

Second Chances 1

It was another late afternoon at the Magic Shop. Anya reverently shut the cash register drawer as she finished ringing up the only customer in the store. Buffy had just finished training and she was sitting in front of the counter cooling off drinking a bottle of water. Giles was at the other end of the counter, looking at mail. Xander, noticing the time, looked at Giles.

"Should we lock up big guy?"

Giles looked at him, over his glasses, then looked at his watch. He nodded. Xander got up, heading over to the front door.

As he was heading over a man entered the shop. Xander shrugged and returned to the table, to wait until he left to lock up. The man started working his way around towards the counter, stopping every now and then to look at something that caught his eye. Giles looked up inquiring if he needed any help but the man shook his head no. Giles went back to his mail. Xander remembered that he needed to fix the dummy in the training room as Buffy had literally knocked the stuffing out of it yesterday. He got up, walking out of sight into the back.

Anya watched the man as he roamed around, always somewhat hostile towards customers if they looked like they were just touching without any intention of buying. She could just tell that he wasn't going to purchase anything. She was itching to assist him out to the sidewalk. She held her tongue knowing that Giles would not be happy. He always insisted that all customers be treated with respect and it grated on her.

As the man in the store passed her by, Buffy briefly looked up watching him as he strolled in Giles' direction. She admired his leather coat, wishing she had one like it. Buffy liked coats. She had a lot of them, which made no sense given that there wasn't much coat wearing weather going on for most of the year in Sunnydale.

As the man walked past Giles, he snaked out an arm and pulled Giles to his side. That got Buffy's attention and she looked to see what was going on. The man spoke softly saying, "Nobody move, everyone stay quiet. No one needs to get hurt. I just want the money out of the register." He looked briefly at Anya. Anya got a defiant look on her face. This man had to be kidding. Buffy looked closer and saw that leather guy had a gun, sticking in Giles' side.

Giles looked at Anya. "Anya, just give him the money."

Anya looked at him, her chin set. "Giles, I'm not giving him my money."

Giles swallowed. "Anya, please, just give him the money." As concerned as he was about the gun in his side, he was more concerned for her. She had such an extraordinary gift for annoying people and he didn't think a man with a gun was the best person to annoy.

Buffy meanwhile was thinking fast. She was also concerned with the gun, but after dealing with evil bottom dwellers and blood-sucking vampires with bad fashion sense on a nightly basis this guy was a piece of cake. He had so picked the wrong store to rob. She waited for leather guy to shift his eyes to Anya and she moved.

Giles had seen Buffy start to move. He shook his head, fear for her now coming to the front. He realized that she was, of course, as usual, committed to her impulsive act. He braced for impact. She barreled into leather guy grabbing his hand and that's when it all went wrong. As the man felt Buffy's body hit his, he instinctively pulled the trigger.

The bullet tore through Giles, at point blank range. Giles was slammed into the side of the counter and then started to fall. Buffy watched in disbelief. She lunged for Giles, catching him before he hit the floor. She lowered him down. The man she had been fighting lurched to his feet, and ran for the door.

Xander, Willow and Tara had run into the room when they heard the gunshot. Willow screamed when she saw Giles go down. "Giles!" She ran up to Buffy falling to the floor next to Giles. She saw the blood pouring out of him, out of his mouth. She looked up, tears streaming down her face, "Xander, call an ambulance!"

Buffy started to cry, terrified, not knowing what to do. There was too much blood, no way to stop it. He was dying, in front of her. Dying because she had to prove she was tougher than anything, because she always knew best what to do. Dying because of a freaking bullet. Her eyes turned to Willow, beseeching. "Willow, do something, do a spell or something, don't let him die. Please Willow, do something." Willow looked at Buffy, tears streaming down her face, "I don't know what to do...I.." She looked at Tara, and Tara shook her head.

Xander was trying to stop his hand from shaking to press the correct buttons on the phone. He kept saying to himself, "It's three stupid numbers, it's only three numbers." He finally connected and stammered out the required information. He ran back over to Giles and saw his lifeless eyes staring up at him, blood everywhere. The tableau just stopped, everyone motionless until the ambulance unloaded its team and they raced into the Magic Shop. Buffy

and the rest of them watched as they covered Giles, loaded him into the ambulance, and took him away.

##

He had taken care of them all. Even in death his love for them was strong. He had left them all financially set up, left the condo to Buffy, the store to Xander and Anya, his private collection of books to Willow and Tara. He had divided the rest of his personal possessions amongst them all with Buffy getting the lion's share but leaving nobody out, somehow knowing instinctively what each would have wanted. None of them expected him to have done that; couldn't imagine when he had taken the time to get his affairs in order. Buffy moved into Giles' place, needing to feel his things around her.

She was a basket case. She knew it; her mom knew it; all her friends knew it. They didn't know how to help. She couldn't believe he was gone. Every stray noise she heard she was sure it was Giles about to walk in the door either of his home, or at the Shop. His death had been too sudden, too traumatic for her mind to grasp. Too much her fault. She played that last minute of his life over and over again, imagining what she could have done differently. But this was too big a mistake; there was no kindness left in life for her, nothing would bring him back.

Tara had been the one to step up to the plate and help with all the funeral arrangements. She directed Willow, Xander and Buffy as to where they needed to be and they went. Anya just went with Xander. Death was confusing to her and Giles' death created an unexpected void in her that even promises of store ownership and lots of money of her own didn't fill. The store was too empty without him, even though everyone still hung around, actually more than they had. They needed to feel each other's presence in his absence. And his absence was keenly felt. As quiet as he had been, as unobtrusive, he had provided something essential for each of them, and they all felt lonely and lost.

Even Spike had been morose. Not that he would have spoken of it for the world but he had liked Giles. Sure, he would have killed him in a heartbeat if he didn't have that chip in his head, but there was a lot to Giles. There were worse guys to have at your back. Not to mention that Giles had paid him on a regular basis for information and assistance. More than the bloody rest of them were likely to do. Plus, he liked good scotch and Giles had always had good scotch on hand. He considered it a last personal favor to Giles to keep an eye on Buffy until she pulled herself together. She was making mistakes on patrol and she'd already have been dead a couple of times if he hadn't intervened. He didn't think she'd last long at this rate.

##

It had been a month and things were starting to settle into a routine. Willow and Tara had taken over research duties trying to fill Giles' shoes. Buffy dropped by every day after school to report in on any unusual Hellmouth activity. Then she would go and punch something in the training room for a really long time, inevitably coming out with reddened eyes that no one commented on.

That evening they were all there, finishing up a pizza provided by Xander, and listlessly flipping through books. It was past closing time but no one had bothered to lock the door. The bell on the door jingled indicating someone entering and they all looked up to see Ethan Rayne coming into the shop. Xander rolled his eyes saying, "Great, I was just wishing for a little excitement and in walks Dr. Chaos himself."

Buffy stood, crossing her arms over her chest, "What the hell do you want?"

Ethan strode over to her getting right in her face. "What the fuck were you trying to do?"

Buffy pushed him away. "What are you talking about?"

"Ripper, Rupert. I know that you were responsible for his death. You were always almost getting him killed. Why did you have to interfere?"

Her breath caught. Xander stood up, threatening, "She didn't do anything. He got shot during a hold-up. It wasn't Buffy's fault so just back off."

"Of course it was her fault. I read the article in the newspaper. I read how she was trying to be the hero." He turned to Buffy, his eyes ablaze. She shrunk back at the look in them. She could still feel the gun going off as she had moved in.

Xander was getting angry. "Buffy saved Giles' life and our lives and even your worthless life more times than you'll ever know. Where do you get off talking like this? It was an accident."

Ethan was unappeased, "A fucking accident, is that what you're calling it?" He started to prowl around the area in front of the counter. "All of you, all of you have been killing him for years." They looked up at his comment, confusion evident on their faces.

Ethan continued. "None of you knew him. None of you knew what he was

capable of, what he could have been. You had him here, right here and instead of appreciating him you used him and you used him and you sucked him dry until he was a shadow of the man he used to be." They all looked at Ethan's face, saw the madness lurking there. They could feel his anger and hate radiating from him. Buffy couldn't move, hearing his words, feeling them fall like a sledgehammer on her heart and mind.

"I knew him for 35 fucking years. Since we were 10 years old. I was his friend, not you. I was the one who picked up the pieces when you lot tore his heart out of his fucking chest. Who do you think sat with him night after night after Jenny died? Who helped him out after Angelus tortured him almost to death? He couldn't even wipe his own fucking butt but did any of you care? Did any of you even come by and see him? Did you?" He looked at Buffy. "You fucking ran away. I drove him around looking for you, you worthless piece of shit." Xander moved forward on that and Ethan put his hand up chanting something. Xander couldn't approach any closer; he could feel a barrier preventing him.

Ethan wasn't done. "I know I gave him some shit, but I knew how to be a friend when he needed it. I loved him more than you ever did, the fucking lot of you thrown together." He sobbed once. "I never understood why he chose to come here, and I sure as hell don't understand why he stayed. You didn't deserve him."

He sobbed again. Suddenly he swung over to the counter smashing his hand down hard on the glass shattering it, needing the pain to focus on, to keep himself together. He looked at them all, disgust on his face. "He was the best there was, and you fucking treated him like he was a joke." Blood dripped down his hand, dripping on the floor. He turned back to Buffy. "Well, it won't be like that next time. When he comes back, he won't choose you this time, I'll make sure of that. I'll make fucking sure of that." He turned and moving fast made for the door.

His final words slowly registered with Buffy and she lunged after him. "Ethan, what did you mean, when he comes back?" She screamed after him as he hit the sidewalk, "Ethan!" He kept moving. She ran to follow him seeing him get in his car. She raced over, still screaming his name. He started the car and began to pull away. She reached the car and put her fist through the passenger side window, breaking the glass, but it wasn't enough to stop him and he drove away. She stood there at the side of the street watching the car move out of her reach, and she crumpled to the sidewalk, the sobs wrenching at her. Xander, able to move once Ethan had left, came out and shooed people away helping her inside.

They all felt angry and defensive and scared. They all looked at each other,

no one knowing what to say. Finally Willow spoke, "Were we really that bad to him?" Her voice caught on the end. Tara moved up behind her putting her arms around Willow. "No, of course you weren't. He was angry. You guys loved Giles." Willow just started to cry turning around to hold Tara tightly.

Xander stood there next to Buffy. There was enough truth in what Ethan said to make him feel uncomfortable and guilty. Buffy couldn't stop crying. Every awful thought she'd had about herself since Giles' death had just been spoken out loud to her. She had no defenses left.

