

## Friends and Lovers 1

January, 1998

Buffy pulled the trigger and the rocket flew straight into the Judge's chest as Angelus and Drusilla jumped over the railing to escape their own doom. The Judge disappeared into an explosion of flame and smoke. All the people in the mall started screaming, trying to run to safety. Angelus and Drusilla hit the floor below and looked around them in disbelief. Bits of the Judge were falling all around. Angelus slowly got up and ran off. Drusilla let out little startled cries of alarm and then ran off in the opposite direction.

Buffy looked at the disintegrated Judge with satisfaction. She handed the rocket launcher down to Xander. "Best present ever."

Xander nodded. "Knew you'd like it."

Willow looked around her with some concern. "Do you think he's dead?"

Buffy was looking for Angelus but she answered Willow's question. "We can't be sure. Pick up the pieces and keep them separate." Buffy saw Angelus and jumped down off the refreshment stand and took off after him, avoiding the customers who were still running every which way in fear.

Cordelia eyed the floor with distaste. "Pieces? We get the pieces? Our job sucks!"

The sprinklers came on in response to the smoke, dousing Buffy as she continued to run after Angelus. Suddenly Buffy fell as Angelus blind-sided her, hitting her.

He sent her a mocking look. "You know what the worst part was, huh? Pretending that I loved you. If I'd known how easily you'd give it up, I wouldn't have even bothered."

Buffy slowly got up. "That doesn't work anymore. You're not Angel."

"You'd like to think that, wouldn't you? It doesn't matter. The important thing is you made me the man I am today." He smiled, one of his chilling Angelus smiles that spoke so clearly of the demon within.

Buffy kicked him in the face. Angelus blocked her next swing and punched her in the face and in her gut. The two of them grappled for a minute, trying to throw the other off-balance. Then Angelus kicked her in the face and Buffy fell

to the floor. Rolling quickly she found her feet and launched herself at Angelus. She again found herself on the floor.

Angelus sneered at her. "Not quittin' on me already, are ya? Come on, Buffy. You know you want it."

Incensed, Buffy leapt up and kicked him in the face. He tried to recover but she kicked him in the chin and then landed a number of ferocious blows to his body. By the time she was done beating him he had staggered back into a potted tree. Buffy pulled out a stake and stood over him, fully intending to stake him. But her mind was suddenly full of Angel, of his love for her, how often he'd saved her life, of making love with him, how gentle he'd been. The arm holding the stake slowly fell to her side.

Angelus watched her for a second and then stood, facing her. "You can't do it. You can't kill me."

At his mocking tone, Buffy kicked him in the crotch and Angelus fell to his knees. Buffy turned as if to walk away. "Give me time." She took a step and then she thought of Giles. Thought of all her friends, and how Angelus would continue to prey on them all. She couldn't let that happen. Buffy spun around and thrust the stake through Angelus' heart. "That's enough time."

Angelus' eyes opened wide in disbelief as he looked down at his chest, the stake still in place. Then he exploded into dust and his remains settled on the floor.

Buffy knelt down on the floor, the tears streaming down her face getting lost in the spray from the sprinklers. She ran her hand through the dust, as it turned into mud, grieving for Angel but so relieved that Angelus was dead and wouldn't be able to hurt anyone anymore. Finally she got up and headed back to her friends.

Giles had been watching for her and smiled thankfully when he saw her. Buffy walked over to him and spoke softly, her voice tight. "He's dead."

She saw the flash of relief in Giles' eyes but he quickly squelched it, his concern for her taking precedence. He put his hand on her shoulder. "I'm so sorry, Buffy. Are you all right?"

She shook her head. "Not right now. But I will be."

"I'm here if you need me. I always will be."

She smiled at him, even through her tears. "I know that." She looked around

at her friends, still gathering up the Judge's remains, then turned back to Giles. "Can you finish up here? I really need some alone time."

"Absolutely. Take whatever time you need." He looked down at her, his face worried. "Just be careful." She nodded but didn't respond. He spoke again. "Come over later, if you want to, if you need to talk." She nodded again and then headed for the door, pushing it open and disappearing into the night.

Much later, Giles heard a soft knocking at his door. He put his book down and moved to open it, knowing it was Buffy. His heart broke for her when he saw her face. Her eyes were puffy and red rimmed and she was trying so hard not to cry as she stood there. Her need overcame his reserve and he reached for her to pull her into his arms. Buffy started to sob helplessly against his chest. Lifting her up he shut the door with his foot, and then carried her to his couch, where he sat and held her as she cried out her pain and her loss.

##

February, 1998

Jenny was at her desk, working on a computer program. She took a sip of coffee and then set the cup back down, looking pensively at the screen. Giles stood at the doorway. "Hello."

Jenny startled and looked at Giles, her heart leaping in her chest at the sight of him standing there, so close to her. "Oh! Hi."

Giles walked into the room. "You're working late."

Jenny rolled her eyes. "Snyder asked me to do ... well, trust me on this one, something very stupid that would bore you to tears if I tried to explain it to you."

"Oh." He wasn't sure what to say after that. There was so much still unsettled between them.

Jenny took a deep breath. "I spoke to Buffy today."

Giles glanced up at her in surprise, feeling a sense of hope that perhaps things weren't quite as irreparable as he'd thought only a moment ago. "Oh! Yes?" Giles sat on the corner of Jenny's desk.

"Mm." Jenny looked away. "She said you missed me." Jenny picked up a

pencil and ran it through her fingers, playing with it.

Giles pursed his lips. "Well, uh, she's ... a meddlesome girl."

Jenny looked at him, saw the humor back in his eyes, and knew that they had finally crossed a bridge. "I need to finish this up, but could I see you later?"

"Y-yes, yes. You could stop by my house."

Jenny smiled. "Okay."

Giles smiled back and stood up. "Good." He smiled even more and then he left.

Jenny watched him as he left, a grin on her face, her heart lighter than it had been in a while. She turned back to the computer scowling, wanting now to finish as quickly as possible so she could go see Rupert.

Giles was just finishing cleaning his dishes when he heard the knock on his door. Still wiping his hands off with a dishtowel he opened the door to find Jenny standing there. There was an awkward moment as the two of them stared at each other and then she crossed over the threshold and pulled him into a kiss. Throwing the dishtowel on the desk Giles wrapped his arms around her, shut the door with his foot, and kissed her back.

##

Buffy walked into the library the next day just in time to see the finish to what looked like a major smooch. Jenny noticed her and, still a bit uncomfortable around Buffy, turned to say a quick good morning to her, before heading out of the library back to her computer lab. Buffy grinned at Giles. "Guess you guys made up." She perched on the end of the library table

Giles blushed a little and moved to straighten some books. "Y-yes, we did." He glanced at her to see how she was taking it. As she continued to sit there grinning at him he let out a breath and moved over to the table to sit next to her, his shoulder near to hers. "Thank you. I know that you're still angry with her, and that this couldn't have been easy for you." He turned to look at her. "Is it all right?"

"The two of you?"

Giles nodded.

"Yeah, it's all right. No reason for all of us to be lonely. Besides I know she didn't mean it. I believe her when she says she didn't know what would happen."

"I know, but if she'd been honest we might have been able to research it, prevent it from happening."

Buffy smiled her self-deprecating grin. "Right. So I could spend the rest of my life with a boyfriend who I can't touch. That would have been a fairy tale come true. No matter how you sliced it, Giles, this was not going to end up happy."

"No, I suppose that's true enough, but I'm still sorry."

"I know you are. And it makes a difference that I know you really mean that. I keep catching Xander doing happy Snoopy dances. I can't tell you how much it's bugging me."

Giles bit back a smile. "Yes, well, Xander was never very fond of Angel."

Buffy snorted. "Understatement much?"

Giles did smile at that. One of his fast smiles that was gone almost as soon as it appeared. "So, you really don't mind about Jenny and me being back together?"

Buffy shook her head. "I really don't mind." She pushed off the table into a standing position. "Just make sure that in all of the excitement that you don't forget that you're my Watcher."

Giles stood as well and looked down at her. "I never forget that. Ever."

Buffy gave him a solemn look and then she nodded. Pointing to the hallway she spoke. "I gotta get to class."

Giles looked up at the clock. "Yes, you'd better hurry, or you'll be late." He smiled at her. "I'll see you later? For training?"

Buffy's nod this time was much cockier. "After my last class. I'll bring the music."

Giles made a face at her. "Must you?"

"I must." Giles let out a long-suffering sigh and Buffy grinned at him. Spinning on her heels she headed off to her class. Giles watched her go and for a brief moment in time was grateful to feel that all was well with his world.

## End of Part 1

### Friends and Lovers 2

January, 2000

Giles stepped outside the hotel room to watch Ethan get manhandled into a vehicle. Riley stepped closer to Buffy and she smiled up at him. "Thanks."

"I told you I'd help."

"You did. If I'd gotten here any later and if Giles had killed Ethan, I ...never would have gotten him back."

Riley looked at her. "You'd find some other way." He paused. "You're really strong. Like Spiderman strong."

"Yeah. But I don't stick to stuff. But ...yeah."

"And you're in charge. You're like, make the plan, execute the plan. No one giving you orders."

Buffy hesitated for a second, nervous about his reaction, but then she simply spoke the truth. "I'm the Slayer."

"I like it."

Buffy smiled. "Yeah?"

Riley smiled back. "But give me another ...oh ...week to get ready. And I'll take you down."

Buffy gave him a look, letting him know that she got the double meaning. She rose on her tiptoes and kissed him. "Let me get Giles home, and then I'll come over, okay?"

Riley nodded. "Don't be long."

"I'll be there as fast as I can." Buffy headed out the door and went to stand next to Giles. He was watching the car holding Ethan drive away down the street. She looked up at him. "Hey."

Giles looked down at her, his face still holding traces of his embarrassment. He ran a hand through his hair and sighed.

She moved a little closer. "And that wraps up another fun filled Ethan Rayne episode."

Giles let out a small groan. "He really is a pillock. And I'm a fool for letting him into my flat and drinking with him."

Buffy tilted her head to the side, considering him. "Why did you, anyway?"

Giles shook his head. "I don't know. We used to be friends, long ago. He said he had some information for me about the Initiative." Giles looked speculative for a moment. "Which surprisingly, he did. Not that I'm at all sure he should be considered a reliable source of information." He glanced down at Buffy. "Nevertheless, it was a mistake."

Buffy touched his arm lightly, her face tight. "I could have killed you. If that letter opener had been silver, you'd be dead right now."

"Yes, well, let's be grateful for cheap knock offs." When he saw that Buffy was not amused he spoke again. "I'm sorry I put you through that."

"What do you have to be sorry for? I'm the one who should be sorry, I almost killed you."

"You thought you were killing a demon, one that had killed me. There was no way that you could have known. And I'm sorry that I didn't exhibit greater wisdom as regards my drinking companion." He looked at her for a moment, his lips pursed. "Do I really spend that much time looking annoyed with you?"

Buffy looked at him, at his eyes. "No. I just said that to get us through the awkward moment there." She smiled at him. "But I do know them, your eyes. I know them as well as my own. As soon as I got a look at them I knew it was you." She scowled. "I just wish I'd looked a few seconds earlier."

Giles touched his chest where the letter opener had entered him. The wound had gone away once he was human again but the sensation of pain remained. "I'm just grateful you recognized me at all. It was a very unpleasant sensation having no one know it was me." He rolled his eyes. "Except Spike. That's irony for you." He looked around. "I wonder where he got to, anyway. He has my car."

"Knowing Spike he's probably on his way to Tijuana."



Giles let out a sigh and then shook his head, shaking the care away. "Well, he did find Ethan for me so I suppose I ought to be grateful to him." He looked down at Buffy again. "And to you."

"Hey, that's what Slayers are for." She furrowed her brow. "By the way, where's Jenny been in all the excitement? We tried to call her when we found your apartment all trashed, hoping maybe you were there."

"She's out-of-town at some computer convention. She's due back in tonight and was planning on stopping by."

Buffy looked at the ground. "That was bad."

Giles wasn't sure he followed. "I'm sorry? Jenny's leaving?"

Buffy shook her head. "No, finding your apartment that way. Thinking you were dead."

He lifted her chin with the side of his hand. "I'm sorry, Buffy. I really am sorry I put you through that."

Buffy gave in to her impulse and hugged him. Giles was surprised but he held her close for a minute. Buffy mumbled against his chest. "I'm just glad you're alive."

Giles chuckled and Buffy could feel the vibration beneath her cheek. "As am I."

Buffy pulled back and glanced up at him, feeling a little shy. She decided to go for an offensive move to help get things back in balance. She frowned and shook her finger at him. "No more drinking with Ethan."

Giles flashed her a quick grin and he acquiesced to her command with a slight dip of his head. "I promise."

Buffy nodded, satisfied. Then she looked worried. "What time is Jenny supposed to be getting to your place? She's gonna freak when she sees the apartment if you're not there."

Giles looked at his watch. "She could be arriving any time. I'd best be getting back." He glanced down at Buffy. "Of course, she has become somewhat used to my surroundings being in a bit of an uproar."

Buffy gave him a wry smile. "The joys of being my Watcher."



Giles spoke sincerely. "It is a joy." He grinned. "Most of the time."

"Yeah, well, I don't think Jenny will be thinking it's a joy when she hears about this." She grinned at him though, delighted at his words.

"There is no way she can blame you for my poor judgment, Buffy. Ethan was my friend, and my enemy, long before I met you. I should have known better."

Buffy flashed him an impish look. "Hey, you can make this all her fault. Tell her if she'd stayed in town this never would have happened."

Giles gave her one of his looks. He shook his head. "You know as well as I do, that Jenny and I do not spend every night together."

"I know. I know you still spend most of your time doing Watchery things."

"That's because being a Watcher is what I am. Jenny understands that."

"Well, I'm glad she does because I'd hate to have to slay her if she didn't. You're my Watcher first."

Giles smiled at her and then he glanced at the hotel. "And are you my Slayer first?" He wasn't quite sure why he suddenly felt the need to know that.

Buffy smiled one of her lopsided smiles. "You'll notice I'm out here, and not in there, right?"

Giles smiled softly back. "Point taken." He looked down again at his shirt, touching it distastefully. "I really need to get home. My stint as a Fyarl demon has left me with a strong desire for a long hot shower."

Buffy grinned at him. "Probably all that mucus, huh?"

Giles looked affronted. "Can you believe it? Of all the demons Ethan could turn me into he turns me into one that sprays mucus. Why didn't he turn me into something that could shoot flames of fire, or ...?" Giles tried to think of another equally worthy trait but he came up empty. "Mucus." Shaking his head in disgust he shivered. "The whole thing was just appalling."

Buffy laughed. "Well, come on mucus guy. Let me get you home." She started to head off. They actually weren't too far from Giles' home.

Giles glared at her. "Stop calling me that, immediately."

Buffy just laughed again and the two of them headed off companionably into the night.

Riley watched from the hotel room until he couldn't see them anymore.

##

Jenny pulled up and parked in front of Giles' apartment. As she was about to open the car door she saw Buffy and Giles approaching, deep in conversation. Her first instinct was to get out and greet them but something in their demeanor kept her inside her car, watching them.

Buffy stopped once they got outside his place. She looked up at Giles. "Here you are, safe and sound."

Giles flashed a grin at her. "Yes, well, thank you." He took a step towards the door. "Would you like to come in?"

She shook her head. "Nah. I've spent enough time with that shirt."

"Ha ha. Very funny."

They stared at one another for a moment and then Giles, in an uncharacteristically intimate gesture touched her cheek with the backs of his fingers. "Thank you for recognizing me."

Buffy closed her eyes for a second, enjoying the closeness. When he pulled his fingers away she opened her eyes and smiled. "Sure. Thanks for not dying. Really, I mean that."

Giles let out a soft laugh. "You're quite welcome."

"I don't want to ever have to do this alone."

"You're not alone, Buffy. You have Willow and Xander."

"It's not the same. When I say not alone I mean you, you and me. It's always been us, no matter who else gets involved." She gestured between them with her hand. "The buck stops here."

He smiled softly at her. "I suppose it does. It is our duty, after all."

A look of sadness flashed across Buffy's face. "Is that all it is?"

Giles' eyes widened, shocked that she even felt the need to ask the question. "No, no, of course not. It never has been, from the moment I met you."

Buffy let out the breath she didn't even know she was holding. "Not just my Watcher then?"

"No, your friend, too. As I hope that you are mine as well."

"You are. My friend. You and me, friends."

Giles smiled down at her. "Friends it is." He glanced at the door. "I'd best get in." He paused. "Buffy, until we know a bit more about the Initiative, would you be careful?"

"I will." Buffy took a step away. "Oh, and don't forget to tell Jenny all about the mucus."

Giles glared at her. "Must you keep bringing that up?"

Buffy giggled. "I can't help it."

"Do try."

Buffy giggled again. Giles sent her a final glare, coupled with a brief smile and he turned away and headed inside. Buffy watched until he got in safely and then she turned around and headed to Riley's.

Jenny sat in the car for another minute and then she slowly opened the door. Retrieving her suitcase she glanced down the street where Buffy had disappeared and then, shaking off her mood, she hurried the rest of the way in.

##

After they had made love Giles lay in bed, Jenny nestled against his side, her head on his shoulder. The hateful shirt was wadded up in the trash. Jenny ran a hand over his heart, where the letter opener had pierced him. "She almost killed you."

"No, you mustn't say that. She didn't know it was me when she did that. Buffy would never hurt me."

Jenny found herself annoyed with Buffy for some reason, or perhaps her annoyance lay with Giles' constant need to defend her. "You get hurt all the time when you're with her."

"None of it is intentional. She's the Slayer. Her life is filled with danger and my place is beside her."

"Must you place yourself in danger as well? Can't you be her Watcher from afar?"

Giles let out a sigh. "Like my father before me, like most Watchers have been and will probably be?" He ran a hand down Jenny's arm. "I suppose I could be, but I don't choose to be that way. My place is with her, helping her any way I can." He rolled on his side facing Jenny. "You know that. You know my thoughts on this. I've never misled you, Jenny. She must come first. If something happened to her because I wasn't there with her I wouldn't be able to live with myself."

