

Mexico 1

Sunnydale

Francine had been picking through the detritus of the last known residence of one Jonathan Levinson when she was attacked. The first thing she had noticed was a handsome man standing there, staring at her. She'd flashed him her world famous smile, the one that almost always got her noticed by a man, and then, before she could say a word, his face had changed, he had moved like a blur, and he'd latched onto her neck with a painful bite and she knew she was going to die.

All her expertise in hand to hand combat seemed useless against her attacker. Her own fear and disbelief at what was happening had further debilitated her.

She looked at her reflection in the mirror. Her face was as pale as she'd ever seen it. Francine knew she probably needed a blood transfusion. But that would mean she'd have to admit that she had actually been attacked by a vampire and she wasn't ready to do that. It terrified her too much.

Turning her head she looked at the puncture wounds. She let out a hiss of displeasure. "Shit, those are going to leave a scar." Realizing that she was extraordinarily lucky to be alive, complaining about a potential scar seemed petty, but Francine liked looking beautiful, and a large scar on her neck was bothersome to the extreme.

She had no idea why her attacker had suddenly left, unless it had been the earthquake. Through the haze of her impending death and the pain of the teeth in her neck, Francine had still felt the tremor in the ground underneath their feet. Then she'd been dumped on her ass, and she'd watched in astonishment as the man, or whatever he was, ran away.

Francine snorted. Despite her fears, she wasn't sure that she was that impressed with a supposed creature of the night if a little earthquake scared it away. After all, this was California. Living in California and being afraid of a little earthquake would be as ridiculous as living in D.C. and being afraid of a little government corruption.

Sighing at the mirror again, she picked up the small black diary she had found underneath the rubble before she'd been attacked. It was one of those old-fashioned ones with a small snap lock to secure it. Francine had rolled her eyes when she saw that. It had taken her less than a second to pick the lock with a paperclip.

She settled back on the bed in the hotel room she was staying in. It was disgustingly below her usual standards, but there hadn't been much to choose from in this one horse town. She longed for the D.C. nightlife. Francine opened the diary and picked up where she left off, shaking her head again at the infantile warning that anyone who read the diary was in BIG TROUBLE.

Her first assumption as she started to read was that this guy had used the diary to write some outlandish science fiction stories. But as she read on, and as the holes in her neck throbbed in constant reminder of her own encounter of the something kind, she started getting nervous. After a while she got up and made sure the window was closed and both locks were secured on the door.

##

Buffy didn't think the sky had ever been so blue. She sent her sister a brilliant smile which Dawn returned. The Slayer let out a happy sigh. "I think I'm happy."

Dawn let out a giggle, delighted with her sister's ebullient mood, considering how depressed and taciturn she'd been. She gestured around her. "And hey, the world's still here."

Buffy nodded firmly. "Which is a good thing."

"A very good thing."

Suddenly Buffy let out a gasp, and a pained look crossed her face, her eyes brightening with tears. "Oh, God."

Dawn looked at her with dismay, watching the good mood vanish as quickly as it had arrived. "What is it?" "Giles. I forgot about Giles." She sent Dawn an anguished look. "How could I have forgotten about him?" Buffy remembered the pain that had shot through her when Anya had appeared and told her that Giles was dying. A few tears escaped as she let out a wounded cry. "I gotta go." Without another word she was gone, running as fast as she could.

Dawn watched her sister disappear and let out a sigh. "So much for staying by my side and showing me the world." Then, as worry for Giles consumed her as well she began quickly walking back to the Magic Box.

##

Buffy got to the shop just as Anya was assisting Giles out the door. Buffy kept running and threw herself in his arms. Only her strength kept him from falling backwards. Anya was reluctantly forced to let go. Buffy held on tight. "You're alive!"

Anya scowled. "No thanks to you."

Buffy ignored her. She pulled back and looked up at Giles. "Are you all right?" Her eyes were still bright. "Anya said..." She couldn't finish the sentence, the idea of him dying too difficult for her to speak about.

Giles smiled tightly. "I thought I was dying. I think I should be."

"But, you're okay, right. I mean, you're not going to die, are you?"

Giles shook his head. "No, I think I'm fine. I'm a bit bruised and quite tired, but other than that..." He smiled down at her. "How about you? Are you all right?" He glanced around. "Where's Dawn?"

Buffy pointed back from where she had just come from. "She's coming. I'm fine, so is she." Realizing she still had her arms around Giles she blushed and took a step back, letting her arms fall to her side. "What happened?"

Anya sent Giles a proud look. "It was Giles. He dosed Willow."

Buffy's eyebrows furrowed. "What?"

"He dosed her with good magic. It let her get in touch with the goodness in her." Anya frowned. "The little tiny bit of goodness that was buried deep underneath her completely psychotic outer parts."

Giles sent her a gentle remonstrative look. "Anya." He turned to Buffy. "I can't take all the credit. It was Xander who made the real difference."

Anya's eyes darkened with a dangerous gleam. She was in no mood to give any credit to Xander. "He couldn't have done anything without what you did. And it almost killed you."

Giles frowned at the thought. "I'm still not sure why I'm not dead."

Buffy glared at him. "You sound like you're complaining."

Giles gave her a tired grin. "No, I'm not complaining, I just was told that if she took the bait and stole my magic, that I wouldn't survive."

Buffy let out a horrified gasp. "You came here expecting to die?"

"I didn't know any other way to stop her. You saw how powerful she was."

Buffy grimaced. She had seen how powerful Willow was. And felt it. Even with her Slayer healing she was sure she still was sporting a bruise or two. She'd also seen Giles completely rout Willow and bind her power. She looked at him with a new found respect. But then she grew worried again. "Is all your magic gone?"

He shook his head. "No, at least I don't think so. Until I know otherwise I have to assume that when Willow found herself again that some of that magic was released and found it's way back to me. That's the only reason I can think that I'm alive." He stumbled a little and Buffy was at his side instantly, holding him up.

"Let's get you home."

He looked at her, his eyes surprised. "Home?"

"My home, yours too. You're staying with me." Her voice brooked no disagreement. She shied away from the thought of him leaving again.

Giles smiled at her, not having the strength to argue even if he were inclined to, which he wasn't. Staying with Buffy suited him fine. The thought of lying down and sleeping sounded like heaven, but there was one more job to do. "Someone has to go find Xander and Willow."

Anya moved to Giles' side and slid her arm around his waist, appropriating him from Buffy. "Buffy can go find them." She had no intention of taking on that job.

Buffy frowned at Anya. She didn't want to let go of Giles. "Why don't you go. He's your boyfriend."

Anya hissed her response. "Ex boyfriend, ex fianc? Ex everything." She moved even closer to Giles. "I'm not leaving Giles. I'm the one who's been with him while you've been all useless trapped underground."

Buffy sent a pointed glance in the direction of the destroyed store. "Yeah, and you've done such a good job protecting him and the shop. Remind me not to have you baby- sit."

Anya glared at her. "I did better than you did. You couldn't even get out of

your hole."

Giles let out a sigh. "Perhaps it might be prudent if I go and find them."

Buffy's lips tightened as she realized she was going to have to give in. "You're in no condition to drive. I'll go." She looked at the remains of the shop. "My keys are in there."

Giles carefully turned, not wanting to stumble again. "Be careful, I'm not sure how stable the building is right now."

Anya scowled as she looked at the remains. "The insurance company's going to cancel our policy."

Giles tilted his head to the side. "You can hardly blame them. They certainly can't be making any money on the premiums we pay them, considering how often we incur damages." He watched nervously as Buffy gingerly made her way into the store to retrieve her backpack. He let out a silent sigh of relief when she returned safely.

She held up her keys with a flourish. "Do you know where they are?"

Giles had seen it all in his mind as it had played out. "They're on the overlook, north of Sunnydale. Or at least that's where they were. They may be on their way back."

"I'll find them." Buffy glared at Anya. "No demon funny business. Just get him home safely."

Anya let out an insulted noise but then decided Buffy's comment wasn't worthy of an additional response. Then she decided it was. "Just go and be useful." She took a hold of Giles' arm. "I'll take care of Giles."

Buffy's eyes narrowed at the fingers wrapped around Giles' arm. It made her, just for a moment, want to rip off Anya's fingers.

Giles again intervened. "Buffy, I'll be fine. I'll try very hard not to scorn any women between here and your house." His lips tightened. "I'm worried about them. They might need help."

Buffy nodded. "You're right. I'm going." She sent a warning glare toward Anya and without another word she spun around and headed for her car.

##

Buffy found them still on the overlook. Xander was sitting on the ground, Willow almost in his lap. Willow's hair was red again, and her face was blotchy from crying.

Buffy crouched down next to Xander. "Hey." Xander's eyes slowly focused on her. Then she noticed the wounds on his face and chest. "You all right?"

He nodded and then looked down at the small woman in his arms. Glancing up at Buffy again, he tightened his hold on her. "She's all right, Buffy, she's all right now."

Buffy smiled tightly at him. She remembered Giles' words and wondered if Willow would ever be all right again. It wasn't that she wouldn't be forgiven. Seeing Willow look so broken in Xander's arms made it hard for Buffy to even remember her anger. But she had known Willow a long time. And while Buffy knew most everyone would eventually forgive Willow, it was Willow who would be unforgiving of herself.

It had taken her months to stop her self flagellating behavior after the spell she'd cast that had turned Giles blind, and made her kiss Spike. And the tears and self- recriminations after she'd realized what she'd done to Buffy by bringing her back from the dead had driven Buffy to distraction. And then there had been Dawn's broken arm, and Willow's betrayal of Tara. All of which Willow had been paying for with major guilt.

And now...she'd tried to kill them all. She had killed Warren, as gruesomely as possible. Buffy didn't know if there would be any Willow left at all after this, any of the Willow she had loved so much at one time? Buffy was afraid there would only be an endlessly apologetic version of the friend she once knew.

It all felt so overwhelming. Even though they had won this particular war, the thought of trying to pick up the pieces made it feel as if the battle had just begun. Buffy thought of Giles and she knew she had to make him stay. She couldn't even begin to put it all back together without him here. The pang of unhappiness that pierced through her at the thought of him leaving again felt like a knife wound.

Silently she helped Xander get Willow in the back seat of the car, and then watched as he climbed in next to her. Buffy got in the front and chauffeured them home.

End of Part 1

Mexico 2

Washington, D.C.

"Yeah, Billy." Lee stuck his head in his boss' office.

Billy Melrose looked up. "Ah, Lee, come on in. Have a seat."

"Ooh, this sounds serious."

Billy lifted his eyes heavenward in mock exasperation. "Is Amanda still around?"

Lee frowned. "No, she's out on a date."

Billy tried not to grin at the tone in Lee's voice. He wasn't sure what it was going to take for this man sitting across from him to realize what he had in Amanda and stop pussyfooting around. Biting the inside of his cheek to keep a smirk off his face, he nodded seriously. "I need to ask you for a favor. This would be strictly off the record."

Lee sat down, concerned. "What is it, Billy? I'll do anything you need."

"I appreciate that, but wait until you hear me out, then decide. I'll understand if you want to say no."

"I'm all ears. And the answer is still yes, and I'm sure Amanda will feel the same way."

Billy smiled in response, then he let loose a sigh. "I got a call a couple of weeks ago from an old friend. His son's disappeared. He didn't really give it much thought at first because he and his son haven't been that close for a while. But when he hadn't seen or heard from him for a little too long, he went to the house where he had been living with two other friends, and it had been destroyed."

Lee's eyebrows rose. "Destroyed?"

"As if it had been torn apart. He did a little checking and it seems as if all three boys are gone. He called me to see if I could run his name through our system, see if his name cropped up."

"Did you find anything?"

"Not a thing. Francine happened to be in California on vacation, and I asked her to take a couple of extra days and see if she could find any leads."

"I was wondering how she was managing to take such a long vacation."

Billy rolled his eyes at his top agent. "She's spooked, Lee. She was trying to hide it, but something has her scared. I want you to go see what's going on, what she's found."

"I can't imagine anything scaring Francine. Usually it's the other way around."

A chill went down Billy's spine. "Maybe you should leave Amanda out of this one."

Lee didn't like the idea of that. He'd gotten used to working with Amanda. He felt weird when he worked on cases without her now. He found her presence soothing. He smiled to himself. He even liked it when she babbled. "She won't stand for that. Besides, she has such a different way of looking at things. Her perspective might be just what we need."

Billy's lips tightened and then he nodded. "Be careful. This whole thing makes me nervous for some reason. I wouldn't even ask you to help, but he's a good friend."

"We'll find his son. Don't worry." Lee stood up. "Where exactly are we going?"

"Sunnydale."

"Never heard of it."

Billy handed him a file. "Here's all the information the research department could pull on the place, and on Jonathan."

Lee took it and stuck it under his arm. "I guess I'll go tell Amanda."

"I thought you said she was on a date."

Lee scowled. "I'll wait for her to get home."

Billy bit back another grin. "Okay." His gaze softened. "Thanks Scarecrow."

"You've been there for me, more times than I can count. It's about time I got to even up the score."

Billy handled the emotion with his usual gruffness. "Fine, then get out of here,

already. I've got work to do."

Lee grinned and with a jaunty salute he sailed out of his boss' office.

##

Lee looked at his watch again, his expression growing ever darker. Amanda should have been home a while ago. That is if this was anything like any of her other dates. Dinner, maybe a movie, and then straight home. Amanda was an old-fashioned woman, and that was fine with Lee. Especially when she was with another man.

His fingers tapped impatiently on the steering wheel of his silver Corvette. He looked at his watch again. "Damn." Lee hated these dates. He hated that Amanda wasn't around when he needed to talk to her. He hated that someone else might be touching...Lee shook his head. He didn't want to go there. His relationship with Amanda was just what it needed to be. A professional friendship. That's all.