Anya walked over and locked the door. "Should have done this fifteen minutes ago. Would have made this day end a lot happier."

Buffy finally looked up, turning around to look at Willow and Tara, her face swollen with tears. "What did he mean, when he comes back? What is he going to do? Is there a way to bring Giles back?"

Willow and Tara looked at each other. Tara spoke. "There are spells that bring people back from the dead but they're bad and dangerous. People don't come back right, they don't come back the way they were. If Ethan is planning on doing a spell to bring Giles back we need to stop him."

Buffy nodded. "We have to find Ethan." They all nodded and fell to the task. Willow got on-line. Buffy called Angel and asked him to poke around down in LA. Xander started calling hotels. They found nothing. It was as if Ethan had vanished into thin air.

Buffy finally went out on patrol. She slowly made her way through the abundance of Sunnydale cemeteries, knowing she would end up at Giles' grave. She was helpless to resist and ended up here every night, sitting against his tombstone running her hands over the engraved words. She was almost there when she realized that things didn't look right. She ran over and saw the hole in the ground. Giles' grave had been dug up and his coffin was gone. She lifted her head up and screamed, "Ethan!" The sound reverberated through the night, bringing no answers.

##

Ethan had everything he needed. He wasn't worried about Giles coming back wrong. He had access to spells no one even knew existed. He worshipped a powerful god. Ethan had arranged for a few changes of course. A little less conscience, a lot less guilt, and some muddled memories. Ethan would fill in all the blanks for the last five years, his version of it.

He didn't want a 20-year-old Ripper; he wanted a 45-year-old one. A grown man with all his watcher experience, all his demon knowledge, all his fighting abilities, all his power. He smiled thinking of the fun they would have. How pleased his god would be with this new devotee. Ethan knew he could show this Ripper how to take a different path this time around. Ripper was his, always had been. He snarled thinking of Buffy and her band of misfits. He thought of all the time Ripper had spent with them. "What a fucking waste." He shook his head. He almost hoped Buffy would run into them, after Ripper was back, so Ethan could watch him reject her. It would almost be worth the risk.

It was time. He moved into position after taking off his clothes. He had waited for the new moon. It was barely showing on the horizon. He had wrapped Ripper's body in cloth hand drawn with magical symbols. He poured some oil over the wrapped body and then covered the shroud with a mixture of herbs and earth. He had already offered up a sacrifice to his god and had felt his god's pleasure at his gift. He began the incantation, walking around the circle. It would take most of the night, and he felt the power course through him.

End of Part 1

Second Chances 2

It had been two months since Giles' body had disappeared and there had been no trace of Ethan. Their efforts had started falling off, and they all began to believe that whatever Ethan had planned to do had failed. The cemetery had refilled the hole in, but Buffy never went back. He wasn't there anymore. She felt rootless, and plagued by unease. She had started losing weight and they all worried about her. They knew Spike was bailing her out. He'd show up every now and then asking Xander for money and he paid him. He was too afraid not to. Too afraid that she'd be dead without Spike's help. All of the rest of them were still grieving but life was pulling them. All that was pulling on Buffy was death, and she was tired of it.

Xander got desperate and actually called Angel for help. "Dead-boy. It's Xander."

"No kidding."

"You have to do something to help Buffy."

"I tried. I've come up there twice, she barely spoke to me."

"Can't you come up with some sort of demon crisis down there that you have to have a slayer to deal with? She needs something to focus on. She's wasting away up here."

Angel paused, thinking. "Let me talk to Wes and Cordelia and see if we can come up with something."

Xander spoke, "Make it snappy, dead-boy."

Angel sighed and hung up.

Angel called Buffy the next day, asking for her help. She protested but he insisted and she finally agreed. Xander put her on the bus and Wes picked her up. He was appalled at her appearance. He took her back to the office and Angel filled her in on the mission. She started patrolling that night.

It was on her second night of patrolling that she saw him. Her heart started racing and she told herself she was mistaken but there couldn't be someone who looked so much like him. She felt like she was having a heart attack. She started making her way over to the bar. He was sitting at a table next to the window. She hung in the shadows, needing to be sure. He wasn't wearing his glasses and he was dressed differently but it was still his face, still his eyes. She watched him pick up his drink and saw his pinky ring. She ran inside, running up to him. "Giles?" Her heart was in her throat.

He turned to look at her, smiling, "Why hello there." It was his voice, his smile, well sort of his smile, but close enough. Her heart was singing. She threw herself in his arms. "Giles!"

The man squeezed her back, looking over at his friend, "Well Ethan, I'd say our plans for the evening just took a turn for the better. This woman wants to play!" He moved his hands down to Buffy's butt and squeezed. She gasped and jumped back.

"Giles?"

"Why do you keep calling me that? It's my last name. Call me Ripper." He raked his eyes over her, "Or for that matter never mind, you can call me anything you like." He grinned at Ethan.

Ethan spoke up, "Ripper, you don't want this one."

"Why on earth not, Jesus, look at her."

"This was your slayer."

Ripper stood up, a look of disbelief on his face, looking at Buffy. "This was my slayer?"

"Yes." Ethan waited.

Ripper threw some money down on the table and motioned to Ethan. "Let's go, I need some fresh air."

Buffy followed him outside, grabbing his arm. "Giles, it's me, Buffy."

"I know who you are."

"Why are you acting this way?" She turned angry eyes on Ethan. "What did you do to him, why is he so different?"

Ethan laughed. "I just explained the facts of life to him, slayer, like how you made a mockery of his life and then killed him." Oh, this was wonderful. He shot her a look of triumph.

Buffy turned entreating eyes back to Giles. "Giles, that's not true. We loved you. We still do. We need you." Her eyes begged him to believe her.

There was no answering recognition in his eyes. He removed her hand from his arm as if it were distasteful. "I don't give a fuck what you need. Get the hell away from me." He motioned again to Ethan and the two of them started to walk away.

She grabbed his arm again, hard, and swung him around. "Giles, you have to listen to me. He did something to you; this isn't how you are. You have to believe me. Maybe we can fix it, maybe you can remember."

He laughed, and it sent a shiver down her spine. That wasn't a sound that had ever come out of Giles. He shoved her hard, away from him. She started to approach him again. He glared at her. "You come near me again and I'll hurt you. I don't usually hold with hurting women but with you being the slayer I don't really have to worry about that, do I?" He smiled unpleasantly at her. "I don't want you in my life. I don't want to be your watcher. I don't want anything to do with you. Go rip somebody else's balls off. Am I being clear enough?"

She stood there, looking at him, tears in her eyes, feeling his death all over again. Except this felt worse, because he was right there standing in front of her. She fell to her knees, starting to cry. He frowned at her, something in him

responding to the tears. Ethan took his arm and pulled. Ripper shrugged his shoulders and responding to Ethan's tug, turned and disappeared into the night.

Buffy just knelt there crying. A couple of people asked her if she was okay but she ignored them and they eventually left her there. Angel finally found her, huddled against the wall after she had missed their prearranged rendezvous time. If he hadn't seen the shape she was in when he found her, he wouldn't have believed what she told him. After she'd cried herself out she curled up in a ball on the sofa and wouldn't talk to anybody. Angel went out looking for Giles.

##

Ripper was feeling uneasy. He knew he'd been dead. Ethan had explained that to him, and had helped fill in the holes where his memory was hazy. He'd been having a hell of a time since. He and Ethan had slipped right back into being the best of friends. The two of them had plowed through half the women in the city. And the magic they'd practiced had been unbelievably powerful. Many of the front-page headlines were due to the chaos they had caused. Nothing too deadly; just enough to inconvenience a lot of people, the more important the better.

Ethan had told him about the slayer. How she had treated him, how they all had treated him. How she'd emasculated him. How she'd killed him. He had been humiliated that he'd allowed anyone to treat him that way. He'd sworn at that time that he would never let it happen again. He felt too good, too strong, too powerful, to ever be at someone's beck and call. He was strong enough to control the magic this time. He was stronger than Ethan, much stronger. He liked his life, liked that it was uncomplicated.

Seeing her tonight made him think of complications. He had felt some emotions rise, emotions that seemed to corroborate what Ethan had told him. He could almost feel her hurting him, tearing his heart out. He didn't remember any of the actual events, but the emotions were there. But, he had also felt his instinctive desire to console her when she had fallen to her knees in tears. It made him feel weak. It made him feel trapped. He scowled, "Fuck that." He called out to Ethan that he was going for a walk.

Ethan had tried but he hadn't been able to break Ripper's need to take a stake with him when they went out at night. After the first time he had used it, Ethan started carrying a spare for him. Ethan said he was a vampire magnet. There was hardly a night when one didn't come after Ripper. It was as if he had slayer scent still on him and that made him a prize target. Ripper felt for

the stake in his pocket, reassured by its presence.

Someone stepped out of the shadows. Ripper stopped, the face looking vaguely familiar. "Giles?"

"No, Ripper."

"Giles, its me, Angel."

"Why is everyone calling me Giles? Does no one call me by my first name?" He paused, moving closer. "Did you say Angel, like Angelus-Angel?" Ethan had told him those stories too.

"Y-yes."

Ripper hauled back and punched Angel with everything he had. Angel slammed into the wall behind him. Ripper shook out his hand, smiling, "God, that felt good." He pulled out the stake.

Angel put his hand up. "I'm not here to hurt you. I'm here to help. Buffy is worried about you."

Ripper's eyebrows rose almost off his forehead. "Buffy was worried about me, so she sent you, the demon who killed my girlfriend and tortured me for hours? She sent you as a way to help me? Holy Christ, she really is a piece of work." He slid the stake back in his pocket and glared at Angel. He moved forward and grabbed Angel by his jacket lapel, slamming him against the wall again. "Well, Angel, you don't get staked tonight because I want you to take a message back to my sweet lil ol' ex-slayer. Tell her to leave me the fuck alone." He turned his back on Angel intending to walk away.

"What did he do to you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Ethan, what did he do? This isn't...you're not at all like you used to be."

"And what would that be exactly? Hmm? Some pussy whipped watcher who allowed a bunch of suicidal teenagers to destroy his life?"

Angel had no response to that. Even he hadn't been able to believe the amount of abuse that Giles had taken, from them, from him. Except that there had been a purpose to his life. "You used to have a purpose. Your life had meaning."

Giles just snorted. "Oh, you mean like destroying demons?" He took the stake back out of his pocket.

Angel put both his hands up this time. He obviously needed to try a different approach. "This will kill Buffy."

Ripper stopped, casually flipping the stake end over end. "What do you mean?"

