

Eternal gratitude to 🧑🏻‍🎤 [kitty_poker1](#) and 🧑🏻‍🎤 [saifai](#) for the encouragement, and to 🧑🏻‍🎤 [txrabbit](#) for the read thru and the kisses

Summary: All human AU.

Alex Harris is no stranger to tragedy. Touring the world as a photojournalist, then losing the use of one eye, he retreats to a small town in Oregon to heal. Alex is quickly absorbed into the family that he finds there, and discovers acceptance in the eyes of a stranger.

Disclaimer: I don't own the bois, in fact I own very little. Suing me would be a great waste of time.

Distribution: My site and anyone who asks nice enough.

I know absolutely nothing about photography, I am an expert at capturing the pad of my thumb. Any and all mistakes are mine.

Apartment 4A

by
Kyrieane

Part One

Alex carefully tucked the portfolio under the trundle bed, smoothing down the dust ruffle to hide the slim black case. He stood, making sure to keep his head tilted under the attic rafters, then took a final glance at his new home. Mrs. Summers' voice echoed up the stairs, calling him down for his first meal at the boarding house.

He placed one foot in front of the other, still not sure of his balance, and let the door swing gently shut behind him. Years of living in a house where silence was not only golden, but also essential to survival, had taught him to let doors do their own thing.

Stairs were a slow affair, only doable with one hand firmly on the handrail, the other trailing the opposite wall. Corners were best approached with a loud voice, and God forbid anybody hands him a cup of coffee from the left side.

He made his way into the dining room, navigating around the buffet and china cabinet by touch. He settled carefully into the old ladder-back chair, not sure if the antique wood could handle his weight, and finally looked up into the curious faces of his new housemates.

"What happened to your eye?" A slim, dark haired

girl leaned across the table, sticking her nose against Alex's. Mrs. Summers swatted her butt with a dishtowel, muttering a scandalized 'Dawn!' before plastering a brilliant smile on her face.

"Everybody, this is Alex. Alex, this is everybody." She tangled her fingers in the girl's long hair, giving a tug to pull her back into her seat. "Willow, Tara, my heathen child Dawn, and her sister Buffy." Alex looked from one female to the next, noting Willow and Tara holding hands on the edge of the table, Buffy and Dawn were like opposite bookends, both quivering on their seats with suppressed energy.

"I h-hope you like it here, Alex." Tara was the first to break the silence, her shy voice barely muffled by the sheaf of wheat blond hair that obscured her face. Without thinking, Alex reached out and brushed her hair away from her eyes.

"Pretty ladies shouldn't hide, Tara." He smiled when she turned to Willow and flushed. Willow glared for a moment, then softened at Alex's wistful look.

"Where are you from, Alex?" Willow pressed a soft kiss to Tara's cheek, her eyes never leaving Alex's face.

"Um...California originally, been here and there for the last few years." Alex smiled up at Mrs. Summers when she passed the dishes on his right side.

"Here and there...what does that mean? Thanks mom." Buffy concentrated on her plate, stabbing at the pot roast like it was trying to escape.

"Bosnia, Russia, Africa, Egypt. Here and there." Long moments were spent with the girls staring at Alex, eyes wide and jaws dropped.

"Wow. What do you do?" Dawn reached across the table, snagging the butter from in front of Willow's plate. She sloppily slathered her slice of bread, then shoved the whole mess into her mouth.

"I'm a photojournalist. Or at least, I was." Alex waved at his eye patch with his steak knife then continued cutting his roast. "Two eyes are kinda helpful with a camera."

Dinner was finished with a minimum of talking, the girls feeling awkward about touching on what was obviously a sensitive subject, and Alex just wanting to eat and go to sleep.

“Ok, worky-work time!” Buffy dropped her knife and fork on her plate, shatteringly loud, and jumped out of her seat. “I left a note by the phone in case Spike calls, he still owes me twenty bucks!” She grabbed a gym bag from under the table and bounced out of the house pulling her hair into a short ponytail.

“Spike?” Alex looked from Willow to Dawn, flashing back on old Tom and Jerry cartoons.

“Ohhh...resident hottie.” Dawn’s face lit up, a huge smile almost splitting her face in two. Tara snorted, Willow nudged Dawn in the side with her elbow.

“Resident GAY hottie! He had to go into Portland for some class.”

Dawn blushed, then sat up straight. “It only takes the right woman!” Mrs. Summers snorted at that.

“Dawn, that’s enough.” She rose, gathering up empty plates and discarded silverware. “Help me clear the table, then it’s time for homework.”

Alex made his way back to his room, keeping his head ducked down to stave off any invitations or questions. He sat on the bed before taking off his

shoes, falling on his ass not high on his 'how to end my day' list. Shoes down, socks tucked neatly against the heels, and left the rest of his clothes on. He shifted and squirmed and flopped until his head was centered on the pillow and his ankles were crossed. Never took the patch off, unless he was in the doctor's office or the shower.

The dreams started almost immediately.

The little girl looked both ways before she stepped out into the street. She had a rag doll clutched tight in one hand, pulled close enough against her chin it looked like a limp yellow beard. Her other hand was loosely wrapped around the handle of a small wooden wagon, somebody had taken the time to paint it a lurid sunset orange color, but it was flaked and chipped to look like a twisted burnt giraffe. A litter of mongrel pups squirmed and rolled on their fat little bellies, tearing up their make-shift bedding of rags and savanna grass.

Alex lifted the camera from his chest, the little girl's huge honey-colored eyes a stunning contrast to her blue-black skin. She smiled when she saw him, tilting her head back and dropping the doll to her side. Alex smiled back and brought the camera to his eye, adjusting the lens just a bit. His finger pressed down on the shutter at the same moment

that her head exploded into little shards of crimson glitter. The sound of the rifle bounced crazily off the stone and brick walls, followed by a few startled screams. Alex dropped the camera, knowing in some distant part of his mind that the thump announced a bruise for later.

Alex knocked his head on the low rafters when he jumped out of bed, hand automatically pressing against his breastbone, groping for his Hasselblad. The lamp was on the wrong side of the bed, the roof was too low, and his heart was doing way too many flips and flops and skitter-skips. The window was open, moonshine and a faint ocean breeze making the curtains dance on the sill, and slowly Alex became aware of his surroundings.

This is Oregon, not Mozambique.

This is Oregon, not California.

She's dead, and nothing I did then, or can do now will bring her back.



Alex quickly settled into the house, gaining confidence in his movements as he moved around the house.

He discovered that Willow's brilliant red hair was natural, but Buffy's sun-tinged blonde came straight from a bottle. If Dawn came out of her room with a smile on her face and a bottle of nail polish in her hand, run, fast. Tara was an angel sent to earth, her wings only hidden by her shy, sweet smile. And Mrs. Summers made the absolute meanest cup of cocoa north of Mexico. She was also dating the local 'curator' of the museum cum library, one Rupert Giles of *The Sussex Giles*'.

Alex also found himself drafted as the new fix-it guy, Giles being able to wield a mean whisk, but utterly helpless with a wrench. Alex could do most repairs by touch and instinct, and drafted Dawn when he needed fine detail seeing.

The only member of the house still missing was Spike.

The days quit blurring together, every moment began to stand out with crystal clarity in Alex's mind. Memories of the hospital, of nurses and doctors and plain white walls began to fade, the ringing laughter of gossiping girls taking their place. Alex even started going hours where he forgot about his eye, there just wasn't enough time for brooding or moping. The most glaring reminders usually came from Dawn, in the form of bright artwork, drawn on his patch while he slept.

Alex brushed his hair and teeth, still avoiding the mirror above the sink, and made his way down to breakfast. His first indication that something might be wrong was Mrs. Summers dropping the plate of scrambled eggs all over the floor, his next was when she started yelling for Dawn.