Lee looked at his watch again. He wondered if he should go track her down. Maybe the guy was getting frisky. Maybe he needed to have his teeth knocked in. Lee was grinding his own teeth when a car pulled into Amanda's driveway. "Jesus, it's about time." He watched as the man got out of the car and walked around to open Amanda's door. He walked her up the sidewalk to the front door. Lee winced and looked away when the man leaned in to give Amanda a kiss.

Then it was over and she was in the house. Lee waited until the man drove away, making mental note of his license plate number. Then he got out of his car and made his way to the back of Amanda's house, back to where the kitchen was. That was inevitably where she ended up. He was getting to be an expert on her habits.

He smiled when he saw her and he quietly tapped on the window. He didn't want to alert Amanda's mother and he had no idea where she might be. Amanda saw him and gave him a wide smile, her brown eyes twinkling. God, he loved that smile. He smiled back.

She snuck out the back door. "Hey! What are you doing here so late?"

That reminded Lee. He scowled. "I could ask you the same thing."

Amanda shook her head at him, gently chiding him with her expression. "Did you come all this way just to scold me?"

"No, but while we're on the subject, why are you home so late?"

"That, Mr. Stetson, is none of your business." She grew concerned. "Did you need me? Is there something wrong?"

Lee scrunched his face up. "Maybe. We need to go to California."

Amanda's eyes grew wide. "Really? California?"

"We need to go meet Francine."

Amanda grimaced. "Oh."

"I know, I know. I'm not crazy about it either, but Billy needs our help." Amanda stood a little taller. "Then I'm in."

Lee grinned. "I knew you would be." He gestured into the house. "Can you make arrangements to get away? I'm not sure how long we'll need."

"Sure. I'll tell my mom we're going on a last minute location scout for IFF. She'll be glad to watch the boys."

"Great. I've got us tickets for tomorrow morning, 10 am."

Her eyebrows rose. "You aren't giving me much time."

Lee shrugged. "I know, but Billy thinks it's important."

Amanda gave him her lopsided smile. He bit back a sigh. He loved that smile too. He realized she was talking and paid attention. "I'll be ready. You'll pick me up?"

"Of course."

"Okay, then." She turned to go back in the house when their eyes caught. Amanda thought her stomach would turn inside out with all the butterflies she had. These moments kept happening, moments when she was sure Lee would kiss her, but then he didn't. It was making her crazy. When the moment had grown into something uncomfortable and Amanda couldn't take it anymore she took a step toward the house. "Well, good night Lee."

Lee let out a breath. "Good night, Amanda." He took a couple of steps back until he blended into the darkness but he stood there for a long time until the kitchen light went out.

End of Part 2

Mexico 3

Sunnydale

Francine's head hurt. She hated Sunnydale with a vengeance and hated this kid Jonathan because he'd brought her here. She hoped he was as miserable as she was, the little snot. Hearing a sound she looked for a weapon, recoiling only slightly when she saw all her choices. The multitude of deadly implements made her hesitate and she hadn't yet picked one up when she heard Lee's call. "Francine?"

Letting out the breath she'd unconsciously been holding she moved to the doorway of the back room. "In here."

Amanda and Lee cautiously made their way through the debris until they reached her. Lee grinned as he brushed some dust off of Francine. "Your sartorial splendor is slipping, Francine."

Francine shivered at the thought. "I hate this town, I hate everything about it, and I hate everyone who lives here."

Amanda looked at Francine in surprise. While the woman was never unduly pleasant, this vitriolic outburst was a bit excessive. "What happened?" Then she noticed the bandage on Francine's neck. She reached out a hand toward it. "Are you all right? Did you get hurt?"

Lee was looking dubiously around the store. "Is it safe here?" Francine had left them a note at the hotel to join her here when they arrived.

Francine was shooing off Amanda. "Yes, it's fine. The owners were here earlier and got everything braced up so they could start removing inventory."

Amanda pursed her lips, thinking that Francine looked pale and shaken. She wished, not for the first time, that the woman wasn't quite so prickly. "Why did you want us to meet you here?"

"Because for some reason everything I've found out about the little shit seems to center around this store and the people in it."

Lee's eyebrows rose. "The little shit?"

"Jonathan. The miscreant who brought us to the misbegotten town."

Lee let out a breath and considered Francine. "Let's start over and maybe you can try making some sense this time."

Francine shot him a look of annoyance and then crossed the room and sat on a faded couch. "Fine. I found the home where Jonathan used to live with these two other guys, Andrew and Warren. It's been destroyed. Cut into pieces." She shook her head. "Why is no one noticing this stuff? Why can a house be ripped apart, this store mangled, monsters roaming around at night and no one cares? There is something seriously wrong with this place and everyone here."

Amanda sat next to Francine, starting to really worry about her. "Monsters?"

Francine ripped the bandage off her neck, revealing the puncture wounds. "Monsters. I'm at the house, going through the wreckage when I see this guy standing there. Then, the next thing I know, he turns into this monster thing and bites me." She jabbed her chest with a finger. "Me! Francine Desmond." She sent Amanda and Lee a glare. "No one bites me without my permission."

Lee bounced back on his heels, not quite sure how to respond to that statement. Amanda courageously kept at it. She looked at the wound. "Francine, it looks like someone attacked you with a barbecue fork. You could have been killed."

The dismay in Amanda's voice mollified Francine a little. "It wasn't a fork. It was teeth." She bared her own teeth. "Fangs."

Lee pursed his lips. "Tell us about Jonathan."

Amanda looked up at him. "Lee, she's been hurt." Amanda couldn't stand for anyone to get hurt.

Lee almost got lost in the large chocolate colored eyes staring imploringly up at him. With an effort he pulled his eyes away and looked at Francine. "Are you all right? Do you need to see a doctor?" He was willing to focus on the wound. He was not willing to talk about monsters who bit people.

Francine shook her head in disgust and slapped the bandage back on, wincing slightly. "No, I'm fine. Just don't expect me to go out at night while I'm here."

Lee shot her an incredulous look. Francine, afraid of the dark? He shook his

head. "Okay, now can we get back to Jonathan?"

Francine pulled out the small black notebook. "He was obsessed with these people. Obsessed with magic, and demons, and taking over the world. It's like reading the diary of Pinky and the Brain." Then she gestured around her. "Look at this place. Look at this stuff."

Lee took a good look around, seeing the knives and other assorted weapons lying around. "There are perfectly reasonable explanations for this stuff, Francine. Lots of people collect weapons." He motioned towards the punching bag. "This looks like a training room. They probably practice some kind of martial arts."

Francine sent the back of her hand waving at him in a dismissing gesture. "You didn't meet them. You didn't see the books they had hanging around before they could get them all in boxes and take them away. Books on demons, and creatures of the night. Books on magic, and mayhem." Her voice was rising.

Amanda smiled gently at Francine, hoping to calm her down. "It's a magic shop, Francine. The merchandise is bound to be a bit odd."

Francine blew out an exasperated breath. "Fine. Whatever. But these people know about Jonathan, and they know what happened to him. I'd bet my last paycheck on that, as paltry as it is." She stood and started pacing. "First, there's Rupert Giles, part owner. Good looking man, in his forties. Full of secrets, and a very bad liar. He has a shadow, a young blond, one Buffy Summers, who wouldn't let him out of her sight. They kept making eyes at each other." Francine had to admit that she was annoyed she hadn't been able to charm Rupert. He'd been too distracted, too focused on Buffy.

"Who did you tell him you were?" Lee wanted to be able to corroborate her story.

"Insurance investigator." Realizing the pacing was making her tired, she flopped back down on the couch. "Then there's the other owner. Anya. She's a piece of work, let me tell you. The only person she was half way pleasant to was Rupert, and even then it was borderline. How they ran a business together was beyond me. They were all lying. They hadn't taken the time to come up with a good lie, so they all told me different stories about what happened to the store."

Lee leaned back on the vault horse. "How did you work Jonathan into the conversation?"

"I mentioned I was investigating the other house as well, and mentioned their names, saying I was looking for the three of them so I could ask them some questions. You should have seen the looks on their faces." She moved to the edge of the couch and nailed Lee with a glare. "They know something, and whatever it is, it's not good."

Lee scowled. He didn't want to bring bad news back to Billy without some further proof. "Maybe Amanda and I can go talk to this Rupert Giles fellow and you can go talk to Anya. Maybe separately we'll get more information out of them." He looked at his watch and couldn't help grinning at Francine. "Although it's almost dark. It's almost your bedtime."

Amanda sent him a disapproving look. "Lee."

Lee relented. "All right, I'm sorry. Obviously something attacked you, Francine. It's just not like you to get so rattled. You've been attacked as often as I have on the job, and been hurt far worse."

Francine touched her neck and stood. "I know." She hated letting anyone see any weakness and she was determined that these two had seen enough. "I'll go see Anya. I have her address." She fished for a piece of paper out of her purse. "Here's where Rupert Giles is staying. It's with that Buffy girl and her younger sister, Dawn."

Amanda took the paper and held it while she considered Francine. Her voice was soft when she spoke. "Are you sure you're all right?"

Francine flipped her hair back and squared her shoulders. "Sure, I'm fine. We can meet back at the hotel later." Without another word she headed out of the room, through the main body of the shop, and was out the door.

Amanda and Lee locked gazes for a moment. When Lee saw how worried Amanda looked he moved over to her and put his arm around her shoulder. "She'll be fine, Amanda. She's a trained agent."

Amanda sighed and nodded. "I know. She just wasn't acting normal, even for Francine."

Lee had to agree. "Well, then I suggest we find what we came here to find and get the hell out of dodge. What do you say?"

Amanda smiled at her partner. "I couldn't agree more." Then the smile faded. "I hope he's okay."

"Jonathan?"

She nodded.

"Me too."

##

At the fourth truck stop, Jonathan had decided he'd had enough. Even dealing with Buffy was better than dealing with the looks being shot his way by too many swarthy looking truckers. He didn't know what was on their minds, but it was totally creeping him out. Totally.

Then he remembered Willow and that she was trying to kill him, and that that had been pretty creepy too. Jonathan sighed and moved a couple of inches away from the man who was standing just a little too close.

He closed his eyes thinking about what a mess he'd made of everything. Warren dead, Andrew becoming less and less the friend he'd thought he was with every passing hour. Nothing made sense. And the guilt was tearing him up inside. So many bad things had happened because the three of them had wanted to take over the world, and get laid.

Jonathan sighed again. Maybe he should just go back and take what was coming to him. At least then it would be over. Mexico seemed far away but all the ghosts, and guilt, and fear were just going to be crossing over the border with him. And that made Mexico as bad as Sunnydale. Well, except for Willow.

He just needed to find Buffy first. She'd protect him. She probably wouldn't be too happy about it, but she'd protect him. She sort of had to. Jonathan was pretty sure it was kind of in her contract, being the Slayer and all.

The truck driver who had picked he and Andrew up sauntered over to him and put his hand on Jonathan's shoulder, giving a baleful glare toward the other man. Jonathan felt like a piece of raw meat between two pit bulls. He smiled weakly at the driver. He held up his finger. "I'm just going to use the bathroom." He oozed out from under the meaty paw and followed the signs to the restroom. Then he was out the backdoor and running.

##

Francine knocked on the apartment door. The pressure from the knocking opened the door and she realized it hadn't been latched shut. "Hello? Anya?"

No one answered her but she could hear muttering coming from the bedroom. Angry muttering. Francine followed the noises until she found the woman she was looking for, packing a suitcase, and being none too gentle with the items she wasn't taking. "I hate men."

Francine couldn't help but agree. "I hear you."

Anya spun around. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Francine pointed back the way she had come. "I knocked, but you didn't hear me. The door was open."

Anya started muttering again. She picked up a bottle of men's cologne and threw it against the wall. Rather than breaking, the plastic bottle just ricocheted off the wall and almost hit her. "I hate men. They are scum, they are worse than scum. They are the parasites that live on scum."

Francine nodded. "I've been there." She sat on the edge of the bed. "What'd the bastard do to you?"

"First, he made me fall in love with him with his wooing eyes. Then he weakened me with his kisses. Then he asked me to marry him and wouldn't let me tell anyone. Then when we were finally getting married he left me at the altar."

Francine whistled. "Sounds like a man."

Anya wasn't done. "And do you know where he is now?"

Francine was familiar with most of these plots. "Let me guess. With an old girlfriend, right?"

Anya gaped at her. "Yes, yes, that's exactly where he is. His best friend girlfriend. The one that's supposed to be gay. And right now, he's in bed with her." Anya didn't mention that they were only sleeping. She didn't care. It was the principle of the thing.

Francine tightened her lips and nodded her head. "Ah, the old 'she's only a friend' trick. I've heard that one before."

Anya sat down on the bed next to the woman. "You have been scorned too?"

"Oh yeah, more times that I care to remember."

Anya's voice began to change, grow deeper and more formal. "Do you wish

revenge?"

"Let me count the ways."

"The men you wish to have revenge on are here?"

"No, in Washington, D.C."

"There are many men to scorn there?"

Francine snorted. "D.C. is the leave 'em weeping capitol of the world."

"What would you wish on these men?"

Francine had given it a lot of thought. "Well, for Brian I would wish that he'd suddenly find himself screwing a goat the next time he's addressing Congress. Tom needs to have his dick fall off. I'd like Eddie to marry some real shrew who'd make his life a living hell. Lee..." She thought for a moment. "Let's leave Lee out of it for the time being."

"Why would you not wish vengeance on this Lee? Did he break your heart?"

"Yes he did. But to be fair, he told me not to fall for him, so at least he didn't play games with me." She grinned. "Besides, I think he's falling for Amanda and that seems a fitting sort of punishment. God, that woman can talk the leaves right off a tree."

