

## Chance Meeting 1

Roger noticed him first. Of course, Roger was there by himself that night. He'd been trying to find the perfect bar for him and his brother to frequent. Roger had been living in Sunnydale for a little over a year but he hadn't gone to many bars since he'd been in town. He didn't like to drink alone. But his brother Paul was arriving tomorrow to become the new Chief of Police, and when the two of them were together, a regular bar was essential.

Roger took a sip of Guinness and let out a happy sigh. Excellent beer. He decided this was the one. Roger turned on his bar stool to scope out the rest of the place. That was when he saw him. He was sitting in a corner booth, reading. Every now and then he'd pinch his nose under his glasses or run his hand through his hair. He looked worried. And he looked weary. Roger didn't know why but he felt his heart go out to the guy.

Roger turned back to the bar. The bar was not crowded. Only one other man sat at the bar, the few other clients were sitting in booths in pairs. Roger caught the bartender's eye. He gestured towards the back booth. "Who's that guy?"

The bartender looked in the direction Roger was indicating. He pursed his lips. "He owns the magic store down the street." He didn't volunteer any more information.

Roger lifted his eyebrows. Magic shop. That he never would have guessed. Maybe a teacher, or some sort of researcher. "What's his name?"

The bartender shook his head. "I don't know. I don't ask my customers for their names. I figure if they want me to know it, they'll tell me."

Roger grinned and held out his hand. "Roger Erikson."

"Frank La Salle." Frank took Roger's hand and they shook on their introduction. Frank took his hand back and cleaned away the glass from the other man who had just left. "I figure if a man can't come to a bar and be anonymous if he wants to be, what's the point?"

Roger grinned again. "Does he come here often?"

"A couple times a week. Sometimes more, sometimes less." He pointed to Roger's beer. "Want another one?"

"Please, thanks."

Frank filled his glass. "So, Roger Erikson, what keeps you busy?"

"I'm a doctor."

"My sister's a doctor."

"Really, what kind?"

"Obstetrician."

"Oh, I'm an emergency room doctor."

Frank let out a laugh. "Well, you're in the right town for that."

Roger gave him a curious look. "What do you mean by that?"

Frank had lived here for a long time. "It's just an odd town. The police think there's a lot of gang activity."

"There are a lot of violent accidents in this town, I'll give you that. Puncture wounds, animal attacks. Not the stuff you'd expect in a smaller town like this." Roger took a swallow of his beer. "So, are there a lot of gangs?" Paul might be interested in knowing this.

Frank shook his head. "No, no gangs."

"So, why do the police think there are gangs?"

Frank just looked at Roger. "Like I said, it's an odd town."

Roger turned to look at the corner booth and saw the man unhappily close the book he'd been reading. He stood and put on his coat. Picking up his book he headed for the door, barely noting Frank and Roger on his way out.

Frank called out. "Goodnight."

The man looked briefly disconcerted and then smiling, just a little, he stammered out a good night. Frank and Roger both watched him as he left. Roger turned back to Frank. "He's English." Frank nodded. Roger didn't know why he was so curious. "Does he ever come in here with anyone?"

Frank shook his head. "Nope, maybe once or twice he's been in here with someone but he's almost always alone."

"And he runs a magic store." Somehow the pieces didn't fit.

Frank didn't help him out. He knew a little bit more about that man than he wagered most did. But it wasn't anything he would ever talk about. All he knew was that one night he'd been attacked by something that wasn't human as he was taking out the garbage. The man had been heading out to his car. He'd obviously heard Frank yell and had come running. And he'd shoved a wooden stake through the thing's heart. Frank had watched him explode into dust. The man had asked if he was all right and when Frank had nodded, he'd left with a warning to be more careful when he went out at night. Frank took the garbage out in the morning now.

He didn't know what that thing had been, didn't really want to know. He had some ideas, but he wasn't going to tell anyone and the only one he might have asked clearly wanted to be left alone. All he knew was that the man had saved his life and Frank would have given him free beers for life if he'd let him. But he'd insisted on paying, and insisted on not being made a fuss of, so Frank left him alone. People had the right to be left alone in a bar.

And ever since then, truth to be told, Frank liked having him in the bar. Frank

wasn't a coward but that thing had scared him. And there were some nights when the memory of that attack felt a little too close and when that happened he felt that the man was a good luck charm. So despite Roger's curiosity Frank kept his mouth shut, because he didn't want to run the man off.

Roger felt himself getting tired. He finished off his beer, told Frank good night and left. As he got in his car he was grinning. This would be a good bar. There was good beer, a friendly enough bartender who would loosen up quite nicely, and a mysterious man who sat in the corner. Roger started his car and drove off.

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When Roger showed up the next night with Paul in tow the man was once again seated in the corner booth. And he was once again reading a book. He was reading with that same extraordinary concentration Roger had noticed the day before. He nudged Paul in order to point him out.

"That's him, that's the guy."

"That's the big mystery guy?"

"Yeah." Roger walked up to the bar and got Frank's attention. "Hey, Frank. This here's my brother, Paul Erikson."

Frank put out his hand. "Nice to meet you, Paul."

"Same here." He nodded in the general direction of the corner. "Roger here seems quite taken with mystery man."

Frank pursed his lips. "Don't do anything to run him off."

Paul snickered. "Can't promise that. Roger sort of comes by that gift naturally."

Roger pretended to punch him. "Hey, I have a charm that never ends. You're the one that scares people away."

Paul noticed something. "Look, they have a dart board." He looked at Frank. "You got the darts?"

Frank reached under the counter and retrieved a tray of darts. "You guys good at this? I don't want holes in my wall."

Roger put his hand on his chest. Paul interrupted him before he could start pontificating. "Trust me, you don't want to listen to his spiel about his skill at darts. Let me just say that we won't put holes in your wall. Or at least not on purpose."

Frank nodded. "Good enough."

As Roger and Paul moved over to the dartboard Roger muttered to Paul under his breath. "That bartender knows stuff."

Paul deliberately misunderstood. "You mean about mixing drinks, that sort of stuff?"

Roger rolled his eyes. "No, about the guy. I can just tell, there's something in his eyes."

Paul snorted. "Hey, I'm the cop in the family. Would you leave the conspiracy paranoia to me?"

"No, see that's how I know. He gets that same look you do when you're holding back on me."

"How would you know? I always end up telling you anyway."

"Well, sure, you know I could beat you up if I had to."

"First of all, you couldn't beat me up if I had one hand tied behind my back, and besides I could shoot you any time I want."

"Okay, then you tell me because you trust me." He gestured with his chin back towards the bar. "See, Frank doesn't trust me. So, he's not going to tell me. But I know he knows something."

Paul just made a face and handed half the darts to Roger. "Just shoot."