Alex looked down in confusion, wondering what Dawn could have done to him that would make Mrs. Summers react like that. He spun in a slow circle, catching his reflection in the kitchen window just as Dawn was skidding to a halt behind him. Alex sucked in a deep breath and stared. This was the first time he had looked at himself since the day he had been released from the hospital. He raised a hand to his face, noting absently the

tremble in his fingers as he traced the outline of the huge cartoon eye, carefully detailed with Spike's pilfered collection of make-up. The lashes were black, tipped with glittery gold. The iris was the same woodland brown as his real eye, complete with a black pupil and thin spidery lines of gold to highlight the brown. She had even put eye shadow across the lid, and drawn a thick feathery eyebrow.

Alex waited for the embarrassment, the anger that this should have caused, and couldn't find it.

He turned around to face Dawn, cringing inwardly when she wouldn't meet his look.

"Hey," He kept his voice as normal as possible, "The least you could have done was paint the other eye." She looked at him then, Alex opened his arms wide when he saw the tears welling up in her eyes.

"I'm sorry Alex, sometimes I just don't think-" Alex pulled her into a tight hug, resting his hand on the back of her neck to keep her close.

"Just one thing... No flowers ok?" She nodded her head, her mumbles lost in the folds of his shirt.

It became a competition after that, each girl trying to outdo the others for the most outlandish eye-patch design. Alex finally declared Willow the winner when she presented him with a velvet piece covered in brilliant rhinestones. He wore that one for two days.

He could hear Dawn's shrieks all the way in the attic. The newly installed mirror clattered against the wall when she started jump-stepping up the stairs. Somehow the sound of the front door crashing against the wall was a quiet echo compared to Dawn. Alex opened his door before she could tear it down.

"Spike's home, he's back, you gotta come meet him I just know you two are gonna be friends, I know these things, Spike's gonna just want to eat you-" Alex clamped his hand over Dawn's mouth, grimacing when she continued to babble and spit against his palm.

"Breathe, Dawn. Breathe." She blinked rapidly, a vibrant blush coloring her face. Alex let her go when she began to giggle quietly. He eyeballed her for a moment, then pulled his hand away, wiping

the moisture off on the leg of his pants.

“So, Spike’s home, eh? Lead on MacDuff.” Dawn went up on tiptoes to press a wet kiss on Alex’s cheek before spinning wildly and rushing back out the door and down the stairs. Alex followed, still careful on the stairs, letting the excited babble direct him to the kitchen.

Spike sat in one of the old ladder back chairs, Dawn wriggling around looking for a comfortable perch in his lap, looking like a throwback to a 1980’s punked-out Billy Idol. His white blonde hair stood up in wicked looking points all over his head, oddly delicate shell ears were covered from top to lobe with winding silver links and hoops. Dawn finally settled down, Spike wrapped his arms around her waist and pressed a kiss to her cheek, leaving a vermilion smear on her flushed skin. Alex leaned against the wall, crossing his arms over his chest, and watched the ladies of the house fuss over their returned roommate.

Mrs. Summers was busy at the stove, whisk in hand and a bag of mini colored marshmallows open at her elbow. Willow and Tara flanked Spike, each pressing close to hear whatever naughty secrets he was telling Dawn to make her blush like that. Buffy was rifling a black leather duster hung

by the door, looking up guiltily when Alex's movements caught her attention.

"Spike!" Her voice was sharp enough to make the blonde jump in his seat and almost dislodge Dawn, "You haven't met Alex, he moved into 4A." Spike lifted his eyes and pinned Alex with an intense curious look.

All Alex could see was two amazingly blue eyes; each surrounded by a thick line of kohl. Blue like he hadn't seen since taking photos of Great Whites jumping out of an impossibly blue ocean to catch their dinner. Blue like the fjords in Norway, soaring up to meet the azure skyline. Blue like the summer twilight out across the savanna.

Two too incredibly blue eyes, staring at him.

Alex nodded, ducking his head and spinning away to the left. He bumped off the doorjamb, almost falling in his haste to get out of the kitchen, and practically ran up the stairs. He slowed once he got into his room, letting the door thump shut behind him. Alex took careful measured steps to the mirror, taking stock in his reflection.

Thick shock of just brown hair, all of the interesting gold and red highlight from the African

sun long since grown out. Long face, its only distinguishing feature the ugly black patch that covered his scarred socket. Too loose clothes on a too lanky frame.

He turned away from the mirror and made his way into the bathroom. Dropping to his knees on the cold tile floor, Alex vomited up the remainder of his lunch.



A soft knocking woke Alex up. He looked around, disoriented, until he realized he had fallen asleep on the bathroom floor. Standing up made all the kinks in his back and legs scream, Alex groaned softly. He stumbled across his room, not surprised to open the door and find Mrs. Summers standing in the hall.

“Supper in about thirty minutes, Alex. Could you come and help me before its ready?” She spun away before Alex could answer, not like he would refuse her.

He followed her down the stairs, stunned when

Mrs. Summers lead him into her private rooms.

She held the door open for Alex, closing it and twisting the lock as soon as he was in. he looked around surreptitiously, not wanting to stare, but curiosity getting the better of him. Mrs. Summers was quiet, moving over to open a drawer in her bureau, pulling something out and hiding it behind her back when she turned to face Alex.

“What do you see when you look at me, Alex?” Mrs. Summers walked towards Alex, standing close enough that the tips of her breasts brushed against his chest, and if he looked down, he thought he might be able to see her navel.

“Do you see an attractive woman, Alex? Maybe an older woman, who can teach you things that never in your wildest imaginations, dreamed possible? What do you see?” She brushed her hand across Alex’s cheek, letting her fingers trail down his cheekbone to swirl in the hollow of his throat.

“I...ah...Mrs. Summers?” Alex was too shocked to be embarrassed by the squeak in his voice, he was sure that would come later. “I’m...I should have told you...I’m gay. You’re very attractive, very much a woman, but... um...yeah, gay now.” He shut his eye, anticipating a slap, a knee to his

balls, anything but the full-throated laughter that came from her.

“Oh thank God, I was almost afraid you would take me up on that. Call me Joyce, please.” She stepped back and pressed something cold and gelatinous against his chest. Alex opened his eye and looked down.

“Um?” He brought his gaze back to Joyce’s face, looking more confused when she laughed again, and put the mass in his hand.

“That would be my right breast. I had a mastectomy ten years ago.” She moved over to the bed, sitting down and patting the comforter beside her. Alex followed, gently squeezing the silicone. He ran his fingers over the cool surface, noting the indent where her bra must rub, and the fake perky nipple that made it so realistic under her blouse.

“Now just listen to me. The mastectomy actually came six weeks after my hysterectomy. Hank left six weeks after I got out of the hospital. That’s the girls’ father, by the way.” Joyce sighed, looking down at her fingers twisting the hem of her shirt, “He couldn’t handle the idea of me still being a woman without my...woman parts.” She did the

little air quotes with her hands, and smiled when Alex let out a snort.

“What an ass.” Alex handed her breast back. Joyce nodded, and let her smile soften.

“But I now have Rupert, and he loves me, all of me. Including the missing parts. What I’m trying to say here, Alex,” She reached up and brushed his patch, “Is that this doesn’t change who you are. Your heart and soul are still the same. And it’s a good heart and soul. Let it out, let yourself be loved.”

Dawn’s voice echoed up the stairs, calling them down to dinner.

Dinner wasn’t so much dinner, as it was Spike holding court. Even Buffy was silent as the blonde told about the clubs he’d visited in Portland, and his impressions of the overly pompous bankers. Dawn squealed loud enough to make Alex’s ears hurt when Spike told her how much the bank was

willing to lend him.

Alex kept his head down, not really understanding the gist of the conversation. He'd expected Spike to sound like Eliza Doolittle, dropping 'H's' and slurring words together. Instead he sounded like Rupert, rich and cultured, like he should be attending High Tea with the queen rather than pork chops with applesauce with the commoners.