"She's half dead already, missing you, needing you. This will throw her over the edge."

"Sounds fair, after all, she killed me."

"Is that what Ethan told you?"

"I read the newspaper article, I heard Ethan's explanation."

"Giles, it was an accident. She was trying to save your life. She couldn't know that would happen."

"According to Ethan, she never seems to know when the shit's gonna hit the fan, but she keeps throwing it."

"Do you want her death on your hands?"

Ripper pursed his lips. He looked at Angel. "No matter what you say, I'm not going back. I don't want that life any more. I can never be that man again, never."

Angel thought he understood. He remembered Angelus thinking about how he'd been as Angel. Feeling humiliated at how soft and weak he'd seemed. Angelus couldn't see the strength in who he'd been, as this Giles couldn't see the strength he'd had being Buffy's watcher. "Giles..." At Ripper's look he started again, "Ripper, she needs you, they all do. She'll die without you. If I go back and tell her your message, she'll be dead in a day."

Ripper was cursing that he'd ever left the house. "Tell her you never found me then." He turned and walked away.

Angel leaned back against the wall. "Holy shit."

##

Ripper started having the dreams that night. Every night he dreamed about her, about them, horrible dreams. He watched them all, including himself die countless painful deaths. Ethan came in the first couple of nights to wake him up from the dreams but they happened so often every night that Ethan finally stopped. He watched Ripper grow more haggard every day. He didn't know what to do to help. He placed wards around Ripper at night to see if that would make a difference. It didn't. He got him drunk, he got him laid, he even got him high one night but nothing stopped the dreams.

After Ripper had told him about some of the dreams Ethan suspected that somehow his memory was coming back. Ethan didn't know how, but he was pretty sure that's what was happening. He had no idea what would happen if they all came back. Ethan was afraid he would lose Ripper again. He invoked his god, he researched his spell library but he could find nothing to stop whatever it was that was going on. He watched, helpless.

##

Angel sort of lied to Buffy. He told her that he had seen Giles but hadn't been able to actually catch up to him. He kept her alive on the hope that he would catch him the next night and then the next. She only ate when forced to and he could see she was slipping away. He swore, heading out the door to see if he could find Giles again. He had to make him understand before it was too late.

End Part 2

Second Chances 3

He found him at the bar where he had discovered Buffy crying on the sidewalk. His face hardened and he went inside walking up the table where Giles was sitting with an attractive, actually a pair of attractive brunettes. Angel saw Giles notice him and watched a dangerous glint come into his eyes. Angel knew he was treading on thin ice with this particular Giles, but he had to do this for Buffy. Ripper excused himself and motioned Angel outside.

"I thought we had finished our conversation."

"Ripper, she's dying. She's lying on my couch right now, dying."

Ripper felt a pain shoot through his heart. He clenched his jaw resisting his

feelings. "That's not my fault."

"Part of it is. She started dying when you were killed and you can't be blamed for that. But this part you can. The part where you're alive again and treating her like shit."

Ripper growled feeling trapped. "I can't be what she wants me to be."

"What, you can't be someone who cares if she lives or dies?"

Ripper just shook his head.

Angel continued, feeling his helplessness, "Fine, come with me then and tell her that to her face. Tell her that her life is meaningless, and she should just go ahead and die, so she can stop inconveniencing you. C'mon, let's go tell her that. It should be easy for you if she means so little to you. At least you can put her out of her misery."

Ripper punched the dumpster next to him, "Fuck." He punched it again, "Fuck, fuck, fuck." He ran his hands over his face. "Where the hell is she?"

"I'll take you there." Angel took a step and looked back at Giles, looking to see if he would follow, hoping this wasn't a really bad idea. But, at this point, there was nothing left to lose.

Ripper followed Angel, feeling memories teasing at the borders of his mind. He couldn't believe he was doing this. He knew she was bad news; she made complications complicated. But, he also knew that he didn't want her death on his conscience. That was a new feeling for him too. When the dreams had started, he had started having second thoughts about some of the magic he was doing, the god Ethan worshipped. He scowled. He wanted to punch something that would punch back. He needed to get into a good bar brawl.

They had arrived. He walked into Angel's home, ignoring the other people in the room. Angel put his hand up to stop Wes and Cordelia from saying anything. He gently but firmly shoved them out the door, following behind them. Ripper ignored it all, all his attention on the huddled body on the couch. He stopped, wondering if he was already too late. She was so still. He watched her, and finally saw that she was breathing. He took a breath, not aware until then that he had been holding his. He walked over to the couch, crouching down beside it.

"Buffy?" He hesitated for a moment, and then reached out his hand to touch her shoulder. "Buffy?" he repeated.

She opened her eyes, turning her body around at his voice. Her face was stained with tears, her eyes red, her face gaunt, her eyes disbelieving. "Giles?" He just crouched there looking at her, not knowing what to say.

"Giles! Oh God, Giles." She launched herself at him, holding him tight, crying hysterically. "Oh God, Giles. You're here, you're here." She held him tight enough to hurt. He finally put his arms around her. He still didn't say anything. She kept talking, "Giles, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry for everything, I never meant to hurt you, I'm sorry I got you killed, I'm sorry I hurt you, I never meant to, I swear it, I'll never do it again, oh God, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry, please don't hate me, please don't hate me. God, I'm so sorry..."

More memories flooded into his brain. Memories of loving her, laughing with her, his moments of pride in her, her extraordinary skill and selflessness in the face of death. The memories crowded his brain, these good ones side by side with the fearful ones, the hateful ones, the painful ones. He squeezed her tighter, needing the comfort of holding someone as his mind fought for sanity.

Finally her words ended, her crying abating. She pulled back out of his arms and touched his cheek. She realized that he hadn't said a word. She pulled her hand back, concern spreading across her face, "Giles?"

He eased back sitting on the coffee table across from her, sighing. He still didn't know what to say. He felt as if he was walking on a tightrope and both their lives depended on his balance. He looked for something to hold and found a paperclip. He bent down to pick it up, running it through his fingers.

She spoke again, "Giles. Talk to me, please." Her lips trembled.

He sighed again. "Buffy." He took a deep breath. "I'm sorry I was so cruel to you."

She smiled a small smile, not being able to keep her lips from still trembling. "It's okay." She spoke softly, her eyes on the floor.

"No, it's not. I wasn't quite myself." He almost laughed at that, never were truer words spoken.

"Are you yourself now?"

"No." She hadn't been expecting that answer. She looked up, her eyes wide.

"What d..do you mean?"

He sighed. "Buffy, I'm still figuring that out myself. But I do know that I'm not

the me you remember, or would necessarily want back." He stood up, pacing across the room. "Shit. It's too soon to have this conversation, too soon for me and too soon for you."

"I don't understand." Her eyes were filling with tears again, and he could see her body hunching in on itself. He walked over to her quickly sitting next to her on the couch.

"Buffy, I need some time. I need to figure out who I am again. I can't be that man who was your watcher, not anymore." He reached forward and wiped the tears off of one cheek. "But I also know I don't want you to die, and I don't want you to be so sad."

Her heart was breaking. "You mean I don't get to have you back?" He didn't respond. She started to cry again. She couldn't imagine she had tears left to cry but she seemed to have an ocean inside her. "God, Ethan said he'd t..take you away from me, make you not choose m..me, and he did it. I'm going to l..lose you all over again, aren't I?"

Ripper closed his eyes at her words, all brain activity screeching to a halt. "Excuse me?"

"Ethan, he came to the Shop, he was s..so mad after you died. He said I d..didn't d..deserve you, he said I had treated you so b...badly, he said I d..didn't love you like he did. He s...said that he would bring you b..back and fix it so you wouldn't ch..choose me. And he d..did it." Her last statement ended on a wail, as she curled back up into a ball, sobbing.

Ripper got up, feeling used on all sides. He punched the wall, denting the plaster. Buffy looked up at the noise. She saw what he had done. "Giles? Are you okay?"

Ripper walked over to her. He sat again on the coffee table, sitting her up, putting his hands on her shoulders. "Buffy, I need you to do something for me." She listened. "I need you to stay alive. I need you to give me some time." She shook her head at that. He held his head to the side, biting off a curse. He tightened his grasp on her shoulders. "Buffy, please, give me some time. I need to know you're okay so I can go think and go beat the shit out of Ethan." She smiled a little at that. "I'm not making any promises here, Buffy, you need to understand that. But, I need you alive, I need you to eat, and get your strength back. Will you do that for me?" He sounded so like Giles, her heart seized in her chest. "Buffy, please?"

"Will you come back and see me?"

He nodded. "Yes. I'll come and see you. Will you be here or will you go home?"

"If I go home, will you come see me there?"

"Yes." He wasn't sure if it was the truth, but he needed to say it, make her believe it.

"I want to go home."

"You'll take care of yourself?"

She nodded.

"Promise?"

"I promise." He caught her eye and frowned at her. "I promise, Giles. I'll get better if you promise to come see me."

He nodded his head and smiled at her. She smiled back. She moved to the edge of the couch and put her head on his chest and snuck her arms around him.

"God Giles, I missed you so much."

He let her hold him, running his hand down her hair, until her arms grew slack. He looked down and saw she had fallen asleep. He leaned her back and swung her legs up, covering her with a blanket. He hoped she didn't remember when she woke up that he hadn't responded. The truth was he hadn't missed her at all, hadn't even remembered her other than the information Ethan had provided him with. A part of him wished he hadn't met her again, to deal with all these memories crowding his mind, and to feel all these emotions, the hate, the love.

He started outside only to find Angel, Cordelia and Wes waiting for him. He spoke to Angel. "She should be okay now."

Cordelia snapped, "No thanks to you."

He pivoted around to her. "Actually, Cordelia, completely thanks to me. Are you ever able to not be a bitch? All my memories haven't come back yet, but the ones of you are crystal clear." He turned threatening eyes to Wes who had moved towards him ostensibly to defend Cordelia. "Wesley, don't even think about it." He turned back to Angel. "She wants to go home. Will you see to it?" Angel nodded.

He asked as Giles turned to leave. "Will you go back to her?"

Ripper turned back to him, "Not to the way it was." He walked away.

He heard Cordelia complain, "He called me a bitch." Ripper smiled.

##

Buffy went home the next morning. Xander came down to pick her up. Angel had been calling letting them know what was going on but Xander was still unprepared for how Buffy looked. She gave Angel, Cordelia, and Wes a hug and got in the car. Xander drove her home, neither of them talking for the first part of the trip. When Angel had called to tell them that Giles was alive, and how he had treated Buffy, the four of them had gone back and forth hating Giles, missing Giles, hating Ethan, forgiving Giles, being worried for Buffy, on and on until their heads ached. Xander had also needed to calm Anya down on a regular basis, as she was afraid that Giles would take the store back. Right now he was just worried about Buffy.

