" Buffy asked, trying not to be cruel, but failing. "You didn't see her Dawn. She's evil. She kills innocent humans to feed off of their blood. Is that the Tara you want back in your life? I don't think she's going to be making you any funny shaped pancakes for breakfast tomorrow morning."

"And I suppose you're the only one who can have a relationship with vampires?" Xander asked. "You almost killed Willow tonight, Buffy. Why didn't you let her die?"

Buffy felt her guilt returning. "I can't Xander. I love her. Just like I love you and Dawn. You're my family and I can't turn my back on you no matter what you do."

"You said it yourself, Buffy," Dawn said. "Tara is our family, too. You can't turn your back on her either."

"But she's a vampire," Buffy protested. "She's evil."

"If that's the way you really feel Buffy, then you would have staked Spike a long time ago." Xander said.

Buffy looked at him, the anguish in her face. "Xander..."

Xander shook his head. "I can't Buffy," he said heading for the door. "I'm going back to the hospital and sit with Willow."

Buffy looked at the closed door.

"I'm going to get some sleep." Dawn said. "I'll want to see Willow later."

Buffy was left alone with her dark thoughts.

The next morning, Buffy called the hospital to check on Willow's progress before heading to work at the high school. She was told her friend was resting comfortably and would be released in a few days.

Dawn came home soon after Buffy arrived from work.

"Hey," Dawn said.

"Hey," Buffy replied, pulling open the refrigerator and rummaging around for something to make for supper. "Did you see Willow?"

"Yeah," Dawn said, leaning past her sister to pull out the bag of baby carrots. "She was mostly out of it all day."

"She say anything?"

"Just asked about Tara." Dawn crunched on the vegetable. "I told her that she was okay. That's true, isn't it?"

Buffy's face darkened. "For the moment."

"Yeah, well, the doctors said she'd be pretty doped up at least until tomorrow. Gonna go see her?"

"Maybe," Buffy said. "I have to patrol, though."

"Don't do it, Buffy," Dawn warned. "It would kill Willow, you know that. I don't think she could stand losing Tara again."

Buffy looked at her sister. "If she comes here, don't you invite her in, Dawn."

"This is my house, too!" Dawn protested.

"I mean it, Dawn," Buffy said. "I don't want her in the house."

Dawn threw down the carrot she was munching on to the floor and stormed from the kitchen.

Buffy, her appetite gone, headed out to patrol.

Willow came awake, confusion clouding her brain. She smelled antiseptic and recognized the scent of a hospital. She opened her eyes and looked into the eyes of her oldest friend.

"Xander," she said softly, a pleased tone in her voice. She vaguely remembered speaking with Dawn the day before and knew that all the Scoobies knew about Tara. The fact that Xander was here gave her hope they hadn't all abandoned her.

"Hey, Will," he said, leaning forward and placing a gentle kiss on her cheek.

"Hi Willow!"

Willow looked into the face of the smiling teenager.

"Dawnie," she said, taking the young girl's hand and giving it a squeeze. "Thanks for coming."

"Yeah, just Scooby duty, you know."

Willow smiled and looked out the window, seeing the darkness beyond. "Buffy off patrolling?"

Xander shrugged, "Just doing her part to keep the streets of Sunnydale safe from the denizens of the night."

Dawn saw the look of fear in Willow's eyes. "I'm sure she's okay, Willow."

Willow gave a ghost of a smile. "She is," she said, instinctively knowing that Dawn was not speaking about her sister.

Xander blinked at the conviction in Willow's voice. "You can feel her, eh? Just like a sire?"

"I am her sire, Xander," Willow said. Suddenly Willow sat up in the bed, but a twinge of pain from her chest forced her back down.

"You okay, Will?" Xander asked, concerned.

"Thanks for coming, guys, but I think you should go now." Willow said frantically, a look of panic in her face. Dawn frowned at the heart monitor's increase in tempo.

"We just got here, Willow. No school tomorrow and I already did my homework." Dawn said.

