

Divided

by

Jackson

Part One

Xander had a list of least favourite places, and the city dump was up in the top five. Not as bad as the Morgue because at least the dump didn't have dead people but definitely worse than the local Bus Station, cos okay there were less winos at the dump but he really did have to deduct marks for the stench. Still duty called and here they were.

Ah the city dump. If I'dve known this was where we were gonna end up I . . . probably would have still worn this.

Even he had to admit the clothes he was wearing tonight made you reach for sunglasses if you looked at them too long but his mom had broken the washer again and at least they didn't smell. Or hadn't before coming here. *If the demon is so damn sophisticated howcome he hangs out in a dump? Oh that's right he's only sophisticated when it comes to killing people. Not a comforting thought*

"People say they're [recycling](#)." Riley said, interrupting his inner rant as he shook his head sadly. "They're not recycling."

Xander bit back a grin as he patted Riley comfortingly and continued to bring up the rear behind Buffy and Giles. And Riley and Willow just to be on the safe side. Not that he was nervous or anything of this huge robed demon that used pain inducing weapons and could be lurking behind any pile of rubbish . . .

He heard some scuffling sounds nearby and tensed but the look on Riley's face reassured him slightly. It was the 'oh no not you' look rather than the 'oh crap how many times can that thing kill me before it gets tired' look. Xander peered over Riley's shoulder and relaxed. Though it was a demon lurking it was more the annoying, impotent kind that seemed to turn up every damn place you go, rather than the robed, sophisticated type.

"What are you doing here Spike?" Riley asked threateningly.

Spike's ice blond head raised itself up as he looked at them in frank disgust. Yet again with the Slayerettes and the farm boy missing the blindingly obvious. Didn't these guys have anything better to do than apparently follow

him around and catch him doing things he'd rather have kept private?

"Oh, there's nice lady vampire who's set up a charming tea room over the next pile of crap" he said witheringly to hide his embarrassment at being caught. "What do you think I'm doing, I'm scavenging ain't I?" Scavenging. Yeah, that was a good word. Put a slightly better complexion on picking through other peoples less than sweet smelling rubbish.

He waved a lamp at them, which Xander actually thought was pretty nice. Would go a lot better in the basement than a crypt. Then again the two were probably even. The basement also featured on his list of least favourite places.

"Very pretty" Willow chirped.

Damn right Spike thought slightly mollified. Red had taste. He almost smiled then caught Buffy's glare and thought better of it, instead throwing a wave at her as he walked away.

Giles looked apologetically at the others then called out.

"Spike erm . . ."

Spike rolled his eyes. *Of course, don't let me hang on to my last tatter of pride will you Rupert?* But he turned back, if nothing else at least the Scoobies kept him alert to any new demons he could kill.

"We're looking for a demon." Giles continued. "Tall, robed, skin sort of hanging off, deep voice."

Spike's eyes widened slightly as he looked behind Giles at what was advancing on them silently. Maybe he'd let the Slayer take this one. There was split second temptation to keep quiet and watch them get hit, but he couldn't resist seeing the look on their faces.

"You mean a great tall robey thing like that one?"

Crap, crap, crap, next time I'm staying in the middle Xander thought manically as they all whirled around. *Assuming there is a next time.* Great, tall robey thing just like the vampire said. Oh and did he mention it looked absolutely petrifying? Raising it's weapon as it stalked towards them and fired what looked like a bolt of light right at them. The Scoobies all scattered and he threw himself on the ground hearing it hit somewhere behind him.

"Take cover!" Riley yelled.

/Yeah thanks Ri. If it hit's me be sure and let me know I'm dead won't you?/ Xander thought frantically, eyes darting around to see if everyone was safe, if Buffy could start the slash and dice anytime soon. Spike was open, maybe he could help . . .

"Hey big guy, kick her ass!" Spike yelled.

Maybe not. When the hell was it gonna sink in Spike was an evil, annoying, ungrateful . . . Xander watched with some satisfaction as Toth obviously not liking the 'all demons together' thing Spike was selling, fired at him, smashing his lamp.

"Oh very nice!" Spike yelled affronted. "I was on your side!"

Toth ignored Spike, sensible demon, and raised his weapon again, directly at Buffy. Xander launched himself at her and threw her out of the way as Riley rushed at Toth, knocking his arm and deflecting the bolt so it flew scant inches past Buffy, straight at Spike who looked up from his mangled lamp just in time to see it heading straight for him.

"Aw shi . . ."

Spike disappeared from view as the power of the blast knocked him off his feet, making him fly over a pile of

garbage. They gaped in horror, before whirling around to fight Toth again . . .except Toth was nowhere in sight.

"What the . . ."

"Where's Toth?"

"He's gone!"

As the others scrambled around looking for Toth, Xander clambered over the mound of rubbish to check on Spike. Not that he was concerned but because . . .okay he couldn't think of a good reason, but he still stumbled over the garbage, trying not to think about what he might be putting his feet in.

He spotted Spike at once, groaning as he shifted on the rubble and slithered over, crouching in front of him.

"Spike! You okay? Can you get up?"

Spike was not happy. He stunk, he hurt, he'd been caught pawing through rubbish by his enemies, he was lying on something that somehow felt both pointy and slimy and his lamp was broken. And now some idiot was asking if he was okay? He felt snappish and had a strong desire to sulk. He swallowed back the annoyed retort that rose to his lips and opened his eyes to find himself gazing into what could very well be the biggest, softest, hottest dark

brown eyes he'd ever seen, with long eyelashes, blinking through the soft brown hair that was tumbling into them

...

Xander looked at Spike, who was staring at him mutely, opening and closing his mouth. *Crap. I bet it's fried his brain, that's all we need, Spike acting like a goldfish*

Xander shook off the image of Spike with scales and waved his hand in front of Spike's face.

"Spike, are you alright?" Spike blinked rapidly, Xander, he of the velvet eyes, was waving at him and seemed to want an answer. He felt wonderfully, giddily, dizzy and couldn't quite get a hold of the words he wanted to say.

"Xander?" He asked confused. He felt . . different. Kind of trembly and, for a change, not really wanting to find the demon that had hit him and rip out it's spine. More like he needed a cup of tea and a sit down. Being hit had been quite a shock.

"Spike." Xander said impatiently. "Are you gonna get up or what?"

"Umm yes." He said shakily, his anger vanishing. "I think so. Thank you."

Xander raised an eyebrow. Spike saying thank you? That blast must have packed a hell of a punch. "Okaaay . . .here." He held his hand out and Spike slowly placed his own in it, a small tingle going through him as Xander's fingers closed over his own.

Xander stood and heaved, Spike came up, stumbling on the shifting bags a little and found himself looking up at Xander. Xander that he was suddenly standing very close to.

Xander, his expression a little bemused raised his eyebrows at Spike then looked pointedly down to where, Spike realised with a sudden flame to his cheeks, he was still holding on to Xander's hand.

"Xander! Are you okay?" Buffy's voice cut in.

"Yeah Buff" Xander yelled back, dropping Spike's hand and moving back to his friends.

Spike stood there for a moment, bewildered. His hand still felt warm where Xander's fingers had touched him. He frowned, trying to place the unfamiliar feeling running through him. Sort of warm and looked after. It had been kind of Xander to come and check on him. No wonder he felt odd. Usually he didn't have much time for kindness. Or for Xander come to that. He'd known

Xander for ages, even lived with him for a while, and basically found the lad to be a waste of space. An irritating, sanctimonious one at that. So why was he suddenly coming over all shy and girl-like, staring into his eyes? He clambered over the rubble, losing his footing and hitting the bags with a surprised "Ooofff" sound.

"Blech." With a kind of scrabbling run on all fours, he lurched over the mounds and then ducked down to peer over the top to watch as Xander walked away with the others, he strained to hear snippets, frowning slightly. That blast must have really thrown him off, he didn't usually have this much difficulty tuning in to conversations.

". . .he okay?" Red.

"Stunned, not to . . .Happened . . .Toth?" Xander.

"Better . . .next time . . ." the soldier.

Xander and the other's vanished from view and Spike managed to get to his feet and stagger back to the path. He shook his head crossly. The garbage stench must be sending him crazy. Either that or his head was still spinning from the blast from Toth's stick. That was it. Nothing to do with Xander. No. Not a thing.

Slowly, he made his way home, wincing slightly with each step, and the demon, green and feral, out of sight and stunned under a broken table, opened its red eyes.

Part Two

The demon crouched close to the ground, listening for any sounds of danger. Every muscle in his body tensed, ready to leap, to kill anything that threatened him. His eyes darted around, taking in his surroundings. He didn't know how he'd got here, all he could remember was a bolt of pain, then darkness and now this. He whipped his head from side to side, trying to take in the abundance of stimulus suddenly bombarding him. Scent, sound, sight, everything was amplified to an almost unbearable pitch, the slight creaking as the bags shifted slightly under his feet, the overpowering stench of the rubbish surrounding him, the scrape of leather and denim against his skin.

All around him was still and he relaxed slightly. Whatever this place was, it held no danger. He stood and flexed his body experimentally. Strength coursed through him, he felt released, like he had been cooped up in a cramped space for far too long and was finally free.

With grace and ease the demon leapt from one mound of rubbish to another, each time inhaling deeply. Beneath the overpowering stench of the garbage around

him, he could catch the scent, faint and tantalizing of something. Something he wanted.

He tore his way through the rubbish, tossing it to one side. He didn't know what he was looking for exactly, but it wasn't here, his rage mounted. Too much to keep hemmed in. No room for thoughts, no need for them. Only feelings. And he felt hungry. The faint tinge of pink in the sky and the change of the wind strengthened the scent of what he wanted. People. Blood. Food. It called to him, a pull that was impossible to refuse; he could almost taste the blood already in his mouth, the coppery warmth spreading throughout him.

With a growl of triumph he began to make his way towards the scent, only to throw himself back under cover, howling with rage as the burning pain from the sun struck his skin.

Spike woke at sunset, but didn't stir from his uncomfortable bed. Still half asleep, he replayed last night's events. A dreamy smile spread over his face and a warm bubble of happiness expanded in his chest at the memory of Xander helping him after Toth's attack.

That had been so nice of him! Xander had been concerned about him. His smile grew and he sighed happily. Maybe he could get hit by a blast again and Xander would be there to help him up. Only this time, instead of dropping his hand, Xander would tighten his grip. His eyes would flick to Spike's mouth. He'd slowly pull Spike to him, lean in, and Spike would raise his mouth up for the kiss . . .

Spike jolted himself out of his half-dream before imaginary Xander had a chance to close the gap between their lips. Flushed and appalled, he shot up in bed. He didn't just fantasize about kissing Xander! However, a certain part of his body still tingling slightly under the sheet was providing a silent, but eloquent argument that he had, and that he'd enjoyed it quite a bit.

He couldn't possibly like Xander! Had he suddenly gone crazy? Why Xander? Why now? Besides, even if he did . . . um, like Xander, it would be pointless. Xander had a girlfriend, he would never be interested in him. He couldn't fall for anyone more out of reach than Xander if he tried.

But . . . he thought hesitantly *he's so nice*. It was just last night. That small show of concern that he'd had no reason to deserve or expect. With that one gesture,

Xander had walked straight into his heart, and now he couldn't imagine why he hadn't noticed him before. As though he was seeing Xander through new eyes and suddenly noticing all the things he'd known for years but never appreciated. He was kind and brave, funny and gorgeous and always smelled so good, looked so good . . .he remembered nights tied to the chair, watching Xander clamber into bed, only wearing his boxers . . .the long line of his neck, the play of the muscles in his arms, skin gleaming in the dim light. . .

A slightly dazed expression came over Spike's face as a small, besotted smile tugged at his mouth. He could have stayed there daydreaming indefinitely, but a low growling sound interrupted him. His stomach.

Still a little starry-eyed, he got out of bed, shivering slightly as he slid into his jeans and looked with distaste at his tiny, portable fridge. The only thing in there was couple of bags of cold pig blood. He'd really better look into finding a microwave. In human terms his fridge held the equivalent to some gone off bacon and half a can of flat beer. But still. *Hungry*. He swallowed back his odd nausea at the thought of drinking blood and bit into the bag, struggling against the plastic before the blood spurted into his mouth. And Spike promptly spurted it back out again.

"Urrrgh!" Spitting it out in disgust, he wiped his mouth vigorously in an attempt to rub all the taste away. He knew pig's blood wasn't exactly fine dining, but it had never tasted that bad before. Despite its bitter taste, it usually satisfied some deep part of him, but apparently not today. It must have gone bad or something. He shuddered at the memory of the taste, but his stomach was still roaring for food.

He counted the money in his wallet. Twenty-three bucks. Not much, but enough to get him a fresh bag, then he'd head over to the Bronze for a beer. Maybe Xander would be there. Excitement he couldn't hold back raced through him. Not that he'd do anything, it would be stupid to even hope that there was any chance that Xander would feel the same. He'd tried that too many times in the past, reaching out to people, overcoming his shyness only to have it flung back in his face. But if he could just see Xander, spend a little time being with him, looking at him, listening to him, that would be enough.

With a smile Spike just couldn't wipe from his face, he finished dressing and set off, slowly strolling, enjoying the warm breeze, the velvety duskiness of the evening. He hadn't felt this happy, this peaceful in longer than he could remember. The constant tension and frustration he'd been feeling lately just drained away.

So he was chipped. So what? There were worse things. His problem was he didn't have a hobby. He needed to keep busy, maybe he could join the library, borrow some books off Giles. He used to love reading, writing, playing with words, making them into a beautiful form. Maybe he just hadn't had the right inspiration for a while, but for the first time in over a hundred years Xander was making him feel the urge to pick up a pen and try to write a poem again. Why not? It wasn't like anyone would ever see what he wrote.

His head still in the clouds, he hardly noticed the two giggling girls walking by. They whispered together, waving flirtatiously as they appraised him appreciatively. Spike dropped his eyes and blushed from the tip of his toes to the roots of his hair.

As he passed the Bronze on the way to the butcher shop, he paused. He was sure they served chicken wings in here, which was suddenly a lot more appealing than a bag of animal blood. The hunger kicked in again, ten times stronger than before. He needed food. Right now. Real food, like chicken. And fries. And chocolate.

Entering the Bronze, he blinked a little, letting his eyes adjust to the dim light before heading straight for the

tables. As he hungrily perused the menu, a waitress appeared in front of him.

"What can I get you?"

Spike's initial thought was he wanted everything, several times over.

"Umm ..."

Some time later Spike was surrounded by empty dishes and making fast work through a plate of chicken wings. Oblivious to his surroundings, all that mattered was the food, even though his stomach felt like it might just burst from how much he'd eaten, he just couldn't get enough of it. He'd spent nearly all his money and frankly didn't care. He'd never tasted anything as good as this in his life. Of course he'd had food now and then since he'd been turned, even more since he'd been chipped and couldn't sample the variations in the blood of different humans. An all pig blood diet all the time got boring, but never had he tasted food so strongly, never had it felt so utterly there.

His waitress passed . . . again, and smiled at him, with more than a touch of professional interest, amused at the speed he'd been gulping his food down at.

"Good?" She twinkled at him.

"Oh yes, delicious thank you " Spike replied bashfully.

"Can I get you anything else . . .anything at all?" She asked, leaning forward a little.

"Actually . . ." Spike said thoughtfully, "I'd like another beer please."

Slightly miffed, she moved away, and Spike returned his attention to his plate.

"Well, if it isn't short, blond and gruesome," came a voice from behind him. Spike promptly choked on his chicken wing as Xander moved around to stand in front of him.

"Xander!" Cough. Choke. Splutter. Cough. Swallow. He managed an embarrassed smile while dabbing at his streaming eyes. "Um ...hello"

He wanted to be cool, witty, sophisticated, but Xander was here! Right in front of him! Talking to him!

It was overwhelming. Spike was frozen with nerves, his tongue just didn't seem to want to talk properly, and he could feel a blush was just waiting to happen. His skin hummed with excitement, he couldn't have felt more

acutely aware of Xander's presence if he had taken him in his arms.

Fortunately Xander seemed completely unaware of the affect his presence was having on Spike as his eyes flicked casually over Spike, glanced around the Bronze, then looked back at Spike, as he paused before moving on.

"I see you're all recovered from the blast." Xander said, his eyebrow arched quizzically, his eyes dark with amusement as he took in the mountain of empty plates.

"Blast?" Spike said blankly as he tried to keep his hands steady, his mind was in a daze, completely unable to grasp anything other than the fact that Xander was here. Suddenly this crush was blossoming into something a whole lot bigger than he'd first thought.

His waitress returned, placing his beer in front of him, casting an indifferent glance at Xander before giving Spike a brilliant smile.

Spike barely even noticed she was there, but Xander's eyes narrowed as he watched her move off.

Xander really does have the most amazing eyes Spike thought dreamily. Eyes that gleamed, teemed, beamed

with heat and humor and . . .did he just rhyme? He'd have to remember that and write it down. Later.

"Gee what is it with women and the undead?" Xander asked sourly, his eyes still on the waitress. "Why doesn't the guy that works his ass off *saving* them from vampires ever get a little appreciation?"

"What?" Spike pulled himself back from his contemplation of Xander's eyes with an effort. "You think she . . .uh, liked me?"

Xander shot Spike an exasperated look. "She was practically drooling."

"Really?" Spike asked, surprised. Maybe it was a good thing that Xander noticed other people finding him attractive. He actually sounded a little jealous. "I didn't notice."

"That's a surprise." Xander said cynically. "You're usually loving the attention."

"I am?" Spike wondered aloud. "Well not anymore. I'm not interested in . . ." He trailed off.

Something more pressing had his attention. Xander had chocolate. Spike's wide eyes followed as Xander brought the bar to his mouth and bit into it. When he lowered the

bar again, Spike didn't follow it. Somehow his eyes were stuck on Xander's mouth. His luscious, delectable, fully edible mouth.

Xander chewed on his chocolate and noticed that Spike was staring at him.

"What?" he asked through a mouthful of chocolate. "Do I have something on my face?"

Spike blinked. "Um .. .no, nothing." Unable to tear his eyes away he reached for his beer.

Xander shrugged, swallowed the chocolate and licked his lips lingeringly. Spike promptly knocked his glass over, and the beer flew across the table drenching Xander.

"Hey!" Xander snapped.

"Oh, I'm sorry" Spike stammered, feeling a flush of embarrassment rise up. "Did it splash you badly?"

"I guess those famous vampire reflexes ain't what they used to be," Xander grumbled as he dropped his chocolate and grabbed a bundle of napkins, mopping at his jeans. Spike stood, grabbed another bundle and reached towards the damp patch on Xander's jeans.

"Woah!" Xander exclaimed, pointedly moving out of Spike's reach. "What are you doing?"

"Well I was . . ." Spike looked at the bundle of napkins in his hand, where he'd been about to start mopping, Xander, with his eyebrows raised expectantly, and wondered why the room wasn't glowing red along with him.

"Oh ... dear." Where was a trapdoor to hell when you really needed one?

Xander frowned, and looked at Spike a little closer.

"Spike are you blushing?"

"No! Of - of course I'm not blushing." This was dreadful. Xander was sure to guess, and then he'd either laugh at Spike or kill him. Neither option was particularly appealing. How would he have acted before he started liking Xander?

"Vampires don't blush. Stupid." In an attempt to look confident and relaxed he leaned on the table, his hand slid in the beer and he stumbled, falling against the table and banging his hip painfully on the corner. Inside he was screaming, but he resisted the need to rub what was sure to be one hell of a bruise and jump around shouting

"ow". Instead he froze where he stood, leaning on the table and gave Xander a pained smile.

Xander looked at the table, then Spike. His eyebrows climbed a little higher.

"Your hand's in a pool of beer." He pointed out.

"I know." Spike said defensively.

"What is up with you tonight? And why are you talking like that?" Xander asked, his frown deepening.

"Like what?"

"Nicely. So . . .proper. You sound like Wesley, what happened to the working class accent?"

"Nothing. I just . . ." Spike trailed off. Xander had a point. What had happened to the accent?

He shook his head; he couldn't worry about that right now, despite his vow not to hope for anything from Xander, here was a golden opportunity to buy Xander a drink, to apologize for splashing him, and also to thank him for his help last night. Maybe Xander would begin to look at him in a new way. Not in *that* way, but at least in a way where Xander didn't hate him.

It was easier to speak now Xander wasn't looking at him, he was mopping at his jeans again.

"Xander" Spike began, pleased that his voice was only shaking the smallest amount "are you here on your own?"

"I'm waiting for Anya." Xander replied distractedly.
"We're having a little R & R, before I go patrolling with Buffy on the lookout for Toth. Oh, and thanks so much for the help there by the way."

"Help?"

" 'Hey big guy kick her ass?'" Xander quoted glaring at him.

"Oh. I was just trying to . . .um, distract him. I didn't really mean it, you know." Spike babbled quickly.

"And I'm sure Buffy won't really mean it when she kicks *your* pale annoying ass."

This really didn't seem like the ideal moment to offer to buy Xander a drink. Spike had a feeling that the only chance he had of Xander looking at him in a new way was if he started walking upside-down. But he had to start somewhere. Spike licked his suddenly very dry lips.

"Xander. A-as an apology, would . . .would you let me . .
."

"Xander!" Spike felt himself wincing at the loud voice cutting between them. Anya appeared and grabbed hold of Xander's arm possessively, giving Spike a dirty look.

"Why are you talking to him?" She pouted up at Xander.

"Something I've been asking myself since the conversation, - and I use the term loosely - began."
Xander smiled down at her and kissed her briefly on the mouth.

Spike looked away, he felt so stupid. An unwelcome third. This was what he got for letting his defenses down, getting his hopes up. The pain welled up inside him at seeing the two of them together. It wasn't even so much the kiss as Xander's smile. Indulgent, entertained and loving.

"He's probably trying to steal your wallet." Anya continued.

Xander looked thoughtful. "He did make a grab for my jeans."

"See!"

"I wasn't trying to grab your wallet!" Spike protested horrified.

Anya narrowed her eyes. "What were you trying to grab?"

"Well I was . . ." Spike stumbled on the words, this conversation was spinning way out of control. He looked at Xander beseechingly.

"I would never steal from you," he said sincerely, desperate for Xander to believe him. Oh. Except sometimes he did steal from him.

"Well I won't from now on." Spike added frantically.

Xander looked up, an expression of utter disbelief on his face. Spike tensed in readiness for the next slam, but Xander was distracted by Anya.

"What happened to your jeans?" she asked. "It looks like you peed."

Xander shot Spike a black look. "Spike killed the evil beer. I got caught in the crossfire."

"Poor baby." She smiled consolingly at him as a slow song started to play. "Let's dance before you have to go kill more evil things."

"Sure your arm will be okay?" Xander asked, lightly touching her sling.

Anya nodded and led Xander away, and Spike grabbed his coat, blinking rapidly. Suddenly he wasn't hungry anymore.

Unfortunately, his broken heart would have to wait as *something* came crashing through the main entrance, bringing the door and a fair portion of the wall with it.

Shrieks of shock and fear drowned out the music as the demon bounded around the Bronze, whipping its head around, like it was trying to take everything in. Spike froze in terror. It was huge, green, with burning red eyes. It was immensely strong, flicking a table aside like it was nothing but a feather. The table flew into the wall, smashed beyond repair. The screams echoed through the building as people tried to escape. The demon grabbed a girl and bent her head back, exposing her throat.

"Hey!"

Spike's head whirled around, along with the demons to see Xander throwing chunks of broken table at it in an attempt to distract it. It worked, almost too well. The demon roared with anger, threw the girl to one side and bounded over to Xander.

"No!" Spike snapped out of his paralysis and tried to snap the leg of his chair for a weapon, but it wouldn't come off. He pulled so hard his hands ached but it wouldn't budge.

He looked up in horror to see Anya help Xander batter the beast with pieces of wood and debris. The demon roared and lashed out at Xander, landing a hard blow across his face. Spike winced as Xander flew across the room and crashed into the wall. Xander's nose was bleeding and the scent of blood in the air attracted the demon like a magnet, it bounded towards Xander. Spike dodged around the fleeing people, the horror was pounding through him, he had to get to Xander before the demon did, nothing mattered but that, but his feet just wouldn't move fast enough and the people banging into him kept knocking him off course, it was already way ahead of him, it was hopeless.

Spike grabbed an empty glass and heaved it at the demon.

"Hey! L-leave him alone!"

His voice was drowned out in the sounds around him, and the glass didn't even hit the demon, it hit the ground and shattered behind it, but still, somehow he must have caught its attention because, just before it reached

Xander it stilled. Sniffed the air. Then turned to stare straight at Spike. Their eyes locked on to each other's.

For a long moment, oblivious to the screams and fleeing figures around it, the demon stared at Spike. Spike stared back, unable to move, fear crawling over his spine, his scalp. Like he was trapped underwater, all sounds became a dull roar far away.

Then the demon growled. Low and long. Its eyes narrowed and it coiled itself up, ready to pounce. Spike knew that, but he couldn't move, couldn't run, couldn't shout. Then suddenly:

"KILL IT!! KILL IT!" A girl screamed hysterically. She grabbed a stool and hurled it at the demon. More by luck than judgement it hit the demon square on the back of the head.

The demon broke its stare on Spike, howling in pain, whirling around to fend off the attack the people were launching on it. Sound and color rushed back into Spike's world, and more importantly the ability to move. He stumbled away out of its sight as the demon crashed outside, in search of easier prey, Spike and Xander, for the moment forgotten. Spike watched it go, his knees buckled under him for a moment, but he couldn't think

about this now. Right now he had something else to worry about. His eyes darted around the Bronze.

"Xander!" Spike caught sight of him slumped against the wall and scrambled over to where he was groaning on the floor.

"Xander are you alright? Please be alright!" He said frantically, stroking Xander's face tenderly, trying to take all the pain away from him through gentle touch.

Xander's eyes fluttered, began to open, and Spike watched him with his heart in his mouth. He knew it was crazy, but Xander was going to open his eyes and see him, the same way he'd opened his eyes and seen Xander last night, maybe, just maybe . . .

"Hey! What are you doing?" Anya yelled protectively as she darted over to Xander.

"Nothing!" Spike jumped guiltily. "I was just trying to. . ."

Spike suddenly found himself face down on the dusty floor as Anya shoved him to one side and knelt over Xander.

"Get away from him, he's hurt!"

" . . . help." Spike finished, wincing as he got up from the floor.

Anya ignored him as Xander finally managed to prise his eyes open.

"Ahn?" He croaked.

"I'm here Sweetie." She crooned gently. "Are you okay?"

"Don't stop . . . touch me . . . like that . . . again." He mumbled, his eyes falling closed.

Spike started, joy bubbled up inside him, he took a quick step towards Xander, the words "That was me!" about to come out, but then he froze. The two of them were locked in their own world. Anya was gently wiping the blood away with the hem of her skirt. Xander reached a hand out to cover hers gratefully. Spike's shoulders slumped and the words died in his throat.

"I have to get you to the hospital." Anya said, her fingers feeling the bump on his head.

"Nah. I'm good." Xander sat up, winced, and continued.

"Well maybe not good, but I'm not dead. I know because it hurts too much. Call it a plus. Come on, help me up, we've got to tell the others."

"Can you see?" she asked worriedly.

With an obvious effort Xander tried to focus on her. "Sure. I can see all three of you. And they're all gray and fuzzy. Like bunnies." He finished with a weak smile.

"Xander that's not funny. Come on. We have to get Buffy." Anya announced decisively.

With her good arm she tried to hoist him to his feet, he came up reluctantly.

"That's my girl and can I just say 'ow'?" Xander groaned, leaning heavily on her as they left the Bronze.

Spike watched them go with a pang. Anya could take her place at Xander's side so easily, and all he could do was watch.

Then he looked around at the state the Bronze was in. It was bad, but could have been so much worse. They'd got off pretty lightly. A cold chill crept down his spine as he played back those endless moments where the demon's eyes had locked with his. Whatever that thing was, it was powerful, bloodthirsty, and why the hell was a demon he had never seen before, from a species he didn't recognize wearing exactly the same clothes as him?

Part Three

"Buffy!" Anya helped a groaning and bruised Xander into Giles's house. "Is Buffy here?" she snapped at a startled Giles. "She'd better be here."

Giles spared a moment's silent salute to the library. Longing for the golden days when the masses converged in the library instead of trampling through his home without ever knocking. He nodded to the kitchen where Buffy stood in the doorway with Riley hovering behind her.

"Oh God, what happened?" Buffy asked, hurrying over to relieve her of Xander's burden. Anya willingly relinquished him, wincing in pain as she readjusted her sling.

"Man, you look trashed, are you okay?" Riley asked Xander.

"Yeah, yeah." Xander sank down on the couch in relief. "It looks worse than it is. I hope." He tried a reassuring smile. "Ow!" He touched his lip where a cut had started bleeding again.

"Who did this?" Buffy asked angrily.

"A demon." Anya snapped.

"What kind?" Buffy asked.

"A big one." Xander groaned, lolling back on the couch.
"At the Bronze, the place was trashed. Again."

"Are you alright?" Giles asked, pouring him out a cup of tea.

"Yeah, just took a bump on the head." Xander said, tentatively touching said bump and wincing.

"It threw him across the room."

"Thanks Ahn, I was trying to go for the silent heroic suffering there."

Buffy glanced over at Giles. "Looks like our research party just came to an end. I'd better get out there."

"Now, let's not just rush in." Giles frowned. "You need to know what it is first. Xander, what did it look like?"

"Umm. Green. Red eyes."

"Any markings?"

"I couldn't see. It was dressed."

"Dressed in what?"

"Jeans." Xander said slowly. "Black jeans, and a T-shirt and . . . a duster."

"Just like the kind Spike wears," Anya piped up helpfully.

"The demon was dressed like Spike?" Giles asked, his brow furrowed.

Anya nodded thoughtfully. "Exactly like him."

"So what, Spike is giving the demons fashion tips?" Buffy questioned.

"Now that really is terrifying." Xander quipped. There was a moment's pause as they all pictured thousands of demons, all dressed like Billy Idol.

"Quite terrifying." Giles agreed fervently as he began polishing his glasses, obviously needing some kind of soothing routine. Possibly the memory of Spike as his houseguest had left scars that made the thought of a thousand demons like Spike not only mind-boggling but also nightmarish. Riley patted his shoulder comfortingly.

"So maybe I need to have a word with our non-friendly neighbourhood chipped vampire for this one." Buffy suggested. "Was he there when all this was going on?"

"Yeah, he was!" Xander started up with excitement, then reluctantly sank back as his bruised back twinged in protest. "I should have known he was up to something, he was being way too polite."

"So maybe Spike is controlling it somehow?" Buffy suggested. "Trying to get it to do his dirty work? Giles, what do you think?"

Giles frowned thoughtfully. "It's possible I suppose, he could have found a spell or something. Though I've never heard of any controlling spell affecting a demon's dress code, did either of you see if the demon had any contact with him?"

"It didn't talk to him, " Anya said. "But it did stare at him, does that count?"

"It stared at him?" Giles repeated in bewilderment.

"Yes." Anya frowned as she tried to remember. " The demon was going after Xander, then Spike threw something at it. The demon stopped and stared at Spike."

"Oooh, like he had it in some kind of mind meld thing?" Xander suggested excitedly.

"The demon looked like it was going to kill him." Anya pointed out. " Why would Spike make it go after himself? That would just be like killing himself. Only in a painful way."

"Yeah," Xander agreed disconsolately. "There's no way Spike would do something that we could all enjoy."

"And why would Spike stop it from attacking Xander?" Riley pointed out. "Surely Xander would be one of the first people he'd want killed."

"Hey!" Xander said indignantly.

Riley paused at the filthy looks he was being shot from Buffy and Giles. "I'm just saying," he said defensively.

"Yes," Giles replaced his glasses. "Riley does have a point. Even if the demon has nothing to do with Spike, it's still surprising that he chose to help Xander."

"Spike was acting weird," Xander admitted.

"Weird how?" Giles asked.

"Kind of like Wesley actually."

"Uggh." Buffy and Giles took a step closer together.

"Wait a minute," Buffy said turning to Giles. "Spike was hit by Toth's stick last night, and now there's a demon dressed like Spike in town, and Spike's being all helpful. I don't think that's coincidence. Could the stick be doing some kind of magic, maybe making demons draw on Spike's energy or something?"

"And copying his dress sense?" Riley remarked, unimpressed.

"I said 'or something'" Buffy protested.

"Possibly," Giles conceded, "as always I'll need to research."

"Well since Spike is being so helpful maybe I'll just go and see if he feels like helping me." Buffy suggested.

"There's certainly no harm in keeping an eye on him," Giles agreed.

"Right." Buffy turned to the others. "Riley you go to the Bronze, see if you can track where this thing went, recon *only* I don't want you getting hurt. Giles, call Willow. If Toth is working some kind of mojo she could break it, and can you still keep looking into Toth?"

Giles nodded.

"What am I gonna do?" Xander asked.

Buffy paused for a second taking in his battered state.

"You and Anya stay here, try and figure out what kind of demon attacked you, that could be important."

"Hey, I can do more than look at demon mug shots!" Xander protested. "How come Riley gets to do all the cool 'recon' stuff?"

"Because Riley isn't a walking bruise with a bump on his head so big it deserves its own name." Buffy answered dryly. "Plus recon usually involves a lot of walking and following, and you're lucky you can sit up straight right now."

"Good point." Xander admitted.

"What are you going to do?" Giles asked Buffy.

"I'm going to have a word with Spike. See if 'talk or bleed' gets results."

"Be careful. If this demon is linked to him somehow, I don't want you getting hurt."

"Oh, believe me Spike is going to be the one getting hurt." Buffy said confidently.

"If there is a spell we may need him to reverse it." Giles said, "Maybe you'd better bring him here."

Buffy nodded as she swung out of the house, Riley close behind her.

Xander glanced at Anya, who was fidgeting uncomfortably with her sling.

"Is your arm okay?"

"It's sore."

"You need to be careful." Xander said, reaching out his hand to run down her arm gently, but she shifted away.

"I was trying to be careful when a demon started attacking you." Anya tried to move it and flinched. "It was nearly better. Now I think it's worse again."

"Maybe you should go home, rest."

"Yes," Giles said, looking up from the bookcase. "I can drive you if you're not feeling up to research, and on the way back I can pick up Willow." Apart from anything else Anya was tiring when she was in a good mood. The thought of trying to research with her when she was irritated was not a happy one.

"I would like to go." Anya agreed uncertainly.

"Then go," Xander encouraged. "I'll stick around and make like the Research Boy."

"Alright." She opened the door.

"Hey, and tomorrow we can go look at the new apartment okay?"

Anya paused, but didn't look at him. "I guess. I mean sure. Why not." She went out, followed by Giles.

Xander watched with worried eyes as the door closed behind them. He'd really thought that he and Anya had been on the verge of putting the current bad patch behind them, but now thanks to the demon attack they seemed to be right back in it. Maybe he was paranoid but it was almost like he could feel her slipping away. If it was finally sinking in that she wasn't invulnerable anymore, she could seriously be considering her mortal state. She may well decide someone with his kind of lifestyle was just too dangerous to be around, and all the beautiful apartments in the world weren't going to help.

The thought made him shiver. He wanted Anya with him. She was gorgeous and entertaining and incredibly sexy, and if sometimes he felt like there was something missing then hey, life was never perfect. He shook his head trying to dislodge the fear in there. Of course she wasn't going to leave! She obviously still cared about him. Only tonight when he'd been knocked out he'd felt her. Cool, slender fingers stroking his face, then the rough rasp of cotton as he'd opened his eyes to see her.

He'd never known such tenderness in her touch before. It was the closest he'd ever come to falling in love with her.

Spike couldn't sit still. Nerves kept him pacing up and down his crypt. Worry for Xander combined with worry about himself was causing a knot in his stomach.

Ever since he'd been hit with Toth's stick he'd been feeling strange, acting strange, not like himself. The demon was dressed just like him. Wasn't that a bit weird? He had spat out blood. Wasn't that a bit weird? He had been hungry for food. Wasn't that a bit weird? He hadn't been able to snap the leg of a chair - wasn't *that* a bit weird? All added together it was . . . well it was *weird*. Whatever it was. Something was going on, he just didn't know what. Whatever it was it was far more important than some embarrassing, and hopefully temporary crush.

Xander had the warmest smile in the world.

Spike sighed sadly. He desperately wanted to go and check if Xander was alright after hitting the wall at about 30 miles an hour, but Xander didn't want to know him. Anya was probably kissing Xander better right now.

He threw himself down in his chair, and flicked the T.V on, trying to distract himself from the torturous images

in his head of Xander kissing Anya. Of Xander dancing with Anya. Of Xander holding Anya. No! He wasn't going to think anymore about this.

He stared at the T.V trying to concentrate on 'Ally McBeal'. Great, the picture was blurred, even his T.V was rubbish. He half-heartedly tried to retune it then gave up and switched it off, resuming his pacing. This was awful, all this misery and jealousy. He wished he could stop these feelings as quickly as they'd started. If there was anything more humiliating and pathetic than unrequited love he didn't know what it was.

Suddenly a loud crash preceded his door flying open. Spike jumped as the Slayer flounced - there really was no other word for it - into his crypt.

"Spike," she said casually before punching him in the face.

"Ow!" Spike promptly hit the floor. He groaned as his head hit the stone floor with a thud. Okay, maybe there was something more humiliating than unrequited love. He knew for a fact that it hadn't been one of her harder punches, wasn't even close, but he'd never wilted so easily before. Today really was going to have to go on his list of 'Worst Days Ever'.

He opened his eyes warily, to see she was still standing over him.

"Hows about you and me have a chat?" She smiled sweetly.

"Well y-yes, of course. W-what can I do?" he babbled as he scabbled to back away from her before standing awkwardly.

Buffy raised her eyebrows at him. "New demon in town, you saw it at the Bronze. The weird thing? It was dressed exactly like you."

"I noticed that," Spike said eagerly, "I don't know why though."

"Really?" Buffy said unimpressed. " Anya said it seemed pissed off with you. Care to clear that up?" As she spoke she pulled out a stake, toying with it casually as her eyes bored into him.

"No!" Spike blurted fearfully, backing away. "I don't know what it is." He tried to look stern, like Giles had when he'd left a blood ring from his cup on the table. He crossed his arms. "I don't think I can help you."

"Spike do you *want* me to punch you again?" Buffy said brightly, advancing on him. "'Cuz I can keep up that game for hours without getting tired. For example . . ."

She punched him again, slightly harder this time.

"Oww! Ow!" Spike stumbled back a couple of steps, banging into his chair and collapsing into it.

"So lets talk about Toth," Buffy suggested. " What about when you got hit last night? Any strange things been happening?"

"Um . . ." It couldn't possibly be connected could it? His feelings for Xander beginning after he was hit with the stick? Of course not. "Well . . .I don't seem to be quite as strong as I used to be I suppose." He said nervously. " Why?"

"I'm asking the questions here. Anything else?"

"No. I really don't know anything. You're wasting time here, you should get out there and kick some . . .some . . .um . . ."

He trailed off. He just couldn't bring himself to say that word in front of lady. Even a lady who was currently hauling him up by his T-Shirt and marching him out of the crypt.

"Well, Spike" she said conversationally as she pushed him towards the door, "as much as I would love to keep hitting you until you talk, I'm sorry to say I believe you, but you're still gonna have to stay with me until this is over."

Xander looked up from the musty volume he was currently reading as Buffy burst in with Spike, Spike stumbling as she shoved him inside.

Spike did a double take as he saw Xander. "Xander! Um, hello." He said, blushing furiously. If only he'd had a minute or two to prepare!

"Hey Buff." Xander greeted her casually, ignoring Spike.

"Where's Giles?"

"Taking Anya home, she wasn't feeling so good."

Spike restrained himself from dancing with excitement even though it felt like the room had just lit up. Anya wasn't here! She wasn't kissing Xander better at all! This was great!

"She okay?" Buffy asked.

Xander shrugged. Such a good question. "I don't know. So what does fangless here know?"

Buffy rolled her eyes. "I'm thinking nothing."

"Nothing useful?" Xander raised his eyebrows. "There's a surprise."

"Of course, there's never any harm in making sure . . ." Buffy suggested.

The phone rang interrupting them, and Buffy answered it much to Spike's relief. He'd felt another punching session coming on.

"Hello?"

She paused, then said. "Right I'm on my way, keep your eye on it and stay back."

She slammed the phone down and turned back to them.

"Riley's found the demon. It's by the movie theatre. I'm gonna go see if I can bring it down." She frowned and jerked her head at Spike. "Keep an eye on him?"

"Can do." Xander saluted her as she swept out of the house.

Xander settled down to the book he was looking at. Spike perched on the edge of the chair opposite and watched him surreptitiously from under his eyelashes. This was a fantastic opportunity for them to talk, for him to help Xander, for them to work together, like comrades, pals, buddies . . .

"What?" Xander asked, looking up in exasperation. "Quit staring at me!"

Spike felt his cheeks flame. " I was just . . .Do you want me to do anything?" He offered awkwardly.

Xander shrugged. "Other than leave town on a dustpan?" He pretended to consider it for a moment. "No."

"Oh." Spike felt his spirits hit rock bottom and begin to try to bury underneath.

Xander, oblivious, continued to study the books. Spike managed to keep his eyes away for a full 15 seconds before giving in and looking at him again. Trying to do it a little more discreetly than last time he let his eyes pass over him yearningly. Xander looked . . .like hell. Disheveled, dusty, pale and unhappy.

"Is everything alright?" Spike asked suddenly.

Xander looked up in irritation. "What?"

"Well you look a little . . ." Spike began to wither under Xander's barely concealed impatience. "Never mind."

Xander dropped his eyes back to the book, but knocked the pile next to him, sending some tumbling to the floor. Xander bent to retrieve them then froze as his aching bruises screamed in protest. "Ow!"

Spike shot over to help pick them up. Xander looked at him quizzically as he piled them back on the coffee table.

"Okay what gives?" Xander questioned.

"What?"

"This, " he tapped the pile of books, "the Bronze, you're not acting like your usual self." Xander thought about that for a moment. "Which is good, but still disturbing."

"Well I, I wanted to help."

Xander sighed; he was too damn soft-hearted, but Spike had - apparently - helped save him tonight. He tossed a book over to him. "Fine. Start with that one."

Spike smiled gratefully. "What am I looking for?"

"Demon at the Bronze," Xander replied. "You got a good look at it right?"

"Yes." Spike nodded.

There was a moments pause and Xander looked meaningfully at the book. "Sooo, you gonna look it up?"

"Oh. Yes. Right then."

Spike hurriedly sat next to him on the couch and opened the book, and Xander settled back down to his reading, Spike turned the page to give the impression that he was taking in what was in front of him, though for all he could understand it could have been written in Chinese. He couldn't look directly at Xander anymore but was acutely aware of him only inches away. If he concentrated hard he could smell the faint aftershave. Just out of the corner of his eye he could see Xander's hand holding the book, and could hear his steady breathing.

With a huge effort Spike forced himself to concentrate on the book. He was going to be helpful if it killed him. He began to read, but frowned, the words were blurred like his T.V had been earlier. What was the matter with his eyes tonight? He automatically reached for a spare pair of Giles' glasses lying on the table and slid them on. The words were suddenly magnified to a huge degree. Giles obviously had weaker eyes than he did, but at least he could read.

Xander glancing up, gaped at the sight. Spike reading, not only reading but also wearing a pair of glasses.

Spike's attention was attracted by a choking noise from Xander - he looked up to see Xander appearing to be in the grip of some violent emotion.

"What's wrong?" Spike asked cautiously.

Xander swallowed down the wild burst of laughter trying to get out. "I've finally figured it out."