They started a lively game of darts with much laughter, insulting and shoving. Paul happened to glance over at the corner and caught the man watching them. He had the oddest look in his eyes. When the man saw Paul looking he went back to his book. Paul missed his next shot trying to figure out what that look was. Suddenly it came to him. Wistful. That's what it was. Like the guy wished he could play too.

Paul walked over to his booth. "Do you play darts?"

The man looked up, surprised at the question. He also looked a bit alarmed. "No, no."

"Want to learn how?"

A small smile appeared on the man's face. "Thanks, but perhaps another time."

Paul looked at the book he was reading. His eyebrows lifted. "What language is that?"

"It's Latin."

"You're sitting in a bar, drinking Guinness, turning down a darts game for a book in Latin." Paul shook his head. The man smiled ruefully and didn't respond. Paul smiled. "Must be a real page turner."

The man let out a half laugh. "Well it certainly keeps me awake at night." He looked at his watch and took a last swallow of his beer. "Well, it's late." He

stood and grabbing his book, he left.

Roger swatted Paul on the arm. "Great job. You scared him off."

Paul just watched the door the man had just left through. There was something about him...Paul hoped he'd be back. He shook his head and went back to the game.

End of Part 1

Chance Meeting 2

Paul and Roger came three times over the next week but the man wasn't there any of those times. It was now a week to the day that they had last seen him. They were both sitting at the bar having a beer. Roger shot a disgusted look Paul's way. "You scared him away. You shouldn't have talked with him yet."

Paul rolled his eyes. "Jesus, Roger, he's not a wild animal. It's not like we need to tame him." Paul leaned towards Roger. "But, just in case he comes back, I wouldn't tell him what I do for a living. He does seem a bit...skittish."

Roger let out a snort. He called over to Frank. "He hasn't been in at all?"

Frank shook his head no and shot them both a glare. Roger grimaced back and decided to shut up about it. He and Paul sat there in silence, nursing their beers. All of a sudden Roger saw Frank's eyes light up and he flashed a quick grin at the two brothers making an almost indiscernible nod towards the door. Paul and Roger forced themselves not to turn around and just waited until he walked in and headed by them.

Paul glanced up at him and winced. The words were out of his mouth before he could think better of them. "What the hell happened to you?" The man had a serious set of bruises on one side of his face. And one nasty looking gash that had gotten stitches. Paul didn't know why but he was furious on this man's behalf.

The man looked for a moment as if he didn't even know what Paul was talking about, as if he walked around most of the time with wounds like that. Then he gingerly touched his face. "Oh, oh, it's nothing."

Paul opened his mouth to argue when Roger poked him, hard, in his side. Frank called out. "Want a beer?" The man nodded and headed off to his corner booth. Frank poured him a Guinness and took it over to him. "Want anything else? You hungry? Should I get the waitress?"

The man smiled at Frank. "No, this will be fine, thanks. I'm fine." The man glanced at the bar where Roger and Paul were sitting. He didn't say anything, but Frank answered the unspoken question.

"They're brothers. The one with short hair's a doctor. I don't know what the other one does."

The man nodded. "Ah." He looked down at his beer. "Maybe I will have something to eat."

Frank nodded. "I'll get Kathleen out here." The other side of the bar was a small restaurant. The man smiled his thanks and as Frank moved away he opened the book that he'd brought with him.

Paul and Roger were whispering up at the bar. "What do you think happened to him?"

"Maybe he got in a car accident?"

Paul shook his head. "That looks like someone hit him." He'd seen a lot of fistfights in his career.

Roger opened his eyes wide. "You mean like he got in a fight?"

Paul shrugged his shoulders. "It just looks like someone hit him, a few times."



"Why would someone hit him?"

Paul shot an incredulous look at Roger. "How am I supposed to know? You won't let me talk to him. Maybe we should have brought some food and we could see if we could make him come to us." He rolled his eyes.

Frank returned and took his spot behind the bar. "He was asking about you."

They both raised their eyebrows. Roger spoke. "He asked about us?"

Frank hesitated. "Well, not in so many words, but he wanted to know who you guys were."

Paul made a face. "How do you know that, bartender ESP?"

Frank glared at Paul. "I could just tell. He was looking, okay?"

Paul put up his hands. "Okay. What did you tell him?"

"That Roger was a doctor and I didn't know what you did."

Paul nodded. "Good answer." He hadn't been sure if Roger had told Frank what he'd be doing when his job started in another week.

Frank looked at Paul. "What do you do, anyway?"

Paul took a swig of beer. "I am currently between jobs." That was true enough.

Frank grinned and spoke softly. "Watch this." Kathleen walked by and headed over to the man's table.

All three men watched as Kathleen did everything she could to throw herself at the man as she took his order, short of sitting on his lap. And she would have done that if he hadn't quickly slid over in his seat. And they all watched

as he completely ignored it. Frank spoke softly again. "She does that every time. And every time he blows her off."

Roger pursed his lips. "Do you think he's gay?"

Frank laughed. "I don't think so. I think he's oblivious."

Paul wasn't so sure. He watched the man closely, as he was unlikely to notice Paul staring as the waitress took his attention with her attempts to get both his order and a date. As the waitress finally walked away he continued to look. And because of it he saw it. The man lifted his eyes, saw Paul was watching him, and a quick smile passed his lips, a mixed look of amusement and exasperation in his eyes. Then his eyes went back to his book and the moment of male bonding was over.

Paul had to bite his lips to keep from laughing. He turned back to the bar. "I don't think he's oblivious. I just think it gets rid of her without him having to be rude about it."

Roger stared at him. "What, now you're the expert on mystery man?"

Paul took a swallow of his beer. "Yes, it's all those wildlife classes I've been taking." He almost spilled his beer as Roger smacked him on the arm.

They both sat there in silence for a while and then watched as Kathleen brought the man his food. She only made a half-hearted attempt this time. As the man dug into his dinner, Paul, Roger and Frank appreciated the sway of Kathleen's hips as she headed back to the restaurant. Roger shook his head. "I don't get it. Why isn't he interested?"

Paul shrugged. "Maybe he has someone already."

Roger shook his head. "Frank says he's always alone for the most part." He looked to Frank for confirmation and Frank nodded. "If he had someone wouldn't he bring her here every now and then?"

Paul shrugged again. "You haven't brought Linda here."

"Well, it doesn't mean I won't."

"Maybe he's a workaholic."

Roger rolled his eyes. "Not quite the expert, are you?"

Paul slammed his beer down. "All right, time for me to whup your ass at darts. Come on."

"In your dreams, buddy." Frank pulled out the dart tray and handed them to Paul.

