

The Power of Friends 1

Buffy walked into the Magic Shop through the back door looking for Giles. Before she could ask Anya where he was she saw him outside the front door talking with a man. She couldn't see his face, but nothing about him seemed familiar.

"Who's Giles talking to?" she asked Anya.

"His friend Paul."

"Giles has a friend?"

"Actually he has two friends."

"Since when does Giles have TWO friends??"

"For about six months now. They're good for him. They make him happy and a happy boss let's me do what I want."

Buffy frowned at that. "What, and we don't make him happy?"

Giles finished his conversation, slapped the man on the back, and as Paul walked away, he entered the shop smiling when he saw Buffy. He walked over to her, still smiling. "Hello, Buffy."

"Since when do you have friends?" she blurted out. His eyes widened at her question and his smile went away. "No, I didn't mean it like that...." Buffy quickly stated. "I meant, since when do you have friends I don't know anything about? I feel out of the loop." Buffy pouted while waiting for his reply.

Giles couldn't stop the brief grin from forming on his face, feeling a certain satisfaction at Buffy's sense of being out of the loop as he so often felt that way. He quickly extinguished that feeling as being unworthy and looked at Buffy, not sure how to respond.

"C'mon, Giles, spill, what's the sitch?"

"Buffy, there is no sitch, they're just friends, they don't know anything about you, or me being a Watcher. You needn't be concerned about them." The conversation was closed as far as he was concerned and he walked behind the counter to start looking at some invoices. Buffy looked unconvinced, but didn't want to force the conversation in front of Anya, so reluctantly let it go.

She walked into the back room to start her training exercises.

Giles started thinking about his two new friends. He hadn't spoken of his friends to any of the gang. Anya knew, of course. But one of her irritating, yet in this case convenient, attributes was that if it had nothing to do with Xander she quickly lost interest. Giles wanted to keep his friends to himself; his time with them afforded him a much-needed escape from the insanity and painfulness of his life as a Watcher. An escape he had never had up until this point. The simple pleasure of having two male friends his own age that he could just be a guy with had become very important to him, and he was fiercely protective of it.

Paul and Roger were brothers. He had met them at the small bar down the street that he would go to occasionally after closing the shop for a glass of Guinness. The two of them would be there together, laughing, poking fun at each other and the other hapless inhabitants in the bar, including him on occasion, and he had found himself laughing and enjoying their antics. Over time, they had introduced themselves and somehow, a friendship had ensued. They knew that he kept things from them, and because of it, they avoided certain topics as if to spare him the discomfort of evading their questions. He appreciated their willingness to take him on, secrets and all, and he had come to love them both dearly. Roger, ironically, was an emergency room physician at Sunnydale Memorial. Giles wondered if Roger had ever treated him on one of his various trips to the emergency room there. Paul was working in some capacity at the police station, which he didn't seem to want to elaborate on. He had been quite vague about it and Giles had quickly stopped pressing. Giles understood secrets, and was willing to return the favor offered to him.

Finished with his woolgathering, Giles went back to watch Buffy and assist with the work out. He squelched a small sense of guilt at closing her out of this part of his life, but he didn't think that she would understand the intense need he had to have friends of his own, of his own age, and didn't want her feelings to be hurt. Avoiding the whole subject seemed the best approach.

"How was patrol last night?" Giles asked, after she was done with her stretching.

She frowned, remembering, "Something weird is going on. With the police." Giles lifted his eyebrows at this. "No, I'm serious. Instead of 'plunge and move on, plunge and move on, it's been plunge and run, plunge and run. I barely got away last night after killing those vampires over by the Bronze." She shook her head, scowling. "It's as if they're clued into the vampire activity in town, but I don't get how. Most of the police we've dealt with have been happily living in the land of denial about this place." She walked over to the

weapons wall, running her hand over them. "Or they've been bad and evil. What's the poop on the new Police Chief? Could he be some sort of uber-evil, like a Master wannabe?"

Giles smiled at that thought. "Highly unlikely, Buffy, besides, Spike would have heard something about that and told us, for adequate compensation, of course. Here, pick your weapon of choice and throw a matching one my way." Buffy complied and the training began in earnest.

##

Paul sat in his office, looking out at his city. He lived in a constant state of worry and frustration, not understanding, but knowing there was something really wrong going on here in Sunnydale. When he had arrived here a few months ago, taking over as Chief of Police, he had at first been horrified at the number of deaths that occurred on a regular basis. Then, he found himself losing that edge and drifting off into an apathy that alarmed him even more. He had to constantly fight to believe that there was something seriously wrong with this place, and that he needed to do something to combat it. He had put in place a huge snitch system, paying any informant for information regarding violent attacks or deaths in the city. He did patrols himself several nights a week responding to these calls.

He still had no idea why so many people were being killed but he had started to identify someone who was a part of it. Several times over the last few weeks, while responding to a call from an informant, he had caught a glimpse of a young girl with blond hair, leaning over bodies, looking up with fear in her eyes as the police car approached and rapidly leaving the scene. While he could hardly credit that she could do such violence, he had seen the aftermath too many times with his own eyes. He had also seen what the victims looked like and how they were hurt or killed, and that most of them had those marks on their necks. Marks that looked like..... He stopped the thought that kept popping into his head, questioning his own sanity. Could she be....? He closed his eyes and found visions of Dracula behind his eyelids, not for the first time. He hadn't found any sort of internal comfort zone dealing with that thought but catching her had become a quest for him and he wouldn't rest until he had her and could figure out what the hell she was and make her stop doing....whatever the hell she was doing. He sighed.

His thoughts wandered to Giles. He and his brother Roger were enjoying that friendship more than he had thought possible. There was something about the man that pulled at your heartstrings and Giles had become as important to them as anyone else in their lives. Paul could see right off that Giles was hiding facts about his life, and that he got pretty skittish when pressed. It was what made Paul decide not to be entirely forthcoming about his actual job

with Giles. He was afraid Giles would back away and Paul didn't want him to. He had a pretty good instinct about people and he trusted Giles, and was willing to give him privacy in return for his friendship. Maybe someday, he and Roger could get Giles stinking drunk on his beloved Guinness and pry him for information, but in the meantime he was okay with the secrets.

Dusk was falling and Paul was planning on going out again tonight. The petite blond frustrated the hell out of him, and he could feel his anger growing at his sense of helplessness. It was easy to project it all on her. She gave him a place to focus. It ends tonight, he thought, and got up to start his evening patrol.

##

Buffy heard a scream and ran, following the sound. She found a vampire drinking from a young man. She quickly ran up and staked the vampire watching him explode into dust. She leaned over the young man, but he was dead. She felt that familiar guilt that always arose in her when she arrived too late to stop a death from happening. She sat down by him for a moment, looking at him, wondering what his life had been like, who would be mourning him come tomorrow.

Lost in her sad reverie, she missed the footsteps approaching her. "Step away, and put your hands in the air," a man's voice barked at her. She looked up, stunned, preparing to flee, wondering if she could outrun a bullet. She couldn't believe that she had failed to notice his approach. She shifted her weight, preparing to run. She realized her spidey-sense was tingling; she could sense vampires all around. If she ran, this man would be attacked. She fought an inner battle and made her decision. She couldn't allow this man to die, not if she could help it. She stood up and backed away, raising her hands in the air.

Paul couldn't believe he had her. Disgust for her raced through his body as he saw yet another victim on the ground in front of her. He used his phone to call for an ambulance. He walked over to the young woman, turned her around, slamming her against the wall. He slapped cuffs on her while reading her rights. Buffy only hoped that no vampires attacked now as she was not going to be much help with her hands cuffed behind her back. {Way to think things through, Buffy } He pulled her roughly to his car and put her in the back seat. He looked at her venomously, and Buffy cringed at the look in his eyes. She closed hers so she didn't need to see it anymore. She started running through escape scenarios in her mind now that they were away from all the vampires. She hadn't counted on the cuffs, or at least these cuffs. They were strong and she couldn't break them. Paul put the police bubble on the roof of his car and raced back to police headquarters. His CB kept up a constant squeal and as

she watched him respond to certain queries, she realized that she had just made the acquaintance of the new Chief of Police.

Before Buffy came up with an escape plan, they had arrived. He opened the back door and hauled Buffy out of the car, none too gently. She realized that she was actually going to be arrested and that there was nothing she could do about it. She was starting to feel numb with bewilderment at this strange twist of fate and she began fervently praying that Giles would be home. She was taken inside, run through processing then thrown in a cell with two other women. Her senses started tingling and she looked at them suspiciously. Her mind balked at the complete travesty this evening had turned into. She was locked in a cell with two vampires with no weapon, and after frantically looking around the cell, no wood of any kind at all. She knew if she didn't get a weapon, or get out of this cell soon that she would be dead come morning. She was the Slayer, but even she couldn't fight two vampires all night and survive.

The two vampires grinned at her, a feral gleam in their eyes. Their evening was looking up. She had just provided them with a free dinner and a way to get out. They needed out before sunrise. Once she was dead, they would call the guard and once the cell was opened the guard would be dessert and they would be free.

End of Part 1

The Power of Friends 2

At that moment, a guard came around the corner, telling Buffy it was time to make her call. Buffy sidled up to the door, keeping her eye on her cellmates. She was not going to let anyone be killed while she was around. She followed the guard and once at the phone called Giles. While she was waiting for the phone to be answered, her throat got tight, and tears started to form in her eyes. *Answer, Giles, be home, please.* Finally Giles voice came on the line.

"Hello?"

"Giles....". Her voice sounded thick. Giles was instantly on alert, his heart starting to race.

"Buffy, what's happened? Where are you? Are you hurt?"

Buffy sobbed once, suddenly overwhelmed with the need for Giles to just be there, holding her. She held the phone so tightly she was afraid it would

crumble in her hands. She kept trying to get any words to pass by the lump in her throat.

"Buffy, talk to me!"

"Giles", finally a small voice responded to his worried inquiries. "I've been arrested, I'm locked up at the police station." Buffy took a deep breath, trying not to cry. "Giles, come and get me, please, I need to get out of here." Desperation colored her voice and something in Giles' gut responded with a growing fear.

"Buffy, I'll be right there, everything will be all right." He started putting on shoes and gathering up his keys. "I'm leaving right now." He could hear her sniffing and he stopped at his door torn between wanting to get to her, and not wanting to hang up on her when she was in such distress. "Buffy, will you be all right until I can get there?"

"Just hurry", there was a long pause, "and bring a stake."