"And if something happens to you? Would she be able to live with that? Have you asked her? Maybe she'd rather have you someplace safe." Jenny ran her hand over his chest again. She longed to keep Rupert safe, to keep him alive and by her side.

Giles cocked his head a little to the side. "She probably would. In fact, I know she would. She's told me as much herself. Just as I would choose to keep her safe, keep her home, with her mother, with her friends, instead of facing death every night."

"Are you sure you don't make it more difficult for her by being with her? Isn't her life difficult enough without her having to be afraid for your safety every night as well?"

Giles pursed his lips, considering Jenny's words. Doubt started to wiggle its way into his heart. Maybe he was making it harder for her. He let out a sigh. "I'll talk to her about it, all right?"

Jenny nodded. "I just don't want anything to happen to you. I love you." Giles pulled her closer to him and he caught her lips in a kiss. Jenny allowed herself to be distracted but it didn't escape her attention that he hadn't told her that he loved her as well. He never did. She knew that he loved her; he showed her that he did. He called her love, and touched her so tenderly, but the actual words never passed his lips. The I'm in love with you words. The words that, as time passed, Jenny found herself more and more desperate to hear.

##

Riley held Buffy in his arms as they both cooled down from their lovemaking.

She wore him out. He grinned at her. "You are so amazing."

She grinned back at him. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Buffy snuggled in closer. "Tell me more."

Riley laughed. "Okay. First of all, you're like a superhero. Then, you're beautiful, with this knockout figure, and you're great in bed. And then you're caring, and smart."

Buffy rolled up on an elbow and looked down at him. "You were doing so great but you lost me on the smart part. Giles is the smart one. He's the brains, I'm the brawn."

Riley frowned. "You are smart, Buffy. Does Giles tell you you're not smart?"

"God no, he's always scolding me whenever I say that I'm dumb." She grinned. "He's the one who helped me study for my SATs and I completely aced those."

"So why don't you think you're smart?"

"It's not so much that I don't think I'm smart, I just know that Giles is smarter. He's kind of a genius guy."

"Who is he, anyway? I mean, I can guess by what you're saying that he helps you with the Slaying, but what is he?"

"He's my Watcher. Every Slayer has a Watcher."

"And what does a Watcher do? What does Giles do?"

"He trains me, he teaches me to fight." At the look on Riley's face she grinned. "I know he's kind of old, but he's good. He knows a gazillion types of martial arts, and how to use every kind of weapon there is. Plus he's a whiz with a sword."

Riley wasn't quite sure he believed her but he wanted to move on. "What else does he do?"

"He knows tons of stuff about demons and reads a bunch of languages, and has a huge library of books filled with info about the stuff I fight. So he researches a lot, finds out how to kill the demons, finds prophecies of bad

things coming up." Her eyes grew bleak for a second.

"What's the matter?"

She shook off her mood. "Nothing. Just some of those prophecies suck, big time." She thought about Giles again. "He patches me up when I get hurt, and makes me feel better when bad stuff happens. He's sort of like the other half of me. Slayer and Watcher." A flash of pain crossed her eyes again. "I had a Watcher before him."

Riley's eyebrows rose. "What happened to him?"

"He died. I got him killed. I froze up with this uber bad vampire and he tried to protect me and he died." She looked at Riley. "I killed the vampire, I got it together enough to do that, but it was too late. Merrick was dead."

"Were you as close to him as you are to Giles?"

She shook her head. "No. I mean, he wasn't my Watcher for long, less than a year, but we just never connected that way. Not the way Giles and I am. Connected, that is."

"What does that mean, exactly?"

"Connected?"

Riley nodded. "Yeah." He was annoyed at how jealous he was feeling. Jealous of a man old enough to be Buffy's dad.

"I don't know. It's like we can read each other's thoughts. We always know when the other one is upset, or angry. He just knows me, inside and out. I can't imagine doing this without him. I get so afraid sometimes, that something is gonna happen to him, like it did to Merrick, like it almost did tonight." Buffy rested her head on Riley's chest and her voice was muffled. "I almost killed him tonight." Buffy was having a hard time getting past that.

"But you didn't."

"He gets hurt so often, and it's always my fault."

"Why does he get hurt so much?"

"Because he's with me so much." She lifted her head and smiled ruefully at Riley. "You should know that it's an occupational hazard if you're going to hang with me."

"I'm willing to take the risk."

Buffy kissed him softly. "That's what Giles always says."

Riley was tired of talking about Giles. He rolled over until he was on top of Buffy. "Well, we're all safe now, so let's get back to the business at hand, all right?"

Buffy could feel his erection against her leg. She reached down and grabbed him. "Consider it well in hand."

Riley grinned and started kissing her.

End of Part 2

### Friends and Lovers 3

The next night Giles and Buffy were patrolling. During a lull Giles brought the subject up, as promised. "Buffy?"

"Hmm?"

"Would you rather I didn't patrol with you?"

She looked at him in surprise. "I thought you liked patrolling with me." She winced when she heard the pout in her voice.

Giles hurried to reassure her. "I do. I do like patrolling with you."

"So, why are you asking me?"

Giles let out a sigh. "I just wonder if I make it harder for you by being here. If I distract you. If I possibly put you in danger by insisting on accompanying you."

Buffy stopped and moved to sit on a tombstone. This required face-to-face communication. Giles leaned on the one opposite hers. For a long time Giles had felt that the easy way Buffy perched on tombstones, using them as her personal furniture was disrespectful. He'd finally decided that that if he were dead he would be more than happy to let a Slayer perch on his headstone and he'd moved on, letting it go. Giles just waited for Buffy to respond, wanting to give her time to answer honestly. A part of him scanned the darkness, looking for danger. Finally Buffy answered. "Merrick died when he



was with me."

"I know."

"I don't want anything to happen to you."

"Nor do I." Giles clarified. "Want anything to happen to you."

Buffy tapped her stake against the headstone, thinking. "But you got hurt the other night and you weren't even with me."

"That's true. I've been hurt several times when I've not been with you."

"You even got hurt on campus that one time."

Giles nodded, remembering. After the high school was blown up, both he and Jenny went to teach at UC Sunnydale. One night, when he was working late, he had surprised a demon rifling through an office close to his. "This is a dangerous town."

"At least when you're with me, I can keep an eye on you."

Giles rolled his eyes. "I'm not completely helpless, you know."

"I didn't mean it like that. I just ..." Buffy sighed. "Riley's offered to help me patrol. Him and his team. You know, with all the hi-tech gadgets they have."

Giles nodded, keeping his face clear of all expression. "Would you prefer that?" Giles was pleased that his voice sounded so calm, that none of his dismay showed up in it.

"No. Maybe." She saw it then, on his face, and she jumped off her tombstone and walked over to him. "Giles, the only reason I don't want you on patrol with me is that I don't want you to get hurt. I couldn't handle it."

"Aren't you afraid Riley could get hurt?"

"Yes, but it's different."

Giles scuffed at the grass with his shoe. "How so?"

"I really care about Riley, I do, and he's my boyfriend and everything but ..."

"But?"

She looked up at him, her eyes huge and dark in the night, only the smallest sliver of moon casting any light. "If you died, if anything happened to you, I'd feel like a part of me had died. I need you, Giles. I need you alive to keep me going."

Giles looked down on his Slayer. "Ah."

Buffy frowned at him. "You're being Mr. Inscrutable. What does 'ah' mean?"

"Quite a few things, actually."

"So start listing them."

"It means that I feel the same way. It means that I want to do whatever I can to keep you alive as well. It means that perhaps I do distract you when I'm on patrol with you, because you know I'll take chances with my life to protect you. It means that perhaps you should take Riley patrolling with you."

"As long as you get it that it doesn't mean I don't want you around. And I still want to patrol with you every now and then." Suddenly Buffy felt a moment of panic at the thought of not patrolling with Giles, of not being with him. "Like every other night."

Giles smiled at that. "Every other night?"

"Yeah, like one night with Riley, one night with you. That cuts the danger in half. That's a good thing, right?"

Giles put his hand on her shoulder, lightly resting it there. "I don't want to make this harder on you, any harder than it already is. You needn't worry about my feelings in this."

"I'm not." Buffy grimaced. "I mean, I am, but I'm also thinking about my feelings. I like being with you. I don't want to not patrol with you but I also don't want you to get hurt." Her eyes pleaded with him. "So, every other night. We'll try that and see how it goes."

"All right. Just try not to let Riley get hurt. He seems like a nice chap."

Buffy grinned. "He is a nice chap. And he'll be okay. He's pretty good in a fight." She glanced at Giles again. "Not that you're not. I mean you're great in a fight. He's just, you know, kinda young, and you're, you know, kinda not."

"Ah." Giles nodded.

"There you go with the 'ah' again. What does this one mean?"

Giles was actually grateful for the vampire who came out of nowhere. He hadn't wanted to answer Buffy's question, let her know that that particular 'ah' meant that Buffy's words had suddenly made him feel terribly old, and not very useful. Perhaps he truly was better suited to be behind a desk, communing with his books, a cup of tea in his hand.

Buffy dispatched the vampire fairly quickly, wanting to get back to the conversation. She had a feeling that 'ah' hadn't been a particularly good one. Giles just stood to the side and watched her, amazed anew at her skills. He loved to see her in action when he wasn't deathly afraid for her. His thoughts were interrupted when suddenly Buffy was standing in front of him, picking up the conversation as if a vampire hadn't just interrupted it. "What did it mean?"

"It doesn't matter, Buffy."

"Oh oh. Yes it does. Especially if you think it doesn't matter." Giles took off his glasses and started to clean them. Buffy looked even more nervous. "And even more especially if it makes you clean your glasses."

Giles flashed her a small grin at that. "It's silly, really, not even worth talking about." Giles put his glasses back on and gestured for her to move on. "Let's finish patrol. It's getting late."

Buffy didn't budge. "No way." At Giles' look she simply sat on the tombstone again. "Fine, I'll figure it out on my own." Buffy began reviewing the conversation. She screwed her mouth up, first on one side and then the other. Finally she looked up at him. "It's about Riley isn't it?"

Giles looked momentarily disconcerted. "What do you mean?"

"It's like how I felt when you sort of let me know that you'd rather research with Willow. I felt stupid, and like you didn't want me around."

Giles' eyebrows rose and he protested. "I never felt that way."

"Yes you did. You'd much rather have Willow help you research than me."

"That might be true but it never meant I didn't want you around or that you were stupid. Willow just ..."

Buffy grinned, interrupting him. "I get it, Giles. I mean I already got it. She's total research girl and I'm not. But back then, it made me feel bad." She looked at him, her eyes worried. "Did I just do that to you with Riley? Make

you feel bad?"

"Buffy, it wasn't you. You have the right to be with whomever you want."

Buffy frowned at him. "You always do that."

"What?"

"Make it about me when I want it to be about you."

Giles smiled a little. "You noticed that, did you?"

"Yes." She jumped off the tombstone and walked over to him again. "I didn't mean it, whatever I said. I mean, I probably meant it, but not in a way that means anything about you." Buffy scrunched her face up. "Did that make sense?"

"Surprisingly enough, yes it did." And even more surprisingly, Giles felt better after hearing her convoluted words.

Buffy grinned. "Cool." She scrunched her face up. "So, are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine." At the look on her face Giles smiled. "Really, I'm fine. Thank you for being so concerned."

"Hey, if there's one thing I've learned, boyfriends come and go, but I only have one Watcher." Buffy looked around nervously. "But don't tell Riley I said that."

Giles chuckled quietly. "He'll never hear of it from me, I promise you."

They both headed off, Giles matching his stride to Buffy's shorter one. Buffy could tell that Giles was a bit distracted. Finally she stopped walking and swung around to face him. "What? Spit it out."

Giles smiled wryly at her. "You really are getting very good at that."

"At what?"

"Reading my mind."

Buffy grinned, but then she shook her head. "Nah, I can't read your mind yet, I can only tell when there's something in there screaming to get out."

"It's hardly screaming, Buffy." Giles looked indignant that she might think any

part of him would ever actually scream.

"Whatever. Spill."

Giles put his hands in his pockets and looked at the ground. "I just wanted to tell you that I feel much the same way."

Buffy frowned. "You lost me."

Giles struggled against his usual reticence. "I understood you to say that your relationship with me, as your Watcher, is significant to you. Quite significant."

"Did I say that?" At Giles' glare Buffy laughed. "Sorry, I'm ruining the mood. I know this mushy stuff is hard for you."

"Yes, well, I'll stop now."

"Oh, no you don't." Buffy grabbed hold of his arm when it looked as if he might start walking again. "Really, I'm sorry. I'll be good now. And if it helps, yes, I did say that, although in a much less British and stuffy way."

Giles rolled his eyes at her words. "I simply wanted to say that I feel the same way, about you, as my Slayer."

"You mean, like, girlfriends come and go but you only have one Slayer?"

"Something like that."

"I probably shouldn't tell Jenny you said that either."

"Probably not."

"Although actually you've had another Slayer, even if it didn't last very long."

"She was never really mine, Buffy."

Buffy grinned at him in delight. "Like I am?"

Giles nodded. "Yes, like you are."

Buffy leaned forwards and kissed Giles on the cheek. "Thank you."

Giles touched his cheek in surprise. Then he smiled at her. "You are most welcome." He looked at her. "Although as regards me having another Slayer, you have also had another Watcher."

"Not like you."

Giles touched her arm. "Just so." They stared at one another for a moment and then a noise up ahead startled them both.

Buffy sighed. "Duty calls."

Giles pulled out a stake from his inner pocket. "Yes, it does." He gestured at her to go look. "I'll be right behind you."

At his words, Buffy felt an odd moment of peace. Smiling at him she turned and ran.

##

Four months later (late spring):

Giles was speaking on the phone to Jenny when he realized what time it was. "Jenny, I'm afraid I need to go. I need to meet Buffy for patrol."

There was a brief period of silence. "I've been meaning to talk to you about that."

"About what, dear."

"Patrolling."

"Is there something that needs to be discussed?" Giles' voice has grown tight.

Jenny ignored the warning tone. "I'm not sure I understand why you continue to patrol with Buffy when she has all those young Initiative men to patrol with her."

"I patrol with Buffy because she has asked me to."

"Are you sure she just didn't want to hurt your feelings?"

"Yes, I'm quite sure." Giles sighed. "Jenny, why are we even having this conversation again?"

"I just don't see why you should be risking yourself when she seems to have dozens of these young men more than capable of backing her up. Wouldn't it make more sense for you to be spending your time in ways that they can't?"

Using that extraordinary mind of yours?"

Giles smiled tightly. "Jenny."

"Besides, I miss you. I wanted to come over tonight. I want to make love to you, touch you."

Giles sighed. "As wonderful as that sounds, I really do have to go. I don't want to be late." He paused. "I can come over later."

Jenny's voice was rich with disappointment. "No, you always get home too late. I have an early class tomorrow."

"I'm sorry, Jenny."

"I know, Rupert. I just don't feel as if I see you enough."

"Shall we have dinner tomorrow night? Perhaps see a show?"

"As long as it's Mexican."

Giles' voice was teasing. "Which exactly? Dinner or the show?"

Jenny laughed. "I'll drop by your office later tomorrow."

"Lovely. See you then." Giles hung up and grabbing his jacket, checking the pockets for stakes, he headed out.

##

"I don't understand why you still patrol with him."

Buffy glanced at Riley. She was slipping on her boots. "He's my Watcher."

"You told me he got fired." Riley had been told most of the stories.

Buffy waved her hand. "That's just a technicality. I think he's my Watcher, he thinks he's my Watcher, that makes him my Watcher."

"That still doesn't explain why you have to patrol with him. I can patrol with you."

"I know you can, but I like to patrol with him."



"Buffy, he's an old man. He could get hurt."

Buffy looked at Riley, miffed at his words, feeling defensive of Giles, and then her jaw dropped as she recalled her conversation with him and connected the dots. She smacked herself on the head. "That's what I said." She shook her head, disgusted at herself.

"What?"

"I told ..." Buffy waved off the comment. "Never mind. Yeah, he's older than you but he's in great shape and he's killed way more vampires than you."

"I find that hard to believe."

"Believe it."

"He still can't protect you like I can. I know he doesn't have all the equipment we have."

Buffy sighed and looked up at Riley. "Riley, why do you care so much? I want to patrol with you and I want to patrol with my Watcher. Deal, okay?" She got up to her knees and inched over to the bed where Riley was sitting. Buffy reached up and gave him a kiss. "It's no big."

Riley knew she was right, but he also knew she was wrong, and he wasn't quite sure why. Running his fingers through her hair he claimed her lips for a territorial kiss. When he paused for breath he spoke. "Will I see you later?"

Buffy shook her head. "Nah, not tonight."

"Why not?"

"Because Giles and I have some talking to do. There's some weirdness coming that he found in one of his books and we need to figure out how to deal with it."

"Maybe I should come along too, then, so I can help."

Buffy didn't want Riley there. "I'll let you know how you can help once we figure out what's going on. Hopefully it's just a false alarm." Buffy stood, looking down at him. "Have a night off, go hang with your guy friends, do guy things." She turned as if to go.

Riley grabbed her arm. "Just be careful, I don't want anything to happen to you."

"I'll be fine."

"I love you."

Buffy looked at Riley with some surprise. "You do?"

"So much."

Buffy ran her hand down Riley's face. "Wow." She kissed him softly and then she left the room. It didn't escape Riley's attention that she hadn't said it back.

End of Part 3

## Friends and Lovers 4

It had been a busy night and they decided to reward themselves with some ice cream. Settling into a booth after ordering their favorites, Giles frowned when he saw Buffy's face under the harsh lights. "You're hurt more seriously than I thought. Perhaps we should take our ice cream home so I can wash that out."

Buffy put her hand up to her head, touching the place where it hurt, pulling away fingers dabbed with blood. "No wonder the guy at the counter was giving me such weird looks." She stood. "I'll just go wash up. It really doesn't hurt."

