

A Different Life 1

Buffy sat at the bar, drawn in on herself, her body language making it clear to all and sundry to stay away. She was 21 today. Funny, no one felt like celebrating. Willow was going through the magic DTs, Tara was being miserable off by herself, Xander and Anya were bickering about wedding plans, and Dawn took the easy way out and was staying at a friend's house. Buffy was trying to avoid Spike. And Giles, well, Giles was still gone.

So, that left Buffy. She was legal today and she was taking full advantage of it. Buffy was drinking scotch. Giles' preferred choice of alcoholic goodness. She had the birthday card he'd sent sitting in front of her. It said that he would be toasting her with a good glass of scotch and Buffy thought she'd return the favor. She couldn't understand how he could stomach the stuff but she was gamely on her second drink, determined to get drunk enough to forget, at least for the night.

She was tired of remembering. Tired of remembering what had been taken away from her, tired of remembering how fucked up everyone's life had gotten, tired of remembering the dreams she'd once had of how her life would turn out. Buffy ran her fingers over his signature. She was still angry with him, but she missed him more than she would have believed possible. He'd always been there, like oxygen, something you never even think about it until it's not there any more.

The card had a birthday cake on the front, with a lot of candles on it. Inside, the caption told her to Make A Wish. Giles had made one for her; he wished happiness for her, that she find her way, that she find a way to be glad to be alive, as glad as he was that she was alive. She had no idea what to wish for. Buffy didn't think she believed in wishes anymore.

She thought about it for a while. And she found to her surprise that she was full of wishes. But they were coupled with sorrow because she knew they'd never come true. She wished Giles was still here, she wished he'd never left, she wished she hadn't died, and she wished she hadn't been brought back. Buffy wished she'd never slept with Spike, that she'd never slept with Angel, that she'd gotten to Riley before his helicopter left. She wished her mom were still alive and Glory had found another universe to annoy. And Buffy wished she could cry. The pressure grew unbearable sometimes but the tears wouldn't fall. It was as if there was an ocean of tears inside of her held back by this impenetrable wall that allowed Buffy to see her emotions but to never really touch them.

A man sat down next to her. Buffy could tell he was watching her. She

scowled at him and spoke. "Do you mind? I'm not in the mood for company." She looked at him and his eyes captured her attention. They were ancient and amused all at the same time. Pulling her eyes away she took in the rest of him. He was old, dressed in nondescript baggy pants and shirt, an old cardigan sweater on top of that. He had a bristly gray beard and snippets of hair sneaked out at odd angles from under his hat, a beret, tilted at a cocky angle.

When he smiled at her his teeth were a bit yellow as if he'd been smoking for a very long time. "Wishes are powerful things."

Buffy scoffed. "None of mine have ever come true. Not so very powerful from where I'm sitting."

A matching glass of scotch was suddenly sitting in front of him. He toasted her and took a sip. "Happy birthday."

Buffy's eyes narrowed. "How do you know it's my birthday? Who are you?"

"A friend."

Again, she let out a disgusted noise and she lashed out at him. "What do you want? Because I'm really, really not in the mood for company."

"I've come to give you a wish."

"Oh, please." She turned away from him and faced the bar again.

"Not just any wish. No, this is only for a certain type of wish."

"You had to come in here? You couldn't have gone to a different bar and found another person to harass?"

"But, I'm willing to help you work on it, until you get it right."

"Do I have a sign on my head that says my life doesn't suck enough, please make it worse?"

"And you don't want to waste it. You want to think big, girl, don't settle for something mediocre."

"Listen buddy, I don't want to hurt you but..."

"You can change your life. You can make it different."

Buffy looked at the man again. She felt a glimmer of hope, and then a flash of anger that obliterated it. Anger that this man was promising her something she could never have. "Right. And what do I have to do to get this wish?"

"Just wish it. I'll do all the work. Tell me what you're thinking; we'll work on it together until you get it just right. Then when you're ready I'll do the magic for you."

"And then when you've got me all full of hope you laugh and walk out of here?" She looked around. "Did Spike send you here? Is this his idea of a sick joke?"

"No joke. You've been through too much. You shouldn't have to suffer anymore."

Buffy didn't answer at first, although she agreed with the man. She shouldn't have to suffer anymore. She didn't think she could handle anything else, she felt fragile, like she might come apart at the seams at any moment. Then she felt a surge of defiance, suddenly felt a strong desire to do something for herself. She turned to the man. "Any wish?" Buffy knew she was being a fool but the lure was too strong.

"No, only certain wishes. But go ahead, tell me what you'd wish for."

Buffy's dark mood swept over her again. "I wish I was still dead."

The man shook his head. "Can't do that."

"Why not?"

"Just can't."

Buffy rolled her eyes. "Fine, I wish you'd go away."

"Can't do that either." He grinned. "Besides you're thinking too small. He tapped the birthday card. "Think, make a decent wish."

Buffy looked at the card. "I wish he were back here."

The man shook his head. "Nope."

Buffy looked at him, incredulous. "Why can't you do that? All you have to do is change his mind and get him back on a plane."

"It's not that simple."

Buffy sneered at him. "You don't even know who I'm talking about."

"Rupert Giles. Watcher. Yes, I do. And if he came back now, things would just get worse."

"Fine, then I wish I'd never slept with..." Buffy turned away, disgusted with herself.

"Can't do that one either."

Buffy stood up. "You are so full of shit. I don't know why I even listened to you."

He stood too. He wasn't any taller than her. "I know you feel bad about it. But I can't change people's hearts. Given the same situation I can't go in someone's head and rewire them so it turns out different. Make my job a lot easier if I could. People love who they love; people hate who they hate. Only thing you can change is the circumstances." He gestured towards a booth. "Perhaps we should talk someplace more private."

Buffy allowed her frustration to show on her face. She was torn. This guy was a fruitcake but there was no denying that he knew things about her that he shouldn't know. Finally she nodded briefly at the man and they moved to a booth. As soon as they sat he spoke. "Try again."

Buffy looked at him, stymied. "I don't know..." She thought again. "I wish I could feel again."

"You don't need to wish for that. You feel just fine. Feeling dead inside is what you're feeling. Feeling angry is what you're feeling. Feeling lost is what you're feeling. Plenty of feeling going on."

"I wish I could be happy."

He squinched his face up again. "That's rewiring, can't do that."

She shot him a disgusted look. "You have got to be the most worthless wish giver on the planet."

"I'm not. I'm one of the best. You just have to come up with one I can do, one that's worth my time and my energy."

"Shit. You tell me what to wish for then."

"Can't do that. But I can tell you this. You're thinking too small. Think big; shoot for the moon. Opportunity like this doesn't come around very often." All Buffy felt right then was tired. Tired of her life, tired of being the Slayer, tired of it all. Even tired of this game. She leaned her head back again and wished it would all go away. He smiled. "Now you're thinking, girl."

Buffy's eyes widened. "I can wish for that?"

The man looked at her, his eyes glittering. "The sky's the limit. Stuff like that's my specialty."

"I can wish this never happened?"

He leaned forward. "Be more specific. What do you wish never happened?"

"That I never became the Slayer. That I never got called."

"If that's what you want, I can do that. But it has to be what you want." His eyes were lit with excitement and he was almost breathless with anticipation. "Say it for me, say the wish."

Without volition Buffy said the wish, feeling almost compelled. "I wish that I had never become the Slayer. I wish the whole thing passed me by and I'd had a different life." After she said the words Buffy tried to see the danger. Nothing like this could possibly be true. No one could make her life that different. But a part of her ached for it. A part of her was willing to pay the price for it, whatever it was.

"You want this wish, girl? All you have to do is say yes."

Buffy's heart was beating so hard she felt as if it might explode. "Yes."

The man smiled. "Thank you my dear. That's the wish I hoped you'd wish for. This was almost too easy." He seized her hand and began to chant.

Buffy tried to pull her hand away but she couldn't. He was too strong. "Why, why did you want me to make that wish? What did I make easy?" A fear filled her, a fear that she had perhaps done a serious evil with this wish.

"Don't worry. You'll never know." His voice sounded as if it was far away. The bar grew dim and a wind swept through it. Giles' card that Buffy had left sitting on the bar flew up in the air along with a flurry of cocktail napkins. Then, everything froze, the card, the napkins, the people on the street. Nothing moved except the man's lips as they continued chanting. Buffy gazed in horror as his eyes began to glow. Then it all started to fade away.

End of Part 1

A Different Life 2

Buffy came to with a start. She closed her eyes and then she opened them wide. She was on an airplane. The last thing she recalled she had been in the bar trying to get drunk and that man had started talking to her. Buffy tried to remember. He had done something, he'd...he'd told her to make a wish. Her heart started to pound as she remembered his eyes. Who had he been? What had she done? She tried to remember what she had wished for; the memory seemed so distant.

Then she remembered. She had wished that she hadn't been called, that she hadn't become a Slayer. For a minute she was overcome with disappointment. She still had all her memories of being a Slayer. Of dying, of being wrenched out of heaven, of watching it all fall apart.

But then new memories started crowding her brain. And with the memories came emotions. Excitement for her new adventure, sadness at leaving her mom and dad, the thrill of her first overseas trip, a sense of fear mixed with anticipation as to what might happen over this next year, who she'd meet, what she'd accomplish.

Buffy sat there, confused as both sets of memories vied for attention. Both felt so real. She searched for her purse. Finding it she took out her wallet looking for her license. Buffy Summers. That hadn't changed. She noted the address, the LA address, the one where she used to live before her parents got divorced. But now she had memories of them staying together. Of them staying in LA, of her finishing high school with her friends, of proms, of dates, and being homecoming queen at Hemery High.

She searched again through her purse and found her ticket. Opening it she looked for her destination. She was on her way to London. The needed information was suddenly in her head. She was doing her senior year of college abroad, studying in London, at the University of London. There was a small apartment already waiting for her, and she started classes in a little over two weeks.

Buffy could feel the old memories start to fade. Out of fear she mentally tried to grab hold but they twisted out of her reach like a dream on awakening. As they faded out of reach a pair of glowing eyes seemed to stare back at her but after a minute she couldn't remember anything at all. Shaking off a shiver

down her spine she turned off the light above, curled up in her seat and soon fell asleep.

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Buffy walked down the steps from her apartment and grinned. She loved it here. She'd had a week of classes already, she thought her teachers were great and she already had made some friends. And she adored the English accents. Although for some reason she couldn't figure out, every now and then it made her feel so lonely. Not lonely for home, lonely for someone.

Shaking off her weird nostalgia Buffy grinned again. Today she was planning on just roaming. No planned itinerary, no plans of any kind. Just walking and shopping and eating. Heading off the steps she let her feet choose her destination. By early afternoon she found herself standing in front of the British Museum. Buffy knew she'd be spending a lot of time here as her major was in history and much of the material she needed for her senior project was housed here. She toyed with the idea of going in but stuck to her original plan of a free day and kept wandering.

A few blocks up she came to a public garden. Getting out her map she tried to figure out where she was. After noting the street signs she determined she was at Russell Square. Entering the garden she found a park bench to sit on.

At the other end of the park a man was throwing a Frisbee to two dogs, one golden and one chocolate lab. She laughed as the dogs did everything they could to sabotage one another as they raced for the Frisbee. Suddenly the dogs took after some ducks. The man yelled. "Ethan, Rayne, come back here." The dogs sheepishly came to a halt and after the dark lab scooped up the Frisbee they went lumbering back to the man.

Buffy felt strange. The names of the dogs were jogging something in her memory. Something important. She gritted her teeth as she followed the tenuous lead within her brain and then she gasped as all her old memories came crashing back. They didn't erase her new ones, and they didn't emotionally overwhelm her. It was more like she had just remembered a movie she'd seen a thousand times that she'd forgotten all about until just this moment. And as quickly as they appeared, they started to fade again.

Buffy stood and started to walk, feeling the need for movement while she tried to figure out what was going on. Not paying attention she was knocked to her knees when one of the dogs ran sideways into her. The man came running over. "I'm dreadfully sorry. They're such complete idiots. Are you all right?" He reached down a hand to help her up.

When she looked up at him she froze. Enough of the memories were still there for her to know this man, as well as she knew herself. "Giles?"

He looked surprised but continued to reach down and help her up. "Have we met?" He held on to her tightly as the dogs raced by again. Shaking a finger at them, he scolded them. "Both of you, sit. Consider yourselves quite disgraced." He pointed at the golden lab that had knocked Buffy down. "Especially you." As they sat, looking quite forlorn, he turned back to her and grinned. Sensing their movement he turned to the dogs again and he put up his finger as if to warn them off. Disgusted, both dogs flopped down.

Giles escorted Buffy to the nearest bench. Sitting down next to her he checked her over for any overt signs of damage and then apologized again. "I really am sorry. I didn't even see you. I'm afraid as much as I'd like to blame them, I was the one that threw the Frisbee they were chasing." He frowned at the shocked look on her face. "Are you all right? Are you afraid of dogs?"

Buffy managed to shake her head. She looked at Giles. He was wearing jeans and a heavy wool sweater with the sleeves pushed up. His tattoo was still on his arm but he was making no effort to keep it covered. He wasn't wearing his glasses and he looked about ten years younger than when she last saw him. He didn't look so worn, so worried, so desperately sad. His voice broke into her reverie. "I'm starting to feel a bit worried. Should I call for some help?"

Buffy reached up a hand and touched the familiar crinkles at the side of one of his eyes. He still had them. When she touched him he felt something, felt as if something important had happened but he didn't know what. Feeling as if he already knew the answer he asked, "Do I know you?" They gazed at one another.

Buffy wasn't sure what to say. He didn't know her, not in this life. But she knew him, and she ached for him. It felt like years since she had seen him instead of weeks, although even those weeks had been too long. But even as she stared at him, the memories grew fainter. She dropped her eyes finally and shook her head again. "No, I thought you were...I thought you were someone else." She looked at the dogs and pointed at them. "What are their names?"

He gestured at the golden one first. "That one's Ethan and he's Rayne." He grinned.

Buffy grinned in response although her eyes were quizzical. "Did I miss a joke?"

Giles kept grinning. "Well, it's sort of a private joke. I get a tremendous pleasure out of yelling that name out loud and knowing that when I do that dogs come running." He laughed. At her blank expression he laughed again. "Like I said, it's a private joke. He doesn't much care for it either."

"He?"

"The man I named them after, Ethan Rayne. He wasn't amused." Giles snickered.

"Is he around?"

"Ethan Rayne, you mean?" At her nod he nodded his head. "Too often. He thrives on making my life miserable." Again he grinned. "You're American?"

Buffy nodded. "From California, Los Angeles."

"Ah, land of sunshine. You won't find much of that here." He looked up at the sky with a look of satisfaction. "Every day, something different." As the dogs whined Giles stood. "Well, I best let them finish their run or they'll drive me crazy all night." He looked down at her. "Are you sure you're fine? Do you need me to take you home?"

Buffy felt confused. She sensed within her such a connection to this man, she wanted to throw herself in his arms and hold him tightly. But he was a stranger to her and lessons had been too well ingrained in her about the danger of strangers so despite her longing to say yes she shook her head. "I'm fine." She smiled at him, her eyes sad.

He was strangely reluctant to leave her but the dogs were whining more and more loudly. Giving her a small smile he headed back over to the dogs. "Okay, you can get up. Go fetch." Pulling back his arm across his body he threw the Frisbee and the dogs took off madly after it. He watched them for a minute and then he turned back around to share a grin with the girl at their antics but she was gone. Looking around he saw her at the edge of the park walking away. Feeling a sense of loss he didn't understand Giles stood there until he couldn't see her anymore.

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Giles dreamed about her that night. He dreamt that he was at the edge of a huge scaffolding that went into the sky as high as he could see and then further yet. She was standing at the top of it and she jumped off. He ran to try

and catch her but no matter how fast he ran he couldn't get there in time. Her body hit a pile of rubble and he knew she was dead. Walking slowly towards her, his heart and soul wracked with unbearable pain he finally reached her. Picking her up in his arms he cried out at the night.

Giles woke up and found that he had tears on his cheeks. He lay in bed for a long time, the sadness swirling around him, until he heard a key in the door. He smiled as he heard her speak. "Where are my babies? Where are my puppies?" Giles heard the dogs barking, their toenails scraping on the linoleum as their speed prohibited them from making that last corner as gracefully as they may have liked. Grinning, he hopped out of bed.

She walked into the bedroom, as the door was still open, catching him in his pajamas. "Ru, aren't you even dressed yet?"

"I overslept. I had the oddest dream."

"Well go and take your shower and you can tell me all about it over breakfast."

"I don't have time for breakfast, Gwen." He walked over to her and placed a kiss on her cheek. "Are you sure you don't mind taking them?"

"Are you kidding?" She got down on her knees and the dogs started to wildly lick her face. "These are the closest I'll ever get to nephews out of you."

Giles rolled his eyes but chose not to respond. This was a well-worn topic of discussion. He headed into the bathroom and turned on the tap waiting for the water to get warm. "Well, I appreciate it. I don't know why I arranged for that Egyptian shipment to arrive today, on a Sunday."

Gwen moved to sit on the bed. She didn't know why but she had always loved to watch him shave. "I do. You want a chance to play before everyone shows up tomorrow. This way you get to give your undivided attention to your new toys and not have to be bothered by those pesky tourists who insist on the right to see all your treasures."

"They do get in one's way." He sighed. "My life would be so much easier if they'd all just go away." He put some shaving cream on his face.

"As long as they still make a donation, of course. They could make a small tithe and then just leave. That way the museum could still afford your salary."

He made a face at her. "Once it all gets organized I'll have dozens of groups who'll want to see the exhibit." He snorted. "And they'll all know someone who

knows someone who'll know one of the trustees who will insist that I take them through personally on the offhand chance one of them might part with a substantial donation. Actually, it's already started, I have a group tomorrow." He shuddered. "I hate it." He began to shave.

Gwen grinned. "Well, you shouldn't be so good at it then. You know more than the rest of them combined but you have such a knack for keeping it simple. Of course they want you." She wiggled her eyebrows at him.

"Besides, you're the man in charge and people with money want to deal with the man in charge." Gwen ignored Giles' scowl. She frowned. There was another reason her brother liked to see deliveries before anyone else. "Do you think there's anything evil in the shipment? Anything dangerous?"

"No, not really. Although I thought the last one would be harmless and I found that cursed tablet. If anyone had read that out loud every person buried within a 100 mile radius of here would have been wandering the streets looking for new bodies to take over." He blew out a deep breath. It made him nervous, thinking about what potential disasters were laying about in museums all over the world, museums where the Curator wasn't as intimately acquainted with the reality of evil as he was.

The dogs began to whine. Gwen cooed at the dogs. "Yes, auntie's going to take you for a walk. Yes, she is." As Giles shut the door of the bathroom behind him Gwen got up and headed for the kitchen. Opening up the back door to the small fenced in garden she let the dogs out to do their immediate business. She began puttering about in the kitchen, making tea.

When Giles joined her he found Gwen looking at the photographs on the refrigerator. She tapped the one of Olivia. "Why didn't you marry her? She was willing, and you seemed quite fond of her."

Giles snorted. "Now that's a solid foundation to start a life long commitment on. She was willing and I was quite fond of her." He reached for a couple of teacups. "No thank you."

"Why do you keep her picture up? You must still like her a little."

"Gwen, we've been friends for almost twenty-five years. That doesn't go away just because we're not together anymore."

"You'd have made such beautiful nieces and nephews for me to dote on."

Giles snorted again. "Sorry to disappoint you."

"So, what did you think of Stephanie?"

Giles sent an exasperated look towards his sister. "Would you please stop trying to set me up. I'm perfectly capable of meeting someone on my own." Giles thought of the young blonde woman he'd met yesterday. The one he'd dreamed of, the one who'd fallen to her death and broken his heart into a million pieces.

"No, you see, that's where you're wrong. You must meet a dozen women a day at the museum. I have at least that many friends who are dying to go out with you. You're handsome, single, reasonably well off, clever, have a great job, have no ex-wives or children hanging around your neck but you just can't seem to find anyone to date."

"I go out on plenty of dates."

"Single dates. You go out once and that's it. And you know why?"

"I know why you think that happens and I'm sure you're going to tell me again."

"Because you are a hopeless romantic." Despite Giles' look she further explained. "No, it's true. Don't give me that look. Despite all your scientific training, and an IQ that even intimidates me, you still think that's there's that one woman out there, one woman who's your soul mate, your other half, and that somehow, you'll just know, in this blinding flash, that she's the one."

She checked the tea and began to pour. "But there's a flaw in your plan. You'll never have the opportunity for any flashes to hit if you won't hang around long enough with anyone to give it time to happen." The dogs were scratching at the door and she let them in. As they bounced around her and Giles she spoke to them, again in a high singsong voice. "No, he'll never find her that way, will he? He's not lucky like you beautiful babies."

Giles shook his head and took only a single sip of his tea. "Well, as much as I hate to do it, I guess I'll have to leave you and my dogs to discuss my love life. I've got to go." He smiled fondly at her. "Thanks again."

"You see, you're not even arguing with me, because you know I'm right." She yelled after him as he opened the front door. "Say hi to the mummies for me." She looked at the dogs. "Are you boys hungry? Want some breakfast?"

Giles noted the time and walked a little faster while he thought about what his sister had said. He knew better than to argue. He hardly ever won any fights with her unless he could pull out the text in question and show her the facts and this wasn't that kind of argument. She was also right.

Gwen had given him several books on the subject. Books that discussed how he was keeping women at a distance by creating this mythical soul mate in his head. Books that discussed how because his mother had died when he was young that he didn't want any other woman to sully his memory of her. Books on how the ideal woman was right in front of him but he was too blind to see it. He had obediently read them all and then thrown them away. He couldn't help it. He just felt it in his bones. He was meant to be with someone. The other half of him. And she was out there somewhere.

Giles thought of his dream again. He felt another wave of sadness break over him. He let out a half laugh and he tried to shake it off as he reached the back entrance to the museum. After entering his security code into the keypad the door opened and pushing all thoughts of dreams and soul mates aside he headed for the receiving area.

End of Part 2

A Different Life 3

The further Buffy got away from the park, the dimmer the memories became. Soon, they had faded completely. But Buffy remembered the man. She couldn't get him off her mind. Him and his two dogs. Ethan and Rayne. Somehow those names seemed important to her but she couldn't place it.

Buffy stopped and looked back. She had gone too far to see the park any more but she felt a longing to go back. A longing to talk some more with him, find out what his name was, and maybe walk with him for a while. There was something so appealing about him. Something that pulled at her heart. Suddenly the pull became irresistible and she began to run back to the park. Buffy was afraid that she had made a terrible mistake by leaving, that she had missed her chance, that she would never see him again.

As she arrived back at the park she scanned the area and she fought back the tears when she realized he had gone. Still determined she ran through it, looking down streets, hoping she might catch a glimpse of him but he was nowhere to be seen. Buffy walked back to the bench where they had spoken together and she sat down. For the first time since she had arrived Buffy really, really missed her mom.

That night she dreamed of him. She dreamed that he was holding her. That he held her tightly against him as he ran. They entered a room and he knocked everything off a counter and lay her down on it. Looking down at her

he spoke. "I'm going to stop this. I promise." He took off his coat and folding it, he placed it under her head. "You just hang on."

Her vision was blurred but she watched him as he opened a book. She knew she was ill. She knew she was dying. A woman spoke to him. "How is she?"

Giles looked over at her. "We only have a few minutes left." After some ingredients were added to a potion he stood before it. "Right, here we go." He began to chant. "The center is dark. Centrum est obscurus. The darkness breathes. Tenebrae respiratis. The listener hears. Hear me!"

Giles picked up the book and began to read. "Unlock the gate. Let the darkness shine. Cover us with holy fear. Show me Corsheth and Gilail!" Putting the book down he raised his hands in the air. "The gate is closed! Receive the dark! Release the unworthy! Take of mine energy and be sated!" Giles plunged his hands into the liquid, wincing. "Be sated! Release the unworthy!"

Buffy could feel the illness leave her. The scene faded out as she stood and when it faded back in she was standing next to Giles as he looked down at her, speaking to her. "I assume the, uh, all the spells are reversed. It was my first casting, so I may have got it wrong."

Buffy grinned at him. "You saved my life! You were a god!" He nervously grinned back at her.

Buffy rolled over in bed, a smile on her face.

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When Buffy woke up her first thought was of the man. Him and his goofy dogs. Then she remembered her dream. The dream had been of him but for some reason in the dream she had known him as Giles. And she had felt so safe, so sure that he would protect her.

Buffy headed for the kitchen and automatically reached for the coffee. Her eyes settled on the tea she had bought last night for no reason except that she felt she had to. She pulled the box out of the cupboard and kept it in front of her as she drank her coffee.

Buffy knew she ought to study but she decided to go for a run first. In the back of her mind she knew exactly why she was taking a run and it had nothing to do with exercise. She wore her most flattering shorts and cropped top. She ignored her inner voice teasing her as she put on some make-up.

When she opened the door and felt how cold it was she grimaced and threw on a jacket. With one last look in the mirror she headed for Russell Square.

She saw the dogs first and her heart rate started to speed up. She looked for the man but she didn't see him anywhere. Suddenly a woman's voice called out. "Ethan, Rayne, come." The dogs bounded back to her and she wrestled the Frisbee out of Rayne's mouth. Buffy couldn't stop the dismay she felt when she saw a woman with the dogs.

When the woman threw the Frisbee again both dogs took after it but Ethan saw Buffy and ran over to her. Buffy patted him and he wagged his tail and looked for all the world as if he was grinning at her. Buffy couldn't help but grin back. Gwen saw her and headed over. "Sorry, I hope he isn't bothering you."

Buffy looked up at the woman. She was tall, several inches taller than Buffy. She shook her head. "We've already met."

Gwen looked surprised. "You have?" She scratched Ethan around his ruff. "Have you been sneaking around behind my back?" She grinned at Buffy. "You can't trust him for a minute, him or his namesake."

Buffy shifted to avoid being knocked over as Rayne joined the fray. "His name's Ethan, right?" At the woman's nod she continued. "He knocked me over yesterday. Some man came to my rescue." Buffy tried to nonchalantly look around for him.