"Bring a stake?" But, Buffy had hung up. *Bring a stake?!* Giles grabbed a stake and put it in the inside pocket of his jacket. *What on earth does she need a stake for?* Giles lost that train of thought as he raced to his car. Thoughts of Buffy being locked in a jail cell eclipsed all other thoughts. His anger started to build. *She is the only reason this town hasn't been sucked into the Hellmouth and those sodding idiots throw her in a jail cell.* He wished he could allow Ripper to pay a visit to whatever bloody pillock had arrested her, but getting himself arrested probably wasn't the best course of action at this point. He took a couple of deep breaths and concentrated on getting to the police station as quickly as possible.

Paul had left word that if anyone came to visit or tried to get out blondie, now known to him as Elizabeth Summers, that they should be allowed to talk with her, but he wanted to be notified immediately. Under no circumstances was she to be allowed to leave. His phone rang and he was informed that a man had arrived to try and arrange her release. Paul smiled unpleasantly, looking forward to this confrontation, needing to vent some of his frustration. He began to make his way down to the cellblock.

##

Giles had walked into the police station, going through the metal detectors on his way in. He held his breath, hoping they wouldn't search him, but no one approached him to do so. After inquiring, he started being escorted to where they were holding Buffy. For some reason his heart was in his throat as he

was walked down the hall. He was terrified of what he might see. He couldn't account for his fear, but it was a living thing and only the thought of a bullet in his back kept him from sprinting down the hall to see with his own eyes that Buffy was okay. His relief at seeing her alive almost took his breath away. She saw him and ran to the bars putting her hands through, needing to touch him.

"Oh, God, Giles, you're here." She held his arm, not wanting to let him go, feeling as if she had never been so glad to see anyone.

"Buffy, are you okay?" Giles looked her over; she had several gashes on her arms and face, and bruises starting to form. His anger took over again. "Did they do this to you?" meaning the police. He wanted to kill someone.

"No", Buffy replied, gesturing with her eyes and a slight motion of her head to the other women in the cell. "Did you bring....?" Buffy didn't want to say it out loud. Giles eyebrows rose as he began to understand her situation. His stomach clenched as he realized that his fears of finding her dead had not been that unrealistic.

Giles turned to the guard. "May I give her my jacket?" The guard grunted his assent, bored, and Giles took off his jacket and passed it through the bars. Buffy put it on, feeling secure for the first time this evening, not only because of the stake she could feel in the pocket, but because the jacket was imbued with Giles warmth and smell. It felt as if he was holding her.

Paul walked into the corridor to see what sort of scum had come to try and take the girl out of here. As he turned the corner, he saw Giles, and he was momentarily confused. *What is Giles doing here?* He felt the usual pleasure at the site of him. Then his mind shifted gears and as he walked closer he began to feel tendrils of dread shooting up his spine.

"Giles? What are you doing here? What are you doing here with her?" Paul stressed the word her, making it sound distasteful. He motioned to the guard to leave them. "Paul?" Giles looked at his friend, also, momentarily pleased, until the words he had spoken finally filtered through. Buffy looked at the two of them, standing there looking at each other as if in thrall.

Buffy finally spoke, "Giles, is that your friend Paul?"

"Yes" Giles responded softly, trying to figure out what was going on, feeling a sense of pain and loss beginning in his heart.

"That's the Chief of Police, Giles. He's the one that arrested me."

All the blood drained from Giles' face. He looked as if he'd been slapped.

Buffy had never watched someone's heart break before, right in front of her eyes, but she was watching it happen to Giles.

"God, how could I have been so stupid?" Giles groaned the words out. He turned to Buffy, "I'm sorry Buffy, I didn't know, I had no idea." He spoke as if he was afraid Buffy wouldn't believe him. He turned to Paul, and running his hands over his face, said with such sadness that it almost broke Buffy's heart, "Did you use me to get to her?" Buffy, mesmerized by the fierce emotions coming from both men, looked up at Paul and recognized that he was as bewildered as Giles. She watched Paul's face as he started to realize that something had gone terribly wrong and she caught the sadness and loss in his eyes as he looked at Giles.

Buffy turned her face back to Giles and watched in amazement as he transformed in a matter of seconds from sadness and despair to Ripper. Giles walked over to Paul and spoke to him in a very quiet voice.

"Let her out."

"Giles, I can't, she's hurt people. Why are you here? How do you even know her?"

"Paul, let her out, now."

"Giles....", Paul spoke the name, like a plea.

Giles continued to speak softly. "Paul, she is not your enemy, she helps to fight the evil that plagues this city. However, if you do not let her out, now, if you hurt her in any way, I will be your enemy, and trust me when I say that is not something you want."

Paul looked at Giles, and saw the deadly threat in his eyes. Paul could feel a part of himself being afraid of Giles, amazed that such soft-spoken words could have such power. Paul couldn't believe that Giles was acting this way. He needed a minute to think. Either he was wrong about the girl, or he was wrong about Giles. Either way, he had completely screwed up, and that was not something he did very often, or handled particularly well. Paul just stared at Giles, as if he could pull the truth out of his eyes.

Giles broke eye contact and moved back to Buffy. He looked in her cell and saw that she was now by herself, and there were two small piles of dust. She was sliding the stake back into the inner pocket of his jacket. She mouthed the word thanks, and flashed a small grin at him. Giles heard Paul walk away, and closed his eyes in pain realizing that the friendship of the two brothers that had meant so much to him was over. Suddenly, Paul was back, with keys

in his hand. He unlocked the cell door and gestured for Buffy to get out. He didn't even look at Giles. He looked back in the cell. "Wasn't there.....? He shook his head. He turned and walked them to a room used for meetings and gestured them both inside.

"I need to take care of some paperwork, I'll be back down in a minute." He spoke tersely, directing his comments to Buffy. He wouldn't look at Giles. He spun around and left. Once out of their line of sight he walked into the adjacent room and watched them through the one-way mirror.

Giles and Buffy both looked stunned and sat there looking at each other. Then, Giles began to assess her wounds to determine if she had been hurt badly.

"I'm fine Giles." Then a pause, "Is he going to let me go?" She asked in a small voice.

"So it would appear". Giles voice was gruff.

"Hey, nice choice of friends there Watcher-mine. Is his brother the head of Army Intelligence?" Paul, watching behind the mirror, could hardly contain a laugh.

"Buffy, I had no idea, I really am sorry."

"What are you sorry for?"

"I feel as if this is my fault somehow, that I could have prevented it."

"How?"

"I don't know, I just..." He had no words to say. Buffy looked at him with sorrow knowing that somehow Giles had lost something very important to him tonight, and that once again, it was because of her.

"Giles, if it makes you feel any better, I don't believe this had anything to do with you. I think he was as wigged out as you were about the whole thing." Giles glanced at her and then looked away again. "I think the only reason he is letting me out is because of you. It's pretty clear that my charm was lost on him." She looked at Giles, hoping her comment might coax a smile out of him. It didn't. "I'm sorry I came between you. I didn't mean to."

Giles looked up at her, hearing the sadness in her voice. "Buffy, you always come first, you always have, you always will."

"I know, but it seems as if you lose so much because of me."

"Buffy, look at me." He waited until she looked up, tears brimming in her eyes, "I would risk anything to protect you, and be glad of it."

Buffy shook her head, but rather than say anything else, she leaned her head forward and placed it on Giles' chest, just wanting to be near him.

"Why did you let yourself be taken? Why didn't you run away?" Giles ran his hand over her hair, enjoying her closeness as a balm to the ache in his heart.

"There were vampires all over the place. If I had run, they would have killed him, I couldn't let that happen."

Giles let a small smile appear on his face, feeling inordinately proud of his Slayer, and rested his chin on the top of her head.

##

Paul spoke softly to himself, "Shit". Running his hand through his hair, he walked out of the room, to make arrangements for Buffy's release. He had chosen to trust his instincts about Giles, quelling the loud voices in his head telling him he was an idiot. He had put them in this room to see if things might become clearer. They hadn't except that he now realized that Giles had been keeping some pretty huge secrets, secrets he wasn't sure he even wanted to know about. But, he needed to know. He sensed they were vital to his own mission of keeping Sunnydale safe. However, he didn't see Giles just opening up to him after tonight and just sharing. He didn't know if he would ever see Giles again at all, just to talk, or to have a beer. He wondered how he would let Roger know that he had potentially blown this friendship, big time. "Shit", he commented again.

##

Giles and Buffy left the police station, and walked to his car. He opened the passenger door for her, and got in the driver's side. He drove her home, neither of them speaking. They arrived at her house. "Will you be all right? Do you want me to come in?" Giles asked her, concern clear on his face.

"No, thanks. I just need to take a very, very long shower and clean all the eeww away. Thanks for coming to rescue me." She smiled at him, saddened for him, but feeling so inestimably grateful that he was hers. "My hero."

He did smile at that. "Please don't do any more patrolling tonight, I want to know that you are safe at home for the rest of the night."

"Don't worry, I am definitely done with the patrolling." Giles smiled at her as she got out of the car, and watched until she got inside. He gazed at the house for a minute longer, lost in thought, and then he started the car back up, and drove home.

##

Paul got into his car, Buffy's address in his hand, and sat in the dark for a few minutes. He couldn't decide if what he was planning was a good idea or the stupidest thing he'd done in a long time. His need to understand, and his need to try and make amends made his decision. He looked at the address again, sighed, and started driving to her home.

End Part 2

The Power of Friends 3

Buffy, after watching Giles drive away, opened the front door again. She walked out and sat on the front steps. She wanted to be under open skies for a few minutes, even if they were dark and potentially full of things that go bump in the night. Even though she had been locked up for a relatively short period of time, she felt claustrophobic, even in the house. She sat quietly, wishing she had asked Giles to stay, not wanting to be alone. She knew he would come back if she called, but she had already ruined his life enough tonight. Ever since her mother had died he had spent so much of his time and energy helping her, pulling her life together, emotionally patching her up. He deserved the rest of the night off.

She continued ruminating about Giles when she saw the car pull up. Her heart started speeding up as she recognized the chief getting out of his car. She started to get up, to go into the house, thinking she might need to call Giles after all. Paul saw the flight response begin in her body. He called out, "No, don't go, I just want to talk for a few minutes." His voice expressed a tired need that impressed itself upon her and it held her, silently watching him as he walked closer. She saw the sadness and confusion on his face and she realized in a brief flash of intuition that this visit was about Giles, not about her. She sat back down and patted the space next to her. He smiled briefly and sat down next to her.

The two of them sat there, in companionable silence, the irony of that lost on neither of them. Finally Paul shifted his weight.

"I'm sorry about tonight, how I treated you."