"Figured what out?"

"Come on, Spike, I know the truth. " Xander said seriously, though his eyes were still dancing. "Admit it."

"Wh-what?" Spike stammered. Could Xander have guessed about his crush? Was Xander even now preparing to deal out a mocking rejection breaking his heart?

"Giles is your hero. You want to be just like him. That's why you've dropped the accent and are wearing his glasses."

Spike half laughed, his head filled with exclamation points. Xander didn't know! Xander was smiling at him! Xander was joking with him! If only he could think of

something witty to say back to keep Xander's interest. "Oh well . . . yes . . .Giles." Oh God. How embarrassing. *That* was the best he could do? What had happened to his quick tongue? Xander was still watching him with a growing smile, then he hissed with a sudden pain.

"Damn. Keep forgetting about that." Xander muttered, touching a small cut on his mouth.

"Giles must have something for that." Spike said, quickly getting up and finding the small first aid kit Giles kept by the bookcase. He proffered it to Xander who took it with a raised eyebrow.

"What do we have here?" Xander mused as he shuffled through the kit. "Treasures of bandages, band aids and antiseptic lip ointment!" He finished triumphantly. Spike smiled weakly, watching as Xander smeared a small amount on the cut.

"What?" Xander asked again. "I'm officially getting paranoid. Why do you keep staring?"

For a second Spike was non-plussed then said. "You um, have a little dust." He tentatively brushed the small smudge of gray dust off Xander's cheek with his finger, his face burning.

"Cool hands." Xander said his voice slightly amused, but then his brow furrowed slightly as he looked at Spike. Confusion, in that dark gaze and Spike felt something in his stomach. A leap of fear? Excitement? The way Xander was looking at him, like he was just on the verge of . . .

The sound of the phone peeling out in the room made them both jump and Xander turned away with a frown to answer it.

Spike sank down on couch weak with relief and a touch of disappointment and picked up his book again with shaking hands.

"Yeah? . . . Oh hey Buff. No Giles isn't back yet. Why? Oh, are you okay?" Xander's voice quieted and Spike looked up with worry. Something was wrong. "Don't worry, I'll keep looking into it, and Giles will be back soon. Yeah he'll know what to do." Xander hung the phone up.

"What's wrong?" Spike asked.

"The things on a rampage, Buffy couldn't take it down and two people are dead." Xander recited flatly.

Spike winced. "I'm sorry."

"What, sorry you couldn't be out there helping it?" Xander snapped.

"No!" Spike protested. "Of course not."

"Yeah right," Xander rolled his eyes. "Spike you said yourself, you're evil, you live . . .or rather don't live for stuff like this. Just because you can't do it yourself anymore doesn't stop you getting a happy when something else is doing it."

"No, it's not like that!" Spike faltered. "I don't want that anymore. I've changed."

"That chip isn't change." Xander spelled out, "its something that was done to you and you should be glad for it. Its only because now you kill demons we put up with you hanging around."

"Oh." Spike said slowly, watching his finger trace a meaningless pattern on the page. "That's the only reason you like me, because I can kill things?"

"Weren't you listening Spike? I don't like you at all."

Spike managed to look up at Xander. "If I helped to stop it, would that prove I've changed?"

Xander shook his head in disgust. "Spike there is nothing you could do that would prove to me that you are someone worth knowing." And with that he left the room.

In the bathroom Xander splashed his face with cool water and drank a little. After a few moments he had cooled down a little. He winced when he thought of what he'd just said to Spike. He hadn't meant to lash out like that, it hadn't been Spike he'd been mad at, it was his own frustration that he'd been taking out on Spike. Besides there had been a seriously weird atmosphere in there for a moment, of course he'd just been imagining things, but it had almost been a relief to put things back to normal by yelling at him. Besides the good thing about Spike was you could say what you wanted to him, because hey, it was only Spike, it wasn't like it mattered. But still Xander felt a twinge of guilt. It might have been true, but maybe there hadn't been a need to say it. Spike was a menace, but he had been trying to help tonight and had seemed genuinely upset at his outburst. What he'd said had maybe been slightly uncalled for. It could be time for a peace offering.

"Hey Spike" he called as he came out of the bathroom.
"Do you want a beer?"

There was no answer. /Great. Now I'm stuck with him sulking/

"Come on Spike its a free beer . . ."

He trailed off as he entered the room. The room was empty and Spike was gone.

Part 4

Spike sniffled miserably as he edged warily down the road, his eyes darting nervously around him. He'd always know Xander and he weren't friends, but he hadn't imagined that Xander hated him quite so much. More than hated him. Despised him for what he was. He felt so stupid, it was just like Cecily all over again, he'd fallen in love with someone who ...

Wait, wait, wait. Spike jerked to a stunned halt as he processed that last thought. In love? He wasn't in love with Xander, that was impossible. A crush was bad enough but to actually *love* him ...

I love him he thought again, tentatively testing the words in his mind. *I love him, I do.*

They sounded right. They felt right. Spike leant weakly against a wall as he tried to take this in. He loved Xander. This was so unexpected, insane, amazing. He couldn't explain it, but it made more sense than anything else in his life had for a long time, like he'd found himself again. A smile began to break across his face as joy bubbled up inside him. He loved Xander! He wanted to laugh, dance,

yell it from the rooftops - he was in love and it was fantastic! He was in love with the bravest, most wonderful guy in the world ... who would never love him back.

His smile faded as the unwelcome fact marched through his mind. Xander hated him, and everything he stood for, he would never forgive Spike for being what he was. Xander would never even like him.

Once he would have given up but he didn't want to do that. Not with Xander. Of course he was never going to speak of his feelings, but he was going to do what he'd come out here to do. Because if actions did speak louder than words then maybe there was a way to show his devotion, a way to gather up a few crumbs in the form of his respect at least. He would show Xander that he wasn't all bad.

Spike swallowed down his terror and determinedly set his jaw, gripping Giles' axe a little tighter as he resumed his journey.

Xander swore softly as he saw the empty front room. Typical! Just typical! And to think he'd actually been feeling guilty for yelling at him! This was how helpful

Spike was, so helpful the second he was left alone he took off. All that being kind, picking up books for him, helping him research was just a nasty, sneaky trick to make him drop his guard, and he'd fallen for it! Damn the vampire with his deceitful ways and lying and cool hands...

He shook his head vigorously. /God what is that?/ He wondered in bewilderment. Why the sudden fixation with Spike's hands?

For a second he considered going after him, but his head was still throbbing with pain, and hell, Spike could take care of himself. Instead he carefully lowered himself into a chair and picked up the book he had been looking at.

He aimlessly flicked through a few pages feeling irrationally annoyed. Why didn't Giles ever have any slim volumes written in clear English? Concentrating on the fuzzy pictures and obscure text was hard, too much stuff was bothering him, his injuries, Anya, Spike.

Not that he felt bad that Spike was gone. Of course not, he just felt bad that Buffy had asked him to do something and he'd messed up. Xander drummed his fingers restlessly on the page in front of him as his glance travelled restlessly around the room, his gaze passing over the glasses Spike had worn.

This place sure felt empty.

Spike was exhausted; his stamina was apparently just one more thing that was on the blink today. His feet hurt, his legs ached, and he'd been on the receiving end of a lot of weird glances as he wandered around town clinging to his axe.

It will be worth it he reminded himself. It's for Xander.

The thing was he felt quite unreasonably terrified. Despite the fact he been fighting and loving it for years, he really didn't want to do this. He didn't want to fight a demon. He wanted to go home and daydream about Xander. Dreams were so much safer, nicer. Although he liked the idea of being a hero in Xander's eyes ... Spike traced his hand over the claw marks that had been scraped across the wall opposite the movie theatre ... this thing didn't look like the stuff dreams were made of.

He turned away, his shoulders already slumping in a way they hadn't for over a hundred years. The way he had hated but had never been able to stop. That defeated, half-ashamed way, whenever he told a joke no one laughed at, when he was ignored and patronised. When he knew he was a better card player than any of the

other men at the table but never had the confidence to pull it off. Who was he kidding? He couldn't beat this thing, he was just going to go home.

Spike, there is nothing you could do that would prove to me that you are someone worth knowing.

Xander's voice echoed in his head stopping him in his tracks. Saying what everyone else had thought back then. Then he'd met Drusilla and she'd given him power - oh so much power! He'd had so much attention and fear! It had been like a drug, a dream come true. But now he could see, even then he hadn't been someone worth knowing. Someone worth fighting, or someone to fear. But not *knowing*.

He didn't know why he'd changed this past day or so, why he suddenly felt so different, but he did know that sentence had the power to crush him if he didn't do something about it. Not just for Xander - for himself. He was someone worth knowing. He looked again at the marks on the wall.

The demon wasn't here any more - but it had either come, or gone this way. Taking a deep breath, and wishing his legs would stop shaking quite so hard Spike turned into the dark street.

As the front door opened and Willow and Giles came in Xander felt a surge of relief - at least now he could stop pretending to research. But under his relief he actually felt a twinge of disappointment. That made no sense - who else was he hoping to see?

Anya, his mind suggested swiftly, and this conclusion was so comfortable he didn't examine it any further.

"Hey guys," he greeted them slightly nervously. He wasn't looking forward to explaining he had goofed up on a) research, b) watching Spike.

"Hi Xander."

"Xander have you made any progress?" Giles asked, his eyes already lighting up at the prospect of doing some research.

"On finding out what the demon was at the Bronze? A big no, but Buffy ... "

The door flew open again as Buffy burst in with Riley behind her.

" ... is here." Xander finished.

Buffy's coat was torn, her arm bleeding and Riley didn't look much better - he had a gash on his forehead and one side of his face looked red and sore in a way Xander recognised was going to come up into one spectacular bruise.

"Buffy!" Giles grabbed his first aid kit and hurried towards her. "Are you alright?"

"Well my pride took a beating." Buffy said wryly, "but apart from that I'm okay. Giles this thing is scary. Its strong, quick, I couldn't stop it."

"Well Xander hasn't found it in the books yet, maybe we'd better push on with trying to find Toth."

"We so don't have time, this thing is out there now - I only came back for weapons. The only good thing is it's not exactly low profile, it shouldn't be too hard to track it."

"You said it was killing people, what's its style?" Xander asked, trying to keep her distracted from noticing that Spike was gone.

"General ripping out of throats and draining their blood." Buffy answered briskly as she shrugged out of her coat.

Willow and Xander grimaced.

"Like a vampire?" Willow asked.

"But to the power of ten." Riley said grimly as he took the first aid kit from Giles and began wrapping a bandage on Buffy's arm. "Vampires feed maybe once, twice a night. This thing is still hungry."

Giles frowned, wandering over to his bookcase, he regarded the books there thoughtfully.

Buffy looked around the room expectantly. "Speaking of vampires, Xander where's Spike?"

"Ah, yeah, good question." An uncomfortable laugh came out of his mouth.

"You let him go?" Riley asked incredulously.

"I didn't let him go, he just sneaked out!"

"You left him alone? Oh nice going!" Buffy said in exasperation.

"Well he was being so helpful! I thought he'd at least stay still."

"Spike was being helpful?" Willow's eyebrows raised in surprise.

Giles, who had picked a book out of his bookcase, was reading it intently, obviously not listening to them. "Oh, dear lord," he said quietly.

"I should have known it was a trick - he's never been so..." Xander frowned trying to place the right word. "...nice before."

"I *said*, 'Oh, dear lord'." Giles muttered affronted.

"You always say that." Buffy pointed out impatiently.

"Well, it's always important!" Giles said, with perfect truth. He came over to them with the book he'd been examining. Why, Xander didn't know since he was obviously going to explain it anyway. Giles lived for these moments. "I think I know what's wrong with Spike."

"Apart from the obvious he's not dust?"

"What? No. Toth, uh, the rod device he used, it's called a ferula-gemina. It splits one person in half, distilling personality traits into two separate bodies. As near as I can tell, Toth was attempting to split the slayer into two different entities."

"Two Buffys?" Riley asked, a gleam coming into his eye. Xander couldn't blame him. If he was Buffy's boyfriend

he'd be intrigued as well. That idea had all sorts of, um, interesting possibilities.

"Yes. One with all the qualities inherent in Buffy Summers, and the other one with everything that belongs to the slayer alone ... the, uh, the strength, the speed, the heritage."

"So when that blast hit Spike..." Buffy said, slowly working it out.

"I think it separated him into his human and demon sides."

"That's what the demon inside a vampire actually looks like?" Buffy asked.

"Yes, apparently in it's undiluted form."

"Yikes." Xander said quietly.

"So does this mean Spike is human now?" Willow asked bewildered.

"No, well it's his human side that was here I believe, that would explain the difference in his manner that Xander noticed, but he's not alive as a human would be, with a uh, heartbeat. It's the demon that keeps him alive, even

now they are separated they're still connected. While his demon side lives so does his human side, and vice versa."

"But which one's the real one?" Riley asked.

"They're both real. They're both Spike. There's nothing in either of them that Spike didn't already have."

Two Spike's. Xander turned the thought over in his head. Amazingly it made sense. No wonder Spike hadn't been acting like the annoying, arrogant, sarcastic vampire they all knew and loathed. With the demon out of him he must have felt so different. His eyes widened in dismay as he realised what he'd done. Spike hadn't been playing tricks - he'd really been that helpful, oddly shy guy that had been here tonight. He'd yelled at a relatively innocent guy. Perfect. Could anything make him feel any worse?

"I have a question," he said suddenly to distract himself from the unfamiliar, unwelcome feeling of guilt that was demanding to be noticed. "This demon side to him is killing, so what happened to the chip? How come that wasn't copied like his clothes?"

"It probably was, but it was manufactured for a human brain, demon physiology is completely different."

"Besides" Riley said thoughtfully, "it reacts on what Spike perceives, when Spike tries to harm someone he knows it's wrong - he doesn't care - but he does know, and that's what sets off the chip."

"But the pure demon wouldn't perceive anything it was doing as wrong," Giles finished. "It's reacting purely on instinct, it has no thought, no conscience."

"I still don't get the original plan." Riley said bewildered. "I mean, why do it? The slayer half would be like slayer concentrate, pretty unkillable."

"But the two halves can't exist without each other. Kill the weaker Buffy half, and the slayer half dies."

"So the same goes for the Spike's." Buffy said, suddenly perky. "Bring them together and grab some popcorn! Two dead, no waiting!"

"Buffy!" Willow examined. "We can't do that!" Xander felt a slight smile pull at his mouth. Willow was such a sweetheart.

"Yeah," he agreed, "I have to say I'm not completely on board with that idea myself."

"Why?" Buffy asked sulkily. "It wouldn't even be like killing him ... exactly."

Giles sighed regretfully. "I think Willow and Xander are right - although the idea does have its appeal, we should probably just put them back."

Buffy rolled her eyes in exasperation. "I should have known Spike was involved in this."

"It wasn't really his fault," Xander pointed out, the others looked at him with identical looks of surprise, he couldn't blame them - he could feel the same expression on his own face. What was wrong with him tonight?

"Well," Giles said wearily, "Spike can control the demon, we need to put it back in him. Willow we'd better start looking at how to break the spell from Toth's stick."

For some reason Xander wished Giles hadn't phrased it like that. He knew it was the only thing to do but saying they were going to 'put it back in him' sounded kind of crappy on the human side of the guy.

"What's up Xander?" Buffy asked.

"Huh? Oh - nothing," he said hurriedly "it's just . . . I never really got before how hard it must be for him to control it." He shifted uncomfortably. Sticking up for, or feeling sorry for Spike was not a feeling he was used to. The sooner they got this over with and things back to normal the better he'd feel.

"So not our problem," Buffy shrugged. She opened Giles' weapon cabinet. "Okay pulling this thing in is not going to be easy, we need tranquillisers, chains and a really big axe."

Giles shot Buffy a glare that had taken years to perfect.

Buffy held up her hands in surrender. "Just as a kind of a comfort blankie thing."

"Pretty scary comfy blankie," Willow said sotto voice to Xander and Riley.

"Tell me about it." Riley agreed with feeling.

Buffy was investigating the weapons cabinet. "Giles where's the big axe?"

"Its not there?"

For a moment they all frowned with confusion when Xander shot to his feet ignoring the bolt of pain from his bruises as they protested at his sudden movement.

"Spike!"

"What about Spike? Do you think he stole it? Gee his human side is almost as big a pain in the ass as..."

"Nu-uh! He's going to try to fight this thing!"

"How do you know that?" Willow asked, her brow creased as she looked at him with surprise.

"I just do! We have to stop him!"

"Xander chill!" Buffy ordered. "Why do you think Spike is going on a 'certain death' mission?"

"I uh, might have kind of given him a hard time." Xander muttered.

"Xander!" Buffy and Willow crossed their arms and Riley shook his head. Even Giles looked as though he was feeling a twinge of sympathy for the absent Spike.

"I didn't know it was his human side!" Xander examined defensively. "Look we can yell at me later but right now we have to find him, he doesn't know! He's out there trying to kill himself and he'll be dead!" *Oh great. Really winning awards for being articulate here.* He didn't care - human Spike was going up against the real big bad all because he'd pushed his buttons after the guy had tried to help him. Great, apparently something else *could* make him feel worse.

"Okay" Buffy stood up, "Willow, Giles you set up here what you need to break the spell."

"No!" Giles said quickly. "I'm putting my foot down with that. I want no demons wrecking my house for at least another week, we'll do it at the magic shop."

"Fine. I'll take town, and get the demon. Riley, in case I don't find human Spike with the demon, you look for him, get him to the magic shop, try his place, the Bronze, anywhere that he might go."

"Oh fun," Riley muttered.

"I'll do it." Xander surprised himself by blurting out.

Buffy paused mid breath. "Huh?"

"I'll look for Spike - Riley can go with you, help bring the demon down."

"You're hurt..."

"I'll be fine! I want to do this." He really did. He didn't know why but if he didn't get out there and help he was going to go crazy. His jaw set determinedly as Buffy's eyes flicked over him for a long moment, then she gave him a quick, terse nod.

"Fine, Riley you're with me, let's go."

"Uh Buff? What if Spike's found the demony part to himself?"

Buffy looked at him. "Reach minimum safe distance."

Spike's palms were sweating but the rest of him felt cold. Very, very cold. He slowly crept down another dark alley, no slashes on the wall this time, but some overturned trashcans had made his innards curl up in fear. He tried to raise his spirits. He should feel excited, ready for the fight. Death or glory!

He felt sick.

His eyes darted all around him and a sudden flare of sound from behind him had him whirling around in a panic. Fortunately it was only some people walking past the entrance to the alley, laughing and chattering loudly. Particularly fortunately as when he had whirled around he'd tripped over his own feet. He landed on the ground banging his knees painfully and the axe flew out of his grip landing a few feet away.

"Ow!" Sighing he picked himself up disconsolately, only thankful that no one had been around to see that. He brushed himself off. The chatter of the people nearby still carried to him faintly, then ... his heart leapt into his mouth. The laughter had turned into screams. He stumbled over to the axe and grabbed it tightly. Terror

urged him to run, run as far away as he could but he forced himself to race out of the alley.

Panting with exertion and fear he looked up the street to see the group of people pelting away at high speed.

Then he heard a growl behind him, a muffled groan, and very slowly turned around.

A young guy was lying on the ground, barely conscious, holding his head and groaning, but crouched over him, sniffing him cautiously was the beast that had attacked at the Bronze. It hadn't noticed him yet. He could run. He could hide ... but he couldn't leave the guy, alone and helpless, he couldn't leave him to die!

"Hey!" His voice came out loud, nervous, but determined.

The demon looked up - its eyes glowed with interest - anger, and Spike tightened his hold on the axe, stamping out the urge to run he stood his ground.

The demon sniffed the air and as it caught his scent, it growled. It hated him; he knew that, yet he didn't know why. Turning its attention away from the guy on the ground it jumped - it was so damn fast! Spike whirled around again to find it behind him. It took a swipe, not a murderous one, it was only playing yet. But Spike felt the

rush of air fly past his face, heard the whistle as it's claws raked the air by his face. One of it's claws caught the axe and Spike felt it shudder in his hands despite his tight grip. Biting back a whimper of terror he thrust the axe down, trying to catch the demon on it's head - one swift chop would have all this over with - but when did this axe get so damn heavy? His aim was way off even if the demon hadn't moved - which he did, the axe whistled through empty air and with a swift blow the demon knocked the axe free from his hands.

Spike croaked in terror, his shaking legs taking jerky steps backwards, his eyes still fixed on the demon. It watched him, shifting slightly, preparing to jump. Spike's legs tensed, it all came down to this, it was only a question of what came first. The demons leap, or his.

It was two hours later, and Xander had checked every place Spike had ever even *heard* of. Or at least it felt like it. Now he was just wandering around the alleys behind the Bronze, for no other reason then he couldn't face going back and admitting he'd been unsuccessful. He felt sick with worry, which was just the crowning irony of a weird day. Worried about Spike dying had to be a first, but he didn't want any harm to come to the bleached

moron - not this way at least. He already had enough to worry about late at night when he couldn't sleep, he didn't need Spike guilt on top of it.

I bet he'd love this He thought bitterly. *Going out and making it my fault. Well it ain't gonna happen Spike! You are going to end this night safe and sound or I will kick your ass myself.*

To distract himself from his worry and the fact that he really wasn't getting anywhere he complained bitterly.

"Knew the bleached menace was at the bottom of this, how come I have to be Spike's sitter, when I get hold of him..."

He shut his mouth as a couple passed by him, their arms wrapped around each other. He felt a slight pang inside. He missed Anya, the way she used to do that with him.

"I can't believe the Bronze is closed again!" The girl complained.

"What are they saying this time - some animal attacked the place? Some gang more likely."

"No it could be - I heard this guy in the ice-cream place telling his friends about an escaped gorilla that attacked him around here! He said a punk guy saved him."

The guy chuckled. "Whatever he's on he should cut the dose."

They disappeared down the street and Xander's heart leapt - Spike could still be around here! Of course he could be dead - but that was something best not to dwell on. He couldn't believe Spike had faced off with his demon side to save someone. The brave moron!

Please be alive Spike He thought fervently as he continued down the alley. *Please be alive. Oh yeah - and please don't let the 'escaped gorilla' still be here. I like my spine exactly where it is*

He gazed around him, nothing moved, but his eyes alighted on trashcans that had been knocked over. Something had been here alright. He listened carefully. Nothing.

But something was glinting slightly in the moonlight. Stepping closer he recognised Giles' axe. As he bent to pick it up he heard a sound, tiny, muffled. Kind of like a gasp.

"Spike!" *Woah* he thought - slightly embarrassed at the excitement and relief in his tone. *Okay I'm pleased he's not dead, but lets take the enthusiasm down a notch!* In a

slightly more muted tone he yelled again. "Spike? Hey c'mon I know you're here!"

Nothing stirred and he looked around in frustration, it wasn't like there was any place to hide ... His glance passed over a dumpster, half hidden in the deep shadows and he groaned inwardly.

Oh no. No, no, no - I don't feel that bad about yelling at him.

"Spike!" He called up at the dumpster. "I know you're in there."

Nothing.

Briefly he toyed with the option of just pretending Spike wasn't in there - but this was apparently what he had to do as the price for opening his big mouth. With a long-suffering sigh he hoisted himself up and lifted the lid. The stench hit him like slap in the face - a very hard, rancid slap.

"Spike - c'mon - don't make me come in there or I'll kick your ass! Jeez what is it with you and garbage lately?"

That bag of rubbish sounded like it was crying. With a grimace Xander lowered himself into the dumpster, wincing as his bruises yelped again in protest. He began

to move the garbage aside. Spike really owed him big for this one. He tried not to think about what he was touching as he shifted the bag, half worried he was going to pull it aside to reveal that he was about to get up close and personal with Spike's demon side again. Frankly a little of that went a long way, but he saw the familiar glint of white blond hair.

"Spike!"

Spike, curled up into a little ball, looked up at him nervously, tear tracks were mingling with dirt on his face.

A smart remark hovered on his lips and although there would be moments later when he would doubtless regret it - 'cause this was a stinger alright - Xander swallowed it down. He'd never seen anyone look so scared in his life.

"Hey," he said gently, touching Spike's shoulder. "Its okay. Its me."

Spike's eyes flicked to Xander's hand on his shoulder then back to Xander's face. "Xander?"

It was crazy but something swelled up inside Xander, almost painful compassion and concern, dampening his annoyance, making him want to be gentle with him. He kept his voice low and soothing.

"Yeah, come on, its gone, give me your hand."

Spike put a shaking hand in Xander's and Xander hauled him up.

"It's gone?" Spike asked nervously.

"Yeah - can we save this until after we get out of the dumpster?"

Spike nodded and Xander swung himself to the ground in relief, Spike followed him slowly. He had obviously stiffened up from being crouched in the dumpster and fell against him awkwardly.

"Whoops!" He grabbed Spike, ignoring his own soreness, and helped to right him, keeping an arm braced about him firmly to keep him upright. Not the sort of thing he'd usually do for Spike, but something about his extreme vulnerability was touching him in completely unexpected, but not unpleasant ways. Like he wanted, he didn't know, to give him a friendly punch or something. Make him smile, comfort him. It was a nice feeling - he just wasn't sure he liked that it was directed at Spike

"What happened?" he asked neutrally.

"I was looking for it."

"I'm guessing you found it," Xander observed.

Spike shuddered all over and Xander tightened his hold around those thin shoulders. "It jumped at me and I rolled, towards it, it was the only thing I could think of - it overreached and we heard Buffy coming. It was distracted and I, I ... hid." Spike's voice broke slightly on the last word. "I heard them fight, but I couldn't make myself get out and help. Really brave of me."

"Hey," Xander gave him a comforting squeeze. Spike was still shaking slightly in the circle of his arms and oddly he felt no burning desire to let go of him. "You did the right thing. And you were pretty smart. You got away from it. It would have killed you, and you were brave - I hear there's a guy singing your praises about saving him from an escaped gorilla."

Spike half smiled lifting his eyes hopefully to his. "You really think I was brave?"

For some reason Xander couldn't quite look away, it was like Spike's eyes had some kind of tractor ray attached to them. "Yeah," he said, his voice sounding like it was coming from a long way off. "It must have been really ... scary."

Something here still felt scary. Maybe not exactly scary, more like weird. Oddly tense, something hovering too damn close to the surface. This sure didn't feel ... safe.

Xander realised with a jolt his arm was still tightly wrapped around Spike.

He hurriedly dropped his arm, clearing his throat uncomfortably. "Look never mind that now - come on. The sooner we find Buffy and get you guys back together the safer I'll feel."

"What? Get what together?"

Oh great. Real smooth of me.

"Oh - yeah I meant to bring that up." He took a deep breath. "Spike that thing is ...well it's you. It's your demon side."

Xander was looking at him with a wary, worried expression, and Spike wondered briefly if he'd taken a blow to the head that was making him hallucinate this entire encounter. It could be. Xander had found him, praised him, held him tightly, and now like most dreams it was taking a swing into freaky territory just as things were getting really good.

However the night air was cool, and the smell of the garbage lingered in the air. Apparently it was real. Xander thought that thing was him? Maybe Xander was the one that had taken a blow to the head. Spike ignored the tiny frightened lurch in his stomach that was somehow frightening and *knowing*.

"What? It, it can't be me. I'm me."

"It is you. Toth's stick. It worked some kind of mojo on you, it split you in half."

"You're wrong." Spike denied angrily. " You're completely wrong! No way can that ... that foul creature be part of me."

"Okay." Xander said agreeably. "Put your game face on."

"Fine!" Spike drew in a deep breath and tried to flick that switch in his head that let the demon show itself. His face remained smooth and human. He frowned, slightly panicked, and tried again, trying to crease his brow in just the right way, trying to pull on the power that should be there.

Nothing.

He gulped in fear as Xander watched him calmly with raised eyebrows. "Grrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!" He tried to growl,

but instead of turning into an animal-like sound it tapered away into a wheeze.

"Convinced?" Xander asked.

"No! I could put my game face on - I just don't feel like it right now."

"Spike it's you. Sorry, but why would I lie? Toth's stick split you into two - your demon side and your human side." He paused. "You're the human side. Um obviously."

Spike's legs suddenly felt like they were about to give way again, he moved away from Xander and walked a couple of steps before collapsing in a perilous position on one of the overturned trashcans.

"Are you okay?" Xander asked helplessly.

Spike looked down at his hands. So that explained it. "I think ... I think I knew," he said softly.

"I know it's a shock but try not to freak out ... Woah. Woah, woah woah." Xander stared at Spike in utter disbelief. "Lets take that again. What do you mean you think you knew? Why the hell didn't you say something?"

"Maybe I didn't want to. Would you want to admit that that thing was a part of you?"

"Was that why you were trying to fight it?" Xander frowned.

"No."

"So why?"

Spike raised his eyes to Xander's.

"Because you asked me to."

Spike almost smiled. For the first time in his life Xander - fast-talking - Harris looked utterly lost for words, and for a moment there - just a split second he was sure some kind of understanding flashed over Xander's face before he broke the silence saying;

"Huh? I didn't ask you to fight it! Come on Spike we don't have time to play games. We'd better get back to the shop, fix this."

"When you say fix it ...?"

"Put you together again."

"No."

"What?" Xander asked bewildered.

"I don't want to 'fix it'."

"What are you talking about?"

"I don't want that thing back in me!"

"But Spike it's you!"

"It's not me!" He jumped to his feet passionately. "I told you - I'm me! That thing invaded me and it makes me crazy, makes me hungry, makes me hurt people. It's snarling and angry and I have to contain it all the time, and I don't want it back inside me!"

He stopped, panting for breath as Xander bit his lip.

"I'm sorry," he said at last. "I get now how hard it must be for you to keep it under control. And if I was you I wouldn't want it back either, but I don't think there's anything else we can do. We can't just let it roam around, unchipped."

"You could lock it up!" Spike said defensively.

"Yeah, that'll work." Xander said sarcastically.

"Then kill it."

"It's *you* Spike, we kill it, we kill *you*."

"But ..." Spike said helplessly, "you said yourself, you wouldn't want it in you. Why should I take it back? I like being me."

"You took it in the first place," Xander said softly.

Spike dropped his eyes from Xander's miserably. Of course he had. That night in the alley when Drusilla had offered him everything he'd ever wanted. It was just he'd forgotten how much a human life had to offer. He liked being peaceful. He liked being himself. He liked loving Xander. He didn't want to let go of all this, and he knew he would.

Suddenly Xander's hand was under his chin, lifting his face, until Spike's eyes met his. "Spike there's no way we can control it, but you can. I was an idiot tonight. I said there was nothing you could do to prove to me you were someone worth knowing. I was wrong."

"But if I do it - I won't be me anymore." Spike whispered.

Xander frowned. "That is actually a good point."

For a long moment Spike stared into Xander's eyes, then suddenly he burst into laughter, helpless, giggles that welled up from inside him, until his eyes watered, until his stomach hurt with it, he'd forgotten he could laugh like that, a laugh where nothing else mattered.

It took him a moment to realise Xander had joined in. Roaring with loud laughter they clung on to each other.

"I'm glad ... the irony isn't lost on you," Xander gasped.

"No - I love these little twists of fate," Spike agreed gulping for breath.

Eventually the laughter died away and they leaned companionably against the wall.

"It's been a hell of a day," Spike said shaking his head ruefully.

"Sounds it," Xander agreed.

"But worth it," Spike said daring to look up at him.

Xander's eyes were warm as they met his. "Good."

Spike shook his head slightly at his own foolish hopes, glancing away from Xander, as he felt a lump rise to his throat. He couldn't speak up - not now, not when he was about to change back, but he would hold on. Xander was right - him, William, he controlled the demon now, and whether it liked it or not he would cling on to his love for Xander. No demon could stop it.

"C'mon ... William," Xander said at last. "Lets get you together again."

With a nod he agreed. Xander shot him a supportive smile and side by side they turned in the direction of the magic shop.

Xander led a subdued Spike into the magic shop where Willow and Giles were busy chalking a shape on the floor. He felt Spike shiver next to him and clasped his shoulder in a wordless gesture of support.

"Hey Xander, Spike." Willow said looking at him with curiosity.

"Hello Willow," Spike said politely. "Giles."

"Spike," Giles greeted him with interest, looking at Spike as frankly as Willow was. For some reason Xander really had to bite his tongue to stop himself from telling them to knock it off.

"We ready to go?" he asked tersely.

"Yes, I think so," Giles gestured to the drawing on the floor. "Buffy has the demon in the back, uh Buffy! We're ready!"

Buffy came into the room, the demon following doicily on the end of a chain.

"I remember it being angrier than that." Xander observed.

Riley grinned. "It's got enough tranquilliser in it to put down a herd of elephants."

"Wow!" Willow's eyes flicked between the two of them in fascination. "So that's the two of them?"

Riley nodded enthusiastically. "Psychologically speaking this is fascinating," he said cheerily. "Doesn't it make you want to put them in separate rooms and do experiments on them?"

Spike's shivers became a little worse and Xander shot Riley a look that promised a world of pain, as Giles, Willow and Buffy turned to Riley with identical incredulous expressions.

"Okay," Riley said uncomfortably. "Just me then."

Xander shook his head in exasperation. You could take the boy out of the Initiative ...

"What about Toth?" he asked Buffy.

"He's history," Buffy said happily.

"Right!" Giles said, "take your places please."

Buffy led the demon into the centre and backed away, though still keeping a tight hold on the chain.

Xander nodded, turning to Spike. "You okay?"

Spike nodded bravely. "M-maybe I'll still, you know, be me. Maybe now I've been me again, I'll remember."

"Maybe," Xander agreed softly.

Spike nodded, then moved away from Xander, standing warily next to the demon. Looking at him as though he was trying to imprint his face on his mind forever. As though he thought he'd never see him again, and bizarre as it was Xander didn't feel the slightest urge to look away.

"See you on the other side," he nodded supportively at Spike and Spike nodded back before closing his eyes.

"You sure you know what you're doing Will?" Xander asked.

"It should be pretty simple," Willow said. "Toth's spell is doing all the work at keeping them apart, I just have to break it. Okay. Let the spell be broken!"

Let the spell be broken? Spike echoed in his mind in disbelief. *Was the Witch mad? This was some serious mojo they were working with! Geez she may as well just say abracadabra, there was a better chance that might work.*

Spike shook his head, his eyebrow raising in utter disbelief. "Yeah, like that's gonna work" he said sardonically.

"Open your eyes." Willow sounded like she was smiling.

Spike opened his eyes and he felt ... different. Sharper. Colours were brighter, sounds were clearer, He felt more impatient. Wanting to be out, moving, not hemmed in like this. Stretching his body and it felt so much more responsive, faster, the power humming in his veins again. And he could smell again, so much, it was a whole other dimension to the world. Perfume, shampoo, aftershave, under that, sweat, heat, pheromones. Could hear all the heartbeats in the room, all that lovely, rich blood pumping, pumping all around him ...

"So, you okay?" Xander asked nervously.

An evil smile spread over Spike's face. The kind of smile human Spike wouldn't know how to do. "Yup, just the two of us."

"Oh," Xander said looking at him searchingly. "Um... good."

"Damn right - an' get these soddin' chains off me Slayer - I don't want you using this to act out one of your little fantasies." He leered at her happily. Oh it felt good to leer again! Good to piss people off, good to be him!

With a 'tsk' of exasperation Buffy unlocked the chains. "Its him all alright - all back to normal." She paused as a thought struck her. "He's chipped again right?"

"Let's see." Spike punched her in the face with a surge of satisfaction, just a little pay back for earlier.

"Arrrrgh!" The sizzles of pain ripped through his head, easing off just as Buffy punched him back.

"Ow! Bitch," he growled, though with no real heat. The tranquillisers in his system were still making him feel woozy.

"Do you have like two sets of memories now?" Willow asked with curiosity.

"Don't remember much at all," Spike said thoughtfully, "but what I do know is I've spent far too much time with you people tonight."

He strutted out, lighting up a smoke happily as they watched him.

"Knew we should have let him kill himself," Xander voiced. The others nodded in agreement.

Spike kept up his confident cocky walk into the alley behind the magic shop where nobody could see him, then he sank to the floor with a whimper. He couldn't believe it! A crush! A crush on XanderbloodyHarris! Oh the shame! Oh the humiliation! Oh how was he ever going to live this down!

Any tiny satisfaction he gained from the demons memories of maiming and killing were drowning under a tide of humiliation as he remembered some choice things his human side had said tonight. "'Because you asked me to,'" he mimicked viciously. "'It was worth it'. Did I actually say that? Why didn't I just bend over and spread myself?!!" He finished the sentence on a roar, hitting his head repeatedly with his hand. If he could grab hold of William he'd shake him until his teeth rattled. Every part of him burned in helpless mortification. He couldn't believe it! William the pathetic, sneaky little bastard had resurfaced! He thought he was gone forever.

He is gone. Spike thought feverishly, *tonight never happened.* It was a bizarre, freaky occurrence never, ever to be repeated. No wonder his demon side had been so pissed with his human side - it had sensed that this snivelling human git was what had been controlling it. He embraced his demonic side back into him like a long lost brother. *Never leave again! See what happens when you leave!*

He sat huddled there moaning with shame for awhile before he could begin to pull himself together (pun definitely intended) and calm himself down.

"Okay," he muttered eventually, trying to apply some damage control. "Its not that bad. I don't think Xander knows. I was out of my mind. It's over now."

So saying soothing things like that he picked himself up and as the tranquillisers began to wear off, he started to walk unsteadily home. His hands deep in his pockets he felt a crumpled bit of paper. He pulled it out, reading it easily in the moonlight.

'Blood has flowed, But my heart has been cold, Until you set me alight, With eyes so warm, so dark, so bright ...'

'Urrgh!' He writhed in embarrassment, feeling a very unromantic urge to heave. Shuddering, and unable to

bear reading the rest of the poetic, pathetic drivel, he viciously tore the paper in two, then grabbed his lighter and hurriedly set fire to the crumpled pieces, grinding the ash into the ground with his boot.

He needed to shower, he needed to throw up, he needed to rip someone to shreds - with finesse not like the demon did, all fangs and teeth - he had to do something to get this crap out of him. It was disgusting!

Okay, it's all over. He thought frantically, From now on no more even being polite - I'm going to be the meanest, rudest, nastiest bastard I can possibly be. Especially to Xander -monkeyboy-Harris. All that madness is over now.

It was a couple of days after the whole being 'split into two' incident and Spike was watching T.V in his crypt when Xander burst in, his eyes blazing with anger.

"Okay Spike - I have had enough of you! Just because you've got a demon in there again doesn't mean you have to go back to being prick boy!"

Spike raised his eyebrow coolly as his gaze raked over the dishevelled lad; he looked considerably hot under the collar.

"Really?" He felt a smile pull at his mouth. At least he wasn't the only one effected by his recent split. "And why not?"

"Because you said you wanted to hold on, you said you liked being yourself again!" Spike still looked at him coolly, waiting for more and he finished more quietly. "I liked you okay? I liked you."

"Oh you did, did you?"

He rose in one fluid motion and stalked over to where Xander was standing. Xander looked a little taken aback at Spike walking over to him but stood his ground.

"How did you like me pet?" He said, inches away from Xander. Xander's eyes were wide and confused, with a hint of hunger lurking in their dark depths as his glance flicked between Spike's eyes and his mouth and back again.

Spike swiftly grabbed Xander in a grip of iron, but Xander made no move to get away.

"Like this?" Spike asked a hint of desire heating his cool voice, and kissed him, hard. Demanding, and Xander matched him, beat for beat, holding on to him tightly, responding eagerly, frantically, the kiss went on and on and on ...

Spike's eyes flew open and he shot up in bed, looking around the empty, dark crypt, panting heavily. *Just a dream* he reassured himself frantically, *just a dream*. Then he felt himself turn even colder. *I ... just ...dreamt about ... kissing Xander, and I ... liked it.*

"Oh bloody hell!" Spike whispered appalled.

The End

Two's Company

Part One

It had been nearly a week since Toth's stick had worked its personality splitting mojo and Spike's stupid human side had developed a tiny, insignificant crush on Xander. A *crush* nothing more. Sure his human side had thought he was in love - but that was crap. William had always been a hopeless romantic; it was natural he'd gotten carried away. However, all that was over with now, he was back to his old self, i.e. evil, sarcastic and sexy. In other words; cool, and he did not, repeat - did *not* have a crush on Xander Harris. William was so wet he'd get

soppy over anyone that gave him the time of day, but Spike was a regular heterosexual demon of the night, he liked his blood warm, and his women sizzling. Sure occasionally he'd entertained an idle fantasy about shagging a guy - being an evil, soulless fiend did allow for a certain sexual elasticity after all - but it was always some confident, seductive creature of evil being bent to Spike's will. It was a *long* way from that to panting after the Slayer's comic relief. Fancying Droopy-Boy was not just impossible, it was naff. As for that dream he'd had a couple of nights ago about kissing Xander - that was nothing. Everyone had weird dreams now and then, in fact it had been a nightmare! Yes! Definitely a nightmare. He. Did. Not. Want. Xander.

Spike lit up another cigarette as he stared at the lighted window of Xander's apartment.

So why was he here again?

Maybe he just needed to see him, to just test his feelings. Yeah that was it. He'd been avoiding Xander like the plague since that dream and as a result it was never off his mind. What he needed to do was face his nightmare full on and then he'd be fine. It was like falling off a horse, you had to get straight back on, because the

longer you didn't ride, the harder it was ... That analogy was heading into a weird place.

Spike inhaled deeply, and tried to push all the confused images of Xander and riding and hardness out of his head as he waited, trying to ignore what felt suspiciously like nerves churning in his stomach.

Xander bounded out of his apartment, a smile on his lips. Goofy maybe, but he couldn't help a thrill of excitement everytime he thought of his new apartment. Life was feeling pretty good right now. He was finally working at a job that he enjoyed, that he was actually good at, and now the weekend stretched enticingly before him, kicking off with tonight at the Bronze. He glanced down at himself a little nervously. It was obvious by the stunning collection of shirts in his wardrobe that he'd never taken much of an interest in the less Hawaiian side of fashion, but tonight he'd made the ultimate sacrifice and put aside his love of the colourful print. He was now wearing pants and a shirt somewhat darker, sleeker and tighter than usual. He just hoped Anya would like it. He'd also spent a while grooming in front of the mirror before coming out, and looked - well - the last time he'd made this much of an effort it had been his and Anya's three-

month anniversary, and he'd planned to take her out to dinner. They'd never made it to the restaurant. Hopefully his efforts would start them off on the right foot tonight.

He turned in the direction of the Bronze, but before he'd gone two steps, he paused. Facing death every other day had helped him develop an acute sixth sense, and the pricking at his neck told him he was being watched. He turned, catching a flash of white blond hair and black leather out of the corner of his eye.

Oh no, not tonight Xander thought in exasperation. He'd been enjoying the 'Spike-lite' quality of his life the past couple of days. When Spike had been put back together after the 'Toth splitting him in two' episode, he had snapped immediately back from shy, gentle William into the irritating asshole everyone loved to hate. Still at least Spike's obnoxiousness had swiftly and efficiently knocked on the head the slight feelings Xander had of actually liking the guy. It had been seriously disturbing when he'd momentarily found himself touched by human Spike's vulnerability and *niceness*. However taking back his familiar and comfortable position of chief slogan writer in the 'Stake Spike Now!' campaign wasn't enough to make him put up with another round of cutting insults, designed to take the shine off his night. *My sanity, my choice. Stake Spike Now! If only.*

He turned to the deep shadows without even trying to suppress his irritated sigh.

"Spike."

Nothing.