She smiled at him, "Xander, I'll be okay. Really, I will be. Giles made me promise."

Xander raised his eyebrows at that. "Angel said he came to talk with you last night." At her nod, he continued, "I'm guessing things went better than last time?" She nodded, but didn't elaborate.

"Buffy?"

She turned to look at him. "What?" she softly replied.

"Is he coming back?"

She looked out the window and he watched a tear fall down her cheek. He sighed. He felt a moment's anger at Giles and then missed him so damn much he wanted to cry. "Does that mean no?"

"I don't know. He said he'd come up to see me, but he said he wasn't promising anything." She didn't repeat that he had said he didn't want to be her watcher anymore. That hurt too much. "He said he needed some time, and he needed me to stay alive."

Xander nodded, "That's Giles, still hard at work keeping you alive." He looked

at Buffy, hoping that had gotten a smile out of her. It had coaxed a small one. He asked her, "How did he look?"

"Alive."

"Alive. Wow."

"Yeah, wow."

They were silent the rest of the trip home. She decided to stay with her mom for a few days, figuring that the food would be better and more available and her mother couldn't have more pleased by that arrangement. The whole gang took on the job of pulling her back into the land of the living, while they waited, wondering what Giles would do, all of them hoping he would come back to them.

##

Ripper walked home that same night. He needed to blow off some energy or he'd rip Ethan's bloody head off. He slammed open the door, and saw that Ethan was still awake, reading. He slammed the door shut. Ethan looked up.

"Hello, Ripper."

Ripper paced around the room. "I've just had a most enlightening conversation with my ex-slayer."

"Oh, do tell."

"She said that you threatened to take me away from her, make me choose a different life. Did you Ethan? Did you purposefully mess around with my head and with my memories when you brought me back?"

"Yes, I did."

The honesty was unexpected. It took the wind out his sails. He sat next to Ethan. "Why?"

"I missed you. I hated how they treated you. I thought you deserved better. I hated watching you be slowly consumed by guilt and pain, when you were the best thing in their lives."

Ripper leaned back into the couch. His contacts were bothering him. He realized he missed having his glasses to play with. He reached over and

picked up a pencil lying on the coffee table. He started twirling it in his fingers.

Ethan spoke again, "Do you remember everything now?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Are you going back to her? Back to that life?"

"No." That wasn't the answer Ethan was expecting.

"No?"

"No to the second part for sure. I can't go back to that life. You were right about that part of it. I lost myself somewhere. I forgot my strength and my power. I forgot how it felt to stand up for myself. I was so busy being a watcher, I forgot how to be a man. As pissed off as I am at you right now, I love that you gave that back to me. I don't want to lose it ever again."

Ethan smiled a sad smile at Ripper. "But the other question? Do I lose you to her all over again?"

"Why do you ask it like that? You were my friend when I was with her before."

Ethan snorted. "Yeah, when she wasn't trying to kill me, or beat me to a bloody pulp."

"I beat you to a bloody pulp myself on one or more occasions."

"Yeah, but that's different."

Ripper snorted this time. Ethan continued. "I don't imagine hanging around would be very comfortable for me. I don't think Buffy would be awfully happy about it."

"If I go back, she won't have a choice about it. I don't want to lose you again. You mean too much to me." Ethan turned his head away, looking out at the lights of the city, moved by Ripper's words. "Ethan, I mean it. I need a friend right now, no matter what I decide."

Ethan looked at Ripper, seeing the caring in his eyes. "God, we've been through some times together, haven't we?"

Ripper laughed, "Yes, we have."

They sat there together, thinking over their lives together. Thinking of the

bond between them. Ethan spoke again, "Ripper, I'll stand by you, whatever you decide. But if you choose to go back, don't expect me to not give you shit about it, and don't expect me to become one of the pansy good guys."

Ripper nodded. He leaned forward and grasped Ethan's hand for a brief moment. He got up and went to his room, shutting the door. Ethan watched him go, remembering a long time ago when walls didn't separate them.

Ethan watched him over the next couple of weeks, watched him struggle as he decided what his next step should be. He waited for the announcement. He saw a look in Ripper's eyes one evening and spoke, "You've decided then?"

Ripper looked up, a rueful smile on his face. Ethan knew him so well. "Yes, I need to go back. Not to be her watcher, not to pick that life up. I'm not ready for that. But, I need to go back and see what's there for me. What she means to me, what I can or want to do. I can't decide that down here. Will you go with me?"

Ethan sighed; he knew this was a bad idea. "Yes."

Ripper grinned. "That town won't even know what hit it." Ethan grinned back, shaking his head and laughing.

End of Part 3

Second Chances 4

Giles hadn't called once. She knew it had only been two weeks but she was starting to wonder just how much time he needed. She wished she'd asked him to clarify. She smirked at herself. Yeah, how much time do you need to reconcile being raised from the dead, having your memories mucked with by an evil poophead, and having your slayer shoved down your throat. She was feeling better; she'd gained her weight back. She focused on the fact that he was alive and had promised to come see her. She tried very hard to not think about the possibility that he might choose to live without her in his life. In his absence she had come to realize that he had been more important to her than she had thought possible.

She had stumbled upon a nest of demons last night and had been unsuccessful killing them, just managing to really piss them off. The group was researching trying to find some information on them so she'd have better luck tomorrow. She sat there fiddling with the book in her lap, having read the

same page about a hundred times.

As the bell on the front door jingled, they all looked up to see Giles walking in the door. Buffy's heart soared, the phrase 'he's here, he's here' ringing through her head. The rest of them were momentarily spellbound. They knew he was alive, but it hadn't rung true for them until just now. Willow shrieked, got up, and slammed into Giles, giving him the biggest hug she could. He wrapped his arms around her, and lifted her up, squeezing her back. He had missed Willow. He put her back down and let go. She looked up at him, tears in her eyes. "We all missed you so much. I can't even believe you're here. It's too good to be true." She hugged him again.

He smiled at her, lifting a hand to ruffle her hair. "I missed you too." He looked around slowly at the rest of them. First Anya.

"Anya, the store looks good."

"Are you going to take it back?" He looked at her and saw the worried expression on her face. He grinned.

"No, Anya, it's yours. Yours and Xander's. Are you making lots of money?"

She grinned like a Cheshire cat, nodding her head, and then frowned, still not sure she believed him.

He looked at her, moving closer. "Anya, I don't want it back. It belonged to a life that doesn't fit me anymore." Buffy, behind him, stiffened at his words. Anya nodded. Then she looked at him saying softly, "I'm glad you're back. Please don't ever do that again. It was horrible."

"I shall endeavor to grant you your wish." He turned and looked at Tara. He smiled at her. "Tara."

She smiled at him. She wanted to go give him a hug too but she hadn't been that comfortable with him before he had died. Now, she was even less so, he seemed so....so....formidable somehow. So, she just smiled. He walked around her and put his hand on her shoulder, squeezing. He kept walking ending up by Xander.

"Xander? You've been well?" Ripper took a step back as he suddenly felt himself being hugged by Xander. Ripper hugged him back. Of them all, Xander still felt like his child, his son. His smart-mouthed, disrespectful son, but his son nonetheless. Some of that would need to change. The hug finished, Xander sat back down, a little embarrassed. His eyes on the floor he simply said, "It's good to see you, I...we've missed you. It just wasn't the

same." Ripper waited until Xander's eyes rose to meet his again. He smiled at Xander, reaching down to squeeze his shoulder as well.

He then moved to stand in front of Buffy. "Buffy, you look better. You've been taking good care of yourself?"

"Yes, I promised you I would." Her heart was pounding. She longed to ask him if he was staying but she didn't have the nerve. "Do you want your condo back?"

He shook his head. "No, that's not mine anymore either. I would like to come and pick up some things though, if that's all right? Assuming they're still there."

Xander snorted, "Still there?" He snorted again, "Jeez Giles, it's like a shrine. She hasn't touched anything."

Ripper looked at Buffy watching her blush. He looked up as the front door opened and the bell jingled again. Ethan walked in.

Buffy stood, "What the hell is he doing here?"

Xander piped in nervously, "Yeah, G-man, what gives?" He was remembering the last time Ethan was here.

Ethan kept a grin to himself and walked over to stand next to Ripper. Ripper eyed both Buffy and Xander as he spoke. "Ethan is here at my request. He is my friend." Buffy opened her mouth as if to speak, her brow furrowed. He spoke first, his voice harsh. "Buffy. I dealt with Angel. You deal with Ethan. He stays." Her eyes widened, but her mouth snapped shut. "And while we're setting new rules, let me add a few." He took them all in at a glance, smiling at Willow and Tara. "I remember hearing too many cracks about my personal life, my appearance, my age." He glared at Xander, Anya and Buffy, implicating them in this. "That stops now. I didn't like it then, and I won't stand for it now. Is that clear?" He swung his head to Xander moving closer, his body tight and graceful as it moved. "And don't, ever, call me G-man again, got it?" Xander nodded, his head pulled back, eyes wide.

Ripper stood over them, watching them, satisfied at the expressions on their faces. They stared at him, really looking. Noticing his clothes, his face, and the way he looked standing there. No one in that room could imagine calling him old, or making fun of his appearance, making fun of him at all. He looked good, and he looked dangerous. Buffy's eyes slid to Ethan, feeling just for an instant how Giles must have felt seeing her with Angel. She looked back at Giles. She felt intimidated by him. She hated feeling intimidated; the feeling

made worse because it was Giles generating it inside of her.

She tightened her lips, trying to push past it, overdoing it. "So, do we all have to call you Ripper now?"

Ripper shook his head. "No, as my memories have started to come back, I remember you all calling me Giles. You can keep doing that."

She asked another question, in a small voice, needing to know. "Are you staying?"

He looked at her, nodding. "For a while, at least." He took them all in again, saw the glazed looks on their faces and sighed. "Listen, I told Buffy in LA that I...." He paused and started again, "I'm not the man you remember, not all of him at any rate. I'm different, I feel different, and I want different things. I don't want the life back I had. I don't want to be that man again." He paused again, marshalling his thoughts. "I told Buffy that I might not be someone she even wants in her life, and that goes for all of you. So, we'll see what happens. We'll see how we fit, how we work together, if we should be working together. We get used to each other again." He looked at them seeing if any of them had a response. None of them did.