"No big, it's not like you knew or anything."

"No, that's true enough, seeing as I still don't know." Another few minutes of silence ensued.

"So, can you tell me what's going on?"

"Giles is explain-guy, he's much better at it than I am."

"Are you a vampire?" Paul clapped his hand over his mouth not even believing he asked the question out loud. Buffy's eyes grew huge and her jaw dropped as she turned to look at Paul. She barked a laugh out.

"God, is that what you think? That I'm a vampire?" All of a sudden she started giggling, and snorted in the middle of it, which made her giggle even harder. Paul sat there grinning back at her, her giggling infectious. All of a sudden, her eyes narrowed and she looked at Paul again.

"How do you know about vampires?" She asked with a suspicious tone in her voice.

"You mean there are vampires?" He shot back, feeling like he was in the twilight zone all of a sudden.

"Yeah," Buffy replied softly, "but I'm not one."

Another few minutes of silence occurred, less comfortable than before. Paul wondered why every conversation he was having tonight seemed to spiral rapidly out of his control.

"So, how long have you known Giles?" Paul decided to bring the topic back to safer ground.

"Since I was a sophomore, he was the librarian at my high school." In answer to his unspoken question, she said, "I'm 21, almost 22, so around six years."

"Are you two.....?"

"Are we what?" She looked at Paul, not sure where his question was leading. Then she got it. She blushed, "No, no we're not, we're...well, something different." She didn't know what she and Giles were, it was not easy to explain to someone who knew so little about anything having to do with her life. Her response to Paul made her feel lonely. She almost wished she could have said yes, just to somehow claim Giles in a way Paul might understand. Make him understand that Giles belonged to her.

She returned the question, "How long have you known Giles?"

"For about seven months."

"What's the attraction? I mean, why him? There are all sorts of people to be friends with, why pick Giles?" She couldn't keep the suspicion, and if she was honest with herself, the jealousy out of her voice. Paul stared at her, wondering what on earth she meant. He somehow felt defensive on Giles' behalf.

"Why Giles? He's the best man I know, apart from my brother. Who wouldn't want to be friends with him?" He paused lost in thought about Giles. "Not to sound overly maudlin about it, but Roger and I are crazy about him, and....."

"....And?" Buffy prompted.

"I saw his face tonight, when he thought I had betrayed him, but I didn't, I didn't know about you and him. I was just doing my job, I really thought you..." He didn't finish his sentence. Buffy stayed silent. Paul started speaking quickly. "Can you talk to him for me? Can you try and explain that he means more to me than...well, just about anything, and I don't want to lose him as a friend? I wouldn't know how to talk with him after tonight, after seeing that look on his face. I know I don't have the right to ask you, but maybe he'll listen to you." Paul drew a breath, and shifted his body so he was facing Buffy, waiting for her response. He wouldn't have blamed her for refusing, he actually expected her to.

Buffy suddenly couldn't breathe. She looked at Paul with such sadness on her face. He didn't understand why she looked that way. All of a sudden, tears filled her eyes and her lips trembled.

"Buffy, what is it, what's wrong?"

She covered her face with her hands, trembling with emotion. Paul realized she was crying and looked at her speechless, not knowing what to do. "Buffy, did I say something...what's wrong?"

Buffy started to speak, in between her hiccupy breathes. "No, it's me, it's me." Buffy couldn't put it in words, but she was overcome with sadness that this man sitting in front of her, who had only known Giles for a short time, seemed a better friend to Giles than she had ever been. Paul had been willing to put his job and beliefs on the line tonight for Giles, and now he was here, talking with someone he had no reason to trust, just on the off chance she could give him Giles back. It shamed her and she whispered, "I don't deserve him."

"Who?" Paul was lost again.

"Giles."

"Well, he obviously thinks you do." He was confused at the direction this conversation was taking. *Why should this surprise me?* Buffy shook her head, "No, I have treated him so badly, after everything he has done for me." At that thought, Buffy began to cry again in earnest. She didn't know what was wrong with her. She couldn't believe that she was saying these things, that she was bawling her eyes out in front of a man she hardly knew. Paul continued to look at her, baffled, and then reached over and pulled Buffy into his chest. She started crying harder. Paul wondered again at how weird the evening had become. Here he was comforting the young woman he had started off hating with a vengeance just a few short hours ago. He awkwardly patted her on the back, whispering inane words of comfort, trying to think of something to say, to console her, and to get her to stop.

"Well, can't you just do whatever it is you need to do to make him deserve you?" Paul decided to go for the simplest approach.

That question stopped Buffy in her tracks. She pulled back and looked at Paul, tears staining her face but a determined gleam in her eyes. She sniffed, wiping her nose with her hand. She nodded her head. "Yes, I can, and it starts right now, c'mon."

"Come on where?"

"We're gonna go see Giles."

"But, it's late."

"I may not deserve him, but I know him, and I know he'll still be up, thinking too much about what happened tonight. I'm going to fix things between the two of you."

They both got up, and approached his car. Paul opened up the passenger door for Buffy. She paused, remembering how he had shoved her in the back seat earlier in the evening and looked up at him with a small smile on her face. "Welcome to the weirdness that is my life." She got in. Paul walked around, silently agreeing with her statement and drove to Giles' apartment. When they arrived, the downstairs lights were still on, and she could see him sitting behind his desk. She motioned to Paul to join her and she went and knocked lightly on his door.

Giles started, pulled out of his thoughts by the knock on the door. He assumed it must be Buffy, but wasn't sure why she would be dropping by, especially after he had told her to stay in for the rest of the evening. *Not that she ever does a bleeding thing I tell her.* He opened the door to find Buffy and Paul. His eyes hardened.

Buffy held up her hand, "Wait, Giles, this is of the good, don't go all Ripper on me." She walked in dragging Paul behind her. She pulled Paul into the living room and told him to sit. She walked back to Giles saying, "We need to talk." She walked out onto the terrace. Giles followed, a quizzical expression on his face.

"I don't understand, why are you here with Paul? Has something happened? Are you all right?"

She just looked at Giles, really looking at him, appreciating him, thankful beyond words that he had been sent to her, that out of all the watchers she could have ended up with, that he'd come, that he was hers *Mine*. She felt a longing, that shook her to her core, to get to know him better, not him her watcher, him, this man sitting next to her that she felt she hardly knew, had in fact, never bothered to get to know. She felt another surge of shame shoot through her, and she lowered her eyes, blushing. Giles tried to follow her thoughts but emotions flickered over her face too fast for him to follow. So, he just sat there, at her side, watching her watch him, and waited for her to speak.

"Giles, Paul dropped by a while ago, to talk."

Giles responded by raising his eyebrows, his eyes wide. "Talk about what?"

"About you."

"What about me?"

"Never mind, I started this wrong. Listen, Paul feels bad, you feel bad, Paul doesn't want to lose your friendship over this, you don't want to lose your friendship. So, I brought him over so you guys could kiss and make-up, but without the kissing part. Right, I mean, why would there be kissing? I mean, okay, I'm babbling so I'm stopping now."

Buffy blushed at her words. Giles just stared at her, her words starting to penetrate. She took a deep breath, "So, this is a good thing, right? I mean, I'm not in jail, and I actually kind of like Paul so you guys can still be friends, and I did a good fuzzy friend sort of thing for you." She paused, "So, yay me." She looked up at Giles, an entreaty in her eyes, looking for confirmation that

she had done well by him.

Giles looked at her, a smile forming on his face, his heart full as he realized that she was trying to make things right for him. "Thank you Buffy, this means a lot to me." Buffy grinned back. She stood and pushed him in the direction of the door.

"So, go talk, and tell him what the sitch is. It might be nice to have the police on our side for once." She turned to walk away.

"Do you want me to drive you home?"

"Nah, I'd rather walk. Can I keep your jacket for the night though? The pocket contents might come in handy."

"Of course, be careful, I'll see you tomorrow."

"Night."

"Goodnight, Buffy." He watched her walk away until the night swallowed her up, loving her so dearly, and wishing he could always keep her safe from harm.

Paul, while waiting, had started looking at the books lying around and felt another twilight zone moment as he perused the titles. He opened up the one closest to him, and looked at all the pictures of monsters in there and wondered for what felt like the billionth time tonight what the hell was going on. Giles walked in at that moment. Paul looked up, with a crooked smile, and spoke first.

"Giles, I'm sorry, I didn't know, still don't, but I never would have...." He stopped, hoping he was getting his point across, however badly.

"No, Paul, I should apologize. There is no way you could have known, well, any of this, and I was wrong to assume that you did, and that you acted against me. I tend to get a little protective of Buffy."

Paul laughed, "Yeah, I noticed that." He smiled at Giles, feeling that things were going to work out.

Giles sat down, smiling back, feeling the friendship reassert itself and relaxing into it. "I suppose you'd like some explanations?"

"Well, it would certainly help me make sense of this evening. I asked Buffy if she was a vampire, and she laughed at me... a lot, for a long time."

Giles started laughing as well. He laughed harder than he could remember laughing before, until tears were coming out of his eyes. He caught Paul's expression and tried to stop. "Paul, I'm sorry, I will explain, and then you will hopefully see the humor in it as well, I don't mean to laugh at your expense."

Paul waved his hand, dismissing his concerns. "Laugh away, as long as I can get in on it at some point, I don't mind. Where'd Buffy go, by the way?"

"She's walking home."

"She's walking home?"

"She'll be fine, don't worry." He sent a prayer skyways, *let her be okay.*

End Part 3

The Power of Friends 4

Paul accepted that and settled back in his seat, waiting. Giles shifted in his, wondering how to begin. "What I need to tell you won't be easy for you to believe, and knowing it will change your life. I wouldn't blame you when I am done, if you chose to just walk out that door and be done with both Buffy and me." Paul again dismissed his words, and then gestured for him to continue. So Giles did. He spoke about Slayers and Watchers, vampires and demons, about the Hellmouth, even about Buffy's two cellmates at the police station. Paul believed him; he believed everything he said, although it terrified him. Finally the talking was done, and they sat there for some time, Giles letting Paul process the extraordinary information he had just been given. He felt a momentary sadness, grieving for the lighthearted friendship he'd had. He wondered how things would change, knowing that they had to.

Paul desperately needed a light moment, "Okay, well, and here I thought you were going to tell me something I didn't know." Paul glanced over at Giles, with a wry smile on his face.

"Sorry to bore you." Giles retorted, a mirror smile on his face. "I imagine for an officer of the law, battling evil and so forth, that this is pretty run of the mill."

Paul snorted. "Yeah, absolutely, run of the mill. I keep waiting to wake up."