"Spike I know you're there, your hair is one of the few things on Earth that can be seen from space, you may want to consider an image change if you want that undercover agent job. Get out here."

Spike stepped out from the shadows. Xander raised his eyebrows and folded his arms expectantly, but Spike actually seemed stuck for words. His eyes flickered over him in his new clothes before coming back to rest on his face, staring at Xander with a strange expression that Xander couldn't read, but for a brief, poignant moment reminded him of human Spike. Xander frowned and shook off the odd pang the memory sent through him. Human Spike was gone. What they had now was the regular, undiluted pain-in-the-ass version.

Spike cleared his throat. "Uh ... um ... hi."

"It figures," Xander said, unamused. "It's been two whole days, what are you having withdrawal symptoms from not insulting me?"

"Well it's so easy to do Harris." But the insult was said without it's usual edge. Spike certainly wasn't operating on full power tonight; in fact he had a slightly glazed look about him. Xander wondered if he was drunk.

"What are you doing here?"

"Nothing - just uh ..." Spike's eyes darted around him as though searching for inspiration. "What are you doing here?"

"I live here!"

"Oh. Yeah. So uh ..." Spike shifted - if Xander didn't know better he'd say Spike seemed almost uncomfortable.

"How's the new place?"

Xander stared at him incredulously. What the hell was Spike playing at? "None of your business, and you don't have an invite so don't even think of trying to break in to steal my stuff."

Spike's eyes flashed and he seemed to snap out of his daze as he snorted derisively. "Yeah, as if I'd want any of your crap, I have better taste."

"I have good taste!" Xander snapped, pushing the image of himself singing along to the Backstreet Boys only moments ago firmly to the back of his mind.

Spike raised his eyebrow in an effortless sneer, and Xander immediately obliged him by feeling inadequate. It must have been the years of training of being laughed at in High School that had developed this Pavlovian response.

"You forget mate," Spike drawled. "I had to put up with your taste when I had to stay in that Hellhole basement you used to call home. Been there, seen it, still got the mental scars."

"This from the guy that lives in a crypt and cries if he misses 'Passions'?"

"That episode was the finale of an important plotline!"

Xander rolled his eyes in exasperation. "Whatever, I don't have time for this, I've got friends waiting for me - you know Spike, *friends*, the things I have and you don't? Not to mention a girlfriend who's gonna flay me alive if I'm not there on time." He turned away irritably, eager to cut this short and not-so-sweet encounter a little shorter.

"Oh yeah, now she's a good example," Spike snapped after him. "You think now you can afford to kit yourself out in clothes that don't come from the Salvation Army, you got taste? It goes deeper than that Harris, if you

want to talk about bad taste, try looking at your girlfriend!"

Xander's vague irritation morphed into serious anger. He turned back to Spike, taking a step closer to him, his jaw set. "One more remark like that Spike," he said in a low voice, "and chip or no chip I will kick your ass."

For a moment they stared at each other angrily, eyes locked on each other's, neither of them prepared to give way. Xander's fists clenched, when suddenly Spike dropped his eyes from his glare and stepped back. "Oh whatever Harris, didn't know I'd touched a nerve."

Xander's eyes narrowed. "It takes a hell of a lot more than a de-fanged vampire shooting his mouth off to get anywhere near my nerves, get the picture? I don't care what you think." With that, he turned and walked away, moving fast to try and burn off the energy coursing through him that he really wanted to expend by punching Spike in the face.

"Well fine!" Spike yelled after Xander's retreating back. "Cos I don't care about you either!"

Xander favoured him with the one-fingered salute without turning back around and vanished around the corner.

"I don't care what you do." Spike muttered to himself. "Don't care what you think, or how bloody good you smell!" He roared the last words out in frustration, throwing his smoke on the ground, grinding it to a pulp under his boot. *God damnit! Bloody Hell and fuck!* He stormed away in the opposite direction to Xander, heading straight to the graveyard, where he was lucky enough to find a newly rising vampire struggling from his grave. *Oh yes* he thought, pacing by the grave, waiting for the vampire to break free, his coat snapping behind him as he stalked up and down. *That went just perfect!*

The vampire was still lodged in the ground from the waist down. Spike shot him a glare as he morphed into his game face, reaching down and hauling him out of the ground. "Y'know I haven't got all night!"

"Oh thanks ."

Spike punched him in the face.

"Ow!" The bewildered vampire cupped his hands over his nose. "Jeez what's your problem?" Spike grabbed him by the neck and threw him over a gravestone, launching himself in pursuit.

"What's my problem?" Spike repeated as the vampire rolled to his feet in a lithe movement and threw a punch

at Spike. He blocked it easily, catching the vampire's fist in his hand, and crushing the bones for good measure.

"Xander Harris - that's what my bloody problem is! What the hell is going on? Why did he have to pick tonight to look good enough to eat?"

Taking advantage of his lack of concentration the whimpering vampire broke away, and began trying frantically to shake him by darting around a nearby tree, trying to keep him on the opposite side. "Hey, no worries man," he babbled fearfully. "I'll help you find this guy, you can eat him. Can I share? I mean I'm pretty hungry."

Spike nabbed him easily, slamming him against the tree trunk with slightly more viciousness than was strictly needed. "Don't you even mention touching Xander."

"Woah, sorry, you just said he looked good enough to eat. *oh!*" Comprehension flashed in his eyes, and he looked Spike up and down. "You mean you're."

"No I'm not!" Spike cut off whatever the vampire was going to say next by rhythmically banging his head against the tree trunk. "So what if I've been thinking about him? Doesn't mean I'm interested!"

"Ow!"

"So what if he's with that bitch of a girlfriend right now - I don't care!"

"Ow! No, of course you don't!"

"I'm no poofter, I can shag any bint I want!"

"Ow! Yeah, sure, any, uh, bint you want!"

Spike thought of Xander in his new clothes.

He thought about Xander out of his new clothes.

"Bloody Hell!" Spike ceased in his task of slamming the vampire's head against the tree. "This. Is. No. Good," he ground out. The vampire nodded his bloodied head in battered agreement, and looked warily down at Spike's hand, which was still gripping his collar.

"Hey, we've talked, we've bonded, is there any chance of you letting me go now?" he asked hopefully.

Spike frowned in thought. "No."

He flung the vampire into the air, snapped off a nearby branch and staked him on his way back down in a smooth manoeuvre that, despite his anger and confusion, he couldn't help but feel a little bit smug about.

"But thanks," he addressed the dust drifting to the ground. "I feel better."

Okay, he thought as he calmed down a little, letting his face slide back into its human features. So lets say that William is still a part of me and so wet he'll obviously fancy anyone. Then there's the demon side of me that will rut with anything. Put them together and maybe there's a tiny possibility that - in a purely meaningless way mind - I wouldn't find the idea of say ... throwing Xander against the wall and ramming myself into him, wholly repulsive. Say that maybe the thought even turns me on a little. A shiver of excitement ran through Spike, so intense he had to stop and force himself to calm down before continuing on his way. Okay, so it turns me on more than a little. Maybe I do have an itch for him. What can I do about it?

'Nothing' was the answer that sprung to mind. There was no way, either in this world or the world to come that Xander would scratch his .. itch. Xander hated him, and although Spike was reasonably confident in his seduction abilities with women, trying to get into a blokes pants was a whole new ball game, pun definitely intended. Xander was so straight he should be adopted as a mascot for heterosexuality. Then again up until last week Spike had been certain of his place in the straight parade,

maybe in time there was a chance Xander could come around to the idea, but there was something else. The same something that had sent a pang of pure jealousy through him earlier when he'd realised who Xander was all dressed up to meet. Something that would never let him get within six feet of Xander, that would blow him apart at close range if he even tried to encroach on her territory. A very loud-mouthed, annoying something that went by the name of ...

"Anya!" Xander yelled above the music in the Bronze as his patience finally deserted him. "I didn't say we couldn't, I just said not now!"

"Well when Xander?" Anya retorted her voice also rising dangerously. Buffy and Riley discreetly looked away, both assuming distracted expressions as they gazed around the Bronze pretending they couldn't hear the argument, - lalala gosh were you two arguing? We never heard a thing! - "When *is* it a good time to go away?"

"Not now - I told you," Xander lowered his voice, hoping to influence her by his example. "I've just got my new place, I can't afford to take holidays now. Remember I explained how this all works - I need to put in lots of hours at the site so they'll pay me, so I can pay the rent,

so they don't throw me out and I don't have to move back into The Parental Basement of Debasement."

"But when its not work it'll be your friends trying to fight something ..."

Xander felt his face burn in embarrassment and anger as Buffy studiously began to examine her fingernails. Okay so Anya was mad at him, but there was no need for her to complain about his friends - in *front* of them. He grabbed hold of her arm, recently out of the sling, and pulled her under the stairs where it was slightly more discreet, she jerked furiously away from his hand.

"Listen to me ..."

"You can't leave them they need you." Anya parroted impatiently before he could say it. They'd been having this 'discussion' a lot lately. Xander often thought they should just tape it and play it at regular intervals to save time while they got on with doing something more fun.

"That's just stupid Xander, they don't need you! I need you more, and if you're dead ..."

"I'm not dead!"

"Not yet but you will be if you keep helping them! You've got no special powers, no slayer strength, it's not like you can be any real help to them ..." Somewhere inside

Xander felt himself flinch as her words flicked a very raw, private pain, but she didn't notice as she stormed on full steam ahead. " ... and sooner or later you're going to get yourself killed and there's no point in us staying together if you're going to die and split us up anyway!"

Xander felt all the air whoosh out of him, as though he'd been punched in the stomach. "Are you saying you want to break up?"

Anya bit her lip, and Xander felt sick - and for some strange reason - angry. "Anya this is crazy! Even if I stopped helping ."

Anya opened her mouth to say something, and Xander quickly talked over her, " . or getting in the way while Buffy fights the evil, I could still easily be hurt at work one day. That came out wrong. Look, I'm not going to die - well not right now at least ..." He took a step back at the furious expression on Anya's face. "Though judging by the look on your face the odds on that are improving..."

"You think this is funny?" Anya yelled.

"No! I think this is deadly serious and that's why I want to ... " Anya turned on her heel and stormed away from him, out of the Bronze. He watched her go and finished quietly; ".work this out."

As dawn was breaking Spike slid into his cold bed. He tried not to do the cliched 'thinking about his crush before he went to sleep' routine, but he couldn't stop himself from tormenting himself with thoughts of what Xander was doing right now. Did he spend the night with Anya? Probably. From what he'd seen of the two of them they were usually at it like rabbits, and Anya was never backward in demanding sex from Xander. Would they even now be tangled in the sheets together, sated and happy? Or would they be doing it again?

"Hellfire!" he snarled as jealousy twisted painfully in his gut. How had this happened? How had the guy he'd long since written off as a loser, someone he wouldn't have bothered to bite a year ago, suddenly, inexplicably, become the most incredible, sexy person in the world? Was this fates way of treating his life like some big cosmic joke?! Bad enough he wasn't even a real vampire anymore, now he had to have developed a hard-on for Xander Harris! And no - he wasn't just talking metaphorically. Why him? What had he ever done that was bad? Aside from the obvious of course. Bloody Tooth and his mojo - this was all his fault! No, it was worse than that - it was *William*. The sneaky little bastard had sworn to hold on to these feelings, and he had. If anything his

demon just upped the intensity of them. Raw, powerful and base, it made him want with a singleminded, burning hunger, and right now, he wanted Xander. Wanted to make him plead, to see the heat in those brilliant, dark eyes when the pleasure was treading the line at pain. Wanted to make Xander feel those incredible shivers racing through him that only happened when the sex was good - really, really good.

Spike's body clenched in a helpless spasm of desire and he gave up on the idea of sleeping. He summoned up a vivid picture of Xander as he'd been tonight: sleek and citrus scented. He remembered how Xander had stepped closer, how his dark eyes had flashed, only in his imagination Spike didn't back down, he and Xander stared at each other angrily, the attraction simmering between them. He pictured himself reaching out and pulling Xander to him, kissing him desperately, hard enough to make him lip bleed, just a little. Xander kissing him back just as passionately, as his hands tore Spike's T-shirt, dragging his nails down Spike's chest, and wrenched open his jeans ...

Spike imagined the encounter ending somewhat differently to what had actually happened, as he slid his hand down to his rock hard erection.

Xander sighed and rolled over, as the first light of dawn broke over the sky. He'd come home from the Bronze early last night and slept restlessly. He gazed glumly at the empty space beside him in the bed. So much for a great start to the weekend. First Spike showing up, which always rubbed him up the wrong way, then *another* fight with Anya. Oh well tomorrow was another day, he'd call her later and see if she wanted to make up. Maybe she was missing him too. Maybe she was feeling as bad as he was about the fight. He had the strangest feeling that someone out there was thinking about him.

Part Two

Spike woke up late in the afternoon, and his very first thought was of Xander. Not only that, he was picturing him in what could only be described as a 'diet-coke break' image, with low riding blue jeans, a sultry smile and beads of sweat glistening on his chest. *Oh great. I'm living the cliché* Spike thought irritably, instantly wiping

the sappy smile off his face. *All I need now is to start listening to soppy songs that make me think of him, and giggle like the Slayer's little sis at every bloody thing he says.* Fine, he admitted he seemed to have developed a yen for Xander - here he skimmed very quickly over the memory of exactly how he'd uh ... relieved the tension last night - but he wasn't totally nuts! He could handle this in a calm, mature manner. Now all he needed to do was talk to someone calm and mature and ask what exactly that entailed. Giles maybe? He tried to imagine what Giles would say if he knew what was going on in Spike's mind; 'Spike, stay away from Xander', was the first thing that sprang to mind. Spike curled his lip. Screw calm and mature, he'd always known there was a reason why he'd never tried it.

The fact was he fancied the pants off Xander and usually when Spike fancied the pants off someone, getting into their pants was high on his list of Things To Do.

Unfortunately he was utterly out of his depth here. He hadn't a clue how to go about seducing a man. Women were easy, a seductive look, some smooth chit-chat, sexual body language, but Xander ... Spike tried to picture just how fast Xander would try to pin him to the wall and threaten him with a staking - and not of the good variety - if he casually dropped his hand on

Xander's knee. He estimated, allowing for some disgusted comments, it would be about fourteen seconds. Maybe twenty if Xander momentarily froze with horror. Besides; Spike cringed in embarrassment at the thought of sliding into 'flirt mode' with him. It was *Xander* and while he couldn't exactly say they were friends, they had known each other a long time. Using his usual methods would feel so weird on a guy who knew him so well. Besides, he didn't just want to shag him, although that was a major part of it. He wanted Xander to like him, to spend time with him, Spike wanted to ...

Date him? an outraged voice in his head yelled in disgust. *Date him?? I can't believe I've been reduced to this! It's so squeaky clean I just may throw up!*

Sad but true, and after all the fun he'd had making jibes at Angel for dating the Slayer. No doubt there was a very moral lesson to be learned here. Mock not, lest ye fall ... Or something. Still it could be worse; at least he hadn't lost all sense of reason and fallen for Buffy. Spike gave a shudder of disgust.

Still, he had a more important problem than hypothetically falling for Buffy, namely Xander and the possibility of getting into his pants. If he really wanted Xander to - he shied away from the word 'date' - like him,

the first thing was obviously to convince Xander he wasn't such a bad bloke. Then kill Anya and possibly find some way to frame Buffy for the crime. *Yes!*/cheered a voice in his head. Spike snickered, then caught himself. No! He had to be smart about this, if Xander found out he'd arranged Anya's death, he'd never get into his pants. Humans could be so uptight.

Spike sighed, the problems surrounding this seemed insurmountable. On the other hand Xander had really seemed to like his human side. He'd been really nice, jumping into dumpsters in order to help him and holding him tightly when Spike's shaking legs had threatened to give out. Maybe that was something he could work with. What he needed to do was hang around Xander and - he grimaced painfully - act *nice*. He wondered where Xander would be now; it was a sunny Saturday afternoon so maybe he was hanging out with his pals on the beach, which pretty much knocked Spike out of the loop unless he wanted to make a lasting final impression in Xander's mind as Spike flambé. He'd have to wait until tonight if he wanted to see Xander. Unless he was at the Magic Box, but of course he wasn't going to venture out in the afternoon sunshine on the slim chance that Xander might be there. Even if he was there, bitch Anya would probably be in tow. He'd have to be totally crazy to turn

up on the faint possibility of seeing him. He'd swing by the Bronze tonight instead. Or not. Whatever, no rush. He could take it or leave it.

Spike lay for a moment, his fingers fidgeting impatiently with his sheet before leaping up to dress and grab his blanket.

Xander sat at a table in Magic Box, watching Willow measure out some spell ingredients while he finished filling her in on the fight she had missed the previous evening. In a violent reaction against the clothes he'd been wearing last night, which had so obviously failed to impress Anya, he was cheering himself up by wearing his most colourful (or as Anya had once called it, his most nauseating) shirt. His dark, sleek clothes were still cowering under the bed where he had kicked them in a snit last night. He was planning to go back and finish the job later.

Giles, for once, had won an argument with Anya; ("Do you want your wages to take a sudden drop or not!?!") and he was working the till while Anya had been dispatched to do a stock-take in the basement. However at the moment the shop was deserted, Giles was in the back, and they could talk freely.

"... so then she said if I wasn't going to stop helping Buffy maybe we should break up, and stormed out," Xander finished glumly.

"Ouch." Willow responded, wrinkling her nose in a way as cute as it was sympathetic.

"Yeah," Xander agreed, leaning over the table laying his head down over his folded arms. "You see, this is why I love talking to you, Will. You always remind me of Mr. Rogers; you remember my favourite teddy from when we were kids? Okay, so he was kind of ugly, and he had crooked eyes and bald patches, but one hug from that bear would always make me feel better about anything." The sides of Xander's mouth went up slightly at the memory. "That's you exactly."

Willow's brow creased in a way that suggested she didn't find the comparison particularly flattering and Xander hastily added; "Uh, but you know, without the ugly part, and your eyes and hair are in no way crooked or patch-like."

Willow gave him a reluctant smile. "Uh, thanks. I think."

"So what should I do now?"

"Stop helping Buffy or break up," she responded instantly.

"I'm fighting the urge to put together a search party for Mr. Rogers here Will. You've got to give me more than that. Come on, that massive intellect of yours is already cooking up a third option for me, right?" Xander asked, sitting up straight and using his best Willow-I-don't-understand-math-will-you-please-do-my-thinking-for-me pleading eye look.

"Xander I'm sorry, this is important stuff, and there aren't any 'options', if Anya feels.." The shop bell interrupted her as it pealed out. They both looked up to see a smoking Spike - and not in his usual nicotine addicted way - charge into the shop under a threadbare blanket.

Oh great, because God knows I just haven't seen enough of Spike lately Xander thought, feeling his blood pressure rise through the roof. Although he hated to admit it Spike was really getting to him lately, even more so than normal. Spike had always been able to get under his skin. He had an unerring ability to find his weak spots and mercilessly expose them, which Xander had always managed to deal with, mostly by telling himself that he didn't care what Spike thought. However when Toth had split Spike it had upset that balance because he'd met someone, that well ... he'd liked. He scowled. That had to be the most annoying thing Spike had ever done.

Spike threw his blanket off and stamped on it, putting out the tiny flames licking at it. Xander toyed briefly with branching out from 'Stake Spike Now!' into launching a 'Set Fire to Spike' campaign, but reluctantly decided it was too much of a mouthful, better to stick with his strengths. Or maybe 'Burn Spike Now!'?

Spike caught sight of him, and looked a little flustered, which Xander put down to Spike having fire perilously close to the person he loved more than anything: himself.

"Spike, don't tease me like that, seeing the flames so close, yet not setting fire to you ..." Xander shook his head sadly.

"You're here," Spike said stupidly.

Xander raised his eyebrows. "Yeah I am. Wow Spike, you are sharp today."

Spike made a noise that sounded almost like a giggle, before quickly having some sort of coughing fit.

"I in turn," Xander continued, "Notice that you are also here. This is a problem, but luckily the solution comes very easily with you leaving. Care to improve my day?"

"Hey," Spike said with annoyance, "I'm a paying customer."

"Really?"

"Well, yeah, apart from the fact I'm not gonna pay for anything."

"Oh and what are you planning to steal that's so damn important you're willing to risk a tan for it?"

"Hey, sometimes a bloke really needs some ..." Spike grabbed a bottle randomly off the shelf and read the label; "... Holy Water? Shit!" He dropped the bottle as though the contents could scald him through the glass, and snatched a different jar. "Ah here it is. Essence of Toad."

Willow and Xander exchanged looks, and Xander shook his head as Spike turned to study the shelves. He began speaking to Willow in a low voice. "So about Anya, I was thinking, maybe a romantic evening would help."

"What romantic evening?" Spike asked sharply turning to look at him.

Xander frowned. "Hey this is a private conversation pal, go take your vampire hearing elsewhere." He turned

back to Willow. "Wills, you're a girl, help me out, what do you think she'd like?"

Willow looked unconvinced, but gave it a go. Bless the girl. She was better than Mr. Rogers any day. "Well you could try candles ..."

"No!" Xander and Willow looked up in shock at Spike's interruption, apparently perusing the shelves was forgotten as he looked at them with an expression of horror. "You don't want candles, they're an ... uh fire hazard. Fluorescent lighting that's the way to go. Remember, safety first."

Xander ignored him. Maybe if they could ignore Spike enough he'd simply vanish, like Marcie Ross had back in High School. It was a hell of a lot easier said than done, but Xander was nothing if not a trier. "Okay candles, what else?"

"Music?"

"Yeah, Alice Cooper, Marilyn Manson - I've got some stuff you can borrow." Spike put in quickly, Xander looked up irritably at Spike, and the blond, obviously sensing he was just a drop-kick away from making a swift, undignified exit, quickly grabbed a crystal ball, holding it up to the light, ostentatiously examining it. The

effect however was ruined by his quick peak at Xander to see if he was buying this. Xander glared at him, some of his too-long hair falling in his eyes. He flicked it back impatiently and took a long drink of his coke, absent-mindedly running his tongue along his lips to trace the sweet flavour.

Spike fumbled the crystal ball, and hurriedly lunged for it. The ball, enjoying its break for freedom appeared resistant to being caught, its slippery surface more than a match for Spike's vampire reflexes, it shot free again, and it took a few grabs before Spike could bring it under control.

"So what food should I have?" Xander asked Willow thoughtfully, ignoring this impromptu juggling.

"Ooh, strawberries and cream, oh and champagne!" Willow said, bouncing a little in her seat as she warmed to the idea.

"Yeah, and maybe I should sprawl naked in front of the fire with a rose between my teeth," Xander grinned waggling his eyebrows suggestively.

"Oh my God," Spike said faintly.

"Shut up," Xander replied automatically.

"You should probably stick wearing to clothes at first," Willow advised.

"Yeah, you're probably right," Xander agreed. "Plus I don't even have a fire - and central heating just doesn't have the same vibe. Okay, candles and champagne it is."

"You know what's really romantic?" Spike said wildly. "Car-chase films."

"Spike!" Xander snapped. "Shut up or I'll be forced to throw you outside and watch you do your impression of the Human Torch."

"Fine!" Spike snarled. "Go, dim the lights and eat your bloody strawberries, I don't need to listen to how you plan to get naked and grunting with your cheap bird, I might just heave, and, and I hate that shirt you wore last night and ... you need a haircut!"

With that Spike slammed out of the shop. Xander stared after him in bewilderment. "What the hell was that about?"

Willow shrugged. "I don't know, but he's forgotten his ..."

At that moment Spike burst back into the shop, looking extremely flustered and slightly singed. Under Willow and Xander's silent gaze he walked over to where his

blanket was still crumpled on the floor, picked it up and draped it about himself.

Willow and Xander watched him as he walked to the door where he turned, looked at them, opened his mouth, then shook his head, and made some kind of incoherent whimper before leaving again.

Spike raced down the street to the nearest sewer entrance. He had important plans once he got out of the sun that couldn't wait for a moment. Namely curling up into a little ball and rocking, whimpering with humiliation. Sadly he had to admit his first try at convincing Xander he was a decent bloke didn't seem to have gone terribly well. He'd been thrown off balance just by seeing Xander, who hadn't even been dressed up this time, and it hadn't made a damn bit of difference to him. These feelings must be getting stronger if they could withstand the green and purple swirled monstrosity masquerading as a shirt he was wearing this afternoon. Spike covered his eyes with a groan as he remembered he'd giggled - he'd actually giggled.

He'd picked up Holy Water by mistake, he'd shown truly impressive clumsiness when Xander had distracted him with that sexy head toss to flick his hair out of his eyes,

immediately followed by sensually licking his lips. He'd almost got hard there and then when Xander had mentioned - gulp - being naked, and he'd claimed - sexy or what - he'd wanted some Essence of Toad, then topped the whole thing off by leaving without his blanket.

Points for lack of noticeable evil, but big penalties for the presence of unmissable stupidity Spike thought glumly. Just to crown his shining moment he hadn't even stolen the bloody Essence of Toad. Add to that if Xander was laying on a special night for his Bitch Girlfriend then things must be going really well. Unlife really didn't seem worth living. Spike pictured himself dramatically wasting away with unrequited love, a shadowy, mysterious figure, unable to eat or sleep ...

Yup it was definitely time for curling into a ball and whimpering. Unfortunately running around under a blanket severely compromised his vision, and his important plans were delayed as he ran smack into someone.

"Ow!" they exclaimed.

"Aggh!" Spike grabbed his head in agony as the chip sizzled his brain happily. "Oh, come on!" he shouted indignantly. "That was a bloody accident!"

"Spike? What are you doing out in the afternoon?"

Able to focus again, peering from under the blanket which was begin to smoke gently, Spike saw that Dawn was standing in front of him, looking a little worried. His hackles rose, he loathed concern from people when once upon a time he'd have snapped their necks like twigs.

"None of your business that's what," he growled.

Dawn's eyes narrowed. "Fine."

She made to walk past him, heading to the Magic Box.

"Wouldn't bother going in there," Spike said, still burning with mortification and jealousy. "None of them have got time to baby-sit. Harris is planning how to romance his bird tonight. It's disgusting."

Dawn paused. "Anya?" She rolled her eyes in disgust. "What does he *see* in her?"

"I know!" Spike agreed vehemently. Dawn looked pleased at his eager agreement.

"You don't think she's pretty do you?"

Spike shook his head vigorously. "No way!"

"And she's not nice ..."

"Or fun ... She doesn't get his jokes ..."

"Xander deserves better," Dawn said with shining eyes, and it didn't take Einstein to work out who she was thinking of to take Anya's place. "He's smart and funny and really cares about people ..."

"Yeah," Spike sighed, just as dreamily, then caught himself quickly. "You know, err, if you go for that sappy crap."

They paused. Spike shifted uncomfortably under his blanket. Although Dawn didn't seem to have clicked to what his annoyance with Anya really meant - being a bastard to everyone did have some benefits after all - he'd really better be more discreet, or he may as well just get a huge sandwich board proclaiming 'I FANCY XANDER!' And while he was at it, he may as well get one made for Dawn as well, who he'd suspected - and had now had his suspicions confirmed - of also having a crush on Xander. Great, he now shared a fourteen-year-old girls fantasy, and as far as he could see both of them stood about the same chance with Xander. Could this *get* more embarrassing?

"Well I'm off," he said as briskly as he could as his flesh began to sizzle.

Dawn cast an unenthusiastic look at the Magic Box, and turned back to him. "Do you want to get some ice-cream with me?" she said hopefully gesturing at the ice-cream place over the road. "It's shady in there."

Spike frowned, he could think of a million and one reasons why *that* was a bad idea. If Buffy found out he'd been socialising with her sis she'd tear him a new one was right up at the top of the list, closely followed by the fact he was trying to hang on to the remaining tatters of his reputation. William The Bloody did not eat ice-cream with kids. Plus, his plan to be a shadowy mysterious figure wasting away with unrequited desire was waiting ...

"Oh alright then." he said grumpily. Dramatically wasting away was all well and good but a chocolate fudge sundae was a chocolate fudge sundae. They walked over. "But you're paying," Spike said as an afterthought.

That evening Xander looked around his apartment in satisfaction and began painstakingly lighting the candles, but leaving the light on until Anya got here. He had changed into his smart clothes from last night - they had looked so abjectly miserable, he'd decided to give them another chance, but had been nervous of looking like

he'd tried too hard and compromised by not ironing them. He checked his breath nervously for the hundredth time, still minty fresh. *Yes that's it, that's what will win her over, your breath!*

He hoped tonight would work, Willow had looked a little dubious to begin with, and looked a whole lot more when he confessed just how much he and Anya had been disagreeing lately. He hadn't wanted to examine that dubious look, or to discuss his so-called options. *Yeah ditch my friends or ditch my girlfriend, what great options. Either way I am Xander the Betrayer.*

He felt really out of his depth here, and just wanted to put all this badness behind them. He was sure that if they had just one good night, everything would be okay again. Maybe last night Anya had been a little wrought up - maybe she hadn't meant what she'd said, and yes, he did know the meaning of clutching at straws. //Ladies and Gentlemen step up and observe Xander Harris as he submerges himself in that famous Egyptian river.//

He drew back the curtain, checking for Anya approaching. It was exhausting living on the edge like this, holding this relationship together was beginning to feel like holding back the tide. If only things could be ... easy. He gazed out on the empty street and sighed. He

cared about Anya a lot, his world would be a lot lonelier without her, even if this relationship didn't feel exactly perfect. He wasn't great at putting stuff like this into words, but when he woke up in the night sometimes and watched the pattern of the shadows on the ceiling he could feel himself yearning for something. Something that wasn't there, and the absence of it made him ache inside. Sometimes he felt like it was hovering close, yet he couldn't quite see it, couldn't quite grasp it. At least if Anya was with him he could let her sleepy, soft arms wind around him comfortingly and he could imagine that this elusive missing something didn't matter.

Spike let the smouldering butt of his cigarette fall to the ground, as he watched the window to Xander's apartment. How pathetic that his idea of a fun time these days consisted of staring at a building or letting Dawn treat him to an ice-cream. Not that it had been a bad afternoon, she'd paid after all. Plus it was a good deal for her, she got the pleasure of his company and an ally in amicably trashing Anya, while he listened out for any little snippets of information about Xander she had. (As it turned out the only info she had was that Xander was gorgeous, kind and amazing. All of which Spike already knew.) Still it was nice to chat to another member of the

Helpless Crush on Xander brigade. He was having doubts about her staying power though, by the end of the afternoon she had begun looking at him with more than a flash of interest. Spike bit back a smile. Typical teenage girl, why have a crush on one guy, when you could have two? At least she had great taste. Anyway, hanging with Dawn, while not working wonders for his pride could help his cause in convincing Xander he wasn't such a bad guy. Maybe if luck decided to make a guest appearance in his life Dawn would tell Xander they'd chatted and he'd exhibited extraordinary patience as she'd listed her ten favourite Boy Bands, and hopefully wouldn't mention his idea of tying Anya to a tree in one of Sunnydale's cemeteries and waiting to see if anyone took a bite; ("The chip shouldn't go off - it's not like I'm murdering her - I'm just ... doing a good deed for some some hungry vampire!")

Meanwhile night had fallen and yet again he was lurking outside Xander's apartment, but he wasn't going to stay for hours, that would be really pathetic. Any minute now he was heading to Willy's to have a quick drink, and find a demon to pick a fight with. Any. Minute. Now.

The curtains were drawn carelessly and through the chinks he could see the lights were on, not candles, which was good news. Spike was hoping like hell Xander

had decided against the whole 'romantic evening' thing. Actually he was hoping like hell Anya had fallen under a bus on her way here and been splattered all the way up the high street, but at the moment he'd take 60 watt lighting.

He lit up another cigarette when suddenly the curtains twitched and Spike swiftly bolted back behind a bush as they parted and Xander was framed in the window looking out at the street. Spike wondered, with his heart in his mouth, if Xander could sense his presence out here, feel the strange new emotion like a fire in his heart, emanating from Spike. Peering through the leaves of the bush, secretly watching Xander, Spike felt a pang of fierce yearning that almost scared him. He wondered irritably what was it about Xander that drew his gaze like a magnet. Looking at him strictly dispassionately, sure he was nice-looking, but he wasn't spectacular. His hair was untidy, the smart clothes crumpled. He wasn't particularly graceful or buffed and yet he had something, something that made Spike want to run his tongue over the hollow at the base of his throat, and discover the taste of his skin. It was the flashes of his eyes, his wise-cracking wit, the fact that Xander honestly didn't know just how sexy he was. It wasn't a 'hit-you-over-the-head, yes I know you want me' blast like Spike knew he

possessed. Xander's was natural, frank, and completely unaware, even now, maybe especially now, when he looked a little tired, and oddly lonely. Spike was totally unable to tear his gaze away, and stared hungrily, storing this private moment in his memory.

I want him he thought helplessly. *I mean I really fucking want him. What the hell am I gonna do?*

Because really, all evil plots and plans aside, the truth was a secret fear lurking in his heart, that was totally at odds with the confident persona that he put out there. That there was just no way he'd stand a chance with a guy like Xander.

He gazed at him longingly, and if heat could be channelled through eyes then his must be scorching Xander right now. Suddenly his stomach lurched as, as if in response to his gaze, Xander's gaze swept the street. Almost as if he could sense Spike's gaze, almost as if he was lookig for him ...

Anya passed by him, so close he could taste her perfume. Spike only just stopped himself from jerking back in surprise, something that would have certainly alerted her to his presence. His lip curled bitterly as Xander saw her and turned away from the window, letting the curtain cover the window again - and oh shit. Through the chinks

Spike could see the light was suddenly switched off, and a flickering, warm light revealed candles.

"Hey Ahn," Xander greeted her, giving her an awkward kiss on the cheek, regretfully missing the days when Anya would leap on him and have half his clothes off before he'd finished opening the door.

"Hello Xander ...oh!" She looked around at the apartment with the first genuine smile he'd seen in days. "It looks lovely. I like the candles, you look so much nicer in dim light."

"Uh ... thanks. That's what I was going for."

"Xander, I ..." Anya began stridently.

"So listen," he interrupted. "I was thinking how about just for tonight we don't talk about any of the stuff that makes us scream at each other? How about tonight it's just you, me and ..." he poured her a glass and handed it to her " ... champagne?"

For a moment Anya looked torn, then she gave him a small, reluctant smile. "Well ... if there's champagne."

Smiling with relief Xander leaned in to kiss her, and for a crazy, fleeting second it felt wrong, her familiar form almost alien to him. He closed his eyes, and enjoyed the kiss, squashing the strange feeling that he really shouldn't be doing this.

It had been over an hour since Anya had gone in. Behind that glass and those walls Xander was in there with her. With candles. No prizes for guessing what they were doing. If he focussed hard enough Spike was convinced he'd be able to make out Anya's moans. He snarled, trying to use anger to cover up the stabbing pain of jealousy. *He* should be in there, with the candles, listening to Ella Fitzgerald, and eating strawberries and cream - or having a bag of blood and listening to thrash metal. Whatever. He should be the one in there, not out here, torturing himself by waiting outside, alone in the cold while the guy he was in lo ... uh the guy he was crazy about got a shag with his bird.

He felt a growl welling up, if he really wanted Xander, Anya had to go. Two's company, three's a crowd and all that. Not that before Toth's mojo he had anything in particular against Anya, he'd actually kind of liked her, she wasn't sickly sweet like the witches, or so cold he

could freeze ice on her ass like the Slayer, but all was fair in love and war. The only problem was he couldn't think of a way in the world to do it.

Spike stubbed out his twelfth cigarette and stalked away.

Afterwards, they were lying next to each other in bed. Close but not touching and Xander felt strange. Tonight had gone so well, he should be overjoyed but now the evening was over and he knew that nothing had been solved. He was more on edge than ever, like he was just waiting for the axe to fall.

"Xander," Anya said cautiously, as though she too was scared to shatter the fragile peace between them. "I don't want to fight, but this is really important to me. I ... I get scared. I don't want either of us to die. Please can't you give it up?"

"Anya no," he said quietly. "This is really important to me. I'm part of the team. I don't want to give that up."

Anya nodded, and in a way her resignation was even scarier than her fury. "And I don't want to keep getting close to death," she said quietly.

Xander stayed still as Anya sat up, moving away from him.

"So what are we going to do?" he asked.

Anya sighed. "I don't know."

Part Three

Spike grabbed his beer, scowling heavily as some drops splashed his hand. He was in a black mood, which wasn't helped by the pounding in his head, a leftover from last night's drinking session. He hated this. It had been a long time since Spike had had a crush on someone, and even longer since it had been on someone so totally oblivious to him. He'd forgotten how crap it felt; the prospect of staying in bed for some serious moping had been pretty strong. The only reason he was at the Bronze now was because he flat out refused to stay in a dark room and brood, it was just too 'Angel'. Besides he needed some hair of the dog that bit him. Last night after leaving Xander's place where he and Anya were probably shagging like rabbits he'd gone to Willy's and gotten seriously hammered. He had a vague memory of slinging his arm around Willy's shoulder and declaring emotionally that Willy was his best friend and if he had a sister he'd want Willy to marry her. He then 'delighted' the bar by doing an impromptu rendition of Britney

Spear's 'Crazy' thinking of Xander all the while, before breaking down and wailing nobody had ever loved him and he was going to die alone. He had no recall at all of how he'd gotten home, but had woken with a monster hangover to find himself curled up in bed with a pink feather boa around his neck and embracing a large cuddly-toy hippo, neither of which Spike was entirely sure what to make of.

He had to get over this! Xander Harris was seriously messing him up. But ... he wanted him. He wanted him so much and it wasn't fair to feel like this, without even having a shot at getting what he wanted. Jealousy was attacking him, twisting around in his gut like a knife, and try as he might, he couldn't stop tormenting himself with images of Xander and Anya smiling at each other, kissing each other, shagging each other ... They'd probably end up getting married or something and ... Spike almost passed out in horror as the thought occurred maybe that was what the romantic evening last night had been about! Maybe Xander had been proposing, slipping his ring onto Anya's finger, even as Spike stood outside imagining slipping his finger into Xander's ... Ahem.

Bloody Hell why was he only thinking of this now? If only he'd thought of this last night he'd have done something - nuisance phonecalls, putting a brick through the

window, anything to spoil the mood. Oh perfect, Xander and Anya were going to live happy-bloody-ever-after, totally oblivious to him with his pathetic, futile, painful desire. Him with his daydreams and fantasies that were all he had because Anya had the whole package ...

He had to jerk to a sudden halt as he turned around and promptly bumped into someone. He growled as even more of his beer slopped over the glass, then felt his temper rise another ten notches or so as he saw The Bitch Girlfriend herself standing in front of him. Not content with taking his guy, she now had to ruin his beer. He wanted to rip out her intestines and strangle her with them.

"Well look who it is." Spike sneered, infusing the words with a **wealth** of bitterness, and a touch of disgust.

"Spike, go away." Anya snapped, the air of discontent around her almost palpable. Spike's eyebrow raised. He'd learnt a couple of things about women over the years he'd spent with Dru. One - *never* disagree with Miss Edith, and two - when a girl looked as pissed off as Anya did right now, she usually had boyfriend troubles. Well either that or the stars weren't singing but somehow he didn't think that was the problem with Anya. At the very least she certainly didn't look like a happy fiancée, and a

quick glance to her hand revealed it was ringless. Suddenly Spike's rock bottom spirits lifted.

"So," he said, switching tones in an instant, and sounding both warm and agreeable. "What's new with you?"

"I said go away!" Before he could say anything however she launched into a vitriol of abuse. "What is wrong with you men! Why can you never accept a woman's point of view?"

"Oh dear," Spike said, oozing sympathy. "Had a fight with Xander have you?"

Anya rolled her eyes. "He's so ..."

"Isn't he though?" Spike agreed swiftly. "What happened? I thought you two were all happy and nauseating. Yesterday Xander was planning a ... " He curled his lip and managed to spit out the words; "...romantic evening."

"Yes, he had candles and champagne," Anya said, waving her hand and dismissing the romance that had tortured Spike with an impressive lack of interest. "So what? It doesn't solve anything!"

"Right, right, so you didn't uh ... " Spike stopped, he totally balked at saying the words 'shag him' to Anya,

accompanied as it was by all the painful imagery. " ... uh ... you know?"

"What? Oh yes, we had the romantic make up sex but ..."

Anya stopped as the pint glass in Spike's hand shattered, beer cascading over his hand onto the floor.

"Um, it must be a faulty glass," Spike said quickly, "Come on." He wiped his hand off on his duster and led her away from the broken glass, sitting them both down on a nearby couch. Fortunately with it being early Sunday evening the place was quiet, almost cosy, and just the sort of atmosphere to induce confidences. "What's the trouble in Paradise then?"

"He doesn't take me seriously."

"I've noticed that," Spike lied.

"You have?"

"Sure. I mean to be honest, I never got why you were wasting your time with him, you could easily dump him and find another guy."

"I don't want another guy!" Anya snapped.

"Oh. Right."

"I just want Xander to stop finding danger and running straight into it taking me with him!"

"I get that." Spike agreed carefully. "Why should you risk your neck for the goody-good gang?"

"Exactly! And Xander has no powers, no special strength, its not like they couldn't do it without him, why doesn't he just stop? He can still be friends with them, why does he keep nearly dying for them?"

Because it's him. Because he's loyal to the end and brave to the point of stupidity and if you can't understand that, then you can't understand him. And Spike didn't pause to question how it was that he understood this so well.

"Beats me." Spike shrugged, as he forced himself to speak casually, keeping a tremor out of his voice that might betray his glee. In reality his insides were churning with violent excitement. This wasn't just some lovers spat - this was an ongoing, serious problem. If he played this right he might have a shot at actually getting rid of Anya. "What does Xander say about all this?"

"Nothing, he just wants to go on as we are!"

"Not seeing your point of view is he? Breakdown in communication, never a good sign."

"Why?" Anya continued, barely even listening to him anymore. "Why is it so stupid to not want to be in mortal danger every night? I mean is it so crazy to not want to fight monsters? I'm mortal now - I can't be careless with myself the way I used to be. I'm going to get old and wrinkly, if I don't get eaten by some demon first."

"And he doesn't understand that?" Spike shook his head sadly.

"Oh he understands, he just doesn't want to change, but I do .. I have changed. I'm sick of Sunnydale and all the demons, I saw enough of that while I was working in vengeance. Now I'm mortal and I like it. I want to travel and see what the world is like as a mortal and do all the things that normal girls do, but Xander won't even take a holiday!"

She wants to leave town? Spike almost wept with joy. *To whatever power that looks out for us vampires thankyouthankyouthankyou! I'll eat the poor, I'll set fire to churches, anything you want, just please let me get rid of this chit.*

He forced himself to stretch his arm nonchalantly along the back of the couch, as though he just couldn't care less what way this conversation went and remarked idly;

"Well if he won't budge, and you won't change your mind maybe its time you just left. Alone."

"Alone ...?" Anya's brow creased.

"Yeah, you know ... dump him. Go live your life, and let him get on with his."

Anya plucked at her skirt, biting her lip. "I've thought about it. I just ... I'm not sure ..."

"Take it from me luv, dump him. There's no way you two are gonna work this out, and the quicker you do it the better, the longer you leave it the worse its gonna be."

"I guess," Anya agreed uneasily. "But ..."

"Hey, obviously you guys have had fun, but you can't hold onto that as a reason to stay together if you want different things." Spike inspected his nails as he let the line play out a little. "Of course if you change your mind and decide you don't mind the danger and being stuck in this town for the rest of your life ..."

"No," Anya said, with decision. "I've thought about this a lot, and I know I won't."