He noticed the book Willow had been looking through. He walked over to her, "What are you trying to find?"

She snapped out of her thoughts and looked up at him, "What? Oh, Buffy had some demon trouble last night and I was trying to figure out what they were."

"Describe them." Willow did, looking to Buffy for confirmation. Buffy nodded.

Ripper pursed his lips, looked at all the books sitting around and reached for one. He flipped open some pages and placed the book in front of Willow. "Here it is." She turned to the book, her eyes widening as she realized that he had found it, that quickly.

"Wow." She smiled up at him, her eyes filling with tears. "Trying to fill your shoes was not the easiest thing I've done." He smiled back, ruffling her hair again.

"I'm sure you did fine Willow."

He looked at Buffy, and then at the rest of the group. "Anything else demon-wise going on?" They all shook their heads at him. He nodded, "Then I'm out of here. See you later." He motioned to Ethan and the two of them left the store together.

When he had left, the five of them just stared at each other. Xander spoke first. "Okay, okay, what the hell was that? Giles was kinda scary." He turned to Buffy, "And what did he mean, he didn't want his life back? Isn't he going to be your watcher?"

Buffy pulled her legs up, wrapping her arms around them, curling in tight. She shook her head. "He said he didn't want to be my watcher anymore." She put her head down on her knees, feeling the tears filling her eyes, just at the thought.

Willow spoke up, "Are you sure, Buffy? Because he was being kind of watcher-y there right at the end. I mean, he found your demons."

Buffy didn't respond, keeping her face hidden.

Xander kept going; he was on a roll. "And excuse me, but, Ethan? Since when does a good guy hang out with someone like that?"

Tara responded to that. "Ethan did bring him back. I would imagine that would be a pretty strong reason to stay friends with someone." She had never met Ethan, but had heard the stories from Willow.

Buffy finally pulled her head up. "I can't think anymore about this. Will, what does the book say? How do I kill these stupid demons?" She listened as Willow read from the book. Piece of cake. She nodded. "I'm gonna go home, I'm beat."

They all stood to rise, taking their cue from her and after locking up, they headed out to their cars. Xander and Anya dropped her off at her condo. She had moved back in there a couple of days ago against her mother's wishes. She waved at Xander and Anya when she reached her door. She went inside and closed the door behind her. She leaned back on the door feeling weary beyond belief. She stood there motionless, waiting for some energy to get ready for bed. There was a short rap on the door. She started away, and then opened the door, hoping it would be Giles. It was. He had been about to knock again, so his hand was fisted, up in the air.

She stood back, making room for him to pass her as he entered his old home. He stopped and stared. Nothing had changed. It was as if he had never left. It sent a shiver down his back. He let out a sigh of exasperation, "Buffy." The tone in his voice spoke volumes.

She looked around the living room and then looked at him. "I know, kind of creepy, isn't it?" She looked at the floor. "It made me feel like you still lived

here somehow."

He sighed again, moving to sit on the couch. She sat on the other end.

"Are you here to get your things?"

"No, well, maybe a couple of small things. I'll come back for the bigger stuff later." She nodded.

"Why are you here?"

He wasn't sure himself. His memories were still returning and the ones about her tumbled in his head. His feelings regarding her swung like a pendulum. Sometimes he hated her; sometimes he missed her so desperately he thought he'd go insane not to be with her. He felt fond of all the others, especially Willow, but this girl sitting in front of him, she would be the reason if he stayed or if he left. He knew that, and he knew that to figure it out he needed to spend time with her, despite the turmoil in his head.

"Do you want to set up a training schedule?"

Her eyebrows rose. "But, I thought...." Her voice trailed off.

"What did you think?"

Her eyes fell again, her heart hammering in her chest. She whispered so softly that he had to strain to hear. "You said you didn't want to be my watcher anymore."

He shook his head. "Buffy, I only said that when I first saw you, when I first heard who you were, and the only memories in my head of you were the ones Ethan had put there."

She shook her head, "No, you said it again, when you came to see me at Angel's."

"No, Buffy, I said that I can't be the man that was your watcher." She looked confused at that, not seeing the difference.

He stood, feeling the need to add movement to his words. He paced the length of the living room, running his hands over his old belongings. "Buffy, when Ethan brought me back, he changed me. He did some things he shouldn't have; even I admit that. But, overall he did me a favor." He watched the look of disbelief rush across Buffy's face. He put his hand up to stop any possible words. "You need to listen, and you need to understand." He moved

back to the coffee table sitting directly across from her. She waited, nervous, nothing about this Giles was predictable to her.

"We.." he motioned with his finger pointing to the two of them. "We never spoke that much about my past, about my watcher training." Again he forestalled her speaking. "I know, part of that was my fault. I never used to be comfortable talking about my past." Her eyes widened at the use of his past tense. "My older memories weren't affected by my...transition." He grinned at the word. She didn't grin back. He could tell she was nervous, of him, of what he might say.

"Part of watcher training is to die a little. Die to what's important to you, learning how to get past your needs, learning how to live with pain. Learn how to just live for your slayer, put her first in everything. I cooperated fully with the training. I lost part of myself there. I never even felt it go."

"I remember some of being your watcher. Hell, I remember being everybody's watcher." He laughed, tersely. "I was so needy, wanting you to be the perfect slayer, wanting to prove myself to the Council. I trained for one, and ended up with a pack of you. A pack of disrespectful, impulsive teenagers." He smiled ruefully, "I don't know how I stood it. I wouldn't now. Not the way it was, not with the lot of you running around, ignoring me, disregarding my advice, getting into one impossible scrape after another, putting each other at risk." He stopped, "And you..." He took a deep breath. "The things you did. The things you said. I can't believe I just took it. I'm ashamed of myself that I did." He saw the pain in her face. He took one of her hands. "I know these words are hurting you Buffy, but you need to hear them. I don't believe I did you any favors, making you think it was okay to treat someone like that. I don't care if you are the slayer, you are a person first, at least you should be."

He stretched first one shoulder and then the other, trying to release some tension. "But, I didn't understand that, just like I didn't understand that I should have been a person, a man, first, and then be a watcher. I had been trained too well. So, I was watcher first, and expected you to be slayer first, and we both lost sight of who we should have been, who we could have been."

"So, maybe we have a second chance. Whatever Ethan did to me, it's fading, or at least changing. I seem to have redeveloped some sort of conscience, and I still feel a connection to you." He caught her gaze, "I need to figure out what that means. I don't know if I want to be a watcher anymore, but what I do know, as sure as I am breathing, is that if I choose to become your watcher again, that I'll be a man first, and a watcher second."

He picked up her other hand, holding them both in his. "So, Buffy, are you

willing to try? See what we both want? See if we can stand to be around each other?" He gave her a lopsided grin. It pulled at her heart. She started to protest his words and again he stopped her. "Buffy, you don't know me. You are thinking it's me back, but it's not, not completely. Don't just say that of course you want me back and that of course you want me to be around. Those words belong to a man that is dead. This man, sitting in front of you, a lot of him is new to you."

She finally spoke, "Not the part that matters."

He looked at her. "Yes, especially the part that matters."

She looked down. He tightened his grasp on her hands. "Buffy, what do you say?"

"You know my answer. I'll do whatever it takes."

He smiled, knowing she still didn't understand, but it was enough for now. "So, do you want to set up a training schedule? I think I might have some new moves to show you."

She nodded, "We could go back to our old one. My school schedule hasn't changed."

"Every day at 3:00?" That time seemed familiar.

She nodded.

He walked to the door and she got up to follow. When he put his hand on the doorknob she stopped him. "Um, Giles, do you need some money?" She blushed.

He smiled at her, "No, but thanks for asking." He opened the door and stepped outside. He smiled again. It was amazing how money poured into your hands with the right kind of magic. He was set for life, well, a couple of lifetimes as a matter of fact. He got into Ethan's car, having borrowed it, and headed back to the hotel.

End of Part 4

Second Chances 5

They settled into a routine. He'd show up at the Magic Shop every day at

3:00. Buffy was late the first couple of days but after a tongue blistering from Ripper she started being on time. She could see differences in him now clearly as they trained together. He almost won sometimes. Not because he was stronger, but because he fought dirty, and he was better at anticipating her moves than she was of him. He worked on that with her, and taught her his moves. He was violent and deadly and as the days went by she could feel her skills and response time improving.

He even used magic. He cast spells on her that affected her movement, or blocked one of her senses. Then he'd make her fight her way through it, adding to her repertoire of fighting skills.

He didn't stop with Buffy. He insisted they all learn. He started training with Xander in the evening after the shop was closed and Xander was done with work. He shook his head, wondering how on earth he had thought it was okay to have Xander go out and patrol with Buffy when he had no fighting skills other than amateur fisticuffs. Xander protested at first but quickly got into it and showed remarkable aptitude. Ripper taught him like he had taught Buffy. He used a mishmash of fighting techniques that accented Xander's strength and afforded the greatest defense of his weaknesses.

He taught street fighting to Anya. She loved it. He grinned when she would talk about her and Xander fighting as a prelude to sex. She loved this new Giles. He liked to talk about sex and money, her two favorite things, after Xander of course. Out of all of them, she was the most comfortable with him. He yelled at her regularly, but anger didn't faze her and she just yelled back. They'd end up grinning at each other, out of breath, as if they'd just physically had a go at each other. As far as she was concerned this Giles was an improvement on the old one.

Ripper trained with Willow and Tara as well. Ethan helped when invited to by Ripper. He loved doing magic, loved doing it with Ripper and Willow and Tara were easy on the eyes. Ripper taught them spells, taught them control, taught them how to sense magic, how to fight against it, how to use someone else's magic against them. He also worked alone with Willow honing her research skills. Teaching her methods passed on to him in his training as a watcher.

He turned them into a lethal fighting machine. He accompanied them on patrol and watched them, continuing to train them, looking for their weaknesses, improving how they could complement each other. Spike often watched them and was impressed at the changes. He had spoken to Giles...no Ripper, a couple of times since he'd been back and had even met him one night for a drink at his hotel. He wasn't quite sure what to make of him. Except that he knew that this Giles would stake him in a heartbeat if Spike pissed him off. And never look back.

The gang could feel the difference in themselves. They responded to his teaching, and his new way. He demanded respect, not only for him but also for each other. They all felt older, but in a good way, and they walked a little taller. They had discovered a newfound respect for each other and the talents they had. They still weren't completely comfortable with this new Giles. He had a temper, and he let them know when they had annoyed him. He also didn't hang around with them. When the training or patrol was done, he was gone. No more sitting around, shooting the breeze, watching him make tea, watching him blush as they talked about sex, or well, sex. He made them blush now. They had found him secretive before, but now, when he was with them he seemed perfectly willing to talk about his exploits. Xander was in the throes of deep hero worship.