Gwen sent a sharp glance Buffy's way. She could tell the girl was hunting for information. As she looked Buffy over she slowly smiled. "That would be my brother, Rupert."

"Oh, your brother." Buffy thought she was doing a good job hiding her relief but she wasn't.

Gwen bit back a grin. "Did you talk long?"

Buffy shook her head. "No, just for a few minutes." She looked around. "He's not here?"

Gwen shook her head. "He had to work today. I'm babysitting. He has someone come in during the week and walk the dogs but he's stuck at weekends."

Buffy was dying to be nosy but she didn't feel comfortable enough to start interrogating this stranger about her brother. Gwen got annoyed as Rayne

knocked into her once too often. She threw the Frisbee to get rid of them. She grinned at Buffy. "I know there's only two of them but sometimes it feels as if there's at least ten."

Gwen was dying to be nosy but she supposed it would be quite inappropriate to ask what had happened between her and her brother. Something significant enough to bring this girl back looking for more, that was clear enough. Not that that was surprising. Ru didn't know his own charm. He left a wake of doe-eyed women everywhere he went and he was clueless about it. That was one of his charms. So, knowing Ru, he probably didn't even know that he'd snagged another admirer, him and his dogs.

But Gwen remained ever hopeful. It was only the two of them and she wanted nephews and nieces to spoil. And he wasn't getting any younger. She didn't want children of her own. She liked to travel and be footloose and fancy-free. Rupert was the settling down sort, so he needed to have the kids. Several of them if she had her way.

There was a moment of awkward silence as they both waited for the dogs to return. Gwen wrestled for the Frisbee again, this time from Ethan, and she threw it off in the other direction. She turned to the young woman. As much as she wanted to, good manners just wouldn't let her press for details. So she did what she could. "He walks them here more or less every weekend, generally around this time of day."

She avoided eye contact with the girl and pretended to look for the dogs. When she spotted them she grimaced and shot Buffy an alarmed look. "I'd better go and get them before the gardener shows up and reads me the riot act." She grinned. "Again." She took off after them. The dogs had dropped the Frisbee so they could more thoroughly investigate a flowerbed.

Buffy giggled as the woman tried to convince the dogs to chase the Frisbee instead. Eventually they allowed themselves to be cajoled but not without leaving a few glaring gaps in the greenery. The woman looked as if she might head back to Buffy but then she was joined by someone with two dogs of her own who was clearly a friend and they started talking. All four dogs frisked around each other as they got reacquainted. Buffy watched them all for a few more minutes and then with a sigh she began the run back to her apartment.

##

She dreamed of him again. They were in a burning building. They were both coughing as she supported him outside. He had been hurt but she didn't know why. He pushed her away, his voice angry. "Why did you come here?"

This wasn't your fight!" He tried to go back in.

Buffy punched him in the jaw. He spun and fell to the pavement. She screamed at him. "Are you trying to get yourself killed?" She began to cry and crouching down she reached for him and held him close. He started to cry as well and he clutched at her. Rocking him, through her tears, she spoke in an anguished tone. "You can't leave me. I can't do this alone."

When Buffy woke up, she felt very much alone.

##

Gwen was there when Giles got home. He could smell something cooking. He grimaced. Heading into the kitchen he gave her a hug. "You could have called. I would have picked something up on the way home."

She sent him an annoyed look. "It won't kill you to eat my cooking."

Giles lifted the top off one of the pots and looked at its contents. "Are you sure about that?"

She shooed him away from the stove. "How were the new toys?"

Giles' eyes gleamed. "They were wonderful. Wait until you see them."

She grinned at the excitement in his voice. "Will I be able to get a private tour with the man in charge? Even if I have no vast sums of money to donate to the museum?"

"I think something can be arranged." Opening the oven door he frowned at whatever was cooking in there. "Assuming he isn't poisoned by his sister who refuses to believe that she simply shouldn't try to make anything more complicated than tea and toast."

She pouted. "I just wanted to surprise you." The pout turned into a dramatic sigh that she really didn't mean. "It's a tragic flaw."

He nodded. "Very tragic." He looked in the final pot. "And past the point of rescue I'm afraid. We'll have to start over again or order something in."

She handed him a selection of menus. "Here, I had them ready, just in case."

Giles grinned and selected Chinese. After ordering he went into the bedroom and changed into jeans and a t-shirt. "So, any problems today with the

beasts?"

"Other than their predilection for gardening, not a thing."

Giles got a pained look on his face. "The gardener didn't see you, did he?"

"No, thank goodness. But if he'd shown up I was prepared to make a run for it."

Giles let out a laugh. "Gwen, you just need to not throw the Frisbee so close to the flowers."

Gwen watched him. "I was distracted. I was talking to your new girlfriend."

Giles turned startled eyes on his sister. "I beg your pardon?"

"This girl, she was looking for you." She didn't supply any more information and just kept watching.

Giles looked at her with a furrowed brow and then she saw it, a gleam in his eye. His eyebrows lifted. "Really?" He tried to look disinterested. "What did she look like?"

"Blonde, pretty, American. She said you rescued her from certain death yesterday." Giles laughed. "I'm afraid Ethan knocked her right to her knees." As Ethan heard his name he came over to Giles and leaned against him. Giles scratched him up and down his back. Again the disinterested tone. "You say she was looking for me?"

Gwen grinned. "Yes. She looked quite put out when she saw it was me with the dogs and not you. But don't worry; I threw her off the scent. I let her think that you and I were an item so she won't bother you anymore."

She saw the flash of dismay in his eyes. "What? Why did you do that?"

Gwen let out a cry of victory. "Ah ha, I knew you were interested. You can't hide anything from me." She let out a happy sigh and then waved a hand at him. "Relax, I told her you were my brother and she seemed quite pleased with that information. I also told her that you could be found there most weekends, late in the morning, walking Ethan and Rayne." She looked at her brother, a bit of anxiety in her eyes. "I hope that's all right."

Pushing Ethan out of the way he walked over to her and kissed her cheek. "It's fine." Grinning at her he scolded. "But no more matchmaking."

"Did you really like her?"

Giles rolled his eyes. "You're incorrigible. I barely met her. We only spoke for a few minutes." His eyebrows furrowed again. "But I had the strangest dream about her last night."

"You dreamt about her?"

Giles nodded. "She jumped off this structure and I tried to catch her but I couldn't. She died and I held her while I cried." He shook his head. "I can't imagine why I dreamed that."

Gwen spoke in dramatic tones. "Maybe she's your soul mate and it was your unconscious telling you that you'd done a bad bad thing by not getting her telephone number."

Giles snorted. "You are better at cooking than dream interpretation and that is a frightening thought. I would advise you to keep your day job."

Gwen took in a mock wounded breath. "You cut me to the quick." The doorbell rang. "Just for that you get to pay for dinner." She held out her hand and Giles, with a roll of his eyes, pulled out a few notes and laid them across her palm.

As she walked to the front door Giles couldn't keep the grin off his face. Last night and this morning he had been feeling that maybe he had done a bad bad thing by not getting her number. But now, thanks to Gwen, it looked like he might get a second chance.

##

He dreamed about her again. He was with two people he didn't recognize, a young man with dark hair and a red haired young woman. They were looking across the street. It was daylight where they were standing but it was night where they were looking.

The edges of night were shifting and shimmering. As they watched they realized the night encased a cemetery.

The young woman spoke. "Excuse me, when did they put a cemetery in across the street?"

The young man responded. "And when did they make it night over there?"

The three of them crossed the street and entered the cemetery. Tombstones surrounded them. The young man looked around. "Whose nightmare is this?"

Giles looked at a gravestone that read: Buffy Summers 1981 - 1997. In his mind he saw a brilliant smile, blond hair, bright eyes. He spoke. "It's mine." He knelt down by the side of the gravesite. His heart was so heavy. "I've failed... in my duty to protect you. I should have been more c... cautious. Taken more time to train you. But you were so gifted. And the evil was so great. I'm sorry..."

He laid his hand on the fresh soil. As he started to rise a hand reached up through the dirt and grabbed him by the wrist. Giles awoke with a start, his heart pounding in his chest.

End of Part 3

A Different Life 4

The British Museum had just received a new shipment of Egyptian artifacts and one of Buffy's instructors had made arrangements for the class to go watch the museum experts catalog the new arrivals. Buffy was standing with the rest of her classmates as she looked at tables that were loaded with crates. Several larger crates were on the floor. They had all been opened, as the lids, while still resting on top of their respective crates, were askew.

The instructor, a Miss Thompson, was filling them in. "Apparently the Curator came in yesterday and checked that everything arrived safely and that nothing was missing. We're a few minutes early but the experts in Egyptian relics should be here shortly and they will explain several of the artifacts in the time allotted to us."

Part of Buffy was thrilled to be here. The other part of her wanted it to be Saturday already so she could try and find that man at Russell Square. Miss Thompson caught her students' attention. Several people had just walked in, three men and two women. One of the women smiled at the students. Determining that Miss Thompson was the instructor she spoke to her. "It usually works better when we split the class up and each of us takes a few students." She explained what each of them would be working on and with a minimum of confusion the class was divided into five parts.

Buffy went with one of the women. She was Asian, and very beautiful. She walked over to the crates on one of the tables in the rear of the room. As Buffy was listening to the woman speak she was distracted by a crowd of

people entering the room from the other side. A man was walking backwards towards her as he spoke to a group of about 10 people. The group was an equal mix of men and women and they were clearly riveted by what he was saying. They all started to chuckle at something he said.

The Asian woman looked up and smiled. She looked at her group of students. "It's the boss. Let's let him get through and then we'll continue."

Buffy prepared to wait when she heard the man start to speak again. Goosebumps broke out on her skin and she stared at his back, willing him to turn around. In time he did and it was all Buffy could do not to run to him. Her eyes widened as she took in his appearance. He was dressed in a suit and he looked gorgeous.

Giles noticed the Asian woman. He smiled. "Ah, here's Dr. Chin. She's one of our most renowned Egyptologists on staff here. Dr. Chin, perhaps you might explain to our guests the contents of the crate in front of you and the process we go through to catalog each item."

She smiled back. "Of course, Dr. Giles. I'd be glad to." They all knew the drill. These tours meant money, more money for digs, more money for obtaining exhibits like this one. Dr. Chin launched into her spiel. Giles moved out of the way and that was when he noticed Buffy.

Giles had dreamed about her two nights in a row now, and both nights she'd been dead. He hadn't realized how much the dreams had impacted him until he saw her, standing there, very much alive. It was all he could do not to run to her and hold her, feel the warmth of her skin. Giles could hear Dr. Chin coming to the end of her speech. He moved quickly over to Buffy. "How long are you here for?"

Buffy looked at her watch. "Another 45 minutes but..." She was about to tell him that she was free after that. This was her last class for the day.

He interrupted her. "I'm sorry, I can't keep them waiting. I'll be back before you go. Don't leave." With that he went back to his group and started leading them out

Dr. Chin gave her an odd look. "Do you know Dr. Giles?"

The name finally sank in. "Giles? His name is Giles?" She remembered her dream. The dream where he saved her. And she had known his name was Giles. Somehow she had known.

Dr. Chin was nodding. "Rupert Giles. He's the Curator here."

Buffy finally caught the fact that everyone was staring at her. She stammered out an excuse. "I...one of his dogs ran me down in the park the other day. I didn't know who he was."

At that Dr. Chin laughed. "Those dogs of his should be classified as lethal weapons." Mystery solved she went back to lecturing to her students. Buffy barely paid attention. She just wanted him back, wanted him back by her side.

When the 45 minutes were almost up, Giles ran back in. Panicked that he might have missed her he searched the room. She was now with another staff member. Giles relaxed when he saw her and he leaned against a wall and waited. In a few minutes the instructor thanked all the staff and started to round up her students. Giles noticed Buffy checking her watch, looking around, a look of frustration on her face. He stepped away from the wall and she saw him. He walked over to her.

Buffy smiled. Miss Thompson called her name from across the room. "Miss Summers?"

Giles stood completely still. He looked at her. "Buffy Summers?" Her name had been on the tombstone.

Buffy looked at Giles, her eyebrows high. "Good guess. How did you know?"

Miss Thompson walked up to her. "You need to come now. I promised the museum that I'd make sure we'd leave this area on time."

"I'll take responsibility for her."

Miss Thompson started. She hadn't even noticed him standing there; he'd been so still. She looked at his badge and started again. "Oh, oh, certainly." She smiled at Buffy. "I didn't realize you knew..." She grew flustered. "Well, thank you again for letting us come visit." She gave him a nervous smile.

Giles smiled back and that flustered her even more. She couldn't imagine how she had missed him before. "You're entirely welcome. Thank you for including us in your class plans. One of our goals is to increase the community's awareness of what we do here. You help us accomplish that." Again he smiled.

Miss Thompson blushed. She stammered out a good bye and with one last look at Buffy she left. Buffy grinned up at Giles. "Smooth talker."

Giles laughed. "Yes, well, it's one of the things I'm paid for." He looked down at her, pleased beyond belief she was with him.

Dr. Chin looked up and saw the two of them. She nodded to one of her peers and within a few moments the five of them were watching their boss. To see him paying such close attention to a woman was unusual enough. The fact that he was doing it in public was unheard of. They all watched in fascination.

Giles lifted a hand and touched her cheek. He said her name again. "Buffy Summers." He smiled and dropped his hand. "It's nice to meet you."

Buffy touched her cheek where his hand had been. "How did you know my name?"

Giles just shook his head. He touched a curl of her hair. "I can't believe you're here." He knew he was acting bewitched but he couldn't help it. He moved his hand again to her cheek.

She just stared at him. She covered his hand with her own and the tension between them grew. "I knew it too."

Giles shook his head again, just barely. "What? What did you know?"

"Your name." She touched his badge. "I knew your last name. I knew it was Giles." She looked up at him. "I dreamed about you."

Giles lowered his head, just a bit, as if he might kiss her. One of his staff gasped. Giles took a step back and looked up to find he had an audience. His eyes rolled. Gesturing to himself he spoke. "Do I look like I'm from Egypt?" He shooed them away with his hands. "Don't you have items to inventory, exhibits to design?" They all grinned at him and went back to their work, still keeping an eye on him and his companion.

Giles sighed and looked down at Buffy. "Do you need to leave? Keeping you here was a bit presumptuous on my part."

She shook her head. "No, I'm done. That was my last class." She looked around. "You're the Curator here?" She found that amazing, and she found that it was something that made him even more attractive. She wanted to run her hands up his jacket and lace them behind his neck. He had almost kissed her, she was sure of it. Her stomach was still doing flip-flops.

"I'm afraid so." He grinned. Giles glanced at his staff and they all pretended to be very busy. He let out another sigh, this one a bit more exasperated. He gestured to Buffy to suggest that they leave. "Would you like to get some tea?"

Or perhaps you'd rather have coffee?"

At that moment an older man came rushing up. "Dr. Giles, Dr. Giles. You'll never guess."

Giles looked down at the man. Buffy could see the affection on his face. "You're quite right, Nathan, so put us all out of our misery, will you

The man's eyes were lit up with excitement. "Daniel's on the line. They're through; they got through. Wait until you hear what they've found. He's on the line waiting for you."

Giles stood up taller. "Good Lord. They got through? So fast?" He grinned at Nathan. "Can I take it in my office?" At Nathan's nod he made as if to stride off when he spun around back to Buffy. "Oh, Lord. I'm sorry. I'll just be a minute, do you mind if I take this call?" His eyes were pleading.

She grinned. "Are you kidding? I wouldn't dare say no."

Giles put his hand on her arm in thanks. "Really, I won't be long. Feel free to wander around."

Buffy smiled and waved him away. Giles looked back at Nathan and the two of them dashed off. Buffy grinned at his retreating back. She turned her head to the side. A very nice retreating back. Feeling eyes on her she looked around and saw the same five staff members staring at her as she stared at their boss. Buffy blushed and waved her hand in the air pointing in another direction. "I'll just go wait over there." She moved away quickly.

Buffy started looking at some of the exhibits. She found several that would be invaluable on her project. Of course, she was thinking that a certain Dr. Rupert Giles would be invaluable as well. The Curator. Her mom would flip. Buffy wandered until she heard an announcement that the museum was closing. Startled she glanced at her watch. Two hours had gone by. She frowned and started heading towards the back, where Giles had left her.

A guard stopped her. "Sorry, miss, you're not allowed back there."

"But, Dr. Giles is waiting for me."

He shook his head. "Sorry, miss."

Buffy looked for another way through but she got caught up in the exiting crowd and before she knew it she was outside and another guard was locking the door. Buffy stood there, not sure what to do. Part of her wanted to wait,

sure that he would expect to find her there, and sure that he had simply gotten delayed. Another part of her wondered why he hadn't come back, why he hadn't gotten a message to her, and wondered if this was his not so subtle way of ditching her. She waited another fifteen minutes but then the early evening air started to chill her and Buffy shivered. Looking into the now darkened building one more time, Buffy turned around and left.

Giles had been so excited about the phone call that he lost track of time. This dig was going to be one of the museum's most successful one to date. When he looked at the clock he let out a groan. He gestured to Nathan. Putting his hand over the handset he spoke. "Nathan, do you remember that woman I was with?"

"The blonde one, sir?"

"Yes. I told her I'd be just a few minutes and it's been at least an hour and a half. Will you see if she's still waiting and...and ask her..." He didn't feel comfortable asking Nathan to get down on his knees and apologize.

Nathan helped out. "Shall I escort her here, sir? Perhaps buy her some flowers if we pass by a conveniently placed florist shop?"

Giles grinned and slapped Nathan on the arm, nodding. He headed off. Nathan looked for her but was unsuccessful. He got distracted a few times by fellow staff members who had heard rumors about the dig, about what they'd found. By the time he finished combing the first floor the museum was closing. Checking the back area one more time he headed back to Dr. Giles' office.

Giles looked up when Nathan walked in and felt a keen sense of disappointment when he walked in alone. Giles spoke into the phone. "Daniel, can you hold on for a moment?" Putting his hand over the phone again he spoke to Nathan. "She wasn't there?"

Nathan shook his head. "I'm sorry, sir, I looked but I..."

Giles just nodded his head and went back to the phone. "Sorry, Daniel, go ahead." Giles closed his eyes. Of course she hadn't waited. He could have kicked himself. His eyes opened in alarm as he realized that he had neglected to get her number. If she didn't come back, and he could hardly blame her if she didn't, he had no way to get in touch with her. Giles tried to focus on what Daniel was saying to him but he couldn't get past his fears that once again he had let something precious slip through his grasp.

##

Buffy ate her dinner and thought of Giles. The box of tea was still sitting in front of her. She opened it and was dismayed to discover that it was loose tea. Buffy had no idea what to do with loose tea. A memory flitted through her brain. Giles, in a small kitchen, measuring out tea, putting it in a small silver ball and suspending it in hot water. Two cups, one for him and one for her.

Buffy didn't understand what was happening. Why she was dreaming of him, and having these thoughts of him that made her so sure that she knew him, that she had known him for a long time. Shaking her head in confusion she put her dirty dishes in the sink and turned to her homework. In time, she closed her books and went to bed.

She dreamed of him again. She was in some sort of store. Giles was standing across from her, leaning against a counter. She was standing in front of a group of men. One of them, an older man, was speaking to her and all she felt was anger and disdain for him. "Buffy, I can sense your resistance, I don't blame you. But I think your Watcher hasn't reminded you lately of the relative status of the players of our little game. The Council fights evil, the Slayer is the instrument by which we fight. The Council remains, the Slayers change, been that way from the beginning."

Giles crossed his arms across his chest, disgusted. "That's a very comforting bloodless way of looking at it, isn't it?"

The man looked across at Giles briefly. "Giles, let me talk to Buffy, because I think she's understanding me." He looked back at Buffy. "Glory is stronger than you. She is a more powerful instrument, if you will. We can help you, we have information that will help." Buffy's anger grew as he continued to talk. "Pass the review and we give it to you without reservation. Fail the review either from incompetence or by resisting our recommendations..."

Giles interrupted, walking towards the man. "Resisting your recommendations? She fails if we don't do whatever you say. How much under your thumb do you think we are?" He stood a couple of feet in front of the older man. The man standing next to him was watching Giles closely.

The older man spoke. "How much do you want our help?"

Giles lunged at the older man, shoving a pointing finger in his face. The man standing next to him kept Giles at bay, a hand on his chest. Giles was livid. "She is not your bloody instrument and you have no right to do any of this."

Buffy called to him. "Giles." She wanted him to stop before he got hurt. She

didn't know how far the man would go to protect the older man.

Giles, with a fast movement backhanded the man's hand away. He turned away in frustration. Buffy watched him. Loving him, loving how he was trying to protect her, feeling so grateful that he was her Watcher and not any of these other men looking at her with such contempt in their faces. She hated them all.

As the scene played over and over in her head, Buffy tossed and turned until it finally shifted into another scene.

Buffy felt as if her heart was breaking. "Are you saying you're gonna leave me?"

"I have to."

Buffy couldn't believe he was saying something so stupid. "Uh-huh."

"You have to be strong. I'm trying to..."

She interrupted him. "Trying to...to what? Desert me? Abandon me? Leave me all alone when I really need somebody?"

"I don't want to leave."

"So don't. Please don't. I can't do this without you."

"You can. That's why I'm going. As long as I stay you will always turn to me. If there's something comes up that you feel that you can't handle, I'll step in because...because I can't bear to see you suffer."

"Me, too. Hate suffering. Had about as much of it as I can take."

"Believe me, I'm loathe to cause you more, but this...I've taught you all I can about being a Slayer. And your mother taught you what you needed to know about life. You...you're not going to trust that until you're forced to stand alone."

"But why now? Now that you know where I've been, what I'm going through?"

"Now more than ever. The temptation to give up is going to be overwhelming, and I can't let..."

Again, she interrupted. "So I won't. No giving up. You can be here, and I can

still be strong."

"Buffy, I've thought this over and over. I believe it's the right thing to do."

Buffy looked at him with angry eyes. "You're wrong."

An almost physical pain woke Buffy up. The words Watcher and Slayer were strong in her mind. She knew she ought to know what they meant but she didn't. She felt again the emotions of that second dream. The sense of abandonment was complete. Somehow she knew what had happened next. He'd left her. He'd gotten on a plane and left her. Buffy tried to believe that it was only a dream but it felt so real. She lay in bed until the sun rose, aching for him.

##

Giles let himself into his home. After throwing his briefcase and coat on the sofa he crouched down so he could greet Ethan and Rayne. It was late. Once he'd realized that Buffy had gone he had stayed on the call for another hour and then simply remained in his office getting some work done. The thought of spending the evening alone in his flat had been unbearable. As the dogs romped around him he made some tea, measuring it out and placing it in a silver tea ball. As it steeped he leaned on the counter and stared outside.

When he finally went to sleep he dreamed again of her. He heard footsteps and he began to make his way out of the stacks. A girl's voice called out. "Hello, is anybody here?"

He gently reached out and touched her on the shoulder. "Can I help you?"

She looked startled. "Anybody's here." She collected herself. "I was looking for some, well, books. I'm new."

Giles stared at her. "Miss Summers?" He couldn't believe she was finally here. His Slayer. The one he was destined for, to help, to train, to protect.

Buffy was surprised. "Good call. I guess I'm the only new kid."

He paused, savoring the moment. Not even sure where to start. He gestured at himself. "I'm Mr. Giles, th..the librarian." He began to walk behind the counter.

"Great. So you have, uh..."

Giles smiled. This is where it would begin. "I know what you're after." He pulled out a book and placed it on the counter in front of her. It was a large book, leather bound, with a single word set on its cover: Vampyr.

Buffy looked alarmed. She stepped back. "That's not what I'm looking for."

Giles was confused. "Are you sure?" He had been so sure it was she. Could he possibly be mistaken?

"I'm way sure."

"My mistake." He replaced the book back under the counter and when he went to speak with her again, she was gone. Giles' brow furrowed. He was sure that had been her name. He looked at the door to the library that she had gone through and ran a hand through his hair.

As the dream came to a close Giles mumbled and rolled over onto his stomach. He immediately began to dream again.

He stood inside the door not believing his eyes. It was she. His Slayer, his other half, the woman he had failed to protect. He couldn't move. Not until she noticed him and began to move towards him did his legs start to function again. "Oh, God, Buffy. You're alive." They reached for each other and held on tight. "You are here." It hurt, the hug. He let out a painful laugh. "And you're still remarkably strong."

Buffy's eyes widened and she pulled back. "Huh? Ah, sorry."

Giles put his hands on her upper arms, not wanting to let go of her for a second. The amazement was shooting through his body, his face still mirroring his disbelief. "Willow told me but I didn't really let myself believe it."

Buffy smiled her half smile. "I take a little getting used to. I'm still getting used to me."

Hands still clasping her tightly he smiled softly at her, his eyes full of love. "It's...you're..." He didn't even know what to say, his words failing him for once.

Buffy sort of nodded. "...a miracle."

His smile grew and he felt a love for her that almost overwhelmed him. He placed his hand on the side of her face, wanting to feel her warmth. "Yes, but then I always thought so." Their eyes met and locked, so much emotion passing between the two of them. Only the realization that they weren't alone

broke them apart. He could have held her all night.

Giles woke up and rolled over to look out the window. It was still dark. Hugging a pillow tight against his chest he watched the night sky until it became light, wishing she were with him, wishing he was holding her. He swore to himself if he found her again, he was never letting her go.

End of Part 4

A Different Life 5

Buffy hung around the edge of the block surrounding the museum. She wanted to see him so badly but the feeling of abandonment from her dream was still strong within her and it had gotten mixed in with how he had left her yesterday. Buffy didn't think she was up to being vulnerable, to allowing the potential for further rejection. Passing by the museum she turned and headed for her apartment.

##

Giles tried to find her. He tried to discover who the teacher had been who had arranged for Buffy's class to visit the museum. No one seemed to know. He had no idea what college she was attending. In frustration he even took a break mid morning and walked to Russell Square on the faint hope she might be there.