"Well you do what has to be done then luv. And don't you go worrying about him, he can take it." With evil

pleasure Spike twisted the knife. "If you ask me, he isn't all that concerned with making it work with you anyway, if he was he'd do whatever it takes to hang on to you."

Anya's eyes were bright with tears. "You really think?"

"Are you kidding? He's got a woman like you and he's not even trying to make you happy! The guy's a git Anya. Dump him."

Anya bit her lip but she nodded determinedly and Spike's heart soared. "You're right! You know he's never even told me he loves me."

"Really?" Spike couldn't keep the delight out of his voice. "Never? That's ..." He caught Anya's frown and stopped himself, feigning a look of outrage. "... terrible, that's terrible. Dump him luv, it's the only thing to do."

"I can't believe I've got to break up with him," Anya whispered, suddenly looking very vulnerable.

"Yeah it's a shame." Spike said, sitting on his hands to prevent himself from punching the air in ecstasy. "But you've got to think about you now. Dump him. And don't you worry about upsetting Xander, he'll see it's for the best, cruel to be kind and all that, you've both got to move on."

"Yes, I'm sure it won't take him long to find someone else to have sex with," Anya sighed.

"You got that right," Spike agreed fervently, then was hit with sudden panic. "There uh, isn't anyone else around is there?"

"No, but he's a guy, he'll have sex with pretty much anybody."

"Really? Anybody?" Spike asked casually.

"As long as they're about twenty, female and have a pulse."

"Oh. Right. But anyway, don't you wait around, and start having second thoughts, you be brave. Go and dump him now - tonight, and leave first thing tomorrow. You got your whole life waitin' for you."

Anya gave him a grateful smile through her teary eyes.

"You're right Spike, you've really helped me clear things up. Thank you."

Spike gave her shoulder a comforting pat, and bit back a roar of triumph, looking down to hide the delight he was sure was glowing in his eyes. "That's alright luv, I live to give."

Xander had spent a pleasantly lazy Sunday evening watching a Star Trek Voyager marathon and pigging out on anything remotely edible in his apartment. He was finishing off a pack of peanuts, idly wondering where the zip was on Seven of Nine's skin-tight uniform and if there was any chance of getting Anya to dress up in an outfit like that, when there was a knock on his door.

Levering himself off the couch he found Anya standing at the door, her eyes bright with determination, her jaw set. Despite the warmth of the evening, Xander felt a cold wave wash over him, and silently realised that the chances of him ever seeing her dressed up in a Star Trek uniform had vanished.

"We need to talk," she said.

Spike was bouncing around his crypt, practically bounding off the walls, it was crazy to think just a few hours before he had barely had the energy to crawl out of bed. This was brilliant! Not only was Anya going to break up with Xander, she was going to leave town! Plus they'd been having problems for a while - there was no way Spike could be blamed for this! He wondered when

exactly he'd 'officially' hear about them breaking up. Xander would probably try to keep it quiet from him until he'd licked his wounds a little; he'd hate for Spike to know this. He'd think - and not without reason Spike had to admit - that Spike would use it to make his life hell. Still when Spike was told he'd show Xander how wrong that was ... He laughed out loud and grabbed Petunia, (as he'd named the stuffed hippo he'd woken up with), and waltzed around the crypt with her - he couldn't wait! He'd have to find the Scoobies soon - tomorrow, keep alert for any hints, possibly Dawn would let something slip ...

A loud thud on his door made him jump as the door flew back - and Xander, his face like thunder stood in the doorway. Spike froze in shock. Xander's fists were clenched, his eyes dark with fury his mouth twisted in an angry snarl. Somehow Spike got the feeling this wasn't about to be a 'my darling, I've always longed for you too' scene. He was very good at reading body language.

"Well, well," Spike managed to drawl, though he was unable to release his tight grip on Petunia; she was his only friend now. "To what do I owe this pleasure?"

Xander launched himself across the crypt and punched him in the face. Spike staggered back and hit the floor, but managed to let go of Petunia. A small victory.

"You told Anya to break up with me!" Xander roared.
"She's leaving, you bastard - I should kill you!"

Yeah, he'd have to keep his ears open for those little hints.

"Ow!" Spike considered picking himself up, but decided it wasn't the wisest course of action at the moment. Xander would just see it as a chance to knock him down again. Besides, staying on the floor for a moment was nothing, not when Anya had done it! She'd actually done it! On the other hand it looked like she hadn't exactly kept quiet about Spike's subtle push, and now his joy was tempered by the worry he was about to have his ass kicked from one end of the cemetery to the other, then tied up to await the rising sun. He raised himself on his elbows and met Xander's furious eyes. "Bloody Hell, calm down will you?"

"Calm down?" Xander spluttered. "You just talked my girlfriend into dumping me!"

"Hey all I did was provide a friendly ear!"

"You've ruined my life! Anya is leaving and it's all your fault!"

"My fault?" Spike repeated with a flash of anger. It was so typical he got the blame for this, when all he'd done was give her a push in the right direction - i.e. away from Xander. "I was just tryin' to help the girl!"

"You told her to dump me!"

"Do you think if she hadn't wanted to do it anything I said would have made the slightest difference?" Spike shot back, knowing that it was true, and using it in a swift attack to disarm Xander. He got to his feet, all the better to stare Xander down. "All I did was try and clear things up for her - she decided to leave because it was the best thing to do and if you weren't being so selfish you'd realise that!"

"Selfish? Me? You're the selfish guy around here, you never do anything unless there's something in it for you!" Xander paused as a thought occurred to him, and he grabbed Spike's T-shirt with a fresh burst of anger. "Are you after her?" Xander snarled into his face. "'Cos if you are ..."

"Oh please!" Spike rolled his eyes, but Xander continued to glare at him, only inches away, demanding an answer.

Spike felt a lurch in his stomach that had absolutely nothing to do with the prospect of an imminent beating. "No," Spike said seriously, looking into Xander's eyes - god, how Xander's eyes could blaze - "I'm not after Anya."

Xander shoved him away in disgust. "Oh so it's all because of me!"

Spike felt his mouth go dry with fear. "Wha ... what?"

"It's me!" Xander repeated. "You're just out to make my life hell!"

Spike almost fainted with relief.

"I cannot believe you," Xander continued, by now in a state Spike's dear departed mum would have called 'high dudgeon'. "What the hell have I done to deserve this from you?"

"Hey!" Spike yelled, getting seriously pissed off, not to mention still a little shaken with the after-effects of having Xander hold him so closely. "This was nothing to do with me, and if you weren't so busy trying make yourself feel better by blaming me and having a game of 'Beat the Spike' you'd see that! This was about the two of you and all the things *you* can't give her. The girl wants a normal life, she wants to see more of the world than this

piss-ant little town. She wants kids and safety and not having to think about the latest big bad of the week, and there's nothing wrong with that! If you ask me you're the one being selfish here, trying to make her stay and live a life she didn't want!"

The words seemed to echo around the crypt like a thunderclap. Spike stared Xander down defiantly and suddenly the anger seemed to drain out of him. He visibly deflated, leaning back against the wall, and his lip trembled. "But I need her."

"No - you don't." Spike said brutally. "If you needed her you'd have done anything to keep her in your life. You didn't love her, you just liked having her around. Seems to me if you care about her at all, you'd think she deserved better than that."

There was a long silence. Xander swallowed and looked away as the last of his energy left him and he slumped down the wall, hitting the floor with a defeated thud. "I knew this was coming," he said at last. "I knew it - I just didn't want to see it."

"Yeah, well." Spike suddenly felt utterly at a loss. He should feel delighted at how well today had gone, but Xander, sitting on the floor with his lip trembling and his hair falling into his eyes, looked like a kid who needed a

hug. It made Spike's chest feel tight, scaring him a little at just how much he wanted to console him - and not just in a 'get in his pants' way. *How did I get to the stage where I hurt when he hurts?*

More than sympathy though, Spike was also feeling a very unexpected pang of guilt. Spike *never* felt guilty about anything and he didn't care for the feeling now. He tried to shake it off. He shouldn't be feeling bad about helping to end a relationship that was already over in all but name, even if he did have an ulterior motive! But he did. Despite being overjoyed beyond all measure that Anya was suddenly out of the picture he hated to see Xander so unhappy and know that it was partly because of him. Even Petunia was looking as though she was about to shed a tear for the poor guy.

Spike awkwardly sat down next to Xander, but didn't dare pat his arm in case it made him bolt. He so badly wanted to help, to show Xander he could be a pal, but he was trembling inside. Nerves mingled with the desire to just ... lean over and kiss him. *Keep cool* he told himself sternly. *Stay calm, whatever you do don't screw this up by jumping on him - and for Gods sake don't start talking about Essence of Toad.* He groped for words that could help, although consoling words weren't really his forte.

"Um ... it's better its done now. Worse things happen at sea."

Xander didn't look up. He didn't appear to be finding this particularly comforting. Spike made another effort.
"She'll be alright. So will you."

Xander still stared miserably at the floor and didn't reply.

Spike was flummoxed, this was his golden opportunity to help Xander - and to help himself by showing Xander that he wasn't such a bad guy - and he hadn't a clue what to say. There must be something that would help. He needed to hit the right note - not so arsy as to piss him off, not so needy as to scare him off, and not so cold as to make him feel unwanted.

Inspiration suddenly struck, and he said casually. "Fancy a drink?"

Xander looked up at him with a spark of hope in his eyes.

Xander choked slightly as the disgusting taste of whisky dragged at his throat. He liked beer but other than that he wasn't much of a drinker. He was notoriously susceptible to the dubious charms of alcohol, and it didn't do wonders for a guy's morale when Buffy and

Willow could hold their drink better than him. However now and then he felt the need for a strong drink, and tonight was definitely a now and then time.

"I see you don't appreciate a good strong drink," Spike said from where he sat next to Xander on the floor, smirking a little at his coughing fit.

"I appreciate it fine," Xander responded as coldly as was possible while turning red in the face, and spluttering as though his throat had been sandblasted. He toyed with the idea of leaving, maybe finding Mr. Rog ... uh, that was Willow. But he was feeling exhausted after his emotionally traumatic evening and although Spike was an insensitive, irritating prick, he was an insensitive, irritating prick that was offering him a free drink. He took another sip and grimaced. He really shouldn't have come here, but he'd been so upset and angry after Anya's less than sensitive break up speech; "We both know we should break up! Spike even knows it!"

It hadn't taken much to piece together that Anya had seen Spike earlier tonight, and apparently his 'advice' had been the final straw on the camel's back of their relationship. Although he'd had a strong suspicion that he and Anya were on borrowed time, being dumped was not pleasant, and the fact that Spike had been even

slightly involved had left Xander with the very strong urge to kick his ass. However now that urge was gone and he just felt miserable. As much as he hated to admit it, Spike was right. Anya did deserve better, and if she hadn't wanted to break up with him, nothing Spike had said would have made the slightest difference. *Great, so its all my fault - I feel sooooo much better.* He wished he still felt mad; blaming Spike was much easier than blaming himself. Fun too.

"So how long things been going wrong with Anya then?" Spike asked cheerfully. Xander's hackles should have risen at the tactless question, but he actually didn't mind. Willow and Buffy were always so sympathetic and kind about relationship problems it made him feel over-emotional in a way that really messed with his manly pride. Much the same as when he watched 'Bambi', or 'Charlotte's Web', he could never seem to stop himself from bawling like a child. Spike's matter-of-fact approach somehow made it easier to talk about. Or maybe it was the whisky.

"Ages," Xander sighed, realising it was true, but it didn't make him feel any less crappy about her imminent departure.

"Yeah? Surprising, you two always looked pretty cosy."

"You were obviously looking during those two seconds a day where I hadn't managed to piss her off."

Spike gave a snort of laughter and topped up Xander's glass. Xander watched him suspiciously. *Why is Spike being so nice to me? He's probably going to get me wasted then send me home dressed in a pink ballgown. As long as its not taffeta, itchy, scratchy stuff.* He took another sip and dismissed the worry about going home dressed like a reject from a transvestite bar. He could worry when he wasn't nursing a heart that might not be broken, but certainly felt battered and chipped around the edges. He took a slightly larger sip, the whisky still tasted foul, but at least it was warming. Unfortunately he couldn't stop his face from going into a gargoyle-like spasm of disgust every time he took a drink.

"Bit narky was she?" Spike clucked his tongue emphatically; pausing to drink his own whisky with a smoothness Xander could only envy. "Women, eh?"

"She's leaving town" Xander said suddenly, and he looked away in shame as something knotted painfully in his chest.

Spike paused. "That's not 'cos of you mate," Spike said in a studiedly casual tone of voice. "You're the only reason she hung on as long as she did."

Xander felt a wave of gratitude that momentarily knocked him speechless. He drained his glass to hide his emotion, feeling oddly unsettled. Nice Spike was supposed to have vanished when Toth's spell had ended, but now here he was being - well not nice exactly, but certainly bearable. In fact, right now, with Spike sitting next to him, generously filling his glass Xander was reminded of William's well meaning kindness. It was strangely ... soothing, and it shouldn't be! Awkward, meddlesome vampire always messing with his expectations! He shot Spike a glare, just so they'd both be sure that Xander wasn't succumbing to the madness of actually liking him again, but Spike wasn't even looking at him. He was sipping at his drink and talking. "Now, Dru, she said I was the reason she was going. And she left the *country* when she dumped me."

"Thus proving she's not quite as insane as she made out," Xander said nastily, finding comfort in snapping at Spike. A secure point in a changing world. He took a large gulp of the whisky in case Spike decided to take it off him, quickly followed by his Quasimodo impression.

"Oh no, she was barking all right," Spike replied, ignoring the insult. He had a slightly distant look on his face, as though he was remembering events past. "Sometimes

literally," he winced. "My poor little evil plum, at least life was never dull with her."

"Yeah," Xander nodded. "Anya's a bit crazy, but she really keeps ... kept things interesting."

"Yeah but did she ever ask you to fly to the moon with her?"

"No, but she did want me to tie Giles up in the basement."

Spike choked on his whisky to Xander's immense satisfaction. *Now who doesn't appreciate a strong drink?*

"Wha ...? Please tell me it wasn't a sex thing."

"Uggh! Well thank you for the increase in my future therapy bills there with that image, Spike. No I think it was more of an 'Anya wanted to run the Magic Box' thing."

"Well that's not so crazy, 'sides Dru and I always used to keep a spare human tied up in case we got hun ... umm, that is ..."

"Its okay Spike, I'm aware of the fact that you have done slightly naughty things from time to time. Only replace the words 'slightly naughty' with 'very evil', and the

phrase 'from time to time', with 'every day of your life', right?"

"Not, umm, every day," Spike protested. "And not anything at all lately." He snorted. "Dru thought I'd gone soft before - think she'd stake me if she could see me now."

"I'll do it," Xander offered. *Make Drusilla happy. Stake Spike Now!*

"Sod off."

Xander felt a smile tugging at his mouth and hastily hid it by finishing off his drink. Drinking Spike's booze was one thing, but smiling at him was quite another. Spike refilled his glass, and Xander considered what Spike had said about Dru through the haze the whisky was spinning in his head. "You know with Dru," he said tentatively, "you guys had fun and it was interesting and all that, but was it ever ... kind of ...exhausting?"

Spike looked at him with surprise, as though he hadn't expected Xander to get that. "You know it really was. It wasn't like I minded, but having to watch her, take care of her when she wanted it, stand back when she didn't, pander to every little whim, every crazy idea. I could

never relax. Sometimes I wonder how she's doin' without me."

"You still miss her?" Xander asked, the whisky must have stripped his throat, his voice sounded hoarser than usual. He looked down at his hands - he seemed to have four - no two - no four again.

Spike shrugged. "Not really, I sometimes miss the good times, when they were good they were really bloody good. At first I thought I'd die from the pain of being without her - but now ... mostly I'm just kind of glad I'm out of it. Someone else can take orders from Miss Soddin' Edith."

Xander looked up from his two hands - four hands problem, confused. "Who's Miss Edith?"

"Her doll."

Xander stared for a moment then his lip quirked before a totally unexpected burst of laughter broke free. He'd have to slap himself for that later. Laughing with Spike was not something he should be doing, but there surely had to be a 'get out' clause for moments like this. "You - *you* took orders from a *doll*?"

"Hey it was a big doll y'know?" Spike's lips twitched.

"Did she talk?" Xander spluttered, picturing a Tiny Tears doll, ordering Spike around in its sweet little voice; 'Change me! Feed me! Hug me!' and giving him a cuff around the head with its little plastic hand if he did it wrong.

"Oh yeah - but not in words that any sane person could hear, that would've made it way too easy. Dru used to hold her up to my ear and if I didn't 'hear' her right ... well there'd be precious little action for me in the sack that night."

Xander laughed and drank, then Spike refilled his glass and he drank again. "I know what you mean," he said on impulse. "Not about the doll - about it being exhausting." The whisky was really taking its toll, he caught himself sliding towards Spike's shoulder and jerked himself back upright. "Anya's exciting, lotsa fun, but its never been easy. I've always been waiting to slip up and piss her off."

Spike tutted and shifted so he was sitting a little closer to Xander. "What we men have to put up with - its shocking that's what it is."

"Damn straight!" Xander agreed, slapping Spike on the thigh in emphasis. Spike leapt about a foot in the air - oops, he must have done it harder than he'd thought.

"Sorry."

"Its okay," Spike squeaked. The whisky must be affecting his voice too.

"Well I've had it with women," Xander announced as the whisky in his glass joined the party in his stomach. "First they say they want to go out with you, then they leave town, without even wearing a Star Trek uniform, and they keep changing their hair and expecting you to notice, and saying they look fat." Xander fixed Spike with a serious look. "But lemme tell you - however much a girl says she's fat, you don't want to agree her."

"Oh, I'm right with you mate," Spike agreed. "We can do without them!"

"Cheers!" They clinked glasses, and drank deeply. Of course he didn't like Spike but it was nice to have a pal to drink with on the night his life turned to crap. Xander shot Spike a sideways glance; there was something he really wanted to know. It wasn't something he'd ever imagined himself asking, but tonight had been so strange already, and they were both so relaxed, and Spike was being so sort of comforting that Xander couldn't stop himself.

"Hey, Spike?" Xander began hazily, feeling himself slip down the wall as he took another sip of whisky. It didn't taste too bad now. Or maybe his throat was going numb.

Spike put a hand on his shoulder stopping him from sliding completely down the wall, and looked at him. His blue eyes had a slight glaze over them. "Yeah?"

"There's um ... there's something I really want to ask you."

Spike stilled, his hand still on Xander's shoulder. "W-what is it?"

"It .. uh ... it might sound a little ... weird," Xander stalled.

"Go on," Spike said slightly breathlessly, leaning a little closer to him.

Xander took a deep breath. "Why do you have a stuffed hippo?"

Part Four

Xander swam from the depths of an alcohol induced almost coma, up to the surface of consciousness, with the feeling that Something Bad Had Happened tailing him all the way. He woke, but kept his eyes tightly closed as he had the feeling letting even a sliver of light hit them would hurt immensely. He tried to fix on why he felt so depressed. What was it now ... oh yes, he remembered! Oh no! He wished he hadn't.

Anya. His gorgeous, unpredictable, materialistic, entertaining girlfriend had dumped him. Not just left him - was leaving town. Now he knew how Buffy and Willow had felt when Angel and Oz had left, it was the final crushing blow - never mind that the ex didn't want to stay friends, they didn't even want to stay in town. Maybe the three of them should start a business; 'The Ex-express: Tired of bumping into your past partner? Is this town too small for the both of you? Then come to us - let us decrease that ex-cess Sunnydale population'. Then again the demons that flocked to the town in their droves seemed to have a pretty good handle on that, and the demons methods were far more efficient. Such was life in business, never any room for the little guy.

Xander groaned as his head gave a particularly vicious throb. Heavy-hearted and hungover was not a good combination. What on Earth had possessed him to spend

a night drinking in Spike's company, and why had Spike let him drink so much whisky? Probably some evil vampire plot. He wondered uneasily exactly what Spike had done to him while his brain was happily sodden in whisky land, and cracked an eye open, managing to focus enough to see he was still in the clothes he'd been wearing yesterday. At least Spike hadn't sent him home in pink taffeta. He did however have a horrible feeling that Spike had dared him to down a glass of - oh God no - pig's blood and whisky, and that he'd won the dare with flying colours. He hastily stuffed the hazy recollection right at the very back of his mind, to be suppressed along with the memory of the time when he was six and he walked in on his folks. Hugging energetically. He tried to recall how he'd gotten home. He had a strange inkling that Spike had offered to walk him back, which didn't seem like the sort of thing that would happen, but he must have done because there was some memory of flagging a cab on the way, and Spike had definitely been there. He remembered grabbing Spike by the facings of his coat, and telling him emotionally that this was goodbye before clambering into the cab. Then clambering out again and asking Spike if he had any money, since he, Xander, hadn't a cent.

Xander snickered slightly; at least in some small way it made up for the numerous things Spike had stolen from him. Surprisingly enough Spike had paid up - even extracting a promise from the driver that he would make sure Xander got home safely or Spike would hunt the driver down, skin him, and use said skin to make a coat to give to his grieving widow. Xander had felt a little bad about Spike's death threats and tried to tip the driver with his shirt when they arrived home. The driver hadn't been impressed, and had come up with some very inventive possibilities of what Xander could actually do with his shirt. Xander winced. There really hadn't been any need for that sort of language.

His head pounded relentlessly and he had just made the executive decision to call in work and say he was dead, when the phone pealed out, nearly splitting his throbbing head in two. He groped for the phone by his bed, and thankfully the ringing stopped.

He tried to say 'hello', but what actually came out was a kind of anguished croak, like a small injured animal who had drunk far too much whisky the night before. Off to a roaring start. There was no answer, but he could hear vague squeaking, he cracked his other eye open, focused on the receiver and turned it the right way round.

"Wha ...?"

Willow's voice came in a rush down the phone. "Xander! Are you okay? I called and called last night, where were you? Anya came round to say goodbye, I had no idea she wanted to leave town she said she was leaving today, she wants to look around LA first, oh Xander why didn't you tell me, do you want me to come over?"

"Urk."

"You sound terrible, where were you last night?"

"Spike's," Xander managed to get out. His mouth felt like it had been covered with fuzz, and forming words had changed from an everyday occurrence into a skill that required considerable effort. Frankly he wasn't sure he was up to the challenge. He sat up and with bleary eyes looked at himself in the mirror. Green-tinged skin, bloodshot eyes, and shaking hands. He looked startlingly similar to a decaying monster, only slightly less attractive.

"Spike! Why?"

"Well," he croaked, "I found out Anya had spoken to him before she came round to dump me and ..."

"What? Is Spike behind this?"

"Actually, no." Xander admitted, not without a touch of reluctance. "He just said some stuff to Anya - and me - that was really ... harsh and ... " Xander rubbed his eyes tiredly as he admitted; " ... and really true." Xander blinked as he focussed on a grey, furry blur sitting on his bed. He looked closer. Yes, it was definitely a stuffed hippo. Why did he have a stuffed hippo? Wait a minute, he remembered Spike shoving her into his arms, saying something about her being comforting.

"Do you want ..."

"Petunia?" Xander asked the hippo doubtfully.

"What, you want Petunia? I'll get her!" A beat. "Who's Petunia? Xander - have you met someone else?"

"No, Petunia is Spike's stuffed hippo. I brought her home last night."

A baffled silence met this announcement.

Xander made a mighty effort to get his alcohol-sodden brain to work. "Will, what time did Ahn say she was going?"

"Eleven 'o' clock - she's getting the bus. Why?"

Xander peered at the clock; it was just gone nine. He stood up - then, thanks to his shaking legs, promptly sat down again. "There's something I gotta do. As soon as I can move."

Xander gazed around the Sunnydale Bus Station. He still felt like something the cat wouldn't bother to drag in, but at least after a shower and drinking about six pints of water his body seemed to be feeling like there might be some slight point in living after all. He spotted Anya, sitting with her bag at her feet, waiting for her bus, and reading a brochure about Egypt. A painful knot tightened in his chest and he made his way over to her.

"Makes sense," he said.

She looked up, and her mouth dropped open. After a moment she asked; "What makes sense?"

Xander gestured to the brochure. "I spent so much time paddling around in denial - it figures you'd go to take a look at it."

Anya closed the brochure, putting it neatly in her bag. "You look horrible."

"I'm glad to see the pointers I gave you on the use of tact really stuck."

She smiled a little, then asked with an uncontrollable note of hope in her voice; "Is this where you say you're coming with me?"

A lump sprang up in Xander's throat, and he shook his head. "No. This is where I say all the things I should have said last night about how much I'll miss you. And how sad I am this didn't work. And how brave you are. And weirdly - how glad I am that you're leaving. Because you're doing what's right for you, and I should have seen it a long time ago."

Anya nodded sadly. "I figured."

He sat next to her and took her hand in his. "Thank you for coming Xander," she said quietly. "I know you felt all that anyway, but it's nice to hear."

"Hey, I couldn't let my last words to you be 'the next time you see Spike, his ass is gonna be a whole new shape!' could I?" Xander joked through the tightness in his throat.

Anya gave his hand a squeeze. "I'm glad they weren't. Is it?"

"What?"

"A whole new shape?"

"No, we decided some painful insights into where I'd gone wrong would be more fun."

"Ah." She paused. "You know I probably said it wrong last night - this is nothing to do with what he said ..."

"I know. You don't have to explain," Xander shook his head ruefully. "In a way he probably did us a favour. I still hate the guy though."

"I know. It's strange though," Anya said idly.

"What's strange?"

"Considering you hate him so much, you spend an awful lot of time talking about him."

Xander started in shock. "I don't, I ..." A tinny announcement issuing from the speakers crackled over his protest and Anya ignoring him, listened to it with her head slightly cocked. "That's me."

"Oh. Right."

They stood, looking at each other awkwardly and Xander felt the dull ache of misery sharpen into a knife's point as

he remembered the first night Anya had turned up in his basement asking him to 'interlock parts'. An unusual beginning, that nonetheless had worked for them. For a while. A lot of nights together, a lot of jokes and hope, arguments and sex, it was so sad to think it had finished here.

"Ahn, I'm sorry I ... I couldn't ..."

"Love me?" Anya finished, her eyes too bright with tears.

"I ..."

"Don't. Don't try to explain. I ... I think you came close though?"

"Closer than you'll ever know."

They looked at each other, Anya's lip was trembling and Xander could feel his own composure begin to crumple.

"So ... take care," he choked.

"You too," said Anya.

There was a moments pause. "Well, goodbye!" Anya said with fake brightness and held her hand out formally. Xander shook it solemnly, then they paused. He held out his arms, she hurtled forward, and for a long moment they held each other tightly as Xander inhaled the

familiar scent of her for the last time, speechless with the 'close but no cigar' pain of it all. For a moment he remembered her cool soothing hands stroking his face lovingly after he'd been knocked out once - odd, because Anya's hands were usually so hot - and he wanted to beg her to stay, to try again. Maybe she would have agreed, but a voice - Spike's voice, how strange - echoed in his head. Harsh and loud, and honest. "Seems to me if you care about her at all, you'd think she deserved better than that." And she did.

"You be happy, and if you need anything you call me okay?" Xander said fiercely. Anya nodded against his shoulder and gave him a brief kiss on the cheek before turning and quickly walking away.

In the following week Xander missed Anya like crazy. Despite a slightly guilty feeling of relief that he didn't have to work at holding together something that obviously wasn't meant to be, being without her was a huge wrench. He did however discover what great friends he had. Of course he already knew that, but it was still good to have it affirmed. They were all obviously trying hard to be there for him - he just wished it wasn't *quite* so obvious. So much kind support was, he

suspected, remarkably similar to what being smothered in cotton wool must be like; soft and gentle and overwhelming. Everyone seemed to have their own ideas on what would help him feel better. Giles, after an uncomfortable; 'Well of course if you need to talk ...' speech, (followed, to their mutual relief, by a swift return to a discussion of cross-referencing) seemed to think that keeping busy with a lot of book cataloguing was the way to go. Meanwhile Willow and Buffy placed a lot of faith in warm hugs and sympathy, followed by chocolate and long talks. Not that he was complaining about the hugs - or the chocolate - but he could have done without the pop-psychology. He didn't understand most of it, (and he still hadn't admitted to them that he didn't know what 'co-dependant' meant) but it all seemed to be heading towards the conclusion that absolutely every relationship he'd ever have was doomed. Still at least they didn't try to console him the way Riley did. In fact, much as he liked Riley, Xander was beginning to have the urge to hide whenever he saw him coming. Riley was apparently of the opinion the way to triumph over depression about a broken relationship was not comfort food and long talks, but hard exercise and will power. If Riley had ever heard the phrase 'keep a stiff upper lip' he would have embraced it like a long-lost brother. He therefore dragged a protesting Xander to the gym and to play

Paintball and even, on one never-to-be-repeated-occasion, canoeing. Although how capsizing eleven times was supposed to cheer Xander up was beyond him.

Xander rolled his eyes at himself, talk about Mr. Difficult To Please. He should be glad he had friends willing to devote so much time to him. He was glad, but ... well, it would be kind of nice to spend some time with someone who wasn't treading on egg-shells around him. Someone who he could relax with and be able to tell to shut up if they introduced subjects he didn't want to talk about.

He channel surfed aimlessly. Tonight was the first night he'd had alone all week, and it wasn't the funland it was cracked up to be. He was so bored. Willow and Tara were celebrating some witches anniversary thing - which Xander had a strong suspicion was just an excuse for getting naked and sweaty, and unfortunately he wasn't invited - and Buffy and Riley were on patrol. He would have liked to go with them, after all it was kind of the reason Anya had dumped him, but Buffy had insisted he have 'a night off'. Giles was about, but frankly if he had to look at one more book and mentally recite the alphabet again, Xander was going to shove the book where Giles would discover the alphabet was useless. A reaction that would be a little over the top possibly, but Xander felt a little over the top. Ever since Anya had left he had felt

unsettled, like the ground was shifting under his feet, and his life was changing in some way that he didn't really understand. Hell, the very fact he'd spent an evening hanging out with Spike was surely enough of a portent of doom. Although - reluctantly - he had to admit, strange as that night had been, it had also been sort of, well, okay.

Xander gave himself a mental shake. So they'd had an okay time. So what? It didn't change what Spike was, and it certainly didn't mean that Xander liked him. In fact he would probably have forgotten all about that night, if it wasn't for something Dawn had said last night ...

Flashback

He was hanging out at Buffy's with the girls. Willow and Tara were sitting next to each other on the couch holding hands, while he and Dawn were sprawled comfortably in the armchairs, and they were all working their way through a huge bowl of popcorn with an air of dedication. Buffy was in the kitchen microwaving some more, and they could hear her chatting cheerfully to Joyce.

"So what did you think of the movie?" Tara asked as the end credits rolled.

"Moving beyond all measure." Xander said with his best sincere-eyes.

"You hated it didn't you?" Willow snorted, not fooled for an instant.

"No, not at all - would Buffy really mind if I set fire to it?"

Willow grinned and Xander lazily stretched his leg out to kick the bowl of popcorn closer to him, and missed entirely. Only a quick reaction from Dawn stopped her drink from being splattered over the carpet.

"I blame Spike," Xander said in response to the good-natured giggles. "Ever since that night my co-ordination has been seriously off."

"What night?" Dawn asked.

"Oh, the night Ahn told me she was moving on to pastures new I ended up drinking whisky in his hell-hole." He shuddered. "That was a scary, strange night."

"I thought you said you guys got on okay!" Willow protested.

"I repeat, it was a scary, strange night."

"When he was all human-y because of Toth's spell you liked him."

Xander fidgeted restlessly. "Yeah, well that was before he got his demon mojo back on."

"Spike's okay," Dawn piped up, stuffing another mouthful of popcorn in her mouth. "Wi 'ung ou ovver 'ay an' ha' ife ream."

Xander frowned. "You wanna try that again in some known language?"

Dawn swallowed and said again; "We hung out the other day and had ice-cream." She frowned. "Don't tell Buffy though, she wouldn't like it."

"Gee I wonder why not," Xander said, widening his eyes with mock confusion. "Spike's such a great role-model."

Dawn rolled her eyes. "Why shouldn't I hang out with him if I want? With that chip in his head, I'm badder than he is, and Spike's cool. He doesn't treat me like a kid." She looked at Xander with a wicked smile. "And he's really easy to talk too."

Xander coughed. The glint in her eyes gave the distinct impression that somewhere in this conversation with Spike, his name had made a guest appearance. And what did she mean about Spike being easy to talk to? He shifted uncomfortably as he remembered bending Spike's ear for hours the other night about Anya. And the

way Spike had walked him part the way home. And paid for the cab. *Okay, as blood-sucking demons go, maybe he does fall into the 'Easy To Talk To' category. He's also easy to hate, loathe, and detest. Strangely difficult to stake though.*

"The thing is, Dawn," Xander said, doggedly clinging to the known facts like a child to its blankie. "Spike is evil."

"Rude," Willow contributed.

"Arrogant," Tara put in.

"Conceited," Xander followed up. *Hey, this is fun!*

"Yeah, I know," Dawn agreed. "But once you get over all that, he's pretty cool." She had a slightly dreamy look in her eyes, and Xander's mouth dropped open in disbelief, just as Buffy came back in with more popcorn supplies.

"Hey, what's going on?" she asked cheerfully.

"Oh, Xander was just saying how much he'd like to watch another Hugh Grant movie," Tara said wickedly.

Xander groaned in dismay as the girls whooped in delight.

End Flashback

Xander sighed, he'd recognised that dreamy look on Dawn's face as she'd talked about Spike. Maybe his nose was just a little put out of joint. He'd known of course Dawn had a crush on him, he'd also known that crushes were pretty fleeting, and that at some point someone else would catch her eye, but Spike? Spike was knocking him off Dawn's hot-spot? Why? Just because he was a good-looking guy with a dangerous edge, why was that attractive?

Xander switched off the TV - and just at the start of an episode of Xena - yikes what was wrong with him? - and gazed around the silent room restlessly, drumming his fingers against his thighs. He wanted something, but for the life of him he didn't know what.

The phone rang, breaking into his thoughts, and he darted towards it, trying not to sound too eager as he picked up the receiver. It was probably just Giles ringing to check that he was sure he didn't want to come over, Dawn wanting homework help, Riley bailing on patrol and wanting to go to the gym ...

"Hello?"

"Lo, mate," came Spike's unmistakable rough-edged voice. "How are we feeling tonight then?"

Xander felt a surge of annoyance. He had actually had the crazy hope lurking at the back of his mind that this call was something good about to happen. Obviously not. Knowing Spike he probably wanted his money back for the cab. Plus interest. "What do you want?" Xander snapped. "And I'm not your mate."

"Could've fooled me with all that crying you were doing on my shoulder the other night."

"I wasn't crying and we are not friends."

"So what are you doing tonight then? Moping, listening to girly tunes, crying into your beer?"

"Who's crying?" Xander shot back in a restrained shout. "Not me, and its none of your business what I'm doing."

"Got a beer waiting at the Bronze for you if you want to cry into this. Ya fancy it?"

Xander raised his eyes to the ceiling and shook his head with a weary, more-in-disbelief-than-anger motion that he'd seen Giles use on numerous occasions. As if ..! The nerve ...! He took a breath.

"Okay."

Part Five

Spike beamed at the barman as he bought two beers. The barman looked momentarily surprised, then smiled back, passing Spike his change and giving his hand an over-friendly squeeze. Spike stopped smiling. However, fortunately for the barman Spike was in far too good a mood to spell out (literally; using a sharp knife, and the barman's skin) exactly how little chance he stood. Of course the chip played its part in reining in his worst impulses, but mostly it was the good mood. In fact good wasn't the word for it, Spike was flying. Anya was out of the picture and he had a date with Xander! Well, okay maybe not a date exactly, but Xander was coming here to meet him, wasn't he? That had to make it a kind of a date, right? After his conversation with Xander he'd calmly walked into the men's room, locked himself in a cubicle and given a very loud and uncool whoop of utter delight. And then come out to find a couple of guys looking at him warily and obviously wondering what the hell he'd been up to in there.

He hoped he'd played it cool enough on the phone, it had taken him days to work up the nerve to call Xander. He'd practically haunted the Bronze and assorted graveyards hoping to bump into him, but Xander had turned into the

Invisible Man. Ironic really, considering how in the old days when Spike hadn't liked him, he hadn't been able to move without tripping over Xander or his stupid friends. No doubt he'd have bumped into Xander eventually, but patience wasn't a virtue of his, which left the direct approach. Fortunately Xander was still happily oblivious to all the date-type thoughts that were swirling around in Spike's addled head. He was probably seeing tonight as another chance to get drunk and moan about Anya. Still it was a start in Spike's plan to initially show Xander he wasn't so bad, and would hopefully end up with a mutual declaration of undying love.

Spike found a table, and sat down, Xander should be here any moment. His excitement began to be overwhelmed by sick nerves. This was how spotty teenage boys who had somehow scored a date with the head cheerleader must feel. Overjoyed that they actually had a date, yet absolutely petrified that it was all going to go wrong, that they'd be mocked, rejected and eventually laughed out of town, duster tucked between their legs. But he may be personalising it a bit. The other night when Xander had just ended up drinking in his crypt had been so easy compared to this. Spike ran a hand through his hair, but thanks to the over-excessive amount of gel he'd put on tonight his fingers got stuck

halfway. He wrenched them free with an effort, but panicked. Had he ruffled himself? Was his hair standing up in a ridiculous point? A tentative investigation revealed all seemed to be well, but should he sit or stand? Should he lean casually against the wall, or not? Spike stood up. Then sat down again. Maybe he should play it cool and pretend not to see Xander when he first came in, maybe he should gaze thoughtfully into the distance, a sexy, enigmatic figure. Xander would be intrigued; 'Look he's staring into the distance, he's deep and sensitive and I'm strangely attracted to him!' Or maybe Xander would think Spike was being rude by ignoring him, and leave. God, no wonder he never dated, this was hell. And what was taking Xander so long to get here?

As though his thoughts had magically conjured him up, Xander stepped into the Bronze, his eyes narrowed slightly as he looked around. Spike's stomach lurched. Xander was here - looking for *him*. So much for playing it cool, his hand shot into the air, waving as eagerly as a school kid who knew the answer. Xander spotted him, nodded and made his way over. Spike beamed and nodded right back, thankfully managing to lower his hand. His heart felt like it was about to explode with happiness.

"Hi Xander," he said, feeling extremely short of breath as Xander joined him. He knew he had a huge foolish grin on his face, but couldn't seem to get rid of it.

"Yeah, yeah, save the insults," Xander said, barely listening to him. He sat down, and took the beer Spike pushed towards him. "Don't ask me why I agreed to this, I haven't got a clue."

"Maybe you missed me," Spike suggested, still grinning.

"Maybe there will be a day when you're not a pain in the ass, and maybe there will also be a day when monkeys take over the planet and learn how to hold meetings, but I'm not gonna be holding my breath for either one."

I'd love to be a pain in your ass Spike thought, with a sudden clench of longing so fierce it shocked him. *Well, no not a pain, maybe more of a 'filling' sensation ...*

"Spike?" Xander was looking at him strangely. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Like what?" Spike squeaked, suddenly terrified Xander could somehow see right through into his brain, where the image of him riding Xander, naked and sweating, was still seared. It might sound nuts, but this was Sunnydale. Things like the ability to read minds just kind of happened around here.

"Like ..." Xander widened his eyes, and let his mouth hang open gormlessly. Spike gulped.

"Oh, that. I was just seein'. if you, uh ... recognised your natural facial expression on someone else?" Spike managed to reply, but he could feel his brain melting into a gooey, besotted mess. Xander snorted, and flicked some beer at him. Spike gazed at him surreptitiously as Xander slipped out of his jacket, and glanced casually round the Bronze. He looked good. Maybe a little less groomed than he'd been while he was with Anya, but the rough-edged look of messy hair and faded jeans was really working for him, making him look like a 'real' man. The sort of guy you'd want to be rescued by. Spike, who loved a good fight as much as the next vampire, was a little taken aback by this sudden - and previously untapped - rather girly urge to be rescued. However, drawing on his memories of Xander looking out for him when he'd been human, he had to admit that being rescued by Xander would have all kinds of good points. Xander glanced at him and Spike dropped his eyes from his now blatant stare before he lost control and begged Xander to go to bed with him tonight and marry him tomorrow.

"So ... uh ...h-how've you been?" Spike asked awkwardly as he fumbled for his smokes, searching in all his pockets before he found them.

Xander took a sip of his beer. "I'm drinking with you, does this not convey how utterly my life has turned to crap?"

"Oh, well that's ...uh ..."

"Oh don't act like you're not pleased."

"Pleased your life is crap, or pleased you're drinking with me?"

Xander looked at him with narrowed eyes. "You tell me."

"I invited you didn't I?" Spike said evasively, and instantly wished he hadn't. If he didn't get a grip and stop gazing yearningly at him, and dropping coy little hints Xander would soon work out there was more on Spike's mind than a sudden yen for male company. Something told Spike Xander wasn't quite ready for that yet, not on their first 'date'.

He looked at Xander, noticing how he looked a little tired, how underneath the casual 'don't care' remarks about his life being crap, there was an tone of unhappy regret. "Are you really missing her?" Spike asked quietly.

Sadness flared in Xander's eyes and he glanced away briefly, his shoulders tensing, momentarily surprised out his nonchalant demeanour. "Yeah."

A pang shot through Spike, an ache that Xander's feelings - even sad ones - were still bound up in someone else, and a yearning to do something to chase the unhappiness away. He couldn't exactly make a promise that as long as he had strength in his body he would do anything it took to make Xander happy - but he'd work with what he did have. He pulled out his lighter and said casually; "Y'know if you're really feeling that crap you could threaten to kill me. That always seems to cheer you up."

Xander nodded, relaxing again and looking a tiny bit amused. "That would help. It creates a comfort zone."

"Go on then."

"Okay. Spike, you need something wooden jammed in your heart, I'd like to volunteer for the job."

"There, feel better?" Spike asked.

"Much. Thanks."

"Glad to be of service," Spike rejoined, then instantly loathed himself for sounding like a pert serving wench.

He tried to light his cigarette but the bloody lighter wouldn't spark. He tried more viciously than needed and it sprang out of his hand and clattered to the floor, of course Xander was watching with an amused grin. Damn.

Spike quickly bent down to pick it up in an effort to move away from this embarrassing moment as swiftly as possible. A ploy that might have worked if he'd been looking at what he was doing instead of shrivelling in embarrassment. He cracked his head violently on the table with an impact he could feel from the blossoming ball of agony exploding on his forehead, right the way down to his toes, and that had people turning around from three tables away to see what had happened.

"Ouch!" Xander winced. "That had to hurt! Are you alright?"

Spike managed to lift his head. "Oh yeah." He shrugged and rolled his teary eyes to imply that in no way did he feel like he was going to pass out. "You know me. Pretty tough." His forehead was throbbing angrily and the way Xander was staring at it with a mixture of fascination and revulsion told Spike that it was coming up in one hell of a bump. Spike tried to look cool and unconcerned, but could feel his face slipping into an expression of heart-breaking desperation. *Don't look at me!* Spike inwardly

wailed. *I'm a mess!* He wanted to run home, and lie sobbing under the covers.

"You sure?" Xander said, addressing the bump rather than Spike. "I don't want you passing out on me, 'til I've told you I hate you a few more times."

"Oh thanks," Spike muttered. Some great night this was turning out to be. Xander would never actually like him.

Xander managed to tear his eyes away from Spike's forehead to look at his face. "And until I've bought you a beer, y'know since I drank most of your whisky the other night." Xander gave him a slightly embarrassed, but nonetheless, genuine smile, and suddenly despite the sick pain in his head, Spike felt like the luckiest guy in town.