Buffy could see the benefits to her slayer technique and had to admit that patrolling was much less stressful with a well-trained slayerette team behind her. She didn't have to expend quite so much energy keeping them alive while fighting the bad guys. But she missed the old Giles, more than anyone. She felt lonely, watching Tara and Willow go home together, watching Xander and Anya already with their hands all over each other as they walked to their car. Before, after everyone had left, this was when she and Giles would have some time to themselves, well, when she wanted it. She had been doing a lot of soul searching and realized that the relationship had been a little one-sided. Her-sided. But now it was no-sided. He'd just leave. No softly spoken comments, no gentle concerns expressed asking if she was all right, if she needed to talk.

She was still afraid he was going to leave. The team had discussed it on several occasions but never with Giles. They all wondered if he was training them so hard and so well so that they would be okay when he left. If that was his plan they felt it was sort of backfiring. They depended on him more than ever. They all had firmly placed him in the leader position, including Buffy and they were terrified he would leave, knowing none of them could take his place.

Ripper was thinking hard as he started home. He was getting less comfortable leaving after training or patrol. He had started doing it from the start because he wasn't ready to resume friendships with any of them. He needed to decide if he was staying or not. He knew they could survive without him. They were good. Buffy was the strongest she'd ever been. She was dazzling to watch and he had to fight to keep the proud smile off his face. And Willow took his breath away with her power. She would eventually be as strong as he was, and with Tara doing magic at her side they were a force to be reckoned with.

There was still a part of him that longed for an uncomplicated life, longed to just be hanging out with Ethan, doing magic, wooing women. There was a whole world out there to explore and here he was stuck in Sunnydale. He also had to listen to Ethan, who regularly pleaded a case for hightailing it out of there.

On the other hand, he felt the old friendships pulling on him. He wanted to stay, to chat, to laugh. He saw the look on Buffy's face when he left and he was tired of putting it there. He ran his hand over his face. She pulled on him too. The connection between them, it kept getting stronger. He stopped, stood for a minute shaking his head. He knew Ethan would be pissed at his choice but he knew what he needed to do, he'd known for a while. He turned around and headed to Buffy's.

She had finally, after merciless harrassment by Giles, started to redecorate. He had come over and taken some of his clothes telling her to send the rest to Goodwill. He had taken his weapons, the books Willow hadn't wanted, and his music collection. He didn't want anything else. She kept some and had been gradually getting rid of the rest. There were Buffy touches in all the rooms now and it actually looked like she lived there. She was sitting on the couch, flipping through channels on the TV when she heard a knock on the door.

She got up and seeing it was Giles opened the door letting him in. He walked in noticing the new changes she had made and grinned at her.

"Do you want something to drink?"

"Yes, what have you got?"

"Water, juice, milk, hot chocolate..."

He grimaced at the selection. "Never mind. I'll pass."

"Well if I'd known you were coming I'd have stocked up." She sounded defensive.

"Well then, for the future have some beer in there okay?"

Her heart soared. "The future?"

He motioned her to the couch. "Yes, the future. Well, depending on you."

She raised her eyebrows as she sat, encouraging him to continue.

"Buffy, do you want me to be your watcher again?"

Her eyes filled with tears as she nodded. "Yes." She paused, a tear shaking loose and rolling down her cheek. "Will you stay and talk to me sometimes?"

His heart tightened in his chest, hearing the loneliness in her voice. He leaned towards her and wiped the tear off her cheek. "Yes." He settled back down, "in fact, what kind of juice did you say you had?"

She gave him a shaky grin. "Cranberry."

He tried to contain a grimace. "I'll take some water."

She grinned more fully and got up to get him some water. When she returned she said, "I'm not 21 for a few more weeks, you'll need to bring your own beer."

"I'll bring some tomorrow."

"Okay." She grinned, relieved beyond words that he was staying. He grinned back, relieved she had still wanted him.

End of Part 5

Second Chances 6

Ethan didn't like it but he wasn't surprised. He had been waiting for this announcement much as he had waited for the first one. He and Buffy declared a sort of truce. Ethan figured there was no future in constant unremitting hostility. She had finally taken him aside one day and actually thanked him for bringing Giles back and had given him a hug. He had laughed after she walked away. Ethan loved irony even when he was the one getting slammed with it.

Ripper had given some thought as to how he should occupy his non-watcher time. He was done with being a store proprietor. He thought about seeing what was available at the museum, or at the University. He was certainly qualified, actually, over qualified to work as a curator or as a professor. They all sounded unearthly dull to him. He supposed he could open some sort of martial arts studio, but the thought of dealing with children and their parents made him shudder. He was flipping through the paper one morning when he saw the ad. He went out that day and bought The Bronze.

He spent a chunk of money fixing it up, wanting it to appeal to people his age as well as to the younger clientèle it currently catered to. He had always loved music and spent a significant amount of time looking for great obscure bands and hiring them for extended periods of time. He upped the grade of liquor, upped the quality of the appetizers and between all the changes the place was hopping bringing people in from even outside of Sunnydale. On a lark he hired Spike as a bouncer for Friday and Saturday evenings, when it was the most crowded. It appealed to his wicked sense of humor and Spike loved it. It didn't take long for trouble to stop finding its way there. Spike wasn't the most gentle of bouncers.

With The Bronze had come an upstairs apartment. Whoever had lived there before had obviously appreciated the need for silence and had practically soundproofed the place so the music and noise from downstairs couldn't seep through. Once he had figured that out he moved in. Ethan had chosen to get his own place, wanting a little more privacy to do his magic rituals. His god was still a little peeved with him at the loss of Ripper, and Ethan was working hard to appease him. It was a challenge to create just enough chaos to please his god but without pissing off Ripper by causing too much harm. It was an intriguing challenge.

Ripper would read certain stories in the newspaper and know that they were because of Ethan. He generally laughed, a lot. He actually really appreciated Ethan's sense of humor. As long as no one got hurt he let it go. When Ethan pushed it, a not-so-gentle reminder from Ripper got things back under control. Ripper was still a willing enough partner on occasion to get into trouble. At times he would accompany Ethan to LA, as Sunnydale was a little tame for their tastes, at least non-demon Hellmouth tastes.

Buffy relished having him back as her watcher. She still wasn't at ease with the rest of him. He was so different outside of his watcher duties. So different from the quiet, softly spoken, head-in-a-book, tea drinking, blushing at all things woman-y Giles she had known. He spoke his mind and he hardly ever drank tea anymore. He still researched but he would get tired of it, slamming his book down and needing to do some sort of physical activity, either training with her, or just pacing around the room. Or he'd leave and go do something with Ethan. She didn't like to think about that. She still felt that Ethan was a bad influence on Giles. And as far as women.....

He never seemed to be far from one, or them from him. She saw him with one or another of them sometimes; saw more than she wanted to. She saw how they looked at him, and it made her look at him that way too. And then she couldn't stop, couldn't stop thinking about him. She started hating all the other women in Sunnydale. This was the part of him that she was the least reconciled with, the fact that he had a life apart from her. And the fact that he

had a much better and fuller life than she did didn't help any, and the fact that it was filled with women made her crazy. She wanted to be the woman in his life. She didn't want there to be any others.

Buffy sat at The Bronze with Xander and Willow and watched Giles from a distance. He was helping to bartend and flirting with every woman who came within shouting distance. The problem is that once he flirted they stayed around. He drew them to him like flies. He was handsome; he was well put together and he dressed to kill. He oozed dangerous, and he had that damn English accent. It was an irresistible combination. Plus, he could dance. She sat there at the table, pouting. She hated it.

He flirted with her too. He even danced with her, fast and slow. He gazed at her appreciating her body. She hated that too. Oh, she didn't hate that he did it. She actually liked it, a lot. What bothered her was that she knew she was just one of a thousand women he treated the same way. She sighed.

Willow turned to her. "Buffy, what's the sigh for?"

Buffy remembered a conversation from so long ago. "I lack a guy."

Willow remembered too, she smiled. "You lack a guy?"

Buffy nodded. She gestured to the empty seat next to her, "Note the lacking."

Willow turned as commanded and noticed the empty chair. "Yes, I see the lack." She cocked her head looking at Buffy. "No prospects at all?"

She saw Buffy's involuntary glance up to the bar. Buffy shook her head. "Nary a prospect in site, I am prospect-less. Major loser status." She sat back pouting. Willow looked at the bar to see who was there. A few guys were up there but no one looked familiar. There were a lot of women but there always were when Giles was tending bar. She wondered who Buffy had been shifting her eyes to see.

"Boy, Giles is just a babe-magnet, isn't he?" Buffy looked up at Xander's comment. She rolled her eyes, and gritted her teeth.

Willow agreed by nodding. "He sure has gotten handsome. I mean, I had quite the crush on him in high school but, now, if I wasn't taken, I mean seriously taken, and of the lusting after female kind of variety taken, I'd be after him too. He's gotten so sexy." She stared at Giles across the bar with a dreamy look in her eye. She sat up suddenly, feeling guilty at what she had said, glad that Tara wasn't around. She grinned sheepishly at Buffy and Xander. Xander grinned back. Buffy didn't. Xander had been totally wiggled

out in high school when Willow had told him she had a crush on Giles. He hadn't even liked to think about it. But now, it made sense. Jeez, he'd have a crush on the guy if he wasn't, well, you know, a guy. He noticed that Buffy wasn't grinning.

"Hey, Buff, what's up. Why the growly face?"

Buffy mumbled out a response, "I don't know." Her expression got darker. Her eyes shifted again to the bar and back to the table.

Willow got it that time. "Buffy, you have a crush on Giles."

Buffy just shook her head, her expression getting even darker. Willow just nodded her head bouncing in her seat. "Yes, you do." She turned to Xander, "Xander, Buffy's got a crush on Giles."

Buffy rolled her eyes and scrunched into her seat not meeting either of their eyes. Xander slapped her lightly on the arm, "Buff, is it true, are you crushing on Giles? I mean, not that I blame you."

Buffy shot daggers at him with her eyes. Willow continued the interrogation. "Buffy, give, what's the scoop. Is there something going on, am I missing out on gossip?" Both Willow and Xander stared at Buffy, willing her to speak.

She sat up. "Yes, fine, I have a crush on him, satisfied?" Her tone was angry. Willow sat back, amazed at the tone in Buffy's voice. She was beginning to guess this was way more than a crush.