Paul and Roger headed for the dartboard. As the game commenced Paul glanced at the man every now and then. More often than not the man would be watching them. Paul even saw several small smiles in response to him and Roger joshing each other. He wanted to invite him to join them again, but this time he resisted the temptation.

Two younger guys came in and after getting a beer they asked if they could join in the game. As far as Paul and Roger were concerned the more the merrier so the four of them started playing a game. When next Paul glanced in the corner the man had closed the book and pushed it to the side and he was just watching them, enjoying the silliness. Roger glanced at him too and saw the merriment in the man's eyes as he watched them. Roger had no idea why but he was glad they'd taken that weary look out of his eyes, even if it was just for a short time.

After the game and congratulatory beers were bought for Paul and Roger by the two young men Paul glanced over again. The man was rubbing his head as if he had a headache. Paul turned to Frank. "You got any aspirin?"

Frank opened a drawer and pulled out a bottle handing it to Paul. Paul walked over to the corner booth and displayed the bottle. "Want some?"

The man sent him a grateful look. "Yes, I do, as a matter of fact. I have a bit of a headache."

Paul opened the bottle and shook out three pills into the man's hands. "So, does the other guy look worse?"

The man briefly laughed. The other guy was a vampire who was now dust. "Yes, he does." He swallowed his aspirin. "Quite a bit worse."

Paul wanted to know more but something in the man's expression stopped him. Paul decided to take this little victory and call it a night. He was about to walk away when he noticed the book. "No Latin tonight?" He looked closer. "What language is that?"

The man looked down at his book. "Greek."

Paul was about to explode with curiosity. He held it in somehow and just smiled. "Of course." He took the bottle of aspirin and headed back up to the bar. When Paul looked back he was reading his book again. He turned to Roger. "It's Greek this time."

"What's Greek this time?"

"The book. He reads Latin, he reads Greek. Who the hell is he?"

Roger shook his head, grinning. "See, I told you he was a mystery."

They both decided they needed to use the rest room and when they came out he was gone.

##

"Okay, so what do we know?"

Paul tapped his fingers on the bar, mentally assembling all their information. "We know he owns the Magic Box, per Frank. We know he can read Latin and Greek. We know he's English. And we know he was in a fight and he

won."

Roger nodded. "We also know he worries a lot." Other than the times when the man was smiling at their antics, he looked worried most of the time. Worried and tired. "And he doesn't sleep enough."

Paul rolled his eyes. "How the hell do you know that?"

"Hey, I'm a doctor, remember? I can just tell. He's got shadows under his eyes, and he's always rubbing his eyes like they're tired. He just looks tired."

"Fine, he doesn't sleep enough. We also know he doesn't like to talk a whole lot, or volunteer much information."

They both sat back. Roger shook his head. "Not much to go on." He looked at Paul, a gleam in his eye. "Couldn't you check him out? At least find out what his name is?"

Paul let out an exaggerated sigh. "Roger, I know I like to stretch the rules as much as the next guy but even I have my limits. I can hardly break into private records just to satisfy my curiosity. Unless he breaks the law he does have the right to his privacy."

Roger made a face at Paul. "Fine, be that way." He got a determined look on his face. "We'll figure it out the old fashioned way. We'll just keep spying on him."

Paul barked out a laugh. "What's he doing anyway?"

Roger took a quick look. "Still reading."

Paul risked a quick look as well. "He can read like nobody's business. I swear a bomb could go off in this place and he wouldn't even notice."

"He looks really stressed tonight."

Paul looked over to see what Roger was talking about. The man had taken off his glasses and was pinching the bridge of his nose. He clearly wasn't having a good time. He looked up and Roger and Paul quickly looked away and turned back to the bar. Roger grimaced. "Do you think he noticed?"

"I don't know. Depends if he's far-sighted or near-sighted."

"Far-sighted would be my guess. He always has the glasses on to read."

"Then he might have seen us."

Roger dared to look again. "He's back reading." He looked at Paul. "You looking forward to starting work tomorrow?"

"Yes and no. It's been sort of nice just being a lazy bum. And the few other officers I've met with all seem to think that I need to have my head examined to have actually requested a transfer here."

"Well, Frank said it's a really odd town and that all the cops think there's all this gang activity but there aren't any actual gangs."

"Run that by me again."

"Hey, I'm just telling you what he said. That it was a very odd town, quote, unquote."

"Like I said, yes and no." He glanced at the man. "Mystery man, mystery town." He grimaced at Roger. "You had to move here? An entire country to choose from and this is what you pick?"

Roger looked serious for a minute. "I know it sounds weird, but yes, I had to move here. I have no idea why." He shrugged. "Ooh, I think he's found something. He's getting out a couple of other books, like he's checking something."

Paul glanced over. "Almost like he's researching." They watched as the man slammed all the books shut and stood. He reached in his pocket and pulled

out a handful of change. He headed for the phone. Paul slid off his stool and quietly followed him, standing just out of visual range.

The man dialled a number. "Hello, Anya? It's Giles. Is Buffy still there?" There was a brief pause. "Good. Tell her not to leave until I get there. I found something important." He hung up. As he headed rapidly back to his table he practically ran Paul over. "Oh, I'm sorry. Are you all right?"

Paul nodded but before he could respond the man smiled briefly at his nod, hurried past him, picked up his books and raced from the bar. Paul had a grin on his face when he got back to Roger. "Pay dirt. His name is Giles. He spoke to someone named Anya. He did find some information and it was for someone. He instructed Anya to keep her there until he got there."

"Well, what was her name?"

Paul started laughing. "Buffy."

Roger's eyebrows almost lifted off his face. "Buffy?" He shook his head. "I so don't get it. He speaks two languages, he's clearly well-educated, yet he owns a magic shop and reads books in Latin and Greek to give information to someone named Buffy?"

Paul was still laughing. "I feel like I'm in the twilight zone with this guy."

Roger was laughing too as he ordered two more beers from Frank, but there was a gleam in his eye. "At least we know his name now, or part of his name."

Paul tapped his glass against Roger's. "That we do." They toasted each other and decided to play a game of darts.

End of Part 2

Chance Meeting 3

Giles was feeling relaxed for a change. The latest apocalypse had been averted with minimal damage to the gang. Xander was recovering from a sprained ankle, and Buffy had her usual assortment of cuts and bruises but nothing that would still show tomorrow. And he had emerged from the whole thing with nothing but a filthy jacket that not even dry cleaning would set right. He'd sadly thrown it away.

From a sense of duty, rather than need, he still had a book with him. Giles drove into the parking lot not really noticing that the place was almost full. He found a spot and parked. Getting out he considered putting the hood up but then decided not to. He grabbed his book and headed towards the bar.