Xander sipped his beer and felt his lips quirk slightly as he watched Spike tentatively investigating the truly impressive lump on his forehead. Spike was being very strange tonight. For a start he was actually being nice. He hadn't even mentioned the cab-fare money from the other night, and he seemed nervous. Hell, he was being *clumsy*. Xander was used to seeing Spike move with an arrogant, flowing grace, as irritating as it was impressive.

In fact a while back at the impromptu party they had thrown to celebrate the Magic Box being open for a week, the champagne had been flowing and he'd heard a giggly Dawn say to Tara; 'Do you think Spike ... you know, the same way he fights?' Although he'd quickly blocked his ears - and his mind - he could kind of understand what she meant. Spike never seemed to mess up, or fumble. He knew what he wanted and got it. Tonight, seeing the edge taken off his characteristic confidence reminded him of William, and was almost endearing. Of course Xander was still a little stumped as to why Spike was acting like a nervous teenager.

Spike caught his eye, and smiled shyly. Xander began to toy with the idea of concussion as a cheerful rock song came on over the speakers, Spike absentmindedly hummed a snatch.

"You like Pink?" Xander asked surprised and amused. *Not of course that I'd use this information for blackmail ... much.* Spike had always done his damndest to come across as a purely 'thrash-metal' sort of guy.

Spike started then looked briefly mortified. "She's catchy is all! Do ... you like her?"

"Oh you're not gonna catch me out that easily. Something tells me the next round is on you Spike."

"Damn," Spike said, smiling slightly. There was a moments pause. "So ... who do you like?" Spike blurted out quickly. Xander raised his eyebrows.

"And since when have you been interested in my musical taste?"

"Just making conversation Harris," Spike said casually, as he gazed into his beer as though he'd never seen anything quite like it before.

"Well stop. It's freaking me out." Then he relented. If Spike did have concussion the best thing for him would be to keep talking. "Dingo's were great before Oz left."

"Yeah, Dog-Boy could play."

"I didn't know you'd heard him," Xander commented.

"You'd be surprised on the close tabs I kept on you and yours."

Xander decided not to pursue that one. "I thought the Sex Pistols were more your thing."

"How did you know that?" Spike asked, raising his eyebrows in surprise.

Xander had a sudden flashback to the night he'd come across Harmony trying to burn Spike's CD's, and the fight

he tried never to think of. Even by his extremely low standards, that one had to be at about ant level.

"Oh, just a wild guess," he said airily.

Spike looked at him appraisingly for a moment, then apparently decided to drop the subject. "Yeah, they're ok. Along with Marilyn Manson, Alice Cooper ... 'Sex, Death and Money', now that's my kinda ..."

"Are we still talking about music?" Xander jibed, a slightly hard tone to his voice.

"It's one of his songs!" Spike said indignantly. "Talk about bloody stereotyping, you think us ..."

"Demons?" Xander suggested coolly.

"Living impaired." Spike said pronouncing clearly, "have only got a one track mind - I happen to like doing other stuff than killin', shaggin' and squeezing money out of you lot."

"Yeah I can see by your musical taste what a shy, sensitive guy you are." Xander scoffed, aware that there was rather more edginess in that sentence than a simple discussion of musical taste warranted. What could he say. The two of them had issues.

"I like doing other stuff." Spike repeated emphatically. "Watching 'The Simpson's', playing cards, I even read a book now and then. And I like different types of music."

"Okay, like what?"

"I don't put it about!" Spike spluttered. "I have got the remains of a rep you know. I'm a laughing stock as it is, if it gets out I like soft stuff I'll probably have my lunch money stolen."

For a second Xander felt a twinge of sympathy, he'd used that same technique himself, joking to hide the fear that one day the bigger boys were gonna get him, and he'd never really considered - or cared - how hard it must be for Spike, cut off and chipped. But still, it was no reason to sympathise with him because he couldn't kill people anymore. And definitely no reason to let him off the hook on the music question.

"Come on Spike, I'm not gonna tell anyone. Quit stalling and tell me."

"No."

"What is it? Britney Spears?"

Spike turned a peculiar shade of green. "No!" he choked, his eyes darting uneasily from side to side. "And sod off. I'm not telling you."

"Ah, so you're a 'New Kids on the Block' man!"

"Harris in a minute you're gonna be wearin' that beer."

"Hey there's no shame in it Spike ... If you're eleven, and had your good taste surgically removed at birth."

"I do *not* listen to 'New Kids on the soddin' Block'." Spike growled.

"So who then?" Xander pressed.

Spike sighed and rolled his eyes, and finally said; "Okay. Um ... uh Frank Sinatra."

"Frank Sinatra?" Xander repeated incredulously.

"Hey the guy could hold a tune, you know?" Spike said defensively. "'Sides, you can't listen to the heavy stuff all the time."

Xander nodded, desperately trying to hold back a splutter of laughter. He had an image of Spike wearing a fedora, crooning to 'Something Stupid' when he was alone at night, and try as he might the image wouldn't go away. He couldn't help it, a snort escaped.

"You see!" Spike snapped. "That's exactly why I didn't want to tell you!"

"Sorry, don't sulk," Xander said, choking back the chuckles and regaining control. "No problem with Frank - I just never pictured you as the type of guy who'd like Old Blue Eyes, you're just full of surprises."

"You have no idea," Spike muttered, Xander raised a questioning eyebrow, but before he could ask what that meant, Spike had changed tones and was talking; "So come on, your turn. Who do you like?"

Xander shrugged. "It depends what mood I'm in." He sort of coughed over the next word; "'untry when I'm feeling blue, rock when I want to let of steam and break out my boogie shoes. I've even got some sensitive girly music to make lurrve to." The last he said in an exaggerated French accent.

Spike smiled slightly but there was a flash of ... something in his eyes that made Xander flush and feel a little bit stupid, Spike was probably laughing at him inwardly. Xander dropped his eyes from Spike's, shifting slightly under his gaze. For some reason it was making him feel ... not uncomfortable exactly, just a little ... strange. There was a moment's silence. Xander felt like

he ought to make a joke, but for once couldn't think of anything to say.

"You want another beer?" Spike asked, changing the mood so suddenly Xander jumped.

Xander shrugged. "I should probably get home." It was strange. The words came unhesitatingly out of his mouth. They made perfect sense, and yet he didn't seem to believe them, even as he was saying them.

"Alright. If you want."

Xander frowned, he couldn't help feeling he shouldn't be spending time with a guy he disliked intensely, but it was early yet and he really didn't seem to want to leave. All that was waiting for him was an empty apartment, and Spike **was** behaving okay tonight, (although that was probably the concussion). However he did have some standards; he couldn't spend the whole night just hanging out with Spike - again - could he? With relief Xander spotted the pool table. Of course! He hadn't played pool yet, that was why he didn't want to go. And tonight with Spike having concussion and all, he was probably in with a good shot at winning.

"Okay, just a couple more beers, you order 'em and I'll go snag the pool table, and get ready to be beaten Concussion-Boy."

Spike smiled, his eyes bright. He seemed to be recovering his confidence and strangely, it didn't piss Xander off.

"Harris, if I was blind I'd still beat you."

"That can be arranged," Xander offered.

"I haven't gotten laid in months," Spike said dryly. "Trust me, if I was gonna go blind it would have happened long ago."

Xander choked. "Spike, that comes under the heading of waaay too much information, okay?" But he was grinning as he said it.

"Bollocks, you tosser!" Spike was saying passionately some time later, in some might say, a somewhat unfair character assassination, considering his earlier statement. "The best Simpson's character is Mr. Burns - people just don't appreciate the effort it takes to be that evil."

"No way! Homer is the King!"

"Oh come on - a fat, stupid, bald guy? And how did a guy that looks like him get a knockout like Marge?"

"So blue hair does it for you? That's ... scary, Spike."

Spike shrugged, and shot him a sidelong glance. "Nah, I've always had a thing for brunettes myself. H-how about you, do you prefer ... blondes?"

Xander pondered, a fleeting picture of all the girls he'd had a crush on flashing through his head. Blonde Buffy, brunette Cordelia, red-headed Willow, Anya who had been every shade of brown and blonde ... "Nah, no preference."

Spike nodded. "Right." There was a moments silence as Spike studied the arrangement the balls had formed on the pool table, deliberating which to go for. By this time they'd had two games, both of which Spike - despite his possible concussion - had won, and it was looking like he was going the right way to win this one.

"So c'mon," Xander said impatiently. "Take your shot."

"I'm gettin' to it," Spike replied as he lazily strolled around the table. "You're eager for me to beat you for the third time on the trot aren't you? Guess this proves who the better pool player is, when even with 'concussion', I still win. "

"Spike, all this proves is your head is so thick that hitting a stationary object extremely hard makes no difference, and hey, I already knew that. I will however challenge you to another game, another time, just to be sure tonight wasn't a fluke."

"Oh," Spike said lightly as he paused in his wanderings, chalking the tip of his cue slightly more thoroughly than seemed needed. "You mean you want to ... meet up with me again?"

"Well, it's getting beaten - or not as the case may be - at pool, or Hugh Grant with the chicks. Hand me a pool cue any day of the week."

"Ugh," said Spike, sounding decidedly chipper for a discussion on Hugh Grant, as he took his shot, and the ball raced eagerly towards the pocket. He stepped back and picked up his beer. "That guy gives British Guys a bad name. Plus the flicks he does are so wet."

"Tell me about it," Xander said with fervent understanding as he surveyed the table. "Last night they had me watching 'Four Weddings and a Funeral'."

"Ack. Give me some violence or I'm straight to sleep."

"We're not actually discussing your sex life right now, Spike."

Xander snickered as Spike choked on his beer.

"I'm not ... I mean occasionally Dru would ... but not ... uh ..."

"I'm kidding!" Xander interrupted before Spike let some information slip that they would both wish he'd kept to himself. "And yeah, I think directors should have a rule. More explosions than dialogue. That's what makes a classic movie." He took his shot. Missed, but did manage to put Spike in a tricky position for a shot.

"You said it," Spike agreed. He frowned thoughtfully at the table, wandering around it before settling on a position, and leant way over the table, his T-shirt riding up a little, revealing a strip of pale skin. Xander grinned to himself and moved to stand next to him as Spike carefully lined up his shot.

"Hey Spike, you ticklish?" Xander asked innocently as he playfully flicked his fingers over the exposed skin. Spike leapt like a scalded cat, the cue slipped and the ball shot off the table with a clatter. Xander doubled over with laughter, as Spike, looking adorably flustered, darted his eyes from the table, to the ball, back to Xander. He swiftly tucked his T-shirt back in, and shot a glare at Xander.

"You bloody cheat!"

"What? I asked an innocent question, to which the answer was obviously a resounding 'yes'! Don't worry Spike, I won't use this information to make your life hell. Much." He feigned a tickle attack at Spike's ribs, and Spike jumped back nervously, bumping into the table, but he was smiling too.

"Sorry," Xander lied through a huge grin. *I should have done that years ago* The sight of Spike watching him with an air of suspicion and anticipation was enjoyable in the extreme. "No, really take your shot, I'll go over there."

Strangely Spike looked almost disappointed for a moment. He picked up the ball and placed it back in its approximate position, and leant back over the table, watching Xander warily all the while. Xander gave him a teasing wink. Spike took his shot - and missed quite spectacularly.

"Ooh, a swing and a miss for Concussion Boy," Xander commented gleefully. He chose his shot, and made it easily. He was quite a bit behind Spike in the game, so he wasn't really expecting to beat him, but for the rest of the game Spike seemed unsettled, his concentration shot. More than once Xander caught Spike glancing at him surreptitiously, visibly vibrating as Xander passed

close to him. *Wow - he is sooo paranoid about being tickled!* Xander thought with amusement as he began to catch up, then -metaphorically speaking - kick Spike's ass all over the pool table.

Soon he was just about to pot his final ball in an easy shot, and was looking forward to a sweeping victory, (and possibly doing a little dance as well, just to rub Spike's nose in it) when the table seemed to shift slightly, just as he took his shot. They watched, Xander in disbelief, Spike in delight as he jabbed the ball violently and inexpertly with the cue. It missed the pocket, bouncing off the side and scuttling to the other side of the table.

"The table moved!" Xander protested.

"Oh, yeah!" Spike crowed. "That's the most pathetic excuse I've ever heard, the table moved ..."

Then Spike staggered sideways with a little yelp that he would deny forever after, as the whole *room* moved. A chorus of surprised yells hit the air as everything rocked, the tables and chairs, the bar, the staircase. The ground shook under Xander's feet, and he grabbed onto the pool table for balance. Some lights on the ceiling, shaken free from their position, crashed to the floor, mercifully not hitting anyone. The wires snapped with a fiery cascade of

sparks shooting up into the air, then all the lights flickered and went out. The Bronze was plunged into pitch black and the ground rocked again, more violently than before. The table shifted away from Xander's hands, he could hear several clatters that indicated the balls were bouncing off it. He managed to stay on his feet, but felt paralysed with nerves now he had nothing to hold onto.

"WHAT the bloody HELL...?" Spike's voice roared out of the darkness.

"Its an earthquake you idiot!" Xander shouted in the approximate direction where Spike's voice was coming from. Someone hurtled into his back, knocking him painfully with their elbow, and forcing him to shoot forward a few steps under the momentum.

"Ow! Hey watch it, don't panic ..."

It was useless - people were badly spooked, and the cries and shouts filling the Bronze drowned out his voice. Plus the fact he was feeling more than a little panicked himself. Although the ground had stopped shaking, no progress was being made with the lights, and he could hear people charging blindly about. Various unhappy scenarios, mostly involving being trampled to death were streaming through his head. His eyes were open as wide

as they could go, and he couldn't even distinguish a slightly darker black spot from just the general blackness, that might indicate someone was about to run into him. No sooner had he thought it then someone did slam into him. He stumbled back and his foot landed on one of the fallen pool balls. In a second of horror-stricken realisation his arms flailed wildly for balance, and failed. He flew backwards, bracing himself for the impact - but never hit the floor. //WHAT the FU ...?// Somehow he was floating with his upper body a foot above the ground, his feet scrabbling uselessly for a purchase on the ground. After a stunned moment, he realised that someone had tight hold of him under the arms.

"People are running at you like you're a punch bag. We need to get out of here." Spike's voice spoke next to his ear, making Xander jump in shock.

"Gee, y'think so?" Xander snapped, as Spike pushed him back up to his feet and he broke away from him. "And how are we meant to do that when we can't see ..."

"I can see," Spike interrupted impatiently.

"Oh," Xander felt himself flush a little. Of course Spike could see - how else did he think Spike had caught him?

"Vamp vision. Right."

"Grab hold of my arm."

"I can't see your arm."

"Oh, right." Spike sounded a little uncomfortable, and there was an odd quiver in his voice, that sounded almost like nerves - or excitement. Typical vampire revelling in the chaos. "Okay, hang on, just let me ..."

And Spike's arm was slipping around his waist.

For a second Xander caught his breath.

Maybe Spike did too.

Then Spike was holding him in a firm, reassuring clasp; "C'mon," he said nudging Xander. "It's this way."

"Oh. Erm ..." Xander stared utterly blankly out into the black void where he could hear yells, and people smashing into things. "I dunno Spike ..."

"Xander we need to get out, it's not safe!" Spike snapped, his voice taut with frustration, then he added in a more gentle tone; "It'll be alright, I'll lead you. Trust me."

"You serious?" Xander questioned shrilly.

"I'm not going to make you walk into a wall if that's what you're worried about," Spike said impatiently, then sounding slightly amused; "Of course if you prefer it I can always carry you - "

"And we're walking!" Xander interrupted, taking a tentative step out. Oh crap. Oh crap. Oh crap. He was all turned around and didn't have a clue which way they were going. All he could see was black, black, and more black. *Yeah, that decision to black out the windows was really a touch of genius guys!* Although he knew it was nuts he felt like he was about to walk straight into a pit, or that monsters were hovering all around him, just waiting for the right moment to rip into him. This being Sunnydale, maybe he wasn't being that paranoid. All he could hear were yells and people brushing past ... and Spike. Holding onto him tightly, talking him through it soothingly.

"Okay, take a big step, there's wires on the floor ... yeah, that's it. Over this way now, or you'll walk into the staircase ... " Spike's free hand suddenly pressed firmly against Xander's chest, halting his faltering progress.

"Stand still a minute, wait for this wanker to pass ..."

Someone pushed past Xander so close his hair lifted in the breeze, and shit this was so creepy. Apparently unable to stop himself, his arm shot around Spike's waist,

and gripped him tightly. Xander made a mental note to be embarrassed about this later. Talk about any port in a storm, he'd obviously cling to anyone in a blackout.

"O-okay," Spike said, his voice higher pitched than usual. "Lets go, nearly there ..." Xander took a deep breath and stepped forward again, still clinging to Spike.

"I don't usually do this on a first date y'know," Xander quipped, trying to calm his terrified, frantic heart that was thudding rapidly and kept making a concerted effort to leap up into his throat.

"Don't worry, I won't tell anyone," Spike reassured him, sounding a little breathless, Xander wondered a little guiltily if he was holding on too tight, and tried to get his fingers to loosen their death grip on Spike, but couldn't physically do it. Another shock, a very mild one compared to the others vibrated the floor under their feet, and more yells filled the air, as he clung to Spike more tightly than ever.

"Oh, Spike is the Earth moving for you too?" Xander gasped, feeling hysterical giggles welling up in his chest.

Spike gave a low laugh, that somehow had a bit of an edge to it. "It really is. C'mon you're doing great, we're there, I've just got to ...oh bugger."

"What is it?"

"The doors slipped in the frame - that's probably why no-one else has got out yet, even if they find the bloody thing, they can't open it, hang on a sec, I'll just ..."

The next thing Xander felt Spike give a sort of jump and jolt, there was a cracking of wood, the door flew open and they were spilling out into the night air, where the street lights and the moonlight flooded Xander's eyes. He blinked in the welcome light, it was such a relief to see again. All at once he felt a million times better, and a little silly for being so freaked out in there. He disentangled himself from Spike, and looked back at the door. "Did you kick that down?"

"Yeah."

"Nice!" Xander said impressed. Other people inside the Bronze spotted the exit, and quickly began to surge out. He and Spike headed away quickly before they got caught up in the crowd. Xander took a deep breath, as they walked, and he began to shake off his panic. The world looked reassuringly normal, the Bronze had probably got the worst of it since the lights had fused. More of the famous Xander Harris luck working for him there. Of course it could have been a whole lot worse if Spike hadn't been there. Although, now they were safely

out, the embarrassment about draping himself over Spike like a girl having the vapours had arrived bang on time.

Xander shot Spike a sideways glance, as they walked. "Hey, um ...thanks for the help in there," he said, a little awkwardly. "You'd make a great guide dog."

Spike glanced at him, and gave him a smile. "Don't mention it. Glad to help."

There was a pause.

"So - a night out Sunnydale style, huh?" Spike said.

"Oh yeah, that's my home town - filled with spills, kills and chills. Gotta say, at least thanks to living in constant terror, it's never dull here. What do think - apocalypse?"

Spike shook his head decidedly. "I haven't heard about any new big bad about to spring up - and there's usually something, rumours, or you can smell it in the air. I think it's just Southern California."

"Well that's a relief," Xander said thankfully.

"Apocalypses are time consuming, and I've got a load of work on at the minute. Buff is gonna be freaking about this though."

"What, she's not keen on earthquakes?"

"Everytime there's been one while she's been here she's either died or nearly died. That kinda thing can really put a crimp on your day. So yeah - earthquakes lead to an edgy Slayer."

"Better not sneak up behind her then."

"You think I've got a death wish?"

They grinned at each other, then Xander checked his watch. "I'd really better get home," he said, slightly reluctantly. Tonight, surprisingly, had been the most fun he'd had since Anya had left. Earthquakes notwithstanding. "I'd better ring the others, check they're all okay, and I've got an early start tomorrow."

"Yeah," Spike said, sounding a little subdued all at once. "C'mon then, lets get you back."

"Um ... you don't have to see me home," Xander stuttered, both surprised and uncomfortable. "I'll be fine, you really don't have to bother."

"Yeah then I'll just be up all night worrying," Spike said, his voice sounding a little tense.

"You'd worry?" Xander repeated in astonishment, even as he began to smile at Spike. A feeling he couldn't identify, but felt suspiciously good and warm was unfurling inside him.

"Yeah 'bout myself," Spike said quickly. "You know the Slayer'll drown me in holy water if anything happens to you."

"Oh." The warm, happy feeling was instantly doused and the good 'two-guys-together' vibe that had developed over the evening abruptly vanished as he simmered in anger. Typical - just fucking typical, even Spike thought he needed looking after, and Spike wasn't even doing it because he cared one way or another. The only thing he was bothered about was keeping Buffy off his back.

"So are you coming or what?" Spike said impatiently as he realised Xander wasn't following him.

"Look I said it's okay," Xander said petulantly, folding his arms and standing exactly where he was.

Spike rolled his eyes. "C'mon Xander, just let me see you home. There's just been an earthquake for cryin' out loud, and you of all people know it's not safe here at night! All sorts of scary things could be lurking."

"Oh yeah, what a great way to be safe from scary things in the dark, to walk *with* a scary thing in the dark."

"It didn't bother you in the Bronze just now!" Spike snapped.

"Shut up! You don't have to treat me like I'm helpless you know!" Xander shouted defensively, furious - and hurt - and embarrassed, his face flaming at the memory of how only a few moments ago he had indeed been clinging helplessly to Spike. "Just because Anya thought I was the useless, most-likely-to-get-killed one in the gang, and just because I don't have bat vision and needed some help in there, doesn't mean I need walking home like I'm Dawn! I have been fighting the lurking evil for a few years and I'm not a kid anymore I'm a ..." he paused, his face getting even hotter, but finished defiantly; "... man."

He looked at Spike, daring him to laugh and bracing himself for the mockery sure to follow, but Spike wasn't laughing. Spike's jaw was suddenly cast in iron, like he was holding himself back. His gaze flickered over Xander; and Xander's anger vanished as quickly as it had come. Replaced with an uncomfortable, confused feeling, because there was something there. Something that he couldn't place, and certainly hadn't expected to find in Spike's gaze. Xander found himself tensing, wondering

wildly if he'd pissed Spike off somehow, because Spike almost looked like he was about to grab him.

But Spike didn't move. He swallowed and nodded slowly. "So you are. And I don't think you're helpless. Or useless. Or a teenage girl. So what if you can't see in the dark? I can't take a stroll in the sun. I know you can handle yourself. But you'll still need help if you're outnumbered five to one, so I either walk with you or follow you. Up to you."

For a long moment Xander just stared at Spike, his mouth slightly open in shock. Spike looked back at him, his eyes dark, and utterly serious. Xander didn't know if he was astounded at the way Spike had so calmly handed him his pride back, flattered that Spike obviously was concerned about his well-being, or completely confused. What he did know was that the warm, good feeling was making a tentative recovery. However he had his newly discovered male dignity to hang on to so he covered it with a nervous laugh. "My very own stalker, huh? It's tempting, but you may as well walk with me, so you can hear me complaining."

Spike nodded with a touch of relief, and they fell into step together. The walk home was silent, despite Xander's threat to complain, he couldn't quite bring

himself to do it. He felt too confused to do anything as straightforward as complain. Tonight had been weird, and he didn't mean the earthquake. That barely rated a mention against the feelings that Spike was causing, from the extremely unexpected, and slightly scary warm fuzzies to the weird tension that had simmered up and was still hanging between them now. What the hell was going on? Maybe they were both in shock, Xander fixed on the idea with relief. What with the earthquake, and Spike's concussion, no wonder Spike was acting strange, and no wonder he was feeling strange.

"Well thanks," Xander said awkwardly as they arrived at his apartment, and he turned to say goodbye to Spike. "Sure you don't want to come in and check under the bed?" Spike's eyes widened and for some reason Xander began to blush and babble in a way he hadn't since he was sixteen. "Kidding! There's nothing there, at least I don't think so - I haven't cleaned under there since I moved in - but don't worry I can handle those pesky dust-bunnies -"

"Sure you can," Spike agreed vigorously.

"Plus, I've still got Petunia there, keeping guard, oh did you want her back, I could run in and get her -"

"Nah, you hold on to her for now."

Xander nodded, mercifully managing to shut up, God, what was wrong with him tonight? "Well ... goodnight then."

Spike's eyes rested on him for a moment. "Night," Spike said so suddenly Xander jumped, moving to walk away.

"Hey!" Xander said suddenly.

Spike stopped. "What?"

"Well um ..." Xander searched for the right words. He needed some answers but the problem was he wasn't even sure what the questions were. "Tonight ... before the earth started shaking, it was ...um ... fun."

Spike nodded. "Yeah, it was," he agreed in a low voice, drifting a little closer to Xander.

"And well I was wondering ...why? I mean why are you being like this?" Xander asked awkwardly feeling strangely like although he had hit on the right question, somehow he was asking it wrong.

"Like what?" Spike asked warily.

"Like, almost, okay to be with."

Spike sighed, and rubbed the back of his neck thoughtfully, as though he was trying to decide what to say. "Well, you were ... decent to me when I was split."

Xander felt his cheeks flush. Not that he'd done anything to be embarrassed of with human Spike, but still, the slight affection he'd begun to feel for the guy wasn't something he really wanted Spike to know about. He'd make Xander's life hell. He looked at Spike narrowly. "I thought you didn't remember that."

"I remember bits. I remember you being less of a git than you usually are when I had my back against the wall - I just figured, since your life is so crap and all, maybe I could return the favour."

"Oh, well thanks. I think." Xander said in surprise. He could be wrong, but at least part of that had sounded like Spike wanted to help him out. Another shock, frankly Xander wasn't sure how many more shocks he could take tonight. There was a moments pause. He had the crazy feeling he was waiting for something, but he didn't know what. "Well goodnight -"

"Hey," Spike said hurriedly, "So I thought, maybe we could umm ..." Spike paused and looked acutely embarrassed, "...hang out a bit. Y'know, if you want to."

"Oh!" Xander said blankly, utterly flabbergasted. Spike looked at him hopefully, and panicked, Xander tried to back up his exclamation of astonishment with some words.

"Umm."

He tried again, coming out with; "Aaaah."

Oh come on mouth! You've been forming words for years, often miles ahead of my brain, why have you frozen now?

He couldn't help it though, under his amazement those good, warm feelings were staging a full on take over bid. Spike wanted to be his bud, William was still in there, and for a crazy moment Xander almost wanted to hug him. He didn't though - he felt he'd had more than enough 'embraces' with Spike for one evening. A guy had to draw the line somewhere after all.

Xander managed get a grip on his ridiculous emotions, enough to cobble together a few words, but he couldn't stop the bright grin he could feel spreading across his face. "You know I hate you right?"

Spike's mouth began to grow into a brilliant smile. "Oh yeah, me too, I lie awake at night thinking about how much I um ... hate you."

"Good as long as that's nice and clear."

A beat.

"So," Spike said. "You want to go the flicks this week?"

"To see something mindless and explosive?"

"What else?"

"I'm in."

Part Six

"Oh, please," Spike scoffed, but he seemed breathless. "I let you win, it was the only way to get you to shut up."

"Oh yeah? Is that why you're panting like that?" Xander teased.

"I'm not panting," Spike scowled.

"You are too, you need to get more exercise, pal."

"Need to get something," Spike muttered.

"Laid?" Xander suggested, with an evil grin. He was rewarded by Spike gulping audibly and looking at him with a shocked expression.

"What? Um ... what?"

"Hey you did say it had been a while," Xander teased.

"Maybe you should give Harmony a call."

Spike scowled and struggled under him. "Get off."

"Oooh, sensitive! It was only a joke, Spike." But he moved off anyway. "Not that I blame you for not seeing the funny side - I mean *Harmony*? Spike, what were you thinking?"

Spike sat up, trying to smooth his ruffled hair. Xander rather liked it like that, it was oddly endearing. "I wasn't," Spike admitted. "Not with my brain at least."

"Freak," Xander said affectionately.

Spike shrugged good-humouredly. "I've given up dumb blondes now, so tell the Slayer she's out of the running."

"She'll be heartbroken. So what type do you like?"

"What?"

Xander was just stepping out of the shower dripping wet when a knock came at the door. He cursed inwardly. Tonight was the night he and Spike had arranged to go to the movies but he'd gotten caught up at work and was now running late. He felt unreasonably annoyed that Spike was catching him on the hop. Didn't Spike know Xander expected him to be late for everything? It just didn't fit in with the Bloodsucking-Fiend image to be scrupulously punctual. Apparently though Spike was just full of surprises lately, being the polite Creature of Unspeakable Evil that he was becoming.

Xander grabbed a towel and pelted through to the bedroom. There was no time to get into the clothes he planned to wear tonight, but there was no way he was opening the door to Spike dressed in a towel. Another knock came at the door, this one sounding slightly more impatient. Xander hurriedly pulled on a pair of baggy jeans and a T-shirt that, thanks to his wet skin, instantly dampened and stuck to him. Rubbing frantically at his wet hair with the towel, he went to the door and flung it open.

Spike was nervous enough without being made to kick his heels outside thank-you-very-much, so as the door opened he burst out irritably;

"Well it's about ..." His voice trailed off as his eyes registered what was standing in front of him. "...time," he finished lamely.

Spike had never really considered he would find a guy with wet hair and a damp T-shirt especially spectacular. He fancied Xander, because he was ... well 'Xander' not because of his masculine appeal. He was obviously on a steep learning curve. The T-shirt was thin and slightly see-through. His widening eyes noticed how the white, wet cotton clung lovingly to Xander's torso, erotically concealing just as much as it revealed. Water was trickling down from strands of hair Xander hadn't yet dried. One intrepid drop was sliding down into the hollow at the base of Xander's throat. Spike's eyes fixed on that trickle. He had never in his life so much wanted to be a drop of water. He wanted to follow it with his tongue. He wanted to peel off that T-shirt. He wanted to slide his hand between the gap between Xander's stomach and those loose jeans, hanging off his hips. What was going on? Was Xander *trying* to turn him into a besotted, bibbling idiot? If so, he was doing a damn fine

job of it. Spike could see the outline of Xander's nipples through the cotton. He was staring. He couldn't help it.

"Yeah, sorry," Xander said, unaware of Spike's hungry gaze as he gave his dark, wet hair one final rub. With a pull that Spike could *feel* he managed to tear his eyes from Xander's chest and look him in the face. "I'm running a bit late, you'll have to hang for a few while I get ready."

Since words were beyond Spike at the moment he over-compensated by nodding vigorously. His brain still happily disengaged, he took an unthinking step forward towards Wet T-shirt Xander and bumped smack into the invisible barrier.

"Bloody Hell!" He hated it when that happened, it was so embarrassing.

Xander snickered. "Sorry, uh ..." Xander paused, looking uncertain for a moment, then with a roll of his eyes and a slightly self-deprecating smile said; "Come in."

"Oh," Spike stepped into Xander's apartment for the first time, and gave him a shy smile. "Thanks." He had an invite! This was great, he could break in and watch Xander while he was asleep - uh, in theory.

"Take a seat," Xander offered. "I'll be out in a sec."

Spike sat down on the couch and looked around curiously at Xander's home. It was a nice place, untidy, yet comfortable, a huge improvement on the basement, but despite his momentary pleasure at having an invite, Spike felt his heart sink. It was so ... straight. He hadn't been expecting to see a pile of gay porn magazines and a full Judy Garland C.D collection, but some tie-backs and a few less glossy posters of nearly-naked women would have been encouraging. Surely Xander had to have at least a flicker of interest in ... um ... less straight stuff? Spike didn't want to do anything to scare Xander off but maybe he should flirt a little and see if any response was forthcoming. He cleared his throat nervously.

"So whaddya think?" Xander called in from the bedroom. "An improvement on the basement, huh?"

"Yeah," Spike agreed, trying to sound casual. "Don't suppose you fancy a roommate do you?"

"Oh, no!" Xander emerged from the bedroom dried and dressed in somewhat smarter clothes, his hair combed. He looked nice but Spike infinitely preferred the other way. His eyes lingered longingly on the chest beneath the shirt Xander was now wearing, and toyed not-so-idly with the idea of carrying a water-spray around with him. Now he'd seen what he'd been missing, Xander in

clothing that wasn't wet was nothing short of cruelty to besotted vampires. "I'm never living with you again!"

Spike pouted. "Hey, I was a great roomie."

"How do you figure that? You had no money, did no chores, complained incessantly, stole things when you left-"

"I let you tie me to a chair!" Spike protested, giving Xander his special flirtatious eyebrow raise. "You pervy sod, do you think I'd let just anyone do that?"

Xander grinned easily, hearing the joke, but totally oblivious to any undercurrents. "Yeah, well as pleasant as that wasn't, unless my next room mate is Jeri Ryan, bondage promises mean nothing to me. Now come on or we're gonna miss the start of the film."

Spike inwardly sighed as he followed Xander out, shooting a filthy look at the poster of Seven of Nine in her slinky catsuit. Jeri Ryan had a lot to answer for.

They settled into their seats at the cinema and Spike beamed happily as Xander casually reached into the large bucket of popcorn resting on Spike's knee, helping himself to a large handful. So far, so good.

"You don't mind, right?" Xander asked redundantly through a mouthful of popcorn.

"No!" Spike squeaked. "Help yourself."

"So, another dark room," Xander commented as the lights went down and the previews began. "Seems to be happening a lot when we get together, think maybe someone's trying to tell us something?"

"Like what?" *Like we should be taking advantage of it to do delicious and hitherto untried things to each other's bodies?* Spike crossed his fingers, even though he knew it was a long shot.

"Like us hanging out upsets the natural order of the universe?"

Damn. "More likely it's the fates trying to tell you what kind of light you look best in."

Xander gave him a mild cuff in mock indignation. "And where does that theory leave you Mr. 'If I Walk In Natural Light I Burst Into Flames'?"

"Ah, with me they're protecting poor innocents from seeing someone as sexy as me in my full power." Spike gave Xander a slow, suggestive smile.

Xander snorted. "Yeah, are you sure it's not so you can hide that massively swelled head of yours?"

"Just stating a fact." Spike ran his tongue over his suddenly dry lips, as the leather of his coat creaked as he shifted slightly closer to Xander. "Bet if I turned on the charm even you'd be eating out of my hand."

Xander grinned but Spike could see he was distracted by the preview. How was he meant to flirt with someone who didn't know he *was* flirting? "Either that, or you'd be drinking through a straw, and I warn you, if you try the 'Yawn and Stretch' maneuver, I'm outta here."

Spike snorted derisively as he retreated. "Yeah, as if." Damnit!

The film started and they stopped speaking. Time slipped by and Spike found himself stealing glances at Xander's profile now and then. Although he'd made it sound slightly insulting, he hadn't actually been kidding before. Xander looked good in any kind of light, but in the dark he looked his best - at least in Spike's eyes. There was something ... intimate in seeing the pale shade of his skin in the dark. The shadows made his eyelashes look longer than usual, his eyes slightly bigger. Xander was focussed on the film and didn't notice Spike's lingering glances, or when their hands occasionally brushed as they both

dipped into the bucket for popcorn, but each brush made Spike shiver delightfully. Plus, he was a lot of fun. Spike had to admit, even without any flirting, or kissing, this 'just hanging out' with Xander was really, really ... nice.

Xander shifted slightly in his seat and suddenly his knee brushed Spike's, a tiny brush but Spike started as violently as if Xander had suddenly leaned over and grabbed his crotch. Yeah. Chance would be a fine thing. He looked cautiously at Xander. An explosion on screen lit Xander's face with a sudden orange flash, he was still engrossed with the film, and didn't know that all Spike would have to do was relax his leg just a little and their knees would be touching. Spike swallowed, frozen with uncertainty - did he dare let his knee touch Xander's? Would Xander notice and guess that Spike liked him? He eyed the tiny gap between them, he really, really wanted to close it. Oh this was stupid! A hundred and twenty plus, and he was acting like a fourteen-year-old boy! Spike took a breath and tentatively let his knee rest very lightly against Xander's.

Xander didn't move away. Spike looked at their knees touching and felt a surge of delight. He gazed blankly at the screen, with a ridiculous smile on his face. He hoped Xander wouldn't ask him what happened in the film from that point on, he was too delirious to care.

"So what did you think?" Xander asked Spike as they wandered out of the cinema. "You sure seemed to be enjoying it."

Spike looked at him, still appearing a little dazed. "I did?"

"Well yeah, every time I looked at you, you were smiling."

Spike's eyes widened. "Well it was just such a good - um film." Xander grinned at him through a yawn. It was getting late, and he had an early start tomorrow, but he didn't feel quite ready to call it a night yet.

"You want to grab a coffee?" Spike asked, seeming to read his mind, pausing outside Starbucks and opening the door enticingly.

Xander nodded. "Yeah, sure." They entered the warm building, and he inhaled deeply - he just loved that smell of caffeine. "Now why do chicks mess around with perfume and bubble bath and all that girly stuff when there are smells like this?" Xander asked rhetorically. "If I could find someone who smelt like coffee I'd marry her like a shot."

"**Really?**" Spike asked, interested.

"Definitely." Xander took a step towards the counter where a blast of coffee-scented steam from the cappuccino machine momentarily obscured the very pretty blonde who was serving.

"No, I'll get 'em!" Spike said hurriedly, stopping him in his tracks. "You go and find a seat."

"Yeah, but you bought the popcorn," Xander protested in surprise.

"I didn't say I was going to pay for them," Spike scoffed. "Just give me the money, you look ready to drop."

"Oh - okay. Thanks," Xander said uncertainly, unsure whether to be touched or offended. Either way he wasn't going to argue - the queue was pretty long, and he was tired after a long day on site at work. He handed Spike some money, and sank into a seat, resting his chin in his hand and idly watched Spike waiting to get served, marveling slightly at the weirdness of Spike getting him a coffee. Xander raised his eyebrows, Spike was wafting at the steam that hung over the counter, but it looked like he was wafting it *over* him, not away. Xander shook his head. He may be starting to like Spike, but he did *not* understand him. After a few minutes Spike came back over with a tray.

"You got me a brownie!" Xander said, deeply impressed.
"How did you know that's my favorite?"

"It's a pretty good bet you'll eat anything with chocolate in it," Spike shrugged. "You're such a girl, Harris."

"I'm not the one that dyes my hair," Xander shot back through a mouthful of brownie. He took a deep swallow of his coffee with a happy moan.

"Would you like to be alone?" Spike asked amusedly.

"Coffee can be a lot like a woman," Xander said loftily.

"Oh yeah? How?"

"Well, if you're lucky, it's hot. Can be bitter, unless you give it things to sweeten it up, lethal if it's at boiling point-

"-and goes cold if you leave it alone too long." Spike finished.

Xander nodded with a grin. "Exactly."

Spike took a sip of his own drink. "Well at least there's been no earthquakes tonight."

"Always a plus," Xander agreed.

"So is the Slayer as jumpy as you thought she'd be?"

Xander shuddered. "You have no idea, she's attacking everything - there's a cat out there somewhere that probably needs treatment for nervous shock - and she still keeps hugging us extra hard and telling us she loves us, even if we're just going to the bathroom."

"So she's a wreck, is she?" Spike said thoughtfully, a tiny, evil smile touching his lips.

"She'll get over it," Xander said, eyeing Spike sternly. "Try anything and you'll be paying very painfully for the rest of your life."

"Try anything?" Spike said widening his eyes innocently. "Me? Do something to make the Slayer shriek like a little girl - why would I want to do that?"

Xander gave him a narrow glare but he could feel his mouth twitching.

"So," Spike changed the subject. "Tonight's been ... alright hasn't it?" he said casually.

"Yeah, it has," Xander agreed. "Again." He gave Spike a sharp look over his steaming cup. "Not that this 'us hanging out thing' is gonna become a habit or anything."

****Four weeks later****

"Hello?"

"Good, you're in, I thought you might be out."

"Is that why you rang?"

"Oh, tee-bloody-hee. I'm bored. Get over here and don't forget the sodding cards."

"It's hard for me to resist such a charming invitation."

"Yeah, yeah, keep making jokes while I slowly roast out here, why don't you. You coming or what?"

"On my way."

Xander hung up and began gathering supplies that were essential for a lazy afternoon hanging out at Spike's place. Cards, soda, Doritos and dip. He had them all ready in the minimum amount of time. To tell the truth, he'd had them all at hand.

To an outside observer, it might have even looked like he was waiting for Spike to call.

Spike aimlessly opened his tiny fridge, peered in, and closed it again. He was peckish, but he didn't really like to drink blood when Xander might see him. Although they

were friendly these days, seeing him with a blood moustache or whatever could well be a little too 'vampire' for Xander to accept. Things had been going so well he didn't want to jinx it. Besides, he was too wound up to eat. Crazy really - he and Xander had been spending so much time together lately, yet he still got butterflies when he was waiting to meet him.

He paced restlessly around his crypt, marking time until Xander arrived. He thought - he liked to believe - that he and Xander were friends now if the amount of time they spent together was any indication. Hell, it was getting to the point where it felt a bit strange when Xander *wasn't* around. Yet, weirdly, the more time they spent together, the harder the thought of telling Xander how he felt about him became. Spike had always considered himself to be a pretty 'do or die' kind of bloke. The type to risk everything on the roll of dice and so on. If you lost it all - so what? You obviously hadn't been satisfied with what you had if you wanted more, and at least you'd taken your bloody shot. But then Spike had never had Xander Harris's friendship to lose before.

Spike groaned as he paced the crypt. He'd always had a bit of a gift for messing up, but he'd really done it this time. When he'd begun hanging out with Xander he hadn't realized that being friends with Xander would

come to mean so much, that the thought of losing him would give him a sick thud of panic. *It's all Xander's fault for being such a great mate* Spike thought irritably - and irrationally, he had to admit, but he didn't know what the hell to do. To not say anything - to give up on something he wanted so badly - it went against his very nature. But what if he made a move on Xander and the answer was - and Spike had no reason to believe it would be otherwise - an unarguable 'no'? Things wouldn't be the same between them, Xander would know. It would always be there, an unspoken, awful tension. Even worse, maybe Xander would be disgusted or embarrassed and wouldn't want to be friends with Spike at all anymore, and now he'd managed to slide into Xander's life Spike couldn't bear the thought of being on the outside again. Maybe he should just give up hope.

Yeah, right. That was why he was wearing a tighter-than-usual T-shirt.

A loud kick at the door startled him out of his contemplation. "Spike!" Xander called through the door, his voice muffled. "Hurry up, my arms are full!"

Spike cautiously eased the door open, careful not to let the sunlight hit his hands. "Hey," he said his voice croaking slightly as he shivered, trying to hide the sudden

shyness he always got the first few moments he saw Xander.

"You need to get a phone in here," Xander said irritably. He pushed past Spike, juggling his armload of goodies, and giving Spike a waft of his clean, masculine scent. The air felt palpably warmer with his entrance, Xander spent so much time out of doors on his job sometimes it felt like the sunshine was somehow weaved into his skin. "Risking your hide to ring me from the phonebox is crazy."

Spike watched as Xander dumped the bag on his chair, noticing the muscles play in his arms and swallowed. Xander turned to give him an easy smile, as usual totally oblivious to all 'Obvious Crush' signs.

"Spike? You listening? Get a phone, okay?"

Spike rolled his eyes, slipping into his usual nonchalant demeanor. "Yeah, yeah, did I ask for a mother hen?"

Xander gave him a second look and frowned. "Have you been trying to do the laundry again? 'Cos I thought you'd come to an arrangement, you dump your dirty clothes at my place and complain until I wash them."