Giles watched her as she entered the ladies washroom. Sighing, he stretched out his legs. He hated when she got hurt. It always reminded him of what could happen to her if she let her guard down at the wrong moment. That's all it would take, one wrong move and she could be dead. Over the years, the possibility of her death had grown more difficult for him to deal with until at this point, the thought of it felt quite overwhelming. Giles didn't think he'd survive if anything happened to her. Lost in thought he didn't even notice Buffy's return. He looked up, startled, to find her staring at him. "Buffy."

She grinned at him. "Where were you? It didn't look like a very happy place." The grin slid off her face. "Are you all right?"

Giles nodded. "Just woolgathering. I'm sorry."

"Woolgathering from black sheep, it looked like."

Giles smiled at the imagery. "Yes, very black." Giles was grateful when he heard his name being called, indicating that their ice cream sundaes were ready to be picked up.

As he brought them back to the table Buffy's eyes lit up. "Yum."

Giles couldn't help but agree. "It's a good thing we don't do this very often or I'd be as big as a house."

Buffy cast her gaze over Giles. "Nah, you got nothing to worry about. You stay in great shape."

Giles' eyebrows rose at her comment but his mouth was full of ice cream so he didn't respond.

Buffy ate for a while, punctuating the air with sounds of delight. Then she looked at Giles. "How old are you?"

"46."

Buffy pursed her lips, spoon held mid-air. "46?"

Giles nodded. "Why?"

"Does that feel old to you? I mean, do you feel old?"

Giles let out a soft laugh. "No, well, sometimes, I suppose I certainly feel older. But, no, I don't feel particularly old."

"How do you feel older?"

"A little creakier, a little less resilient, a few more aches and pains, especially after a difficult patrol, that sort of thing."

"But inside of you, you don't feel old?"

Giles furrowed his brow as he looked at her. "Why this sudden interest in my age?"

"Just answer the question."

"No, inside I still feel as if I'm young, most of the time. Wiser, certainly, than when I was your age, and I've had many more experiences, but the important things that give one pleasure and cause one pain are pretty universal regardless of age."

"Like what?"

Giles thought for a minute. "Wanting someone to love you, wanting to love someone in return, wanting to feel as if you are living your life well and making a difference. Most people want those things, regardless of their age, once they've ceased being a child, at any rate. The advantage to being older, at least in my experience, is that it helps clarify things a bit." He took a bite of ice cream and then waved his spoon at Buffy. "Don't you want those things?"

"Absolutely." She paused. "I want people to like me, too."

Giles smiled at her. "Everyone wants that, Buffy. But as you get older you begin to realize that you cannot be true to yourself and have everyone like you. People are too different. You need to determine how you mean to be and what's important to you. Then spend time with the people who like you for those traits and recognize that the rest of them don't really matter and can in fact make you sell yourself short if you try to please them."

"Do you like me?"

Giles stared at her, his spoon half way to his mouth. "Excuse me?"

"Do you like me? I mean, I know I'm your Slayer, and we're all connected and stuff. But do you just like me for me?"

Giles smiled at her, reaching out with his free hand to lightly touch hers. "Yes, Buffy. I like you very much."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Cool." She went back to her ice cream. After a few bites she looked up at Giles. "I like you too."

Giles smiled again. "Thank you. That's nice to hear."

"And I don't think you're old. I mean, not in a bad way. Just that you're older, like you said, with more aches and pains."

Giles stared at her for a moment, his face serious as he considered her. "Have you been worrying about that conversation all this time?"

"Sorta. I knew I said something stupid. It just took me this long to figure it

out."

"Buffy, it wasn't stupid. It was the truth. I'm sure I seem very old to you. I was older than you are now when you were born."

"That's kind of a wigsome thought." Giles let out a short laugh and opened his mouth to speak but she beat him to it. "It's kind of cool, though, too. Cuz it means you're smart and can understand all the stupid things I do." She watched Giles' eyes darken and she corrected herself. "Okay, not stupid. Less than smart. Is that better?"

Giles shook his head in exasperation. "Buffy, you're simply growing up. It should all fall under the category of learning. Not identified with such pejorative words."

"I'm guessing that means bad."

"Yes, that means bad."

"Say it again."

"Pejorative."

Buffy mouthed it a couple of times. "Pejorative, pejorative. Hmpf. I need to get one of those learn a new word a day calendars so I can start using big fancy words like you."

"That's not necessary. I generally understand you quite well."

"Yeah, well, it doesn't always work so well going the other way."

"You always ask me if you don't understand what I'm saying."

"Assuming I haven't fallen asleep."

"Very amusing. Would you like me to start using words of fewer syllables so you can more easily follow my thoughts?"

"Nah, it wouldn't be Gilesy if you did that."

"Gilesy?"

"Yeah, it wouldn't be you. You're all smart. I like that. It's sort of, I don't know, sexy."

Giles coughed on his current bite of ice cream. "Sexy?" That's a word he never expected Buffy to use to describe him.

"Yeah. I read that all the time in my magazines. That women think smart guys are sexy. I get it now. It is."

Giles had no idea how to respond so he went back to his ice cream.

Finally Buffy spoke again. "Does it bother Jenny when you patrol with me?"

Giles looked at Buffy, surprised. "Why do you ask?"

"Just curious."

He cocked his head to the side. "Does it bother Riley?"

Buffy nodded. "Big time."

"Why?"

"I have no idea. But he really doesn't like it. We argued about it again tonight."

"Ah."

Buffy frowned at him. "There you go with the 'ah' again."

"Sorry." He smiled. "It didn't really mean anything this time."

"So, does it bother Jenny?"

"Yes, it does."

"Do you argue about it?"

"I wouldn't say we argue about it, but we certainly have an overabundance of conversations about it."

Buffy grinned. "That's my Giles. I'll bet Jenny would call them arguments."

Giles sighed. "She might at that."

"So, what's her deal?"

Giles thought about the conversation he'd had tonight with Jenny. He took a more generalized tack when he answered Buffy. "When people fall in love

with someone, they like to think that the object of their affection belongs entirely to them. I would imagine that the relationship that you and I have is not easily understood by anyone else. It might be perceived as threatening."

"You mean like they're jealous?"

"I suppose that's one way to put it. But I think it's a bit more complicated than that."

"Like not jealous romantically, but jealous even deeper. Like they know there's a piece of you they can never, ever have."

Giles' eyebrows rose at her words. "Yes, I believe that sums it up very well."

Buffy grinned with pleasure. "See? I can be smart too."

"I am hardly the one who needs to be convinced of that."

"I know. I was saying it for me." She took a last bite of her ice cream. "I'm stuffed. I can't eat another bite." She pushed her bowl away.

Giles wasn't quite done so he kept eating.

Buffy started playing with the salt shaker. "So, you think that's what Riley and Jenny are seeing? That you and I, you know..."

"That you and I are invested in one another in a way that makes them feel excluded?"

"Yeah. Like we own pieces of each other that they don't get to have."

"Yes, I imagine that is exactly what they see."

Buffy looked at Giles' bowl. "Is that a cherry?"

Giles grinned and lifted it out. "Here."

Buffy leaned forwards and nibbled it out of his fingers. Giles tried to ignore the flush that went through him as her lips touched him. After she finished eating the cherry she looked at the bowl again. "Any more of those?" Giles started looking. While she waited she leaned back. "No wonder they're not crazy about us spending time together." Giles found another cherry and spooned this one out. Buffy picked it off the spoon. "Thanks."

Giles nodded. "You're welcome. I think that's the last one." He pushed his



bowl away too. "They don't understand. Even were we to spend less time together, the connection would still be there."

"Yup, you're stuck with me." Buffy picked up her spoon and started scraping through Giles' ice cream, looking for missed goodies.

Giles grinned. "Yes, I am, as you are stuck with me."

Buffy grinned back and then she let out a cry of victory as she found another cherry. After making sure Giles didn't want it, she ate it. "You'd think Jenny would be used to it. I mean, you guys have been together for ..." She started counting on the tabletop. "'97, '98, '99, '2000, four years."

Giles looked startled. "Good heavens, has it really been four years?" "Yup. You met her my first year here." Buffy counted again. "Calendar year." She grinned. "No pun intended." She finished her thought. "You guys started dating right after I started my junior year and that was still 1997."

"That's right, we did. It's easy to lose track of the time."

"Are you gonna marry her one of these days?" Buffy was sorry she asked the question as soon as the words passed her lips. She really didn't want to hear Giles say yes.

"I haven't given it much thought."

"I bet she loves that."

"Jenny knew I was your Watcher before we started dating. I've always made it clear to her that you come first."

"And I'll bet she loves it when you say that to her."

Giles winced. "No, I don't believe she does." Giles slumped back in his seat. "Perhaps it's unfair to expect any woman to put up with this sort of arrangement. It really isn't fair."

"Well, like you said, she knew what she was getting into." She leaned forwards. "Not that that always helps. It's like me with Angel. I knew it was a mistake, I knew he wasn't right for me, but I didn't care, I just dove in." Buffy looked at Giles. "Maybe Jenny hoped that things would change, that you'd change. Maybe she figured I'd die, I mean, not that she wishes I were dead, or anything, but I'm sure she knows how long the average Slayer lasts."

That thought disturbed Giles, especially having to revisit the idea of Buffy's

death. "Well, you aren't going to die, not if I have anything to do with it." His voice was quite ferocious.

Buffy patted his hand. "Sorry. I shouldn't have said that. I know you hate talking about it. Not that I'm crazy about talking about it, either."

"I can't bear the thought of it." Giles' voice was tight and he turned his head away.

Buffy watched him; surprised for some reason at the emotions she could feel pouring off of him. She touched his hand again, lacing her fingers through his, holding on tightly. "I'm sorry." When he still wouldn't look at her she leaned forwards and with her fingers she gently tugged on his face, urging him to make eye contact with her. "I'm on your side on this one, Giles. No dying, I promise."

Giles let out a long sigh and finally looked at Buffy. His eyes were bright and Buffy's eyes misted in response. "You mean so much to me, I really ... I can't imagine anything worse." Giles took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. Running his hand through his hair he sent Buffy a rueful grin. "I apologize. I didn't mean to get quite so dramatic." He gave Buffy's hand a squeeze, their fingers still joined.

Buffy had to swallow past the lump in her throat. She put her other hand over their joined hands. "I really sort of love you Giles."

Giles put his free hand over hers. "I love you too, Buffy."

Buffy had to dig out her hands to wipe her tears away. "Okay, drama moment over." She let out a shaky laugh. "But as long as I'm all teary, let's not waste it. What's this prophecy you found?"

Giles shook his head. "False alarm. I did a bit more research and discovered it won't come to pass for a few hundred years."

Buffy looked surprised but then switched to happy. "Yay."

Giles grinned. "Actually it was quite amusing. The particular conjugation of the verb the author used ..." He looked up as Buffy patted his hand. "Yes?"

"Giles, I don't want to hurt your feelings, but I gotta tell you, I think you need to save this amusing anecdote for Willow. Then the two of you can have a hearty chuckle over verb misuse. I think it's gonna be lost on me."

Giles let out a silent laugh. "Perhaps you're right."

"But still, yay, no bad prophecy. That's of the good."

"Yes, it is. I was quite relieved."

"Bad one?"

"Yes, rather bad."

Buffy grimaced. "So, not so good news for the Slayer who's gonna be around then."

"No." Giles glanced at Buffy. "However, you, better than anyone, know that the words of a prophecy seldom tell the entire picture."

"Yeah, I guess I do know that." Buffy reached out and touched his jaw. "Did I ever apologize for that?"

"For what?"

"For hitting you and knocking you out?"

"An apology was hardly necessary, Buffy. You were saving my life."

Buffy frowned at him. "I still can't believe you were gonna go meet him on your own. If I hadn't shown up you were just gonna go, weren't you?"

"Yes, yes I was. I was quite determined"

"And he'd have killed you."

"Probably."

Buffy let out a sigh. "Did Jenny ever say anything to you about what I said?"

"When?"

"After I knocked you out. Did she ever give you a message from me?"

Giles thought for a moment. "No, I don't believe so. Why, did you give her a message for me?"

"Not really. I told her to make something up, something that sounded cool."

Giles' eyebrows rose. "That was very eloquent of you."

Buffy grinned. "I know. It's hard to put into a couple of sentences everything I'd want to say to you, even back then, and sound cool at the same time. Plus I was afraid I'd chicken out if I hung around too long and I didn't want you to wake up."

Giles shook his head. "No fear of that. I'm afraid I had barely regained consciousness when the fighting began. Then I was rather preoccupied, and suddenly, there you were, very much alive." Giles smiled sadly at her. "I wished I'd let you know how I felt when I saw you."

"Tell me now."

"It was as if I were a boy again celebrating Christmas, and I'd just been given the present I'd been waiting for, for the longest time, the one I wanted more than anything. I'd never felt so blessed in all my life."

"That's kind of how I felt when I realized that you were planning to die in my place. Except not as much fun."

Giles smiled at her turn of phrase. "No, not nearly as much fun."

Buffy sat back, looking at him. "They're never gonna understand, are they."

"Who?"

"Jenny and Riley, about us."

"No, I don't think they can."

Buffy nodded and thought for a moment. "That's okay. As long as you understand."

Giles smiled at her. In unspoken agreement they both slid out of the booth and headed for the door.

End of Part 4

## Friends and Lovers 5

One month later (early summer):

The vampire came out of nowhere and for some reason he had a knife. Riley

let out a yell but Buffy couldn't duck in time. The knife entered her from the back, above her heart. Buffy managed to turn and stake the vampire before she fell to the ground.

Riley ran to her and turning her he put pressure on the wound with one hand while he pulled out his phone with the other. "I'll get help, Buffy, just hold on." He called dispatch to get an ambulance.

Buffy was finding it hard to breath. Turning her head she looked at Riley. "Call Giles."

"Buffy, don't move. We'll call him when we get to the hospital."

"Call him, call him now." As it grew harder for her to breathe, all Buffy knew was that she wanted Giles, she wanted him with her.

"I'll call him later."

Buffy's eyes closed. "Please, Riley."

Riley let out a curse but not wanting Buffy to get more upset, he dialed Giles' number. Jenny answered. "Hello."

"Jenny, it's Riley. Is Giles there?"

"Yes, hold on." Jenny handed the phone to Giles.

"Yes? This is Giles."

"Giles, it's Riley. Buffy's hurt. She wanted me to call you."

Giles' heart started racing. "How badly is she hurt?"

"I don't know. Pretty bad. I called an ambulance."

"Where are you?"

"East Lawn Cemetery."

Giles could hear the sirens of the ambulance over the phone. "I'll meet you at the hospital." He was already slipping on his shoes, looking for his keys.

Buffy reached up a hand for the phone. Riley handed it to her. "Giles?"

She sounded so tired. "Buffy, don't spend your energy talking to me. I'll see

you at the hospital." Giles could hear how hard it was for her to catch her breath. When she didn't say anything he panicked and yelled in the phone. "Buffy?"

The pause before she finally spoke almost gave Giles a heart attack. "I'm here."

"Don't you die, damn it, don't you die on me."

"Hurry." Buffy couldn't hold the phone anymore and it slipped from her fingers.

Giles hung up and ran for the door. Jenny grabbed his arm. "I'll drive." She didn't think he was in any condition to be driving anywhere. Before he could argue, Jenny grabbed her purse, snatched the keys out of his hand and ran for the car.

They made it to the hospital in record time, arriving before the ambulance. Giles was standing by the door, his face pale, every prayer he knew, in every language, heading skywards. Jenny stood silently at his side.

Riley was in the ambulance with her, holding on to her hand, staying out of the way. Her breathing was easier now. The knife had punctured her lung but the paramedics had been able to re-inflate it and stabilize her. Buffy came to with a start, and called out a name. "Giles?"

Riley tried to squelch the annoyance he felt. "No, it's Riley."

"Where's Giles?"

"He'll be at the hospital."

She nodded and closed her eyes again. When the ambulance arrived, the team began to move her stretcher out. Buffy began looking for Giles. She turned her head the other way and saw him. Buffy held out her hand and Giles moved to her side and took it, holding it tightly. He could see at once that she would be all right and it was all he could do not to break down and cry.

They got the stretcher ready for travel and one of the team spoke to Giles. "We need to take her inside."

Giles stepped away. "Of course."

Buffy let out a cry and reached for his hand again. "No, don't leave me."

"Buffy, let them get you inside. I'll see you in a minute."

Buffy nodded but she kept her eyes on Giles' for as long as she could.

Once she was out of sight, Giles let out a breath. He turned to Riley. "What happened?"

"A vampire with a knife."

Giles' eyebrows rose. "A knife?"

"I know. You don't see that every day." Riley touched Giles on the back. "He stabbed her here, punctured a lung."

Giles blanched at the thought that only a little bit lower and it might have been a stab through the heart. Giles caught Riley's eyes, and saw that he was having the same thought. "She'll be fine, Riley. She's strong." He said it to reassure himself as much as to reassure Riley.

Riley nodded. The three of them went in the waiting room, letting the clerk know they were there. Giles used the phone to call Joyce. Then he joined Riley and Jenny, taking a seat. Every time the door opened Riley and Giles both looked up, waiting for news. Finally a man in scrubs opened the door. "Is there someone named Giles here?"

Giles stood. "Yes, that's me."

"She wants to see you."

Giles smiled absentmindedly at Riley and Jenny, his entire attention focused on getting to Buffy. When he disappeared through the door Riley and Jenny looked at each other, both feeling a bit abandoned. Riley stretched out his legs and pursed his lips. "I hate that she's the Slayer." He shook his head. "I really hate it."

Jenny smiled softly at him. "I hate that he's a Watcher."

Their eyes met again and they understood each other completely. It wasn't so much that she was the Slayer, and he was a Watcher. It was that she was his Slayer, and he was her Watcher. That was the problem.