Xander spoke up, "And this is a bad thing because....?"

"Because he doesn't even know I'm alive."

They both burst out laughing at this. Xander saying, "Jeez Buff, he's your watcher. I think you're underestimating him if you think he hasn't figured out you're alive."

"Ha, ha, very funny. I didn't mean it that way. I mean, look at it up there." Both Willow and Xander turned to look at the bar. "Look at them all, they're falling all over him, and here I am, stupid Buffy, just one of the sheep. He expects women to have crushes on him. It's just weird and I hate it." She allowed herself a full pout at that, bottom lip extended.

Xander laughed, "Hey Buff, better watch out or some bird's gonna come along and land on that thing." She stuck her tongue out at him. He sighed, watching her. "Sorry Buff, I know that this worshipping from afar stuff sucks,

big time."

Willow nodded in commiseration. She'd spent a lot of high school in that state. "Have you talked with him about it?"

Buffy stared at her in amazement, "What, are you kidding, and have him laugh at me?"

"Giles would never laugh at you."

"Yeah, well, the old Giles never would, but this new and improved one would and does on a regular basis." They all thought about the truth of that for a moment. He had taken strides at befriending them all again but part of that meant being teased by him and dealing with his sometimes wicked sense of humor. Often being with him felt like old times but then suddenly he would do something that would remind them again that he had changed so much.

"I've thought about it, believe me. I've thought about just kissing him senseless but the problem is that he'd just kiss me back, and I'd end up as one more notch on his bedpost."

Willow frowned at that comment. "I don't believe that. I think you mean too much to him for him to just take advantage of you like that."

Buffy sent her an unbelieving look and snorted in response. "Yeah, right, oh and by the way I have some nice property on the Hellmouth I'd like to sell you." Xander laughed at that. Buffy started pouting again after looking up at the bar seeing new female additions up there. Willow again followed her gaze. She looked at her friend, worried.

"Do you want me to, you know, try and talk to him, see if he feels the same way?"

Xander got into the plan, "Yeah, Buff, we can tag team him. Willow and I can dazzle him and get him to spill the beans before he even knows what hit him."

Buffy looked at them both horrified. "God, no, please, do not do anything, I'm begging you." She nailed them both with her eyes. "Promise me, both of you?" They agreed, reluctantly.

Buffy sat back in her chair and then stood. "I'm leaving before I suck you both into loser hell with me. I'll do a quick patrol and then head for home."

Xander asked, "Do you want company?"

She shook her head, "No, I just want to kill something and call it a night." She picked up her coat and headed out the door.

Ripper watched her leave, seeing the dejected shape of her shoulders and sighed. He thought about running after her, but the other bartender was on break and he couldn't leave. He turned back and started chatting, mixing drinks as he talked.

After closing he headed upstairs. He needed to think. He walked over to the window, staring out at the city. When all his memories had finally come back and all the pieces put back in place, he had remembered something. He had remembered that he had been in love with Buffy and had wanted her with a passion. He also remembered that he had kept that passion locked tightly inside him like a tiger locked inside a cage with thick iron bars.

Lately, the feelings had started to come back. They had come back so gradually he hadn't even realized it until he'd felt that tiger come to life, pacing back and forth in his tiny cell, staring out through the bars. He didn't want to feel this way and he'd been fighting it hard. But, his close and constant proximity to Buffy made it hard. He knew he could have her in his bed, he knew she was attracted to him. But, he couldn't do that, not to her.

He was beginning to understand why he had taken so much shit from her before. Not that he would again, but he could understand it. She was magnificent, and had more courage than anything he'd ever seen. Her body was like poetry in action when she fought, especially now with the new direction she had been receiving from him. She moved with a fluidity of grace and economy of motion that was a delight to see. He loved watching her, both as a teacher, and as a man.

He could feel himself growing hard, thinking about her. He looked down at himself, sighing. He knew he could have had company tonight. But, he also knew that it wasn't the answer. He wanted Buffy. He put one foot up on the baseboard ledge and pressed his forehead against the glass. He hoped she was home safe. "Shit." He turned away, to get ready for bed.

Ethan could tell Ripper was edgy, and getting more edgy daily. He took him out with him one night to a little seedy bar he had found in the next town over and got him drunk. Ethan stayed relatively sober.

"Ripper?"

"Hmmm?"

"Tell me about it."

"What."

"What's got you all pissy these days? Tell your old friend Ethan."

Ripper hung his head down, processing the question. "You're not going to turn me into a demon are you?" The memory and the question seemed so silly all of a sudden that Ripper started helplessly laughing, almost sliding off his seat.

Ethan couldn't help but laugh in response, putting his foot up to keep Ripper from falling completely under the table. "No, Ripper, I don't need to do that anymore."

Ripper tried to focus his eyes on his friend, "Why not?"

Ethan waved his hand, "Ripper, you're too drunk to have that particular conversation. Now, tell me what's wrong."

Ripper snorted, and took another swallow of beer.

"Buffy."

"What's the slayer done this time?"

Ripper shook his head. "S'not her."

Ethan wasn't following. "What do you mean, you just said it was her."

Ripper shook his head again, grabbing at the table as the room spun a little. "No, s'me."

Ethan thought a minute, trying to work out the seemingly contradictory responses. His eyes widened. "You've fucking fallen in love with her. Again. Haven't you?"

Ripper nodded, an unhappy expression on his face. Ethan started to laugh. "God, this is rich." He looked at Ripper shaking his head. "Well, I know how good old boring Giles handled that. What are you going to do?"

Ripper put his head down on the table. Hard. "Shoot myself."

Ethan let out a bark of laughter. "You already tried that and it obviously didn't work."

Ripper pulled his head up at that and started laughing again. "No, it didn't, did it?" He laughed even harder. He thought about Buffy and stopped laughing. He put his head back down on the tabletop. Ethan shook his head again, ruefully smiling at his friend's misery. He laughed at himself. He'd done everything he could to pull Buffy and Ripper apart and here they were, back together again. Ethan wasn't a stupid man. Even he knew when to give up fighting a losing battle.

He stood up, "C'mon Ripper, let me take you home." He assisted his drunken friend out the door. He got Ripper home and he decided to just stay and sleep on his sofa. He felt too tired and too drunk himself to go any further. He was awakened by the sound of Ripper fixing breakfast. He ran his hand over his face and through his hair. He had always admired this about Ripper. No matter how drunk he got, he got up bravely the next morning to face the day. And he had an amazing ability to eat on a hangover. He got up and walked into the kitchen. Ripper grinned at him. "Want something to eat?"

"No, just tea please."

Ripper pointed at the kettle. "Ready to pour mate. Help yourself." Ethan did and went and sat down at the table. Ripper finished making his omelet and brought it over with some toast to the table. He dug in. Ethan read the newspaper until he was done. Ripper pushed the plate away. He sat back in his chair.

"Ethan."

"Yes."

"What did you mean last night when you said I didn't have to worry about you turning me into a demon anymore?" He started to laugh, the thought of his laughter last night creating it anew this morning.

This was another thing that Ethan admired about Ripper. As drunk as he got, he still remembered everything. "It's not important." He got up to pour more hot water in his tea.

"Yes, it is, I want you to tell me. You used to do shit to me all the time when I was here before I died. You must have spent months thinking up cruel and unusual ways to harass me." He waited for a response but Ethan just looked at his tea mug, watching the steam rising. Ripper prompted him again, "C'mon Ethan, talk to me."

Ethan took a deep breath. "I got what I wanted."

"I don't understand."

"The reason I did those things was to get Ripper back. I missed him. I missed you. It was the only way to get you to come out and play." He looked down again, embarrassed at his own words.

"And now?"

Ethan looked up. "You're here. Maybe a little mellower, a little more into a sense of duty than I'd like and less into creating havoc, but you're still here."

Ripper met his gaze, a serious look on his face. "Ethan, you're a good friend. You always have been, even when you've been a royal pain in the ass." Ethan smiled and Ripper continued. "I'm sorry I left our friendship behind. I don't even know how it happened. I never meant for it to happen. I don't want to lose it again."

"I know. You won't." They both were a little embarrassed by the emotional vein of the conversation. They both sat looking at the table. Ethan stood. "Well, I guess I'll head home." Ripper stood to walk him to the door. Ethan headed down the stairway, turning around half way down. Ripper waited for him to speak.

"She'd be a fool not to be in love with you too." He smiled, turned and headed down the rest of the way. Ripper slowly shut the door and headed to the kitchen to clean up.

End Part 6

Second Chances 7

Willow was having lunch with Ethan. They had been having lunch regularly and they both enjoyed the companionship. They easily chatted about magic, and about their lives. Willow trusted Giles enough to trust Ethan, and Ethan was touched by it. Up until now, Ripper was the only one who trusted him that way, and Ethan had come to value Willow's friendship. Willow was sitting across from Ethan, playing with her food.

"Willow, what's on your mind?"

"Ethan, is there a spell where you can tell what a person is feeling about something, like whether they love someone?"

Ethan grinned, "Worried that Tara is straying?"

Willow grinned back, "No." She paused, not wanting to divulge any confidences. "But, suppose someone loved somebody but was afraid to say anything because that person didn't have any idea how the other person felt. I mean, that would be hard, right? So, suppose you could do a spell and just find out something about how that other person felt, and that you could let the other person know and then they could do something about it without worrying about getting their heart broken."

She sat back, waiting for him to respond. He sat there for a moment, letting her words sort themselves out in his brain. He enjoyed the challenge of trying to interpret her ramblings without having to ask for help. "Ah." He nodded his head, guessing. "Are you talking about Buffy and Ripper?"

Willow's eyes got very wide. "How did you know?"

Ethan grinned, a glint in his eye, raising his eyebrows dramatically. "Magic." He loved teasing her; she was still so innocent.

Her eyes got even wider, and then she looked suspiciously at him. "What kind of magic?"

He laughed. "I'm kidding. Call it good old fashioned inductive reasoning. I'm guessing Buffy let it spill that she was in love with Ripper, am I right?"

Willow nodded. "At first she said it was a crush, but later she told me how she really felt. She's crazy about him." She got a worried look on her face. "But, you can't say anything. She would die if she knew I was talking about this with you."

Ethan could only imagine. He snickered. "Well, Ripper told me the same thing last night."

"He told you that Buffy was in love with him? He knows?"

Ethan rolled his eyes. "No, luv, he told me that he's in love with her."

Willow's eyes got wide again, and then she grinned, "He did?" Ethan nodded. "Really?" Ethan nodded again. "Wow." She looked at him, "So, now what do we do?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, how do we get them together?"