Giles finally headed back to the museum. He was thankful for once that his afternoon was booked with tours and meetings. He didn't want to think. He didn't want to think about not having her in his life. He didn't want to think about why he was dreaming about her being his Slayer, and him being her Watcher when Giles had made the decision to leave the Council years ago. Six years ago to be exact.

He had run away when he was younger, turning his back on what his father had called his destiny. But, he had come back. He had been pulled back by a tension in his gut that he hadn't been able to deny, calling him to be a Watcher, calling him to his destiny, regardless of his wishes. But, then, six years ago, it had just disappeared. He'd waited for it to come back but it never had and within a few months he had given in his notice and never looked back. Until now, until these dreams.

Between his meetings he wandered the museum hoping she would be there. When the museum locked its doors for the day he walked home to his flat. When he opened the door he smiled when he heard Gwen fussing about the kitchen. He called from the door. "Please tell me you didn't make dinner."

"Ha, ha. It would serve you right if I did." She looked up when he walked into the kitchen and she frowned. "You look tired."

Giles sat on one of the kitchen table chairs. "I am tired." He scratched both of the dogs as they crowded up against him. When he was done scratching, Ethan continued to rest his head on Giles' knee. Rayne lay down on Giles' feet.

Gwen put some tea in front of him and pulled a chair out to sit down next to him. She studied him. "No, it's more than that. What's wrong?"

"She came to the museum yesterday."

For some reason Gwen knew exactly who he meant. "Did she come to see you?"

Giles shook his head. "No, she didn't know I worked there. She was there with a class, to see the new artifacts."

"Did you speak with her?"

Giles nodded. "I dreamed about her last night again. I dreamed I was her Watcher, that she was my Slayer." Giles took a sip of his tea. "I don't understand what's going on." He held the teacup in his hands, the warmth comforting. "She knew my name. She told me she dreamed it. And Sunday night, I had another dream where she was dead. I saw her name on a tombstone. Buffy Summers."

Gwen's eyes were focused on her brother. "When you saw her did she tell you her name? Was that her name?"

Giles nodded. "Yes." He took another sip. "It was."

"Could the Council be doing something to try and get you back?"

"They never have before. Why now? And if so, why like this? Why not just come and talk to me?"

"How about Ethan or one of your other magic cronies?"

Giles shook his head. "If it was just me that's the first thing I'd think of, but why her, and for what purpose? I never laid eyes on her until Saturday. Ethan hasn't met her, none of them have."

"Do you think she knows anything?"

"No, she seemed as startled by the whole thing as I was. I..." He put down his cup and ran both hands through his hair. "They got through, they got through on the dig and the call came in while we were talking." He shook his head, his lips tight.

"You didn't."

"I did. I told her I'd just be a few minutes and asked her to wait. I didn't even get her number."

"Oh, Ru." She put her hand on his arm. She'd never seen him this miserable over a woman he'd just met. "Do you feel that strongly about her?"

Giles locked eyes with his sister. "Yes, I do. But I'm sure she thinks I forgot all about her."

Gwen smiled. "Which you did."

Giles scowled. "Just for a while."

"She'll have to get used to it anyway. Might as well get right to it. It certainly won't be the last time she waits around while you get sucked into something."

"Assuming I ever see her again."

Gwen poured him some more tea to warm up his cup and he picked it up again. "How can you doubt that? All of this must be happening for a reason. For whatever reason you two are being drawn together." Giles didn't respond. He absentmindedly scratched Ethan's ears. Gwen shook her head as she watched him. "You've got it bad, haven't you?"

Giles put down his teacup. "I don't know what happened." A week ago his life had been so sane, as sane as an ex-Watcher's life could be at any rate. He gently pushed Ethan's head off his knee and stood. "I'm going to go and take a shower. Have you eaten?"

Gwen shook her head. "I was waiting for you. I thought we could just have sandwiches."

"Sounds great. I'll be out in a few minutes." At Gwen's nod he turned and left the kitchen.

Gwen looked after him concerned. But a part of her was elated. She couldn't wait to spend more time with this girl who had Rupert so crazed after two short conversations. Maybe in a couple of years she'd be buying presents for a niece or a nephew. Then she frowned and muttered. "It better not have anything to do with the Council." Gwen had watched her brother bloom once he'd got out from under their thumb and she had no intention of letting them get their hands on him again.

Neither Buffy nor Giles dreamed of each other that night. When they awoke they felt a brief moment of relief as the dreams had been overpowering. But coupled with the relief was a sense of loneliness because at least in the dreams they had been with each other.

##

The day passed slowly for both of them. Buffy split her time between classes

and studying. Despite the barrage of paperwork, conversations with Daniel and the never-ending visitors who flew in and out of his office, Giles thought the day would never end. At dusk Giles and Nathan left the museum together, a guard letting them out. Nathan narrowed his eyes and he pointed. "Rupert, isn't that your young lady friend?" He couldn't be sure, but he thought he recognized her.

Giles spun his head and followed Nathan's finger. It was she. She was on the corner, looking up at the museum. Giles dropped his briefcase and took off running. Grinning, Nathan picked it up and slowly followed.

Giles reached her just as she was about to step off the curb, heading away. He spoke her name. "Buffy." Hearing his voice Buffy almost lost her balance but he was there before she could fall. Giles grabbed for her and once he was touching her he completed the action and pulled her into his arms, wrapping his arms tightly around her. He rested his head on the crown of hers. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

He was relieved when he felt her hugging him back. He pulled back and put his hands on the side of her face. "I really am sorry. I lost track of time. I sent Nathan after you but he couldn't find you. My sister scolds me about it all the time. She said it's just as well that it happened so you'll know what you're getting yourself into." Giles knew he was babbling; he couldn't help it. He was just so glad that he'd found her.

His apology and dismay were both so genuine that Buffy believed him instantly. In fact she found it hard to believe she had doubted him at all. But she couldn't stop herself from teasing him. "So you weren't trying to ditch me?"

Giles' eyes widened. "Oh God, is that what you thought? I really am sorry. I've been kicking myself that I didn't get your number, that I couldn't call and apologize. I've just been hoping you'd come by."

Buffy grinned a little sheepishly. "I've come by here a dozen times a day. I just...I didn't want to be a pest...you know...in case you weren't..." She blushed.

He pulled her closer and hugged her again. She rested her head on his chest and relaxed into him. There was a discreet cough behind them. Giles turned

his head and saw Nathan standing there, his briefcase held before him. Giles grinned. Keeping a tight arm around Buffy as if he were afraid she might run away if he let her loose he introduced her. "Nathan, this is Buffy Summers. Buffy, this is Nathan Roper, my right hand man. The museum would fall apart without him."

Nathan beamed with pleasure. "Don't listen to a thing he says. It's him we can't do without."

Buffy put out her hand and shook Nathan's. "It's nice to meet you."

Nathan smiled and then handed Giles his briefcase. "I imagine you'll be wanting this."

Giles took it from him. "Thanks." He sent Nathan a look. "And thanks."

Nathan nodded and with a final smile at Buffy he started whistling as he headed down the street.

Giles moved he and Buffy off the curb and closer to the building. He stared down at her, mesmerized by her presence and her touch. Following through on his instinct from the other day he bent down again but this time he touched his lips to hers. Electricity sparked between them and they both groaned. Buffy's arms came up and closed behind his neck as his arms wrapped around her and pressed her even closer.

It was as if they'd been separated for years and this one kiss had to make up for it. They clung to each other. Giles had Buffy pressed to the building and he used the leverage to lift her a little, to bring her lips up closer to his. He slanted his lips over hers, tasting her, wanting more. Buffy opened her mouth for his questing tongue and she moaned when he entered her. He was so hot, his breath fevered. Buffy wondered if she'd survive the kiss. She met his tongue with hers and her body quivered in response to his groan.

A loud honking penetrated Giles' brain and he realized that he was molesting Buffy in a very public place. He pulled back quickly, appalled at his behavior. At the anxious look on her face at his withdrawal he hastened to reassure her.

"I'm sorry, I..." He touched her face. "I seem to lose the ability to think rationally when I'm near you." Giles gestured at their location. "I can't believe I just attacked you in public."

Buffy touched her lips and she grinned. She didn't think she'd ever received a nicer compliment. Especially from someone like him who clearly did a lot of rational thinking. "I liked it." She grinned again. "The attacking part anyway. We might want to rethink the public part of it."

It was all Giles could do not to kiss her again. "My place is right around the corner, we could..." He looked at her concerned, not wanting to be too forward. He cringed. He'd already been about as forward as he could get.

Buffy laced her fingers through his. "Let's go."

Squeezing her hand and not taking his eyes off of her, Giles nodded. He gently pulled her and he led her to his home. As they walked the tension between them grew until their bodies were practically humming with it. Giles could barely get the door unlocked; his need for her was so strong. As soon as the door shut behind them they were in each other's arms, their lips fused, their tongues mating.

The light suddenly flicked on and they heard a gasp. "Oh, oh, I'm sorry." The light went back off. Then there was a loud whisper. "No, Ethan, Rayne, back in the kitchen." But it was too late; the dogs were on them, pushing between them and around them and Giles was forced to let Buffy go.

He looked mortified and then he just started to laugh. Buffy began to laugh too and she crouched down to greet the dogs, enjoying the feeling of their thick fur. They were dancing with delight at the unexpected company. Giles took off his coat and helped Buffy with hers. Then taking her hand and pushing the dogs out of his way he walked to the kitchen.

Gwen was making tea, looking both embarrassed and thrilled at the same time. She grinned at Buffy. "Sorry, I didn't know Giles was expecting company." She gave Giles a mischievous wink.

Giles rolled his eyes and did the introductions. "You've both met but I don't believe you've been properly introduced. Buffy Summers, this is my sister

Gwen Giles."

Gwen took Buffy's hand in both of hers. "You don't know how glad I am to meet you." Gwen could feel the sparks flying between the two of them. She had a good feeling about this girl.

Buffy was blushing furiously but she managed a response. "It's nice to meet you too."

Gwen winked again at her brother and ignored his glare. "Well, I hate to run but..." she tried to come up with an excuse, unsuccessfully, "...but I'm going to anyway." She laughed and kissed Giles on the cheek, whispering to him. "I'm glad you found her." With a final grin she headed out.

The dogs went back to their dinner and Buffy and Giles just stood there looking at each other for a minute. The teakettle began to whistle and that got Giles' attention. Moving to the stove he turned off the burner. "Do you want some tea?"

Buffy nodded her head and she moved to his side, wanting to watch him. As he started making the tea she watched him move, watched the steps he took feeling as if she had seen it a thousand times, feeling a level of comfort with this man that belied the fact that she had only met him five days ago and then only for a few minutes. He looked at her as the tea steeped. "How long are you here for?" Giles thought he'd go insane if she was only here for a few weeks.

"A year, at least a year. I'm doing my senior year here."

Giles relaxed. And then he grew nervous again. He knew she was young but... "Please tell me that's your senior year of college you're talking about."

Buffy laughed at the expression on his face. "Yes, I'm 21. I'm going to the University of London, Birkbeck College, the School of History, Classics and Archeology."

Giles grinned, relieved. "Three of my favorite things. I teach classes there sometimes. Not this term, however." He checked the tea. "I'm 46, quite a bit

older than you."

Buffy shrugged. "I don't care."

"You might care when you're 51."

"In thirty years I could be fat with really bad hair."

Giles grinned. "I suppose that's true but somehow I doubt it." He sent an appreciative gaze over her. "But even if you were, I don't think I'd care either."

Buffy lifted herself on her tiptoes and kissed him. Dismissing the tea he wrapped his arms around her and lifted her onto the counter so their faces were level. She opened up her knees and invited him in, invited him to get as close as he could. Buffy couldn't believe how much she wanted him. She had never felt this way before, never been swept away by a passion so fierce. Pulling back she looked at him. "I don't usually do this."

Giles was pressing kisses down her neck. "Do what?"

"Move so fast."

That stopped Giles. "Me neither, actually." It was true. He hadn't slept with anyone since he and Olivia had gone their separate ways. Giles tended to be cautious with women, had never found someone who made him want to throw caution to the winds. "Do you want me to slow down, I don't mean to..."

She stopped his words with another kiss. "No, don't stop. Don't ever stop."

He groaned as he pulled her even more tightly against him. He couldn't get close enough; he couldn't get enough of her. She was like a drug in his system. Picking her up he carried her to his bedroom, shutting the door to keep the dogs out. He watched her face as he laid her down, wanting to make sure he hadn't misunderstood her. When she grinned and held her arms out to him he grinned back and lay on the bed next to her, pulling her close.

As she explored his body and experienced him exploring hers Buffy couldn't remember ever feeling this sensually alive and yet so comforted at the same time. It never even crossed her mind to feel self conscious or inexperienced. She just trusted him and when their bodies finally merged as one all she knew was that she loved him.

As Giles made love to her he knew he was home. He had found her. Through some extraordinary twist of fate she had flown across the ocean and shown up in his life, and all he knew was that he was keeping her. She completed him and he would never let anything pull them apart. Not if it was within his power.

End Part 5

A Different Life 6

A long time later they were lying side by side, taking a quiet moment, content to be still. She turned until she was on her stomach, resting her head on his chest. "Giles?"

"Hmm?"

"Have you ever been to America?"

"A few times actually. Never for very long, just for conferences and that sort of thing."

"You ever been to California?"

"I've been to LA and San Francisco. Why?"

She shook her head. "I just feel like I've met you before. I keep trying to figure out where it could have been." She looked at him. "I feel like I've known you forever."

"I know. I feel the same way. But I don't know how we could have met. When I've been in LA I've spent all my time in museums and conference centers." He rolled on his side and grabbed a pillow for her to rest her head on. He held her hand. "Why do you call me Giles?" She had called him Giles all evening, all during their lovemaking. And not once had he considered it odd, but now suddenly he was curious.

She frowned. "What do you mean? It's what I've always called you." Her brow furrowed as she listened to her words. The gaze she shot Giles was almost frightened. "I don't understand what's going on."

"That makes two of us. But I don't think I really care as long as you're here with me."

"Do you mind that I call you Giles?"

He let out a soft laugh. "No, it feels right, somehow. As if it is what you've always called me. Feel free to call me Rupert though, or Ru, that's what Gwen calls me."

She softly kissed him and then she laid her head back on the pillow. A remembered piece of one of her dreams flitted through her brain. "Have you ever heard of Watchers and Slayers before?"

Now that Giles cared about. He sat up and looked down at her. "Why do you ask that?"

She shook her head. "I dreamed about it. I dreamed that I was something called a Slayer and you were my Watcher. And this man was saying something about a Council remaining and the Slayers changing. And you got so mad at him for saying that. Then he said that I was an instrument and you practically took his head off telling him that I was not his bloody instrument and that he had no right to do this. He was doing some sort of test." She shook her head again. "I didn't understand much of it, but it felt so real." She looked up at him. "Do you know what it means?"

Giles was even more confused now. He tucked a piece of her hair behind her ear. "Not really, or at least not why you would be dreaming about that." He didn't explain further. "I also dreamed that I was your Watcher and that you were my Slayer." His eyebrows were furrowed.

"What is a Watcher?"

Giles let out a short laugh. He had no idea how to explain. And he was still under oath to protect the Council's secrets. He decided to ask a question instead. "What else did you see in your dream?"

"Dreams, actually. I've had them almost every night since I met you. We're always in some sort of danger and we're trying to protect each other. And that man, he said that we fought evil." She took a deep breath. "And then the last dream I had, you left me. And I hated you for it." She shook her head as if to try and erase how the dream had saddened her. She looked up at him, her

realities confused for a moment, tears in her eyes. "Why did you leave me?"

Giles shook his head. "I didn't leave you. I'm right here." It had to be magic. Giles couldn't imagine what else it could be. "Buffy, I know these dreams feel very real, but they're only dreams. I didn't leave. We've only just met." Even as Giles said those words he knew that somehow they weren't true.

"What did you dream?"

"I dreamed that you died, twice. Once I just saw your tombstone. It's how I knew your name. Then I dreamed that I watched you fall to your death and afterwards I held you in my arms. Both times I felt as if I had failed you. But then you came back; you were alive again. I..." He laid a hand on the side of her face, remembering how he had touched her in the dream, needing again, right then, to feel her warmth, to know she was alive. "I couldn't believe it. You were alive again."

This time it was Buffy who reassured him. "I didn't die, I'm right here." She kissed him softly on the lips. "Why is this happening?" She ran her fingers down his arm until she noticed his tattoo. "And this tattoo, I know it." She touched the back of her neck. "I had one, I think. Back here." She covered his tattoo with her hand. "What does this mean?"

Giles pulled her towards him so he could look at the back of her neck. There was nothing there. "It's a reminder of the foolishness of my youth." He covered her hand that was covering the tattoo with his and let out a cry as he felt a flash of heat shoot through her hand to his. He tried to remove his hand and he couldn't. He was thrust into a waking dream.

Giles watched as Ethan placed the mark of Eyghon on the back of Buffy's neck. He spoke to her in that mocking tone of his. "You can go ahead and scream." Buffy grimaced but stayed silent. Giles was appalled at what he was seeing. Why would Ethan be doing this? How would he even know Buffy?

He realized he was seeing this part of the dream through Buffy's eyes. Giles could still feel her next to him and he tried to speak to her but he was frozen as more scenes played themselves out. Images started playing one on top of another. Him crossing names off a list, Thomas Sutcliffe, Phillip Henry, Deirdre Page, Eyghon engulfed in flames, Deirdre screaming, a possessed Phillip crashing through a window, Ethan pouring acid on his arm to obliterate the tattoo.

Giles watched the sequence realizing that in this dream that all his friends were dead and Ethan was planning on having Buffy die in his place. Giles cried out and he wasn't sure if it was him or the man he was watching.

"Ethan...oh, no" He staggered up and stumbled to the door, filled with an urgent need to get to Buffy, to keep her safe.

Ethan wrapped a bandage around his arm. He turned to Buffy. "I hate to mutilate and run, but..." He looked up; he had taken too long. Eyghon was there.

Ethan backed away, fast. Eyghon menacingly walked up to him. "It is your time." It moved in closer but then it suddenly swung its head to Buffy and moved to attack her instead, following the lure of the tattoo.

Giles slammed open the door just in time to see Eyghon go after Buffy. He yelled. "Eyghon. Take me." Eyghon whipped its head around. Giles yelled again. "Buffy, get out of here." Eyghon went for Giles.

Buffy screamed. "No!" She tried to move in between them. Eyghon raised its hand and touched its finger to Buffy's face. A surge of energy rushed through the touch and Buffy was thrown across the room.

At the same time the surge of energy threw their hands apart and the dream stopped. They sat there facing each other, panting with imagined fear and exertion. Giles touched her face. "Are you all right? Did it hurt you?" Realizing the absurdity of the question Giles shook his head. He pulled Buffy down again to look at the back of her neck. There was still nothing there. "I don't understand. That's not what happened."

Buffy was looking at Giles just as confused. "That was Ethan Rayne wasn't it? The man you named your dogs after. What was he doing to me?"

Giles ran his hand over his face. "I don't know. But Eyghon's dead. Ethan and I killed him five years ago when he tried to possess Thomas. But he's fine, him and Phil and Deirdre; they're all fine. None of them died." Only Randall had died. But he and Ethan had saved the rest of them.

Buffy looked at Giles with widened eyes. "You mean there was a thing like that? Boy, I had no idea that being a museum curator was such an exciting life. Was it like one of the mummies, did it come back to life?" She almost looked thrilled about the possibility.

Giles barked out a laugh. Again, he didn't know how to explain. But, if he really wanted Buffy in his life she'd have to know about this, about this and a great many other things. There were still occasions when Giles found himself on the other end of a stake as it plunged into a vampire's heart. He had saved Gwen from one the first week he was home after quitting the Council. Choosing not to be a Watcher didn't make the night any safer. And then there

was the fact that being a museum curator sometimes was pretty exciting, although to date, none of the mummies had come back to life.

Giles lay down and he pulled Buffy down with him. Holding her close he stroked her hair. "I don't know how to explain any of this to you. I want to but I don't know where to start. I don't want to scare you away."

Buffy leaned up and over him. "Just tell me something for now. Which is real? This life we're in or the one we're dreaming of. Which one is real?"

He lifted his head up and kissed her. "I know which one I want to be real. This one. That other one, the one we're dreaming about, it hurts too much." He smiled softly at her. "And despite how real they feel, I do believe they're only dreams and unless someone has changed the rules this life feels very real to me. You feel very real to me."

Buffy held him tightly. "I wish they'd stop. I don't like them. I don't like to feel that we're always in danger, and always almost dying and hurting all the time. How do we get it to stop?"

"I don't know." He didn't know how to fight this, not when he didn't know what it was. Besides, whatever it was, it had brought them closer, it had connected them. Looking up at her he began to kiss her. The kiss grew passionate and for a while their thoughts turned away from their dreams and became entirely focused on each other.

##

The next morning it was nearing the time when Giles needed to leave for work. Hugging Buffy tightly he spoke to her. "When can I see you again? I can hardly bear the thought of letting you go. I'm afraid I will be quite worthless all day."

Buffy grinned. "I love how you say things like that." She ran her hands down his suit jacket lapels. "You look so handsome." She was thrilled that he was hers. "Besides you're much busier than I am. When are you free?"

He considered her question. "When am I free?" He ran his thumb over her bottom lip. "How about the rest of my life?" He smiled at her.

Buffy's eyes widened but then they grew very bright. "Well, I'll have to check my calendar but I think I'm free too."

Giles kissed her, a kiss that started spiraling out of control. Only the dogs

barking to be let back in kept Giles from taking her back into the bedroom, or taking her right there in the foyer. Sighing he let the dogs in. "Perhaps I should actually feed you tonight." They'd never gotten around to eating last night. "There's a wonderful little place right by the museum. Perhaps you could meet me there." He pulled out a business card and wrote the name of the place on it and another number and then he handed it to her. "That's my number here, and the name of the restaurant. And my direct line to my office is on that card." He winced as if already apologizing. "If I'm late, call me."

Buffy laughed. "At least I've been forewarned. I can see lots of waiting in my future."

Giles kissed her again. "If anyone can cure me of it, it will be you."

"See, there you go again, saying those wonderful things."

Giles softly laughed. "You're so easy to say them to." At Buffy's grin he grinned back. Then he looked concerned. "You will be there, won't you? You're not going to just vanish on me?"

Buffy squeezed him tightly. "I'll be there." She grinned. "And if you're late, I'll call." She waved the card at him. Standing on her toes to kiss him she spoke softly to him. "I'm missing you so much already."

Giles began to kiss her when his eyes lit on the clock in the hallway. "Good Lord, is that the time? I have to go."

Buffy grabbed her jacket, laughing. "Let's go then." Buffy walked with Giles partway until they reached the road to her apartment. Kissing briefly and hugging for a longer time they finally parted.

##

A short while before Buffy planned to head out to meet Giles she called home. She still hadn't quite gotten into a rhythm that took into account the time difference. Her dad had probably already left for work but she should still catch her mom. She had to tell somebody.

"Hello?"

"Mom, it's me."

"Buffy, your dad and I were just talking about you, trying to decide when we could fit in a trip to visit you."

"Really? That would be so great."

"How are you? You sound good."

"I met someone."

Buffy could almost hear her mom smile. Buffy was always meeting someone.

"That's nice. One of your classmates?"

"No, I met him in a park. He was out walking his dogs."

"So, tell me about him."

There was a brief pause. "He's a little older than me."

"How much older."

"He's 46."

"Buffy, he's as old as I am. I'm not sure..."

"Mom, he is so handsome, and in great shape and..."

"Does he have a job?" Joyce had visions of some deadbeat older man sponging off of Buffy.

Buffy laughed. "Are you sitting down?"

Joyce grimaced. "No, should I be?"

"He's the Curator at the British Museum."

There was a silence. "You mean, The Curator?"

"With a capital T. He runs it, mom. He's the boss."

"The British Museum? That big one in Bloomsbury Square?"

"Yep, that's the one."

"Oh, my."

"And he's got a Ph.D., and everyone calls him Dr. Giles, and he teaches at my school sometimes although he isn't teaching this term."

"Oh, my."

"And he is so smart, and so funny, and has a great sister and two great dogs."

Buffy's enthusiasm was almost buffeting Joyce. "You seem quite taken with him."

Buffy let out a sigh. "I am. His name's Rupert Giles. His sister calls him Ru."

"Rupert Giles. That's a strong name."

"Mmmm." Buffy could feel his strong arms around her.

"Are you sure he's not married?"

"He's never been married."

"Why hasn't he ever been married?"

"Mom."

There was a pause. "When are you seeing him again?"

"Tonight. He's taking me out for dinner."

"That's nice. The Curator, you say?"

Buffy smiled. "Yup, and I'm sure he'll give you guys a private tour when you come and visit. Into all the cool back rooms where you can't usually go."

Joyce's eyes gleamed at the thought. "Well, perhaps your father and I will firm up our plans tonight. Of course, I realize that you might not still be dating him when we arrive and I don't want you to feel badly about that or stay with him..."

Buffy interrupted her. "Mom, this is for keeps. I don't understand why I know that, but I do."

Joyce sat down. "Buffy..."

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to wig you out but you'll understand when you meet him. Come soon, I miss you, you and dad."

Joyce's mind had wandered again. "The British Museum." She couldn't quite get past that.

Buffy laughed. "I gotta go. I love you. Give dad a hug for me." At Joyce's distracted response Buffy hung up. Grabbing her coat she practically skipped out the door.

End Part 6

A Different Life 7

Buffy entered the restaurant with a smile on her face. Thanks to Giles' warning she was unconcerned when she didn't see him there. She was a bit early anyway. Securing a booth she sat down and stared out the window. Buffy couldn't wait to see him, to touch him. The longing for him had been strong all day and now that she was minutes from seeing him, the anticipation was at a fever pitch.

Buffy was so wrapped up in her thoughts that she didn't notice someone standing by her until she spoke. "Slayer."

Buffy spun her head to see who had spoken. Her eyes widened at the sight. It was a woman, but not an ordinary woman. She was tall and severe looking but with a beauty that was almost unearthly. Her hair was long and fell in ringlets almost to the small of her back. Buffy at first thought she was dressed in white but every movement revealed flashes of color, too many colors to count. Recalling what the woman had said Buffy shook her head. "I'm not..."