Giles needed to offer, although he didn't want to. "Do you want to leave? You

could pretend this conversation never happened."

Paul responded without a pause, "Giles, this stuff, the stuff you told me, scares me, I won't deny that. But the thought that I could help in some way, that I could stand at your side and fight with you, it makes me proud; it gives me hope. It makes me proud that you felt you could tell me, and it makes me proud to be your friend. You couldn't pull me away from this for anything in the world."

Giles felt moisture prick his eyelids. "You'll be in danger, you could die." He needed to make sure that Paul understood the risk.

Paul quickly responded, "I was in more danger being ignorant, as well as being dangerous. I almost destroyed this town's best hope tonight because of it. I'd rather know what the danger is and face it than go around knowing that people keep getting killed and I can do nothing about it."

"People still die, we're not enough to stop it."

"I want to help." His tone of voice brooked no argument. "Hey, and I also volunteer Roger." Paul grinned thinking about explaining this to Roger. "I can't keep this from him." He said that, but looked at Giles, asking for permission.

"No, I couldn't ask that of you, but you both need to keep it between the two of you."

"Like anyone would believe me!"

"Well, why don't you and Roger plan to come over for dinner tomorrow night, in fact let's do it at Buffy's. Then I can make her clean up for a change. Maybe you can meet some of the rest of the team."

"There are others?"

"You've met one already.... Anya."

"Anya, you mean Anya at the Magic Shop?"

Giles grinned, understanding Paul's amazement. Paul had been at the store frequently enough to see Anya in action abusing tact and diplomacy like nothing he'd ever seen.

"Yes, well, Anya is a long story."

"I can't hardly wait to hear it. What time?"

"6:00?"

"We'll be there. We'll bring the beer."

The two men looked fondly at each other, relieved that this night hadn't destroyed their friendship. Paul got up and let himself out. Giles watched from the door making sure he got to his car safely, then slowly shut the door. He headed up to his loft, knowing now that he could sleep.

##

Giles called Buffy in the morning to tell her she was having company for dinner. He asked her to contact Willow and Tara and see if they wanted to come over as well. She agreed to host the dinner providing Giles cooked. Giles agreed to her condition and got off the phone. Giles extended an invitation to Anya and Xander but Anya refused saying it was their anniversary and she was expecting lots of orgasms. Giles sighed and turned away only grateful that no customer had been within earshot.

##

Giles left the shop early to go grocery shopping for dinner and arrived at Buffy's at 5:00. Giles moved into the kitchen with ease and started pulling out the pans and utensils he would need. Buffy was frantically trying to pick up and make the house presentable for company. The Scoobies were one thing, but this was Real Company. It made her miss her mom, and she stopped moving, trying to breathe through the tightness in her chest. She turned and saw Giles humming quietly to himself in her kitchen, and was able to breathe again, feeling such a surge of love for him. She attacked the rest of her chores with a lighter heart.

"Giles?"

"Ummm?"

"Did you hear from Willow today?"

"No, I thought you were going to call her, or see her in class."

"I tried, but I never got through, and she wasn't in class, which is way not like her."

"Well, she didn't come by or call the shop. I didn't stop home on the way here, I suppose she might have called."

"I just hope she's okay."

"Is your spidey-sense kicking in about her?" Buffy grinned at Giles' use of that phrase.

"I don't know, it's just not like her to miss school."

"Do you want to run over to their place and see if everything is okay?"

"No, if I haven't heard from her before I go patrolling, I'll run by there then. So, why aren't Anya and Xander coming?"

Giles cleared his throat. "It's some anniversary." He gave her a look she interpreted correctly, and she laughed out loud.

"Orgasms, hmmm?"

"Yes, well, enough about that. Do you know where your whisk is?"

"What's a whisk?"

"Never mind."

##

Paul and Roger arrived promptly at 6:00. Paul had filled his brother in on the general gist of the grisly fairy tale they were now a part of. Roger still hadn't decided if this was some elaborate practical joke. Buffy answered the door, flashed Paul a brilliant smile, and invited them both in. Paul introduced Roger to Buffy. Giles came around the corner wiping his hands on a dish towel.

"Roger, Paul, come on in." He relieved Paul of the beer he had carried in asking, "do you guys want one of these?" Seeing their affirmative nods he motioned them into the kitchen. Buffy tagged along. Giles got out a beer for both of them and one for him, putting the remainder in the refrigerator. He removed the cap from his beer with a deft movement. He looked at Buffy. "What would you like?"

"I'll have a beer too." Giles looked at her, surprised; she rarely drank beer.

"Are you sure? I bought you some Coke."

"Yes, I'm sure. I like beer." Buffy grimaced at herself. She felt like a kid trying to prove that she is all grown up. She didn't like the feeling.

"You won't like this beer. It's for professional beer drinkers only." He grinned at Paul and Roger.

Buffy just lifted her chin so Giles handed her a beer after removing the lid for her, and he watched her take her first swig. He grinned as she schooled her face to not squint up. She moved to sit on the counter away from Giles' dinner preparations.

Giles, Roger and Paul saluted each other with the beer and each took a hearty swallow. Giles turned back to his dinner-making chores chatting easily with his friends. They each talked about their day, lightly touching on those events that would make for amusing conversation. Buffy watched them from her perch, mostly watching Giles. He had taken off his jacket and tie, and was dressed in khakis and a button down shirt with the sleeves rolled up. He looked relaxed and casual, and there was no hesitance or stuttering in his voice as he kidded with Paul and Roger. Buffy couldn't ever remember seeing him this way. He looked like a normal guy. A guy, guy. Like a guy who might not be a Watcher with a Slayer. Like a guy who could have an okay life without her in it. *Has he been there all this time?*

Roger and Paul watched Giles move around the kitchen with an easy familiarity. They also watched Buffy watch Giles, and watched the play of emotions on her face as she watched him move, and talk, and laugh. Buffy noticed their looks and wondered what they were thinking. She felt in competition with them for Giles' attention and felt like she was somehow losing. *God, Buffy, can you at least try and grow up?* Her thought prodded her to action and she jumped off the counter and started pulling salad stuff out. Giles smiled at her, and she smiled back, amazed at how the smallest smile from him helped put her back on an even keel.

Giles started asking Buffy about her day at school and before long all four of them were chatting easily throughout dinner. When they were finished she went outside to shut the sprinklers off and watched the three of them through the kitchen window. Giles was walking across the kitchen to get some containers for leftovers. She watched him move and gasped when she realized that she was checking out Giles' body. *Buffy, get a grip.* Part of her was acknowledging that he was put together quite nicely, not tweedy at all, very guyish, in a sexy way. She felt a thrill of liquid heat go through her body at the thought. She couldn't stop looking at him. She stood out in the yard, lost in this new mental terrain.

Giles excused himself to use the restroom and Paul and Roger looked at each other. Roger spoke first, "Are you sure there's nothing going on between them? Because it sure feels like there is."

"Buffy said they weren't involved that way. I would think she would know."

"Yeah, you'd think so." He paused, thinking about how they behaved together. "But I'm thinking they're both clueless." Paul looked up at Roger at these words noticing a familiar gleam in his eye.

"Roger, I know you think that you are the world's best matchmaker, but I think you should leave this one alone."

"Why? Just a few gentle shoves and if it's meant to be then it will happen."

"They've known each other for six years, if it was meant to happen it already would have happened."

"Nah, she's been too young. He never would have done anything about it if he had feelings for her. It just isn't done, old chap." He made this last statement using an English accent and Paul laughed at him.

"Well, don't push too hard, or make Buffy upset, because I already learned the hard way that he doesn't like it."

"Gotcha, subtle it is."

Giles walked back into the kitchen and looked at the two of them suspiciously. "What are the two of you up to? I've seen that look before and it means nothing good." He was met by two sets of innocent eyes. He snorted and began to clear the table.

"So, Giles, she's quite the hottie." Giles almost dropped the plates he was carrying at Roger's remark.

"What?"

"Buffy, she's a babe."

Giles' eyes narrowed, he looked at Paul, but Paul shrugged his shoulders as if to disclaim any relationship with Roger.

"Roger...." Giles began, but stopped, not quite knowing where to go.

"C'mon Giles, you can't possibly be that blind, she's gorgeous. Quite the little package."

Giles turned to Roger, feeling his annoyance grow. "Roger, that's my....." Again he stopped. "And, no I'm not blind, but that's not how....." Again he

stopped. He couldn't seem to finish any of his sentences. Of course he wasn't blind, he'd been watching Buffy for six years, watching her grow from a young teenager into a breathtakingly beautiful young woman. But, he worked hard to keep those thoughts buried. He had to work too closely with her, had to be too near her body all the time, to risk having those feelings surface. It would make things awkward, and he didn't need that. He glared at Roger only to find him laughing at him.

"Ha, bloody, ha." He went to the refrigerator to get another beer inquiring with raised eyebrows if either of them wanted one. He emptied out the remainder of Buffy's beer, which, he noted with a grin, was most of it, and threw the bottle away.

End of Part 4

The Power of Friends 5

Suddenly there was a frantic knocking at the front door and he heard Tara's voice calling for him. He raced to open it and found a frightened Tara supporting Willow who looked too pale and listless. He reached over and picked Willow up in his arms and took her over to the couch.

"Giles, thank God you're here. I went to your place first and you weren't there so I thought I'd try here." She was trying hard not to cry. Roger and Paul walked in, Roger, shifting into physician mode, went over to the young girl, to see if he could help.

"Tara, what happened?" Buffy had walked in as well by this time. "What's wrong with Willow? Did you get attacked?"

Tara seemed to have a hard time answering. Giles walked over to her and put his hand on her shoulder. He lifted her chin and gave her a long look. He gave a heavy sigh and asked, "Did she do a spell?" Tara nodded her head, meeting his eyes with difficulty.

"I tried to talk her out of it, but she was so excited, I thought maybe if I helped, that it would be okay. Is she going to be okay?"

"I need to know what spell she did before I can answer that."

"The book is in the car, I'll go get it." Tara ran out of the house, towards her car. Giles walked over to the couch to look at Willow. He ran his hands a couple of inches away from her skin over the length of her body. Roger

moved over to give him room. Giles took his glasses off and pinched the bridge of his nose. Then after putting his glasses back on, he ran his hand through his hair.

Roger looked at Giles, "How can I help? I'm guessing they left this out of my medical training."

"I'm not sure yet, I need to see what spell she did."

"Spell?"

"Willow and Tara are both witches, part of the team."

"Witches, like...witches?"

Giles let a small smile grace his face. "Another long story, I'm afraid."