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Roger let out a gasp. "Look, there he is." It had been almost two weeks since they'd seen him. Paul had been busy with meetings and Roger had pulled some extra evening shifts because the ER had been so busy. More of the non-existent 'gang' activity. After his conversation with Frank about Sunnydale Roger had to admit that much of what happened in the ER was quite odd. Then Giles hadn't shown up at all this week.

Paul glanced out the window. "Wow, he has a BMW convertible." Yet another fact to be stored away with the rest of the data that didn't compute. Paul looked around and pursed his lips. "There's no place for him to sit." The place was packed for some reason. There was a sense of celebration in the air and Sunnydale had responded to it in droves. Every booth and every seat at the bar was taken. Paul and Roger had gotten the last booth.

Roger's eyes twinkled. "Let's invite him to join us." They watched him as he entered the bar.

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Giles walked in the door and finally the ramification of the almost full parking lot hit home. The bar was wall-to-wall people. He felt a moment of dismay but he let it go as he realized that even though these people had no idea why they were celebrating, that indeed it was a night for rejoicing. He turned



around to leave when he caught sight of someone waving. It was the two brothers. He turned to look behind him but there was no one there. The short-haired one, the doctor, grinned at him and pointed at Giles, waving him over.

Giles deliberated. He turned and left the bar.

##

Roger sat back down. "Damn, he's leaving."

Paul watched him as he walked back to his car. The guy opened his trunk and put the book in it. Closing it he looked back at the bar, hesitating. Paul shook his head. "No, I don't think so."

Roger looked out the window. "What's he doing?"

"Deciding. Deciding on whether to join us or not."

"And this is a decision meriting such thought...because?"

Paul grinned at Roger. "I'm going with the wild animal theory. For some reason he doesn't feel safe. It's like he's sniffing the air for danger." He turned back to the window. Giles was leaning against his car.

"Should I go out?"

Paul shook his head. "Nope. Either he'll come in or he won't."

##

Giles watched the bar, torn. He felt drawn to these men. He appreciated their sense of humour, their relationship, and their easy manner. It was alluring, especially as he had so little of that in his life. It had been so long since he'd

had friends his own age. Just mates, guys to meet for a drink, talking about inconsequential matters. A part of him longed for it.

But the other part of him found it hard to believe that he could have it. His duty as a Watcher, and the activities of the Hellmouth did not lend themselves well to relationships outside of that realm. There was too much he couldn't say, too much he couldn't possibly explain. And sooner or later he'd have to walk away.

Giles scuffed the gravel with one of his shoes. Could one night hurt? Didn't he deserve one night? One night where he could pretend he was normal, that he was someone that two brothers might choose to be friends with? The longing grew in him and deciding to tempt fate he squared his shoulders and headed back inside.

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"Oh, my God, he's coming back in." Roger sent a startled look at Paul. "I feel so nervous all of a sudden, like it's our first date."

Paul barked out a laugh. As soon as Giles entered the bar he slid out of his seat. As Giles approached their booth Paul gestured him into the now empty seat while he sat next to his brother. Paul stuck out his hand. "Paul Erikson."

Giles took Paul's hand. "Rupert Giles. But everyone seems to call me Giles. I can't imagine why." He shot them both a wry grin.

Roger introduced himself next and Giles shook his hand too. Paul grinned at the man. "Well, Giles, it's nice to finally meet you."

Frank suddenly showed up dropping off a beer for Giles. Giles smiled his appreciation. He took a swallow and the three of them sat there for a few moments, feeling a bit awkward. Finally Paul took the plunge. "So, no book reading tonight?"

Giles shook his head. "No, not tonight." He took another swallow of his beer.

"The world is spinning safely on its axis, then?"

Giles silently chuckled. He looked at the brothers, his eyes lit with a satisfied air. "You could say that."

"So, that book you had, the one you put in your trunk. What language was it in?" Paul knew he wasn't doing a very good job containing his curiosity.

"English tonight. I didn't want to have to work too hard." Giles grinned.

"How many languages do you speak?"

"Five, fluently."

"And what do you do with five languages?"

Giles grinned again. "Read books in other languages." Paul grinned too. He could see pulling information out of this guy was going to be a challenge. He was feeling equal to the task.

Roger stepped up to the plate. "Obviously you're from England. Whereabouts?"

"Bath."

"How long have you lived here?"

Giles thought for a second. "Almost six years."

"What brought you here?"

Giles hesitated, covering the pause with another swallow of beer. "A new opportunity." He looked up at Roger. "I understand you're a doctor."

Roger nodded. "Emergency Room." Both he and Paul noted the surprised look in Giles' eyes. Roger leaned in and spoke softly. "Frank, the bartender, thinks this is an odd town. What do you think?"

Giles almost spit out his beer. He was saved from answering by the arrival of Kathleen. "Hey handsome, want something to eat?" Paul and Roger glanced at each other and bit back their grins. She hadn't come into the bar once since they'd been there.

Giles glanced at Paul and Roger and rolled his eyes at the expressions on their faces. "Perhaps you could leave us some menus and check back in a little while." He gave her a charming smile and she practically melted on the spot.

"Sure, sugar." She dropped three menus off and after a quick nod to Paul and Roger and a show-stopping smile to Giles she sauntered off.

Paul started to laugh. "Man, she is after you big time."

Giles let out a sigh. "It's embarrassing. I don't know how to get her to stop."

"Why do you want her to stop?"

Giles made a face. "Oh, well, you're right. No doubt we'd have scads in common."

Paul bit back another laugh. "It's possible."

"Not if the scintillating conversations we've already shared are any indication."

Paul did laugh this time. "I don't think she's interested in having a conversation with you."

Giles just sent Paul a dark look. Truthfully, he'd thought about it. It had been a long time. "I'll pass, thank you."

Roger was looking at the menu. "So, multi-language guy, do you have an impressive degree to go with all of that learning?"

"Not any more impressive than an MD."

"I heard a yes in there somewhere." Roger looked over at Giles, his eyebrows raised.

Giles looked a little uncomfortable but he answered. "I have a Ph.D. from Oxford."

"What's it in?"

"Ancient languages and artifacts."

Roger raised his eyebrows. "Wow. What do you do with a degree in ancient languages and artifacts?"

"Mostly study ancient languages and artifacts." Giles' eyes were lit with humour as he gave Roger his answer.

Paul took over. "A lot of call for that in Sunnydale?" He found that improbable.

"More than you'd think." Giles took another swallow. "I do some occasional consulting work in LA and San Francisco."

"What were you doing in England before you came here?"

"I was a curator for a museum there."

"And you came here to open up a magic store?"

Giles just shook his head again. "I only opened that store a year ago."

"So, what did you do before then?"

Giles let out a long breath. "I was the librarian at Sunnydale High School before it blew up."