##



Giles entered the room where they were keeping Buffy. There was a single staff person in there, drawing some blood. Buffy smiled when she saw him. "Hey."

Giles let out a short, rather pained laugh. "Hey."

She held out her hand. "Come here."

Giles walked to her side, away from where the blood was being drawn. He pushed some hair off her face. Giles had never seen anything more beautiful than she at this particular moment. Bending down he kissed her forehead and then pressed his cheek against hers. "Oh, Buffy."

"I'm all right."

"You frightened me so."

Buffy lifted a hand and ran them over the furrows on his forehead. "I'm all right, Giles. I'll bet I just need to have this chest tube in for a couple of days." She watched as the woman who was drawing her blood left the room. "Probably not even that long with my Slayer healing." She patted the bed. "Sit. You look like you're about to fall down."

Giles decided she was probably right and he carefully sat down, not wanting to jar her. He didn't know what to say; for once all his words seemed to have abandoned him. Giles just sat there watching her.

Buffy tried again. "I'm all right."

Giles smiled softly at her. "I'm sorry I'm such a wreck."

"I shouldn't have had Riley call you."

"No, I'm glad you did."

Buffy grinned at him. "No, you're not."

"I am. It certainly frightened me, but if you ever need to talk to me, I always want you to call." Giles took her hand and held it between his own, resting them on his thigh.

Buffy's stomach unexpectedly did a couple of flip-flops. "Well, next time maybe I'll wait until I know I'm better so I don't freak you out so much."

"Please don't. Please say you'll always call when you feel the need. Please."

Buffy nodded. "All right. Riley's cell phone came in handy."

"I shall get us both phones tomorrow. I've been meaning to do it for months now. If he hadn't been able to call the ambulance so quickly you might have been in serious trouble." Giles' eyes grew dark. "And if that knife had ..." He turned his head away for a moment.

Then he lifted her hand and held it against his chest. What he really wanted to do was hold her, hold her tightly in his arms until all the fear left him. Giles just closed his eyes and moved her hand until he held it against his cheek, feeling her warmth. When he opened his eyes again it was to find Buffy staring at him, her eyes bright. She lifted her other hand, keeping track of her IV tubing, and ran it down the other side of his face.

Joyce walked in the room and she stopped, her eyes wide. They hadn't noticed her and she wasn't surprised. All they could see was each other. The touch they were sharing was so intimate, so lover-like, that Joyce almost felt as if she should leave, as if she were intruding.

Buffy again touched his face. "Giles, I'm all right." She had never seen her Watcher so undone.

Joyce coughed, making her presence known. They both turned and Buffy smiled. Giles tried to move, tried to let go of her hand but Buffy glared at him, and caught his hand again with her own. She hissed at him. "Stay."

Joyce walked into the room, her gaze moving from one to the other. Giles felt guilty for some reason and had trouble meeting her gaze. Buffy held a hand out to her. "Hey, Mom."

Joyce dropped a kiss on Buffy's forehead. "Hey, honey, are you all right?"

"I'm fine."

Joyce looked at Giles. "Is she really?"

Giles finally looked up at Joyce. "Yes, or she will be, at any rate."

Joyce frowned. "Is there something going on that I should know about?"

Giles' brow furrowed. "I beg your pardon?"

"Something about the two of you?" Joyce glared at them both.

Buffy scrunched her face up. "What are you talking about?"

Joyce stared at Buffy, trying to read her face. She finally decided that Buffy wasn't that good a liar and her perplexity was genuine. Joyce let out a laugh. "Never mind. Just a mother's nerves."

The doctor chose that moment to walk in. He looked at the paperwork. "Miss Summers?"

"That would be me."

"I'm Dr. Sanders. I've just come on. Dr. Johnson informs me that you were stabbed in the back?"

"Yup."

He looked at her puzzled and then walked over to study the x-ray displayed on the light box. "In the lung?" This couldn't possibly be right. She looked far too healthy.

"Yup." At his continued puzzled look she grinned. "I heal fast."

"Hmmm." He approached the bed then looked at Giles and Joyce. "I'm sorry, only one of you can stay while I'm examining her."

Giles stood. "I'll go."

Buffy shook her head. "You stay." She turned to her mom. "I need Giles to stay." At the angry look in her mom's eyes, Buffy gave her a pleading look. "Please, I'll explain later."

Joyce wasn't happy but she didn't want to make a scene. With a glare at Giles she stormed out of the room. Giles looked down at Buffy. "Buffy, are you sure?"

"Very."

Giles moved to get out of the physician's way. He was grateful that Buffy had chosen him to stay. He truly didn't want to let her out of his sight. Giles brought a chair over to the other side of the bed and sat down. Buffy put out her hand for him to hold.

The doctor had her roll to the side, facing Giles, so he could look at her back. His brow furrowed in confusion. "This happened tonight?"

Giles answered him. "Yes, less than an hour ago."

"Well, if I didn't know better I'd say this happened a couple of days ago. Your back doesn't even need stitches." He looked down at the chest tube. "We'll plan to keep you over night and order new films in the morning. If you continue to heal this quickly you can go home tomorrow." Shaking his head he left the room.

Buffy squeezed Giles' hand. "Feel better now?"

Giles let out a soft laugh. "Yes." He could see the wince as she settled back down on her back and he stood quickly to help her get adjusted. "Do you hurt?"

"Nah." At his frown she tried again. "Well, a little bit, where they put the chest tube in, but nothing I can't deal with, okay?"

Giles smiled down at her. "Yes, okay." He glanced at the door. "Did you ask me to stay so I could hear what the doctor said?"

Buffy nodded. "I didn't think you were believing me. I thought you might feel better if you heard it firsthand, rather than from my mom."

Giles brushed some hair off her cheek with the backs of his fingers. "Thank you for that, although I'm sorry that in the midst of your injury that you ended up taking care of me. I didn't mean to fall apart so completely."

Buffy smiled at him. "That's okay. I kinda liked it. It's nice to know you care so much."

"I do."

"And it's fun to be able to take care of you for change. You always take such good care of me."

"And quite an onerous task it is, indeed."

Buffy rolled her eyes. But she grinned at him, knowing that if he was being a smart aleck then he really was all right. "Maybe you better go get my mom now. She didn't look very happy when I kicked her out."

Giles grimaced. "Perhaps you're right." Giles let go of her hand and turned to leave.

"Giles?"

He turned back. "Yes?"

"Don't go far."

He smiled at her. "I won't."

End of Part 5

## Friends and Lovers 6

Joyce sat down next to Jenny, across from Riley. Jenny looked at her, and then at the door. "Where's Rupert?"

"He's still with Buffy."

"Wouldn't they allow you both to stay?"

Joyce frowned. "The doctor only wanted one person in there, and Buffy chose Giles." She knew she sounded sulky about it but she couldn't help it. She glanced up at Riley. "Aren't you two still dating?"

Riley's eyes narrowed. "Yes, why?"

Joyce looked at Jenny. "And you're still with Rupert?"

Jenny nodded, her eyes narrowing as well. "Why?"

Joyce shook her head and leaned back. She must have imagined it. "It's nothing." Jenny and Riley exchanged a look.

A few minutes later, Giles appeared in the doorway. "Joyce, she's asking for you."

Joyce stood quickly and giving everyone a small smile she headed back to her daughter, relieved beyond measure that Buffy had requested her presence.

Giles moved to sit next to Jenny. Jenny took his hand. "Is she all right?"

Giles smiled. "She's fine. The doctor is quite amazed at her recovery. I imagine she'll be able to go home tomorrow."

Jenny smiled in relief. "That is good news." She squeezed Giles' hand. "Can we go home, then, if Riley and her mom are going to be here?"

Giles shook his head. "I'm sorry, Jenny. Buffy asked me to stay." He turned to her. "But, please, feel free to go. I can always get a taxi home."

Jenny's jaw clenched for a second. "May I speak to you outside for a moment?"

Giles nodded and rose. When they got outside he turned to her. "What is it?"

"You let her depend on you too much."

Giles' eyes grew dark. "Excuse me?"

"She doesn't need you here tonight. Her boyfriend is here and her mother is here. Why do you need to stay?"

"She asked me to."

"And so you just say yes? You don't tell her that she'll be fine, that you'll call her in the morning, that Riley and Joyce will be here if she needs something?"

Giles shook his head. "No, I don't tell her that." Giles took a few steps away and turned to face her. "Jenny, she could have died tonight."

"She could almost die every night, Rupert."

Giles' eyes closed in pain. "I know that. But, tonight she did get hurt. And it was only luck that kept her from being killed."

"But she didn't. She's fine."

Giles ran a hand through his hair. "Jenny, go home. I'm staying. If she wants me to stay, I'll stay."

"And if she wanted you to leap off a cliff, would you do that?" Giles didn't answer her and Jenny let out a short mirthless laugh. "You would, wouldn't you?" She pointed back inside. "Does she know how much she owns you?"

"She doesn't own me, Jenny. But I am her Watcher, and I am responsible for her."

"What about me? Do you feel responsible for me, for us, at all?"

Giles looked at her sadly. "You know I do, but ..."

Jenny turned her head away. "I know, but she comes first, even when she doesn't really need you and I do." Jenny fished in her purse and took out Giles' keys and she handed them to him. "It's your car. I'll get a cab."

"Jenny."

"I'll talk to you tomorrow." Without another word Jenny left him standing there.

##

Joyce sat by Buffy's side in the emergency room. They were waiting for a room upstairs. Joyce looked at her daughter. "So, explain it to me."

Buffy frowned at her mom. "What?"

"Explain why you had Rupert stay instead of your own mother."

Buffy took a deep breath and winced at the sharp pain. "He was freaking more than you."

"Excuse me?"

"Giles, he was freaking out, big time."

Joyce mentally reviewed how Rupert had looked. He had appeared to be his usual calm and unflappable self. "He looked fine to me, Buffy. And didn't it matter to you that I was concerned?"

Buffy really didn't want to have this conversation but she knew she had brought it on herself. "Yes, of course it mattered. And I know Giles looked calm but he wasn't. I know him. He was freaked. He needed to stay. You just need to trust me on this one." She reached out a hand to her mom. "I knew you'd be okay. Please, Mom, don't be mad at me."

Joyce frowned but let it go. She changed to another topic. "Do you want to see Riley?"

Buffy shook her head. "No, I'm fine."

"Buffy."

Buffy turned her head towards her mom. "What?"

"Maybe he'd like to see you."

Buffy's eyes widened. "Oh, okay." As her mom left Buffy winced. She hadn't even thought of seeing Riley. Some girlfriend she was. Waves of guilt washed through her as she realized that she'd much rather have Giles come back. She just felt whole when she was with him. She never had to think about what she was saying, or to be anything but what she was. She could just be Buffy, and know that that was all he ever wanted her to be.

Joyce followed Riley in. Riley smiled at Buffy and crossed the room, leaning down and giving her a kiss. Buffy cut the kiss off before Riley wanted to because for some reason it felt weird to be kissing him. Riley gracefully gave up that fight but then he held her hand to his chest just like Giles had. Buffy didn't know what was wrong with her but she felt like grabbing her hand back. Riley spoke. "How are you?"

Buffy smiled at him. "I'm fine. You know me, Slayer girl."

"You scared me."

Buffy wasn't sure what to say so she just smiled again. Joyce watched the two of them, mostly noticing the difference between this scene and the one she'd interrupted between her daughter and Giles.

Riley leaned over to kiss her again. "I love you so much."

Buffy closed her eyes and found herself wishing she were anywhere else but here. She squeezed Riley's hand and then glanced up at him. "Thank you for taking such good care of me tonight."

Riley's lips tightened. "Should I tell Giles he can go home? There's really no reason for him to stay."

Buffy's eyes flashed, just for a second. "No, I want him to stay."

"Why? I'm here, your mom's here."

"Riley, I just want him to stay. He doesn't mind."

"No, but he does have a life outside of you. He and Jenny got into an argument when he told her he was planning on staying."

Joyce cut in when she saw the worried look on Buffy's face. Part of her



agreed with Riley, but a larger part was annoyed that Riley was making Buffy feel badly when she was hurt. "Buffy, do you need anything?"

Buffy looked gratefully at her mom, recognizing a distraction when she saw one. "Can you help me get to the bathroom?"

Joyce stepped up next to Buffy. "Are you sure you should get off the stretcher?" She turned to Riley. "Would you go get the nurse?"

Riley nodded. "Sure." He pushed the curtain aside and left to fulfill his charge.

Buffy let out a sigh of relief when he left. "Thanks, Mom."

"He does have a point." Joyce knew she being irrational, doing the very thing that she had gotten annoyed with Riley for, but she was Buffy's mother and that gave her certain inalienable rights.

Buffy turned her head away. "I know. I didn't mean for them to fight."

Joyce was about to speak again when the nurse entered. Buffy insisted on using a real bathroom so the nurse got her out of bed and helped her across the room. Joyce hovered nervously. Riley stood out in the hall. He glanced into the waiting room to find Giles standing by the window, looking out into the darkness. He knew it was ridiculous but somehow he felt that he was losing Buffy to this man. No matter what Riley did, he couldn't compete.

The nurse left the room and Riley assumed it was safe to go back in. Despite Buffy's protestations that she was fine, it was clear that she was in some pain after the exertion. Riley rushed to her side, glancing at Joyce. "Is the nurse getting her some pain medication?"

Buffy shook her head. "I don't want any."

Joyce frowned at her. "Buffy, you're in pain. I think you should let them give you something."

Buffy just shook her head again. Joyce sighed and then she had a thought. Whatever annoying connection existed between her daughter and her Watcher, Joyce could make it work for her in this situation. Joyce snuck out and called for Rupert. He entered the room, Riley scowling when he saw him. Joyce whispered to him as he approached the bed. Joyce and Riley both watched as Buffy's eyes followed Giles as if he was the only one present. Walking up to the bed he smiled at her. "Are you still hurting?"

Buffy shook her head. Giles just looked at her, not saying a word. Buffy caved

under the third degree. "Yes, I'm still hurting." She glared at him.

Giles bit back a smile. "Then perhaps some pain medication might be in order. Yes?"

Buffy grabbed his hand. "Will you stay with me?"

Giles looked at her in some surprise. He saw a bit of fear in her eyes. "I'll not leave your side until you wake up." Giles turned to Joyce and nodded and then he turned back to Buffy. He saw that her eyes were bright with unshed tears. "Buffy, what's the matter?"

"I'm sorry if I got you and Jenny into a fight."

Giles glanced up at Riley, his eyes angry. Riley found himself taking a step back. Giles took a deep breath and got himself back under control. He smiled at Buffy. "It doesn't matter."

Buffy's lips trembled. "It does matter. I always come between you."

"You know where I stand on this, Buffy."

Buffy did but she needed to hear him say it. "Do you want to leave and patch things up with Jenny? I know I'm being selfish asking you to stay."

"My place is here with you as long as you need me, however you need me."

"So you don't mind staying?"

Giles let out a soft sigh as he looked down at her. "You know I don't."

"I don't deserve you. You're too good to me."

Giles flashed her a quick grin. "Ah. At last you see the truth."

Buffy laughed and then winced. "Don't make me laugh. It hurts."

It seemed as if a group of people walked in the room at the same time, the nurse with Buffy's medicine, a transporter to take her to her room, and the unit secretary with some papers for her to sign. Joyce still had Buffy on her insurance plan so Joyce signed the papers. Giles moved away to allow the nurse access to Buffy's IV. The transporter started getting things organized.

In the shuffle, Riley moved back to Buffy's side and took her hand. The medicine was already starting to kick in and Buffy had her eyes closed and

made a small sound of sleepy comfort. She pulled Riley's hand in closer to her and smiled. Riley smiled back down at her and kept pace with the stretcher as it started heading down the corridor. Giles walked behind the stretcher with Joyce.

Buffy's pain was going away but so was her ability to defend herself and that feeling made her nervous. She held onto the hand holding hers as if it was a lifeline. She moved it to her face, holding it against her, rubbing it against her cheek. Riley smiled tenderly down at her. Buffy mumbled something. Riley leaned down to hear her better. "What did you say, Buffy?"

Buffy's eyes opened in alarm. Her vision was blurry at first but eventually Riley came into focus. She realized the hand she was holding was Riley's and not Giles'. Her drug-affected mind knew only that it was supposed to be Giles. She called his name. "Giles?"

He called from behind the stretcher. "I'm right here, Buffy."

It wasn't good enough. "Giles?"

Giles increased his stride until he was walking on Buffy's other side. "Here, I'm here."

Buffy let go of Riley's hand and reached instead for Giles'. Riley stopped walking and let the stretcher move on without him. Joyce stopped as well, knowing, despite her own personal reservations about Rupert, that her daughter was in the very best of hands for the time being.

Riley looked at Joyce, his eyes hurt. "Did you see that? I might as well be invisible when he's around."

Joyce let out a soft consoling laugh. "She doesn't only do it to you, Riley. We all tend to be a little invisible when he's around."

"Are they together?" The idea seemed inconceivable to him.

She shook her head. "No. I don't believe they are, at least not romantically."

"I'm supposed to be her boyfriend." He glanced at Joyce again. "What did you see in there when you came out and asked me if I was still her boyfriend?"

Joyce shook her head again. "It's not important."

"It is to me. What did you see?"

"What you just saw. The two of them, as if they were all alone, as if everyone else could just fall away and they wouldn't even notice."

"I don't understand. What's so special about him?"

Joyce blushed as a random thought of how it felt to have Rupert on top of her flashed through her brain. She banished it, just as she'd banished those thoughts a thousand times before. "He's her Watcher."

"What the hell does that mean?" Riley knew he was losing it but he loved Buffy and it was hard to stay calm.

"I don't know. I've never understood their relationship. Except that I know it's important to her. Probably more important to her than any other."

"She didn't even want to be with me tonight."

Joyce had seen that. "She's hurt."

"I've been with her when she's been hurt before. Something's different. She's changed." He looked up at Joyce, his eyes anguished. "I've lost her somehow."

"Oh, Riley. Don't jump to any conclusions. Come by tomorrow. Things might be very different then."