Tara returned with the book in hand. Giles took one look at the book and stood up suddenly looking quite fierce. "Why do you even have this book? I expressly forbid her to even touch it, let alone do a spell in it. She is not strong enough to do any of these spells without a severe backlash. Tara, why did you let her..." He stopped his tirade, seeing the look on Tara's face. He took a deep breath. "Tara, I'm sorry, I know that Willow can be very persuasive. Please show me what spell she did."

Tara opened up the book gingerly and flipped to a page. Giles took one look at the page and cursed. Buffy walked over to him.

"What is it Giles, what happened to her?"

Giles didn't answer, lost in thought. Buffy opened her mouth to speak again, and then, looking at Giles, chose to remain silent. Giles was already deep in research mode, reading the spell, trying to determine what it might have done to Willow. The four of them watched him, waiting for him to speak. Several minutes passed. He looked at Tara, "Why did she do this spell, what was she trying to accomplish?" As Tara paused before replying, Giles spoke again, "This is important Tara, and I need you to be honest with me. This spell can be used to achieve several different objectives. It will help me figure out what went wrong."

That convinced Tara. She spoke, "She was trying to make herself stronger. She gets frustrated when you tell her she isn't strong enough." She flashed an apologetic look at Giles, then continued, "So she thought she could use that spell to make her powers stronger." Giles clenched his jaw and his fists. *How could she be so foolish? How could I have been so foolish not to*

anticipate this?. He sat back on his haunches down by Willow and ran his hands over her again, this time repeating some words in Latin. He spoke to her, "Willow, can you hear me? Willow?" Willow moaned, and tossed her head, but didn't open her eyes or respond.

Giles started barking out commands and as a group they moved to obey. Paul and Roger moved the coffee table and other couch. They rolled up the carpet. Tara started drawing a large pentagram with chalk, large enough to place Willow in. Buffy ran to get candles and matches, and the herbs he wanted. Giles had them perform these tasks without talking. Giles stayed by Willow, continually running his hands in the air over her body. Inside himself, he was conflicted. The spell had backfired, and all of Willow's magic was hovering outside her body. Anyone, with any skill in magic could simply take it away from her to increase his or her own power. A small part of Giles was tempted to take it himself, not to increase his own power but to protect her from herself. She frustrated the hell out of him with the chances she took. He knew better than anyone how much damage magic could do once it got out of control. But, Willow would never forgive him, and he didn't have the right, as much as he wanted to protect her.

He glanced over and seeing that the pentagram was nearly done, lifted Willow up and placed her in the center. He had Tara close the symbol. Buffy saged the outline, at his direction, and Tara lit the candles. He knelt close to Willow outside the pentagram, at one of its points, and closed his eyes. He lifted his hands with palms facing Willow and started an incantation. All of a sudden they could all see a greenish glow around her. Giles opened his eyes and moved to each point of the pentagram repeating the incantation. Paul and Roger watched, as spellbound as Willow.

After the last point and incantation, Giles sat back. Tara lifted her eyes to him in tears, "Will she be okay?"

"I hope so Tara. The spells in this book are dangerous in so many different ways. This spell created a backlash that actually removed her magic from her body and made it available for someone to take. That's it, that greenish haze around her, that's her magic." The group all watched Willow. Giles continued, "I have placed wards around her so no one can take her magic away while she is vulnerable. Now we have to wait and see if it will reabsorb."

"How long will it take?"

"Tara, I'm not sure, but the longer it takes, the more chance there is that it won't reabsorb."

Tara gasped, "So, she could still lose her magic?"

Giles looked at her sadly, "Yes, that is possible." Tara started to cry and Buffy went over to her and held her, murmuring softly to her.

Roger looked at Giles and said, "Okay, the two of them are witches, what the hell are you?"

"I'm a Watcher."

"Nope, not good enough. Are you a witch too?"

Giles hesitated, and then answered, "Well, for a male the word sorcerer is more correct."

"Fine, are you a sorcerer? I mean it's fine with me if you are, I just want to make sure I know all the facts here so I can have my story ready when I get taken away by the men in their clean white coats."

"Yes, he is, but he doesn't like to talk about it." Paul and Roger looked up at Buffy as she spoke in response to Roger's query. "He's very strong, and very powerful, but..." she lowered her voice to a dramatic stage whisper, "we don't ever talk about it."

Giles shot her an exasperated look. She shot one right back at him. "Is that look supposed to intimidate me oh Watcher-mine? I think it's cool that you're all magician-y." She grinned at Giles, then lost the grin when she moved over to Willow. "Do you think she'll be okay?"

"I believe so, the haze has already started to diminish. She seems to be reabsorbing it without difficulty."

"Ooh, she's gonna be in so much trouble with you when she wakes up, isn't she?"

"Yes, she is. She could have killed herself, or given her magic to something incredibly evil. I just don't know how to impress upon her the importance of not doing such dangerous spells."

"Poor Giles, surrounded by people with no impulse control." She got up, moving over to Giles, and sat down next to him, as close as she could get, and put her head on his shoulder with a completely false look of penitence on her face. Giles looked down at her and snorted.

"Bloody right about that." But, he relished her closeness and had to resist putting his arm around her. He took his glasses off and pinched his nose

instead, missing the knowing look that Roger flashed to Paul and the responding grin.

Now that the crisis had been averted Tara was introduced to Paul and Roger. The five of them quietly talked, allowing Paul and Roger to ask all the questions they could think of, while Giles intermittently monitored Willow. Suddenly the green haze disappeared and Willow opened her eyes. She looked panicked for a moment until she saw where she was, and who was with her, well except for the two guys she didn't know. That confused her for a minute, and she closed her eyes. In a couple of minutes she opened them and tried to sit up. She saw Tara and smiled at her, but then she saw the look on Giles' face, and gulped.

"I'm guessing something went wrong." She meekly stated. Then she saw the book on the coffee table. She looked at Giles' face again, gulped again, guilt written all over her face. Giles didn't trust himself to speak to her yet so remained silent as he slowly started to take down the wards, and open the pentagram so she could exit it. Tara helped her up and over to the couch. Buffy introduced Willow and Tara to Paul and Roger. Willow silently hoped that having company might protect her from Giles' anger. Suddenly feeling an urge she couldn't resist she reached over to touch the spell book.

"Don't touch that book, ever again, without my express permission." Giles snapped at her. She pulled her hand back as if she had touched fire. She looked up at Giles and gulped again. Giles picked the book up, picked up his keys and walked out the front door. The five of them looked at each other, eyes wide. They had all felt the anger radiating off of Giles. Willow looked at Buffy, worry evident in her eyes. Buffy consoled her, "Willow, don't worry, Giles just worries about you. He's gonna yell at you like he always does, and then he'll make you feel better and everything will be back to normal." She stopped for a moment, thinking about what had just happened. "You scared the crap out of all of us. You gotta stop with the magic badness."

"I know it Buffy, I just can't seem to resist. Where did Giles go?"

"He's probably putting that book in the car where you can't get to it."

"I don't know why he doesn't just teach me more stuff."

Tara put her hand on Willow's shoulder. "Willow, you almost lost your magic tonight, completely. Giles saved you...it...got it back into you safely. Someone could have stolen it from you." Willow's eyes opened wide again and she looked at the other four people, all nodding their heads at her in confirmation. She gulped again.

Buffy began to wonder what was taking Giles so long. She got up and walked out the front door to find him. He was standing by his car, lost in thought, all his worry lines in full play on his face. She stopped, just watching him, as he was not yet aware she was there. She wanted to go to him, and touch his face, and smooth all the worry lines away. She wanted...if she was honest with herself, to have the right to touch him. It saddened her that she didn't, that she didn't even know if he would want her to touch him. She shook her head to clear her thoughts and walked over to Giles.

"Are you all right?" He looked down at her, anguish clear in his eyes. She knew he was reliving his own nightmares of magic gone awry. "Do you want me to tell her to go home, that you'll talk with her later?"

"That might be best, I don't want to regret what I might say to her." Buffy looked at him, waiting to see if he was finished. He reconsidered. "No, I....she isn't....I need to talk with her now." He sighed and started for the front door, Buffy trailing behind him, worried for Giles, and worried on behalf of her best friend. He walked in the front door and Willow opened her mouth to speak. Giles raised his hand, silencing her. Looking at his expression she snapped her mouth shut. He reached for her hand, and pulled her into the kitchen with him. She let herself be dragged by him, but she turned her head, staring at Tara and Buffy as if she was being taken to the gallows.

The four of them sat in silence for a few minutes, hearing the rise and fall of Giles voice and an occasional response from Willow, but they were unable to make out any of their words. Paul suddenly stood up announcing, "I'm sorry, it's the cop in me, I have to go eavesdrop." He started to walk softly over to the kitchen door. He looked behind him and saw that they were all following him. He grinned at them and put a finger to his lips cautioning them to be quiet.

End Part 5

The Power of Friends 6

"Giles, it's not fair!"

"Willow, I know it seems that way to you but it's the only thing I can think of to keep you safe until you recover from this spell."

"But, I already told you that I wouldn't do any more spells for the rest of the week."

"Willow, as much as it pains me to say this, I don't trust you in this. You have proven to me that you are not to be trusted. You gave me your promise that you wouldn't use the books I keep locked away, and you willfully not only broke your promise but stole from me to do it."

Willow lifted her chin up stubbornly. "You never let me do anything, you just keep telling me I'm not strong enough. How do I get to be stronger if you won't let me do anything?" Giles looked at her, until she looked away, ashamed, knowing she was sounding like a petulant child.

"Willow, this has nothing to do with your strength as a witch, the strength of your magic. This has to do with your strength as a person. You are an incredibly powerful witch. You have the magic to do any spell you want. What you don't have is the strength to control the magic. It is a powerful lure, it twists people, it controls them, making them do things they would never normally choose to do. The magic is controlling you right now. It made you steal, and lie, and that is not the Willow I know. The strength you lack is the strength to resist. The stronger the spell, the stronger your ability to resist needs to be. You don't have that strength so whenever you do a spell that is too strong, it uses you; it perverts you to its will. Magic is a living thing, Willow, you have to respect that."

Stubbornly not willing to concede yet, Willow responded, "You did all the magic you wanted to when you were younger." She looked up at him, and saw the pain in his eyes at her thoughtless remark.

Giles closed his eyes briefly. "Willow, you're right, and how many people have died or been hurt because of it? I learned my lesson that day. I don't want you to learn it as painfully as I did."