"The high school blew up?" Giles nodded. "What happened? Who blew it up?"

Giles picked up the menu. "The police never identified who did it." He looked at Paul. "So, what do you do?"

This time it was Paul who hesitated and Paul saw that Giles noticed it. "I'm doing a little work for the police department. Research of sorts." It was research of sorts. Research into how to explain the high death rates that no one seemed unduly concerned with.

Giles cocked his head to the side as he looked at Paul. Paul wasn't being completely honest, but then neither was he. Giles nodded and he grinned at Paul. Paul grinned back, recognizing that some sort of pact had just been agreed upon. With that they all looked at their menus.

Kathleen came back and got their orders. Giles just sat there and let Paul and Roger make fun of him. He actually enjoyed it. Paul gestured towards Giles with his beer. "So, tell me the truth." He watched as Giles tensed just a little. "Do you know how to play darts?"

Giles let out a short laugh and he relaxed. "Yes, yes I do. I played quite a bit in my college days."

Paul smacked his hand on the table. "I knew it. I can always tell a darts player." He jabbed Roger in his side. "We'll play a game later if Roger has recovered from me beating the pants off of him last night."

Roger let out a disgusted snort. "In your dreams. You only won because you cheated."

Paul rolled his eyes and grinned at Giles. "You should be glad you don't have

a brother to deal with on a daily basis."

Giles' eyes grew sad. "You should be glad you do." At Roger and Paul's worried look he shook his head, laughing a little. "Sorry, I didn't mean for that to come out sounding so melodramatic. I don't have a brother. I wish I did."

Roger gave Paul a sideways glance. "Well it has its good parts and its bad parts." He fended off a punch from Paul as he asked Giles another question. "So, what do you do for fun when you're not running your shop or reading books in foreign languages?"

There was another pause. "Nothing of any interest, I'm afraid." Giles avoided Paul's eyes. He was sure that Paul was too aware of every half-truth he'd told tonight. Giles had no doubt that he must be coming across as the dullest human on the planet. He softly laughed.

Paul stopped his beer half way to his mouth. "What?"

"A friend once told me that I needed a personality, stat." He ran his finger through the water ring his beer had left on the table. "I spend too much time looking at books and studying. It seems to be all I ever do."

Paul tapped the table with an index finger. "Well, now you can add playing darts to your dizzying array of extracurricular activities." He looked around the bar. "Assuming everyone here goes home." His eyes grew curious. "Where did they all come from anyway?"

Giles glanced at all the people in the bar. "Sometimes people's need to connect with other people makes them do things they normally wouldn't." He looked at the beer in his hand and then up at Roger and Paul. A small grin formed on his face as he gently saluted Roger and Paul with his beer. Without him saying anything they both knew that he'd been talking about himself as well.

Roger's eyebrows furrowed. "Well, I hope they all forget about this place tomorrow. I like that it's our bar." He gestured to the three of them. "And by our bar, I mean our." He wanted to make sure that Giles knew he was included.

Giles grinned and saluted Roger again. "Thank you for sharing."

Roger gave a royal nod and then he leaned in again. "What does Frank know about you?"

"Pardon me?"

"Frank knows something about you. I can just tell. Some juicy piece of gossip or..." His voice trailed off as he noted the alarm on Giles' face. Roger was relieved when Kathleen chose that moment to appear with their food.

Giles stood up. "I'll be back in a minute." He headed for the rest room.

Paul glared at Roger. "Could you be more nosy? Jesus, the guy's as skittish as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs and you're pumping him for juicy gossip, about him? He's probably half way home by now." Paul looked out the window and was relieved to see that Giles' car was still there and that there was no evidence that Giles was sprinting for it.

Roger looked pained. "How am I supposed to know what I can't talk to him about? I feel so comfortable with the guy it just never crossed my mind that we obviously still need to proceed with caution." Roger threw a confused look Paul's way. "What do you think is going on with him?"

"I think he spends way too much time by himself."

Roger pursed his lips. "I like him. There's something about him that..." He touched his chest, over the region of his heart.

Paul grinned. "I know. I like him too. So, if he comes back, could you try and keep your mouth shut?"

"Like you weren't interrogating him?"

"But they didn't make him get up and leave, did they? It's not the questions



that are the problem. They just need to be little questions. Questions that hit him sideways, not head on." Paul laughed a little. "I feel like I'm playing What's My Line, and at the end of the evening the announcer will say: Will the real Rupert Giles please stand up."

##

Giles thought about leaving. Just for a minute, but he thought about it. It was those sorts of questions he had no defense for. No ready excuses or methods of deflection. It would only get worse. But he reminded himself that it was only for tonight. And it probably only would be tonight because there was no way they'd want to spend another evening with him, not when he refused to answer their questions about who he was, or what he did. So he'd go back and continue to pretend for the rest of the evening and then it would be over. Squelching down the sense of loss he felt he headed back for the table.

##

Paul let out a sigh of relief. "Look, he's coming back." Paul reached for the ketchup, ready to eat now.

Giles sat down gingerly, wondering if Roger would pick up the conversation where it had been left before they'd been interrupted. Roger grinned. "I was just telling Paul about this guy who came into the ER this morning." Roger winked at Paul as they both watched Giles relax. Roger launched into the first of several amusing stories and in a short time all three men were laughing as they ate their dinner.

After dinner and another couple of beers they played a few games of darts. Giles wasn't up to Paul and Roger's level being so out of practice but he was relieved that he had played passably well. Giles found himself telling a string of unbelievable stories about the things some of his customers came in looking for which had Paul and Roger laughing so hard they were holding on to the wall for support.

It had been a long time since he had enjoyed himself this much. It wasn't until Frank yelled out that it was last call that Giles even thought about the time. His eyes widened and he looked at his watch. He had no idea how it had

gotten to be so late. Buffy would have finished patrol and come by his house. Ever since her mother died Buffy came by almost every night, unless he was already at her house waiting for her, or they'd made other arrangements. They'd gotten much closer and he knew she would only imagine the worst if he weren't home. He excused himself and headed for the phone. Paul fought with himself but he ended up following again. Giles had already dialled the number.

"Buffy, it's Giles." Paul could almost hear her yelling from where he was standing. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you worry." There was a pause. "I'm fine. I just lost track of time. Do you want me to come over?" Another pause. "I'll be there in a few minutes." As Giles hung up Paul moved back over to Roger. He mouthed the word Buffy to Roger. Giles moved back to them both. "I'm sorry, I had no idea it was so late. I have to go."

Paul nodded his head. "Big date?"

Giles' eyes opened wide and he shook his head. "No, nothing like that." He stood there awkwardly for a moment, not sure how to end the evening, a part of him sorry that it had to end at all.