And if Alex had looked up once in a while, he would have seen Spike watching him. Would have seen Spike reach out occasionally, like he wanted to touch Alex, make some kind of contact with him. But Alex kept his head down, and when he was done eating he stood and rinsed off his plate, sliding it neatly into the dishwasher. He left the kitchen without saying a word, his thoughts split between what Joyce had told him, and the intense sensations that just the thought of Spike was causing.

Alex wandered into the living room, stopping in front of the overstuffed bookshelves and perused the titles, not really seeing them. He picked a book at random, anything to make his brain stop the frantic spinning. When he turned around, Spike was right there.

“I don’t have any impulse control, and no respect for personal space. Just so you know.” And then Spike was touching him, running curious fingers down his nose and around his lips. They stayed for a long time, tracing his jaw under the day-old stubble of beard, making a raspy sound as they went from ear to ear. Spike was close enough that Alex could smell the gel in his hair, and the powdery scent that men always noticed about make-up.

“Oh love, you are a treat.” And then Spike was gone, and Alex couldn’t breathe.

Part Three

Willow came up to tell him a package had arrived, postmarked ***Special Delivery*** all the way from California. And he had to come down and sign for it before the postman would let go of his terrier like grip. Alex had stayed up in his room pretty much all day, sneaking down once to fix a sandwich before the grumbling in his stomach alerted Joyce

to his continued absence. But he was honest with himself about it, Alex was perfectly aware that he was avoiding Spike. Their encounter had been unsettling to say the least, and he wasn't looking forward to their next.

But he followed her down the stairs anyway; curious as to what his mother had sent. It had to be from her, she was the only one in his family that knew he was in Oregon. The neat wrappings on the box threw Alex momentarily; crisp paper edges lined up with a military precision his mother couldn't manage in her most sober moments. And those were few and far between. But it was addressed to him, with the address in thick black block script.

He took the box from the postman, thanking him absently, and gave Willow a shaky smile before climbing the stairs back up to his room.

Alex carefully peeled the tape away, the clenching in his gut making his hands shake. Under the plain brown paper was a more familiar sight. Virulent yellow and purple striped party paper, patched together with crisscrossing layers of scotch tape. There were places where the paper didn't quite cover the box, an old shoebox that was probably left over from his Jr. high days, colored in with

black magic marker. Yup, this was more like mom. His name was scrawled across the top, apparently she had been drunk enough to actually misspell his name, and the address was missing the zip code. Some days it had amazed him that his mother could go grocery shopping.

He had to dig out his pocketknife to slice through the masses of tape, and the lid of the box disintegrated when he flipped it off. A folded piece of paper sat tucked down, almost hidden by rolled up balls of toilet paper.

*Alexaner,
Yer dad found all yer cameras. He brok all of them
but this. Don't come back.
Mom*

Alex dug through the wads, pulling out his treasured Hasselblad. His fingers traced the upraised numbers around the lens cap, the notched X where the flash locked in. He was sure that if he opened the film door, there would still be dust from Madrid or Botswana caked in the spindles.

The box and scraps of paper were shoved to the floor, falling and scattering under the bed to make nice with the dust bunnies. He curled up on his

side and tucked the camera under his chin.

The red glow made his reflection look twisted and demonic in the developing solution. He poked at the paper with tongs stolen from his dad's barbecue set, since his equipment seemed to have taken an unexpected detour to London. The image grew from rippled transparency to clarity with a suddenness that still had the power to amaze him.

Two men pressed together with an intimate casualness, beads of sweat catching the light and making their flesh gleam like they had been painted with a diamond acrylic. They stood leaning against a wall, the smaller of the two men with his head tucked against the shoulder of the larger, his hands loosely clasped just above the dusky swell of naked buttocks.

Alex pulled the picture out of the tub, carefully hanging it on a line with several more wet stills. Attention focused on the crimson-tinged black-and-white story being woven before his eyes, Alex didn't notice the door opening behind him, didn't hear it close.

A rough hand wrapped around the back of his neck, jerking him backward and flipping him around.

"Dad! The light-" a heavy fist landed in his midsection, knocking the breath from his lungs.

"Sinner, sinner, sinner." Alex looked up into his face, terrified at the blind rage in his father's eyes. The fist spread out, long meaty fingers twitching above his head now like a mutant spider.

"If thine eye offends thee, pluck it out." His voice was calm for all the fury burning in his face, his hand descended and Alex was shocked when his father gently caressed his cheek, then dug his thumb into Alex's left eye socket.

Alex screamed, finally swinging his arms and batting at his father's chest. The hand around his neck was gone, Alex kept flailing even as his father backed away, leaving the dark room as quietly as he had come in. Alex put his hand to his face, feeling the hot ooze of blood and the wet slime that was left of his eye.

The blood looked black against his flesh, he could still feel himself screaming, could feel the vibrations in his chest and throat. But he couldn't hear it anymore. Then everything was black.

"Shh, love, 'salright." Alex wondered when he got

a male nurse. A British male nurse with a sexy voice. A sexy, British male nurse who thought nothing of climbing into bed with him and holding him really really tight.

"C'mon now pet, open that pretty eye and look at me, yeah?"

So Alex opened his eye. The room was dark, and once again the bedside lamp was on the wrong side. The person holding him slowly came into focus, from the shiny blond hair, to the silver accented ears and the kohl lined eyes.

"Spike?" Alex reached under his shoulder, pulling the camera out from the tangled blankets.

"Yeah love, it's me. Had yourself right one, didn't you?" he smiled down at Alex, kept threading his fingers through his hair, tugging and twisting until Alex wondered if his hair was going to be just as spiky...but more in a porcupine way.

"Um...nightmare, yeah." Alex sighed and leaned into the caress, letting his eye flutter closed again and just enjoyed the non-medical uncurious touch.

"Joyce sent me up to tell you supper's ready, you didn't answer when I knocked." Spike let his

thumb drift down to trace Alex's eyebrow, "Tend bar most nights in town, welcome to come along, listen to Lindsey play."

Alex turned his head into Spike's shoulder, twisting slightly so the hold became an almost embrace. "Another night, maybe." The words were muffled against Spike's shirt, and Alex became aware of how he was laying. He blushed.

"Sorry. Thanks." He pulled away, missing the look of loss on Spike's face.

"No worries, love. But I'll take you up on that other night." He leaned towards Alex, touching chin to shoulder. "It'll be a date." And then he was gone, leaving Alex oddly comforted and confused.

The rest of the night passed with a surreal sort of fuzziness, Alex ate dinner and escaped back up to his room as fast as was passably polite. He spent the next several hours curled up on his bed, turning the camera over and over and side to side. He knew every country this Hasselblad had ever

been to, remembered the names of several of his subjects. Snatches of in-between photoshoot conversations played in his mind. And then he saw it. The tiny glass window that marked the number of shots taken said 20.

Alex twisted down on his side, clutching the camera to his chest again, and wondered if he dared.



The sound of thunder came an instant before Dawn's scream echoed up the stairs. Alex opened his eye, scrubbing the sleep out and sat up. The walls lit up with a brilliant flash of lightning, followed closely by another peal of thunder. And another Dawn scream.

Alex rolled off the bed and stumbled to the door, pulling it open then tripped over a small box left in the hallway.

"This? Is not going to be a good day." He picked up the box, rattled it close to his ear before flipping the top open.

Two rolls of film and a neck strap.

Alex was still staring at the film when Joyce appeared at the top of the stairs.

“Spike said you needed one of the rooms in the basement.” Lightning flashed again, the air was filled with a burnt ozone smell then the house was plunged into a grayish gloom. “Great, just great. I have a cake in the oven.” She walked over to him, lightly trailing a finger over the top of the box.

“What would I need a room for?” Alex looked up briefly, then ducked his head back down to look at the box.

“There’s four rooms down there, I think one was a mud room at some point in time, it’s unfinished. It would make a perfect dark room.” The lightning flashed again, illuminating her back as she walked back down the stairs.