Fully ashamed, Willow looked away. "Willow, I need you to understand." He put his fingers under her chin and made her look at him. "I love you as if you were my own daughter. I couldn't take it if something were to happen to you. And I would hold myself personally responsible if something did, if it happened because I was unable to persuade you to be more respectful of the power you have. It would be unbearable to me." Willow saw the love in Giles' eyes and tears came into her own. She threw herself into his arms and burst into tears.

"Giles, I'm so sorry, I'll be better, I promise."

Giles held her for a minute, holding her tightly to him. He would never be able to forgive himself if something happened to her. "Willow, it's not good enough this time. You are weak and your magic is erratic. You would endanger yourself and anyone around you if you tried any magic for at least a week.

You need to choose which spell you want me to do."

Willow pulled out of his arms, looking at him. She felt she was finally thinking clearly. She knew she could trust him. "Could the spell where you can feel me do magic hurt you?" she asked.

"It could."

"Then I don't want you to do that. Do the other one."

Giles got a knife out of the drawer. "Do you want me to make the cut?"

Willow held out her hand, "Yes, please."

Giles made a small incision. Willow couldn't contain the small yelp of pain. Then Giles cut himself. He used his other hand to take some of Willow's and his blood and rub it between his thumb and first two fingers. He brought his thumb up, making a mark on her forehead with the blood and spoke an incantation. "That's it, it's done, you won't be able to access your magic until I undo this spell, which I will do at the end of the week, assuming you are back at full strength."

Willow looked at him, "Sort of like a cast if I had a broken leg, right?"

Giles smiled at her, feeling very proud of her, glad to have his Willow back. "Exactly, that's a good analogy. Oh, and Willow, I think that we should start meeting regularly, once a week, to work on your magic. Maybe it will keep you out of trouble?" He sent a mock frown in her direction.

"Can Tara come too?"

"Yes, Tara can come too."

She flashed him a brilliant smile and went to hug him again. "Giles, I really am sorry."

"I know you are. Consider yourself forgiven." Then he looked sternly at her, and said "This time."

She giggled and together they opened the door to the living room practically tripping over the other four who had not had time to move away. Giles rolled his eyes and shook his head. Tara looked at Willow and asked her if she was all right. Willow nodded yes, and smiled.

"Giles is going to start teaching me on a regular basis." She was thrilled by

that, it made her inability to access magic for a week a small thing. She turned to Buffy, "Then I can really help out with the evil fighting!"

Buffy smiled sadly. "Willow, helping me best is staying alive, remember that please." She gave Willow a big hug. Both Tara and Willow said goodbye to Paul and Roger. Willow gave Giles another brief hug before she left.

Buffy walked over to Giles. "Are you okay? I know I keep asking that, but stuff keeps happening. And I didn't know you could do that."

"Do what?"

"Take someone's magic away from them."

"I didn't take it away, I shielded it from her so she can't access it."

"So, I didn't know you could do that."

Giles had no response to that. After a few moments he said, "Before, when I could see what she had done, I almost did take it." He wasn't sure why he was telling her this. He looked at her face, waiting to see her reaction.

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I said, I almost took her magic away from her, so she couldn't do it anymore. It would have gone into me instead."

"So, you can take someone's magic."

"Well, not without some very complicated, very powerful spells, or unless a young wiccan attempts a spell she cannot control."

"So, you could have just taken it away?"

"Yes."

"She never would have forgiven you."

"That's why I didn't do it."

"I wouldn't have blamed you if you had." Giles looked at Buffy, surprised at that statement. She continued. "You work so hard to protect us, you have for years. You must be exhausted from it."

Giles smiled at Buffy, grateful for her understanding, glad now that he had

told her. She never ceased to amaze him, this woman child who could be so young and innocent one moment, and display such wisdom in the next. He felt momentarily dazzled by her. She flashed him her brilliant smile and touched his cheek with her hand. He put his hand over her hand, stunned at how intimate it felt.

Roger coughed, disturbing the moment. "Do you want us to leave?" Giles and Buffy moved away from each other, both shooting daggers at Roger. Roger just grinned back.

Buffy glanced at the clock. "I guess I better do the patrol thing." She glanced at Giles. He nodded back. "What do you want to take with you?"

"The usual. Oh, and that new crossbow."

"I'll get you the crossbow. C'mon Paul, I'll show you the arsenal." Paul got up and followed Giles into the garage.

Roger remained behind, wanting to seize the moment. He was on a mission. "So, Giles must have a bunch of magic groupies at the shop." He made it a statement, not a question. Buffy looked at him, momentarily confused with the new subject. "Giles, you know, single handsome bachelor, nubile young witches, you do the math." Buffy was completely speechless. She could do the math, and she didn't like what it added up to. She could remember all the times she had walked into the store and seen him talking with attractive women, and at Roger's words her imagination was taking care of the rest.

She glared at Roger, "Hey, that's my Watcher you're talking about."

"Is he not allowed to have a girlfriend? Is that a Watcher rule?"

"No, he can have a girlfriend, he just doesn't need one, or have time for one." Besides, she added silently, I'd have to kill her.

"Oh."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing, just oh."

She glared at him again, and he grinned back.

##

Paul walked into the garage behind Giles, looking up at the walls in

amazement at the armament that was hanging there. Since Buffy's mom had died, they had shifted a lot of the weapons she used on patrol to the garage. Xander had built the necessary shelving. Paul looked around and noticed a large box on a lower shelf. He winced.

"Giles, I probably don't want to know the answer to this, but why do you have a large box that says Property of U.S. Military, Rocket Launcher here in the garage?"

Giles looked at Paul. "Do you want me to answer that?"

"Is it a rocket launcher?"

"Yes."

"I don't suppose they just gave it to you?"

"No, they didn't." Giles put his hands in his pocket. "I guess I should mention, that we do on occasion, work outside the law. I don't know how you feel about that, what sort of bind that puts you in."

"Why did you need a rocket launcher?"

"It was the only thing that would kill a demon that was able to burn the humanity out of people, leaving only evil behind."

Paul couldn't control a nervous laugh. "For real?"

Giles looked at him, "For real. We don't break laws, or steal rocket launchers indiscriminately. We do it to save lives, and to fight unimaginable evil."

Paul sighed. {In for a penny....} "I can live with that. Just next time, ask me first, I might be able to get you one through legal channels, okay?"

Giles grinned. "Okay."

End of Part 6

The Power of Friends 7

Buffy walked in and saw the grin, "What's so funny?"

Giles shook his head, glancing down at the rocket launcher. Buffy followed his

eyes. She quipped, "Oh, my birthday present." Memories of that birthday hit all of a sudden. She couldn't stop a small groan from escaping. Paul looked at Buffy and was appalled at the look in her eyes. She looked as if she was a thousand years old. She looked at Giles. "That whole year" she said grimly, "from my 17th birthday straight through to my 18th birthday, sucked beyond the telling of it."

Giles silently agreed, and looked away from her, reliving his own pain of what that year had wrought and what he had done to her on her 18th birthday. Buffy gasped realizing what she had said. "Giles, I'm sorry, I didn't mean that, I mean I did mean that, but not in any way to make you feel bad. Giles, it's way over. Giles, look at me." She reached over to turn his face towards her. Paul saw the age, the horror, in his eyes as well. His chest tightened at the sight. Buffy saw it too, and moved to Giles to pull him into her arms. He hugged her tightly, her slayer strength keeping it from bruising her. They remained that way for a minute, a human lifeline for each other.

Neither one of them wanted to pull away, but they did, Giles pulling away first. He quickly glanced at Paul, seeing all the questions and concerns in his eyes. He reached up and took down the crossbow that Buffy wanted. Giles slipped into Watcher mode. "How many bolts do you want?"

"Load it up, and I'll take six more."

Giles loaded up the crossbow quickly, Paul noting his skills. He reached into one of the baskets and pulled out more bolts and handed them to Buffy. She was filling her pockets with a few stakes, and picked up a cross. She looked at Paul. "First lesson. Vampires can be killed in a variety of ways. Something wood through the heart, decapitation", she favored Giles with a grin, "Giles' personal favorite. Trust me, you don't want to go up against him if he has a sword in his hand." Paul nodded, mentally filing that away under helpful safety tips. She continued the lesson, "They're also not crazy about fire and sunlight; and holy water and crosses really annoy the heck out of them." She grinned at the thought of annoying vampires.

"Do you patrol every night?"

"Pretty much."

"Can I go with you sometime?"

"Yeah, sure, Giles can come too and keep you out of trouble. And then I can keep you both out of trouble." She looked to see Giles' reaction to her comments. He smiled at her, without making a response. "Well, I'm off." She made as if to leave the garage. Giles touched her hand.

"Buffy, stay a minute." She looked back at him. Giles looked at Paul and Paul took the hint and went back in the house. Buffy liked the feeling of Giles' hand on hers. She tightened her fingers around his not intending to let him let go. He looked down at their clasped hands, unable to marshal his thoughts as he felt her skin against his. His mouth felt dry.

"What's up Giles? Giles...? Hey, earth to Giles."

Giles head snapped up, refocusing. "Buffy, I know Paul well enough to know that he will ask me what happened that year." He looked down at the rocket launcher, helping her follow his thoughts. "A lot of it was personal to you and I don't want to share anything you don't want me to." He looked at her, eyes filled with compassion for her.

She sighed, guessing Giles was right about Paul. "Giles, tell them anything you want, I trust you. They'll hear it eventually. I'd rather they hear it from you than from, oh say, Xander. You'll be much kinder about my behavior than he would be." She smiled a tight smile at him, kissed him on the cheek, slowly let go of his hand, and quickly left. He placed his hand on his cheek where she had kissed him realizing that they had touched more in the last 24 hours than they had in the last six years. He wasn't quite sure what was going on, but as much as he tried to disregard the thought, he was thinking that he liked it.

##

Paul and Roger sat on the couch, waiting for Buffy and Giles to return from the garage, not speaking. Finally Roger looked at Paul and said "Jesus H. Christ." Paul responded, "No shit." The two of them burst into laughter, recognizing the touch of hysteria in it. Buffy walked through the living room watching them, grinning at their laughter and left. Giles entered a few minutes later and sat down in a chair facing them, waiting. As predicted, when the laughter died down, Paul turned to Giles and asked, "What happened that year? Can you talk about it?"

Giles sat there for a moment, wondering if he wanted to put himself through this right now. He felt that Paul and Roger deserved to have a deeper understanding of the level of danger they would be facing if they chose to become a part of the team. Sharing the events of that year would convey that clearly. Giles got up to get another beer for each of them. And he started to talk.