Riley grabbed on to the slim hope with both hands. "You think so?"

Joyce didn't think so but she was too kind to say it. "The two of you can talk when she feels better, clear the air. That's often all it takes."

Riley let out a long breath. "Okay. I'll come back tomorrow." He turned to leave but then turned back. "Call me if she needs anything."

Joyce nodded, although she was pretty sure that all Buffy needed was already up in her room with her. She watched as Riley walked away. Joyce shook her head. Riley gone, his heart in tatters, Jenny gone, apparently in a huff, and Giles and Buffy, in a world of their own. Joyce thought about the merits of clearing the air. She squared her shoulders. It was time to have a talk with Rupert.

End of Part 6

Now that Buffy was assured that it was Giles next to her she felt safe enough to allow the pain medication to take her away. As she drifted off she pulled Giles' hand to her, holding it to her breast. Giles looked down at her and his longing to protect her, to keep her safe, was so strong that it almost took his breath away. When they got to her room he was able to slip his hand away so they could shift her to her new bed. She appeared to be asleep but Giles stayed close in case she woke up. And she did, just a bit, the jostling startling her eyes open. Giles simply took her hand again, reassuring her. "I'm right here, Buffy."

Buffy smiled and fell asleep again. Without letting go of her hand Giles snagged a chair with his foot and pulled it to him. He settled down and held Buffy's hand to his chest as he sat beside her, watching her.

##

A few minutes later Joyce found the room and entered. Giles looked up at the noise and smiled at her. Joyce tiptoed over. "Is she asleep?"

"Quite firmly asleep, I believe." Giles looked at the door. "Where's Riley?"

Joyce let out a sigh. "He went home."

"Ah."

"What does that mean?" Giles smiled and that made Joyce scowl. "And what's so funny?"

"I'm sorry. You sound so much like your daughter. Every time I say 'ah' like that she always insists on knowing what it means." He looked at Buffy and smiled.

The words slipped out before she could stop them. "You love her, don't you?"

"With all that I am."

He offered the answer up so easily with no dissembling that Joyce stared at him. Then she began to realize that he was answering a very different question than the one she had posited. Another question slipped out. "How do you do it, then? How do you send her out every night, knowing she could get hurt, or killed? How can you say you love her and yet let her live this horrible life?"

Giles looked at Joyce and she almost wept at the sadness in his eyes. He closed his eyes for a minute, collecting himself. He let out a long sigh and then looked around the room for a seat for Joyce. Realizing he was sitting in the only one, he stood. "Please, have a seat."

Joyce shook her head. "I'll find another chair." And she did, a rather large recliner, and soon, with some help from Giles, she was sitting next to him, waiting for his answer.

Giles looked at the floor for a while, pulling his thoughts together. Finally he looked up at Joyce. "I think, perhaps, that it is time we had this conversation."

Joyce frowned. "Which conversation is this?" She knew her voice sounded snippy but she couldn't help it.

"Joyce." Giles sent her a look. Joyce shut up, feeling legitimately scolded. Giles pinched his nose under his glasses. "You have always blamed me for Buffy's life as a Slayer." He put his hand up to stop any more commentary from Joyce. "Please, let me speak."

Joyce nodded.

Giles continued. "I understand that this has been difficult for you. I understand that it is not a path you would have chosen for your daughter, in fact, it is not a path anyone would ever choose for someone they love. If I could, I would take it away from her." Giles leaned forwards. "But I cannot. She is the Slayer. It is her birthright, and I had nothing to do with it. There have been Slayers for millennia, and long after you and I are dead, there will be countless more."

Joyce felt the need to argue. "But you encourage her."

"No, Joyce. I help her."

"She was always complaining that you were making her do this, or making her do that."

"In much the same fashion as you insisting that she do her homework, or clean her room."

"Doing her homework won't get her killed."

"But neglecting her training, ignoring the signs of an impending apocalypse, and failing to report in so I can do adequate research can."

"It isn't right that she has to do this."

"I agree. But I didn't set up the system. I am merely someone trained to keep an eye on the Slayer and do everything I can to keep her alive." Giles let out a breath. "I believe you do your daughter a disservice by assigning blame."

Joyce glared at him. "What?"

"Have you ever spoken with her about what it feels like to be the Slayer?"

"I don't need to, I just have to listen to her complain about it."

"I think that there is hardly a profession on the planet that doesn't offer fodder for complaints."

"It's a little different when your job can get you killed. That's worth some complaining."

"And I'm not disagreeing. All I'm suggesting is that you should talk to Buffy about being the Slayer. I think you would find that there is much about it that she finds rewarding. Buffy gets an immense satisfaction in knowing that she is keeping the world safe, and takes, rightly so, an inordinate pride in being the Slayer. You belittle it and her when you make it sound as if it's little more than a punishment handed out by irate librarians."

Joyce shifted in her seat a little. None of this had ever crossed her mind.

Giles continued. "Buffy can sense evil. And evil comes to this town because she is here. She is the fulcrum. It is her job to keep things in balance. If I were not here, none of this would change. Do you honestly believe that your daughter, if not pushed by me, would sit by and allow evil to reign supreme in this town? That she would do nothing as people got killed? That she could in good conscience live a normal life, turning a blind eye to the suffering around her? I know she could not. She might elect to escape for a while, but it would not last for long. Buffy would choose to put herself in the thick of it to save the lives of those around her, of those that she loves, and in fact, those that she'll never know. It is not in her to sit by when someone is being hurt. She is too loving and caring a person for that."

Giles pinned Joyce with his gaze. "If I left, she would simply be forced to act as the Slayer on her own, without assistance. And knowing Buffy she would probably manage reasonably well. But I believe that I make her stronger, that she is better able to fight with my training, and that she fights more wisely with my knowledge. If there is anything I can do to assist her I must, and not only because she is the Slayer. Your daughter is the most extraordinary,



loving, courageous person I have ever met. It has been my honor and privilege to be at her side since the day I met her."

Joyce felt ashamed, but a small childish piece deep inside was not ready to let go yet. "Why did you keep it a secret from me?"

Giles let out a sigh. "I do take the blame for that. Truthfully, the identity of the Slayer has always been a carefully guarded secret. Knowing the truth puts her and the ones who know at risk. But within hours of her arrival at Sunnydale High it seemed as if half the student body knew who she was. I felt as if I was losing control. I told Buffy not to tell you, just as I pleaded with her not to let anyone else know. I think, in retrospect, it was a mistake, and I apologize."

Giles interrupted his speech to turn to Buffy who was shifting in the bed. He waited until she settled down again and then turned back to Joyce, a fleeting grin passing over his lips. "Buffy was quite a surprise to the Council."

Joyce furrowed her brow. "What do you mean?"

"No one knew about Buffy. Every potential Slayer before her had been identified early and spent years in training, so that if by chance she was called, she would be prepared to meet her destiny."

"So what happened with Buffy?"

Giles shook his head. "No one knows. No one really knows how a Slayer is chosen. There does seem to be a family tendency to it." He flashed another grin at Joyce. "I wouldn't be surprised if you had been a potential Slayer, your family's bloodlines somehow lost from Council records."

Joyce put her hand on her chest. "Me?"

"You two are so much alike."

Joyce sent Giles a rueful smile. "You mean stubborn, opinionated, mouthy, and whiny?"

Giles laughed his silent chuckle. "And strong of heart, with tremendous courage, a strong sense of right and wrong, and the ability to love very, very strongly."

Joyce let out a long breath, and with the breath she felt years of hostility start to fade away. "I'm sorry, Rupert."



"There is nothing to be sorry for, Joyce."

"Yes, there is. I've been quite mean to you over the past couple of years, ever since I found out Buffy was the Slayer."

"It was difficult for you. I do, and did, understand."

"You're much more gracious about it than I would be."

Giles smiled at her. "Well, the incident with the band candy didn't help. It only made things more awkward."

Joyce grimaced. "You had to bring that up?"

"Yes, I thought I might, as long as we're clearing the air. We've never talked about it."

Joyce let loose a short, almost hysterical laugh. "I never knew quite what to say. Especially with Jenny."

Giles nodded. "I know. Neither did I." He sent Joyce a sad grin. "I still don't."

"Did you ever tell her?"

"Jenny?"

Joyce nodded.

"No. No one knew but you and Buffy and it seemed...it seemed it would do more harm than good." He looked at Joyce. "Did I do the right thing?"

Joyce nodded her head firmly. "Yes. I mean it's not like you really cheated on her. You never would have. And unless she had eaten that candy there's no way she would have understood how much it changed you, us, all of us. But she didn't eat any, and so she wouldn't have understood and would have seen it as a betrayal of your trust. It would have probably destroyed your relationship and all for something that, in a way, really didn't happen."

Giles put his head back on the chair and let out a frustrated groan. "God, I agonized over it. I felt so guilty about it, about what happened, about not telling her. I almost told her so many times, but as the time passed, it seemed that even more harm would come of it." He shook his head. "That's the problem with lies, isn't it?"

"It wasn't your fault, Rupert. And I for one am glad you didn't tell her. The last

thing I needed was for her to be giving me hateful looks, treating me like the other woman."

"She felt that way for a short while but she got over it. I'm glad you never picked up on it. I did have to tell her about us kissing."

"She knows we kissed?"

"Yes. Too many people saw us to keep that a secret." He grinned ruefully at Joyce. "I think by the time we were...well, by that time, the effects of the candy were so rampant that no one paid us the least amount of attention, a fact that astonishes me." Giles took his glasses off and covered his face with his hand. "On a police car." He glanced at Joyce as he ran his hand down his face. "I have to admit it helped Jenny cope with the whole thing knowing that we couldn't seem to stand each other."

Joyce couldn't help but grin at him. "It actually feels good to talk about this. We should have talked about it right away."

Giles rolled his eyes. "You'd have stabbed me with a skewer if I'd come within ten feet of you."

Joyce let out a soft laugh. "Yes, you're probably right." She sat up a little straighter. "Okay, well then, let me say something." At Giles' nod, Joyce blew out a breath and began. "You are a very attractive man, and I have to say that I enjoyed myself tremendously that night. But, before that day, while the thought crossed my mind, I never really saw us together that way. Then you started dating Jenny and it became even more of a non-issue." Joyce waved her hands as if to try and hurry herself along. "Anyway, my point is, that despite the occasional hot flash when I think of that night I haven't wanted to pursue anything further. Of course, I was so angry with you by then, that it was pretty much out of the question, even if you hadn't been with Jenny."

Giles grinned. "Hot flash?"

Joyce grinned and glared at him at the same time. "Don't tell me you didn't enjoy yourself. I was there."

"I did. I did enjoy myself. But I'm relieved to hear you say that it started and ended there. I feel much the same way." Buffy began to turn on her side without lessening her hold on Giles' hand. He found himself needing to stand or be dragged half way across the bed. He disengaged his hand and started to move his chair.

Buffy frowned in her sleep and spoke his name. "Giles?"

Giles spoke softly. "I'm right here, Buffy." He moved his chair around to the other side of the bed and then reached for her hand again. At his touch she smiled a little and relaxed.

Joyce spoke from the other side. "I don't know how to compete with you."

Giles looked at her, his eyebrows lifted. "Why do you feel you must compete with me?"

Joyce pointed at their joined hands. "I feel like it should be me holding her hand, that it should be me taking care of her. She would have been fine if I hadn't shown up. She didn't even care if Riley was here. All she wanted was you."

Giles considered Joyce's words. Finally he looked at her. "She loves you. She loves you so much. She so desperately wants you to be proud of her. But she knows that her being the Slayer is hard for you, that you hate it, that you can barely stand to acknowledge it. It puts her in a difficult position. I believe that she turns to me, sometimes, because she can be what she is, say what she wants to say, without having to censor it, or be concerned about my reaction."

Joyce frowned. "Are you saying it's my fault?"

"Joyce. It's not a question of fault. It's about a young woman who is living a hard life, and she needs a place of safety. For instance, I know that the pain medication made her nervous because she wouldn't be able to protect herself. She felt safer knowing I would be with her while she was medicated."

Giles paused for a moment and then continued. "She also knows that if she is injured that I will take care of her, not just physically, but emotionally as well, without asking anything of her. She knows that I will not scold her about her life, or remind her once again that there is something inherently wrong with what she is. She trusts that I will also keep anyone else from doing that to her while she is hurt and vulnerable." He smiled tightly. "Although tonight I feel as though she were taking care of me instead of the other way around."

Joyce looked at him. "She told me you were 'freaked out'. Were you?"

Giles grimaced at the phrase. "Well, once you get past that quite disturbing description, then, yes, I suppose I was."

"How could she tell?"

Giles smiled softly and looked at Buffy. "She knows me quite well. Probably

better than anyone."

"Why were you so upset? You must see her hurt all the time."

Giles shook his head. "I don't know. It was just ...it hit me hard tonight." Giles looked away, but Joyce could see the pain and sorrow in his eyes. After a moment he looked at her again. "In any case, are you able to see that at times, it would be easier for her to choose me than to choose you?"

Joyce didn't want to see, but she could. "I'm her mother, I can't help it."

Giles smiled softly at her. "She does all she can to shield you from it. I also imagine she chooses me at times in order to protect you, to keep you from seeing that she's hurt, or frightened, because she knows it upsets you so. She would turn to you much more readily, if she felt that she could, I promise you that. I don't mean to compete in any way, but if she turns to me, I will always try to be there and I will not turn away simply because someone else's feelings may be hurt."

"I hate that she's the Slayer." Joyce still knew that she hadn't even begun to let go of the fantasy of having a normal daughter.

"I know. It is understandable and I would think less of you if you didn't. I imagine that every mother who sends her child off to war weeps about it, even if it is in private. It is a mother's place to fear for her children."

"You love her. How do you do it?"

"I help her. I spend every waking moment doing everything I can to make things easier, to make her stronger, to give her the knowledge she needs to make it through another day." He smiled tightly. "And I spend some time simply hating it, as well."

"Why did you choose to become a Watcher?"

Giles let out a half laugh. "I didn't. I was born to it. I was informed when I was ten years old that I would be a Watcher." He shook his head. "I didn't take the news particularly well. And I spent many years doing everything I could to run away from it. But it was my destiny, much as being the Slayer is Buffy's. And I believe that we were destined to be together."

Joyce's eyes narrowed. "How do you mean that, exactly?"

Giles glanced up at Joyce. "As Watcher and Slayer, of course. We complete each other in the work we do." Giles pursed his lips. "Many Watchers and

Slayers don't suit that well. It makes for an uncomfortable time for all involved, and often those Slayers die quite early in their tenure as Slayer."

"So, the closer the Watcher and Slayer, the longer the Slayer lives?"

"That seems to be a very accurate predictor."

"And how close can a Watcher and a Slayer get?"

Giles looked at Joyce askance, sure that she couldn't possibly be asking what he thought she was asking. "I beg your pardon?"

Joyce blushed but she pressed on. "Do Watchers and Slayers ever become romantically involved?"

Giles' raised his eyebrows, relieved that at least she'd asked the question in a general way. "Yes, yes they do."

"Do you feel that way about Buffy?"

Giles felt the safety rug being pulled out from under him. He stared at Joyce, nonplussed.

Joyce continued. "I know you love her, but are you in love with her?"

Giles looked at Buffy and then back at Joyce. He shook his head, confused, temporarily bereft of speech.

Joyce raised her eyes to heaven, as if looking for guidance. "Let me tell you what I think. I think you are in love with her, and I think she's in love with you, but neither of you know it yet. I think it's why she doesn't even think about putting Riley first, and why you push Jenny away. If you were in love with Jenny, you'd work harder at it. But a large part of you, regardless of how much you care about Jenny, would be fine if you didn't have her, because you have Buffy and she's all you really need."

Giles looked like a deer caught in headlights and Joyce found a perverse satisfaction in having struck him dumb. She also found a new strength inside, and a sudden weariness with fighting the inevitable. She'd spent much too much time wrestling with the things that simply were and it all felt like wasted time and wasted energy. Joyce knew that she still had things to work out, and personal demons to do battle with, but one thing she was feeling very clear about. It was time to start helping her daughter and stop being a hindrance. And if a good relationship between Buffy and her Watcher was one way to help her and keep her safe, then Joyce figured that it was high time she got

out of Rupert's way. Somehow, in the midst of all her anger, until tonight, she had missed the fact that he loved Buffy, certainly as much as she did, and in many ways, loved her so much more completely. It left Joyce feeling ashamed, and determined to do better.

Joyce stood. "I need some coffee. Do you want anything?"

Giles looked up at her, his eyes still a bit glazed. He just shook his head.

Joyce grinned at him and left the room.

End of Part 7

## Friends and Lovers 8

Giles' mind had simply shut down. He felt incapable of a single coherent thought. He turned his head and watched Buffy, her presence acting as his North Star, his reason for being. Still holding her hand he reached out with his other hand and touched her hair, running a few of the silky strands through his fingers. He had no idea how to begin considering something he'd spent years treating as a forbidden subject, not something to even reflect upon in an idle moment. She'd been too young, he'd been her mentor, an instructor at her school. The idea alone had been wildly inappropriate, and he was grateful that he'd, truly, rarely had occasion to push those sorts of thoughts aside.

The thought of being in love with Buffy wasn't what gave him pause. He supposed it was true. Assuming being in love meant that all of one's being was wrapped up in someone else, that all of one's thoughts were on him or her, that being with them gave one such a sense of completion. Certainly, despite his deep affection for Jenny, Buffy held the majority of his heart, and Giles felt a moment of guilt, understanding now, that he had been terribly unfair to Jenny. But even he hadn't seen the hold Buffy had on him, not until this very moment. And he knew that when he saw Jenny tomorrow that he would end the relationship, regardless of where things went with Buffy.

What gave him pause was the thought of touching her. He couldn't imagine it, or maybe he just wouldn't allow himself to. She had grown into a beautiful woman but she was still so young. Giles knew she loved him, but he found it hard to believe that she also, was in love with him. Or that she ever thought about being with him that way. Giles could feel himself shying away again at the thought. It felt as if that would be so extraordinarily different from what they had now. That it would be similar to jumping off a precipice, having no idea of what lay beneath. And the thought of putting what they had at risk, for



something so unknown, shook Giles to his core.