Roger clapped him on the arm. "We're glad you decided to join us. It was a treat to meet you."

Paul agreed. "Anytime you don't have to read one of your books of many languages you know where we'll be." He gestured towards the bar.

Giles nodded his head, gave them both a shy smile and without another word he simply turned around and left.

Paul and Roger looked at each other as he left the bar. Roger had a puzzled look on his face. "You know what? I'm not sure he believed us."

Paul nodded. "He's going to take some work." He raised his eyebrows. "You up for that?"

Roger grinned. "As long as he ends up being a friend I'm up for just about anything." Paul grinned back. "We need a plan." The two of them started

tossing ideas around as they headed out the door.

End of Part 3

Chance Meeting 4

Paul and Roger hadn't seen Giles at the bar for over a week. The thought crossed their minds that he was avoiding them. They decided to put their first plan into action. The first day Roger had a slow day at the ER and that Paul wasn't besieged with paper work they both dropped by the Magic Box.

Anya could tell right away they weren't customers. She eyed them suspiciously. "What do you want?"

Paul's eyes widened. "We're here to see Giles."

Her eyes narrowed to slits. "Why?"

Paul started to feel annoyed. "Is he here?"

Roger started roaming around looking at the merchandise on the shelves. He picked up a piece of sculpture. Anya hurried over to him and took it from him. "Don't touch that."

Giles walked into the store from the back. "Anya, have you seen that invoice that came with the last shipment?" He had a handful of paperwork and didn't look up. Paul's eyebrows rose. So, this was Anya.

"Giles, these men say they're here to see you." Anya's voice was drenched with skepticism.

Giles looked up then and saw Paul and Roger. He seemed at a loss for words. Finally he stammered out a word. "Hello."

Anya walked over to him. "Do you know them?"

Giles looked at Anya. "Yes, I do, actually." When she continued to stand at his side he looked at her again. "Thank you, Anya." When she still didn't move he sighed. "Anya, I'll take it from here, thank you."

She scowled. "I don't trust them." She was making no effort to speak softly and Paul and Roger could hear every word. Roger felt like he'd slipped into the Outer Limits.

Giles bit back a grin and glanced quickly at Paul and Roger. Looking back at Anya he reassured her. "I believe I will be quite safe. Would you try and find that invoice for me?"

Anya nodded reluctantly. As a parting gesture she showed him the sculpture. "He was touching this." With a last glare towards Roger she headed into the back.

Roger held out his hands. "Sorry, I didn't realize I couldn't touch anything."

Giles took off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. Putting his glasses back on he shook his head and laughed a little. "I'm sorry. Anya's...well...she's Anya." He shook his head again.

Paul gestured towards the back room where Anya had disappeared. "She seems quite protective of you." Paul was almost willing to like her just for that.

"Yes, well, we do get some odd visitors in here." They all grinned as they remembered some of Giles' stories from the week before. Clearing his throat Giles looked at the two of them. "So, did you need something?" He gestured around the store.

Paul looked momentarily alarmed at the thought but then he laughed. "No, we just came by to see if you were free for lunch."

Paul's heart clenched a little at the dumbfounded look on Giles' face. Giles almost couldn't believe it. "Really?"

Roger nodded. "Really. Are you free?" Roger wanted to hug the guy. He had a suspicion that it had been too long since anyone had asked Giles to do anything.

Giles began to recover. "Yes...I...yes...I believe I am." He looked down at the papers in his hand as if he had no idea how they'd gotten there. He looked at Paul and Roger again and he grinned. "I'll be right back." He strode into the back office.

Roger sidled over next to Paul. "I want to adopt him." Paul started to agree when Giles came back out, shrugging on his jacket. Paul grinned at the pleasure he saw on Giles' face and he felt relieved. Giles may have been avoiding them but it wasn't because he didn't want to see them, but rather, or so Paul believed now, because he really had expected that he and Roger might not want to see him.

Paul slapped Giles on the back. "This is your neck of the woods. Any good suggestions?"

Giles thought for a second. "There's good Chinese around the corner." He always had it delivered but he imagined there were tables in there to actually sit at and order.

Roger's eyes lit up. "Great, I love Chinese." He headed out and Paul and Giles followed him. As he held the door he couldn't resist asking. "Why didn't she want me to touch that sculpture?"

Giles laughed. "I'm sure she thought you were going to steal it." At Roger's stunned look he laughed again. "Anya automatically distrusts anyone who comes in the store if she doesn't think they intend to spend money."

"So if I go back in there after lunch and buy something will she be nice to me?"

"Anya doesn't do nice very well. I do imagine she'll stop taking merchandise away from you." He looked at Roger. "Please don't feel you need to buy something just to get on Anya's good side." Giles grinned. "It might cost you a

lot. It's a bit of an uphill climb."

Paul was curious. "I assume she works for you?" They entered the restaurant and were seated immediately.

Giles started perusing his menu. "Yes, she works for me." He glanced up at Paul and let out a short laugh at the expression on his face. "I'm assuming your question is why do I have someone like that working for me?"

Paul nodded. "The thought crossed my mind."

Giles let out a deep breath. "It's complicated. Suffice it to say that she knows the merchandise better than I do, and she's willing to put in some odd hours and deal with some odd customers."

Roger grinned. "All in this very odd town of Sunnydale."

Paul grimaced. "Very odd." He looked at Giles. "I guess that makes sense." He let it go for the time being. "Where have you been? We missed you."

A quick but delighted smile crossed Giles' face. Then he tried to come up with an excuse. "It's...I...I've been busy."

Paul looked at him sternly. "Well I trust you can unbusy yourself every now and then for a beer and a game of darts."

Giles smiled again. "I think I can manage that."

Paul nodded in satisfaction. "Good. I'd hate for Roger to think for a second that he plays darts better than anyone. You need to practice more so you can beat him."

Roger rolled his eyes. "Paul, the only time you win when I'm around is when you and I are on the same team or when you cheat." He looked at Giles. "I will also always beat you. Just accept the inevitable. It will be easier that way."

Paul sent a begging look Giles' way. "Tell me you were really, really good in your college days."

Giles grinned. "I was really, really good."

"Good, we'll do some practising on the side and then whup his ass." He leaned closer to Giles. "We'll pair him up with Kathleen."

Giles barked out a laugh. Roger glared. "Hey, I heard that. And no fair. She'll be spending all her time trying to make time with Giles. She won't be concentrating." He grinned. "We could pair her with Giles."

Giles shook his head. "No, thank you. She doesn't need any encouragement. The word pairing shouldn't be used anytime she's near me."

They ordered their food. Roger was thinking. "So what's that sculpture for anyway? Does it mean anything special?"