"No, please..." Willow begged.

"Willow? What is it?" Xander asked.

Willow whispered, "She's here."

"What? Who?" Xander said.

Willow shot a look at her friends as the door flew open and Tara walked into the room. Xander's face just mirrored shock, but Dawn's held something else—hope. The teenager turned toward the vampire whose eyes were fixed on the young girl.

"Hi Dawnie," Tara said, moving slowly into the room.

Xander moved to step between Dawn and Tara, but Dawn pushed him aside and moved to hug Tara. Willow caught Tara's eye as the vampire enveloped the young girl in her arms and gave a small sigh of relief at the expression on Tara's face. She knew that Tara wouldn't hurt the girl.

"Will?" Xander said nervously.

"It's ok, Xander. Tara won't hurt her. She won't hurt any of you. You're safe with her." Willow squeezed her friend's hand in reassurance.

"Family," Xander whispered, remembering the conversation with Buffy and Dawn the other day.

"Family," Tara repeated and then said, "Isn't that right, Slayer?"

The three humans in the room looked to the open doorway behind Tara and saw Buffy standing there, a dark expression on her face.

"How are you, Willow?" the Slayer asked looking at the redhead on the bed, ignoring the others in the room.

"I've been better," Willow said with a wry grin. "But I should be out of here in a couple of days."

"Good," Buffy said. "I'm sorry I staked you." The regret in her voice was painfully obvious.

"Yeah, well, I guess I deserved it," Willow said.

"Maybe so," Buffy retorted, "But it's not my job to judge you."

"And Tara?" Willow asked. "That is your job."

"It is," Buffy began, walking into the room. "But as everyone from Giles to these two have pointed out, I can't have you without her. And frankly Willow, that pisses me off."

Willow managed to look ashamed, but held her tongue, knowing that apologizing would do no good.

"So here's the deal, Willow," Buffy said, the fire in her eyes. "No more killing. Got it? I don't care what Tara's family did to her, what you did to them is inexcusable."

Buffy began to pace the room. "As for Tara, if I catch her while on patrol, I'll stake her just like any other vamp. If I find out she's turned someone, I'll stake her. If she hurts you or anyone else on purpose, I'll stake her. Got it?"

"Yeah," Willow said, knowing the Slayer was not finished yet.

"If she can help us in a fight, then fine, I'll fight beside her, but I don't want her in the house," the Slayer concluded.

"But Buffy..." Dawn protested.

"No, Dawn," Buffy said, finally turning to her sister, still standing next to Tara with the vampire's arm around her shoulders.

"It's okay, Dawnie," Tara said, gently squeezing the young girl. "I understand. It's going to take time before she can trust me."

Buffy nodded. "Very wise for one of the undead," the Slayer said, a small smile gracing her lips.

Tara returned the smile with a smirk and a shrug. "Hey, what can I say, I'm special."

"I'll move out, Buffy," Willow said from the bed. "I'll respect your wishes."

"I don't want you to, Will," Buffy said. "But I did speak to Angel and he's agreed to let Tara stay in the mansion if she wants. It's a lot nicer than a crypt and more comfortable."

"Can I keep my room?" Willow asked.

"It's your home, Willow. You're always welcome," Buffy said, love and friendship in her tone.

"Thank you, Buffy," Willow replied, a tear slipping down one cheek.

The Slayer turned to her sister. "Dawn, not too late, okay."

"I'll make sure she gets home, Buff," Xander said.

Buffy nodded. "I need to patrol. See you guys, later," she said and hurried out the door.

"Okay, what the hell was that?" Xander said looking at the door swinging shut.

Willow chuckled, "That was Buffy the forgiving friend rushing out to turn back into Buffy the vampire slayer."

Xander smiled, and then grew serious. "Willow, she's right about one thing. What you did to Tara's family was wrong, no matter what they did to her. Please, do me a favor and leave the vengeance stuff to Anya."