He talked about Buffy's 17th birthday, about the Judge, about Angel, about Buffy's and Angel's feelings for each other and what happened when he and Buffy had made love. He talked about Angelus, his humiliation of Buffy, the

words 'was it good for you too' splashed against the wall, written in blood. He spoke about how Angelus terrorized all of them, about Jenny's death, the rose petals, music and champagne, and finding her dead in his bed. He talked about the attack in the library, Kendra's death, the hurts done to Xander and Willow, Buffy's arrest and subsequent escape. He talked about his own kidnapping and torture at Angelus' hands to discover how to free Acathia. He talked about the soul restoration spell and how Buffy had had to kill Angel to save the world. He spoke about her running away, and his fruitless searching for her. He talked about Angel's reappearance, the effect that had had on everyone. He talked about her 18th birthday and the hated test he had partaken in, betraying her trust in him, and how he had been fired as her Watcher.

Paul and Roger listened, without saying a word; there were no words to say. They were horrified and while a part of them wanted to leave, they were bound by the love for this man sitting in front of them telling stories no one should have to hear, let alone live through. When he finished, Paul got up, needing to move, and went to get cold beer for the three of them, the other beer, untouched once Giles had started, had gotten warm. He handed them out and then sat back down.

Finally Giles spoke again, leaning forward, making eye contact with both Roger and Paul. "I need you to understand that this is a deadly game. No one will thank you, no one will ever know that you are a part of saving their lives. There is nothing glamorous about it. It is relentless and exhausting. The only thing that makes it worthwhile is the people fighting at your side, but that is coupled with the knowledge that they are placing themselves in mortal danger and could die at any time. Every night I send Buffy out on patrol, I know that this might be the night that...." He closed his eyes. He tried again. "Every night I know she could die. She's already outlasted most Slayers. Every time we face a new evil I wonder if this is the one that will be too much for us, too much for some of us." He paused, taking his glasses off, throwing them on the coffee table. He ran his hands over his face. "I appreciate your friendship more than I can say, but I will understand, in fact, I would advise you, to choose not to get involved." He sat back exhausted.

Paul and Roger looked at each other, divining each other's thoughts. After a minute, they nodded at each other. Roger spoke first, "Seems to me you could use a doctor so I volunteer. 'Doctor for the Scoobies'. Sort of like 'Doctor to the Stars' but with less money and more danger. At least there are plenty of beautiful women involved." He grinned at Giles and saw that Giles didn't think he was taking this seriously. He got up and sat on the coffee table across from Giles, scooting his glasses over first. "Giles, I get it. I'm so afraid right now I could puke, but I'm in."

Giles looked past him, over to Paul. Paul met his eyes, "I meant what I said last night, that hasn't changed. I'm afraid you're stuck with us." Giles looked at the two of them, moved to his depths, tears filling his eyes. He held them in the warmth of his gaze. "Let's hope I'm stuck with you for a long time."

They moved into the kitchen and started scrounging around for something to eat, needing to lighten the mood. They stayed in the kitchen, talking and laughing, Giles glancing at the clock every now and then waiting for the sound of Buffy's return. Roger went to get another beer and dropped it on the floor, it spun around and shot across the kitchen. He went to retrieve it and without thinking removed the cap. The beer exploded, all over Giles, dousing his shirt.

"Jesus, Roger!" Giles exclaimed, looking down at himself, dripping.

"Sorry about that."

Roger looked both amused and sheepish at the same time. Without thinking, Giles unbuttoned his shirt, taking it off, wringing it over the sink and hanging it on the doorknob. Paul and Roger saw his back, covered with scars. Giles turned back and saw their expressions. He looked ruefully over his shoulder, down at his back and murmured, "Souvenirs."

Roger got up and walked closer. "Giles, what happened?" He couldn't bear to look, imagining the pain that had caused the scars, yet he couldn't help himself.

"Angel, or Angelus, to be correct."

"Angelus did this to you, when he kidnapped you?"

"Yes. Well, most of it. I already had a couple of these."

##

Buffy walked up to the front door, and could hear the rumble of the three men talking. She grinned. "Hey, guy talk!" She decided she would eavesdrop a little and see what they were talking about. She quietly entered the house and positioned herself where she could just see the three of them in the kitchen.

##

"How did he give you this really deep one?" Roger touched the scar running over the top of his shoulder.

"Chain saw."

"Ahhhh." Roger flinched with his whole body. "He used a fucking chain saw on you?"

"Just there. Then he.... they changed tactics." Giles didn't elaborate. Roger didn't even want to go there. He couldn't believe what Giles was telling them; let alone what he didn't want to tell them. He swallowed and started up again.

"God, a fucking chain saw, Giles? What kind of an animal was he?"

Paul, internally wincing, gestured to Roger. "Is this your usual doctor bedside manner, cuz if it is, it sucks."

Roger had the grace to look bashful, "Sorry, Giles, but...Jesus.!"

Giles flashed a small smile, "It's okay, I forget how bad it looks and I usually don't take my shirt off in front of people. I was so beer-drenched, I forgot."

Roger slipped into doctor mode, feeling safer there. "Do you have scars like this all over?"

"Not this badly, no. I have some on my legs, and well these burn marks on my chest", he gestured to the series of burns that Angelus had inflicted on him. He was amazed he didn't feel more self-conscious.

"What else did he do to you?"

"You can probably just read my medical chart and get all the details. He broke most of my fingers, in several places. The doctors didn't think I'd get full use back." He raised both hands, wriggling all his fingers, showing that they had been wrong. "They do ache though when it's cold, so I guess it's a blessing I live in California." Giles had never told anyone about what had happened to him. He felt a cathartic release at finally being able to tell someone. Giles pointed at his legs, "He cut my legs multiple times, but nothing surgery couldn't repair." He stared down at his body, shaking his head, lost in the memories. "He beat me pretty thoroughly with anything he could get his hands on, including his fists. There wasn't much of me that wasn't black and blue, and I had several hairline fractures in both my legs and my arms. He broke...well, the doctor said that I had 'a lot' of broken ribs. I don't think he wanted to tell me how many."

He looked at his back again. "Some of this is from him whipping me, some from cutting me, some from burns, heating up his knife and laying it on me." He motioned to his chest, and the burn scars. "These are from 6 hours of cigarettes. He put every one out on me." He didn't tell them how Angelus had

talked to him, talking about all the things he was going to do to Buffy, to the rest of his young family. Giles eyes got bleak, remembering how those words had buffeted him, equal in pain to the physical torment.

There was silence in the kitchen as Paul and Roger watched Giles. They knew he wasn't telling them everything and that made the whole thing worse. His scars brought a level of reality to the stories that Giles had told them in the living room and their stomachs both clenched with fear for this man, and for themselves.

Roger sat there, thinking of all he'd been told. Suddenly he made a connection and his eyes got angry. "Giles, are you telling me that after Angelus did this to you, that Buffy got back together with this creep?"

"Well, yes, but he had gotten his soul back by that time."

"That doesn't matter, doesn't she have any allegiance to you at all?"

"She doesn't know what he did to me, I've never told her. She's never seen these scars."

"How can she not know. Is she blind? Could she not see you?"

"No." Giles swallowed at the memory, pain shooting through his chest. "She ran away."

"That's when she ran away?" Roger's voice got louder and higher in disbelief. "Did she even know if you were okay?"

"She knew I was alive."

"So, after sucking the soul out of Angel, creating this monster that tortured the shit out of you, she didn't even hang around to help you recover, and then when she got back, she got back together with him?"

"I know it sounds bad..."

"Sounds bad!? Sounds bad? There are no words to say how bad that was. How could she do that? How could she even think that was okay to do to you? How could she shove that in your face like that? What kind of total bitch is she? I'm sorry, Giles, but I'm kind of hating her right now."

##

Buffy stared at Giles' back, listening to the conversation, her eyes bright with

tears, her hand over her open mouth, her stomach churning. She wanted to die, she wanted to run away, but she couldn't move.

End of Part 7

The Power of Friends 8

Giles quickly turned to Roger, with anger in his eyes. "It's not your place to judge her, or to hate her."

"Why not? What she did was unforgivable."

"You don't understand."

"Then explain it to me. Out of all the crazy things you have said to Paul and me over this evening, out of all the things you have expected us to accept, this one feels the most unacceptable. Is that the only time she's hurt you like that? I'm thinking that it probably isn't. Hurting people like that takes practice." He spit the words out, angrier on Giles' behalf than he had ever been before. Paul sat silently, the conversation he had with Buffy last night on her front porch, starting to finally make sense.

Giles sighed, not answering Roger's question, running his hand through his hair. He knew how many times Buffy had ripped his heart out of his chest with her thoughtlessness, but he also knew that he had forgiven her for all of it. He needed to make them understand. Roger.....Paul.....you can't.....she's not....." Giles, stopped, unclear how to proceed. He thought for a moment, looking for an analogy, for anything that would help him explain.

"Remember when so many of the Viet Nam vets came home, and were diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder?" He looked at the two men and they nodded. He continued, "Those men served, what, one or two tours of duty, a few, maybe more than that. They were 18 years of age or older, fighting with the support of an entire military and the U.S. Government behind them. Their tours ended, the ones left alive, came home. Some of them couldn't cope with the things they had done, and the violence they had seen. They couldn't integrate back into regular society, they had seen too much."

Giles paused, gathering his thoughts. "Buffy was 15 when she was drafted into this war, without her permission, against her will. She had her life ripped away from her; any chance for a normal life denied her. She has been fighting, for the most part, alone, for six years. She fights and kills every night, she has seen more people die horrible deaths than any soldier ever

has. She has lost loved ones. Every one that dies, every death she can't prevent weighs on her. She gets no R & R, no vacations; there is no end of tour for her. She gets to stop when she dies. It will never end for her, never."

Giles walked to the refrigerator to get another beer, needing something to do with his hands. He took a moment to open it and take a sip. "Buffy struggles every day to maintain her humanity in the midst of all the killing and the fear. It frightens her that she will lose the ability to love anything, that being a Slayer will turn her to stone. But Buffy is capable of extraordinary love. I know that Buffy loves me; she loves Willow and Xander, and Tara and Anya. She will, I'm sure, come to love the two of you. But Buffy loves the same way she has to live her life. She doesn't love gently and with kindness, she loves fiercely and protectively. She would die for me, any of us, without a thought. She has put herself in the line of fire to save us all more times than I can count. She would do anything to protect us, anything to protect us all."