Again the woman spoke. "Slayer, we must talk." Her voice sent shivers up and down Buffy's spine. It was as if several people were talking.

Buffy tried again, but she could feel her fear start to grow. "I don't know what you're talking about. I'm not..."

The woman reached out a hand and touched Buffy's forehead. Buffy gasped and if she hadn't been sitting she would have fallen as all her memories came crashing back. And this time when they came back they came back full force. With all the emotions, the pain, the horror. Buffy's eyes widened and she pressed up against the back of the booth, trying to put as much distance between her and this being, whatever it was. Buffy cried out. "Go away. Leave me alone."

The woman touched her again and Buffy found herself standing in a patch of

light in a room that was otherwise dark. She tried to move away but she could not get past the light into the darkness. Looking at the woman Buffy spoke angrily. "What do you want with me? Why are you doing this?"

"You are the Slayer."

"No, not any more." She started to cry and fell to the floor. "Not any more. Please." Her new life seemed far away, except for Giles. Giles was so clear in her mind and in her heart. She screamed for him. "Giles!"

"He cannot hear you. Even were he here he would not be able to see you."

Buffy moved away as far as she could. It was still too close. "What do you want with me?"

"You are the Slayer. You are needed."

"I'm not the Slayer." She shook her head. "I used to be or I once was, but I didn't get called this time. Someone else is the Slayer, not me."

"You have lost your way. This life is not your destiny."

Buffy's heart clenched within her chest. She hated that word; she hated that word with a passion. "I fulfilled my destiny."

"No, you ran from it."

Buffy gritted her teeth. "I didn't run from it. I gave it to someone else. Let her deal with this. Let her be the Slayer, whoever she is. I did it long enough, I died for it too many times."

"This is not your choice to make. You cannot give away this responsibility."

"Why not? Is there another Slayer?"

"Yes." "So I didn't get called. Not this time. You have your Slayer. Why come to me?"

"She does not have your strength. She is not strong enough to combat the evil."

Buffy lashed out. "That sounds like your problem, not mine."

"It was your responsibility. You were able to fight back this evil. But now, in this new reality, the evil has been allowed to grow too strong. We have been

sent to correct this."

Buffy snarled. "Who the hell are you?"

"We represent the Powers That Be."

"So who the hell was that man who gave me my wish? I like what he was selling better."

"He is a demon. A trickster. His name is Gazrok and he longs for the power of the Hellmouth and you have given it to him.

Buffy stood, her posture defiant. "I have given him nothing. I have been living my life, living the life I want."

"You have been living a lie."

Buffy's voice was thick with more tears. "It's not a lie. It's real. I'm real. Giles is real. I belong here with him."

"You belong to your duty."

Buffy moaned as she thought of her duty. As she thought of what it had done to her, of what would be waiting for her if she returned. She sank to her knees. Not even Giles. Not even the Giles of that life. "I can't. It's too much to ask."

"You must return. As must your Watcher."

Buffy looked up at the woman. "Why? Why does he have to return? He's gone. He's not even there anymore." Buffy sat and brought her knees up to her chest, hugging them tightly against her. "Don't ask me to do this. Please."

The woman raised a hand. "Watch." There were 10 women standing around the Hellmouth. Buffy recognized four of them. Willow, Tara, Amy, and Jenny. Buffy's eyes widened as she took in Jenny.

Buffy pointed. "She's dead."

"No, not in this reality. Angelus was killed before he could murder her.

Buffy's eyes filled with tears at the thought of Angel being dead. "Why are you showing me this?"

"Gazrok has deceived these women, much as he deceived you. He is a

master of disguise, a master of knowing one's weakness. The Hellmouth was never properly closed. Three times as Slayer you fought to keep it closed and three times you were successful. The other Slayer has not been as successful. It has only been partially closed. Gazrok came to some of these women and told them that if they became familiar with the power of the Hellmouth that they could learn its secrets, that they could learn how to close it. That they alone held that power, that they alone could save the world."

"Their pride made them blind. He seduced them and they have now bound themselves to the Hellmouth. It now owns them. And Gazrok will use that power to open the Hellmouth and destroy all that you once held dear. Behold what has been foretold."

Buffy watched in horror as the Hellmouth opened and evil oozed out of it. She watched as Gazrok stole the witches' power, consuming them until there was nothing left but empty shells that crumbled in the wind. Tears coursed down her cheeks as Buffy watched Willow and Tara die. She watched as Xander was torn apart by demons and then the faces became too many to differentiate. The screams too painful to listen to. They were all dying; the entire city was being destroyed.

And she watched as Gazrok, satisfaction on his face as he watched Sunnydale be consumed by flame, full of his new power, turned his attention north towards LA. And Buffy knew, even if she kept this life, that her family would die if she didn't stop this. She looked up at the woman. "What do I need to do? How do I stop this from happening?"

"You do not need to stop it. If you take your place, if you undo this wish, this future will simply cease to be. You will have closed the Hellmouth as the Slayer. Gazrok knew the only way he could succeed would be with a weaker Slayer, so he deceived you and he removed you."

"What took you so long to figure this out? Why wait until now, when this life is so important to me?"

"It wasn't until this future was foretold and we studied it that we became aware that the balance had shifted, that changes had been made to the timeline."

Buffy covered her face with her hands. She was filled with an unbearable longing for Giles to hold her. To be safe within his arms, ignorant and loved. She thought of the Giles she had known and the Giles she now knew. The contrast was startling. He was happy here. And he had not been happy in Sunnydale. Buffy started to cry as she realized what being her Watcher had done to him.

It had almost destroyed him. She thought of his solitude, his drinking, his sadness, his weariness. And she thought of the Giles of this life, his ready smile and easy laugh, his friends, how much satisfaction he got from his job. She smiled through her tears as she thought of Ethan and Rayne. His silly dogs that he loved so much, and his sister. Buffy thought for a moment, trying to remember something. Something Willow had told her. Buffy had been wondering about Giles' family one day and Willow had told her that he used to have a sister, but she had been killed by a vampire. It had happened shortly before Giles had come to be her Watcher, while he was still at the Council.

Buffy shook her head. She couldn't do that to him. She wouldn't. Drying off her tears she stood again and looked at the woman. "Can you make me do this?"

The woman shook her head. "No. We can only show you what comes of your choice."

Taking a deep breath Buffy spoke. "I'll come back. But Giles stays here. He gets to keep this life."

"That is not possible."

"That's the deal. You get me alone, or you get nothing."

"If he does not become your Watcher the past will change."

"It's already changed with me not there. But if I come back at least you'll have me. You need to figure out if I'm strong enough. If I'm strong enough without him to keep the Hellmouth closed. None of the rest of it matters." She would give him this. It was the very least of what he deserved, for all he had done for her, for all he had given up without complaint, without blame.

The woman closed her eyes and grew very still. Buffy stood silent as she waited. Finally the woman's eyes opened. "It is sufficient. He will keep what he has. You will come back if we agree to this? You will deny this wish you made?"

Buffy fought back more tears. Her heart screamed at the thought of denying this wish, of turning away from this love she had found with Giles. She honestly didn't know if she would survive this choice. But then, it didn't really matter. If she went back, if she never left, she would have done her duty, and kept the Hellmouth closed. And if then she died, she'd be done. Done for the last time. And Giles would be safe and he'd be happy. Squaring her shoulders

she looked at the woman. "Yes. I'll come back. I will deny the wish."

The woman nodded and Buffy found herself back at the restaurant, still sitting in her seat, the woman standing in front of her. The woman held out her hand. "We must go."

Buffy nodded. Sliding out of the booth she walked up to the bar. Getting the bartender's attention she asked a question. "Do you know Rupert Giles?"

The bartender grinned. "Sure do, luv."

Buffy smiled sadly. "Will you give him a message for me?"

He pushed a napkin and a pen at her. "Just write it down. I'll make sure I get it to him."

Buffy nodded and she picked up the pen. She wanted to write something that would explain why she was gone, why she wouldn't be back. Finally she wrote: 'There was an emergency and I had to go home. I'm sorry. I love you, Buffy.' She handed it to the bartender. "Please make sure he gets this. He'll be expecting me."

"No problem." The bartender taped it to the mirror behind the bar. "I won't forget."

Buffy nodded. Feeling as if her heart were actually breaking she took the proffered hand the woman was holding out. No one even noticed when the two of them vanished from sight. The writing on the paper began to fade until it disappeared. Then the note simply faded away.

##

Giles was sitting in his office when he heard her scream. He heard Buffy scream out his name. He was out of his seat and running before he was even consciously aware of it. As he raced down the hallway he yelled for her. "Buffy? Where are you?" He continued to run, having no idea where he was going.

He ran into a guard who was racing towards him in response to his call. "What is it, Dr. Giles? What's wrong?"

"Did you hear that? Did you hear a woman scream?"

The guard looked confused. "No, I only heard you yelling." He looked

concerned. "Are you okay?"

Giles let out an exasperated noise. "I'm fine. You really didn't hear anyone?"

"Just you."

Giles ran his hand through his hair. It had been so clear. He knew he heard it. Somehow, Buffy was in danger. His gut was tense and a feeling of dread started to crawl over him. Looking at the guard he spoke quickly. "Let me out. I have to leave, now."

"No problem, Dr. Giles."

The guard had to run to keep up with him and he shook his head as he watched Giles take off outside as if the place was on fire. Shrugging his shoulders he locked up again and went back to his rounds.

Giles burst in the door of the restaurant and looked for Buffy. He looked at his watch and saw that he was only a few minutes late. Trying to quell his panic when he didn't see her he reasoned that she might be late, that there might be nothing wrong. He didn't believe it, not for a moment. He headed up to the bar.

The bartender saw Giles and grinned at him. "Hey Rupert. How's tricks tonight?"

Giles smiled quickly. "Fine, thanks. Have you seen a very attractive, petite blond in here? I'm supposed to meet her for dinner.

The bartender grinned. "Blind date?"

Giles shook his head. "No, no, we're together, I just...I don't see her...I thought you might have."

He shook his head. "No, no one's come in who looks like that. I'd have noticed a pretty blonde."

Giles nodded. "Okay, thanks." Giles wandered through the small restaurant and even sent another woman into the restroom on the off chance Buffy might be there. He just knew that something had gone terribly wrong. After determining that she wasn't in the restaurant Giles sat in a booth near the door. His eyes scanned the outside sidewalk and every time someone came in the door his heart leaped and then sank in disappointment when it wasn't her.

He waited two hours for her. Giles had a couple of beers and ended up ordering dinner although all he did was push the food around on his plate. He checked for messages both at work and at home in case she had called and left a message. He sat there, sick at heart, and full of fear. Finally he headed home.

End Part 7

A Different Life 8

Giles was glad when he heard Gwen rummaging around in the kitchen. He hadn't wanted to be alone. The dogs heard the door open and they came running almost knocking him down in their frenzied welcome. Crouching down he found some solace in their attention. Gwen came out of the kitchen at the commotion. "You're so late. I thought you'd be home earlier."

"I told you I was meeting Buffy."

"Who?"

"Buffy, the woman you met."

Gwen scrunched her face up. "You've lost me. Was this someone you introduced me to at the museum?" She smiled. "Was this a date? And you didn't tell me?"

Giles rolled his eyes. "Gwen. It was the woman I was kissing here in this room last night when you barged in on us. Buffy Summers. Blonde, American, you shook her hand in the kitchen."

Looking concerned she walked over to Giles. "I don't know what you're talking about. What woman?"

The fear started to grow again. "I don't think this is funny, Gwen."

"I'm not trying to be funny. I really don't know who you're talking about. I wasn't here last night." She frowned at him. "Have you been drinking?" She couldn't remember the last time he'd had too much to drink.

Giles stood and taking Gwen by the elbow he took her into the kitchen and sat her down. "Gwen, on Saturday I met this woman, her name was Buffy Summers. Ethan knocked her down. You ran into her on Sunday and you told her I usually walk the dogs on weekends because you could tell she was

interested in me. You've got to remember this."

Gwen shook her head. "This Sunday? The one that just happened?" She wanted to help but she was lost. "I met Belinda at the park on Sunday."

Giles blew out a breath. "No, remember I dreamed about her? I dreamed that she had died. And you told me that it was because she was my soul mate." His voice was starting to get a little desperate. "Gwen, you have to remember. I met her again at the museum and you teased me because I forgot about her when I took that phone call and lost track of time. Then you were so glad that I found her again. You said that to me last night before you left."

Gwen put her hand on Giles' face. "Are you all right? I don't know what to say to you. I don't remember any of this."

Giles groaned and he pushed out of his chair, pacing around the kitchen. "She was here. She was...she was mine. Gwen, she was right here." He leaned against the counter and covered his face with his hands. When he removed them she gasped at the look on his face.

Springing up she crossed the kitchen and took his hands. "Ru, I..." Finding no words to deal with whatever he was going through she simply hugged him. He held her tightly for the longest time.

Gwen spent the night and in the morning she tried to talk him into taking the day off but he insisted on going in. Giles wanted to talk to Nathan and to Susan Chin. They had seen her; they had spoken to her and he was frantic for proof of her existence. Gwen watched him leave, worry clear on her face.

When Giles got to the museum he hunted down Nathan. Nathan gave him a grin. "Daniel's already called. He needs you to talk to the Egyptian authorities. They're giving him a headache."

Giles waved Daniel's concerns away. He asked his question carefully. "Did you see the woman I was with last night?"

Nathan looked confused. "When? Before we left the museum? Or when we were at dinner?"

"We had dinner last night?"

"We tried out that new Italian restaurant. The one in Soho." Nathan ran his hand over his chin. "At least I think it was last night. What's today? Wednesday, right? So, yes, it was last night." He grinned at Giles. "You didn't have that much to drink."

Giles couldn't speak. He leaned against the wall and tried to keep his body from trembling. None of this made sense. Either he was going mad or the world around him was. Nathan looked at him, concerned. "Are you all right?"

Summoning some strength Giles shook his head. "No, I don't feel very well. I think I'll go and sit down." Nathan fussed over him as he escorted Giles to his office. As he left to go get Giles some tea Giles put a hand on his arm. "Would you find Dr. Chin for me?"

Nathan nodded. A few minutes later Nathan showed up with tea and Dr. Chin. Giles directed her to sit. Nathan dropped off the tea and left, telling Giles to call him if he needed anything. Giles looked at Susan. "Do you remember the students who were in here Monday, the ones who came to look at the new artifacts?"

Susan nodded. "The ones I was with when you came in with a group of people? The ones you asked me to speak to?"

Giles almost gasped with relief. "Yes, those students."

She grinned. "Well, then, yes I do remember them." She looked at him, her eyebrows raised in curiosity. "Is there a problem?"

"Do you remember me talking to one of them? A blonde, hair down to her shoulders, in a light purple jacket?"

Looking confused Susan shook her head. "You didn't talk to any of them. You waited until I was done and then you took the group away. Unless you talked to someone later." She thought for a minute. "I don't remember a blonde in a purple jacket. And I'm pretty sure I talked to all of them. We rotated them around."

Giles sat back in his chair. "Yes, well thank you. That will be all." As she got up to go Giles stood as well. "If anyone needs me I'll be at home. I'm not feeling quite myself today. Will you work with Nathan on covering my meetings?"

"Of course. Do you need anything?"

"No, no." He followed her out of his office and then he headed outside. His head bowed he thought for a moment and then he started running for the University. As he reached the building that housed the Department of History, Classics and Archeology he headed for administration.

Beverly looked up as he entered. "Dr. Giles. How are you today?" She frowned. "I didn't think you were teaching classes this term."

He smiled at the secretary. "I'm not. But I am working with one of the students on a project. I've lost her number. Can you look her up for me?"

"Absolutely. What's her name?"

"Buffy Summers." Giles waited impatiently as Beverly looked the roster up in her computer.

"Are you sure she's on this course?"

Giles wanted to scream. "Yes, yes I'm sure. She's from California, doing her senior year here."

Beverly shook her head. "I don't have her on the list. Do you want me to try another department?"

Feeling dangerously frustrated on every front, Giles shook his head. "No." Slamming his hand against the wall he left.

##

"Buffy." A pause, then louder. "Buffy."

Buffy looked up. Her eyes were glassy. Another voice spoke. "Hey, Buffy, are you okay? You're making us nervous."

She shook her head and looked at her friends. "Yeah, I think so."

Xander made a face. "Cuz I gotta tell you, I was almost thinking I might have to call Wes. And you know I hate to call him about anything."

Willow chimed in. "Especially because we're here. You know, at the Bronze. He'd flip."

Xander leaned in. "Yeah, he might think you're having fun."

Willow put her hand on Buffy's arm. "So are you all right?"

Buffy looked around her and took a deep breath. She was back. She was back and she was with Willow and Xander at the Bronze. Different memories were fighting for dominance in her brain and nothing seemed particularly

clear. "So, you mean Wes, like my Watcher Wes?"

Willow made a face. "Yes, he's the major general. And I don't mean that in a Pirates of Penzance sort of way, you know with singing and frolicking."

Buffy's heart ached at the thought of asking the question but she knew she had to. "And he's always been my Watcher?"

Xander looked at Buffy with a funny expression on his face. "I know he's bad but you're usually willing to at least admit he's your Watcher."

Buffy thought about another question that might tell her what she needed but didn't want to know. "What was the librarian's name in high school?"

Xander and Willow looked at each other. Willow answered. "Miss Contino."

Xander shivered. "And still I have nightmares."

Buffy could remember Miss Contino now. Wes had not become the librarian. He would never have taken a job like that, sure that it was beneath him. She looked at Xander. "Where's Anya?"

Xander looked confused. "Anya who?"

"Your fianc?."

"Man, Buffy, I'm not sure where you went when you faded out there for a couple of minutes but I'm thinking it was an alternate universe or something." He patted himself on the chest. "You're looking at a single guy here. Just me and my two gal pals."

Buffy looked at Willow. "And Tara?"

It was Willow's turn to look confused. "Who's Tara?"

"Your girlfriend."

Willow looked alarmed. "You mean girlfriend, girlfriend, like, you know, like boyfriend but girlfriend type of girlfriend? I don't have one of those. I don't even have a boyfriend."

"Do you do magic?"

Willow grinned. "I wish." Then she frowned. "Buffy, what's going on?"

Xander agreed. "Yeah, what's with the twilight zone twenty questions?"

Buffy wasn't done. "Where's Dawn?"

"She's home."

Buffy's eyes widened. "Alone?"

Xander shook his head. "No, she's with...Buffy, you're starting to wig me out here a little."

"Did we fight Glory?"

Xander and Willow exchanged another glance, this one quite worried. "Yeah, you jumped into that rift thing and saved us all. Even Wes was impressed." Xander scowled. "Although afterwards he was mostly just annoyed that you got hurt. Like you'd done it on purpose to get out of patrolling."

"I didn't die?"

Another glance was exchanged. "No. Well, almost. You were in the hospital for a long time."

Buffy closed her eyes. All she wanted was Giles' arms around her. She'd even have settled for him just watching her the way he always had. But instead she had no one's arms, and she had Wes. And the memories that were slowly oozing into her head were not particularly pleasant. Standing she smiled at her friends. "I need to make a pit stop. I'll be right back." Without waiting for a reply she spun around and walked away.

Xander looked at Willow. "Now, was that really weird or did I miss a stop somewhere?"

Willow followed Buffy with her eyes. "That was pretty weird. I mean she's been kind of off ever since she almost died but that was way, way off."

Willow was tempted to follow Buffy. She had been out of the hospital for a month now and with her Slayer healing she was almost back to complete physical health. But, something had been different. Wes hadn't noticed. He never noticed anything unless it had to do with how well she could kill a vampire. He didn't care about Buffy's personal life except that he didn't want her to have one. Wes felt it was irrelevant to her duty.

Willow knew the only reason she and Xander had been able to stay friends with Buffy was because Joyce had put her foot down and insisted. And that

was after Joyce had gone head to head with Wes about where Buffy was going to live. Wes had wanted to take Buffy away from Joyce so that she could be submersed in her training and studies. But he hadn't reckoned with Joyce. Apparently most mom's of most Slayers knew what was expected of them. They expected to lose their daughters to their training, to their calling but Joyce wasn't like those moms. And the only way Wes could have taken Buffy away was over Joyce's dead body.

Willow looked to see if Buffy was coming back. "What do you think is wrong with her?"

Xander shrugged his shoulders. "Well, this might sound sort of crazy but..." He hesitated.

Willow's eyes widened. "You had a theory and you didn't tell me? What kind of friend are you? Spill."

"Just don't hurt me if this seems really, really lame." He paused. "I know Buffy seems okay, or seemed okay most of the time but it's gotta kind of suck, being the Slayer and having a Watcher like Wes. I mean even Kendra's Watcher, Sam, is pretty cool. He wouldn't care if we were here tonight. He wouldn't care if Kendra was here tonight. I think he wishes she'd relax a little, have a little fun but she's like this Energizer Bunny of a Slayer, she just keeps going and going..."

"Xander. Buffy theory."

He sat up straighter. "Right, sorry." The whole Kendra thing bugged him. He kind of liked her but she was too busy being the Slayer to give him the time of day. "Okay, so Buffy, sucky life. No fun, no boyfriends, no college. Sees you go off to college, sees me get to be traveler adventurer occasional dishwasher but all she gets to do is stay home and train and then go kill things that want to kill her."

Willow encouraged him with her hands. "Go on."

"So, Glory comes and things are even more stressful than usual and then she jumps to save Dawn, to save us all and she ends up in the hospital." He paused. "Willow, I saw her eyes when she first woke up after that coma she was in and ..." He closed his eyes in pain, remembering what he'd seen, wishing he hadn't.

Willow smacked him. "Xander, she'll be back soon. Keep talking."

"She looked sad to be alive. She looked like she'd been hoping that fall would

kill her and she couldn't believe she was still alive, that this was still her life." Xander's voice had gotten thick with the telling of it. The punch in his gut when he'd seen her eyes that night still had the power to affect him.

Willow's eyes teared in response to his emotions. "You think she wishes she was dead, that she had died?"

"I just think that there's not a whole lot about her life that would make her want to sign on for another season."

"She's got us."

Xander smiled sadly at his best friend. "Yes, she does. But I don't know if it makes up for the rest of it."

"So why was she acting so crazy just now?"

"You got me on that one. I'm a one theory at a time guy."

Willow let out a long sigh. "I don't want her to be sad."

##

Buffy sat in the toilet stall crying. She wasn't even sure what she was crying about. Most of it was about Giles. Having to leave Giles and knowing that he was out of her life completely was like being ripped out of heaven again. But mixed in with that pain were old memories and new memories that were filled with pain as well. Her old life as a Slayer had buffeted her until in defense she'd become hardened and filled with dark emotions. And those last few months before she had traded her life away for a dream had been the worst in her life. This life had been gentler in some ways, but it had insidiously sucked away her joy until she knew she seldom experienced it anymore.

And then, in between these lives as a Slayer, there had been the dream. Buffy covered her face with her hands, and let out a cry. No Giles. No Giles. He didn't even know who she was. She had never gone to London now, they hadn't met, they hadn't made love, and they hadn't fallen in love so fast that it had turned her life upside down with an indescribable joy. He wasn't hers to call, or to even think about. Her life felt meaningless. It felt as if it contained nothing but death, too many years of it, too many lifetimes of it.

She heard the door open and knew it was Willow. Buffy started to dry her tears.

Willow called out. "Buffy. You've been in here forever. Are you okay?" She bent down and started looking for Buffy's feet under the stall.

"I'm fine. I was just thinking." Willow could tell by her voice that she had been crying.

Willow wished there was something she could do to help. "Is there something you want to talk about?"

Buffy couldn't help but smile. Willow had been her friend in this life much as she'd been her friend in her first life. But in this life she had stayed the Willow that Buffy loved so much. No magic, just Willow. Just the best friend anyone could want, let alone a Slayer who shouldn't even have friends. Buffy left the stall and went to hug Willow. "Thanks Willow. I'm just glad you're here. I'm just glad you're you."

Willow hugged her back. "Me too. I mean, glad that you're you." She looked at Buffy. "I know that your life must seem sort of sucky sometimes but that's what we're here for, you know, to help make it less sucky. So if there's anything we can ever do to make things less sucky for you then you'd tell us, right?"

Buffy longed to tell Willow about Giles but it was too raw a wound and she didn't think that Willow would believe her. "You bet. Any anti-sucking that needs to take place, I know right where to go."

Willow didn't really want to settle with that but she also didn't want to push. "Are you okay? You were acting sort of spacey out there."

Buffy smiled sadly. "I'm sorry. I sort of got lost in some memories. I'm okay now." She looked at Willow. "So, who's with Dawn again?"

"Your mom. At home."

Buffy's jaw dropped. "My mom, my mom's alive?" She grabbed Willow. "She didn't die?"

Willow shook her head, alarmed anew. "No, she's fine."

"She didn't have an aneurysm?"

"Yeah, but she was at the hospital. They did surgery again and fixed it."

Buffy's heart was pounding. Her mom was alive. "I have to go home. I have to go home now."

"Sure, Buffy..." Willow was talking to air. Buffy was gone. Willow left the bathroom and headed back to Xander.

Xander was watching the front door. "Was that Buffy making like a speeding bullet? What'd you say to her?"

"I told her that Dawn was home with her mom and she got all crazy again and left."

Xander ran a hand through his hair. Then he sighed. "Slayers, can't live with them, can't live without them." He grinned ruefully at Willow. "Wanna dance?"

Willow looked at the front door. "Ah, sure, I guess. You don't think we should make sure she's okay?"

Xander stood shaking his head. "Nah, it's Joyce's shift now. Time for her to earn that mom pay." Willow tightened her lips in concern but then she shrugged. "Okay. Let's dance." She grinned up at Xander and the two of them headed for the dance floor.

End Part 8

A Different Life 9

When Buffy got home she hesitated outside the front door. Suppose Willow was wrong? What if she'd misunderstood? Maybe Willow meant that Dawn was with her mom. She searched her mind for memories and she found them and acting on them she opened the door quickly. She didn't think she'd believe them until she actually saw her mom for herself.