"You say that like you don't get any enjoyment out of it."

"Lets just say you skipped the part where you ran it past me. But have you? Been doing the laundry I mean?"

"No, why?"

"Your T-shirt looks like it's shrunk."

Spike shifted nervously. "Um ... does it?"

"Either that or you're putting on weight there porky," Xander prodded him teasingly in the belly.

"Am not," Spike tried to scowl, but couldn't help giggling as Xander's fingers tickled him. "Get off! Did you bring the cards?"

"Yeah. I got sodas, chips and dip here somewhere too."

Spike helped Xander unpack the bags, kept two sodas out and put the rest in the fridge, making sure to shove the blood bags well away from it. They settled on the floor, their backs against their usual seats and Xander stretched out his legs, his jeans pulling taut against the long, firm lines of his thighs as he leaned forward to deal the cards. Spike popped open his soda, suddenly needing to do something with his hands.

"So, what's the story. Awful, sunny day like this, I thought you'd be at the beach, sunbathing with your pals or something, being all healthy."

Xander shook his head. "Nah, I hate sunbathing, the chicks take it so seriously it's all timed and everything, and lying motionless in the sun is not the fun-fest its cracked up to be. After a few hours it can even be considered boring. Anyway today they're shoe-shopping. Hence, here I am. Even hanging with a de-fanged vampire in his Crypt 'o' Crud is better than shoe-shopping."

"How gracious," Spike said sweetly.

Xander flipped him the bird.

"So the Slayer's finally calmed down after the earthquake, has she?" Spike smirked, changing the subject. "No more demons jumping out from behind her?"

"Yeah, strange thing that," Xander gave him a baleful glare. "Lots of demons sneaking up on her, shouting 'doom!' then running away. Not the kind of thing you'd expect them to do."

"Hmm, almost like someone had put them up to it," Spike agreed, biting his lip to hold back a grin. "Any idea who might have been behind that?"

"Well I've narrowed down my list of suspects," Xander said pointedly, giving Spike a hard look. "But yeah she's fine now, I just hope Will doesn't make any sudden moves while Buff's got a stiletto in her hand."

"Sounds like fun, shame you're missing it."

"You're joking, even without Buff being freakishly paranoid, Riley and I like to reach minimum safe distance on shoe-shopping day."

"Ah, yeah. So what, you didn't fancy spending the day with Captain Cardboard?"

"Don't call him that," Xander said automatically, frowning at his cards, Spike hid an affectionate smile. Xander had never really managed the poker face. "And no. He's at the gym."

"Ah yes," Spike nodded sagely. "Mastering his ass."

They glanced at each other. Xander's mouth twitched, then they both began to snicker.

Xander stretched his arms up above his head and groaned. They'd played about eight hands, and he now owed Spike a trip to the pictures, a pizza, more beers than he could remember and a T-shirt Spike had fallen in love with that said; 'Don't piss me off, I'm running out of places to hide the bodies'. They'd learnt early on not to play for money, as it led to accusations of cheating, loud arguments, sulking and possible bankruptcy.

"Aww, you ready to give in?" Spike asked lazily, watching him stretch and doing some fancy shuffle with the cards.

"I'm hungry," Xander whined. "How can I concentrate when I'm hungry?"

"You've been scoffing all afternoon," Spike snorted.

"Yeah, snacks, that's different. Snacks are not food. You got anything around other than type O?"

Spike shrugged a little uncomfortably. "No, sorry. You could go to the phonebox - call for a pizza for us."

"Us? You not gonna be cracking open a blood-bag?"

Spike looked at him warily. "You - uh - wouldn't mind?"

Xander frowned slightly at Spike's slightly nervous expression. "Well it's not exactly endearing, but I've seen

worse. Geez, you should see Willow with Reese's Peanut Butter Cups at a certain time of the month." He shook his head in pained recollection. "You don't want to get between her and her chocolatey goodness."

Spike suddenly gave him a brilliant smile. Xander raised his eyebrows. "What?"

"Nothing," Spike said, still smiling.

"Okaaay. I'm gonna go call for the pizza."

"Get sausage on it," Spike said as he stood.

"I thought you were having the red stuff?"

"I am but it doesn't mean I can't dunk."

"Okay, now that's disgusting."

"You should try it with onion rings - "

"I don't want to hear!" Xander yelled, clamping his hands over his ears as he made a sharp exit.

It took a while to find a pizza place that would deliver to Spike's address. On the fourth call, Xander asked in exasperation; "Why not? What's he done to you?" to which he got the reply; "Nothing, I've never been there, but the guy who delivers for the Chinese place hasn't

been the same since." Xander sighed and hung up. On the fifth attempt he finally found someone who hadn't heard of Spike, but even then Xander practically had to promise to leave a tip bigger than the cost of the pizza just to get him to agree, because for some reason the guy didn't seem to find 'Oakhill Cemetery, the fifth crypt in from the entrance' a reasonable address. Xander rolled his eyes. *Now* the people of Sunnydale decided to get a clue?

He headed back to Spike's place, and let himself in. "What the hell have you been doing to the delivery guys?"

"Me? Nothing." Spike said innocently, though his guileless look was slightly spoiled by the smear of red at the corner of his mouth, telling what he'd been eating while Xander had been out. Even without it Xander wouldn't have been fooled, the last time he had seen that innocent look he'd gotten a surprise invite out for dinner and drinks. Spike had paid for everything, it had been great - until the next day when he discovered his wallet had been stripped bare.

Xander raised a disbelieving eyebrow. "Riiiiight. Well next time we order a pizza we're doing it from my place, and you are *not* getting the door. By the way you have a little

..." He tapped the side of his mouth. Spike nodded, looking a little embarrassed, yet pleased that he didn't mind. Xander hadn't realized that Spike thought drinking blood would be a 'thing' for him. It made his chest feel tight in a sweet sort of way to think that Spike had avoided doing it in front of him just in case it made him uncomfortable. Even now Spike seemed shy about it, turning slightly so he wasn't looking at Xander, he dragged his thumb over the smear, pulling his lip a little and sucking it from his thumb.

Spike had more color when he had just fed, in his mouth especially. His pale lips were slightly flushed. Xander realized he was staring and hurriedly averted his eyes, feeling unaccountably flustered.

"So you want another game while we wait for the pizza?" Spike asked, turning back to him, shuffling the cards in anticipation. The pink tint to his mouth had faded, much to Xander's relief. The moment of strange embarrassment passed.

He sat down next to Spike, pulling a face. "I don't think I can take any more poker."

"How about a game of snap?"

"Snap?" Xander asked, idly reaching over and plucking the cards out of Spike's hands. "Didn't think that was your thing."

"Hey, as I told you once - there's a lot you don't know about me."

"So you say, but I dunno. You've been hanging round like a bad smell for long enough-"

"Hey!"

" - not to mention I even had to put up with you as my roommate for a while, and the fact that I am now spending more time with you than Buffy spends kicking demon ass - I think I know you pretty well."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah!" Xander said, starting to count the facts off with his fingers. "You have a bizarre liking for onion rings dunked in blood -"

"Yeah, but you only found that out just now so it doesn't count."

"-you spend more time than can possibly be good for you watching 'Passions', you like Frank Sinatra, and scream like a big girlie girl when there's an earthquake -"

"For the last time I didn't scream -"

" -and I'm almost certain you cheat at Poker."

"Let's see you prove it," Spike said smugly, then looked at him appraisingly. "Okay then, so if you know me so well, let me ask you this - if I had the chance to kill Angel or the Slayer, but could only pick one of them who d'you think I'd pick?"

"Spike!" Xander exclaimed in exasperation. "That's one of my best buds!"

"So you're saying you don't know?"

"No! I'm just not going to guess at something like that!"

"Don't know me as well as you'd think then, eh?"

"It's a twisted question, and you're sick for asking it."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever you say."

A pause, Xander fiddled with the cards. "Sooooo - out of curiosity, who would you pick?"

Spike snickered. "It was a trick question, bugger the rule about killing one of them - it'd have to be both."

"Spike!"

"No, really. As long as one of 'em was walking around the doubts that I'd killed the wrong one would haunt me for the rest of my life."

Xander laughed, he couldn't help it, he'd get his punishment when he died. "But really, what's either of them ever done to you? Apart from all the death threats and fighting, which you've gotta admit, you started."

"Angel's a prick, I've got 'bout a hundred years of grudges there, but the Slayer - she's just really bloody annoying."

"Okay, I'll give you the Angel thing, but hey remember", Xander said holding one hand up. "Friend of the Slayer here, four years and counting."

"Hey, you asked. And admit it Xander - your pal *is* annoying."

"No she's not."

"Is too."

"Is not."

Spike adopted a high-pitched voice. "Oh woe is me!" he breathed out as he leaned back, lifting the back of his hand to his forehead in a mockery of frailness. "I am cursed with the superpowers of the Slayer, and a destiny

that makes me harass perfectly innocent, yet devastatingly handsome vampires, before I go to get my hair bleached again while riding that big hall monitor I call my boyfriend - "

"Shut up!" Xander threw the cards in his hand at Spike who raised a dangerous eyebrow, then grabbed the bag of chips and swiftly emptied them over Xander's head.

"Hey!" Xander objected through sniggers as he tried to wrestle Spike into a headlock. They would often end up play fighting like this - sometimes Xander would swear Spike deliberately tried to antagonize him into fighting. "They're all we had to eat till the pizza comes! And look whose talking about bleached hair!" he added as he ruffled Spike's gelled hair out of shape.

"Oi! That takes bloody ages to do without a reflection!" Spike gasped, also snickering.

"Actually you and Buff have a lot in common," Xander continued dodging as Spike wrenched free from the headlock and began to pelt empty soda cans at him. "You both fight vamps, are obsessive about your hair care routine -"

"Yeah, but at least that's all - I'm not shagging Captain Cardboard -"

"Don't call him that - and no, somehow I don't think it'd work for you two - think of all the testosterone-filled fights over who gets to be 'the guy'. We'll have to find someone else for you." Xander batted a can away, and grabbed Spike's wrists. They flailed together for a moment then Xander managed - more easily than he'd expected - to push Spike to the floor. He sat on top of him, straddling his chest, his knees pressing Spike's arms to the floor. "Winner and champion!" he said triumphantly, clasping his hands above his head in mock victory.

"You've given up dumb blondes - a type I have to say you've got a lot in common with - "

"Hey!"

"-thus implying you like another type now."

Spike looked away and Xander sat up a little straighter.

"You do? Really? Is there someone you like?" To his surprise he felt a violent pang of childish 'but he's supposed to hang out with me!' jealousy. If Spike got a girlfriend then things wouldn't be the same, Spike wouldn't always be available, Xander wouldn't be able to just drop in on him the way he did now.

Spike still wasn't looking at him, and Xander felt irrationally angry and snappish, his teasing coming out a little more viciously than he intended. "So what is it - you like someone, and you haven't managed to get her into bed? Wow, who is this wonder-girl? I'd like to give her an award for good taste."

"There's no girl," Spike said curtly.

"Oh." Xander sank back, feeling oddly relieved and slightly ashamed for being mean. Spike didn't meet his eyes, straightening his T-shirt that had gotten a little rumpled in the fight. It definitely looked tighter, but Xander could admit to himself that it wasn't because Spike was putting on weight. He seemed to spend a lot of his time grappling with Spike and he could feel - uh well, things felt pretty firm under there. Xander gave him a light kick. Spike glanced at him, then kicked back. Xander retaliated a little harder this time and another scuffle could well have broken out when there was a cautious knock on the door.

"Pizza," Xander said eagerly, levering himself up off the floor and heading to the door.

"And don't forget you're paying!" Spike called after him.

Xander rolled his eyes. "Yeah, okay." Of course most people would consider that since it was Spike's fault they no longer had any food, and since he was Spike's guest, that Spike should pay for the pizza - but then most people weren't friends with Spike, so what did they know?

He opened the door, checking Spike was safely back in the shadows and grinned at the pizza guy.

"Hey, glad you found the place."

"Yeah, that'll be twelve-sixty, and I heard there's meant to be a big tip -"

A growl coming from behind Xander made the guy's eyes widen with fear as he glanced over Xander's shoulder and took a hurried step away. "Wha-what is ...?"

"SPIKE!" Xander shouted without turning around. "Quit it! Sorry about him," he said to the pizza guy. "He's a little ... challenged. Thinks it's funny to scare people."

"Uh-huh. Well it's not fun-"

The growl got louder and the pizza guy turned white and began to back away rapidly, as Xander followed him out, trying to give him the money. "Keep the tip!"

Xander frowned and closed the door, glaring at Spike, who looked the picture of innocence.

"What?" Spike asked as they settled down, tearing into the food. "Saved you a few bucks didn't I?"

"Yeah, but we're never gonna get pizza delivered here again."

"Oh, stop complaining," Spike grumbled. "You're such a whiny human."

"Oh come on Spike, you know you love me just as I am," Xander said absently. The sudden quiet from Spike made him look up at the vampire who looked away swiftly, making a big production of wiping his hands on a napkin. Maybe Xander had surprised him in the midst of a sneak attack to grab the slice of pizza he had in his hand. The fact that there was plenty of pizza left wouldn't have deterred Spike in the slightest. Xander folded the slice and stuffed it in his mouth expertly, looking at Spike with his eyebrows raised smugly. *Ha, can't get it now can you!*

Spike shook his head slightly, looking equally disgusted and impressed. "And you say *I've* got bad table manners."

"Do you see a table anywhere?" Xander managed to say reasonably clearly as he swallowed.

"Good point."

"Actually you do really need to get some furniture in this place."

"A phone, furniture, you're just a regular little homemaker aren't you?"

"The place needs a woman's touch."

"You want the job?"

"Very funny," Xander said, checking the time and reaching for another slice. "I'll have to go after this. I've got to help research tonight."

"Yeah, okay." Spike asked casually. "So what you doing tomorrow?"

"Well there's this crazy thing us mortals do called work - then tomorrow night me and the guys are hitting the Bronze." Xander grinned as he spoke, he was really looking forward to having a night out with them, it had kind of been all work, no play lately for the Scoobies lately, their time together being limited to research or patrol. "You gonna swing by?"

Spike snorted. "Yeah, right. I hang out with you, not your mates. I can imagine the welcome I'll get off them."

Xander waved his hand easily. "They'll be cool."

"Yeah, like ice. I don't think so."

"Oh, c'mon!" Xander protested. "I need someone with a 'y' chromosome there, and Cap ... uh, Riley is gonna be busy. 'Manic' are gonna be playing, and they're pretty good."

Spike rolled his eyes. "They're just another boy-band with a new look ... which explains why you like 'em."

"Hey -" Xander began indignantly.

" - and there's a film on that I wanna watch," Spike said smoothly.

"Oh. Okay." Xander nodded reluctantly, listlessly flipping the lid of the empty pizza box open and closed. That meant tomorrow he wouldn't see Spike all day.

The thought was oddly unappealing.

Xander smiled politely as the music roared on, and let a group of girls squeeze past him. A fatal mistake, because that meant that absolutely everyone now saw the tiny patch of space in front of him as a sort of walkway. After a few moments of non-stop human traffic he took the

plunge anyway and stepped out. The people trying to walk past gave him filthy glares, Xander gave them a blank look. *Okay, here we go* he intoned in his head as he began to squeeze through the crowd, clutching the drinks he had just bought tightly in his hands. *Captain Xander's Operation Safe or Spilled is commencing. I'm gonna try to get you all there intact, but it's risky. Casualties are likely.*

He inched through the throng and as he'd suspected, a goodly portion of the drinks ended up over his hands and on the floor after jostling elbows had shoved him about. He didn't think he'd ever seen the Bronze this busy before. The band were playing their hearts out, the place was hopping and Xander felt slightly out of sync with it all. He reached the table where Buffy, Willow and Tara were sitting with the relief of a thirsty man in a desert who had been handed a large, ice-filled glass of coke.

"Here we go ladies," he said genially, sitting down and distributing the glasses.

"Thanks, Xander," they chorused.

"Just couldn't resist my drink, huh?" Buffy teased, looking at her half-empty glass.

"Hey stick a banana cocktail under a guys nose what do you expect?" Xander said cheerfully. "So what's up guys? It's been a while since we just hung out. Buff, how's the new training schedule going?"

Buffy rolled her eyes with a frustrated groan. "Don't ask - Giles is a slavedriver!"

"Yet, you sound surprised. Because he's been such a slacker up till now?"

Buffy smiled reluctantly. "I shouldn't complain, I did sign up for this, and it's going pretty well, though it does mean I've been really busy. I've hardly seen Riley the past few weeks." She lowered her voice a little. "I think it's weird for him, you know my powers getting stronger? He's started joining all these clubs that go rock-climbing or parachute jumping."

"Yeah, he asked me if I wanted to join with him," Xander agreed.

"Oh, are you going to?" Tara asked.

"Nah, I've got enough terror in my life, I don't need to sign up for more."

"Don't worry Buffy," Willow said soothingly. "Riley likes that you're the Slayer, he'll deal. Besides we've all been

busy lately, I've been so tied up with study and spells and working in the Magic Box since Anya left ..." she paused. "Oh, sorry Xander."

Xander blinked - he must have been spending too much time with Spike, someone being tactful actually came as a shock to him now. He shrugged easily. "It's cool."

Willow gave him a smile. "And what have you been doing, while we've all been slaving away?"

Xander gave her an easy grin. "Oh, you know, working on my plans for world domination."

"How's that going?" Tara asked with amusement.

"Not that great, in order to take over the world I need minions, but I can't pay them until I take over the world, it's a cruel irony."

"I'll be your minion, Xander," Willow said comfortingly. "All the payment I need is for you to take me for a spin." She nodded towards the heaving dance floor.

Xander rolled his eyes as he stood and held out his hand to her. "The sacrifices I make for my career as supreme dictator of the human race!"

She took his hand and they hit the dance floor - or rather inched politely onto the dance floor, making a space with their elbows and knees to shuffle around in. Willow was about as good a dancer as he was - which meant on their best day they were only average, so he didn't feel in the least self-conscious.

"So do you like these guys?" Willow shouted over the music, her face flushed with enjoyment.

"Oh, yeah!" Xander yelled back. "But Spike says they're just another boy-band with a new look." He shook his head. "I swear if they don't smash up their equipment, or wear a fedora he just doesn't wanna know!" Willow nodded with a slight smile, but she looked a little confused as to why he was telling her this. Why was he telling her this? All the noise must be addling his head.

"Hey, look at her!" Willow pointed towards a truly hot girl with long dark hair in a spray-on dress gyrating away not far from them.

"Now this is why gay Willow is so cool!" Xander grinned, noting the girls form appreciatively. "Does Tara know you like to look?"

Willow gave him a mild cuff. "For you dummy! Why don't you go talk to her?"

Xander shrugged, as he looked at the brunette appraisingly. "I dunno ...". Just then the girl glanced up, catching his eye. She gave him a quick up and down flick over with her eyes, her mouth quirking into a slight smile. Xander raised his eyebrows flirtatiously at her, then turned back to Willow.

"Well, go on, she smiled at you!" Willow encouraged.

Xander shook his head. "I think I'll give it a miss tonight."

"Why? Is it too soon? Are you still missing Anya?"

Xander felt a momentary pang of guilt. *God, I haven't thought about Anya for ages.* He had missed Anya a lot at first, and in a way still did, but he missed her for herself, because she was fun and outrageous, not as his girlfriend. "No - it's not that."

"So go on then, trying to get a date couldn't hurt."

Xander glanced over at the brunette again, then shook his head. "Nah, I mean she's hot, but she's not ..." He snapped his fingers trying to hit on the word he wanted. It refused to come to light, and he shrugged again.

"Y'know?"

"Y-yeah," Willow sounded a little uncertain. "So what are you looking for? What do you want in a girlfriend?"

Xander grinned teasingly. "Well, gorgeous, of course."

"Of course," Willow agreed smiling.

"And she has to consider me a sex-god and laugh at my jokes," he continued.

"Well anything less just wouldn't be right."

Xander smiled, then became more thoughtful. "Someone I can be comfortable with, y'know? It takes a lot of effort continually impressing you chicks, someone who was just happy to take me as I am would be cool. And maybe they could have a bit of an edge - someone full of surprises."

Willow nodded, and Xander pulled a face, remembering Anya. "And hopefully someone who already knows about demons and can handle the sheer terror of my life, which includes facing certain death every night."

"Well ... it's good to know what you want," Willow said encouragingly.

Xander snorted. "Yeah - come on Will - how many people like that are out there?"

"You never know until you start looking."

"Not really into looking right now, Will. If it happens great, but until then ..." Xander trailed off with a shrug, and whirled her into a spin that ended the conversation.

When the song ended they left the dance floor flushed and happy, joining Tara and Buffy who were deep in discussion.

" ... so then I saw this dress, that was like a million times nicer than the other, but a million times more expensive, so I said to mom ..."

"Oooh, is that the red one?" Willow joined in eagerly.

Buffy nodded enthusiastically. " ... so then I said to mom; 'Mom ...'"

Xander tuned out the conversation, not that he wasn't passionately interested in Buffy's new dress of course, he just felt a little restless. Although he was having a perfectly nice time it felt like some indefinable spark was missing. Maybe Willow was right, and he should start looking for a girlfriend, although apart from having sex - yeah, he did miss the sex - he didn't feel like he was lacking anything. He absently watched the hot brunette wander over to the bar, and let his eyes slide past her, glancing around again. The Bronze was heaving with people, but he realized he was actually looking out for a

distinctive blond head that wasn't there. Spike obviously wasn't going to show tonight. Not that he should, since he had already said he wouldn't, but Xander had thought maybe Spike might give up on the movie and come out for a beer anyway.

"... do you think Xander? Xander!" Xander snapped back to attention as Buffy slapped him lightly on the arm.

"What? Sorry zoned out there."

"I'll say! I was asking what you think of my shoes." Buffy stuck her foot out and showed off what undeniably looked like a shoe, albeit a rather high, strappy sort of shoe. Xander groaned inwardly. Why did girls do this? Didn't they know the reason men wore flat shoes with no straps was because they were born without the chromosome that made them care about that sort of thing?

"Hey, they're great!" he said cheerily. "Look at that, they match and everything."

"Didn't you notice?"

"Notice ...?"

"What makes them so special!"

"Umm ..."

"The buckle, dummy! Don't you love the buckle?"

"Oh yes. Absolutely. They have a buckle and I love it."

"And I can walk in them," Buffy said cheerily.

Xander frowned. "Can't you walk in shoes anyway?" The girls gave him mingled looks of pity and contempt. Buffy shook her head, and turned back to Willow.

"So then I got this gypsy top and ..." Xander edged his chair away slightly. He was a little nervous in case Buffy asked his opinion about her top. He feared she'd quiz him on what made it special, and after he'd failed it miserably they'd all look at him as if he was simple and say; 'tsk, the buttons' or something. He checked his watch, it was eleven-thirty, the band would probably be winding up here pretty soon, but Spike's movie would have only just started. Would it have nudity or violence? Knowing Spike it would have to have one or the other, probably both. Actually, watching some scantily clad girl wander down into dark basements towards creepy noises and scream her heart out was actually sounding pretty appealing right now. He could maybe call by Spike's place on the way home and catch the end, Spike

could tell him what had happened, and then he could moan at Spike for talking all over it.

Buffy stood as a new song started and turned to Xander.

"Hey, fancy a dance?"

He shook his head. "No thanks Buff, I think I might split."

Buffy looked surprised. "Already? You okay?"

"Yeah I'm fine, I just want to ..." For a moment he very nearly said 'have an early night' but stopped himself, finishing honestly; " ...call in on Spike on my way home."

"Again?" Buffy asked, surprised. "Why? Didn't you see him like last week or something?"

Actually it was every day last week and five out of seven this week but -yeesh- like Buffy needed to hear every little detail? Of course the gang knew - were vaguely aware at least - that he was hanging out with Spike, but somehow he'd never got round to telling them just how much. To keep the peace tonight he probably should have told the guys he was going straight home, but something in him shied away from that. Evasion was one thing but he shouldn't have to lie like he was doing something to be ashamed of.

"Well, yeah," Xander answered Buffy, who was looking at him curiously. "But I figure one day the guys gotta fall on a stake, and I wanna be there when it happens." He finished with a grin, but Buffy didn't return his smile.

"But ..." She looked a little non-plussed. "Well, Xander I know we've all been busy lately, and if you want to hang out with the chipped undead to pass the time then that's up to you but why do you have to go and see him tonight when we're all here?"

Xander's jaw dropped in disbelief as he found himself vibrating with a surge of oddly protective anger. Of course he told Spike he only hung out with him because his pals were busy. Often and to his face, but it wasn't like he actually meant it. "Excuse me?" he spluttered. "I'm not hanging out with Spike because I've got nothing better to do ... well okay, yes a lot of the time I am, but it's not *just* that."

"So what is it?" Buffy asked. "Why are you bailing on us to go see him?"

"I'm not bailing..."

Willow chipped in quickly. "Um ... I think what Buffy means is, well, you can see Spike anytime, but we

haven't really had chance to spend non-slayage related time together lately, and we miss you."

"Yeah, what she said," Buffy put in hurriedly.

Xander's annoyance ebbed and he reluctantly smiled, touched. "Guys, it's great hanging out with you," he said sincerely. "Always a pleasure and you know it. It's just now, well lately Spike and I ... um me and Spike we ... well we're ..."

"Friends?" Tara suggested, looking a little amused.

"Can you not say that out loud? It's much easier to deny it that way."

Tara mimed zipping her lips.

"But yes," Xander finished reluctantly and with a touch of surprise. "I guess we are."

"You're *friends*?" Buffy repeated, with as much shock as if Xander had just told her he liked to spy on Giles in the shower. "Why? How? Why?"

Xander crossed his arms defensively. He was feeling like a rebellious teenager, trying to explain to his parents why a nose-ring was a good idea. The annoying thing was he had no-one to blame for this but himself, he should have

told them sooner, but he honestly hadn't realized until just now much he missed the Bleached Menace when he wasn't about.

"Well ... we're friends because ..." Xander paused, images of Spike filling his head. *Because he's smart and fun and tough and sarcastic. Because he looks out for me in a way that makes it seem like he's not and everything just feels ... 'more' when he's around, bigger, better, brighter, and he seems to feel exactly the same about me, and that's ... Well. That's really something.*

He caught Buffy's eye, she was watching him curiously with raised eyebrows as she waited for his explanation and he knew she wouldn't believe all that, even if he could put it into words.

" ... uh, he's explaining 'Passions' to me."

"But you never told us you two were friends!" Buffy protested in bewilderment. "Xander, you're the one that hated Spike the most! What's changed? Even Spike keeps telling us he's still evil and how much he hates us all ..."

"Look, that's all talk. Spike's not dangerous - well except for the sarcasm - so why is it a problem if I want to hang out with him?"

"It's not a problem," Willow said, trying to pour oil on troubled waters. "It's just a surprise that you'd rather spend time with him."

"It's not a question of I'd rather be with him," Xander protested, beginning to feel hot under the collar. "It's just he didn't come tonight because he knew you guys wouldn't like it, but, well I don't want to have to choose."

"So, you want us to hang out with Spike as well?" Tara asked tentatively.

"No, not if you don't want to - God can you imagine trying to referee between him and Buff? I just want you guys to be okay about me hanging out with him." Xander cleared his throat. "Quite a lot actually."

Buffy heaved an irritated sigh. "This is just like the Cordelia thing all over again."

"What!" Xander spluttered. "I'm not making out with Spike!"

"Eww! And, by the way disturbing that that's where your mind leapt straight to, but I mean the way you start something then tell us at the last minute and expect us to deal." She shook her head resignedly. "Well, we can't stop you. I guess in a way it could even be helpful. It doesn't look like Spike's gonna leave town any time soon,

and if he's hanging with you, then he might actually make himself useful and give us demon information when we ask for it."

"It'd save you having to beat him up," Willow pointed out helpfully.

"Yeah, I suppose," Buffy sighed, a wistful expression on her face.

"Great," Xander said tightly. "Glad you're all seeing the good side. So, you guys won't mind if I split now and drop in on him?"

"Okay. But, we'll see you tomorrow?"

Xander nodded. "Sure. See ya ladies."

"Bye," they chorused, still all looking a little shell-shocked. Xander had the feeling his ears were going to be burning tonight.

"Xander!" Buffy called out suddenly.

Xander turned back. "Yeah?"

"Just ... be careful okay? Remember what Spike is. He's not the most trustworthy guy in the world."

Xander paused - for a moment he just wanted to nod and leave, at least that way they wouldn't think he was any crazier than they already did, but something in him just couldn't let that remark go.

"He always walks me home at night, to make sure I get back safe, and never even cracks a joke about it," Xander said, making an effort to keep his voice steady. "I think that makes him pretty trustworthy. At least to me."

There was a pause, then Buffy unexpectedly gave him an affectionate smile. "Well, just don't forget your old friends, while you're making a new one."

Xander felt himself relax as he flashed them all a genuine smile. "Impossible."

As Xander walked to Spike's place he felt a little discomfited. It was no big shock that the others didn't much like him hanging out with Spike, but hell why shouldn't he? It was his life after all. Geez, he hadn't been happy when Buffy started dating Angel, and Willow's choices had certainly taken a little adjustment, but even so he'd eventually respected the fact that it was their choice to make, just like this was his. Not that he was dating Spike of course, but he liked hanging out with

Spike - hell, he liked Spike. It wasn't that Spike could take the place of Willow, or Buffy or Giles, but he was special in a different kind of way. A way that Xander couldn't really define, and hadn't really noticed until tonight, highlighted by his absence. Maybe it was something to do with the fact that with the gang they all shared in, and shared alike. He didn't get any more of Buffy than Willow or Giles did. In fact occasionally, and totally undeliberately he knew, he sometimes felt that he got less of them than any of the others, but Spike - Spike had no time for Buffy, or Willow, the only person he had time for was him, a thought that made Xander's stomach leap ever-so-slightly.

He knew Buffy was just looking out for him, and in her position he'd have said the same thing, but things had changed between him and Spike. Ever since the Toth incident, when he'd seen just how much control Spike's human side kept over the demon he had begun to respect Spike, and it was hard to hold someone in contempt when you respected them. And it was hard to hold onto the 'evil enemy' thing when he and Spike spent hours in the arcade, battling it out for Ultimate Fighting Champion, until their thumbs practically cramped up. When they watched Dawson's Creek together, both yelling advice to the characters. When Spike always

started the conversation with an interested; 'So how are you today then?' When he had let Xander hold onto him during an earthquake, but had never once made him feel like an idiot about it.

Okay, so he was evil, Xander hadn't forgotten that - exactly - but while the chip was still doing it's thing it was easy to put it to the back of his mind.

Xander reached Spike's crypt and knocked on the door. A string of curses told him the movie had just got to a good bit. He grinned to himself.

Spike flung the door open; "This better be ... Xander!"

Xander nodded, "Then you are most definitely in luck."

Spike smiled as he stepped in, but looked surprised.

"What are you doing here? I thought you were off with your pals tonight."

"You're a pal too," Xander said, looking at Spike seriously. After the scene at the Bronze, he really wanted Spike to know that. He didn't want anyone - especially Spike - to think this was about convenience. Spike's eyebrows lifted in surprise, but the corners of his mouth started to curl up into a pleased smile, and Xander suddenly felt much better, the tension that had lodged in his chest, easing. "Besides," he said, switching tones and settling into his

favorite chair, "there's only so much talk about gypsy-tops and sling back shoes a guy can take."

Spike went to the fridge and threw him a beer, which he caught easily. On the T.V a sexy girl with dark wet hair wrapped in a towel was inching her way down a dark flight of stairs. Spike pulled out a beer for himself and sank into the chair next to Xander's. Xander glanced at Spike. "So I told them that I was coming to see you."

Spike raised his eyebrows. "I bet they loved that."

Xander shrugged. "They were mostly okay, though it'll take a little time." He gave Spike a mock glare. "You couldn't have been nice when you first got to town?"

Spike sighed ruefully. "Didn't know things were going to work out like this, did I? If I'd have known I'd end up chipped I ... probably still would have tried to kill you all. I'd have just tried a bit harder."

"Spike!" Xander groaned, although despite his exasperation he could feel a smile lurking. "It's you saying stuff like that that's making Buff get all tense about us."

"Just stating the facts," Spike said, mock-innocently. "If you lot were all dead it'd make my life easier now."

"But I wouldn't be hanging out with you now. The only reason I am is 'cos you sucked at trying to kill us."

That was a cue for Spike to make a crack about punishment after punishment being heaped on his head, but instead he gave Xander a small smile. "Every cloud ..." he said softly.

Xander started, staring at Spike in surprise. Spike looked back. He wasn't smiling. His blue eyes were dark and oddly intense. Xander's heart gave a peculiar, frightened little lurch, and he looked away in confusion. On the T.V the hot girl in the towel was now fleeing for her life, the flapping of the towel providing some interesting views.

Xander gestured towards the T.V, trying to break the sudden awkwardness. "Anyway I figured I'd come and watch this classy movie of yours, and try to piss you off before the day ended."

"Just your presence does that, Harris," Spike said, sounding decidedly sarcastic and normal again. Xander heaved a sigh of relief. What could he say - he was a man, uncomfortable with emotional declarations from other men. Though it was nice to know Spike saw his friendship as a 'silver lining'. A warm, touched feeling made Xander smile slightly. Yes, that was nice to know.

"Watch it, fangless," he retorted comfortably. "A bit of appreciation for me coming here wouldn't go amiss, especially since there was a girl at the Bronze even hotter than her," he nodded at the T.V. "Who was checking out yours truly."

"Oh," Spike said fiddling with the tab on his beer can. "Did you talk to her?"

"Nah, this girl was a goddess! I know my limits."

"You don't have limits," Spike protested.

"Yeah, I do. My limits involve watching bad movies with a cheap bleached blond."

"Who are you calling cheap?" Spike spluttered.

"To be honest I didn't want to go over to her. Looking is one thing, but the whole small talk thing is just so much effort." Xander sighed. "Actually all of it feels like too much effort. Even with Anya, I could never just be, not the way I can with Willow say."

"Think you may have missed the boat on her," Spike said, sounding slightly uncomfortable. "You know, with her being gay and all."

"Nah, not like that - but that's the thing, do you think there can be someone that feels like your best friend, but makes you get that flip in the stomach?"

Spike glanced at him, then quickly glanced away.

"Wouldn't know mate," he said casually, staring straight ahead at the film. "Wouldn't know."

"Yeah, I guess it is pretty rare," Xander sighed. He turned to the T.V. "So what's happening then?"

Spike began to explain, and Xander felt the last tension seep out of him as he sipped his beer and listened to Spike. Oh yeah. This was where he wanted to be.

Part Seven

Xander slammed his front door behind him by kicking his heel back as hard as he could, instantly regretting it as the bang resounded in his pounding head. He dropped his keys on the table, and watched as they slid off and hit the floor. Of course they did. It had just been that sort of day. He shrugged off his jacket and let it lie where it fell. The couch looked tempting, but he was starving. He checked the fridge, just to see if any delicious food and a cold beer had miraculously appeared. No. Still the same dubious smelling remains of takeaway Chinese that had

been there yesterday. Typical. No nice unexplained things ever happened to him.

He flicked on the kettle and spooned the last of the coffee into his favourite mug. As he turned to grab the kettle his elbow caught the mug and sent it crashing to the floor, where it broke.

"Oh fucking perfect!" He gave the mess a kick for good measure, missed and banged his toe on the wall.

Hobbling away spitting curses, he slumped on the couch and massaged his head that was aching so badly he felt slightly sick. It didn't actually help, but it was the kind of thing you were supposed to do when you had a headache. He couldn't see the remote, and he couldn't be bothered getting up to switch the TV on. He was supposed to have finished work hours ago, thus giving him time to go shopping for food, but a problem had been discovered with the foundation of the work they'd done so far on site. They'd all had to work through lunch and stay late as they dismantled it and started again, which hadn't put anyone in a sweet temper. None of the right tools had been to hand for any of the jobs, so he'd had to stop and search continually for the right gear. Wood had splintered, nails had bent, tempers had been lost, and the day had finished with him accidentally being

smacked across the face with a plank of wood. He wasn't seriously hurt, apart from his pride, but his nose was throbbing and likely to bruise. It hadn't improved his mood, which was now as black as the Bronze after an earthquake.

The phone pealed out and Xander winced irritably at the invasive sound. For lack of anything better to do, he picked it up.

"What?" he snarled.

"Hello mate," Spike greeted him cheerily. "You sound like you're about to beat someone to a bloody pulp. What's going on?"

"Just me wishing I could get a seconds peace," Xander snapped, his bad mood unreasonably stoked by Spike's casual good humour. "And no, before you ask I don't want to go to the movies, or the Bronze or do anything other than stay in and stare at the wall."

"All right!" Spike responded defensively, an annoyed edge to his voice. "Who stuck the stake up your arse?"

Xander scowled, his skin and hair prickly with anger and indignation at Spike's tone. Couldn't Spike tell he needed some sympathy here? "Bad day in work, not of course that you'd know anything about that, since you don't

work. No, you just mooch off me instead - your own personal cash machine. Well whatever you had planned to spend *my* money on tonight you can forget it, 'cos the bank's closed, pal!"

"Oi! Is it my bloody fault I occasionally get a bit short of the readies? You try findin' a job when you're a vampire that's had his fangs clipped! And I don't know what the hell has got your knickers in a knot, but don't take it out on me 'cos you've had a rotten day!"

Knickers? For some reason the knowledge that if he wasn't in such a snit he would find that amusing, made him feel worse than ever. Xander closed his eyes in the vain attempt to soothe his pounding head, and suddenly he couldn't muster up the energy to keep fighting. "Yeah whatever, Spike, I'll speak to you later."

"No, wait," Spike said, obviously making an attempt to get a grip on his temper. This mature, considerate behaviour irritated Xander beyond belief. "Look, I can come round with some beers and -"

"No. Thanks," Xander added as an afterthought. There was an uncertain silence from Spike's end of the phone that made Xander feel both cross and sourly satisfied. "Look I've got to go, I'll call you tomorrow. Bye."

Without waiting for an answer he hung up, but the moment the call had disconnected he felt worse than ever, his prickly annoyance ebbing to make room for the even less pleasant clench of guilt. He'd childishly taken his filthy mood out on Spike and behaved like an asshole when Spike hadn't done anything wrong, and had in fact been trying to help. *I shouldn't feel bad* he thought irritably. *It's true, I don't want to go out, and he does mooch off me.*

It was no good. Guilt had settled in for a good long sulk with him, and there was a small ashamed knot in his chest that he knew wouldn't go away until he had apologised. *Spike can take it* he reassured himself, slipping from the peaks of indignation to the valley of feeble excuses. *Everyone's entitled to have a bad day and be in a bad mood now and then, I mean what does he expect, I'm not perfect.*

He sighed glumly and stared at the phone, willing Spike to call again but it stubbornly refused to ring. He briefly toyed with the idea of going round to see him, but honestly didn't have the energy. *I'll go tomorrow* he promised himself. *And I'll buy him some of that expensive beer he likes.* Trying to quiet his conscience with promises of bribery he located the remote under the

cushion and flicked on a mindless quiz show, keeping the sound low.

About half an hour later a knock on his door startled him out of his half-dazed staring at the TV. He levered himself out of his chair, grimly promising himself that if this was a door-to-door salesman he would make him cry, but when he opened the door it was to a familiar black-leather clad form that made his stomach give a happy jolt.

"Spike!" he exclaimed in surprise.

"Yeah," Spike said looking a little uncomfortable. "Look I know you want to be alone, but-"

"No, I'm glad you're here," Xander said quickly. "Listen, I'm sorry about before, I was just in a really bad mood, I shouldn't have taken it out on you."

Spike gave him a relieved smile and a tiny shrug. "'S'all right. I've got something that might help."

Xander raised his eyebrows slightly. "Oh?"

"Yeah," his smile turned slightly wry. "And you don't have to pay for it."

Xander winced. "I really am sor-"

"Skip it, c'mon."

Xander hesitated. Spike's method of cheering him up was probably going to involve dragging him to a bar and getting good and hammered. While he appreciated the gesture, he really wasn't feeling up to it. "Um, Spike I don't want to be rude, but I really am kinda beat ..."

"Don't worry, this'll perk you up," Spike said with a glint in his eye.

Xander caved. "Okay," he sighed. Pausing briefly to zap the TV he followed Spike out into the night and turned automatically into the direction of the Bronze. However Spike stopped by a gleaming motorbike. Xander's eyes widened.

"Okay - Spike, it's not that I don't appreciate you trying to cheer me up, but as gifts go this is a little over the top -"

"It's not for you, you prat," Spike snorted as he easily swung his leg astride, sitting on it as naturally as if he'd grown out of the saddle. "It's not even mine. It's ... on loan for the night, thought you'd enjoy a ride." He handed Xander a black helmet. "Put this on, and get on."

Xander stared at Spike in amazement.

"How did you know ..."

Spike gave him an amused smile. "I've seen the way you look at them."

It was true, although he had sadly long since accepted that he just wasn't the motorbike type, they had always given him a little-boy thrill, a fantasy about being the kind of guy who rode one. They were so sleek, so fast, so cool. His cousin had bought one a few years back and Xander's heart had felt like it would burst with jealousy, especially since the bastard had never even given him a ride. He'd said Xander was too uncoordinated and clumsy, and would make them fall off.

And now Spike was sitting astride the sleekest, coolest looking bike Xander had ever seen, waiting for him to get on.

"Well come on," Spike said impatiently as Xander didn't move.

"Did I mention that my balance isn't the best?" Xander stalled, revolving the helmet in his hands nervously.

"Your balance is fine," Spike scoffed. "C'mon, it's easy."

Yeah, for you Xander thought. Spike was just the kind of guy who rode a motorbike like he'd been born to do it. But he was waiting, drumming his fingers impatiently, and it was nice of him to go to all this trouble. And he

had always wanted to try it ... With mingled excitement and nerves he slipped the helmet on and awkwardly got on the bike, resting his hand on Spike's shoulder for balance as he settled in the seat behind Spike.

"What do I hold onto?" he asked, hoping his nerves didn't show in his voice.

"Me," Spike replied.

"Oh. Right." He tentatively slid his arms around Spike's waist as Spike started the engine up. Xander felt a noticeable tremor go through Spike as the bike roared into life. His nerves increased as he noticed that normal safety rules apparently didn't apply to Spike, who wasn't wearing a helmet.

"Um, Spike? What happens if -"

"Don't worry about it, pet," Spike interrupted. "The thing about a bike is not to try and think too much and force it to happen. You just feel it, then it all comes as easy as breathing. Ready?"

"Uh ..."

"Good, lets go."

Xander's arms tightened reflexively around Spike as the bike began to move, picking up speed quickly. He clenched his eyes closed, a pained grimace on his face as the wind whipped past his tense, terrified body. His fingers gripped the leather of Spike's coat so tightly they ached, yet he held the rest of his body back rigidly, keeping a little distance between them, not wanting Spike to think he was a clinging wimp. He was acutely aware that they were racing along the road with *nothing* to protect them if they crashed, and spent the first few minutes of his fantasy come to life wishing fervently it was over and he had his feet back on the sweet, safe ground.

However as they rode on and didn't crash, despite his rigid form, he began to sense from the vibrations and Spike's movements when the bike was slowing, speeding, making a turn, and it wasn't so scary when he knew what was coming. Although he still held on tightly to Spike, the tense set to his shoulders eased, and he began to relish the wind roaring past him that had somehow blown his headache away. As he relaxed he opened his eyes, and suddenly, all at once he slipped into the rhythm, automatically leaning into the turn Spike made without even thinking about it, letting his body press easily against Spike's. Xander heard Spike shout something

encouraging back to him, but it was lost in the wind, it didn't matter. Suddenly he felt as light as air, his heart swelling with happiness. He whooped as they picked up even more speed and flew down the streets, inhaling the scent of Spike's leather coat, the thrum of the bike underneath him feeling like an extension of himself. He was flying, free. Spike was right, this was easy, this was wonderful and he could do it! He was A Guy Who Rode A Motorbike!