Alex put the box back in his room, tossing it carelessly on the bed next to the camera. He made his way down stairs, holding tight to the railing in the gloom. Thunder shook the house before the lightning came this time, stopping Alex in his tracks next to the living room.

Rupert had shown up sometime earlier, bringing Joyce her mail from town. He sat next to the window in an old wingback chair he moved. The panes were open, rain and leaves blowing in with the wind. Rupert brushed the curtains away when they blew into his face, keeping his eyes trained on the storm raging overhead. The clouds leached all of the color from the room, leaving man and furnishings like an old tintype photograph. Alex's fingers itched for his camera; he could smell the wet paper hanging from the line dripping developing solution back down into the tub.

And then the Hasselblad was in his hands; Spike was standing behind his shoulder, silent in the shadows. Alex turned it over once, checking the shutter and lens cap. Lifting the camera to his remaining eye, he walked into the room snapping the rest of the roll in quick succession. Rupert looked up, startled, then seemed to understand.

Spike handed Alex another roll of film, entranced as he wound the spindle and loaded the fresh roll. Without looking at his hands.

Rupert leaned forward, long fingers wrapping around a tumbler on the floor. And brought it up to rest on his knee. Alex moved forward, angling

Rupert's head down just a little, and waited until the wind blew the curtains in again.

Part Four

Spike went out twice more for film, returning each time with his hair plastered to his head like wet platinum. Alex used two rolls just on Tara painting henna designs on Willow's back.

The lovers had set up dozens of fat white candles, circling the bed in some ancient voodoo pattern. The tiny flames danced merrily when the wind blew through a small crack in the window, giving Tara's face an ethereal quality. She sat straddling Willow's thighs, a little pot of ocher ink resting by her knee and several fine haired brushes stuck end first in her mouth. Tara kept tucking her hair back, then leaning over to draw the delicate lines on her lover's back. In the shadows, Willow's hair was the same earth color as the paint, and Tara repeatedly brushed it away from the drying ink.

Willow opened her eyes when Alex first started snapping pictures, she wriggled a little to get Tara's attention, giggling when Tara uttered a mild oath at the interruption. Tara stared at Alex for several long moments, face solemn and eyes so dark blue they looked bruised. She finally blushed lightly and then returned to her designs, giving Alex silent permission to continue.

He walked all around the bed, camera never leaving its place in front of his eye. Spike watched from the doorway, noting that Alex stepped over and around the lit candles without looking.

The clicking sound stopped, Spike realized Alex had quit moving, and was standing with his hand outstretched. He walked quietly to Alex's side, dropping another roll of film in his hand. Alex snapped three more photographs and changed rolls, eye never leaving the vision on the bed.

Alex got pictures of Joyce sitting on the couch, Dawn curled up under a blanket, tucked next to her mother's side.

Buffy standing next to another open window, lightning turning the sky electric white and purple.

Spike and Rupert next to the fireplace, an old

wooden chessboard between them, mugs full to the brim with real cocoa, fancy colored marshmallows and painted knights battling out an ancient dance.

On his second trip into town, Spike dropped off the film and begged off work. He came back with hot dogs from the butcher's shop and all the fixings for s'mores. When Alex dropped to the couch, breathing out a sigh of exhaustion, Spike pulled out the groceries and several long metal skewers. He sat down next to the fire, pushing Dawn over when Alex crawled across the floor and flopped next to the hearth. Willow and Tara came downstairs when Dawn began a very off-key version of 'She'll be Comin' Round the Mountain', Tara exchanging a secret smile with Spike when they curled together opposite Dawn. Joyce brought more cocoa, telling Rupert to leave the chess set alone and get more marshmallows.

The power came back on at two a.m., illuminating Spike and Alex still curled up before the dying embers.



Spike made it to his car, turning the key in the ignition and cranking the stereo before Alex landed on the hood. If the look in his eye hadn't been so frantic, Spike might have laughed. Alex's eye patch was crooked on his cheek, hair winding all over his head like drunken medusa snakes, red lines creasing his skin where he'd rested his face against his arm. Spike turned down the music, sticking his head out the open window.

"What's wrong, pet?"

"Film." Alex croaked the word, stretching one hand out plaintively towards the dash. Spike gathered the canisters up with one hand then turned the car off and climbed out. Alex waited until Spike was clear of the door, and then reached for the film.

"Was supposed to be a surprise, Alex." Spike laid the rolls in Alex's hand, cocking his head.

Alex clutched the rolls tight against his chest, ducking his head and chewing on his bottom lip. "I know." He stepped away, turning his head to the left out of habit.

"I'm confused, pet. I understand that I've done

something, but you've got to tell me what so we can fix it." he watched the emotions cross Alex's face, watched as the indecisiveness firmed up, and Alex finally *looked* at him.

"I've pretty much always done my own film, the processors...they just don't do it right." Alex took another step back, shuffling his feet, poised to flee. Spike followed.

"C,mon, Alex, don't know anything about pictures. Gonna have to tell me." He pulled close to Alex, leaning in and brushing his lips right under the patch strap. Alex whipped his head around, almost crashing into Spike's face, staring in amazement.

"Why did you do that?"

Spike smiled, not his cocky gonna take over the world and damn anyone who gets in my way smile, but his just this side of almost soft and sweet and flirty. "Wanted to."

"What happens when you don't want to anymore?"

Spike stared back, his expression a mirror of Alex's amazement. He took two steps away from Alex, dropping his hand to his side. Alex blinked, then Spike was back, both hands cupped around Alex's

jaw.

“‘M only sayin’ this once, so you listen to me. I knew the minute I saw you all ducked over your dinner plate that I wanted to kiss you. Knew the minute I looked into your face that I wanted to make all the hurt and pain in your eye go away. Like a click in my head, and every minute that I spend with you, that click gets louder and stronger. Not gonna want to stop kissin’ you, unless it’s to breathe.” He kissed Alex then, ghost soft touch of lips against lips. Alex dropped the rolls to the ground, bringing both hands up to tangle in the soft fabric of Spike’s shirt, pulling him close and brushing back.

Alex spent the rest of the day on Willow’s computer, reaching out and rubbing his fingers across the top of Spike’s thigh. He ordered all his darkroom supplies, telling Spike about every piece and hiding his surprise when Spike began to ask detailed questions.

Dawn called them down to dinner, and the girls all

smiled when Spike and Alex sat side by side instead of face to face with the table between them. The alarm on Spike's watch started its quiet beep right around the same time Joyce cleaned up dessert. Alex watched as Spike went still, face going hard and sharp like old bubble blown glass, then it was like somebody had plugged him into a 220 jack and turned the power on.

Spike began to vibrate, everything twitching with barely restrained energy. His face broke into a brilliant smile, his fingers started twisting the silver hoops in his ears round and round and round.

"Time for work, pet. Come with me tonight?" There was hope in his eyes, and his smile softened, just for Alex. Alex smiled back, just as soft, and a little secretive.

"I'll... I'll come up later?"

Part Five

Alex pulled the portfolio out from under the bed. His fingers traced the etched letters gracing the front.

Alexander Harris

The zipper slid down like it was waxed, barely making a whisper of sound. He took a deep breath and flipped the leather back.

Children picking through an elephant graveyard, pointing out tusks and teeth for the ivory hunters.

Tall thin men, dressed in beads and scraps of leather, passionately dancing around writing masses of venomous snakes.

A mother, cradling her still born infant to her breast, silent tears streaming down her face while the rest of the village women surround her, touching her and howling out their grief.

Lions twisting mid-stride when the antelope darted left instead of right.

Dozens and dozens of black and white images, a still life story of his travels. All of the beauty and all of the horror that he'd seen. He touched their faces, remembered their lives and honored them

every time he opened this book.

And the series that made his name famous in the most elite circle.

One tiny village tucked back in the jungle, huts made of long slim branches covered in broad leaves and vines, maybe thirty people when everyone was there. The only white people this village had ever seen had been anthropologists, seeking out lost civilizations and scientists seeking esoteric medicines.