Anya stared at the attractive blond woman sitting on her bed. "Have you ever considered becoming a vengeance demon? I think you might be a natural."

Francine's eyebrows rose. "A what?"

Anya let her face change. "A vengeance demon. A protector of scorned woman."

Francine rolled her eyes. "Jeez, is everyone in this town a mutant?" She pulled off the bandage on her neck. "What did this?"

Anya shifted back to her human face, and looked. "A vampire."

Francine let out a long breath. "A vampire. Shit." She looked at Anya. "A vengeance demon. Of course." She tapped her fingers on her thighs and then she pursed her lips. "Are there good benefits?"

"You'll be immortal. You'll never age. You'll never want for money. You will

never fear again."

Francine stared at her, incredulous. "I was thinking insurance, vacation time, retirement fund." She thought about what Anya had said. "Those are good benefits." She stood and moved to the bathroom staring in the mirror. "I'll never age?"

Anya moved to stand next to her. "I am over 1200 years old."

Francine's jaw dropped. "Get out." She looked more closely. "Your complexion looks great."

Despite the fact that Xander, before he'd broken her heart, had almost made up for the inconveniences of being human, Anya had to admit that being immortal was pretty great. "Just don't make the mistake I made and fall in love with a human."

Francine snorted. "Fall in love? I'll never do that again. As far as I am concerned, you just play for a while, and then you move on." She pointed at Anya's face in the mirror. "That thing that happened to your face. Would that happen to me too?"

"Yes, when you are using your power. Otherwise you will look the same as you do now."

"So I could keep my job, and get to sneer at all the women I work with as they get older and I don't?"

Anya moved back into the bedroom to finish packing up the few things she had left behind. "You can do anything you want." She threw some shoes into the suitcase. "Except trust men."

Francine rolled her eyes. "That's a given." Then she remembered why she was there. "Oh, and do you mind telling me where Jonathan is?"

Anya shrugged. "Last I heard, he was on his way to Mexico. I mean, after all, he's a man too, so naturally, after helping create a catastrophe, he ran away. He didn't even stay to make sure that the people who were helping him were okay. The people who were out of his mind to help him, because he's scum too. Lower than scum." She sat again. "All men. Except maybe Giles." Her eyes grew dark. "He might not be scum but he's almost as bad. Because he left Buffy. He left us all. He didn't even come for the wedding and if he'd been here, Xander wouldn't have run away." Anya fingered the pendant between her breasts. "I hate men."

Francine was feeling a deep kinship with this woman. "They're scum all right."

Anya stood and stared down at the belongings she had gathered. "Let's go. I don't want any of this stuff. It will just remind me of him."

Francine stood too. "Where are we going?"

"To see D'Hoffryn. He's the vengeance demon boss. You're lucky. He's kind of on a recruiting jag right now."

Francine suddenly felt nervous. "Suppose I don't want to become one of these vengeance demons?"

"Then you just tell him no. He doesn't want anyone who won't give a hundred percent to the job."

"Oh, okay." With that, she followed Anya out of the apartment.

End of Part 3

Mexico 4

Giles stood in the doorway and watched Willow and Xander sleeping. Xander had woken up occasionally, but was still exhausted, his battle with Willow having clearly taken its toll. But even when awake, other than taking care of necessities, he hadn't wanted to leave Willow's side, not wanting her to wake up alone.

Giles was sure that Willow had been awake a few times but no one had been able to catch her at it, and she refused to respond to entreaties to wake up. Giles could only imagine the mental and emotional pain she was in. Actually, he was sadly certain he was all too familiar with the pain, as he had also caused the death of someone through his own embracing of dark magic.

He knew he was probably the only one who would be able to help Willow now. Well, he and Xander. Xander's love, and Giles' personal experience and magical expertise. But he couldn't help if Willow wouldn't talk to either of them. He was deathly afraid that she might just drift away, unable to face her own inner demons and the devastation she had wrought because of them.

Giles couldn't find it inside of himself to blame her. Oh, he supposed he could blame her for that spell she did on Buffy, that spell that foolishly left too many doors open inside of her, a welcome invitation for the twisted side of magic to

slowly take control. But even that he could understand. He'd been young and incredibly foolish himself, and been willing to take the fates on with that glorious delusion of grandeur that magic bestowed.

He just wasn't sure how to get through to her. Everyone she knew right now, everyone who loved her the most, she had hurt, one way or the other. Giles knew that accepting help from any of them would be difficult for Willow. Giles scowled. What she needed was a mother who gave a damn about her. Little chance of that happening.

With another sigh, Giles turned and headed downstairs. Dawn had just left to go spend the night at Janice's. So, that left Buffy. He joined her in the kitchen. She looked up. "Anything?"

Giles shook his head. "She's still asleep. Or pretending to be asleep."

Buffy leaned against the counter. "Will she be okay?"

"I don't know, Buffy. Hopefully she just needs time."

"Can she still use her magic if she wants to? I mean, can she turn back into that thing that tried to kill you, tried to kill all of us?"

"That will always be a part of her. As sorry as I am that she had to go through this, perhaps this will finally teach her what can happen when magic gets out of control and that it must be controlled."

Buffy smiled softly at Giles. "She's lucky she has you, someone who can understand. Most people wouldn't. But then most people wouldn't have come and helped at all once they'd had the good sense to leave in the first place."

Giles' lips tightened. "I never should have left. This might not have happened if I'd stayed."

"She was already going bad, Giles, before you left. You know that. She was on a way one trip to being the wicked witch of the east." Buffy turned back to the stove. "The important thing is that you came back and you got her back." Her voice tightened. "Even if it was going to kill you."

Giles walked over to her. "I didn't know what else to do."

Buffy spun quickly and faced him, her eyes bright. "What was I supposed to do when I found out you were dead? Hmm? How was I supposed to deal with that? I mean, you show up, and do the big rescue scene and then you die? That's not the way it's supposed to happen."

Giles rested a hand on her shoulder. "You of all people know that life rarely happens the way it should. But every now and then it can surprise us, and things don't turn out as badly as they might have. I appreciate your concern, Buffy, truly I do, but I'm fine."

Buffy looked up at him, and their gazes locked for a moment. Giles was captured by the longing and concern on her face, and Buffy was drinking in the affection on his. Then, for a moment, it didn't feel like enough, and they both wanted more. Giles' hand rose from her shoulder and moved to her neck, his thumb caressing her jaw. Without moving her eyes from his, Buffy was shaking off the potholder on her one hand, and trying to place the spatula on the counter with the other so she could touch him, hug him, connect with him.

The doorbell rang. Giles dropped his hand and took a step back. He stammered. "I...I'll just go and uh...see who that is."

Buffy just nodded, not sure what had just happened, but knowing that she felt like strangling whoever was at the door for their rotten timing.

Giles opened the door and saw a very attractive man and woman there. He noticed that it was just dark. He stepped back away from the door a few inches. "Yes? May I help you?"

The woman spoke. "We're so sorry to bother you when it's this late. I'm Amanda King, and this is Lee Stetson. We're here about the store."

Giles' brow furrowed. "The store?"

"Yes, you met one of our colleagues earlier, Francine Desmond? She called us in to give her a hand."

The man took over. "We know it's late but there's just never enough hours in the day, are there? We just want to ask you a few questions and then we'll get out of your hair."

Buffy walked out of the kitchen and stood next to Giles. She glanced up at him, her eyebrows lifted, a question in her eyes.

Giles answered the unvoiced question. "They say they're with the insurance company that covers the store."

"You mean like that blond woman today?"

"Yes." Giles was frowning. That woman today was more than she had let on, and he suspected these two were as well. He had dealt with this insurance company too many times already and this wasn't how they operated. He stepped away from the door and implied an invitation, without actually speaking the words.

They both crossed the threshold and Giles and Buffy exchanged a small look of relief. Amanda and Lee exchanged a look as well, aware that there was something going on, some undercurrent that they weren't privy to.

Giles allowed them in but invited them no further. "I'd like to see some identification please."

Lee and Amanda exchanged looks again. Amanda spoke. "What sort of identification?"

Giles gave them both a patient look. "Identification that might make me actually believe you work for my insurance company."

Lee threw out a laugh. "Well, that's a new one." He gave Amanda a look as if to silently commiserate about the eccentricities of their customers.

Buffy moved a few feet away until she could keep an eye on the two visitors and protect Giles if they proved to be something dangerous.

Amanda opened up her wallet and pulled out her license. "See, Amanda King." She smiled a very nice smile at Giles.

Giles found it hard not to smile back. He just nodded. "Thank you. Now, please let me see an ID badge, or a business card, or some paperwork with my insurance company's logo on it." When they both hesitated he sighed. "I know you're not from my insurance company, so let's stop playing games and tell me why you're here."

Another look was passed between the two. Lee broke the silence. "We're looking for Jonathan Levinson."

Amanda and Lee watched as two sets of eyes quickly glanced toward the stairs. Giles shook his head. "Why are you looking for Jonathan?"

Buffy jumped in. "And why are you pretending to be someone you're not while you're looking for him?"

Amanda tried to redirect. "Do you know him?"

Buffy nodded. "I went to high school with him. What's up? Why are you looking for him?"

"His father's looking for him. We're just helping him."

Giles was exasperated. "By lying? Why didn't you just ask? I don't understand the reason for your pretense."

Buffy folded her arms over her chest. "Doesn't exactly make us want to trust you, you know."

Lee realized it was time to start over, not time to tell the truth, but time to start over. "You're right, of course. It's just that we've asked a few people about him and we've gotten some odd answers. We thought we might find out more by beating around the bush." He let out a soft laugh. "Sorry, didn't mean to make you nervous. We're sort of new at this."

Amanda laughed. "Yeah, it's not like we're spies or anything." She and Lee both laughed.

Giles just looked at the two of them.

Amanda forged on. "So, do you know where he is? His father's very worried about him."

Buffy's voice was hard and definite. "No, we don't."

Amanda gestured toward the living room. "Do you mind if we sit for a minute? It's been a long day."

Giles decided to play along for the time being. "Of course." He gestured an invitation.

Before Amanda sat she leaned toward Giles. "I'm sorry, but could you tell me where your bathroom is?"

Giles nodded and pointed down the hall. "First door on the right."

She smiled. This time he couldn't help but smile back. She really did seem very nice. "I'll just be a minute." She sent Lee a look and he nodded.

Giles and Buffy sat down on the couch, Lee across from them. Lee started right in, wanting to cover for Amanda. He had no doubt she was going to try and get upstairs to see what these two were hiding. "Maybe you could just tell me when you last saw him."

Giles and Buffy exchanged another look and Lee suppressed a sigh. Francine was right about these people. They were definitely lying about something and not doing a very good job hiding it.

##

Amanda raced quietly up the stairs and started peeking in doorways. All the rooms were empty until she got to the master bedroom. A young man and woman were sleeping on the bed. Amanda felt a pull on her heartstrings when she glanced at the young redhead. Something in her face, even while sleeping, looked so sad. Too sad, for someone so young.

Amanda wondered if the young man were Jonathan. She found herself entering the room, her compassionate nature overcoming her need for secrecy. She sat softly on the side of the bed next to the young woman. She didn't understand why she felt so compelled to reach out to her, but Amanda followed through on the instinct, and ran her hand softly down the red hair.

A shiver ran down the young woman's body and Amanda stroked her hair again. She found herself crooning to her as if to her own child. "It'll be all right. You'll see. It'll all work out." She kept caressing the hair, brushing wisps of it off the porcelain face.

Willow felt as if she were coming out of an endless nightmare. Every other time she felt this close to surfacing she fought to dive again, the fear of her current reality, of what she'd done, too much to even begin to deal with. But this time, this time, something felt safer about it. Her eyes opened and the first thing she saw was Xander, lying next to her, asleep. Then she realized that whoever was touching her was on the other side. She didn't recognize the voice but it was compelling, soft, and loving.

Willow cautiously turned over and looked at the stranger sitting there. Amanda's heart almost broke at the look in her eyes. She smiled. "Hi."

Willow's voice was barely audible. "Hi."

Amanda kept softly touching her, brushing her hair back, consoling her with her touch and her smile.

Willow's eyes drifted closed again, soaking in the tenderness. Her eyes opened again. "Who are you?"

"Amanda." Amanda watched as her eyes drifted shut again. "Are you all

right?"

Willow covered her face with her hands at the question and she shook her head.

Amanda wanted to take her in her arms. She really wanted to. She didn't think she'd ever seen anyone who needed a hug more. Giving in to the temptation Amanda leaned down and wrapped her arms around her, lifting her up a little, resting her head on her breast.

Willow had no idea who this woman was, but she knew love when she felt it, and she needed it desperately. She found herself holding the woman back, and then she was sobbing in her arms.

Amanda rocked her, still crooning, tears forming at the sheer depths of misery in the cries. "It will be all right."

Willow shook her head. "No, no, it will never be all right."

"It will. Things always work out."

"Not this time. Not after what I did."

"Shhh...shhhh." Amanda continued to rock her and she closed her eyes. When she reopened them she found herself staring at the young man.

His eyes glued to her, he inched closer to Willow and touched her back. "Hey, Willow."

Willow cried harder. "You must hate me. You must all hate me so much."

Xander shook his head. "Not true, Will. I love you. We all love you."

"I tried to kill you."

Xander shot a nervous look at the woman but he was too concerned about Willow's needs not to respond. "That wasn't you."

"It was me."

"Listen, it was the magic. It wasn't you. And who should know that better than me? I've known you since you were five."

"How can you even look at me? How can Giles...?"