Giles grinned, his eyes sparkling with mischief. "It's used in a fertility rite. A man is supposed to ejaculate his sperm on it during the rite. Supposedly it will make him powerful and allow him to impregnate the next female he has sex with."

Roger wiped his hands off on his pants. "God, tell me it's new."

Giles began to laugh. "No, I believe that one is quite old."

Paul was watching both of them. He glanced at Giles. "You're serious, aren't you?"

Giles took a sip of his tea. "I've never used it myself to see if it works, but that is the mythological history of that particular artifact."

Paul had an admiring look on his face. "Well, I guess seeing as you're our resident expert on ancient artifacts that it must be true." He looked at Roger

who was looking at his hands with some dismay.

Roger stood. "I have to go wash my hands off." Paul and Giles both began to laugh. Roger glared and headed for the restroom.

Paul was intrigued. "So, some day a guy will come in and buy that because he'll want to make someone pregnant?"

"I've sold two in the last year."

"No shit?"

"It's quite true, I assure you."

"Are they all old?"

"So far. There's not much of a market share for that kind of artifact. Now the objects to increase women's fertility sell very quickly, and there's quite a few companies making contemporary versions."

Paul shook his head in amazement. "Man, the things you learn. So, do you learn all this from those books you read?"

"Much of it. Some of it Anya knows. Things she's learned in her...studies." Paul wondered what he had been going to say. Giles continued. "Some of it is explained in catalogs or at dealer shows." He flashed Paul a rueful grin. "Magic's always been a bit of an interest of mine."

"Really? Can you do any tricks?"

Giles was saved from answering that by both the arrival of their food and Roger. Roger glared at Giles. "Next time I'm in your store I expect a personal tour so you can show me everything I should never touch."

Giles grinned. "I'd be glad to give you a personal tour." With that assurance, they all dug into their lunch.



## End of Part 4

### Chance Meeting 5

From that day on Paul and Roger didn't let a week go by without seeing Giles. If he didn't show up in the bar they went looking for him. He'd been to their homes, and one night they went to his. When they arrived he'd spent a minute shoving books that had been lying all over the living room into bookcases. Paul watched him as he put the last books away. "So these books are in how many languages?"

Giles looked around. "Dozens, I expect."

"Dozens? I thought you could only speak five languages."

"No, I'm fluent in five languages. I can read in several more fairly well, and I have a smattering of skill with some after that. For the others I use translation resources, dictionaries if they're available, although for most of these languages the dictionaries are ancient scrolls or stone tablets of some sort or another. There are also other experts around the world I can contact."

Paul sat back. "Wow, I'm impressed. Show me your oldest, most valuable book." He glanced at Giles. "Do you mind?"

Giles softly laughed. "Do I mind? I'd love to show you." He searched his shelves and finally found the oldest human writings he had. He didn't think showing Paul and Roger some demon artifact was the way to go. He gingerly brought it over to the table. Paul and Roger sat on either side of him. It looked like an ancient manuscript. Giles opened it reverently. "This one is over eight hundred years old. Much older than that and they really need to be preserved. They just fall apart when you touch them."

Roger spoke in hushed tones. "What language is that? What does it talk about?"

Giles turned another page. The brilliancy of the colors always astounded him. "It's in Egyptian." He paused at one page. "It's about curses. Egyptian

curses." He pointed at a picture of a man with his intestines lying on the ground. "They were quite creative."

Paul was captivated. "I'm sure the book couldn't be in better hands but why isn't it in a museum? Why do you have this book?"

"I bought it."

"You bought this? Where do you buy something like this?"

"On E-bay. It's astonishing what you can buy there." Actually Willow had discovered it and let Giles know. She checked for books now all the time. Giles had been able to buy some remarkable books and manuscripts, many thought permanently lost or destroyed.

Roger was still looking at the picture. "So, what does this curse do? What does it say?"

Giles looked more closely at the curse associated with the picture. He grimaced. "Essentially it says that this curse will cause your intestines to bloat with infection until your stomach ruptures and they fall out at your feet."

Roger grimaced too. "Charming. Can you say that curse? Say it in Egyptian?"

Giles' looked alarmed. "Good Lord, no. Best not to fool with curses."

Paul looked at Giles. "Do you believe in this stuff?"

"Let's just say that I've seen some unusual things in my time. Power rests in unexpected places."

"So, is Egyptian one of the languages you're fluent in?"

Giles shook his head. "No, I can read it but I can't speak it worth a damn." He turned another page. Roger stopped him from turning another. "God, what

does that one do?"

The picture was rather revolting. "It threatens to increase your body's temperature until the victim melts."

Paul had stopped asking why Giles had left his position as museum curator to work as a librarian. Every time he asked, Giles told him it was complicated. That was the phrase Giles used to nicely tell them that he wasn't going to say anything more on the subject. Paul pushed it every now and then but when Giles decided to clam up he was pretty serious about it. Both he and Roger had learned to just change the subject. Paul couldn't imagine what Giles was hiding, but he trusted the guy, a lot, and it wasn't worth losing him to try and push past his resistance.

Besides, Giles let him keep his secrets too. Paul's phrase was that it was hard to explain. Then Giles backed away, no more questions asked. As Paul watched Giles flip through the book and then show them a few more, his interest grew. There was so much more to this guy than what he let them see.

At one point when Giles was showing them another book in his collection Giles got caught up in his reading. Paul watched him as it sucked him in. It was as if he and Roger had disappeared, fallen off his radar screen. Giles just sat there as he turned the pages and read whatever it was he was reading in whatever language it was. Paul and Roger grinned at each other. They started to time him. It was a full twenty minutes before he looked up. And when he did he seemed startled to find Roger and Paul sitting with him. They just laughed at him when he started blushing and stammering out apologies.

He finally looked at them exasperated. "How long were you going to let me sit there?"

Roger grinned. "We figured we'd give you thirty minutes before we tapped you on the shoulder and reminded you that we were here."

Paul laughed at the expression on his face. "You should see yourself. It's like you go into this whole different world, as if those words are telling you something that pulls you in and makes you forget everything around you."

Giles sat back against the couch, smiling. "Buffy calls me..." He realized what

he said and he shut his mouth and closed his eyes. Then he abruptly stood and started putting the books away that he had pulled out.

Roger asked him softly, as if to sooth Giles at the same time he was questioning him. "Who's Buffy?" It was the first time he had ever mentioned her name in their presence. Both Paul and Roger were sure that whoever she was, that she was important.

Giles stood with his back to them for a minute. When he turned around his face was sad. "She's a friend." When Roger started asking another question Giles put up his hand and shook his head. "I'm sorry." He looked at his watch. "It's late, I have some reading I need to do." Roger and Paul took the hint and quickly left.