He knew, as he sat there, that he would never initiate anything. That he would not be able to be the one who made the choice to change the way things were. But, perhaps, if Buffy ...

Giles let out a soft laugh. If Buffy asked it of him, he'd do it. Jenny was right. He'd jump off that precipice if it were what she wanted. Anything for her. Anything. Despite his fears about it. Despite the risk.

Again he let her hair run through his fingers. Buffy stirred and he held very still. She opened her eyes and when she saw him she smiled. Giles felt his heart leap in his chest. He spoke softly to her, slowly retracting his hand away from her hair. "Go back to sleep."

She closed her eyes but then opened them again. "What time is it?"

Giles looked at his watch. "Two in the morning."

"Where's my mom?"

"She went to get some coffee."

Buffy smiled again, sleepily, making a small sound of acknowledgement. Then she turned her head, checking out the room. "Riley?"

"He left." Giles felt a momentary twinge of some uncomfortable emotion at the mention of the young man's name.

Buffy smiled again, which surprised Giles. "Good."

Giles' eyebrows rose, and he felt a sort of fierce relief that Buffy truly didn't seem to care if Riley were here, in fact, seemed glad that he wasn't. Giles couldn't resist brushing some hair off Buffy's forehead. "How do you feel?"

"Okay." Buffy focused her gaze on Giles. "Are you in love with Jenny?"

Giles' eyes opened wide, wondering why Buffy would be asking him that, wondering if perhaps she had overheard part of his and Joyce's earlier conversation. With another momentary flash of guilt about Jenny, he shook his head. "No, no I'm not."

Buffy wrapped both of her hands around Giles' one. "Me either."

Giles puzzled that out. "You mean with Riley?"

Buffy nodded. "He wants me to be." She looked up at Giles. "Does Jenny want you to be?"

Giles nodded. "Yes, she does."

"I sort of want to be too, but I can't. I mean, I sort of want to be in love, just not with Riley." She yawned and then shot Giles a sheepish look. "Do you know what I mean?"

"Actually, I do."

Buffy turned his hand so the palm was facing up, and she moved her head closer to the rail so she could rest her cheek on his hand. "I guess it's just you and me."

Giles smiled down at her. "Yes, you and me."

Buffy yawned again. "But, that's not so bad."

Giles found his other hand gravitating to her face again, and he brushed her cheek softly with the backs of his fingers. "No, in fact, it's quite all right with me."

Buffy made a soft happy sound. "Me too." Buffy looked ready to settle down again. Giles barely heard her when she spoke. "I love you, Giles."

Giles felt the sting of tears. "I love you too, Buffy." He brushed her cheek again. "Now go to sleep. I'll be right here."

"Okay."

As she settled back into sleep Giles ran his hand down her hair and felt so much love for her that he thought his heart might burst in his chest. He looked up to find Joyce standing across from him.

Joyce saw the brightness of his eyes and the acute vulnerability. It was as if he'd been stripped bare before her and Joyce could see the depths of his love for her daughter. He still looked beyond speech and Joyce couldn't think of any words to say. She felt humbled and she felt a certain peace that her daughter was loved so much by someone who, despite their differences in the past, Joyce knew to be a good man. A man who would do everything and anything in his power to keep Buffy alive and happy.

Joyce had gotten Giles some tea, despite the fact that he had told her he



didn't want anything, and she silently handed it to him. He smiled his thanks to her and took it, setting it down beside him, on Buffy's bedside table. He spoke softly. "She woke up for a minute."

"I know."

Giles looked up at Joyce, realizing that she must have heard much of the conversation between he and Buffy. He caught her eyes, trying to see what she might be thinking and was surprised to find nothing in her eyes to condemn him. "Ah."

Joyce grinned at him, her eyes knowing. "I think I can guess what that one means."

Giles nodded. "I suspect you would be right."

"Will you tell her?"

"No."

His answer surprised her. "No?"

He shook his head. "No. This cannot come from me. And despite your words, I cannot believe it will come from her." Giles touched Buffy's hair again. "She is so young."

Joyce looked sadly at her sleeping daughter. "I don't think she's been young for a long time."

Giles didn't respond, but he turned and awkwardly balanced the cup with his one free hand, until he managed to get the lid off. He took a cautious sip.

Joyce glanced at him. "Was I wrong to say something? Should I have kept quiet? Have I made things more difficult for you?"

Giles shook his head. "No. My love remains the same, it is simply, well, perhaps defined a little more clearly. I am satisfied with the way things are." He let out a breath. "I feel no great need to change things, and I certainly am not willing to risk what we have by trying to make her feel something she doesn't, or isn't ready for."

"You're satisfied with the way things are?"

Giles nodded.

Joyce prodded a little harder. "So, it doesn't bother you to think that she might go home tomorrow and be sleeping with another man?" She didn't miss the flash in his eyes.

Giles reined his reaction in. "That is Buffy's choice."

"Maybe she makes it because she doesn't realize she could have you."

Giles looked up at Joyce. "Joyce, two hours ago, you would have been happy if you'd never seen me with your daughter again. Now, I feel as if you're forcing my hand to become ..." He waved his hand holding the tea gently in Buffy's direction. "...intimate with your daughter. It's a bit much." He looked around the room. "You don't have a shotgun with you, by any chance?"

Joyce barked out a laugh and then she covered her mouth as if to pull the sound back. She looked at Buffy to see if she'd awakened her. When she saw that she hadn't she grinned at Giles. "No shotgun."

"Well, that's a relief, at any rate."

"I just know I'm right."

"And I must ask that you leave it alone, now. Please."

Joyce scowled but she nodded, pulling her chair up and sitting down, focusing on her coffee. The two of them sat silently, keeping vigil over Buffy as she slept.

##

When Buffy woke up next she could see the sun shining in around the closed curtains. Craning her neck she saw her mom curled up on a reclining chair in the corner of the room. "Mom?"

Joyce opened her eyes immediately. "Hi, honey. How are you feeling?"

Buffy stretched. "Good, actually." She checked the room again. "Where's Giles?"

"You sent him home, remember? You thought he looked tired."

Buffy thought back to the last time she'd woken up and then she did remember. "Oh, yeah. He looked whipped." She looked disgruntled for a minute. "He really left?"

Joyce let out a laugh. "Yes, he really left. After you threatened him with bodily harm and gave him some heartfelt speech about him needing to keep healthy for you."

Buffy grimaced. "Who knew I could be so dramatic in the middle of the night?"

Joyce stood and came to sit on the chair that Giles had vacated. "He didn't want to go, if that makes you feel any better."

Buffy glanced at her mom, expecting to see the usual furrowed brow. "Hey, you seem remarkably Giles angst free. What gives?"

"We did a lot of talking last night. Cleared the air a bit."

Buffy's eyes narrowed. "What'd you two talk about?"

Joyce didn't miss the expression that crossed her daughter's face. Giles had asked her not to talk about it to Buffy, but it didn't mean she couldn't prod her a little. "Oh, our feelings for one another."

Buffy's face took on a very nervous look. "What feelings? What feelings that you have for one another?"

The door opened up and a nurse came in. "Good morning. How are you feeling this morning?"

Buffy shook her head. "Wait." She looked at her mom. "What feelings?" Her stomach felt as if it was tied up in knots.

Joyce just pointed to the nurse. "Let the nurse do what she needs to do. We have plenty of time to talk." Joyce stood. "I need a restroom break." She leaned down and kissed Buffy on the forehead. "I'll be back in a few minutes, honey."

Buffy's brow was furrowed as she watched her mom leave the room. She barely tolerated the nurse's assessment and for the most part kept her eyes on the door waiting for her mom to come back. The nurse finally looked at her. "Well other than being grouchy I think you're in pretty good shape. Remarkable, considering. I'm sure the doctor will let you go home today."

Buffy nodded at her, still distracted. "Uh huh." When her mom entered the room Buffy was back on the conversation like a dog with a bone. "What feelings? Why should there be feelings?"

Joyce bit back a smile. She knew she should feel guilty for this, but she didn't. "Well, we've never talked about that ... you know ...that night. The band candy night."

"And there should never be talking about that night, ever."

"Why? Why does it matter to you so much?" Joyce sent her daughter a confused innocent look.

"It doesn't ...matter. Why should it matter?" Buffy was able to keep her mouth shut for about ten seconds. "What feelings?"

Joyce got up to take the tray from the dietary assistant and she began to set up Buffy's breakfast. "I've just decided that I like your Mr. Giles, very much."

Buffy scowled. "What's that supposed to mean?" She scowled again and muttered under her breath. "And he is mine, you know."

"Buffy, are you jealous?"

"Jealous? Jealous of what? Were there things going on that I should be jealous about?" Buffy's voice rose an octave.

"I don't know. You just sound jealous." Joyce poured some milk in Buffy's cereal. She took another look at Buffy's face and relented. "We've decided that we should try to be friends. Everything's been forgiven and forgotten, so to speak."

Buffy put the head of her bed up more, so she could get to her breakfast. "Friends?"

Joyce nodded. "Friends."

"Like no touching, no kissing, no nothing of any kind sort of friends?"

"Exactly."

Buffy thought about that for a second and then she nodded. "Okay. That's okay."

Joyce pursed her lips as she considered her daughter. "You do realize that he does do that sort of stuff, right?"

Buffy's eyes opened wide. "What?"

"Rupert. I mean, he does have a girlfriend. I imagine they do touch."

Buffy scowled again. "So?"

"So, I'm just wondering if you don't like the idea of your Mr. Giles and I touching because you don't want me to be with anyone, or if it's because you don't want him to be with anyone?"

Buffy went still, the spoon of breakfast cereal halfway to her mouth. The phone rang and Joyce reached for it. "Hello?"

"Joyce, it's Rupert. How's Buffy this morning?"

Joyce frowned at her watch. "You couldn't have gotten much sleep."

"Well, I had a class this morning."

"Still ..."

"I'm quite used to going without sleep. I'm fine."

Buffy was reaching out her hand, quite demanding. "Is that Giles?"

Joyce grinned, speaking into the phone. "Someone wants to speak with you." She handed the phone to her daughter.

"Giles?"

"Good morning, Buffy."

Buffy felt better just at the sound of his voice. "I missed you when I woke up and you weren't here." Buffy blushed when she realized how that sounded. "I mean ..."

"That's all right, Buffy. I know what you mean. Are you feeling better? Is the pain gone?"

Buffy stretched a little. "Yeah, hardly any pain at all. The nurse thinks I'll go home today."

"Good. Will you go and stay at your mum's for a couple of days?"

Buffy glanced at her mom. "Yeah, if she doesn't mind."

"I hardly think she'd mind, Buffy."

"Will you come by tonight?"

"If you'd like."

"I would."

"Then I will."

Buffy could hear a knocking sound. "Is that someone for you?"

Giles hesitated. "Yes, it's Jenny."

Buffy frowned. "Oh."

There was a few seconds silence on both sides. "Well, I'd best go."

"Okay, but Giles?"

"Yes?"

"Come by tonight, okay?"

"I will."

Buffy hung up. She knew she should have told Giles to take Jenny out somewhere romantic tonight, but it wasn't in her to do that, even though it was her fault that they had fought last night. Instead Buffy found herself not liking the idea of Giles and Jenny being alone, and of what they might even now be doing. Somehow Giles had been with Jenny for so long that Buffy didn't really think about it, but her mom was right. Giles probably did touch Jenny, a lot. Like she touched Riley. And Buffy didn't like that idea, at all. Buffy pushed her breakfast tray away.

Her mom looked at her concerned. "What's the matter?"

"Jenny."

Her mom bit back a smile at the misery on Buffy's face. She wished she could tell Buffy not to worry, that she had captured her Watcher's heart completely, and it was hers for the taking, but Joyce knew it really wasn't her place. But at least she had a pretty good idea that Buffy's heart was taken as well, even if she hadn't figured it out yet.

## End of Part 8

### Friends and Lovers 9

Jenny watched as Giles hung up the phone, her stomach churning. "Was that Buffy?"

Giles nodded. "She's going home today."

Jenny managed a smile but then couldn't resist a jibe. "So, not at death's door."

Giles let out a long sigh. He wondered when it had happened, when his allegiance had so shifted to Buffy that no other woman could hope to win his heart. He wondered if he and Jenny had ever had a chance. Giles remembered his manners and gestured Jenny in, pulling a chair out for her to sit on. Once she was sitting, he sat across from her. They sat there for a few moments, the silence awkward. Finally Giles spoke.

"Jenny, I'm sorry."

Jenny shook her head. "An apology isn't enough."

"I know."

"I deserve more than that."

"You deserve so much more. More than I can ever give you. I've been dreadfully unfair to you."

Jenny couldn't agree more. "Things have to change."

"Yes, they do."

"I think we should live together."

Giles looked up at Jenny, surprised. "Excuse me?"

"You know, move in together. Then I'd get to see you more. Maybe I wouldn't mind you going off to get Buffy out of one bind or another if I knew you'd at least be coming home to me."

"Jenny."

"No, I've given this a lot of thought. And I think it could work."

"Jenny."

"It would probably make more sense for you to move into my house, because it's bigger. There's even a spare bedroom for Buffy if she gets hurt, so she doesn't have to sleep on the couch."

Giles tried again. "Jenny."

Jenny could tell things weren't going the way she had planned but she couldn't give up, not yet. "Besides, it's hardly appropriate for a girl Buffy's age to be spending the night at a bachelor's apartment, is it?"

Giles sighed again. "She's been doing it since she was sixteen. It hardly seems the time to start worrying about proprieties now."

"That's not the point."

"No, I don't suppose it is."

"Rupert, I understand she's the Slayer..."

"But?"

"But, she's also a young woman. She might get the wrong idea if you continue to hover."

"My behavior hardly constitutes hovering."

Jenny glared at him. "Every time she calls, every time she gets a scratch, every time she gets in a mood, you're who she calls, and you go running."

"I dare say you're exaggerating a bit."

"Not by much. At least not from where I'm standing."

Giles stood and started pacing, as much as his office would allow him to. "I can't afford not to go. When she says she needs me, I must go."

"Have you never read the story about The Boy Who Cried Wolf?"

"I think you're being a bit unfair. Buffy never calls me unnecessarily."



"What was last night then?"

"Jenny, she almost died."

"But afterwards, when it was clear she was fine, she still asked you to stay. And don't tell me it was because she was scared witless because she wasn't. I saw her. She was calm enough to know exactly what she wanted and to milk the situation for all it was worth to make sure she got it."

"Jenny." Giles' voice was sharp. He knew Jenny was justifiably venting but his automatic defense of Buffy was difficult to stem. "You're not being fair."

Jenny let out a groan of frustration. She tried again. "Did you think she was scared and in desperate need of you?"

"No, I didn't think that, except that I knew she didn't want to take any pain medication unless I was with her."

"Why?"

"Because she wouldn't be able to protect herself. Vampires can enter hospitals. If word got out that she was injured, it's not unreasonable to assume that one might try to get to her while she's vulnerable, to kill her."

"And Riley couldn't have protected her? It had to be you?"

"She feels most comfortable with me. You know that."

"Does she ever think about the fact that you have other people in your life?"

"Yes, she does, and she felt badly that you and I fought last night."

"It didn't stop her, though, did it?"

"Her asking me to stay was as much for me as it was for her."

"What?"

"She may not have been frightened, but I was. I was terrified, and she knew it. She knew I wanted to stay, that I wanted to be near her."

Jenny narrowed her eyes. "If she hadn't asked you, would you have stayed anyway?"

Giles shook his head. "I don't know. It doesn't really matter at this point."

Jenny watched Giles, watched the sadness on his face, and watched, as he wouldn't meet her gaze. Her own heart started to hurt as she finally gave voice to her fears. "Rupert, what's going on? What aren't you telling me?"

Giles sat again, and he took her hands. "Jenny."

Jenny suddenly didn't want to know. She stood up, moving away. "So, what do you think about us living together?" Maybe if she spoke fast enough, made plans fast enough, they could get past this part.

But Giles needed to get it said. "It just won't work any more."

Jenny looked down at Giles. "Why are you saying that? Isn't it up to us to make it work?"

Giles pursed his lips and then he stood as well, leaning against the wall, hands in his pockets. "All right, then. I can't do it anymore. I can't keep hurting you, letting you down. You're right, you do deserve more. You deserve someone who will put you first."

Jenny shook her head. "I'm the one who's getting hurt here. If I've come up with a possible solution, why won't you take a chance with it?"

"It's not a solution, Jenny. Unfortunately it will simply be a vehicle for me to hurt you more. Buffy is my life, she always has been, always will be. If we live together, you'll just see more proof of that, not less."

"Do you love me, Rupert?"

"I do, Jenny, I love you most dearly."

Jenny hated herself for asking, when she knew the answer but she did it anyway. "Are you in love with me?"

Giles looked at her sadly. "No, no I'm not."

"Have you ever been?"

Giles' lips tightened. "I don't know. I think I hoped I might be."

"What the hell does that mean?"

Giles moved to his desk and sat on the corner. "I don't think I understood. I don't believe I...I don't believe there's really room in my heart for more than..."

He sighed in frustration, not sure how to say what needed to be said.

Jenny let out a horrified gasp as it all suddenly became clear. "Oh, God, you're in love with her, aren't you?" Giles didn't say anything, which in itself was enough of an answer for Jenny. "For how long?"

Giles shook his head. "I just realized it, last night." He looked at Jenny, confusion on his face.

Jenny had no compassion in her at the moment. "Have you been sleeping with her? Behind my back? Is that what you've been racing off to do every time she calls?"

Giles stood quickly, and moved over to Jenny, putting his hands on her shoulders. "No, never. I would never do that to you."

"But, it's okay to be in love with her while you sleep with me? Did you wish it was her when you were with me?" Jenny turned her head away, her eyes filled with tears, humiliated.