Xander tried again. "Willow. You know that there is no one in the world who gets what you must be going through better than Giles. Right? I mean, you know that. And he's going to help you, we're all going to help you. All of us love you, and none of us are giving up, so you can't give up."

Willow burrowed her head on Amanda's shoulder. "Oh, Xander. How did it all go so wrong?"

Xander's eyes were bright for a moment as they met the tear-filled eyes of the stranger holding his friend. "I don't know. I just don't know. But we'll find our way back. We all will. I promise."

He watched as Willow gave the smallest of nods and then started crying again. Somehow knowing that Willow was in good hands, Xander rolled out of bed and stood. He looked at the woman. "Is Giles downstairs?"

Amanda nodded. As the young man left, she let out a sigh. Lee wouldn't be too happy about this, but she couldn't help it. This young woman was in such pain, too much pain to ignore. It just wasn't in Amanda to pass by and do nothing.

##

Xander was suddenly there in the living room. "Hey, who's the lady up with Willow?"

Three sets of nervous eyes turned to him. Giles spoke first, standing. "Excuse me?"

"The nice lady. She got Willow to talk. I figured she was a friend of yours." He was looking at Giles as he said this.

Giles looked at Lee. Lee shrugged and then he glanced at Xander. "Are you Jonathan?"

Xander snorted. "Please, like my life isn't wretched enough." Then he kept on going. "Jonathan..."

Giles cut him off. "Xander."

Xander shut up, suddenly realizing that the living room wasn't the comfort zone he had been expecting.

Lee's frustration was growing with this group. His face grew harder. "I think it's

time to stop playing games."

Giles took a step toward him, and Lee to his amazement, felt himself taking a step back. Something about the man felt so momentarily menacing. "Games. You come into this home under false pretences and you lecture us about games?" He gestured upstairs. "Why is she up there? What does she want with Willow?" He didn't wait for an answer, just headed up the stairs, everyone else tromping up right behind him.

The scene in the bedroom stopped him at the door. Willow was crying her heart out, Amanda's arms around her, holding her so tenderly. Giles recalled his futile wish for a mother that cared about Willow. He softly entered the room, and Xander followed him, getting back in bed, claiming his usual spot. Buffy and Lee stayed by the door.

Amanda watched Giles as he approached, trying to decide how annoyed he was. All she saw was concern for the young woman in her arms. Giles sat on the bed. "Willow?"

Willow let out a cry and refused to look at him. "Don't look at me." He sat there silently. Her voice was raw with anguish. "How you must hate me."

"I don't hate you, Willow."

"You should. I tried to kill you."

Giles sent a quick look at Amanda, frustrated at the invisible gag her presence put on him. "There were extenuating circumstances. You know that." He tilted his head to the side. "And, in any case, you did not succeed. I'm fine. We're all fine."

"No thanks to me."

"Perhaps not this time, but you have helped save us all too many times to count in the past."

Amanda's brow furrowed as she listened to the conversation, wishing she had some idea of what they were talking about. Surely this slight girl in her arms couldn't have truly tried to kill this man, these other people. That made no sense. What she did believe was that this man was sincere in his concern for Willow. Maybe she could help. "Willow?"

Willow made a noise.

Amanda smiled a little. "Look at him."

Willow shook her head.

"Go ahead, I'll be right here."

Willow took a deep breath and slowly turned her head so she could look at Giles. She and Giles' eyes met. She looked for the hatred, for the accusation, but all she saw was worry and affection. More tears fell down her cheeks. "You don't hate me?"

Giles shook his head. "No."

Willow launched herself out of Amanda's arms and into Giles'. His arms closed around her tightly. She spoke through a fresh spate of tears. "I'm so sorry, I don't know how to make it right again."

"Minute by minute, Willow. That's the only way you can."

"I said and did such horrible things. How do I live with that inside of me? How can you ever trust me again?"

"We all have darkness inside of us. All of us. It doesn't need to define us, or make us who we are unless we let it. You can control it. I know you can. And the trust will come. We all just need time."

"Will you help me?"

Giles held her tighter. "You know I will." Amanda glanced up at Buffy and Xander and saw a sharp look of relief pass between them. As if they both knew that if anyone could, that Giles would be the one to pull this young woman out of whatever hell she was in. And the first step had just been taken.

The room was silent as Giles just held Willow until the crying stopped. Giles glanced down and realized that she had fallen asleep. He smiled so sadly, and slowly lay her down, and accepted Amanda's assistance in getting her tucked in again. Xander lay down too, rolling on his side so he could continue his protective watch over his best friend.

Relieved beyond words that Willow had not only spoken to him, but had also asked for help, Giles felt as if a huge weight had been taken off his heart. He knew there was a long way to go, and that Willow would never be truly the same, just as he had been irrevocably changed. But at least she'd reconnected. He touched her cheek briefly with his hand, and then he smiled up at Amanda. "Thank you." Giles knew that somehow she had been just

what Willow needed.

Amanda smiled back. "She just needed a little TLC." She gestured around the room. "I'm sorry. I know it really wasn't any of my business."

He nodded. "Nevertheless, I can't tell you how grateful I am. She wouldn't talk to me, to any of us."

Amanda smiled down at the redhead and then again at Giles. "Well, I think she will now."

"Yes, I think she will."

Lee wasn't crazy about the way the two of them were smiling at each other. He coughed from the doorway. Amanda looked up at the noise and smiled at him, and he felt immediately better. Leaving Willow and Xander, they all quietly left the room and reconvened downstairs.

Buffy started pacing as the other three sat. Lee chose a spot close to Amanda. Giles looked at her, needing some clarification. "I really do appreciate your help with Willow, but I would like an explanation as to why you were upstairs."

Buffy knew why. "She was looking for Jonathan." She gave Amanda a searching look. "Right?"

Amanda nodded.

Buffy scowled. "He's not here. We told you we didn't know where he was." She sat down on the couch, close to Giles. She hadn't been crazy with how he and Amanda had been smiling at each other either.

Giles acknowledged Buffy's comments. "She's right. He's not here."

Lee was growing weary of the evasive answers. "But you know where he is."

Buffy decided she was tired of the two of them. "Look, he isn't here. That's all we can tell you."

"You mean, that's all you will tell us."

Buffy stood again. "We don't even know you guys. You come waltzing in here like you own the place...", she gave a meaningful look at Amanda. "And you snoop around, and you make all these accusations..."

Amanda tried to intervene. "We're not making any accusations, we're just trying to understand what's going on here."

Giles took a turn. "All you need to understand is that we don't know where he is. He wasn't a close friend. He wasn't..." Giles wasn't sure how to put it.

Amanda helped. "One of yours?" She'd already seen the way they all looked to him.

Giles smiled a little. "Yes, exactly." He found himself reaching for Buffy's hand and giving it a squeeze. "One of mine."

Buffy wouldn't let him let go after the squeeze. She instantly decided she liked holding his hand.

Amanda wanted to try one more time. "Can you help us figure out where he is?"

Buffy just shook her head. "No." Giles glanced at her. She shook her head again and spoke more firmly. "No."

Giles acquiesced and shook his head as well. "We've said all we can say."

Amanda and Lee shot each other another look. Time to divide and conquer again. They just weren't sure how. Buffy figured it out for them. As far as she was concerned it was time to call it a night. "Well, I have to go...out." She waited for everyone else to stand and leave too. Except for Giles, of course.

Lee was the only one who stood. "I'll go with you. I could use a walk."

Buffy's eyes widened. This was unexpected. "You can't. I'm..."

Giles stood as well. He was thinking this was actually a good idea. Maybe he could talk to Amanda, find out what was really going on. He tried to communicate that silently to Buffy, eyeing Lee, eying the door.

Buffy got it and glared at him. "Giles."

Giles just gazed back with his implacable stare. "You two go on. Amanda and I will just have a cup of tea." He turned and smiled at Amanda and she smiled back.

Buffy was even more sure this was a bad idea. First of all she didn't want Lee to go anywhere with her, especially on patrol, not if she was supposed to be keeping secrets from him. And now, she definitely didn't want to leave Giles

with Amanda. He liked her. Buffy could tell. A thrill of jealousy and possessiveness shot through her and she had to forcibly resist the urge to do physical harm to the woman.

Lee frowned. Even though it had been his suggestion, he suddenly was sorry he'd opened his mouth. He could see that Amanda liked Giles, and he didn't like that. Of course, Amanda liked everyone, even people who had no business being liked, but this Giles guy was too good looking, and smart, and had his hands full of things that needed taken care of with TLC, something Amanda was helpless to resist. Before he could argue, Amanda echoed Giles' sentiments. "That's a lovely idea." She smiled at Giles again. "I'd love a cup of tea."

"Lovely. I'll make some, shall I?" Buffy couldn't remember seeing so many smiles on Giles' face in such a short period of time.

Amanda stood now. "I'll help." The two of them headed off for the kitchen.

End of Part 4

Mexico 5

Lee and Buffy looked at each other, similar expressions of disgruntlement on both of their faces. Lee gave her a mocking grin. "I think we've been dismissed."

Buffy snorted. Then she got a little defiant. "Fine, so come on." She sent Lee a challenging look.

Not sure what he was being challenged about, but recognizing the challenge nonetheless, Lee got stubborn back. "Fine. Let's go."

"Fine."

"Fine." He gestured toward the door.

Holding her head high, Buffy sailed out the door.

Lee followed her, closing the door behind them.

Once they got out, Buffy had no idea what to do with him. She couldn't really patrol. She didn't really want to socialize with him, although he was pretty cute. "Where do you want to go?"

Lee gave her a look. "How about showing me where Jonathan is?"

Buffy gave him the look back. "How about telling me why?"

"I told you, he's a friend of the family."

Buffy rolled her eyes. "Oh, right. I forgot. Which is why you're at my house, because I'm family too?"

"Look. I know you know something. I know you're involved in this. I know you know what happened to him. It's written all over your face. You're involved in this up to your armpits and you might as well just come clean."

"Or what? You and the family gonna say mean things to me?" She took a step toward him. "Are you a cop?"

Lee shook his head. "No."

Buffy gave him a disgusted look and just started walking. Let him follow. Maybe if she got really lucky a vampire would attack and get rid of the problem for her.

Lee had to almost run to keep up with her. He couldn't believe how fast she could move for someone so small. He also knew he'd annoyed her. He was usually better than this when he was dealing with women. Thinking of women made him think of Amanda, back having a cup of tea with Giles. His lips tightened. Then he looked and realized that Buffy had put some considerable distance between the two of them. He broke into a run to catch up. He put a hand on her arm to stop her. "Buffy."

She looked at him, her face and body screaming resistance. "What?"

"I'm sorry. Let's start over."

Buffy stopped, giving him a suspicious stare. "How do you mean?"

Lee took a deep breath, giving himself some time to come up with a charming strategy. Then he realized where he was. "Why are we in a cemetery?"

Buffy looked around. She hadn't been paying attention and her feet had just brought her here. Mindful of the risk she started walking back toward the street. She couldn't stop needling him, though. "I didn't mean to scare you."

Lee gave her another astounded and somewhat annoyed look. "I'm not

scared of a cemetery. I was just surprised we were in one." He gave Buffy his most charming smile. "It's just not where I usually take walks with beautiful young women."

Buffy could feel herself respond to that smile. He really did seem nice. He really didn't feel like an enemy. Confused as to what to do she didn't even see them coming until they were surrounded them. Four vampires. Big ones. Cursing herself for her inattentiveness and sorry she'd even thought about having a vampire snack on Lee, Buffy pulled a stake out of her pocket and moved closer to him. "Stay close."

Lee looked at the feral faces surrounding them, at the fangs, and yellowed eyes, at the clear menace emanating from them. He thought of Francine and the holes in her neck and her talk of vampires. "Shit." He reached for his gun and pulled it out.

Buffy stared at it with some surprise, and then at him, never losing track of the vampires. She wasn't sure why they hadn't attacked yet. "I thought you said you weren't a cop."

"I'm not."

"Oh, you just carry a gun for the fun of it? Isn't that against the law?"

Lee didn't say anything. He just aimed the gun at the one creature that had started to move.

Buffy shook her head. "Guns won't kill them."

Lee risked a look at the stake in her hand. "Don't tell me. Stake through the heart?" He couldn't believe the old vampire cliché? were true.

"Yup." That was all she had time for as the vampires moved in for the kill. Buffy moved faster.

Lee's mouth dropped as he watched Buffy move so fast she was just a blur as she thrust the stake in the closest vampire's heart. He exploded in a cyclone of dust. Then she started to fight, looking for an opening to stake the others. Lee felt his arm grabbed and hot, fetid breath was blowing in his face. Dropping the gun he let loose with a right upper cut and spun the vampire around, following up with a spin kick. Then Buffy was there and the vampire was settling to the ground in miniscule pieces.

She gave him an approving look. "Nice moves."

He grinned, high on the danger, high on the disbelief. "Thanks." A couple more vampires had joined the party. "Got another one of those?"

Buffy handed him her stake, as she let the one up her sleeve drop down into her hand. "I never leave home without a spare." She grinned too. Then she spun into action again, one eye on Lee, one eye on the vampires.

Lee moved too, and within seconds was engaged with another vampire, doing his best to avoid slashing fingernails, and sharp teeth. Then he found an opening and as hard as he could he slammed the stake home. He watched in amazement as he felt the implosion, felt the solid body disintegrate into dust.

Buffy dispatched her third vampire and then the remaining ones finally got the message that these two weren't the easy pickings they had expected them to be. They ran. Buffy wanted to run after them but she didn't want to leave Lee alone. Despite the fact that he was pretty capable of taking care of himself, he wouldn't be able to handle a group of vampires. She looked around carefully and then hid the stake up her sleeve again. Giving Lee a look she followed it up with an impish grin. "So, now what do you want to do?"