This was asking too much. He was willing to get out of the way and let destiny take its course but he drew the line at matchmaking. "Nothing, they'll figure it out eventually."

Willow wasn't satisfied. "No, we have to do something, Buffy is so unhappy. She's feeling very smoochie deprived."

Ethan smiled at her turn of phrase but shook his head. "Sorry Willow."

"I guess I could tell her that he loves her. Then maybe she'd just go talk to him."

"Don't Willow, you're taking all the fun out of it. They need to figure it out on their own."

She sat back in her chair, discouraged at his lack of willingness to participate. He could see her brain working feverishly. "Willow."

She looked up, "Ethan, she's so unhappy. She's been so unhappy for so long. I can't stand it."

Ethan sighed. He didn't know what god was looking after Ripper these days but he was going to have his god go slap him upside the head. He looked up seeing the hope in Willow's eyes. He sighed again. "Well, there is this one spell...." Willow grinned, leaning in.

##

Buffy and Ripper had gone out patrolling by themselves as it had been pretty quiet lately. They had finished early and Buffy had talked him into ice cream. If she hadn't been so in love with him, and depressed about that, everything would be perfect. He had been spending more and more time with her, and she was enjoying his attention, even if it made her miserable because she wanted more. She was obsessed with him, on so many levels. First she was seeing more and more of the old Giles. Not the tweedy part, but the caring part, the taking care of her, and making sure she was okay part. Throw that together with how smart he still was, and how dangerous in a fight, and what an amazing teacher he was. Then toss in how gorgeous and sexy he'd become, and how he dressed, and that rakish smile, and the teasing and flirting and hints of skill in the bedroom arena, and she almost fell, her knees getting weak. She stumbled.

He caught her arm. "Are you okay?" She blushed.

"Just call me clumsy."

He laughed and once he saw she was steady on her feet, let go of her arm. She sighed. Willow and Ethan watched them, out of sight, as they approached the ice cream parlor. When they opened the door to go in Willow looked at Ethan and he nodded. She made a symbol in the air and spoke an incantation. They both ducked back out of sight.

Buffy and Ripper walked into the shop, getting in line. A little girl yelled out, "Look granpa." She pointed at the two of them. Ripper looked down at himself and over at Buffy with a confused look on her face. The little girl's grandfather hushed her but he got a dreamy look on his face when he looked at them.

The woman in front of them turned slightly, seeing them, and her eyes widened. "Oh my God, you two are so cute!" She reached for Buffy's left hand. "I was sure I'd see a ring here. What are you waiting for?" She directed this to Ripper, "Ask her already." She giggled and turned back around to order her cone. Buffy and Ripper just stared at each other flummoxed. Buffy felt her ring finger with her thumb.

It was their turn to get waited on. The girl behind the counter beamed at them. "God, you guys just make the best looking couple. I wish I could be in love like that." She sighed. The other girl working behind the counter prodded her to snap her out of her reverie. She turned at the prod. "C'mon, look at them, aren't they perfect together?" The second girl looked up, coming closer. "Wow, they are." Both of the girls sighed. The first one spoke, "I wish some guy would look at me that way." The other girl nodded, "Me too." They both sighed again.

Buffy cleared her throat, "Our cones?"

"Oh, right, sorry." The girl made them their cones and handed them off with another happy sigh, looking back and forth at the two of them. Buffy and Ripper looked at each other, and headed for the door. The grandfather of the little girl stopped them. "You remind me of me and my wife when we first got engaged. God, we were so in love." He smiled, patting Ripper on the arm. "Good luck you two. I hope your love lasts as long as ours has."

Ripper looked around the shop, suspicion in his eyes. Everyone in there was looking at him and Buffy with the same dreamy look in their eyes. He grabbed Buffy's hand. "Let's get out of here." Buffy nodded and they bolted for the door.

Once outside they tensed as a few people passed them by, waiting for further comments, but none were made. They relaxed and made their way over to the bench, both sitting on opposite ends. Buffy licked her cone, "Well, that was one of the weirder things that's happened to me lately." Ripper just nodded, looking around, trying to figure out what just happened. "I mean, that wasn't quite normal, was it?" She looked at Giles and saw him looking around. "Hey, Giles, I'm trying to have a conversation here."

"Oh, sorry, what did you say?"

"I said that wasn't quite normal, was it?"

"No, not quite. Someone did a little magic."

"What kind of magic was that? I mean what was the point of it? Other than totally embarrassing me and that doesn't sound particularly Hellmouthy."

He hesitated before answering. "I'm not sure."

Buffy looked at him her eyes narrowing. "Sorry buster, not good enough. What was that spell supposed to do and will it keep happening?"

Ripper looked around again, and suddenly, there in the shadows he caught a glimpse of red hair. Willow. He licked his cone, thinking. "Buffy?"

"Hmm?" She was concentrating on her cone, the ice cream trying to melt faster than she could lick it.

"Why would Willow do a spell on us?"

"What?"

"Willow, I just saw her, and I think she did this spell."

Buffy choked on her ice cream. I'll kill her, she thought. She spoke carefully. "That brings me around to my original question. Just what kind of magic was it?" She really was going to kill Willow.

Ripper hesitated again. "Well, it's hard to know exactly, but obviously it made the people in that shop see something when they looked at us."

Buffy kept her tone even, "You mean like we were gaga over each other?"

"Yes, quite."

"That seems like a stupid spell."

"I would agree, unless someone was trying to make a point." He looked at Buffy. She flinched.

"What kind of point?"

"Well it would depend on the kind of spell, whether the spell just manufactured how we appeared or if it made visible real feelings."

Oh God, Willow you are so dead. Buffy just sat there, paying attention to her cone. She could feel Giles' eyes on her. She looked at his cone. "Hey, you're melting." He looked at his cone and swore. He got up and threw it away, wiping his hand off with a napkin. He sat down again, closer to Buffy. She really paid attention to her cone. He watched her tongue as it swiped at the ice cream and felt his body respond. She flicked her eyes over to him and then back to the cone.

"So, Buffy, why do you think Willow would do a spell like that?"

"I have no idea."

"Hmmm." He kept watching her tongue, watched as she licked ice cream off her lips. He groaned, turning away.

"Hey, are you okay?"

Instead of responding he stood up quickly, racing over to the shadows where he had seen Willow. He heard a squeal, quickly muffled, and heard two sets of feet running away. Willow and accomplice. He tried to think of who Willow could have roped into doing a spell on him and Buffy. It didn't take him long. Ethan. He shook his head. What had they been trying to do? He stood half way in the shadows, thinking. Buffy watched him standing there, drinking him in.

Ripper thought hard. Ethan knew how he felt about Buffy. Suppose Buffy had told Willow... He lifted his eyes then and looked at Buffy, and he saw her watching him, saw the desire and love in her eyes. He walked over to her quickly. He took the unfinished cone out of her hand and threw it away. She watched him, saw his eyes. She started to breath fast, her eyes glued to his. She went to lick the ice cream off her lips with her tongue and he shook his head. "Let me." He put his own tongue on her lips and tasted the ice cream there. He licked it off, with his lips and his tongue, from her chin, and above her mouth, and then pressing his lips to hers, he claimed her mouth. She wrapped her arms around him and kissed him back.

They parted for air. Buffy smiled uncertainly. "Is this part of the spell too?"

Ripper shook his head, "No, this is real." He leant down to kiss her again, capturing her sigh. Her arms tightened pulling him in closer.

They heard applause and looked up, both confused. They turned around and everyone in the ice cream shop was in the doorway, clapping and hooting appreciatively. Ripper rolled his eyes. He stood up and bowed. They clapped more. He laughed. He reached for Buffy's hand and pulled her up. "Let's go."

She let him pull her up, still feeling dazed. Her other hand reached up to touch her lips. She stumbled behind him. He pulled her up and put his arm around her smiling down at her. "C'mon, let's go some place a little more private, hmm?"

They walked heading back to her place. Once they got there she looked up at him, suddenly fearful, not knowing what this meant to him. He looked down at her, a question in his eyes. She spoke, "Giles, I can't..." She couldn't finish.

He put his hand out for her keys. She shook her head. He waited, his hand still out. He wasn't having this conversation on the street. She sighed and handed them to him. He opened the door and they both went in.

He sat in her new recliner and pulled her down into his lap, just holding her. He wondered how to begin. He decided on the direct approach. "I told Ethan last night that I was in love with you." She tried to sit up to look at him, but he held her head down against his chest. "I'm thinking maybe you said something like that to Willow, yes?" He waited, and then felt her nod. He rocked the chair a little.

"I think it was both Ethan and Willow there, tonight. I think they were doing some magical matchmaking." He squeezed her a little. "I think that spell let people see how we felt about each other." He rocked a little more. He added, "So we'd talk about it, maybe figure it out." He saw her touch her ring finger again with her thumb. He smiled. "Do you want a ring Buffy? I'd give you one in a minute if I thought you wanted one, if I thought you'd wear it."

She tried to sit up again, and he let her this time. She smiled. "Do you know how long the old Giles would have taken to say all of that?"

Ripper laughed. "He'd be in his grave first." He realized what he'd said, saw her eyes fill with shadows. "I'm sorry Buffy, poor choice of words."

She drew in a shaky breath. "Did he love me too?"

Ripper nodded.

She touched his face, "I never knew, I never even guessed."

"My point exactly."

"Is it him or you saying the words now?" She pulled her hand back. She needed so desperately to be sure.

"Both of us. Me. I'm saying it. I'm saying that I love you."

"For real?"

He nodded. "I fought it for so long. Before and now. But, I think even Ethan figured it out."

"What?"

"That we belong together. That nothing can keep us apart."

She reached a hand out and touched his face again, reverently. "I love you so much." He closed his eyes. "And just in case you were wondering..." He opened them back up. "I love both of you, both parts, all of it, all of you." He smiled. He had been wondering, but he wasn't going to ask. He felt renewed at the unexpected gift of her words. He kissed her, holding her tight. She broke away, laughing, her heart full. "I'll even let Ethan be your best man." He laughed out loud, squeezing her tightly.

"You'd better, he's the reason I'm here. He gave us this second chance." She shuddered, remembering that she had stood at Giles' grave side, watching his coffin be lowered into the ground, not so very long ago. She shook that thought off, rejoicing at the feeling of his arms, strong and solid around her.

She deliberated for a moment. "Okay, we can name our first son after him, but that's my final offer." He laughed again.

"I'll take it." He kissed her again. Then he stood, holding her in his arms and carried her upstairs.

The End