Dawn and Joyce both looked up. They were working on a puzzle. Joyce smiled. "Hi honey, you're home early. I thought you were going to patrol first."

Buffy swallowed past the lump in her throat. "I...I wanted to see you." She could feel herself losing the battle to keep from crying again.

Joyce stood up and walked over to Buffy. "Buffy, what's wrong?"

Buffy just pulled her mom into a hug and she began to cry. "I just missed you."

Dawn made a rude noise at the table. "Right. You missed her but you couldn't

wait to get out of here so fast that you left me the dishes."

Buffy let out a laugh in the middle of her tears. She pulled back and looked at her mom. "Sorry, I just seem to be an emotional basket case tonight."

"Do you still need to patrol?"

The new memories were starting to become dominant and Buffy found the response fall right off her tongue. "Yes." She held up a finger. "A Slayer who patrols every night is a like an alert watchdog, ever ready to protect its property." She rolled her eyes. Wes had a stupid saying for everything. "I'd have to be dead or...well, let's just say that this watchdog needs to go into protect mode if I don't want to listen to Wes yell at me."

"I wish you could stay home tonight, you look tired." Joyce looked at her daughter with some concern. She had been looking tired ever since the accident but there was something else going on tonight. She looked so sad. "Did something happen tonight?"

Buffy shook her head. She knew she was acting weird. She touched her mom's face and then moved her hand down to her throat to feel her pulse. The last time she remembered doing this, her mom's skin had been cold and lifeless under her fingers. The pulse beat steady now. "I was just thinking about how sick you'd gotten and I just wanted to see you."

Joyce smiled at her daughter. "Well, that's behind us now. I'm fine, and you...well, you're well on your way to recovery." Joyce knew that Buffy hadn't bounced back after her accident. Her body might be healed but Buffy was still far from well. She'd tried to talk about it with Wes to see if he knew what was wrong, if maybe the rift had caused it, or Glory had done something to her but Wes had been unconcerned. He had told her that Joyce should just leave Buffy alone and let her attend to her duties. Joyce wanted to shove those duties right up Wes's ass.

She just didn't know how to fight Wes. How do you fight against someone who on one hand stripped every dream away from Buffy but on the other hand made it so clear that it had all been essential to keep her alive? Joyce had seen over the years the things Buffy had to fight against. She knew she couldn't protect Buffy from that. Wes seemed to think he could. If Joyce would let him do as he thought best. He was the one trained to keep a Slayer alive. Joyce didn't know how to refute that, she didn't dare. Oh, she had won a few battles here and there but ultimately when Wes threw Buffy's life on the table Joyce backed down.

She hated him, but she depended on him to keep Buffy alive. And when

Kendra had shown up it made it even harder for Joyce to win concessions for her daughter. Kendra worked much harder than Buffy did. She hadn't joined Buffy at Sunnydale High, preferring to use that time to train and to study. Joyce really liked Sam Zabuto, Kendra's Watcher. She had often wished that the girls could trade Watchers. Joyce was pretty sure that Wes often wished that Kendra were his Slayer. Buffy had a little too much of Joyce in her to suit Wes. No matter how hard he tried to drill it out of her, it persisted. At least it had until she'd gotten so injured. Now Buffy seemed beaten and it broke Joyce's heart.

Buffy finally took her hand away. "Well, I guess I better go patrol."

"You'll be careful won't you?"

Buffy nodded. "I'll be careful. I promise." Buffy looked at her mom one last time and then she headed out.

##

At her second cemetery she ran into Kendra. "Hey, fellow watchdog."

Kendra frowned. "You mock your Watcher's words. You shouldn't do that. He is just trying to protect you."

"You know what? You've been here for five years now. You really need to unwind now." Buffy could tell that both her past lives were giving her a little extra attitude. She wasn't just what this life had made her, not anymore. She tapped Kendra on the shoulder with a stake. "Like maybe you should go out with Xander one night."

Kendra looked horrified. "No dating. You read the Slayer's Handbook. You shouldn't have relationships with any civilians."

"Friends, Kendra, the word is friends. And even your Watcher says the handbook is merely a guide. He never seems to mind me having friends and I've heard him encourage you to go out with us. Why don't you one night?"

"Wes does not approve."

"Don't you ever just want to be naughty? Run amok? Not be a Slayer?"

Kendra looked at Buffy with the same puzzled eyes she'd turned on her every time they had this conversation. "I am a Slayer. There is no time when I am not the Slayer."

"But don't you want to be other things, like a girlfriend, or a..." Sad thoughts of Giles intruded, "...pilot or a grocer?" At Kendra's look Buffy shook her head. "Never mind. I've sort of had a bad day today."

Kendra was perfectly willing to move on. "Do you want to finish patrolling together or split up?"

Normally Buffy would have wanted the company. Despite their philosophical differences about being the Slayer, Buffy liked Kendra and it was always good to have another Slayer around to watch your back. But tonight she needed to think. "Let's split up. I'll take north." Kendra nodded and headed south.

Buffy found a crypt to lean against while she focused on the memories of this lifetime. She needed a better understanding of what had happened to her. Wishing Giles was with her, even if it was just to grill her on her SATs Buffy let out a sigh. Then she tried to focus on the good stuff. Her mom was alive and that counted for a lot. Dawn was still her sister. She still had Willow and Xander. And an even better Willow than before. A non-magic Willow.

Obviously she had still died or Kendra wouldn't be here. Buffy furrowed her brow. Xander had been with her that night, on a regular patrol. A copy of the Codex had never made its way to her Watcher's hands so no one knew of the prophecy. So, in this life Buffy hadn't gone after the Master knowing she would die. Instead, she happened upon the Master and he killed her, but Xander had been hiding close by and as soon as the Master had left he had done CPR again and brought her back to life. But where was Angel? Buffy tried to piece together what happened with Angel this lifetime.

She had still kissed him in her bedroom, still discovered he was a vampire. But then that was it. No more memories. Her eyes narrowed. Except for one. Wes telling her that Angel wouldn't be back, that he had told Angel to leave them alone or that Wes would make sure he never bothered them again. And for whatever reason, Angel had obeyed and left.

And because Angel hadn't been around, so many bad things hadn't happened. Spike had come to town briefly but then he had left. Buffy figured that he must have gone in search of Angel when Dru had started getting ill. Buffy had never slept with either vampire so Angelus hadn't shown up, Jenny and her uncle hadn't been killed, in fact Jenny had never shown up in town at all that Buffy could tell, the only reason she had shown up in Sunnydale had been because her clan had sent her to watch Angel.

The Judge had never been assembled; Acathla hadn't created a vortex into hell. Buffy had never killed Angel or run away, Angelus hadn't tortured Giles or

anyone, Kendra hadn't been killed, Faith hadn't been called just to end up going rogue. And because Jenny had never come to town Willow had never learned witchcraft. So many terrible things had happened because Angel had been a part of her life. And now, none of them had happened.

Buffy made a sad sound. In an ironic kind of way Travers had been right. Giles' love for her had rendered him incapable of clear and impartial judgment. Not in everything, but when it came to Buffy's personal life, Giles let his love for Buffy reign supreme. Giles would never have told Angel to leave. Everyone else felt they had the right, but no one had had more right to do it than Giles. But he never had. And that was because of Buffy. Giles had been willing to bend for her, allowed himself to be persuaded by a pout, and offered her some semblance of a normal life. And Buffy had run with it and made one stupid decision after another, that Giles inevitably paid the price for.

Buffy laughed bitterly as she made another realization. Before Kendra had shown up Buffy had had to deal with the Hellmouth but she had only been marginally successful. But when Kendra had arrived and they had tackled the Hellmouth together they had managed to close it. But it had only been closed, not sealed, so at the request of Wes, Kendra was transferred to Sunnydale, in case it opened again, and her Watcher, Sam Zabuto, had moved here as well.

Buffy had asked that woman, the one that had brought her back to this life, if she would be strong enough without Giles to keep the Hellmouth closed. And the woman had said it would be sufficient. Buffy had thought that meant that she would be sufficient. But what the woman hadn't said was that it would take two Slayers and two Watchers to do what she and Giles had been able to do on their own, more effectively.

She was weaker. She could tell. And while Giles' absence as her Watcher may have put her in less danger and without the consequences of the stupid decisions he'd allowed her to make, it also had other ramifications. Buffy had never connected to Wes, not like she had with Giles. He was her Watcher and nothing more. He didn't plan birthday parties for her, or talk with her if she was sad, or offer to go die in her place. It was business with Wes. And if Buffy had died, really died, he might have been sad for a short while, but then he'd have been realistic that when one Slayer dies, another is called.

He had put her through the Cruciamentum without a second's remorse and yet Buffy's sense of betrayal when she found out what he had done was nothing compared to the agony of when she found out what Giles' had done. Giles had filled her life with emotion. Love, hate, trust, betrayal, gentleness, roughness, she and Giles had been all about relationship. And it added a dimension to her life she hadn't even realized until now, when she could

compare it to a life with another Watcher. Giles had made her feel real. In the midst of a surreal existence, he had made her feel. And it had made her stronger.

The pain of losing Giles again grew overwhelming. Buffy pushed away from the crypt and began to walk. Time to go kill something.

##

That evening Gwen found him sitting at home in the dark. She flipped on the light and he was sitting there, a glass of scotch in his hands, another on the table next to the bottle as if he'd been expecting company. He looked awful. She hurried to sit by him. "Ru, what's wrong? Is this still about that girl?"

He turned to her, his eyes deadened with pain and liquor. "She's gone. She's vanished." He pointed to the door. "I asked her right there. I asked her if she'd be there. I said 'you're not going to vanish are you'? And she laughed and promised she'd be there. But she wasn't. She isn't anywhere." He took another swallow of his drink.

"Rupert, how much have you had to drink?" He sounded like a mad man.

"Not enough."

She tried to take his drink away but he just moved it to his other hand, out of her reach. Gwen tried again. "Did Nathan remember her?"

Giles shook his head. "No one does, except for me. Even the University doesn't have her registered. She's vanished."

She spoke cautiously. "You sound a little crazy."

Giles turned to her. "I'm not. Gwen, you have to believe me. She was here." He pointed to his bedroom. "I made love to her in there. I can still feel her, taste her. She was real. She was the one. I didn't imagine her." He let out a harsh moan. "Something happened. Maybe those dreams had something to do with it. Maybe you were right, maybe the Council did something, maybe it was magic. I don't know. But she was real." He threw his glass against the wall and it shattered. Covering his face with his hands his shoulders began to shake. Gwen pulled him into her arms and she held him while he cried.

In a while he pulled away from her and wiped his face with his hands. He just sat there shaking his head. He didn't know where to turn; he didn't know what to do. Looking at Gwen he repeated himself. "She was real. I swear it. And I

don't know how to find her."

Gwen looked at him for a long time. He was her brother and the sanest person she knew. Plus even though she didn't remember saying anything about magic or about the Council, the fact that he did made her nervous. She nodded. "All right, then. We'll just have to work it out." She smiled encouragingly at him but he just reached for the second cup, filled it and took a swallow, not meeting her eyes.

##

After patrol Buffy had gone home. She always went home. Wes didn't want a report at night. He didn't want to be bothered. Morning was soon enough for him. He liked a full night of sleep. He said it kept him sharp.

Again she thought of Giles. When he had been her Watcher he had never seemed to sleep. Buffy doubted he even thought of going to bed until he knew she was safe. She lay down on the bed, still fully clothed. A longing for Giles inundated her. She wished she had something of his. A sweater, or a picture, anything. Suddenly she sat up straight, her heart beating in her chest. They hadn't taken away her memories of him so maybe...

She jumped off the bed and ran downstairs to find her jacket. She hadn't thought of it but she had shown up in this life wearing the same clothes she had been wearing in London when she had been torn away from that life. Frantically going through the pockets she felt a hard piece of paper. Being careful not to rip it she pulled it out. His business card.

She ran her thumb over his handwriting. He had written on it such a short time ago. Buffy went back to her room and curled up on the bed again. Giles' card was clasped tightly in her hands as if it might be him, as if he might suddenly appear and be in bed with her. Touching her, making her feel complete in a way she hadn't even known existed. Her body grew warm with longing at the same time this exquisite sadness pierced her soul.

She wanted him here with her. She could practically feel him pressed against her. Suddenly Buffy looked down at her body. She let out a groan as she realized something. She had memories of sex. Of having sex with Angel, with Parker, with Riley, with Spike. In her life that took her to London she had memories of a couple of unfulfilling sexual encounters with fumbling boys before she had made love with Giles. But this body, the body in this lifetime, this body was untouched. She had not gone to college; she had never met Parker or Riley or befriended Spike, she had never met those other boys down in LA, and in this life she hadn't been allowed to date and had found no

opportunity to do otherwise. She had never slept with anyone.

And despite her memories and her longings she had never slept with Giles. A sadness swept through her and her eyes filled with tears.

She looked at the card. Looking at the phone she wondered. She wondered if she could call him, just to hear his voice. There was nothing she could say to him. He'd think she was a lunatic if she tried to explain, if she tried to convince him to come to Sunnydale because they were meant to be together. That he'd already been in two of her lives and she couldn't bear to live a third without him. He'd laugh at her and then when he realized she was serious he'd change his number.

Buffy still remembered the time difference. After Giles had left she had often kept track of what time it was there, wondering what he might be doing. She looked at the clock by her bed. It was two in the morning. That meant it would be ten in the morning, his time. He'd be at work so she'd be safe. She'd get his answering machine at home and she could just listen to his voice.

Moving to sit on her bed she reached for the phone. Buffy knew there were extra numbers she had to add but she had no idea what they were. She ended up calling an operator who placed the call for her. She sat there, her palms sweating, as the phone rang.

##

Ethan let himself in. Gwen had called him late last night and told him to get here as soon as he could. Gwen was not given to dramatics so Ethan had cancelled his plans and here he was. Ethan saw that Giles was sleeping on the couch. He walked over and crouched down near to him, looking at him. Ethan, the golden lab, was lying on the floor by the side of the couch. His tail thumped on the rug as he watched Ethan. Ethan was a familiar visitor and the dog couldn't be bothered to actually get up. Ethan scratched him absentmindedly as he took in the scene.

Ethan could tell that all was not well. Even in his sleep Giles' face was strained. Ethan looked at the coffee table and his eyebrows rose as he noticed the empty glass and the half empty bottle of scotch. Giles rarely drank spirits anymore. He'd have a few beers down at the pub but that was about it. Then he noticed the shattered glass on the floor and the stain of alcohol on the wall. Whatever was going on, Giles was pretty upset about it. No wonder Gwen had called him. A drunken angry Giles was not a pretty sight.

Ethan was certain that Giles should be at work. Unless this was about work.

Maybe he'd been fired. Gwen hadn't wanted to go into any specifics on the phone. The phone began to ring. Ethan made no move to answer it. He watched as the ringing slowly started to wake Giles up. Giles opened a bleary eye and grunted when he saw Ethan. They both listened as the answering machine kicked on, as his voice requested the caller to leave a message.

##

Buffy felt tears running down her face as she heard his voice. She longed for him so much she was trembling with it. When the machine beeped without even thinking she sobbed out his name. "Oh God, Giles."

##

Giles' eyes snapped open wide. Not wanting to take the time to find the cordless phone he leaped over the back of the couch and lunged for the phone in the hallway that was connected to the answering machine.

##

Buffy suddenly realized she had spoken. She thought she might explode from the emotions racing through her. She hung up, not able to deal with them.

##

Giles yelled for her when he picked up the phone. "Buffy? Buffy? Where are you?" The fact that it was a dial tone buzzing in his ear slowly penetrated. He stood there not knowing what to do.

Gwen came out of the guest bedroom and saw the look on her brother's face and she saw Ethan standing there, a curious look on his face. "What is it? Who was that?"

Giles turned his head to slowly look at her. "It was Buffy. I know it was."

Gwen smiled in relief. "She called? Where is she? What happened?" Gwen frowned as she realized that the mystery still wasn't solved. "Why don't any of us remember her?" She turned to Ethan. "This is what I called you about."

Giles shook his head. "We didn't talk. She hung up."

Gwen gave him a look. "How do you know it was her?"

Ethan spoke. "I heard her."

Giles turned to him in acute relief. "You heard her? You heard her voice?" He had started to wonder if he was going mad. Giles turned back to the answering machine and saw the blinking red light. "Listen." Giles played back the call. All she said was 'Oh God, Giles' but Gwen could feel her eyes fill with tears. The way she had said his name was heart rending. Whoever this was, she was as miserable as Giles. Gwen wanted so badly to believe him. "Why did she hang up? Why didn't she talk to you?"

Giles didn't know. He stood there looking at the phone. Then he snapped his fingers. "Gwen, what's that number you call, that one that gives you the number of the person that just rang you?"

Gwen furrowed her brow, thinking. "It's 1-4 something. Let me get the phone book. Before she had taken a few steps the phone rang again.

Giles grabbed for it. "Buffy?"

"No. Rupert? Is that you? It's Nathan. I hate to bother you because you still sound under the weather but the media's arrived. They've got us surrounded. They want to hear about this new dig and you usually take care of all of that." Nathan hated the press with a passion. They made him nervous and when he was nervous he came across like a complete idiot.

Giles covered his face with his hand. He blew out a breath to try and curb his disappointment, to not scream at Nathan. "I'll be there shortly, Nathan. Just stall them for a while."

"Thank you. I...thank you." Nathan hung up.

Giles kept the phone in his hand and looked at Gwen. "What's the number you dial?"

Gwen looked at Giles sadly. "It won't work now. It only lets you go back one number. It would just give you Nathan's number."

Giles stared at Gwen and then at the phone. He slammed the phone down and with one ferocious sweep of his arm Giles swept the contents of the small table crashing across the floor. The answering machine went flying and smashed against the front door. Looking down at the wreckage Giles spoke. "I have to go and take a shower." Without another word he headed for his bedroom. Rayne passed him on the way out to see what was going on. The two dogs nosed all the new items on the floor looking to see if anything was edible.

Ethan surveyed the floor and then looked up at Gwen. His lips pursed. "Perhaps you better tell me what's going on."

End of Part 9

A Different Life 10

Joyce went to check on Buffy when she woke up and found Buffy lying on top of her bed, still fully clothed, a piece of paper clutched in her hand. Joyce gently removed it and looked at it. She stood there staring at the card, nothing about it making sense. Why would Buffy have a business card for the Curator of the British Museum? With his home number on it. She looked down at her daughter and saw that her face was stained with tears. Joyce wished she knew how to make her daughter happy again but she didn't. Putting the card on the bedside table she drew a blanket over Buffy and then left the room.

When Buffy awoke she instantly thought of the card and panicked when it wasn't in her hand anymore. Afraid that the Powers That Be had taken it she searched the floor for it. Finally her eyes saw it on the bedside table. Grabbing it she held it to her breast. She heard her mom calling her. "Buffy, come down here. Quickly."

Buffy ran down the stairs. "What?"

Her mom pointed to the television set. "Do you know who that is?" Joyce knew because the reporter had just mentioned his name. But she wanted to know if Buffy knew. Joyce noticed that the card was back in Buffy's hand.

Buffy moved so she could see the TV. She gasped. It was Giles. Her Giles. On TV. She sat as close to the television set as she could. Reaching out a hand she traced his face as he spoke. Joyce was stunned at the look on her daughter's face. It was filled with such love, and longing, and desperate sadness. Buffy moaned when the interview was over and Giles' face left the screen. She laid her head down on her knees. Then she looked up at her mom. "See if it's on any other channel."

Joyce complied with her wishes, biting her tongue for the time being. They found the story on another channel. Again Buffy watched him, her face never leaving the screen, her fingers resting on his face. "He looks so sad." Buffy had spent too much time with him sad in her first life with him as her Watcher to not recognize that emotion on his face. She wondered what he was sad about.

Someone was trying to hand him a message as he spoke. Buffy grinned when she saw who it was. "That's Nathan. Giles said that he's his right hand man. Oh, and look, that's Dr. Chin." Buffy felt as if they were old friends. Again the story ended. Buffy turned to Joyce and gestured with her fingers for Joyce to look again.

Joyce did the full circuit of channels twice but then she shut the TV off. "All the morning shows are done now. It probably won't be on again until the noon news. Who is he? Why do you have his card?"

Buffy was lost in her memories of that life. "Don't you remember? I called you. I called you and told you that I met someone. You were a little wigged about his age because he's 46 but when you found out that he was the Curator of the British Museum you kept saying oh my, over and over again." Buffy looked at her mom, a grin on her face. A grin that Joyce hadn't seen in far too long. "I told you that he'd take you on a private tour of the museum and you were in seventh heaven about it. You and dad..." Buffy faltered. "You and..." Buffy covered her face with her hands and let out a cry. "Oh, God. None of this happened, did it?"

Joyce got up to go sit by her daughter. "None of what?" She needed to understand. Buffy started to rock herself and she moaned again. The hopeless sound of it sent shivers up and down Joyce's back. "Buffy, tell me what's going on." She could see Buffy shutting down. Thinking frantically Joyce came up with the only question she could think of that might make Buffy talk. "Tell me more about him, this...this Curator of yours."

Buffy looked up at her mom. "Really?"

Joyce nodded. "Yes, I want to hear about him."

Buffy needed desperately to talk about him so even though a part of her knew that her mom was humoring her, she gave in to her needs and she started to talk. "He's got two dogs. Two labs, a chocolate one and a golden one. The golden one is Ethan and the chocolate one is Rayne. He named them after a friend who hates that he did that." Buffy giggled and wiped her nose with her hand.

Joyce couldn't remember the last time Buffy giggled like that, like she didn't have a care in the world. "Tell me more."

"Ethan knocked me down. I was walking in Russell Square, you know the one in Bloomsbury by the museum?" At her mom's nod, she continued. "Anyway, Giles was there playing Frisbee with the dogs and Ethan knocked me down."

That's how we met." Buffy's face was so lit up. "And his sister is so nice. Her name is Gwen and she barged in on us when we were kissing." Buffy blushed at the memory. Then Buffy noted the look of confusion on her mother's face.

Joyce watched as the joy on Buffy's face slowly gave way to sorrow. Buffy shook her head. "It doesn't really matter, does it? None of it happened. I mean, if you don't remember any of it happening, then it didn't, right? You know I've never been to London. How could I know this guy? How could I have his card in my hand?" Buffy started to cry and the sobs tore at Joyce's heart.

Joyce asked her softly. "How do you have his card in your hand?"

Buffy sobbed the words out. "He gave it to me. Right after he told me he wanted to spend the rest of his life with me." Buffy continued to cry for the longest time and Joyce gently rocked her, running her hand down her hair, making soothing sounds.

When Buffy finally stopped crying she pulled out of her mom's arms and wiped her tears away, one hand still holding on to the card. She smiled sadly at her mom. "I know I sound crazy. I'm sorry. I know the whole Slayer gig's been a drag for you and the last thing you need is to be worrying about whether I've gone nuts."

Joyce chose her words carefully. "It's true that I don't understand any of this. But I know that as a mother to a Slayer and to a cosmic key that unbelievable things happen in our life all the time. And I know that whatever this is, whatever this man is to you, or that you think he is to you, that it makes you happier than anything has in a long time."

Buffy's eyes were bright with tears. "He did make me happy. I love him." The misery was clear on her face. "But he doesn't know who I am anymore."

"Why not?"

"Because I never went there."

"Help me out here, Buffy, I'm floundering. Please, I want to understand." Buffy looked at her mom for a long time. And then she told her, all of it.

A couple of hours later they were back on the couch and Buffy had her head in Joyce's lap. Joyce was still trying to clarify things. "So I was dead in that first life?" She felt Buffy nod. "And you died?" Another nod. "And this Rupert Giles, he was your Watcher?" Again, a nod. "And you went to college?"

Buffy sat up and grinned. "He helped me study for my SATs. We'd sit around the graveyard for hours while he quizzed me and kept an abundant supply of number two pencils in his pocket."

"So not all Watchers are like Wes?" Joyce knew Sam was different but it didn't really matter, as Kendra didn't want a normal life.

"No, they're totally different."

"Did he give you that test?" Joyce had almost killed Wes when she had found out what he had done to Buffy.

"Yes, but half way through he changed his mind and he told me about it. They fired him for it, but he stayed. He wouldn't leave me."

"Did I like him?" She couldn't imagine that she wouldn't.

Buffy grimaced. She was totally not telling her mom about the band candy incident. "Well, you know how Wes told you right away that I was the Slayer?"

Joyce's eyes narrowed. "Yes, with the announcement that he planned to take you away from me."

"Well, Giles didn't tell you. And by the time you found out I was the Slayer you were pretty mad that he had kept that a secret from you. In a lot of ways that life was pretty bad compared to this life. Lots of bad things happened and you blamed him for a lot of it. You guys got along but you were definitely not best buds."

"But you went to college."

"Yup, UC Sunnydale. I got accepted to Northwestern."

Joyce gasped. "You got accepted to Northwestern?"

"I totally aced my SATs, thanks to Giles." She paused. "Oh, I got to be a cheerleader for a while."

"He let you be a cheerleader?"

"Well, he wasn't thrilled but he was pretty good about letting me have a life, you know, boyfriends, and dates, and stuff." Buffy sat up. "He took pretty good care of me. When you died, he took care of everything. The funeral, the paperwork. I was a basket case. Me and Dawn both were. He was over here all the time cooking us dinner and helping clean up. And when I died after I

jumped into the rift and they brought me back, I was so in debt I thought I might lose the house and he gave me a bunch of money."

"Well, I'm sorry that I didn't like him more. He sounds like a bit of a miracle after dealing with Wes all these years."

"He was a miracle." Buffy let out a tremulous breath and looked at her mom. "Do you believe me?"

"I believe that this all seems very real to you. Whether you actually lived those lives, or whether someone put these memories in your head, I don't know what to believe about that." She put her hand on Buffy's cheek. "I do know that I wish I could make you that happy again."

Buffy ran her thumb over Giles' card and sighed. "If someone just put memories in my head why do I have this?"