Willow nodded, "No more vengeance. And when she hunts, we'll leave Sunnydale."

"Willow..." Tara protested.

"No Tara," Willow put on her resolve face. "No more killing in Sunnydale. You'll subsist on bagged blood and we'll make trips out of town on occasion."

Willow waited for Tara's response. She knew that she could not stop the vampire from killing, trying to do so would be useless. There were limits to her control over Tara, but as her sire Willow knew that Tara would follow her commands, within reason. Tara was evil, but without evil there would be no good in the world and Willow understood that all things in nature balanced in the end. Tara needed to kill, but with Willow's guidance perhaps good could come from evil. She'd be a fool to think that would be the case every time or even most of the time, but perhaps in the long run she could learn to live with it. The alternative was to deny Tara her true nature, and in turn, deny herself and that would end up destroying them both.

"You're no fun," Tara pouted and Willow relaxed, knowing a small victory had been achieved.

"Well, I said no more killing. I didn't say we couldn't go to the Big O every now and then," Willow smirked, lightening the mood, but forgetting they had company.

"What?" Xander said, confused. "Where?"

"The Red Oyster," Dawn explained. "It's a gay bar."

"Dawnie!" Willow said.

Tara gave a hearty laugh. "Wanna join us one night, Sweetie?"

"Sure!"

"No!" Willow exclaimed.

"Why not?" Dawn frowned. "How else am I going to learn about life? Besides, I've been to the Bronze. Why not the Big O?"

"It's a gay bar, Dawn," Willow tried to explain.

"So what? I'm strictly dickly, but then again, so were you at my age," Dawn smirked at Willow's face.

Xander cleared his throat. "Okay, that's it," he said, taking Dawn's hand and pulling her towards the door. "Let's go before I get staked due to guilt by association. I never heard this conversation. Night, Willow. Night, Tara." Dawn squeaked her goodbyes as Xander dragged her out the door.

Tara chuckled as she sat down on Willow's bed. Gently lifting her sire up, she settled back on the bed, cradling Willow in her arms and softly stroking her red hair.

"Thank you for saving my life," Willow said, running a warm hand up and down the cooler arm holding her.

"Just returning the favor, my love," the vampire whispered.

"You're a more powerful witch now, Tara," Willow observed. "You could not have done that spell before."

Tara nodded her head in agreement. "Buffy helped. But I am more powerful. I don't think I'll ever be as powerful as you though. Even with my demon, I don't think dark magic will be as easy for me as it is for you."

"Probably not," Willow sighed. "But that's okay, I think we can make a good team. Tara? Will you join the fight? Can you ally yourself with Buffy to battle evil, even if you are evil?"

"And if I couldn't?" Tara asked. "What then?"

Willow took a deep breath. "Well, you could leave Sunnydale, there are other places you can go."

"You'd come with me?"

"No," Willow said after a pause. "I have to stay. Buffy believes in me and I won't let her down. You could stay here, live in the mansion, but not help."

"I could," Tara said. "But I won't. I can't stand aside while you put yourself in danger. I'll do it for you, Willow. I'll fight by your side, not the Slayer's. I'll be there to protect you."

Willow smiled and hugged the arms holding her. "We'll protect each other."

"Deal," Tara said. "Now, wanna help me find something to drink around here? Gotta be a few terminal patients on the ward."

"Tara!" Willow said, turning around and looking into Tara's amused face.

"Just kidding, love," Tara laughed, leaning down to kiss Willow passionately on the lips.

Willow returned the kiss, and then lay back in Tara's arm, exhaustion overcoming her. "You know," she began, but paused to yawn. "Maybe. Just maybe...if you're really good and when I get better, I just might let you take a little sip of me every now and then."

"Vixen," Tara smiled down at her lover. "That a promise?"

"I said maybe," Willow replied, closing her eyes. "I hear it's quite an aphrodisiac."

Tara chuckled as she watched Willow fall asleep. "Oh, you have no idea. But you will."

The End