"Yes, Buffy can be thoughtless, and at times it is painful for me, but..." He looked up at Paul and Roger, making sure they were listening to him as he accentuated his next statement, "I am not Buffy's responsibility, I never have been. She, however, is mine. I am her Watcher, and her friend, and I can state without equivocation that she is the most extraordinary person I have ever known. The fact that she is able to love, that she feels anything at all, never ceases to amaze me. Regardless of how hard it was for me to see her with Angel, or to deal with her loss when she ran away, if she needed it to cope, if even a moment of that time provided her with some comfort, some few fleeting moments of happiness, it was a price I was willing to pay."

Giles stopped, finished for the time being. He braced himself, waiting for some sort of response. Paul and Roger shifted in their chairs, sobered by his words, shooting brief glances at each other. Roger finally spoke. "Okay..." He paused, gathering his thoughts. He tried again, "Clearly I don't understand what she goes through, in fact, I can't even conceive of it. So, I'll try to put judging and hating on hold for the time being. But I still can't help thinking that she doesn't deserve you."

Giles spoke, frustrated, "It's not about her deserving me." He turned hearing a noise by the kitchen door, and saw Buffy there, tears streaming down her face as she slowly walked into the kitchen. She walked behind him, putting her hand on his naked back, touching the scars.

She spoke softly, "No, Giles, they're right, I don't deserve you, I never have." She was overwhelmed at his defense of her, and deeply shamed. "I don't want to hurt you, I don't ever mean to, but it keeps happening. How can I stop it when I don't even see myself doing it until it's too late?" She put her head gently on his back, wrapping her arms around him, and started to cry.

Giles turned himself around, pulling her into his chest, and held her, stroking her hair, searching for something to say that would soothe her, not sure what she had heard. "How long have you been standing there?"

"A long time."

Giles grimaced, glancing at Roger and Paul. Roger winced, thinking over the harsh remarks he had made. He made an attempt to apologize. "Buffy, I'm sorry, I..." He stopped, not knowing how to possibly apologize for the things he had said, not even sure he wanted to.

Buffy raised her head from Giles chest and looked at Roger and Paul, making no effort to leave Giles' arms. "Don't apologize. You were right, everything you said was right."

Giles' arms tightened around her, "Buffy, don't say that."

Buffy tightened her arms in response looking up at him, "Giles, they were defending you, they were trying to take care of you." She turned again to Roger and Paul, "I love that you did that, he needs someone to take care of him." She started softly crying again, putting her face back down against Giles' chest.

Giles reached down and took hold of her chin, pulling her face up to look at him. "You take care of me fine."

"No, I don't." She responded sadly, "I don't take good care of you at all. And I should. The only reason I am alive at all, the only reason I still have a soul is because of you."

"Buffy, it isn't your job to 'take care' of me. You have enough to worry about without taking on that as well."

"Giles, this isn't about me being a Slayer, or whether taking care of you is on my job description. This is about me loving you and never telling you how much you mean to me, and how indispensable you are to me. This is about me putting myself first all the time, hurting you..." she swallowed, "so many times." Her eyes filled with tears again, her fingers tracing the scar lines on his back.

"Buffy, how can you even think that? Your whole life as a slayer is about putting everybody's well-being ahead of your own."

Buffy drew a deep breath. She lifted her head again and pointed her chin to

Paul and Roger. "They get what I mean. It didn't take them long to figure it out. One day. You even said I was thoughtless and that I had hurt you." She shook her head at his pained expression. "No, no, I'm not saying that to make you feel bad. You were right, I am thoughtless, and I have hurt you terribly, but you never would have said anything to me, ever. You are the most selfless person I have ever known and I don't, won't ever deserve you."

Giles looked down at her, eyes full of love, "Buffy, you don't need to deserve me, I'm already completely yours, in every way. I have been from the moment I met you."

Buffy hugged him, as tightly as she could. Giles winced, "Ahhhh, Buffy, slayer strength, my ribs."

"Sorry about that." She let back on the hug, but stayed put. She never wanted to move. His skin felt so warm, and his arms felt so safe. Giles continued to hold her, feeling that he had never held something so precious. He stroked her hair marveling at the softness of it.

Roger and Paul watched the two of them, enraptured, feeling the strength of their relationship, despite the hardships suffered. Roger felt that he had never seen two people who looked so right together. His angry words and feelings about Buffy disappeared in an instant. Paul felt overwhelmed by the whole evening. He could not believe the emotional roller coaster he had been on since he had arrived at the house a few short hours ago. He felt it was years ago that he had knocked on Buffy's front door. "Is it always like this?"

Giles pulled himself away from the intense feeling of Buffy in his arms, confused by the question. "Always like what?"

"I've been here for less than 5 hours, and I feel like I've been here for years. So much has happened, so many ups and downs, so many crises. Is it always like this, your life?"

Giles and Buffy looked at each other and grinned and turned as one to Paul, "Yes." Giles added as a caveat, "with a few mild days thrown in for good measure every now and then." Giles reluctantly removed his arms from around Buffy. He leaned against the kitchen counter and pulled her up beside him, putting his arm around her. She leaned into him gratefully, not willing to not be touching him. She couldn't believe how good he felt. She never wanted to let him go. She wanted to wake up in his arms. She waited to be wiggled about having that thought, but she wasn't. She looked up at him, looked at his lips, and felt a thrilling urge to kiss him. She wished Paul and Roger weren't there so she could. She forced herself to look away from Giles. She caught Roger's eyes, and saw him grinning at her. She stuck her tongue

out at him.

Roger nudged Paul and stood, "Well, time for us to go." Paul stood up as well. "Thanks for having us over, it's been an....," he paused stymied. "You know what? There is not an adjective in existence that could do justice to this evening." He grinned at Giles and Buffy, and they both grinned back.

Buffy left the shelter of Giles' arm and walked over to the two men, giving them both long hugs. "Hey, welcome to my world," she said to them. They smiled at her, after hugging her back.

Paul said, "Proud to be a part of it."

"Ditto," Roger stated, "terrified, but proud." He looked at her, putting a hand on her shoulder. "Buffy, I really am sorry for all the things that I said."

"I'm not," she replied, "I needed to hear them. And I give you both permission to slap me upside the head if you ever see me being mean to Giles."

"Count on it." Roger and Paul grinned at Buffy to soften the comment, letting her know they were in complete concert with her.

##

Giles walked with Buffy to the front door to escort them out. Buffy felt nervous tendrils shooting down her body, knowing she would soon be alone with Giles. She stood by him, watching to make sure Paul and Roger made it safely to their car without demon mishap. As the car started up and the lights came on, she shut the door. Giles watched her shutting the door and wished he had a shirt to put on. He felt naked, even though he was half dressed, standing like this alone with Buffy. He knew he should leave as well, but the thought of not being with her felt like a physical pain.

They stood near each other, not moving, not looking at each other. Giles had his eyes on the floor. He started to look up, and found his eyes traveling up Buffy's body, noticing her curves, the slight swell of her hips, her waist and her breasts. He felt paralyzed, the longing for her, sharp and strong, in his gut. He was reluctant to meet her eyes, knowing she would see the desire in them. She watched him, watched his eyes travel over her, amazed at her body's response to his gaze. Her nipples tightened, she could imagine his hands on her. Her eyes finally caught his and they stared at one another, seconds passing, and the desire, like electricity, flickering between them.

Buffy felt as if she was drowning. She had never felt this much desire for anybody. She was almost afraid to touch him, wondering if she would survive

the sensation. She knew her Watcher well enough to know that he would never make the first move, not in this. She took a shaky breath and took the step that would place her right next to Giles. She put her hands on his chest, moaning softly at the feel of him, under her hands. She moved her head close to him and placed a small kiss, on his chest, between her hands. Giles groaned in response, stunned that such a small kiss could feel so sensual. He could feel himself hardening, instantly, in response. He cupped her face in his hands and held her still as he lowered his head to capture her lips in a kiss. He played with her lips, sucking on them, biting gently on them, running his tongue over them. He placed feather light kisses on her mouth, her chin, down her neck. He returned to her lips, kissing her with a passion that surprised them both.

Buffy felt that she had never been kissed before, and wanted Giles with a fierceness that left her dizzy. She could feel herself getting damp, and wanted Giles inside of her, wanted him on top of her, thrusting into her. She leaned into the kiss, reaching up with her hands to pull him closer. He lifted her, holding her against him tightly, bringing her face, and her lips closer to his. He couldn't get enough of her. She wrapped her legs around him, wanting to feel his hardness, wanting to will him into her. He pressed her against the door, one hand still capturing her head to keep his lips on hers, and one hand cupping her bottom, holding her to him.

Giles pulled back from the kiss, looking at her, wanting to see her face, needing to see the desire there. She moaned in protest, trying to pull him back into the kiss, but he wanted her to look at him. He watched her mouth, soft and open, her lips wet, and wanting. She opened her eyes and looked back at him, shyly smiling. "Wow," she said softly. "Where'd you learn to kiss like that?"

Giles grinned at her, "Remember me? Old guy? I've been doing this for a very long time."

The thought of that sent a shiver of desire through Buffy from her lips to her toes. She moved her head forward and captured his lips again for a moment. She pulled back. "Show me?"

Giles responded by carrying her over to the couch. He laid her down, laying down half to her side and half lying on top of her. As Buffy felt the weight of him on her, her body instinctively responded to him as her hips lifted up and against him. Giles groaned, running his hand down her body, caressing her neck, her breast, down her leg, bringing his hand back to land on her hip. "You feel so good," he whispered to her. "So strong, and so soft." He pulled his hand up to cup her cheek, "You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen."

Buffy felt tears in her eyes at his comments. She had never felt so loved, and nothing had ever made her feel so beautiful. She looked at his face, seeing the familiar lines of it, feeling that she had never seen him before tonight. "You're the one who's beautiful," she whispered to him. "I love you so much, I feel as if my body might shake apart with it."

"Oh, God, Buffy," Giles felt as if her words were a benediction. "I have never loved anyone like I love you, I am yours completely and irrevocably."

"Wow, you even use big Giles' words when you're smooching!" Buffy grinned up at him, shifting her body to be completely under his, lifting her legs up and around him to pull him to her. His eyes darkened with desire and he lowered his head to capture her lips again, reaching underneath her to hold her to him as tightly as he could. His hips ground into hers, and she lifted her hips in response.

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Paul and Roger walked into Paul's home, Paul going over to flip the television on. They sat down companionably, silently mulling over the evenings' events. They sat through the current events, the sports updates, and the weather report. Suddenly Roger turned to Paul and spoke with a grin on his face, "So, I'm thinking that Giles is getting lucky right about now." Paul smacked him on the shoulder, and laughed. Grinning at each other, they both turned back to the television.

The End