"Jenny, no. It hasn't been like that. Every moment we've spent together has been important to me, and real. You must believe me. I didn't put it together until last night and as soon as I did I realized that I was being completely unfair to you, that this wasn't right."

Jenny tried to control her tears. "Jesus, Rupert. You really are a noble bastard, aren't you?"

"I don't feel noble at all. I feel dreadful about the whole thing. And I wish..."

Jenny looked at him. "What do you wish?"

"I wish I was in love with you. I wish it could be that simple." He raised a hand and touched her cheek.

"Is she in love with you too?"

"I have no idea."

"You're not going to ask her?"

Giles shook his head. "No, I'm not."

"Why not?"

Giles put his hands back in his pockets. "Because I am her Watcher and I cannot compromise that relationship."

Jenny poked him in the chest, angry all of a sudden. "You seem to think you have the right to make all the decisions here. You haven't even asked me what I think, or if I'd be willing to live with things the way they are, and you're not giving Buffy that choice either. We have a right to a choice, you know. Who are you to make everyone's decisions for them?"

"Jenny, please. I understand that you're angry. You have a right to be, but let's not play games. Would you? Would you be willing to stay with me knowing I'm in love with her?"

There was a pause, and then a grudging answer. "No."

"So why belabor the point?"

"But that doesn't mean Buffy wouldn't choose you." Jenny couldn't believe the words coming out of her mouth, but she was so angry she couldn't stop talking. And she knew that once she stopped that it would be over, that this thing, this wonderful and annoying thing between her and Rupert would be truly over.

"If she chooses me, then she and I can discuss it. But until then, things will remain the same. It changes nothing of how I feel or the duty I have."

Jenny shook her head at Giles. "She has no idea of what she's done to you, does she?"

"She's done nothing to me. I suppose it's somewhat inevitable for a Watcher to...to develop strong feelings for his or her Slayer."

"Right, she's done nothing. Except wrap you slowly around every one of her fingers."

Giles spoke sharply. "Jenny, that's enough. None of this is Buffy's fault. She is in fact, one of the least selfish beings on this planet. She offers her life up nightly to protect us all. If you must speak harshly, do so to me and about me."

"Oh, that's right, I forgot. Buffy can do no wrong." Jenny snarled. "The great and wonderful Buffy." Jenny glared at Giles. "Well, it's just as well that you aren't going to tell her, and do you want to know why?"

"Not particularly but I'm sure you're going to tell me."

"Because women don't like a man who's a doormat. And that's what you are to her, someone to use and abuse. How could she possibly love you? She doesn't even respect you. How could she and treat you the way she does? As if the only reason for your existence is to wait on her every need, to come running every time she crooks her finger. God forbid you want a life of your own, a woman of your own. But does she care? No, she doesn't. She doesn't care at all."

"She does care, Jenny. She cares very much. However, it doesn't matter. Much of what you say is true, not in how Buffy treats me, but in how I treat her. I am here for her. And I know that upsets you."

"Upsets me? You think I'm upset?" Jenny moved in close to Giles and poked him hard in the chest again. "You're damn right I'm upset. I'm being jilted for the world's most selfish nineteen-year-old girl who doesn't even know you're a man. Someone who's probably going to be dead ..."

Giles grabbed her hand and pushed her firmly away. "Stop it, Jenny, don't say it."

Jenny bit back those words, but she couldn't keep it all back. "Well, she is. And when she's dead, and you suddenly find yourself lonely and feel like you can love someone again, don't come looking for me." With that Jenny stormed out of Giles' office, slamming the door shut behind her. The pictures on his walls rattled in response.

Giles closed his eyes and sank to his desk again. "Bloody brilliant, Rupert." He shook his head. Giles tried not to take Jenny's words to heart but it was hard. He found himself wondering if Buffy did even know he was a man. And he found himself wishing she were here so he could hold her, and lose himself in her presence.

End of Part 9

## Friends and Lovers 10

Buffy was up in her room resting when the doorbell rang. Joyce grinned at the look on her face. Buffy made as if to bounce out of bed but Joyce put her hand out. "You stay put, young lady. If it's Rupert, I'll send him up."

Buffy lay back on her pillows, frowning. The doorbell rang again. She pointed. "Well, go get it, before he leaves."

Joyce rolled her eyes as she headed downstairs. As if he would leave. He'd probably break the door down if no one answered it; afraid that Buffy was lying hurt somewhere, unable to call him. Joyce opened the door and her eyebrows rose when she saw it was Riley. "Oh, Riley."

Riley smiled at her, a look of hope on his face. "Well, here I am, to take your advice." He looked around. "She's here, isn't she?"

Joyce nodded, momentarily stymied at Riley's appearance. "Uh, yes, she's up in her room." Guilt swamped her as she realized that she had told Riley to talk to Buffy, to try and convince her that he was still the guy for her, back when Joyce couldn't stand the hold Rupert had on her daughter. That seemed so long ago now.

"Great. I'll just go on up."

Joyce's eyes opened wide. For some reason she didn't want Riley up in Buffy's room. She had to bite back a laugh at herself that just seconds ago she hadn't had a thought about sending Rupert up. "No. I'll go get her."

"I don't mind." Riley made as if to head up.

"Riley." Joyce spoke more sharply than she intended and Riley looked at her, surprised. Joyce decided to go with the intimidating mom routine. She pointed at the couch. "You just sit there, young man, and I will go get my daughter."

Riley flashed her his lovely smile and he sat, quite obediently. Joyce let out a little sigh that her daughter's life would never be this easy, never allow for a normal boyfriend, with a nice obedient smile, that her friends and neighbors wouldn't think twice about. Shaking off that fantasy yet again, Joyce headed upstairs. She opened up the door to Buffy's room. Buffy looked up, a smile on her face, clearly expecting to see Giles. "Hey!" She frowned. "Oh, Mom. Wasn't that Giles?"

Joyce shook her head. "It's Riley. He wants to talk to you."

Buffy flopped back down on her bed. "Great. Can't you tell him I'm sick or something?"

"Buffy, he's your boyfriend."

Buffy pouted. "I know." "If you don't want him to be, you need to let him know."

Again, the pout. "I know."

"Do you want him to be your boyfriend?"

Buffy wasn't sure when it had happened but somehow between yesterday and today she didn't want him to be her boyfriend. "No." She glanced up at her mom. "Does that make me a terrible person?"

Joyce sat down on Buffy's bed. "Of course not, honey. You have to be true to yourself. But if you don't love Riley, you need to tell him that. Stringing someone along is a very unkind thing to do, despite the fact that it sometimes seems the easiest thing to do."

Buffy sighed a big sigh. "I know. I don't know what happened. Yesterday it was fine that he was my boyfriend. But today ..." She shivered. "Major ick factor."

"Any ideas why?" A part of Joyce was begging Buffy to think it through.

Buffy shook her head. "No. Although I guess things haven't been super great for a few weeks now. He really doesn't like all the time I spend with Giles."

Joyce just nodded. "Well, you better go down and talk to him."

"What will I do if Giles comes by while he's here?"

"Well, I imagine he will offer to come by again later, or I could take him in the kitchen and keep him company until Riley leaves."

Buffy narrowed her eyes as she looked at her mom. "No hanky panky?"

Joyce pulled her daughter out of bed and smacked her on the butt. "Buffy Summers. Your boyfriend is down in the living room. I suggest you tend to him and not worry so much about me." Buffy sent her mom one last pout and then she headed down the stairs.

Joyce rolled back on Buffy's bed, fighting back a grin. Joyce knew that she was enjoying having her daughter be jealous of her far too much. She imagined if Buffy and Rupert ended up together that she'd have a few jealous moments of her own, so she was going to enjoy this part as much as she could. The grin slipped off her face. Although if Rupert really wasn't going to say anything, and Buffy continued as clueless as she seemed to be, Joyce truly wondered if anything would happen between the two of them. She hugged a pillow, thinking up possible plans to help them along.



Buffy found Riley sitting on the couch. He stood and headed over to her, giving her a big hug. She hugged him back, wondering again why she didn't feel like touching him anymore. He pulled back just a bit and Buffy knew he was planning on kissing her. Buffy managed to evade him and headed for the kitchen. "I'm thirsty. You want something?"

Riley, ever agreeable, nodded. "Sure." He followed her into the kitchen.

Opening the refrigerator door Buffy looked at the possibilities. She glanced up at Riley. "Juice? Soda?"

"Whatever you're having."

Buffy sighed and pulled out some juice. She poured them both a glass and then put the container back into the refrigerator. Handing him a glass she sat opposite him at the table. "Here."

"Thanks." Riley reached across the table for one of her hands. "Buffy, we need to talk."

Buffy pulled her hand back and stood up. "Are you hungry?"

Riley stood too and captured her hand, pulling Buffy close to him. He lowered his head to kiss her.

She managed to stand it for a minute but then she turned her head away. "Don't."

"Buffy, did I miss something? Did we have a fight and somehow I missed the newsbreak? Because you sure aren't acting like my girlfriend." He pulled her to him again. "Or are you just mad at me and we just need to make up?" He nuzzled her neck. "Hmmm?"

##

As she headed downstairs Joyce saw Giles coming up the sidewalk to the house. Opening the door she smiled at him. "Rupert."

Giles smiled at her. "How are you?"

"I'm fine." She grinned, anticipating his next question. "Buffy is fine." Joyce thought for a moment and then decided that maybe throwing the three of them in a room together might break a few truths loose. "She's in the kitchen." Joyce didn't bother to mention that Riley was in there as well.



"Ah, well, I'll just ..." He pointed towards the kitchen.

"Of course." Joyce followed behind him. When he opened the kitchen door Joyce winced and almost grabbed his arm to drag him back out. She really hadn't intended on Rupert being the one to get his heart broken in this scenario.

Giles stopped when he saw Riley nuzzling Buffy. He turned to leave immediately but Buffy saw him and cried out. "Giles." She moved away from Riley. "Look, Giles is here."

Giles pointed to the door. "Actually I was just leaving, I didn't mean to interrupt." His heart was hurting, as he suddenly realized how not all right he was with the thought of Buffy with another man. He turned around and sent a disbelieving glare at Joyce.

Buffy could see the hurt look on Giles' face and she wanted it to go away. "No, don't leave." She gestured to Riley. "This wasn't what it looked like." She glared at her mom too.

Joyce gave them all a sickly smile. "I have laundry to do." She left quickly, leaving them on their own.

Riley stared at Buffy. "What's going on?"

Buffy stared back at him, all innocence. "What do you mean?" She took a step towards Giles. He was standing too near the door, and still looking poised to run.

Giles looked at the two of them. "Clearly I've interrupted. I'll come back later."

Buffy leaped for him and grabbed his arm. "No, no, stay. I want you to stay."

Giles looked down at her, confused. "Buffy, what are you doing?"

Riley looked at the two of them and his jaw dropped. "Oh God, the two of you have something going on, don't you?" He smacked himself on the head. "Could I be more stupid? This explains everything."

Giles and Buffy looked at each other and then back at Riley. Giles spoke. "I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh please. I'm here with my supposed girlfriend, trying to kiss her, and you walk in. Suddenly she doesn't want to be near me and tells you that it wasn't

what it looked like, like I'm the other man. Give me another explanation."

Giles looked at Buffy. Buffy bit her lip, looking back, racking her brain for an explanation that made more sense than the fact that she didn't know why she did it. She held her hand up towards Riley. "I ...was just embarrassed to be kissing you in front of Giles." Buffy looked at them both, hoping that maybe that might eek her by. At the looks on their faces she tried again. "Giles told me to take it easy, I was afraid he'd yell at me if I was kissing you and being all strenuous."

Giles rolled his eyes and Riley just glared at her. Riley took a step in her direction, gesturing at them both. "How long has this been going on? How long have you two been sneaking around behind my back?"

Giles was feeling annoyed that he was having this conversation for the second time in one day. "We have not been sneaking around." Realizing that wasn't having quite the effect he wanted it to have on Riley, he tried again. "There isn't anything of a romantic nature going on between Buffy and myself. There never has been. And I don't appreciate you throwing around accusations like that. Buffy would never behave that way."

Buffy sent Giles a grateful smile. She looked at Riley. "And neither would Giles." She glanced at Giles again and he smiled softly at her.

Riley was pacing around the kitchen. "Well, maybe you haven't been sneaking around but it's pretty clear something's going on. I should have guessed it with the way she's been acting. Always Giles this and Giles that, and I have to go be with Giles now." He glared at Giles. "And then last night making me call you and once you got there I might as well have been chopped liver." He stormed over to the two of them and Giles stepped in front of Buffy. Buffy rolled her eyes and moved to stand next to him.

Riley looked at them both and then fixed his attention on Buffy. "I don't know what's going on between the two of you, maybe you don't even know, but I'm guessing that whatever it is, that there's no room for me anymore, is there?"

Buffy looked up at Riley, hating that she was hurting him. Finally she shook her head. Her voice was very soft. "No." She took a step towards him. "Riley, I'm sorry."

"When were you going to tell me? Hmm? How long were you going to string me along?"

"I wasn't stringing you along. I was going to tell you today, right now." She gestured to Giles. "But Giles came in."

Giles let out a breath. "I can still leave."

Buffy grabbed his arm again. "Don't you move."

"When did you decide you didn't want me anymore?" When Buffy didn't answer Riley answered for her. "It was last night, wasn't it?"

Giles looked at Buffy, his eyes wide. Buffy glanced up at him and then at Riley. Again, it took a moment but finally she nodded. "I don't know what happened. It was there and then it wasn't."

"Maybe it's still there. Maybe it was just because you got hurt and got scared. Maybe you just need some time." Riley knew none of those statements were true but he couldn't just give her up.

Buffy shook her head. "I'm sorry, Riley."

"So that's it?" Buffy didn't respond and she didn't meet his eyes. Riley pointed at Giles. "What is it with him? What's he got that I haven't got? What's the attraction?"

Giles tried to take a step towards Riley, his body answering the implied challenge. But Buffy kept a firm hold on him. She looked up at Riley. "Giles isn't the point. The fact that you and I are over is the point. I'm sorry I'm telling you this way. I know I'm really bad at this. I'm sorry that I'm hurting you but the truth of it is that I just don't want to see you anymore."

Riley let out a bitter laugh. "And you think Giles isn't the point? I thought being the Slayer meant that you learned to keep your eyes open. You're about as blind as a person can be if you don't think Giles is the point here. This has everything to do with him and nothing to do with me." He shook his head. "But maybe it never did have anything to do with me." He reached out a hand to touch Buffy's face. Giles had to fight the urge to slap it away. He could feel Buffy moving ever so slightly closer to him, and away from Riley, and Giles made do with that. Riley spoke. "Did you ever love me?"

Buffy's eyes filled with tears. "I tried. I wanted to. I thought you were everything I wanted."

Riley pulled his hand away as if burnt. He gestured at Giles angrily. "Yeah, except I'm not him."

Buffy pulled herself up to her full height and glared at Riley. "Time for you to go."

Riley looked at them both. "Yeah, I guess it is." He brushed by them both and pushed his way out the kitchen door, none too gently. They both winced as the front door slammed behind him as well.

Giles and Buffy stood another moment looking at each other. Then Giles moved away, needing some distance, and headed over to the stove. "Would you like some tea?"

Buffy shook her head. "Nah, I think I'll go straight for the ice cream. You want some?"

Giles considered the idea but then he shook his head. "No, I feel the need for tea at the moment. Perhaps later."

Buffy opened the freezer and took out a container, then went searching for a bowl. Giles put some water in the kettle and turned on the burner. He leaned back against the counter and watched Buffy. Buffy finally noticed Giles watching her and she sent him a rueful smile. "That was fun, huh?"

Giles' eyebrows rose. "Yes, very entertaining. Especially getting to go through it twice in one day."

Buffy thought for a minute and then she grimaced. "Jenny?"

Giles nodded. "Jenny."

"Didn't you guys kiss and make up, though?" Buffy hated the idea, especially the kissing part.

"No, it ended much the same as this one did."

Buffy tried to make her voice sound sad. "You broke up?"

"Yes, I'm afraid we did, quite definitively so. Slamming doors seems to be the exit of choice today."

Buffy winced. But then she grew genuinely contrite. "Giles, I really am sorry. I know it was because of me."

Giles bit back a laugh at Buffy's statement. It was true, much more than Buffy knew. "Buffy, please, don't hold yourself in any way to blame. Perhaps it did have something to do with you, but there is nothing about the way things are that I would willingly change to keep Jenny with me."

"But suppose you could wave a magic wand?"

As the water began to boil Giles started pulling a mug and the tea out of the cupboard. "A magic wand?" He mulled over that thought. "Are you asking if I would make my life something completely different, not be a Watcher? Instead be someone who could simply fall in love, get married, have some children, live a simple and relatively danger free life?" He pursed his lips. "Certainly I think about it. Don't you?"

Buffy nodded. "Sure, I think about it a lot. But if I handed you that wand right now and told you that you could have that, would you do it?"

Giles let off his tea making and turned to face Buffy. "You mean end up with someone like Jenny and lose you?" Buffy nodded, her face prepared for the worst. He smiled softly at her. "No, I don't believe I would."

She smiled at him, relieved beyond measure. "Really?"

"Really."

"You'd choose me?"

"I did choose you, Buffy. It's why she's gone and I'm standing here with you in your kitchen."

Buffy nodded, still grinning. "Good point."

Giles rolled his eyes and went back to his tea making. Buffy put the container of ice cream back in the freezer, opened the drawer to get a spoon, and then took her bowl to the kitchen table. She sat down and dug in, watching Giles, feeling quite content.

Giles finished his tea and brought it over to the table, sitting across from Buffy. Buffy wished he'd sit closer. She took another spoonful of ice cream and watched him some more. Giles looked up and caught her eye. "What?"

Buffy hesitated for a second but then she jumped in. "Why do you think Riley thought there was something going on between us?"

Giles stilled, his mug poised near his lips. Then he took a sip. "Well, he did have a point. You did act somewhat oddly when I walked in. I'm not surprised he drew the wrong conclusion."