Joyce shook her head. "I don't know, Buffy, I don't know."

##

Ethan grinned at Gwen as the door slowly opened. She whispered to him. "How did you know you could get this door open?"

"Come on, Gwen. How do you think I played all those practical jokes on poor Rupert."

"You've broken into the Council before?" It was almost midnight and Gwen couldn't imagine that she had let Ethan talk her into this.

Ethan grinned again. "More times than you want to know about." Gwen had explained the situation to Ethan as to what was going on. Ethan, who had seen a few more magical things than Gwen, was quite willing to believe that something was going on other than his friend going mad. Gwen had recounted the dreams the best she could, as Giles had been pretty drunk when he had started talking about them.

She'd told Ethan enough to make him want to check out the Council. There had been too many dreams about Slayers and Watchers. Besides he was always willing to blame everything on the Council. It was so convenient that way. And on this he and Gwen completely agreed. The Council had not been a good thing for Rupert. They had both been very relieved when he had suddenly left.

Ethan pressed Gwen against the wall as a guard made his rounds in an adjacent corridor. She hissed at him. "What will they do to us if they find us in here?"

Ethan wiggled his eyebrows and spoke in a menacing tone. "Throw us in the dungeons."

Gwen smacked him. "Ha ha." She pointed down the hall. "Can we just get this done?"

Ethan nodded and taking Gwen's hand he pulled her through a labyrinthine journey until he reached the office he had been searching for. He tried the door but it was locked. Again, as he had done with the side door, he picked the lock. Grinning with success he slowly opened the door.

When they were in and the door was shut behind him Gwen looked around. "What is this room? Why did we come here?"

"Ru showed me this room. It's where they keep information about the current Slayer. The demons she's been killing, the reports from the current Watcher. This way everyone can stay up to date in case research is required or if anyone has some information to contribute."

Gwen's lips tightened. "How very organized of them. And I suppose when the Slayer dies they just throw it all away and start over?" Gwen hated the Council's attitude about Slayers. She thought it was inhuman. And once Giles had left the Council he had finally agreed with her. That had been part of what had made Gwen hate the Council. It had turned her brother into someone who believed that Slayers were instruments, and not just young girls on whom fate had played a miserable trick.

Ethan poked Gwen. "Just look for something useful. Perhaps an entry about some magic demon, or stuff about time anomalies, that sort of thing."

Gwen began to peruse the stacks of paper. "Oh, this one says the Slayer's name is Kendra." Putting that paper aside she kept looking.

Ethan stood up straight. "I'll be damned."

Gwen walked over to Ethan. "What?"

Ethan showed her the paper. "Apparently there are two Slayers. And this one? Her name is Buffy Summers."

Gwen gasped. "Oh, my God. That's her name, the one that Ru lost."

Ethan nodded. "We need to find out why there are two of them. Maybe that's when this whole thing happened."

Gwen nodded and the two of them settled down to do some serious reading.

##

Joyce answered the front door when the doorbell rang. She smiled when she saw Xander and Willow. "Hi. Buffy's not here. She's training."

Xander and Willow exchanged a look. Willow spoke. "We know. We sort of wanted to talk to you."

Joyce's eyebrows rose. "Well, come on in. Do you want some hot chocolate?"

Xander grinned. "Got any marshmallows?"

"Of course."

"Count me in."

"Willow?"

"Yeah, that would be great." They both followed Joyce into the kitchen. Joyce had Dr. Rupert Giles' business card in her pocket. Buffy didn't feel safe just leaving it around, afraid it might get thrown away, and she refused to have it with her anywhere near Wes. He was always taking things away from her if he thought it was distracting her. Buffy was always complaining about all the books and magazines he'd taken away from her over the years. So, she had left it with her mom, with strict instructions to keep it safe.

Joyce bustled around the kitchen making the three of them hot chocolate. After she was done she sat down with them at the table. "So, what's on your mind?"

Again, Willow and Xander exchanged a glance. Willow wrinkled her nose. "Was Buffy sort of weird last night when she got home?"

Joyce pursed her lips. "What do you mean?"

Willow launched into her story. "Well, she just was acting kind of goofy last night like she didn't know anything about her life. She thought you were dead and that she had died when she jumped off that thing. She acted like she

didn't even know that Wes was her Watcher."

Xander chimed in. "Which is the only thing that makes sense to me. You know, being in denial, about that." Xander went back to his hot chocolate. But then he remembered something else. "She didn't even remember who the school librarian was and that is not something that you could ever forget. Ever."

Willow gave Xander a look and picked up again. "And then she thought Xander was engaged and I was...well...never mind. She just seemed so confused and sad last night and well, we were sort of worried about her."

Joyce took a sip. "She thought I was dead?"

"Yeah, when she found out you weren't she took off so fast I didn't even see her go."

Joyce thought about what Buffy had been like last night when she had gotten home, the tears, the rib-bruising hug. She touched her pocket where the card was. "Buffy..."

Willow and Xander both leaned in. Willow encouraged her. "Buffy...?"

Joyce looked at the two of them. Buffy couldn't have stauncher friends. Joyce was constantly amazed and grateful at their dedication to her daughter. Nodding her head she pulled out the card. She held it up so they could look at it but she pulled it back when Xander reached for it. "No, you can't touch it. If something happens to this card Buffy will kill me."

Willow looked confused. "Who is he? Who is Rupert Giles, Ph.D.?"

Joyce let out a soft laugh. "Apparently, the love of her life." At the looks on their faces she laughed again and then she explained. She only told them about Buffy's life that ended up with her in London. She didn't want to talk about that other life. That would be Buffy's choice to share or not to share that with her friends.

When she was done Xander looked at her. "Do you believe her?"

Again Joyce laughed. "Xander, one of my daughters is a Slayer. Every night she kills creatures that 99% of the world doesn't believe in. My other daughter didn't exist until a year ago when some mystical monks made her to protect a key from a crazed god from another universe. They implanted an entire lifetime of memories in my head, in all of our heads. I remember giving birth to Dawn, holding her in my arms. I don't know what happened to Buffy, but I

believe that something did."

Willow scrunched her face up. "Could she have dreamed it all while she was in that coma? She was in it for a while. Maybe she created this world for herself, because this one was kind of sad."

Joyce held up the card. "I would say yes to that, just like I'd say yes to almost any theory you might come up with, but it doesn't explain how she has this card." She turned it over. "It has his home number on it. Plus she knew who he was on the television. She knew things about him." She shrugged. "I don't know if any of them are true, but she seemed to think they were."

Willow was looking at the card. "What time is it in London right now?"

Joyce looked at her watch. "Almost one in the morning."

"So call the number, his office number. He won't be there at one in the morning. And if this is some sort of hoax, the number won't be his."

Xander nodded. "Someone might just be playing some major head trip on Buffy."

Joyce tapped the card on the counter, thinking. Then she reached for the phone.

End Part 10

A Different Life 11

Giles was still in his office. There was always plenty of work to do but the main reason he was still there was because he didn't want to go home. He didn't want to lie on his bed and think of Buffy. It was too painful. His phone rang. Looking at the source of the call he could tell it was the front guard. He pushed the speaker button. "Yes, Fred."

"Dr. Giles, I'm sorry to disturb you but there are two people down here who say they have to speak to you."

"Who are they?"

Giles could tell Fred was grinning by the tone of his voice. "One of them is Gwen. The other is a man calls himself Ethan Rayne. They say it's urgent."

"Let them in, Fred. Thanks. I'll come down to escort them up." After hanging up he looked at the clock on the wall. He couldn't imagine why they were there so late. Probably checking up on him. As he stood up and turned to leave his office the phone rang again. Assuming it was Fred again he quickly turned and hit the speaker button again. "Yes, Fred, what is it?"

There was a pause and then a woman's voice said, "Oh!" Giles heard whispering in the background. "What's the matter?" "Someone answered the phone." "Is it him?" "I don't know." "Ask him." Then the first voice spoke again. "Is this Dr. Rupert Giles?"

"Yes, who is this?"

Again the whispering. "It's him." A high-pitched squeal, "it's him?" "What do I say now?" "Ask him if he knows Buffy."

Giles' response to that was immediate. "Buffy? What do you know about Buffy? Who are you people?"

"You know Buffy? Buffy Summers?"

"Yes, where is she? I have to speak with her."

Joyce's voice was confused. "She's not here at the moment, but she lives here, with me."

"Who are you?"

"I'm her mother. Joyce Summers."

Giles sat down. "Her mother?"

"Yes. Something odd is going on and I thought...well I don't know what I thought but she seems to think she knows you so..."

"What do you mean, seems to think? Why is she there? Why did she leave London? Where are you?"

"In California. And as far as I know she wasn't ever there in London. She thinks she was. She has all these memories of an entirely different life that included going to school there in London and meeting you. Are you saying that actually happened?"

"Yes, we met a few days ago, on Saturday. We were supposed to meet for dinner on Wednesday night but she disappeared."

Ethan and Gwen burst into the office, a frustrated guard behind them. Gwen was waving a piece of paper. She spoke, her voice excited. "We found her. She's the Slayer, she lives in California, in a place called Sunnydale."

Giles' eyes opened wide. "She's the Slayer?"

At Willow and Xander's prompting Joyce had put the phone on speaker. At Giles' words all three sets of eyes across the Atlantic opened wide as well, although it was Joyce who spoke. "You know about Slayers?"

Giles looked up at Gwen. "Who's her Watcher?"

Ethan's voice was droll. "Wesley Wyndam-Pryce."

Giles snorted. "That prig?"

Joyce grinned. She loved this man already. Joyce spoke again. "Uh, Dr. Giles?"

Ethan looked at the phone. "Who's that?"

Giles shook his head in disbelief. "Buffy's mom. Joyce Summers."

Gwen spoke, disappointed. "You found her first?" She smacked Ethan. "We didn't have to break into the Council after all."

"No, she called me." Giles' brow furrowed. "How did you get this number?"

"Buffy had your business card. She saw you on television today and she started talking about you as if she knew you. Then when the report was done I asked her what was going on and she said..."

Giles prompted her. "What did she say?"

"Well, she said that she lived there as a student and the two of you met and fell in love. She said you gave her that card after you told her you wanted to spend the rest of your life with her." Joyce scrunched her face up waiting for his response.

"I did and I do." Giles still needed some more information. "So Buffy remembers coming here but you don't have any memory of it?" Giles sighed. "No one here remembers her either, except for me. I thought I was going mad." He turned to Gwen and Ethan. "Did you find anything else? Did the Council do anything?"

Ethan shook his head. "She's been the Slayer there for six years, although her first year she was in LA. Oh, there's a second Slayer too, named Kendra."

"How on earth is there a second Slayer?"

"Apparently Buffy died for a short time. She was revived but it was long enough that a second Slayer was called."

Giles' heart clenched at the thought of Buffy dying. He'd dreamed about it too many times. Joyce's voice interrupted his thoughts. "I don't understand. How do you know about Slayers and Watchers?"

"I used to be a Watcher. I quit the Council, though, about six years ago."

"She said you used to be her Watcher."

Giles' eyebrows lifted. "Excuse me?"

Joyce looked at Willow and Xander. "Apparently this life she's living now, it's her third. The first one was as a Slayer with you as her Watcher. The second one was with you in London and now she's the Slayer again but with Wes as her Watcher." There was a pause. "Somehow, she seems unable to live any life without you being in it, one way or another."

Giles looked at Gwen. "Gwen, please make me some plane reservations. I need to get to Sunnydale. Make it as soon as you can"

Gwen nodded and went to the office next door to use the phone. Ethan followed her. Giles reached for a pencil. "Before we do anything else, please give me your number. I almost lost Buffy because of that and I don't want to do it again."

Joyce gave him her number and her address. "Dr. Giles?"

"Rupert, please."

"Rupert, do you really love my daughter?"

"More than I've ever loved anyone. We belong together. I know that's a fairly existential excuse to give to a mother for stealing her daughter but it's true. I've been a lunatic since she's been gone. Did she tell you what happened? Why she left here?"

"Well, I'm not pretending to understand it all and Buffy can explain it better to

you but apparently some demon granted Buffy a wish." There was a pause. "Her life as a Slayer with you as her Watcher, it wasn't easy for her. For some reason you had left..."

"I left her?" Giles was astonished. But then he remembered Buffy's dream. His voice was sad. "Buffy dreamed that while she was here. She dreamed that I left her."

"Well, this demon sort of fooled her into making a wish that she'd never been called and she ended up in the life with you in London. Then that night you were supposed to meet for dinner, the day you gave her the card, someone showed up and told her she'd have to go back. Actually they told her that you'd both have to go back."

"So why am I still here?"

"She refused to do that to you. A lot of bad things happened to you to as her Watcher. And apparently if you stayed a Watcher your sister would die, and quite a few of your friends would die and somebody named Ethan would go bad, although that might be the dog's name. I started getting confused after a while, plus I wasn't quite sure whether to believe her or not, to be perfectly honest. Anyway, she said you were happy in London and she told this person that they'd have to fix it so only she went back. And they did, which is why she has a third life now."

Giles felt tears prick his eyelids. Clearing his throat he spoke. "She did that for me?"

"She loves you too. She hasn't been happy for a long time, but when she talked about you, she was happy. She reminded me of how she used to be. You make her happy." Joyce paused. "I want my daughter to be happy, Rupert."

"I want her to be happy too. I'll be there as soon as I can."

"I believe you when you say you'll be here but how will that make her happy? You live in London. You're the Curator of the British Museum. She's the Slayer; she can't leave here. Your lives are on two different continents."

"Then I'll move there. I'm sure I can find something to do."

"You'd leave your life there for Buffy?"

"If that's what it took to be with her. I can't live my life without her." Giles leaned back into his chair. "Is she all right?"

"No, Rupert, she's not. But I believe she will be when you get here."

Gwen walked back in and handed him a piece of paper. "I'll be leaving for Los Angeles early this afternoon and I arrive at 6:20 tomorrow evening. How far is it to Sunnydale?"

"About two hours at that time of day."

Xander spoke. "I can go pick him up."

Gwen spoke up. "It needs to be a big car."

Giles looked up at his sister, suspicion on his face. "Why does it need to be a big car?"

"Well, we're going too."

"Gwen..."

"Forget it Ru, we're going. The tickets are booked."

Giles looked at her suspiciously. She sounded entirely too innocent. "Gwen."

"Okay, the dogs are going too."

"What?" Giles could hear giggles in Sunnydale. "Gwen, the dogs are not..."

"Ethan says they have to. He has a feeling about it, you know, one of those feelings." She emphasized the word those.

Giles frowned. Those feelings involved magic. And if Ethan felt the dogs had to go then... He spoke back into the phone. "Apparently I'm bringing an entourage with me. It might be easier to simply rent a car."

Xander shook his head. "Nah, I got plenty of room. Besides this way you'll get to Buffy faster."

That decided Giles. "Fine then, I appreciate it. I appreciate that you are taking so much on faith. You don't even know me."

Joyce spoke. "She knows you and she loves you. And that's good enough for me." There was a pause. "Rupert?"

"Yes, Joyce."

"What do we do about Wes? He won't approve. He'll try and stop it."

Ethan snorted. "Don't you worry about Wes. Ru here can beat the crap out of him."

Giles turned exasperated eyes to Ethan. "Ethan, could you please not help?" Turning back to the phone he sighed. "I'll deal with Wes. There is nothing he can do. Watchers are trained to do everything they can to keep their Slayers powerless. But the truth of it is that the Slayer holds all the power. Buffy can do whatever she wants. He has no way to stop her. The Council and Watchers can bluster all they want but they would never hurt a Slayer, except through manipulation and control."

"Is that why you quit? Because you thought that way?"

Giles shook his head. "No, I worked that out later, once I got away from them."

Joyce needed to say one more thing. "Rupert, she may not be as you remember her. In this life she's been a Slayer for six years. She's burdened by her life, it hasn't been easy for her."

"I'll make it up to her, I swear."

There was another long pause and then Xander spoke. "Give me your flight details. You said you get in at 6:20? What airline? Should I meet you at your gate?"

Willow spoke up. "I don't think they let you up to the gates anymore."

"Right, okay, I'll meet you at Baggage Claim. Or do we need to find customs? And what do you look like?"

Giles let out a soft chuckle. "Baggage claim is fine. We'll be going through customs in New York. United Airlines. And I'll be the one with the parade behind me."

Joyce chuckled too. "I'll put the news on. I'm sure there will be more reports about the dig and you should be on the news again." She paused. "That's very exciting news by the way. How can you just walk away from that?"

"I can still be involved as a consultant of some sort. I can fly to London when they need me, for that matter I can fly to Egypt. I'll probably get even more involved this way, I'll probably actually get to the dig site."

"And they'd just let you do that? Just switch like that?"

Giles knew how valued he was. "Yes, if it meant they could keep me around they'd work something out. I don't mean to sound immodest but..."

"No, I understand. You're clearly well thought of. I'm glad. I'm glad that being here doesn't mean that you'd have to walk away from all of it."

"It wouldn't matter. I would if that's what it took." Giles pursed his lips. "Will you tell her I'm coming?"

Joyce thought for a second. "No. I know you mean to come, and I do believe you plan to arrive here when you say. But on the off chance that something happens, if all memory of this phone call fades away, or I don't know, something happens that postpones your arrival, I couldn't do that to her. I couldn't break her heart more than it's already been broken."

Fear clutched at Giles at the thought of forgetting this conversation. He started writing words on a piece of paper in hopes that it would still exist and might prompt him. "So, who is picking us up? I didn't catch your name."

"I'm Xander. I'm one of Buffy's best friends."

"And I'm Willow. I'll be there too. I'm her other best friend. I'm about Buffy's height, with red hair and Xander's tall with dark hair."

There was a pause all around. Then Giles spoke. "Right then, well, we'll see you later tomorrow."

No one really wanted to hang up in case it all went away. Finally Joyce spoke. "I'm looking forward to meeting you and seeing a smile on my daughter's face." With that she disconnected.

Giles sat there staring at the phone, waiting for a few moments. Then he turned to Ethan and Gwen. "You still remember this? That we were just talking to Buffy's mother?" When Ethan and Gwen both nodded Giles closed his eyes and leaned his head back. "Thank God." Then he lifted his head up and looked at Ethan, his brow furrowed. "The dogs? The dogs have to come?"

"Don't worry, I paid for them."

"That wasn't what I meant and I would be perfectly willing to pay."

"I know. But you know I can afford it. Besides you'd have flown us all economy. I booked us all first class." He sat down across from Giles. "I just know they have to be there. You need to trust me on this one."

Gwen grinned. "And I certainly wasn't not going to go. This girl's probably going to become my sister-in-law. Besides, if you move to Sunnydale, I will too, so I want to see it."

"Gwen, I don't mean for you to..."

"Ru, you're all I have. I'm not going to live 8,000 miles away from you. Besides, my job's sort of transportable. I can edit books wherever I live."

Ethan sighed. "That means I'll have to move too." At their expressions he made a defensive noise. "What, you two are my family. What will I do without you here to properly annoy?" He grinned. "Besides, I can afford to put us all up while you two look for jobs." His eyes gleamed and he rubbed his hands together. "And two Watchers I can harass, that's almost reason enough to go."

Gwen tried to hide her grin. "But look, your flight leaves at 1:00, which means we need to be at the airport at 11:00. You need to go home and get some sleep and pack. Not to mention calling Nathan and coming up with some excuse as to why you're leaving the country and leaving him to deal with the press. He'll never forgive you for that."

Giles looked dismayed. "No, he won't. I'll suggest he put Susan Chin on press duty. She's the natural person to take over for me if I leave here, anyway. It will be a good opportunity for her to see just how hot this seat can get." He stood and Gwen was so glad to see the light back in his eyes.

Gwen touched his arm. "I'm so glad you found her."

Giles pulled her in for a hug. "Me too, Gwen." He pulled back and looked at them both. "Thank you, thank you for believing in me. I know I must have seemed like a madman."

Gwen smiled at him. "Well, that's what sisters and best friends are for."

Smiling back at her Giles stood and shut off his office light. The three of them left the museum together.

End Part 11

A Different Life 12

Joyce, Willow and Xander sat in front of the television set waiting for news of the dig to appear. Joyce was on the couch, Willow and Xander sitting on the floor. Finally it was on and Joyce pointed. "There he is."

It was mostly the same stuff from earlier. Now that Joyce was seeing him in a whole new light she thought he looked sad too. It touched her heart for some reason. She was suddenly looking forward to seeing him smile. The whole thing seemed so surreal all of a sudden. Willow leaned towards the set. "He's kind of old."

Joyce glared at Willow. "He's exactly my age, thank you very much."

Willow made a nervous face. "Did I say old? I meant mature, wise." She looked at Joyce, hoping she'd said the right thing.

Joyce grinned at Willow, shaking her head. "I'm sure he does seem old to you, I'm sure I must seem old to you. But Buffy doesn't seem to care."

Xander pursed his lips. "He looks kind of important. Seems weird that Buffy would have such an important guy in love with her."

Willow smacked Xander. "She's like the most important girl in the world. Why shouldn't she have someone important love her?" She sighed. "He's awfully good looking."

Joyce nodded her head. "He is that, for sure." Joyce had sort of given up on the hope of a relationship. There was someone she was interested in but after all this time she didn't think it would ever turn into anything. "Very handsome." She was thrilled for Buffy and jealous all at the same time. "The Curator of the British Museum." She shook her head again. "I can't believe I just got off the phone with him."

Willow grinned. "I know, it seems so weird. I can't wait to see Buffy's face when we show up with him." She looked up at Joyce. "Do you think we'll have some sort of sparky thing? I mean we must have been in that life of Buffy's when this guy was her Watcher. Do you think he'll remember us?"

Joyce shrugged. "Willow, I have no idea. He doesn't seem to remember being her Watcher although he did dream about it, at least Buffy said he did." Again she shook her head. "Who knew that the Curator of the British Museum would be an ex- Watcher?"

Xander looked up at Joyce. "You seem really hung up on the British Museum thing."

Joyce grinned self deprecatingly. "I do, don't I?" She laughed. "I just love that museum. I don't suppose Buffy could have picked a guy with a job that would thrill me more."

Xander snorted. "Well, if he moves here, he'll probably be washing dishes with me, so don't get too excited. Not much call around here for ex-Curators of the British Museum."

Joyce poked Xander with her foot. "He could work at the Sunnydale Natural History Museum."

Xander snorted again. "I'm sure that would be a career challenge."

"Well, he could teach at U.C. Sunnydale. Buffy said he taught at the University of London."

"Again, quite the vertical career move."

Joyce gave up. "He said he didn't care. He said he'd figure something out."

Xander heard a nervous tone in Joyce's voice. "I'm sure he'll stay. I mean a guy who chases down invisible girlfriends that he's only known a few days, I color that committed." He grinned at Joyce. "I was just giving you a hard time." He pointed at the TV set. "A guy like that? He'll land on his feet." Xander got a speculative look on his face. "And maybe he'll take me with him. I could get used to having someone important as a friend." He took in Joyce and Willow's looks. "Not that you guys aren't important." Xander sighed. "Do you really think he'll beat up Wes?"

"I can only hope." When both Willow and Xander turned around to look at her in surprise, Joyce grimaced. "Did I say that out loud?"

Both Willow and Xander grinned and turned back to the TV. The section regarding the dig ended. Joyce stretched. "Well, now you know who to look for."

Xander nodded. "I still say the two dogs will be a dead giveaway."

Joyce looked at the two of them sternly. "And you may not say a thing about this to Buffy." She looked even more sternly at Willow. "Willow?"

Willow squinched her face up. "I know. I know. I'm just so bad at this. Maybe I

better just go before she gets home. She'll know something's up just by looking at me." She stood and Xander stood as well.

Xander checked his pocket to make sure he had the flight information. "When next we see you it will be with your potential future son-in-law in tow."

Joyce looked a little stunned as she let Willow and Xander out the door. "The Curator of the British Museum my son-in-law. Oh my."

##

Giles watched as Gwen and Ethan went to look at his dogs. Smiling softly at their retreating backs he closed his eyes and tried to get some rest. The night before he had hardly slept because he had been too despondent. And last night he had hardly slept because he had been far too excited. Blowing out another breath in an effort to calm down Giles shifted again in his seat. At least they were roomy seats. Thank God for Ethan and his money.

Giles never took advantage of it but sometimes it came in handy. And Ethan had been spending plenty of it. The amount of money that had changed hands just since they'd been on the plane had stunned him. But Gwen was worried about the dogs so Ethan had worked it out for her to see them. Ethan was convinced that everything was available for the right amount of money, and he was generally right.

Giles had known him since they were young lads in school and he loved Ethan like a brother despite his vicious sense of humor. Giles had often hoped that Gwen and Ethan would...well, Giles supposed that would never happen. They'd all known each other too long and if lightening was going to strike it seems as if it would have by now. Shifting again in his seat he started trying to count sheep.

Ethan followed Gwen down the narrow aisle way. They were squashed together tightly as they took the small lift down to the lower hold. As the cabin steward showed them where Ethan and Rayne were being held Ethan discretely handed him a large note. After Ethan reassured him that they could get back up on their own, the man left.

Ethan rolled his eyes. Even though it was what he wanted he couldn't believe the steward had left them down here alone. They could rifle through everyone's belongings. Ethan didn't respect very many people. They all had a price and it wickedly delighted Ethan to sometimes find out what that price was. There had been few people along the way that he hadn't been able to eventually buy. Two of those few people were this woman in front of him

cooing at the dogs, and the man still up in the first class cabin. There wasn't anyone that Ethan loved and respected more than these two.

Gwen opened the door of Ethan's crate. Both dogs had been given a sedative so they were pretty groggy but their tails were thumping quietly on the grate floor of their crates. Gwen leaned down and put her face against Ethan. She crooned at him. "Ethan, how's my handsome fellow? You're being so good. I love you." While she spoke she caressed him the length of his body.

Ethan watched her, sitting at her side, as she stroked the dog and her motion mesmerized him. Coupled with the fact that she kept saying his name while she was doing it made it seem so intimate. He knew it was the damn dog's name she was saying but he could feel his body responding. Ethan shook his head. He didn't understand why he was responding this way. He'd known Gwen since she was in nappies and he'd always thought of her as a sister.