He'd been there two weeks, taking pictures of naked children climbing trees like little Capuchin monkeys. Young men with intricate dots and swirls tattooing their faces, tracing their lineage back thousands of generations. Women with their breasts lying almost flat down to their bellies, nipples looking like round smears of mud against their dark brown flesh.

The huts made a circle around a small thatch of berry bushes, the bright red fruit considered a powerful and magical medicine. Made right, they were an amazing antibiotic, keeping the people free from infection and illness. Made wrong, they created a poison, strong enough to kill a man in a matter of minutes. The elders of the village the

only ones within hundreds of miles with the secret.

The war party struck just after sunset, when the men had come back from their daily hunt and the women were putting tired children to bed. Alex was left alive because of the color of his skin, the lead warrior afraid that he was some sort of spirit there to take back the tale of genocide to their Gods.

Alex photographed every body he found, both villager and warrior. He walked back to where the jeep was hidden, images of glossy red blood turning black and dull as the air got warmer. He drove blindly, hopping from village to town to city, catching the first flight out of Africa. Paid for his ticket without knowing or caring the destination. Landed at Heathrow Airport and sat in the terminal for almost twelve hours before calling Ethan to come pick him up.

Ethan submitted the photographs to Time, and then told Alex he'd done it. Alex didn't care, didn't think they would be picked up and published, but sent the first copy on the stands home to his mom.

Alex closed the portfolio, absently brushing away a stray tear with the back of his hand, and slid it back into its place under the bed.

It was time.

Spike pushed the door open, bracing himself for the onslaught of voices and music. Every night was a repeat of the previous one, the only difference tonight was Alex coming up.

Lindsey was up on stage, hat brim-up on the floor next to his chair and guitar cradled in his lap. The song was the same, some old backwoods bluesy number that was just right for the scratch and twang of his voice. Lilah stood in front of the office door, scanning the crowd, arms crossed over her chest like that would shield her from the stench of spilled beer. Faith moved back and forth behind the bar, motions brisk and efficient, huge false smile plastered on her face.

She looked up at the clock hanging above the liquor racks, then looked over and caught him standing at the door. One eyebrow raised, and Spike could hear the sarcasm in her expression,

Waitin' for an engraved invite, Blondie?

Nothing for it but to get to work.

Spike bounced on the balls of his feet, wiping down the bar and pouring drafts, looking up at the clock every minute or so. Each time the door opened, he leaned against the bar, and held his breath. And every time, released it with disappointment.

He turned to the sound of breaking glass.

“Oi mate! Not self serve `ere!” Two steps and he was kneeling on the floor under the taps, picking up shattered pieces of a beer mug. Warm rich laughter floated over the top of the din chattering voices.

“That’s what I thought you should sound like.”

Spike swiveled around, still crouching, to see Alex leaning over the edge of the bar.

“I was starting to wonder if you were coming or not.” Spike brushed the shards of glass into the garbage and stood up, face to face with Alex.

“Oh no you don’t, go back to sounding like Eliza

Doolittle." Alex raised his hand, lightly tracing the line of Spike's jaw, and then dropped a quick kiss to his open mouth.

"They expect me to sound like a guttersnipe, all fancied up like this. Look nice tonight pet." He smiled when Alex blushed, reaching out to finger the collar of Alex's wine colored shirt. Alex looked down at himself and fussed with the buttons.

"They don't fit right any more, I had to wear a belt." He glanced up at Spike through his lashes, oddly pleased when Spike started shaking his head.

"No, luv, you look right perfect."

Alex marveled at the way Spike's voice could caress his skin as well as any touch. He shifted, turning to sit on an empty stool, and pounded the top of the bar with a fist.

"Well, barkeep, gimme a cold one!" Spike laughed, delighted with the teasing tone of Alex's words. He pulled an iced mug from the cooler, and poured him a beer from the tap.

"Spike, I pay you to serve drinks, not play with your toys." A bitter voice intruded on their easy

banter. Spike turned, his features cold and brittle, mouth going from its easy smile to a grim line.

“Lilah Morgan, Alex Harris.” Spike seemed to settle, his expression carefully blank. He set the draft on the bar, waving his free hand between them.

Alex spun on his seat, feeling a shudder ripple through his nerves at the appraising look in her frigid eyes. She looked him up and down, one finger tapping against the fox-point of her chin.

“Alex Harris...where do I know that...” she snapped her fingers, the look on her face turning calculating, “You’re the photographer...The Mal’tac Massacre. Brilliant work, too bad though, seems the talented eye was the one plucked out.”

Alex wrenched back like he’d been slapped, staring in shock as her lips turned up in a cruel smug smile. He felt something pop and click between his brain and his heart. He turned to Spike, offering a wicked smile of his own, wrapping his hand over the fist gripping the edge of the bar.

“Actually, Lilah,” Alex faced her again, “I may have lost an eye, but the world didn’t lose its beauty. I just see it more clearly now, and don’t waste my

time on the ugly or insignificant.” Alex felt Spike’s hand relax in his grip, heard him give a little crowing laugh. Lilah jerked back this time, mouth opening in a surprised ‘O’.

“Stupid bint.” Spike hopped up on the bar, sliding his legs over to come to a rest in front of Alex. “Two weeks notice and I’m starting my vacation now.” He tugged Alex to his feet, dragging him out of the bar amid hooting catcalls and clapping hands.

Part Six

“Where’s your car, luv?” Spike stood next to his restored DeSoto, eyes flicking over the vehicles in the lot, trying to guess which one Alex had driven.

Alex snorted, reaching out and stroking Spike’s face, drawing his attention back to Alex’s face. “The whole ‘no peripheral vision thing’ kinda interferes with the driving process. Joyce dropped me off on her way to Rupert’s.”

Spike stared for a minute, mouth working silently, and then his face turned a pale red color.

"Sorry, Alex, didn't even think of that." He looked down, reaching up to take Alex's hand in his.

"Hey," Alex hunched over enough to look into Spike's downward turned face, "You've never once looked at me and thought about the things I can't do. It doesn't even cross your mind." Spike slowly blinked, lashes close enough to almost brush against Alex's face. "It's pretty much all I've thought about for the last six months. But I...I think I was wrong about a lot of those things. I can't drive, that's a law, regardless of my ability." Spike tilted his head up, gaze trained on Alex's expression, aware that more was meant than just what was said.

"I didn't think I could take pictures anymore, but I can. I didn't think I would be able to look at myself in a mirror, but I can. And..." Alex drew back, blushing and turning his face down now, "And I didn't think I could make that look happen in anybody's eyes ever again. And I sound a lot like a girl right now."

Spike chuckled, shaking his head. "No, luv, you

sound..." He tilted Alex's chin up, "You sound like you're healing."

The moonlight seemed to glow and sparkle between them, drawing Alex to Spike like silver-shot silk. Spike's hand slid up Alex's jaw, twisting and wrapping in his hair to tug them closer. Alex brushed his lips across Spike's, faint as a summer breath. When Spike leaned into the kiss, pressing firmly against Alex, Alex was sure that somewhere bells were ringing and choirs singing.

Alex waited until Spike was comfortable on the bed, shifting from foot to foot, eye darting around the room anxiously.

"Ok, what's this about then?" Spike leaned back against the headboard, settling his hands in his lap. Alex didn't answer, just crouched down and pulled the portfolio out from under the bed. Spike wrapped a hand around Alex's wrists when he tried to walk away.

"Not going anywhere, pet, gotta tell me about

these." Spike flipped the pages, asking Alex about the places he'd been, the people he'd photographed. Alex told him about working for the magazines, teaming up with the journalist Ethan Rayne, of having his name known the world over in photojournalism circles for the stark beauty of his images. He stopped when Spike came to a page filled with color Polaroid's.

"Who's this?" Alex started, he'd forgotten about these pictures, a page he habitually flipped past.