After they left Giles sat back down on the couch. He took off his glasses and threw them on the table. Rubbing his eyes he felt a moment's despair. He had been inexcusably rude to Paul and Roger and they hadn't deserved it. Giles wouldn't be surprised if they walked away after this. But his need to protect Buffy and her identity was so strong that he'd simply reacted without thought. He breathed out a sad sigh. Sooner or later it had to end. Sooner or later he'd known that his duty would get in the way. He had just been hoping it would be later.

End of Part 5

Chance Meeting 6

Paul sat in front of his computer and rested his fingers on the keyboard. The internal debate was still raging. He knew he was invading Giles' privacy but he and Roger were at a crossroads. Paul had to know if the secrets Giles was keeping involved anything illegal. Taking a deep breath Paul typed in the name of Rupert Giles and hit the search button.

As the computer started finding matches Paul actually covered his eyes. His stomach was churning with nervousness at what might pop up on the screen. He opened up a space between two of his fingers and peeked at the upper right hand corner. There was nothing there. Paul let out a sigh of relief. That

meant Giles had never been arrested and he wasn't wanted. That was a good sign. Paul dropped his hands and put his fingers back on the keyboard.

Most of the notations were in regards to articles Giles had written. Paul whistled. He'd written a lot of articles. He didn't even understand the titles of most of them. They started drying up six years ago. He wrote a couple the first year he was here and one the next but then they stopped. Paul wasn't sure what sort of new opportunity led him here but it had nothing to do with advancing his career.

Paul began scrolling down to see if there was any police activity. There was one. Paul clicked on it and began to read. By the time he was done he had tears in his eyes. He flipped to a different software program to access the Coroner's files. He typed in the name he had just read: Jenny Calendar.

When he was done with the report he picked up the phone. Before he dialed a number he hung it back up. Standing, he grabbed his coat and headed out the door.

It was slow in the ER so Roger had taken a break and sat with Paul in the cafeteria. His Danish was lying on his plate, uneaten. There was a look of horror on Roger's face. "He found her? Someone murdered his girlfriend and left her in his bed, and he found her there?" Roger put his hand over his mouth and he wasn't sure if it was to keep from throwing up or to keep from crying. He put the heels of his hands over his eyes and this time it was to wipe the tears away. "Jesus."

"He was brought in for questioning but he was never even considered as a suspect. They never found out who did it." Paul was feeling sick to his stomach as well. Both men just sat there and fought their feelings that were threatening to overwhelm them.

Roger stood suddenly. "Let's take a walk, I need some air." Paul stood as well and they headed for the nearest exit. They both walked in silence for a while, taking comfort in the other's company. Finally Roger spoke again. "It explains a lot of things."

Paul nodded. "Not everything, but a lot."

"I would imagine something like that would make you a little gun shy about

letting people in your life."

"It might make you believe that bad things will keep happening."

"And that good things won't."

"And it might make you do things to push people away." Paul kicked a stone off his path. "Roger, I don't know why this guy crossed our path but I just know that in the few months we've known him that I've grown to love the guy like he was another brother. And all I know is that I don't ever want to be something bad or hurtful that happens to him." He turned to his brother. "Does that make sense?"

"Yes, it does." The story Paul had told him was still resting so heavily on his heart. "He may think he can get rid of us by kicking us out of his home..."

"Or keeping major secrets about someone named Buffy..."

"Or by liking to read so much that he forgets we're around..."

"Or by thinking he can beat me at darts..."

Paul laughed. "Or by hiring employees who are rude to us..."

"Or by sharing secrets with the bartender that he won't tell us..."

Paul stopped walking. "If he thinks paltry efforts like those are going to push us away..."

Roger stopped and faced him. "He's got a lot to learn. He's going to have to work a lot harder than that to get rid of us."

Paul nodded. "Damn straight."

They started walking again, heading back to the hospital. When they arrived

back at the ER Roger looked at Paul. "Frank's place tonight?"

"Frank's place. We've got some reassuring to do." The brothers exchanged sad smiles and then Paul turned and headed off to his car as Roger went back into the hospital.

##

Giles was sitting in his booth, his book forgotten in front of him as he stared off into space. They hadn't shown up in over a week. Frank said they hadn't been in at all, even the nights he hadn't been here. He felt like his heart was breaking. Those two had come to mean so much to him so quickly. Not that he blamed them for not coming back. Giles had never really understood why they'd stayed so long, why they'd put up with his evasions and with all the inconsistencies of his life. He took his glasses off and ran his hands over his face.

A voice intruded into his misery. "Hey." Giles looked up to see Paul and Roger standing there. Roger gestured at the seat. "Can we join you?" Giles put his glasses on and just nodded. Paul could see hope warring with resignation in Giles' eyes. Paul fought the impulse to just hug him.

Instead, Paul dove right in. "Okay, look. We know you have secrets. We know, for whatever reason, that there are people in your life that you don't want to discuss with us." He stopped Giles from interrupting. "No, me first. We know that there is a whole lot more going on with you than meets the eye. But, none of that is really important. What is important is that Roger and I, well, we've grown pretty attached to you and we've decided that we don't care."

Roger chimed in. "Essentially what Paul is saying is that you're stuck with us whether you want us or not. The only way you're getting rid of us is if you walk away. Because we're not leaving."

Paul nodded and watched the emotions race across Giles' face. Paul leaned a little closer to the table. "So, do you want us to leave?"

Roger jabbed him with his elbow. "I just said that we're not leaving, remember?"

Paul winced. He turned to Roger. "Ow." He turned back to Giles. "Right, we're not leaving. So, do you want to leave?"

Giles looked at them both, amazement and affection clear in his eyes. His eyes started to shine and he shook his head slowly. "No, I do not."

Paul slammed his hand down on the tabletop. "Good, that's settled." He turned around and hollered at Frank. "Frank, beers all around, if you please." He turned back and glared at Roger. "Did you have to jab me that hard with your elbow?"

"You were mucking up your lines. We were having a perfect little scene here and you were getting it all wrong."

"I was not getting it all wrong."

Giles grinned and sat back in his seat, watching the brothers argue. He let their voices wash over him and through him, washing away his sadness and his loneliness. He felt his world shift just a little. Because of a chance meeting in a bar, his life was forever changed, and immeasurably for the better.

He smiled at Frank as he dropped off three beers. Taking a swallow he felt himself relax in a way he'd almost forgotten was possible. Friends. Friends who expected nothing from him, placed no demands on him, and needed nothing from him, except his presence. It was a heady feeling.

He lifted his beer and got Paul and Roger's attention. He clicked his glass against each of theirs. "To friends."

Paul and Roger lifted their beers high in salute. Roger smiled. "To the best of friends." They all smiled and bringing their glasses to their lips they drank and sealed the vow.

The End

December 29, 2001