Lee barked out a laugh. He looked down at the stake in his hand, and at the piles of dust on the ground. Lee bent down and retrieved his gun, replacing it in his holster. "There's an encore for that?"

She shook her head. "Just more of the same." She gestured around her. "Welcome to Sunnydale."

Lee suddenly needed to sit down. So he did. Right there on the ground, between the piles of dust. He put his head between his knees.

Buffy crouched down. "Breathe, just breathe. You'll be all right."

While he was trying to breathe he saw something move behind Buffy. All he was capable of doing was pointing.

It was enough. Buffy stood, spun, and staked. Then she crouched back down. "You all right?"

Lee nodded. "You're good at that."

"It's what I do." She didn't see the point in pretending anymore.

He couldn't believe the words were coming out of his mouth. "You kill vampires?"

"Yup. And other demons."

"Other demons?"

Buffy nodded and then stood, holding out her hand to him. "Come on, I need to check on some new graves."

Lee let her help him up, feeling some of her strength as she did so. "You're strong."

"Very. It comes with the job."

"And what job is that, exactly?"

"I'm the Slayer."

"And you slay vampires?"

She nodded again.

Lee brushed himself off. He was impressed with how calm he was. "Are there many of you?"

"Nope, just two. There's only supposed to be one, but I died for a minute, and so now there's two of us."

"And Giles?"

"He's my Watcher."

"Which is?"

"He's the brains of the operation. I do the fighting, he does the thinking." She thought about the gun, and his fighting skills. "So, what are you exactly?"

Lee decided that was a fair question given what she had just told him. And he supposed, in a way, his answer would be just as unbelievable as hers. "I'm a spy."

She grinned delightedly. "For real? Like a real spy?"

He nodded. "For real."

"And Amanda? Is she a spy too?"

"She's sort of a spy in training."

"Cool." She grinned again. "That is so cool." She sat on a tombstone that was next to a new grave. "So are you like James Bond?"

Lee leaned against a tombstone across from her. "Yeah, except we don't get all those cool gadgets."

She frowned, disappointed. "No cool gadgets?"

"Well, some. But not like what the M5 gives James Bond."

"So, are you with the FBI, or the CIA?"

"No. We're with somebody else, and I can't tell you that."

"Or you'll have to kill me?"

"Something like that."

She grinned again. "That is so cool."

Lee found it amusing that she was so taken with his job when hers was to stake mythical beasts. He let out a cry as the earth trembled beneath his feet.

Buffy stood and shooed him away. "Don't worry. It's just a newbie." As the face and upper torso of the vampire appeared she quickly staked him. "Come on, there's a couple more I want to check out."

Lee stared at the ground for a moment, at the disturbed earth, and shook his head. Then he followed Buffy. "You do this every night?"

"Just about. Like I said, it's my job to kill the bad guys."

Lee considered her. "I guess we're not that different. I kill the bad guys too."

Buffy gave him a startled look. "What bad guys do you kill?"

"Bad guys who want to topple over governments, usurp power for their own selfish purposes, guys who plan to assassinate world leaders and key scientists. The world is filled with plenty of human bad guys who thrive on chaos."

"So you almost get killed a lot?"

"I've been shot at, and stabbed so many times I've lost count."

Buffy was filled with a sudden sense of camaraderie. "Me too. Except the being shot at. Demons don't use guns very often."

Lee grinned. "Does trouble just seem to follow you everywhere you go?"

She nodded. "As if I was a trouble magnet."

Lee sighed. "I can't even remember the last time I had an uninterrupted vacation."

"Tell me about it." Buffy glanced at him as she perched on another tombstone. "Do you hate it sometimes?"

This time, Lee sat a little further away from the new grave. "Sometimes I hate it with a passion. Sometimes I resent that I don't have a normal life. I worry that the people I care about are in danger because of me."

"Do you want to run away sometimes?"

Lee let out a soft laugh. "Yes. I've come close. I've gotten pretty burned out."

"What keeps you going?"

"I believe in what I do. I believe it makes a difference, that I make a difference." He smiled. "And then there's Amanda." Lee smiled at Buffy. "In some ways, she's like your Giles. She just has a way of looking at whatever we're working on that gets to the heart of things. And she..."

"She what?"

Lee tried to decide what he was trying to say. "She makes me feel better. She makes me feel important. She keeps me from losing hope, and makes me feel like someone cares about me." He looked up at Buffy, a little embarrassed. He shrugged. "It makes a difference."

Buffy thought of Giles. She thought of how it had been when he'd been here, and then how it had been after he left. "I know. It makes a big difference."

Lee decided he wanted to talk about the thoughts that had been on his mind so strongly. "I was pretty resistant to the idea of working with Amanda for a long time."

"Why?"

"It was easier to not care when she wasn't around. I could just go and get the job done and not worry about the consequences of what I was doing, or who might get hurt. Then she came along and she made me feel stuff. She made me see the big picture in a whole new way, and I didn't like it. It made things messy."

"But now you don't mind it so much?"

"No, now I don't mind so much. I'm a better person because of her. Sometimes I think about what I'd be like now if she hadn't come into my life, and it's not a pretty picture."

"Does she know that?"

Lee nodded and then he shook his head. "Maybe. I mean, I've told her some of this, but I'm not really good at saying this sort of thing."

"Sounds like you're saying it just fine to me."

"Yeah, but you're not her." He gestured towards the grave. "How long do you have to wait?"

"Not much longer. They usually rise pretty fast once it gets dark." She glanced at the grave. "And sometimes they're just really dead."

Lee considered the newly replaced sod. "So does Giles do the same for you?"

Buffy thought about it. She thought about what she'd become without him. "Yes, he does."

"Does he know?"

She shook her head. "No."

"Maybe you should tell him."

"I'm not good at that stuff either."

Lee grinned. "Practice on me. What would you tell him if you could?"

Buffy blew out a long breath, thinking about it. "I'd tell him that I need him." She shook her head. "No, never mind. I told him that. He still left."

Lee's brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"He left. He moved back to England. He just came back to deal with some bad stuff that was going on."

"Will he go back?"

Buffy sighed. "Probably."

"So, you need to make him stay."

"I don't know how."

"Tell him how you feel."

"I don't know how I feel. That's part of the problem."

"Figure it out. Talk to me. Pretend I'm him and tell me how you feel."

Buffy gazed at him, chewing her bottom lip, not sure where to start. Then she squared her shoulders and stood up, beginning to pace. "Okay." She thought for a few seconds. "Okay. This is what I would say." She thought for another few seconds. "Okay."

Lee grinned but stayed silent, one eye on the grave.

"Giles. I need you to stay. You are the only part of my life that makes sense. You are the only part of my life that I can depend on." She sent Lee a nervous glance. "How's that?"

Lee cocked his head to the side. "Pretty broad. Maybe some specifics would help."

Buffy screwed her mouth up from side to side. "Okay." Another pause. "Giles." Buffy wasn't sure how to put into words how empty everything was without him, and what she had felt when he had just suddenly been there. How wonderful it had been to have him beside her even for just a short time, how protected she had felt, when she could share the load she was carrying. She didn't think she could find words for how loved she had felt when he had noticed her hair, and how safe she felt when he held her in his arms. Or how annoyed she'd been when Anya started horning in. She frowned.

Lee snapped his fingers at her, getting her attention. "Maybe you need to say some of that stuff out loud."

Buffy started at the noise. "Oh. Yeah." She shrugged. "It's complicated. We're so different."

"Amanda and I are pretty different."

"Not this different."

"I'm not sure I buy that. How are you different?"

"I'm so much younger than he is."

Lee snorted. "When I met Amanda I was a playboy spy and she was a suburban housewife with two young boys. That's about as different as you can get."

Buffy's eyes widened. "She's married?"

"Divorced." Lee continued. "At least you and Giles fight the same fight. I mean, Amanda and I do now, but back then, she didn't even know this sort of thing existed. Bad guys on a global scale."

"Most people don't, whether they're your type of bad guy or my type of bad guy."

"That's the way it should be. Most people should be able to live their lives, untouched by evil. That's why there are people like us."

Buffy felt that solidarity again. She liked it. She liked the fact that even if he wasn't a Slayer, that he, and others like him, were out there fighting the good fight, just like her. Buffy sat on the tombstone again. "How about you? What would you say to Amanda?"

Lee shook his head. "Let's stick with you and Giles. Amanda and I, well, it's complicated."

Buffy let out an exasperated noise. "That's what I said. Why can't Giles and I be complicated if you and Amanda are?"

"Because you're not in I..." Lee slapped a hand over his mouth, his eyes showing his distress that his own lips had betrayed his deepest secret.

It was too late. Buffy had heard enough. "You're in love with her?" Then she got defensive. "And who says I'm not in I..." This time she slapped a hand over her mouth. Then her hand dropped away. "Oh, my God." She sent an

astonished look toward Lee. "I can't be."

Lee let out a pained half laugh. "We're quite a pair, aren't we?"

"No, you don't understand. I can't be in love with him."

"Why not?"

"Because he's...because he's Giles. I've known him forever. He's so much older than me. He's Giles."

Lee didn't think Giles was that much older than him and he took some offense. "Jesus, Buffy. It's not like he's an old man. He's still in the prime of his life."

At his words Buffy thought back to her impression of Giles when he had appeared in the shop. She had to admit he'd looked good. Better than good. In fact, he'd looked downright yummy. Dangerous, and determined. But still Giles. Still her touchstone, her center. She remembered that hug. She thought about that moment in the kitchen, and when she'd held his hand. She thought about what it would be like to touch him some more and she almost bent over as a thrill of liquid heat raced through her. She let out a moan. "Oh, God."

Lee grinned. "Maybe that's what you need to tell him."

Buffy shook her head, suddenly terrified of finding this within her. "I can't. He'll pat me on the head, and tell me not to be foolish."

"Maybe he'll kiss you instead, and stay."

Another thrill went through her at the thought. "Maybe he'll just leave."

"I thought you said he was going to leave anyway, so what do you have to lose?"

She shook her head again and then decided to go on the offensive again. "Why haven't you told Amanda?" She thought about how Amanda looked at Lee. "I'm pretty sure she feels the same way."

Lee sent her a hopeful look. "Really? What makes you say that?"

"Just the way she looks at you." She asked again. "Why haven't you told her?"

"Scared, I guess. Amanda's something special. A relationship to her is a big deal. She doesn't believe in casual flings."

"And you do?"

"I always have, until I met her. They're easier. Like I said, you go in, you get out."

"Giles always says I need to do that more. Plunge and move on, plunge and move on." Buffy suddenly realized how sexual that sounded given the conversation they were having and she blushed furiously. Grateful it was dark she spoke again. "I mean, with the slaying." She demonstrated with her stake.

Lee was laughing. "I get it."

Buffy covered her face with her hands.

Lee laughed a little bit more. Suddenly he remembered why he was here in Sunnydale. "Buffy?"

"What?" She lifted her head.

"Do you know where Jonathan is?"

She shook her head. "He was alive and here in Sunnydale last night. We were all being attacked. He was with another guy named Andrew. Xander said they had been talking about heading to Mexico."

"Why Mexico?"

Buffy tried to figure out how to explain it, without getting anyone in trouble. "Jonathan and cohorts decided this year would be a good year to play around with stuff that they had no business messing around with. And they pissed somebody off, big time. Somebody who wanted them dead, big time. They were sort of running for their lives."

"Does that somebody still want them dead?"

Buffy shrugged. "I don't know." She thought of Willow. "I don't think so."

"What did they do?"

Buffy felt stuck. "Listen. Jonathan's not a bad guy. He wanted to try and set things right. He's all right. But these other guys, specifically this one guy, he

wasn't all right. He killed some people. He tried to kill me."

"This Andrew guy?"

Buffy shook her head. "No, another guy. He's dead now."

"Did you kill him?"

Buffy shook her head again. "No." She gave Lee a hard look. "He was one of the bad guys, and now he's dead. And that's all I'm gonna say about that." Buffy didn't want Willow to go to prison for what she'd done. Not unless Willow felt she had to. And maybe not even then. For some reason Buffy flashed back on how she had threatened to kill Giles if he touched Dawn, back when Glory was hunting them down. Her thoughts shifted gears and she tried to imagine what she'd have felt like if that random bullet had hit Giles instead of Tara. If he had been killed instead of Tara. It made her want to throw up. Buffy was pretty sure that she would have gone after Warren too. In fact, she was damn sure.

Lee was watching her face, watching the emotions flicker, faster than he could keep up.

Buffy looked up and saw him watching her. She needed him to understand. "Lee, things are different here. This town, there's a lot of evil here. It changes people, makes them different than who they were."

"Murder is still murder."

"When you kill one of your bad guys that's planning on assassinating someone, is that murder?"

"No, but I have the authority of the government behind me. It's sanctioned."

"Do you think I murdered those vampires?"

Lee ran a hand through his hair and sighed. "No."

Buffy moved to stand next to him. "I don't have any right to ask, but I need you to focus on Jonathan and leave the rest of it alone. Some bad stuff has happened, but all that's gonna happen if you push it is more bad stuff."

Lee blew out a long breath and closely scrutinized Buffy. He wasn't crazy about it but he reached a decision. "Mexico?"

Buffy nodded. "Mexico."

"Shit."

End of Part 5

Mexico 6

Amanda leaned against the counter after she pulled down two mugs. She watched Giles as he set the kettle on. "You care about them all, don't you?"

Giles gave her a small smile. "Yes. Yes, I do. They're like the children I might have had." He flashed her a larger smile. "A pack of unruly teenagers."

"Except for Buffy."

Giles sent her a startled glance and then let out a short silent laugh. "She's the most unruly one of the bunch."