The tang of fresh sea air told Xander they were near the beach, and soon - too soon - Spike slowed the bike and shuddered to a stop. For a moment Xander remained in his seat, his arms around Spike, still grinning, still caught up in the sensation, then reluctantly he took off his helmet and stood, moving off the bike and coming back to earth.

"That was amazing," Xander said reverently.

"Yeah," Spike gave the bike an affectionate pat as he swung himself off and pulled a bag and a blanket out of the cubby space under Xander's seat. "She's a beaut," he gave Xander an appraising look, a slight smile hovering on his mouth. "And you're a natural. What the hell were you worrying about balance for?"

Xander blushed. "Well, I hadn't done it before."

Spike shrugged. "It's like everything. You've got to give it a go first. You never know what you might end up liking."

Xander nodded. Spike was looking at him with odd intensity, he looked like he was about to say something else, then just tossed the blanket at him. "C'mon."

He set off down the beach, and Xander fell into step with him. There was a beach party not far away, he could hear the hum of voices and music, and see the fire, but Spike headed in the other direction. They passed a few smooching couples, but soon it was deserted. No-one really came this far down late at night. This was Sunnydale after all. Of course one of the good things about hanging out with Spike was he was more than capable of handling anything that tried to bare its teeth at them. It was a bit of a girly thing to think, but Xander always felt so safe around Spike.

Spike walked purposefully along until he found a spot that apparently met with his approval. Xander laid out the blanket and spread himself out on it as Spike busied himself with the bag. A can of beer landed with a heavy thump on Xander's stomach.

"Oof!" Xander protested, but without any real heat. "Y'know if this was anything but beer I'd throw it back at you. Hard. At your head."

"Oh yeah?" Spike said unimpressed.

"Well we already know it couldn't do any damage."

"How about if it's ... Doritos?" A pack of said munchies landed on Xander's chest.

"Okay - beer and Doritos - but nothing else."

"Oh, really?" Spike's grin had now officially reached the definition 'smug beyond all reason' as something else pretty heavy landed on Xander's chest.

"Ow! You - oh, Spike," Xander stared at the jar of chocolate spread, touched to his heart.

"Yeah, I've noticed you dip Doritos in that. Just don't let me see it okay?"

"This from the man that dunks onion rings in blood?" Xander teased, even as he unscrewed the lid, his mouth watering. He dipped his finger in, scooping up some chocolate and licked it off happily. He caught Spike watching his finger slip into his mouth, a look of hunger on his face and held the jar out. "Want some?"

Spike turned away so Xander couldn't see his face, busying himself with pulling something else out of the bag. "No."

Xander was about to respond with something witty and cutting like; 'you liar', but stopped when Spike freed a tiny portable radio from the bag and switched it on.

"Music too? Wow, I'm impressed."

Spike passed him the radio. "You choose."

"Jeez, that makes a change," Xander said wryly. Spike had a habit of taking over music, or the TV, swaggering in, sprawling on the couch and asking redundantly 'You watchin' this?' with his finger already poised on the remote.

Xander fiddled with the dial, hitting some soft ballad, then flying past to some rock music that sounded more Spike's sort of thing, but somehow didn't really fit in with the surroundings, or the relaxed mood. He went back to the ballad, looking at Spike, daring him to laugh, but Spike didn't even seem to notice, as he leant back on his hands, gazing around him and enjoying the view.

Xander sighed contentedly as he gazed around, it really was a lovely night, cool and clear, with a blanket of stars twinkling above, and the moon reflecting brightly on the ocean. The last vestiges of tension vanished, and he shot Spike a brilliant smile. This had been such a good idea.

This was an incredibly bad idea Spike thought helplessly. Not that Xander didn't seem to be enjoying it - he was relaxed, and happy, all traces of a bad mood had long since vanished. Oh, yes, on the 'cheering up Xander' front the night had been a huge success, but Spike himself was so tense he physically hurt. He looked around with despairing eyes - when he'd first hit on this idea, he'd just thought a motorbike ride followed by some fresh, sea air would be a nice change of scene. They'd sink a few beers, chat and generally cheer Xander up. Now he realised the whole thing could be his undoing. Having Xander pressed so close to him on the bike, their bodies moving together so naturally, had stoked a fire that he'd been trying his damn best to dampen down. He could have regained his self-control if they'd been anywhere else, but the setting of sea and stars was disastrously romantic; he'd unconsciously set up a seduction scene.

And on the subject of unconscious seduction, there was the master right next to him. Effortlessly making Spike feel hot and anxious, tight with longing, and all he was doing was just lying there! How did Xander do this to him? Maybe three times a week he went to a class and struck poses, while some woman in a Miss Whiplash outfit nodded and took notes and said things like; 'Yes, yes - that's quite good Xander, but remember keep it

natural, your body must scream 'ravish me' while your eyes must look totally innocent and unaware.'

Because Xander was unaware - all this time and there had been nothing - not one moment to make Spike think Xander wanted him as anything more than a friend. Nobody had been looking more eagerly than Spike for that one moment. It just wasn't there. He kept telling himself to be thankful for what he had; Xander's friendship, and sometimes he could even mock himself; William the Bloody, slayer of Slayer's, the vampire who could make girls damp with just a twitch of his eyebrow, crazy for Xander Harris, just an ordinary straight-as-a-ruler guy who didn't even notice him in that way. How ironic. How funny.

And then there were moments like this, when he couldn't pretend.

It wasn't funny. It wasn't funny at all. This wasn't a passing crush, he'd fallen head-over-heels in love, and the more time he spent with Xander, the more it hurt. Friendship, sweet as it was, was pale and unsatisfactory compared to the vibrant wealth of emotion pent-up in his heart. He wanted everything. Wanted to be Xander's long-term, monogamous, possibly *slightly* possessive boyfriend. To be the one Xander lived with, fought with,

laughed with, celebrated anniversaries with, woke up with.

Slept with.

God, how he wanted Xander. Wanted him. Wanted him. Wanted him. Wanted him so badly he was trembling, his stomach hollow, his groin heavy. Wanted to roll over and kiss him, strip him, have him laid out under him, naked and hard and his. Wanted to use his hands and mouth on that body he'd only caressed with his eyes. Wanted to slide in and feel the hot curving sensation of being buried inside him, hear the noises he'd make in the throes, as they made love, right here, right now, under the stars, by the sea. Wanted to have him over and over and over until they were both crying with release and this relentless burning ache inside his stomach, and heart and cock was sated and silent, and he couldn't. Because Xander didn't want him.

He tried to clamp down on the surge of desire but he couldn't - all he could do was clamp down on himself. Frozen with tension and anxiety. Terrified of doing anything that might upset Xander, and ruin their friendship, yet wanting him so much he could hardly contain himself, couldn't relax, could barely look at him for more than two seconds. What the hell had he been

thinking, bringing him here with the moonlight, and the stars, and the sea, and romantic music...

"This is so nice," Xander said contentedly.

"Good," Spike replied, staring steadfastly ahead as his hands clenched in the folds of the blanket. "I was a bit worried on the way here, I remembered you saying sunbathing was boring."

"Yeah, but there's a lot of difference between sunbathing with the guys and ... well I guess you'd call it 'moonbathing' with you."

"A good difference?" Spike asked, cursing himself for a fool as he begged for a scrap.

Xander gave him a playful kick. "What do you think?"

"I don't think you're bored," Spike answered giving him a fleeting look, trying to sound light-hearted, as he spoke through a dry throat.

"No, I can honestly say Spike, no matter what we're doing, being bored with you has never been a problem."

How can he not know? Spike thought desperately as he stared blankly at the sea. *How can we be here - like this - with me feeling like this, and he doesn't know?* But

Xander didn't - it was apparent in his easy, teasing manner, in his relaxed posture. Spike glanced at Xander, so close to him on the blanket, separated only by inches. His stomach clenched, he felt tortured, taunted by something he wanted so badly, that was so close, yet always out of his reach.

Xander was lying back, propped up on his elbows, watching the sea, and even as Spike watched Xander dropped his head back to look up at the stars, revealing the long, sleek line of his neck and the hollow of his throat.

Spike swallowed, and although a tiny voice in his head was yelling at him to get a grip he couldn't force himself to pull his eyes away. Couldn't help noticing that Xander's neck was just the right angle for someone to press kisses down, to flick their tongue out and taste the skin at the fluttering pulse. That someone could straddle Xander's hips and grind down if they wanted to. Someone could pull Xander's T-shirt up and off - could suck on his nipples, and kiss down his chest and stomach, down from his navel to his ...

Spike snapped his gaze away, as he realised to his horror he was getting hard, and no wonder, gazing at Xander who was spread out on the blanket like a poster-child for

'Waiting to be Ravished'. He quickly dragged his duster over his groin, biting his lip savagely. He either needed to be alone for a while, which wasn't really possible, or take a cold shower.

Spike's eyes fell on the sea. He managed to stand, keeping his duster swirling around him. "'M going for a swim."

"What?" Xander asked, surprised. "Spike it'll be cold! It's dark, who knows what's lurking ..."

Spike shook his head, ignoring Xander's admittedly valid points and headed determinedly down the beach, toeing off his boots and socks, dropping his duster, and T-shirt, then, making sure his back was to Xander, finally his jeans. He waded into the chilly water, the cold waves smacking against his bare skin helping to rid him of all the confusing, searingly hot images chasing around in his head. The want didn't vanish, but it did go back underground, lodging somewhere in the pit of his belly, and tightly across his chest, ensuring that he would be able to treat Xander like he was just a friend when he got out. He wondered wistfully if Xander had watched him strip off and wade into the sea, but doubted it. He splashed his face with the cool salty water, binding his feelings tightly with self control, promising himself a

good fight later, a stiff drink, and an extra long fantasy with his hand once he got home, he just had to keep it together now...

"Hey, Spike!"

Spike turned to see Xander standing at the waters edge. "You're nuts, y'know that!"

Spike managed a grin. "A guys gotta do-" he slammed to a stop as he noticed Xander was barefoot.

"Yeah, apparently a guy does," Xander grinned. Then he pulled off his T-shirt. Spike drew in a sharp breath, he couldn't have moved if his life had depended on it. Xander unfastened his pants and let them drop, stepping out of them. Spike was motionless, couldn't speak, his eyes wide, looking at the long line of Xander's legs, the pale glow of his skin, the pattern formed on his chest by muscles and nipples. Xander hooked his fingers into the waistband of his boxers ... then paused and looked up. Spike snapped his gaze away a split second before their eyes met, turning and looking the opposite way, not daring to look back until he could be sure Xander was safely covered.

"Aaaggh! It's freezing!" Xander roared as he advanced into the sea.

"Sissy," Spike called back, glancing up and seeing to his sort-of-relief that Xander was now chest-deep in the water. He smiled despite himself at the disgruntled expression on Xander's face, and with a pang, dismissed the idea of trying to sneak a peak or cop a feel. The easy trust Xander displayed in him nowadays was too special to abuse. He wanted to deserve it, not take advantage of it. He sighed. God, he was so whipped.

"Who's a sissy?" Xander challenged, launching himself at Spike and grabbing his shoulders, pushing him backwards. Spike fell back into the water, momentarily going under, and emerged, spluttering furiously.

"Hey!" Spike protested as Xander sniggered at him, and suddenly everything felt okay again. They were together, they were friends, and they were happy. If friendship was all that was on offer, then he'd be the best friend going. The very damn best. Of course that was no reason to let him off for the dunking ... Spike smiled dangerously, and Xander, who recognised the smile, promptly began to back off.

"Now, Spike, it was just a joke... don't overreact now... ooh, quick look over there! Aggggghhh Spi-" but the rest was lost in an outraged burble as Xander got a faceful of salt-water. He shook his head to get the water away, and

watched him warily, eyes bright as they circled each other in the water. Xander flicked a tiny splatter of water at him. Spike raised an eyebrow. This meant war.

He launched himself at Xander, who was waiting for him and everything became a little confused for a few minutes as they did battle with water as ammunition. It was lucky he didn't need to breathe as they dunked each other over and over. Xander was at a disadvantage on that point, but he more than made up for it by splashing huge waves of water into Spike's face. Salt water was in his eyes, his throat, his ears, and Spike didn't care, they were both roaring with laughter. He foolishly turned his back for a moment, to try and rub salt water out of his eyes, and Xander grabbed him from behind, trying to dunk him under. Spike managed to twist in his arms and face him, laughing as he managed to dunk Xander instead.

Xander thrashed furiously, still clinging to him, trying to pull him under too and Spike let him up, chuckling. They were so close Spike could feel their chests drag against each other as Xander broke the surface coughing for air but grinning. Spike stopped laughing. Water was streaming down Xander's chest, tracing patterns over his skin, and dark hard nipples. One of Spike's hands was still resting on Xander's hip under the water, the other was

on his shoulder. His skin was chilled and smooth. Spike swallowed. Xander was rubbing at his eyes, blinking at the sting of the salt. He squinted at Spike through reddened eyes, and gave him a smile. Spike's stomach gave a terrified lurch, but he couldn't stop himself, couldn't, not with Xander so close, under his hands, making a mockery of all his good intentions. His mouth felt parched, desperate for just one taste ...

"Woah!" Xander said holding his hands up as Spike suddenly moved closer, freezing him in the movement. Spike snapped back to his senses, feeling sick with horror.

"Xander - I didn't ..."

But Xander was grinning, still completely at ease. "No! No more water fights, okay?"

"Oh," Spike stammered, vaguely realising he was luckier than he had any right to be, and Xander had misunderstood his intentions. "Yes. I mean, no, fine. No more fighting."

Xander ducked out from under Spike's hand, slipping away easily and launching himself into the backstroke, and kicking his feet playfully in Spike's direction and

sending droplets of cool water over his face. "Sorry!" he called back, not sounding in the least apologetic.

"Watch it, you," Spike said croakily, but it was mere token protesting. He still felt a little sick, shaking with relief and loss in the aftermath of what he'd almost done.

Xander floated lazily in the water, and Spike was careful to keep his distance, and his eyes averted in case madness took over once again. He was experiencing a serious impulse control problem tonight.

"I've never done this before," Xander said dreamily.

"Oh?" Spike answered with no clear idea of what he was saying. "Me either."

"Surprising," Xander commented. "I always had the impression you'd been pretty much everywhere, and done everything."

"Oh," Spike focussed. "Well yeah, I have, and I've done this before," he said, with no trace of bragging, just stating a fact. "But doin' it with you, that makes it different."

"So, there's nothing we could do that you haven't already done?" Xander asked curiously.

The hot jumble of images that had driven him into the water flooded back, and even the cold water didn't seem to be helping to calm him anymore. "There are a few things," Spike said hesitantly.

"Like?" Xander pressed.

"Things you don't want to do," Spike said shortly. Before Xander-the-Curious could ask any more questions he cleared his throat, and hurried on. "So what happened today that pissed you off so much? Anyone you want me to kill for you?"

Xander sounded like he was smiling when he spoke.

"Tempting, but no. It was just a load of crap that doesn't even matter anymore."

"Good."

Beside him Xander shivered. "I'm gonna have to get out. Next time we do this lets do it in August, 'kay?"

Never, never, never are we doing this again. Spike silently swore. It was more than flesh and blood could stand.

"Yeah, sure thing mate."

"You coming?" Xander asked.

"Umm, right behind you," Spike hedged, needing another few moments alone to compose himself.

"Okay." Xander swam, then waded out of the water up to the beach. Spike tried not to look, he honestly did, but Xander was far enough away that he wouldn't do something stupid, and he had bugger-all else ... As though his head was being tugged on a string he looked up. Xander was standing on the beach with his back to Spike. Spike's mouth parted slightly, his chest aching as he gazed at the long line of Xander's back, flowing down into the firm curves of his ass, and then Xander stepped into his boxers, turning slightly as he pulled them up, and Spike could see - oh - everything. His mind was a camera, recording the images - the taut, pale skin of Xander's thighs, the pattern of hair over his groin, his heavy, perfect cock. He was beautiful. A small, yearning sound caught in the back of Spike's throat. Xander pulled on his jeans and fastened them, then grabbed his T-shirt, pulling it over his head as he began to make his way back up the beach.

Spike stood alone in the dark water, shivering as desire pooled heavily in his groin. Trying to make it stop, waiting for it to ebb and flow away with the tide, and to be able to gather himself together enough to wade back out of the sea.

This time when he got back onto the bike Xander enjoyed every second of it, though it may have had something to do with the fact he was so physically relaxed his body felt like it was about to melt. He clasped his arms around Spike, and let himself press against him, vaguely noticing how well his larger form fit against Spike's slighter form, yet Spike was still strong enough to lean heavily on. Spike came across as being all pointy and sharp, but he wasn't. He felt solid and comfortable, like a favourite pillow. Something comforting to embrace after a bloody awful day. Xander tucked his chin on Spike's shoulder. He could smell the fresh sea salt lingering on Spike's skin in the curve of his neck. It had washed off the aroma of smoke and copper and leather that usually clung to Spike and idly the thought drifted into Xander's head that right now Spike must have the scent of the ocean all over him. For some reason the thought brought a picture into his mind of Spike standing waist deep in the sea, water trickling down his hair and over his pale, naked chest, a look of amused outrage on his face. The way he'd looked right after Xander had pulled off a quality dunking move on him. Xander closed his eyes, smiling.

They reached his apartment all too quickly and he handed back his helmet and got off the bike with

reluctance, feeling an odd pang of loss. He stumbled a little and Spike reached out, grabbing his wrist quickly and steadying him.

"Careful there, mate."

"Thanks - I'm kinda beat."

Spike nodded. "Yeah, well you trot off to bed, I've gotta get this back before the owner reports it ... uh ... that is ..."

"Oh did you say something?" Xander asked innocently. "I didn't hear you."

They smiled at each other, then with a lurch of shock Xander realised Spike still had hold of him, his thumb was absent-mindedly rubbing lightly over his skin at the inside of his wrist. Xander glanced down, Spike followed his gaze and inhaled sharply, dropping his wrist like it was a hot coal. Xander quickly shoved his hands in his pockets, not wanting to embarrass Spike, when he obviously hadn't realised what he'd been doing. There was a slight, tingling feeling on his wrist where Spike had been stroking. Maybe due to residue sea-salt.

He nodded back towards his apartment. "Well I'd better go - listen, thanks for tonight Spike, really. It was great."

Spike shrugged, not quite meeting his eyes. "No problem. Just a few beers and a motorbike ride really."

"Well, whatever it was it really helped. Thanks Spike, you're a pal."

Spike nodded. "I am," he said wryly, as he started up the bike. "Aren't I."

Part Eight

Xander emerged from the toilets and took a moment to steel himself. It was Dawn's fifteenth birthday and Joyce had hired the Bronze out for the night for a private party. Teenage girls were *everywhere*, in their giggling, shrieking droves. Some sugary pop song by a band whose name Xander forgot but seemed to consist of entirely too many people, all with floppy blonde hair, was playing loudly on the sound system. Every time the chorus repeated the volume in the place nearly raised the roof as all the girls joined in at the top of their lungs. Joyce and a friend were sitting distanced away from the

frivolity, chatting and keeping a discreet eye on things, while he and the Scoobies, minus Giles, who had pleaded pressure of work - and then just pleaded - were right in the excruciating thick of things. He tried to edge unseen around a gaggle of girls, but one spotted him, and nudged her friend, who nudged her friend - it was like watching a lightening fast Mexican wave, within a split second they had all turned to look at him. Xander gave a weak smile. It was nice to be noticed but he was beginning to feel like a sheep surrounded by a pack of wolves. A pack of wolves who were way too young for him, and kept eyeing his ass. He took a breath, affected blithe indifference, and walked past them. A chorus of giggles followed him and he screwed his face up in a pained expression as he joined Willow and Buffy, who were watching with amusement.

"Like walking over hot coals?" Willow asked.

"Hot coals would be a delight compared to this," Xander said sincerely. Not that he didn't love Dawn, but this was torturous on levels that hell-dimensions could only wish to emulate.

"Oh come on," Buffy teased. "It's not just a little bit flattering?"

"If I was sixteen again, yes, but sadly the only time anything like this happened back then, was thanks to a love spell that went horribly wrong. Now, my sixteen-year-old self is really pissed with me for not taking advantage of this chick-fest, but all I feel is way too old. And a little scared. It's not so much the giggles but the whispering. Have they stopped yet?"

Buffy glanced over. "Not yet... ah, now they have."

Xander checked his watch in mock annoyance. "I get less than a minute of whispering? Riley got like three!" He was extra insulted because despite still privately blaming them for the Anya debacle he had decided to give his smart, sleek clothes another airing.

"Poor Xander," Willow clucked, patting his shoulder.

Xander shrugged. "Ah, what can you expect from teenage girls - they have no taste."

"Are you saying my boyfriend is bad taste?" Buffy challenged, crossing her arms and eyeballing him beadily.

Xander sighed. "What's it gonna take to make you forget about this?"

Buffy grinned. "Oh, fixing my bedside table at least."

"Deal," Xander backed up a little to make room as another group of shrieking girls passed by, giggling as they looked at him. He fixed Buffy with a pleading gaze. "Can I go early and make a start?"

"No! If I'm stuck here, you're all stuck here. You think helping me fight unspeakable demons is the hard part? No, this is the true test of friendship."

Xander groaned as a new song came on and all the girls screamed in delight. He was beginning to wish a portal would open up, and suck him into any hell-dimension available, it would probably be pleasantly quiet and soothing by comparison.

"I thought Dawn was inviting some boys too - where are they all?" Willow asked, looking around.

"They're all over the other side of the room, trying to look bored and cool," Xander answered instantly.

"How do you know?" Buffy asked.

"Because it's what teenage boys do, remember I was one once."

"Are they going to mix at all?" Willow wondered.

"Oh, sure they will, but not for another hour or so yet. Then once the boys join the party, there'll be kisses, and cat fights and tears in the toilets."

"I remember those days," Buffy said reminiscently.

"The circle of life," Xander agreed.

Riley came back from the bar with their drinks, throwing a kindly smile at the group of girls he passed, which turned to a look of slight alarm at the shrieks and giggles that followed him.

"You cheap flirt," Xander accused, taking his soda.

"My boyfriend the cradle-snatcher," Buffy mock-pouted.

"Hey, I was just trying to be friendly!" Riley protested.

"Don't do it, man," Xander advised. "They have no mercy, and can sense weakness. They'll stalk you all night."

Riley slipped an arm round Buffy. "I'm not worried, my girlfriend can kick their ass."

"I could so do that!" Buffy agreed. "I mean I wouldn't - but I so could!"

Tara, who had been chatting with Joyce, joined them, reaching for Willow's hand and looking a little flustered.

"Okay, baby?" Willow asked.

"A-are they mentally undressing everybody?" Tara asked, with a slightly hunted look on her face.

"Please tell me you're talking about the boys," Buffy begged.

"I don't believe this!" Xander said in annoyance, looking at the girls who were shooting glances at Riley. "They're still whispering!"

"Let it go, Xander," Buffy advised briskly. "They're far too young for you to worry about impressing." Then she paused as an idea occurred to her. "But hey - you know what? I know lots of girls at Sunnydale U. above the age of consent who are looking for a guy to whisper about. You maybe want me to set you up with someone?"

"College girls are the best," Riley concurred, grinning at Xander and giving Buffy a squeeze.

"Hmm?" Xander said distractedly. "Yeah, maybe." He was watching a group of girls who were staring at something in open-mouthed wonder. He followed their eyeline curiously, and a delighted smile sprung over his face, coupled with a rather worrying amount of happiness as he saw the flash of bleached hair and black leather. Spike was here! He'd actually come!

Spike looked around taking in the atmosphere, his face the picture of disdain. He seemed to sense Xander's eyes on him and looked over, raising an eyebrow in greeting. His eyes flickered over Buffy and Riley and he turned his lip up in a sneer, nodding towards a quiet alcove, indicating where he was going to be. As Spike passed the girls, he left behind him a momentary awed silence, before they let loose a simultaneous shriek that nearly pierced Xander's eardrums.

"What?" Buffy asked following his gaze, looking for the source of the noise. "Oh no, not him."

Xander gave her a look. "You said you didn't mind if Dawn and I invited him."

"Yeah, but I didn't think he'd actually turn up!" Buffy rolled her eyes at Xander's face. "Oh, fine, I won't try to kill him, okay? I'll just threaten to beat the crap out of him if he does anything."

"It gives me a warm glow to hear you say that. I'm gonna go say hi."

He slipped away from the others, and immediately got stuck behind the group of girls who had shrieked. They didn't even notice him, as their collective attention was still firmly on Spike. Xander didn't know whether to be

relieved or insulted that he had been so completely eclipsed.

"Omigod! That guy is so hot!"

"I know!" Dawn squealed.

"Where did you find him - you just don't get guys like that in Sunnydale!"

"I'm in love - it's just the hair - and the eyes - and the coat!"

"Do you think he'd let me wear it?"

Dawn snorted. "No way! Spike would never let anyone wear his coat."

"Is that right?" A girl who had been listening with interest, though not joining in with the screeching looked over at Spike. She looked maybe twenty, and Xander thought she might be an older sister, or one of Willow's college buddies. He hadn't noticed her before in the midst of all the others, but on a second glance she was something a bit special. Extremely pretty with pouty lips, tumbling dark curls, a figure that curved in all the right places and an aura of confidence that would have given even Cordelia a run for her money. You just knew by

looking at her that she had never, ever been turned down for anything.

"I bet I can get it," she said. A chorus of disbelief rose into the air, but she eyed Spike with a slight smile on her mouth. "Watch and learn, by the end of the night I'll be wearing that coat."

Xander rolled his eyes derisively, feeling distinctly aggrieved. God, he hated girls who acted like guys were just toys. Maybe he should warn Spike, but for some reason he didn't want to draw Spike's attention to her. After all, the girl was probably all talk, and Spike's ego was quite big enough. He managed to get past them as they moved off in a single chattering herd to the dance floor, and he joined Spike, who was lounging against the wall, his hands shoved deep in his duster pockets, a fearful scowl on his face.

Spike ignored the rapid flip-flops his stomach was turning as he watched Xander all clean-shaven and smart approach him, feeling the pull of him as sharply as if Xander had yanked tightly on a cord attached to his heart, and pasted a sour expression on his face. Xander had gotten a real yen for him to come to this thing, and had pressed and whined at him for days. He had finally

given in when Xander had proclaimed; 'Oh, Spike come on! It won't be any fun if you're not there, hating it even more than me.' Pathetic it may be, but apparently he could deny the lad nothing, and the fact that Xander wanted him around gave him a rosy glow. However he was salvaging some pride by looking extremely pissed off about the whole thing. He shook his head in disgust as another loud screech from the girls hit the air. Fortunately that wasn't difficult.

"I cannot believe you talked me into this," Spike grumbled in greeting as Xander joined him, trying not to let his gaze linger on the curve of Xander's neck, slipping out from his fitted, smooth shirt. He was looking sleek and groomed, and God, what Spike wouldn't give to rumple him a little. Or a lot. Tear those clothes open and make love to him in the tatters until he was sweaty and dishevelled... "If word ever gets out that I came to a kids birthday party and didn't kill any of the little bints -"

"Now, now," Xander said, a slight smile playing about his mouth. "Play nice."

"Bugger off, you never said anything about being nice, you just said I had to come."

"Now, don't pretend you haven't been looking forward to this, I can tell by the way you've dressed up," Xander said

ironically, noting his usual uniform of battered, tight, black jeans, black T-shirt and duster.

Spike felt a smile coming on, and scowled fiercely to hide it. If he had to be here, he was damn well going to complain about it. "Yeah well, some of us don't have to dress up to look good."

"Was there a compliment hidden in there somewhere?" Xander wondered.

"Sides," Spike continued as if he hadn't heard, "I thought there might be a dress code on this shindig and I'd be knocked back, but obviously they're desperate enough for guests they don't care what they wear."

Xander patted him on the shoulder in mock-commiseration as Spike lit up a smoke. "Cheer up, Spike. Would you like a slice of birthday cake? It's pink."

Spike gave him a filthy look. "I would rather - " he cast around for something awful enough, "-take a Jacuzzi with a Chaos Demon in a vat of holy water."

Xander looked impressed. "Really? Those are the slimy antler guys, right?"

"Yeah, that's 'em."

"Wow."

"No, actually," Spike said warming to his theme, "I'd rather spend the evening with Angel, listening to him do his patented 'I'm so tortured' routine, and getting some really helpful tips on the overuse of poofy hairgel."

Xander snickered.

"I would rather," Spike continued, by this time on a roll, "have Red put another spell put on me, and spend the evening frenching the Slayer, and making wedding plans - actually no." He backed down with a shudder. "Nothing could be worse than that."

"I agree," Buffy's dry voice came from behind him. "How about instead we spend the evening with you screaming in pain while I beat your head against a stone wall?"

Xander's eyes widened in horror, as Spike turned lazily to her, waving his cigarette in greeting.

"Ugggh," he said involuntarily as he took in what she was wearing, a perfectly hideous gold top with ruffles, pink leather jeans and a pissy expression. "Well, if it's a choice between bein' here, kissing you, or the wall, I'd pucker up for the stone any day."

Xander gave a tiny groan, briefly covering his eyes with his hand. Spike gestured to him. "I'm only here because Xander wanted some backup."

"I think Xander can handle it, so please Spike," Buffy said, with a hint of steel. "Do feel free to leave *any* time. How about right now?"

"How 'bout you get off my back?" Spike growled.

"How about you get out of my face?" Buffy countered narkily. By this time they were both narrow-eyed, squaring up to each other, and Spike was seriously weighing up whether the pain of the chip would be worth it for the satisfaction of one good punch.

"Oh, trust me, Slayer I don't want to be anywhere near your face. Or that outfit."

"Come on guys," Xander interrupted too-brightly, waving his hand between them as though trying to shoo away the tension. "Mutual friend, standing right here! Can't you at least try doing the polite chill thing?" Spike rolled his eyes, and opened his mouth to make a sarcastic retort, but Xander's pleading look made him swallow it. *I am so whipped!* He shot Xander a look, indicating that Xander owed him big for this, shuddered, and then gave Buffy sickly polite smile.

"Evening, Slayer, you're looking well. Feel free to stay away from me as much as you want. Really."

Buffy glanced at Xander, who widened his eyes beseechingly. She sighed, visibly steeled herself and returned Spike's fake smile tooth for tooth. "Thank you Spike, I will. Please do the same."

"That was beautiful," Xander mimed wiping a touched tear away and slung his arms around them, giving them a warm squeeze. Typical, the one time Xander hugged him and he had to share it with Slutty. "I can feel the love."

Just then Dawn and a gaggle of her friends paused by them, breaking Xander's embrace, and the evil glare he and Buffy were holding at each other from either side of him. Spike blinked a little. All the girls in the group were staring at him with bated breath, giggling and smiling prettily. Not that he wasn't used to that, but so many at once was like being cornered by a pack of very determined, lip-glossed, shiny-haired hyenas.

"Hi Spike," Dawn said a little breathlessly, seeming to be nearly bursting with suppressed excitement.

"Hey, Sweet Bit," he greeted her casually. "Thanks for the invite."

Dawn nodded, faux-coolly as she swelled with pride, and all the girls dissolved into muffled squeals and giggles. "Yeah, it's cool," she beamed at him. "Come on guys." The pack swarmed off, all of them shooting backward glances at him. For some reason Xander scowled, folding his arms as he watched them leave, giving them - or maybe just one of them - the evil eye.

"Hmm," Bitchy narrowed her eyes as she looked at him, as though calculating the size of the axe she'd need to behead him, while managing to hide it from Xander. "Just make sure you behave yourself, or you know what I'll do."

Spike arched his eyebrows derisively and pointedly stood a little closer to Xander. *Yeah, that's right* he looked straight at her with a mocking smile. *I can do this, and you can't stop me. 'Cos guess what? Xander likes me, and I'm not going anywhere.* Judging by the sour expression on her face, she was picking up the message loud and clear. Spike blew a cloud of smoke in her face. She made a disgusted sound and Xander pulled his attention back from the girls to them. Spike immediately assumed an innocent expression. With a roll of her eyes she turned away from him and smiled at Xander, letting some warmth into her voice. "Xander, I'll see you later."

"Sure thing Buff," Xander winked, and she moved off. Not before time either. Spike could only do 'polite' for so long, before he broke into hives. He could manage with ducks like Joyce and Dawn, but not being able to punch the Slayer right in her narky face made him feel irritable and itchy all over.

"Good, 'nuff?" he asked Xander tetchily, feeling he deserved a little damn appreciation.

"Very good," Xander grinned wickedly, making a shiver run down his spine and his bad humour dissolve like snow in the sun. "Polite and sociable, and I see you've made a hit with the chicklets. No ... special one catching your eye?"

Spike snorted. "Yeah, right. They all look the same to me. 'Cept for Nibblem of course."

Xander grinned. "I bet she'll be glad to hear you say that. Gotta say I'm a little jealous, you knocking me off the Dawnsters hot spot. She was a girl of good taste," Xander shook his head mock-sadly, "I don't know where it went so wrong."

"Face it, Harris, you're okay for a little while, but then you've just gotta step aside for the real deal. You got no stamina."

Xander's eyes narrowed, and he leant in slightly. "Oh, I got stamina, pal. I could stamina your ass off." There was a pause, where Xander frowned slightly, aware that that hadn't come out quite the way intended, and Spike tried to fight down the brief, but surprisingly strong impulse to leap on Xander and demand proof. "Or something to that effect," Xander finished, lamely.

For the sake of keeping an erection at bay, Spike let it drop. "If it helps I think she fancies us both. Anyway look." He dropped his smouldering cigarette to the floor, casually grinding it out under his boot, and pulled a mobile phone out of his pocket. "I got it today, will this finally stop you moaning about me not having a phone?"

"Oh, excellent!" Xander exclaimed. "How much did it cost?"

"Cost?" Spike asked blankly.

"Stupid question, never mind. Give me the number."

"Got a pen?"

Xander patted his pockets. "No."

"Scuse me, luv?" Spike raised his voice slightly and addressed a couple of interchangeable little blonde chicklets who had been loitering nearby for the last few

minutes. One looked behind her to check he was speaking to them, the other was doing a good impression of freezing like a rabbit in headlights.

"Y-yes?" the girl who had checked behind them stammered, looking like she was about to faint, and clinging to her tongue-tied friend for support.

"You got a pen?"

She looked at her friend in desperation. "No."

"I've got an eyeliner," her friend piped up bravely.

"That'll do," Spike smiled charmingly, and the girl looked like her knees had liquefied. Oh, yeah, he still had it. He flashed the same smile at Xander who didn't notice, he was looking at the girls, with an expression that was partly amused, partly nauseated. Yup, he had it all right. Everywhere but where he wanted it.

With slightly trembling hands the chicklet foraged in her handbag and held out an eyeliner pencil to him. "You can keep it," she said in a high-pitched voice. "I've got lots of them."

"It's dangerous giving Spike make-up, by the end of the night he'll be looking like something out of 'Cabaret'," Xander joked.

"Well, that's okay," she said, gazing at Spike adoringly.

Spike winked at her. "Thanks, luv."

She let out a small squeak that Spike pretended not to notice, and the two headed off at high speed to spread their story to the world.

"Got a bit of paper?" he asked Xander, feigning indifference, but feeling cheered by the fact that Xander had just seen up close that there were some people in this big old world who happened to think he was pretty damn sexy. It was a little balm for his ego, which had been taking quite a battering lately.

"What d'ya think I am, a walking stationary supply closet?"

"All right." Still a little high on the obvious admiration the girls had displayed gave him the confidence to take Xander's wrist and unbutton his cuff. "We'll do it this way."

Xander watched him with raised eyebrows. Spike met his eyes and slowly pushed his sleeve up to his elbow, his hand moving up the skin of his arm in a firm, yet gentle movement as he rucked up the materiel, thrilled to be caressing him, even in this innocent way. He turned Xander's arm, so the paler, more fragile skin of his inner

arm was exposed, and holding his wrist in a strong, steady grip, pressed the blunt point of the eyepencil firmly against his flesh. He wrote his number in slow, firm black strokes and curves, letting himself pretend for a second that they had just met, and Xander wanted to call him for a date. They both watched him form the numerals, and Spike could feel himself somehow transferring a fraction of his longing into the way he lingered over them, in the passionate curve of his '8', the long, strong stroke of the '4'. He finished and Xander glanced up from his arm to look at Spike again. He looked faintly amused, but there was a faint crease of bewilderment between his eyebrows.

"Thanks," Xander said after a moment. He tugged his arm and Spike quickly let go of his wrist. For those few moments the party had faded, but now it came roaring back to Spike's ears, and with it sanity.

"Typical of you," Xander joked, sounding a little awkward. "You can't even give your number without making it into something - uh - something more dramatic."

"I like to leave my mark," Spike managed to sound relaxed. "And now every time you think of an insult you

can ring and share the moment, instead of having to save it for when you come round."

With an almost audible click they were suddenly back to normal. Xander grinned and began to roll down his sleeve to conceal the markings on his arm.

"Oh, but the best part of insulting you is watching your face."

"I'm sure you'll adjust." Spike looked around them, and his lip curled. "Can we *please* go now?"

"Oh no!" Xander admonished. "The party's hardly started, I've gotta be here till the bitter end and so do you, pal."

"Don't see why," Spike growled.

"I have to be here because Dawn is my friend, and I am a good person who will celebrate her birthday, and you need to be here to make it slightly more bearable for me."

Spike scowled. "Well, to make it slightly more bearable for me, I'm gonna get good and snockered."

"Ah, you can't," Xander pulled a regretful face. "Joyce banned any alcohol from being served."

"Lucky I think ahead then, innit?" Spike smirked, opening his duster and showing Xander the large flask of bourbon in the inside pocket.

"Spike!" Xander said in mock-shock. "I can't stand back and watch you get hammered at Dawn's birthday party!"

"Oh, can't you?" Spike raised an eyebrow.

"No," Xander said firmly.

There was a beat.

"You have to share it with me."

About an hour later the two of them were cosily ensconced on a couch in the most secluded corner the Bronze could afford, happily sipping from Spike's bourbon and beginning to feel the effects as the party roared on around them. Spike was in his usual relaxed, open-legged sprawl, and Xander was nearly lolling against him, with his arm stretched out along the back of the couch. He was now tipsy enough to begin to find the party more entertaining than excruciating. Even Coat-Girl seemed to have vanished into the haze, she had wandered around in front of them once or twice, sending Spike a knowing, flirty smile, but Spike hadn't even

glanced at her, and she hadn't approached for the last half-hour. Xander was now feeling more amused than irritated by the situation. If that was her best shot then there was nothing to worry about. He turned his attention back to Spike who was just winding up a particularly bloodthirsty story.

"-so then I said to this bloke - I said - look mate, I don't speak the lingo, but I'm gonna show you exactly what you can do with that stake, and I shoved it -"

"Wait, why didn't you speak the lingo? Where was this again?" Xander interrupted. He didn't want to appear squeamish but Spike's stories often were distressingly graphic, and he didn't need a visual image of what he suspected Spike had done.

"Russia."

"God, you really have been everywhere huh?" Xander observed idly, taking the flask out of Spike's hand, taking a sip and putting it back.

"Pretty much, all that snow and culture did my bloody head in though, prefer warmer climes and a bit more action meself. What about you?" Spike asked. "You been anywhere more exotic than Sunnyhell?"

Xander shook his head. "Nah, can you imagine taking a holiday with my folks?" He shrugged slightly bitterly.

"Mmmm," Spike said empathetically, and let his knee nudge Xander's gently in a supportive gesture. Xander gave him a grateful smile, letting the tension ease out of his frame, and continued. "I set out on my own once, but exotic it wasn't. I only got as far as Oxnard."

"Yeah? What's in Oxnard?"

Xander frowned in thought. "Well, they've got a big penis in lights over the stage of 'The Fabulous Ladies Night club'. I've never known anywhere else do that."

"A dick in lights?" Spike looked cautiously impressed. "Uh - why?"

"I think the owner wanted to drum up a little tourist trade, so he commissioned it to draw people from far and wide. He maybe should have put it outside to do that, but it *was* huge."

"Huge, huh?"

"Oh yeah, very impressive as far as fake male genitalia go. Not at all intimidating to those that had to work under it's shadow."

"No, of course not. So - what exactly were you doing, working in the shadow of a large glow-in-the-dark dick?"

Xander spluttered. "No way am I telling you that, pal!"

"Oh, come on! You can't tell me that much, then not finish it! Tell me!"

"No!" Xander said on a shriek, blushing like mad. He blamed the party. Being surrounded by fifteen-year-old girls was somehow making him act like one. In his defence Spike seemed to be affected too.

"Go on! Tell me! What was it? I'm coming up with all kinds of options and they're all terrifying. Modelling sex toys? Escort to the lonely and insane? Or were you just the coat-check boy?"

"No! Okay, okay," Xander snickered. "I'll tell you. But you can't tell anyone."

"Oh, fine! So what was it?"

"Well, in a way Oxnard was exotic, the dancing anyway. I did some...um-" Xander coughed. "-stripping." His cheeks flamed, but he laughed as Spike did a spit-take.

"You stripped?" Spike choked with unflattering disbelief.

"You? When was this? To who?"

"Yes, me. About two years ago. To a crowd of women I pray nightly that I'll never see again."

"I don't believe it!"

"Yeah, I kinda wish I didn't. The memory is still painful."

Spike seemed caught between laughter and intrigue.

"You any good?"

"The dollars down my G-string seemed to imply so."

By this point Xander was worried Spike might hurt himself with laughing - well actually no, he wasn't worried, it would be a nice kind of justice - after all it wasn't *that* funny. "Hey, all that's behind me now! I'm living the clean life. When I got back I hung up my G-string and spent months before I discovered my love of carpentry building the worlds longest resume of crappy jobs and perfecting my delivery of the phrase 'do you want fries with that?'"

Spike grinned at him as his chuckles eased off. "If it helps, I'd buy fries from you."

"Ah, it was all worth while."

Spike's eyes flickered over him, and his smile... changed. Became less amused. More thoughtful. The bourbon

must be doing its work, because his gaze seemed slightly darker and heavier than usual, and his voice had a slightly huskier edge. "So, you gonna give me a demo, then?"

"Of what?" Xander teased gently as his eyes met Spike's and held, lingering. "Asking if you want fries?"

"No," Spike's voice sounded almost liquid now, like the bourbon in his flask, lingering over the words, infusing them with something hot and rich. "Of you doin' your thing in a G-string."

An image flashed in Xander's head of himself, stripped to the waist, gyrating under the hot lights, skin gleaming with oil and sweat, his heart racing and women cat-calling. Popping the buttons on his pants open, one by one, hinting at the silver of the G-string beneath - although he wasn't much of a dancer, he wasn't bad at showing off the goods if he said so himself - and Spike in the audience, his heavy gaze lingering on him the way it was now. Making him feel so... well... naked, vulnerable, yet oddly powerful too. Watching him like he was fascinating - like Spike could taste the anticipation...

Xander's cheeks grew hot, it must be with embarrassment, because Spike was obviously teasing him. "Oh, no," he demurred, and he must be falling

under the bourbon's spell himself, because his voice was also sounding a little husky, dripping thickly into the space between them. He cleared his throat. "You're not getting any bump 'n' grind off me, buddy."