"That's...that's Jesse, my...um, my twin." Two shining smiling faces, captured forever in their innocent sixteen year old gonna stay like this forever state.

Dad had bought them all access tickets for the state fair, opening the night of their birthday. Drunk on cotton candy and chilli dogs and teenage boy freedom, Jesse had talked Alex into riding every ride at least once, most of them more than once. Alex got his revenge though, coercing Jesse onto the Ferris wheel. Jesse's girlfriend Cordelia had met up with them, taking pictures with Alex's brand new camera. She got them with sticky taffy strung between their hands, Jesse winning a stuffed rabbit at the Ball Toss, Alex stumbling off the roller coaster with his hands crossed over his

mouth.

The big alligator clock in the middle of the kids ride gonged midnight, the crowds started milling towards the gates and the midway lights started flickering out. Jesse looked around for Cordelia, hating that she made him hold the rabbit and her purse while she went to the bathroom. He almost missed her cry over the sound of the crowds.

Alex ran faster than Jesse did, always had, he found Cordelia behind one of the patched striped tents. Two boys were holding her down, kneeling on her arms while a third struggled with the zipper on her shorts. Jesse came around the corner, lunging at the boy holding Cordelia down. With the heavy weight off her belly, she fought free, punching one of her attackers in the face while Alex took the second to the ground.

The fight was fast, over in seconds when Jesse gave a harsh grunt and the boy he was fighting rolled off him and scrambled to his feet. They were gone, running towards the gate as fast as they could, while Alex tried to process what he saw.

Jesse flat on his back, hands clutched over his heart, color drained out of his face. His eyes darted between Alex and Cordelia, mouth opening and

bubbles of blood popping every time he tried to breathe.

He was dead before the ambulance got there, eyes glassy and hands limp on the red-smearred grass.

“Dad was still a minister then, and he just couldn’t understand why God would take one of his boys. I never realized how much they treated us as one person, until after the funeral. It was like...like half of me was always missing after that. Dad started to drink first, mom couldn’t handle it, so she started drinking too. By the time I graduated high school, mom had tried to kill herself twice. They...it’s not like they blamed me, they just...I wasn’t enough. So I left, took the money that I had saved for college and bought some camera equipment and a plane ticket. Met Ethan a year out, then Mal’tac happened, and I needed a break.” Alex hung his head, slowly curling down in a ball to lay in Spike’s lap. Spike traced the elastic of his patch, fingers wandering up to stroke his hair then back down to trace the curves of his cheek.

“Is that where this happened, luv?”

Alex shook his head, taking a deep breath.

“No, I came home and got a job working with a private studio. Somebody had commissioned a series of male nudes; I was in the basement developing them when Dad came in. He freaked, I woke up in the hospital.”

Spike let the tears fall from his eyes, watching as they tumbled down to mix with Alex's.

Part Seven

Alex stretched, arms going one way legs the other, until he ran into something that wasn't the wall. One eye slowly pried open, and the something was Spike curled on the edge of the bed. His hair was soft with the gel bed-mussed out of it, the lids covering his too blue eyes were almost translucent in the morning light, lined with indigo-colored tracery. He took a stuttery breath, hands twitching lightly under his chin, then his eyes popped open and he was staring back at Alex.

“Mornin' luv.” Spike's voice was soft and sleep-

drunk, he tried to smile but yawned instead.

“Morning.” Alex smiled back, propping his head up on one fist. His fingers itched to run through that messed up mop of curls, and remembering back to their first real meeting, Alex gave in to the urge. Spike’s eyes fluttered half-shut, pink lips parting so his tongue could sneak out and just rest between his teeth. He made a growling sound, somewhere deep in his throat, and pushed back into Alex’s hand. Alex wished he had gotten up and brushed his teeth before waking Spike.

“I’ll give you exactly thirty minutes to stop doing that.” Spike shifted closer, moving one hand to splay against Alex’s chest. His fingers tapped lightly in response to the rhythm of Alex’s heartbeat.

It’s not long enough is what he thought.

“I need a shower.” Is what he said.

“Take a trip with me today?” Spike’s fingers dug a little into Alex’s chest, curling around the stretchy fabric of his shirt.

Anywhere, anytime is what he thought.

“Yeah, ok.” Is what he said.

Alex climbed over Spike, giving the curls one final tug, and waited until he got in the bathroom to strip.

Spike listened to the muffled sounds for a minute, eyes half closed and imagining what it would be like to get up and follow Alex into the shower. He got as far as the brunet standing in the stall, water hitting his body and making his flesh look all sheened and satiny, then grudgingly rolled off the bed and headed for his own needs-to-be arctic cold shower.

They were out the door and in Spike’s car within the hour.

Spike pulled into a parking lot, throwing a cheeky grin at Alex as he put the car into park.

“Looks like a dive, but it’s the best diner in Oregon.” Alex didn’t look relieved, but he followed Spike through the double glass doors anyway. The

woman behind the counter gave a high pitched shriek, slamming a half full pot of coffee back on the burner and dropping her hand towel on her way around the stools.

“Spikey!” she launched herself at Spike as Alex took a step back. He watched, not trying to hide his smile, as Spike unsuccessfully tried to untangle himself from the woman. There were arms and legs and masses of blond hair everywhere, Spike’s voice was muffled by the hands planted on both cheeks and the woman marking his pale skin with five-dollar whore red lipstick.

Alex finally took pity on him, stepping forward to tap the woman on the shoulder and smiling when she looked up in surprise.

“Excuse me, would you mind getting off of him, I don’t think he can breathe.” She giggled then slithered down Spike’s body to stand between them. Spike took a step back, half-shielding himself behind Alex.

“Dammit, Harm, just took a shower.” Spike looked around for something to wipe the lipstick off with, snorting when he saw the napkin box behind Harm on the counter.

“Whatever. Who’s this?” She tugged her skirt, smoothing down the red and white checked fabric so it strained over her hips and belly. Alex instinctively leaned back when she smiled and leaned forward, thrusting out her breasts and batting her eyelashes.

“I’m...I’m Alex, I’m with him.” Alex jerked his hand up, pointing his thumb back over his shoulder at Spike. She instantly relaxed, body slouching down in disappointment.

“Oh, One of those. Corner booth.” She reached behind her, grabbing two menus off the counter and pushing them at Alex. Spike hooked a finger in Alex’s back pocket, tugging until he stumbled back then led him deep into the diner.

Spike waited until they were both seated then pinned Alex with an intense look.

“Never been anything between me and Harm, she’s a dozy bint who thinks if she can bed me once, she’ll *cure my sexual crisis*. Complete with air quotes there, luv.” Spike waited, still except for the frantic tatatap of his fingers against the table top. Alex took Spike’s hands in his own.

“I’m a black and white kind of guy, Spike. A

shadow is a shadow and a light beam a light beam. You've made it pretty clear that while this is something new, it's still a relationship. Mutually exclusive I'm thinking. So until you tell me otherwise, or I catch you doing something undeniable, I'm not going to question you or doubt you. You said, complete with air quotes *Not gonna want to stop kissin' you, unless it's to breathe*. To me that means you don't want to kiss anybody else."

Their waiter came while Spike was trying to compose himself, marveling at the treasure he'd found all wrapped up in flannel and khakis. Alex ordered for them both, the breakfast they had missed in their rush to leave the house, and twined his fingers with Spike's.

"So, what are we doing here, anyway?"

Spike blinked, mentally shifting gears. "Need to decide on a building." Alex cocked his head to the side, Spike realized that while it felt like they had known each other forever, Alex really didn't know anything about him.

"Mum tended bar back home, I could mix most drinks before I could read the recipes. Traveled all over Europe on a pint and a draft. Da called her his

gypsy, said that she had cursed him with a soul when they got together. Mum could see the beauty and splendor in just about everything, wouldn't hurt a fly on a bet, Da was a rogue and a drunk when she fell in love with him. Cleaned him up and kept him on the straight and narrow even while she took us all over on a crooked path." Their breakfasts came, Alex ate as Spike wove story after story about all the places they had been.