Buffy shook her head. "Nah, it was more than that. He's been thinking there's been something going on for a while."

"Well, we discussed jealousy a while ago, Buffy. Jealousy can frequently color one's perception of events, and put an interpretation on things that aren't at all true."

Somehow his answer disappointed Buffy. "So, there isn't anything going on ...between us?"

Giles almost choked on his tea. "Excuse me?"

Buffy blushed. "Never mind. Stupid question."

Giles reached out and gently touched her hand. "Not a stupid question, you are merely trying to understand. But, for there to be, as you say, something going on between us, there would need to be something ... actually going on between us."

"Right, which there isn't." Buffy frowned at that thought. She glanced up at Giles. "Right?"

Joyce chose that moment to poke her head in the door. She smiled when she saw Giles and Buffy. "Is he gone?" Both Buffy and Giles glared at her. She winced.

Giles spoke first. "You might have told me that Riley was in here, Joyce."

Buffy simply added her weight behind Giles'. "Yeah, Mom." Although now she was actually glad Giles had interrupted them.

Giles spoke again. "What were you thinking?" He truly didn't understand. He'd thought Joyce on his side in this.

Joyce lost her patience. "I thought it might make the two of you actually talk to each other." She glared at them both. "Has it? Are you?"

Giles snapped at her. "Joyce."

Joyce's reaction was immediate. She bit her lips to keep her mouth closed and she looked guilty. Buffy looked at both Giles and her mother in amazement. Giles had used that tone of voice with her but Buffy had never imagined him using it on her mom. It was nice to see it had the same result. But her curiosity was completely aroused. "Talk about what?"

Joyce rolled her eyes and just turned around and left, muttering as she did so. Something about idiots.

End of Part 10

## Friends and Lovers 11

Buffy stared at Giles again. "You yelled at my mom."

Giles winced. "Yes, well, I do apolo..."

Buffy interrupted. "And it worked."

Giles stared at her as he realized that Buffy wasn't upset that he had yelled at her mother, merely amazed at the result. He got up to add some more hot water to his tea hoping the entire incident would be forgotten.

"What did she want us to talk about?"

Giles' lips tightened. He ought to have known that Buffy wouldn't ever let something alone. "It's not important."

"Well she thinks it is."

Giles sent Buffy a stern look. "I have no intention of talking about it."

Buffy started pleading. "But if she thinks it's important and you think it's important enough to not talk about then it must be important."

"Buffy. The answer is no."

"I don't even know what the question is."

Giles sent her one of his looks. "It won't work."

She pouted at him.

"I mean it, it won't work. I have no intention of succumbing to your wily ways."

That stopped Buffy. "I have wily ways?"

"Very wily."

She grinned. "Cool." Then she frowned. "Or not. I mean, look at Wily Coyote. He must have wily ways or they wouldn't call him Wily Coyote and look at



what always happens to him."

Giles couldn't help it. He laughed.

Buffy stared at him. "I made you laugh."

Giles was still chuckling. "Yes, well, you can be quite ...amusing." He almost said adorable but stopped the word just in time.

Buffy frowned. "What were you going to say?"

She knew him entirely too well so he decided to tell a small lie. "I was going to say droll."

Buffy's brow furrowed. "I hate that word."

"Why on earth do you hate that word?"

"Because it always seems like a word I should understand but I never do."

"Exactly. So I thought I'd expedite the entire conversation and say amusing instead."

Buffy pouted again. Then she perked up. "But at least the word I understood has three syllables and the one I didn't only had one."

Giles shook his head in amazement. "It is a truly frightening and odd world we live in."

Buffy scowled at him. "Ha ha."

Giles smiled at her and then lifted his eyebrows. "Actually his name is Wile E. Coyote. The E in wily is his middle initial."

Buffy's eyes opened wide. "Get out." She paused. "Really?"

"Really."

She thought about that for a moment and then she grinned. "I can't believe you know that."

Giles just grinned, looking smug.

Buffy couldn't resist it and grinned back. Then she thought back on what they'd been talking about. "So, you're really not gonna tell me?"

Giles shook his head.

"Fine. I'll just figure it out on my own then."

Giles nodded. "And when you do, we can talk about it."

Buffy let out a disgusted noise. "So, now we're not talking about it because I'm stupid?"

Giles' eyes narrowed. "Buffy, you know I don't think you're stupid." He frowned at her. "And you know I don't like it when you refer to yourself as such."

"But right now you're not talking to me about something important because you don't think I'll understand it, you or my mom."

"This is different, Buffy. It's got nothing to do with how bright you are or whether you'll understand."

"Right. Which is why my mom was mumbling about idiots when she left the room. Part of which was directed at you, by the way."

Giles muttered something under his breath, entirely directed at Joyce.

Buffy's eyes opened wide. "You just called my mom a bad name."

Giles sighed. "You heard that?" He always forgot about her Slayer hearing. Buffy nodded. Giles sighed again. "Well, perhaps I better go before my behavior disintegrates even more." He stood to leave.

Buffy reached across the table and grabbed his hand. "Don't go."

Giles looked at her, surprised. "Why not?"

"Because I don't want you to go. I like having someone here."

"You're not alone. Your mother's here."

"I know that." Buffy took a deep breath. "I like having you here. You."

Feeling both delighted and frustrated Giles sat down again. Buffy still had a loose hold on his hand and he wasn't quite sure what to do, whether he should continue holding her hand or remove his. He hated that he suddenly felt awkward around her. Buffy took the decision away by lacing her fingers

through his and moving to the chair kitty corner from him.

Giles was astonished at the effect of her touch on him. She had touched him before and held his hand, but it felt so different this time. It made him want her, it made him want to touch her and he had no idea how to deal with it.

Buffy could feel something in the air. She gazed at Giles but he was looking at everything but her. She squeezed his hand. "Giles, what is it?"

Giles glanced at her just for a second. Then he regretfully pulled his hand away. "I had better go."

It had only been the briefest of looks but Buffy's stomach did flip-flops in response to it. She grabbed his hand again before he pulled it completely away. "No."

"No?"

She shook her head, looking at him. Frustrated that he still wasn't looking at her she reached out and placed a hand on his cheek, turning his head to face her. "No." Buffy could feel it there, tickling her, tantalizingly out of reach. "Wait." She finally caught his gaze.

He stared at her, captivated by her eyes and by the growing wonder there, equal parts within him hopeful that she would share his feelings, and fearful that she would reject him.

Buffy pulled her hand away from his and Giles' heart sank, but she merely placed it on his other cheek so she was holding his face in both her hands. Her eyes were wide and searching. She gazed into his eyes, where the emotions were so clearly written for her to see. "You love me."

Giles let out a sigh. "I do."

"Why didn't I see it before?"

Giles smiled ruefully. "I didn't know it before."

Buffy didn't feel close enough to Giles. She inched her chair around the corner until she was as close to him as she could get. Buffy reached up and touched his face again. She couldn't bear to not be touching him. "This feels so strange."

Giles covered her hand with one of his. "Yes, it does."

Buffy couldn't look at him enough. "Does it just happen like that?"

"Like what?"

"Like magic? Like all of a sudden it's there when you had no idea?"

Giles smiled softly. "Apparently."

Buffy's brow furrowed. "My mom figured it out?"

Giles laughed his soft laugh. "Yes, before I did."

Buffy wasn't sure how she felt about that. She pushed it aside for the time being. "Will you say it to me?"

"Do you want me to?"

Buffy nodded, unconsciously leaning closer to him.

Giles hesitated for a second but then he found it surprisingly easy to say. "I love you."

Buffy closed her eyes for a moment and then she smiled. "You've said that to me before."

"Yes, I have."

"But, it's different now."

"Yes, it is."

"So, say it the real way." She wanted to hear it the way she hadn't been able to say it to Riley. And the way she knew Giles hadn't said it to Jenny. She needed to hear him say it to her.

Giles touched her cheek with the back of his fingers and then let his fingers run through her hair. "What is it you want me to say? Do you want me to say that I'm in love with you?"

Buffy's hand had slipped off his face and was resting on Giles' chest over his heart. She nodded.

Giles smiled, his face so close to hers, so close she could feel his breath on her cheek. "I am, I am very much in love with you."

Buffy laid her head on Giles' chest. "Oh, God."

Giles pulled back, concerned. "Buffy, are you all right?" She nodded, her hands over her stomach. "I just got attacked by about a million butterflies."

Giles continued to look confused. "Is that a good thing?"

Buffy giggled and then lifted her head to smile at him. "It's a way good thing."

"Ah."

Somehow Buffy knew exactly what that particular ah meant. She ran her fingers over his lips. "So, what do we do now?"

Giles held her fingers still with his hand and as hard as he tried he couldn't resist kissing them. Then he pulled her hand away, holding it in his. "That depends entirely on what you want to do."

Buffy found herself feeling very young. She frowned at him. "Suddenly I'm in charge?"

Giles smiled at her. "For this moment, for this first touch, yes, you are in charge. I have to know it's what you want."

She frowned at him again. "What, and then you'll be Mr. Bossy again?"

He rolled his eyes. "Yes, immediately thereafter and henceforth. We both know how successful I've been at that."

She grinned quite impudently at him. "I might like you bossy in this."

Giles let out a groan and rested his forehead against hers, praying for patience. "Would you please just decide."

Right then Buffy felt the power she had over him and Giles knew he was in trouble when he saw her next grin. She ran her hand through his hair, watching as Giles closed his eyes at the sensation. Buffy leaned forward and kissed his jaw. "What is it, exactly, that you want me to decide?" She pressed another kiss on his jaw and then on his chin.

He growled her name. "Buffy."

She laughed in delight and moved in even closer, her hands on his chest as she kissed his temples, and his eyebrows and the end of his nose. "Am I supposed to decide where I should kiss you?" She kissed him everywhere on

his face, everywhere but on his lips. "Am I doing it right?"

Giles felt as if he was on fire. He wondered where that man had gone who had looked down at Buffy sleeping last night unable to imagine touching her. There was no trace of that man now. If Buffy didn't kiss him soon he thought he might explode, just spontaneously combust.

Joyce chose that moment to push open the kitchen door, her curiosity finally getting the better of her. Joyce bit back a grin as Buffy sprang away from Giles and he lowered his face into his hands. Joyce decided it served him right for snapping at her earlier.

Buffy's face was bright red as she looked up at her mom. She wanted to go strangle her but she made herself stay seated. "What, Mom?"

Joyce finally succumbed to the grin. Giles still had his face hidden. "I'm going out. I've got a show tonight at the gallery. I'll be home after ten." She couldn't resist a last shot. Favoring her daughter with the best mom glare she could she left with a warning. "You two behave." Shutting the door behind her, Joyce laughed all the way out of the house.

Giles groaned from behind his hands. Buffy was petrified that the moment was lost, that he would just leave, that he would realize that he couldn't possibly love her, that it had all been a dreadful mistake. Her voice was filled with all that worry and fear when she spoke his name. "Giles?"

He heard the fear and he lifted his head, concerned for her. She decided not to give him the chance to change his mind. Buffy moved to his lap, straddling him, capturing his lips with hers.

Giles was initially stunned but he rallied quickly. Wrapping his arms around her he pressed her close. One hand rose to fist in her hair, turning her head ever so slightly so her lips would fit even more fully over his. Buffy moaned and wiggled in closer. She felt his hardness and she rubbed against him. At his groan she rubbed some more, loving this proof of his attraction to her. Suddenly she realized how close she was to having an orgasm. She tried to move away, almost embarrassed at how his touch had enflamed her, but Giles chose that time to sweep his tongue in her mouth and press her even closer. Before she knew it she found her release.

Giles could feel it in her body and he swallowed her cries with his lips as she trembled in his arms. He couldn't believe how responsive she was to him. When she quieted he looked down at her, at her still flushed face and swollen lips. She buried her face in his chest and moaned, mortified.

He pulled her head up and smiled at her. "Don't hide. You have never looked more beautiful to me. Don't you understand that it excites me to see what my touch does to you?"

Buffy was still pressed against him and she could feel how hard he still was. His words and the feel of him felt wonderful. She rubbed against him again, feeling suddenly naughty, and whispered in his ear. "How much does it excite you?"

Giles tried to stop her. "Keep that up and you'll find out."

Buffy didn't want to stop. "No, show me." She reached down and stroked him through his pants.

Giles let out a cry. "God, Buffy."

She stroked him again, applying some pressure. "Let me see what I do to you."

He thrust against her hand and let out a moan. Buffy felt her own excitement grow in response and she kissed him, begging for entry with her tongue. And then she was capturing his cries as he bucked against her hand. It was the most erotic thing she'd ever felt. After a while, Giles let out a pained laugh and he rested his head on her shoulder. "I can't believe I just did that."

This time Buffy lifted his head up with a gentle caress so she could look at his face. She smiled at him. "You and me both." She rested her hands on his cheeks and she just stared at him. "How did I not see it?"

Giles shook his head, still a bit overwhelmed at his body's response and behavior. "I'm not sure I follow you."

"How did I not see how yummy you were?"

Giles grinned. "I'm sure I have no idea."

She poked him on the arm. "Hey." Giles just grinned again. She ignored him and took off his glasses. Running her hands down his face she shook her head. "I mean it. You're so handsome. Why didn't I ever notice it before now?"

He frowned. "You never thought I was handsome?"

"Well, I guess I did, because you are. But not in a wow you're really handsome and you're mine, so everyone better back off and keep your hands off kind of way."



"Ah." She poked him on the arm again. "Ow." He rubbed his arm, even though it hadn't hurt. Then at the look on her face he relented. "Buffy, love changes everything. You look so different to me now as well. And yes, before you ask, I always knew you were lovely but now you're mine and you are so very beautiful."

She sighed and rested her head against his chest. "I really, really love you." She lifted her head. "You know, the in love kind of love."

Giles kissed her again, softly and so tenderly. "You don't know what that means to me, to hear that, to believe it, to have it be you who's saying it to me."

Buffy nodded. "I know. It's like you're the only person who I could say that to and know that when I say it that I mean it with all of me. That there isn't a part of me that belongs to somebody else."

Giles grinned. "You mean, like your Watcher?"

She grinned back. "Yeah, like my Watcher."

Giles shifted underneath her, suddenly uncomfortable. "I have to go and get cleaned up."

She grinned at him again. "Make a mess in there, did you?"

Giles rolled his eyes. "Yes, and it's all your fault."

She smiled at him, all flirt. "Need some help?"

He stood in one fluid moment, Buffy in his arms. She shrieked a little and held on tight, her legs closing around him. He moved forwards and sat her on the table. "No. Despite the very tempting offer I can take care of this all on my own, thank you." Buffy pouted and he tapped her on the bottom lip with a finger.

She pulled him down and kissed him hard. "You just feel so good. I thought..."

Giles pulled away reluctantly. "Buffy, I think it's a good thing we both lost control a bit, and so quickly. It's slowed us down quite nicely. I'm not in a rush, despite my body's reaction to you. I have no intention of dragging you upstairs and having sex with you in a heated frenzy only to have to get dressed before your mother gets home. When I make love to you for the first

time I want to be able to hold you all night, and make it a special evening with candles and music, and declarations of love."

Buffy sighed. And then she wrapped her legs around him again, pulling him in tight. "You're not leaving, though, are you?"

Giles reached behind him and unclasped her legs. "No, I'm not leaving." He pressed a quick kiss on her lips. "Trust me, I can barely stand to be parted from you long enough to go to the loo."

She smiled at him fondly. "British guy."

He laughed quietly and moved away. "I'll meet you in the living room."

She stood too. "And we can snuggle?"

Giles turned back to her and hugged her tightly, wanting to chase all her uncertainty away. "I'll hold you the rest of the evening until your mother comes home and chases me out of here as if I was a school boy." He stepped away again, and looked down at himself. "But now, please, I have to go and clean up."

Buffy giggled and pushed him away. "Go." Giles headed for the downstairs bathroom while Buffy ran up to the one upstairs. She had to clean up too. Buffy took a moment and stared at her reflection in the mirror. She couldn't believe how different she felt, how right she felt, how completed she felt. She shook her head and then grinned. Racing back downstairs she got settled on the couch, changing her position several times, trying to get it perfect.

Giles caught her for the last couple of position adjustments. He spoke softly from the darkness. "No matter how you sit, you look perfect to me." His voice was rich with amusement.

Buffy groaned and buried her head in the couch cushion. Giles laughed and moved to sit next to her, pulling her into his arms, holding her lovingly. Buffy relaxed after a minute and just sighed. Finally she spoke, safe within his arms. "You know, it's kind of nice being in a relationship with someone who already knows every bad thing about me and still loves me."

Giles kissed the top of her head. "That works both ways, you know."

She sighed again. "It is still kind of weird."

"What is?"

She sat up and grinned at him, a nervous grin. "Well, that it's you. I mean first we're just Slayer and Watcher, and then a while ago we decide that we're friends. And now, suddenly we're ..." She got stuck there.

Giles helped her out. "Lovers? Or soon to be lovers?"

"Yeah, friends and ... and lovers. And a part of it feels weird that it's with you. Rupert Giles, brainy guy, Watcher guy, you know, you."

Giles grinned affectionately at her. "I know the feeling."

"It feels weird to you, too?"

"It does feel quite, well, a bit unreal."

She looked nervous again. "But that's not a bad thing, right?"

Giles shook his head. "No, it's just a thing, as you put it, that will take some getting used to. Despite how well we know each other, the intimacy will be new to us, and perhaps even more embarrassing in some ways because we do know each other so well. It's another reason I want to take some time. Time to get to know each other this way, as potential lovers, and give the other people in our lives some time to get accustomed to the idea."

Buffy leaned forwards and kissed him and it didn't take long for the kiss to grow quite heated. When Buffy pulled back they were both panting for breath. She grinned at him. "Remember what I said a while ago about how sexy it was that you were so smart?"

Giles nodded. "Vividly."

"I so meant it."

Giles laughed and pulled her in for another kiss.

The End

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