Amanda gave him one of her lovely smiles. "I believe that, but that's not what I meant. I meant that she's not a daughter to you."

Giles tilted his head to the side, curious. "I'm not sure I understand."

Amanda could believe that. "The two of you. There's a lot there between the two of you."

Giles let out another short laugh, not much more than an expelled breath, as his eyebrows rose. "Yes, I suppose there is." As he realized her eyes were still on him he tried to explain. "Our relationship...it's complicated."

"Like how?"

Giles braced a hip against the counter on the other side of the stove and crossed his arms over his chest. "I'm not sure I can explain."

"Do you love her?"

"Oh, yes, very much." He smiled softly. "I always have."

"But not like a daughter?"

Giles' brow furrowed. "I don't suppose I've thought about it much. Does it matter?" He cocked his head to the side again. "And what's wrong with loving her like a daughter?"

"Nothing, if that's how you feel. Do you?" Amanda was uncomfortably aware that there were entirely too many unresolved emotions in this house. As soon as she stepped in the front door she had felt somehow that this was not a happy home. But then she'd seen the connection between this man and Buffy, and the rightness of it, and now she felt a tremendous need to meddle.

Giles opened his mouth to speak but the kettle began to whistle. He moved quickly and prepared their tea. Then he gestured back to the living room. As she sat down he moved to the bottom of the stairs, listening. When nothing but silence floated down he joined her on the couch. Taking a cautious sip of the hot beverage, Giles began his gentle inquisition. "So, tell me again how you know Jonathan?"

Amanda had no intention of being distracted from her new mission. "Are you in love with her?"

Giles almost spit out his tea. "I beg your pardon?"

"Buffy, are you in love with her?"

Giles stared at her, stymied. "I...I don't believe that's any of your business."

Amanda heard the kind but very clear reprimand in his voice and decided to let it go for the time being. She had every intention of getting back to it as soon as possible. And as she wanted the truth from him, she decided to answer his question with the truth. "Lee and I are spies."

Giles' eyebrows lifted and he decided to put down his tea before he dropped it. Amanda grinned at his expression. "Well, that's not strictly true. Lee is a

spy and I'm sort of a spy in training." She frowned. "Well, to be perfectly honest, I have a tendency to get into trouble and Lee has to rescue me a lot."

Giles thought about his bouts with unconsciousness. "I can relate to that." He leaned forward. "Who, exactly, are you a spy for?"

"I can't tell you that. But I can tell you that we're the good guys."

"I imagine the bad guys would tell me the same thing."

Amanda laughed. "I suppose they would at that. But we really are the good guys."

Giles believed her. He couldn't imagine Amanda being anything other than one of the good guys. There was just something so empirically wholesome about her. "So are we."

"I know that."

"And we really don't know where Jonathan is. Except that I understand he's on his way to Mexico."

"Mexico?"

He nodded. "That's all I know."

"I think you know more than that."

"What makes you say that?"

"Your face. You're not a very good liar."

Giles sighed. "No, I'm not. I never have been." He smiled at her. "But I don't where he is."

"But do you know why he went to Mexico?"

"I do. But, I can't tell you that, or I suppose I should say that I won't tell you that. I can tell you none of us intend him any harm, and that I believe he's safe for the time being, and will eventually find his way back home."

Amanda leaned back on the couch and took a sip of her tea. "So are you in love with her?"

"I believe we've had this conversation already."

Amanda grinned. "I know. I'm just an incurable romantic." As Giles stayed silent, Amanda let her eyes roam over his face. Such a strong, handsome face, but so much sadness there. "She needs you, you know."

Again, startled eyes met hers. "What?"

"She needs you."

Giles felt some frustration well up. This woman was like a dog with a bone. "I'm not sure I see your point."

Amanda started musing. "I think Lee needs me too. He'd never tell me that, but he does. I help lighten his load a little. I make him smile. I make sure he eats."

Giles wasn't sure what the proper response was. He went for polite. "I'm sure he values you." Then he changed his mind and spoke his mind. "What do you do when someone needs you too much?"

"Too much?"

"Yes, when they grow too dependent. When they look to you for everything."

Amanda thought for a moment, thought of Buffy. "Are we talking about Buffy?" She couldn't imagine Buffy as too dependent.

Giles nodded.

Amanda raised her eyebrows. "That ball of fire? Dependent?"

"She was having a rough time, and she started looking to me for too much. I was afraid she'd just grow weaker."

"If a person has a broken leg and they're using crutches would you take them away?"

"Of course not."

"So, if she was having a rough time, what does it matter if she needed to use you as a crutch? She seems like a strong young woman to me. If she needed you that badly, then it seems to me that you just needed to be there for her."

Giles let out a sigh and didn't meet Amanda's eyes.

Amanda leaned forward, all sincerity. "We all have easy times and hard times, strong times and weak times. It's knowing you have someone to depend on when things get bad that makes all the difference. The lucky ones are the ones who have someone they can count on to be strong for them while they recover."

Giles tried to defend himself. "It's not that simple."

"Love is always simple. We're here to take care of each other."

"Sometimes the best way to take care of someone is to leave them."

"And sometimes the best way to take care of someone is to stay by their side and see them through it." She touched his arm. "Haven't you ever had tough times in your life?"

He expelled a long breath. "There have been a few rough spots, yes."

"Times when you really needed someone?"

Giles hesitated but then nodded.

Amanda's hold on his arm tightened as she watched his face. Something told her that there had seldom been someone there for him when he had been in need. "Times when it would have been nice if someone had been there?"

Giles nodded again.

She kept on, relentless. "Do you think you'd be weaker now if there'd been someone to stand by you at those times?"

He leaned back and her hand dropped off. Giles took a rare moment to think about those most painful times of his life. And he spoke a newly realized truth. "No, I think I'd probably be stronger." He thought about what he'd done to Buffy by leaving and he took his glasses off, throwing them on the coffee table and covered his face with his hands. Even with his eyes closed all he could see was the look of pain on her face when he had told her he was leaving.

Amanda watched him for a moment and then she reached for their mugs. "I'll just go heat up the tea."

Behind his hands, Giles nodded. He listened to her footfalls, listened as she moved out of sight, and then Giles let his hands drop. He retrieved his glasses and stood, moving to the window. He had told Buffy that he never should have left when they spoke in the training room only last night. But that had been in response to the laundry list of disasters that had befallen them all in his absence. He was ashamed to realize that it hadn't been because he thought he might have done her a deep injustice. That he might have betrayed their friendship by leaving.

The thought of that appalled him. And he resolved, as he stared out at the darkness, that he wouldn't leave again, not if she still needed him. He wouldn't let her down again.

He didn't hear Amanda come back in until she was standing next to him holding a hot cup of tea. "Are you thinking about her?"

Giles sent her a clearly exasperated look. "You are persistent, aren't you?"

She laughed. "To a fault."

"Well, yes, in answer to your question. I am thinking of her. I rarely do anything else." As she opened her mouth to speak he interrupted her. "And please, do not ask me if I am in love with her."

Amanda snapped her mouth shut and then she smiled. Again, he found himself responding. She laid her hand on his arm. "I think she's very lucky to have you."

Giles wasn't so sure, but he found himself deeply wishing that Buffy felt that way. He felt a moment's kinship with this woman and in a rare gesture he lifted a hand and cupped her cheek. "I think he's very lucky to have you."

##

Lee and Buffy neared the house. Buffy came to an abrupt stop. Lee stopped as well, vigilant, as he saw her guarded expression. "What's the matter?"

Buffy pointed with her chin. "That. That's the matter."

Lee followed her chin and saw the window, and saw what she was seeing. Amanda and Giles, touching, her hand on his arm, his hand on her face, smiling, standing close, too close. His heart shrank at the sight, afraid suddenly that he'd left it too long. He'd stayed silent too long and now he'd lost her.

Buffy growled. "That is so not all right on such a cosmic scale that it must be stopped." And then she was gone, heading for the house. She slammed the door open and stormed in, Lee right behind her.

Amanda and Giles looked up in surprise, hands dropping, stepping away

from each other. They both watched Lee and Buffy, sensing that something was wrong, but clueless as to what it might be. Giles snapped out of it first. "Buffy, what's wrong? Are you hurt?"

His question spurred Amanda and she hurried to Lee's side. "Did something happen?" She glanced at him, looking for evidence of foul play.

Buffy was still seeing red. "What have you two been doing?"

Giles could hear the anger in her voice but he was mystified as to its source. "Buffy, what is it?"

Lee had taken a proprietary position by Amanda, one hand at the small of her back. His gaze kept moving between her and Giles.

Amanda watched his eyes move, saw the clenched jaw, his hand on her back. She looked at the window, saw the front lawn, the front door. All the pieces clicked. She turned to Lee and gave him one of her brilliant smiles. He saw it and turned to face her fully, lost in that smile, lost in her beautiful brown eyes. He smiled back. "What?"

She leaned in, still smiling, speaking softly. "You're jealous, aren't you?"

Lee winced at her words but he didn't turn away. He just kept looking at her, as if he could see the truth there, see the proof that she hadn't slipped away because of his carelessness. All he saw was the same shining affection in her eyes he had come to depend on so much. That, he suddenly realized, he couldn't live without. He grabbed Amanda's hand and pulled her, needing to be alone with her. When Lee got her into the kitchen he pulled her into his arms. He looked at her. "Should I be jealous?"

She shook her head. "No." She smiled again, feeling the tension grow between the two of them, daring to believe that this tantalizingly familiar moment of potential was about to become something tangible.

Lee just let out a soft laugh, and shook his head in a quiet gesture of surrender. "Oh, Amanda." He lifted his hand, cupping her cheek, mesmerized by the softness of her skin. He coaxed her toward him with a gentle touch and

he tilted his head just enough to fully press his lips against hers.

Amanda sighed against his lips and wrapped her arms around his broad shoulders, reveling in the solid feel of him. She loved that his kiss was so gentle, when she knew how strong he could be. Amanda deepened the kiss. She wanted to feel some of that strength.

##

Buffy and Giles both watched as Lee dragged Amanda away. Then Giles turned back to Buffy. "Are you really all right?" She just glared at him, and Giles realized that somehow he had done something significant to annoy her. He didn't want to feel estranged from her in any way. Giles just started with his largest offense, the one he was aware of. "I'm sorry, Buffy."

Buffy looked at him, startled. Then her eyes narrowed. "Sorry for what?"

"For leaving you."

Buffy had to regroup for a moment. Then she shook her head. "I already told you it was all right."

"I know you did, and I appreciate it, but I never should have left you and I really am sorry."

She was caught by his sincerity and she felt her anger drain away. What was left was an indefinable sadness. "It's all right. Really." She sent him one of her self mocking grins. "I haven't been such joy to be around, trust me."

That broke his heart, just a little. "Buffy."

She shook her head, not wanting to have this conversation. She just wanted to know that he wouldn't leave again, but she couldn't make herself ask, too frightened of what his answer might be. Instead she gazed toward the kitchen. "What do you suppose they're doing?"

Giles had finally figured out what the look on Lee's face had been when he'd

stormed in behind Buffy. He grinned. "If he has any brains at all, he's kissing her senseless."

Buffy's mouth opened in surprise and she glanced up at Giles, entranced by the grin, relieved that there was no disappointment on his face, that he was really glad that Amanda and Lee might be kissing. She grinned back and let out a small giggle. And as he kept smiling, she felt the urge to lift up on her toes, and feel what that smile felt like to her lips and to her tongue. She licked her lips and watched as Giles noticed. A sensation like lava spread through her body.

Giles watched Buffy lick her lips and he was a bit stunned at his response to it. He felt suddenly awkward, and unsure of what to do. His body seemed to be of one opinion, but his mind knew that it wasn't that simple. It could never be that simple, not with Buffy. He wracked his brain trying to come up with something to say.

He heard footsteps on the stairs and he glanced up, grateful for the distraction. Moving away from Buffy he watched as Willow and Xander slowly walked downstairs, Xander's arm tight around her shoulders. He smiled at Giles. "I'm just taking her back to my place. She doesn't really want to stay up there, you know, in that room."

Giles winced. "Of course. I should have thought of that." He glanced at Willow. "I'll come over tomorrow. Will that be all right?"

Willow nodded. Giles nodded back, relieved. Buffy gestured outside. "Do you need me to drive you?"

They all heard a honk. Xander shook his head. "I called for a taxi."

Buffy moved to the front door and opened it. "And there it is."

Xander scooped Willow up in his arms. "I'll see you guys tomorrow."

Giles put his hand on Xander's shoulder. "Call if you need anything."

Xander gave him a sad smile. "Got everything I need right here." His eyes captured the girl in his arms, Giles and Buffy.

Giles nodded. "Good night, then."

Buffy and Giles watched as Xander helped Willow into the cab and then crawled in beside her. When the cab drove away Buffy shut the door. She let out a long sigh. Then she grinned. "What do we do with our smooching spies in the kitchen?"

Giles' eyebrows rose. "He told you?"

Buffy nodded. "She told you?"

He nodded in return. As one they looked toward the kitchen.

End of Part 6

Mexico 7

Lee had Amanda pressed against the counter, his lips devouring hers. He couldn't get enough of her. She tasted so good, and her mouth fit his perfectly, and if he didn't get control of himself he was going to ravish her on the kitchen floor. He put his hands on her shoulders and using her as leverage he pushed away a bit.

Amanda let out a soft noise of disappointment and it was all he could do not to just pick up where he'd left off. "Amanda." Her eyes, dazed with desire, lifted to his, and he had to take another step back to keep from grabbing her, although he couldn't help but let a smug grin cross his face. "Amanda."

She focused back in. "Lee?"

He let out a soft laugh. "It better be me, if you're kissing like that."