And yet, last night, at the Council, as he had pressed her against the wall to avoid being discovered by the guards, he had felt her body, felt her breasts, and the juncture of her thighs and it had surprised him how tempted he'd been just to stay there, to kiss her and run his hands over her body. And then just now, in the lift, again she had been pressed against him and he'd wanted her. Ethan looked at Gwen, how she was bent over the dog, the lush curve of her derriere enticing him. He groaned and pulled his legs up to hide his erection.

Gwen looked at him. "Am I driving you crazy? I know you hate it when I gush over them."

Ethan rolled his eyes. "Oh please, gush away. We're stuck here on this plane for hours and your gushing is much more entertaining than watching Rupert sleep."

Gwen grinned at him. "You talk to Ethan now, while I go play with Rayne."

Her words further incited his imagination. Snorting at himself he sat down in front of Ethan's cage and watched as Gwen went through the same stroking ritual with Rayne. Ethan scratched his namesake's ears and rubbed under his collar. He really did love the dogs; he just hated their names.

Gwen watched him out of the corner of her eye. She sighed. She watched as he tenderly touched the dog. Gwen knew that most people approached Ethan somewhat warily as he delighted in making people squirm but she had always trusted him. And she had always hoped that when she grew up that he might take an interest in her but he had always looked at her as a little sister. Gwen sighed again.

Ethan heard her. "They'll be fine, Gwen."

Gwen smiled sadly at him. "I know."

"So why the sad face?"

"I don't know. I guess I'm a little jealous of Ru."

"Jealous about what?"

"Him falling in love. Finding someone just for him." She took Ethan's hand in hers. They had always touched a lot; she knew he wouldn't find anything odd in that. "It just makes me feel a bit lonely."

Ethan looked down at their clasped hands and he caressed her thumb with his. He looked up at her and saw that she was also staring at their hands. She wouldn't meet his eyes so instead he assessed her body. He was a master at figuring out what someone's body was betraying, information that people generally didn't want known. He noticed her faster than normal breathing, the slight flush of her skin, and the tenseness in how she held herself. Ethan felt his own heart rate increase. He caressed her thumb again. "Gwen, look at me."

Slowly she lifted her eyes and what he saw there was enough. He leaned forwards and captured her lips with his. She let out a soft cry and pressed against him. He pulled her closer and wrapped his arms around her wondering how he could have possibly denied himself her sweetness for this long. She pulled back after a while. "This isn't just because I said I was lonely is it? You're not just trying to make me feel better?"

Ethan felt insulted. "What, me be kind? Please." He touched Gwen's cheek. "I've loved you your whole life, Gwen. Now suddenly I find myself wanting you as well."

Gwen grinned. "Well it took you long enough."

Ethan's eyes widened. That was an unexpected response. "What does that mean?"

"Only that I've wanted you for so long."

"How long?"

"Since my first training bra."

Ethan let out a loud laugh and pulled her in for another kiss. "You foolish girl. Wasting your whole life pining after a reprobate like me." Ethan couldn't believe he had missed it. Him, the expert at reading people, had been reading Gwen wrong for too many years to count.

Gwen kissed him back with her whole heart. "It was worth it, you're worth it."

He pressed his cheek against hers. "How can you say that? I'm not a very nice person, Gwen. You know that."

"You are to me, you are to Ru. You've always been wonderful to me. Will this change that?"

Ethan shook his head. "No, I love you."

"That's all that matters." She pulled away looking a little worried. "I don't want children, do you care?"

Again Ethan laughed. "You don't know how relieved I am to hear you say that. Somehow I don't see myself as father material."

"But I'll want to watch Ru's children all the time."

"As long as we can give them back when I'm sick of them."

"I'll want dogs."

"As long as we don't name them after me, you can have a dozen of them."

"Will you take me places?"

"I'll take you anywhere you want to go. Just stick a pin in a map and we're there."

"I love the fact that you have money." She grimaced. "Is that really shallow of me?"

Ethan laughed. "No, it's refreshing. I know you've never given my money a thought, nor have you ever asked me for anything. I'm delighted to think I can lavish my wealth on you."

"Just think of the things we could do to help Buffy and Kendra. I mean if she's going to be married to Ru we have to do everything we can to keep her alive." She turned anxious eyes to Ethan.

Still chuckling Ethan hugged her tightly. "You may spend my money however you see fit. It does make me very glad that I have a rather endless supply of it, otherwise I might be quite nervous."

"Even when I'm PMSing I couldn't begin to make a dent."

Ethan looked at her with a grin. "I don't know. You do more shopping than anyone I know when you're PMSing."

Gwen grinned. It was such a relief somehow that Ethan knew everything about her. Even what her cycles were like. "I can't wait to tell Rupert. He'll be so excited."

"He'll probably cut my balls off."

Cupping them softly she shook her head. "I won't let him." Ethan groaned. "He'll say something sarcastic but he'll be thrilled, trust me." She kissed Ethan again, her hand still fondling him. Without disengaging she latched the dogs' cages. Standing she started to pull Ethan towards the back, out of sight.

Ethan allowed her to pull him but he raised his eyebrows in disbelief at the naughty look in her eye. "Gwen, you can't possibly..." Gwen shut him up with a kiss and she began to unbutton his shirt. Ethan threw caution to the wind and helped her.

##

A long time later they returned to their seats. Giles heard them and he opened his eyes and then he opened them wider. Giles took in the fact that the two of them were holding hands. He looked at them both and then again at Gwen as she settled in next to him. "Gwen, the cargo hold?" He glared at Ethan but Ethan just grinned back, unrepentant. He shook his head. "Assuming I ever get to sleep I shall now assuredly have nightmares. Thank you both so much."

Gwen leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. "I love you, Ru."

Giles smiled at her and squeezed her other hand. "I love you too." Glaring at Ethan one more time Giles settled in his seat again and closed his eyes. He could hear Ethan and Gwen settle closer together and as he finally started drifting off to sleep he had a smile on his face.

End of Part 12

A Different Life 13

Giles had managed to get a few hours of sleep. Ethan and Gwen had gone down twice more to see the dogs. Gwen was glad the plane was landing as the sedatives had completely worn off and the dogs were going stir crazy. Someone had the dogs waiting for them in the jetway as they were getting off the plane. Giles raised his eyebrows but figured that this was just more of Ethan's money in play. Gwen was delighted and the dogs were beside themselves to see Giles.

After the happy reunion was completed Giles, Gwen, and Ethan with dogs in tow headed down towards baggage claim. Between the three of them they had six suitcases. One each for Giles and Ethan and four for Gwen. As Giles wrestled another one of hers off the conveyer belt he looked at her askance. "Honestly Gwen, what did you bring with you?"

"Well, Ethan just got us one-way tickets. I have no idea how long we'll be here before I get to go back and get more stuff. I had to bring something for everything. Plus I packed the dog bowls and some food for them."

Giles rolled his eyes. "Gwen, I am sure they sell dog food here. As well as bowls."

"But it may not be the sort they like. And things will be different enough for them without making them eat new food." She saw another one of her suitcases coming down the belt. She attempted to hand Rayne's leash over to Ethan but it dropped to the floor and that was all Rayne needed. He was desperate for a run. Taking off down the baggage claim concourse like a flash it was only a moment before they couldn't even see him anymore. Ethan handed the leash for the other dog to Giles and sprinted after Rayne. Giles just covered his eyes and groaned. Gwen nudged him. "Do you see him?"

"No, I don't want to look. Just tell me when it's over and to whom I owe damages." Giles could just imagine the passengers who were now lying on the ground, little old women with broken hips, children traumatized by being knocked askew by the racing dog.

"I'm hoping this belongs to you." Giles removed his hand, opening his eyes and saw a young dark haired man holding Rayne's leash.

Giles nodded and then looked at the young man again. Then he noticed the petite red head next to him. "Xander, Willow?"

Willow grinned. "In the flesh." She grimaced. "What does that mean anyway? It's kind of gross given what we know and all, you know, about things that actually eat..." Willow noticed Gwen. She leaned towards Giles. "Does she know?"

Giles grinned. "Yes, she knows." He introduced his sister. "This is my sister Gwen Giles. This is Xander and Willow. I'm sorry I don't know your last names."

Xander pointed at himself. "Xander Harris", and then pointing at Willow, "Willow Rosenberg." He noticed that Giles was looking at them intently. "Do I have something on my face? We ate right before we got here."

Giles let out a silent chuckle. "No, you both just seem so familiar. I had a few dreams when Buffy was in London and you were both there, in my dreams." He shook it off. "I can't really explain it."

Willow was willing to try. "Maybe those dreams were from Buffy's first life when you were her Watcher. I mean me and Xander were there too. Maybe you just remembered part of it."

"Do I seem familiar to you?"

Willow looked at him, her head cocked to the side. "Yes, you do. I mean not so I would have stopped you on the street, but with you standing here in front of me I just feel comfortable with you, really fast. And I'm not usually that comfortable with people I don't know."

Xander nodded. "She has stage fright even when she's not on stage."

Ethan came running up, bending over to catch his breath. "I couldn't..." He caught sight of Rayne. "That blasted dog, where did he come from?"

Xander grinned. "I caught him outside, looking a bit confused."

Gwen gasped. "He was outside? Oh my God." She got onto her knees in front of Rayne and threw her arms around his neck. "You could have got yourself killed."

Ethan stroked Gwen's head. "He's all right, Gwen." He followed the leash up to Xander's arm. Holding out his hand he spoke. "I assume you're Xander?"

Xander nodded. "Xander Harris, and this is Willow Rosenberg."

Ethan shook both their hands. "I'm Ethan Rayne." He turned to Giles. "Do we have all the luggage?"

Giles raised his eyebrows. "I have no idea, I was too busy imagining myself in court for the rest of my life to worry about luggage." He looked at Ethan. "Did you notice any moaning bodies around on your mad dash through the airport?"

Ethan grinned. "Nary a one. But perhaps we should take the dogs outside in case anyone is looking for them."

Giles nodded. "Good idea." He prodded Gwen. "You need to get the rest of your luggage. I don't remember what your other suitcases look like."

With one last hug to Rayne, Gwen got up and started looking at the bags going by. Giles went and got a luggage cart for Gwen and then left her and Ethan at the carousel while he, Willow and Xander took his bag and the dogs outside.

Giles was starting to feel impatient. He blew out a breath. Xander grinned. "She's fine. Don't worry."

Giles grinned, and shook his head. "Am I that transparent?"

Xander nodded, decisively. "It's like you're glass."

Willow looked up at Giles. "What should we call you? Buffy seems to call you Giles but isn't that your last name?"

Giles pursed his lips. "It is. But somehow it feels fine when Buffy calls me that, as if she always has. But, please, call me Rupert, or Ru."

Xander grimaced. "Rupert. Did your father hate you or something?"

Giles glared. "It's a family name and I'll thank you to treat it respectfully."

"You got it, big guy." He looked down at the dogs. "Who are these guys anyway?"

Giles pointed at first one dog and then the other. "Ethan and Rayne."

Xander's brow furrowed. "Isn't that guy's name in there Ethan Rayne?"

Giles grinned. "Yes it is."

Ethan walked out pushing a loaded luggage cart. "Yes, it is my name. And I had it long before Rupert here got the idea of pawning it off on a couple of mongrels."

Xander looked at Willow. "Promise me if you ever get two dogs that you won't call them Xander and Harris."

Willow nodded seriously. "I promise."

Gwen came to Giles' rescue. "Now wait a minute. Ru only named the dogs after Ethan because Ethan played a terrible joke on him. It was a fitting and just revenge."

Xander's eyes lit up. "What did you do to him?" He grinned when he saw Giles cover his face with a hand.

Ethan grinned back. "I got him very, very drunk one night and took pictures of him dancing on the tables. Then I blew them up into poster size and put them on all the office doors at the museum."

Xander choked out a laugh and gave Ethan a look of pure admiration. Willow looked horrified and she glared at Xander. "If you ever did anything like that to me I'd buy two rats and call them Xander and Harris."

Giles let out a sigh. "Yes, well now that you've all had a laugh at my expense may we please move on?"

Willow tucked her arm in his and grinned. "We're parked this way."

Giles grinned down at her and patted her hand. "You'd buy rats, you say?"

"Ugly rats."

"I wish I'd thought of that."

Willow giggled as she directed Giles to where the car was parked.

##

Wes was annoyed with Buffy. Which was nothing unusual, except that tonight he was particularly annoyed with her. She'd been very distracted the last two days during training and both days Kendra had come out the victor in every sparring match the girls had. It was humiliating. Wes was the senior Watcher here, so his Slayer should be superior at all times.

He decided that he better go out on patrol and watch his Slayer in action. If her slaying technique while out in the field was as sloppy as her movements over the last two days then he was really going to have to step up her training. He knew he had been too lax by allowing her to spend time with those two friends of hers. Not wanting to have it interfere with his necessary sleep regimen he decided that they should all go out on an early patrol so he could observe her.

So far it had been a fairly quiet night and other than being able to make some snide comments about Buffy's atrocious use of the English language he'd had no satisfaction at all from it.

##

The closer they got to Sunnydale, the more nervous Giles became. Willow kept patting him on the leg and despite her kindness Giles was starting to feel like one of the dogs. It was a tight fit between all the passengers, the two dogs and the luggage. That wasn't helping either. Rayne was practically sitting in his lap and he wasn't a small dog by any stretch of the imagination.

He tapped Xander on the shoulder. "Could you drive a little faster? I know I'm being a nuisance but..."

Xander looked at his speedometer and grimaced. "It's about maxed out. This baby doesn't do much over 65."

For about the tenth time Giles wished he had just rented a car. A very fast car. Curbing his impatience he looked out the window. He knew that it wouldn't really have got him there any faster because he'd have had to take the time to rent it and then work out where he was going but it frustrated him to be this close and yet so far away. And he couldn't seem to ease past the tension in his gut that something was going to go wrong.

##

Joyce kept looking out the window waiting for them to arrive. Wes had shown up unexpectedly and insisted that Buffy go out early to patrol. Without spoiling the surprise there was no reason for Joyce to refuse. She did get a somewhat tenuous itinerary out of them.

She blew out a breath and let the curtain fall. Joyce was almost sorry she had let Dawn sleep over her friend's house. She could have used the company. She wished she had thought of having Xander call once they connected. For

all she knew Xander and Willow were still at the baggage carousel waiting for a phantom to arrive.

##

Giles almost gasped with relief when they passed the sign that said Welcome to Sunnydale. Xander looked in his rearview mirror and grinned. "Almost there, it takes about ten minutes to get to her house from that sign."

Giles smiled tightly in return and nodded. He knew he was being a nervous wreck but he couldn't help it. There was still so much that was unknown. She'd lived another entire life. Suppose she was too changed. Suppose she found that once faced with him that she couldn't love him, suppose she had a lover. That thought made Giles grit his teeth. It was almost worse being this close, this close to the thing that mattered most to him in the world and with no idea how things would turn out.

He was grateful that Gwen and Ethan were with him. If things turned out badly he wouldn't have to make the return trip alone. He had to grin when he thought about the two of them. Giles wasn't quite sure what had triggered the change in their relationship but he was thrilled. Gwen would be safe with Ethan. And Ethan would be a better man for Gwen.

##

The vampires came out of nowhere. They rarely congregated in these numbers but Wes couldn't even count them. Not that he tried very hard. Buffy and Kendra were in the thick of it punching, kicking, working off each other. Sam was standing over by Wes, watching Kendra closely, wanting to be available to her if she should need him. He held a stake in each hand. Wes was taking notes, shaking his head and making tsk tsk noises.

Sam shook his own head. Sometimes he couldn't stand Wes. Sam took it upon himself to watch out for Buffy as well and he continued to watch the girls fight, unconsciously mimicking their movements by the shifts of his body. It seemed as if they were getting the best of the vampires. One suddenly loomed over him but before he could even get his stake up Kendra was there turning the vampire to dust. Sam flashed her a grateful look. He offered her another stake as that last one had gone to dust as well. She took it and he pulled out another one.

##

Joyce let out a cry of relief when she saw Xander's car pull in the driveway.

She pulled open the door and waited to see who would get out. The first ones out were a man and a woman that she didn't recognize. Then two dogs got out and ran up to her, circling her with delight. Then they promptly went and peed on her lawn. Finally she saw him. He got out the other side of the car and she watched him blow out a breath and square his shoulders.

Xander and Willow got out of the front seat and Xander waved at Joyce. "The British reinforcements are here."

Joyce grinned nervously. She headed over to the car wanting to greet Rupert first. He lifted his head and saw her. Walking quickly around the car he held out his hand. "You must be Joyce. She looks so much like you."

"Welcome to Sunnydale, Rupert. I can't believe you're really here. I was just watching you on the television again."

Giles let out a short laugh. "I'm afraid I've left my staff a bit stymied by my abrupt and somewhat unprecedented departure. It will take them a couple of days to rally and send a new victim out to face the press. Then my face will be gone, at least for the time being."

"Do they know why you're here?"

"No, I told them it was a family emergency and that I'd contact them when it became clearer as to how long I might be gone."

"For instance, the rest of your life?"

Giles grinned somewhat ruefully. "Exactly. I'd rather make that sort of announcement in person and with a plan already in place, with all the right people already forewarned. They expect I'll be back, at this point." He glanced up at the house and his brow furrowed. "Is she here?" Giles was beginning to think that she wasn't.

Joyce let out a frustrated noise. "No, Wes came by and decided he wanted to observe her patrolling. And that means an early patrol. They left about 30 minutes ago."

The nervousness in Giles' gut increased. He tried to shake it off and went to make the rest of the introductions. "This is my sister Gwen Giles, and my friend Ethan Rayne. This is Joyce Summers, Buffy's mum."

Gwen gave her a hug. "Isn't this exciting? I've never been to America and for it to be for such an adventure just makes it even better."

Joyce hugged her back, already feeling that she and this woman could be good friends. She shook hands with Ethan and took in the fact that Gwen and Ethan were obviously a couple. Giles finished with the dogs. "And this is Ethan and..." He looked around, "...and that's Rayne." Off her look he explained. "Yes, they have the same name as my friend. It's a long story which I'm sure, to my utter humiliation, will be thoroughly explained to you." Giles sighed.

Joyce stared at him. He was even better looking in person. He still wasn't looking happy, though. More nervous now than sad, but not happy. Hopefully that would be rectified soon. She pointed to the house. "Would you all like to come in while we wait?"

Giles hesitated. "Do you know where she is?"

This time it was Joyce who hesitated. "I have a rough idea, but Wes doesn't like anyone to intrude unless it's an emergency." She scowled. "Or rather something he would consider an emergency important enough to interrupt him."

Giles looked at her seriously. "I know this sounds mad, but perhaps no madder than the rest of this tale, but I fear something has gone wrong. I feel as if Buffy needs my help. It is beyond presumption to ask but will you show me where she is? I'll accept full responsibility for Wes' wrath."

Joyce saw the seriousness on his face and nodded. "We can take my car." As she looked at the determined faces around her she raised her eyebrows. "We'll need to take both cars if everyone wants to go." She went in the house and retrieved her keys. Giles went with Joyce with the two dogs in the back seat. Ethan and Gwen followed with Xander and Willow.

End Part 13

A Different Life 14

In one moment it changed. Buffy was fighting the last vampire, Kendra was talking with her Watcher and Wes had filled up several pages of his notebook. Then the vampires struck again. All four of them were attacked and separated. Kendra and Buffy worked their way to their Watchers to clear the vampires away. As Kendra got to Sam's side he managed to stake the vampire that had been seconds away from biting him. He gestured Kendra away. "I'm fine, I'm fine. Go help Buffy."

Wes was screaming. A vampire had latched onto him and was attempting to stop the squalling creature he had a hold of long enough to get to his neck. Wes didn't even have a stake on him so all he could do is flail at the vampire. Buffy finally fought her way clear and grabbed the vampire by his collar and yanked him off of Wes, staking him. Wes kept yelping and brushing himself off as if the vampire dust was burning him.

Kendra let out a yell and Buffy turned to see her fellow Slayer inundated with vampires. Sam was trying to pull vampires away from her and getting beaten for it. Buffy left Wes to go help. Wes screamed out. "No, don't leave me." He crouched down and hid behind a tombstone, his eyes darting all over the place.

Buffy staked a vampire just as it was about to grab Sam. "Sam, take Wes and get out of here."

"No, there's too many of them. We all have to leave."

Buffy kicked a vampire in the face and finally she and Kendra were standing back to back. The vampires were circling them. Kendra kept one eye on the vampires, and one eye on Sam who was trying to stay nearby and yet out of sight. Kendra spoke softly. "There are so many, why are there so many?"

Buffy shook her head. "I don't know. We need to get out of here."

"We'll never make it. You and I might but we'll never get our Watchers to safety."

"You and Sam can make a break for it. I can watch your back."

"Then you and Wes will die."

"Better than all of us dying."

"No, I think I will stay. I will not leave you to face this alone."

Buffy smiled even though she knew Kendra couldn't see. "Then let's go down fighting. Are you ready?"

"Ready."

Both girls jumped the vampire nearest to them. The element of surprise was briefly on their side but they were already tired and there were too many of them. Sam leaped into the fray and got a couple of vampires himself before he too found himself surrounded.

##

Giles was gripping the seat tightly. Joyce noticed his grip. "Am I driving too fast?"

"No, not fast enough." Joyce looked at Giles. He was sweating. His eyes closed and he let out a moan. "Hurry, Joyce. We don't have much time."

Joyce stepped on the gas. Fortunately it didn't exceed the speed available to Xander's old car and both vehicles hurtled through the neighborhood. They had already tried two cemeteries without any success. Joyce was trusting to luck as opposed to the brief itinerary she'd been given and was racing towards the closest cemetery. Joyce didn't know if she could also tell that Buffy was in trouble or if she was merely picking up on Giles' anxiety but her own heart was beating hard within her breast.

Giles pointed. "There. Stop the car." All he could see were vampires. Whoever else was here, and Giles knew that included Buffy, they were in serious trouble. He gave a quick mental prayer of gratitude that Ethan had insisted on bringing the dogs. They hated vampires almost as much as vampires hated them. As Joyce came to a screeching halt he turned to her. "Stakes, do you have stakes?"

She pointed to the glove compartment and he snapped it open grabbing a handful. Shoving a couple in his pocket he held one in his hand as he opened his car door. He quickly opened the back door gesturing to the dogs. They were already snarling. He gave them an order. "Protect." Both the dogs took off.

##

Buffy knew she was going to die. There were too many. Three of them had her pinned down and a fourth was punching her. She knew it would only be a minute before it decided to feed. She could hear Kendra's cries and longed to go to her aid but as soon as she got one limb loose they'd grab her again and restrain her.

##

Ethan was out of the car before Xander even stopped. He looked back in. "Stakes, crossbows? What do you have?"

Xander leaped out of the car. "All of the above." He opened the trunk and

Ethan's eyes lit up. He grabbed a crossbow for Gwen and one for himself. Then he shoved a stake in his pocket. Grabbing Gwen by the arm he warned her. "Stay close. I mean it, Gwen. No heroics."

Gwen nodded. Xander had grabbed a few stakes of his own. He tossed one to Willow and Joyce. Joyce heard Buffy scream and her heart froze in her throat.

##

The vampire had grown tired of beating the Slayer and was ready to feed. Turning Buffy's neck he leaned down over her. Suddenly two shapes appeared as if from nowhere and knocked him off of her. Buffy let go with a scream before she could help herself. They had moved too fast for her to see what this new danger was. The attack had taken the vampires by surprise and they let their grips loosen in the confusion and that was all Buffy needed. She yanked free and sprang to her feet only to find herself surrounded by two labs, one golden and one chocolate. Their barking hurt her ears and they looked deadly as they stridently barked out their displeasure at the unholy ones around them.

Buffy couldn't stop looking at the dogs. It was too much to hope for but they looked just like... She lifted her head and saw that several other people had joined the fight. Shaking off the mystery she moved quickly and staked two vampires in rapid succession. She noticed Wes still cowering by a tombstone, clearly having not considered that perhaps he might come to her aid. She looked for Kendra and saw that she was being helped by Sam and two people Buffy didn't recognize. Then she realized that she did know the woman. She gasped as she recognized Gwen.

And then she saw him. He was running towards her. One of the dogs had started harrying a vampire, herding him towards Giles. Giles stopped to stake him, an easy kill as the vampire was focused entirely on the dog. Giles took a second to praise Rayne. Rayne took off to find another vampire. When Giles looked up again it was to find Buffy staring at him.

Most of the vampires were dead or on the run now. As the action died down more heads turned to watch the reunion. Tears were running down Buffy's face. Giles walked the rest of the way to her. He lifted up his hands and wiped her tears away with his thumbs. It was all he could do not to break down and cry himself. It had been so close. If they'd arrived only a few seconds later she might have been dead. Buffy looked at him in wonder. "You're here."

"Where else could I be? You're here."

"You remember me?"

"Oh Buffy. I haven't had a single other thought in my head, but you."

Buffy shook her head in disbelief. "How did you find me? How can you remember me? I didn't even go to London."

Giles cupped one of her cheeks in his hand. "We're meant to be together, Buffy. I don't think anything could keep us apart, not for any length of time."

Rayne and Ethan were snapping at another vampire. Buffy's eyes opened in alarm as he got dangerously close to Giles. Suddenly a crossbow bolt shot through the vampire and he exploded. Buffy looked for the source and she saw Gwen grinning at her.

Buffy grabbed Giles' arm to keep her balance as Ethan knocked into her as he raced by. Giles laughed. "He's doing it again."

Buffy looked up at him, confused. "Who's doing what again?"

"Ethan, knocking you down."

It finally sank in. "You really are here. You're really standing right here in front of me." A smile started to form on her face.

Giles grinned, the knot in his stomach finally melting away at the look on her face. He reached for her and she leapt into his arms, laughing and crying at the same time and placing kisses everywhere she could reach. Giles spun her around and just held her tight.