"Oh go on, Xander," Spike was still looking at him with that strangely serious half-smile, and somehow the air around them felt a little thicker, warmer than before. The smooth heat of the drink twisted pleasantly in Xander's stomach, making his skin feel warm and slightly tingly. By now they were both leaning against each other, and their knees were still touching.

"Two words Spike," Xander spoke on autopilot, but he didn't have any clear idea of what he was saying anymore. The only thing he was really taking in was this diffuse warmth spreading through him. "'Nuh' and 'uh'."

Spike's eyes held him in their heavy lidded gaze. "No?"

"No."

"You're no fun," Spike sat back a little, his lower lip jutting out.

"Are you pouting?" Xander teased, shifting on the seat, following Spike and closing the gap between them as he pointed at Spike's pink lip. He let his finger momentarily

hover just shy of brushing it, before he dropped it. His hand was now on the seat, brushing Spike's thigh.

Spike shifted slightly closer. "No. Aren't you worried I'm going to use this G-string information for blackmail?"

"Do your worst," Xander said lazily, as that warmth fired up again. "I've got plenty on you, buddy."

"Like what?" Spike drawled, looking unimpressed.

Xander leant into Spike to whisper, letting his arm that was resting on the couch behind them fall to rest around Spike's shoulders. "Like, I could tell everyone you have a stuffed hippo."

Spike choked, turning a wounded blue gaze on him. "You wouldn't!"

"Oh I would," Xander assured him as his fingers circled absently on Spike's arm. "And I'd tell 'em you call her Petunia."

"Xander don't tell anyone that, okay?"

"And you dress her in a pink feather boa."

"You're a sneaky, cruel, heartless git, Harris. I'm impressed."

"Spike stop, I'm blushing."

Spike smirked, and lifted the bourbon flask to his mouth, taking a long draft, before lifting it questioningly to Xander's mouth. He tilted his head in acceptance, placing his free hand over Spike's to steady the flask and took a long pull at it. It slipped down heated and rich, gathering in a pool of warmth in his belly. As Spike lowered the flask, Xander's eye fell on Willow. She was standing with the others, but seemed oblivious to the conversation surrounding her. She was looking straight at him and Spike, her eyes narrowed, a peculiar, thoughtful expression on her face. Xander jumped and the warmth in his blood abruptly vanished, as though someone had just thrown a bucket of ice-cold water over him.

Suddenly he felt embarrassed, aware that maybe he and Spike were getting a little too drunk and tactile tonight. His arm was still resting on Spike's shoulders and he quickly removed it, shifting so he was sitting a little distance away from Spike.

Spike looked a little surprised at his swift movement.

"You all right?" he asked, confused.

"Yeah - fine," Xander said awkwardly, the relaxation of moments ago completely gone. "I'm just a bit too drunk, I mean obviously." He gestured vaguely at the space

between them, indicating he must be drunk to have been sitting so close. "

Yeah," Spike said on a sigh that sounded oddly defeated. "I know." Then he was all normal again, concerned but slightly sarcastic. "You're not gonna throw up are you? Actually on second thoughts, yeah, throw up. Then we can leave."

Xander snorted, relaxing a little, he was overreacting, it had just been some drunken leaning, no big deal. "Nice try, Spike. How about you -" Just then Xander became aware that someone was standing in front of them. They both looked up, and a shock of dismay shot through him.

"Hi," said Coat-Girl, her eyes firmly on Spike.

Spike's quick glance at the girl melded seamlessly into a slower, more appreciative look.

"All right, luv?" he greeted her casually.

"Can I sit here?" she asked, parking herself practically on Spike's lap.

Spike shrugged. "Sure, why not." He raised his eyebrows conspiratorially at Xander, his eyes lazy and amused. Xander didn't return the amusement though, he felt like a third wheel. He wondered if Spike wanted him to go -

yeah - that was probably what the look was for. Nudge, nudge, wink, wink, let me get to work here. Not that Spike would have to work hard, hell just not putting up a fight would do the trick. Well, fine, he'd just get out of Spike's way while they got friendly, that's what buddies did right? Xander stood quickly.

"I'm just gonna go, chat to the guys," Xander announced loudly. Spike looked at him in surprise.

"No, hang on-"

"Oh come on, Spike! I haven't spoken to them nearly all night," Xander said with a large, fake smile that was extremely hard work to maintain.

"Oh fine," Spike said, looking a little put out. "Sorry to have kept you."

"I didn't mean - oh forget it. See you later."

Xander stumbled off feeling awkward and uncomfortable. The drink was making his movements slow and clumsy, and he felt a little queasy. He joined the Scoobies with relief, they were keeping an eye on the dance floor. The boys had finally joined the party and the air was rife with hormones.

"Hi!" Buffy greeted him brightly, then paused and looked at him a little more closely. "You okay?"

"Yeah, sure! What's happening with the hormone brigade?"

Buffy launched into a confusing tale involving Mindy and David, who apparently were making out, resulting in Ginger crying in the toilets to the distress of Mike, who was Ginger's date, but the delight of Alice, who was totally into Mike. However, despite the live soap-opera being played out in front of him, Xander couldn't give it his full attention. He kept glancing back at where Spike and Coat-Girl were sitting. He supposed he shouldn't be surprised, girls were always looking at Spike, and though he'd never actually seen one approach him before, it had only been a matter of time. Maybe Spike would end up taking her home. Fortune favoured the bold and so on. Although they were out of earshot Spike didn't seem to mind her talking to him at all. Xander was dying to shout over to Spike not to give that over-confident girl his coat, she'd made a bet about it - but then Spike would just give him that amused look and shrug. Why would he care about that? A pretty girl - and a brunette too, the type Spike liked - was giving him the green light. Letting her parade around in his coat for a few minutes would probably be worth it if it meant getting laid. Typical Spike

with his twisted priorities! Xander scowled and Willow who was next to him, followed his eyeline.

"Who's that with Spike?" she asked.

"Oh, just some chick who thinks a bleached-blond, heavy-smoking, heavy-drinking, black-leather-wearing Creature of the Night makes a good boyfriend prospect," Xander said eyeballing them sourly. "It's stupid, why is she chasing him? You only have to look at the guy to know he's trouble."

Willow's brow creased, in that cute way she did when she was trying to figure out what was pissing him off.

"Well, maybe she likes trouble. And it's not a problem is it? I mean she and ...Spike - can see whoever they like, right?"

"Absolutely!" Xander said, trying to smile good-naturedly, but he couldn't quite manage it. He wasn't amused for some reason.

Coat-Bitch shifted so she was leaning towards Spike.

"The thing that gets me," Xander burst out suddenly, making Willow jump. "Is I talked Spike into coming here, and if all he's gonna do is chat up girls I shouldn't have bothered. I mean I don't care that he's talking to her - I'm glad he's having a good time, but it's like Buffy said

before, this is a test of friendship, and it's, it's rude to just ditch someone to hook up."

"Rude," Willow agreed, nodding and looking at him thoughtfully. "Yeah."

Something about the way Willow kept looking at him, and agreeing with him was making Xander uncomfortable. He moved around so he was standing by Buffy. Moments later Riley slipped an arm around her, and began to whisper in her ear. Buffy began giggling and blushing.

Xander rolled his eyes and looked around. He spotted a group of chicklets watching Spike and Coat-Bitch, looking both impressed and envious. Xander wondered with bitter satisfaction what reaction he'd get from the whole giggly gang of them if he told them that he'd seen Spike naked. *Yup, that's right. I've been skinny dipping with him, I've seen him naked and wet, and I can tell you he's not a natural blond. I've seen the way his back dips, and his ass, and his nipples, and his ...* Xander suddenly forced himself to an abrupt halt before he thought the word, his cheeks flaming as he wrenched his mind away. God, he was almost gloating about seeing Spike naked, as though they were in some childish competition. What the hell was wrong with him?

The music was loud in here and Xander felt out of sorts, too hot and verging on pissed off. He glanced back over at Spike, who was smiling slightly as Coat-Bitch chatted to him, giving him plenty of coy looks and knowing smiles. However despite that, things didn't seem to be moving along. When Spike was really interested in something his eyes narrowed, and became a sharp, clear blue. Xander was too far away to see what colour they were, but he didn't have a focussed expression on his face, if anything he looked mildly entertained but a little bored as she prattled on and flicked her hair. As he watched Coat-Bitch reached out and lightly plucked at the sleeve of Spike's duster. That got a reaction, Spike raised his eyebrows, and quirked his lips in amusement. Xander scowled. Spike should not let that girl wear his coat! It was - it was about male liberation dammit! Girls like that just thought they could swan in and interrupt peoples nights out and take whatever they damn well wanted... Just then Spike's eyes flicked up and looked right at him. Xander looked away quickly, flushing. Fine, Spike could seduce her if he wanted, he didn't care. He just didn't want Spike to know he was watching and he definitely didn't want Spike to get all patronising and superior and start showing off his cool, smooth moves on how to flirt with women to 'poor old Xander' who hadn't had a date in ages.

He stared out at the dance floor blankly, but couldn't help looking back just once more. Spike and Coat-Bitch were standing now, and for a heartstopping moment Xander thought Spike was about to take off his duster, then Spike took the girls hand in his, and with a slight smirk, bestowed a kiss on her knuckles. Then he left her, heading towards him. Xander's jaw dropped. Spike sauntered over to him, a somewhat smug smile on his face. The girl looked after Spike for a moment, then with a huff and a toss of her hair, turned on her heel. With her head held high and a faint redness to her cheeks, she disappeared into the throng.

"What happened?" Xander said without preamble as Spike joined him, moving so they were slightly away from the others.

Spike shrugged, though he was still smiling. "She let it be known that if I would let her wear my coat tonight, then she wouldn't be averse to letting me take it - and various other bits of clothing off her later."

"So, what did you say?" Xander asked quickly.

"I said although I was tempted, I was here with my slow cousin Billy, who gets upset and bangs his head on the walls if I leave him alone too long."

"Hey!" Xander spluttered indignantly, but with no real heat. "But, really you didn't like her? I mean why? She was hot - and brunette! You like brunettes."

"Yeah," Spike sighed slightly regretfully. "But she's not-"
He stopped.

"Not what?"

"Nothing," Spike said without quite meeting his eyes. Before Xander could press him, he seemed to shrug it off, and looked at him properly, giving him a relaxed grin. "Sides, I came here to make this bearable for you didn't I? I'm not gonna ditch you 'cos some bint's giving me the eye."

Xander grinned back, as a heavy load he hadn't even noticed he'd had, vanished from his heart. Suddenly he was as light as air, and very touched, he wanted to do something really, really nice for Spike - what could he do to say thanks...? Ah, he knew what Spike would like.

"Spike?"

"Yeah?"

"Would you like to leave now?"

Spike looked at him in surprise. "But it's not over yet."

"You got paroled early, you want to leave or what?"

Spike gave him an awed look. "Oh, hell yes."

"Let's go."

As they were leaving the Bronze they paused in the doorway while Spike stashed his flask, and Xander, who wasn't wearing a coat, registered the slap of a brisk, cold wind. He sighed and resigned himself to getting cold before he got home, but then glanced at Spike, who was unaffected by the chill, leaving his duster hanging open. He looked at Spike thoughtfully as a wicked impulse sprung into his mind. Maybe he was still a little pissed by the girls' attitude, maybe he was just curious, or felt he had something to prove, but he wanted to try...

"It's cold," he complained, shivering elaborately, and lingering in the shelter of the doorway.

"Well it's not gonna get any warmer standing there, is it?" Spike said unsympathetically. "Come on, lets get you back so I can go pick a fight with something. After havin' to listen to all those sodding boy-band tunes I'm itching to tear something's head off."

"Gee, it's true, some music *does* encourage violence! But it really is cold," Xander persisted as he slowly began to walk with Spike, rubbing ostentatiously at his arms. "It was warmer than this before, but now it's freezing! Do you think it'll rain?"

"You've almost convinced me it's going to snow, get a bloody move on and you won't be so cold."

"I knew I should have brought a coat. That must be a good thing about not having body temperature, you don't feel the cold as much."

"Well that's what you get for being human," Spike deadpanned.

"Oh, yes that's right, we humans deliberately choose to have a heartbeat and a body temperature that reacts to the weather. Bad humans, we deserve all we get."

"Yeah, you do, or you should have the brains to sort out your own clothing as you're so susceptible to the weather, and stop trying to get mine off me. I know what you're up to and it's not gonna work. I had to work bloody hard to get this coat, and I'm not givin' it away."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Xander said with dignity as he cupped his hands together, blowing on them. "I was just making the observation that I was cold,

and vampires were lucky because they just don't feel the cold as much as poor humans with no coat on -"

"Oh for crying out loud, come here will you?" Spike huffed in exasperation. Pulling Xander to him, so Xander's back was against Spike's chest, he opened his coat, wrapping it around him.

"Uh, Spike," Xander said tilting his head back on Spike's shoulder to look him awkwardly in the face. "I appreciate you trying to put your coat on me, but you still appear to be wearing it."

"Stop whining Harris or I'll take it off you altogether," Spike snapped. "God, what is with people wantin' my coat tonight?"

"Oh fine," Xander huffed, letting it drop before Spike pursued that line of thought. Inwardly, however he wasn't displeased, he might not have got the coat totally off Spike, but at least he'd beaten Coat-Bitch! However, despite his satisfaction, there was no denying it was a difficult way to walk. They shuffled slowly down the street, kicking each other's feet as they tried to stay upright. Things weren't helped by the fact Spike seemed to be holding himself back a bit, pulling them off balance and letting the cold wind blow through the facings of the coat.

"Ow! Watch it Harris! You've got two left feet," Spike complained.

"You could let me stand on your feet," Xander suggested.

"You already are," Spike grumbled.

"No, let me balance on them while you walk, you know the way kids learn to dance."

"Oh, so now I've got to teach you to dance? No way Harris I know my limitations."

"Oh, come on Spike, you dance like you're on fire... and you will be if you insult my moves again."

Spike's feet tangled up with Xander's again, and they both nearly landed on the ground, grabbing at each other to keep upright.

"Right, that's it," Xander said decidedly. "Look, come here will you?" He wrapped Spike's arms firmly around his middle, so Spike's body was pressed tightly behind his. He held onto Spike's wrist with one hand, and with the other he held the facings of the coat, managing to nearly close them. "That's better isn't it? Warmer?"

"Uh, yeah," Spike's voice sounded a little strangled, maybe the coat was stretched a little too tightly around

him. "You're really hot. I mean you feel hot - I mean with the body temperature thing even though it's cold, you're, uh..."

Xander muffled a snicker. Spike sounding flustered after a slip of the tongue wasn't something that happened every day. "I am hot stuff," he agreed teasingly. "I didn't know you cared."

"I - uh - oh, very funny." Xander could swear he *heard* Spike rolling his eyes. "Are we gonna walk or what?"

"Yeah, I'll keep count, and we'll march. Ready? Okay then, left, right, left, right..."

They moved off, marching in time, taking large exaggerated steps, and soon couldn't stop laughing helplessly at the sheer madness of the situation. Xander felt happier now than he had all night. Suddenly a nagging worry that had been niggling at him for the past few days rose up in his head, and now, with Spike so close to him, yet not in sight, it seemed like the right time to ask. He broke the count, and Spike took it up.

"Left, right, left-"

"Spike?"

"-right, left - what? - right, left-"

Xander slowed down the walk a little, as he struggled for the right words. "You - you're - are you planning on leaving Sunnydale anytime soon?"

"What?" Spike said again, sounding bewildered and dropping the count as he too slowed down. "Leaving? No. Why? You trying to get rid of me?" Spike was joking, but there was an undertone of worry in his voice.

"No!" Xander replied quickly. He looked down, fiddling nervously with the facings of Spike's coat. For some reason even though Spike was behind him, he felt like he needed to look away. "It's just, you've been pretty near everywhere, and seen so much, and - demons and apocalypses aside - Sunnydale's not got that much going on. I just thought maybe you'd get a bit ... well ... bored." He flushed a little and he concentrated on his feet. They were actually fascinating from this angle.

There was a tiny pause. "Xander," Spike said seriously. "I don't think I've ever been less bored."

"Really?" Xander asked hopefully. "What about China and the Boxer Rebellion?"

"Oh, China," Spike tutted dismissively. "Yeah, it was all right, but they didn't have any onion-rings."

"So, you're not going anywhere?" Xander clarified, feeling a grin begin to spread over his face.

"No," Spike said decisively.

Xander couldn't wipe his smile away, as a warm glow of relief radiated through him, but he forced himself to sound nonchalant. "Right. Damn. I guess that means I'm stuck with you for a bit longer huh?"

"Ah, don't lie," Spike teased, poking him lightly in the stomach. "You'd miss me if I wasn't around."

"Yeah, well," Xander shrugged fake-casually, leaning his head back on Spike's shoulder to look at him. "Who else would I get to spoon-walk me home?"

Spike twisted his head to look at him. "Well, you don't have to worry about that, because I'm not going anywhere."

Suddenly Spike snapped out of Xander's sight. The pressure of the blond behind him was pulled away, along with the coat. The warmth surrounding him vanished abruptly, and Xander was standing alone in the street.

"Oh, haha-" Xander began turning with an exasperated grin.

"Glad you think it's funny," a voice - not Spike's - grated in Xander's ear as an icy hand on the back of his neck suddenly lifted him right up.

A wallop of horror hit Xander with such force for a split second he couldn't move - not that he could have anyway - but the horror wasn't really due to the vampire holding him, as unpleasant as that was. It was seeing Spike, his hands trapped behind him, being held tightly by a vampire with a nose ring. Xander let out a strangled yelp, his legs kicking uselessly.

"Xander!" Spike's voice had a note of sheer panic in it. With a roar he melded into gameface, and grabbing the vampire's arms for leverage, bent at the waist and threw him head over heels forward. The green-haired vampire holding Xander actually dropped him in shock.

"Hey, you're a vam-" He didn't get the rest of the word out as he got a gutful of extremely pissed off Spike barreling forward and tackling him, the force of which made them stumble into a nearby alley.

The two rolled up from the ground, circling each other, throwing kicks and punches, Spike fighting so smoothly, moving with such confident grace that for a moment

Xander was briefly caught in aesthetic appreciation - only briefly as Nose-ring picked himself up and with a roar charged at Xander.

"Oooof!" They joined the party in the alley, slamming to the ground, but Xander managed to twist so he landed on top of the vampire. He threw a punch to keep him dazed, and got to his feet with considerably less grace than Spike had shown. His heart was racing wildly - he had a clock in his head of how long he could fight before his luck ran out and he got killed and it was nearly halfway through already. He wasn't like Spike or Buffy who could drag the fight out for sheer enjoyment, he liked his vampires dusted the quicker the better. Nose-ring slithered up to his feet, growling ominously.

"Xander, here!" Spike yelled from where he and Green-hair were still battling it out, throwing him a stake he must have had concealed somewhere about his person. Xander caught it, but Spike's lack of concentration meant Green-hair got him with a vicious kick to the stomach that had Spike doubled up. Unfortunately Xander didn't have time to fly to his aide. Nose-ring charged at him again, easily avoiding the stake. He grabbed Xander's arms and, maybe in an effort to prove he was just as adept as Spike, used the same move Spike had, and flipped him. Suddenly Xander found himself flying in an

altogether different direction, as he rose up in the air, and slammed heavily down on the top of a nearby dumpster. Fortunately the lid was closed.

Winded and breathless with shock and pain, the voice in Xander's head that kept him going in these fights was shouting for him to get up *right now*. Ignoring his body that was whimpering to lie still for a moment, Xander rolled up into a crouching position as Nose-ring leapt up to land gracefully on top of the dumpster. Xander rose to his full height, then they flew at each other. Nose-ring twisted at Xander's wrist, trying to make him drop the stake. Never mind using it, Xander could barely hold it.

"Xander!" Spike tried to kick off Green-hair and race up the dumpster, but Green-hair caught his foot and threw him back to the ground. However Nose-ring apparently decided he didn't have time to waste. He let go of Xander's wrist, landed a punch that made him see stars, and moved lightning-fast so he was behind Xander. Nose-ring wrenched at his collar to expose his neck. Xander's skin crawled in revulsion, but using a move Buffy had shown him long ago, Xander snapped his head back as hard as he could, headbutting Nose-ring in the face. There was a loud cracking sound, and they both let out a yelp of pain - Buffy had never told him this move was so painful! - but Nose-ring seemed to be worse off,

he let go of Xander, staggering back with his hands over his face. Xander didn't have as much knowledge as Buffy, but he knew when to go with his advantage and, stake in hand, he charged.

"Xander be careful!" Spike shouted, not paying enough attention to his own fight, he struggled viciously but not effectively with Green-hair, as he watched Xander.

"I've got him!" Xander yelled as he staked Nose-ring cleanly. Xander flashed Spike a grin.

Spike gave Xander brilliant smile, "Good one mate!" Spike punched Green-hair so hard he flew back and lay, groaning on the ground. Spike slid back into his human face and Xander tossed the stake down. It landed on the ground beside him.

"Thanks," Spike reached for the stake, but was still looking up at Xander. "Now lets-"

Green-hair rolled suddenly and his hand closed over the stake a split second before Spike's. Xander's smile, along with any colour, drained from his face. Spike glanced around in alarm but it was too late, Green-hair rose up and knocked Spike flat on his back.

"-shut up and die?" he suggested, as Spike looked up with a mixture of laughing disbelief at the vampire that

stood over him with a stake whistling down towards his heart.

Usually Xander would think Spike could manage fine on his own - he was already bringing his feet up to kick the stake from Green-hair's hand - but in that split-second horrified glance, things were moving so fast. There was a peculiar whooshing sound as the stake sliced cleanly through the air, and Spike's feet seemed to be so far from reaching their target, and he just didn't know. What he did know was that without thought, and charged by what could only come from the ice cold wallop of terror that slammed into his gut, he leapt off the dumpster, jumping towards Green-hair, an unholy sort of howl issuing from his mouth.

He flew through the air, and crash-landed with a jolt as he slammed into Green-hair. The stake, less than an inch from Spike's heart was knocked from the vampires grip. It arced through the air and clattered harmlessly on the ground, as Xander and Green-hair crashed to the floor in a tangle of limbs. Xander let out a shout of triumph, even as he wondered vaguely what his plan was regarding the extremely pissed off vampire that he was currently trying to free himself from. Pleading for his life seemed the most likely bet, but he never got the chance. Green-hair, nearly spitting with anger, staggered up to his feet,

dragging Xander up by the collar of his shirt and struck a furious heavy blow across his face that slammed Xander back into the wall. He hit it headfirst. There was a sharp blast of agony, like a lightening flash inside his skull, then everything vanished in a grey haze.

Xander didn't know how much time had passed but through the high-pitched buzzing in his head, he began to make out a voice babbling in his ear - Spike's voice. It had a tone Xander had never heard before, and in Xander's honest opinion, didn't suit him. It was panicky, with an edge of hysteria.

" - you so much Xander, oh God, please be okay - and just WAKE UP you stupid sod!"

The world seemed to be shaking and Xander groaned and shook his head hard in an effort to dispel the fog within it. Doing this hurt, so he stopped. The buzzing faded though and the shaking ceased. He managed to peel his eyes open to see Spike kneeling over him, hands gripping his shoulders tightly.

"Xander?" Spike said, his voice harsh with concern. "Are you all right?"

Xander took a moment to collect his thoughts - it didn't take long, mostly because the only thought he had was; 'Ow', but it seemed like such a reasonable thought, that he said it out loud. Well if he was being honest, he actually groaned it in a long drawn out whimper of pain.

"God," he moaned, clasping his hand to his head. "You have no idea how much this hurts." He slowly sat up, trying not to jar his head anymore, and brushed his clothes down.

Spike let out a short, strange sound, like a relieved sob, if such a thing existed, and seemed to be trying to stuff his fist into his mouth. "Oh," Spike choked out from around his fist. "Oh."

Xander felt a little irritated, he was the injured party here after all, and Spike was being less than helpful.

"Where's Green-hair?" he asked, looking around.

"Umm, over there," Spike removed his fist from his mouth, pointing vaguely with a trembling hand at a nearby pile of dust.

"Man, you really don't like it when someone has brighter hair than you, huh?"

"This isn't funny, Xander!" Spike snapped, his voice shaky. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah, yeah." Xander growled, touching his head where it seemed to be throbbing the most, wincing a little at the size of the lump.

Spike closed his eyes momentarily - then opened them, again, blazing with anger. "Well you bloody shouldn't be! WHAT the HELL did you think you were DOING?"

"What are you talking about?" Xander snapped back in angry bewilderment. He gave a gasp of pain, the world momentarily swirling grey as he shakily got to his feet. Spike moved forward to help him and Xander irritably slapped him away, leaning heavily on the wall for support. "It looked to me like I was saving your ass!"

"I didn't need your help, I was handling that fine - you nearly had your brains smashed out right in front of me!"

"If lying on your back while a stake flies down toward you is 'handling it' then yeah, I agree, you were totally on top of that! I however thought fighting the vamp about to dust you would be a good way to go!"

"You didn't think about how I'd feel if anything happened to you, of course!"

"And what about me? Were you thinking about me when I was getting the front row seat for your big exit scene?" Xander screeched, uncaring of how much it hurt his head to be speaking at these volumes.

"Of course I was thinking about you - I never bloody stop thinking about you! God, you're so stupid Xander!" Spike screamed back at him. "You just charge in, you never look at what's going on around you, you never notice ... notice - oh you're just so *fucking stupid!*"

"Yeah," Xander yelled back, suddenly feeling perilously close to tears. "I am - I must really be stupid to have done anything to try and help you - the only thing I should have done is watch and laugh!"

"Fuck you," Spike snarled bleakly. All at once Xander realised his legs were trembling violently, and he really couldn't stand to have Spike looking at him so angrily another second. He turned away and began to walk slowly away from Spike.

"Where do you think you're going?" Spike snapped.

"Home!" Xander shot back without turning around as he trailed his fingers along the wall for support.

"You need to go to the hospital!" Spike yelled after him.

Xander ignored him.

"Oh, fine, go on, see how far you get, Harris." Spike's tone was hard and slightly mocking. It reminded Xander of old Spike, the way he used to be, how he used to delight in making Xander feel small. His insides curled up at the memory. His eyes were burning, his knees were trembling and there was a tight lump in his throat. He reached the end of the wall, he had to cross the street. He took a deep breath, he wasn't going to ask Spike for help - not after that fight. He stepped out without the support of the wall to lean on, and inched slowly across, like a weary old man, refusing to look back. Luckily the road was deserted, but still - he hadn't thought Spike would really let him go like this. Why wasn't Spike following him, helping him home, grumbling but walking with him?

Seconds passed, and Xander reached the other side and stumbled on, his legs shaking so badly he could barely stand. He was hurting so much, and he didn't mean his painfully throbbing head. How could Spike have said those things to him? And why wasn't he coming after him? *Well fine. See if I care. If he did come after me, I'd tell him to fuck off. I don't need him. I bet by the time I count to ten he'll be following me, begging to me to let him help, and he can just piss off! One, two, three ...yeah,*

he can just die for all I care, after the horrible things he said ...

He tried to swallow, but the lump in his throat refused to budge.

Four, five, six ...I hope he takes a stroll in the sun.

He concentrated on watching his feet, not looking up or behind him.

Seven, eight, nine ... and he's forgetting I've got a Slayer who hates his guts for a best friend, yeah, he'll see ...he'll have to grovel before I ever speak to him again

His hands were trembling. He couldn't seem to make them stop.

Ten ...

An arm slipped around his waist and Xander wordlessly leant heavily against the support.

"I'm sorry," Spike said in a low voice.

Xander swallowed. "I know. So am I. We were both a little freaked back there." He risked a glance at Spike, who looked like he'd been suffering from the 'stinging eyes' syndrome himself. He held onto Spike tightly, not

entirely because of his shaking legs, and Spike seemed to be holding onto him just as tight.

"You should go the hospital," Spike said worriedly.

"Nah, I just wanna go home."

"But-"

"You can patch me up."

"Okay," Spike agreed gently. "Hey, you're shivering. Hang on a sec." And the next moment a comfortable weight and warmth settled over Xander's shoulders, as Spike shrugged his duster off and wrapped it around him.

Xander sank onto a wooden chair in his kitchen, reluctantly slipping off Spike's duster. It had been oddly comforting. Spike drew the other chair up so close that their legs interlaced, one of Spike's knees was wedged between Xander's thighs, one of Xander's knees between Spike's. Xander liked it, the contact felt safe, solid, reminding him that Spike was here - he was okay, wasn't a pile of formless dust. He was still shivering, he couldn't seem to stop. He was used to seeing people he loved in danger. Hell, he'd even seen Buffy die once, but seeing Spike come so close to being dusted had an extra

dimension of awfulness to it, a thump of sick ice-cold terror that even now still had a tight grip on his heart. The look of dawning realisation in Spike's eyes, totally at odds with the arrogant smile still on his mouth could so easily have been the last sight he'd had of the infuriating, sarcastic menace. He didn't think he'd ever forget it. There wouldn't have even been a body left. Xander shivered again and pressed his legs tighter against Spike's, feeling the reassuring press of firm flesh against him.

Spike spread out the first aid kit on the kitchen table and leant forward, holding Xander's chin in his hand, turning his head this way and that to check his pupils, making sure he didn't have concussion. He was so close Xander could see the flutter of Spike's eyelashes as he blinked. They looked soft above the slash of his cheekbones, and oddly vulnerable. A lump tightened in Xander's throat as he watched Spike, inhaling the familiar scent that surrounded Spike of smoke and leather and hairgel. He knew it so well now. So many evenings spent lounging next to him as they played cards, leaning against him when they were drunk, a motorbike ride one night.

"No ringing in your ears is there?" Spike asked.

"No," Xander's voice came out a little shaky, and he cleared his throat.

"How do you feel now?" Concern was still etched on Spike's face.

"Like I had a fight with a wall and it won," Xander quipped feebly.

"Yeah it's a nasty bump you've got there," Spike said sympathetically, leaning closer and threading his fingers through Xander's hair, gently running them over the lump on Xander's head, checking it. Xander caught his breath sharply.

"Hurt?" Spike asked briefly.

"Nah, I'm okay," Xander said feeling the tension across his shoulders begin to relax, as Spike's careful fingers somehow helped soothe the pain. At the very least it was making his injured area feel like someone cared.

Spike raised a sceptical eyebrow.

Xander rolled his eyes. "Really I'll be fine."

Spike gave him a strange, twisted smile as his eyes travelled searchingly over Xander's face. "You're a brave bastard aren't you?"

"Flatterer."

They smiled at each other. A small smile, but a nice one. A real one. The cold tightness around Xander's heart began to loosen.

"You sure you don't need a trip to hospital?" Spike asked, an edge of worry still in his voice.

"Yeah."

Spike let his hand slip from his head to cup his face, circling his thumb soothingly over the rising bruise on his cheek. "Positive?"

"Spike!" Xander smiled. "I'm fi-"

Then he froze. Spike's hand on his face, his fingers, God, that touch. Cool and firm and concerned, and with something in it, a kind of tenderness that was so sweet it made him ache, just a little. A wordless assurance that he was being looked after, that he was something special to this person. Once felt and never forgotten - or repeated, until now.

"Oh my God," he whispered, staring at Spike.

"What?" Spike asked, startled.

"It was you in the Bronze." It wasn't a question. His voice was shocked, yet certain. "When Toth had split you, and the vamp side of you knocked me out, it was you - human you - that was touching me."

Spike started in surprise, taken aback by the sudden change in topic. "Yeah. Anya shoved me out of the way just when you were coming round. You remember that?"

"Uh, yeah! Why didn't you tell me?"

"Why?" Bitterness flashed over Spike's face, and he took his hand away from Xander's face, leaving him feeling oddly bereft. "You were all lovey-dovey with your girl. Why would you have wanted to know that? Why do you even remember that?"

"B-because it was so - because it made me feel so -" Xander struggled. This whole moment felt like he'd suddenly hit deep water with all kinds of undercurrents he didn't quite understand. "But - we weren't even friends then, why would you-? I thought it was her - if I'd known it was you -" Xander stopped.

"What?" Spike said quickly. "What if you'd known it was me?"

Xander swallowed nervously, staring at Spike as though he'd never quite seen him before. Everything was turning

upside-down - or maybe it was finally the right way up. No wonder things hadn't worked out with Anya, he'd been trying to recapture something that had never been there in first place. "I - I don't think I'd have tried so hard to stop Anya from breaking up with me." Or maybe he would have tried even harder. Because all at once he felt scared. Scared in a breathless, bewildered way, that was somehow ... exciting.

Spike's eyes widened.

Neither of them said anything. The only sound in the room was their breath coming shallowly and quickly. Spike's gaze was flicking over him a little uncertainly, yet his eyes were darkening as they looked at him, and he was just staring at Spike. Noticing things he'd always known, but never really seen before, like the pale, soft skin of Spike's face, the shape of his mouth. Spike swallowed nervously - it was so strange, so touching to see Spike nervous - and slowly, shakily he reached out his hand again, sliding it to cup Xander's face, his thumb tracing a gentle caress over his cheek. Xander caught his breath. His heart was hammering so hard in his chest his legs felt weak, and Spike's legs, pressing hard on either side of his thigh didn't make him feel safe anymore, suddenly he was very aware of just how close Spike's knee was to his crotch. His heart gave a leap of

dangerous excitement, his groin prickled and the thought of just how easy it would be to just press forward a little and let Spike's knee rub against it, flashed through his mind... Xander's stomach leapt with panic as he realised they were slowly moving closer to each other, and he couldn't blame it on the alcohol this time. It was like being pulled by a magnet, he was helpless to stop himself from moving closer, closer - oh shit this was weird. And. Oh fuck. Spike's knee was nudging higher between his legs as they leaned into each other and Spike's forehead was resting against his. He was trembling, but it wasn't because of their brush with death anymore.

"Spike," he whispered. "What's happening?"

Spike gave a shaky laugh. "I-I dunno," Spike sounded oddly breathless. "I think I'm dreamin',"

Their noses were sliding over each other's, breathing each other in, it should have felt playful, but didn't. It felt like they were dancing, hovering right on the line that separated friendship from... other things. Knowing that something, everything was changing. Something hot and sweet, excited yet with an edge of fear was rolling in his stomach, and it was that something that was making him ignore that tiny, distant part of him that was screaming to get the hell out of this now. It was that something that

made him want to... do... this. Xander's eyes flickered closed, they moved together and Spike's mouth was fleetingly soft against his.

The quiet, slick sound of the kiss caught in the air as they broke contact. Spike was so close Xander could barely focus on him, he was a blur of pale skin and stunned blue eyes, but he could feel Spike's breath coming fast, melting on his lips, and Spike was trembling. So was he. He drew in a shaking breath, then suddenly, suddenly they were kissing again, and he was just ... falling. Falling into Spike, into his mouth, into this kiss, God, this, he had been *born* to do this. The kiss flooded through his body, intoxicating, molten, tasting faintly of the bourbon they'd drunk tonight. Their mouths slipping over each other's was like that touch of Spike's, only magnified to a nearly unbearable pitch, indescribably tender and so fucking sweet, with an edge of desire. It was familiar and brand new all at once, and Xander couldn't get enough of it. Spike's tongue was flicking at his lower lip, Xander willingly welcomed him in, getting a hard, heavy thump of desire right in the pit of his stomach and between his legs as their tongues slipped smoothly into each other's mouths. Spike made a low, aching sound of want in the back of his throat, making Xander's stomach jump and roll. His heart was pounding madly, his head spinning, he

was drawing in shuddering breaths in the split seconds their mouths parted. Spike's hands were gripping his shoulders tightly, his hands were bunched up tightly in Spike's T-shirt, and - oh God. He was hard. A moan escaped from the back of his throat, caught in Spike's mouth. Spike shifted closer, the scrape of the chair was loud in the silence of the room, and Spike was kissing him almost painfully hard now, just ravishing his mouth, claiming it for his own, and he was yielding, and taking just as much back from Spike, who surrendered willingly, passionately... it was a delicious, delirious cycle that just went on and on... Spike's erection was pressing demandingly into Xander's leg, and suddenly a blisteringly loud alarm went off in his head. It was too much! He was overwhelmed, couldn't breathe, panic flooded over him, and the real world - the world where stuff like this just didn't happen came crashing back down around him.

"Woah!" He leapt back away from Spike, knocking his chair over, struggling to regain his breath. "What the hell -? Oh fuck, shit, what have I done!"

Spike was still locked to his chair, looking at Xander as though he didn't know which way to jump. He was panting heavily, his eyes wide and dilated, and seemed lost for words. His jeans strained over his erection, his

mouth was flushed and swollen, showing the world he'd just been kissed.

Kissed. By me. Oh SHIT!

A fresh wave of utter horror swept over Xander, and he let out a small aghast croak. Spike shook his head a little, visibly struggling for composure. He stood up, taking a step forward. Xander immediately took a step back.

"Xander, that - that was - "

"-a horrible, freakish mistake that should never, ever be repeated or even talked about ever again? Yeah, I think so too!"

"Listen - Xander ..."

"No! No listening, no talking, just madness which is now over! Not another word!"

"Xand-"

"Ah-ah!" Xander held out his hand defensively as if to ward off Spike's speech. "That sounds like another word to me!"

"Look, don't freak out-"

"Who's freaked?" Xander yelled at a high pitch as he retreated rapidly, yet clumsily towards the front door, bumping into every wall along the way, panic fuelling his movements as Spike moved towards him. "Not me! I've got an early start tomorrow though, so I guess I'll just be getting out of your hair!" He reached the front door, opened it and shot through.

"But Xander - "

"Bye then!" he yelled maniacally, closing the door behind him, his heart racing. He looked blankly around the hall. The penny dropped, just as Spike opened the door again.

"Xander, this is *your* apartment."

Xander closed his eyes briefly as his already burning face rapidly heated to the colour and temperature of fire. *Oh God, kill me now!* Of course nothing happened. The one time Sunnydale took a break from granting death wishes... Spike stepped out into the hall, and quick as a flash Xander darted back inside. "Oh, yeah, thanks for that pal. Buddy. Friend. Who is a guy. Well I guess you'll be needing to leave now, don't let me keep you, we'll hang tomorrow okay? Good, bye then!"

Just as Spike opened his mouth to speak, Xander slammed the door in his shell-shocked face, and leant

against it for a moment, his heart still pounding in his chest as though he'd just run a race. He stayed still until he heard the movements of Spike leaving, then let out a whimper.

"Oh. My. God." He let himself slide down the door until he was sitting in a crumpled heap at the base of it. What the hell had just happened? He'd kissed Spike. He'd kissed a *guy*. His brain was caught on a loop of; *What? How? Why?* His poor, bewildered, buzzing head felt like it was going to explode, and the confusing physical after-effects lingered on. His mouth was still tingling, his cheek burned where Spike had touched it, and that strange, hot prickle of arousal in his groin was still there, willing to flare up with the tiniest provocation. His body felt charged, restless, as though he just wanted to grab Spike and finish that kiss, have Spike under him right now, and kiss him and feel him and grab his hips and thrust slickly against him and into him until all this excess energy was gone ...

Waves of horror and shock crashed over him again and again. What the hell had he been thinking? Or more to the point what had he been thinking *with*, and why the hell had his cock apparently decided that Spike was a Happy Thought? He wanted to give it a slap for being so fucking stupid. He didn't want this! He wasn't gay! And

neither was Spike, so what the *hell* was he playing at? Spike was straight - it was one of the facts of the Universe. Fish swam, birds flew, and Spike was straighter than a Roman road and couldn't possibly be - Xander cringed - interested in him.

But... the way Spike had kissed him - it was as though that kiss had popped the lid on a box. His mind kept flashing with images. Of the way Spike's eyes had been dark and almost yearning that night on the beach - he could have *sworn* Spike had been watching him strip off. Of the over-eager wave Spike had given him, that first night they'd met for a drink in the Bronze. Of the way Spike had been short of breath when in a play-fight Xander had wound up on top of him. Of the way Spike had written his phone number so seductively on his arm tonight and turned down Coat-girl because she wasn't that specific something that Spike wanted. Of how even people slow on the uptake eventually saw what was right in front of them.

It was no longer just about friendship. Maybe it never had been. Spike had feelings for him, and suddenly Xander was more terrified than he had been at any time in his life, facing any amount of demons.

He let his head fall back against the door, then yelped in pain as he smacked it right on the lump. He cradled his head protectively. "Ow, oh dammit!"

Yup. That about summed it up.

Spike walked home in a state of utter shock. More than once he stopped in his tracks to touch his mouth and look back in the direction of Xander's apartment, even though it was long since gone from view. If anyone had told him at the start of the night as he was getting ready for Dawn's party that he would have kissed Xander by the end of the night...

I kissed Xander! A grin burst out over his face, and he leapt light-heartedly up on a park bench, walking along it. *We kissed! And it was amazing!* Then his grin faded, and he frowned with worry as he let himself drop heavily off the other end. *But he totally freaked.* And that was putting it mildly. Sheer panic had been written all over Xander's face when he'd broken the kiss.

But we did kiss! Spike leapt up on another bench and floated along it, then his heart sank again. *But he freaked* he thudded miserably back to the ground. He stopped and looked back again, feeling completely torn. He so

wanted to go back to Xander's and talk to him, finish that kiss. He was so fired up with excitement he could barely contain himself, but he was almost incoherent with emotion, and he didn't want to scare Xander off. He'd left because Xander had been so freaked it was the only thing Spike could have done that wouldn't have made things worse. After all, he had dealt with Dru for over a hundred years - he knew when people were at their 'freak-out' limit. If he'd tried to push it Xander would probably have spent the rest of his life ducking around corners when he saw Spike coming, and charging across the street without looking to see if a bus was coming.

Yet he was longing to see him again. Spike inhaled his duster, hoping for traces of Xander's scent. He caught a fleeting breath but it vanished before he could wallow in it. Xander hadn't worn it long enough to leave a real mark. Spike really hoped that wasn't a bloody metaphor about the kiss. He twisted his fingers anxiously as his mind buzzed relentlessly. *I hope he doesn't hate me now. What if he just wants to forget about it? What if he doesn't even want to be friends anymore?* Yet he hadn't made the kiss happen, it had just kind of happened all by itself - no better than that, they had *both* made it happen. His heart lightened as he recalled Xander had not only remembered that time he'd touched him after

Demon Spike's attack, more than that, he had *recognised* it - that had to mean something didn't it? It seemed tempting fate to even think it, when it was something he'd wanted so much for so long, but maybe Xander *did* want him!

Spike felt his stomach lurch, his knees momentarily weakening as he re-lived that incredible kiss. Xander's knee nudging between his thighs, Xander's broad shoulders under his hands, Xander's lips quivering under his, slick and hot, passionate and yielding, and God, what would it feel like to have that mouth go down on him? Spike let out a small, pleading moan and clung briefly to a nearby tree for support. He cleared his throat and unnecessarily brushed down his duster. No, no, not here, he'd think about that when he was someplace a little more private. Besides as much as he wanted Xander, right now he'd be happy with just kissing. Lots more kissing. Spike pulled out his mobile and looked at it longingly, but forced himself to put it back in his pocket. He'd call him tomorrow, that would be better, tonight he'd had his moment. The moment he had thought would never happen, a moment where Xander had wanted him! Maybe he wasn't ready right now, but he would be, that kiss had been something else, Xander would have to come round soon.

Excitement thrummed through Spike, warming him with a steady, happy glow, and even his regular panicky thoughts about what might happen next couldn't dampen it totally.

Because he had kissed Xander, and Xander had kissed him back.

In the dark, Spike smiled.

The End