Alex scuffed his shoe in the rubbish, watching Spike prowl around and grumble at the fourth gutted building they'd looked at. When he started listing pro's and con's about the floor plan, Alex turned and wandered back outside. Spike came running when Alex shouted his name. He had to blink a few times to focus, the sudden shift from gloom to sunlight making spots dance before his eyes.

Alex stood across the street, looking up at the blank marquee. He walked forward slowly, drifting as if in a dream, bringing his hands up to push against the antique revolving door. The hinges

made and eerie whine, then the glass shifted and the door hesitantly started to move.

Spike followed Alex in, feeling the same gut-clenching wonder that was evident on Alex's face.

"This is it, Spike. This is your club."

Part Eight

Spike stood in his office, staring down at the theatre floor, nose pressed against the double paned glass. His fingers twisted the knobs and spools of the old reel-to-reel he'd kept, partly for nostalgia, partly for atmosphere. Alex could probably tell him what went where, Spike really didn't care but made a mental note to ask him later, just to hear his voice.

The club had taken exactly nine weeks to gut, repair and restore. The stage had still been pristine, all it really needed was a good stripping and buffing. The orchestra pit had to be torn down

to the concrete foundation, the hard wood flooring so scarred and scratched Alex had almost wept. All of the plush, tattered chairs had been torn out, cast-iron bolts saved away for a rainy day. Spike wasn't too sure what he was going to do with them, but there they sat, safe as houses in a clear mason jar on his desk.

The first four rows had sections torn out, opening up a main floor but leaving two wide staircases down to the pit. New wood flooring had been laid, warm honey and rich amber tones in an elegant ladder pattern, from this height it looked like vines of sunlight climbing from front to back.

Alex had torn down the faded maroon velvet lining the walls, amazed at the layers of ancient rotting newspaper he'd found between that and the dry-wall. They'd spent the better part of a Saturday afternoon curled in the mess of fabric, picking through the scraps of paper and reading eighty year old headlines. Then Alex and Rupert had driven all the way up to Seattle to pick up the special order brocade that now lined the walls. The pearl grey satin, smooth and shimmery with carefully placed watermarks, reminded Spike of an early morning storm, complete with the soft yellows and golds and sepias of a watery sunrise.

Joyce had surprised him with four antique chandeliers, French beaded and Swarovski crystals and burnished brass, each large enough to hang from the four corners and cast the entire room in a hushed white light. Dawn had gifted him with their matching wall sconces.

Just this morning Spike had watched the crew hang the curtains, thick dark burgundy sweeps from top center to stage points, with the same pearl grey backdrop.

The bar stood where the old ticket and concession stand had once been, all burnished honey wood and brass. The kitchen had been built back where the old dressing rooms made a beehive cluster.

Willow and Tara shimmied around the room, putting the final touches to the place settings. Perking up the tails on the peacock fan napkins, making sure all the tapers and floating candles were where they were supposed to be and all the wicks trimmed. Dawn flitted behind the lovers, using a soft cotton sheet to shine the silver and flick away any imagined dust on the gold and burgundy dishes.

Spike checked the clock again, fingers twitching at the hem of his vest. Joyce had insisted on the tux

for opening night, Alex himself had tucked the white rose into his lapel and christened it with a light brushing of his fingers and a sweetly shy smile. He looked back out, heart ramming up into his throat when a familiar brunet came onto the floor.

Alex was finally here.

He turned, staring straight up into the office and smiled at Spike, waving him down. Alex walked back up to the bar, leaning against a heavily laden dolly.

"Present for you, Spike." Alex's hands fluttered over the package, fingers lightly plucking at the white canvas hiding its contents. Willow and Tara moved behind Spike, Dawn flanking Alex's right side.

"I...I hope these are all right." He reached down, snapping the straps holding the canvas down.

"Happy opening."

Spike stared at Alex, one hand rising to take Alex's, the other laying gently on the canvas.

"Thank you pet." Spike leaned over, bussing Alex's cheek with a soft kiss, then pulled the canvas off with a quiet whoosh.

Twelve huge black frames, separated by thick layers of tissue paper, stood stacked like soldiers in a row. Spike picked up the first one, breath catching at the black and white image of Paris at night. He leaned it reverently against the bar, picking up the second, another black and white image, this one a black man playing a saxophone in some anonymous whiskey lit club.

Image after image of unmistakable Alexander Harris originals, all perfectly framed in black lacquer and protected by thick sheets of glass.

A roulette table in Monaco, complete with a tuxedoed man doing his best to lose the pile of chips on the table.

A flamenco dancer in Spain, heels kicked up and a sultry smile on her painted lips.

A riverboat, huge paddle wheel churning up murky silt from the bottom of the Mississippi.

"Help me hang them, luv?" Spike looked up at Alex, not bothering to hide the emotion swimming in his eyes. Joyce ushered the girls away when Spike took Alex into his arms and kissed him breathless.

Part Nine

Alex stood at the small table, looking around the room and inspecting all the little things. Champagne and flutes in a frosted silver bucket, covered tray with strawberries and tiny balls of melon. He shoved his hand into his pocket, pulling out a folded slip of paper. They had talked about this, gone to the clinic together and held hands while the blood was being drawn. He and Spike had talked about a lot of things over the past few weeks,

Alex had left the club while Spike was finishing up last minute paperwork, had Rupert drop him off at the hotel, amused and embarrassed and touched when Rupert gave him the safe sex talk. He'd taken off his jacket and kicked his shoes off by the door, washed his hands and brushed his teeth and wondered what in the hell was taking Spike so long.

The clock on the wall caught his attention, *tick tick*

tick filling the silence, growing louder and louder and louder until the click of the door opening and closing was lost. Alex was supremely grateful he only screamed a little bit when Spike wrapped his arms around him and pressed a kiss to the back of his neck.

"Sorry, luv," Spike's voice was warm and breathy against Alex's ear, "Didn't mean to startle you." Alex turned in his arms, reaching his own out to twine around Spike and pull him closer.

"I'd say don't do it again, but I think that's probably asking too much." Alex smiled at the solemn expression on Spike's face, then gasped when Spike *pressed* against him.

"Probably." And then Spike was kissing him, soft and sweet and not nearly enough for Alex. He wanted tongue and teeth and hot and sloppy and all of the things that made this here and real and right. There were whisper touches, that made Alex wonder if this was all a dream, until Spike used those touches to flick the buttons of his shirt open and slide the fabric off his shoulders with a *shish* and a *skritch* and finally a *whump* when it crumpled on the floor.

Spike danced his fingers over Alex's chest, one

thumb rasping over a pebbled nipple, calloused fingertips tracing the line and whirl of crisp dark hair. The kisses got hotter, more frantic as Spike wound his arms around Alex and Alex pushed up against Spike.

~*~

“Been thinkin’ pet.” Spike rolled his head, proud of himself for being able to move that much. Alex tried to laugh, wound up groaning softly instead.

“Want to take you home with me.” Spike curled his fingers tighter around Alex’s hand, tugging to bring it to his mouth.

“Want to introduce you to Mum, and Da of course. Want to show you some of the photo’s they’ve collected over the years, maybe have you take some of them to bring back.”

“What about the club? I mean, you’ve just opened it.” Alex brushed his fingers over Spike’s face, wondering for a moment how such a beauty wound up in his bed.

“Joyce is a good manager, she needs something more to do than putter around that big old house. And it would just be for a couple of weeks.” Spike

drew in a deep breath, "Thought maybe when we got back, we could look for a...an apartment or something. Together." There was a long moment of silence, Spike held his breath and Alex found the energy to roll over and look at his lover.

"Where does your mom live again?"

"Scotland."

"So, Scotland for a couple of weeks, then apartment hunting. Sounds like a busy summer."