Amanda reached out and touched his lips with her fingers. "Wow." She grinned. "That was worth waiting for." Lee's heart felt like it might burst. "Do

you have any idea how much I love you?"

Amanda closed her eyes. "As much as I love you?" When she opened them, all the love she had for him was there in her eyes.

He felt reborn. "Oh, Amanda." He pulled her into his arms and held her tightly.

They rested in each other's embrace until they both remembered the purpose for their being there at the same time. They both reluctantly pulled away and spoke at the same time. "Mexico."

Lee reluctantly pulled away. "I guess we need to report in to Billy and see if he wants us to head to Mexico."

Amanda ran her hands down Lee's arms. "Then maybe we can pick up where we left off."

Lee leaned forward and placed a quick kiss on her lips. "Count on it." Taking her hand he led her out of the kitchen and practically ran into Giles and Buffy.

The four of them stared at each other. Giles bit his lower lip to keep from grinning. Lee spoke first. "We, uh, we have to see if we can find Jonathan."

Giles nodded. "Of course. I wish I could give you more information, but we have no idea where in Mexico he was heading to."

Lee shrugged. "We'll check in with our boss and see if he wants us to keep looking."

Amanda curved her arm through his. "Which he will."

Lee nodded. "Which he will. Unless something else has come up."

Buffy gave him a crooked grin. "Like bad guys?"

Lee grinned back. "Like bad guys."

Amanda looked at Giles. "May I give you my number? Maybe if Willow wants to talk to me, you could call."

Giles smiled softly at her. "I'd be delighted to take it. I think she might like that very much."

"I'd be glad to come out, if you think it would help."

Lee motioned Buffy to the side while Giles and Amanda exchanged telephone numbers. "Maybe I'll come out here with her and you can explain more about this town, and what happened with that girl upstairs."

Buffy scrunched her face up. "I can tell you some stuff. But not all of it. And you have to be okay with that."

"Well, I won't be, but I'll manage to survive." He fished in his pocket and pulled out a card. "Here's my number. If you need a pep talk, call me."

Buffy flashed him a full smile. "Really?"

"Really, us bad guy ass kickers need to stick together."

Buffy let loose a giggle. Then she leaned in toward him. "I see you decided to do something about what we talked about."

Lee grinned, a totally self-satisfied masculine grin. "Yes, I did. And I'm going to keep doing it."

Buffy gave him an approving look. "Good for you. I think you guys fit perfectly."

Lee agreed. "How about you? You going to do something about it?"

Buffy gave him a nervous look. "Yes. No. Maybe."

Lee snorted. "Buffy, don't waste any more time. Take your best shot."

Buffy glanced at Giles and then back at Lee. She finally nodded. "Okay."

Lee patted her on the arm. "Good. Now we'll get out of your hair so you can get to it."

Suddenly Buffy didn't want them to go. She wasn't ready to do this. But it was too late. Lee went to claim Amanda. Goodbyes and promises to keep in touch were passed around and then Lee and Amanda were out the door.

Once out on the sidewalk, Lee pulled out his phone. Before he dialed he looked back at the house. "Man, I'd sure love to know what's going on with all of them."

Amanda looked at the house as well, catching shadows on the wall as Giles and Buffy moved around the living room. "I don't know if I want to know."

Lee pulled her in close. "Why do you say that?"

"I don't know for sure. But I do know that whatever it is, that it's caused these people a lot of pain."

"It looks like they take care of each other."

Amanda ran her hands down his back. "Just like we take care of each other."

Lee kissed her gently. "That's right. But I think you take much better care of me than I do of you."

Amanda shook her head. "That's not true. You take care of me all the time. You always have."

Lee let out a soft laugh. "Well, Mrs. Amanda King, you ain't seen nothing yet."

Amanda smiled. "Is that a promise, Mr. Lee Stetson?"

"Oh, yeah." He kissed her again. Sighing, knowing that this was again the wrong place for this, he started paying attention to his phone again. "I guess I should call Francine. Let her know what we found out." He glanced at the house again, scowling at the tantalizing but wholly inadequate information he had about these people.

Amanda watched his face. "I trust them, Lee."

He nodded. "I do too. If I didn't I wouldn't leave until I figured out what was going on. What Willow meant when she said she tried to kill them, what it was she did that was so bad that no one will talk about it, what being the Slayer really means..."

Amanda's brow furrowed. "What?"

Lee barked out a laugh. "Amanda, I have to tell you something about this little town of Sunnydale and I'm not sure you're going to believe me."

Amanda was all ears. "So, tell me."

Lee put up his finger as he pushed Francine's number on his speed dial. He listened as it rang.

"Desmond."

"Francine, it's Lee."

"Lee, I'm kind of in the middle of something."

Lee rolled his eyes. "Jesus, Francine. How do you do it?"

Francine narrowed her eyes. "Just say what you have to say."

"Jonathan's hightailed it out of Sunnydale and is on his way to Mexico."

"Great. Little shit isn't even here. Figures." She paused. "Look, you guys don't need me for this, do you?"

Lee shook his head. "Not really. You want to just head for home?"

"Yeah, I really do. I've got some business I need to take care of."

"All right. Should I give Billy a message when I check in?"

"Just tell him I'll be back to work on Monday."

"Okay." Lee stared at the phone for a minute as if he could see his co-worker. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. And if you'll go away I'll be even better."

Lee let out a snicker. "I'm gone." He hung up and put his phone in his inner jacket pocket. He felt the stake that Buffy had insisted he keep. As he looked around at the dark of night he was suddenly glad that he had it.

Amanda glanced at him. "Is she all right?"

Lee snickered again. "It sounds like she hooked up with someone. She couldn't get me off the phone fast enough."

Amanda let out a sigh. She had never understood Francine. Didn't think she ever would. "So what were you going to tell me? What was that word you used, a slayer?"

"Yes." Lee felt for the stake again. He took Amanda's hand and walked with her to the car, keeping an eye out. "Do you like scary stories?"

Amanda snuck her arm around his waist. "Only if I have a big, strong handsome man to keep me from being afraid."

He gave her a quick kiss. "Then you're in luck. Because you happen to have in your possession, one big, strong, often told he was handsome, man, who just happens to be all yours."

Amanda waited as he opened the car door for her and she slid in, amazed at how impatient she was for him to be near again, as he walked around the car. She took his hand as he got in. "Well, then, big, strong, and handsome, go ahead and scare me."

"Let's get back to the hotel first." He brought her hand up to his lips and kissed it. "That way, if you do get scared, I can hold you tight."

She gave him a mock growl. "You better be planning on holding me tight either way, Lee."

He laughed as he pulled away. "You read my mind, Amanda. You read my mind."

##

Francine gave D'Hoffryn a long look. "So everything she said is true? I'll be immortal, and I'll never age, and I'll get to punish men for being jerks?"

D'Hoffryn nodded. "All very true."

She frowned. "I'm not seeing the downside here." She turned to Anya. "Where's the downside? There's got to be a downside."

Anya shrugged her shoulder. "If you don't like it, I guess being immortal would really suck."

"Did you like it?"

Anya nodded. "When I was human I didn't like thinking about dying. I didn't like thinking that everyone I knew was just slowly withering away, including me." Anya shivered.

Francine cocked her head from one side to the other, lips pursed, considering. "I can live in D.C.?"

D'Hoffryn made a wide sweep with his hand. "You may live anywhere, any universe you choose."

Francine's eyes opened wide. "Any universe?" She blinked. "Any universe?"

Anya's hands made an ambivalent gesture. "Trust me, there's a few you want to avoid. Like the everything's orange universe. It's pretty dull."

Francine grinned at her, suddenly thrilled beyond belief with this odd turn her life had taken. She glanced at Anya. "Why don't you come to D.C. for a while? Teach me the ropes. We could have some fun. Trust me, there are scorned women by the thousands there."

Anya thought about it. "Maybe I will. I could use a vacation. I'll call Giles in the morning. The store's closed anyway."

Francine turned toward D'Hoffryn. "Okay, I'm in."

D'Hoffryn smiled. "Excellent." He included Anya in his smile. "You've done well with this one. She will be a good addition to our family."

Francine just smiled back. She couldn't wait to get started.

End of Part 7

Mexico 8

Buffy closed the door. She peered out the window and watched as Amanda

and Lee stopped to talk on the sidewalk for a moment. She suddenly realized that she was alone with Giles. Completely alone. Trying to find her courage she took a deep breath.

Giles watched Buffy at the window. There would be no better time for this conversation. He took a deep breath.

They both spoke at the same time.

"Giles."

"Buffy."

They smiled at each other, and then both gestured at the other to go first. This time Buffy insisted that he go first. As he nodded, a part of her berated herself for her cowardice and then she started to panic wondering what he might say, wondering if he was about to announce that he was leaving again. She felt this enormous inner push to open her mouth, to speak first as she followed him to the couch. The sensation made her afraid she might just explode with the pressure.

He beat her to it with only a second to spare. "Buffy. I don't suppose..." He shook his head and started again. "I was wondering..." He watched as Buffy tried to bite back a grin and glared at her. "What?"

"You're usually better with the talking than this." She finally let the grin out. "Just spit it out."

"Yes, you're right." He still hesitated. She rolled her eyes at him. He mentally chastised himself for his adolescent behavior. He went back to his original start. "I don't suppose you're in the market for a Watcher, are you?"

Something melted inside of Buffy. He wanted to stay. He wasn't going to leave. No matter what happened next, he'd be here with her. For the first time in months, Buffy felt warm inside. She gave him a smile.

Giles heart missed a beat. It was that smile. The smile he had begun to

believe he would never see again. "Is that a yes?"

She shook her head, and at the confused look in his eyes she touched his arm. "Wait. Yes. And no. I mean not no, but there's a but. A yes, but."

Giles was amazed that he had followed that. "And that is...?"

"If I tell you something will you promise not to laugh?"

"I would never laugh at anything you say to me, Buffy."

Buffy's eyes opened wide. "Excuse me? This from the man who laughed himself sick when I told him about the worst months of my life?"

"All right. You have a point." Giles bit his lips to keep from smiling. The laughter that had erupted out of him in the training room was threatening to erupt again.

Buffy stared at him. "You're doing it again."

He bit his lips harder. "I'm sorry. I don't know what's wrong with me." A laugh escaped and he clapped a hand over his mouth.

She fought off a responding grin as best she could, but he was irresistible this way. Buffy prodded his leg with her hand. "Stop it."

He tried. "I am, I'm truly sorry." A broad grin crossed his face and another laugh got past his control. He tried to get serious. "I'm fine, really. Go ahead." This time the laugh came out sounding suspiciously like a snort, and Buffy couldn't help but giggle. At the sound of her giggle Giles lost whatever tenuous control he had and he just started to laugh.

Buffy got swept up in it all over again. Except this time she really watched him. Watched him laugh, watched his face as he let loose, and she inched closer to him on the couch, and laid her hand on his chest to feel the rumble of his laughter.

Giles covered her hand with one of his, aware that the laughter they were again sharing was connecting them in such a lovely way. His eyes ran over her face. She was so beautiful when she laughed. He was determined to bring some more laughter in to her life.

Buffy watched as his gaze caressed his face. She inched even closer bringing up one leg so that she was partly turned to him, her calf pressing along his thigh. She placed her other hand on the couch, behind his neck and she leaned in a little.

Giles' laughter had about run his course and he lay his head back on the couch, and found her hand there. He lifted his head. "Sorry."

Buffy shook her head. "Don't be." The hand from his chest rose and she pressed against his forehead. "Lean back, relax."

He did as instructed, feeling very relaxed, feeling good. Laughter was an amazing tension reliever. His head rested on her hand. She had turned it over so it felt as if she was cradling the back of his head. Unconsciously he nestled into it. Then he realized what he was doing and his eyes rose to meet hers. The tension was back, and it arced between them like electricity.

It thickened when Buffy curled the fingers underneath him, and caressed him. Her eyes were huge and entirely focused on him. "Giles?"

He was captivated by the look on her face, and was all too aware of the response of his body. He made a last ditch effort to pull himself together. "What did you want to tell me?"

As Buffy took in his nervous attempt to regain control she felt a pure surge of feminine power and decided she liked him a little nervous. Her hand against his chest started stroking the fabric of his shirt. Her voice was soft and husky. "Are you done laughing?"

All he could do was nod.

She wiggled her hand out from behind his head and started to run a finger along the side of his face. "Are you sure?"

He nodded again. Then his brows started to furrow. "Buffy."

Her fingers moved to his lips, to stop him from talking. "My turn."

Giles felt as if he were drowning. "Your turn for what?" He watched his hand rise and touch her hair. It felt like satin to him.

She ran her fingers across his lips, feeling their velvet texture, their pliancy. Her tongue ran across her own. "To tell you something."

His eyes watched her tongue again and his fingers found their way into her hair, tangling in the shorter tresses. He made one last attempt to keep things from going where they possibly shouldn't. "Be very sure, Buffy. Be very sure what you tell me is the truth."

A finger slipped between his lips and he couldn't resist greeting it with his tongue. Buffy let out a soft cry, and all she wanted was to be lost in him, lost in the sensation of touching him. "It is. It is the truth." She slipped her finger out, her hand moving to cup his cheek and she touched her lips to his.

All that they had been to each other, and all that they could be, ignited with that touch. Just that quickly, there was no turning back. Giles took that kiss and returned it with one of his own, his lips slanting across hers, his teeth nibbling, setting her on fire, his tongue caressing hers until she thought she might go out of her mind with wanting.

Her world started shifting and then she realized that Giles was pushing her back, laying her down, covering her body with his. Just the idea of it thrilled her and she wrapped her arms and then her legs around him, pulling him down as tightly to her as she could. She felt that power surge through her again when she felt how hard he was, undeniable proof of his desire.