Joyce let out a sigh, as she fought back some tears. That was the look she wanted to see. Sheer happiness. On both their faces. A shadow loomed over her and a vampire knocked her to the ground in his efforts to be rid of Rayne. Joyce was about to let out a scream when Sam was there shoving a stake through the vampire's heart. He reached down a hand to help her up.

She gasped a little. "Oh, thank you Sam. I didn't even see him." She began to brush the vampire dust off of her body. As her hands ran over her breasts Sam averted his eyes. Smiling tightly at her he moved over to stand by Kendra. Joyce's eyes followed the black man as he walked away.

Ethan moved to her side. "You'll have to tell him."

Joyce turned startled eyes to him. "Excuse me?"

Ethan gestured with his chin to Sam. "You'll have to let him know you're interested. There are too many reasons for it not to happen, racial reasons, cultural reasons, Watcher reasons. He would never presume."

"What makes you think I..."

Ethan just looked at her and Joyce found herself dealing first hand with Ethan's disconcerting ability to read into a person's heart and mind. Then he grinned. "He's interested too. But you need to let him know." Moving over to Gwen he put his arms around her as Gwen just stood there grinning watching her brother make a fool of himself in public.

Xander and Willow were grinning too. It had been a long time since they'd seen Buffy this happy. Willow leaned into Xander. "We did a good thing."

Xander put his arm around her. "We are the champions of unsucking our best friend's life."

Wes had finally pulled himself together. He looked around and saw that thankfully no one seemed to be paying any attention to him at all. Then just as quickly he found himself annoyed by that. He could have been hurt. Looking around his eyes searched for his Slayer. His jaw dropped as he found her embracing a man and...and kissing him.

Wes stormed over to the two of them and tapped the man on the shoulder. "Unhand her at once."

Buffy could feel the tension shoot through Giles. Giles spun around and thrust Buffy behind him. "Now you protect her?" Giles had seen Wes cowering behind a tombstone. Cowering in fear while his Slayer was about to lose her life.

Xander prodded Willow who was talking to Joyce. "Hey, watch this, this ought to be good." Both Willow and Joyce looked up. Everyone snuck in a little closer, not wanting to miss a word.

Wes sputtered. "What do you think you're doing? I insist that you let her go."

Giles hit the pad of paper that Wes had in his hand with enough force to send it flying to the ground. "Why, so you can take more notes?"

"Those notes are essential. They could save her life one day."

Giles leaned towards Wes. "She almost just died and you did nothing to help

her."

Wes waved his hand, totally unaware of the danger he was in. "Slayers are always in danger. She would have been fine."

"How would you know? You were sniveling behind a tombstone."

Wes drew himself up to his full height. "I was doing no such thing. I was merely staying out of the way. I might have gotten hurt. A good Slayer always puts her Watcher..." Wes didn't finish his sentence as Giles finally gave in to temptation and punched him, knocking him to the ground.

He was livid. "A good Watcher always puts his Slayer first. Always." He looked around and found Sam. "Sam was helping Kendra. Where the hell were you?" As Wes tried to get up Giles put his foot on his chest and he bent down. "Wes, I've never liked you. You are a sanctimonious prig with delusions of grandeur. And now it is appallingly clear that you are also a coward. You don't deserve to have a Slayer."

Kendra started to go protect Wes but Sam held her back. Sam pursed his lips and looked at her. He had kept quiet too long. It was time for him to sit down and have a long talk with Kendra. She needed to learn to enjoy a few things, and to stop thinking that slaying was all there was to life and that Wes was the last word in Watcher wisdom.

In disgust Giles moved away from Wes taking Buffy with him. Buffy looked back nervously at her Watcher still lying there on the ground but then she nestled closer to Giles. Joyce was watching Giles with her mouth open. Xander punched him in the arm. "Boy, when you say you'll take care of Wes, you're not fooling around, are you?"

Giles let out a disgusted noise. "I can't abide him." He turned to Sam and put out his hand. "Sam, it's been a long time."

Sam grinned and took Giles' hand. He had always liked Rupert and had been sad when he had quit the Council. "Too long. Are you planning to stay?"

Giles looked down at Buffy and smiled. "Yes, I'm staying."

Sam laughed. "Well, this will make things interesting." Still laughing he walked over to Wes to help the man up.

Giles was explaining to Buffy that Gwen didn't remember her and then reintroduced them. Gwen swept Buffy up in a hug, which Buffy was very glad to return. Then Giles introduced her to Ethan. She hesitated when she saw

him. Looking up at Giles she found him grinning at her. "He's okay. That was just a dream."

Buffy shook her head. "Not for me."

Giles' lips tightened. "I'm sorry. But he really is okay in this life. He's a friend, one I trust."

That was good enough for Buffy, at least for now. Buffy smiled at her mom. "Mom, this is Giles." Just saying it was enough to make Buffy start to cry again. Giles held her from behind, pulling her in tight against his chest.

Joyce smiled at her daughter. "We've met."

Buffy turned confused teary eyes up to Giles. He smiled down at her. "She called me. Your mum called me."

Buffy turned her eyes back to her mom. "You called him?"

Joyce turned to Willow and Xander. "It was Willow's idea."

Willow wanted to share the credit. "Yeah, but Joyce told us about him and showed us the card."

Xander grinned. "We just got back from picking him up at the airport."

Buffy let out a cry and launched herself at her mom, hugging her tightly, grinning over her shoulder at her friends. Joyce caught Giles' eyes and the two of them grinned at each other.

Wes and Sam were walking up to the group. Wes was whispering loudly. "Rupert Giles, the Rupert Giles, the one that left the Council and is the Curator at the British Museum? What is he doing here?"

Sam couldn't keep the grin off his face. "Well, apparently he and Buffy are..." He searched for the right word but couldn't find it, as he himself didn't really understand what was going on. "Well, apparently he is going to be staying here."

Wes looked horrified. Then frowning he marched back up to Giles. "I should have you arrested for assaulting me."

Xander grinned. "Who assaulted you? I didn't see anyone assault you." He looked around. "Did anyone see someone assault Wes?" Everyone was shaking their heads. Kendra looked as if she might speak up but a look from

her Watcher silenced her.

Giles grinned. "I'm crushed that you didn't remember me when you first saw me." He indicated Ethan. "Maybe you'll have better luck remembering Ethan."

Wes blanched. He did remember Ethan. Ethan may have played some practical jokes on Giles but they were nothing compared to the practical jokes he'd played on Wes. Wes practically stuttered. "How long are you in town for?"

Ethan grinned wickedly. "Oh, didn't Sam tell you? I'm moving here too." His eyes sparkled. "Yes, we're going to be one big happy family."

Wes turned back to Giles. "I'll call the Council. I'll tell them you're interfering."

"Please do. I'll be glad to talk to them and share a vision of how you comported yourself this evening." Giles got in Wes' face again and poked his chest with an index finger. "I shan't interfere with your Watcher duties unless I feel they are against Buffy's best interest. You may schedule a reasonable training program, and she will of course have to patrol and deal with any supernatural threats, but the rest of her time, and what she chooses to do with her life, are none of your concern. If you are wise you will see that you now have many more resources at your command, all of which will be leant towards keeping Buffy and Kendra alive. But push me and I will make your life miserable."

Joyce still held Buffy in her arms and she watched the two men fight. She wanted to get down on her knees and thank God for bringing Rupert Giles here. He was saying everything she had wanted to say to Wes but had been too fearful to because of her own lack of information. But this man knew what he was talking about. He'd been a Watcher. And he liked Sam, and Sam clearly liked him and as far as Joyce was concerned that was a high recommendation. Joyce gave Buffy a squeeze. "I like him, this man of yours."

Buffy had been watching the exchange with wide eyes. She knew that she never would have stood for Wes in her old life, in fact she hadn't. She had quit the Council rather than work with him. But in this life she had been somewhat cowed by him. She felt the chains start to fall away, Giles' words beginning to unlock her own power. Looking up at her mom she giggled. "Isn't he wonderful?"

Joyce's heart leaped for joy at that giggle. She looked up and saw Giles standing there, having turned again away from Wes. Joyce let go of Buffy and turned her. "Yes, he is." Joyce gave her a little push and Buffy moved into Giles' arms.

She breathed him in. "I still can't believe you're here."

He held her tight. "Neither can I."

End of Part 14

A Different Life 15

Sam tried to offer Wes a lifeline. Things could only get worse if he couldn't walk away with some dignity intact. "Wes, why do you suppose there were so many vampires? Some research might be in order."

Giles knew what Sam was doing and he walked away so as to not interfere.

Wes nodded. "Yes, I think perhaps we should. It was most unusual. I just received some new books, perhaps I can see if there's anything of use in them." Realizing that he was about to walk into Ethan, Wes hurriedly moved around him.

Sam nodded. "Do you require any assistance? I know you often work better on your own. I'd hate to interfere with your concentration."

Wes pursed his lips. "Yes, you're quite right. I'd best have a go at it alone first. I'll contact you if I need some assistance." Wes looked for Buffy and his eyes narrowed as he saw her again in Giles' arms. "Buffy, training tomorrow at 2:00. Don't be late." Buffy kept a tight hold on Giles. "I won't." Wes humphed his general displeasure and stiffly walked away. Buffy looked up at Giles and grinned. "Down boy. After all, despite his general ookiness he is my Watcher. I don't think I should let him get punched more than once a day."

Giles let out a laugh. "I can't believe I did that. I usually have a bit more control than that."

Ethan let out a laugh of his own. "Don't you believe him. When someone that he cares about is in danger it's best just to get out of his way."

Buffy looked up at Giles. "I'm glad you did it, although I suppose that doesn't make me a very good Slayer. It made me feel all protected and girly. And as a Slayer, that doesn't happen very often."

Everyone started heading back to the cars. Buffy pulled Giles back. "Can we walk home? So we can talk?"

Giles touched her face. "Of course." Buffy walked over to her mom and told her that she planned to walk and Joyce just smiled and gave her a hug.

Ethan joined him. "You look happy."

Giles smiled. "I am happy." He looked at Ethan. "Thank you, thank you for everything."

Ethan shook his head. "You never have to thank me, not for anything." He gestured towards Buffy and Joyce. "Will you spend the night there or should I book you a room?"

Giles shook his head. "I haven't thought that far ahead." He let out a short laugh. "She lives with her mum. That presents some practical difficulties."

Ethan laughed. "You mean how do you have sex with Buffy with her mum down the hall?"

Giles scowled at Ethan and ran a hand through his hair. Then he grinned, shaking his head at his friend. "The thought had crossed my mind."

Ethan slapped him on the arm. "Better you than me. I, on the other hand will be enjoying..."

Giles put up a hand to stop him. "Don't say another word or I'll have to punch you too."

Ethan just grinned. "I'll leave a message with Joyce as to where we're staying. I'll book a room for you just in case. You'll need one eventually anyway. If we don't hear from you tonight we'll hook up tomorrow."

Giles nodded and then smiled as Buffy walked back over to him. He pulled her in tightly. "Everything all right?"

She smiled and let out a satisfied sigh. "Everything's perfect."

Giles said goodnight, thanking them all again and then he and Buffy headed off on foot, Ethan and Rayne happily trotting along.

Buffy looked down at the dogs. "They're pretty handy to have around."

Giles looked at them. Rayne was barely a shadow in the darkness. "That they are. They always know when a vampire is around and they're excellent at matchmaking." He grinned down at Buffy and she grinned back. They walked

for a bit and then Giles stopped and looked at her.

"The Slayer." He smiled sadly at her. "Joyce tells me that in one of your lives that I was your Watcher. And that I left you and went back to England." He shook his head. "I'm sorry for that."

Buffy rested her head against his chest. "It wasn't entirely your fault. I was..." She looked up at Giles. "Can we not talk about this now? Because that whole last bit of that life...really, really sucked. And right now, I really want to be happy."

Giles smiled softly down at her. "We don't ever have to talk about it. I just brought it up because I want you to know that I won't be going back to England this time."

"You're staying here? How can you stay here? What about your job? You love your job."

Giles moved them to a bench. He wasn't worried about vampires, knowing that the dogs would alert them if any were around. "Buffy, I do love my job. But nowhere near as much as I love you. I can always get another job but when I thought I'd lost you, I nearly went insane." He kissed her. "Your mum told me what you did for me. That Gwen and Ethan..." He turned away for a moment, overcome with emotion. Buffy laced her fingers through his and he turned back to her. "I can't ever thank you enough for that, although I would not have chosen for you to pay this price."

Buffy held his hand tightly. "Just like I couldn't choose it for you. How could I have asked that of you, after seeing how close you and Gwen are? How much you love these dogs of yours. I know I just said I didn't want to talk about it but you have to understand that that life, with you here as my Watcher, it was bad for you. You were so unhappy. So many bad things happened to you, mostly because of me. Someday I'll tell you about it, if these memories stay in my head. I sort of wish they'd go away. I don't understand why I have them all. I don't understand why you remember me." She touched his face. "Once I got back here I really didn't think that you would have any memories of me at all." She laid her head on his chest again and he wrapped his arms around her.

"I knew something had gone wrong. Even before I got to the restaurant. I knew it. I waited there for the longest time before I finally went home. Then Gwen didn't remember you and the next day neither did Nathan or Susan, or even the school. They had no record of you ever having been there. It was as if you had dropped off the face of the earth." He squeezed her tightly. The memories were still painful but were fading with her in his arms. "I had no

where to turn to, I wondered if I was going mad. I could still feel you in my arms, remember making love to you." He shook his head.

She pulled back and touched his face again. "I saw you on the TV. I started talking about you to my mom. Good thing I'm the Slayer and she has to believe a lot of unbelievable things or I'd probably be in the nuthouse right now. It hurt so bad to see your face and know that I'd never see you again or touch you again."

Giles lowered his face and kissed her. The kiss grew passionate and Buffy was practically crawling into his lap to get closer to him. Their tongues mated as their hands explored each other. Giles groaned as his hands fisted in the fabric of her shirt behind her back. As one of the dogs began to bark he reluctantly pulled back to see if there was any threat.

Giles peered into the darkness for a while and then turned back to Buffy. "False alarm." He lowered his head to kiss her again.

Buffy put her hand up to stop him. He looked at her, curious. She smiled shyly at him. "I need to tell you something." She covered her face with her hands and let out a moan.

Giles grew concerned. "Buffy, what is it?"

Buffy took her hands away and scrunched up her face. "I'm a virgin." She covered her face again.

Giles' eyebrows rose high on his face. "How...?" He stopped. "You never...?" Then he started to smile.

Buffy braved a peek. When she saw that he was smiling she brought her hands down and frowned at him. "What's that smile for?"

Giles had the grace to look a little ashamed. "Well, as loathe as I am to admit it I find that the fact that you are still a virgin delights me."

Buffy shook her head. "Why are you loathe to admit that?"

"It makes me feel as if I'm little more than a caveman. I thought I'd progressed past that point in my evolution."

Buffy giggled. "Why does it delight you?"

"Because it means that you will entirely belong to me. That I'll be your first and your last." He grinned at her. "Do I sound hopelessly romantic? Gwen is

always telling me that I am."

Buffy laughed a little breathlessly. She answered the only way she knew how. "I love you. I love you so much."

He swept her up in a hug that would have been painful if she hadn't been the Slayer. "I love you too."

Buffy's eyes were bright when she pulled out of the hug. "Suppose my mom hadn't called you? Suppose you hadn't been on TV?"

"It wouldn't have mattered. Ethan had already broken into the Council and discovered that you were the Slayer. He arrived to tell me that, he and Gwen, just when your mum called. She just made it easier but I would have found you. Once I knew you really existed nothing would have stopped me from finding you."

Buffy let out a happy sigh but she was still curious. "Suppose he hadn't broken in. What would you have done then?"

Giles pursed his lips. "Well, Ethan has an obscene amount of money. I probably would have asked him to hire someone to find you."

She ran a hand down his face. "You really were going to find me, weren't you?"

"If you were in this universe. That was my biggest fear, that you had never really existed at all, or that you were from the past or the future, or someplace where I would never find you again." He laid his forehead against hers. "That thought was unbearable to me." He began to kiss her again and again the passion rose. Giles pulled away.

Buffy moaned and tried to pull him back. "Where are you going?"

Giles let out a frustrated laugh. "Well, if you were the same woman I met in London I'd probably take you behind that crypt and push you up against a wall but you're not and it changes things."

Buffy felt a warmth flow through her at his words. "Why does it change things? I still remember making love with you. I still remember all the things we did."

Giles let out a groan. "Buffy, please, I'm trying to be a gentleman and you're making it very difficult. I'm not rutting with you in a cemetery for your first time. And I can't imagine your mother would think very highly of me if my first night

in town I spirit you away to a hotel room. Nor do I feel comfortable deflowering you with her right down the hall."

"Even if I promise to be very quiet?"

Giles barked out a laugh. "Based on the last time we were together I find that an unlikely promise."

Buffy blushed but then she moved closer to Giles. "I don't want to wait."

"Trust me Buffy, neither do I, but we're going to." He stood. "In fact, let me get you home."

Buffy let out an unhappy sigh. "I liked it better when you were a caveman."

Giles laughed. "We may have to wait a little while but I promise you that as soon as I can I will be kissing every inch of that delectable body of yours and I plan to keep on doing that until I'm in my grave."

Buffy reached up and pulled his head down for a kiss. "Don't make me wait too long."

Giles groaned again against her lips and pulling her towards him tightly he kissed her deeply. And while the two dogs kept guard they kissed and slowly all the fear and anguish of their separation slipped away.

##

Epilogue: 2 years later

Wes didn't know what had happened to his life. He knew the when and who of it but not the what or why. The who was Rupert Giles and the when was the day that he moved to Sunnydale. But he still didn't understand why Giles' arrival had somehow taken his orderly and fairly predictable life and scattered it to the winds.

He put his finger in his collar and ran it around his neck to try and get more comfortable. If this trend continued he'd have to buy a tuxedo of his own. Three weddings in two years.

The first had been his Slayer. Married. It was unheard of. He'd fully expected to be fired when he informed the Council. They'd gotten married a month to the day that Giles had first arrived in Sunnydale. The Council had certainly not been pleased but there wasn't much they could do about it. And Wes had

not been fired much to his relief.

Wes might not have liked it but he knew when he was outgunned. And he wasn't a stupid man even though it had taken him a while to get past his pride. But he had and he had taken advantage of Giles' offer and the resources that now flowed his way were stupefying. And the improvements in Buffy's slaying skills took his breath away. Along with her independence had come a fire that Wes hadn't even known was there and it made her so much stronger. He was ashamed that he had kept it doused so long. Of course, these days she wasn't slaying much.

The next wedding had been Ethan and Gwen. Now that had been a grand wedding. Ethan would have put on an equal fete for Giles and Buffy but they had wanted something simple. Not Ethan. He loved the spectacle and no expense had been spared. And again, Wes had been invited to be a part of the wedding party. He knew they were all working together to soften him up and he had to admit it was working. Life seemed better these days.

He felt an arm thread through his and he looked down. Willow stood on her tiptoes and kissed him gently on the mouth. "You look very handsome."

Wes smiled. "Well, I'm glad you think so. That's the one good thing that can be said about it."

Willow grinned at him. "I do think so. You look very yummy. I can't wait to get you home alone."

Wes blushed. He looked around. "Willow.

Willow giggled. "Sam was looking for you. It's time for you to go do your best man stuff."

Wes nodded. "I'll see you afterwards then, shall I?" Willow nodded and lifted on her toes again to kiss him and then she headed towards the back of the church as Wes headed for the front.

##

Buffy stood in front of her mother. "You look so beautiful." Her eyes were bright with tears.

"Not as beautiful as you look to me." Joyce rested her hands on the pregnant belly of her daughter.

"I feel silly walking down the aisle when I'm as big as a house."

Arms closed around her from behind. "Don't be. You look wonderful." Giles grinned at Joyce. "And you do look lovely, Joyce. Sam is a lucky man." Buffy turned her head to get a kiss from her husband.

Gwen moved to stand next to Joyce. "Besides don't feel bad. You won't be alone." Gwen ran her hands down her even larger belly.

Giles grinned at his sister. He still found it quite amusing that she would be the first of them to have a child. And while Ethan had been a nervous wreck at first, now he had graduated to mother hen, to both Gwen and Buffy.

"Where's your shadow?"

Gwen glanced quickly at Joyce and then shook her head at Giles as if to keep him quiet. "He's just taking care of something."

Giles rolled his eyes and just hoped that whatever Ethan was up to that it was something good. Ethan liked to arrange things. And moving to Sunnydale had been right up his alley as there had been so many things to arrange. He and Ethan had talked at great length about his career options. Giles had been right and the museum was willing to keep him on in any capacity. He went to England as a consultant every couple of months and had been a frequent visitor to several of the museum digs

But he had needed to find something here in Sunnydale and after long deliberation Giles decided to try teaching full time. It was something he had always loved to do in London. When he showed up at UC Sunnydale to meet with the Dean he had found that Ethan had gotten there before him. Coincidentally someone had just made a staggering endowment to set up a new school of History, Classics and Archeology. The Dean had been somewhat dazed to have been given so much money and then have someone with the credentials of Rupert Giles show up in his office but he had rallied and hired Giles on the spot as Department Chair.

Giles let his eye roam over the rest of the assembled group. It had taken Joyce a while but she had finally talked Kendra into being a bridesmaid. With her Watcher prodding her on one hand and Buffy setting an example on the other, Kendra had slowly been coming out of her Slayer enforced shell. She was still quiet and, when possible, chose to be in the background. But that was becoming more difficult these days as finally she and Xander had started dating and he liked the limelight.

Giles grinned at Willow as she bounced around visiting with everyone. Giles loved Willow. And Willow had been so good for Wes. She had seen

something salvageable in him much sooner than the rest of them had, and Giles was grateful to her for that. Giles had changed his mind about Wes and decided that he wasn't a prig after all. Giles was actually proud to have him as a friend these days.

Ethan came in and shut the door behind him. He winked at Gwen and she grinned back. Joyce and Sam would be riding to the airport in style. He looked at Joyce. "Are you ready? I think everyone's here." There were quite a few guests. Many of Joyce's clients were here as well as her personal friends. Courtesy of a chartered flight that Ethan arranged Sam's family and friends from Jamaica had also made it to the wedding. And Sam was well thought of at the Council and quite a few fellow Watchers were here to celebrate the day with him.

Joyce nodded. The women lined up in order of their progression. Gwen would be going first, then Kendra, Willow, and then Buffy as the maid of honor. Ethan kissed Gwen, pressed his hands to her belly and after Xander kissed Kendra on the cheek the two of them hurried to their seats.

The music started and at a nod from the wedding coordinator Gwen started her march. As the women slowly made their way down the aisle Giles took his place next to Joyce. He had been somewhat stunned and extraordinarily honored when she had asked him to walk her down the aisle. He looked at her, his eyes bright with affection. "Thank you again for this honor."

She smiled at him and shook her head. "It seems fitting, somehow, doesn't it? It all happened because of you."

Giles shook his head. "It all happened because of Buffy, and she happened because of you."

"Rupert, you've made her happy and you've made her laugh again, and now you're making me a grandmother. You've made so many of my own wishes for her come true. There isn't anything else you could have given me that matters to me more."

Gently taking her arm and weaving it through his he rested her hand on his forearm, covering it with his other hand. "I feel the same way. You gave me your daughter.

She blew out a shaky breath. "Don't make me cry, my mascara will run."

Giles laughed and kissed her on the cheek. And as he received the signal he stepped forward and walked Joyce down the aisle.

##

That night Buffy and Giles shared another dream. Giles knew where Buffy was even though he had never been there because she had spoken of it so often. She was curled up on the couch where in her first life with Giles as her Watcher, the two of them had had so many of their conversations, including the one when he told her he was leaving.

Her eyes were open but she wasn't looking at anything in particular. It was quite evident that she was feeling sad and that her thoughts were far away. She didn't even notice as the door to the training room opened.

A voice spoke. "Buffy?" She didn't respond so he spoke louder. "Buffy?"

Buffy's eyes opened wide and she sat up straight, her expression stunned as she took him in. "Giles?"

He smiled. "Yes, it's me."

Without conscious thought she was up and across the room and throwing herself in his arms. Giles' arms closed tightly around her and they held each other for a very long time. Finally she pulled back and stared up at him. "You're back." She touched his face in wonder. "I can't believe you're here." Buffy frowned. "Was I supposed to know you were coming?"

Giles let out a silent chuckle. "No, it was a surprise, even for me."

Buffy's brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"I tried to stay away. I tried to make a new life for myself. But how could I when you're here? My heart is here, with you." Buffy's eyes filled with tears. Giles wasn't finished. "So, I'm back. I'm back if you'll have me. I know I hurt you by leaving."

Buffy hugged him tightly again. "I don't care. I don't care about anything as long as you're here and as long as you're staying." She began to cry, the first tears she had cried in a long time.

Giles walked her over to the couch and he sat down, bringing her with him. He enfolded her in his arms, letting her cry herself out against his chest. His eyes were damp as well as he rested his cheek on the top of her head. "I missed you so much."

Buffy sobbed out the words. "Nothing's been right since you left."

"I'll never leave again, I swear it."

Buffy just cried harder, crying out all her pain, and all her loneliness. "So, you'll stay, for real?"

"I'm here to stay. I understand it now. I belong here with you. I never should have left."

Buffy wanted to crawl inside of him. Instead she just held on tight, feeling her connection to life and to wholeness start to grow again.

##

Buffy and Giles both woke from the dream with tears on their faces. Giles pulled Buffy in and hugged her so tightly she could hardly breathe. Pulling away from him she touched his face, wiping away his tears. "Did you dream that too?"

Giles nodded and wiped her tears away.

Buffy's realities superimposed themselves. Her hand stayed on his cheek, staring at him in wonder. "You came back. You came back to me."

Giles looked at her, his heart so full of love. "I belong with you Buffy. No matter what life you have, no matter how different it is, my place is with you. It always will be."

Buffy let out a cry and holding his face in her hands she kissed him. She closed her eyes as she felt something shift inside of her, the memories of her first life somehow coming to closure and growing more distant, those wounds finally able to heal. And as he kissed her back she let his love for her sweep her clean of those hurts and fears and filled with joy, she claimed this life.

The End

January 18, 2002