The End

Fifteen Photographs

This was written for [👤kitane](#), who requested something in the [Apartment 4A](#) verse, in return for a donation to [👤fund_fic](#). [👤kitane](#), honey, I'm insanely sorry this has taken me so long to do, the boys just would not cooperate, so I finally just let them do what they wanted to do!

It was a black leather book set on a black lacquer table. Spike had bought the portfolio and left it sitting on the counter, just waiting for Alex to get home. Alex had sat on the couch for hours, fingers running alongside the stiff edges of the matte board; empty hours spent thinking about empty pages. Spike watched from the bedroom doorway, silent and scared that he'd made the wrong move. When Alex set the book on the table, nudging the corner again and again and again, then got up to get his camera, Spike knew the gift was perfect.

Fourteen Photographs

Spike slept on his stomach, one arm flung across the bed and one leg tangled in the sheets. Alex usually slept under that arm, pinned in place until the alarm went off and Spike jumped out of bed like a wet cat. But tonight the window was open, the moon was full, and Alex couldn't sleep. Spike looked like something chiseled out of marble, pristine and lifeless in the moonlight, so carefully designed around a bed of indigo blue linen. The wind blew the curtains just a little, their stiff

skritchng sound barely louder than the clicking of the camera.

Thirteen Photographs

She came to the park every day, straight brown hair tied back in a ragged red ribbon, face shiny and scrubbed clean. Her little girl played in the grass, digging around in the rocks and bits of leaves, bringing back secret treasures, pebbles and feathers and bugs, all for her mommy to wonder over. They talked to Alex sometimes, flirted with Spike with their little feminine smiles and long batting eyelashes. And Alex didn't laugh when the little girl shared one of her deepest secrets. One day, when she was tall and pretty, she was going to marry them both.

Twelve Photographs

The blonde was a waiter at the local Bar and Grill, only he wasn't really a waiter, and he wasn't exactly a he. Josh spent his days taking orders and keeping his one white shirt white, and spent his nights touring the gay circuit as Josephine, diva supreme. Josh only hit on Spike once, Alex put a stop to that after two shots of tequila and a quick right hook. Josh applied at the club when the bruise went away, he quit his day job two weeks

later, performing Tuesday through Saturday in his black sequined dress and fuchsia lipstick.

Eleven Photographs

Willow and Tara had been saving since their six month anniversary, three years and ten thousand dollars later and Tara was pregnant. Her face looked like something out of a Hummel catalogue, cheeks flushed and skin glowing translucent. Willow was ecstatic, buying tiny dresses and lacy bonnets when the ultrasound announced a girl. Tara's belly quickly became her defining feature, round and hard with strange lumps just appearing in the shape of tiny hands or feet. Where Willow had once painted love and fertility patterns with her dark dark henna, she now drew prayers for health and prosperity and love.

Ten Photographs

Elsa Marie was born right on schedule, coming into this world with a full head of dark blond hair and big blue eyes. Giles wept, holding her in the cradle of his hands and whispering ancient blessings in her ear. They brought Elsa home bundled up in her lacy white blanket and Winnie the Pooh carrier, handled her like she knew every secret of the universe. Joyce made coffee while Giles fluffed

pillows and fussed over Tara. And when Elsa began to whimper, pursing her tiny lips, Tara settled her in the crook of her arm and let her nurse.

Nine Photographs

You could set your clock by the old man, seven pm, rain or shine, dusk or full sunlight. Alex wondered if that would be him one day, walking through the cemetery in his spit-shined shoes and whisked black suit. There were three grave that the old man visited, bringing flowers to one, and tiny cars or dinosaurs or army men to the others. Alex watched for weeks, then finally walked in the old man's footsteps, grabbing his camera at the very last minute.

*Muriel Thornton. Beloved Wife, Mother, Friend.
1923-1949*

*Bryce and Brody Thornton, Twin Sparks of Brilliant
Light 1949*

Eight Photographs

They held weddings in the park sometimes, brides in their white satin and lace, grooms in their tails and cummerbunds. Mothers and mother-in-laws would spend hours weaving ribbons through the

trees and hanging crepe bells and birds from the branches. Fathers and father-in-laws would hide from their womenfolk, ducking behind the fake trellises and awnings to share nips of stuff harder than the traditional champagne. Brides would fight with their maids, and the grooms...well, more often than not the grooms would get caught flirting with the maids, hence the fights. Alex always made sure to get pictures of the kids.

Seven Photographs

It had been raining for days, wind howling and knocking down trees and telephone poles and garbage cans. When the sun broke through the clouds, Spike packed up the car, wrapping Alex's equipment up in layers of plastic sheeting, and took them out to the beach. Hours spent sorting through huge chunks of driftwood and washed up fish until their feet hurt and their fingers were numb from the wet and cold. A huge brace of rocks sheltered the tide pool, and they spent even more hours untangling the birds from the cast-aside fishing nets. They didn't leave until midnight.

Six Photographs

Jeanie, Spike's head waitress, met them in the park for coffee. She had Snoopy, her three year

old basset hound on a leash and a huge wicker basket under her arm. Alex found out first hand that basset pups had incredibly sharp teeth and a fondness for thin leather straps. They played for hours, rolling in the grass with their too long ears and too floppy skin, making little *arooooooo* trumpet sounds to announce their attacks, and Spike kissed the tiny gashes in Alex's hands when the pups got really rambunctious. They left when all the pups finally fell asleep.

Five Photographs

Joyce proposed and Giles accepted. Dawn and Buffy helped to pick out the rings, Willow and Tara helped to decorate the club. Alex was the best man, with Buffy standing up with her mom. Josh gave the bride away, dressed in sequins, and stepped in as the entertainment. Spike became a little Napoleon, issuing orders to the caterers with out-flung hands and a crisp British accent. There really wasn't much in the way of wedding presents, two households being combined and all that, so everybody pitched in and sent the newlyweds on a two-week all-expense paid cruise of the Bahamas.

Four Photographs

They had been together forever, it seemed, but

this was only their third anniversary. Spike came home from the club just as Alex was lighting the last candle on the table. The white-bone china was laid out, a gift from Joyce their last anniversary, the silver and onyx candle sticks from Willow and Tara the year before that, and the antique linen and lace tablecloth from Giles. Somewhere along the way Alex had picked up napkin rings that matched the candle sticks, and Tara had shown him how to roll the linen napkins to fit. Willow came over and cooked.

Three Photographs

Elsa had her first birthday, complete with the requisite party hats and chocolate cake. Spike bought her a pack of big chubby crayons and different coloring books, but only because Alex said no make-up for at least fifteen more years. Alex bought her a giant stuffed bear, big enough to crowd the crib that she still slept in. So when she finally fell asleep, curled up between the two huge legs of her bear, chocolate cake smeared all over her face and grubby little hands still clutching frosting-coated crayons, Alex kissed her softly and tiptoed out, Spike on his heels.

Two Photographs

Alex went on an avant-garde kick, setting random objects together and photographing them with different lights. He spent two days at the home improvement store picking up bits of this and pieces of that, and gallons and gallons of paint. Spike somehow got talked into being the human model. Alex painted his skin with tribal markings, stretched his arms out and hung long thin chains from his fingers, and propped his lover up against chunks of driftwood and twisted pieces of metal. When *Descent* was unveiled at Alex's first gallery showing, the final bid topped \$10,000 dollars. Alex was famous.

One Photograph

Spike finally bought his own camera, just a little sixty dollar Nikon, but it was his. It was only fair, after all, Alex had taken hundreds of pictures of Spike over the years, Spike was just returning the favor. He spent days just looking through the lens, seeing the world like Alex did, hours snapping photos of whatever caught his fancy. Mostly of Alex; shuffling around the house in his sleep pants, holding Elsa while she slept, fixing the leaky pipe under Joyce's sink. His favorite one had to be Alex all dressed up, tie, jacket, shoes, asleep on the couch.

The End