Giles kissed her again and then he lifted his head and gazed down at her. One of his hands ran through her hair. "Is this what you wanted to tell me? Is this the but?"

She grinned and ran her hands down his back and grabbed his butt. "No, this

is." She decided she liked how it felt and she kept her hands there.

He grinned back at her and closed his eyes in rapture as she squeezed again. It had been so long since he'd been touched this way. He felt his heart skip another beat when he opened his eyes and was irrefutably faced with the fact that it was Buffy touching him this way. Buffy wanting to touch him. "You are so beautiful."

Her return smile was shaky. "Not as beautiful as you."

He looked down at her, amazed at her words. "I must admit, I'm a bit overwhelmed. Are you sure I'm what you want?"

She nodded. "I've never been surer of anything. I want you with me. I never want to be without you again."

"And you won't be. But, if that's why you're doing this, it's not necessary. I planned on staying anyway."

She shifted a little so they could lie side by side. "It's not enough for me, not anymore. I want it all." She bit her lip. "Unless it's not what you want."

A soft laugh escaped. "Not want you?" He shook his head in disbelief. "I never would have dared entertain the thought two days ago, but now that you're here in my arms I don't believe I could bear for you to ever leave."

All she wanted to do was touch him but she had to be sure. "I'm still me, you know. Crazy, mixed up, screwed up like Buffy. I'm not so sure you're getting such a deal."

He smiled reassuringly at her. "I think I can be the judge of that. And I think we'll suit each other just fine."

She smiled back. And she knew he was right. There was a marvelous freedom in knowing that no one in the world knew her as well as this man, every dark and miserable thing about her, and he was still telling her that she was beautiful. "Kiss me, please."

Giles obeyed, as thoroughly as before. One hand still tangled in her hair to hold her head captive. His other hand swept down her body to her bottom and he gave her a return squeeze. She could feel his teeth as he smiled and looked up at him, her face inquiring. He grinned at her. "I like this butt of yours."

She laughed and found his again as well with her own hands. "Me, too."

His hands moved up and under her shirt and then he stopped. "How far do you want this to go, Buffy? I don't want to move too fast."

Suddenly he seemed to be moving much too slowly. She moved away from him enough to reach down and pull off her top. She wore no bra and he couldn't refuse the invitation. His lips moved to one of her nipples and he suckled at her breast, his other hand still caressing her bottom, his fingers moving enticingly deeper between her legs until Buffy was on fire again. She let out a moan and started trying to get him more naked.

He reluctantly parted from her breast so he could pull his shirt off. Then Giles decided as long as he was being interrupted that perhaps it was just time to get completely naked. He rolled over her and stood, reaching down and pulling her up. "Let's go upstairs."

Buffy nodded and they slowly climbed up the stairs, hands wandering across each other's bodies, learning one another as they moved up each step. When they reached the landing Buffy directed him to her room and when they crossed the threshold he slowly unbuttoned and unzipped her jeans and pushed them and her underwear down her hips. As they pooled at her feet she stepped out of them. Then she did the same for him, his pants and boxers slipping to the floor.

They spent a moment admiring each other, eyes of love finding beauty in her too thin form, and his older body. They looked for a moment and then the moment was over and they moved together and both let out groans as naked flesh felt naked flesh.

As one they moved to the bed. Giles lay down first, pulling Buffy down on top of him. She wiggled against him, and felt his hard cock thrust up against her

in response. Needing to have a taste of him she shifted down his body until she was getting an eyeful. He was big here too. Big and hard and all hers. She looked up at him and grinned. And then she ran her tongue up the length of him and felt a surge of satisfaction as he thrust up again and let out a moan. Taking him in her hand she lifted him so she could lower her mouth and take in the rounded dome, running her tongue along its edge. She couldn't stop watching him as he succumbed to passion.

Giles didn't know what was making him hotter. What Buffy was doing with her extraordinarily talented tongue, or the fact that it was Buffy to begin with. He couldn't stop watching her. He couldn't stop watching her bathe his cock with her tongue and saliva, as she fondled his balls, and laid claim to his body. It was the most erotic thing he'd ever seen.

Suddenly he wanted to taste her too. He reached down and began to pull her up. She let out a cry of protest but then she allowed him to move her. He pulled her up until her warmth passed his cock and she ran her wetness over the hard length of him. Both of them groaned and she did it again. She moved until just the tip of him was in her. He felt so wonderful and it took all her control to not just shove down until he filled her completely.

Giles had to fight the urge to thrust into her and stake his own claim but he wanted to taste her before he spent himself in her this first time. Then he'd taste her afterwards as well. He wanted to know what they tasted like together. He kept pulling on her until she crawled up his body and at his direction, kneeled over him, presenting herself to him.

He took a moment to admire the view. Despite her strength and the hardness of her life, right now she looked soft, full of curves, and every inch a woman, one that he wanted more than any other lover he'd ever had. He touched her with his tongue and was gratified at the cry she let out. Gently holding her apart with the fingers of one hand, he explored every dark, moist curve of her center with his lips and tongue.

Buffy was gasping for air, her mouth dry, as she tried to breathe through what Giles was doing to her body. She'd never felt anything like it. She could feel her orgasm seconds away and she was filled with a desire to be united with him when it hit. Moving away from his talented mouth she slid back down him, and before he could argue she guided herself on to his cock and slid down the length of him until he was sheathed deeply within her.

Giles almost came off the bed at the sensation. He yanked her down and took her mouth as he started to thrust inside of her. Lifting off of him just a little she began to ride him, her powerful legs finding an effortless rhythm. His hands found her breasts and he softly touched her, and then grew rougher, shaping them with his hands, pulling at her nipples. She leaned down just enough to tease his lips, just enough for her orgasm to start and she let out a cry that alerted him.

Giles watched her as she came. He watched as she came calling his name as his cock made its home in her. He felt her pulsing around him. It made him crazy. He flipped her over and hammered into her, knowing he couldn't hurt her, knowing she was his for the taking. It didn't take him long before he was calling her name out as he found his release in her body.

Trying to draw air into his lungs he collapsed on top of her, and then rolled them until they were lying face to face. He kissed her forehead, and brushed some damp hair off her face. He couldn't seem to find enough breath to speak so he just looked at her.

She smiled at him and the look on his face allowed her to speak her heart. "I'm in love with you." Her heart rejoiced at the smile he graced her with.

"Really?"

She nodded. "Really, really."

He thought about it for a minute. Thought about Amanda asking him over and over if he was in love with Buffy. "Amanda asked me if I was in love with you."

Buffy looked surprised. "She did?" At his nod, she continued. "What did you say?"

"I didn't know what to say. I'd never really thought about it before."

Buffy looked down at their naked bodies. "Are you thinking about it now?"

He grinned and kissed the tip of her nose. "It would be difficult not to. I believe

if she were to ask me that question right now, that my answer would be a resounding yes."

Buffy let out a long, happy sigh and lay her head against Giles' chest. Then she grinned.

He felt it and looked down at her. "What's that smile for?"

"I'm just glad you didn't laugh at me."

Giles snorted. "How could I laugh? You had my lips thoroughly occupied."

She moved her head back and ran her fingers over his lips. "I like your lips."

He gave her a mock glare. "Good. Maybe the next time they're lecturing you about something it will help you listen."

She shook her head. "It will just make me want to kiss them to shut you up."

Giles didn't think he'd mind that too much. His arms moved to squeeze her tightly as they both drifted off to sleep.

End Part 8

Mexico 9

Amanda and Lee were south of San Diego when they saw him hitchhiking on the other side of the road. Lee found a turnoff and turned the rental car around. As they approached the young man, Lee slowed down and pulled in front of him. Lee got out of the car, followed by Amanda.

Jonathan eyed them warily. Were they giving him a ride or not? He gave them a cautious smile. "Hey."

Lee nodded. "Are you Jonathan Levinson?" Lee was fairly certain he was but figured he might as well be sure.

Jonathan swallowed. "Maybe. Who wants to know?"

Lee tried not to roll his eyes. "We do."

"Yeah? So who are you?"

Amanda decided to take over. She could Lee was only spooking the young man. "I'm Amanda and this is Lee. Your father has been trying to find you."

Jonathan snorted. "Right. My father."

Amanda felt a piercing moment of sadness at the tone in his voice. Sunnydale seemed to breed hurt children. "He's been very worried."

Jonathon snorted again. "Are you sure you're talking about my father? Short guy, dark hair, glasses?"

"We haven't met him. We were just asked to find you."

Jonathan chewed on his lower lip as he considered the two people looking at him. "Have you been in Sunnydale?"

Lee nodded. "We just came from there."

"So, it's still there?"

Lee drummed his fingers on the roof of the car. "Yes, it's still there."

Jonathan thought about that. He was sort of surprised by the news.

Amanda tried a different tack. "Buffy and Giles told us that you were heading for Mexico."

Jonathan's eyes grew very wide and he took a step back. "Buffy and Mr. Giles?" He tossed that idea around in his head. "So, they're all right?"

Amanda and Lee both nodded.

Jonathan was a little surprised by that too. Glad, but surprised. He scrunched his face up. "I don't suppose they mentioned Willow to you, did they?" He braced himself.

Amanda smiled softly. "I spoke with her."

Jonathan's eyes almost bugged out of his head. "You spoke to her? She didn't try to, you know, do anything?"

Amanda's brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"You know. Were her eyes all black and was she like, you know, throwing bolts of lightening or anything like that?"

Lee blew out an exasperated breath. He was getting very tired of the mystery of Willow. He hated only knowing partial answers. Amanda cut him off before he could get too vocal about it. "Lightening?"

"Yeah. I mean she is a witch." At the look on both their faces Jonathan got nervous. "You knew that, right? I mean, if you know Buffy and Mr. Giles, I figured you knew about Willow."

Lee was determined to get some answers. "Are you hungry?"

Jonathan startled at the seeming non-sequitor. "Yeah?"

"How about we buy you dinner and you can fill us in on what's been happening."

Jonathan shook his head. "I really can't talk about it."

Lee let out a warning laugh. "Oh yes, you can, my friend."

Jonathan looked like he was going to bolt. "Why? Do you have ways of making me talk?"

Lee had to bite back a laugh. Then he saw the look on Jonathan's face. It was the same look he'd seen on Willow's face, and Xander's. And flashes of it on Buffy's and Giles'. Endless fear and gut wrenching worry. It got to Lee. And as determined as he'd been to get some answers, suddenly he didn't want to contribute to the worry and the fear. "Never mind. Let's just pick up a bite to eat and let us take you home. No questions. All right?"

Jonathan paused. "My father's really worried about me?"

Amanda nodded. "He really is."

A slow smile formed on Jonathan's face. "Wow." Suddenly going back to Sunnydale seemed like a good idea. He could always leave if Willow turned to the dark side again. And he was really hungry. He pointed back down the road. "There's an In and Out Hamburgers right back there."

Lee opened the car door. "In and Out it is."

Jonathan grinned and got in the back seat. "Cool."

##

Buffy woke up early in the morning. She froze when she felt the unfamiliar sensation of a warm body lying next to her. Then she remembered who it was and she smiled. Stretching languorously she threw her arm over her new and forever bedmate and grinned when he grunted. Then she let out a small yelp when his arm snaked out and pulled her snug against him. She let out a deliciously happy sigh. "Let's just stay here all day."

Giles smiled, his eyes still closed. "I'm afraid that life will intrude, whether we will or no."

Buffy sighed again, a little less deliciously. "Can't we pretend for a little while."

Giles nuzzled her shoulder. "I think we might, yes."

"Good." They lay there a little longer. Finally Giles shifted his body until he was facing her. "I'm not quite sure I believe this has happened. I keep thinking that this is some sort of hallucination brought on by Willow's actions against me."

Buffy ran her hand down his face. "It's real. We're together, the way we should be." Thinking of Willow her face grew pensive. "There's still a long road ahead of us, isn't there? For Willow?"

"Yes, a long and difficult one."

"But at least you're here, and you're staying, and we won't be alone. That makes it so much better, I can't even tell you." She wrapped a leg around his and pulled his lower body closer to hers. "And now there are yummy side benefits."

Giles let out a soft laugh. "Indeed there are." He started to unwrap her leg.

"Hey, where do you think you're going?"

"To use the bathroom, and brush my teeth. I recommend you do the same. Then I plan to get back in bed and ravish you until I'm forced to stop."

Buffy was out of bed before him. "Good plan."

Giles leaned back on the bed as he watched a very naked Buffy walk out the door of the bedroom and head down the hall. He raised his eyebrows and shook his head at the extraordinary sight. "One of my best, I think." Buffy's laughter at his comment floated back toward him. Giles grinned at the sound. Deciding to use the downstairs bathroom, he threw on his slacks and padded down the stairs.

A few minutes later they reconvened in the bedroom. She glanced around. "We need to move."

Giles raised his eyebrows. "To a different room?"

"No, a different home. Too many bad memories here."

Giles nodded his head. "Yes, I suppose there are."

Buffy sighed. "Are you sure you want to take me on? I'm a college drop out, with a kazillion bills, and I'm broke."

"And you're mine, and I love you and the answer is yes. Now, please come here and stop wasting time."

Buffy grinned. "Bossy, aren't you?"

"Just determined to adhere to the plan."

Buffy moved into his arms. "Like I said, it's a good plan." She pushed him down on the bed and crawled on top of him. "I can be bossy too, you know."

Giles snorted. "Is this supposed to be surprising news? Should I be shocked?"

"Wise ass."

He grinned. "I love a bossy woman."

Buffy laughed. It was so wonderful to be with him this way. "I love you."

Giles pulled her down for a kiss. And that kiss led to another and then another. And then, without further ado, Giles followed through on his plan.

The End

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